The Woolwich to Greenwich Heritage Trail: A Strategic Proposal for Conservation and Viability

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Audience: Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO); H.M. Treasury; Royal Borough of Greenwich; Historic England; National Lottery Heritage Fund; Architectural Heritage Fund; Royal Greenwich Heritage Trust; Royal Artillery Museum; Army Museums Ogilby Trust; Royal Museums Greenwich; local communities.

Purpose: To propose a financially astute and strategically advantageous solution for the Rotunda Revival, securing the future of the Grade II* listed Woolwich Rotunda and establishing its role as the eastern gateway in a comprehensive heritage trail linking Woolwich to Maritime Greenwich, creating a major new cultural asset for London.



Figure 1. The Rotunda © Historic England

1.0 Executive Summary

The Woolwich Rotunda constitutes a masterpiece of Regency architecture and a remarkable feat of structural engineering. Designed by John Nash, architect to the Prince Regent, as a temporary and innovative structure for Carlton House in 1814, the building was transferred in 1818 to the military garrison at Woolwich, where it assumed a new and pioneering role as one of the world's earliest artillery museums.

Despite its extraordinary architectural pedigree, pioneering conoid laminate timber roof, and unique cultural history, the Rotunda today faces an uncertain future. Decades of underinvestment have left the building in poor condition, leading to its inclusion on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register. The Ministry of Defence is selling the Rotunda as a separate, early disposal within its strategy for the wider Woolwich Barracks site.

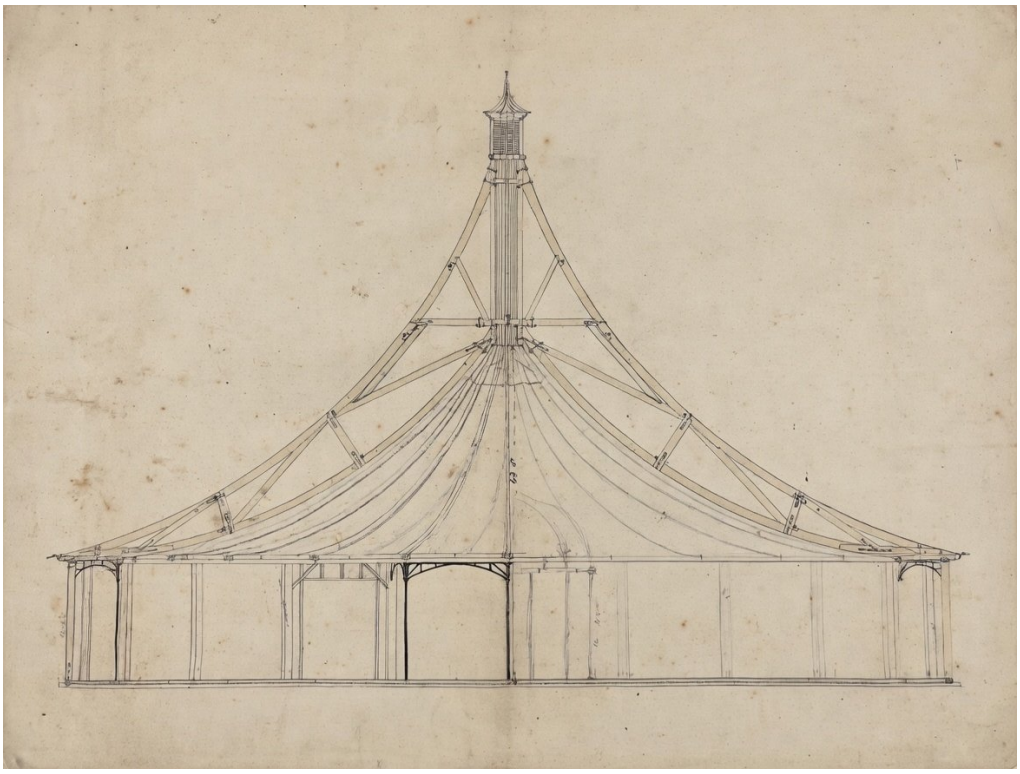


Figure 2. Section through John Nash's 'tent room', May 1814, showing the laminated timber rafters meeting at the central ring beam beneath the cupola, and the colonnade structure carrying the perimeter. (The National Archives, Nash drawings ref. WORK 43/573-577)

This report proposes a new framework for the future management and preservation of the Woolwich Rotunda and its surrounding landscape for the consideration of the Ministry of Defence. If the Ministry of Defence agrees with the proposal, the Rotunda would be managed by a specialist Building Preservation Trust (BPT), 'The Rotunda Trust'. The Trust would safeguard one of Britain's most innovative and internationally significant historic structures.



Figure 3. Charlton House (Grade I), built 1607-1612. Dominic Nelson, January 2026, CC BY-SA 4.0.



Figure 4. Woolwich Barracks SPD Greenwich Council © Crown Copyright and database rights 2024. Ordnance Survey 100019695.

This suggestion could achieve three critical goals. Firstly, it would allow the Ministry of Defence or any future owner of the Woolwich Barracks to address the special requirements of the Rotunda site in a focused way. Secondly, the New Trust would ensure the sustainable, conservation-led development of this extremely

sensitive site, whilst enabling complementary development opportunities at the main Barracks site including appropriate hotel provision.

Thirdly and most importantly, the Trust would establish the final, crucial link in a constellation of collaborating heritage trusts along a newly identified Greenwich Heritage Trail, connecting Woolwich to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Maritime Greenwich. The Rotunda Trust would work in close partnership with existing organisations such as the Royal Greenwich Heritage Trust (RGHT) at Charlton House, and other heritage organisations along the corridor. This coordinated initiative would activate, promote and safeguard the world-class heritage that makes this trail unique, positioning the Rotunda as one of the key cultural destinations of Greenwich, whilst supporting the sustainable regeneration of Charlton Village and its Grade I and II* listed assets.

This is a proposal not just to save one building, but to complete a major heritage trail for London, driven by a powerful network of local, expert-led community trusts.

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2.0 The Strategic Vision: A Heritage Trail Powered by a Trust Network

The restoration of the Rotunda is the catalytic event that unlocks a premier heritage trail for London.

2.1 The Missing Piece in a Premier Heritage Trail

As the map illustrates, Royal Greenwich possesses an extraordinary but disconnected chain of listed heritage assets:

- Woolwich Arsenal - Elizabeth line & Thames Ferry connection
- Woolwich Barracks (Grade II*) & St George's Garrison Church (Grade II) (A)
- The Rotunda (Grade II*, Heritage at Risk since 2007), Repository Woods (Grade II registered landscape, Heritage at Risk since November 2023) and Gun Park Block (Grade II) (B)
- Charlton House (Grade I), Summer House (Grade I) and St Luke's Church (Grade II*) (C)
- Highcombe House (Grade II, Heritage at Risk) with its historic black mulberry, & Our Lady of Grace Church (D)
- Woodlands House (Grade II*) origin of the National Gallery's first paintings (E)
- Greenwich UNESCO World Heritage Site - global tourism magnet & Thames Ferry

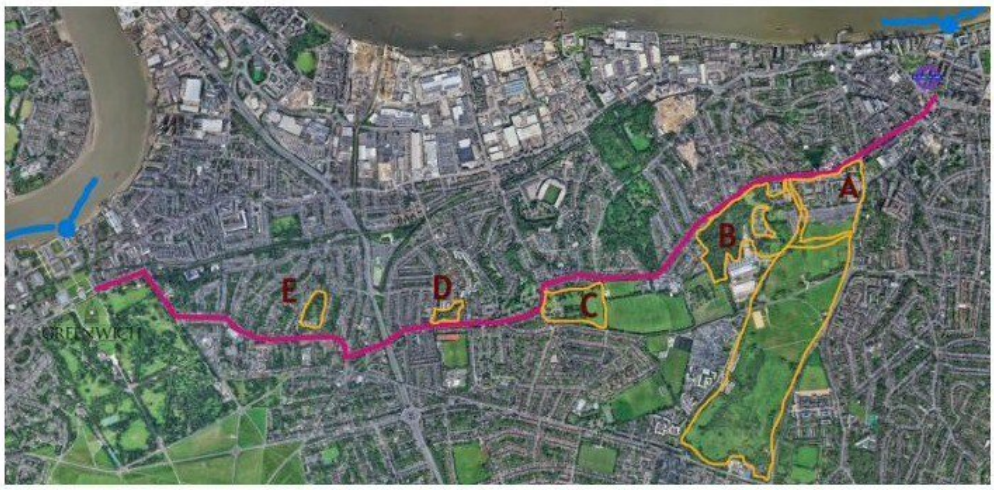


Figure 5. Greenwich Heritage Trail. The Rotunda and Repository Woods can become the compelling eastern gateway along the new heritage trail that starts in Woolwich - now linked to London and the wider world by the Elizabeth Line.

The restored Rotunda would serve as a vital anchor, attracting visitors to the heritage trail and transforming the above disparate sites into a coherent, full-day heritage experience that culminates at the UNESCO World Heritage site. Starting and ending on the Thames riverfront, this heritage trail would not only encourage the rediscovery of the heritage of Greenwich, but also reconnect that heritage with

the river itself, which constituted one of its original sources of identity, prosperity, and global reach.

The Royal Borough of Greenwich's adopted Woolwich Barracks SPD (March 2026, p. 89) sets out a Potential Heritage Trail at the local scale (Figure 6) that places the Rotunda and Repository Woods as the western anchor of a route across the disposal site, connecting through to the Royal Artillery Barracks and St George's Garrison Church to the east, with a connecting line to Charlton House. The SPD's adopted local heritage trail and the wider Greenwich Heritage Trail sit within the same logic at different scales.



Figure 6. Potential heritage trail. Royal Borough of Greenwich, Woolwich Barracks SPD, March 2026, p.89. The dotted route connects the Rotunda, Repository Woods, the Linear Training Fortification, and the Former Observatory, with onward links to the Royal Artillery Barracks and to Charlton House.

2.2 A Constellation of Trusts: A Model of Civil Society Stewardship

This proposal's strength lies in its collaborative nature. The Rotunda Trust would not operate in isolation. It would constitute the final major trust in a network of heritage stewards along this route. This "constellation" model would create a powerful synergy:

- Shared Expertise: The trusts can pool knowledge in conservation, fundraising, and visitor management.
- Coordinated Programming: Joint ticketing, marketing campaigns, and themed events can be developed for the entire Heritage Trail, creating a more compelling offer than any single site could achieve alone.
- Resilience: A network of collaborating trusts creates a more resilient and sustainable heritage sector across the borough.

- Coordination of Conservation Efforts: jointly commissioning conservation plans and coordinating preservation projects, ensuring consistent standards and efficient use of resources.

If they chose to support this proposal, the government and funders would not just back a single project; they would invest in a proven and successful model of integrated, community-led heritage management.

2.3 Strategic Asset Allocation: Maximising Heritage Value Through Functional Alignment

The success of the heritage trail depends on strategically matching each building's inherent characteristics with its optimal use. This comprehensive approach transforms individual conservation liabilities into a self-sustaining network of heritage assets, unified by extraordinary historical connections.

The Congreve Legacy: A Unifying Heritage Narrative

A remarkable historical thread links these properties through the Congreve family's military innovations. Sir William Congreve, 2nd Baronet (1772-1828), who likely commissioned Highcombe House c.1825, was the inventor of the Congreve rocket - the weapon that inspired "the rockets' red glare" in the American national anthem. His father, Sir William Congreve, 1st Baronet, founded the gunpowder factory at Waltham Abbey and occupied the original Eastcombe estate. This direct connection between Highcombe House, the Woolwich Rotunda (which housed artillery collections from 1818), the Gun Park Block, and Repository Woods creates a compelling narrative of British military innovation spanning three centuries.



Figure 7. Highcombe House, Charlton Road, from the air. FennecMedia, March 2025, CC BY 4.0.



Figure 8. Philip Reinagle's 1782 portrait "Mrs Congreve with her Children" (National Gallery of Ireland) shows the Georgian interior thought to represent the original Eastcombe House at Charlton, where the family had moved in 1780. Mrs Rebecca Congreve is shown with her children Ann, Thomas and Charlotte. Note the distinctive blue-grey walls, girandole mirrors, and Godfrey Kneller's portrait of the family's ancestor, the playwright William Congreve (1670- 1729), visible over the mantelpiece. The 2nd Baronet, the future rocket inventor, was 10 years old in 1782 and appears with his father in a companion painting by Reinagle, also at the National Gallery of Ireland. Presented to the National Gallery of Ireland by Edmund Russborough Turton in 1914.

Royal Artillery Barracks

The future use of the Grade II* Royal Artillery Barracks should be informed by a full mapping and assessment of its significance as part of a Conservation Plan. Potential adaptive reuse proposals, including hotel conversion taking advantage of the cellular structure of barrack rooms and the strategic Elizabeth Line connectivity, should therefore be understood at this stage as indicative possibilities requiring further assessment. The Conservation Plan would identify the most appropriate ways to introduce new life into the Barracks whilst respecting its architectural, historical, and landscape significance.



Figure 9. Woodlands House, Mycenae Road, built 1774 for John Julius Angerstein. Reading Tom, CC BY 2.0.



Figure 10. Woolwich Barracks historic façade elevation

Gun Park Block

The future use of the Gun Park Block should be informed by a full mapping and assessment of its significance as part of a Conservation Plan. Potential proposals to develop the Block as a sister site to the Royal Artillery Museum, drawing on the Congreve connection, should therefore be understood at

this stage as indicative possibilities requiring further assessment. The Conservation Plan would identify the most appropriate ways to introduce new life into the Block whilst respecting its architectural, historical, and landscape significance.



Figure 11. St George's Garrison Church (Grade II), Woolwich. Kleon3, CC BY-SA 4.0.



Figure 12. Gun Park Block seen from the Repository Road with the Rotunda visible to behind (circle).

The Rotunda: Eastern Gateway

The Grade II* Rotunda restoration establishes the heritage trail's eastern anchor:

- Nash's architectural masterpiece restored to interpret its dual significance - Regency celebration space and military museum pioneer

- Visitor orientation centre and gateway to the Greenwich Heritage Trail
- Flexible cultural space respecting the building's unique circular form and laminate timber roof structure
- Direct connection to Repository Woods and Gun Park creating an integrated heritage campus

Repository Woods: Heritage Landscape

The Grade II registered landscape, on the Heritage at Risk Register since November 2023, provides essential green infrastructure linking the military heritage sites, offering interpreted walks connecting the Rotunda complex to the wider heritage trail whilst preserving its designed landscape character.



Figure 13. Repository Woods with the Rotunda in the foreground

Charlton House: Unlocking Full Heritage Potential

Charlton House successfully operates as Royal Greenwich Heritage Trust's flagship venue whilst serving as their operational base. However, the Grade I listed building faces significant conservation challenges that require urgent attention to secure its future.

The Summer House Opportunity: The Grade I Summer House, attributed to Inigo Jones, presents ideal characteristics for conversion to a café or wine bar:

- Garden setting perfect for daytime hospitality directly adjacent to Charlton's Black Mulberry Tree, dated 1611, over 400 years old
- Architectural gem attracting visitors beyond event bookings
- Complementary revenue stream supporting conservation
- Community amenity enhancing local engagement



Figure 14. The Summer House seen on a winter's day behind the historic Black Mulberry Tree (dated 1611) outside Charlton House.

Integrated Conservation Strategy

This allocation strategy addresses fundamental conservation principles:

- Buildings at risk receive viable, sustainable uses
- Historic connections, particularly the Congreve military innovation narrative, inform interpretation
- Architectural significance guides appropriate use - grand spaces for public functions, robust structures for storage
- Public accessibility balanced with conservation requirements
- Each element contributes to a coherent heritage narrative from Woolwich to Maritime Greenwich

The constellation of trusts model enables coordinated management whilst respecting each building's distinct heritage significance and conservation needs.

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3.0 Government Heritage Policy

A Building Preservation Trust approach is consistent with the Protocol for the Care of the Government Historic Estate (November 2017), which is mandatory for government departments and commits the Ministry of Defence to securing heritage at risk and safeguarding heritage assets that are unused or in course of disposal. It is also consistent with the Disposal of Heritage Assets guidance (English Heritage, DCMS and OGC, May 2010), which states that maximisation of receipts should not be the overriding aim in the disposal of heritage assets and that large historic sites should be considered as a whole.

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4.0 The Delivery Vehicle: The Building Preservation Trust Model

The conservation of the Rotunda is enabled by the proven Building Preservation Trust structure.

- **The Rotunda Building Preservation Trust:** A charitable company governed by expert Trustees. It would have direct responsibility for the preservation. It can seek formal partnership agreements with the RGHT and other partner organisations to deliver the Heritage Trail.

While the Rotunda Trust's primary role would be to save the Rotunda, its purpose acknowledges the potential role of the Rotunda as the gateway of the Greenwich heritage trail described above.

A key priority is therefore to facilitate the creation of a network of heritage bodies, providing the coordination required to activate the trail. The Rotunda Trust can work closely with Royal Greenwich Heritage Trust to prioritise cross-organisational collaboration, embedding partnership agreements and joint working practices. Working together with existing trusts managing key assets along the heritage trail, the new Trust can initiate a trail-wide coordination mechanism, ensuring shared marketing, interpretation, and conservation strategies. This can include:

- Formalisation of partnerships with fellow trusts, covering joint programming, ticketing, and fundraising.
- Development of signage and interpretation so visitors experience the route as one coherent trail.
- Generating new audiences: use the Rotunda's profile, Elizabeth Line connectivity, and distinctive architecture to attract visitors who can then be directed along the full trail to Maritime Greenwich.
- Unlock funding, coordinating collaborative grants that require borough-wide impact, ensuring resources are shared across the trail network.
- Collaborating with Universities and Heritage Organisations to commission, facilitate and promote research into the architectural heritage of Greenwich.

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5.0 First Actions: The Integrated Conservation Plan for the Greenwich Heritage Trail

The foundational act of governance proposed is to commission a comprehensive Integrated Conservation Plan (ICP). This will focus on:

- Identifying the significance of the Heritage Trail as a whole,
- Assessing constraints and opportunities for its future development, and
- Establishing the operational protocols and strategies for its future conservation and management.

A remarkable connection across three generations of British art links the two ends of the heritage trail proposed in this paper. Philip Reinagle (1749-1833), who painted Mrs Congreve at Eastcombe House in 1782 (Figure 8 above), was the grandfather of George Philip Reinagle (1802-1835), who served as an eyewitness

aboard HMS Mosquito at the Battle of Navarino and produced *The Battle of Navarino, 20 October 1827* (Figure 15), exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1829 and now held by the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich (BHC0623). The Reinagle family thus span the two ends of the Greenwich Heritage Trail in canvas: from Charlton, where the Congreves lived in the 1780s, to Maritime Greenwich, where the closing chapter of the wooden navy is preserved.



Figure 15. The Battle of Navarino, 20 October 1827. George Philip Reinagle, 1828. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (BHC0623). The painter, grandson of the Philip Reinagle who portrayed the Congreve family at Charlton, was an eyewitness to the battle aboard HMS Mosquito.

There are a number of key anniversary dates that can form the basis of a programme of events:

1. 22 January 2027: 200th anniversary of the Duke of Wellington's appointment as Commander-in-Chief of the British Army.

2. 20 October 2027: 200th anniversary of the Battle of Navarino, recorded by George Philip Reinagle in the painting now at the National Maritime Museum.

3. 22 January 2028: 200th anniversary of Wellington becoming Prime Minister.

4. 2028 to 2030: 210th anniversary of the Rotunda's move to Woolwich Common between 1818 and 1820, and of its opening as the Royal Artillery's museum in 1820.



Figure 16. The Duke of Wellington by Sir Thomas Lawrence, c.1815-1816. Apsley House. Public domain.

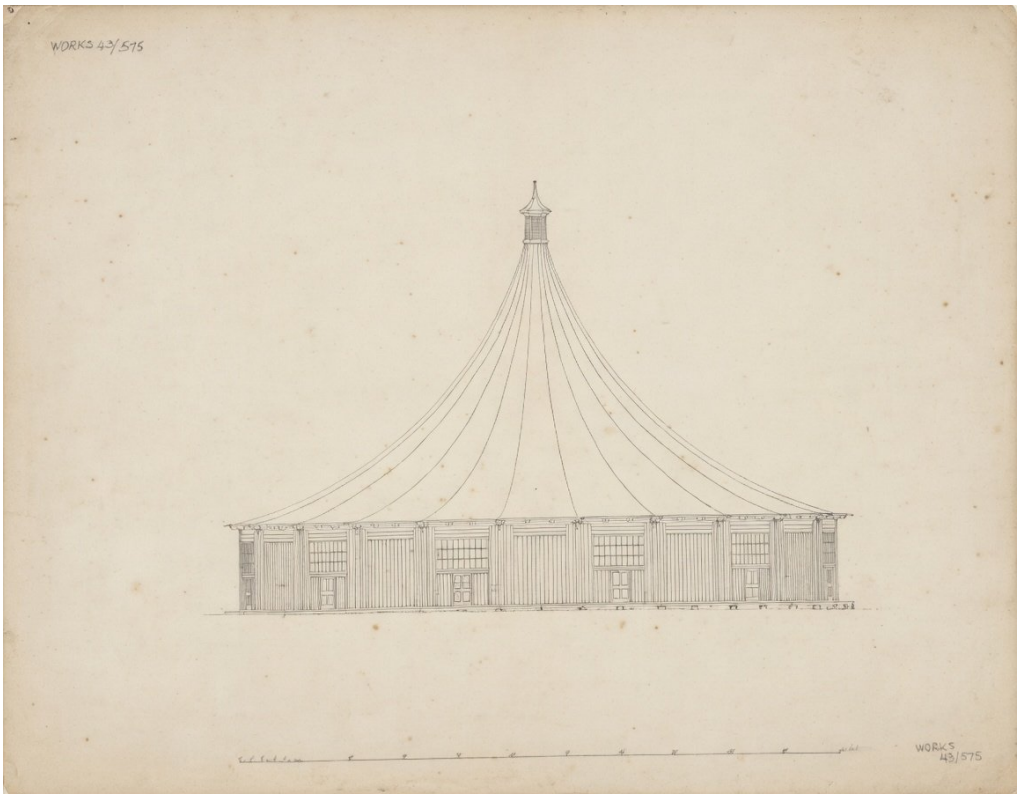


Figure 17. External elevation of Nash's 'tent room' at Carlton House, May 1814. The structure's walls appear to have been covered with decorative boarding and inset with twelve entrances. (The National Archives, ref. WORK 43/575)

6.0 Recommendation

Securing the future of this irreplaceable heritage trail requires immediate action to establish expert, non-profit governance and unlock national funding. The local community, the Ministry of Defence, and the Royal Borough of Greenwich must urgently support the development of a constellation of Trusts to ensure that the entire heritage trail, including the Rotunda, and the Upper Gun Park are suitably protected and contribute to the regeneration of the wider area. This new structure is the only viable method to attract the necessary capital investment and long-term security needed to transform this currently endangered chain of sites into a self-sustaining cultural asset.

Creating a Trust dedicated to the management of the Rotunda and its surrounding heritage parcel would help to safeguard this masterpiece of Regency Architecture and re-anchor it within its historic setting. The proposed Rotunda Building Preservation Trust would ensure the Rotunda's conservation, facilitating its connectivity with surrounding heritage sites. Unlike a conventional trust, the Rotunda Trust would be deliberately conceived as both custodian of the Rotunda and a key instigator of the Greenwich Heritage Trail.

By working in formal partnership with the Royal Greenwich Heritage Trust and other partner organisations, the Rotunda Trust would transform a disconnected chain of sites into a coherent heritage trail. The Rotunda becomes the eastern gateway to Maritime Greenwich, enhancing visitor flows, unlocking joint programming, and amplifying the borough's international heritage profile. Completing a powerful chain of local trusts, the new Trust is expected to activate a new, self-sustaining heritage trail of national significance.

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7.0 Further Reading

See recent publication by Historic England for fascinating details about the 210-year history of the building, written by Emily Cole, Sarah Newsome and Verena McCaig.



Figure 18. The Woolwich Rotunda from waltzes to wargames © Historic England 28 June 2025

Cole, Emily, Sarah Newsome, and Verena McCaig. *The Woolwich Rotunda: From Waltzes to Wargames.* Liverpool University Press / Historic England, 2025.

Catling, Chris. "From Royal Hall to Cannonballs: Rediscovering the Many Lives of the Woolwich Rotunda." *Current Archaeology*, No. 430, December 2025.

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Trousdell, M., and Karydis, N. The Woolwich to Greenwich Heritage Trail: A Strategic Proposal for Conservation and Viability. October 2026.