
Towards a geography of sexual encounter: prostitution in English medieval towns

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A characteristic of the present era of English medieval urban studies is the tendency to concentrate on single-town research at the expense of comparative studies. This has often been true even of analyses of the developing urban landscape, where a comparison both of shared features and of characteristics peculiar to individual towns will provide a basis for discussing the origins and evolution of town plans. In particular, the functions and changing use of specific features are likely to become clearer when studied as a group rather than in isolation. This is especially so with features that seen singly might otherwise appear to be oddities or eccentricities.

An excellent example is the naming of urban streets. Medieval street names were not imposed by authority, but came into use by popular acclamation and invariably reflected function or some other prominent characteristic: the High Street of a town was generally recognised as such, and physical features or locations often provided names. Frequently – and particularly in the larger towns where a degree of zoning could occur – the reference was to an obvious economic specialisation: for instance, Smiths' Street; Walkers' Lane; Tanners' Row; Hucksters' Street; The

Butchery or the Shambles; the Mercery. Given the uniformity of the urban experience, it is not surprising that the result is a high degree of uniformity across the range of English towns, from the smallest to the very large. Yet as functional identifiers these names have an historical interest, not least because trends and changes in the recorded pattern of street names can supplement other evidence for a town's developing economic geography.

Urban historians have often noticed, but seldom commented on, the fact that the monotony of urban street names was considerably relieved by some that were suggestive of sexual activity. The more explicit were clearly offensive to later generations and in the post-medieval centuries were softened or changed altogether to become more acceptable. That these street names needed to be rendered innocuous confirms that they were indeed obscene in character; it seems a reasonable hypothesis, moreover, that like other street names they arose in the first place because for contemporaries they conveyed accurately these streets' perceived, predominant character. A number of northern and eastern towns had, for instance, a Finkle Street or Lane, stemming perhaps from a Middle English word meaning to cuddle or fondle; Love Lane, too, is a name recorded in a large number of towns in the medieval period and later. These might imply nothing that was seriously offensive, although John Stow reported that the Love Lane of late Tudor London was lined with brothels. Mabgate, as in Leeds, appears to derive from mabel, a general term for a loose woman; the many Maiden Streets or Lanes seem to have been ironically named in reference to their notoriety as haunts of prostitutes. Cock Lane or Cocks Lane again appears to have been an explicit sexual reference (Room 1992).

The most outstanding of these street names – strikingly both the most ubiquitous and the most explicit – is the frequently encountered Grope Lane, or more graphically *Gropecunt* Lane. These were evidently interchangeable names: certainly there are examples of the more direct name being toned down in the early modern period to Grope Lane or a variant such as Grape Lane. As a street name it is recorded from the greatest towns of medieval England – London, Norwich, Bristol, York – as well as from the greater regional and county towns such as Shrewsbury, Oxford, Newcastle, Worcester and Hereford, down to smaller and local market towns such as Wells, Reading, Banbury, Whitby and Orford. Doubtless a determined search would produce many more examples. The name can hardly be an ambiguous one, and indeed *Gropecuntelane* (alternatively *Gropekuntelane*) in Norwich – now Opie Street – was also recorded in Latin as *turpis vicus*, the filthy street or alternatively the shameful or infamous street: the term conveys both senses. It clearly derives from Old English *grapian* meaning to grope, but also signifying grab or grasp, or

take hold of.

Unquestionably, street names such as this are significant pointers to the geography of urban sexual encounter, or at least to illicit or casual sexual activity. That might not necessarily imply prostitution. After all, medieval towns contained large numbers of young unmarried people living and working in their masters' households, and records such as apprenticeship contracts, for instance, convey a sense of concern at the way they were tempted to spend leisure time on the streets and in disreputable establishments (Lipson 1945, 312-13). Sexual encounters between these young people must have been frequent, yet there can have been few places within the town where they could meet in private. A characteristic of this group of street names is that they were more often applied to minor streets, particularly narrow lanes or alleyways, than to the busy major streets which carried traffic and were the setting for legitimate commerce. A narrow, perhaps crooked, pitch-dark and not-well-frequented alleyway would readily have lent itself as a venue both for assignations and for casual sexual acts; once its notoriety had been established, moreover, the thoroughfare would be avoided - certainly at night and perhaps even during daylight as well - by the ordinary pedestrian. But clearly such a venue would equally lend itself to the activities of street prostitutes. *Grappunt Lane* in York was well known as a haunt of prostitutes (Goldberg 1992, 154).

But was prostitution characteristic of the central areas of medieval towns? In medieval England prostitution was certainly a feature primarily of urban society, and whilst small-town and even rural prostitution existed it was the larger towns that provided the most opportunity for it to be followed as a regular profession. Its urban character was developed at an early date, as soon as there were viable towns: the Old English word *portwene* for a prostitute stresses that already the connection between prostitution and commercial centres or *ports* was recognised. And much of the historical evidence for prostitution arises out of its control by the authorities of the largest cities throughout Europe.

The mentality determining the varied forms of that control was not necessarily one of censure or prohibition. The position taken by the ecclesiastical authorities derived ultimately from St Augustine's view that although prostitutes themselves were degraded it was legitimate for men to use them as an outlet for lusts that might otherwise be directed towards the corruption of virtuous women or into sodomy with other men (Karras 1989, 399). In French towns a moral stance was sometimes taken in respect of the prostitutes' clients: the prevailing pattern of late marriage for men and the high value placed on the virginity of young brides were instrumental in legitimating a young, unmarried man's resort to prostitutes as a necessary outlet, at the same time as this was

held to be immoral for married men, a betrayal of their marital vows. Often, too, the use of prostitutes by priests was specifically forbidden as a breach of their vows of celibacy (Rossiaud 1988, 38–45). The extensive and well-researched documentary evidence from France shows civic authorities there responding in a variety of ways to theological trends and economic necessity. In general it may be said that municipal regulation underwent a change in the fourteenth century. Thirteenth-century statutes appear mainly to have been concerned with restriction and prohibition: prostitutes were often barred from living or working in particular areas – within town walls, around churches, or in ‘streets of good men’. But in Montpellier in 1285 a single suburban street was designated as what was called a ‘hot street’ where prostitutes were compelled to stay; once there they were given protection, including from hostile neighbours. And while cases of expulsion of prostitutes from cities continued into the early fourteenth century, elsewhere a policy of control was increasingly followed. In Toulouse an officially sanctioned brothel was established in the city centre by 1296, and the fourteenth century saw the growth of municipally run brothels, frequently as a successor to the protected ‘hot street’. It seems to have been felt that it was easier to police a single establishment than a whole street of private houses, and in many towns prostitution that was controlled, protected, or actually run by the municipality was brought back within the town walls, even to prominent, central locations (Rossiaud 1988).

Rather than being forbidden, therefore, prostitution was more often tolerated and regulated. The return of legally sanctioned prostitution to French city centres in the fourteenth century is an interesting development, contrary as it is to the traditionally expressed view of prostitution in pre-industrial towns as pre-eminently a marginal activity. The social position of prostitutes was on the margins of urban society, and symbolically the geographical setting of their profession – whether enforced by regulation or by economics – was the town margin. Gideon Sjöberg described the pattern in his influential sociological analysis of the pre-industrial city, insisting that prostitution was one of the marginal activities that in a variety of geographical and cultural contexts were both socially and physically isolated. The pattern was a deliberate one, he deduced; by placing the various outcast groups outside the urban community, the respectable townspeople could make use of their services without risk of moral or sometimes ritual contamination (Sjöberg 1960, 99–100, 134–7).

Certainly evidence from English medieval towns can be advanced to support just such a generalisation, that the control of prostitution entailed its consignment to the urban margin. Whilst only one case of prostitution being confined to a single municipally run brothel on the continental

pattern is known, in the port town of Sandwich (Karras 1989, 411), a formal assignment of prostitution to the suburbs was more common. Most obviously there was the formal banishment of prostitution from London to the bishop of Winchester's liberty in Southwark, across the River Thames. There, beyond the jurisdiction of the city authorities, highly organised and regulated bathhouses and brothels flourished to the profit of their landlords into the sixteenth century and beyond. Yet contrary to city by-laws providing for a severe punishment of forty days' imprisonment for any prostitute staying within the city walls, reinforced by an order of Edward I in 1310 that all London's brothels should be closed, it is quite clear that prostitution was never in fact ousted from the city (Post 1974-7; Karras 1989). In an obvious attempt to impose a realistic measure of control, the authorities in 1393 allowed prostitutes to lodge in a single city street, the aptly named Cocks Lane (Riley 1868, 535). The impression gained from scattered court records is that the trade continued to flourish within the city, albeit on a less organised basis than across the river: prosecutions were as much of individual women as of brothel keepers (Karras 1989, 409 n. 40). There seems to have been a clear distinction between the regulated and doubtless expensive suburban brothels and the city prostitution carried on principally, perhaps, by women working illegally and alone as street prostitutes. William Langland's moral poem of the 1370s, *Piers Plowman*, describes how Gluttony visits the alehouse one Friday, when he should have been going to confession. Looking around him he sees a representative selection of the lower end of London society, including among others a scavenger from Cheapside, a rat catcher and a street musician, as well as Clarice of Cocks Lane who was sitting with the parish clerk. Father Piers, a priest, was also there, drinking ale with a Flemish whore called Peronella (Skeat 1869, *Passus V*, ll. 315-26).

With the same apparent aim of marginalising prostitution, other English towns and cities enacted similar laws to London's. Coventry did so in 1445, declaring that brothels should be outside its walls, and Leicester did the same in 1467; prostitutes in Bristol also faced exile to the suburbs (Harris 1907, 219-20; Bateson 1901, 291; Bickley 1900, 33-34). In Winchester, prostitution was mainly confined to areas of poor suburban cottages outside the city's jurisdiction, although during the fifteenth century prostitutes brought before the courts were fined rather than expelled, and brothels began to congregate behind the frontages of Gold Street, one of the main intramural streets (Keene 1985, 390-392). From other towns, too, comes evidence to suggest that a formal policy of exclusion and marginalisation was likely to be no more than a facade, behind which flourished a vigorous prostitution industry at their civic and economic centres. The by-laws of Gloucester, framed around 1500, to take

just one example, expressed distress at the 'exceeding number of common strumpets and bawds dwelling in every ward' of the town and reiterated what must have been, for the most part, traditional regulations. Innkeepers were forbidden from harbouring *comyn quwenys* or prostitutes, and householders keeping 'any bawdry' within their houses were to leave the town. Nor did the prostitutes' clients escape attention: interestingly, it was specifically married men and priests who were singled out for censure and made liable to imprisonment. Priests were forbidden to 'walk by night suspiciously', a direct reference to the habit of going out in search of street prostitutes; men with this aim were referred to as 'nightwalkers' in the seventeenth century (Stevenson 1891, 435-7).

The virtual uniformity of such provisions and their repetition at intervals leave little doubt that town authorities were never able to exclude prostitution from the bustle of the central commercial streets. The overcrowding of medieval city centres was essentially a consequence of the imperative felt by tradespeople selling directly to the public, that they had to work and live in a central location; doubtless prostitutes saw the same advantage as other urban workers in plying their trade on the busiest streets. Despite the tenor of many of the contemporary regulations, therefore - and despite any modern sociological models - they refused to allow their trade to be marginalised as the town authorities' vision of an ideal world might have required. And it is with that in mind that we can look again at this question of the significance of sexually explicit street names, in particular that of the most explicit of all.

The striking linguistic uniformity of the numerous *Grope* and *Gropecunt* street names is matched or even exceeded by the uniformity of their relationship to the physical and economic geography of the towns in which they occur. In the great majority of cases, a *Gropecunt* or *Grope Lane* was to be found in direct association with, and close proximity to the principal market-place, or market street, or high street. Alternatively, in towns where port functions were of particular importance, the same street names occurred in association with public quays. And it is significant that although these streets are likely to have been associated with prostitution, they are almost never located in marginal or suburban situations. Indeed, the reverse is true: these streets could scarcely have been more centrally located, whether in the capital or in the smallest country market town.

To begin with the largest medieval cities (Figure 1), London provides what could fairly be described as the archetype. First recorded in 1260-1, *Grope Countlane* lay off the east end of Cheapside, opposite Mercers' Hall (Lobel 1989, 76: hist. gaz. 145/38). A narrow lane running south to St Pancras's Lane, it was sandwiched between *Bordhawlane* to its east and *Puppekirty* or Popkirtle Lane to its west, both street names suggestive of a

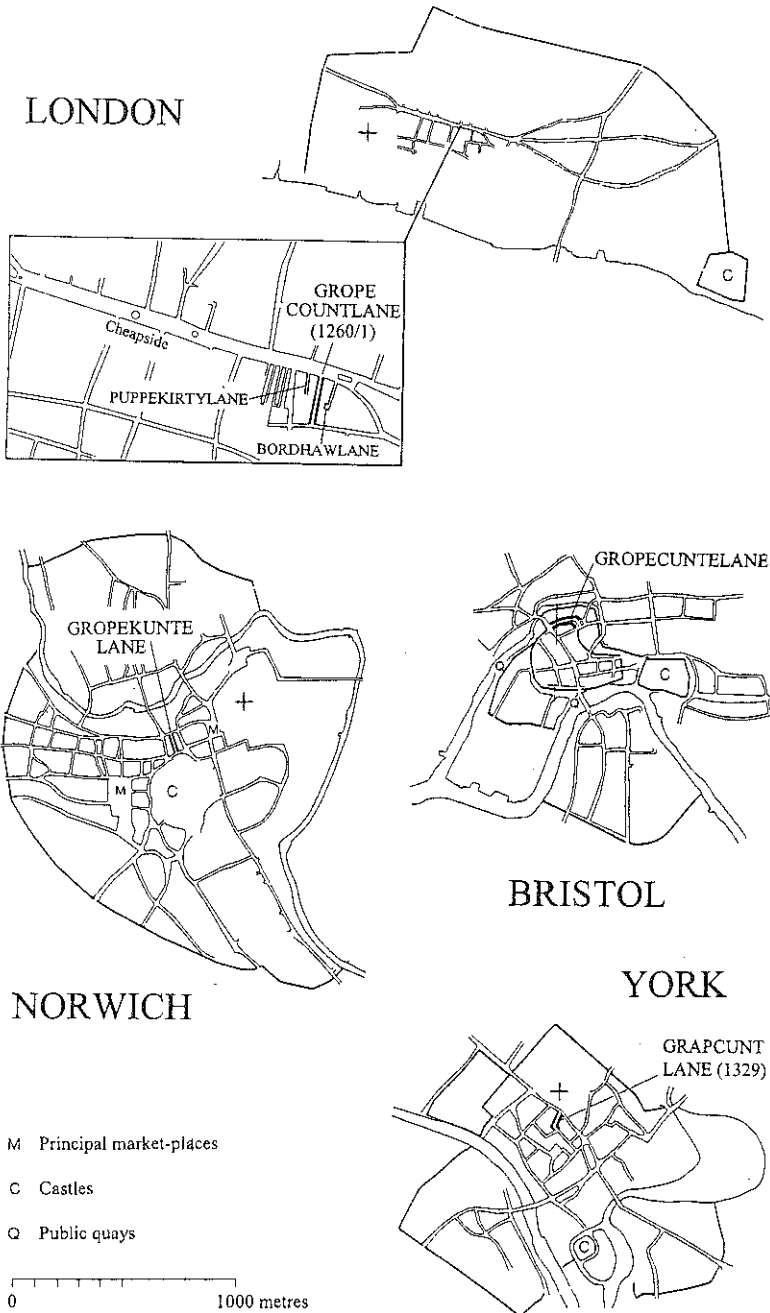


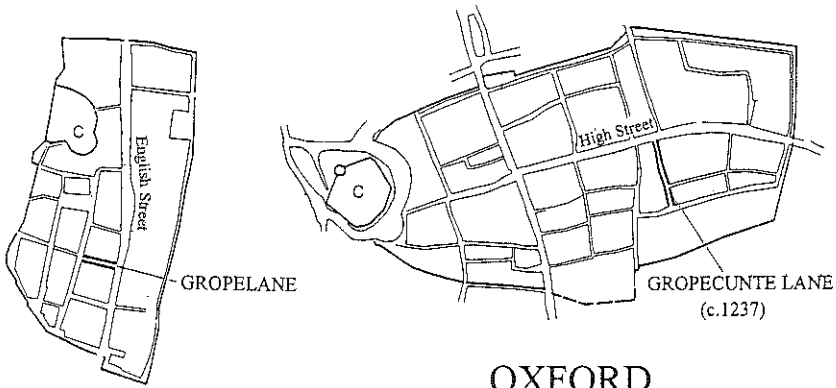
Figure 1.

broadly similar range of activities. It certainly appears that this area, adjoining the city's principal trading street, was a nucleus of medieval prostitution that escaped banishment to the suburb of Southwark. It has recently been suggested that the presence of these street names may have been connected with the concentration of women in the Cheapside area, both as shopkeepers and stall-holders, and as customers purchasing textiles, clothing, and accessories: 'In shops, perhaps, it was customary to agree, or to force, assignments which were consummated nearby' (Keene 1990, 41).

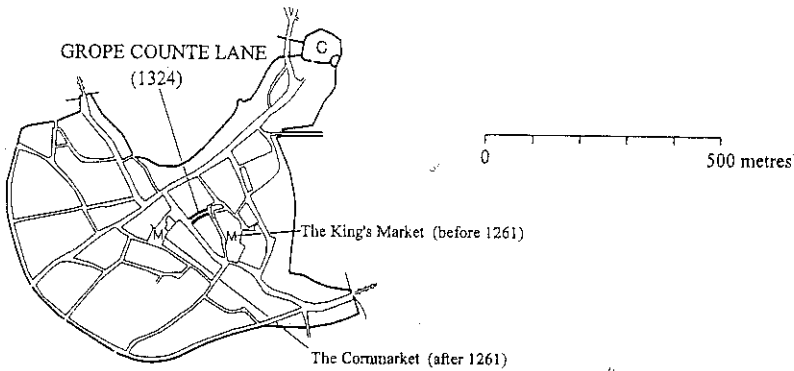
In York, *Grapcunt Lane* was recorded in 1329, appearing in shortened form as *Graplane* later in the fourteenth century (Palliser 1978, 10). The lane led off the south side of Petergate, the principal east-west thoroughfare, opposite York Minster precinct in the heart of the old fortress area. Though narrow, the lane was a through street connecting Petergate with the marketing areas of the Shambles, the Pavement, and the Thursday Market. In Norwich, *Gropekuntelane* lay in the centre of the commercial city south of the Wensum, a block north of the castle, half-way between the great new Norman market-place to the west and the Anglo-Saxon market-place and medieval fair site at Tomblond to the east (Lobel 1975).

Of the examples considered here, *Gropecuntelane* in Bristol is the nearest to being the geographical exception, in that it lay immediately outside the northern defences of the Anglo-Norman town. Nevertheless, it was enclosed within the twelfth-century outer town wall, and lay directly off the principal north-south through-street (Fromebridge Street - Broad Street - High Street) within c. 200 metres of the central carfax. With the development of the streets around Broad Mead and Lewins Mead in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it ceased to be in any way peripheral. As Grope Lane, it is first heard of in 1281, as *Gropecuntelane* in 1339. Just a few years earlier, in 1331, a charter from Edward III had set out the liberties and customs of Bristol, dealing with lepers and prostitutes on a more or less equal footing: no common woman could dwell within the walls, and were such a woman to be so found 'the doors and windows of their houses (would) be taken down and carried away by the sergeants of the mayor to the house of the constable of the ward and kept there until such women are entirely removed' (Bickley 1900, 33-4; Lilley 1998). In this instance, as perhaps in others, a crucial distinction may in reality have been drawn by the authorities between the establishment of a permanent residence and place of work, and the practice of the trade in the open air or in premises that could plausibly claim to be something other than a brothel. *Gropecuntelane* may not have been alone in the services it offered in Bristol. Not far away, Love Lane - which also occurs in fourteenth-century records - could be found leading from Marsh Street to the public quay on the Frome (Lilley 1998; Lobel 1975, 5-8).

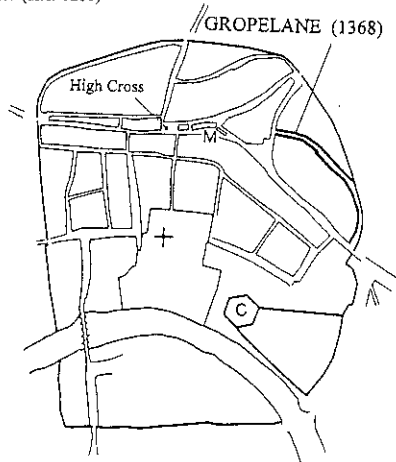
SOUTHAMPTON



OXFORD



SHREWSBURY



HEREFORD

Figure 2.

Amongst the medium-sized towns (Figure 2) the market-place/high street association is even more clearly apparent. *Grope Countelane* in Shrewsbury was first recorded in 1324, the name continuing in this form as late as 1561 (Hobbs 1954, 56; Raby Castle deeds, 1/25/9a-b, ref. courtesy W. A. Champion). The lane connects the town's two principal market-places. At the top was the King's Market, held in the cemetery between St Alkmund's church and St Juliana's. By 1261 the site had become too small, and although some market activities persisted, most were moved down the hill to a newly created market-place, the Cornmarket, now known as The Square, off one side of the High Street at the bottom of Grope Lane (Close Rolls, Henry III, 1259-61, 351). In Shrewsbury the name Grope Lane survives to this day, though it is generally explained by town guides and histories in terms of feeling one's way along a dark and narrow thoroughfare. The loss of meaning following the disappearance of the more explicit name appears to date to the years around 1800. In his 1779 *History and Antiquities of Shrewsbury* Thomas Phillips, or his ghost-writer Bowen, had no illusions as to the name's origin: blame was laid squarely at the door of the locally notorious Augustinian friars, whose many vices included 'scandalous lewdness and venery, insomuch, that a lane in this town from their nocturnal pranks, is to this day called Grope Lane' (p. 108). But to Archdeacon Hugh Owen, whose history was published in 1808, the lane was simply 'called Grope, or the *Dark Lane*' (Owen 1808, 531).

In Hereford, *Gropelane*, recorded in 1368, led off the east side of Olde Street, part of the great post-Conquest triangular market-place (Tonkin 1966). Although spatially its location was peripheral, lying just within the city wall, it was part of the economic centre, adjacent to the High Town area and the Boothall. In Southampton, *Grope Lane* was one of a number of lanes connecting the axial English Street or High Street with French Street to the west (Blake 1981, lxvi, ref. courtesy Keith Lilley). Oxford provides the earliest example of all, its *Gropecunte Lane* being recorded in c. 1237; in 1312 and subsequently it was abbreviated to *Grope Lane* before becoming Grove Street or Magpie Lane. It led off the south side of the High Street, some 300 metres from the central carfax (Salter 1960, 202-207).

Amongst the smaller towns (Figure 3) the market-place association was strongest in Reading, *Grope Lane* there being a minor cul-de-sac off the west side of the Old Market (Lobel 1969). Banbury offers a fairly startling contrast in that its *Gropecunt Lane* was a secondary but potentially busy through street within an essentially triangular street-plan, connecting the principal Market Place and Beastmarket to the east with North Bar Street and Horsemarket to the west. The name was current before the fifteenth century, *Gropecunt Lane* subsequently becoming Parsons Lane (Lobel

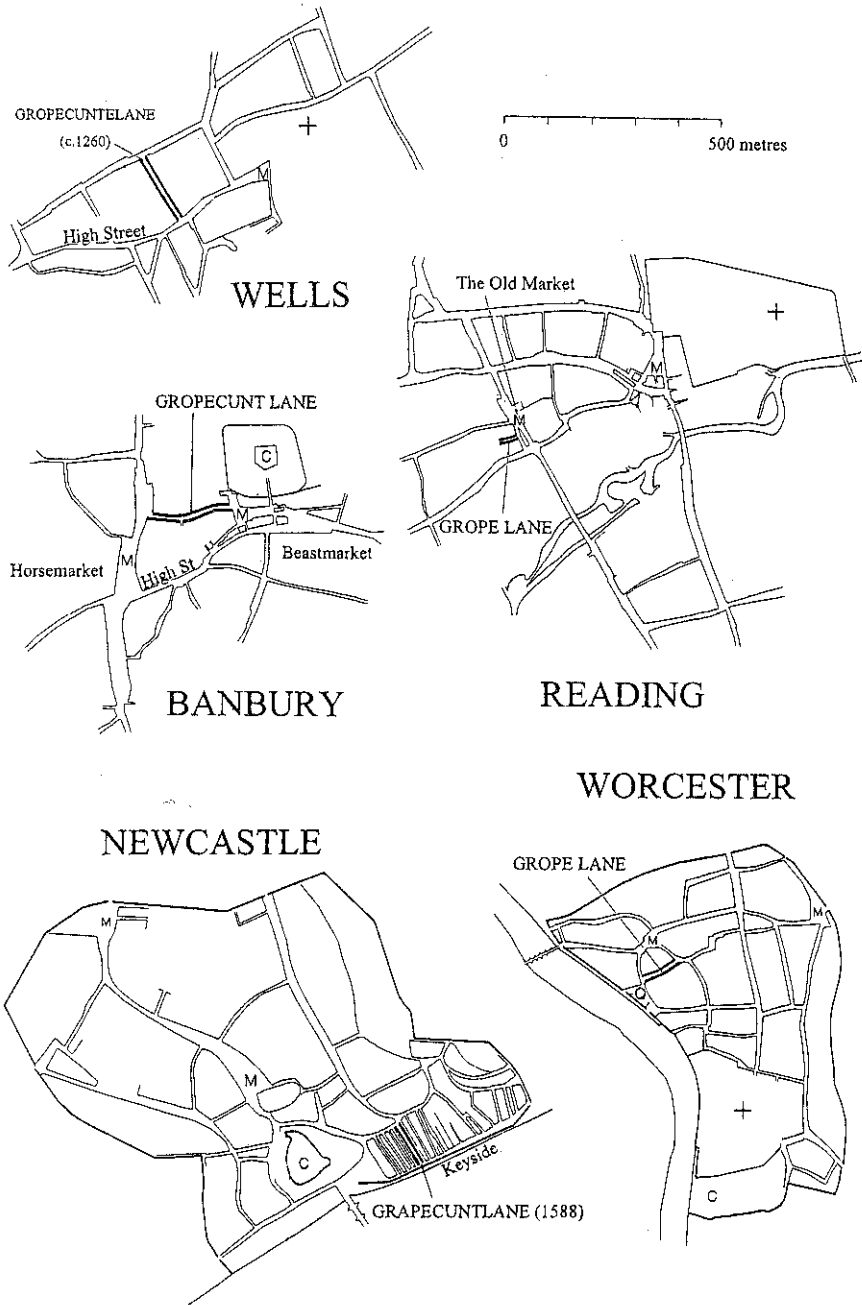


Figure 3.

1969). In Wells, Somerset, *Gropecuntelane* ran off the north side of the High Street, mid-way along it. The name was used between c. 1260 and 1333, but ran concurrently with the contracted form, *Grope Lane*, in use from c. 1280 to 1835; from 1820 to 1865 the ellipsis *Grove Lane* was applied until the name was changed altogether (Scrase, n.d., 9, 104).

Apart from Bristol, there are two clear examples of associations between public quays and Grope Lanes. In Newcastle-upon-Tyne (Figure 3, bottom), *Grapecuntlane*, referred to in 1588, was one of the chares, the series of twenty narrow lanes running down to Key-side; its alternative name was *Shipman's Chare* (Harbottle and Clack 1976, 121). Similarly, in Worcester, *Grope Lane* and *Shipmonneslone* were probably alternative names for the same street, or they may have been adjacent streets; anyway, *Grope Lane* gave access to the South (public) Quay, while being within easy reach of the cattle market in All Hallows' Square, about 100 metres to the north (Baker and Holt, forthcoming).

To summarise, of the thirteen examples of Grope and *Gropecunt* Lanes identified and mapped so far (without a particularly intensive search), none had an unequivocally peripheral or suburban location within the period in which these names can be shown to have been in use. In Bristol and Oxford *Gropecunt* Lanes lay immediately outside the early medieval defences, but by the time we know these street-names to have been current the towns had expanded far beyond their earlier limits, the lanes were no longer in marginal situations, and they were effectively part of each urban core. In five examples Grope Lanes are found running off a High Street or its equivalent; in four examples they adjoin market-places, and in two they adjoin public quays. Most strikingly, in two cases (Shrewsbury and Banbury) they connect two market-places.

Clearly, more needs to be known about this extraordinary geographical phenomenon if it is to be interpreted further. Most importantly, the relationship of these street names to the business of prostitution needs further clarification: more information on premises and householders, for instance, might throw light on the activities associated with these streets and which gained them their name. *Gropecunt Lane* in Banbury, for example, was a busy through street and the prospect of out-door activity in this context is a difficult one for the modern mind to grasp. Many of these lanes may have been narrow, closely built up and dark, but Shrewsbury's, and perhaps others, contained apparently respectable houses occupied by some of the town's wealthier burgesses – at least behind the commercial frontages.

Against all the volumes that historians have written about the medieval town by day, there has been little consideration of the character of the medieval town and its streets by night. Or, for that matter, of what went

on in the side streets even during hours of daylight; for what is certain about these lanes, and the sexual contact for which they were notorious, is their direct association with the town's function as a market centre. Might this not imply that what was on offer in these places was not only, or even primarily, for the indigenous urban male but may, instead, have been to cater for the demands of visitors to the market, customers from the rural hinterland where opportunities for illicit sexual activity were restricted? In that case, time would have been a critical factor. Given the demands of attending the market and journeying to and from it in daylight, an outsider is unlikely to have patronised a brothel in an out-of-the-way suburb. What we may be seeing instead is the accommodation of a demand for rapid sexual attention while someone minded the stall or after business was finished. In some cases, as Derek Keene implies in his study of shopping in medieval Cheapside (Keene 1990), business may have been mixed with pleasure more directly, and opportunities taken to widen the scope of transactions with women traders. The main market streets were thronged with women shopping and with women selling a range of goods, many of them perhaps willing to relieve their poverty through occasional prostitution.

A link between these streets with their extraordinary names and the demands of rural visitors to the market would go some way towards explaining their linguistic uniformity. These were generic street names familiar not only within an urban neighbourhood but to a widely scattered rural population. Names given to many town streets could change rapidly as particular trades came and went or as local citizens built there, and local inhabitants would be familiar with such changes. But for outsiders a reputation and a name would be more enduring; for countrymen seeking a particular service, an unchanging and identifiable appellation would have obvious advantages. In their own way these lanes may have been a predictable rendezvous in a strange town. Archaeologists and historians have been too ready to discuss the function of urban places in terms of markets, defence, and authority; their role as places of entertainment – however defined – has, by contrast, been neglected.

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