

NEW RIVER HEAD HERITAGE SITE  
Amwell Street/Rosebery Avenue  
Islington  
EC1

London Borough of Islington

An archaeological watching brief report

January 2006

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NEW RIVER HEAD HERITAGE SITE  
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An archaeological watching brief report

Site Code: HNI05  
National Grid Reference: 531303 182808

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## Summary (non-technical)

*This report has been commissioned by Thames Water in order to record and assess the results of a watching brief carried out at New River Head, Heritage Site, Amwell Street/Rosebery Avenue, Islington, London EC1.*

*Two trial holes were monitored on 21/12/2005 during remedial works on the site of the post-medieval waterworks.*

*A revetted cut was recorded below a 19th century brick wall. This is thought to be associated with the waterworks and it was later backfilled with concrete. Natural ground was observed at 29.75m OD.*

## Table Of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1	Site background	3
1.2	Origin and scope of the report	3
<b>2</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1	Geology and topography	4
2.2	Archaeological and historical	4
<b>3</b>	<b>The watching brief</b>	<b>5</b>
3.1	Methodology	5
3.2	Results of the watching brief	5
3.3	Conclusions	6
3.4	Significance of the data	6
<b>4</b>	<b>Publication and archiving</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>NMR OASIS archaeological report form</b>	<b>8</b>

## List Of Illustrations

*Front cover: the site on the Rocque map of 1746*

*All figures located at the rear of the report*

Fig 1: Site location

Fig 2: Areas of investigation

Fig 3: Trial Hole A looking east (Thames Water)

Fig 4: Trial Hole A looking north (MoLAS)

Fig 5: Trial Hole B looking north (MoLAS)

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Site background

The watching brief took place at New River Head Heritage Site, Amwell Street/Rosebery Avenue, London EC1. The site is located in the London Borough of Islington, and is bounded by Amwell Street to the west and Rosebery Avenue to the east and south (see Fig 1). The small area of the site that was the subject of the watching brief was at OS National Grid Reference 531303 182808. The level of the ground slab was estimated at 30.0m OD, as a nearby benchmark is at 30.68m OD. The site code is HNI05.

There was no previous archaeological impact assessment or method statement.

Two small holes, approximately 1 metre square, had been dug adjacent to a brick wall and were examined on 21st December 2005. These holes (marked as A and B on fig 2) were for additional supports before the wall, which has been undermined by a nearby tree, is demolished. Fairly substantial roots were noted under the wall and in trial hole B. Several digital photos were taken and are included in this report.

## 1.2 Origin and scope of the report

This report was commissioned by Thames Water and produced by the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS). The report has been prepared within the terms of the relevant Standard specified by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA, 2001).

The purpose of the watching brief was to determine whether archaeological remains or features were present and, if so, to record the nature and extent of such remains. Other than determining what remains were present there are no site-specific research aims or objectives.

The purpose of the present report is to analyse the results of the watching brief and to suggest what further work (if any), should now take place.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Geology and topography

The British Geological Survey map of the area shows the site to be located on sand and gravels. The area slopes gently down to the south.

### 2.2 Archaeological and historical

There have been few archaeological finds in the area. A bronze spearhead (recorded in the Greater London Sites and Monuments Records as LO1538) dated to the Late Neolithic to Late Bronze age (c 2500 to 700 BC) appears to be a casual loss and not evidence of occupation in the area during the prehistoric period.

However a Roman cinerary urn (LO25988) may suggest there was some form of occupation in the area, probably in the form of farmsteads.

The place name Islington suggests the medieval village that lies further to the north may have had a Saxon origin but there is no evidence of Saxon or medieval occupation on the site.

The area remained open fields until the early 17th century when New River Head was established in 1613, as the terminus of the New River. This was an artificial waterway 40 miles long, 10 feet wide and 4 feet deep, that was cut to bring water to the metropolis from springs at Chadwell and Amwell in Hertfordshire. This was collected in the 'Round Pond' and three other reservoirs and was distributed via wooden pipes made from hollowed tree trunks and smaller lead pipes. At the outset New River Head comprised of the 200ft (60m) diameter Round Pond and the Water House, the supervisor's residence over a cistern. By 1660 water was also being drawn from the River Lea and in 1709 the 'Upper Pond' was constructed to the north of the site where the modern Claremont Square Reservoir sits. A windmill pumped water uphill to the new High Pond to give a greater head of water, which enabled the New River Company to improve supply to the expanding West End. The experimental windmill was not a success and was replaced in 1768 by an atmospheric steam engine. This too failed to meet expectations and was quickly superseded. Most of the original engine house survives, embedded within additions of 1784-5 and 1794-6 designed to house much more powerful Boulton and Watt engines. Cast iron water pipes were introduced from 1811. There was further upgrading of the pumping system in the late 1840s, though a tall chimney added in 1818 was removed along with the engines in the 1950s. After 1852 filtration works were constructed using the existing ponds to improve the quality of the water. In 1920 the New River Head became headquarters of the Metropolitan Water Board, which had taken over the works in 1904. The last of the filter beds was abandoned in 1946. The offices of the Metropolitan Water Board and the water-testing laboratories built in 1936-8 were converted to flats in the 1990s.

### 3 The watching brief

#### 3.1 Methodology

All archaeological excavation and recording during the watching brief was done in accordance with the MoLAS Archaeological Site Manual (MoLAS, 1994).

The ground slab had been broken out and cleared, and the trenches hand excavated by contractors. Neither of these actions was monitored by MoLAS.

The locations of the trenches were recorded by MoLAS offsetting from adjacent standing walls. This information was then plotted onto the OS grid.

The heights of observations were estimated relative to a ground level of *c* 30.0m OD, an OS benchmark of 30.68m OD exists nearby on the former engine house.

Sections were drawn at a scale of 1:20, and numbered contexts were allocated where appropriate.

The site has produced: 1 trench location plan; 8 context records; two 1:20 section drawings; 8 digital photographs. No finds were recovered from the site.

The site records can be found under the site code HNI05 in the MoL archive.

#### 3.2 Results of the watching brief

Two small holes (A and B) were investigated; these were for more temporary supports to a brick wall before it is demolished. There follows a brief description of the deposits as recorded.

For trench locations see fig 2

##### **Trench A** (see figs 3 and 4)

<i>Trench A</i>	
Dimensions	1.0m x 1.0m x 0.90m deep (max)
Modern ground level	<i>c</i> 30m OD
Modern slab and fill	0.25m thick
Natural observed	<i>c</i> 29.75m OD

The natural was brown clay over orange sandy silt. There was a 0.40m wide cut running north-west to south-east, the west side was revetted with a soft wood plank 40mm wide on edge, the east side was not seen, the cut continuing to the east below another softwood plank that was laid flat. Underneath the wall another timber laid east-west was visible, this appears to be associated with this cut. The timber is *c*

0.10m thick and is possibly roofing to the cut. Its more decayed appearance may be due to it being more exposed and not buried in the natural.

The cut is possibly 19th century in date and had been partially infilled with recent concrete that sloped slightly towards the south. It is clearly not underpinning to the wall; there is at least 0.50m between the base of the wall and the top of the timber also the concrete does not fill the whole cut. The function of the cut is unclear, possibly it was for drains or pipes associated with the water works, at a later date it was partially infilled with concrete when it was no longer in use; possibly the pipes were replaced or removed. As mentioned earlier a reservoir was located to the north and filter beds to the south, so it is possible this is linking them.

### **Trench B (see fig 5)**

<i>Trench B</i>	
Dimensions	1.10m (N/S) x 1.0m (E/W) x 0.90m deep
Modern ground level	c 30m OD
Modern fill	0.25m thick
Natural observed	c 29.75m OD

The natural was a yellow sand with occasional fine pebbles and some iron staining, there was no sign of the brown clay observed in Trench A. There was a straight-sided cut into the natural, that is probably associated with a concrete intrusion located to the south-west side of this trench. This cut is possibly 20th century in date. A large tree root crossed this hole and another was visible under the brick wall.

In addition there was the brick wall, which is early-mid 19th century in date, with very shallow foundations (only 3 courses c 0.25m deep). This was constructed of dark red bricks (dimensions; 0.21m L x 60mm W x 100mm B) that are bonded with a white mortar. Two large props currently support this wall.

### **3.3 Conclusions**

It is suggested a further visit be carried out once the brick wall has been demolished to establish the true dimensions of the cut observed in Trial Hole A and to see if there is any evidence of its function. At present it is thought to relate to the later water works, possibly for pipes that led to the filter beds that existed to the south from the mid-19th century. The filter beds went out of use in 1946, and this could be when the concrete was laid in the revetted cut.

### **3.4 Significance of the data**

Whilst the archaeological remains are undoubtedly of local significance there is nothing to suggest that they are of regional or national importance.



## 4 Publication and archiving

Information on the results of the excavation will be made publicly available by means of a database in digital form, to permit inclusion of the site data in any future academic researches into the development of London.

The site archive containing original records will be deposited with the Museum of London LAARC within 12 months.

In view of the limited potential of the material and the relatively limited significance of the data it is suggested that a short note on the results of the watching brief should be included in the annual round up of the *London Archaeologist*.

## 5 Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Thames Water for commissioning MoLAS to record the structures revealed in the excavated pits.

## 6 NMR OASIS archaeological report form

OASIS ID: molas1-12238

### Project details

Project name	New River Head Heritage Site, Amwell Street/Rosebery Avenue, Islington
Short description of the project	Two trial holes were monitored on the site of former post-medieval water works. A revetted cut is thought to be 19th century in date and could be related to the nearby filterbeds.
Project dates	Start: 21-12-2005 End: 21-12-2005
Previous/future work	Yes / Not known
Any associated project reference codes	HNI05 - Sitecode
Type of project	Field evaluation
Site status	None
Current Land use	Industry and Commerce 1 - Industrial
Monument type	WATERWORKS Post Medieval
Monument type	WATERWORKS Modern
Methods & techniques	'Test Pits'
Development type	Estate management (i.e. maintenance of existing structures and landscape by capital works and on-going maintenance)
Prompt	Planning condition
Position in the planning process	Not known / Not recorded

### Project location

Country England

Site location GREATER LONDON ISLINGTON ISLINGTON New River  
Head Heritage Site, Amwell Street/Rosebery Avenue

Postcode EC1

Study area 30720.00 Square metres

National grid reference TQ 31303 82808 Point

Height OD Min: 29.75m Max: 29.75m

**Project creators**

Name of Organisation MoLAS

Project brief originator Thames Water

Project design originator MoLAS

Project director/manager Derek Seeley

Project supervisor Tony Mackinder

Sponsor or funding body Thames Water

**Project archives**

Physical Archive recipient LAARC

Physical Archive Exists? No

Digital Archive recipient LAARC

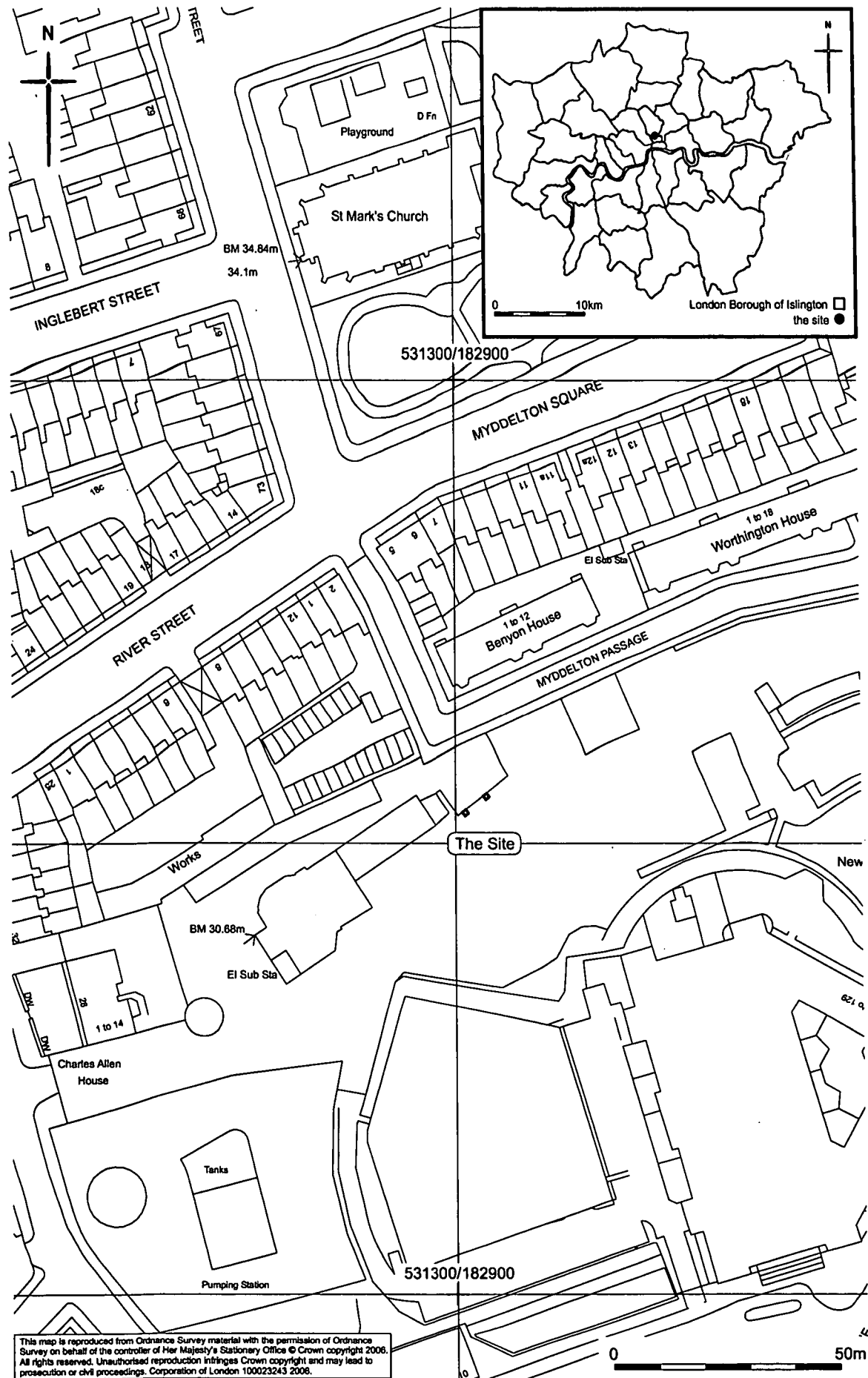
Paper Archive recipient LAARC

**Project bibliography 1**

Publication type Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)

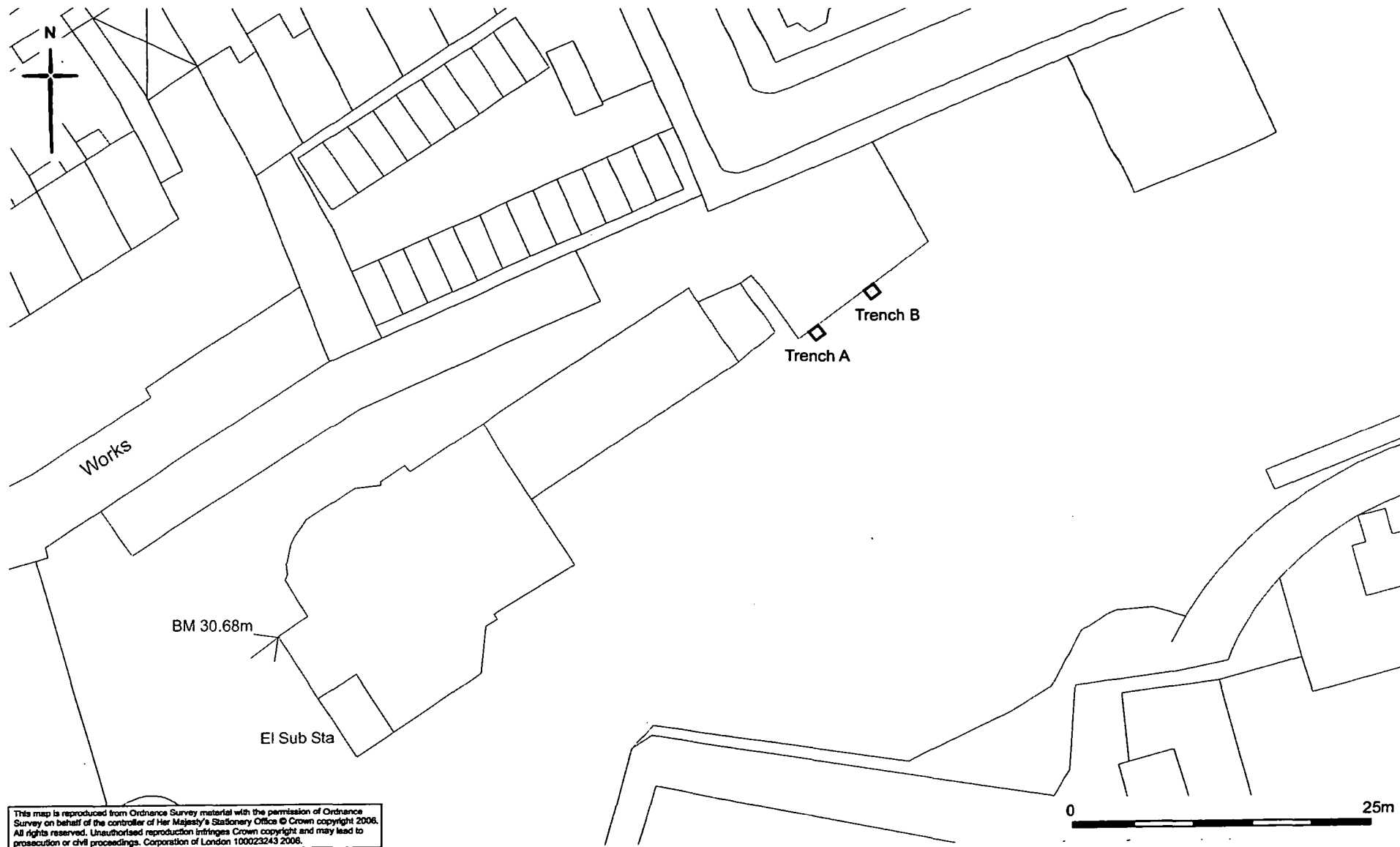
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Fig 1 Site location



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Fig 2 Areas of investigation



Fig 3 Trial Hole A looking east



Fig 4 Trial Hole A looking north



Fig 5 Trial Hole B looking north