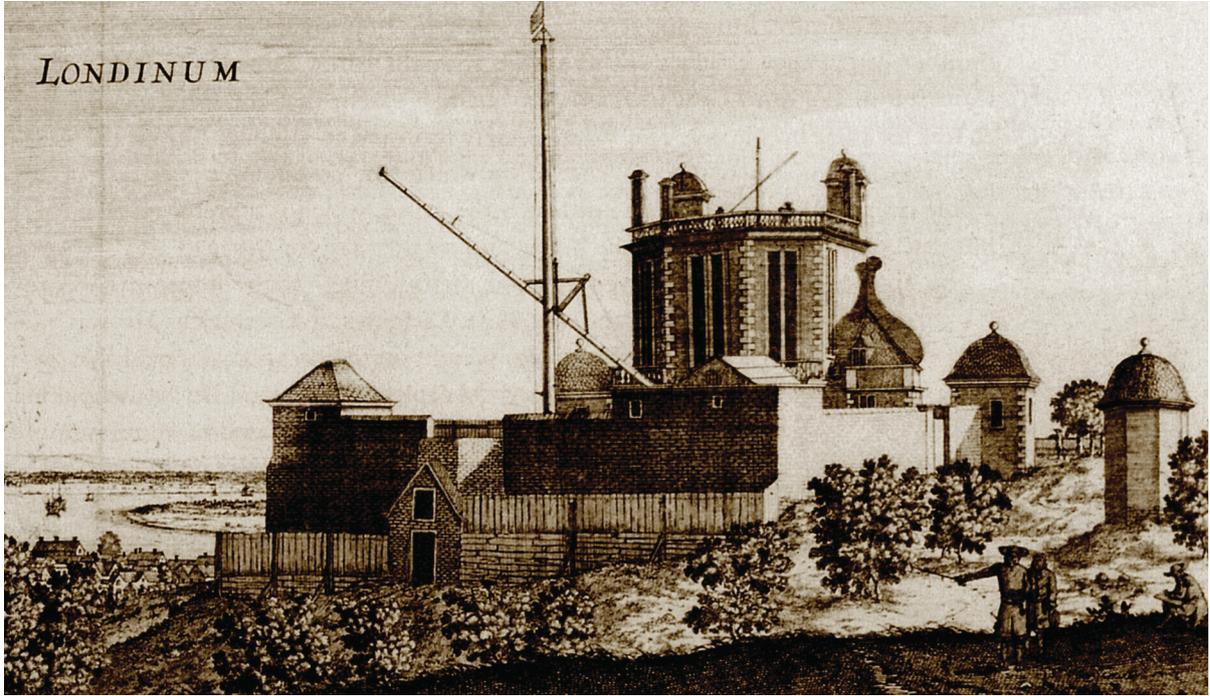


LONDINUM



THE ROYAL OBSERVATORY  
Greenwich Park  
London  
SE10

London Borough of Greenwich

An archaeological watching brief report

June 2005



MUSEUM OF LONDON

Archaeology Service

THE ROYAL OBSERVATORY  
Greenwich Park  
London  
SE10

London Borough of Greenwich

An archaeological watching brief report

Site Code: BKG02  
National Grid Reference: 538936 177231

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**Museum of London Archaeology Service**

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## **Summary (non-technical)**

*This report has been commissioned from MoLAS by the National Maritime Museum in order to record and assess the results of a watching brief carried out at the site of the Old Royal Observatory at Greenwich Park.*

*Deep excavation work, preceding the construction of a new planetarium, was monitored between 11.04.05 and 25.04.05. Several archaeological structures of mid-19th century date were recorded from within the excavated area. These included several brick wells and a service inspection chamber. Also unearthed, were remnants of the cellar originally inserted under George Airey's 1837-8 Magnetic Observatory in 1862 and demolished in 1917. It contained several enigmatic features whose functions must have been purely scientific.*

*Natural ground was observed immediately below the surface at 45.46m above OD, and the highest survival of archaeological deposits occurred at 46.45m OD.*

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Site background

The watching brief took place at the Old Royal Observatory at Greenwich Park, hereafter called 'the site'. The site is located at the southern end of the Observatory complex, between the Altazimuth Building and the Southern Building, and is bounded to the east by Blackheath Avenue and to the west by the slope down into the Astronomer's Garden (Fig 1). The centre of the site is at OS National Grid Reference 538936 177231. Modern ground level immediately adjacent to the site is 47.0m OD on Blackheath Avenue. The site code is BKG02.

A desk-top *Archaeological assessment* was previously prepared by MoLAS, which covers the whole area of the site (Bowsher June 2002). Subsequently, an archaeological field evaluation was carried out by MoLAS in August 2002 and an *Evaluation report* written on the results (Bowsher August 2002). This document, and the previous *Assessment*, informed the design for the watching brief which was eventually carried out.

## 1.2 The planning and legislative framework

The legislative and planning framework in which the archaeological exercise took place was summarised in the *Archaeological impact assessment*, which, formed the project design for the watching brief (Section 2, Bowsher June 2002).

## 1.3 Planning background

Planning permission had been granted by the London Borough of Greenwich in December 2003 (Planning Reference 03/0815/F). An archaeological condition required an archaeological written scheme of investigation to be submitted and approved.

## 1.4 Origin and scope of the report

This report was commissioned by the National Maritime Museum 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. A number of more specific research aims and objectives were established in the *Method Statement* (MoLAS 2002) and are outlined in the following section.

The purpose of the present report is to analyse the results of the watching brief against the standard research aims, and to suggest what further work, including analysis or publication (if any), should now take place.

## **1.5 Aims and objectives**

The following research aims and objectives were established in the *Method Statement* for the evaluation (Section 2.2):

*What is the natural topography of the site?*

*Is there any trace of Roman activity on the site?*

*Is there any trace of Saxon activity - particularly funerary - on the site?*

*Is there any trace of medieval or early post-medieval activity - perhaps associated with the castle - on the site?*

*Is there anything to be learnt from 19th century foundations associated with Royal Observatory?*

*What are the earliest deposits identified?*

*What are the latest deposits identified?*

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



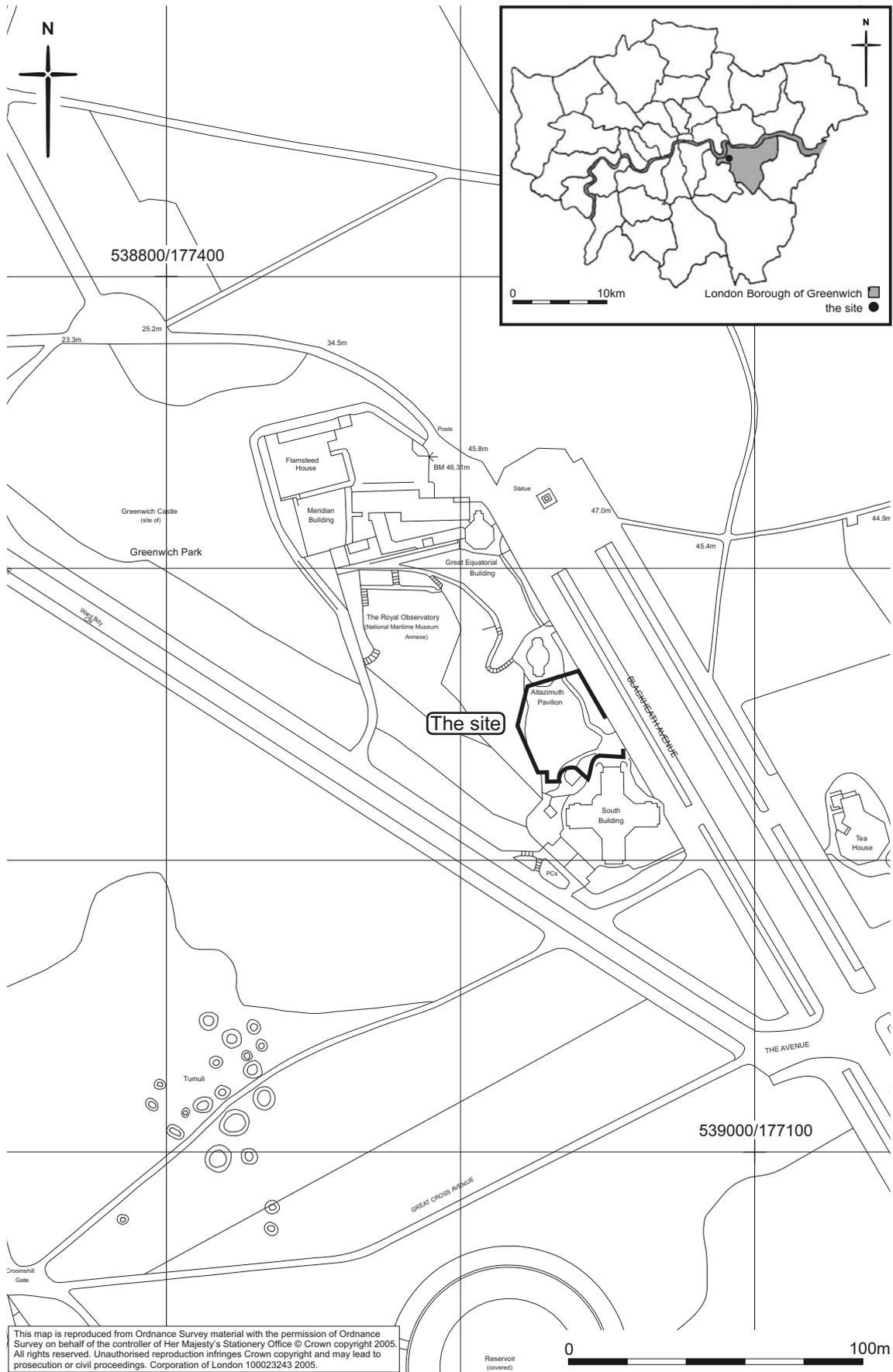


Fig 1 Site location

## 2 Topographical and historical background

The original *archaeological assessment* (Bowsher June 2002) should be referred to for a comprehensive summary the natural geology, archaeological and historical background of the site, and for the initial assessment of its archaeological potential. However, a short extract concerning the Observatory's most recent history is included here.

### 2.1.1 *Development of the Observatory grounds*

The original Observatory building, a flamboyant structure designed by Christopher Wren and known today as Flamsteed House, was completed in 1676. One of the earliest developments associated with the new Observatory was the sinking of a deep well, the base of which was used by the first Astronomer Royal, John Flamsteed, to make observations of the stars during daylight hours. The site of the well was located and investigated in the 1960s by the Lewisham Natural History Society and its backfill was found to contain 17th and 18th century material.

The development of the Observatory complex and the piecemeal addition of further buildings only affected the area of the site in the 19th century. Until this time, there is no evidence to suggest any usage of the area of the site other than an open area of parkland.

In 1837, much of the area of the site was "newly enclosed" and became known as the Magnetic Ground. A Magnetic Observatory was built here in 1837-38,<sup>1</sup> and the area contained a number of smaller ephemeral structures. This new Observatory was a single storey wooden structure (without any interfering metals) in a cruciform plan, but it is known that an anteroom and basement was added in 1862. In the same year 'Magnetic Offices' were built just to the south. This was a long east-west structure that was to the north of the present South Building. Photographs show that this building was a single storey wooden structure.

By the end of the 19th century the relatively small area comprising the site, had become quite crowded. A New Library – later known as the Central Store – was built along the eastern side of the site. This was a two-storey brick building measuring 55' by 18' (16.76m x 5.48m); it did not have any basement but stepped brick foundations penetrating 5' (1.52m) below ground surface. The magnetic offices were demolished in about 1885, but a new stable block was built at its western end – just to the south-west of the Magnetic Observatory – in 1896. Photographs of the stable block reveal it to be a single storey wooden structure.

Forming the southern end of the site, the New Physical Observatory – now known as the South Building - was started in 1894 and completed in 1899. This is a ceramic

decorated three-storey structure, also cruciform in plan and topped by a dome. As this was being completed the new Altazimuth Pavilion was built at the northern end of the site to a similar, but smaller design.

The buildings in between have been demolished over the years, starting with the Magnetic Observatory in 1917 and the stables and central store in 1958. There was some bomb damage to the Altazimuth Pavilion in October 1940. The site has therefore been an open lawn since 1958, although a fragment of Sir William Herschel's telescope has been placed within a perspex dome at the southern end.

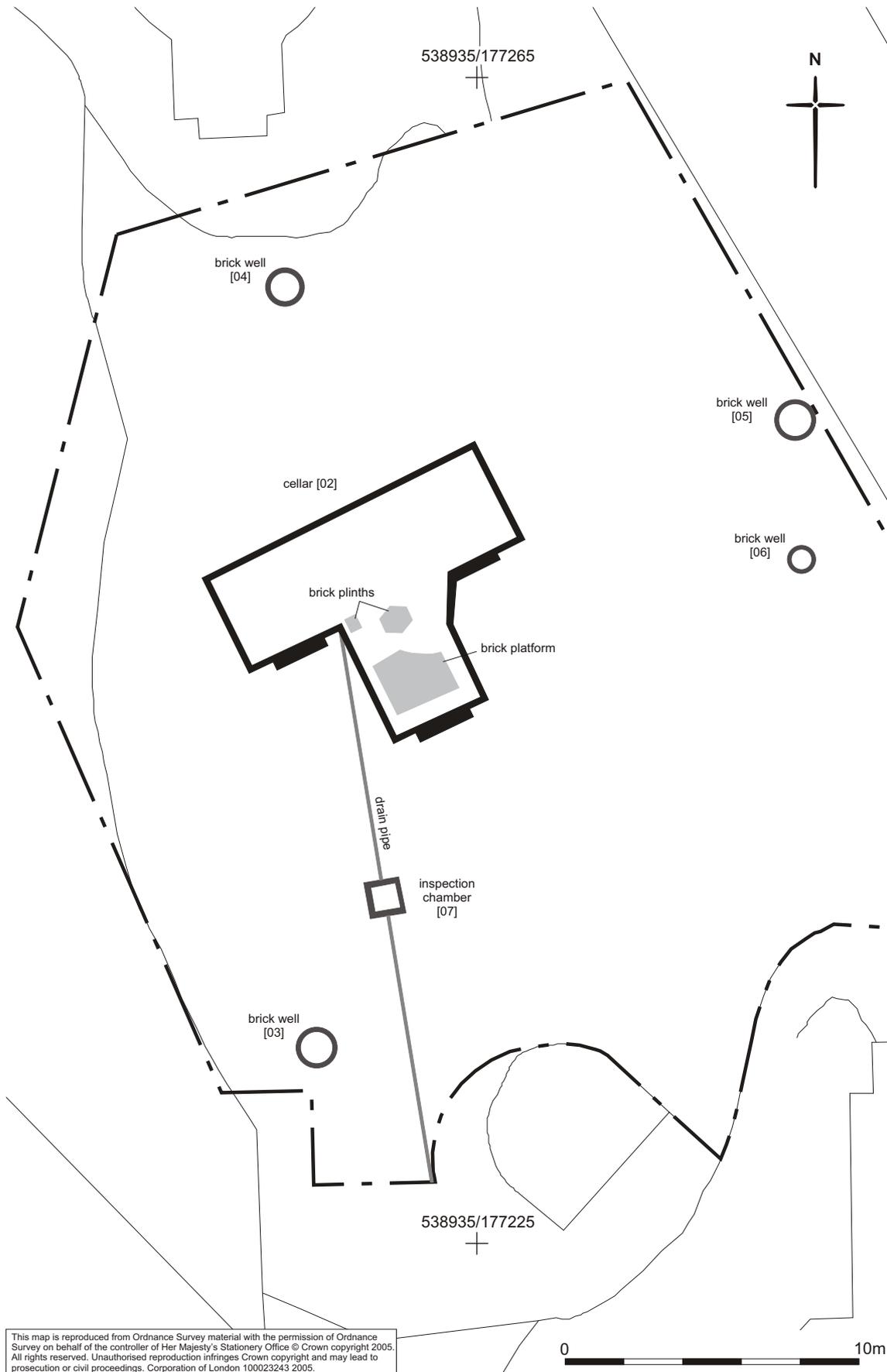


Fig 2 Location of archaeological features recorded during watching brief

### 3 The watching brief

#### 3.1 Methodology

All archaeological excavation and recording during the watching brief was done in accordance with the *Method Statement* (Nielsen 2002) and the MoLAS Archaeological Site Manual (MoLAS, 1994).

The site was machine-excavated by contractors under the supervision of a MoLAS member of staff between the 11.04.05 and the 28.04.05. The location of the area of excavation had previously been recorded by MoLAS surveying team with a Total Station and plotted onto the OS grid. All archaeological features unearthed during work were recorded manually through triangulation and off-setting from grid-markers with 30m tapes, and plotted onto a multi-context plan (PA 01). This information was then plotted onto the OS grid (Fig 2).

The height of surviving archaeology was recorded relative to Ordnance Datum via a traverse to a temporary benchmark erected on site by the contractors and valued at 46.31m OD. Where relevant, numbered contexts were allocated and are embedded throughout the text within square brackets [ ]. The site has produced: 1 site location plan of the excavated area combined with a multi-context plan of archaeological features (PA 01); 7 context records [01-01].

The site records can be found under the site code BKG02 in the MoL archive.

#### 3.2 Results of the watching brief

A total area of 1200m<sup>2</sup> was excavated to a depth of 4m. This involved the removal of the present topsoil and extraction of underlying natural gravels to the level 43.33m OD. During extraction work several archaeological features were uncovered and documented. There follows a brief description of the archaeological deposits as recorded.

For location of the excavated area see Fig 2.

<i>Watching Brief: Mechanical-Excavation of Site Area</i>	
Location	Site centre 538936 177231
Dimensions	40m x 30m x 4m
Modern ground level	47.28m OD highest observed
Base of modern fill	46.70m OD
Depth of archaeological deposits seen	Deepest intrusion 2.64m
Level of base of deposits observed	43.62m OD
Natural observed	46.70m OD

During the deep excavation several features of archaeological note were unearthed and recorded; a brief description of each follows:

### ***Brick well [03]***

Ground extraction commenced with the immediate discovery of a circular brick structure [03] in the south-west corner of site (538930 177232). It had previously been truncated at a height of *c.*45.97m OD. Construction comprised poor quality yellow (with rogue pink and plum) stock laid out in stretcher courses and bonded with very loose grey mortar. Cylindrical in form, the structure measured 130cm in external diameter and reached a depth of 2.48m. It rested on natural sands at 43.49m OD.

A mixture of mechanically stamped yellow brick rubble, gravel and fine grey silt filled the structure's interior. Several thick fragments of worked Portland stone were found in deeper fill levels. On account of their squared outer edges and curved inner rim, these pieces presumably formed a capping stone. Unbroken glass milk-bottles were interspersed throughout the fill. The names of several London Dairies were discernable. The bricks were mechanically moulded and stamped in a identical to those used in the stepped-brick foundations of the library

The tubular form is suggestive of its functioning as a well. Springs are not only attested at the site but also in the surroundings. Even today a reservoir lies just to the south-west of the site on a neighbouring hill top. Construction of the structure could be placed in the mid-to-late 19th century, as materials and bonding are typical for the time. It may well be associated with building of the stables in 1895, which would have lain directly above it. Judging by the fill (a mixture of bricks identical to those of the 1881 Library footings<sup>2</sup> and unbroken post-war milk-bottles) the deliberate back-filling of the well seems to have coincided with the documented demolition of both the library and the stables in 1958.

### ***Brick well [04]***

Continued excavation along the western perimeter of the site hit upon a second circular brick structure [04] to the north-west of site (538928 17725). Truncation had previously occurred at *c.*46.95m OD. The structure was composed of good quality yellow stock (interspersed with rogue pinks) and bedded in extremely hard cement (or hydraulic) mortar. Bricks cut to half-bat (*c.*10-11cm<sup>2</sup>) comprised an internal face of header courses finished with flush pointing. The structure with a 103cm internal diameter was cylindrical in form and ran vertically for 1.77m until reaching natural sands at 45.18m OD.

Dark grey sandy silt and gravel (similar to the demolition fill [01] of the cellar, see below) filled its core. This material yielded several fragments of fine hand painted

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<sup>2</sup> A loose and un-mortared brick layer of machined-moulded light yellow brick inscribed with BBCW was noted laying along the east perimeter of site at 46.30m OD for *c.*14-15m. It was *c.*5.0m in width and could also be traced outside the site area in a workman's trench directly behind the northern site perimeter, next to the Altazimuth Building. The remains conform approximately to the dimensions and location of the 1881 'New' Library building (later known as the Central Store), which was demolished in 1958 (see Section 2.1.1). Wooden in structure, it is documented as having a stepped foundation of brick and no basement (Bowsler June 2002).

china, two sherds of garden pot, a mangled sheet of copper flashing<sup>3</sup>, a perforated lead cone with lead bar (both deformed) and a large chunk of worked Portland stone squared on the outside with a curved inner rim, perhaps the remnants of a capstone.

The good quality and durable construction of this feature is identical to that of the late 19th service inspection chamber [07] (see below). It is therefore likely to be of similar 19th century date. On account of the non-magnetic nature of the finds, the demolition and backfill of this brick well is most probably contemporary with the 1917 demolition of George Airey's Magnetic Observatory.

### ***Brick well [05]***

Another brick structure, circular in plan, was found close to the eastern site perimeter (538946 177253). Once again, the feature had been previously truncated and survived to a level of 45.80m OD. It was composed entirely of red brick laid in stretcher courses and bonded with very loose grey mortar. Its cylindrical form measured 135cm in diameter and 1.40m in vertical length. It was inserted into natural sands to a depth of 44.37m OD. The interior was filled with coarse yellow sand and gravel. A sealed refuse deposit from its base included a large glass sherd of a cylindrical flask (calibrated at 3mm intervals), broken window panes, rusted metal and several ceramic sherds.

Its form and build suggest this feature functioned as a well. The character of the brickwork (wide, inscribed frog) suggests a mid-to-late 19th century construction date. However, absence of 20th century material and the presence of magnetic material in its fill suggest its destruction and backfilling is most likely associated with the erection of the 1881 Library Building rather than its demolition.

### ***Brick well [06]***

A fourth and final circular feature [06] was revealed three metres south of brick well [05] (538946 177248). It was constructed on natural sands in stretcher courses with poor quality red and yellow stock. Very loose grey mortar bonding was evident in places. Its cylindrical form was 0.85 in diameter and survived vertically to a length of 0.70m having been previously truncated at 45.10m OD. The feature had been backfilled with brick rubble. No other materials or finds were noted.

Judging by its form and deliberate backfilling, this poorly surviving feature may have been a well serving earlier structures, which preceded the re-development of this area into the 'Magnetic grounds' in the late 1830's by the Astronomer Royal George Airey.

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, sheets of flashing visible on the roof of the Magnetic Observatory in a 1892 photograph (see p.13 Allies and Morrison June 2002), are very similar to this mangled copper sheet.

### ***Brick cellar [02]***

The remnants of a large brick structure [02] were uncovered in the central area of site (538930 177246). It was composed of yellow stock (with rogue pinks) laid in Flemish courses and bonded with grey mortar. Some of the internal walls were rendered with white plaster. Orientated NW-SE, it formed (in plan) a three-arm cruciform shape without a north-western arm.

The basement walls had been truncated at a level of 46.08m OD and rested on a one-step footing at 44.99m OD. The floor had been robbed out except for the survival in-situ of a large slate slab embedded in whitish grey mortar. At least 1.10m in length, it was 0.77m wide and 0.04m thick. The cellar was backfilled with a whitish grey (mortary) sandy silt and gravel fill [01] mixed with demolition rubble (mortar, plaster, roof slate, copper nails (tacks), tiles, drainage pipes, and glass). Also noteworthy was a large circular column, 1.27m x 0.47m) carved from either Rag stone or York stone. One end terminated in a plinth or capital, the other end had two carved lugs/points/teeth protruding, which were covered in a brass-like residue.

No magnetic materials were noted in the demolition layer or structure. However, a substantial brick platform and two brick plinths were found in situ (see Fig 2). The platform was of yellow stock and very particular in shape as was the polygonal brick plinth adjacent to it. None of the latter's six sides was equal in length. The second brick plinth was rectangular. Both brick plinths had a one-step footing and had been truncated to approximately the same height as the basement walls. In contrast to the rest of the structure though, they were bonded with a very hard brown mortar. It may also be noted that the rectangular plinth was positioned above the point where an external drain/water/sewage pipe (encased in concrete) ran under the basement. Aligned NNW-SSE, the pipe joins with the service inspection chamber [07] (see below).

The structure without correlates in location and depth to the remains revealed in the archaeological evaluation (Bowsher, August 2005, Section 2.0) and identified with cellars inserted in 1862 into Magnetic Observatory of 1837-8. The documented absence of magnetic materials has been verified. The scientific purpose of the building might help explain its particular shape and several of the peculiar features recorded, such as the dimensions of the polygonal plinth and the function of the brick platform. It is viable that the plinths supported scientific apparatus and may even be associated with the large stone column, which was evidently mounted with/to a brass (non-magnetic) object, an instrument perhaps.

Additionally, it may also be noted that slate slabs were often used in conjunction with water for cooling or refrigeration purposes in 19th century dairies; this may suggest a scientific or storage reason for its use as flooring in the cellar.

### ***Brick inspection chamber [07]***



A square brick feature was uncovered approximately 5.0m to the north-west of the brick well [03] (538932 177237). It measured 1.4m<sup>2</sup> and was composed of stretcher courses of yellow stock (interspersed with pinks/plums) bonded with extremely hard grey cement (or hydraulic) mortar. Dark grey silty sand and gravel filled its tubular form, which ran 1.80m vertically into natural sands at 43.77m OD. A concrete base tapered a further 0.38m into sands.

Two metal objects were observed in the fill; a broken length of pipe (with turn) and a manhole lid marked 'Air Tight Inspection Cover', identifying the brick feature as a service inspection chamber. It provided access to two ceramic drain/water/sewage pipes orientated NNW–SSE.

The lower and narrower glazed pipe (0.14m diameter) ran straight through the tapered concrete base of the service feature at 43.39m OD. Lying at the bottom of a deep cut, the pipe could be traced running under the cellar foundations of the Magnetic Observatory to the north-west, where it was encased in concrete just before the junction of the basement's western and southern arms. It was not noted running out from under at any point and may have entered/exited the basement from below. To the south of the service feature, the same drainpipe was traced running straight towards the NW basement corner of the 1896 South Building. Following this exact line, the second larger ceramic drainpipe (0.20m diameter) lay 0.10m directly above the smaller drainpipe where it ran between the service and the south building. The top of the second pipe was recorded as 44.07m above OD. Greyish brown silty gravel filled the construction cut for both the service feature and the pipes.

Similarity of materials and construction between this air-tight inspection chamber and brick well [04] suggest they may be of a contemporary building phase. The chamber may also be associated with cellar [02] inserted under Airey's Magnetic Observatory in 1862, although when and in what way remains unclear.

## 4 Potential of archaeology

### 4.1 Original research aims

*What is the natural topography of the site?*

The site is most level in the northern and eastern sides of the site; however there seemed to be a gradual slope down into the SW corner from the centre of site. Upper layers comprise a clayish topsoil of c0.35m and an underlying loose silty gravel layer dark with discolouration c0.85m in depth. Beneath, alternating strata of natural sands and gravels conform to descriptions of the Blackheath Beds, and were observed for c2.32m to a level of 43.39m OD.

*Is there any trace of Roman activity on the site?*

There is no trace of Roman activity on the site.

*Is there any trace of Saxon activity - particularly funerary - on the site?*

There is no evidence for Saxon activity of any kind on the site.

*Is there any trace of mediaeval or early post-medieval activity - perhaps associated with the castle - on the site?*

No trace remains of mediaeval or early post-medieval activity on the site

*Is there anything to be learnt from 19th century foundations associated with Royal Observatory?*

Yes, the 1862 insertion of the basement under the original Magnetic Observatory of 1837-8 had a very specific agenda: judging by the remains of several enigmatic features, it would seem that the basement was devoted to scientific experimentation and/or the storage of scientific materials.

*What are the earliest deposits identified?*

A series of 19th century structures are the earliest features identified.

*What are the latest deposits identified?*

The latest deposit identified is a backfill deposit probably relating to 1958 demolition of the Central Store (or New Library) and the stables.

### 4.2 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. All remains recorded may be identified as or associated with documented buildings of the 19th century.

## 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* (MoLAS, 2002) with the Museum of London within 12 months of the end of the excavation.

In view of the limited potential of the material (Sections 4) and the relatively limited significance of the data (Section 4.2) it is suggested that a short note on the results of the watching brief should appear in the annual round up of the *London Archaeologist*.

## 6 Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the National Maritime Museum for commissioning the report, as well as Kevin Martindale and Darren Smyth of Gardiner and Theobald Construction Management (GTCM) for their support during the watching brief.

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## 8 NMR OASIS archaeological report form

OASIS ID: molas1-9081

### Project details

Project name The Royal Observatory, Greenwich Park, London SE 10

Short description of the project This report has been commissioned from MoLAS by the National Maritime Museum in order to record and assess the results of a watching brief carried out at the site of the Old Royal Observatory at Greenwich Park. Deep excavation work, preceding the construction of a new planetarium, was monitored between 11.04.05 and 25.04.05. Several archaeological structures of 19th Century date were recorded in plan from within the excavated area. These included several brick wells and an air-tight inspection chamber. The remnants of a cellar, inserted in 1862 into George Airey's 1837-8 Magnetic Observatory and demolished in 1917, were unearthed to reveal several enigmatic features whose functions must have been purely scientific. Natural ground was observed immediately below the surface at 45.46m above OD, and the highest survival of archaeological deposits occurred at 46.45m OD.

Project dates Start: 11-04-2005 End: 25-04-2005

Previous/future work Yes / No

Any associated project reference codes BKG 02 - Sitecode

Type of project Recording project

Site status World Heritage Site

Current Land use Other 5 - Garden

Monument type BUILDING Post Medieval

Monument type INSPECTION CHAMBER Post Medieval

Monument type WELL Post Medieval

Investigation type 'Watching Brief'

Prompt Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPG16

### Project location

Country	England
Site location	GREATER LONDON, GREENWICH, GREENWICH The Royal Observatory, Greenwich Park.
Postcode	SE 10
Study area	1200.00 Square metres
National reference	grid TQ 53893 17723 Point
Height OD	Min: 43.39m Max: 45.56m

### Project creators

Name of Organisation	MoLAS
Project originator	brief MoLAS project manager
Project originator	design MoLAS
Project director/manager	Robin Nielsen
Project supervisor	Eamonn Baldwin
Sponsor or funding body	National Maritime Museum

### Project archives

Physical Exists?	Archive	No
Digital recipient	Archive	LAARC
Digital Contents		'Survey'
Digital available	Media	'GIS','Survey','Text'

Digital Exists?	Archive	Yes
Paper recipient	Archive	LAARC
Paper Contents		'Survey'
Paper available	Media	'Context sheet', 'Plan', 'Report', 'Survey '
Paper Exists?	Archive	Yes

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**Project bibliography 1**

Publication type	A forthcoming report
Title	The Royal Observatory, Greenwich Park, London SE10
Author(s)/Editor(s)	Baldwin, E.
Date	2005
Issuer or publisher	MoLAS
Place of issue or publication	London
Description	An archaeological watching brief report.

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Entered by	Eamonn Baldwin (molas.archive@museumoflondon.org.uk)
Entered on	5 July 2005

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