

# POLICE GRAFFITI, NEW RIVER HEAD, FINSBURY

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Just west of Sadler's Wells Theatre, along the north side of the New River Head site and facing Myddelton Passage, there is a plain brick wall of 1806–7 (Fig 1). New River Head was estab-

lished in 1613 as the London terminus of the New River, bringing water to the metropolis from Hertfordshire.<sup>1</sup> This waterworks quickly expanded, with the outer ponds on the site

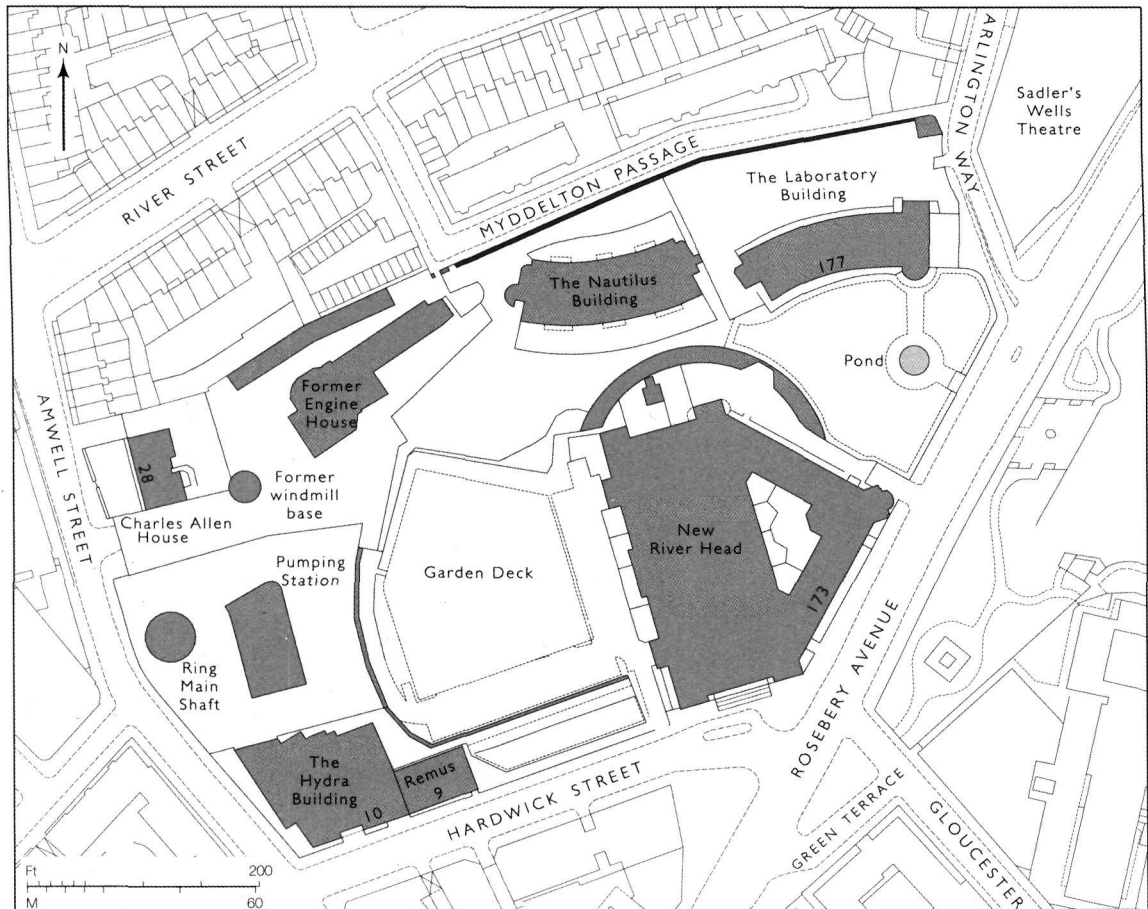


Fig 1. New River Head in 2005 (English Heritage, based on Ordnance Survey)



*Fig 2. Police graffiti on the New River Head perimeter wall of 1806–7 on Myddelton Passage (English Heritage)*

remaining essentially open, and much used for angling. Low timber hurdles around the perimeter began to be replaced in 1770, largely by high brick walls, with some timber fences, secure enclosure of this vitally important water supply being completed in 1780 immediately following the Gordon Riots, during which troops were stationed at the site.<sup>2</sup> The last section of timber fence along the northern boundary was replaced in brick in 1806–7. The eastern length of this wall is all that remains of New River Head's early perimeter security. It runs from Arlington Way to the west for about 100m, is of purple/grey stock bricks, and stands about 3m high with diagonal brick coping.<sup>3</sup> More westerly parts of the wall, beyond a pier, were rebuilt in yellow brick at a later date, perhaps 1935,<sup>4</sup> and there has been other yellow brick repair.

The remaining wall of 1806–7, which is 'Listed', would be otherwise unremarkable, but for the fact that it bears a quantity of carved graffiti of mid-19th- to early 20th-century date (Fig 2). These have been misattributed to prisoners, in the List description and in local histories. In fact, the graffiti were carved here by police constables, in what appears to have been a circumspect rite; until 1950 Myddelton Passage was a narrow alley, not overlooked as it is now, and the graffiti are all some distance from Arlington Way.<sup>5</sup> The policemen usually recorded their 'collar numbers', two or three digits followed by a letter representing their division in the Metropolitan Police, most frequently 'G' for Finsbury Division, based at King's Cross Police Station. The successive holders of these collar numbers were recorded in Divisional Registers many of which are held in the Metropolitan Police Store and Archive. Through these registers identification of the graffiti artists is possible when dates or initials accompany the collar numbers on the wall. The boldest contributor was Frederick Albert Victor Moore, from Cornwall, who joined G Division in 1886 having served at Devonport Naval Dockyard. Before his transfer in 1894 he not only recorded his collar number and initials, 'FM 365G Aug 17 1894', but also carved '365 PLYMOUTH'. Collar numbers alone, of which there are many, cannot be attributed,

but where there is other information identities can sometimes be deduced. 'TK 1913' may have been Thomas Kirkpatrick, a gamekeeper from Dumfries who joined the Division in 1910 and became an Inspector. 'FAH 103' must have been Frederick Albert Huntley, Hackney born, whose collar number was 103G, and who served in Finsbury from 1899 to 1906.

An oral tradition has it that this practice was commemorative, in honour of a fallen colleague, and the graffiti lend some support to this in so much as the only name carved into the wall is 'ROBINSON', and in 1888 a Detective Sergeant Robinson of G Division was stabbed while on duty. However, the wall also bears the carved dates 'Dec 9 1865' and 'Feb 9 1866', the latter with 185G, which collar number also appears with the initials 'JMK', for John McKinley, a butler from County Antrim who joined the Met in April 1865 and who was promoted to the elite AR Division in November 1866. So the origins of the custom remain obscure. Perhaps the boredom of night duties is sufficient explanation.<sup>6</sup>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> R Ward *London's New River* (2003).
- <sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 187, 207; London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA), New River Company Minutes Acc 2558/NR/1/1, ff. 37v, 84r, 101r; /2, pp 35 and 54.
- <sup>3</sup> LMA, Acc 2558/NR/1/6, p 106.
- <sup>4</sup> LMA, District Surveyor's Returns, LCC/AR/BA/04/609/010, No. 582, June 1935.
- <sup>5</sup> LMA, New River Company Deeds Acc 1953/C/1101 and 1110.
- <sup>6</sup> Metropolitan Police Archives, G Division Registers; information kindly supplied by Maggie Bird, Metropolitan Police Archivist, and Guy Smith; [http://www.lightage.demon.co.uk/POL\\_RaRob.pdf](http://www.lightage.demon.co.uk/POL_RaRob.pdf), viewed April 2005.