

**77-81 CURTAIN ROAD  
Hackney  
EC2**

London Borough of Hackney

An archaeological watching brief report

June 2007



**MUSEUM OF LONDON**

**Archaeology Service**

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Hackney  
EC2

London Borough of Hackney

An archaeological watching brief report

Site Code: CUQ05

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## Summary (non-technical)

*This report has been commissioned by Greig Ling Engineering in order to record and assess the results of a watching brief carried out at 77–81 Curtain Road, London, EC2.*

*Pile probing, ground reduction and underpinning neighbouring walls was monitored between 08-12-2006 and 07-03-2007 during redevelopment of the site to construct residential accommodation.*

*A large early 19th-century brickfield quarry had reworked deposits to the level of natural terrace gravel, c. 12m OD, above which was 400mm of reworked brickearth - the residue from brickmaking. Above 12m OD to ground level, 3mm higher was the quarry backfill of grey ashy silt (largely nightsoil).*

*In view of the limited potential of the material found and the relatively limited significance of the data recorded, it is suggested that no more archaeological work is expended on this individual site but that it is used to help map this large early-19th-century quarry. A short note on the results of the watching brief should appear in the annual round up of the London Archaeologist.*

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Site background

The watching brief took place at 77-81 Curtain Road EC2, hereafter called 'the site'. The site is bounded by Mills Court to the North; Great Eastern Street to the South and Charlotte Road to the West (see Fig 1). The centre of the site is at OS National Grid Reference 533249 182417. Modern ground level immediately adjacent to the site is 15.30m OD. The site code is CUQ05.

A *Desk-based Assessment* was previously prepared by Genius Loci Cultural Project Consultants Ltd (Dr. P Chowne), which covers the whole area of the site. This document should be referred to for information on the natural geology, archaeological and historical background of the site, and the initial assessment of its archaeological potential.

The field evaluation was carried out by MoLAS, monitoring geotechnical trial pits on the 10/10/05 and 17/10/05 (Ferguson 2005). This work, and the previous *Assessment*, informed the design (*Method Statement*) for the watching brief which was eventually carried out (Lakin 2006).

## 1.2 The planning and legislative framework

The legislative and planning framework in which the archaeological exercise took place was summarised in the *Method Statement* which formed the project design for the watching brief (see Section 1.2, Lakin 2006).

## 1.3 Origin and scope of the report

This report was commissioned by Greig Ling Engineering 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 monitor pile probing and ground reduction and determine whether archaeological remains or features were present on the site and, if so, to record the nature and extent of such remains.

## 1.4 Aims and objectives

The archaeological brief is essentially limited to establishing where, if at all, archaeological deposits may survive (presence/absence), recording where necessary, and to ensuring that the proposed groundworks do not involve the destruction of archaeological remains of national significance. Nevertheless, in addition, a few research questions can be outlined:

- Do any deposits or features predating the late 17th century survive on the site?
- What is the nature of the 18th century and later activity on the site and is it confined to pitting and quarrying?

All research is undertaken within the priorities established in the Museum of London's *A research framework for London Archaeology*, 2002

## 2 Topographical and historical background

The line of Old Street marks the approximate route of a prehistoric road joining the capitals of small late Iron Age states at Silchester (near Reading) and Colchester. The site lies outside the Roman and later city defences, in an area with some potential for remains of prehistoric date. The medieval precinct of Holywell Priory lay on the east side of Curtain Road opposite the site. The site lay at the edge of a large common field and remained in agricultural use until the late 18th-century. By then it was subdivided into small plots for market gardening. It was north of the medieval (defensive?) feature Holywell Mount, which was the location for an impromptu and possibly unofficial cemetery during the 17th century plague (front cover, *Burying the Dead at Holywell Mount*, one of a series of 18th-century prints on the same theme – for function compare with “The Mount” at the London Hospital, Whitechapel).

A watching brief on ground investigations was carried out by MoLAS between 10/10/05 and 17/10/05. The results of this monitoring are presented in the *Archaeological Watching Brief Report* (Ferguson 2005). A brief resume is provided here:

- Previous basements had truncated deposits around the eastern, southern and northern perimeters of the site to a depth of between 12.6m OD and 13.6m OD.
- Natural brickearth survived to a maximum height of 13.4m OD
- Pits and possible quarries had locally truncated the brickearth to 11.5m OD
- No finds were recovered predating the late 17th century

## 3 The watching brief

### 3.1 Methodology

All archaeological excavation and recording during the watching brief was done in accordance with the *Method Statement* (Lakin 2006) and the MoLAS Archaeological Site Manual (MoLAS, 1994).

The site was clear and open when monitoring began. Pile probing was by mechanical excavator and concentrated on removing obstacles in the formerly built-over area near to the road frontage. This was particularly true of the street frontage itself, the line of which was to be supported by a sheet-pile wall. Following clearance of obstacles the site was piled from the ground surface. Ground reduction took place after piling and firstly, a limited area to the rear of the site was reduced to the base of neighbouring walls (approximately 12.2m – 13.0m OD). The walls were underpinned by 1m-wide holes dug up to 2.5m within the new building and extending 0.5m below the neighbouring wall and approximately 1.5m – 2.4m deep (Limit of Excavation 10.4m OD). The ground was further reduced to the general level for construction. Simultaneously, an area west of this was cleared to the first level. Thus work continued on a series of levels until the last area near the street frontage was reached. Behind it, excavations for drainage, lift pit and a tower crane base were undertaken as space became available. The area near the street frontage would only be cleared after the erection of a tower crane. As this area had been comprehensively reworked by pile probing and the removal of modern obstructions, ground reduction was not monitored here.

The locations of the areas of excavation were recorded by offset from adjacent standing walls and plotted on the OS grid by comparison with the OS 1:1250 map. Levels were measured from the construction site datum.

Finds and records – including those of the previous watching brief – can be found under the site code CUQ06 in the MoL archive.



### 3.2 Results of the watching brief

The level of subsurface deposits was consistent throughout all of the observations. The top of clean, natural, yellow-brown banded Terrace Gravel was at 12.0m – 12.1m OD and it was repeatedly observed in underpinning holes to 10.4m OD. Above it was a thin band of reworked, dirty brown brickearth to 12.4m OD. No clean natural brickearth was observed. Above 12.4m OD was ashy grey silt to ground level – nearly 3m – or truncation by subsequent buildings towards the street frontage.

The consistency of levels indicates the entire area was stripped down to gravel in the early 19th-century as part of a brickfield quarry. These quarries were extensive areas of systematic excavation and the dirty brickearth left above the level of truncation was the residue after brick manufacture, akin to mining tailings. The ashy fill included a large amount of nightsoil, from urban earth closets and middens and the waste from constant fires for cooking as well as heating. It included fragments of domestic cream wares from the early 19th-century (not retained) and is consistent with the observations made in the monitoring of trial pits.

The effect of large quarries such as this is to jumble finds from earlier periods, removing them from the context of their deposition.



*Text figure 1 Brickfield exploited in 1830 at Hackney. This gives an indication of the size, scale and depth of typical brickmaking quarries. Note the level of Kingsland Road to the right (<http://brickfields.org.uk/> accessed 13/10/2006).*

## **4 Potential of archaeology**

### **4.1 Original research aims**

No nationally important archaeological remains were excavated. The two specific research questions were answered as follows:

- Do any deposits or features predating the late 17th century survive on the site?
  - No buried deposits predate the 17th century.
- What is the nature of the 18th century and later activity on the site and is it confined to pitting and quarrying?
  - There was a single large early-19th century “brickfield” quarry.

### **4.2 New research aims**

The extent of the early-19th-century brickfield quarry should be determined by comparing the incremental results of successive investigations.

### **4.3 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.

## 5 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 and finds will be stored in accordance with the terms of the *Method Statement* (Lakin 2006).

In view of the limited potential of the material (Sections 4) and the relatively limited significance of the data (Section 4) it is suggested that no more archaeological work is expended on this individual site but that it is used to help map this large early-19th century quarry. A short note on the results of the watching brief should appear in the annual round up of the *London Archaeologist*.

## 6 Bibliography

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## 7 NMR OASIS archaeological report form

OASIS ID: molas1-24958

### Project details

Project name 77-81 Curtain Road EC2: a watching brief on ground reduction

Short description of the project Pile probing and ground reduction was monitored. a large early-19th century brickfield quarry had reworked deposits to natural terrace gravel, 12m OD, above which was 400mm of reworked brickearth - the residue from brickmaking. Above 12.m OD to ground level 3mm higher was the quarry backfill of grey ashy silt (largely nightsoil).

Project dates Start: 08-12-2006 End: 07-03-2007

Previous/future work Yes / No

Any associated project reference codes CUQ05 - Sitecode

Type of project Recording project

Site status Area of Archaeological Importance (AAI)

Current Land use Vacant Land 1 - Vacant land previously developed

Investigation type 'Watching Brief'

Prompt Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPG16

### Project location

Country England

Site location GREATER LONDON HACKNEY HACKNEY 77-81 Curtain Road EC2, An archaeological watching brief on ground reduction

Postcode EC2

Study area 500.00 Square metres

Site coordinates TQ 3325 8242 51.5244563407 -0.07902881216750 51 31 28 N 000 04 44 W Point

Height OD Min: 10.40m Max: 12.00m

### Project creators

Name of Organisation MoLAS

Project originator brief Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service

Project originator design MoLAS

Project David Lakin

director/manager

Project supervisor David Sankey

Type of Developer  
sponsor/funding  
body

Name of Greig Ling Engineering  
sponsor/funding  
body

**Project archives**

Digital Archive LAARC  
recipient

Digital Media 'Images vector','Text'  
available

Paper Archive LAARC  
recipient

Paper Media 'Unpublished Text'  
available

**Project  
bibliography 1**

Publication type Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)

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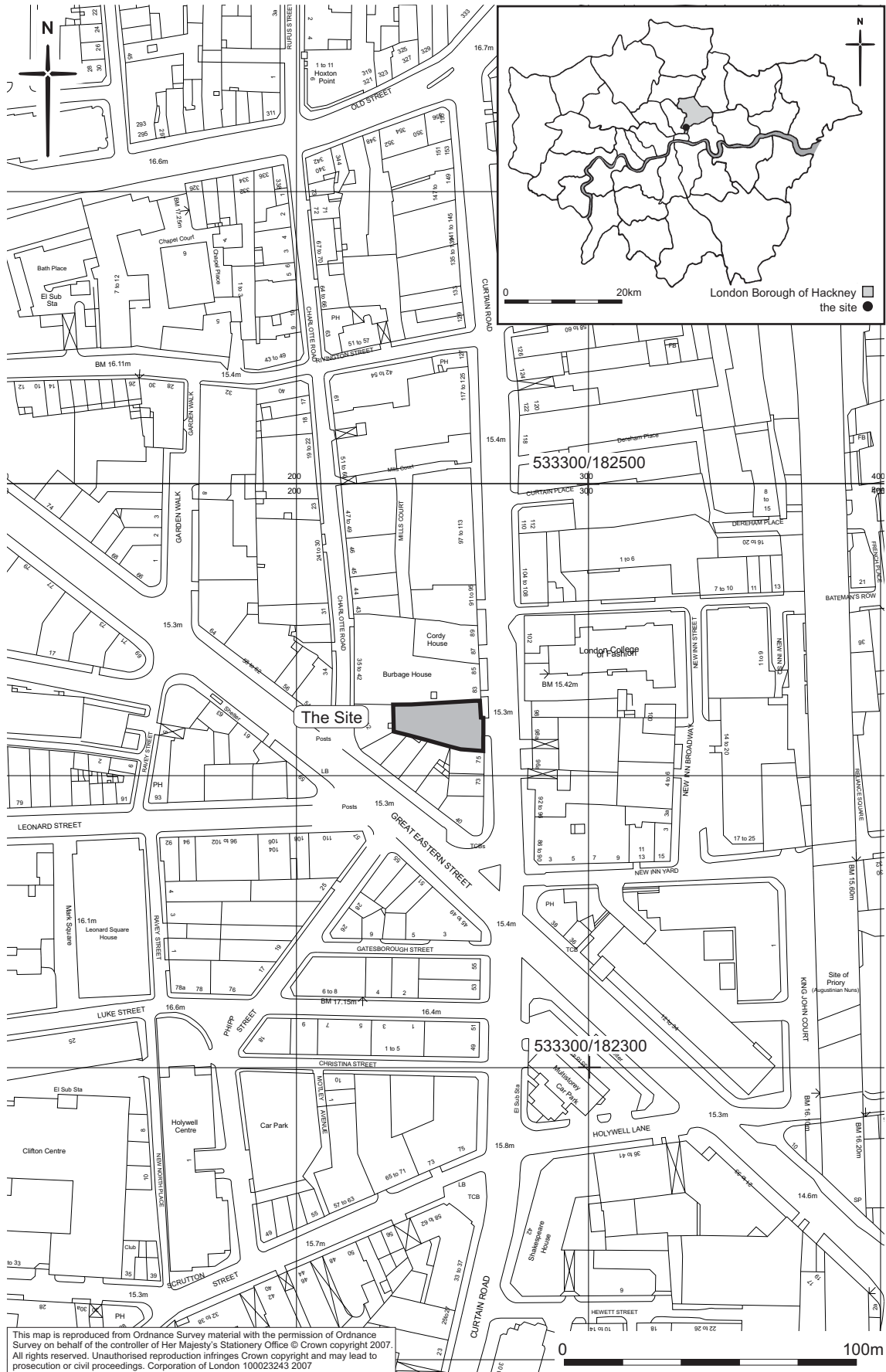


Fig 1 Site location

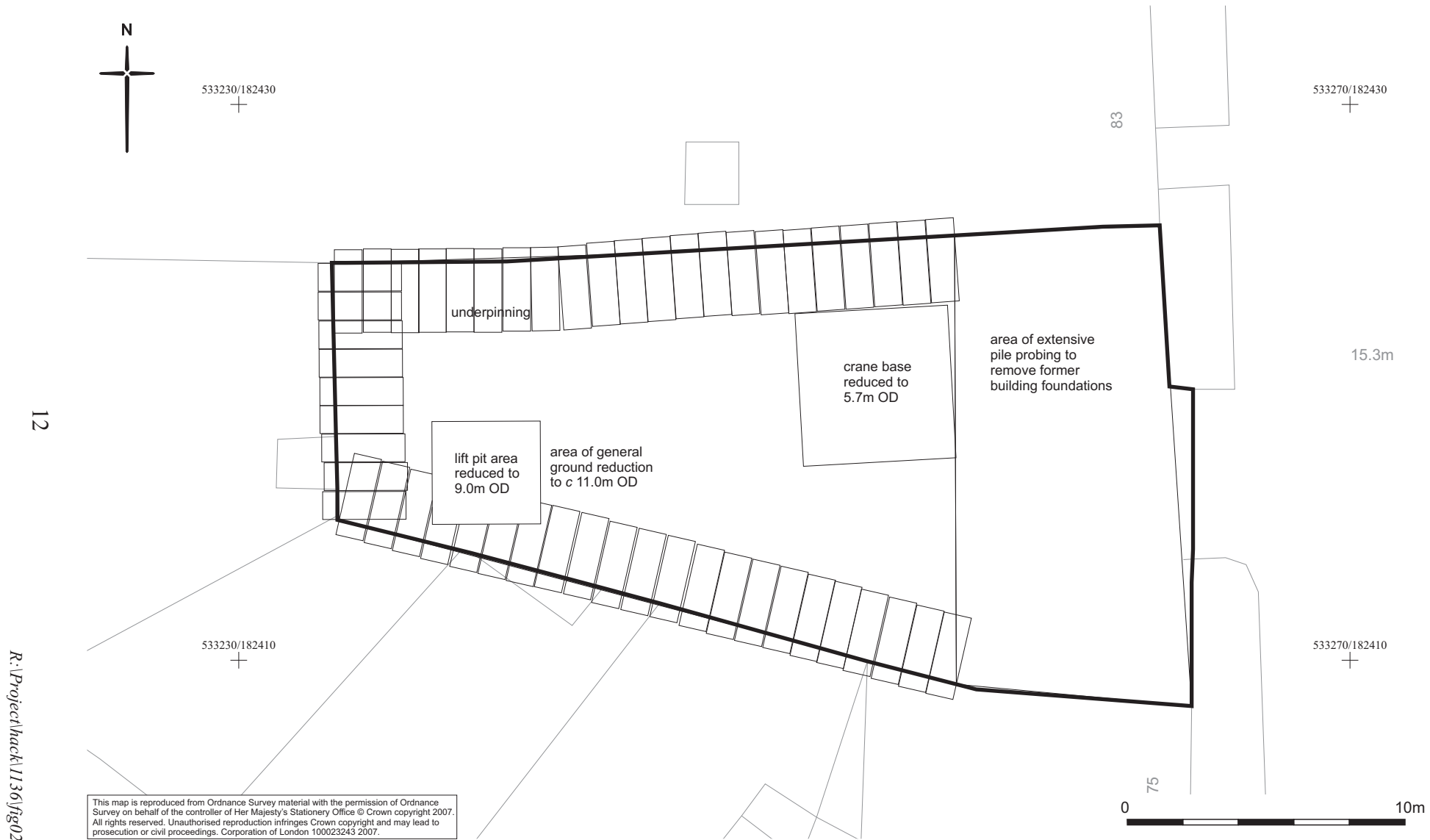


Fig 2 Location of observations