Alsatia

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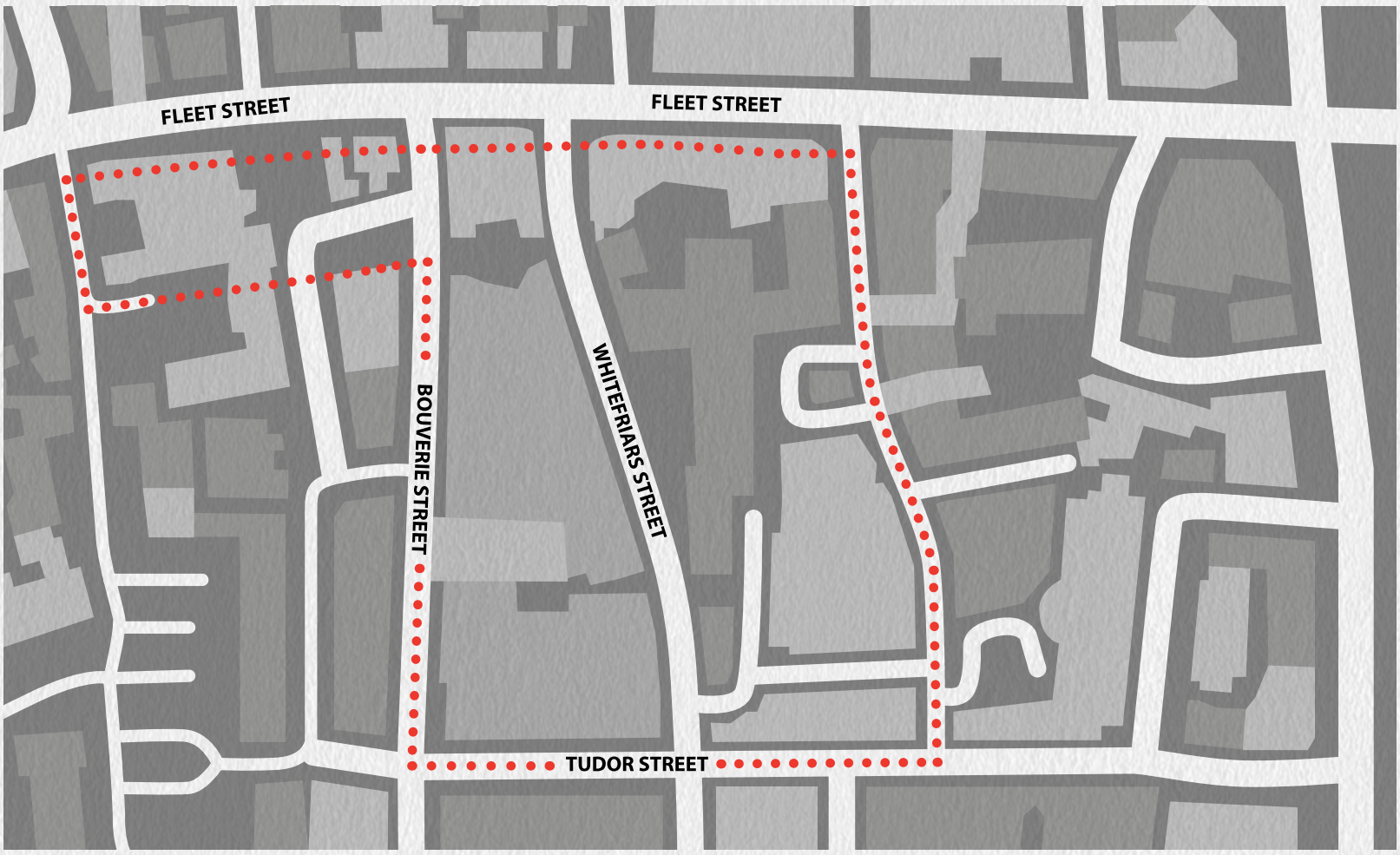

The map shows the approximate boundaries of Alsatia against the current street layout; Alsatia extended to the banks of the Thames, which at that time were inland of the present line of the Embankment. Alsatia had outliers (not shown here) at the Savoy, at Fullers Rents (now Fulwood Place), and at Baldwin's Rents (now Baldwin's Gardens).

From the 1670s to 1697, the area of London between Fleet Street and the Thames was colloquially known as Alsatia.

It was made up of the Precinct of Whitefriars, formerly a Carmelite monastery, Salisbury Court, Ram Alley and Mitre Court; with outlying areas to the West (the Savoy, property of the Duchy of Lancaster), and Fuller's Rents and Baldwin's Gardens.

Across the river were its counterparts in Southwark, sometimes known as Alsatia the Lower, The Mint, The Clink and Montague Close.

Named by the journalist Henry Care after the French region studded by independent cities, Alsatia was a place of refuge for debtors escaping imprisonment in liberties that claimed certain legal freedoms.

Since 1352, those who owed money to private individuals could be arrested and imprisoned at the behest of their creditors. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, hundreds of thousands of people were jailed, released only by paying their debts or through one of many relief acts passed by the government. The largest debtor prisons were in London and Southwark: The Fleet, the King's Bench and the Marshalsea.

Until the prison reform movement of the late eighteenth century, gaols were dangerously ramshackle and unhygienic; imprisoned debtors, by definition with limited resources, had to pay for their own food and drink. Observing the principle of the sanctity of life, the Church allowed debtors to seek sanctuary from prosecution in some of their properties.

Despite Henry VIII's Reformation, sanctuary rights persisted in formerly cleric-owned areas, as with Whitefriars. Other, secular, liberties claimed similar privileges and legal exemptions. After a period of comparative benevolence during the interregnum, the Restoration saw the use of both trade on credit and imprisonment for debt expand, and a consequent revival of the sanctuaries.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these same rights had allowed for the operation of theatres in these areas; the theatrical connection continued with numerous mentions of Alsatia in the plays of the period. Thomas Shadwell set his 1688 comedy "The Squire of Alsatia" in the sanctuary, depicting the inhabitants as rogues, dandies and imposters.

In 1691, the Alsatians rioted against their neighbours, the lawyers of the Temple, who were blocking up one of the passages into Whitefriars. The High Sheriffs of London and their men were called, and roundly beaten; one of them was shot and later died. The King's Guard came and restored peace; the Cornishman Captain Francis Winter, a veteran of the Dutch Wars, was charged with murder.

After two years of appeals, Winter was finally hanged on Fleet Street, outside Whitefriars Gate to instil fear into the Alsatians. It was reported that the inhabitants of the sanctuary attended the execution in their thousands; afterwards they quickly took down his body to ensure him a decent burial.

Such a "Rebellious and Unlawful Assembly" and the army's involvement drew attention and the government moved to declare that these were merely "pretended privileged places." Alsatia was abolished by the 1697 'Escape from Prisons' Act, along with all the other sanctuaries. Southwark Mint revived in the early 1700s, and lasted until 1722, when an amnesty wrote off the debts of thousands. A brief attempt to establish a sanctuary in Wapping in 1723 was quickly crushed.

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Additional notes

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