

North gate

St. Marys Church

High Street

The Market house

Cheape Street

Stawles Church
& Kings Bath

The tennis court

St. Peters church at
the Abbey church

The Abbey

the Abbey Gate

the Abber lane

Stawles Street

South gate

St. Annes Church

Went Lane

Bath Gate

The charge Lane

Cocks Lane or
Slaughter hall lane

The Church of St. Mary Northgate, Bath

Peter Davenport

Until 1572, Bath was served by five parish churches [fig. 1]. Of the four within the walls only St. James's lasted into living memory, and only disappeared in the 1950s after being badly damaged during the air raids of 1942. It had a relatively large and flourishing parish and survived the sweeping changes that followed 1572. Of the others, St. Mary de Stall, St. Michael Within and St. Mary Northgate, all institutional and physical traces have vanished. It was already clear that these small urban parishes were unviable. In 1554, St. Mary Northgate could not even afford a curate and begged to be excused taxes;¹ St. Michael's was already leased out as commercial property as early as 1568.² The presentation of the dilapidated hulk of the old priory church (Bath Abbey) by Edmund Colthurst to the Corporation in 1572 was an opportunity grasped unhesitatingly by the city authorities to provide a place of worship for a reformed and simplified city parish. A new, large, central parish church would also provide space for the many visitors now coming to Bath for the 'cure' '...in the springtime and at the fall of the leaf...' as the city's petition to Lord Burleigh for the requisite legislation spelled out. This was achieved by 1572.³ However, reinstatement was going to be very expensive and permission was granted by the Queen for a national appeal to raise funds. Even with the relative success of this appeal, repair and also the relevant institutional changes took a great deal of time and it was not until 1581 that the east end and transepts of the church were ready for use and 1583 when a new rector was in place. Even then St. Mary de Stall remained in use until 1593 or even later.⁴

The redundant churches were swiftly put to other uses. St. Michael and St. Mary de Stall vanished during the seventeenth century, first used as shops and workshops and then demolished and redeveloped. Their sites are broadly known but few other details survive.

St. Mary Northgate had a more substantial afterlife, serving as a prison and school until the later-eighteenth century. The prison was the Corporation gaol, in the tower of the church, and the body of the church served as the new home for the Free Grammar School, or King Edward's, as a replacement for the small house in Frog Lane (roughly, today's New Bond Street) it had occupied since 1552.⁵ The church was finally demolished in 1773 to allow the construction of Bridge Street, the approach to the new Pulteney Bridge, leading to the proposed developments in Bathwick. The school had moved to its Broad Street site in 1754.

The first work to convert the church to school use was in 1583, when a desk was built (for the master) and many boards sawn, presumably for floors and shutters and, perhaps, benches for the boys.⁶ A door was also built. More work was carried out in 1589. A new window was built in the the *poyme* (gable) or east end of the church. It was not just re-glazed, as a mason was involved and lime mortar paid for. It seems likely that small early-medieval windows were being replaced by larger ones to get more light into the school. This was, however, only a part of a major refurbishment, as other substantial works on the walls and foundations were paid for and the roof was, it seems completely renewed.⁷ The history of the school in the church has been covered by John Wroughton⁸ and, as this article is intended to explore elements of the medieval church, little more will be said about this later period. Nonetheless, the documents

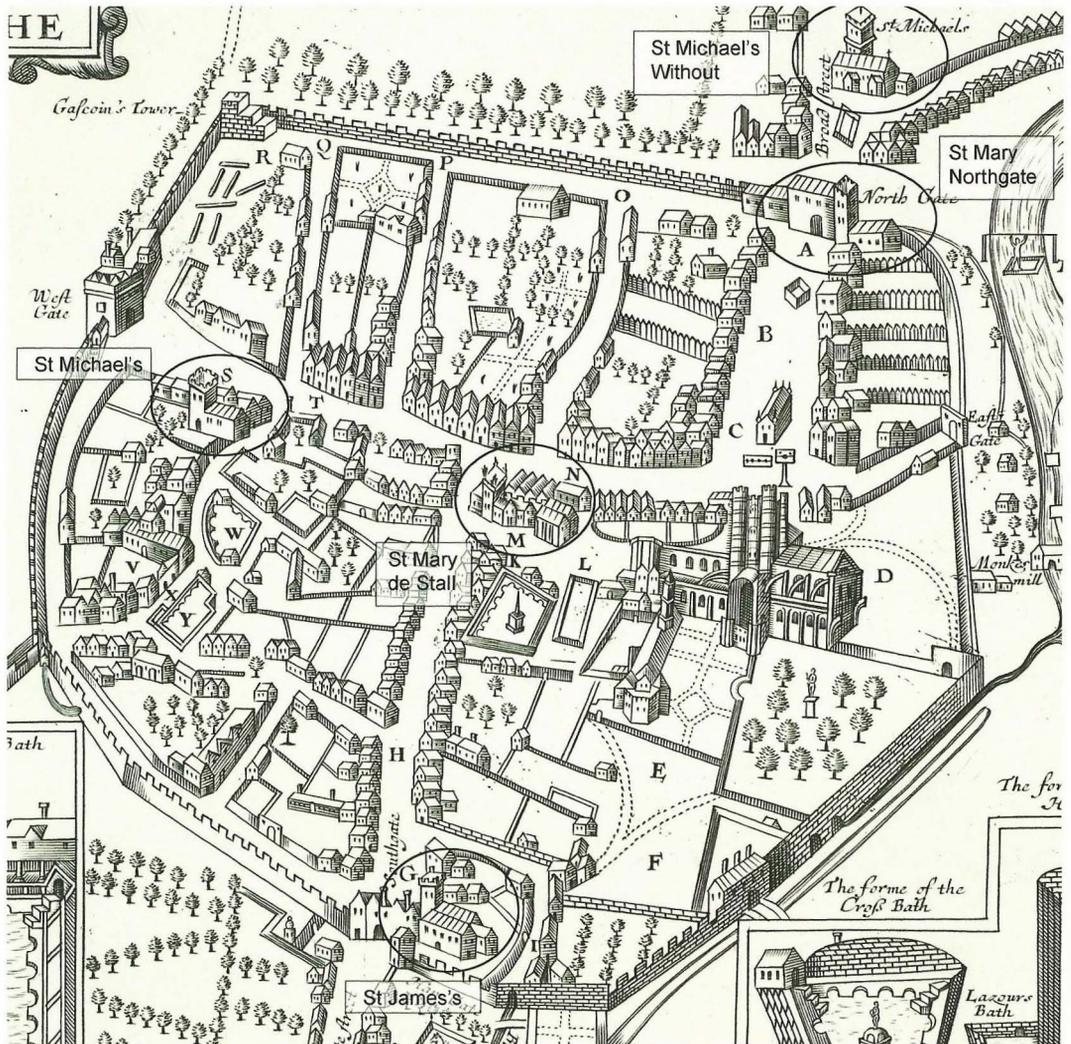


fig 1: Bath as depicted in John Speed's Map of Somerseshire, 1610, with the five parish churches highlighted
 Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection

from the later period will necessarily be referred to as they do cast light on the site and plan of the church.

Origins and history of the church

The case made by Katherine Symons (Symons 1934) for the manorial origin of St. Mary's is persuasive. Throughout the middle ages the church and its advowson were owned by the Manor of Wilmington, south of Bath. Wilmington had no parish church, being part of the parish

of Priston, but possessed a piece of Bath property, on which the church was built. Such urban manorial possessions were, in effect, a detached portion of the manor in the town. In the countryside, the ownership of a church by the lord of the manor was commonplace, and the juxtaposition of the present parish church to the manor house and the possession of the advowson in historic times is *prima facie* evidence of an ancient, proprietary origin for the church. A similar origin is likely, therefore, for St. Mary's. The church would have provided an income and, no doubt, a certain spiritual solace to the founder, unavailable on the manor itself. It would have been available for the inhabitants of the manor's urban properties. The other properties in the town owned by the parish in the middle ages may in origin have been part of such an urban manor. In 1548 the church was possessed of 'certayne landes, tene[men]ts burryages and cottages ther...[worth] iiiijli ijs' (£4.2s or £4.10). These were not more closely specified ('whereof as yit is no p[ar]ticuler rental delyvered').⁹ Other sources indicate properties were owned in West[gate] Street and High Street from the thirteenth century.¹⁰

While such arrangements are very commonly traceable to the pre-conquest period, this throws no direct light on the date of the church. This could be clarified a little by Symons's claim that the church was *rebuilt* by Bishop Reginald (while holding the manor) in 1180-90,¹¹ but no support for this claim can now be found. The earliest certain reference to St. Mary Northgate is in 1280, in a probable marriage settlement, where it is mentioned that the advowson of the church is in the hands of the Manor of Wilmington.¹²

A date in the late-eleventh or twelfth century is likely on general historical grounds for the creation of the parishes in Bath, but the church could be either older or more recent than its parish. That it is no older than the early-tenth century is suggested by its relationship to the city walls and the north gate. The city walls are almost certainly Roman in origin, but in their medieval form are based on the circuit set up by Alfred or Edward the Elder between c.890 and 915.¹³ The positioning of a church, especially one with a tower, just inside the north gate is found in several of the *burhs* founded by Alfred and his successors, for example: St. Mary's, Cricklade, Wilts; St. John's, Gloucester; and actually on the wall as at St. John the Baptist at Bristol. The relationship of the tower of St. Mary's to the wall is especially closely paralleled by St. Michael's at Oxford. There the

late-Saxon tower, probably dating from around 1020, still survives, and careful study has shown that it was as much a part of the defences as it was a church tower, built just inside the earlier medieval line of the city wall at the north gate.¹⁴ Its walls are somewhat thicker than usual for a Saxon church tower, but nonetheless it seems it was built primarily as a church tower which also functioned defensively.¹⁵

We are unlikely ever to know how thick were the walls of St. Mary's tower, unless any remains still survive under the present buildings, but its position, perhaps as little as 18 feet inside the North Gate (see below), shows it could easily have functioned as part of the defences. On balance it is a strong probability that the church

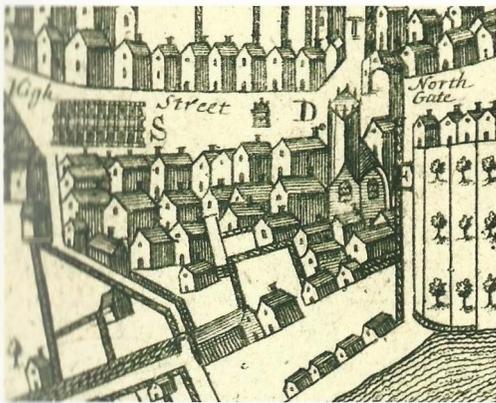


Fig 2: Detail of the Gilmore map of The City of Bath c.1694 showing the tower of St Mary's church
Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection

was founded in the late Saxon period, perhaps in the tenth century. The tower is most likely to have been later. Recent studies of Saxon church towers suggest that none predate the early eleventh century,¹⁶ suggesting that this would be the earliest likely date for St. Mary's tower.

It is quite probable that this tower was the one that survived until 1773, as the tower is often the oldest part of a church to survive; however, although St. Mary's tower is shown on several seventeenth-century maps [fig. 2], the details are certainly unreliable (Gilmore, for example, shows a nave and an aisle or chapel for which there was simply no room), so we cannot use them to obtain any details about the actual structure. One last intriguing comment is hardly scientific dating evidence, but we can note that Leland described the tower as 'a tourrid (towered) steple...[which] semith to be auncient'.¹⁷ Writing in about 1540, he at least implies that it was more than a few hundred years old and not a late medieval replacement.

Not much more is known of the history of the church either institutionally or structurally, although its independence from the priory is confirmed by the rector taking the part of the citizens in what now seems an almost comical dispute over who had the right to ring the curfew, that lasted from 1408 until 1421.¹⁸ The church was a rectory and was by the mid-sixteenth century run by a curate (we saw above that the church could not afford his stipend in 1554) and had a chantry.¹⁹ We also have some scattered references to a few of the incumbents.

The clerical section of the Poll Tax returns of 1379 give us Domini John and Walter, and Symons says these were the chaplain and a curate.²⁰ The incumbent of St. Mary's was later a rector. Rectors could appoint a vicar to deputise (*vicarius*, in place of). Chaplains were sometimes vicars or sang the services, curates deputised for vicars or rectors.

From wills we can find references to Sir William Asshley, chaplain in 1432;²¹ Sir John Wood (e), parson and curate, 1496 and 1502,²² seemingly a monk at the abbey, he was buried in the chancel in the latter year; William Clement, Vicar of Stalls, 1549,²³ he must have held in plurality (and thus the need for a curate in 1554). 'Sir' was a courtesy title for clerics in holy orders. Other references come from property deeds: Thomas de Coventre, rector 1310; Sir John of Southstoke, called chaplain in 1351; John Ganard, chaplain 1352 and as rector 1368/9. This last is the first mention of St. Mary's direct, the others are presumed as they involve St. Mary properties.²⁴ John of Southstoke may have been very long-lived, as his name first appears as a witness on a deed Shickle dates to 'around 1300' and on another certainly dated to 1316-17. He appears at various dates in the 1330s, 40s and 50s and finally in 1362.²⁵ Even if the deed of 'around 1300' was also from 1316, a minimum forty six-year adult career is, while possible, somewhat unusual in the fourteenth century. Perhaps we are looking at two related men.

We can also note that one of the wealthiest of the late fifteenth-century citizens of Bath, Thomas Chauncellor was a parishioner of St. Mary's. Although he was buried in the priory church, he left 200 marks for obits to be said for him and his at St. Mary's, and the ownership of a loom.²⁶

The site of the church

While it is unlikely we will ever recover the appearance and details of the church, it is possible to be much more precise about its site [fig. 3]. In general terms, the site of St. Mary's has been never been lost, but its exact form and position has been slightly less clear.

Study of the various leases and deeds from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries make it quite clear where the 'prison garden' was and another garden to the east of the church

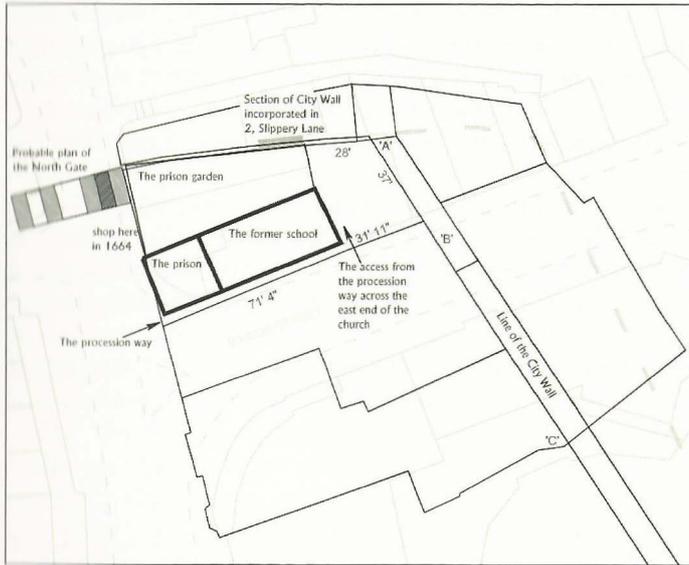


Fig 3: Properties known at 1773 overlaid on the current Ordnance Survey map
Author's Collection

church extent exactly. This was a rectangular plot 26'4" north/south by 71' 4" east/west (8.03m x 21.75m).

How this was divided up in terms of a ground plan is less clear. It seems that a strip 3' (0.93m) wide along the south side was always a passage or alley giving access to the plot at the rear of the church, meaning that the overall external width of the church was only 23'4" (7.11m). This strip is called a 'procession way' in a building lease of 1346.²⁸ It seems to have been the way in to the School in the later centuries, with the door from the street at its west end. The east end of the church itself must have coincided with the east end of the plot, as the eastern boundary of the prison garden to the north 'ranged with the poynne end' of the church, meaning it extended north from the gable end.²⁹ Assuming that the west end also sat on the west boundary (as implied by all the post-medieval descriptions of the prison) this means that the length of the church was very close to three times its width. The access route from the 'procession way' across the east end of the church to the properties north of the school, referred to in several documents, must have been in the plot to its east.²⁹

We know that the tower was at the west end, the conventional but not invariable position [fig. 1]. It was almost certainly square, but it is not clear if it was the same width as the body of the church. In smaller parish churches this is quite usual. That it probably was is indicated by the 1664 lease for the prison garden, the property immediately north of the church.²⁹ This mentions a shop, which must have projected into the street, as it is described as east of the main tenement and south of the north gate. [fig. 3] Wood mentions that the side passages in the gate were blocked,³⁰ probably by the shop encroaching on the street, a process called *purpresture*, which could be regularised by a fine. This shop is north of, or possibly over, an entry passage to the prison. By this date the tower of the church is the prison and the entry must have given

(leases of 1664, 1682 and 1755)²⁷ [fig. 3]. The descriptions and dimensions of these plots, which can be related directly to known property boundaries, make it possible to place the north and east sides of the school and the prison precisely. The western end of the prison plot can be identified from the western end of the prison garden and the Northgate Street frontage. [fig. 3] The southern side is given by the property plans showing the layout before 1773 accompanying the legal documents for the creation of Bridge Street. As the school and prison at this date were the church, this gives the

access to the north side of the tower. As this entry ran within the southern edge of the property north of the tower, this implies that the tower occupied the whole width of the church plot. The tower then would have occupied one third of the plan, and the body of the church two thirds. It does seem that the tower had a crypt or cellar, as there are several seventeenth-century references to a dungeon under the prison, incidentally showing, most unromantically, that the dungeon was not the prison itself.³¹

This relatively large proportion and size of the tower might also explain why the nave of the church is never mentioned, but only the chancel: the tower might well have served as the nave. This sounds odd to our ears but several Saxon churches are known to have been designed thus, acquiring a proper nave only much later. St. Michael's at Oxford and All Saints' at Earl Barton (Northants) are thought to be examples.³² Perhaps the tiny congregation never required a larger space; on the other hand, the sources are so sparse that any mention of specific parts of the church is unusual. The church apart from the tower had never grown from its original size, even if it was rebuilt in the twelfth century and always remained essentially single cell.

Wroughton³³ implies there was a nave and a chancel by saying that the school expanded from the nave into the chancel in 1589, but gives no references for this - we only know that the chancel was repaired and partly rebuilt for the school in that year. The early-modern references mention neither nave nor chancel, merely 'the skole or schole'. It is likely that if the congregation had taken over part of the main body of the church later in the middle ages, only a screen would have separated it from the chancel in the rest of the room. At any rate the tower and church were completely separate by the time they were in use as prison and school in the late-sixteenth century: the connecting arch we would expect must have been blocked up, although curiously, there is no mention of this work in the accounts.

The church certainly had burial rights (*pace* what I thought in 2002),³⁴ but no burials have ever been found. Burials in the church were requested in wills: John Woode, for example, in 1502. Such burial was a rare privilege, and Woode was the Rector. The lay cemetery must have been either in the plots to the north or the east, both accessible via the processional way and a right of access from it along the east end of the church, long after the burials had been forgotten.

However, if burials had taken place in the garden on the north, the space for them was even more restricted when the Parsonage House was built there. This was probably in the later-middle ages as the building was thoroughly refurbished for the schoolmaster in 1585.³⁵ The house was set back from the road in the corner of the city wall, against which it seems to have been built.

The Setting

The preceding discussion makes it clear that the church and its churchyard occupied the whole of the space east of Northgate Street and north of what is now Bridge Street, up to the north and east runs of the city walls. From the High Street or Northgate Street, thinking away Bridge Street of course, the church would have appeared to be tightly crammed into the urban landscape. It fronted on to the street just like any other building and while having an open space to its north, this was probably walled off from the street and largely masked by the North Gate, which was built inside the line of the city wall.

The shop north of the tower, occupying such a prime position, is likely to have been there since the middle ages. A deed of 1346 includes the obligation to build a timber-framed house in oak

with stone roof tiles on the plot immediately to the south, alongside the access way.³⁶ This would have been of at least two and probably three storeys, with a shop on the frontage and a chamber over and possibly a storage loft above that. The rear would have contained any workshops or parlours and a kitchen. There might well have been a hall at the rear as well and further bedrooms on the upper floors. The rest of the High Street frontage was completely built up. The church, while very distinctive with its stone tower, would have been just one more building in the row.

Once past the frontage buildings, however, it appears that the church had a much more open aspect. We have seen that the gardens north and east of the church remained open well into the post-medieval period (except for the Parsonage House, which was probably not at all large). The city wall would have provided a strong sense of enclosure, but beyond it the holdings down to the river were mostly gardens and courtyards.³⁷ In this tight integration into the urban fabric it was typical of the smaller medieval urban churches, both in Bath and elsewhere. [fig. 1]

The city wall

The post-medieval deeds that provide so much information about the site of the church also contain some surprising information about the position of the city walls. The city wall marked the boundary of both the plots north and east of the church, its position quite clearly stated and confirmed by measurements (shown on fig. 3). On the north this fits in well with the traditional position of the wall as shown by the parish boundary of St. Mary's with St. Michael's Without, the present property boundary between 14 and 15, Northgate Street and

the backs of the first few houses on Bridge Street [fig. 3]. Observations in 15 Northgate Street in 2000 revealed the survival of the wall in the ground floor and basement of the present (eighteenth-century) buildings.³⁸ Excavation later that year showed the edge of the city ditch, or moat and the existence of houses or workshops against the outside of the city wall from the thirteenth century at least.³⁹ On the east, however, these measurements play havoc with any of the lines for the wall assumed by previous scholars, myself included, a point made to me by Mrs. Marta Inskip many years ago when she was first investigating these records. The measurements place the north-east corner of the city wall some way west of the traditional position, usually arrived at by projecting the alignment at the east gate northwards towards Slippery Lane [fig. 3]. However,

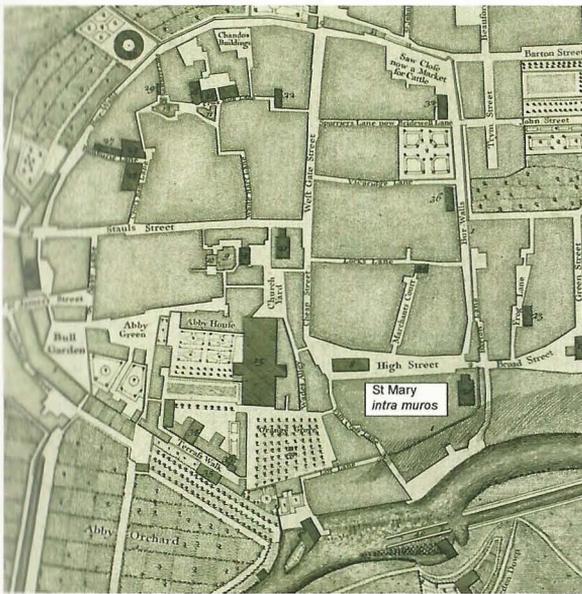


fig 4: Detail from a Plan of the City of Bath from a Survey by John Wood Architect, 1735 showing the position of the city wall

Bath in Time - Bath Central Library Collection

Wood's version of the wall in his map first published in 1730 does show the alignment indicated by the deeds [fig. 4]. This ties in with the alignments of various elements of the property boundaries mapped here in 1773 [fig. 3] which clearly reflect the existence of the wall. Especially interesting are the areas marked A, B and C on fig. 3, which are the effect of the thickness of the wall or its alignment on later property boundaries. Archaeological investigations under the Empire Hotel in 1994 showed that the city wall there was around 10' thick at the base. Other investigations have indicated that it narrowed somewhat as it rose and these property lines indicate a wall around 9' 3" wide (the much narrower north wall remains in 15 Northgate Street are the results of later thinning to provide more accommodation - see note 38). This wall line does not neatly align with the position of the thirteenth-century East Gate, but this discrepancy cannot at present be addressed. It is thought that the vaults under the market retain elements of the city wall and these need a closer study to see what light they may throw on the problem. They have not been surveyed. It is noticeable that the line now understood is more nearly parallel with the river than previous interpretations, which perhaps makes sense. Wood also indicated the slope of the ground down to the river along Walcot Street and down to the mill, and, if this is right, the wall can be seen to occupy the crest of the slope above the river bank [see illustration page 14]. It has been known for some time that the line of the defences in this corner was not that shown on Ordnance Survey maps. However, it has come as somewhat of a surprise, to me at least, to see how wrong recent attempts to plot a more accurate line have been and how this information has actually been available in one sense for several hundred years, although it takes a careful and professional researcher (see below) to actually see the wood for the trees.

One final possibility might be aired here. The similarity with St. Michael's at Oxford has been mentioned above. In its current state, that church sits just inside the city wall line, but excavation has shown that originally it sat on the wall, like St. John's in Bristol, and the wall line was moved out later in the middle ages.⁴⁰ There is, however, no obvious alternative line for Bath's city wall to be picked up from any known property plans related to St. Mary's or the northern part of the walled town. It is more likely that St. Mary's was built against the back of the earth rampart inside the wall, keeping unobstructed the tenth century rampart road believed to have run around the inside of the walls when first refurbished.

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Notes

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2. J. Manco, *The Spirit of Care* (Bath 1998), p. 41.
3. Calendar of Patent Rolls 15 Elizabeth I.

4. J. Wroughton, *Tudor Bath Life and Strife in the Little City 1485-1603* (Bath 2006), pp. 82-84.
5. J. Wroughton, *Tudor Bath Life and Strife in the Little City 1485-1603* (Bath 2006), pp. 46, 58-59.
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9. Somerset Record Society 1888, *Survey and rental of the Chantries, Colleges, and Free Churches, Guilds, Fraternities, Lamps, Lights and Obits in the County of Somerset*.
10. C. W. Shickle, *Ancient Deeds of Bath* V.80 and V.90.
11. K. E. Symons, *The Grammar School of King Edward VI* (Bath 1934), p. 136.
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22. *Op. cit.* p. 344.
23. *Op. cit.* Vol. 19, p. 106.
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25. C. W. Shickle, *Ancient Deeds of Bath* V.10, 89; IV.30, 31, 87; III, 16,17,18, 21,47; II.13, 83, 90-93; I.16, 60. Date range 1316-1362.
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29. See note 27, no. F.654.
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31. Bath Corporation Minutes 25.3.1664 Bath Record Office.
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