

THE STRAND THEATRE, 5 ALDWYCH, LONDON WC2B

CITY OF WESTMINSTER

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

April 2005

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THE STRAND THEATRE, 5 ALDWYCH, LONDON WC2B

CITY OF WESTMINSTER

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

SITE CODE: AWC05

SITE CENTRE NGR: TQ 30612 80956

PLANNING REFS: RN 03/01294/FULL & 03/01295/LBC, TP/1736

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Project 212

Abstract

A small-scale archaeological evaluation within the Strand Theatre, on the western side of Aldwych, City of Westminster, took place in March 2005. The evaluation was carried out as part of the planning process prior to a construction of a new lift pit, during general refurbishment works to the Theatre.

This area has considerable potential for archaeological remains relating to the middle Saxon trading settlement of Lundenwic. There is also some potential for prehistory, and for features relating to the 17th century and later development of the area. The present buildings were constructed c. 1905-7, soon after Aldwych itself was established.

One trial pit measuring 1.2m by 1.0m in plan was excavated by hand in the area of proposed development, and against the party wall between the Strand Theatre and Waldorf Hotel. No archaeological remains were found: backfill deposits up to 1m deep overlay the stepped wall foundation and the adjacent truncated surface of natural River Terrace sand and gravel.

These findings, together with the extent of adjacent building, indicate that the site has been substantially disturbed by the early 20th century development. It is therefore suggested that no further archaeological measures should be undertaken in relation to the proposed development.

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1. Introduction

- 1.1** This report presents a summary of a small-scale archaeological evaluation within the Strand Theatre, (Fig 1: site centred at National Grid Reference TQ 30612 80956).

The evaluation was required through the planning process, prior to a construction of a new lift shaft and pit. The proposed work forms part of a general refurbishment of the Theatre (Planning Refs: RN 03/01294/FULL and 03/01295/LBC, TP/1736)

- 1.2** It was considered that the site had potential for archaeological remains, specifically in relation to the middle Saxon trading settlement of *Lundenwic*. There was also some potential for prehistoric finds, and for features relating to the 17th century and later development of the area.

The site is located within an Area of Special Archaeological Priority as defined by the City of Westminster UDP, principally in recognition of its Saxon potential.

- 1.3** At present the site of the proposed development comprises two small basement yards separated by a brick wall, with early 20th century building on all sides.
- 1.4** English Heritage has advised that a trial pit within the footprint of the proposed lift shaft should be archaeologically excavated as a condition of planning consent, in order to evaluate the archaeological potential of the site before commencement of development.

2. Acknowledgements

The archaeological evaluation was commissioned by Mr Paul Rogers of Alan Conisbee and Associates, on behalf of Cameron Mackintosh Limited.

Diane Walls (English Heritage Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service) monitored the project on behalf of the City of Westminster.

3. Background

3.1 Location and topography

Topographically the site is located on rising ground some 300m to the north of the present bank of the Thames, although this has evidently been much altered by development.

The British Geological Survey (*Sheet 256, 1993*) indicates that the site stands on a fairly recent River Terrace Deposit (Hackney Gravel). This forms a narrow band aligned roughly east-west, with the Taplow Terrace recorded just to the south and an overlying deposit of brickearth (Langley Silt) just to the north.

3.2 Archaeology and history

- 3.2.1** This area has limited potential for prehistoric remains: scattered finds from various periods of prehistory are recorded in the vicinity, including Palaeolithic flint flakes in Catherine Street.

There is little evidence for Roman activity in proximity to the site, although again a number of finds have been recorded. Some of these may represent later redeposition, for example as a result of agricultural manuring.

- 3.2.2** The main archaeological potential is for Middle Saxon remains (7th century and later). The site lies within the eastern part of the trading settlement of *Lundenwic*, which extended along the line of the contemporary waterfront roughly from Aldwych to Trafalgar Square. Numerous remains have been found during previous archaeological investigation (see below 9: Select Bibliography). Recorded features include dump layers, metalled yards, structural and cut features (beam slots, brickearth floors, cesspits, *etc.*), and evidence for trade and commercial activity (imported goods, waste material and rubbish pits).
- 3.2.3** After the demise of *Lundenwic* (probably by the 10th century) this area probably remained open agricultural land for several centuries. Certainly this is indicated by early maps (eg, Agas c. 1562).

However, by the mid 17th century the area had been intensively developed (*cf.* Faithorne & Newcourt's map, 1658). The street pattern which was established by this time seems to have been maintained with little change up to the beginning of the 20th century and the development of Aldwych. The Strand Theatre and adjacent Waldorf Hotel were constructed at much the same time as the road, c. 1905-7.

4. Aims and objectives of the evaluation

4.1 Archaeology and planning

As part of the refurbishment of the Theatre it is proposed to construct a new lift shaft, which will include construction of a lift pit below the present basement floor level (Planning Refs: RN 03/01294/FULL and 03/01295/LBC, TP/1736).

An archaeological evaluation was recommended by English Heritage as part of the Local Authority planning process, to take place before the commencement of development. It was proposed that a preliminary trial pit against the eastern (party) wall should be archaeologically excavated.

4.2 Archaeological research questions

The evaluation presented an opportunity to address a number of research questions, as defined in the preliminary Written Scheme of Investigation (*Compass Archaeology, March 2005*):

- What is the natural ground surface, and does this include evidence of the brickearth cover that is recorded elsewhere?
- Is there any evidence for prehistoric or Roman activity, and is this represented by *in situ* remains or residual finds?
- What evidence is there for Saxon occupation or activity (including trade/commerce), and how does this relate to other finds made in the area?
- What is the date range for Saxon evidence, and how does this fit within the established chronology for *Lundenwic* (c 7th to late 9th century)?
- Is there any evidence for medieval activity, and does this confirm the picture of open agricultural land that is given by the earliest maps (for example, a cultivated soil horizon)?
- What evidence is there for the post-medieval development and use of the site, as recorded by historic maps from the 17th century onwards?

5. Evaluation methodology

- 5.1** The *Written Scheme of Investigation* was agreed prior to the fieldwork. The evaluation was carried out in accordance with English Heritage guidelines (including *Standards and Practices in Archaeological Fieldwork*, 1998) and those of the Institute of Field Archaeologists (*Standard and Guidance for Field Evaluations*).
- 5.2** The evaluation comprised one trial pit measuring *c* 1.0m by 1.2m in plan. This was located within a small basement yard and against the adjacent party wall to the northeast, as shown in Figure 2.

The pit was excavated by hand. The overlying slab and recent backfill deposits were removed to an overall depth of about 1.1m. Thereafter the exposed surfaces and section were archaeologically recorded and photographed.

At the conclusion of the field evaluation the trial pit was backfilled by hand with removed spoil.

- 5.3** The exposed deposits and features were recorded by scaled plan and section, supplemented by 35mm photography. Individual elements were described on the drawings but were not separately contexted. Levels were derived from an OSBM located on the southeast corner of No. 33 Wellington Street, value 20.37m OD (Fig 1). The trial pit position was located onto the existing site survey by taped measurement: this was in turn related as a 'best fit' to the Ordnance Survey grid as derived from the 1:1250 plan (Fig 1).

The records from the evaluation have been allocated the site code: AWC05 by the Museum of London Archaeological Archive: there were no finds. An ordered and indexed site archive will be compiled in line with the MoL *Guidelines* and will be deposited in the Museum of London Archive.

6. The archaeological evaluation

6.1 Excavation

The trial pit was excavated by hand from a level surface at c. 14.30m OD. Excavation took place to the top of the solid wall foundation and to the adjacent natural River Terrace deposit.

6.2 Recorded deposits and features (*Figures 3-6*)

The natural River Terrace deposit comprised a fairly firm light yellow-brown sandy gravel and sand. This was exposed at about 13.3m OD, the surface rising slightly to the southwest but wholly truncated by the existing development. The deposit was quite sterile, and there was no sign of any earlier activity or disturbance.

The natural was cut away to the northeast by a very substantial foundation for the wall dividing the Strand Theatre and Waldorf Hotel, dating to c. 1905-7. This comprised a concrete strip footing overlain by corbelled brickwork, together extending some 780mm beyond the standing wall line.

The concrete footing was exposed to a depth of 330mm, although the base was not seen. The lower part stepped out slightly and had obviously been laid directly into a trench cut into the natural, but the upper 170mm had been shuttered (presumably by timber, although no trace of this remained). The overlying brickwork was stepped back 280mm from the edge of the concrete and then ascended in eight steps to the standing face of the wall. The first six courses of the face were in red brick, but from finished ground level white glazed brickwork was used – probably to enhance the light within this part of the building (*cf.* Figure 4).

Several distinct deposits overlay the wall foundation, at the lower level fairly clean sandy gravel and slightly sandy silt/clay. Both these may represent redeposited natural material, respectively Terrace deposits and overlying brickearth (the latter not seen *in situ* here but frequently recorded in the vicinity). Above this level the fills were more mixed, with increasing quantities of brick and concrete rubble plus some loose mortar, silty sand and gravel.

A later brick-lined inspection pit cut through deposits in the southwest corner of the trial pit, with a concrete foundation at the level of the previously truncated natural gravel. The whole area was sealed by a concrete slab, generally about 120mm thick although thinner and clearly replaced to the northeast.

7. Assessment of the results

The archaeological evaluation has provided an opportunity to address the site-specific objectives that were defined within the preliminary *Written Scheme* (4.3 above). The responses to these are outlined below:

- *What is the natural ground surface, and does this include evidence of the brickearth cover that is recorded elsewhere?*

The natural ground surface consisted of sandy medium-fine gravel interleaved with more homogeneous sand (River Terrace Deposit, assumed to be Hackney Gravel from BGS 1993). This deposit was truncated and there was no evidence for *in situ* brickearth. However, the overlying modern backfill included some fairly clean silt/clay that *may* represent redeposited brickearth.

- *Is there any evidence for prehistoric or Roman activity, and is this represented by in situ remains or residual finds?*

There was no evidence for any prehistoric or Roman activity, nor were any residual artefacts recovered. The natural gravel was truncated, and there was no evidence for the original land surface.

- *What evidence is there for Saxon occupation or activity (including trade/commerce), and how does this relate to other finds made in the area?*

What is the date range for Saxon evidence, and how does this fit within the established chronology for Lundenwic (c. 7th to late 9th century)?

There was no evidence for any Saxon occupation or activity.

- *Is there any evidence for medieval activity, and does this confirm the picture of open agricultural land that is given by the earliest maps (for example, a cultivated soil horizon)?*

Any past soil horizons, *etc*, had been wholly truncated, and there was no evidence for medieval activity.

- *What evidence is there for the post-medieval development and use of the site, as recorded by historic maps from the 17th century onwards?*

The only evidence for post-medieval development related to the early 20th century development of Aldwych and of the Waldorf Hotel.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

The trial pit did not reveal any significant archaeological features or finds. Mixed backfill up to 1m deep overlay the stepped brick and concrete wall foundation of c. 1905-7, and to the southwest the truncated surface of the natural River Terrace sand and gravel.

In conjunction with the extent of adjacent building, these findings indicate that the site has been substantially disturbed by previous development. It is therefore suggested that no further archaeological measures should be undertaken in relation to the proposed development.

9. Select bibliography

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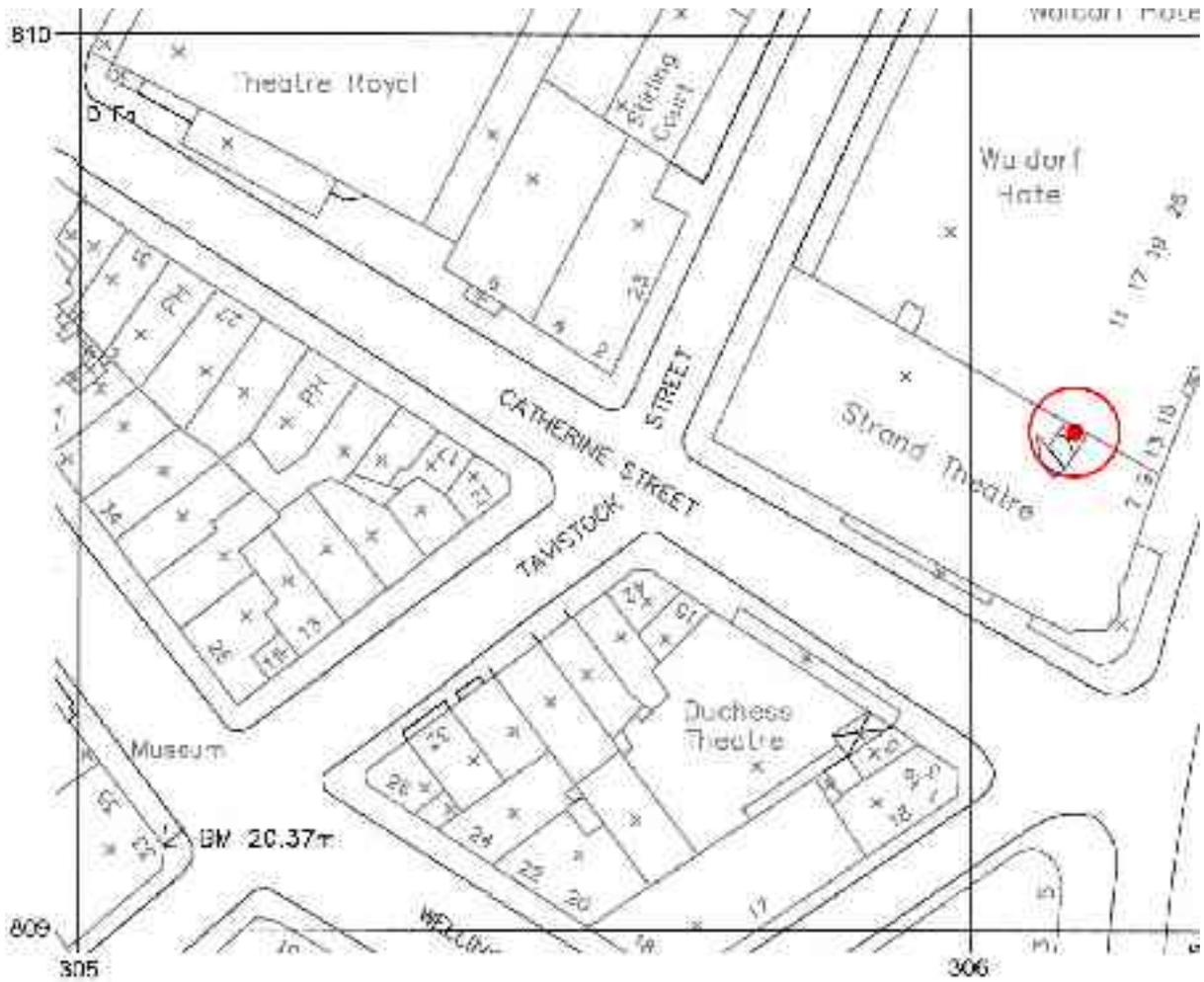


Fig 1 Location of the evaluation trial pit (circled) in relation to the Ordnance Survey map

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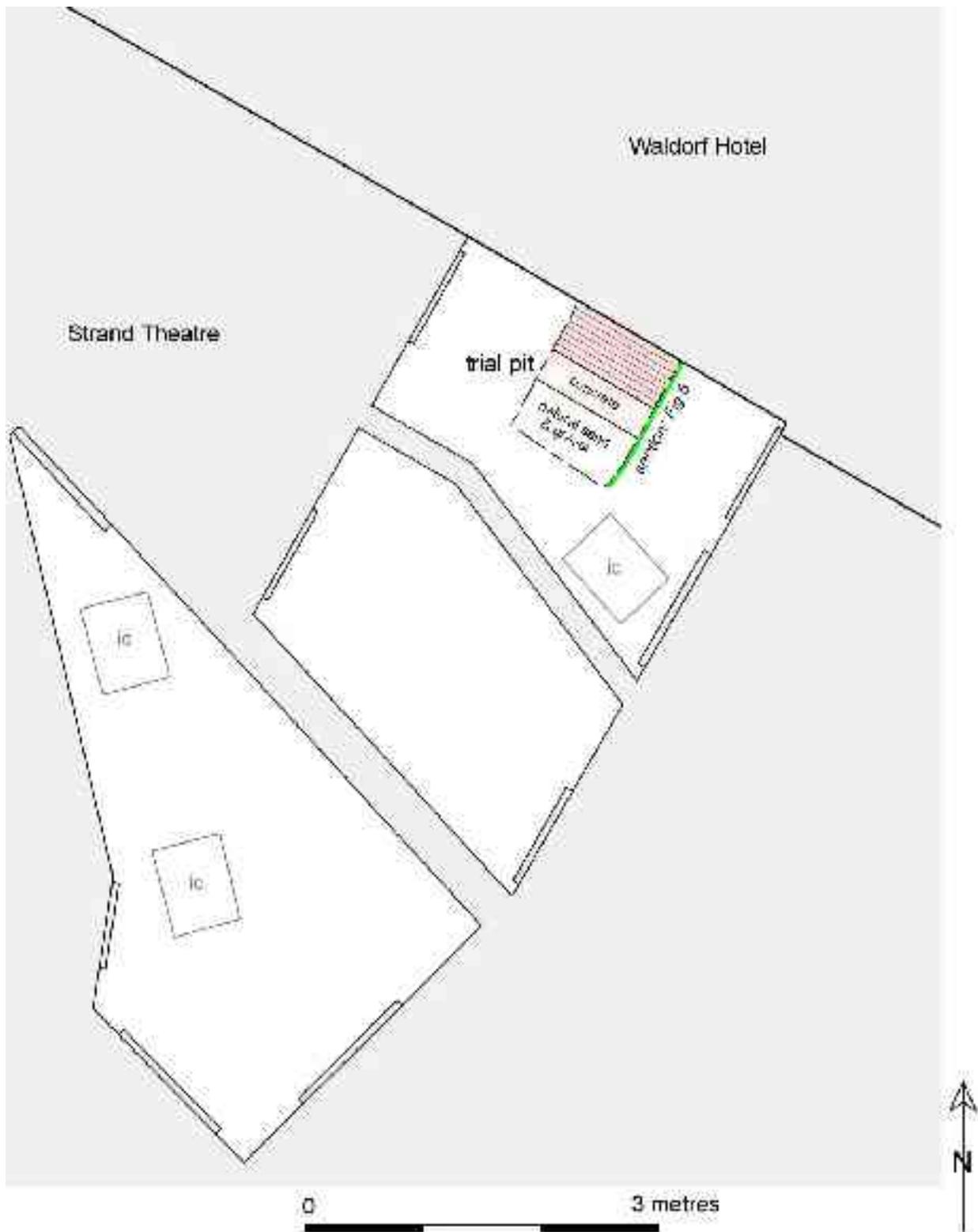


Fig 2 Plan of the trial pit and exposed features in relation to the surrounding buildings (scale 1:50), also showing location of the drawn section (Fig 5)

Outline based on a survey by Alan Conisbee and Associates, drg. no. GF/1



Fig 3 General view of the trial pit from above looking north east, showing the exposed wall foundation of c.1905 with the natural River Terrace gravel in the foreground (*0.2m scale*)

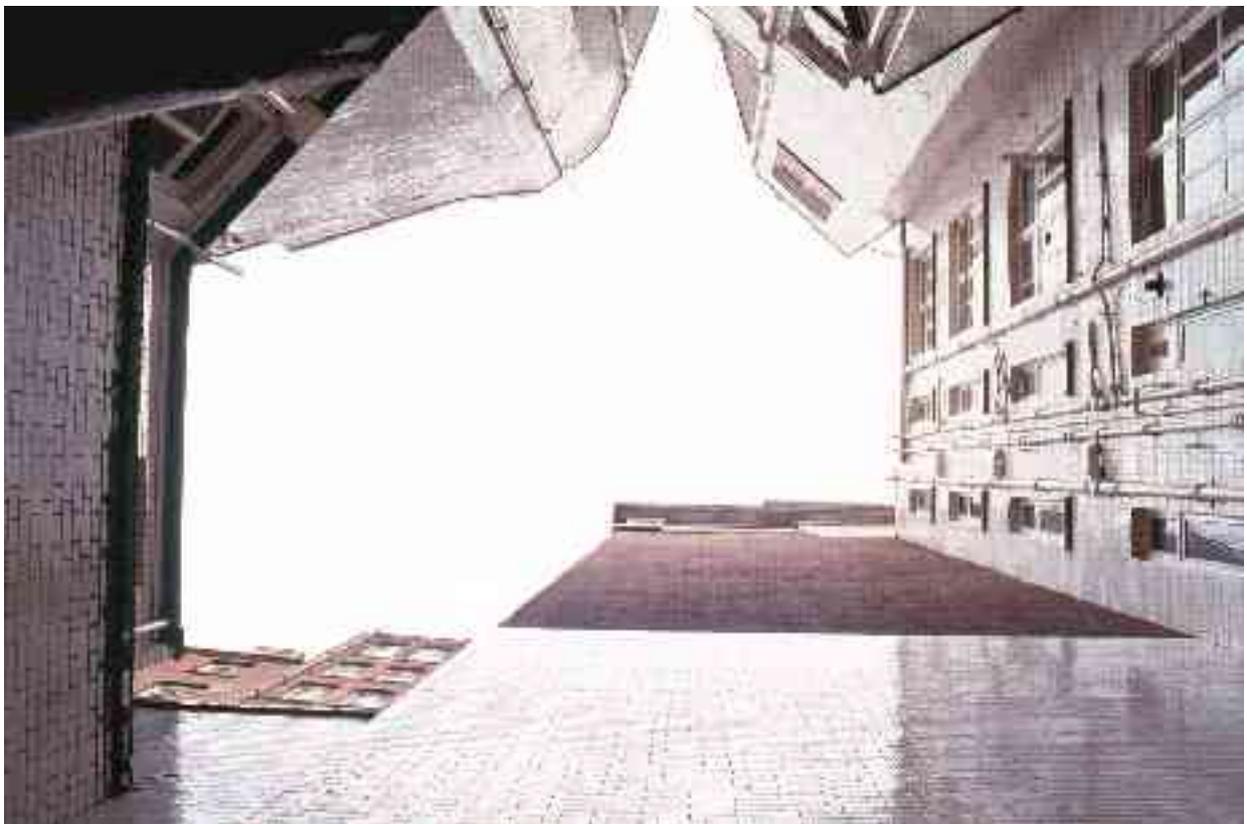


Fig 4 View from the trial pit looking directly up to show the extent of surrounding building. The pit was dug against the party wall seen at the base of this frame

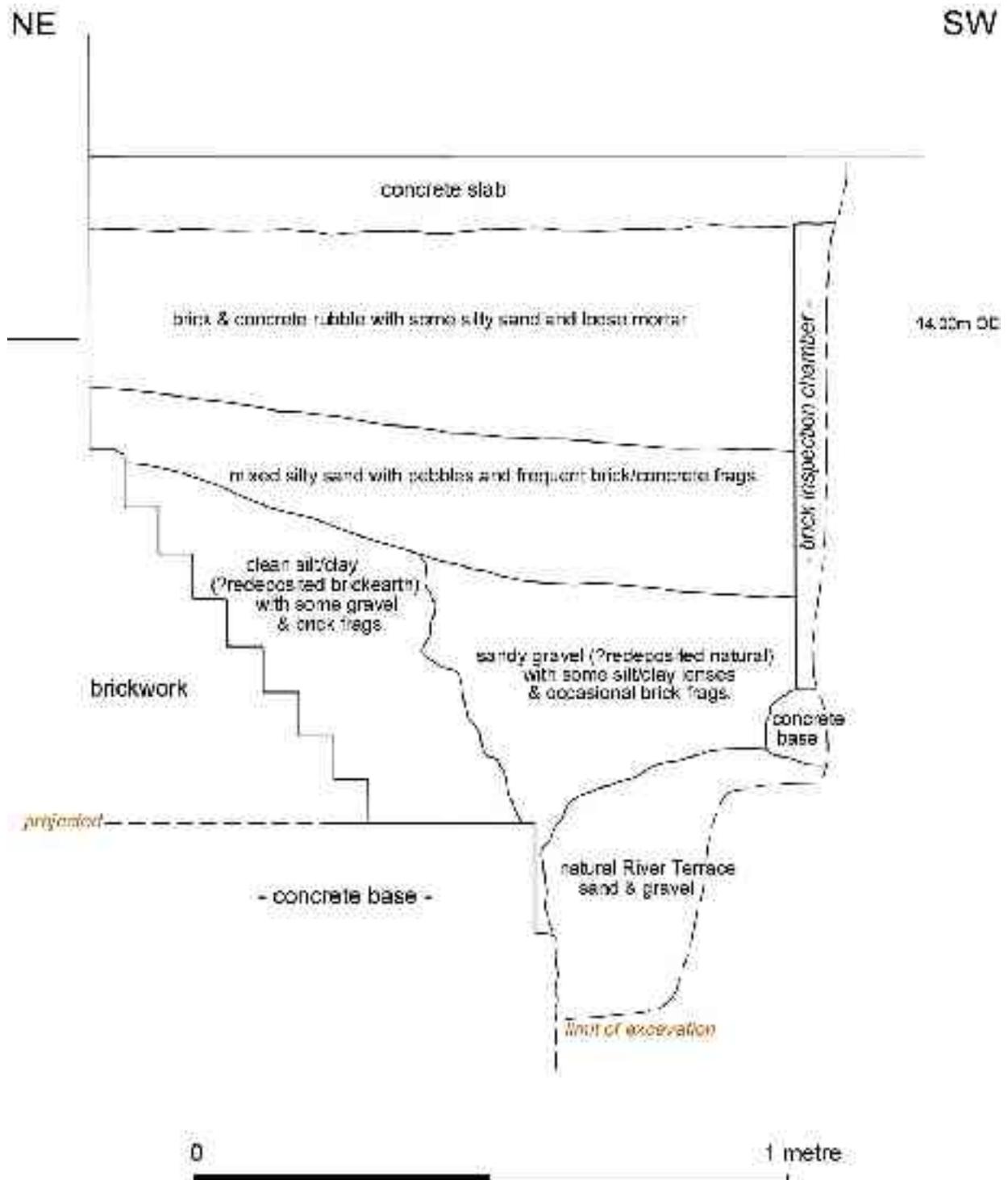


Fig 5 The southeast section of the trial pit, located on Figure 2 and showing the wall foundation of c. 1905 and overlying deposits.

See also Figure 6 overleaf



Fig 6 View of the wall foundation and overlying deposits shown in Figure 5 (*0.5m scale*)

Appendix I. London Archaeologist publication summary

The Strand Theatre, 5 Aldwych, London WC2B. TQ 30612 80956. CA (Geoff Potter).
Evaluation. March 2005. AWC 05

Summary

A hand-dug trial pit produced no archaeological remains. Modern backfill up to 1m deep overlay a substantial wall foundation of c. 1905-8 and the truncated surface of natural River Terrace sand and gravel.