

# The fields of medieval London

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The walls of medieval London were surrounded by open fields, which started just beyond the city ditches (see Fig. 1). Londoners used these fields in a variety of ways, until the extra-mural suburbs expanded to cover them almost completely. The layout and names of these fields can be traced from documentary and cartographical sources used for a number of projects undertaken in the suburban fringe around the city. These fields form the framework and background of archaeological investigations in these areas, and their pattern still largely dictates the geography and names of the modern streets.

## The lie of the land

The whole area north of the Strand, including the abandoned site of middle Saxon *Lundenwic*, was granted to Westminster Abbey by King Edgar in 959, up to the west bank of the River Fleet. By c. 1000 the boundary had moved further to the west, probably to the line of the current City boundary.<sup>1</sup> Amongst the fields of this area were Merslade, St Martin's Field, Long Acre and Westminster Abbey's 40-acre garden and orchard called Covent Garden, enclosed by an earthen wall.<sup>2</sup> To the east of Drury Lane lay Ficketts Field, Purse Field and Cup Field.<sup>3</sup> To the north of Holborn lay the fields of the manor of Blemundesbury, and the two manors of Tottenham (Tottenham Court) and St Pancras, both held by canons of St Paul's Cathedral.<sup>4</sup>

A great tract of land to the north of the city walls was granted to the bishopric of London in the 7th century by King Æthelbert of Kent as part of its foundation endowment. By the 11th century this was called the manor of Stepney, lying between the rivers of Fleet and Lea and extending northwards to include Hackney. Sub-manors had been separated from it to form prebends, estates assigned for the support of the dean and canons of St Paul's cathedral; this system was not

fully formed until the 12th century.<sup>5</sup> The manor of Finsbury and Haliwell was one of these prebendal estates;<sup>6</sup> the manor of Norton Folgate formed another astride the main north road from Bishopsgate, apparently part of the dean's prebend.<sup>7</sup> There were other prebendal manors in Shoreditch and Hackney called Old Street, Wenlock's Barn and Hoxton, and a similar group of four prebendal sub-manors formed the parish of St Pancras, further to the west. The prebend of Holborn lay to the west of the Fleet.<sup>8</sup>

In the *Domesday Book* survey of 1086 other sub-manors of Stepney were held by secular tenants, such as the five hides of Clerkenwell held from the bishop by 'the wife of Brian'. King William held 12½ acres of land called *Nanemaneslonde*, later represented by pieces of land on Goswell Road, each called No Man's Land; the name implies that the area lay outside any manorial structure.<sup>9</sup>

Further east lay the Moor, a marshy area which had formed when the Roman defences had restricted the flow of the Walbrook stream, part of the manor of Finsbury. The *mora* outside Cripplegate was mentioned in a charter of King William in 1068, and in the 1170s it was described by William FitzStephen as the great fen on the north side of the city.<sup>10</sup> Roads crossing the Moor ran on causeways because of the marshy nature of the ground. A postern gate in the city wall onto the Moor was expanded to form Moorgate in 1415, and the marsh was then partly drained by the Mayor of London.<sup>11</sup> Around Finsbury manor house on the west side of the Moor lay the fields of the manor: Bunhill Field (23 acres), surrounded by ditches; Mallow Field (12½ acres), presumably named after the mallow flowers which grew in its marshy soil; and Finsbury Field (45 acres), later called High Field, Meadow Ground or the Old Wrestling Field.<sup>12</sup> Between Finsbury Field and great north road running north from Bishopsgate

lay the walled pasture called Curtain Close, the three narrow plots which were to form the precinct of Holywell Priory, and a field running up to Old Street called Fair Field Close.<sup>13</sup>

To the east of tofts along the Bishopsgate road lay Lollesworth Field (later Spitalfields), 43 acres of arable land which formed part of the demesne land of Stepney manor.<sup>14</sup> On its north and west sides were several small enclosures occupying the space westwards to the main road and northwards to Shoreditch church, including Cistern Close, Lompits, May Leas and Swan Close. To the east of Brick Lane lay Hares Marsh, South Hyde and smaller enclosures.<sup>15</sup> To the south of Lollesworth was the 7-acre Wodeland, also belonging to the bishop's manor.<sup>16</sup> The Field of Holy Trinity Priory, across the part of the city ditch called Houndsditch from the priory, was established by 1222–48; it was retained by the priory as a garden until the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s, reached from the precinct by a small postern gate through the city wall.<sup>17</sup>

East Smithfield was so called by 1197–1221; on its north-east corner was a toft in the 12th and 13th centuries. After the development of the western and southern frontages of the plot as roadside shops, houses and gardens in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, the irregular piece of ploughed land that remained was called *Horseleggfurlong*, presumably because of its shape. The land on the south side of East Smithfield was also divided into tenements and gardens, stretching back from the road to royal pasture land and St Katherine's Hospital property.<sup>18</sup>

The overall pattern suggests no underlying trend of Iron Age fields which might have preceded the establishment of *Londinium*. Rather they were grouped radially around the medieval city and the roads to it on the east side of the Fleet, while to the west of the river they were aligned parallel to

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it. The sinuous long S-shaped boundaries of most of them betray their origin as open arable fields formed in the late Saxon period, divided into ploughed strips called selions. The physical divisions between them were probably no more than shallow ditches or earth banks. There were almost certainly meadows along the valleys of the Fleet and its tributary Faggesswell Brook, and pasture land on the Moor. FitzStephen described the land to the north of the city as occupied by arable fields, meadows and pastures, with watermills along the streams.<sup>19</sup> Turnmill Street indicates the location of some of them.

As the population of London grew in the 13th and early 14th centuries, land around the walls was removed from arable production and converted into pasture to feed cattle brought to markets from the east and the west. The movements of these beasts were channelled through drove roads and stock funnels. St John Street was a drovers' road linking the Upper and Lower Roads at Islington with the market at West Smithfield.<sup>20</sup> This was the site of a horse and cattle market by 1123 and the annual St Bartholomew's Fair by a decade later.<sup>21</sup> Stock funnels fed into it from St John Street to the north, and on the route from Newgate and Ludgate to the south. Other funnels can perhaps be detected at both ends of Old Street, and at East Smithfield, leading to the pastures of Wapping Marshes. Cowcross may have existed as a stock route by c. 1170; another route via Cow Bridge across the Holborn stream was in place by 1252–65.<sup>22</sup> The prevalence of the name 'Hog Lane' suggests the regular movement of swine (see Fig. 1).

### Wards and suburbs

The wards of the city extended beyond the walls into the surrounding fields, their limits on the principal roads marked by the Bars. They were military, civil and judicial units, certainly established by 1127, and probably originating in the mid-11th century. Portsoken Ward appears to have been designed as a scheme of defence to guard the gate of Aldgate, defended by an association of London citizens called the *Cnightengild* from the mid-10th century onwards; its eastern boundary

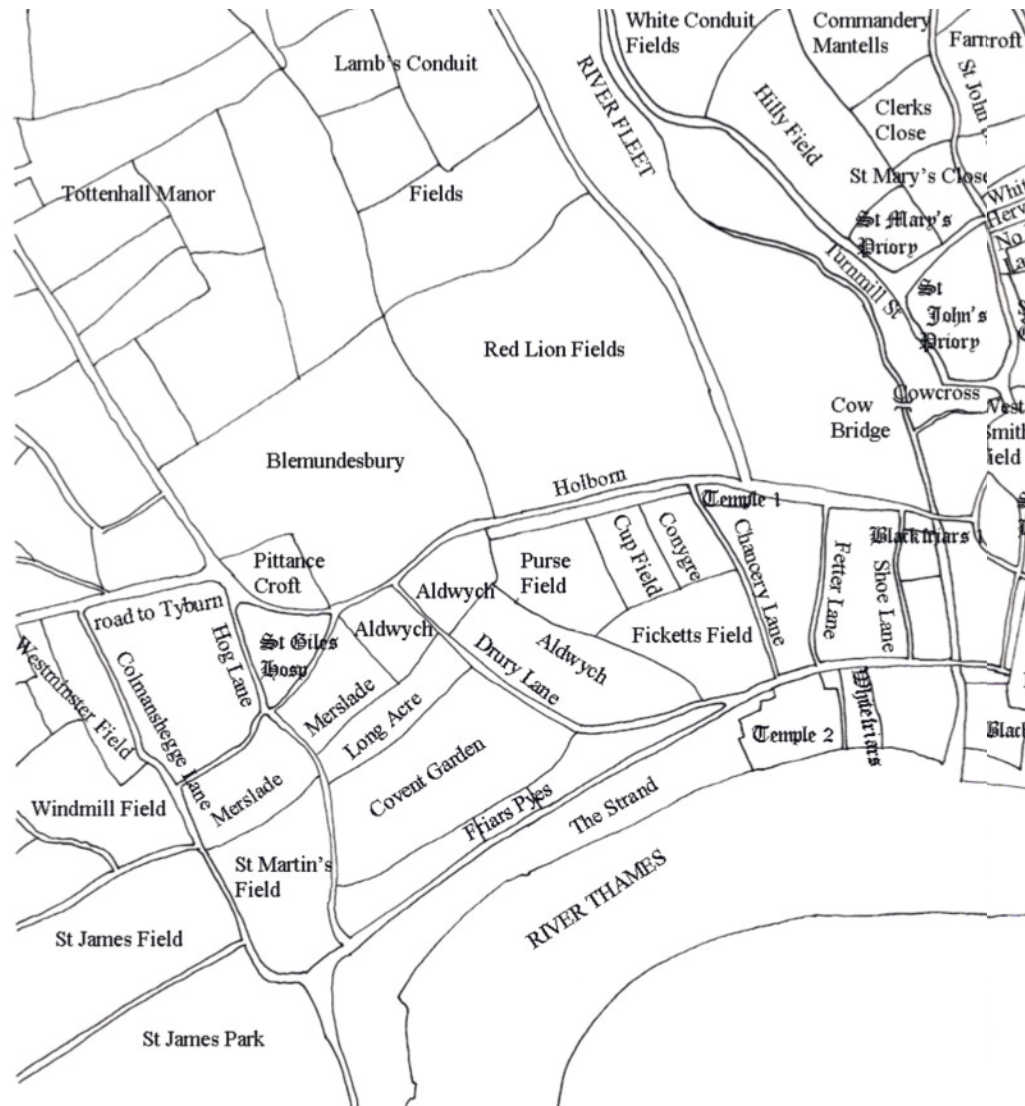
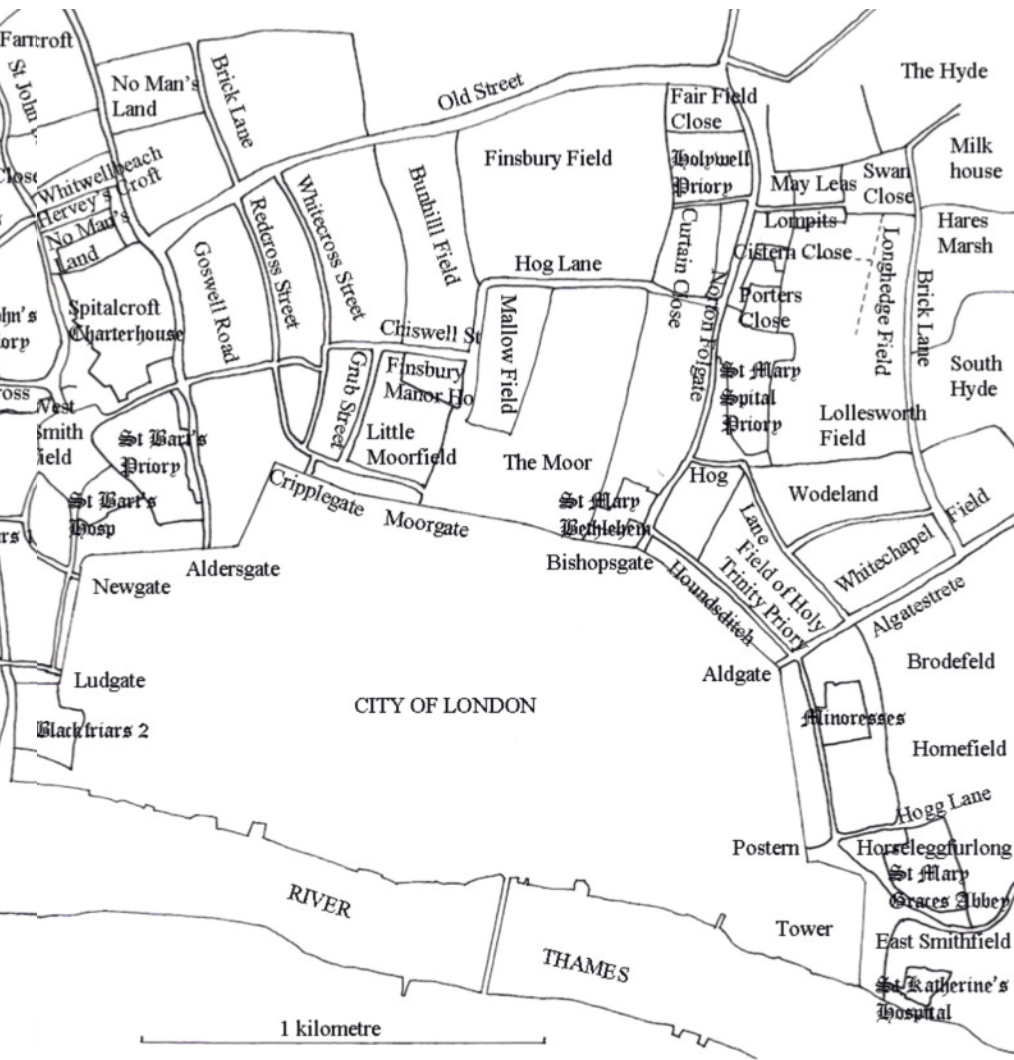


Fig. 1: the fields of medieval London

lay at Aldgate Bars. In 1125 the members of the guild transferred their rights over the ward to Holy Trinity Priory.<sup>23</sup> Farringdon Ward (divided into Within and Without in 1394), and the wards of Aldersgate, Cripplegate and Bishopsgate, were large territories, lapping over the city walls and extending outwards on both sides of the roads from their gates. Temple Bar was probably set up to mark the boundary of the city's jurisdiction with Westminster in 1161, and West Smithfield Bars by 1170.<sup>24</sup> The outer boundaries of Bishopsgate Ward were not apparently formed until after 1235, and its Bars set up across the north road next to the priory of St Mary Spital.<sup>25</sup>

The ward boundaries probably marked the furthest extent of suburban development at the time. In Farringdon Ward the church of St Andrew Holborn was mentioned in 959; St Bride's church was a stone building in the 11th

century; and St Sepulchre without Newgate had been founded by 1137.<sup>26</sup> According to FitzStephen there was a populous suburb between the city and Westminster.<sup>27</sup> By the 13th century suburbs were developing on the west side of the Fleet along Fleet Street and Holborn. Shoe Lane ran between them before 1216, and Fetter Lane by c. 1245.<sup>28</sup> The church of St Botolph without Aldersgate was built in 1108–22, and St Giles without Cripplegate in c. 1102–15. Also within Cripplegate Ward, Grub Street (Milton Street) existed by the early 13th century, Whitecross Street by 1226, and Redcross Street by 1275.<sup>29</sup> In the 13th century plots on the south side of Chiswell Street were being turned into gardens, and houses had been built along the street frontages.<sup>30</sup> The church of St Botolph without Bishopsgate was established by the late 12th century, but the Bishopsgate suburb was probably



still sparsely populated at this time.<sup>31</sup> In the Portsoken, St Botolph Aldgate church existed by 1125, when there was at least one substantial tenement to the south of the street, paying an annual rent to the *Cnightengild*.<sup>32</sup> By the mid-12th century there were tenements along the north side of *Algatestrete* to the east of the church. A subsidiary chapel of St Mary Matfelon was established by 1282 to serve the inhabitants of the ribbon development spreading eastwards onto the open manorial waste beyond the Aldgate Bars; by c. 1320 it was called Whitechapel and had become a separate parish church.<sup>33</sup>

**Precincts, springs and water supplies**

The precincts of religious houses were established in the available open spaces of the fields over the course of three centuries on land provided by their patrons, although usually in the least

productive areas. During the 12th century Augustinian canons were established at St Bartholomew's Priory and St Bartholomew's Hospital on marshy ground in Smithfield in 1123; Augustinian canonesses at St Mary's Priory in c. 1145; and the Knights Hospitaller in c. 1148 at the priory of St John. The last two houses were founded in Clerkenwell by Jordan de Briset (grandson of 'the wife of Brian') and his wife Muriel de Munteni; both precincts were walled around within a generation of the foundations.<sup>34</sup> The canonesses also owned Hilly Field, St Mary Close and Farcroft, where a windmill was built on a mound in about 1358.<sup>35</sup> The churches of the priories of St Bartholomew, St John and St Mary were not oriented on an east-west axis, as their alignment was dictated by the pre-existing field boundaries and roads. Meanwhile the Knights Templar had built their English headquarters on the

south side of Holborn in c. 1128, but moved to the New Temple between Fleet Street and the Thames in c. 1162.<sup>36</sup> The priory of St John the Baptist, Holywell, another house of Augustinian Canonesses, was founded in c. 1152–8 by the prebendary canon of Finsbury; the area of its 8-acre precinct was assembled from three plots, and was complete by 1189.<sup>37</sup> On the manor of Norton Folgate, the Augustinian priory and hospital of St Mary Spital was founded in the mid or late 12th century, and refounded on a larger scale in 1235, in a marshy hollow at the end of the line of tofts along the main road from Bishopsgate to the north. In the early 13th century the priory acquired a series of plots lying to the east of the road frontage, which it consolidated to form a southern outer precinct, used for horticultural purposes.<sup>38</sup>

Smaller hospitals were established on the main roads into the city, forming a charitable fringe around London to provide shelter to pilgrims, the poor and the sick.<sup>39</sup> These included the hospital of St Katherine in 1148 on a site to the east of the Tower and originally subordinate to Holy Trinity Priory.<sup>40</sup> Further out was a ring of leper hospitals, including the hospital of St Giles, founded in the early 12th century by Queen Matilda, wife of Henry I. The 8-acre precinct included gardens, and its home farm, extended eastward almost to Holborn Bars, including Merlade and Purse Field.<sup>41</sup>

In the 13th century the friaries followed. Blackfriars was founded in c. 1221 on the site of Holborn manor, but moved in c. 1279 to the site of Baynard's Castle and the adjacent extramural land to the west; the city wall was subsequently extended to enclose the precinct up to the River Fleet.<sup>42</sup> The Whitefriars arrived in 1241 on the east side of the Templars precinct, on land donated by Henry III.<sup>43</sup> The abbey of St Clare, a house of Franciscan nuns (the Minoreesses) was established in 1293–4 to the south-east of Aldgate. In addition the priory of St Mary of Bethlehem was founded in 1247 on a site just outside Bishopsgate.<sup>44</sup>

In 1349 some of the remaining open space around the city was used for crisis cemeteries, and subsequently became the precincts for the last two





Fig. 2: 16th-century Londoners practise archery, take walks, graze animals and dry laundry in the fields around the Finsbury windmills (Copperplate map of London: Museum of London)

London monasteries. Sir Walter Manny rented a field called Spitalcroft from St Bartholomew's Hospital to serve as a graveyard for the victims of the Black Death; over 20,000 dead are thought to be buried in this cemetery.<sup>45</sup> Another epidemic cemetery was opened in Horseleggfurlong at East Smithfield; burials were interred in the toft following the pattern of the north-south selions. A gatehouse and Holy Trinity Chapel were built to serve the cemetery in 1350.<sup>46</sup> The surplus land became the site of the Cistercian abbey of St Mary Graces, founded by Edward III in 1350, with the chapel at its initial core.<sup>47</sup> Similarly the London Charterhouse was founded on Spitalcroft in 1371 and centred on its chapel; it was not until 1391 that all the land which was to

form its 30-acre precinct was acquired from the previous ecclesiastical owners St Bartholomew's Hospital, St John's Priory and Westminster Abbey.<sup>48</sup>

Some of these precincts were associated with the springs which arose around the city. The mid-16th century 'Agas' map shows the spring at Clerkenwell emerging from the south-west corner of the precinct wall of St Mary's Priory onto Farringdon Road, where it may still be visited. The plot which formed the initial site of Holywell Priory contained the spring called *Haliwelle*, although it is not certain where this rose.<sup>49</sup> FitzStephen's account mentioned this spring as the *fons sacer*, resorted to by students from the schools and the young men of the city with other springs of the northern

fields at Clerkenwell and St Clement's well.<sup>50</sup>

Monasteries exploited these springs to bring water supplies into their precincts: to St Bartholomew's Hospital in lead pipes from Coweslese Meadow in Canonbury;<sup>51</sup> to St Mary's Priory cloister in a lead pipe from a spring to the north-east at Lodder's Well close to the modern Saddler's Wells, granted to the priory c. 1200;<sup>52</sup> and St Mary Spital from *Snecokeswell* to the east of Brick Lane in 1278.<sup>53</sup> The supply to Charterhouse was laid southwards in lead pipes from Commandery Mantells to the centre of the great cloister in 1430–1; the system is shown on a 15th-century plan.<sup>54</sup>

### Recreation, rebellion and rubbish

As the fields of London were increasingly used for pasture, the citizens came to consider them as public space. According to FitzStephen, the frozen surface of the Moor was used by Londoners for ice-skating in 12th-century winters.<sup>55</sup> The fields on the site of Charterhouse were regarded by the citizens as a place of public recreation, and there was some resentment and sabotage when the monastic buildings were being erected in October 1389.<sup>56</sup> Ficketts Field was used for sports by the students of the nearby Inns of Court in the 15th century.<sup>57</sup>

The citizens considered that they had a long-established right to practise archery in the fields of the Moor, Finsbury and Stepney, a jealously-guarded privilege (see Fig. 2). A whole sequence of named targets was laid out across the fields and annual contests were held with rich prizes. In Bunhill Field the ranges were generally eleven score yards long (201m), whilst further east in High Field and Spitalfields the archers shot at the Twelve Score Pricks (219m).<sup>58</sup> In 1498 the hedges of all the gardens to the north of Moorgate in the manor of Finsbury were levelled in order to provide open space for the practice of archery.<sup>59</sup>

There were also more aristocratic military exercises. East Smithfield was the site of duels held by the *Cnightengild* from about 975 onwards.<sup>60</sup> West Smithfield was the site of tournaments in the period 1357 to 1467, most notably during the reign of

Richard II. A blend of entertainment and intimidation for the London crowds was provided here by burning heretics at the stake and hanging criminals from gallows throughout the 15th century.<sup>61</sup>

Other public gatherings took place in the fields and precincts, both peaceful and rebellious. In the cemetery of St Mary Spital was the pulpit cross. From this pulpit, and the cross in St Paul's churchyard, public pronouncements were made in late medieval London, beginning at least as early as Richard II's promulgation of the statutes and ordinances of the Shrewsbury Parliament in 1398. They were also the venues for a series of sermons each Easter week, attended by the mayor, sheriffs and aldermen, and great crowds of citizens.<sup>62</sup> In June 1381 Richard negotiated with the rebels of the Peasants' Revolt at Mile End on the road from Aldgate. The events of the rebellion came to a climax at West Smithfield, where the mayor Sir William Walworth killed Wat Tyler, and the king subsequently persuaded the rebels to move with him to Clerkenwell (see Fig. 3).<sup>63</sup> Participants in Sir John Oldcastle's abortive Lollard rising of January 1414 assembled in the fields of St Giles Hospital to the west of the city, where they were easily rounded up by royal troops.<sup>64</sup>

The open spaces of the fields were also used by the city for the dumping of its rubbish. Before the construction of the London Charterhouse in the 14th century, its site at Spitalcroft was used for the dumping of both household and industrial waste.<sup>65</sup> In 1412 the Mayor and Aldermen inspected the Moor, and found it divided into gardens and areas for dumping rubbish.<sup>66</sup> By c. 1500 there were *dunghills* in the fields on the east side of the Finsbury manor lands.<sup>67</sup>

The eastern part of No Man's Land may have been purchased by the Corporation from St Bartholomew's Hospital specifically to deposit the refuse of the city. Quantities of rubbish placed here in the late 15th and early 16th centuries appear to have been deliberately formed into a windmill mound. There was a windmill here in the late medieval period, destroyed by a storm.<sup>68</sup> In August 1530 the *Wynde Myll Hyll* beside *No Mannys Land* was held on lease from the city.<sup>69</sup> Another windmill was built in its place before 1547 and this appears on a large mound on the 'Agas' map.<sup>70</sup> Windmills were also built in the mid-16th century on top of some of the accumulated piles of rubbish and dung at the west end of Finsbury Field: two were built in the 1550s, and there were three by 1567, and six by 1617 (see Fig. 2).<sup>71</sup>

### Extraction and manufacture

From the 15th century onwards the expansion of London's suburbs was preceded by the extraction of brickearth and the manufacture of bricks and tiles. Some of the gardens of East Smithfield were exploited systematically for gravel and brickearth quarrying before the mid-14th century.<sup>72</sup> The fieldname *Lompits* or *Lome Pittes* to the north of Lollesworth Field implies quarrying for brickearth. There were other quarries in Whitechapel in 1408/9, where the manor received the profits of a 1/2-acre *lompette* on the south side of Algatestrete.<sup>73</sup> By later in the century Whitechapel was a centre for brick and tile manufacture, although most of this industry seems to have concentrated to the north of the main road in the Brick Lane area.<sup>74</sup>

The archers' requirement for unencumbered land clashed with the growing industry of brick-making in the Finsbury Fields. Brickearth was sought here in 1477 and bricks were made to repair the city wall.<sup>75</sup> When the city took possession of the lease of Finsbury manor in 1514, it was ordered that brick carts should be brought to carry sand and gravel from the fields.<sup>76</sup> Brick kilns and stacks of completed bricks in Finsbury Fields are depicted in a plan of 1633.<sup>77</sup> A brick kiln can be seen on the 'Agas' map to the north-east of the windmill mound of No Man's Land, and this gave the name to Brick Lane (Central Street), which bordered it to the east.

In the second half of the 16th century Lollesworth Field was detached from the manor of Stepney and extensively quarried for brickearth. In a manorial survey of 1549 its potential for brickmaking had multiplied the rents in its southern part by six; the road on its east boundary was named as Brick Lane, with two tile garths on its eastern side.<sup>78</sup> Stow states that Lollesworth Field was dug up to make bricks in 1576.<sup>79</sup> Brick-making had reached Shoreditch by 1618, and Swan Close to the east of Shoreditch High Street by the 1680s. By the 1630s there was tile-making on the west side of the main road at Holywell, followed by bricks in 1659. Brickmaking also expanded into the fields of the West End in the 16th and 17th centuries. The active brickfields presented a landscape of



Fig. 3: William Walworth kills Wat Tyler, and Richard II negotiates with the rebels at West Smithfield, June 1381 (British Library Royal MS 18.E.i f175)



large open areas stripped of their upper surfaces, afterwards covered by streets of houses.

### Conclusion

Medieval Londoners used the fields around the city for a variety of purposes according to their current priorities, not just for growing crops and grazing animals, but also for religious and recreational purposes, until they were eventually taken over by the deposition

of refuse, industrial exploitation and the spread of housing. Only a few pieces of the open fields survive: Finsbury Circus (part of the Moor); Finsbury Square (part of Upper Mallow Field); the Honourable Artillery Company ground and Bunhill Fields cemetery (parts of Bunhill Field); Lincoln's Inn Fields (parts of Purse Field and Cup Field); Coram's Fields and the squares of the West End. As in previous centuries, these areas are rightly retained by London's citizens as

places of recreation.

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