

round the South Gate. That will enable this Scheduled Ancient Monument and Grade I listed building to take on a much more public role in informing visitors about 600 years of growth in King's Lynn, and particularly about the Civil War events it witnessed.

Today's keepers who show the public round the South Gate are volunteers. The building is owned and maintained by the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk – successors to the Mayor and Burgesses of King's Lynn who commissioned it.

The South Gate is open to the public on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays from 1pm until 4pm between Mid-May and September. There is no entrance fee but donations are welcomed.

#### Further Reading:

T P Smith: The Medieval Town Defences of King's Lynn  
Journal of the British Archaeological Association (Vol. XXXIII, 1970)

T P Smith: The Date of King's Lynn South Gate  
Norfolk Archaeology (Vol. XXXVI, 1976)

P Kent: The Fortifications of King's Lynn  
Journal of the Fortress Study Group (Vol. XIV)

E M James: The South Gate at King's Lynn  
Norfolk Archaeology (Vol. XL, 1987)

Text by John Lambert 1988, revised by Ken Hill 2006 © Borough Council of King's Lynn & West Norfolk

# The South Gate King's Lynn



The South Gate is the most impressive remaining part of Lynn's defensive fortifications. English town defences like these were seldom constructed to the same military standards as the castles of the time. While town walls may not have been expected to withstand the full rigours of siege warfare, they were an adequate protection against other attackers. A wall also ensured that all people entering or leaving could be controlled. That made it easier to collect tolls and duties from traders on their merchandise. So a town's gateways had more than simply a defensive role. A large and impressive gateway must also have been seen as a significant display of civic pride.

The earliest known structure guarding the road into Lynn from the south was a wooden tower or 'bretask' built at the time of King John's quarrel with his barons – associated with the signing of Magna Carta in 1215. There were four permanent wooden bretasks and a number of portable bretasks which could be erected in time of trouble and used as strong points in the defence of the town. The cost of the upkeep of the bretasks originally fell not on the townsfolk but on people of the surrounding countryside. Responsibility for the bretask on this site, and possibly for its associated bridge, was allocated to the villages lying in the area bounded by Castle Acre, Stoke Ferry and Fordham.

The first South Gate built of stone probably appeared during the reign of Edward III (1312-1377). By the beginning of the 15th Century, responsibility for the South Gate certainly belonged to the town, and a more substantial building was called for. The town accounts show that in 1416 repairs were carried out with stone which had been rejected by the builders of the Lady Chapel at St Nicholas' Chapel. Twenty years later it was again in a very poor condition, and in 1437 the town contracted for it to be rebuilt in brick and stone under the supervision of Robert Hertanger, a London mason.

Lynn at Setchey Bridge before going on to Wisbech or Downham Market. The road north into the town is now the London Road, but in earlier times the route lay closer to the River Nar. Coming through the gate, visitors turned left along Southgate Street and Friars Street, passing All Saints Church, to reach the Ladybridge (over the Mill Fleet) and the first medieval town around the Saturday Market Place.

The River Nar had wharves, warehouses and shipyards along its banks near the South Gate, and closer to the River Great Ouse on the southern bank is Blubber House Creek, where the whaling ships of the 18th and 19th Centuries landed the 'great fish'. Two blubber houses contained huge iron pots which were heated to render down whale blubber into oil for lamps. The smell was notorious and penetrating. The bones were ground up to help make fertiliser, and baleen from a whale's mouth, which filters out the small creatures it eats, was cut up to make stays for corsets.

In the Middle Ages there was an official gatekeeper who may have lived in the South Gate. The keeper was responsible for exacting tolls on the passage of goods, and for closing the doors at curfew. In time of plague the gatekeeper was ordered to keep out all those who could not give a good reason for entering. In the 16th Century the gatekeeper was for a time also responsible for organising the town's dumped rubbish into 'muck hills' outside the wall. His official title was 'Custodian of the South Gate and Cleanser of the Muckhills'. He might also have been responsible for the formation of saltpetre from the muck heaps. Saltpetre, mixed with sulphur and charcoal (very carefully!) makes gunpowder.

The collection of tolls at the South Gate was abolished in 1723, but a gatekeeper stayed until 1741. A pedestrian passageway was opened on the east side of the main gate in about 1817, and a matching passage on the west side in the 1840s, the later one using some of the domestic quarters of earlier gatekeepers. London Road was widened in 1899 to improve the flow of traffic, and since then the arch has straddled only half the carriageway. The Borough Council completed a major repair and restoration programme in 1985.

There is reason to hope that all vehicular traffic can soon be diverted

Like the rest of Lynn's defences, the South Gate was never fully tested in a battle, though it came close in 1643 at the time of the Civil War. King's Lynn lay in the part of England controlled by Oliver Cromwell and Parliament, but was for a time taken over for the Royalist cause by a group of neighbouring landowners led by Sir Hamon L'Estrange.

Trouble was clearly anticipated. On 31 October 1642 the Mayor's Hall Book records: "...this day is ordered that with as much speed as may be, two drawbridges be made that is to say at each of the town gates one viz. at East Gate and South Gate by the good oversight and direction of the chamberlains joined to Mr. Mayor..."

Cromwell's Roundheads, under the Earl of Manchester, blockaded the town a few months later and, using guns mounted across the River Great Ouse in West Lynn, maintained a harassing if not very destructive bombardment for three weeks. More defensive works were quickly built to combat this threat, but when the Roundheads cut off Lynn's water supply and let it be known that they would make an assault, the town's made a treaty and surrendered.

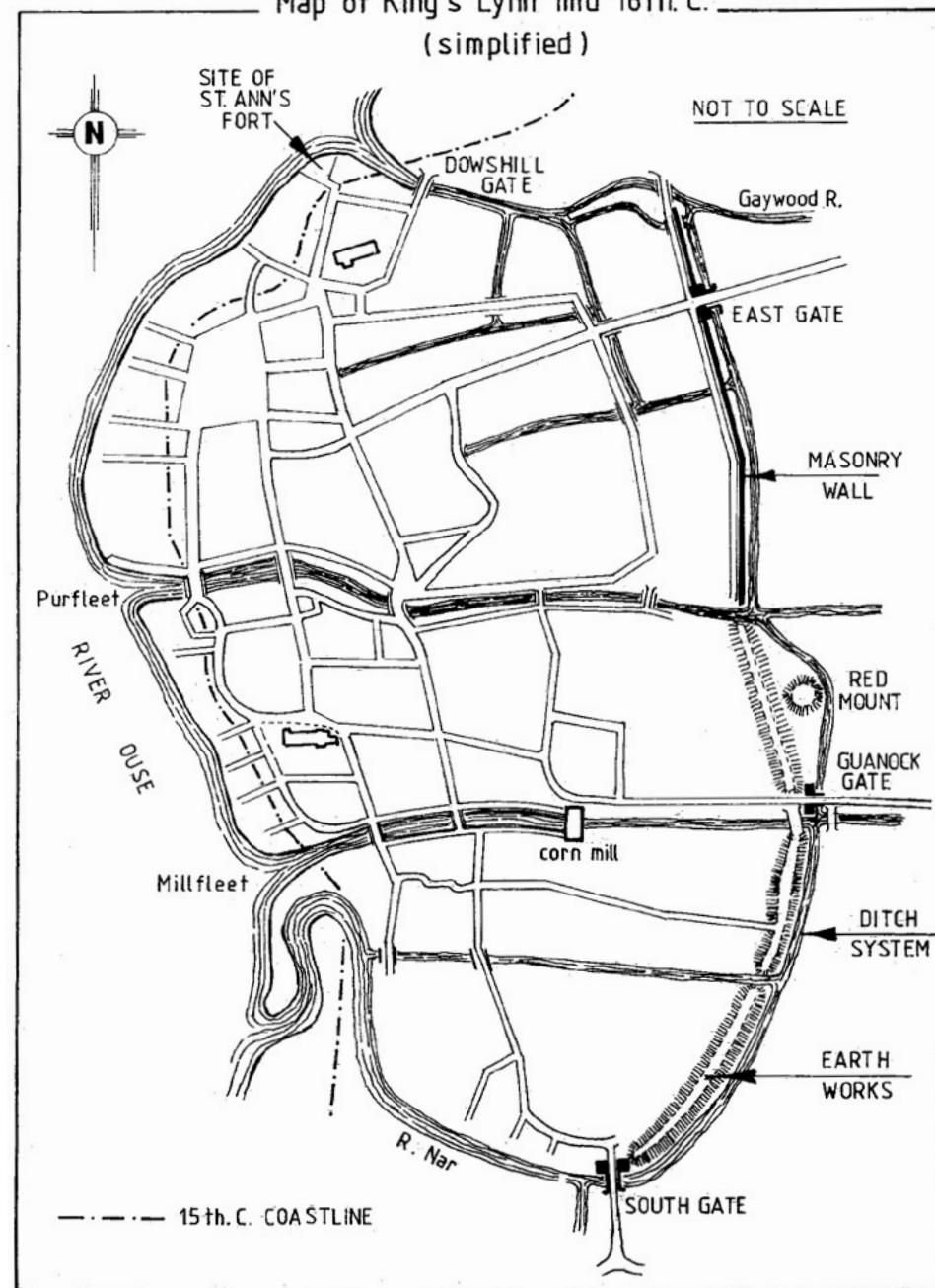
An archaeological survey in 1984 uncovered a layer of coal dust and mud trodden into a floor level dated to the mid 17th Century by the remains of clay pipes. That could denote a period of hurried occupation of the gate during the 1643 siege.

Much of Lynn's defences, including the East Gate, were subsequently either levelled or robbed of their stone for new buildings. But the South Gate was not dismantled, and has been welcoming visitors arriving by road from the south continuously for around 600 years. Sections of wall have been preserved in The Walks, and on either side of Gaywood Road where it crosses the Gaywood River, site of the East Gate.

The early road to London out of the South Gate crossed the fosse and then ran beside the bank of the River Nar, crossing it four miles out of

Map of King's Lynn mid 16th. C.

(simplified)

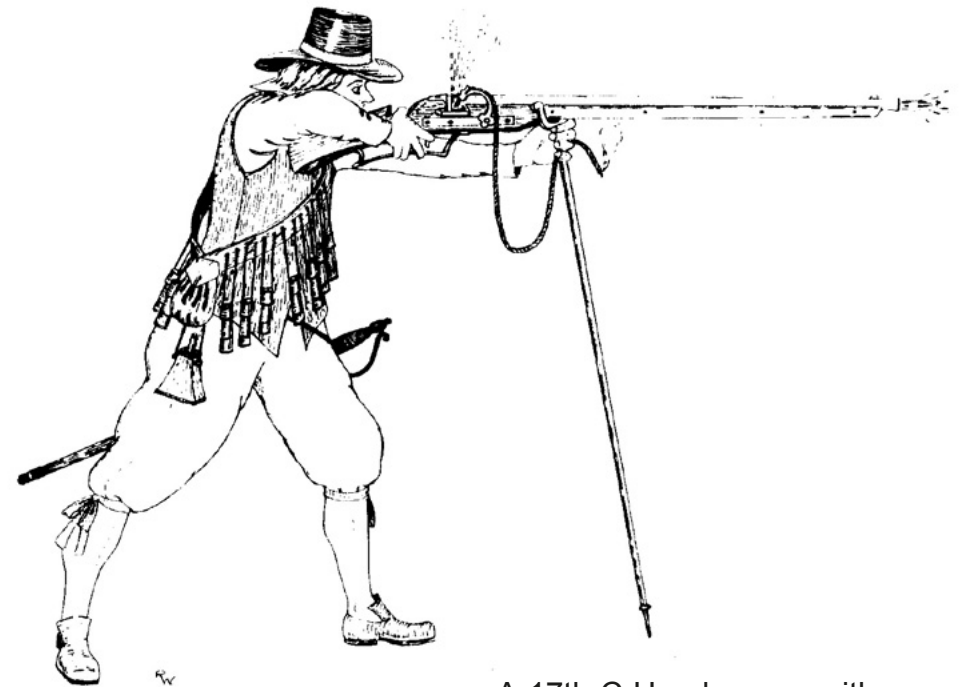


His design was perhaps too ambitious, for the £100 set aside in 1416 for the work was spent before the job was completed. Another mason had to be engaged to bring the building to a useful state of completion. In 1520, two Norfolk freemasons, Thomas and Nicholas Harmer, worked on the South Gate, possibly replacing a temporary wooden floor with the plain stone barrel vault. One can still see the shafts which were to have carried more elaborate vaulting ribs which the Hertanger design had originally included.

Though less grand than originally intended, Lynn's South Gate has the distinction of being one of the earlier examples in England of the use of brick as the principal material for a prestige building. It has stone surrounds to the apertures, and the southern front is faced entirely with limestone. Lynn's two surviving guildhalls – St George's in King Street and the Trinity Guildhall, part of the Town Hall – are of similar construction and date.

In its heyday, the South Gate was an impressive defence work. The front archway has slots in which a portcullis would have been raised and lowered, and immediately behind these are rebates for the two great wooden doors. They were removed in 1795, but the four iron hinge pins, two in each jamb, remain. The floor of the chamber over the central vault was strong enough to carry the winch mechanism to raise and lower the portcullis. There were six round ports for handguns, similar to those in Hurstmonceaux Castle, and there were possibly embrasures for heavier guns at ground level – where the pedestrian passages were opened up later.

The South Gate is situated near the River Nar, where an outfall was made for the town's encircling 'fosse' or ditch, which ran in front of the building. The line of the fosse ran north-east from the South Gate, and there were two Guanock Gates (the one remaining is a reconstruction) before the East Gate (on Gaywood Road) where the Norwich road came into Lynn. The defensive line became part of the Gaywood River, then the fosse turned west to the Dowshill Gate in the north, near St Ann's Fort and St Nicholas' Chapel. Had the mediaeval town had a complete defensive wall of stone, this would have been its route.



A 17th C Handgunner with a matiblock musket