

RIVER WALL
Old Royal Naval College
Greenwich
SE10

London Borough of Greenwich

An archaeological watching brief report

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MUSEUM OF LONDON

Archaeology Service

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National Grid Reference: 538530 178010

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Summary (non-technical)

This report has been commissioned by the Greenwich Foundation in order to record and assess the results of a watching brief carried out at the river wall within the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich. Restoration work on the stonework involved limited 'excavation' which was monitored between July and September 2006.

Evidence for earlier paving was recorded on the riverfront walkway and the location of earlier railing bases were recorded along the frontage. Reused masonry was also noted in a few locations. Excavation on the foreshore revealed timber piling where a few finds were also retrieved.

The archaeological evidence was limited and appeared to date to the 18th century.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Site background

The watching brief took place at the river wall along the northern edge of the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich, hereafter called 'the site'. The centre of the site is at OS National Grid Reference 538530 178010. The walkway adjacent to the central river gate lies at an average of 4.34m OD and ground level on the landward side of the wall is at 5.15m OD. The site code is RNT 06.

1.2 Origin and scope of the report

This report was commissioned by the Greenwich Foundation for the Old Royal Naval College 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 on the site and, if so, to record the nature and extent of such remains. The purpose of the present report is to analyse the results of the excavation and to suggest what further work, including analysis or publication (if any), should now take place.

2 Topographical and historical background

Information on the development of the river frontage within the Old Royal Naval College is limited. There are few documentary references, but with little detail, and few useful illustrations. Archaeological investigation in this area has been largely limited to the observation of small service trenches. Research for this brief study was undertaken in the National Maritime Museum archives, The National Monument Record Archives, The Museum of London Archaeology Service archives and published sources.

The original river frontage at Greenwich was on a different alignment to the present one. The Tudor palace was built at the river's edge and can be gauged from the 1970 excavation plans. The palace complex was demolished in 1662 and the King Charles Building was started in 1664 on a different alignment. Although largely on solid ground, it was reported that its northern end had to be strengthened against rising damp from the nearby river edge. Greenwich Hospital was planned in the 1690s and intended to be on the same alignment as King Charles Building. There was thus a need for a new river frontage and retaining wall. This was part of Christopher Wren's original plan and given its present alignment in 1713.

The north end of the Queen Anne Building was built on reclaimed land. Deep redeposited gravel fills were encountered in this area in watching briefs RNV 99, Pit 4 and all the riverfront trenches of RNW 01 (Trenches – from east to west – 11, 14, 15, 50, 49) extending to just north-west of the King Charles Building. At the western end of the King Charles Quarter a watching brief test pit revealed 17th or 18th century strata indicating dry land within the original river frontage.

The new embankment was completed in 1730, by which time land to the east of the Queen Anne Building where stood a crane, had been acquired. There was a gravel pathway on the inside with gateways at either end. The foundations of the eastern gateway was probably found in RNW 01 (Trench 11). These gateways were demolished in 1777 and the walkway lengthened. The surface of the gravel path inside the railings formerly sloped down to the north in an exaggerated camber. Sometime in the mid 20th century this appears to have been levelled and a 200m long low wall built was against the railings. The foundations of this wall, concrete on two courses of brickwork, were revealed in watching brief RNW 01 (Trench 14).

In 1781 the embankment itself was enlarged. There were railings along the frontage and a modest river gate. By the 1780s a larger gate was thought necessary but designs for a new gate, and even a plan to relocate the large West Gate to the Hospital grounds to the river front were rejected. The present gate dates to the 1850s and the new railings along the river front – and the rest of the site – were completed soon after.

The riverside pathway north of the railings, known as Five Foot Walk, was proposed by Ripley in 1731, for the use of local residents. The river stairs and landing place

were added in 1790 and, along with the whole walkway, repaired in 1848 and 1898. Early 20th century plans to broaden the walk farther north came to nothing.

3 The watching brief

3.1 Methodology

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

There were only three small areas of excavation; two trench along the walkway and a deeper excavation at the base of the western steps on the foreshore. These ‘trenches’ had been excavated by the contractors then examined by MoLAS. The locations of the areas of excavation were recorded by the MoLAS archaeologist offsetting from adjacent standing walls and plotted on to a base plan. This information was then plotted onto the OS grid. Ground levels above Ordnance Datum were retrieved from the client’s site survey.

The site has produced one annotated site plan, a sketch section drawing and a timber drawing. There were no numbered contexts. Some finds were noted but not retained. The site records can be found under the site code RNT06 in the MoL archive.

3.2 Results of the watching brief

Most of the work on the river wall involved repair to the stonework, with only three small areas of ‘excavation’. There follows a brief description of the archaeological deposits as recorded. For all trench locations see (Fig. 2)

3.2.1 Trench 1.

This ‘trench’ was located on the walkway 6.4m east of the east steps at a height of 4.34m OD. The ‘trench’ measured 0.62 by 0.84m. The surface paving was 0.09m thick and lay directly on fragmentary earlier paving. No further excavation was undertaken.

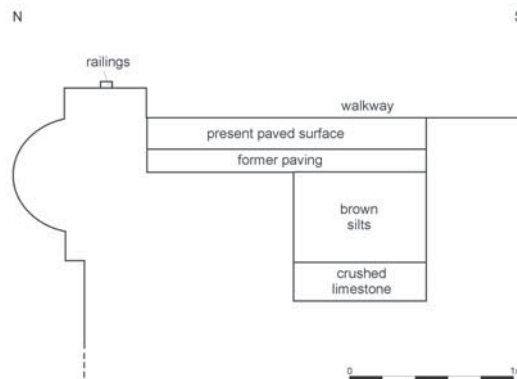


Fig 1 Sketch section of river wall and Trench 2.

3.2.2 Trench 2.

This trench was located on the walkway 7.9m east of the east steps at a height of 4.34m OD. The 'trench' measured 0.84 by 0.80m. The surface paving was 0.09m thick and lay directly on fragmentary earlier paving that was 0.06m thick. This overlay a 0.38m thick layer of mixed brown silts. At an average of 0.54m below the surface, there was a layer largely composed of crushed limestone though its full depth was not ascertained.

Other observations along the walkway included noting the former leaded locations of the earlier railing stanchion bases set in the face of the riverfront bull nosed moulding at approximately 1.5m intervals. Near the east steps where repairs were being made to the face of the wall, it was noted that the core contained fragments of moulded stone though details were not ascertained.

3.2.3 Trench 3.

Trench 3 was located against the north side of the platform in front of the west steps at a height of +0.12m OD. This excavation conducted at low tide, was for the insertion of concrete underpinning. The granite paviments of the step bases appeared to rest directly onto river clay, though it is probable that timber piles were placed below. It is possible that some of the stones were reused but they were sequentially lettered for laying as a platform.

One timber remained *in situ* against the paviments (Fig 2) but another was retrieved as a broken fragment (Fig 3). This was a piece of elm, squared at average 6" (0.15m) but chamfered at one end, with an iron nail projecting sideways from the chamfer. Damian Goodburn suggests that because the timber had a chamfered rather than pointed end it came from the top of the timber as it would have been *in situ*. Thus it was likely to have been an anti scour pile which would have protected the bottom of steps from erosion. The remaining timber *in situ* is likely to be one of a series.

A few fragments of late 17th century clay tobacco pipe and a few potsherds of similarly dated pottery were present within the excavation spoil.



Fig 2 Timbers recorded against the wharf in Trench 3.

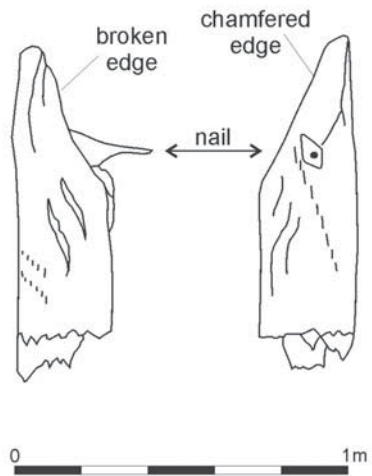


Fig 3 Fragment of timber retrieved from Trench 3.

4 Conclusions

There is little potential in the data accrued by this watching brief. The excavation did not expose enough to provide further details of dating or construction. The archaeological remains exposed are, in themselves, of limited significance. The watching brief results revealed little that was not known in the documentary sources. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that any damage has been made to buried deposits.

The alteration of the Greenwich riverfront was of great significance in terms of the major developments on the site. This wall pushed the former riverfront line out by some distance, particularly at the eastern end of the site. Although the previous alignment is recorded on late 17th century plans, only excavation farther inland might reveal any survival. The Greenwich riverfront still preserves archaeological features within it (cf Milne 1996) as well as artefacts washed up on the shores.

5 Publication and archiving

Information on the results of the watching brief 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 stored with the Museum of London within 12 months of the end of the excavation.

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

6 Acknowledgements

The Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) would like to thank the Greenwich Foundation for the Old Royal Naval College for commissioning this report. In particular we should like to thank Messrs Duncan Wilson and David Harris. We are also grateful to Mr Alan Bilham, of David Ball Restoration (London) Limited for assistance and for supplying photographs of the foreshore excavation (Trench 3). The author is grateful to Dr Damian Goodburn (MoLAS) for commenting on the timber piles.

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8 NMR OASIS archaeological report form

OASIS ID: molas1-19927

Project details

Project name River Wall, Old Royal Naval College

Short description of the project Limited watching brief on small engineering trenches dug in the paving and foreshore by the early 18th century river wall at Greenwich. 18th century paving and levelling was recorded. In the foreshore, timber and fragmentary pottery was observed.

Project dates Start: 01-06-2006 End: 25-09-2006

Previous/future work No / Not known

Any associated project reference codes RNT06 - Sitecode

Type of project Recording project

Site status Scheduled Monument (SM)

Current Land use Other 11 - Thoroughfare

Monument type WALL Post Medieval

Significant Finds TIMBER Post Medieval

Investigation type 'Watching Brief'

Prompt Scheduled Monument Consent

Project location

Country England

Site location GREATER LONDON GREENWICH GREENWICH River Wall, Old Royal Naval College

Postcode SE10

Study area 240.00 Square metres

Site coordinates TQ 38530 78010 51.4835501849 -0.00469184082870 51 29 00 N
000 00 16 W Point

Project creators

Name of MoLAS
Organisation

Project originator brief English Heritage/Department of Environment

Project originator design MoLAS

Project director/manager Robin Nielsen

Project supervisor JMC Bowsher

Type of The Greenwich Foundation for the Old Royal Naval College
sponsor/funding body

Project archives

Physical Archive No
Exists?

Digital Archive LAARC
recipient

Paper Archive LAARC
recipient

Project bibliography 1

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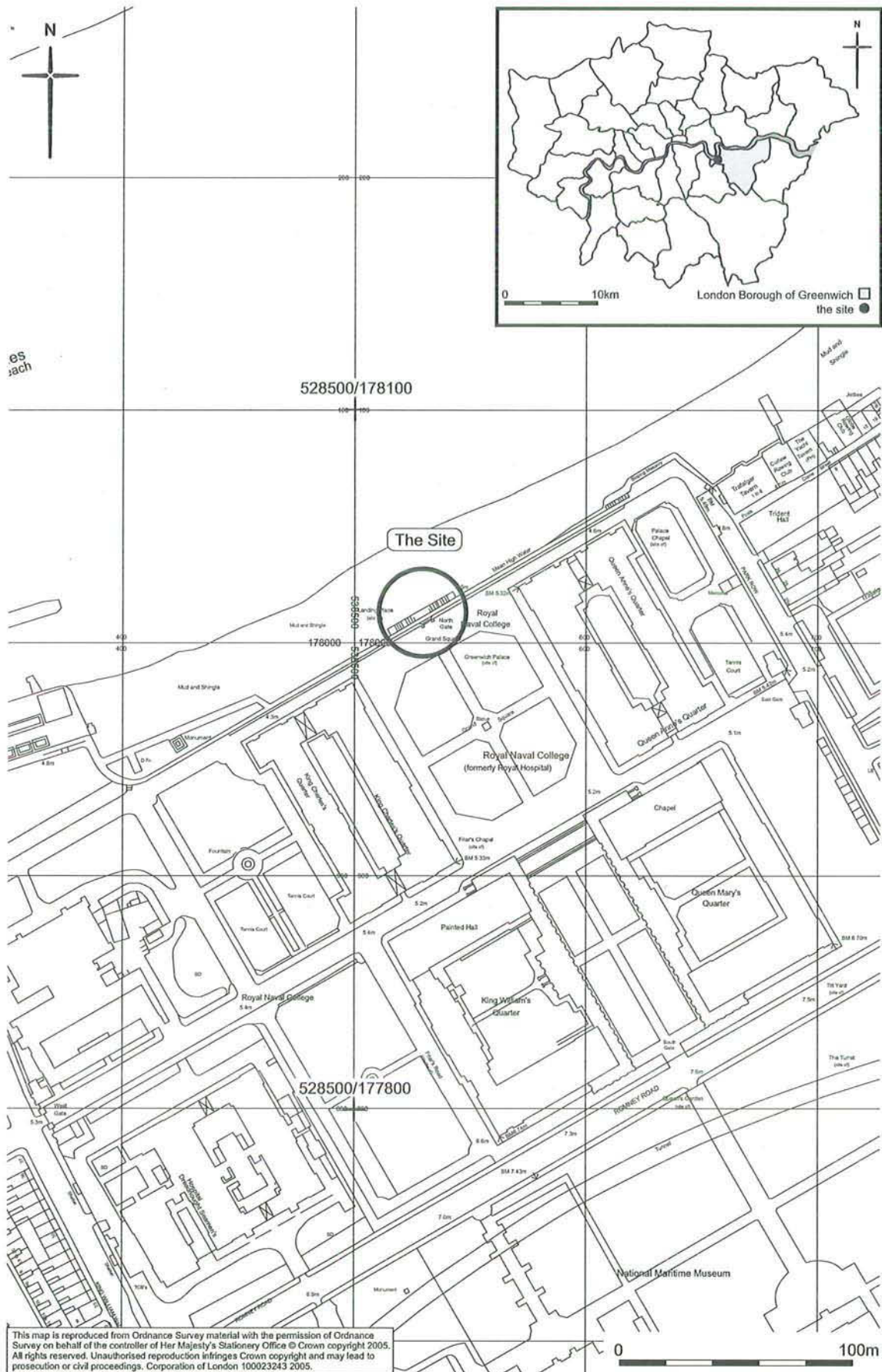


Fig 4 Site location

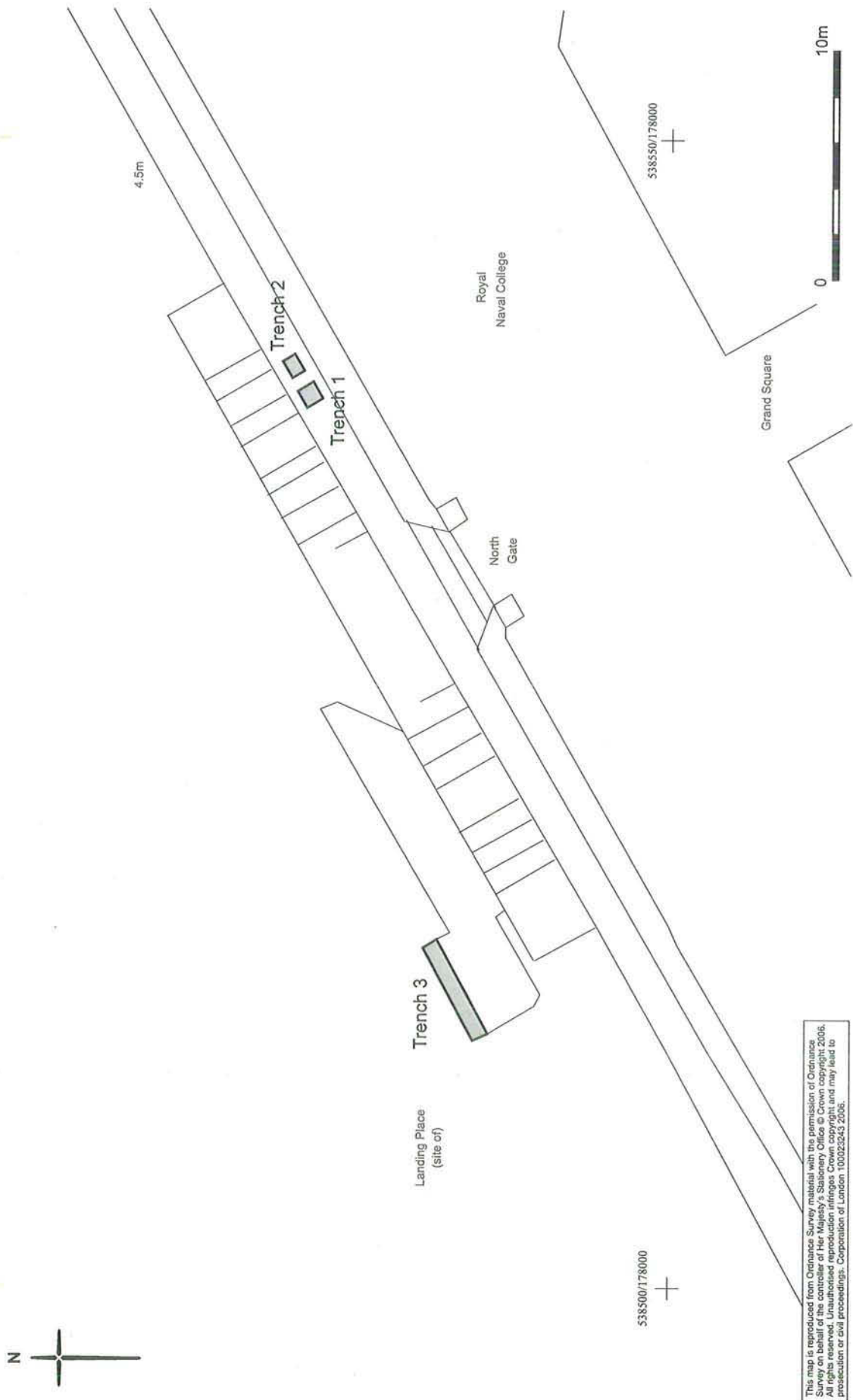


Fig 5 Site Plan