

# HOLBORN: *Walking Tour*



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Historic England

# HOLBORN:

This short 1km tour investigates the inherited character of an area of Holborn in London. It highlights elements, both new and old, that help create a special sense of place. Explore the streets, buildings and spaces to understand the story of how and why the area's character has developed the way it has. In turn, you can look to the area's future, considering how modern developments are responding to their historic surroundings. The different approaches that have taken is useful for thinking about issues of design in context, planning and regeneration.

You can navigate the tour by following the map and the key points along it. Short descriptions with images are provided for each. Please note Gray's Inn Court is a private space and parts have restricted opening hours.

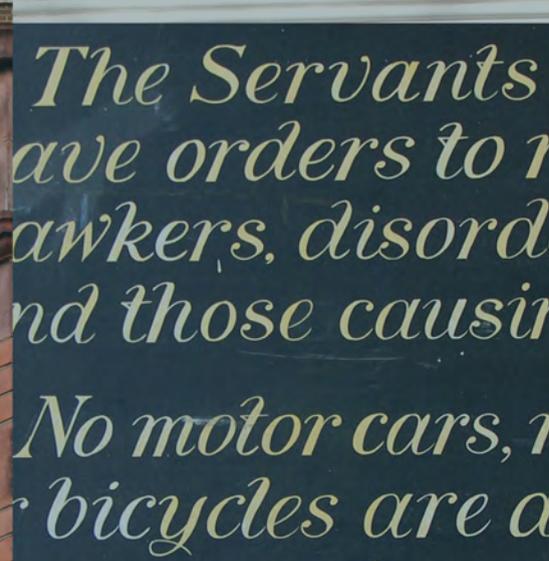
## INTRODUCTION

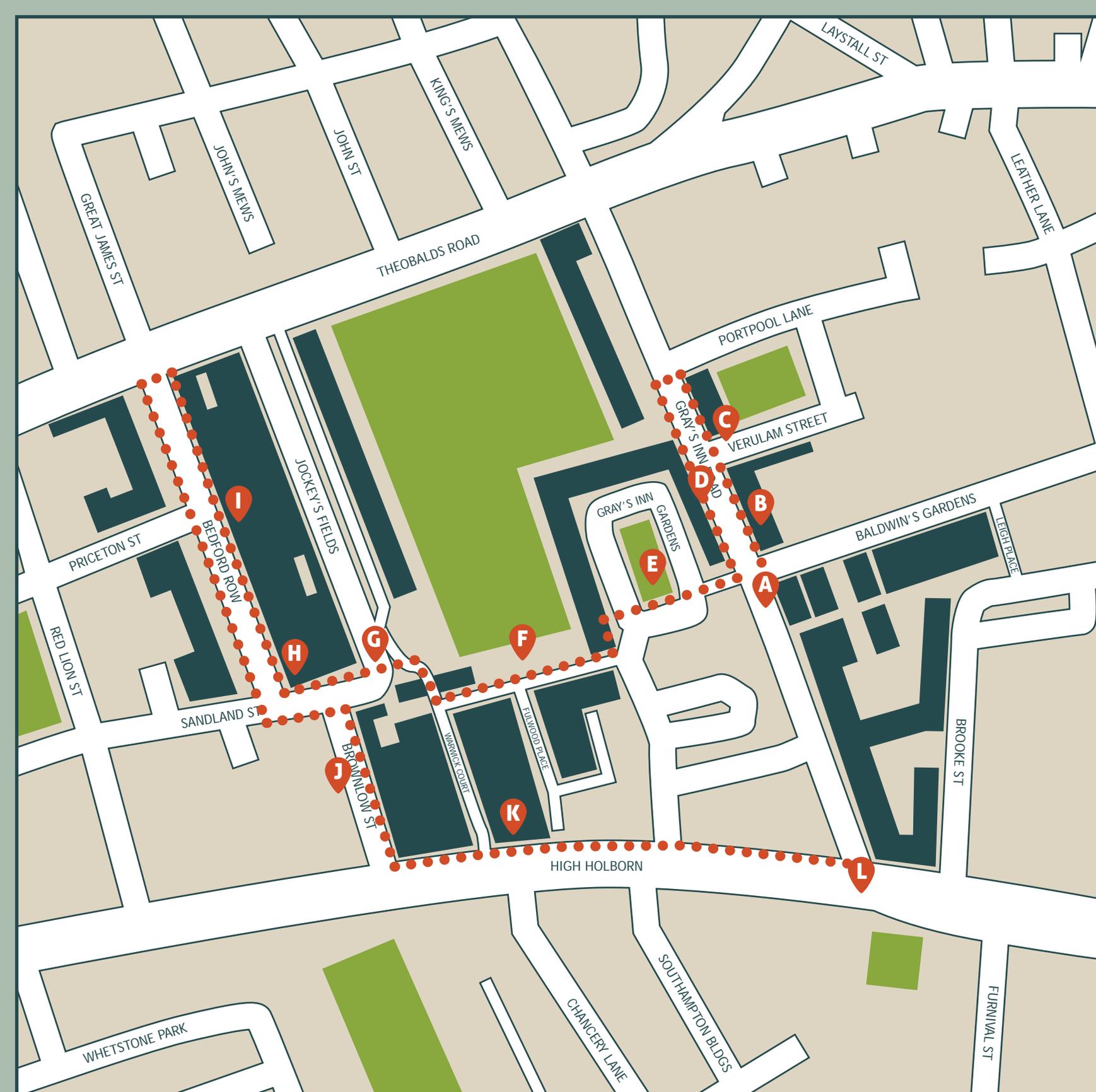
Holborn is an intriguing and ancient place, called home by some of London's most famous residents, including the author Charles Dickens. Some of the earliest evidence for human activity in the city was found here, in 1679, when a 350,000 year old hand axe was discovered on Gray's Inn Road. It's along this street, at the junction of Baldwin's Gardens that the tour begins.

### A NOTE ABOUT SAFETY!



*The tour follows a number of busy streets in Holborn, and special care should be taken when crossing them. Many view points along the tour are taken from the carriageways themselves and each point does not necessarily present a safe place to stop. As such, find a safe place to pause before continuing with the tour. Following the tour as a pair or small group of people will be more fun and safer.*





## GRAY'S INN ROAD:

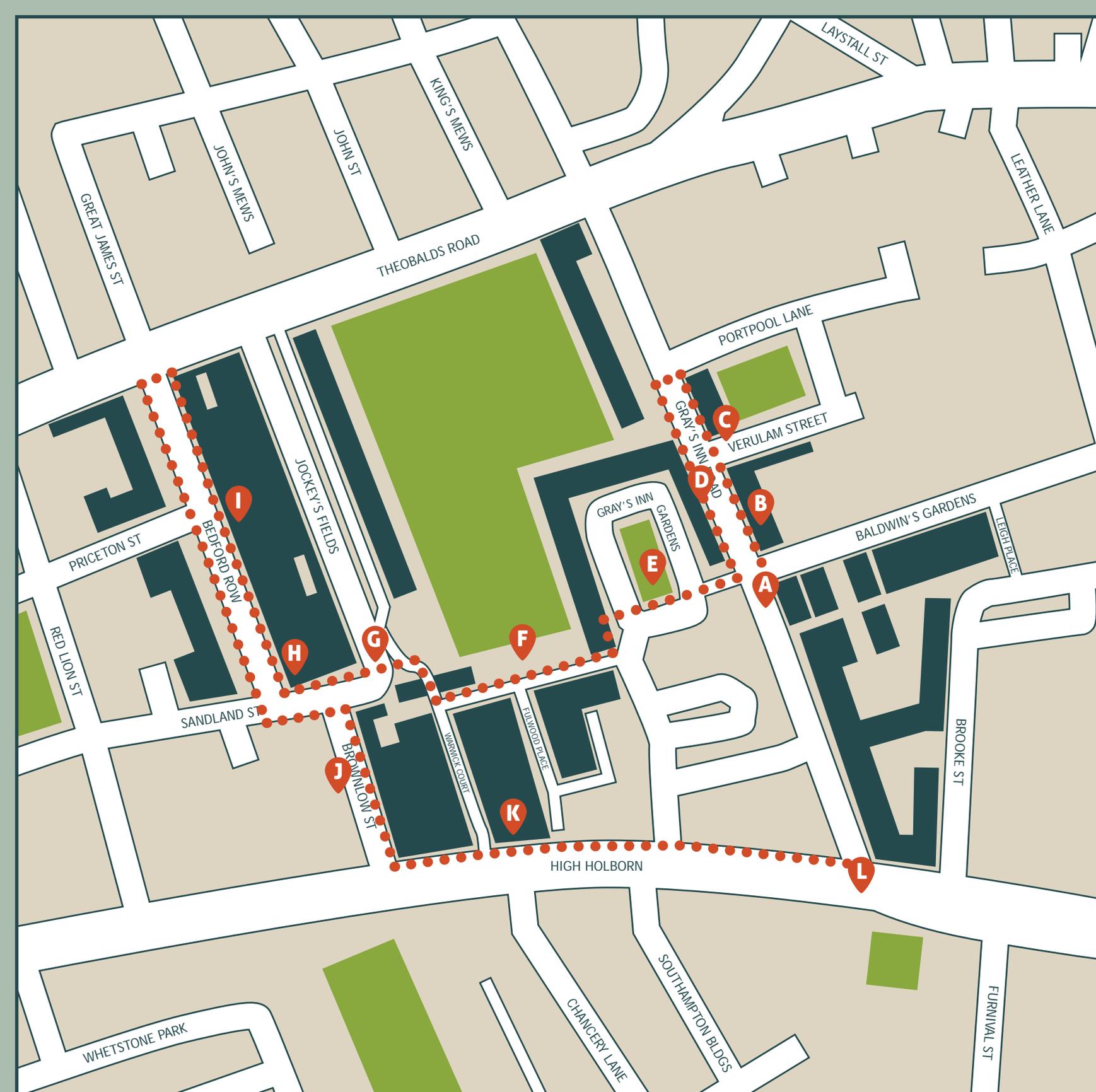
Here the two sides of the street have quite different characters. Looking away from Holborn itself the right hand side has different styles of buildings standing shoulder to shoulder. They date from the Victorian Period to recent times. Their doors and windows face the street, bringing a sense of activity. By comparison, the building line opposite is more continuous and coherent, made of up broader properties with access limited to a single entranceway. The story is an ancient one. Gray's Inn is one of the four Inns of Court, professional associations for barristers in England and Wales. The plot it occupies dates from the 13th century if not earlier, and has continued to influence how the area has developed since.

The high status and private nature of Gray's Inn is shown by the restricted access to it, achieved only through a handful of narrow gateways. Buildings along its edge turn their backs on the

public street, facing towards inner courtyards. Further north towards Theobalds Road, a coherent row of Georgian terraces (Verulam Buildings) sit back from the road behind a tall brick wall, again serving to distinguish themselves from the surrounding area. Much of Gray's Inn was rebuilt after bomb-damage in the Second World War, but the narrow brick and Georgian style windows were reinstated, maintaining the Inn's traditional architectural appearance. It shows a sympathetic approach to redevelopment that we will encounter later on.





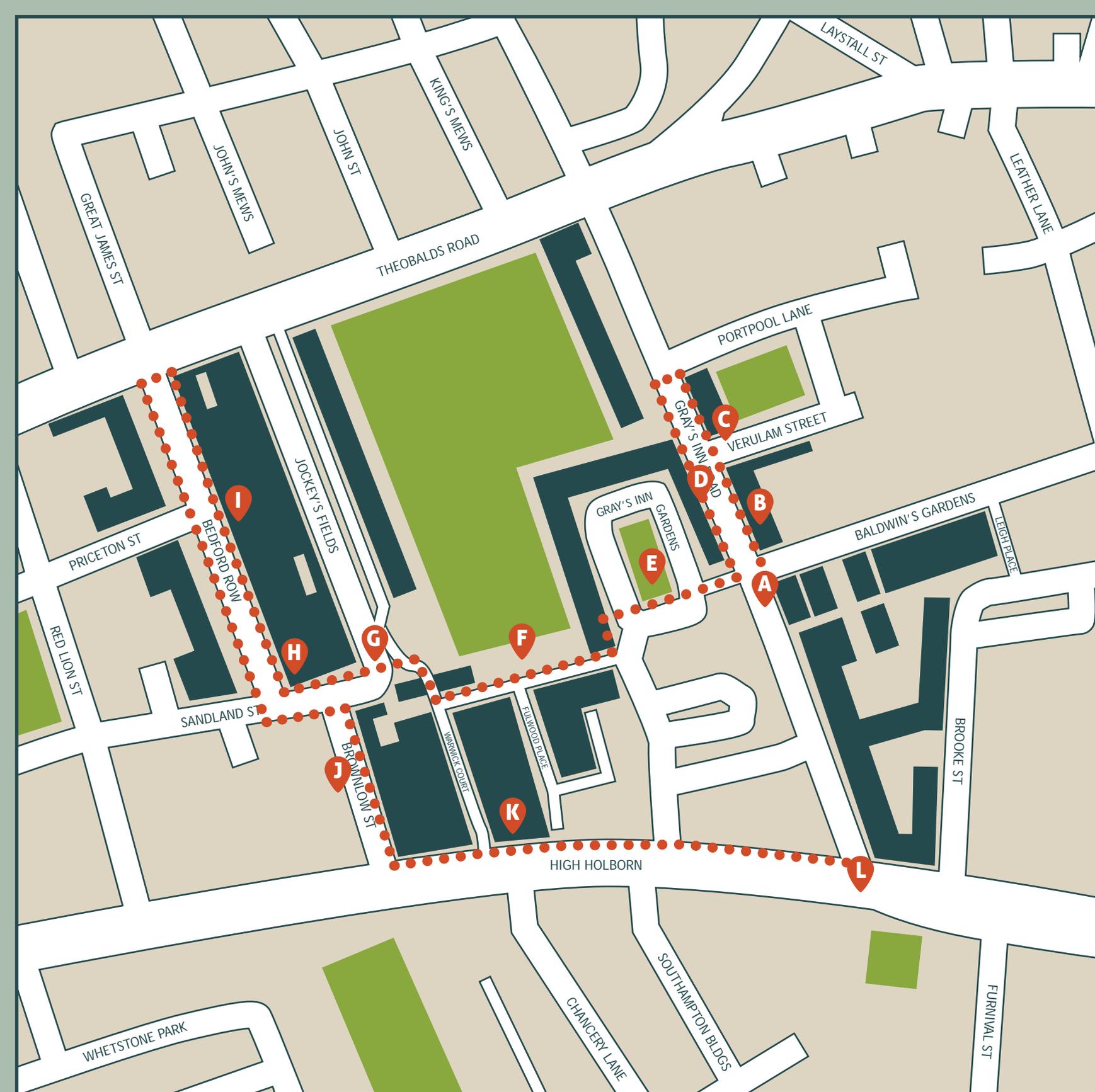


### GRAY'S INN ROAD 3:

The eastern building line of Gray's Inn Road, rebuilt quickly at the turn of the 20th century, retains several of its Edwardian buildings, such as the apartment houses either side of Baldwin's Gardens. Despite later rebuilding the diverse architecture of the street has a number of shared characteristics such as their scale, material construction and the vertical orientation of windows. A refurbished late 20th century development at the junction of Verulam Street, 60 Gray's Inn Road, follows the proportion and massing of the historic building next door, but is otherwise very different.

*QUESTION: How do the two buildings pictured above differ in character?*

*ANSWER:* The buildings share the same scale and position at the back of the footway, maintaining the strong building and roofline. Parts of the modern building are made of brick, but are rendered white above a dark slate grey ground floor. Windows have broad horizontal orientations to upper levels compared with the vertical openings of the Edwardian apartments. The activity at street level has decreased in front of the right hand building, with a single entranceway and fewer, smaller windows. This creates a higher 'solid to void ratio' at street level. This term is used to describe the amount of 'void' in a building façade (e.g. windows and doors) compared to the amount of 'solid' (e.g. the walls). The higher the ratio, the more defensive a structure typically appears. The buildings also clearly differ in their use of decoration, with number 60 far more utilitarian than it's historic neighbour.



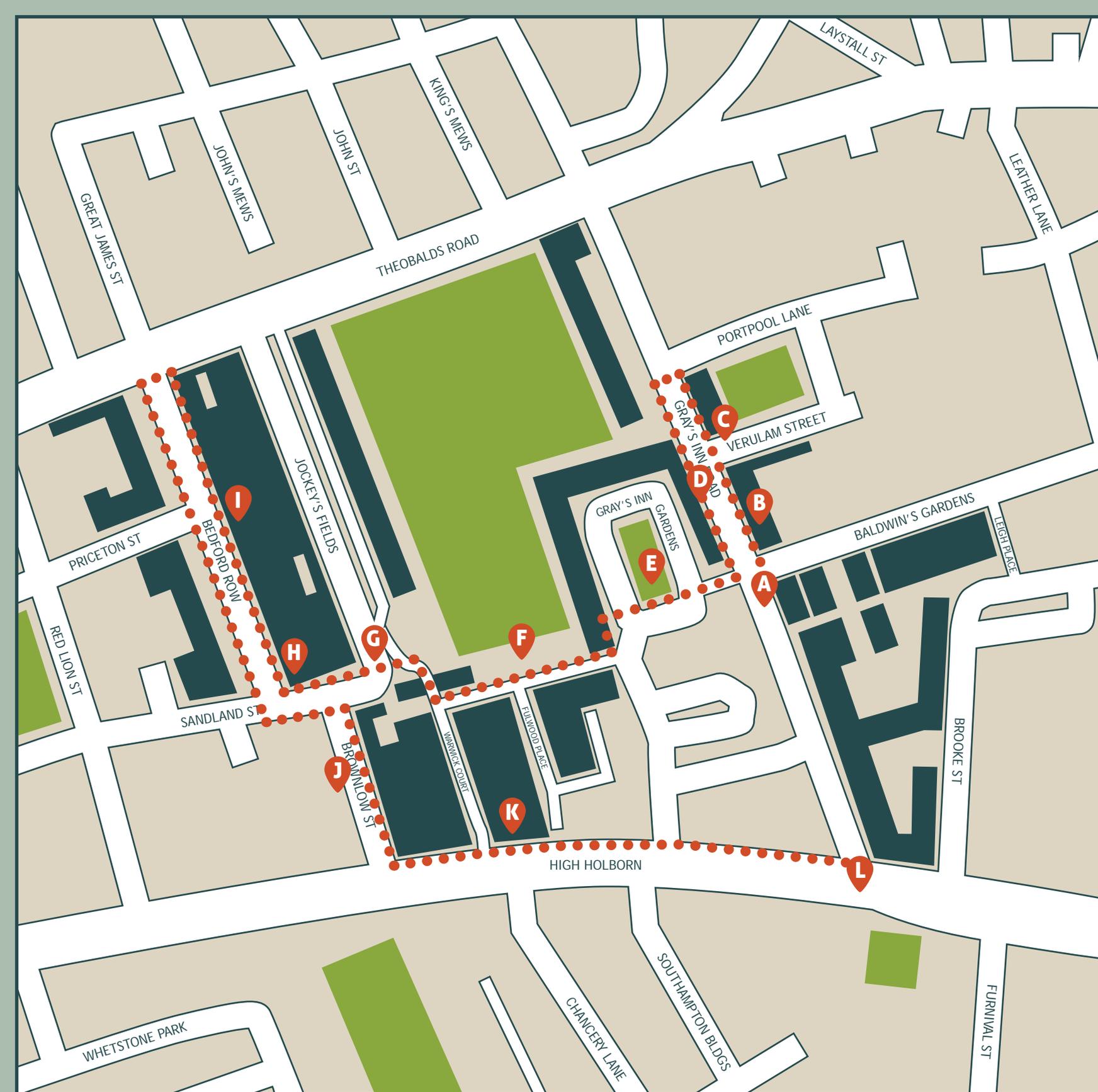
218 m

## GRAY'S INN ROAD WINDOWS:

Looking more closely at the windows, or the 'fenestration' of buildings, we can often get a good impression about the age and status of a building, as well as its use. Near the carriageway entrance of Gray's Inn a window is set apart from every other. The stone tracery and large scale of the window, which spans the equivalent of two

floors of adjacent buildings, indicates that there is a tall internal space. The stained glass and shallow arched shape of the window gives a strong indication of the use of the building and going through the passageway you can see the style of fenestration is replicated. The windows set the Inn's chapel apart from all other buildings around it due to its special function and status. It's essential to bear in mind that as the surrounding area develops, the material construction and architectural form of new windows help Gray's Inn Chapel continue to distinguish itself. There has been a Place of Worship at this site since before the Inn was established here; a document of 1314/15 mentions a chapel serving the manor of Portpool, the property of John de Grey, which later became the premises of Gray's Inn. The present chapel is mostly (other than the chancel) a post-war addition to the site.

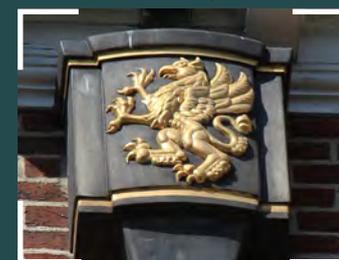




270 m

## GRAY'S INN COURTYARD:

We are now within one of the two main courtyards of Gray's Inn. Note how the buildings engage with the open space, with fine stone door surrounds and consistent horizontal lines of timber sash windows facing into the courtyard. It's a marked change from the more haphazard building line and pattern of windows facing onto Gray's Inn Road. The emblem



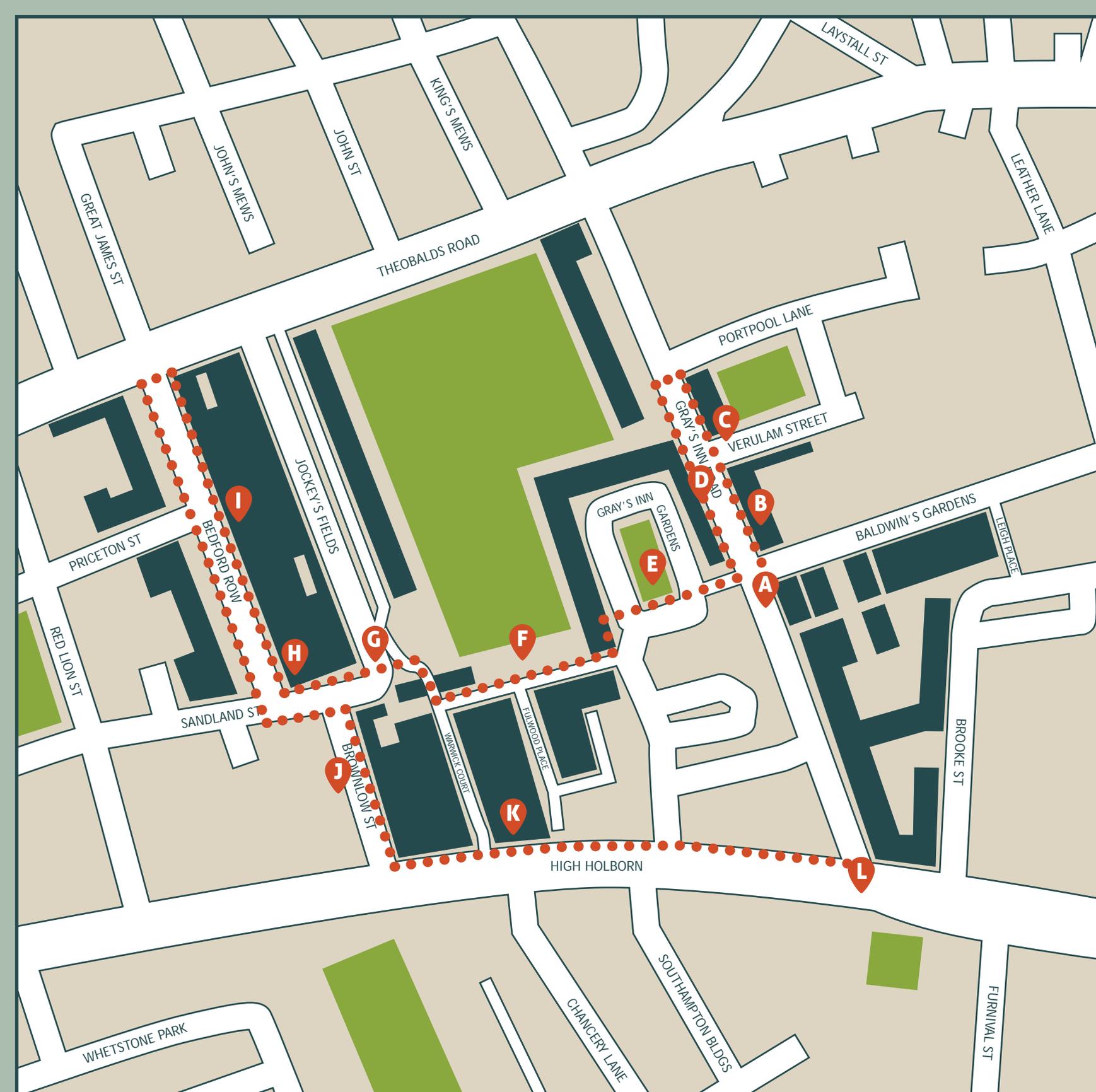
of the Inn, a golden griffin, is ubiquitous, reminding you that this is a private and exceptional place, with access afforded to members of the public by special consent of the Inn.

Although much rebuilt and extended, the courtyard plan of buildings here has its origins in a medieval layout when the Inn was first founded. A good indication of this early layout is shown on the

Agas Map of 1561. The experience of moving around this space remains similar to as it was then, with narrow walkways, carriageways and alleyway leading from one space to another. A covered walkway in the south west corner of the courtyard leads towards Gray's Inn Gardens.



Source: London Metropolitan Archives



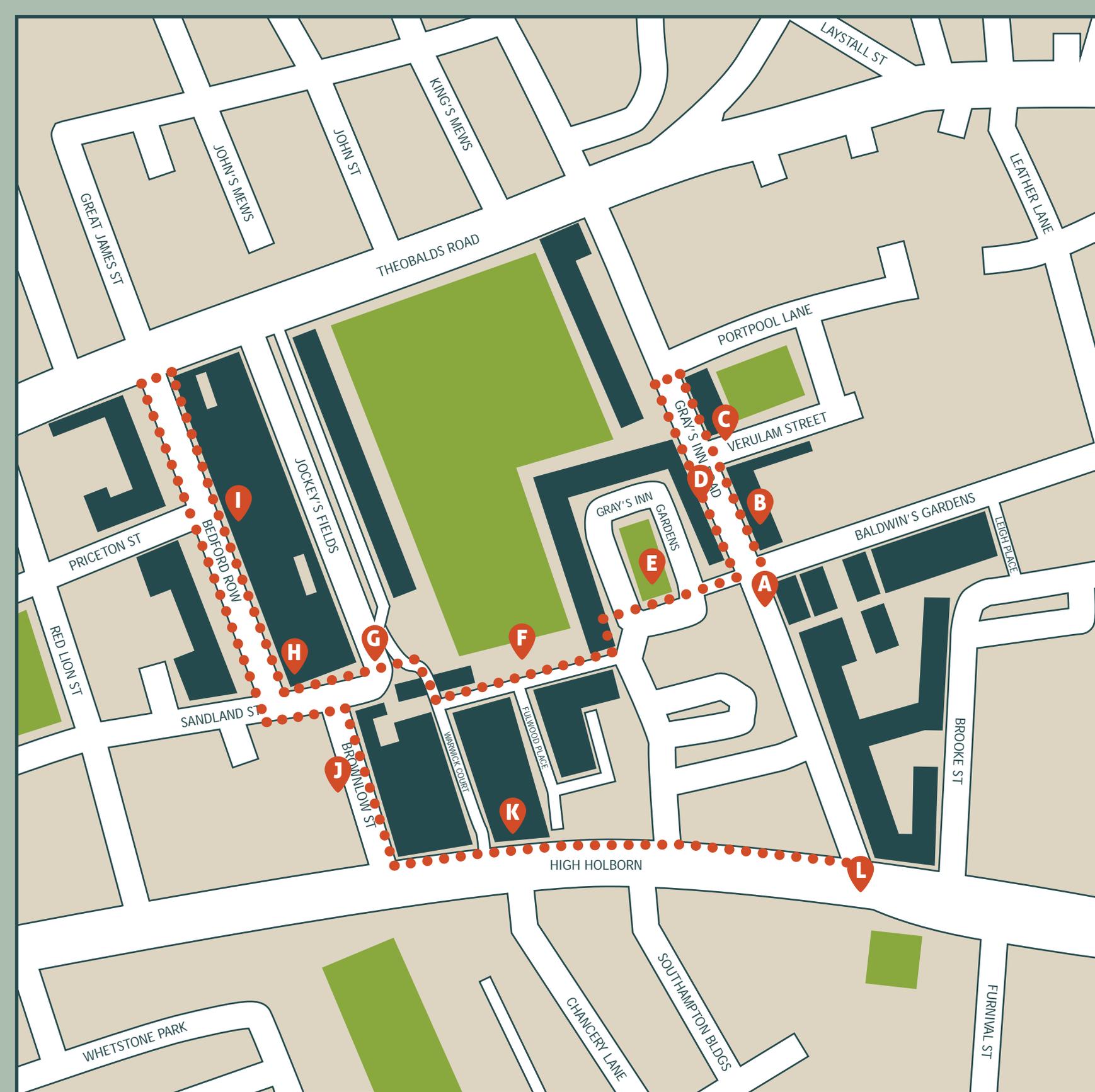
## "THE WALKS":

The public can visit the gardens, known as 'The Walks', between 12:00pm to 2:30pm on weekdays. One of the largest private gardens in London, they were originally designed by Francis Bacon in 1606 using species brought back by the great explorer Sir Walter Raleigh. The undeveloped north side (see map) was purposely left open, originally giving way to views of the then undeveloped hills of Highgate and Hampstead which were much valued by the Inn's residents. Opposite the broad stately iron gates, that even when closed offer intimate views of the gardens, is a wholly different entranceway, a stark reminder that we are in a private and defended enclosure. Two of the Inn's griffins flank a robust and solid brick wall with a narrow entranceway leading down towards Holborn. Comparing the two entranceways, it's a good chance to reconsider the impact that the 'solid to void ratio' has on

the character of buildings and structures. The gates to the park invite the passer-by to peer in and admire the open space. The gateway flanked by griffins is far less so, its character more foreboding and impermeable.



We now leave the sanctuary of the Inn via another small and defensive pedestrian entrance leading to Jockey's Fields and Bedford Row.



443 m

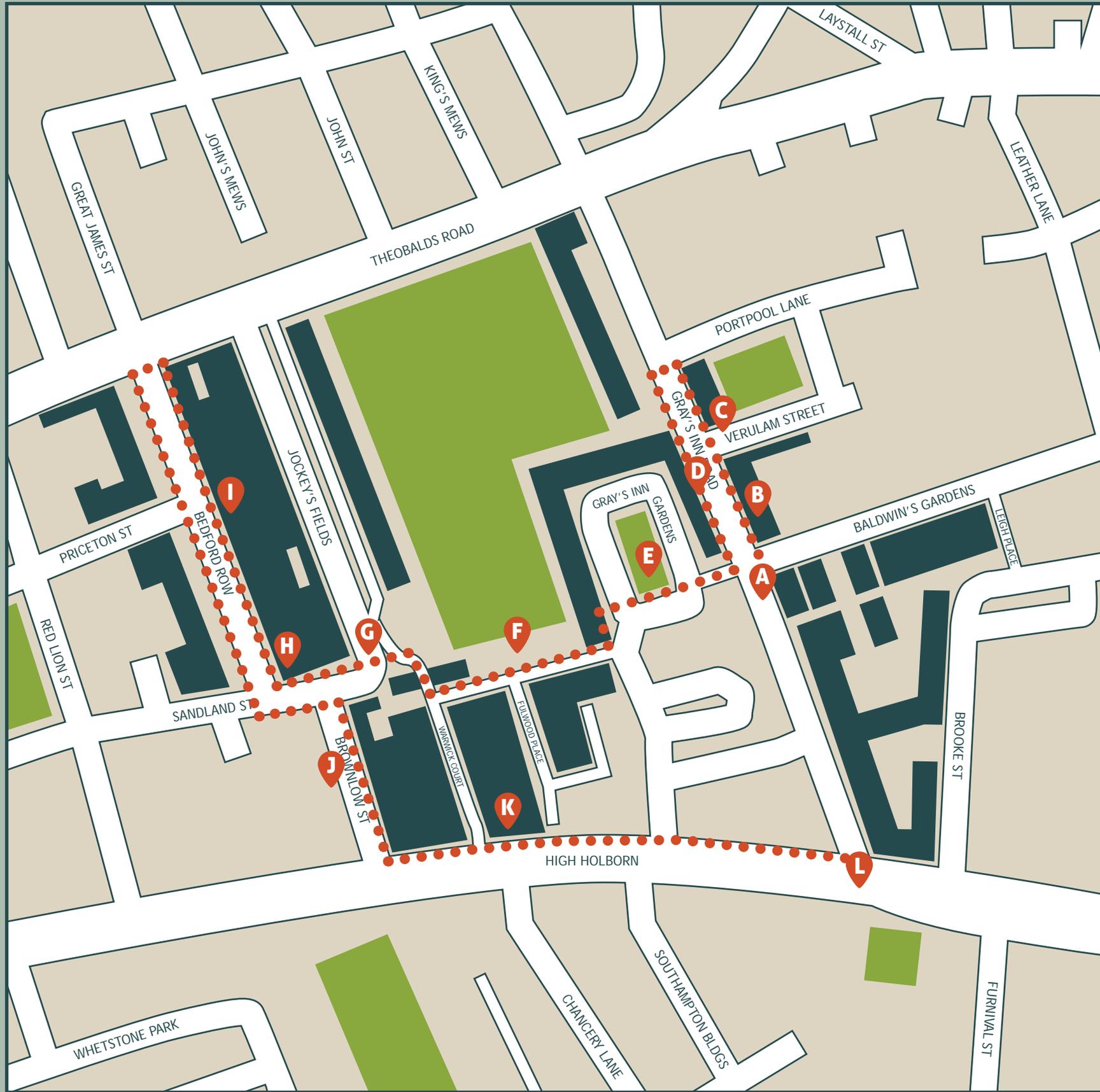
## JOCKEY'S FIELDS:

We're now on what was up until the 18th century, largely undeveloped open land lying to the rear of properties along Holborn and Gray's Inn enclosure. This area was developed around 1720. Jockey's Fields itself was the mews (stables or a row built to look like stables) for the houses along Bedford Row. The cast iron water pump, which served the houses and businesses around it, is much later, dating to around 1840. Before the introduction of mains water supplies, pumped access to water was essential for enabling development. They provided a key public resource and social focus for local communities. Street furniture makes



an important contribution to the character of a place. Look carefully above Numbers 47A Bedford Row and you'll notice two small stone plaques, the weathered writing of which read: "Mrs Eliza Doughty 1824" and "Bedford Charity Bounds 1824". These are boundary markers, essential for identifying ownership of land before accurate mapping was available. Across the street is the worn painted street sign of Bedford Row. These were common in London before their cast iron counterparts were introduced.





495 m

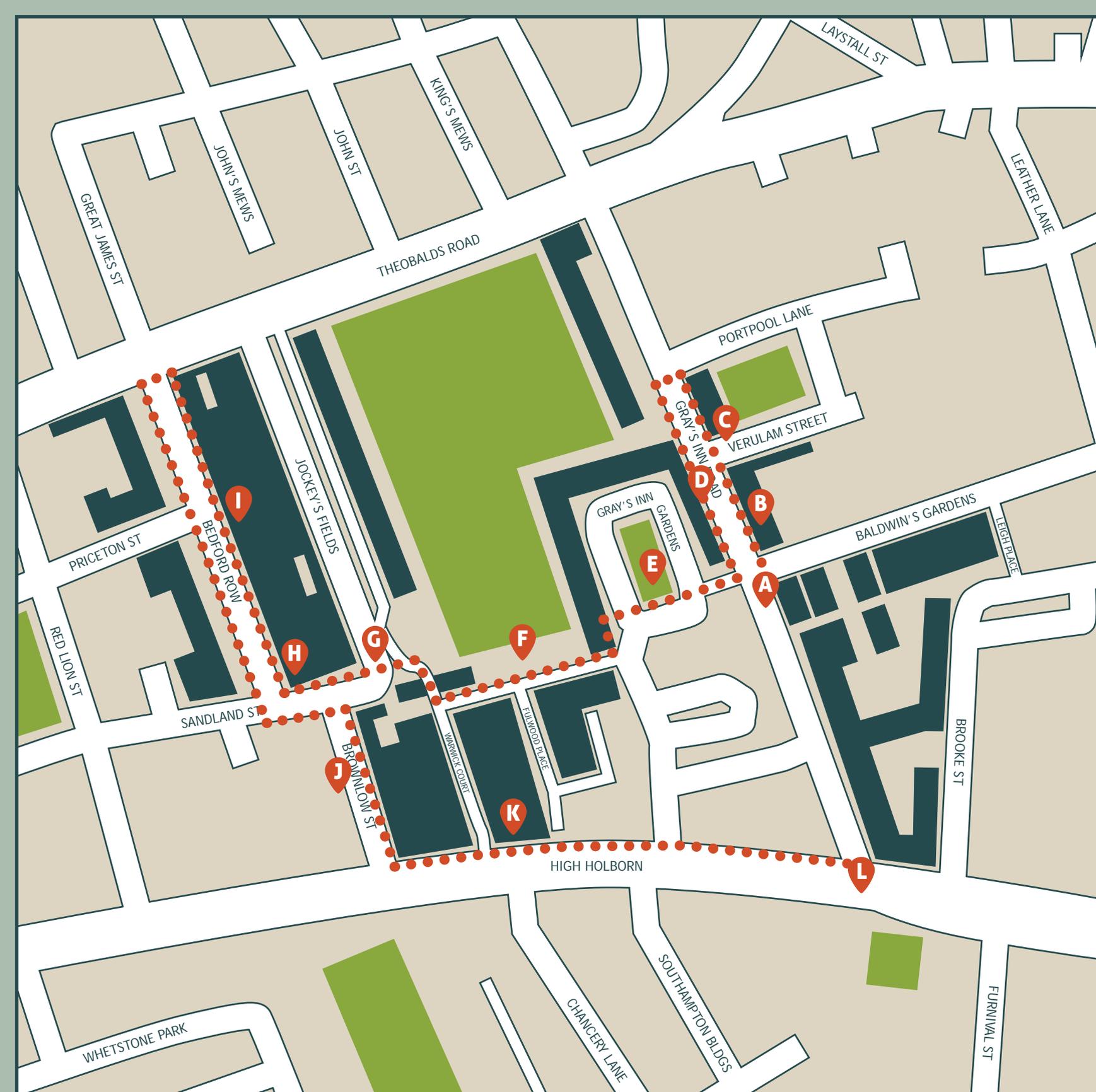
## *BEDFORD ROW:*

Turning right into Bedford Row and there is an immediate change in character. The impressive broad street, with wide carriageway and pavements, is enclosed by strong continuous and opposing building lines. Properties share many coherent characteristics that bind them together to create a distinctive place.

*QUESTION: Can you pick out some prevailing features that you feel help make the eastern building line coherent? They don't have to be on every building, but the majority.*

*ANSWER:* Features might include: Vertical wooden sash windows, brick, strong building lines of attached houses/offices, consistent roofline, ridgelines running parallel to the road, 3 to 4 storeys in height and 3 bays in width, gauged brick arches above windows and single entranceways, with wooden panelled doors beneath shallow porches.

Upon closer inspection, you may have discovered a number of characteristics that differentiate buildings from each other. These often reflect approaches by different architects and builders or by owners who wish to personalise their properties.



495 m

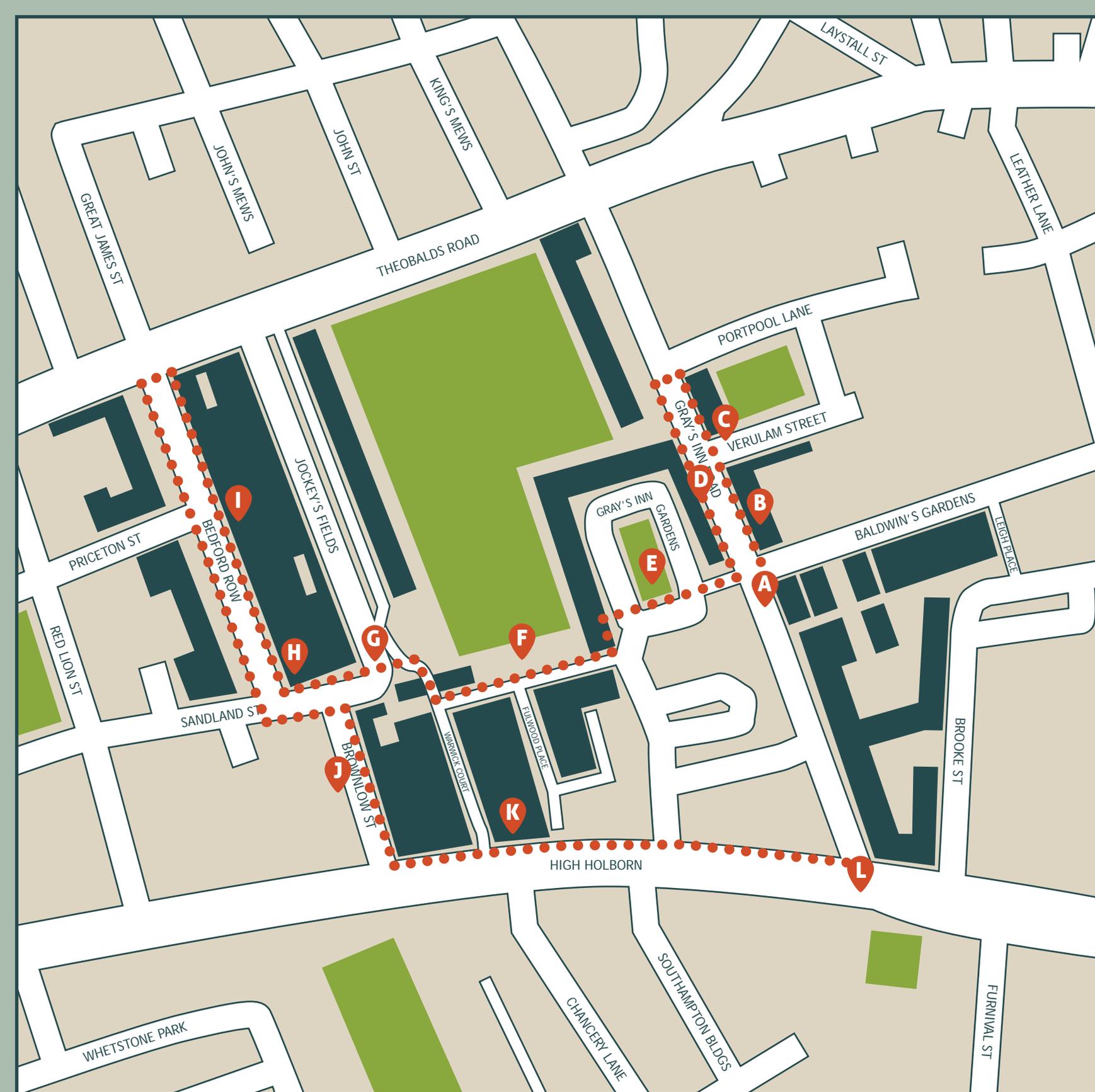
## BEDFORD ROW (Cont):

**QUESTION:** Can you identify some small-scale features that distinguish properties as well as some differences that exist on a larger scale?

**ANSWER:** Small-scale differences include: Styles of fanlights above doors, styles of doorway decoration, brick colour, window style and the style of stringcourses.

There are some larger scale differences between buildings along the street too, such as changes in the height and width of buildings. There is also the use of stucco and stone for decoration, notably on the ground floor, the central projecting bay on number 26-28, the gable end and larger height of number 4.

Coherent runs of the same buildings often relate to what are termed 'build units', single phases of construction of one or more properties. They often have only smaller scale differences between buildings. The term 'development unit' is applied to a group of one or more build units planned as a single development, and are often (but not always) demarked by larger scale differences. In this case Bedford Row was set out as a 'development unit', with approximately ten distinct build units evident on each side of the road. We still build our housing estates in the same way today.



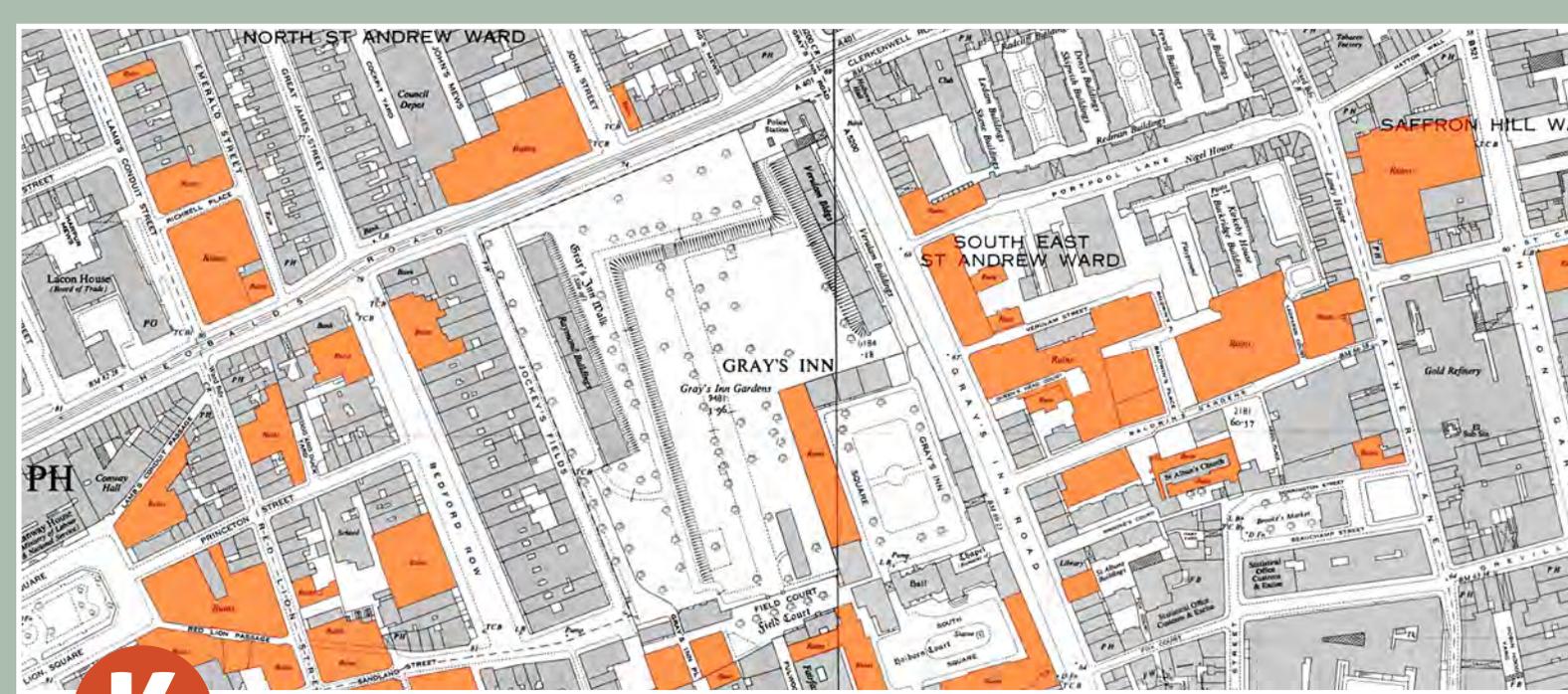
612 m

## CHANGES IN CHARACTER:

When thinking about how existing townscapes can benefit from future development it's useful to start by looking at the coherences and differences in the character of a place. You can understand, in simple terms, if and how a development is inspired by its context. Some developments are noticeably different, whereas others have a more conservative and in keeping design, with similar the scale, density, massing, height, landscape, layout, materials and access of existing buildings.

There may not be a 'right' or 'wrong' answer, but assessing how a new development will affect a place's character, and how the architectural style and features contribute to that, is key to designing in context.





612 m

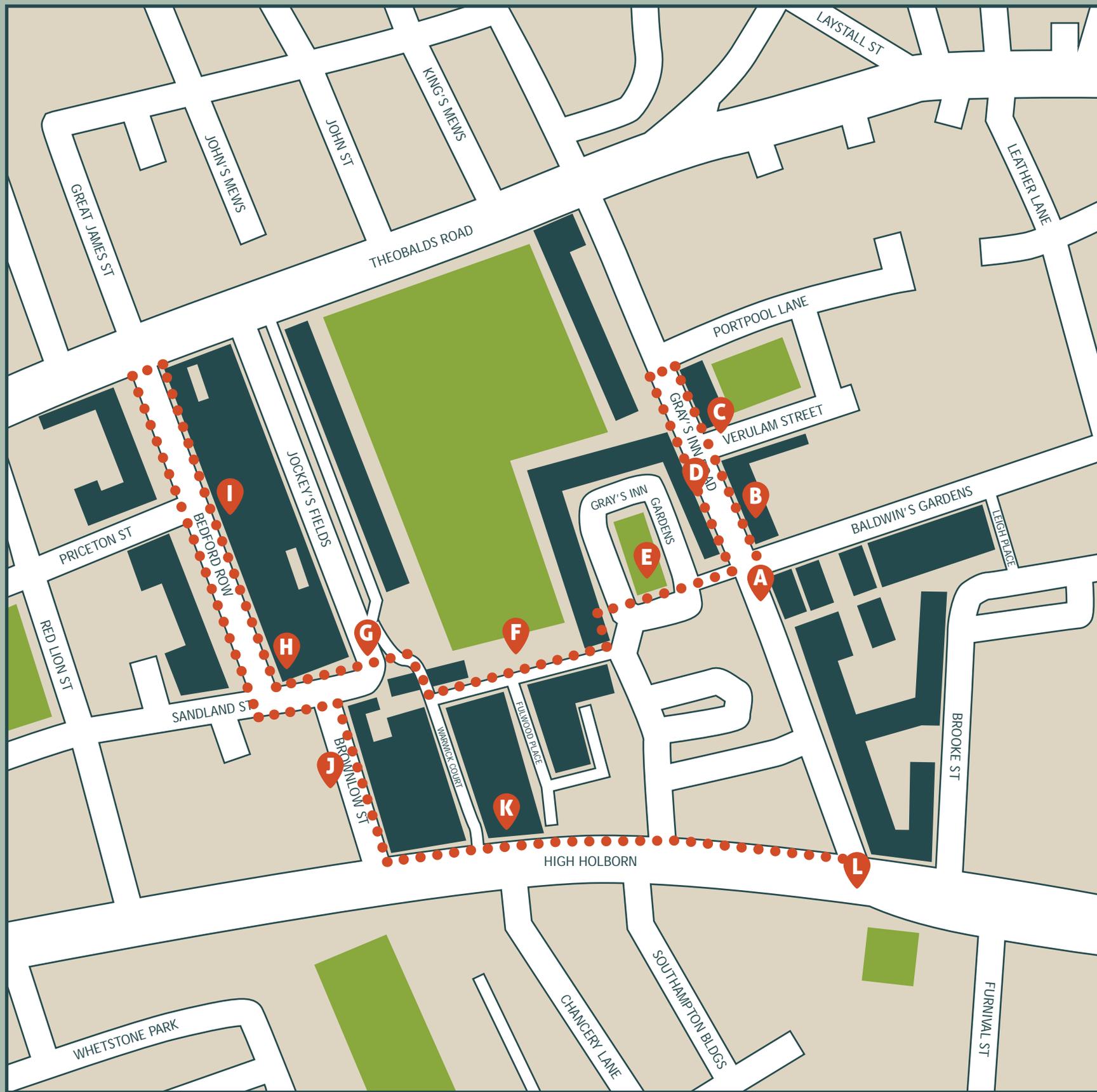
## OUT OF THE ASHES:

Properties along Bedford Row have a particular story to tell in this respect, one that is shared by many of London's older streets. Looking at the 1950s Ordnance Survey Map of the area we can see several gap sites where buildings were demolished by bombing in the Second World War. The buildings that have been reinstated have been strongly inspired by those that survived. You can find them at Numbers 20, 26-28 and 37-41.

Like those building re-constructed in Gray's Inn they have traditional timber sash windows and a narrow brick construction. They follow the same building line and are of a similar scale, retaining the level of the roofline that gives the street such a strong sense of perspective.

However, there are some key differences that set them apart. They have comparably fewer doorways than the earlier Georgian houses, often only accessed by one or a pair of larger doors. The windows are smaller in height, allowing a greater number of internal floors. The pattern of the brickwork provides evidence of construction using cavity walls. Consider the overall impact of the development - do you feel they make a positive contribution to the character of the area, or that the design should have been either more innovative or more traditional?

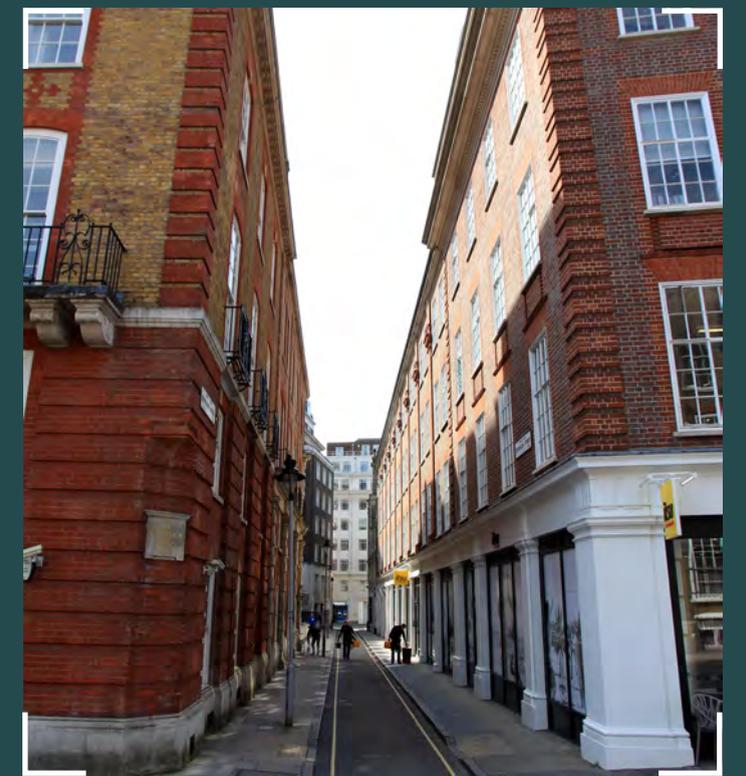


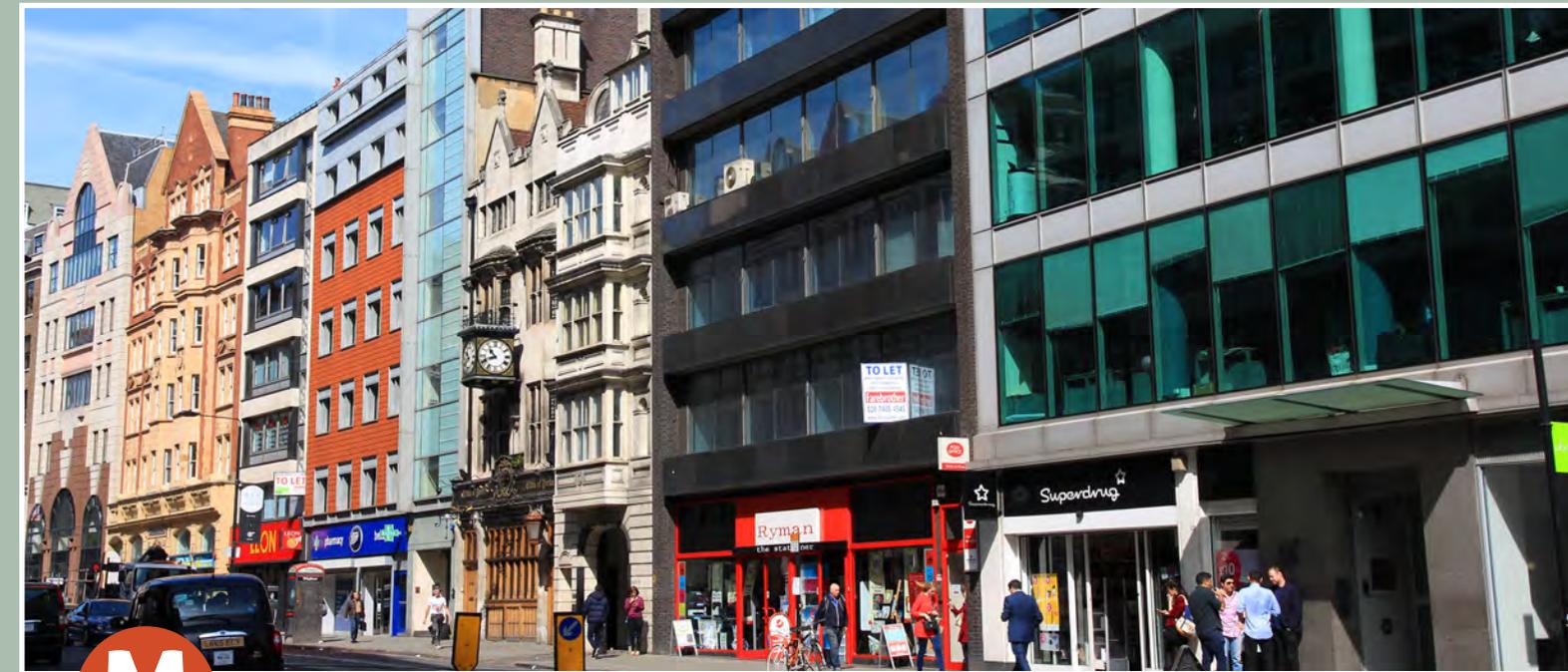
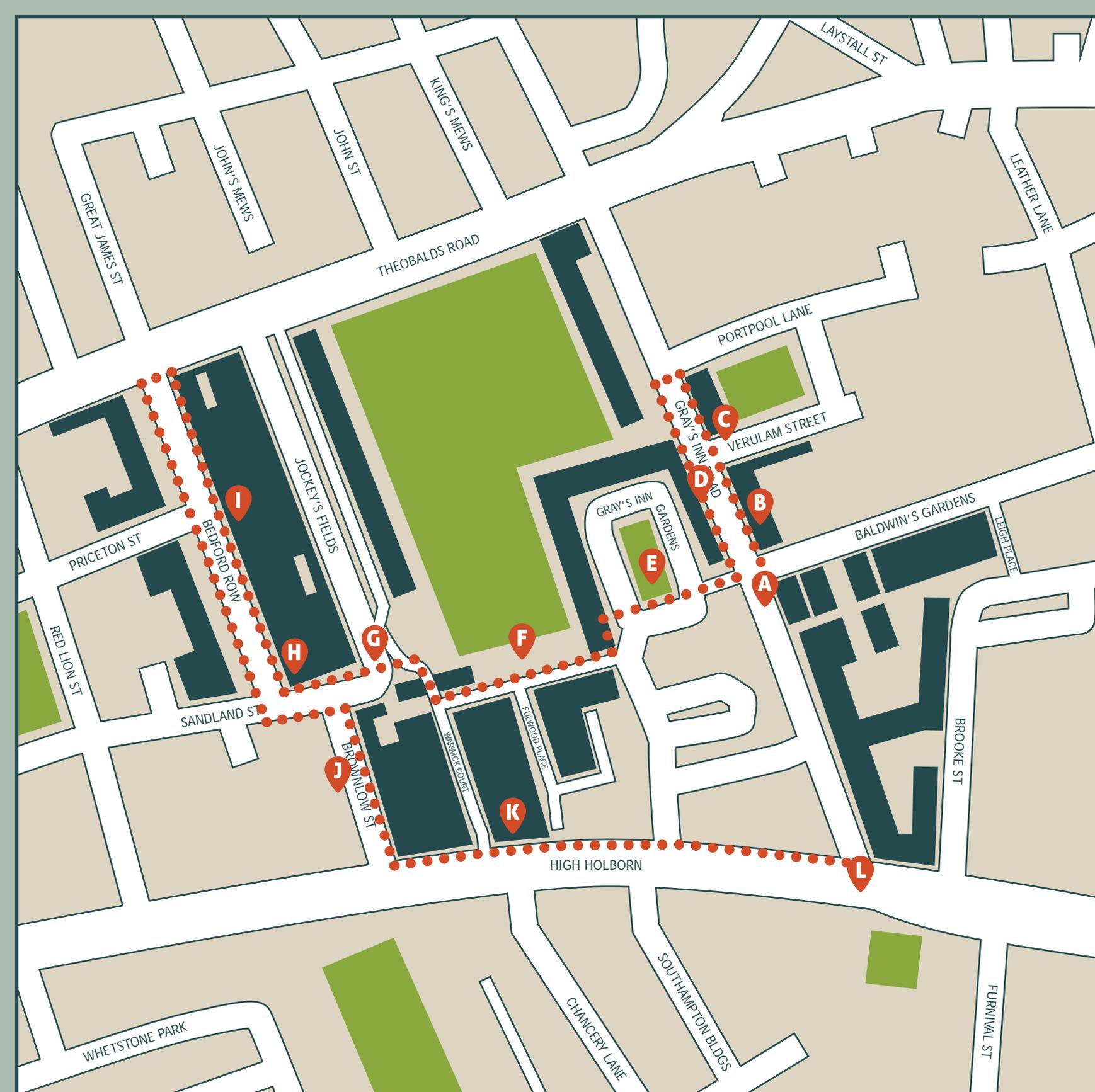


912 m

## ALLEYWAYS:

The final leg of the tour takes us to High Holborn. Heading back to the cast iron water pump we take the narrow Brownlow Street. The street is one of a number of alleyways and other narrow roads that run perpendicular to the north side of High Holborn. These routes follow the old alignment of medieval 'burgage plots', ancient rental properties, owned by a lord or the King, consisting of a building on a long narrow plot of land with a narrow street frontage. Today they are well-used routes that form part of the experience of moving between the busy Holborn High Street and Gray's Inn, Sandland Street and Bedford Row.





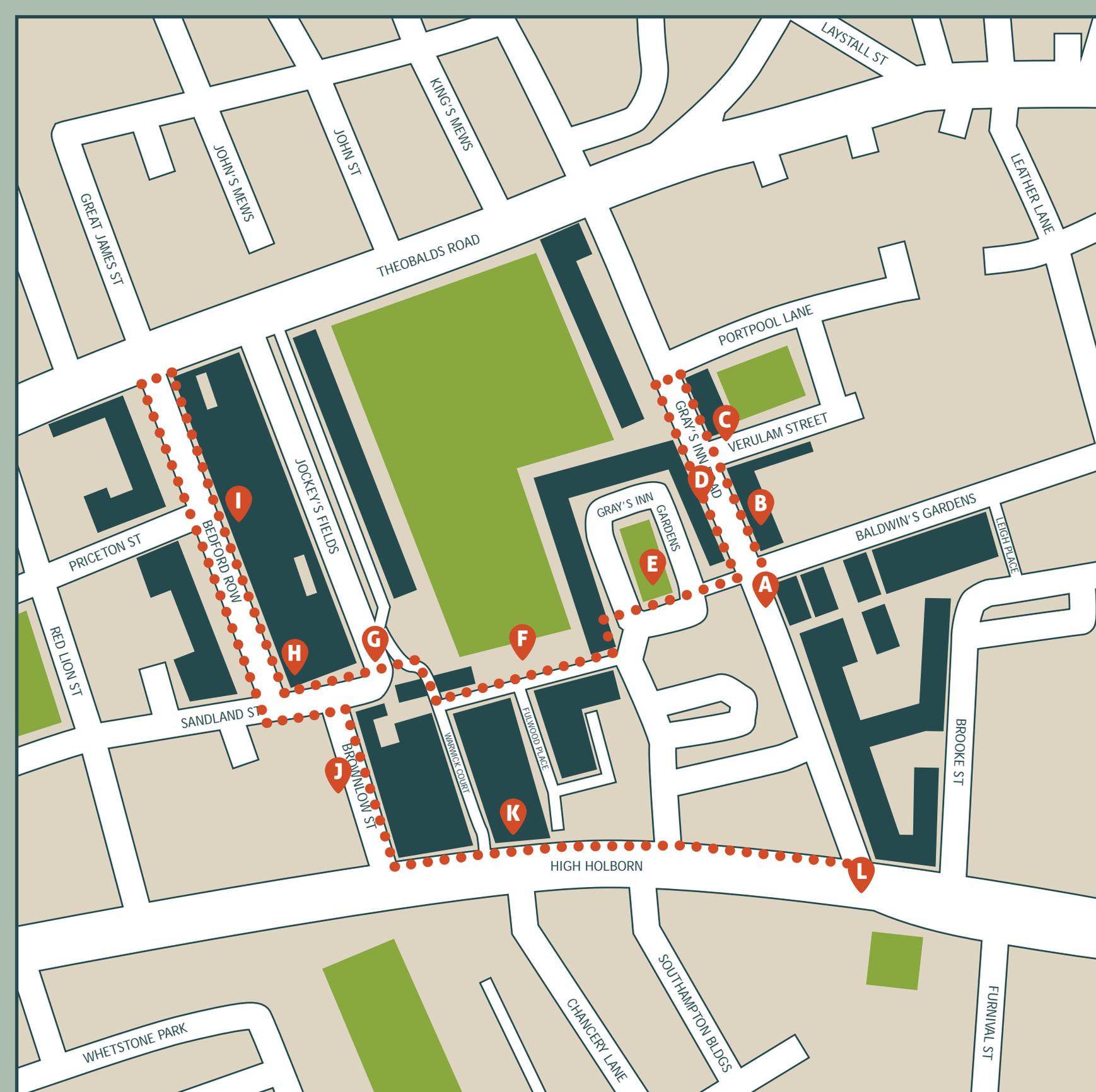
1.07 km

## HIGH HOLBORN:

Reaching High Holborn, you can see that the different narrow facades within the building line along the North of the road still illustrate the ancient arrangement of burgage plots. On the opposite side many of these plots have been amalgamated into larger, broader parcels of land leading to larger buildings and a more consistent building street scene. However, the relatively more recent buildings have not entirely escaped the old pattern of streets. Heading towards the city and Chancery Lane the street broadens out, and the large concrete Holborn Gate building responds accordingly, stepping back to meet the building line at the Staple Inn. This junction was once occupied by 'Middle Row', a row of houses that half blocked the street. Some considered them an obstruction until their demolition in 1868. Writing in 1657, Howell stated "Southward of Gray's Inn Lane there is a row of small houses, which is a mighty hindrance to Holborn, in point of prospect, which if they were taken down there would be from

Holborn conduit to St-Giles-in-the-Field one of the fairest rising streets in the world." The broad width of the junction here bears testament to the building, another subtle feature of the complex inherited character of Holborn.





1.24 km

## HIGH HOLBORN 2:

This point marks the end of the tour and the beginning of the City of London. This boundary was an important one, not least as it was a point of taxation. The timber framed Tudor 'Staple Inn' was once the Wool Staple, where wool was taxed and weighed. It is the last surviving 'Inn of Chancery', groups of legal buildings and institutions formerly attached to the Inns of Court. The boundary marker for the city is clearly seen in the two opposing dragons with shields sat on top of two granite obelisks either side of Holborn.

This is also the former location of Middle Row, a sketch of which was made shortly before its demolition. The broad width of the junction here bears testament to the building, another subtle feature of the complex inherited character of Holborn.



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# Acknowledgements:



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