



# Air raid shelters in a North London park

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This poster describes a collaborative project to excavate and explore a group of public air raid shelters in a park in Hendon, North London (Figure 1).



Figure 1: location of the shelters, showing sealed staircases. Photo G. Moshenska

The aim of the project was to confirm the location of the shelters, to assess their levels of preservation, and to record their structures and interiors, including the presence of artefacts and fittings.

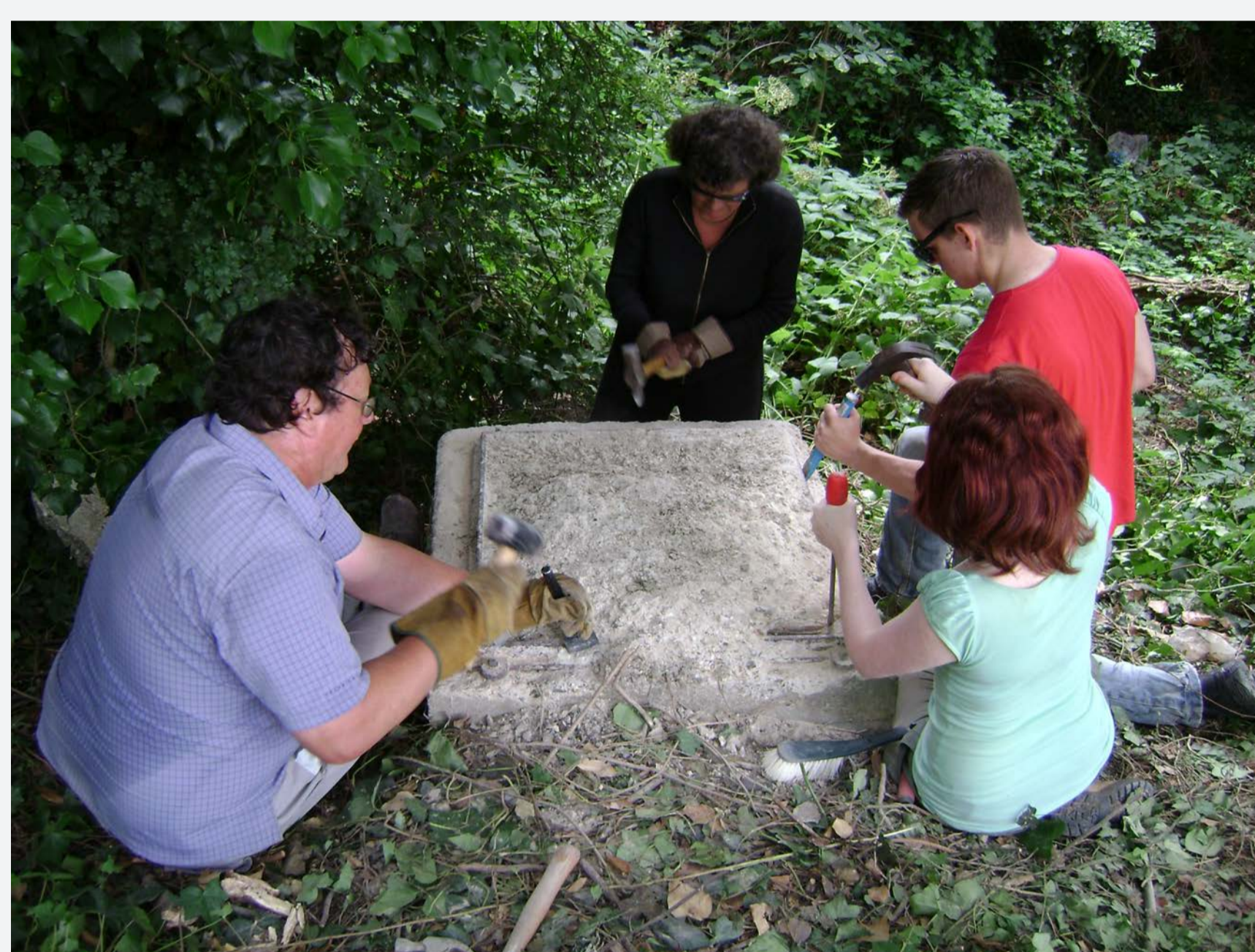


Figure 2: removing the concrete cap from the emergency exit. Photo: G. Moshenska

## History of the shelters

The construction of public air raid shelters in the London Borough of Hendon began in the summer of 1939. Earlier that year, the local council had decided against constructing large, deep air raid shelters, and instead followed government guidelines in the construction of shallow buried trench shelters, designed to hold fifty people each.

This group of five trench shelters in Sunny Hill Park, Hendon, were built some time between June 1939 and March 1940, by a private construction company employed by the local council.



Figure 3: me, about to enter the shelter for the first time. Photo G. Moshenska

The shelters themselves are rectangular, and built from reinforced concrete (Figure 4). At one end they have a staircase, offset from the shelter to protect those inside from bomb blast and shrapnel. At the far end from the staircase is a ladder to a roof escape hatch, sealed with a metal door.



Figure 4: the shelter interior. Photo N. Catford, used with permission.

## Exploration and excavation

We identified the locations of the five shelters from the escape hatches, which stand above the ground and were sealed with concrete (Figure 2). We also identified the locations of several of the staircases, also capped with concrete. In one case this concrete was broken, and the staircase filled with soil. This was the first shelter that we excavated and entered (Figure 5).



Figure 5: the staircase entrance following excavation. Photo G. Moshenska

The excavation removed debris from the staircase, and we also uncovered a part of the roof and side wall of the shelter. The shelter was found to contain electrical fittings (Figure 6), sanitation equipment, and a quantity of general rubbish, dumped before the shelter was sealed.

During the excavation a child who lived near the park showed us where he had found the original wooden sign for the shelter, painted in phosphorescent paint for visibility during the blackout (Figure 7). We arranged for this sign to be donated to the local museum.

The interior dimensions of the shelter was 14.4 metres long, 2.1 metres wide, and 2 metres high.



Figure 6: electrical fittings inside the shelter. Photo G. Moshenska

A second shelter was entered by removing the concrete cap from the escape hatch (Figures 2 & 3). The original metal door was found broken inside the shelter.



Figure 7: the sign and its intrepid discoverer. Photo G. Moshenska

On the walls of the shelters we found traces of decayed paper notices. One contained the words 'A. Fairgrieve Adams... Medical Officer' (Figure 8). In the council archive we found that Alfred Fairgrieve Adamson was medical officer for health for the Borough of Hendon during the war years, and until his retirement in 1954. Posters with public health information were common in air raid shelters during wartime.

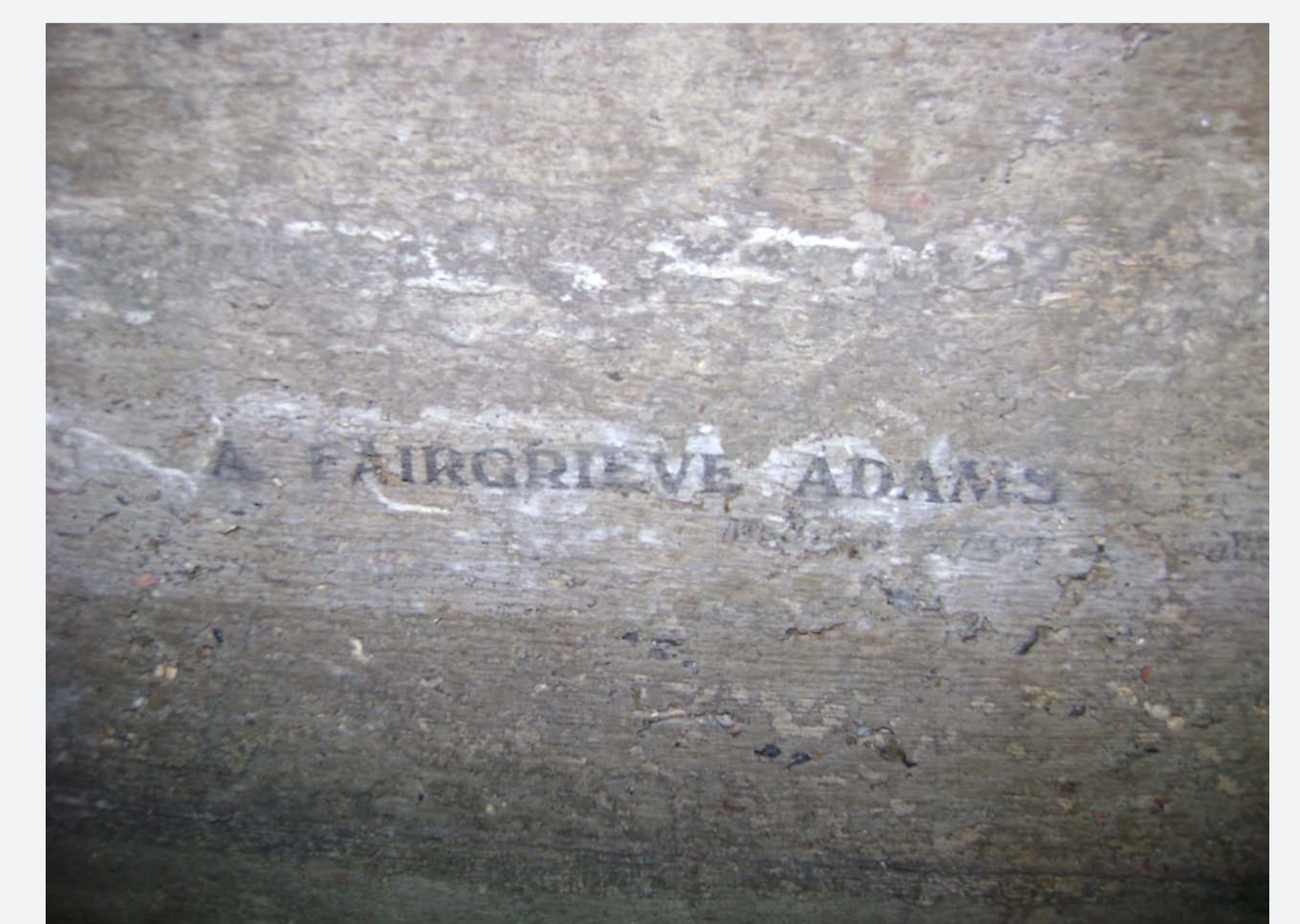


Figure 8: traces of a poster on the wall. Photo G. Moshenska

Following the excavation the staircase entrance was re-buried, and the escape hatch entrance made safe with a locked grate for future visits.

The excavation was a collaboration between UCL Institute of Archaeology and the Hendon and District Archaeological Society, with support from Subterranea Britannica, Middlesex University, and Church Farmhouse Museum.