

# A Medieval Wharf in Thoresby College Courtyard, King's Lynn

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## HISTORY OF THE SITE

SITUATED at the SE. corner of the Wash, on the east bank of the Great Ouse, King's Lynn began its urban development with the founding of the parish church of St. Margaret by Herbert Losinga, bishop of Norwich (1091–1119). The original area of settlement lay between the two streams Purfleet and Mill Fleet, the nucleus being Saturday Market Place, on the southern edge of which lies the parish church (FIG. 24). As its prosperity increased the town expanded northwards into the 'New Land' planned by Bishop Turbus (1146–1174). Further extensions were made south and east, and the town was walled, at latest, before 1337, in which year money was raised for the repair of the walls.<sup>2</sup>

Thoresby College lies at the centre of the original settlement, at the junction of Queen Street with Saturday Market Place and College Lane which runs south-west from the market place towards the river (FIG. 25). It was founded as a chantry college at the beginning of the 16th century by Thomas Thoresby, mayor of Lynn in 1502, and after its suppression in 1547 was converted into a merchant's house. Built around a quadrangle, its W. range ran along the edge of the river in the 16th century. Before Thomas Thoresby acquired the site, the land had belonged to the Gild of Jesus, as recorded in his will:

'I will that lands and tenements to the yearly value of 40s., above all charges, be purchased by mine executors, and after that be made sure to the fraternity of the Ihu Guild in Lynn, in recompense of the place which I caused the new college to be built upon.'<sup>3</sup>

College Lane was a narrow alley leading from the market place to the common quay and the area must have possessed considerable economic importance, although there is no documentary evidence for the presence of buildings. By the

<sup>1</sup> The King's Lynn Archaeological Survey was begun in 1963 to investigate sites threatened by commercial development of the town centre. As part of the survey, excavations in Thoresby College courtyard were carried out in spring, 1964. Thanks are due to the King's Lynn Preservation Trust on whose property the excavation took place, to the Borough Council for its practical assistance, to Miss A. S. Mottram, Curator of King's Lynn Museum where the finds and records are stored, and to all my many volunteers. I am also particularly indebted to Mr. G. C. Dunning for his help and encouragement and for his comments on the knight jug (p. 101 f.), to Mr. B. W. Spencer and Mr. A. S. Trotman of the London Museum who have advised on and treated some of the finds, and to Mr. L. Bick and Mr. J. G. Hurst for their advice.

<sup>2</sup> H. J. Hillen, *History of the Borough of King's Lynn* (Norwich, 1907), p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> G. Eller, *Memorials, Archaeological and Ecclesiastical, of the West Winch Manors* (King's Lynn, 1861), pp. 133–40.

end of the 15th century the economic centre of Lynn had moved away from Saturday Market Place to Tuesday Market Place, the focus of the settlement of the 'New Land', and it was therefore possible to replace commercial property by a chantry college.

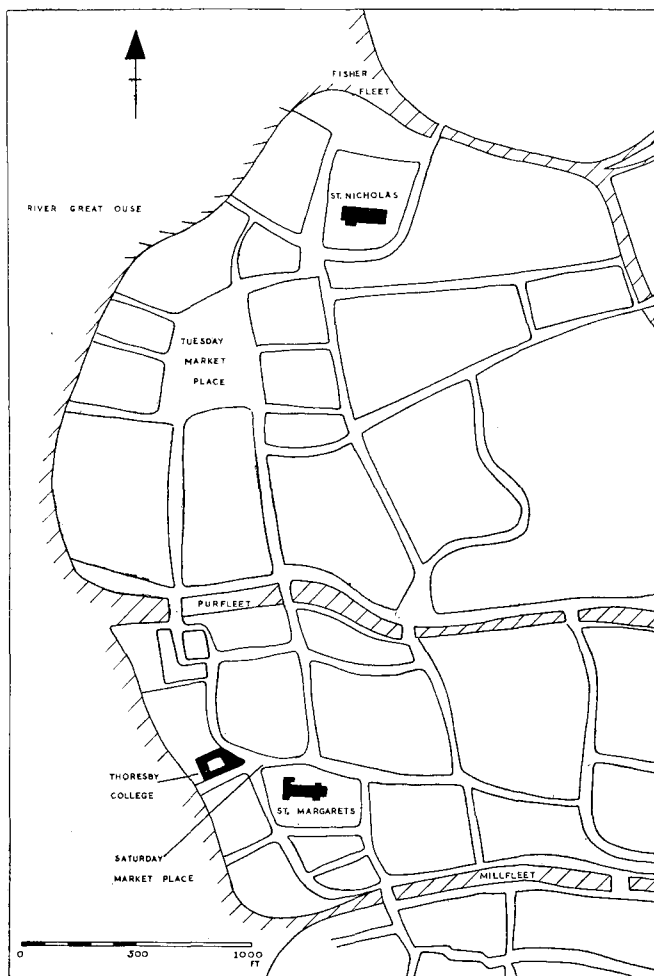


FIG. 24  
KING'S LYNN, NORFOLK  
Map of town in 17th century (pp. 94, 99)  
(after Henry Bell's *Groundplat* of c. 1680)

## THE EXCAVATION

The courtyard was available for excavation for six weeks in April and May 1964 before the restoration of the college by the Preservation Trust. It was hoped that excavation would provide evidence for:

1. The earliest settlement of the town.
2. Occupation on the site before the construction of Thoresby College.
3. The course of the river during the medieval period.

It is to the third of these problems that this paper is mainly devoted.

Two trenches were opened in the northern half of the courtyard. In trench A all traces of medieval occupation were obliterated by an 18th-century brick-

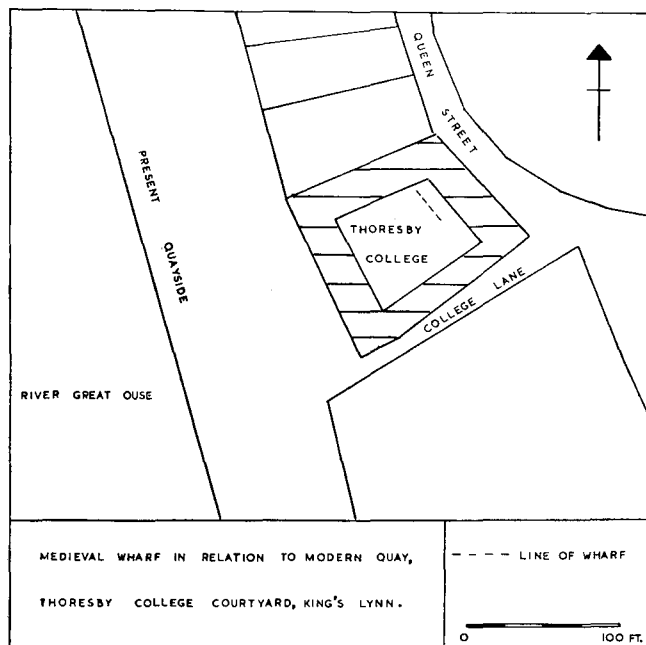


FIG. 25  
KING'S LYNN, NORFOLK  
Sketch-map showing position of medieval wharf (p. 94)

vaulted cellar which appeared to extend over the whole W. area of the court. Trench B, 15 ft. by 20 ft. in extent, lay in the NE. quarter of the courtyard and produced finds of considerable structural interest, including remains of a medieval wooden wharf.

As Thoresby College lies only 19 ft. above sea level and its Queen Street frontage about 70 yds. from the river-bank, the site was waterlogged and organic material was preserved. The subsoil is riverine silt so impregnated with water as to be almost liquid at times. Unfortunately the dangerous nature of the soil and the proximity of the trench to the E. wing of Thoresby College limited the depth of the excavation, and work had to be abandoned before the bottom of the wharf was reached. However, a stretch 15 ft. long and 2½ ft. high was exposed in a state of preservation sufficient to enable its construction to be ascertained (PL. XVII, A).

The wharf ran from north to south across the E. end of trench B, some 60 yds.

from the present E. bank of the Great Ouse, and 25 yds. from the W. wall of the W. wing of Thoresby College. The portion exposed consisted of four upright oak posts supporting horizontal planks which retained the river-bank, and the top lay  $9\frac{1}{4}$  ft. below the modern ground-level. An anchor beam ran from beside one of the uprights into the bank, at right angles to the face of the wharf (PL. XVII, B; FIG. 26).

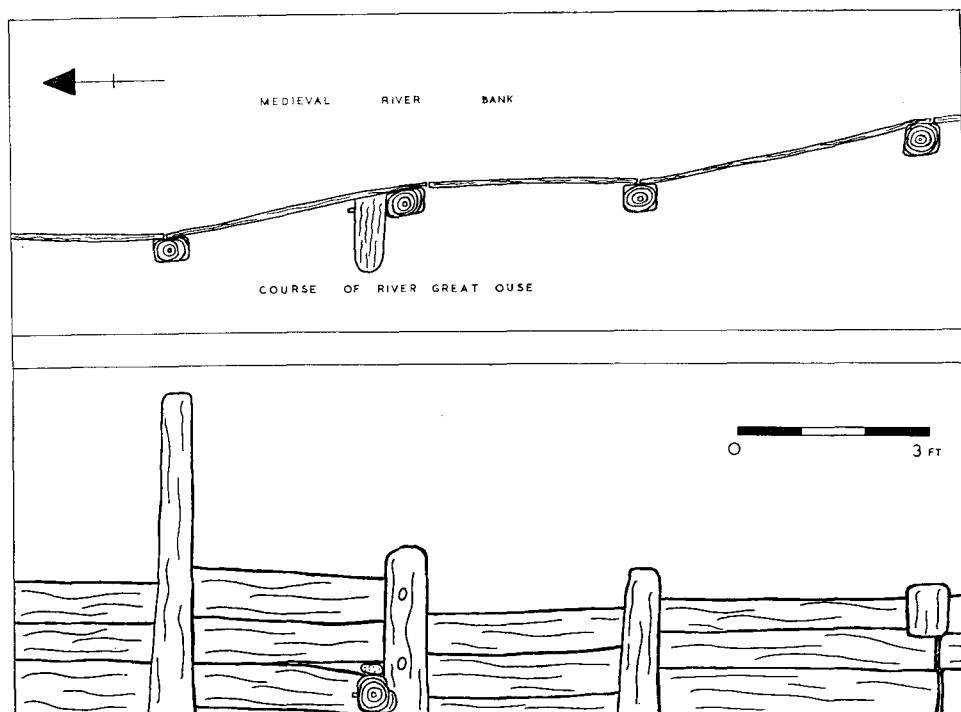


FIG. 26

KING'S LYNN, NORFOLK

Plan and elevation of medieval wharf (p. 97 f.), showing posts A-D (l. to r.)

*Post A* measured 5 ft. 1 in. from the water-level,<sup>4</sup> tapering from 8 in. by 6 in. at the base to 5 in. square at the top. When this post was removed before the trench was filled in again it was found to be 9 ft. 10 in. long and to have a tenon joint at the base, with a dowel hole through it.

*Post B*, exposed for a height of 2 ft. 7 in., was roughly circular in section and 8 in. in diameter. Three holes, 2 in. in diameter, had taken dowels attaching the upright to the horizontal planks which ran behind it. One dowel remained in position

<sup>4</sup> All measurements for the wharf are taken from the water-level at the time when work had to be abandoned. The posts are lettered A-D from north to south (see FIG. 26).

when excavated. Just above the water-level an anchor beam ran into the bank and was dovetailed into post B and secured with a square-sectioned wooden peg. The anchor beam was roughly round in section, 8 in. in diameter, the peg  $1\frac{1}{2}$  in. square, and the whole protruded about 1 ft. in front of the planks, one of which had been cut to provide a square gap through which the beam could run (PL. XVII, B).

*Post C* measured  $2\frac{1}{4}$  ft. from the water-level, and tapered slightly towards the top where it was 6 in. square.

*Post D* consisted only of a piece of timber 9 in. by 6 in. which was attached to the planks but possibly served as a fender rather than a supporting post.

*The planks*, which ran behind the uprights, averaged 3 ft. long and 8 in. wide. The lower edge of each was tapered and wedged behind the wider upper edge of the plank beneath. The planks met edge to edge behind each upright and were, as at post B, sometimes dowelled into the upright. The structure formed a firm face to the hard-packed earth of the river-bank behind it. The weight of the earth had caused the planks to bulge a little so that the wharf had a slightly bowed appearance.

The earth to the east of the wharf, i.e. forming the river-bank, was a compact mixture of blue and brown silt with a scatter of dark occupation-material. The deposit on the W. side of the structure consisted of loose black occupation-material, heavily waterlogged, with occasional pockets of silt. This was similar to material lying above the compacted earth of the river-bank on the E. side of the wharf. The structure, therefore, revetted the river-bank, which, together with the area to the west of it, was covered with a uniform thick layer of occupation-material. Finds in this layer consisted mainly of potsherds and leather. There were only two metal objects, both iron: a *knife* (with broken point) and an almost complete *key*. The thick layer of occupation covering the wharf represents the accumulation of rubbish intentionally thrown into the river (see below p. 99 f.).

All the pottery from this layer is extremely fragmentary. It consists mainly of Grimston ware, a local East Anglian product with a dark grey sandy fabric and dark olive-green glaze. A few fragments of pottery from the east midlands and the north of England are the only non-local wares. Several sherds of a Grimston-ware knight jug (p. 101 f., FIG. 27) show a local development of the Scarborough and Nottingham type and illustrate further Lynn's contact with that part of the country. G. C. Dunning (p. 102) places the King's Lynn knight jug in the early part of the 14th century, and the other pottery is all of the late 13th or early 14th century. The key, with a circular loop and the stem and bit flimsily made out of a single sheet of iron, is of a type generally attributed to the 12th and 13th centuries;<sup>5</sup> the small scramasax knife is of typical medieval form but cannot be precisely dated. It appears, therefore, that the material surrounding the wharf was deposited at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th centuries, which gives a *terminus ante quem* for the building of the wharf.

<sup>5</sup> *Medieval Catalogue* (London Museum Catalogues: no. 7, 1940), p. 136, type II.

# DISCUSSION

As stated above (p. 96 f.), the line of the excavated wharf lies 60 yds. within the present bank of the Great Ouse and 25 yds. east of the W. range of Thoresby College (FIG. 25). There has, therefore, been a 60-yd. accumulation of material in front of the wharf since it was built, and already by the beginning of the 16th century the accumulation was sufficient to enable Thoresby College to be built on an area which had once been river. In order to establish even a tentative date for the wharf, the reason for the accumulation and the possible speed of its formation must be assessed.

The Great Ouse, a wide and slow-moving river, carries both a large volume of water from its tributaries and fenland drains, and a very great quantity of riverine silt which it deposits along its course. Silting of the shipping channel and harbour in King's Lynn is an acute problem today, but the river is scouring the face of South Quay, on which Thoresby College lies, and depositing along the W. bank, where a bend a few hundred yards south catches the silt. Henry Bell's mid 17th-century map of Lynn (FIG. 24) shows that the course of the river through the town was then very similar to that of today, and it is probable that even in the medieval period the river rounded the same bend before it flowed into the Wash.<sup>6</sup> If this is so, silting must have followed basically the same pattern. That is, when Thoresby College wharf was in use, very little silt was deposited along its face; the deposit found in front of the wharf confirms this and indicates that the made-up ground between the wharf and the later quays must be the result of intentional tipping of rubbish into the river.

Material could have been thrown into the river either to dispose of waste or to consolidate ground by the river-bank to extend the quayside further west. The accumulation was probably the result of both; the river would be used as a dumping ground, thus blocking the harbour, the bank would then be consolidated and another wharf built.

Documentary sources for the medieval period provide ample evidence that rivers and harbours were constantly being polluted and obstructed, and there were frequent attempts to prevent it. The Hall Books in King's Lynn archives<sup>7</sup> are a useful source of local information, although they contain few references earlier than the 14th century. Between 1426 and 1450 there are five orders restraining people from throwing rubbish in the river; their tone becomes more and more peremptory and finally threatens punishment. In 1437 'it was strictly forbidden to tip rubbish (fumum) into the haven, for its destruction'<sup>8</sup> and in 1450 'no-one was to throw filth into any fleet or into the haven. 4d. for the first offence, 8d. for the second and imprisonment for the third.'<sup>9</sup> The regularity with which these orders

<sup>6</sup> The Eau Brink Cut (dug in 1821) and the Estuary Cut (1852-3) have radically altered the course of the river north and south of the town, but the river through the town itself has never been diverted into man-made channels.

<sup>7</sup> H. Harrod, *Report on the Deeds and Records of the Borough of King's Lynn* (King's Lynn, 1874).

<sup>8</sup> *Hall Book I*, 20 March, 15 Henry VI. All the quotations from the King's Lynn documents are taken from unpublished transcripts made by Mrs. D. M. Owen for the King's Lynn Archaeological Survey. Reference numbers refer to the catalogue system in the town archive.

<sup>9</sup> *Hall Book I*, Vigil of SS. Simon and Jude, 28 Henry VI.

occur during the 14th and 15th centuries indicates the severity of the problem, which was probably as acute during the previous centuries. An order in 1528 in which it was 'forbidden to cast out ballast into the haven which is suffering for this'<sup>10</sup> implies that ships were also guilty of the offence. Comparisons may be made with Bergen where 'during the greater part of the medieval period refuse from the whole town, and not only from the quay where the merchants lived, was tipped into the harbour. The kings strove in vain to forbid it.'<sup>11</sup>

Another reason for the accumulation of rubbish against the river-bank may be that the communal muckhills were often situated beside the river and the fleets. St. Margaret's muckhill lay west of the Saturday Market Place beside College Lane,<sup>12</sup> and perhaps the occupation-material above and to the west of Thoresby College wharf may be part of the muckhill which slid over the edge of the quay. In 1570-71 the midden in this area was known as College muckhill and an order was made for the construction of a new bridge, wharf and staithe there.<sup>13</sup> Documents suggest that butchers, many of whom had stalls in Saturday Market Place, were particularly responsible for polluting the river, and they were the subject of many decrees.<sup>14</sup> They were not allowed to put their refuse on the common muckhills and it is tempting to imagine them sneaking along College Lane to throw all their rubbish into the nearest stretch of water.

As the accumulation of material in front of the wharf came about through the deposition of rubbish rather than through excessive silting (p. 99) a fairly long time must have elapsed between the construction of the wharf and its abandonment, when the water became too shallow to allow boats to berth there. It is likely, therefore, that the wharf represents the river-bank at a period earlier than the earliest pottery found in the deposit. It was probably constructed during the earliest part of the 13th century, when Lynn's activities as a port were at their height.

Medieval wharves in King's Lynn are mentioned frequently in the town archives. Both the E. bank of the Great Ouse and the banks of the fleets were lined with quays.<sup>15</sup> Several were common quays or staithes; others were private wharves attached to merchants' houses.<sup>16</sup> The documents give no information about the construction of wharves until 1547, when a stone wharf is mentioned, 'a wharf to be made at Purfleet, from the Bridge to the Haven, with lyme and stone'.<sup>17</sup>

Closest excavated parallels to the Thoresby College wooden wharf come from two continental sites, Bergen in Norway,<sup>18</sup> and Staveren in the Netherlands.<sup>19</sup> Excavations on English sites have produced remains of a stone wharf at Pevensey,<sup>20</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Hall Book III*, 19 Henry VIII.

<sup>11</sup> A. E. Herteig in *Med. Archaeol.*, III (1959), 186.

<sup>12</sup> *Rentals and Surveys*, Bc. 7, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Chamberlain's Accounts*, Bc. 7, 1570-71.

<sup>14</sup> *Hall Book I*, 7 December, 23 Henry VI.

<sup>15</sup> *Rentals and Surveys*, Bc. 7, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> W. A. Pantin in *Med. Archaeol.*, VI-VII (1962-3), 173.

<sup>17</sup> *Hall Book IV*, 1 Edward VI.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.* in note 11, pp. 177-86.

<sup>19</sup> Information from Mr. J. G. Hurst.

<sup>20</sup> Excavated by Mr. A. J. F. Dullea, 1963.

and a probable stone wharf with wooden foundation-piles at Abingdon Street, Westminster.<sup>21</sup> A Roman wharf on the River Usk at Caerleon showed a wooden extension to an earlier stone quay.<sup>22</sup> The exclusive use of wood at King's Lynn reflects the lack of suitable local stone, a factor which also influenced the wharves at Staveren and Bergen.

### THE POTTERY

#### FRAGMENT OF KNIGHT JUG (FIG. 27)

Part of jug with simple upright rim and rod-section handle. Dark grey sandy fabric with glossy dark olive-green glaze. Decorated with the figure of a woman flanked by

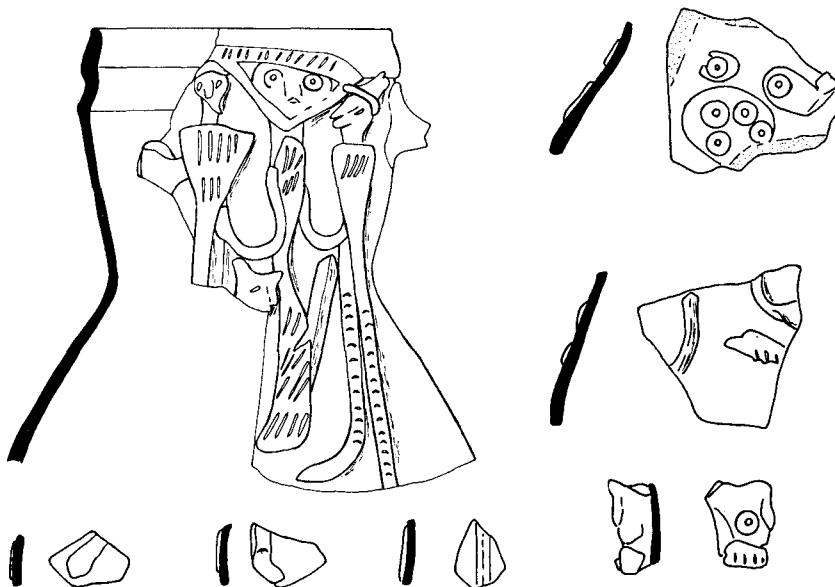


FIG. 27

#### KING'S LYNN, NORFOLK

Sherds of knight jug of Grimston ware from medieval wharf. Sc.  $\frac{1}{4}$

knights and part of a fourth figure. All are modelled in low relief with the heads fairly accurately although schematically portrayed and the bodies reduced to long narrow strips decorated with slashes and crescentic impressions. The woman's head, depicted full-face, is surrounded by a triangular head-dress, the eyes shown by circle-and-dot stamps and the mouth by a simple groove. The heads of the knights, in profile, are much more schematically represented, the eyes indicated by stab marks. Each knight wears a cap and carries a triangular shield decorated with slashes which is in one piece with the rod-shaped body of each knight. The fourth figure is represented only by a head, beside the woman's 'waist', and may be a dog. Several other decorated sherds of the same jug were found but a complete reconstruction was impossible.

Mr. G. C. Dunning comments:

'This jug is clearly derivative in style and technique from the Nottingham/Scarborough knight jugs in full relief, modelled in the round. So style alone puts

<sup>21</sup> Excavated by the Ministry of Public Building and Works: see 'Medieval Britain in 1964' below p. 198.

<sup>22</sup> Excavated by Mr. G. C. Boon: *J. Rom. Studies*, LIV (1964), 152 f., pl. xi, 1.



it into the early 14th century. This is confirmed by the woman's wimple and head-dress. The tendency was for the fillet across the forehead to become stiff and wider, and to be crimped and embroidered. The next step was to join the ends of the fillet to a linen band (barbette) passing under the chin. During the first quarter of the 14th century these bands framed the face in a kind of triangle, and the part of the chin-covering falling over the shoulders and hiding the neck is really the wimple proper. The style of head-dress on the pot is remarkably similar to that of the sculptured effigy of a lady of c. 1300 at Bradford-on-Avon, and also a fine effigy of c. 1310 at Gonalston, south Nottinghamshire.<sup>23</sup> The jug, therefore, can fairly confidently be dated to the first quarter of the 14th century.'

#### OTHER SHERDS FROM THE WHARF (FIG. 28)

The pottery from the wharf is very fragmentary and is mainly of local types frequently found on medieval sites in King's Lynn and the surrounding area. Imports from other parts of the country are sparse, but the decoration on some local wares suggests influence from external contacts.

1. Cooking-pot rim. Light grey sandy fabric with lighter grey slip both inside and out. Out-turned hollowed rim with a rounded outer edge and slight inner cordon. Upper surface of rim decorated with a single incised wavy line. TCBW. 56.
2. Cooking-pot rim. Hard grey fabric with some grits, buff inner and outer surface. Simple everted flat rim. TCBW. 57.
3. Cooking-pot rim. Dark grey gritty fabric with lighter grey inner and outer surface. Simple everted rim decorated with incised wavy lines on surface and thumb-impressions along inner cordon. Well-defined throwing grooves inside and out. TCBW. 61.
4. Cooking-pot rim. Light grey sandy fabric. Everted hollowed rim with slightly thickened, rounded outer edge and inner ring for lid. TCBW. 60.
5. Cooking-pot rim. Fabric as no. 4. Exterior heavily soot-blackened. Outward-sloping rim with internal cordon. Parallel grooves below the rim forming ridges on the outside. TCBW. 62.
6. Part of rim and handle of jug. Hard sandy dark grey fabric, light grey to buff inner surface with splashes of glaze. Dark olive-green external glaze, slightly cracked. Upright rounded rim with external cordon. Narrow strap-section handle attached to neck of jug with two thumb-impressions. Two parallel grooves around neck immediately below handle. TCBW. 64.
7. Part of rim and handle of jug. Fabric as no. 6. Olive-green and brown speckled glaze. Simple upright tapering rim. Strap-section handle attached by two thumb-impressions. TCBW. 87.
8. Part of rim and handle of shallow bowl or skillet. Fabric as no. 6 but glazed inside and out with glossy dark olive-green glaze. Thickened, slightly out-turned rim with flat top. Strap-section handle with single broad longitudinal groove attached, without thumb-impressions, immediately beneath the rim. TCBW. 65.
9. Part of base of jug. Fabric as no. 6 with light grey external slip and splashes of dark olive-green glaze. Flat base with shallow, equally-spaced thumb-impressions around foot. TCBW. 97.
10. Body sherd. Fabric as no. 6. Dark olive-green external glaze overlaid by double curved line of brown slip with spots of slip between. TCBW. 6.
11. Sherd from base of neck of jug. Fabric as no. 6. Vertical lines of brown slip divide the body of the vessel into panels containing a horse-shoe shaped design of lines and pellets of slip. TCBW. 4.
12. Body sherd. Fabric as no. 6. Blobs of brown slip with 'raspberry' stamp. TCBW. 24. Cf. no. 16.

<sup>23</sup> *J. Brit. Archaeol. Assoc.*, 3 ser., xiii (1950), 10, pl. xix; C. W. and P. Cunningham, *Handbook of English Mediaeval Costume* (1952), pp. 50, 74, figs. 17 and 30.

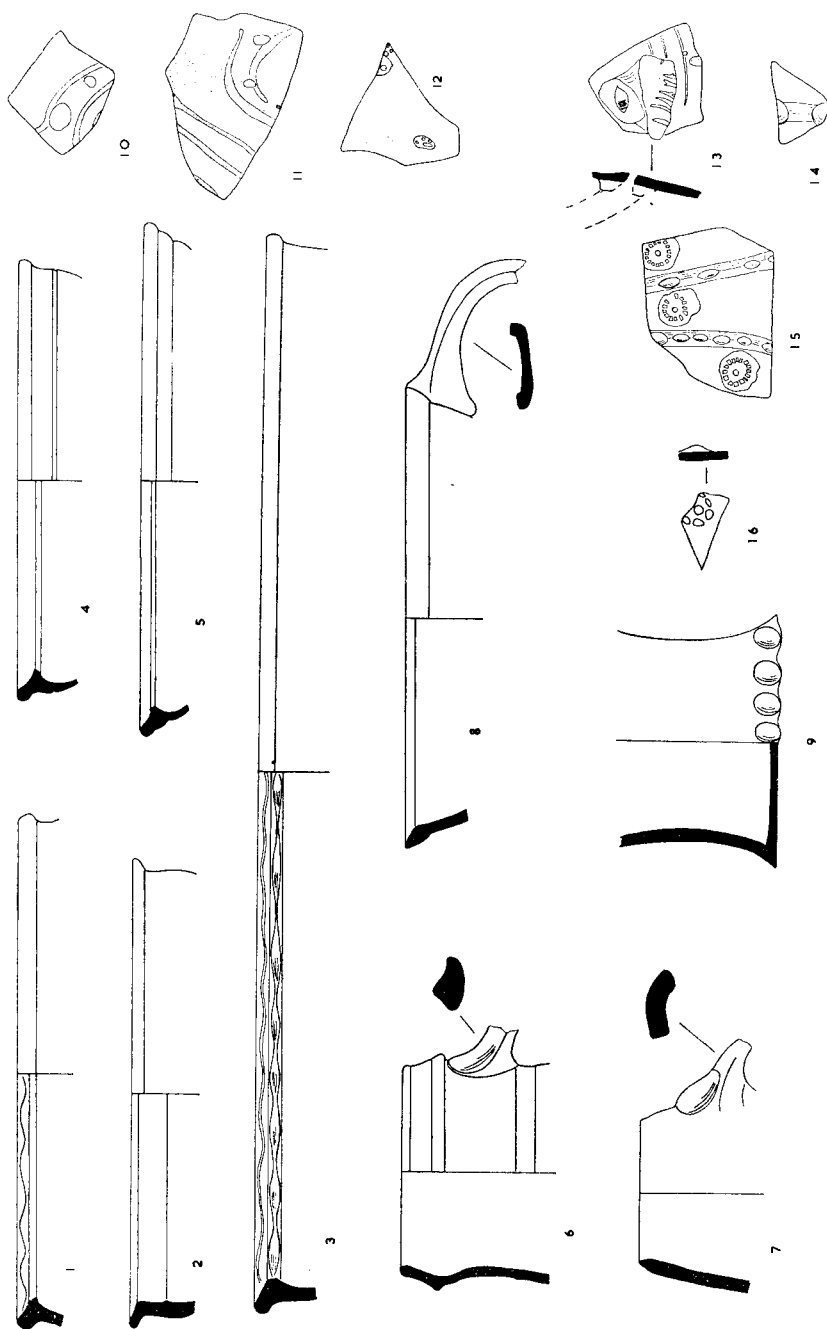


FIG. 28  
KING'S LYNN, NORFOLK  
Sherds from occupation-layer surrounding medieval wharf (pp. 102, 104). Sc.  $\frac{1}{4}$

13. Fragment of body of jug. Fabric as no. 6. Buff inner surface with splash of glaze. Applied strip of clay at base of hollow rod-section handle decorated with finger-nail incisions. On body below the handle are girth grooves and a single applied vertical strip. TCBW. 31.<sup>24</sup>
14. Body sherd. Fabric as no. 6. Vertical applied strip with thumb-impressions.
15. Body sherd. Smooth sandy buff to pink fabric with olive-green speckled glaze. Vertical thumb-printed applied strips and circular applied stamped motifs. TCBW. 37.
16. Body sherd. Smooth sandy grey to buff fabric, dark green glaze, with small outpressed boss with 'raspberry' stamp impressions. TCBW. 38.<sup>25</sup>

The cooking-pot rims are of a more elaborate type than the square-sectioned rims with internal cordon which are typical of East Anglia in the 13th century and should be placed later than these. The glazed jugs are typical of the local Grimston-ware forms, while the decorated sherds, although in the local fabric, display affinities with the east midland and northern English types. Particularly striking is no. 13, FIG. 28, which is exactly paralleled in Scarborough (Rutter type 26/1). No. 16, FIG. 28, is also comparable with a Scarborough type (Rutter 24/1) and may be a prototype for the Grimston-ware sherd with a 'raspberry' stamp on pellets of brown slip. The horse-shoe and pellet decoration on sherds of local ware may represent affinities with east midland forms.

This group, together with the knight jug, may be placed in the early 14th century. It illustrates the extent to which external influences modified decoration on the pottery of the King's Lynn area.

## CONCLUSION

Extensive documentary sources illustrate the importance of Lynn's position as a trading centre during the medieval period,<sup>26</sup> but before the investigations carried out by the Archaeological Survey no archaeological evidence had been produced to supplement this knowledge. The wharf exposed during the excavations in 1964 produced no imported pottery, although excavations in 1963-4 on the Marks & Spencer extension site produced large quantities of imported medieval pottery, including Normandy ware and handled ladles from the Netherlands;<sup>27</sup> but the existence of a wharf indicates some form of water-borne traffic, and pottery shows strong contacts between Lynn and north-eastern England. The wharf, the first of its kind to be found in England, was sufficiently well preserved in its constructional details to be comparable with those found on the continent. The position of the wharf indicates a much greater change in the river line than was assumed from a study of documents and from the position of the medieval buildings still standing along the river-bank; the Great Ouse once ran so close to Saturday Market Place that the parish church must have been built almost directly on its bank. It is hoped that further excavation will reveal the river line in other areas of the town and that in this way the precise course of the medieval river will be established.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. J. G. Rutter, *Medieval Pottery in the Scarborough Museum* (1961), p. 26, fig. 4, no. 26/2.

<sup>25</sup> *Op. cit.* in note 24, p. 24, fig. 4, no. 24/2.

<sup>26</sup> E. M. Carus-Wilson and Olive Coleman, *England's Export Trade, 1275-1547* (1963); Eleanor Carus-Wilson in *Med. Archaeol.*, vi-vii (1962-3), 182-201.

<sup>27</sup> Publication forthcoming.