

The South-East Quarter

The ancient Roman gates of Leicester, probably built in the 3rd century AD, are very likely to have survived into the medieval period, albeit much repaired and altered (1). By the 15th century, their prime function was probably for the collection of tolls from traders coming into the town rather than defence. From time to time, the large iron-strapped wooden gates would be closed to prevent the escape of fugitives or animals from the town. The gates were also symbols of the wealth and status of the borough and above each archway, the royal arms were displayed. Chambers above the gates were a source of revenue for the borough as they were rented out during the medieval period. The narrowness and lack of height of the gates

may have been a factor in the development of the Haymarket outside the East Gate, which contributed to the prosperity of the medieval east suburb (2). This was because loaded wagons of hay could not pass through the arch. The gates were all demolished in 1774.

In this part of Leicester, most of today's streets follow the same lines as their medieval predecessors. Much of this corner of the medieval walled town was taken up by the Saturday Market (3), established as early as 1298 and occupying an area much larger than the current market-place. As now, the market offered a wide range of products for sale – not only foodstuffs such as grain, beans, meat and fish but also wool, clothing and drapery in the 'Housewives' Market'. On the east side of the market-place was the corn wall (4), where farmers would display samples of their grain, whilst to the north was the Sheepmarket (5), modern Silver Street, and the Swinesmarket (6), modern High Street.

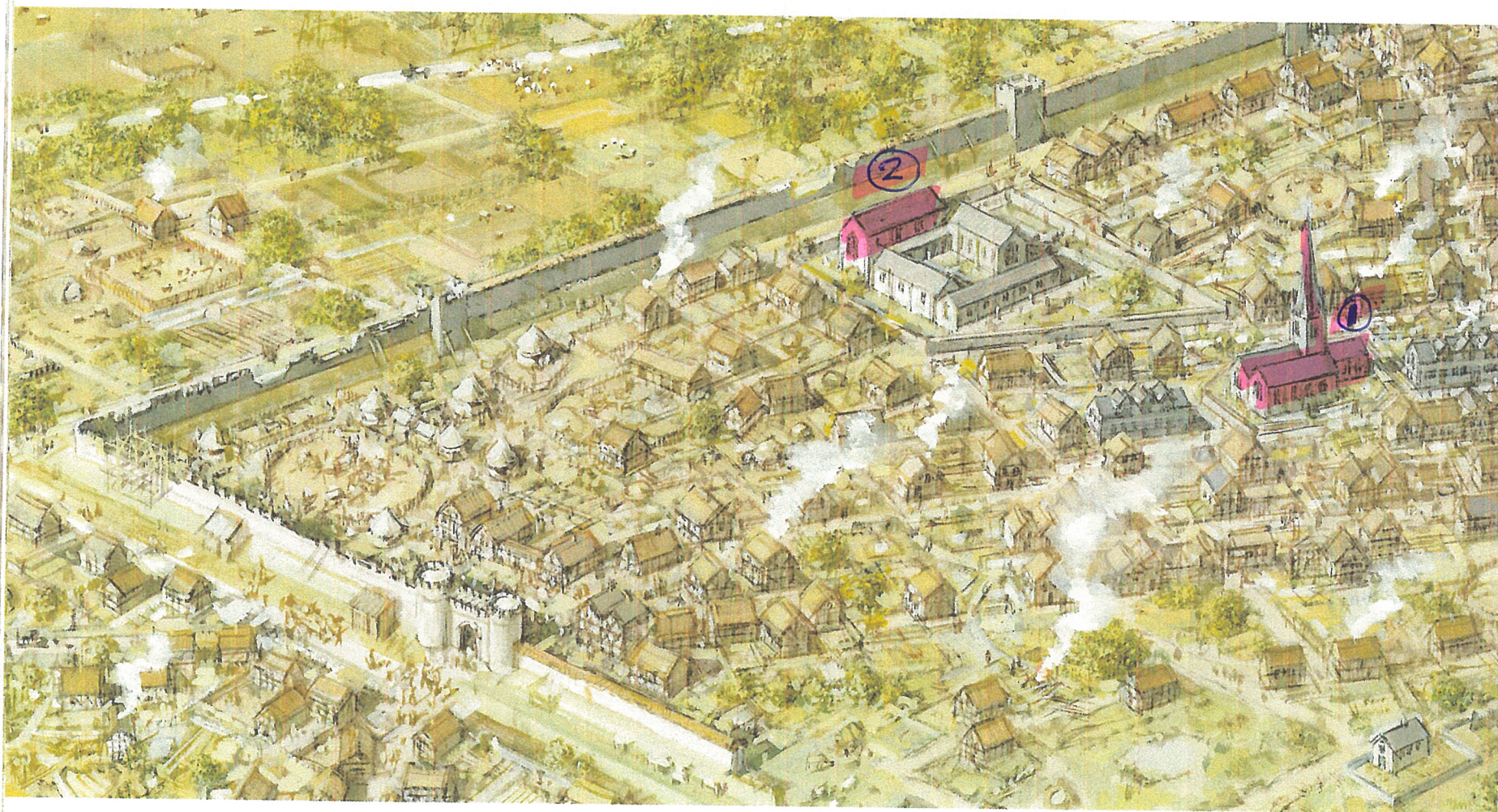
The Greyfriars (Franciscan Friars) were established in Leicester in the 12th century and occupied a large walled precinct west of the market-place (7), with gateways onto what is now Peacock Lane and Friar Lane. Its main claim to fame is that its church was the burial place of Richard III following the Battle of Bosworth. The friary was dissolved in the reign of Henry VIII and demolished not long afterwards. Very little is known about the arrangement of buildings on the site and all that survives today is a fragment of the precinct wall.

In the 13th century, St Martin's Church (8) – now the Cathedral – was Leicester's wealthiest parish church. It is shown here flanked by two large buildings. On the right is the Guildhall (9), built as the meeting place of the Guild of Corpus Christi in about 1390, and to the left was the hall of the Guild of St George (10). Guilds were associations of craftsmen and merchants; they were part trade unions, part secret societies and part charities. Corpus Christi was the leading guild in Leicester and in the later 15th century its two masters had considerable influence over the mayor and council of the borough. By 1494–5, the Borough Corporation began using the hall for their meetings. The Guildhall continued to be Leicester's Town Hall until it was replaced in the 19th century with the present building in Horsefair Street. The Guild of St George was much poorer and less influential. It was probably chiefly responsible for organising processions featuring St George and the Dragon.

Left: The south-eastern quarter as it may have been during the mid 15th century.

Right: The late 14th-century Guildhall as it is today.





1. St. Martin's
2. Greyfriars' Church. → in the south of the precinct (??)