

# The Merchants' Houses and Warehouses of King's Lynn<sup>1</sup>

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KING'S LYNN is an interesting example of the successful development of a piece of ecclesiastical property.<sup>2</sup> It lies on the east bank of the river Ouse, adjoining the bishop of Norwich's manor of Gaywood (which lies to the north-east). There were two stages of deliberate town-planning. First there was the old borough, known as the 'Liberty of the monks of Norwich', lying between the Purfleet stream on the north and the Mill Fleet on the south. This was apparently created in the time of Bishop Herbert Losinga (1091-1119), and included the Saturday Market and the most important public buildings, such as the parish church of St. Margaret and the guild hall. Secondly there was the 'New Land', known as the 'Bishop's Liberty', lying farther to the north, on the marshland, nearer to the sea; this was laid out by Bishop Turbe (1146-74), and contained the Tuesday Market and the chapel of St. Nicholas, a large church which was nevertheless a dependency of the parish church of St. Margaret.

The growth of King's Lynn is typical of the internal colonization that was going on everywhere in England in the century and a half after the Norman conquest; it is paralleled, for instance, at Oxford by the growth of the extra-mural suburbs of St. Giles, St. Clement's, Grandpont and Oseney. Professor Carus-Wilson's article (*infra*, pp. 182-201) emphasizes in full measure the economic importance of King's Lynn as a port throughout the middle ages and beyond. The three main wharves or quays were described in the eighteenth century as being the 'Common Staithe Yard' west of the Tuesday Market; the 'Purfleet Quay', in the middle, on the north side of the Purfleet, adjoining the Custom House; and the 'King's Staithe Yard', south of the Purfleet. In addition, medieval deeds show that there were numerous private quays attached to individual tenements, no doubt stretching up the side streams as well as on the Ouse.

The area with which I want to deal here is the long strip bounded on the west by the river Ouse and on the east by a line of streets stretching from the Tuesday Market southwards: King Street (formerly Stockfishrow, then Chequer Street); Queen Street (formerly Wyndgate); the Saturday Market and St. Margaret's Place; Nelson Street (formerly Lath Street); Bridge Street (formerly

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper read to the Society for Medieval Archaeology at the Spring Conference at King's Lynn in April, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> For a short historical and descriptive account of King's Lynn see *Archaeol. J.*, LXXXIX (1932), 328 ff. There is an excellent collection of photographs in *King's Lynn; Report and Survey of the Buildings of Architectural and Historic Interest, prepared for the Corporation of King's Lynn by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings* (London, 1948), cited hereafter as *King's Lynn*.

Coldhirne). This area contains a remarkable series of tenements, with merchants' houses at the street end, and yards and warehouses at the back, running down to the waterfront (PLS. XIX, XX; FIGS. 64-5). There is probably no better place in England for studying the early development of commercial and domestic architecture combined, that is to say, the complex of buildings—dwelling-house, shop, countinghouse, warehouse—where the merchant or craftsman of medieval or later times lived and worked and stored his goods.



FIG. 64

## KING'S LYNNE, NORFOLK

Merchants' houses and warehouses adjoining northern end of King Street (p. 175)

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The history of commercial architecture in England has on the whole been neglected; its surviving specimens need preservation and study.<sup>3</sup> In some of the continental towns, like the Hanseatic towns or the Dutch towns, where sites were often constricted, we find the various elements, shop or counting-house, dwelling-house and warehouse, piled up on top of each other to form a medieval sky-scraper. In medieval English towns conditions varied, though space was probably never so scarce as in the great continental towns. In some (as at Exeter, Chester, York)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For examples of useful studies of such buildings abroad, see M. Revesz-Alexander, *Die alten Lagerhäuser Amsterdams* (The Hague, 1928); and K. Bjercknes, *Gamle Borgerhus i Bergen* (Bergen, 1961), esp. pp. 108 ff. (English summary, pp. 130 ff.), and A. E. Herteig, 'The excavation of "Bryggen", the old Hanseatic wharf in Bergen,' *Med. Archaeol.*, III (1959), 177 ff. on the Hanseatic merchants' quarter of Bryggen in Bergen; cf. also E. Alnæ *et al.*, *Norwegian Architecture throughout the Ages* (Oslo, 1950), pp. 68 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *infra*, pp. 228 ff.

we find the merchant's house filling the full width of a narrow tenement; the cellar probably served as a warehouse. Where there were broader sites, the house could be built round a courtyard, with the hall at the back, and a fringe of shops on the street, as at Strangers' Hall, Norwich, Marshall's Inn, Oxford, and Browne's Place, London;<sup>5</sup> and at a house at Bucklersbury, London (1405),<sup>6</sup> we find something nearer to the 'piled up' plan of the Hanseatic or Dutch houses: a shop and warehouses occupy the ground floor and cellars, and the dwelling-house occupies the first and second floors. At King's Lynn in the area we are considering the sites were comparatively roomy, up to 200-300 ft. long and more, and proportionately broad. As has been said, the dwelling-house was generally at the street end, from which the merchant could keep an eye on the long courtyard, lined with warehouses and cellars, running down westwards to the river.

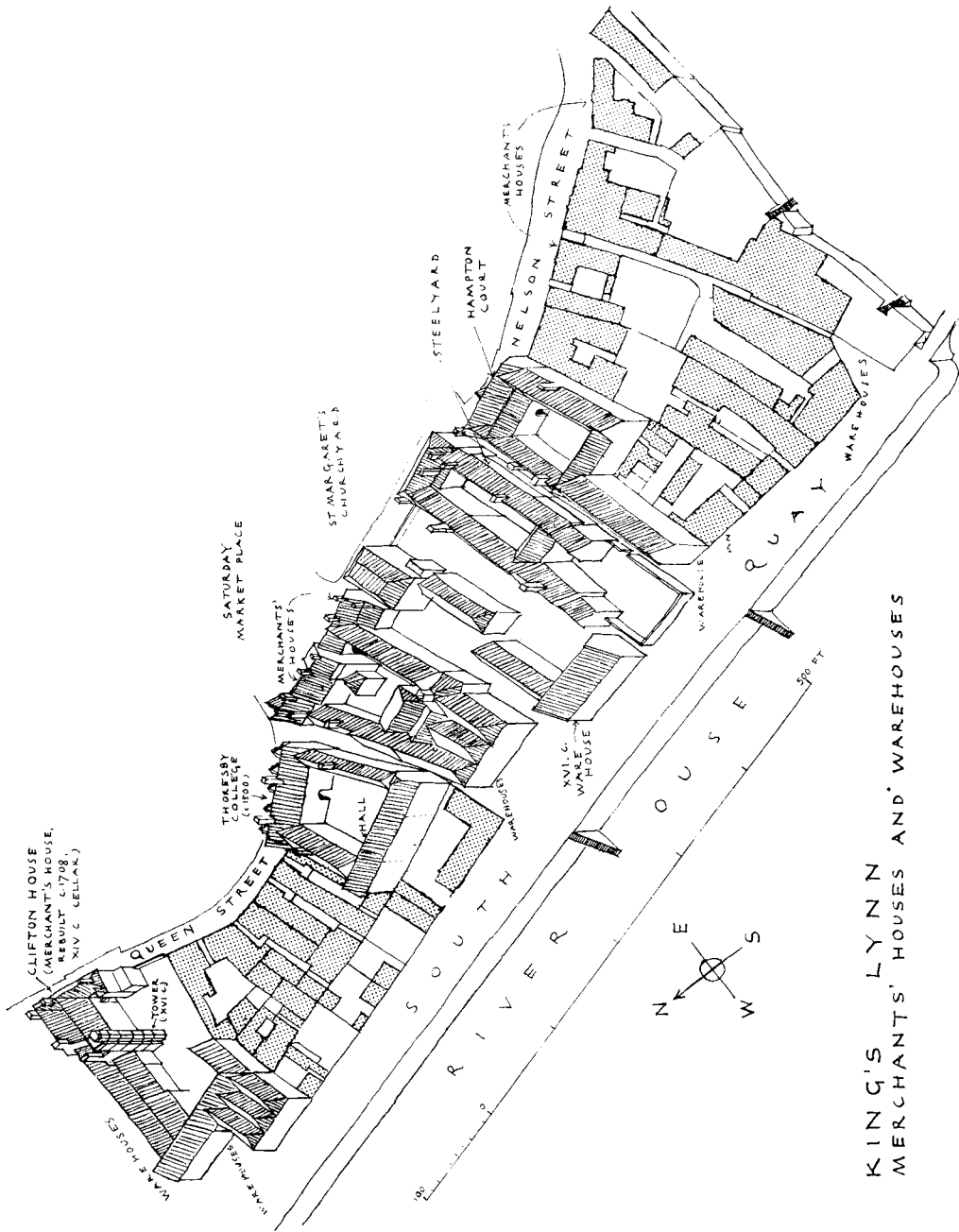
The northernmost block of these houses (FIG. 64) abuts on to King Street, stretching from the Tuesday Market to the Custom House on the Purfleet at the south end, which was built by the King's Lynn architect, Henry Bell, in 1683 (*King's Lynn*, p. 33). Near the northern end is the fifteenth-century guild hall of St. George, recently restored, and adjoining this is a characteristic group of buildings: a pleasant and dignified merchant's house (now known as St. George's Chambers), L-shaped, stone-fronted towards the street and red brick at the back, looking down the long courtyard, about 400 ft. long, lined on both sides with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century warehouses (*King's Lynn*, pp. 44-5). A little farther south is a large, low house (now a school), standing back from the street; here the warehouses and courtyard, which no doubt once existed at the back, have been replaced by gardens. Farther south again are some smaller merchants' houses, with archways leading through to courtyards or lanes flanked by warehouses. The dwelling-houses all along this side of King Street seem to have been almost entirely rebuilt in the eighteenth century, but some fragments of the medieval houses survive, such as a jamb in one of the archways, and the medieval history of the tenements can sometimes be traced; the one nearest to the Custom House, for instance, was the house of Thomas de Melchbourne (d. 1349), who was mayor and collector of customs, and built a king's galley, *Le Philipe*, c. 1337-8.

The next block abuts on Queen Street and lies between the Purfleet on the north and the Saturday Market, by St. Margaret's Church, on the south (FIG. 65); we are now in the old borough. This block includes Clifton House, one of the finest examples of a merchant's house, with accompanying warehouses, in the town.<sup>7</sup> The medieval house consisted of two parallel ranges at right angles to the street, which may perhaps originally have been two separate houses, though a type of house of two parallel ranges abutting on the street is not unknown, as in the twelfth-century Moyses' Hall at Bury St. Edmunds. The southern range contains two early fourteenth-century tiled pavements, which are amongst the finest domestic specimens of the period; one may represent the hall. The northern range contains a fourteenth-century vaulted cellar, half underground, which may

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *infra*, pp. 223 ff.; *Archaeologia*, LXXIV (1923-4), 137 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *infra*, p. 223.

<sup>7</sup> This house has been surveyed and studied by Miss Vanessa Parker, to whose help here and elsewhere in Lynn (e.g. at Thoresby College) I am much indebted.



KING'S LYNN  
MERCHANTS' HOUSES AND WAREHOUSES

FIG. 65

KING'S LYNN, NORFOLK

Merchants' houses and warehouses adjoining Queen Street, Saturday Market Place and Nelson Street (pp. 175 ff.)

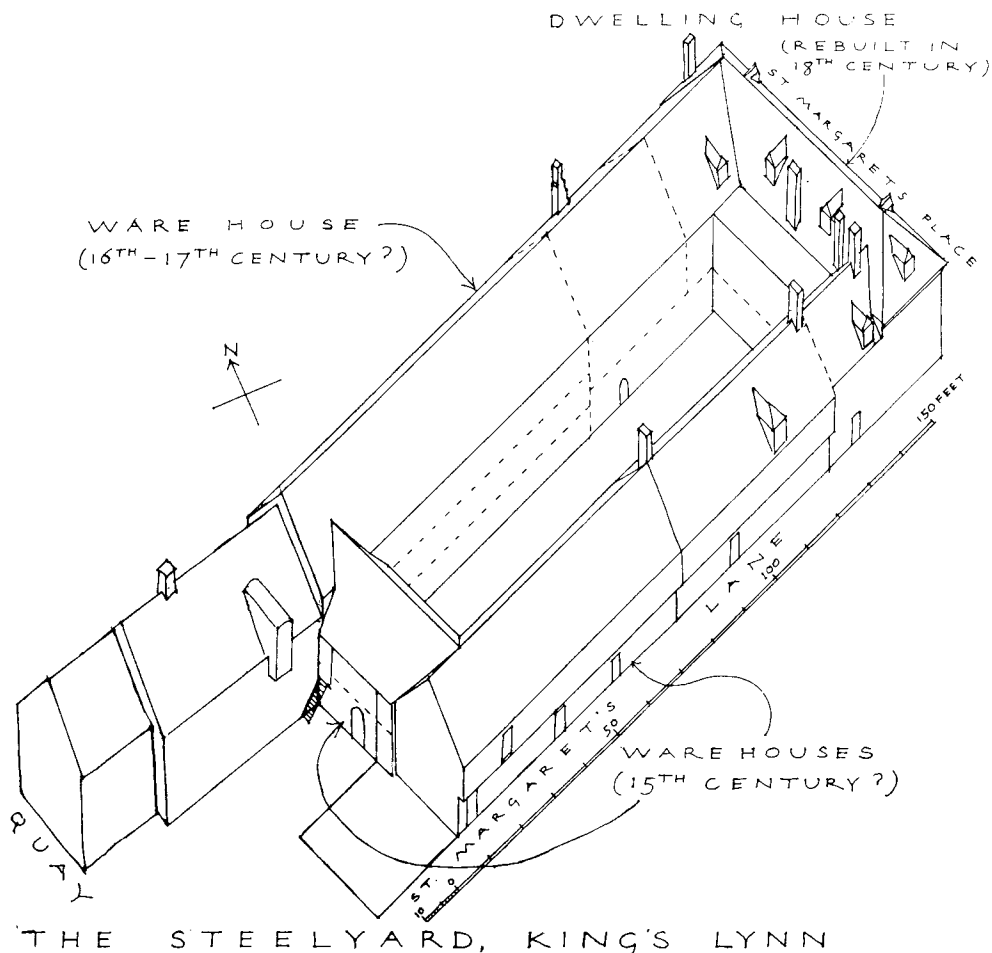
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have supported a solar. The house seems to have been more or less entirely rebuilt, above ground level, in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, to which rebuilding belong the chimney-stack at the NE. angle, and the remarkable watch-tower at the SE. angle of the dwelling-house (FIG. 65); and at the back, continuing the double range of the dwelling-house, is a fine double range of warehouses, built or rebuilt in the sixteenth century. The watch-tower formed a kind of inner gatehouse, standing between the front courtyard or garden, flanking the dwelling-house, and the back courtyard, flanking the warehouses and stretching towards the quayside. Finally, the house was once more refurbished, *c.* 1708, reputedly by the local architect Henry Bell; it was given sash windows throughout, a stylish new front with a baroque gateway (*King's Lynn*, p. 48), and a fine new staircase and panelling within. It was perhaps at this time, too, that the dwelling-house took in part of the warehouse adjoining the tower to form a kind of garden room, or perhaps an office to overlook the back courtyard. In the eighteenth century the house was the home of the Taylers, a family of wine-merchants. At every stage of its development the house shows the fine quality of craftsmanship used, not only for the living quarters, but also for commercial storage space, as with the vaulted cellar and the warehouses; for elaborate as the vaulted cellar is, there is no reason to think it was intended for any purpose but that of storage.

Further along Queen Street lies Thoresby College, a college of chantry priests founded by a leading Lynn merchant, Thomas Thoresby, who was mayor in 1502. This was built for a collegiate rather than a domestic purpose, but, like so many colleges, it follows an essentially domestic plan, and was easily turned into a merchant's house after the college was suppressed. It is built round a quadrangle and measures about 140 ft. by 120 ft. externally. The western range, farthest from the street, was later transformed into a warehouse, but retains a magnificent open roof of many bays. The central part of this, with elaborately-moulded hammer-beam trusses, formed the dining-hall, which, next to the guild halls, must have been the finest room of its kind in Lynn. Of the two ends of the range one must have contained service-rooms and the other perhaps a common parlour with the warden's lodging above. The other three ranges must have contained the lodgings of the chantry priests. The northern and eastern ranges have been a good deal reconstructed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the eastern façade on to the street being given a row of seventeenth-century curvilinear 'Dutch' gables (*King's Lynn*, p. 36), though it preserves the original carved entrance door and archway (*King's Lynn*, p. 46). The original roof preserved in the southern range suggests that the priests' lodgings consisted of chambers and studies flanking a series of staircases, very much like the contemporary college staircases at Oxford and Cambridge.

Farther south, facing St. Margaret's churchyard, lies another interesting complex of buildings, partly domestic, partly warehouses; the house is now known as St. Margaret's House, and is apparently to be identified with the Steelyard, the premises of the Hanseatic traders in Lynn (FIGS. 65-6). This was one of the four Steelyards—at London, Lynn, Boston and Hull—established or re-established by virtue of a treaty in 1475, after a period of political difficulties

and economic rivalry; it handled the import trade (corn, timber, etc.) and export trade (cloth) between Lynn and north Germany and the Baltic. The Lynn Steelyard occupied a long site, about 70 ft. wide and 200 ft. long, stretching from St. Margaret's churchyard to the quay and it was built round the four side of a quad-



THE STEELYARD, KING'S LYNN

FIG. 66

KING'S LYNN, NORFOLK

The Hanseatic Steelyard showing 15th-century and later warehouses (pp. 177 ff.)

rangle. The eastern side was probably always occupied by the dwelling-house, which was rebuilt in the eighteenth century (*King's Lynn*, p. 34).

We do not know what the domestic layout of a medieval steelyard was like,<sup>8</sup> but one may guess that there was a hall in the centre of the east range, with lodgings or chambers at each end, rather like the chambers of a contemporary inn

<sup>8</sup> But compare the Hanseatic warehouses and lodgings at Bergen, as rebuilt after 1702, see note 3.

or college. The other three sides were occupied by warehouses. Of these the long south range (about 150 ft. long) and the short west range are two-storied buildings which may well go back to the original building of *c.* 1475. In the south range the whole wall towards the courtyard and the ground-floor wall towards the street are of brick; the first-floor wall towards the street is timber-framed and projecting (*King's Lynn*, p. 48); the roof has tie-beam trusses. The picturesque pulley at the west end is probably not an original feature, since the first-floor doorway beneath it seems to have been adapted from a window. In modern times the eastern part of this range has been occupied as part of the dwelling-house; but this may have been a post-medieval encroachment. The short western wing has brick walls and a collar-beam roof. The northern range is three stories high, with brick or rubble walls; it is probably a late sixteenth- or seventeenth-century remodelling of a medieval range, since a stone-arched doorway survives on the ground floor giving on to the courtyard. Part of the upper two floors at the east end of this range was annexed to the dwelling-house to form a drawing-room, probably in the early nineteenth century. The dwelling-house and the warehouses are now in separate occupation, as is also the case at Clifton House and elsewhere; it would be interesting to know when merchants ceased to live next to their warehouses. At the extreme north-west corner of the site, on the quay side, is a fine brick warehouse of the sixteenth-century, lying separate from the Steelyard quadrangle (*King's Lynn*, p. 51).

In the next block, abutting on Nelson Street, the most important building is Hampton Court (FIGS. 65, 67 and *King's Lynn*, p. 50), another medieval complex of merchant's dwelling-house, shops and warehouse, which has recently been admirably restored by the King's Lynn Preservation Trust. As has been described elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> the house is built round a courtyard; the south range, built in the fourteenth century, at right angles to the street, contained the service-rooms, hall, and parlour and counting-house with the solar above; the west range, built *c.* 1500, was a warehouse with an arcaded ground floor open to the quay beyond; the east range, built a little later, contained shops opening on to the street; and the north range, rebuilt in the seventeenth century, contained a new kitchen. Here, too, the arcaded warehouse must have been a fine specimen of late medieval commercial architecture; and it makes an interesting contrast with the wholly enclosed warehouses of the Steelyard and Clifton House. It may be noted that at Hampton Court, as in other town houses at Lynn<sup>10</sup> and elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> the hall lies at right angles to the street; and this plan seems to be adopted in the two guild halls at Lynn (the guild hall and St. George's hall) as well as in guild halls elsewhere, as at Exeter and St. Mary's Hall, Coventry.

Nelson Street continues with a fine range of houses (*King's Lynn*, p. 63), with courtyards, gardens and warehouses behind. The house next to Hampton Court has unfortunately been largely rebuilt behind the façade; but beyond this is a charming seventeenth-century house built round a courtyard, with a garden

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *infra*, pp. 233 ff.; and *Culture and Environment: Essays in Honour of Sir Cyril Fox* (ed. L. Alcock and I. Ll. Foster, 1963), pp. 445 ff.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Clifton House and houses in King Street and Chapel Street.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *infra*, pp. 204 f., 228 ff.

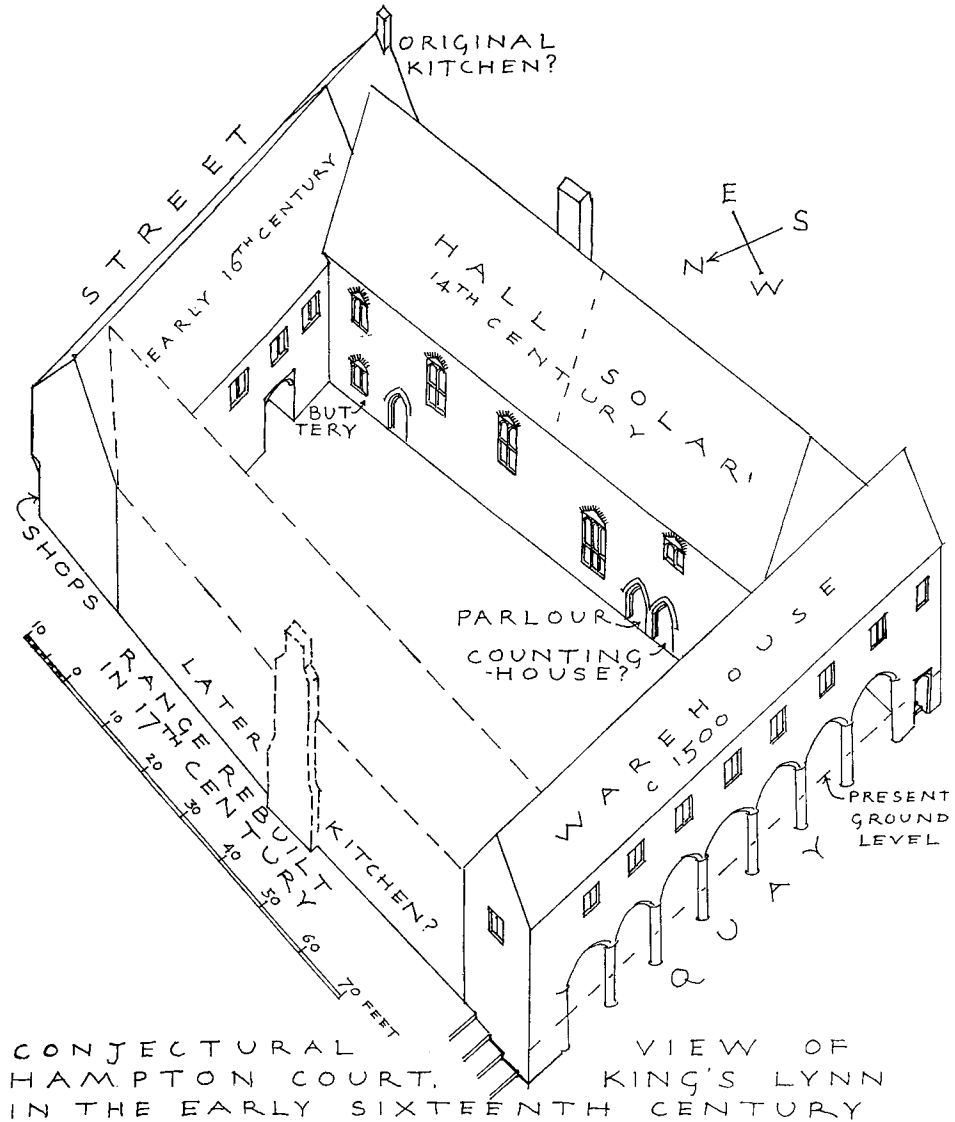


FIG. 67

## KING'S LYNN, NORFOLK

Hampton Court showing arcaded warehouse

(p. 179)

*(After Culture and Environment (ed. L. Alcock and I. Ll. Foster, 1963), fig. 104, by courtesy)*

beyond; the vista through the house from the street to the garden is particularly attractive. Beyond this again are two fine eighteenth-century houses, one very large one of 1788, the other smaller and earlier, with a hipped roof (*King's Lynn*, pp. 48-9).



The merchants' houses of King's Lynn and their accompanying warehouses are important, not only in themselves as architectural specimens, but also as forming the background or framework of the economic, social and religious life of the town. It was in these buildings that the merchants lived and worked. As regards the economic and social history, Professor Carus-Wilson (*infra*, pp. 182-201) tells us about the trade of medieval Lynn, and Mr. H. L. Bradfer-Lawrence has given an account of some of the merchant families of the town.<sup>12</sup> There is such a wealth of documents surviving in the Red Register of King's Lynn and elsewhere, that it might almost be possible to reconstruct the medieval plan and medieval street directory of the town, on the lines of Dr. H. E. Salter's map and survey of medieval Oxford. As regards its religious life, King's Lynn illustrates very well that most remarkable phenomenon of later medieval English history—the rise of the devout layman, especially among the urban middle classes. For this town was the milieu which produced Margery Kempe, whose autobiography gives us such a vivid picture of the religious life of King's Lynn and other towns of the early fifteenth century. We can see the learned or popular preachers coming round and filling the great churches with those congregations, whom Margery so often disturbed with her hysterical outbursts; and she tells us how some people followed their favourite preachers from town to town. Margery Kempe, the wife of a Lynn burgess, and a rather unsuccessful practitioner in the business of brewing, was just the kind of person who would have lived in or visited the houses we have been examining. The great churches, St. Margaret's and still more St. Nicholas's, with their spacious naves, perfectly adapted to serve as preaching houses, and the equally spacious friars' churches, of which one imposing fragment remains; Thoresby's college of chantry priests, the characteristic creation of a leading merchant, a kind of latter-day *Eigenkloster* in a quasi-domestic setting; the Red Mount chapel, ingeniously planned for a continuous one-way stream of pilgrim traffic; the two guild halls, in some way like a merchant's house writ large; all these are the religious and social complement to the domestic and commercial architecture of King's Lynn.

Finally one ought to stress two qualities, the continuity and comprehensiveness of King's Lynn's monuments, which reflect every side of life, from churches to warehouses, in every successive age; for great as the town was in the middle ages, it did not stop dead then, like Winchelsea or Aigues Mortes; it is as much a storehouse of Georgian as of medieval architecture, and many of its buildings are a palimpsest, built and rebuilt over and over again; that is why they deserve so much study. Medieval churches and 'Jacobethan' or Georgian houses need no apologia nowadays, though even they sometimes need vigilance and defence. But the claims of industrial archaeology are not so widely understood; and the fine series of warehouses in Lynn, ranging from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, especially need thorough recording and study, and intelligent preservation; they need in fact as much sympathy as they would get if they were in Delft or Lübeck or Bergen.

<sup>12</sup> In *A Supplement to Blomefield's Norfolk*, ed. C. Ingleby (London, 1929).