

The Conduits

At least three underground tunnels, or conduits **8, 31, 51**, are known to exist under Greenwich Park. Each conduit is brick-built and large enough, or nearly large enough, for a person to walk upright (see Plate 3). Romantically interpreted as Roman remains, or as secret tunnels used by Henry VIII, their real function is rather more prosaic - the tunnels were water mains, designed to channel natural groundwater from high up on the Greenwich escarpment down to the buildings of the Royal Hospital for Seamen (now

the National Maritime Museum) at Greenwich.

At the upper ends of the conduits, open brickwork at their bases allowed water to percolate through from the surrounding subsoil, collecting in narrow channels recessed into the floor on one side of the tunnel. Since the water contained quantities of silt there were occasional dams which ponded the water and allowed the sediment to settle. Lead pipes carried the water to reservoirs, such as the Standard Reservoir, at the end of the conduit systems. The Standard Reservoir is entered via a large brick building known as the Conduit or Standard House 50, which can still be seen at the foot of Crooms Hill on the west side of the Park.

All the surviving conduits were rebuilt at the end of the seventeenth century to supply the Royal Hospital for Seamen; there is nothing that can be attributed to the Tudor or medieval periods. However, it is clear that there *were* early conduits, some of which may have been reused by the Naval engineers. A commission established in 1695 to investigate the water supply for the future hospital noted the existence of eight conduits, one of which, the Arundell conduit, could not be located²⁸. In June 1665, the works' payroll of Charles II included payments made to a bricklayer for '*mending...a conduit at Primrose Hill*'. These early conduits may have been associated with the Tudor palace of Greenwich, which excavation has shown to have had both culverts and a piped water supply²⁹, perhaps even with the medieval manor houses on the same site - in 1434 Duke Humphrey was given permission to construct an aqueduct between his house and '*a certain fount in Greenwich, called Stockwell*'. Early maps of Greenwich, such as the Travers map of 1695, show buildings in West Combe and Blackheath labelled 'conduits', probably conduit heads of the type still to be seen at Hyde Vale³⁰.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a progressive decline in the conduit system and several were abandoned as early as 1732. A century later, in 1831, a report argued the need for an improved water supply to the Royal Hospital, to be achieved by the creation of reservoirs and the replacement of the existing lead pipes with iron. In 1844, the Admiralty began construction of a covered reservoir near Great Cross Avenue, a development which would have destroyed some of the Anglo-Saxon barrows. Following a public outcry - one of the earliest instances of a successful preservation lobby - the reservoir was moved to its present site south of Great Cross Avenue.

The introduction of reservoirs made the conduit system redundant, leading to concerns that their neglect would pose a safety hazard. In 1905, Greenwich Borough Council appointed a special committee to investigate '*the ancient subterranean passages, conduits and caverns within the Borough*', with a view to determining whether any of them were likely to cause subsidence. Their work, in two reports of 1905 and 1906³¹, included exploration of the conduits near Queen Elizabeth's Oak 31 and the Standard House 51.

Several other conduits, whose location is now unknown, were also explored; 'a passageway commencing within the Park opposite Maze Hill House and running in the direction of One Tree Hill, for a distance of about 126 yards' and a tunnel opening off the bottom of a brick shaft 'in the depression sometimes called "The Whipping Place"'.

Unfortunately, the conduits in the Park did not pose a hazard to the road system and so were not reported on in detail. The committee also pointed to the existence of other, as yet unexplored, conduits, including the Primrose Hill and Arundell conduits 'in the neighbourhood of Maze Hill station' and a 'passageway believed to pass beneath the grounds of Greenwich vicarage'. This last was observed recently by the present owner of the vicarage (now a private residence called The Chantry) during pipe-laying operations ³².

The conduits continued to be a source of fascination to the public. A D Webster, the Park superintendent, commented in 1917 that up to '*sixty antiquarians have been in [the conduits] at the same time*'. As a result of this continued interest, known entrances to the conduits have been sealed by the Royal Parks authority to prevent unauthorized access.

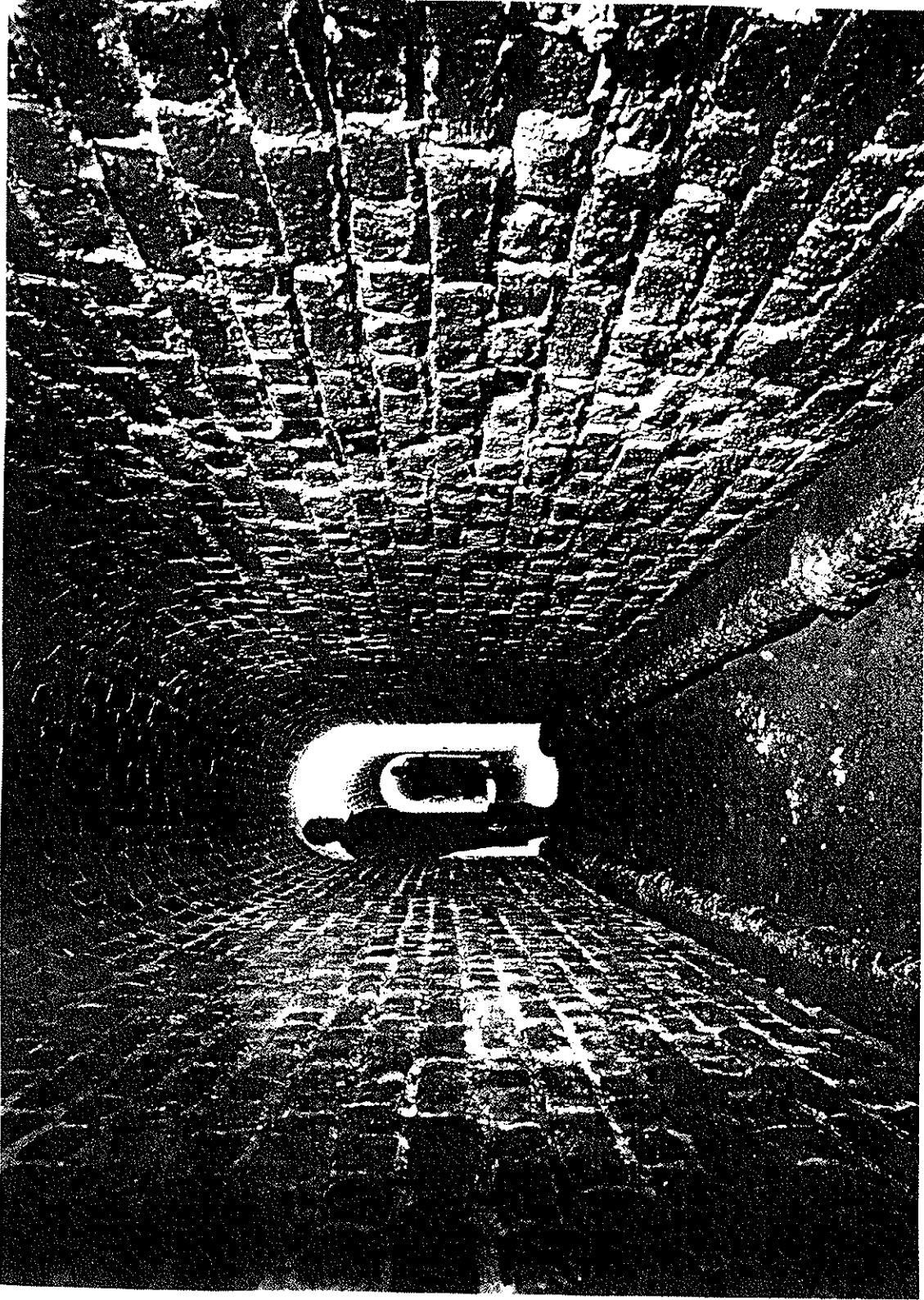


Plate 3: Hyde Vale Conduit
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