

North Wharf,  
Coldharbour,  
Blackwall,  
Tower Hamlets

An archaeological evaluation for  
Bethnal Green and Victoria Housing Association

Project 95/42  
Site Code NWC95

North Wharf, Coldharbour, Blackwall, Tower Hamlets  
Archaeological evaluation

by Steve Ford

Project 95/42

**Introduction**

The specification for a field evaluation produced by Lawson-Price Environmental has highlighted the potential of this site. Coldharbour is thought to be the line of the later Medieval Blackwall River defence. And some Late Medieval occupation is possible nearby. If these deposits are located; structural features comprising the river defence itself, along with associated features such as stairs, or jettys may be encountered. Following construction of the flood defence, activity of both domestic or industrial nature may have been present dating from Late Medieval and Early Post Medieval times.

The project was commissioned by Duncan Hawkins of Lawson Price Environmental on behalf of Bethnal Green and Victoria Housing Association. The fieldwork was carried out in July 1995 by Steve Ford and Alan Ford. The Museum of London site code is NWC95.

**Strategy**

The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the date, nature, extent and state of preservation of archaeological deposits within the proposal area affected by reconstruction. The objectives defined in the Lawson Price Environmental brief were:

- 1) To determine the date, constructional sequence, quality and extent of river flood defences.
- 2) To determine the date, nature, quality and extent of Medieval or Early Post-Medieval activity on the site.
- 3) To determine the date, nature, quality and extent of 17th-18th century activity on the site.
- 4) To establish the presence or otherwise of Medieval or Post-Medieval docks or stairs and establish the sequence of reclamation.

The only appropriate field technique to achieve these aims was machine trenching. Two trenches were required to be dug in the proposal for field evaluation, one rectangular at 5 m. x 10 m. and one L-shaped at 8 m. x 8 m. (maximum) The maximum depth of excavation was to be 2.4 m. below ground level with minimal excavation of any archaeological deposits. There was no requirement to reach solid bedrock. The trench sides were to be stepped or battered to provide safe access to the lower levels.

### **Geology and topography**

The site lies immediately adjacent to the river Thames at a height of about 4 m. above OD. Alluvial deposits (clay-sand) were expected with river gravel at depth. The site contained a now demolished structure with both concrete and granite cobble yard surfaces.

### **Results**

Two trenches were dug as required but with their extent and shape varying from the original brief due to on-site conditions.

**Trench 1** was originally to be L-shaped. However, approximately half of the original trench location was occupied by a live service and the final trench base occupied an area of about 6 m. x 4 m. (Fig. 3). The majority of the trench base was dug to a depth of about 2.5 m. below ground level (c. 1.75 m. above OD) but a sondage was dug to a depth of about 2.9 m. (c. 1.3 m. above OD). Apart from service pipe leakages, the trench remained dry (Plate 1).

The trench stratigraphy was uncomplicated. Beneath the cobbled yard floor, 1.6 m. of made ground was encountered comprising building rubble of 18th/19th Century date. This rested on top of a grey alluvial clay which contained some rare shell and vague humic patches. The base of this clay was not reached.

The only item of interest was a wooden pile located in the extreme south east corner of the trench (Plate 2). This pile, which had presumably been truncated by 18th/19th Century disturbance, was located at a height of 2.62 m. above OD. It was exposed for a depth of about 0.85 m. The pile was square sectioned 0.18 m. x 0.22 m. and curved slightly to the west from the vertical plane. No additional timbers, such as horizontal tie rods were observed. No dating evidence for this pile was recovered other than it pre-dated the 18th/19th Centuries.

The plan of Trench 2 followed more closely the original specification trench plan. However, difficult working conditions were encountered. Beneath about 1.6 m. of made ground, including several layers of concrete, layers of unconsolidated and waterlogged sand were encountered. These deposits appear to represent river foreshore deposits. At the eastern end of the trench a steel tie rod for the embankment was discovered at a depth of c. 1.5 m. (2.47 m. above OD). This tie rod was anchored to a now much decayed wooden beam aligned parallel to the river.

The trench was excavated to a depth of about 2.5 m. at which level more timber work was revealed. This timberwork comprised a vertical pile not surviving above 1.45 m. above OD. set in the middle of the trench with a horizontal beam running from it towards the river frontage for a distance of c. 3 m. The pile was c. 0.25 m. square with the beam of c. 0.25 m. wide. It was not possible to make an accurate plan of these beams due to the instability of the trench sides and flooding.

No dating evidence was recovered for this timberwork, other than it predates the 20th Century.



## Conclusions

Finds of archaeological significance were of limited extent. No occupation deposits such as structural remains or rubbish filled features of later Medieval or Early Post-Medieval date were found. Indeed, no finds certainly pre-dating the 18th/19th Centuries were observed. Archaeological deposits may be present at greater depth than the specified depth of trench required here.

The only features of interest were a series of three timbers. One was a possibly isolated, near vertical pile in trench 1. The others in trench 2 consisted of a vertical pile conjoining a horizontal wooden beam that may have functioned as a tie rod for a water frontage or jetty located beneath the modern embankment features. No associated dating evidence was recovered for these features.

Appendix 1 Trench descriptions  
Trench 1

Cobbled surface	0-0.2m
Made ground and foundations	0.2-1.75m
Grey alluvial clay	1.75-2.9m+

Live service (sewer) running south west-north east across trench.

Trench 2

Cobbled surface/concrete	0-0.2m
Made ground and foundations/ concrete	0.2-1.5m
Layered, unconsolidated sand	1.5-2.5m+

APPENDIX 2 GLSMR/RCHME NAR ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT FORM

1. TYPE OF RECORDING

Evaluation

Excavation

Watching-brief

2. LOCATION

Borough: Tower Hamlets

Address: North Wharf, Managers Street, Blackwall

Site Name: North Wharf, Coldharbour

Site Code: NWC95

National Grid Refs: Centre of site: TQ38390 80085

Limits of site

a) TQ3838280098 b) TQ3840080098

c) TQ2839580069 d) TQ3838180070

3. ORGANISATION

Name of archaeological unit: Thames Valley Archaeological Services

Address: 3 London Road, Reading, RG1 5BJ

Site director/supervisor: Steve Ford

Project manager: Steve Ford

Funded by: Bethnal Green and Victoria Housing Association

4. DURATION

Date fieldwork started: 30/06/95

Date finished: 04/07/95

Fieldwork previously notified? y/n: n

Fieldwork will continue? y/n/ not known: n

5. PERIODS REPRESENTED

Palaeolithic: -

Roman: -

Mesolithic: -

Saxon (pre-AD 1066): -

Neolithic: -

Medieval(AD1066-1485): -

Bronze Age: -

Post-Medieval: y

Iron Age: -

Unknown: y

6. PERIOD SUMMARIES (use headings for each period (ROMAN; MEDIEVAL; ETC.) and additional sheets if necessary).

**Undated**

Two wooden piles and a wooden tie beam were found.

**Post-Medieval**

Late Post-Medieval made ground

7. NATURAL

Type: Not located

Height above Ordnance Datum: Recorded at - m. and - m. OD



## 8. LOCATION OF ARCHIVES

a) Please tick those categories still in your possession:

NOtes      PLans      PHotos      NGatives  
SLides      Correspondence      MScripts (unpublished reports, etc.)

b) All/some records have been/will be deposited in the following museum, record office, etc.: Museum of London

c) Approximate year of transfer: 1996

d) Location of any copies:

e) Has a security copy of the archive been made? y/n: Not yet but will be in due course

If not, do you wish RCHME to consider microfilming? y/n:

## 9. LOCATION OF FINDS:

a) In your possession (All/Some/None): N/A

b) All/Some finds have been/will be deposited with the following museum/other body: N/A

c) Approximate year of transfer: 1996

## 10. BIBLIOGRAPHY:

FORD, S. 1995: North Wharf, Coldharbour, Blackwall, Tower Hamlets. Archaeological evaluation. Thames Valley Archaeological Services Report 95/42. Reading.

SIGNED:

DATE: 18th July 1995

NAME: STEVE FORD

# North Wharf, Coldharbour, Tower Hamlets

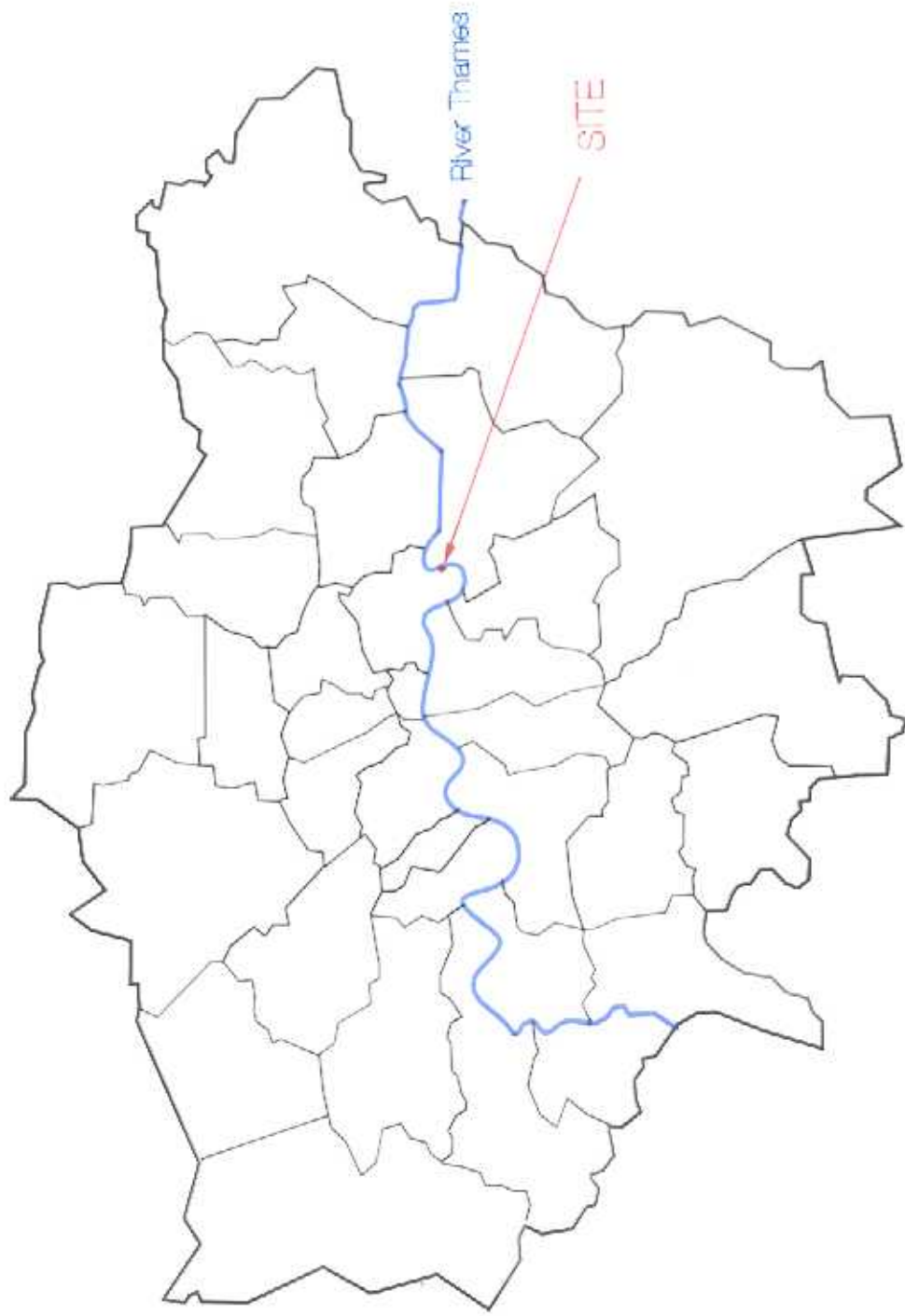


Figure 1. Location of site within London

# NORTH WHARF, COLDHARBOUR 1995

NWC95

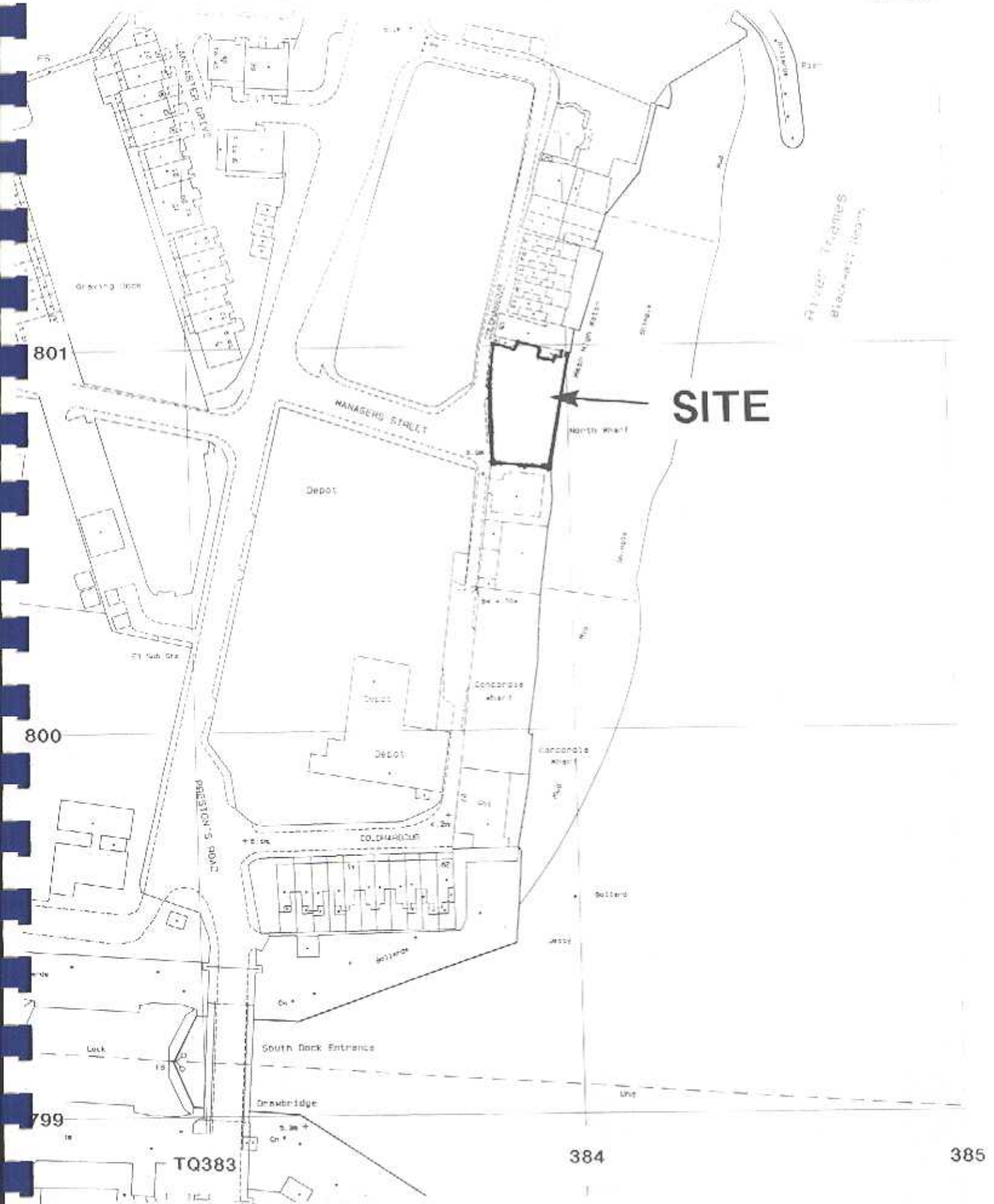


Figure 2. Location of site.

# North Wharf, Coldharbour, Tower Hamlets

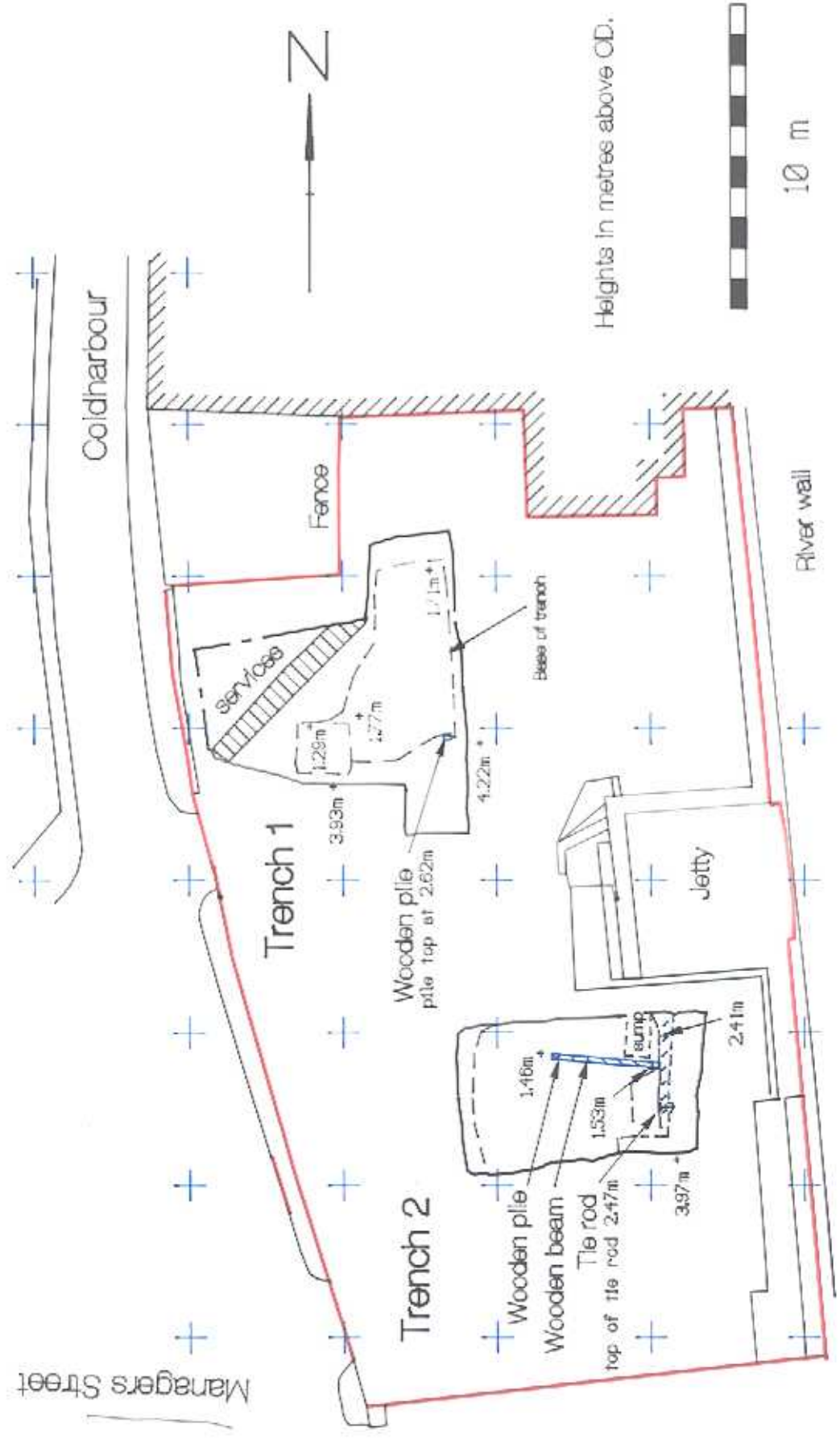


Figure 3. Plan of trenches.





Plate 1 North Wharf, Coldharbour 1995. Trench 1 looking east.  
Scale: 2 m.



Plate 2. North Wharf, Coldharbour 1995. Trench 1 looking south east.  
Detail of wooden pile. Scale: 2m (0.5 m. interval).