

# ◆ The Street Plan of Lewes and the Burghal Hidage

By Michael Holmes

*The striking rectangular pattern of the central Lewes streets is considered in its historical context. The absence of evidence for Roman settlement of the town and its first recorded appearance in the Burghal Hidage suggest an early Saxon origin. Detailed measurements of the layout of features of the town lead to a comparison with Hidage towns such as Wareham and Cricklade which were deliberately laid out as fortified settlements in the mid to late ninth century. It is concluded that Lewes fits this pattern. Based on this and recent discoveries, an estimate of the probable position of the Burgh Ditch is made.*

## INTRODUCTION

Lewes is the County Town of East Sussex and is known to have existed since at the least the tenth century. It is situated in a loop of the River Ouse with high ground to east and west (Fig. 1). The High Street is aligned along a promontory which descends from the west. The eastern end falls steeply towards the Cliffe river crossing. To the north is an ancient river crossing leading to

Malling, while to the south the land descends steeply to the valley of the Winterbourne. Although now dry land, this was formerly a wide tidal inlet. Here stood the Watergate to the medieval walled town. Surrounded on three sides by steep slopes and water, with hills affording views along the Ouse river valley both north and south, the site is suitable for a defensive position and controls the river crossing (Fig. 2).

North of the High Street, the ridge is dominated

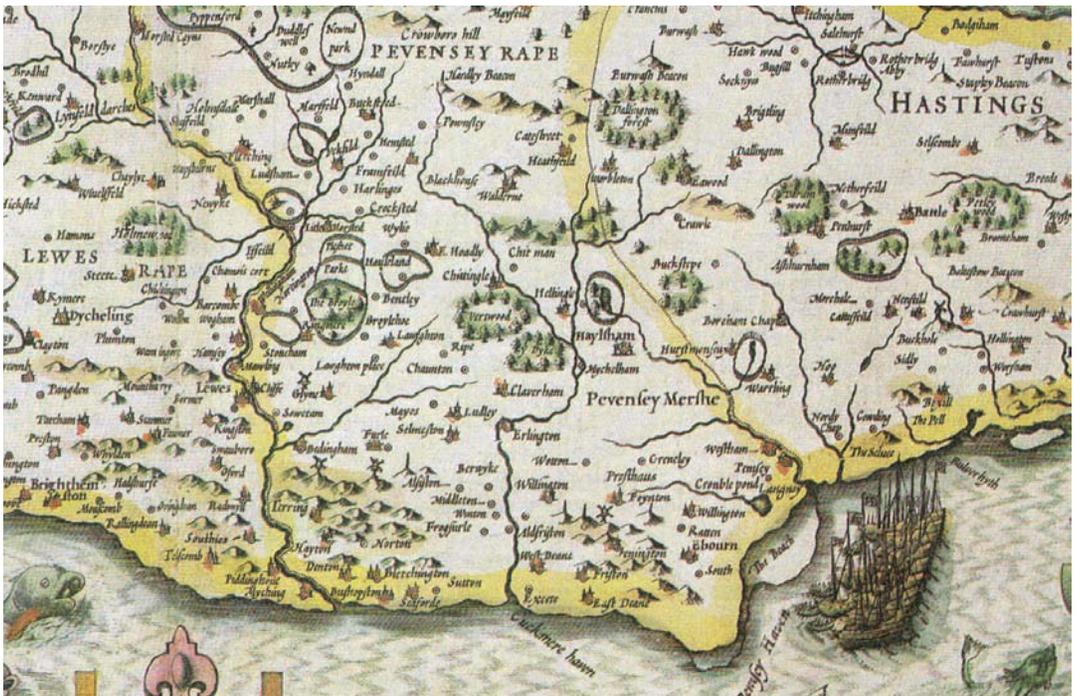


Fig. 1. Lewes in relation to the surrounding hills and waterways; extract of 'Sussex by John Speed 1610'.

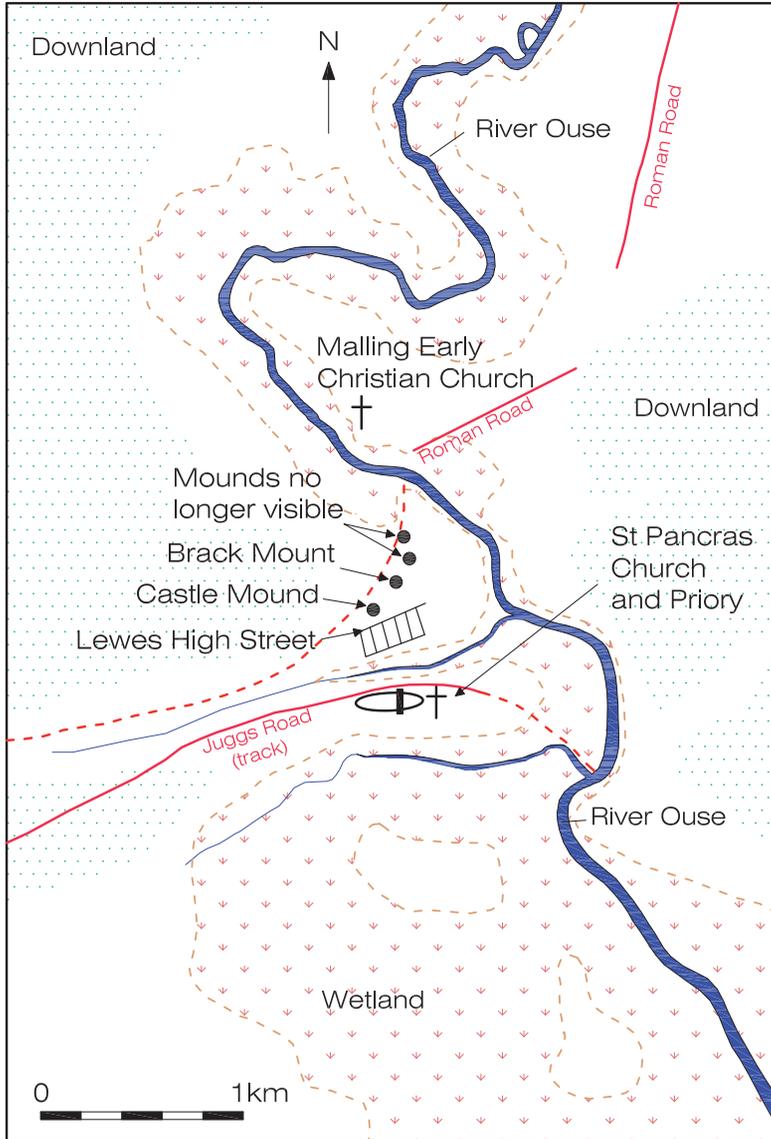


Fig. 2. The surrounding landscape of Lewes High Street.

by an unusual Norman Castle with two mottes, while south of the High Street is a series of parallel and approximately equi-spaced lanes at right angles to the High Street. This distinctive street plan can be seen on Figure 3 — Figg's 1799 map of Lewes. The regularity of the Lewes town centre side-streets (locally called *twittens* or *lanes*) to the south of the High Street has been noted many times. In his history of Lewes and its surrounding

villages, Horsfield (1824) speculated that the street pattern was evidence for the existence for what he called a Roman Camp.

The archaeological evidence for Roman occupation of the Lewes promontory is, however, thin. Rudling (1983) reviewed what was known about the town and came to the conclusion that there was no Roman settlement. Nevertheless, he suggested that there might have been one on the

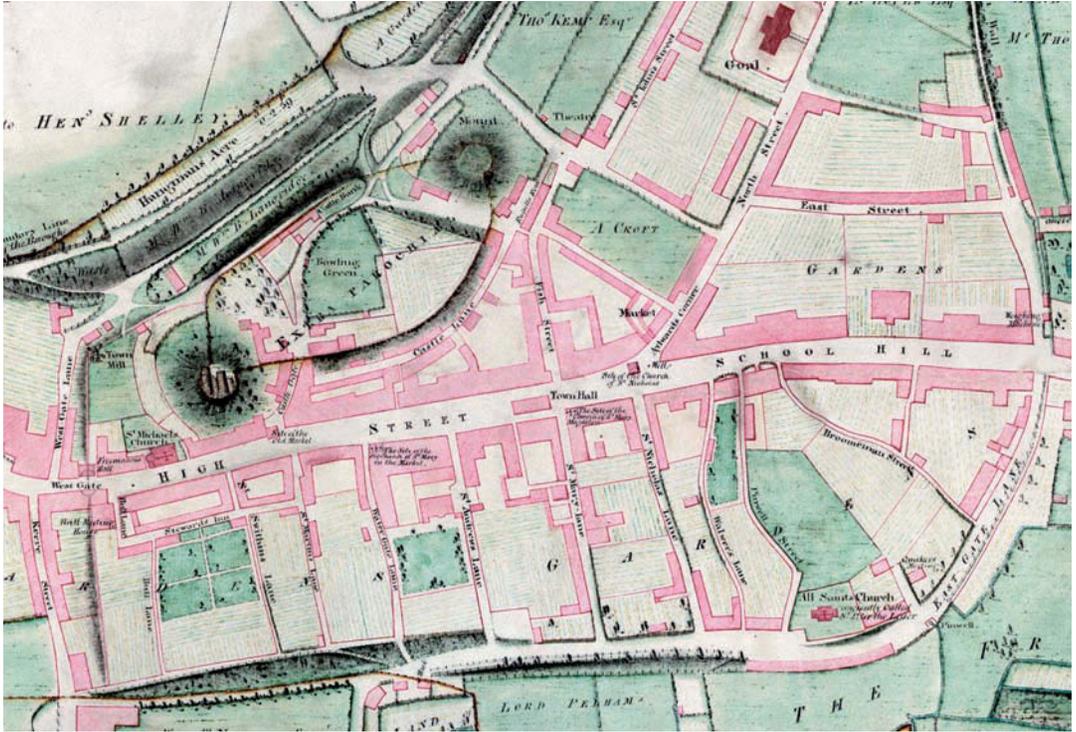


Fig. 3. William Figg's Map of 1799 (ESRO, LEW/C2/3/1).

other side of the River Ouse at Malling. According to Bleach (1997), there is evidence that on the Lewes hill and the land to the north which slopes down to the river crossing there were a series of 'mounds'. Bleach proposed that between the hill where the Norman Castle now stands and the river there may have been a market/ritual site as early as the late Iron Age. Certainly a Roman road approaches the town from the north and is last seen in Malling, where it appears to be heading for the crossing of the River Ouse to the north of the town (Norris 1956).

There are Saxon burials around the periphery of the town, and scattered finds of weapons and other artefacts have been made. However, there is little to suggest that the site was occupied before the early medieval period (Rudling 1983). The best that can be said is that the early history of Lewes is not known, and its history is unclear until the compilation of the Burghal Hidage. In particular, the extent and position of the Saxon boundary and fortifications are not known, although Brent (2004) has offered a suggestion which fits well with recent discoveries.

The Burghal Hidage (Hill 1969) is a document dating to the reign of the Elder Edward (899–924) which lists 33 fortified burghs in Wessex, most of which are assumed to have been fortified in the time of his father King Alfred (871–899). Two versions of the text of the Burghal Hidage exist. In version A, it is explained that each pole of wall was to be defended by four men and that every hide of land was to provide one man. Such assessments were part of a unified defensive system against Danish incursions, and implied that four hides of land were necessary to provide the manpower to defend each pole of fortification. According to Yorke (1995), references to fortress building and other 'common burdens' of military service become a regular feature of West Saxon charters only from the reign of Alfred's brother Æthelbald (855–60).

The document lists the number of hides which were required for each of some 33 burghs, assessing Chichester (the seventh largest) at 1500 hides and Winchester (the largest) at 2400. Lewes is assessed at 1300 hides of arable land, making it the 11th largest. With the conventional interpretation of one pole as equal to 16.5 feet, this gives for

Lewes a total defended length of 5363 feet (1.6 km). However, while good agreement between Burghal Hidage figures and wall length has been demonstrated for Winchester, the fit for other towns is not so good. Haslam (2009) has proposed that the figure given in the Hidage may be an aspiration of the Wessex administration that was not always achieved in practice, rather than a fact of measurement. For this reason, he cautions against using the Hidage figure to predict the fortification length when it is not known from independent sources such as excavation.

#### POSSIBLE AGE OF THE LEWES STREET PLAN

Houghton (1986) made a very careful study of the system of land tenure in Lewes. By relating the length of the frontage of plots along the High Street to the quitrent payable, he made a strong case for uniformity of plot size in the central part of the town. He suggested that when the plots were laid out, they related to a pre-existing street pattern. He presented a convincing argument for the antiquity of the High Street plots and the twittens. He makes the further point that in studies of medieval towns the initial plot pattern has been a remarkably stable element, even if encroachment has sometimes occurred.

In view of this possible antiquity of the street plan in Figure 3, it is useful to compare Lewes with other Burghal Hidage towns, especially those that were not built on re-used Roman sites. Biddle and Hill (1971) studied the street plans of seven Burghal Hidage towns, four on Roman sites and three — Wareham, Wallingford and Cricklade — which were not. In all cases they found evidence of an Alfredian-period rectilinear street plan which was not of Roman origin. In some cases they were able to identify excavation evidence of lost streets which were then found to fit the pattern. They concluded that the towns formed part of a deliberate policy of urban formation, not of forts, but of fortified settlements, founded as a response to the Danish threat. The implication was that the settlement of populations within fortified towns with regular layout of plots and internal streets was a deliberate policy. This policy they ascribed to the time of Alfred's reign (871–899). Further, it has been suggested by Haslam (2009) that the Burghal Hidage forts or towns had a definite relationship

to bridges or water crossing points. In the case of Lewes, the site clearly overlooks the crossing of the Ouse to Malling.

#### THE MEASUREMENTS OF LEWES

Studies of the metrology of Anglo-Saxon towns have suggested that a standard measurement was in use. In particular Crummy (1979) analysed the layout of several Anglo-Saxon towns including London, Winchester and Colchester. He found that a four-pole unit was in general use throughout the medieval period. However, he proposed that a distinctive 'Wessex Style' plan based on 16-pole units could be postulated for the southern towns of Chichester, Wallingford and Winchester. This type of 16-pole plan, he stated, seemed to be confined to towns listed in the Burghal Hidage and probably implied a pre-tenth century date. Haslam (1986) tested this in the case of Cricklade and found agreement within reasonable statistical limits.

In order to see if this also applied in the case of Lewes, measurements were made of the spacing of the north-south twittens and other linear features such as parish boundaries. An Ordnance Survey 1:1250 map was used, and measurements were made from the western end of the town, where the position of the western medieval wall and the Westgate are known. The High Street building line was taken as a base line for the measurements. In general, studies of Burghal Hidage towns (Crummy 1979) have shown that it is the building line, not the position of streets themselves, which corresponds to the edge of the original plot layouts. The streets arose in a secondary way to provide access. In the case of the Lewes twittens it is not possible to say which side of the street should be used, and measurements, therefore, were taken from the centre of the roadway. Further, the twittens sometimes show slight curvature over their length. In view of this, errors of measurement of  $\pm \frac{1}{2}$  pole are included.

#### WEST-EAST FEATURES

All the measurements were made on the High Street frontage building line or the centreline of Stewards Inn Lane for features which do not intersect the High Street.

The chosen features are as follows (Fig. 4).

1. The site of the Westgate and the line of the

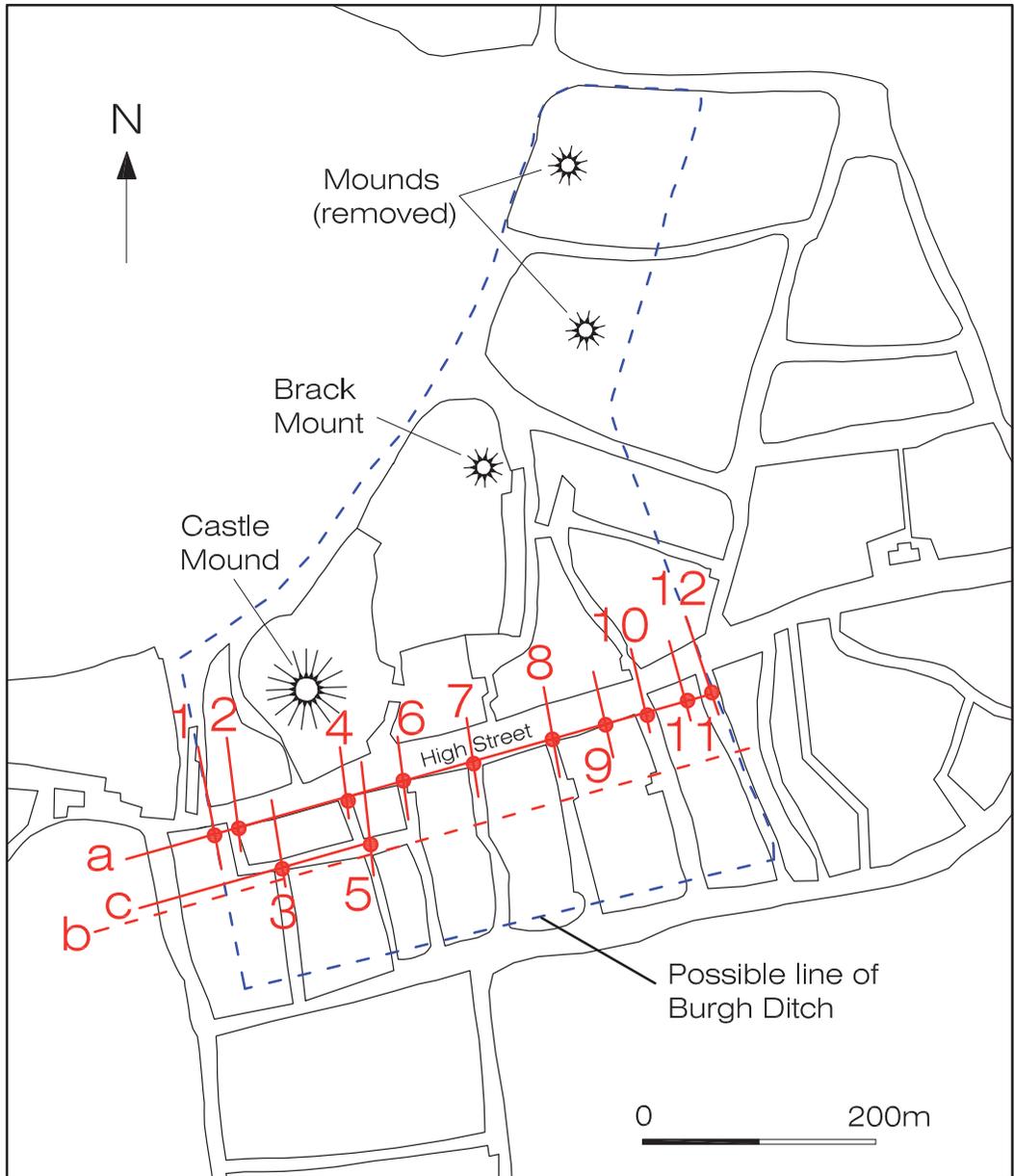


Fig. 4. The measurement points.

medieval wall which runs north–south at this point. It may overlay the Saxon Burgh ditch, although this has not been demonstrated by excavation.

2. Bull Lane — the northern part of which joins the High Street on the east side of Bull House.

This twitten shows evidence of encroachment from the east.

3. Paine's Twitten. This twitten does not reach the High Street. On Figg's map it is called Bull Lane.
4. St Swithun's Lane — upper part. There was no

church of St Swithun, as far as is known.

5. St Swithun's Lane lower part — now called Green Lane.
6. St Martin's Lane. The position of the church of St Martin is now lost.
7. Watergate Lane recalls the southern watergate of the town and the tidal inlet which separated Lewes from Southover.
8. St Andrew's Lane.
9. The entrance to the White Hart. Nowadays this leads only to the hotel car park, but it is likely to have been a twitten as it carries the parish boundary between St Mary's and St Andrew's.
10. St Mary's Lane (now Station Street). The church's exact position is not known, but it was near the High Street. The intersection of St Mary's Lane with High Street marks the major crossroads of the town and was the centre of the market throughout the medieval period.
11. The parish boundary between All Saints and St John sub Castro runs southwards between 44 and 45 High Street. Nothing visible marks this line in the present day.
12. St Nicholas Lane remembers the Market Church which stood in the centre of the High Street at this point. St Nicholas Lane is the last of the roughly parallel straight lanes or twittens. Further to the east the streets assume a typical winding medieval character.

During the excavation of the Baxter's Printworks site, which lay on both sides of St Nicholas Lane, an early medieval ditch was found which was interpreted as a Burgh Ditch, the first time that such a feature has been identified anywhere in Lewes. The Baxter's site yielded many finds from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, including a coin hoard of Edward the Elder (899–924). The Burgh Ditch lay along the line of the lane and on its western side. It was backfilled in the twelfth century (Stevens 2008, and pers. comm.).

#### **NORTH-SOUTH FEATURES**

- a. The High Street building line. Encroachment has affected this line, particularly at the old market site at the top of Station Street. A projected line was drawn based on the western part of the High Street.
- b. Gatehouse Way is a back lane to the High Street now lost. Brent (2004) suggests that it was 138

feet behind the High Street building line.

- c. Stewards Inn Lane.

The results are shown in Table 1.

#### **INTERPRETATION OF THE MEASUREMENTS**

The measurements show a regularity which looks deliberate and may be seen as evidence of a planned layout. If we take the conventional interpretation that one pole is 16.5 feet, the Lewes data does not yield whole numbers of poles within measurement error. However, it is necessary to question the length of pole in use in the ninth century. Measurements in the early medieval period were not based on a centralized or reproducible standard. Nash (1977) has studied the local perch in use in Sussex. The perch is the Norman name for the pole and should be seen as the same unit. He found that perches of 16.5, 17 and 18 feet were in use within a 5 km radius of Lewes. Across Sussex there were large variations. Such local perches were very persistent, and continued in use throughout the medieval period and into early modern times. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the Anglo-Saxon pole also exhibited variation based on local custom.

If one takes a pole of 18', which was known to be in use locally (for instance at Laughton just outside Lewes), then the measurements reveal the possibility that the street plan was laid out on a grid of 64 poles in length and that linear features which may originally have been plot boundaries were spaced at four-pole intervals. This is consistent with Lewes having been laid out in the mid to late 9th century as a fortified settlement, in a similar way to Wareham, Cricklade and other Burghal Hidage towns.

In particular, the most striking result is the distance of 64 poles (4 × 16 poles) for the distance between the Westgate and the newly discovered Burgh Ditch, which presumably marked the eastern boundary of the Saxon Town. As previously noted the 16-pole unit is a significant marker for 'Wessex Style' town plans and characteristic of an early date. There is also a suggestion that the town was laid out between Westgate and St Nicholas Lane as four 16-pole units which were divided into quarters with a width of four poles each. If this analysis is correct, it suggests that the western Burgh Ditch will be found to underlie the medieval town wall.

Table 1. Measurements of Lewes (all  $\pm 0.5$  pole).

| Feature no. | Feature (west to east)                             | Metres cumulative from Westgate (measured) | Feet cumulative from Westgate (converted) | Poles (16½') from Westgate    | Poles (18') from Westgate    | Multiple of 4 poles* (cumulative) |
|-------------|--|--|---|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1           | Westgate - O.S. line of medieval wall              | 0  | 0   | 0                             | 0                            | 0                                 |
| 2           | Bull Lane (northern part)                          | 17.5                                       | 57  | 3.5                           | 3.2                          | 1                                 |
| 3           | Paine's Twitten (formerly Bull Lane southern part) | 43.8                                       | 143                                       | 8.7                           | 7.9                          | 2                                 |
| 4           | St Swithun's Lane (northern part)                  | 90.0                                       | 295                                       | 17.9                          | 16.4                         | 4                                 |
| 5           | Green Lane (formerly St Swithun's Lane)            | 107.5                                      | 353                                       | 21.4                          | 19.6                         | 5                                 |
| 6           | St Martin's Lane                                   | 136.3                                      | 447                                       | 27.1                          | 24.8                         | 6                                 |
| 7           | Watergate Lane                                     | 185.0                                      | 607                                       | 36.8                          | 33.7                         | 8?                                |
| 8           | St Andrew's Lane                                   | 236.3                                      | 775                                       | 47.0                          | 43.1                         | 11                                |
| 9           | White Hart entrance - parish boundary              | 273.8                                      | 898                                       | 54.4                          | 49.9                         | 12?                               |
| 10          | Station St (formerly St Mary's Lane)               | 301.3                                      | 988                                       | 59.9                          | 54.9                         | 14?                               |
| 11          | 44/45 High St - parish boundary                    | 326.3                                      | 1070                                      | 64.8                          | 59.4                         | 15                                |
| 12          | St Nicholas Lane (Burgh Ditch)                     | 347.5                                      | 1140                                      | 69.1                          | 63.3                         | 16                                |
| Feature no. | Feature (north to south)                           | Metres from High Street (measured)         | Feet from High Street (converted)         | Poles (16½') from High Street | Poles (18') from High Street | Multiple of 4 poles*              |
| a           | High Street building line                          | 0  | 0   | 0                             | 0                            | 0                                 |
| b           | Gatehouse Way (position not known)                 | -  | 138**                                     | 8.4                           | 7.7                          | 2                                 |
| c           | Stewards Inn Lane                                  | 38   | 123                                       | 7.5                           | 7.2                          | 2?                                |

**Notes**  
\* cumulative distance in units of  $4 \times (18')$  poles to nearest whole number.  
\*\* from Brent (2004).

### THE SHAPE OF THE SAXON TOWN

The boundaries of the Saxon town are not well established. Freke (1974) carried out an excavation on the supposed position of the north east section of the town wall. He found no evidence of a ditch or wall in Brook Street, which is shown on OS maps as the northern limit of the fortified town. However, his excavation in Lancaster Street was more interesting. In this case evidence of a bank and ditch was found. The bank was dated to the twelfth century and was not necessarily associated with the Burgh Ditch.

Brent (2004) has suggested a possible boundary

for the Saxon town which includes the northern part of the central area discussed above, the Norman Castle precinct and the apparently fortified position of St John sub Castro church. None of the other Alfredian towns shows a rectangular pattern which extends outside the original fortified burgh and, on the face of it, this seems very unlikely. Therefore the High Street twittens should be included in their entirety. This implies that the southern boundary of the Saxon town was similar to the line of the medieval wall. Apart from that, the suggested layout follows that proposed by Brent (*see* Fig. 4).

The Burghal Hidage figure for Lewes is 1300

hides. If four hides supported each pole of wall, and the 18-foot pole was in use locally, then the wall length implied was around 325 poles or 1.8 km (5850 feet). The length of wall shown in Figure 4 is 1.7 km, which is in reasonable agreement with the Burghal Hidage figure and suggests that this may be the layout of the Saxon bank and ditch fortifications.

### CONCLUSION

It appears that the present-day street plan of central Lewes preserves a system of land allocation used in the Alfredian period in the mid to late ninth century to lay out fortified settlements

as part of a defensive strategy against Danish Viking incursions. Although the area north of the High Street has been massively disrupted by the insertion of the Norman castle, a plausible map of the original Saxon settlement may be recovered using the natural boundaries, the surviving medieval walls, the newly discovered Burgh Ditch and the fortified mound at the ancient river crossing to Malling. It appears likely that Lewes as a town was deliberately created by the administration of Wessex at the time of King Alfred or his brother Æthelbald. Future archaeological observations within the town will, hopefully, be able to test the model suggested here.

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