

LAC/23/223

EV: L06030  
SO: L077464

MON: MLO78234

ASTRA HOUSE  
Arklow Road  
Deptford  
SE14

London Borough of Lewisham

A report on archaeological monitoring  
of geotechnical test-pits

December 2004



MUSEUM OF LONDON

Archaeology Service

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A report on archaeological monitoring  
of geotechnical test-pits

Site Code: AKL04

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**Museum of London Archaeology Service**

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## Summary (non-technical)

*This report presents the results of a monitoring exercise carried out by the Museum of London Archaeology Service on six geotechnical pits at the site of Astra House, Arklow Road, Deptford, London SE14.*

*Following recommendations of English Heritage (Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service) six geotechnical pits were monitored on 11.11.04. The geotechnical pits showed the surface of natural sand and gravel to lie at between 2.88m OD and 3.40m OD, approximately 1m below current ground level. An undated silty sand subsoil overlies the natural deposits and is interpreted as an early uncultivated land surface. A homogenous layer of dark brown/black sandy silt garden soil was laid over the subsoil and dates to the late post medieval period. Modern deposits of rubble and ground preparation for the current car park seal the underlying deposits.*

*The report summarises the archaeological potential of the site, and the likely impact on this of the proposed redevelopment, the main component of which is the construction of a new building on the present car park area and the refurbishment of the existing buildings. Any foundations for the proposed new building will locally remove the underlying strata. The deposits are considered to be of low potential and limited local significance.*

*The report was commissioned from MoLAS by Arklow Road Developments.*

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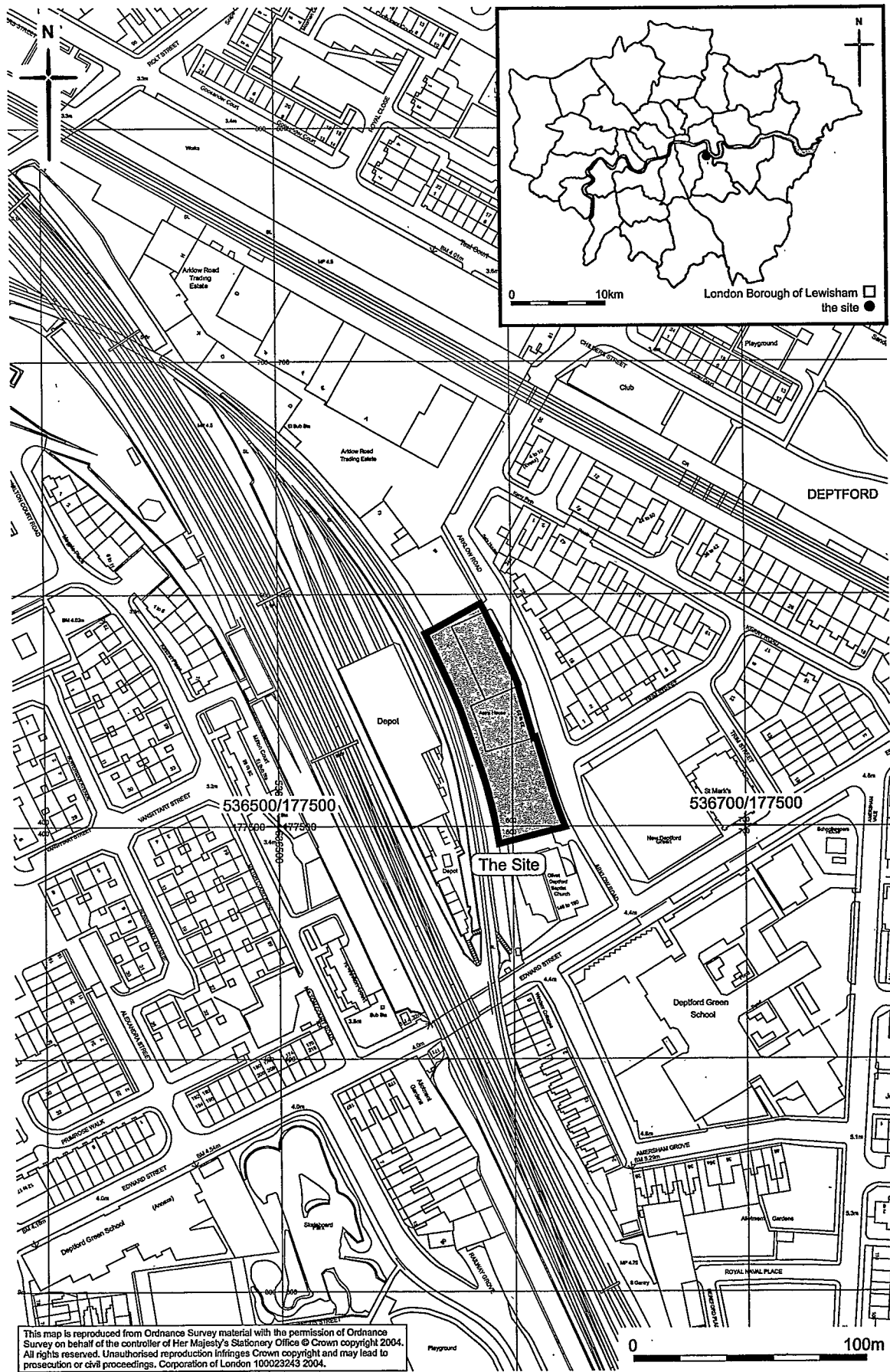
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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Site background

The monitoring took place at Astra House, Arklow Road, Deptford, London SE 14 (hereafter called 'the site'). It is located on the west side of Arklow Road and is bounded on the west by railway lines, to the north by standing buildings and to the south by the Olivet Deptford Baptist Church. The OS National Grid Ref. for centre of site is 536589 177593. Pavement level is at 4.30m OD to the south of the site and 4.01m OD to the northeast of the site.

A desk-top *Archaeological impact assessment* was previously prepared by MoLAS, which covers the whole area of the site (Miles 2004) This document should be referred to for information on the natural geology, archaeological and historical background of the site, and the initial interpretation of its archaeological potential.



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Fig 1 Site location

## 1.2 Planning and legislative framework

The Planning and legislative background to the site has been adequately summarised in the previous *Archaeological impact assessment* (Miles 2004, section 2). The site lies in an Archaeological Priority Area, as defined in the Lewisham unitary development plan. This area (APA2) consists of the Thames and Ravensbourne terrace gravels. The terrace gravels fringing the Thames are commonly associated with evidence of successive prehistoric communities, including enclosed fields and open settlements.

## 1.3 Planning background

On the basis of *Archaeological impact assessment*, English Heritage advised the London Borough of Lewisham that an archaeological planning condition should be placed on the development, and recommended that any geotechnical investigations should be archaeologically monitored in order to gain information to allow the framing of an appropriate mitigation strategy for any archaeological remains identified. No archaeological excavation has been carried out previously on the site.

## 1.4 Origin and scope of the report

This report was commissioned by Arklow Road Developments and produced by the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS).

Monitoring of test pits or boreholes, even when these are not primarily designed for archaeological evaluation, may nevertheless be able to provide useful information on the nature and extent of archaeological deposits. According to the most recent English Heritage guidelines (English Heritage, 1998) this will contribute to the:

- formulation of a strategy for the preservation or management of those remains; and/or
- formulation of an appropriate response or mitigation strategy to planning applications or other proposals which may adversely affect such archaeological remains, or enhance them; and/or
- formulation of a proposal for further archaeological investigations within a programme of research

## 1.5 Aims and objectives

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

Monitoring of the Geotechnical pits was intended to address the following broad objectives and archaeological research aims:

- What is the nature and level of natural topography?



- What are the earliest deposits identified?
- What are the latest deposits identified?

## **2 Topographical and historical background**

### **2.1 Topography**

The site lies on the low floodplain between two ancient tributaries of the Thames, the Earl's sluice and the Ravensbourne. Data obtained from archaeological sites in the Borough of Lewisham indicate that the original surface level of natural is generally to be found between c 3.3m and 3.9m OD.

### **2.2 Prehistoric**

Although there is some potential for prehistoric material in the vicinity as indicated in the description of the Archaeological Priority Area, only two flint implements have been discovered near the site, at New Cross and Deptford Broadway. The material may suggest that the lighter soils and riverine resources of the Thames and Ravensbourne gravels would have attracted early settlement.

### **2.3 Roman**

The area immediately around the site in the Roman period is not well known. There is no information available which records Roman discoveries in the vicinity. Observations within a wider area indicate that there was some occupation centred on Deptford and Greenwich.

### **2.4 Saxon**

The area around Deptford was of some importance during the long, drawn out Viking wars between the mid 9th and mid 11th centuries. The first Viking attack on London came in AD 842 when the chroniclers speak of 'great slaughter' and in AD 851 a fleet of 350 Viking ships attacked both London and Canterbury. The undefended settlement of Lundenwic, located around modern day Covent Garden and Aldwych, was dangerously exposed and trade was totally disrupted. AD 865 saw the beginnings of the determined Danish attempt to destroy the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and in AD 871 the Danes set up their winter quarters in London.

The manor of Greenwich, which included West Greenwich or Deptford, is listed amongst the possessions of Alfred when he inherited the Throne in 871. At this time it appears to have been known as 'Gronovic'. At the time of Alfred's accession, the Danes controlled the entire Thames estuary.

The area immediately around the site in the Saxon period is not well known and no evidence of Saxon occupation has been recovered.

## 2.5 Medieval

For much of the medieval period Deptford remained a small fishing village and became the last stopping place for coaches travelling from Dover to London. The records of the Wardens of London Bridge have produced details of properties in Deptford in the 14th and succeeding centuries

It is not known when the 'Deep Ford' was replaced by a bridge and it has been suggested that a Roman bridge existed here. A wooden 'Deptford Bridge' was certainly in existence in 1345 and was replaced by one in stone circa 1570. The Ravensbourne was tidal at this point and the bridge suffered from flood damage many times over the centuries. The earliest mention of Deptford comes at the turn of the 14th century when land in Deptford and Greenwich is described as belonging to Robert Joyneur, Thomas Cheseman and James Hopere.

In 1411 John Clyfford, mason and Warden, bequeathed lands in Deptford, Greenwich and elsewhere to the Bridge, on condition that the Wardens attended the church of St. Olave, Southwark, for the obits of the testator and Letice, his wife. The wardens set out the boundaries of the lands at Deptford by planting hedges and osiers, a species of willow. Much of the land was first used for brick making, for which purpose expert craftsmen from Holland were employed, and a small dock was constructed for ease of transport.

There are not a large number of documentary sources for the area immediately around the site in the medieval period. There is no evidence for buildings on the site during the medieval period and no archaeological evidence has been recovered from the immediate vicinity.

## 2.6 Post-medieval

The arrival of the Royal Dockyard in Deptford in the early part of the 16th century transformed what was probably a quiet fishing village into a thriving centre of industry. By 1590, the dockyards, both naval and private, were working at full capacity. The parish registers from that year suggest that for every person who died in Deptford there were ten coming into the parish either to take up employment or to marry, amounting to as many as 4,000 newcomers during the last decade of the 16th century. Most of these lived in the riverfront area known as Deptford Strand.

The East India Company, with a base at Deptford, was founded in 1600 and was to provide additional sources of employment and income for the town. Their charter specifically required them to compete with the Dutch and within six weeks of being set up their first expedition set sail. The last of the Merchant Adventurers, the profits from this first adventure allowed them to buy land in Deptford, at the Stowage, where they afterwards built and fitted out their ships. After 1620 they contracted much of the work out to private local yards but retained their headquarters and large Depots in Deptford until they moved to Blackwall in 1782.

During the 18th century, the French Wars provided almost constant work for the Deptford dockyards and at one stage more than 100 men were employed daily just to keep the Wet Dock clean. Deptford was a major embarkation point for the army and soldiers marching through the streets on their way to the docks became a common sight. This was also the last opportunity for unwilling recruits to desert and in 1776 four Irishmen from the 40th regiment made good their escape in Deptford. The shortage of willing recruits meant that the practice of press-ganging became more systematic through the 18th century and was a serious danger for men working in Deptford.

In 1775, whole fleets of private ships and barges lay deserted on the Thames after their crews were press-ganged. The families of press-ganged workers were left particularly badly off and had to depend on parish relief. Unlike the cost of raising the local militia, which was evenly spread across the country during wartime, the parish relief had to be funded locally and, in naval towns like Deptford, was a heavy burden on the local community.

Intensification of the wars with France brought rising food prices at the beginning of the 19th century with it attendant increased hardship. However, the end of the Napoleonic Wars brought even greater hardship when all shipbuilding at the Royal Dockyard was stopped in 1816. Lower Deptford was now on the road to decline, despite the re-opening of the Dockyards in 1844. An outbreak of Typhus in 1817 had the Sayes Court workhouse quarantined for two months and a surgeon's report described the building and its unfortunate inmates as filthy. By 1836, not much had changed and Lower Deptford had now become a truly depressed area of poverty and unemployment.

In February 1836, the first urban railway in the world was opened between Spa Road, Bermondsey and Deptford by the London and Greenwich. On the 14th of December, following the line was extended to London Bridge, which thus became the first South London terminus. The railway was carried on what was then an elegant viaduct lit at night by more than 200 gas lamp standards. It carried more than 20,000 passengers in its first month and double that by the end of April.

The line was soon extended to Greenwich and cut the travelling time to London from one hour to eight minutes. It rapidly became a commuter service but was also popular with leisure travellers; on the first Monday after it opened some 13,000 people travelled by train to Deptford in order to visit Greenwich Park. Also popular were the footpaths, charging a toll of one penny, which ran alongside the railway viaduct from the Maze near London Bridge to Blue Stile, the site of the first Greenwich terminus. In 1849, Deptford Wharf was bought by one of the railway companies and a railway line was brought across Grove Street on a wide bridge. The depot was used for the transshipping of bulk goods, particularly coal, until 1960.

By the 1860s, the railway explosion was well into its stride and the Deptford/New Cross area soon became a tangle of embankments, viaducts, goods yards and station yards and a confusion of criss-crossing lines. The demolition that was required to achieve this resulted in overcrowding and distress to the area. The final closure of the

Deptford and Woolwich Naval Dockyards in October 1869 and the movement of private docks down river brought the end to Deptford's prosperity. Some of the dockyard labourers found employment in the Victualling Yard and the cattle sheds that replaced the dockyard but many more drifted out of the area in search of work at the new yards

The area of the site seems to have been open ground until the construction of a series of terraced houses in the 1880s. These were replaced by the present building before 1950 and it is likely that they were bomb damaged.

### 3 The geotechnical pits and/or boreholes monitoring

#### 3.1 Methodology

All archaeological excavation and recording during the monitoring was done in accordance with the *Method Statement* (MoLAS, 2004) and the MoLAS Archaeological Site Manual (MoLAS, 1994).

The slab/ground was broken out and cleared by contractors under MoLAS supervision. Six trial pits were excavated by machine by the contractors, and monitored by a member of staff from MoLAS.

The locations of the pits were recorded by offsetting from adjacent standing walls and plotted on to available ground survey plans (Drg. No. 4530, M. J. Zara Associates). This information was consequently plotted onto the OS grid.

The heights of observations and/or archaeological remains were recorded relative to Ordnance Datum provided by the site survey plan (GPS data).

The site has produced: one trench location plan; four context records; one 1:10 section drawing. No finds were recovered from the site.

The site records can be found under the site code AKL 04 in the MoL archive.

#### 3.2 Results of monitoring the geotechnical pits and/or boreholes

In total, six separate interventions (trenches) were made. These have been numbered 1 to 6 consecutively. There follows a brief description of the deposits recorded. For all trench locations see Fig 2: Location of trial pits

##### *Geotechnical Pit 1*

Geotechnical Pit 1, situated in the south-west corner of the site, measured 1.50m north-south by 0.75m east-west. The level at the top of the pit is 4.25m OD (see Fig 3).

Natural deposits of yellow sand and gravel survived at 3.20m OD. The gravels were overlain by a 0.40m thick horizon of compacted, mid-brown, silty sands [4]. No inclusions were seen within the soil layer. The mid-brown subsoil was truncated in the southeast corner of the trench by a sub-rectangular cut measuring 0.40m north-south and 0.70m deep [3]. The cut had steep sides and was mostly seen in section, truncating the surface of natural gravel. The fill of the cut [2] was similar to the overlying dark brown black layer of probable 19th century garden soil and made ground [1]. The overlying garden soil measured 0.30m in thickness.

Rubble hardcore and made ground, measuring 0.20m thick sealed the sequence. The rubble was capped by 0.10m of Tarmac

#### *Geotechnical Pit 2*

Geotechnical Pit 2, situated in the centre of the east side of the site and measured 1.50m east-west by 0.70m north-south. The level at the top of the pit is 4.25m OD.

Natural sand and gravel was recorded 1m below the surface of the trial pit. A 0.30m thick layer of compacted, brown, silty sand sealed the natural ground. This was overlain in turn by 0.30m of friable, dark grey-brown to black sandy silt containing fragments of charcoal, coal, 19th century brick and tile and occasional fragments of oyster shell. The deposit is characteristic of late post medieval garden soil and made ground, probably laid down during development of the area in the late 18th to late 19th centuries.

A 0.20m thick layer of disturbed modern made ground overlay the garden soil. A 0.10m thick layer of blinding sand supporting a 0.10m thick tarmac surface sealed the sequence.

#### *Geotechnical Pit 3*

Geotechnical Pit 3, situated in the north-west corner of the site, measured 1.50m north-south by 0.75m east-west. The level at the top of the pit is 4.18m OD.

The surface of natural sand and gravel lay at 3.38m OD. 0.20m of mid-brown subsoil sealed the natural deposits and was overlain by 0.20m thickness of dark grey to black sandy silt garden soil.

Rubble, in excess of 0.20m thick, overlay the garden soil and was sealed by a 0.10m thick layer of blinding sand. Tarmac capped the sequence.

#### *Geotechnical Pit 4*

Geotechnical Pit 4, situated in the south and central part of the site, measured 1.50m north-south by 0.70m east-west. The level at the top of the pit is 4.13m OD.

Natural sand and gravel was seen 1.10m below the top of the trial pit at 3.03m OD. This was sealed by 0.30m of mid-brown silty sand subsoil. A layer of dark brown to black compacted sandy silt overlay subsoil. The layer measured 0.40m thick and contained occasional fragments of charcoal, coal, brick and tile and small flecks of oyster shell. The layer is similar in all aspects to observations in the previous trenches and is characteristic of late post-medieval garden soil and/or made ground. The lower half of the layer was noticeably clearer of inclusions and slightly browner in hue. The latter probably represents the interface between the later soil layer and the underlying subsoil.

A 0.25m thick layer of brick rubble overlay the garden soil deposits and was sealed by a maximum of 0.10m of tarmac.

### *Geotechnical Pit 5*

Geotechnical Pit 5, situated in the north-west corner of the site immediately adjacent to the south side of Astra House. The trial pit measured 1.50m north-south by 0.80m east-west. The trial pit was moved 1m to the south to avoid a brick and concrete wall footing that ran east-west across the pit at approximately 0.40m depth. The level at the top of the pit is 4.18m OD

Natural gravel was seen at 1.30m depth from the top of the trial pit, at c 2.88m OD. A 0.80m thick layer of compacted, homogenous, dark brown/black sandy silt sealed the natural sand and gravel. The layer contained moderate fragments of brick, tile, coal and charcoal, similar to context [1] in geotechnical pit 1. The greater thickness of the deposit and subsequent absence of underlying subsoil suggests localised truncation and disturbance of the deposit sequence. This may be due to modern demolition and the construction of the adjacent Astra House. The existence of late 19th century buildings is supported by the presence of the brick and concrete footing along the north side of the geotechnical pit. The footings truncated the upper portion of the homogenous soil layer and survived below the brick rubble layer.

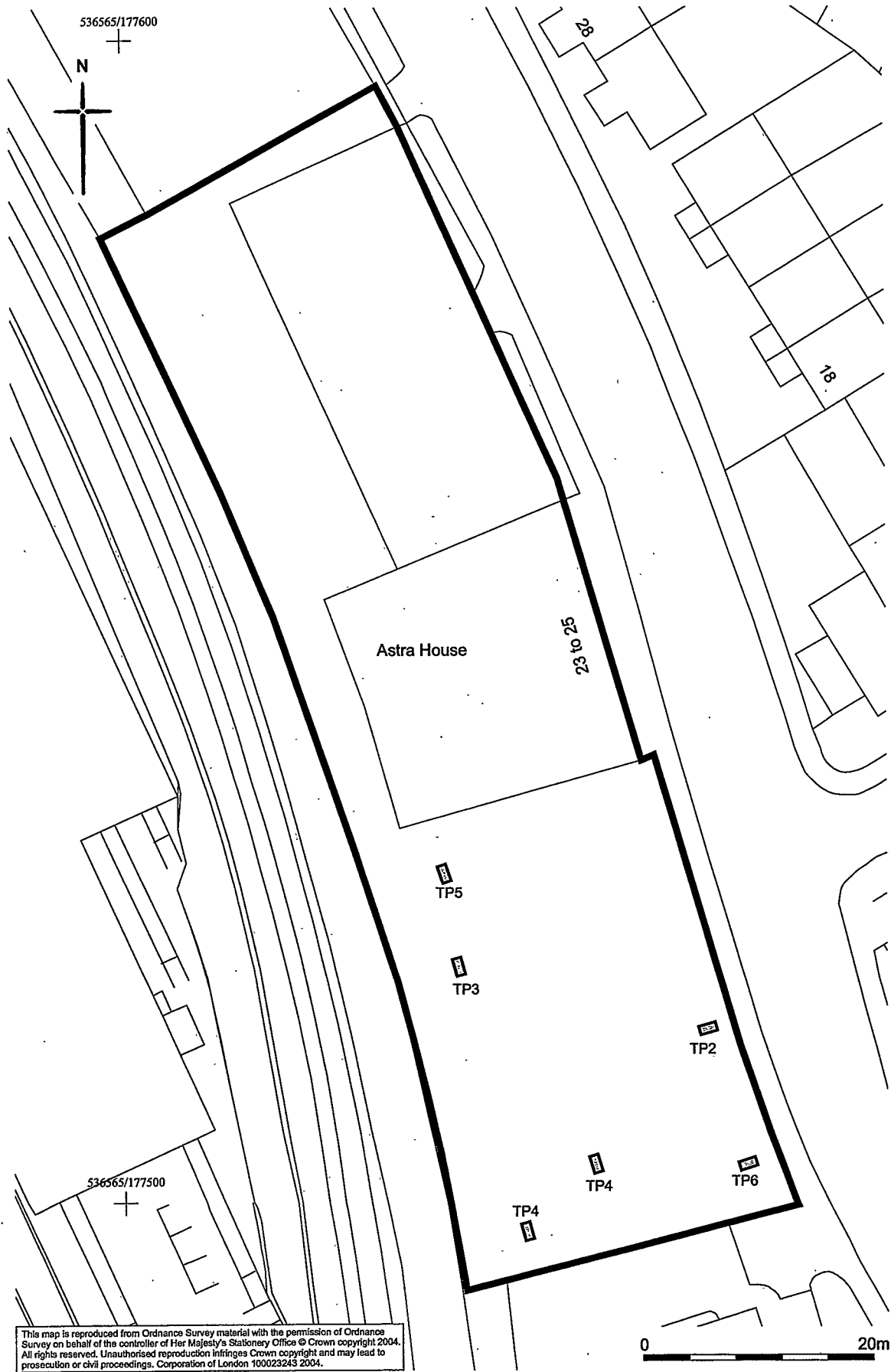
A 0.20m thick layer of brick rubble sealed the footings and made ground deposit. The rubble was in turn sealed by the modern tarmac and supporting blinding layer.

### *Geotechnical Pit 6*

Geotechnical Pit 6, situated in the south-east corner of the site, measured 1.50m east-west by 0.75m north-south. The level at the top of the pit is 4.25m OD.

Natural sand and gravel lay at c 3.40m OD, 0.85m below the top of the pit. 0.20m thick layer of mid brown silty sand, seen in the preceding trial pits, sealed the natural deposit. The subsoil was overlain by dark brown/black sandy silt, measuring 0.45m in thickness. The soil layer was also seen in all the preceding trial pits and is interpreted as a late post medieval garden soil/made ground layer.

A modern deposit of brick rubble, some 0.20m thick sealed the garden soil layer and was overlain by the tarmac of the current car park.



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Fig 2 Location of geotechnical pits



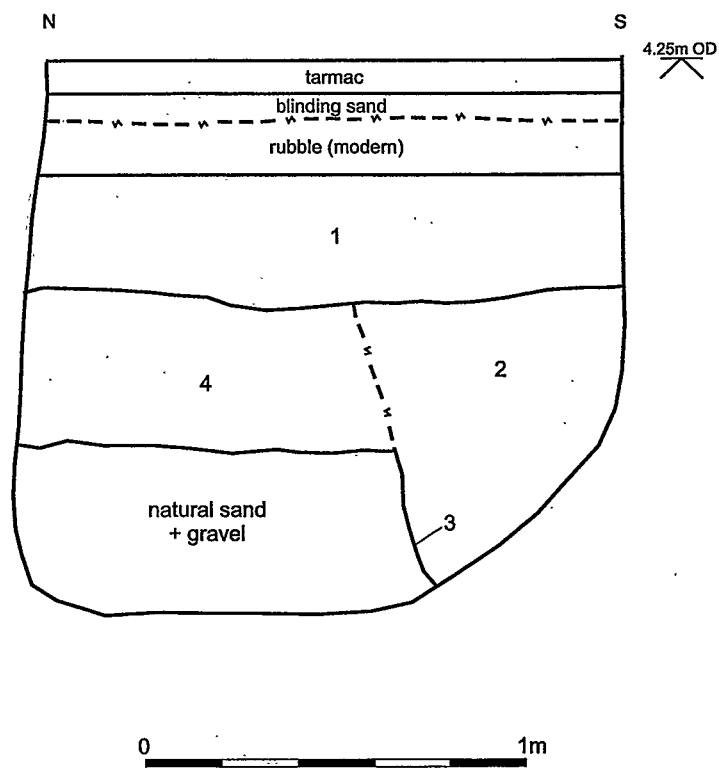


Fig 3 Section 1

### 3.3 Assessment of the monitoring

GLAAS guidelines (1998) require an assessment of the success of any evaluation 'in order to illustrate what level of confidence can be placed on the information which will provide the basis of the mitigation strategy'. In the case of this site there is low potential for archaeological deposits.

The trial pits show natural gravel and sand deposits approximately 1m below current ground surface. The majority of the subsurface deposits across the site comprise sterile, early soil formation deposits (subsoil) sealed by later post medieval garden soil and made ground horizons. Removal of the 19th century terraced housing prior to the current site use appears to have removed the upper horizons of made ground and building foundations. Rubble and tarmac seal the deposit sequence. No dating material was recovered from the trial pits and no features predating the 19th century were observed. Only one trial pit contained foundations of previous buildings on the site. Trial pit 5 is located on the north side of the car park, closest to Astra House. The foundations were of concrete and brick and date to the latter part of the 19th century.

## 4 Archaeological potential

Monitoring of the geotechnical pits has shown that the potential for survival of original ground surfaces (horizontal archaeological stratification) is **low**. There is low potential for survival of cut features earlier than the 19th century. No deposits or cut features are likely to survive in the north of the site adjacent to, and within the footprint of, Astra House due to late 19th century construction and later groundworks.

The archaeological remains are of very limited local significance.

## 5 Proposed development impact and recommendations

The proposed redevelopment at Astra House involves the construction of a new building on the present car park area and the refurbishment of the existing buildings. It is likely that the construction of the new building will cause truncation. It has been shown that natural deposits of sand and gravel lie c1m below present ground level, overlain by a 0.20m thick layer of sterile subsoil and late post medieval made ground and garden type deposits. Earlier brick and concrete foundations were recorded in one trench, Trial Pit 6, closest to the current Astra House building.

Assessment does not suggest that the site requires further mitigation.

The decision on the appropriate archaeological response to the deposits revealed within the geotechnical evaluation rests with the Local Authority and their designated archaeological advisor (GLAAS).

## 6 Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Arklow Road Developments and Mike Hood of that organisation for commissioning this project; Martin Payne of Durkan Pudelek and Mark Stevenson of the English Heritage Greater London Archaeology Advisory Service for their assistance.

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## 8. NMR OASIS archaeological report form

OASIS ID: molas1-4778

### Project details

Project name Astra House, Arklow Road, Deptford, SE 14

Short description of the project

A monitoring brief was carried out on six geotechnical pits in response to local planning advice and discharge of the planning condition. The results show that natural deposits of sand and gravel were present within one metre of current ground surface. The natural was sealed by a mid brown silt and sand subsoil in 5 of the 6 trail pits. The subsoil is interpreted as uncultivated open land. A post-medieval garden/made ground deposit measuring an average of 0.30m thick overlay the subsoil. The deposit was dated by the inclusions of brick and tile fragments and occasional clay pipe stem fragments. The deposit description is also characteristic of late post-medieval activity. A small pit was seen in the southwest corner of the site in Geotechnical pit one and is considered contemporary with the garden soil/made ground activity. The remains of 19th century foundations were seen in the northernmost pit adjacent to Astra House. This was associated with removal of the brown subsoil and thickening of the adjacent post-medieval garden soil/made ground. Modern deposits of brick rubble capped by blinding and tarmac surfacing for the current Astra House car park sealed the sequence.

Project dates Start: 11-11-2004 End: 11-11-2004

Previous/future work Not known / Not known

Any associated project reference codes AKL 04 - Sitecode

Type of project Recording project

Site status Local Authority Designated Archaeological Area

Current Land use Vacant Land 1 - Vacant land previously developed

Monument type PIT Post Medieval

Monument type GARDEN SOIL Post Medieval

Monument type BRICK FOUNDATIONS Post Medieval

Investigation type 'Test-Pit Survey'

Prompt Planning condition

#### Project location

Country England

Site location GREATER LONDON LEWISHAM DEPTFORD AND NEWCROSS Astra House, Arklow Road, Deptford

Postcode SE14

Study area 1120 Square metres

National reference grid TQ 36589 77593 Point

Height OD Min: 2.88m Max: 3.4m

#### Project creators

Name of Organisation MoLAS

Project brief originator Unitary Authority Archaeologist

Project originator design MoLAS

Project director/manager Robin Nielsen

Project supervisor Raoul Bull

Sponsor or funding body Arklow Road Developments

#### Project archives

Physical recipient Archive LAARC

Physical Exists? Archive Yes

Digital recipient Archive LAARC

Digital Media 'Text'

available

Digital Archive Yes  
Exists?

Paper Archive LAARC  
recipient

Paper Media 'Context sheet','Correspondence','Notebook - Excavation',' Research','  
available General Notes','Plan','Report','Section','Survey ','Unpublished Text'

Paper Archive Exists? Yes

**Project bibliography**

1

Publication type Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)

Title Astra House, Arklow Road, Deptford, London SE 14: A report on the  
archaeological monitoring of geotechnical pits

Author(s)/Editor(s) 'Bull, R.'

Date 2004

Issuer or publisher MoLAS

Place of issue or MoLAS  
publication

Description unpublished molas report

Entered by Raoul Bull (molas.archive@museumoflondon.org.uk )

Entered on 12 November 2004

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