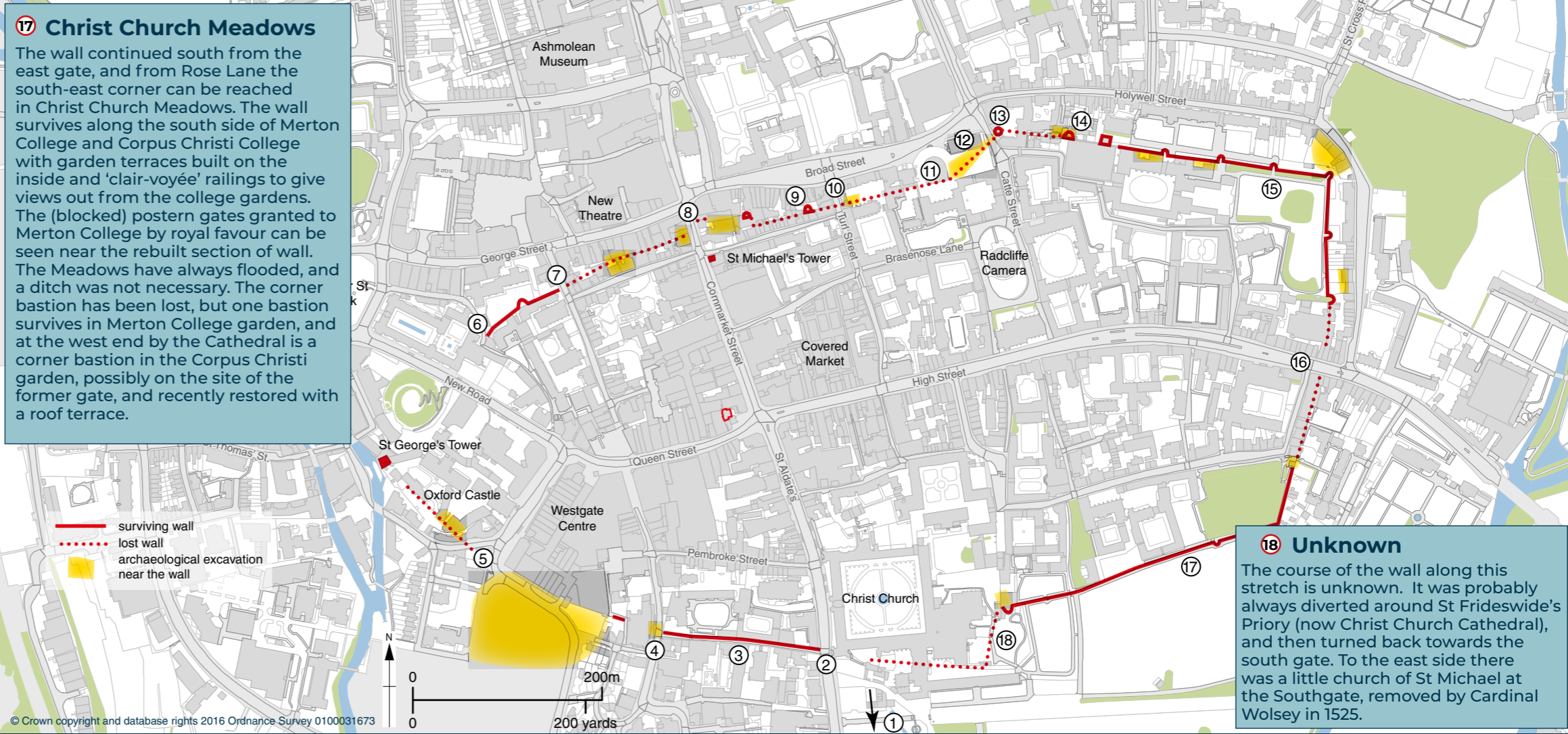


# Oxford City Walls Walk

Discover Oxford's Medieval city walls with this walk guide



**17 Christ Church Meadows**  
 The wall continued south from the east gate, and from Rose Lane the south-east corner can be reached in Christ Church Meadows. The wall survives along the south side of Merton College and Corpus Christi College with garden terraces built on the inside and 'clair-voyée' railings to give views out from the college gardens. The (blocked) postern gates granted to Merton College by royal favour can be seen near the rebuilt section of wall. The Meadows have always flooded, and a ditch was not necessary. The corner bastion has been lost, but one bastion survives in Merton College garden, and at the west end by the Cathedral is a corner bastion in the Corpus Christi garden, possibly on the site of the former gate, and recently restored with a roof terrace.

**18 Unknown**  
 The course of the wall along this stretch is unknown. It was probably always diverted around St Frideswide's Priory (now Christ Church Cathedral), and then turned back towards the south gate. To the east side there was a little church of St Michael at the Southgate, removed by Cardinal Wolsey in 1525.

## Oxford's City Walls

This is a self-guided walk around the city walls of Oxford. Most places are publicly accessible, although college interiors and gardens can only be seen when open, and may have entry charges. There are sections of the city walls that survive in surprising locations and you can learn something of the history of the medieval town along the way, and places where excavations have provided further insights.

*Julian Munby, Consultant at Oxford Archaeology*

Oxford's origins as a defended place were as a late Anglo-Saxon borough (Old English ) built to defend an important Thames crossing against Viking incursions, most likely in the late ninth century in the reign of King Alfred (AD 871-899). It was built on the Mercian side of the river, while Berkshire, in the Kingdom of Wessex, lay on the south side (and the boundary ran along the 'Shire Lake', a stream that still runs across the middle of Christ Church Meadow).

The primary fort was probably laid out after the manner of a Roman fort, with a rectangular plan and the central crossroads (just like Cricklade and Wallingford), and with later extensions on the east and west sides that account for the somewhat irregular plan. It was once thought that the Castle represented a large westward extension to the town in the Norman period, but we now know that the Saxon walls extended

as far as St George's tower (which may have stood by the Saxon west gate). The early walls, as excavated in St Michael's Street, consisted of a turf bank with the timber palisade; this was later replaced by a stone wall on the outside, and there was an external ditch at least on the north side. The four principal gates must have existed from earliest times, and the north gate still has its Saxon tower that was later to become part of the church of St Michael.

There was a major rebuilding of the stone wall in the early 13th century, partly paid for by royal 'murage' grants, from a tax raised on goods brought into the town. The new walls (as seen today in New College) were a very impressive set of defences (especially with the addition of the unusual outer wall), but would have served more to control access to the town and local disturbances rather than having a serious military role.

The walls fell into disrepair in the late medieval period (apart from the sector in New College), the moat was let out as a fishpond, and the towers used for habitation. By the time of the Civil War in the 1640s an entirely new set of outer ramparts had to be built to defend the royalist capital, and the old walls (e.g. in Merton College, and Corpus Christi) became garden terraces providing views out into the countryside, while elsewhere they were abandoned although surviving as property

boundaries or garden walls. The passing of the 'Mileways Act' for road improvements in 1771 led to the removal of the surviving town gates and the widening of roads into the walled centre. Lost parts of the walls are known from old drawings and photographs, while much has been discovered in recent years by archaeological excavation.

1. Folly Bridge
2. South Gate
3. Brewer Street
4. Littlegate
5. Paradise Street
6. Bulwarks lane
7. New Inn Hall Street
8. St. Michael at the Northgate
9. Broad Street
10. Turl Street
11. Sheldonian Theatre
12. Clarendon Quad
13. St Mary's Chapel
14. Turf Tavern
15. New College
16. Eastgate Hotel
17. Christ Church Meadows
18. Unknown

To find out more about Oxford Archaeology and our current projects, visit our website or find us on Facebook, Twitter and Sketchfab:  
<http://oxfordarchaeology.com>

- @oatweet
- facebook.com/oxfordarchaeology
- sketchfab.com/oxford\_archaeology
- instagram.com/oxfordarchaeology/

If you like maps, see also An Historical Map of Oxford (2016) and find out about the forthcoming Oxford volume of the Historic Towns Atlas at  
<http://www.historictownsatlas.org.uk/>



### 1 Folly Bridge

The 'Folly' was the late-13th cent. gate tower on the South Bridge (Grandpont), with a drawbridge on the Berkshire side. It was later known (erroneously) as Friar Bacon's study and survived until 1799, when it was removed by the Hinksey Turnpike trustees.

### 2 South Gate

The south gate, at the lower corner of Christ Church, was partly removed by Cardinal Wolsey in 1525, and finally demolished in 1617.

### 3 Brewer Street

The wall survives along the north side of Brewer Street, supporting Pembroke College. Medieval drain and construction arches can be seen at various points. The mill stream on the south of the road was used by butchers and later by brewers.

### 4 Littlegate

A plaque shows the place where remains of the Littlegate were found on St. Ebbe's Street in 1971-2. It was still standing in the late 18th century and had two arches, for vehicles and pedestrians. In the 13th century the wall was diverted round the Greyfriars' precinct.

### 5 Paradise Street

The walls turned northwards towards the west gate across Paradise Street, near to Simon House, and then continued into the castle ditch. The late Anglo-Saxon wall continued into the castle towards St George's Tower. Was this tower guarding the pre-Norman west gate?

### 16 Eastgate Hotel

Eastgate Hotel marks the point where the walls cross the road. The east gate, consisting of a gate between two towers, was removed in the 1770s for road improvements (when the road outside the walls was widened and rebuilt on the south side).

### 15 New College

William of Wykeham bought the city wall and the road inside it from the town in 1379 on condition that the wall was kept in repair. While the corporation allowed the rest of its walls to fall into disrepair, the frequent inspections of the New College sector resulted in the survival of the very impressive remains of an early 13th century town wall, with its crenellated parapets, bastions and arrow loops. The arrow loops provide continuous coverage between the towers and round the north-east corner, but were perhaps rather difficult to use with a longbow.

### 14 Turf Tavern

The city wall can be seen outside the Turf Tavern (which was built in the city ditch after it was filled in the 17th century). One occupied bastion can be seen in Hell Passage on the approach to the Tavern, while the New College bell tower replaces another bastion. Excavations in Hell Passage found the remains of an outer wall that extended from here to east gate, and included low outer bastions. This was the show front of the medieval town, seen by travellers (and royal visitors) passing along Longwall and Holywell Street, and was reminiscent of the famous double walls of Constantinople.

### 13 St Mary's Chapel

The Chapel of St Mary at the Smith gate, now part of Hertford College, was restored by TG Jackson, but the medieval door with its carving of the annunciation scene (the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary) has somehow survived the iconoclasts of the Reformation period. Rioting medieval students would sometimes lift the gate off its hinges and throw it into the town ditch.

### 12 Clarendon Quad

The first town wall may have turned southwards at this point, but from the bastion the later wall turned northwards towards the Smith gate, and the line of the wall found in 1899 is marked as tramlines in the main east-west path in the Clarendon Quad.

### 11 Sheldonian Theatre

The line of the wall continued along the south side of the Sheldonian Theatre, built on the wall in the 1660s. Somenor's Lane turned south into Schools Street (where the Divinity School stands), and there was a bastion at the north-west corner of the Bodleian Library, excavated in 1899.

### 10 Turl Street

Turl Street is named after the turnstile or 'Twirlgate' that was used as a small postern gate. Ship Street or Somenor's Lane continued through the site of Exeter College Chapel, built across the road when the college expanded its medieval site over the wall and across the ditch.

### 9 Broad Street

Houses on the south side of Broad Street were built on the infilled city ditch from about 1600. One more bastion on the wall behind Morton's sandwich shop is occupied by the Tower House guest house in Ship Street. This was one of the roads following along the inside of the north wall.

### 6 Bulwarks lane

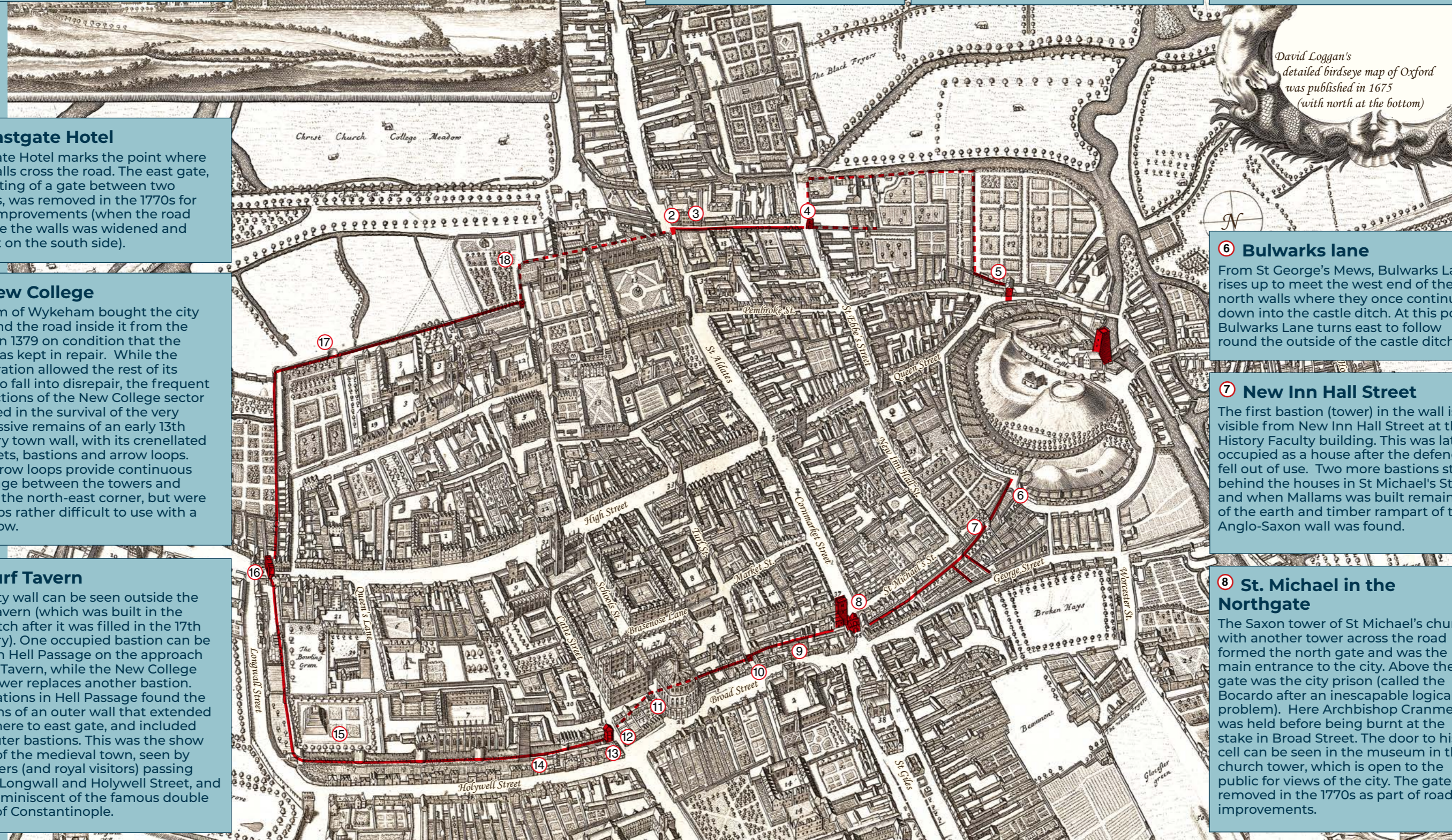
From St George's Mews, Bulwarks Lane rises up to meet the west end of the north walls where they once continued down into the castle ditch. At this point Bulwarks Lane turns east to follow round the outside of the castle ditch.

### 7 New Inn Hall Street

The first bastion (tower) in the wall is visible from New Inn Hall Street at the History Faculty building. This was later occupied as a house after the defences fell out of use. Two more bastions stood behind the houses in St Michael's Street, and when Mallams was built remains of the earth and timber rampart of the Anglo-Saxon wall was found.

### 8 St. Michael in the Northgate

The Saxon tower of St Michael's church, with another tower across the road formed the north gate and was the main entrance to the city. Above the gate was the city prison (called the Bocardo after an inescapable logical problem). Here Archbishop Cranmer was held before being burnt at the stake in Broad Street. The door to his cell can be seen in the museum in the church tower, which is open to the public for views of the city. The gate was removed in the 1770s as part of road improvements.



David Loggan's detailed birdseye map of Oxford was published in 1675 (with north at the bottom)