

**AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AT STAPLE INN, HIGH  
HOLBORN, CITY OF LONDON, LONDON EC4**

**Site Code: INH 06**

**Central National Grid Reference: TQ 3110 8150**

**Written and Researched by Antony Mark Baxter**

**Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited, October 2006**

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# 1 ABSTRACT

- 1.1 This report details the results and working methods of an archaeological watching brief undertaken by Pre-Construct archaeology Limited at Staple Inn, High Holborn, City of London, EC4. The central national grid reference for the site is TQ 3110 8150. The watching brief, which was commissioned by Mellersh & Harding, was undertaken on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 2006.
- 1.2 Two service trenches were dug for the emergency repair of water pipes present within the passage way leading into the courtyard area of Staple Inn.
- 1.3 No archaeological deposits were observed in the service trenches within the aforementioned passage way. Trenches were excavated to a depth of approx 0.70m below the present ground surface and did not extend beyond the extremities of the existing service trenches.
- 1.4 Although the building is accorded Grade I status, these results might suggest that future repairs to previous existing services have a limited potential for viewing or encountering archaeological deposits, unless complete replacement of the existing services was to occur.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 An archaeological watching brief was conducted by Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited on the site of Staple Inn, High Holborn, City of London, EC4. The watching brief was conducted on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 2006 and was commissioned by Mellersh and Harding.
- 2.2 The site was bounded to the north by High Holborn, to the east by Furnival Street and to the west by the London Silver Vaults.
- 2.3 The archaeological investigations consisted of the monitoring of two service trenches within the passage way leading from High Holborn to the courtyard of Staple Inn (figs. 1 & 2). The archaeological watching brief followed the methodology laid out in the following:
- City of London Guidance Note 3: corporation of London, Department of planning & transportation, "Archaeology in the City of London: Archaeology Guidance.
  - The Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service Guidance Papers: Archaeological Guidance Papers: "1 Written Schemes of Investigation; 2 Desk-Based Assessments; 3 Standards and Practices in Archaeological Fieldwork in London; 4 Archaeological Reports; 5 Evaluations; 6 Post-Excavation Assessments and Updated Project Design Reports" (revised June 1998).
  - Institute of field Archaeologists: "Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Excavation" (1995 revised 1999) and "Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Brief" (1994 revised 1999)
- 2.4 The watching brief was project managed for Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited by Tim Bradley and carried out by the author. The site was monitored by Kathryn Stubbs of the Corporation of London.
- 2.5 The completed archive comprising written, drawn and photographic records will be stored by Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited until their eventual deposition in the London Archaeological Archive and Resource Centre (LAARC). The site was allocated the code INH 06.

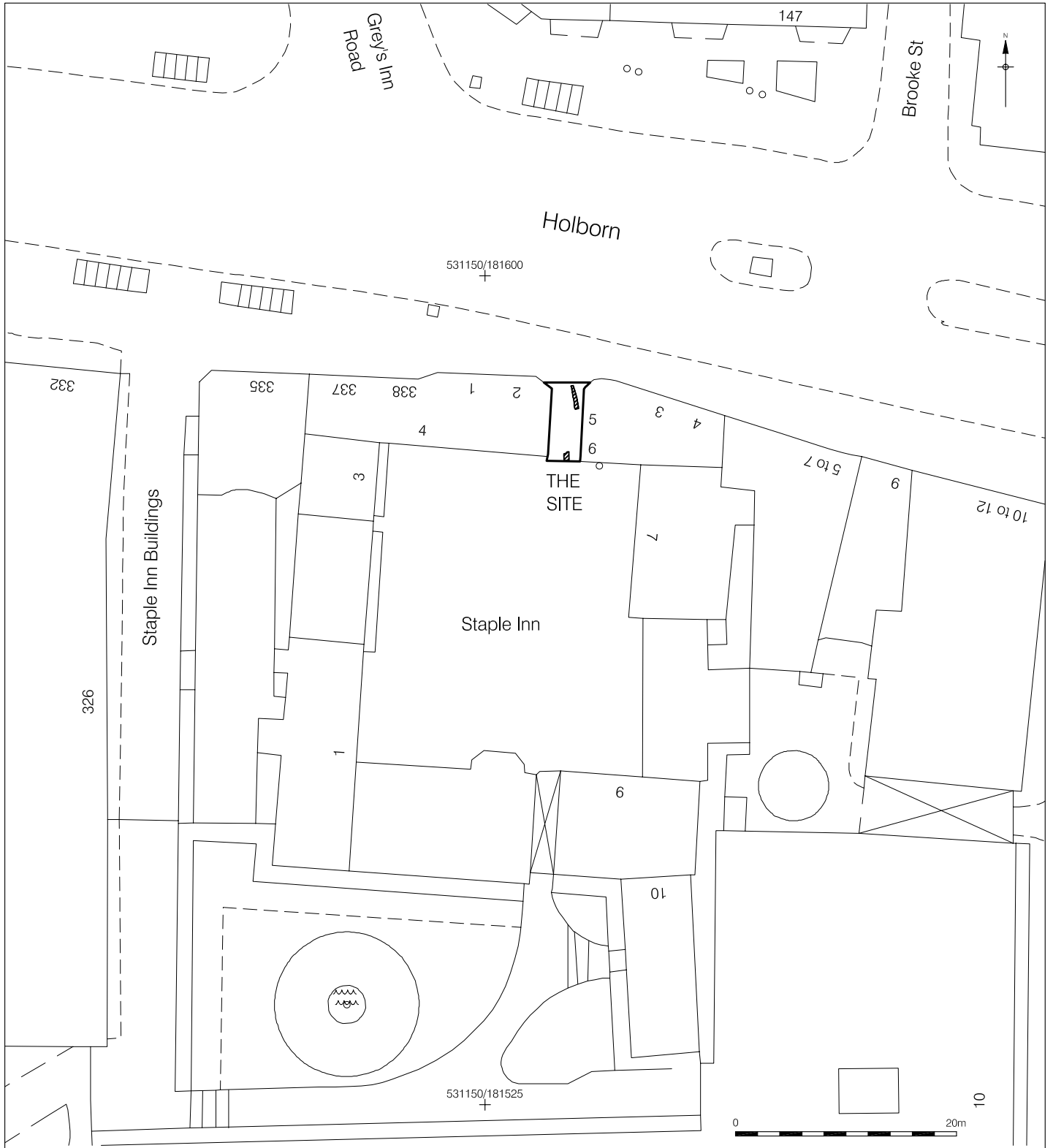


Figure 1  
Site location  
1:500

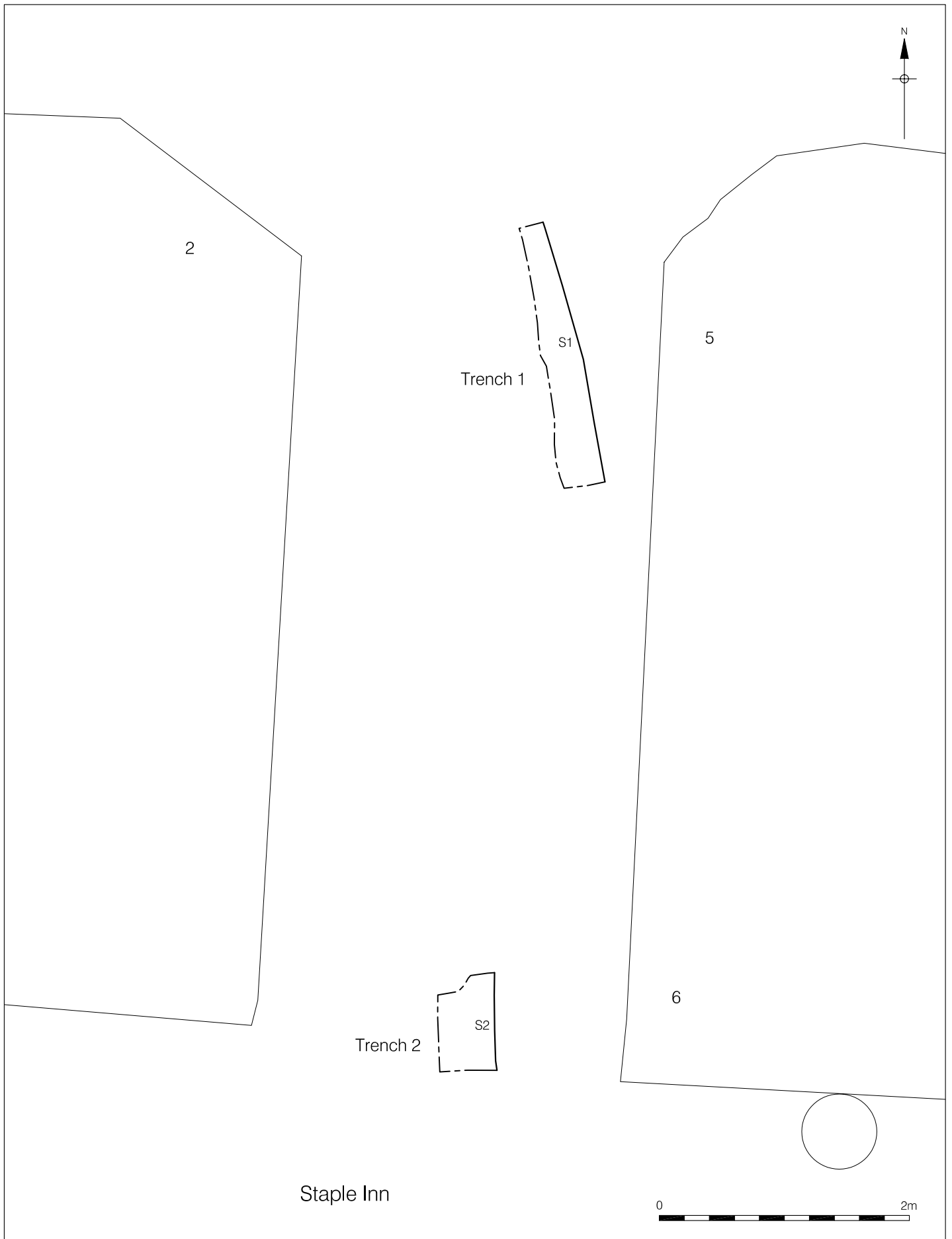
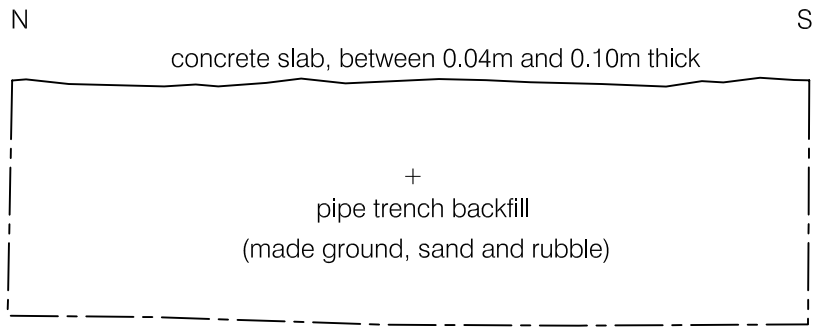
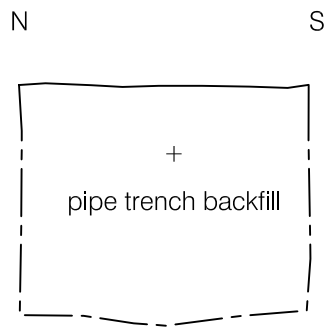


Figure 2  
Trench location  
1:40



Section 1  
Trench 1, west facing



Section 2  
Trench 2, west facing



### 3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### 3.1 Prehistoric

- 3.1.1 The early environment of the Thames Valley is perhaps one of the best researched in the world, principally due to the preservation of extensive undisturbed deposits. This has established that on the retreat of the ice sheets some 13,000 years ago, the Thames formed a braided river system with tundra-type vegetation, which gradually yielded to colonisation by herbaceous plants and grasses on an open steppe. In this context, the first Palaeolithic hunters probably penetrated the area, though evidence for the period is problematic. Many finds, which exclusively comprise stone tools, are often found as redeposited finds, while the brickearth deposits over much of the area post-date the period, and have thus obscured almost all primary contexts.
- 3.1.2 Widespread scatters of flint materials indicates activity in the Central London area in the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, with most evidence clustering in the later period. This activity may have been sporadic<sup>1</sup>, and prehistoric finds are sparse from the immediate area. However, certain Prehistoric artefacts have been recovered from the river. A Mesolithic flint tranchet axe from the River Fleet<sup>2</sup>, Neolithic polished stone axes were found in the Thames between Blackfriars and Waterloo Bridges<sup>3</sup> and near Blackfriars Bridge<sup>4</sup>. Bronze Age objects include a dagger blade found in the “town ditch” (River Fleet) at Newgate<sup>5</sup>, a bronze axe from the Thames near Blackfriars<sup>6</sup>, and a bronze spear head from the Thames opposite the Temple<sup>7</sup>. Additionally a Bronze Age axe was found at Bouverie Street<sup>8</sup>.

#### 3.2 Roman

- 3.2.1 The site lies approximately 0.5km to the west of the Roman city of *Londinium*. The site also resides on the southern side of High Holborn, which with Oxford Street are presumed to follow the alignment of a Roman road, although no archaeological investigations have as yet proved this. However, in AD 1598 Stow does note the remains of an earlier street, possibly a Roman road, on the north side of Fleet Street

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<sup>1</sup> Merriman, N., A Prehistory for Central London? In *London Archaeologist* Vol.5 no.12 (1987) p318-26.

<sup>2</sup> SMR 041110.

<sup>3</sup> SMR 114037.

<sup>4</sup> SMR 114039.

<sup>5</sup> SMR 041143.

<sup>6</sup> SMR 104000.

<sup>7</sup> SMR 1004002.

<sup>8</sup> SMR 041140.



between Chancery Lane and St Dunstan's. He wrote "when the labourers had broken up the pavement of hard stone, more sufficient than the first, under which they had found in the made ground, piles of timber driven very thick, and almost close together"<sup>9</sup>.

- 3.2.2 Roman law prohibited the burial of the dead within towns and cemeteries were sited alongside the main routes into and out of towns and Roman burials have been discovered in the vicinity of the site. To the south of the site, an excavation at 4 Kings Bench Walk/Niblett Hall in 1992 (site code KBK 92) revealed 3 Roman burials<sup>10</sup>. Further burials have been found underneath St Brides, Fleet Street and are thought to be of Roman date<sup>11</sup>. Eight Roman cremations were also discovered in 1927 in Shoe Lane near the junction with Fleet Street<sup>12</sup>. However little evidence for an extensive cemetery, or for concentrated domestic settlement in the vicinity of the site currently exists, with near by sites such as 143-159 High Holborn opposite this site, only encountering redeposited roman pottery (site code BRK80).

### **3.3 Saxon and Medieval**

- 3.3.1 The Roman road along High Holborn/Oxford Street continued in use in the Saxon period and by the 10<sup>th</sup> century a settlement had developed in the area of the Fleet crossing to the south east of the site. In 1130 boundaries were set up to mark the edge of the city limits, one of which was located at the corner of Gray's Inn Road and Holborn.
- 3.3.2 The site of Staple Inn is first referenced to in Norman times, probably containing a covered market known as 'le Stapled Halle' dating to 1292. The word "Staple" comes about in 1275 from a duty introduced on wool. The only remnants on site today from this period are two stained glass windows, with depictions relating them to the wool trade, which ceased after the 15<sup>th</sup> Century.
- 3.3.3 The Society of Staple Inn seems to emerge around 1415, when a group of students and lawyers formed the society, with the Inn remaining in ownership with the woolstaplers until the construction of a new Hall by the society in 1580.

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<sup>9</sup> Stow, J, A Survey of London, 1598, Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, (1994), p362.

<sup>10</sup> Greenwood, P, and Maloney, C, Excavation Round-Up 1992, pt 1 in London Archaeologist vol. 7, no 2, 1993, p49.

<sup>11</sup> Grimes, W. F, The Excavation of Roman and Medieval London, (1968), p182-3.

<sup>12</sup> RCHM, An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in London: Vol. 3 Roman London, (1928), p165-166.

### **3.4 Post-Medieval**

- 3.4.1 Parts of Staple Inn were destroyed by a fire in 1756, but the main hall was undamaged, this is commemorated in an inscription above the door 'Surrexit e Flamis Anno don. 1757. Thomas Leech. Principali Interumque reaedificata 1954.' Referring to the rebuild of the hall in 1954 after being bombed in 1944. The frontage of Staple Inn Building was completely restored in 1936 but the restoration did include the original oak frontage and lead windows.

## **4 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY**

### **4.1 Geology**

- 4.1.1 The site lies within the London (or Thames) Basin consisting of a bed of chalk covered by marine sands, gravels and clays (i.e. Thanet Sands and Woolwich and Reading Beds), over which London Clay formed.
- 4.1.2 The drift geology of the site itself is shown on the British Geological Survey North London map as Floodplain River Terrace gravels overlying the London Clay.

### **4.2 Topography**

- 4.2.1 The surrounding natural topography slopes from east to west, downwards towards the River Fleet valley in the east, and more gradually southwards towards the River Thames.
- 4.2.2 In previous archaeological investigations within a 500m radius of the site, truncated natural gravels have been observed at heights of 21.40-22m to the north of and between 16.50 and 17.03m to the south<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Baldwin E, 2005

## **5 ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY**

- 5.1 In all trenches the paving stones were removed by Conistan Construction. The manual removal of the underlying material was performed by the Thames Water contractor and monitored by the Archaeological Supervisor. No archaeological deposits were revealed in either of the two trenches. A plan and a section were drawn of each trial pit. Photographic images were also taken in each trench. Descriptions were made of the varying kinds of modern backfill found within each of the trial pits
- 5.2 Trench 1, situated at the North of the passageway entrance to Staple Inn, extended 2.10m north-south (max length) and 0.35m east-west. It reached a depth of 0.64m from the base of the paving slab before the required service was revealed.
- 5.3 Trench 2, situated at the Southern end of the passageway entrance to Staple Inn and North of the courtyard, extended 0.75m north-south (max length) and 0.45m east-west. It reached a depth of 0.62m from the base of the paving slab before the required service exposed.

## **6 ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 Trench 1 (fig. 2 & 3)**

6.1.1 No geological or archaeological deposits were found in Trench 1.

6.1.2 Trench 1 measured 2.10m N-S, 0.35m E-W, was excavated to a depth of approx 0.70m from the ground surface, and encountered a single deposit of sandy rubble representing modern trench backfill.

### **6.2 Trench 2 (fig 2 & 3)**

6.2.1 No geological or archaeological deposits were encountered in Trench 2.

6.2.2 Trench 2 measured 0.75m N-S, 0.45m E-W, was excavated to a depth of approx 0.70m from the ground surface, and also encountered a single deposit of sandy rubble representing modern trench backfill.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 Within Trenches 1 and 2 the maximum depth of approx 0.70m from ground level did not exceed the previously excavated service trenches within this area of the site and therefore no geological or archaeological deposits or cultural remains were observed.
- 7.2 These results might suggest that only complete replacement of the present day services is likely to encounter any *in-situ* archaeological deposits or remains, and that any future repairs are unlikely to do so.

## 8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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## **9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- 9.1 Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited would like to thank Stuart Andrews of Mellersh & Harding for commissioning and funding the archaeological investigations and Kathryn Stubbs of the Corporation of London for monitoring the archaeological work.
  
- 9.2 The author would like to thank Tim Bradley for project managing the watching brief and editing the present report, Josephine Brown for the illustrations and Enterprise Ltd. for the ground work and their cooperation on site.



## APPENDIX 1

### 2.4 OASIS ID: preconst1-19641

#### Project details

Project name	Staple Inn High Holborn
Short description of the project	Watching Brief on service repairs. No archaeological deposits encountered.
Project dates	Start: 21-10-2006 End: 21-10-2006
Previous/future work	Not known / Not known
Type of project	Recording project
Site status	Listed Building
Current Land use	Industry and Commerce 2 - Offices
Monument type	STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS Medieval
Monument type	BUILDING Post Medieval
Monument type	BUILDING Modern
Investigation type	'Watching Brief'

#### Project location

Country	England
Site location	GREATER LONDON CITY OF LONDON INNER AND MIDDLE TEMPLES Staple Inn

Study area	30.00 Square metres
Site coordinates	TQ 3110 8150 51.5166920890 -0.110347928029 51 31 00 N 000 06 37 W Point

### Project creators

Name of Organisation	Pre-Construct Archaeology Ltd
Project brief originator	Pre-Construct Archaeology
Project design originator	Tim Bradley
Project director/manager	Tim Bradley
Project supervisor	Antony Baxter
Name of sponsor/funding body	Mellersh & Harding

### Project bibliography 1

Publication type	Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)
Title	Staple Inn High Holborn
Author(s)/Editor(s)	Antony Baxter
Date	October 2006
Issuer or publisher	preconst1
Place of issue or publication	preconst1
URL	preconst1

Entered by	Antony Baxter (jtaylor@pre-construct.com)
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Entered on

24 October 2006

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### **3 OASIS:**

Please e-mail [English Heritage](#) for OASIS help and advice

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