

CHELSEA (KC)

RHCRHWB  
379/2000

Royal Hospital, Chelsea

**Chelsea Royal Hospital  
Ranelagh House  
Drainage rehabilitation works**

NGR TQ 2830 7800

**Archaeological Watching Brief Report**

Oxford Archaeological Unit  
January 2001

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**Archaeological Watching Brief Report**

Prepared by: J Hiller

Date: January 2001

Checked by:

Date:

Approved by:

*R. Williams*

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Date:

*18/1/2001*

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Archaeological Watching Brief Report**

*Summary*

*The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) carried out a watching brief during the groundwork for maintenance and improvement of existing drain runs on the site of the former Ranelagh House (NGR TQ 2830 7800) that dates to the late 17th century. The watching brief took place in November 2000 and was commissioned by the Hospital with the agreement of English Heritage, as the work took place near the site of a former historic building. Parts of existing drainage trenches were re-opened by contractors, with an archaeologist in attendance as required. The former cobbled road surface was re-exposed along the line of Chelsea Bridge Road to the east of the hospital. No new archaeological information relating to the hospital was recovered.*

**1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) was commissioned by the Royal Hospital Chelsea to carry out a watching brief during drainage rehabilitation work on the site of the former Ranelagh House (Fig. 1) at the east part of the hospital grounds.
- 1.2 English Heritage were advised of the ongoing work and a watching brief was agreed between all parties, to record any significant remains exposed during the reopening of parts of existing drain runs. M J Clancy (Clancy, DOCWRA) carried out the repairs, and the watching brief was carried out in November 2000.

**2 Historical and Archaeological Background**

- 2.1 The Royal Hospital is situated in the ancient parish of Chelsea on the edge of the first gravel terrace of the Thames.
- 2.2 No prehistoric or Roman sites have been identified in the immediate vicinity of the hospital; chance finds of prehistoric and Roman material may suggest minor local activity (OAU, 1996). A Roman coin of Tetricus (259-274 AD) was found in College Court during sewer works in 1886.
- 2.3 The medieval village centres on the parish church west of the hospital; prior to the construction of the hospital the site was open fields. Chelsea is mentioned in Anglo-Saxon charters and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that Offa, King of the Mercians, held a synod in Chelsea in c AD 787. During the medieval period



- the site of the hospital lay within *Thameshott*, an arable field at the east of the parish.
- 2.4 Faulkner records that Thameshott was the site of an 'Ancient Cross' which reputedly stood within the area now occupied by the south-west precinct of the Royal Hospital (1804, 237). The cross is undated, though it is known that such features were often erected in open fields or at the roadside to act as boundary markers, memorials, or aids to travellers; the cross was removed in 1642.
- 2.5 In 1682 Christopher Wren was appointed to build the Royal Hospital at Chelsea. The original plan was for buildings around a single courtyard (Figure Court); the side courtyards (Light Horse Court and College Court) were additions of 1686. The Hospital incorporated part of an unsuccessful theological college built in the reign of James I, and hospital layout has remained unchanged since the end of the 17th century.
- 2.6 The Earl of Ranelagh, Paymaster General in 1690, built a house at the east end of the southern terrace of the hospital and laid out gardens to the east and west. Land to the south of was made into gardens for Ranelagh House and subsequently became the site of the notable (or notorious!) 18th century Pleasure Gardens called 'Ranelagh Gardens'. In 1803 Ranelagh House was demolished to foundation level.

### **3 Recent Archaeological Work**

- 3.1 In 1997 OAU maintained a watching brief during the installation of an automatic irrigation system in College Court, Figure Court and Light Horse Court (OAU, 1997). Brick wall footings perhaps associated with the original college were found. A watching brief was carried out by OAU in 1999 during the installation of a communication duct system; evidence of 18th century garden features was found (OAU, 1999a).
- 3.2 In the summer of 1999 OAU maintained a watching brief during the excavation of trenches for a marquee (OAU, 1999b), that uncovered traces of the former canals on the site together with more recent garden evidence and 20th century structures.

### **4 Methodology**

- 4.1 No formal brief was issued for the project. Discussions between the hospital, OAU and English Heritage favoured an informal watching brief. An archaeological supervisor monitored the re-excavation along the line of existing drainage trenches and associated manholes, soakaway pits/gully holes as appropriate (Fig.2). In order to facilitate the repairs the contractors used a camera sent along the length of the existing trenches in order to identify damaged pipe-work. Narrow trenches were opened up accordingly to repair minor stretches of piping. The trenches generally measured 1 m by 1 m to an average depth of just over 1 m.

4.2 Any archaeological deposits were inspected, and where necessary were manually cleaned and recorded in accordance with standard OAU procedures (OAU, 1992). Section drawings were made at a scale of 1:20 at selected points along the trenches. All deposits, structures and features were assigned unique context numbers and records made on pro-forma context sheets. Black and white and colour photographs were taken.

## 5 Observations (Fig. 3)

All of the intrusive ground works were undertaken through previously disturbed ground. The general sequence of deposits within the area of the hospital buildings has previously been reported (see OAU 1997), and a section of trench cut at the front of the site of the former Ranelagh House revealed a similar sequence (Fig. 3, Section 100).

At the base of the trench was layer of grey sand and gravel (504) forming the backfill to the pre-existing drainage trench. This was overlain by a compact layer of sandy gravel hardcore (503) that acted as the bedding material for a layer of cobblestones (502) that formed the late 19th/early 20th century road surface. Above was a layer of brick hardcore (501) supporting the present tarmac road (500). A manhole was observed (505, filled by 506), cut from the level of layer 501. A second section within the grounds revealed drain trench fill (504) sealed by the present topsoil (Fig. 3, section 101).

## 6 The Finds

No finds were recovered in the course of the monitoring works.

## 7 Conclusion

No further archaeological evidence was forthcoming from this phase of work at the hospital.

Oxford Archaeological Unit, January 2001

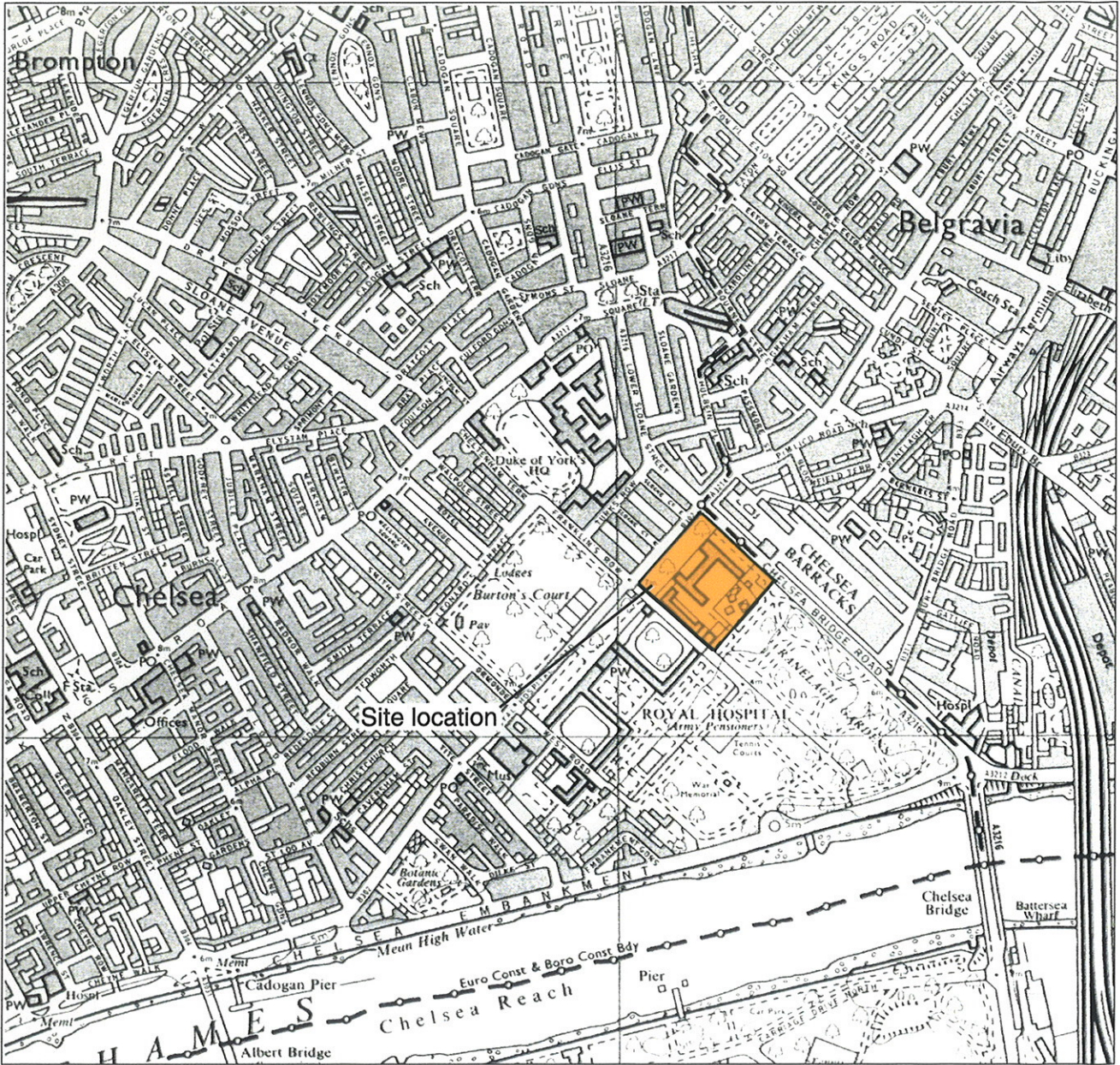
### Table of contexts

Context	Type	Depth	Comments
500	Layer	0.12 m	Tarmac road
501	Layer	0.15 m	Make-up
502	Layer	0.18 m	Cobbled road surface
503	Layer	0.16 m	Make-up for 502
504	Fill	0.25 m+	Fill of drainage trench
505	Cut	0.55 m	Manhole cut
506	Fill	0.55 m	Fill of manhole cut

## References

- Dean C G T, 1950     *The Royal Hospital Chelsea* (London)
- OAU, 1992            *Oxford Archaeological Unit Fieldwork Manual* (ed. D Wilkinson)
- OAU, 1996            *A Desk-Top Assessment of the possible archaeological implications of the Installation of an Automatic Irrigation System at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea.* Oxford Archaeological Unit (unpublished).
- OAU 1997            *An Archaeological Watching Brief conducted during the installation of an Automatic Irrigation System at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea.* Oxford Archaeological Unit (unpublished).
- OAU 1999a           *Installation of a Communication Duct System. Archaeological Watching Brief Report.* Oxford Archaeological Unit (unpublished).
- OAU 1999b           *Chelsea Flower Show 2000, New Marquee.* Archaeological Watching Brief Report. Oxford Archaeological Unit (unpublished)





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Figure 1 : Site Location



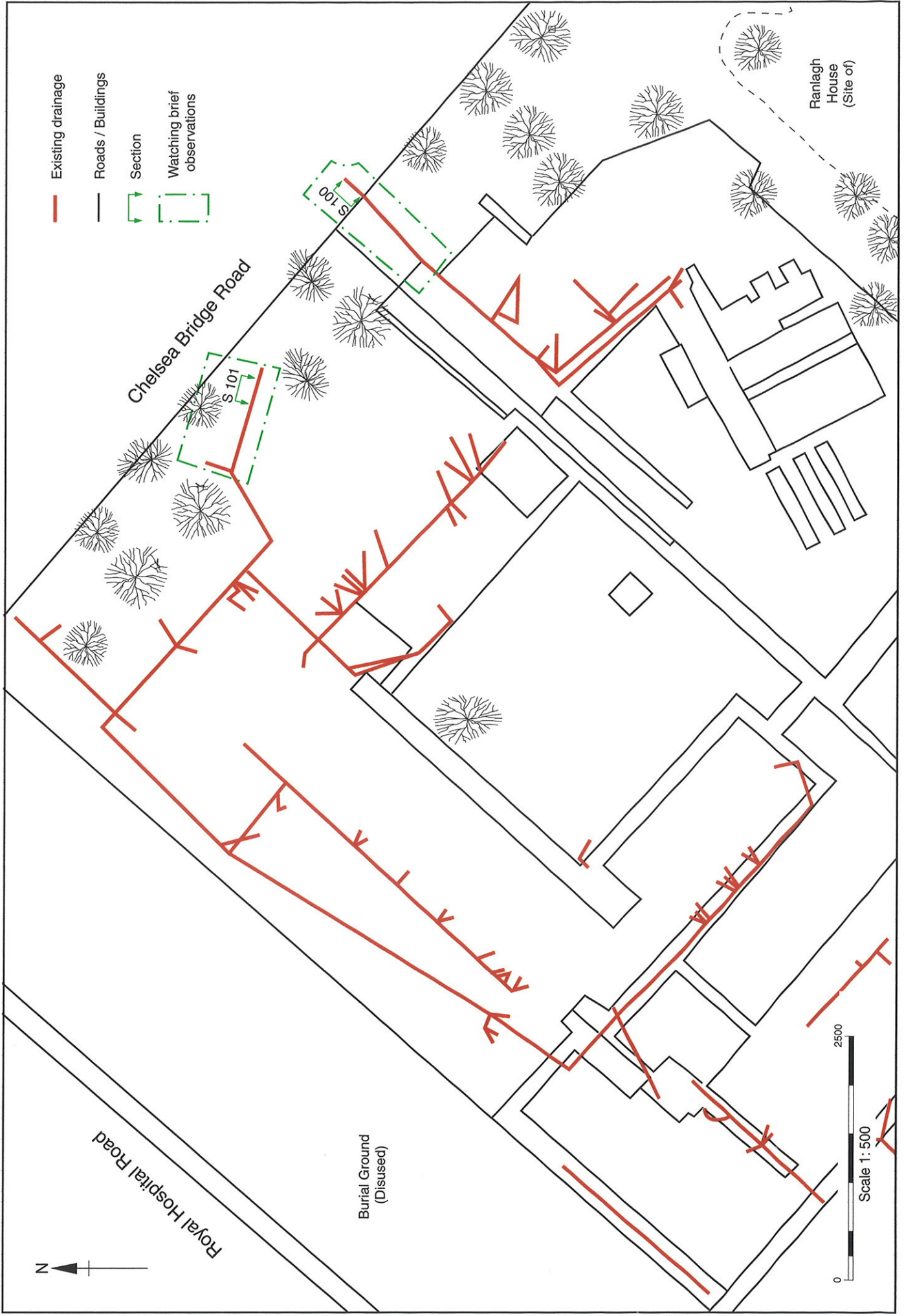


figure 2 : Plan of 19th-20th Century drainage North of Ranelagh House.

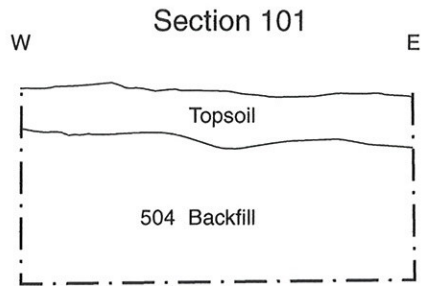
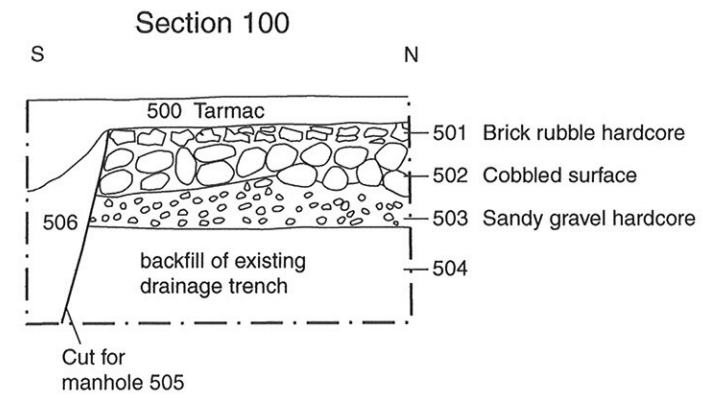


Figure 3 : Sections 100,101 Scale 1:20



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