



Planning, Transport
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A35 AXMINSTER BYPASS
PROPOSALS FOR
ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING

by

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1. Introduction

Axminster lies in the easternmost corner of Devon in the valley of the Axe. This valley is an important corridor for communications within the high Greensand plateau of south-east Devon, and the town probably owes its existence to this fact. It lies beside the junction of two Roman roads: the Fosse Way running north to south and the Exeter-Dorchester road running east to west. Roman occupation has already been identified at Woodbury Farm just 0.5km east of the town, though further settlements probably await discovery. Axminster itself has a rich history from Saxon times, when it became an ecclesiastical centre for a large area of east Devon. In the medieval period the town was at the centre of a wealthy manor which was owned by the nearby Cistercian abbey of Newenham. During this period and beyond, up to the 18th century, the town also became an important centre for the Devon cloth industry.

1.1 The Bypass route

The final route for the line of the Axminster bypass announced in 1988 runs to the south of the town at a maximum distance of some 1.6km from the parish church. It leaves the existing A35 alignment at the foot of Gammons Hill crossing the floodplain of the rivers Yarty and Axe before climbing the Greensand escarpment of Trinity Hill. The route skirts the north of this hill to rejoin the existing A35 at Symonds Down, and then follows this road eastwards to Burrowshot Cross. The total length is some 4.6km.

1.2 Previous archaeological excavation and research

The importance and significance of the landscape around Axminster has already been recognised, as the funding by English Heritage of previous research on the archaeology of the area has shown. Three reports have previously been prepared:

(i) Preliminary Archaeological Survey of Alternative Routes for the A35 Axminster Bypass 1985 by P.J. Weddell

(ii) A35 Axminster Bypass - Pre-Order Publication Consultations: Archaeology by S.C. Timms (both for Devon County Council)

(iii) A35 Axminster Bypass. Report on Trial Excavations and Documentary Research 1987 by P.J. Weddell and N. Holbrook (Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit).

Archaeological evaluation by excavation has so far been of very limited extent. The work described in report (iii) above was only concerned with the western side of the Axe-Yarty floodplain, in particular the Roman road from Exeter to Dorchester; the nature and course of this road across the floodplain has yet to be clarified. Further work in the floodplain will also be necessary to establish a stratified sequence of archaeological features within the alluvial deposits preserved there.

1.3 Scope of this report

The purpose of this report is to describe specific proposals for archaeological work to be carried out along the line of the bypass. The detailed evidence relating to individual sites will not be given here as a full account of this has already been presented. More attention will however be paid to important new evidence bearing on the significance of the sites in relation to the landscape around Axminster, and to a more limited extent to the landscape of south-east Devon as a whole.

3.1 Roman road at Gammons Hill

Description: This is the Exeter-Dorchester road and lies at the extreme eastern edge of the bypass where it diverges from the present A35.

Proposal: Trench cut across disused part of carriageway and adjacent area at SY 28049800.

Purpose: Locate Roman road surface and/or adjacent ditches. Check alignment of Roman road where it heads towards the floodplain.

3.1.1 The bridging works and associated river culverts will cause disturbance to one of the major east-west field boundaries across the floodplain. This boundary has been postulated as the alignment of the Roman road, as it can be followed continuously from the Yarty to the A358 near Woodbury Lane, the presumed alignment of this road south of Axminster. It is known to have formed a boundary in the medieval period within the meadowland on the floodplain (see 3.2 below).

Proposal: Trench cut across the line of the boundary at SY 28729777.

Purpose: To locate the boundary if it survives (the river meanders have moved considerably in this area) and to establish its nature, date and relationship with the valley alluvium.

3.2 Boundary on the floodplain: a possible prehistoric boundary

Description: This is a boundary running north/south which was utilised in the medieval period to define strips of enclosed meadowland belonging to the manor of Axminster. It appears to transgress the line of the Roman road where it should cross the floodplain.

Proposal: Trench cut across the line at SY 28569774.

Purpose: As 3.1.1

3.3 Medieval mill leat at Newenham Abbey

Description: Newenham Abbey (founded 1247) appears to have had both fulling mills and grist mills from an early period in its history. The course of the leat for the grist mills is possibly represented by what is now a footpath running for nearly 900m in a straight line from the road into the town (present A35).

Proposal: Trench cut across the line of the path and adjacent area either side (to allow for disturbance of alignment by railway) at SY 28749766.

Purpose: Locate course of mill leat which will also help solve other topographical problems; recover waterlogged deposits for environmental remains.

3.4 Boundary near Newenham Abbey: a possible Saxon hollow way

Description: This is a north/south alignment just to the east of Newenham Abbey precinct. Documentary evidence suggests that there was once a hollow way through this vicinity which by the early 17th century had become a stream.

Proposal: Trench across the boundary at SY 28969744.

Purpose: The alignment of the boundary is significant; it may be possible to establish the existence of a road which pre-dated the laying out of the abbey lands. This would have further consequences for the topography in relation to Roman roads.

3.5 The Fosse Way

Description: The course of the Fosse Way has been adequately described as far as the town of Axminster itself. Its course beyond here has never been properly established, though it has been assumed that the line of the present A358 follows the alignment (this has been

not follow Woodbury Lane, a presumed Roman road alignment, and therefore a logical boundary. At its lower, western end there is a watercourse along the hedge line, though the contours do not suggest the presence of a natural stream.

Proposal: Trench across the boundary at SY 30519689.

Purpose: To establish the nature and date of this alignment and its relationship with other north-south boundaries. This will also assist in the understanding of the development of land units and manors in the area.

3.10 Roman road at Symonds Down (Exeter-Dorchester)

Description: The course of the presumed Roman road in this vicinity has to some extent been obscured by re-alignments in the last few hundred years. The Roman alignment is represented by Woodbury Lane, then is taken up by Cooks Lane at its western end. At about 260m east of Woodbury Lane the line is taken up by what appears to be an agger, which was described by Margary (1967, 105) and interpreted as Roman. Disturbance to this site will be caused by junction works at Cooks Lane/Woodbury Lane and higher up to the east towards Burrowshot Cross.

Proposals: Excavation of the agger at (i) SY 31229675 and (ii) SY 31329662.

Purpose: To ascertain the nature of the agger and confirm a Roman origin. This might also be useful in comparing the results in 3.1 on the floodplain. The site at (ii) can also be investigated in conjunction with a north-south alignment.

4. Programme of Work

In view of the proposed excavations, it would be impractical to undertake these while the land is still in agricultural use. It would therefore be necessary to undertake the trenching immediately before the land is acquired by the Department of Transport, or immediately after, but before the construction begins. The site at Jackleigh Cottages (3.6 above) which may require more complex excavation, could, perhaps by negotiation with the landowner, be started at an earlier period. It is estimated that the trenching work on the ten sites could be completed within 3-4 weeks depending on manpower.

5. Costs

The proposed archaeological excavations fall into two phases:

(i) evaluation of Jackleigh Cottages: £1800

(possible Domesday manor site)

(to be followed by larger scale work if appropriate)

(ii) excavation of trenches at specified locations along road line: £10,000

(to include preparation of archive report).

6. Conclusions

In view of the obvious antiquity of the landscape around Axminster, and in particular its relationship to the Roman road system in southern England, it is important that this relatively modest programme of archaeological work should be carried out on the line of the A35 Bypass. The suggested programme

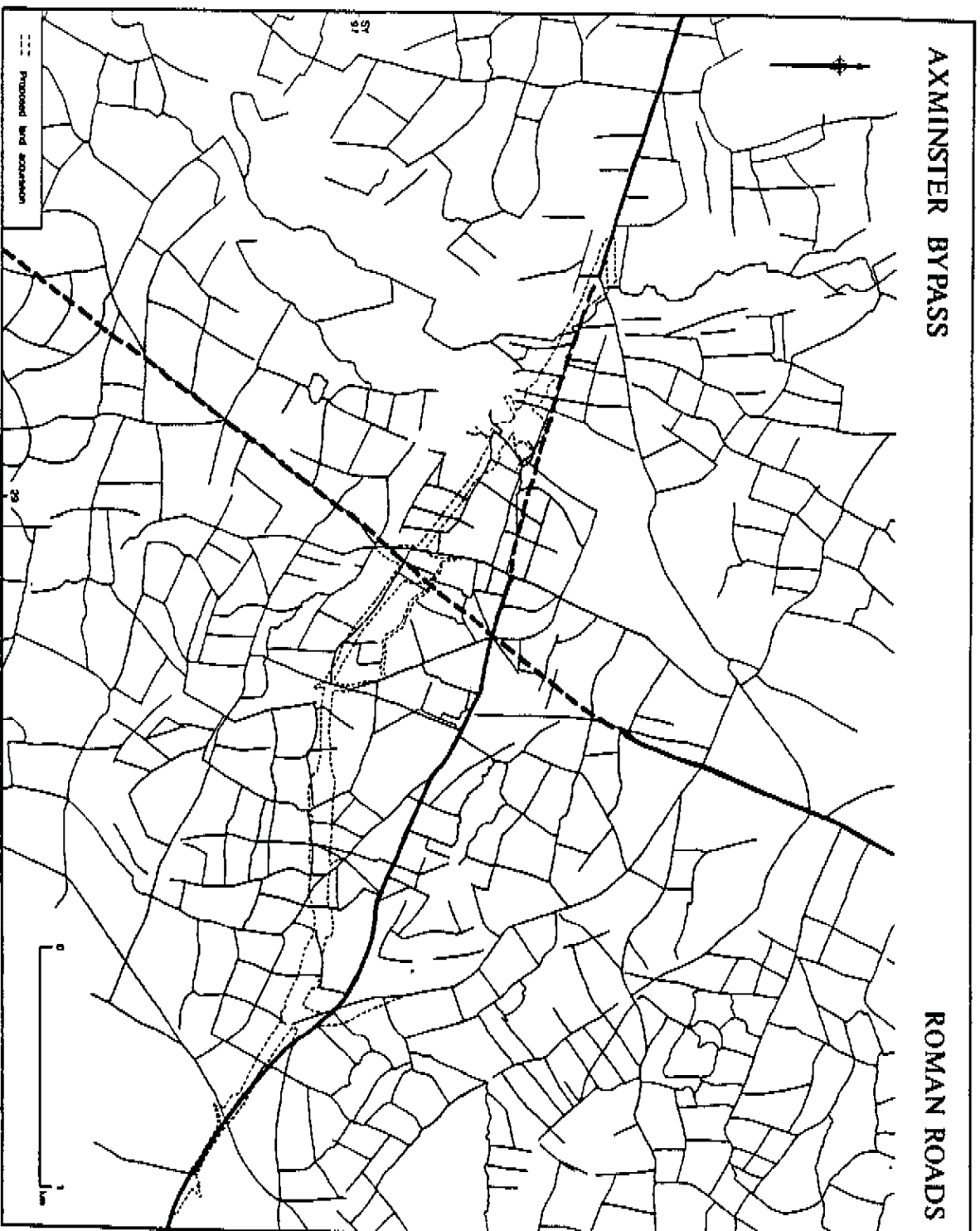


Fig. 1 Roman road alignments near Axminster

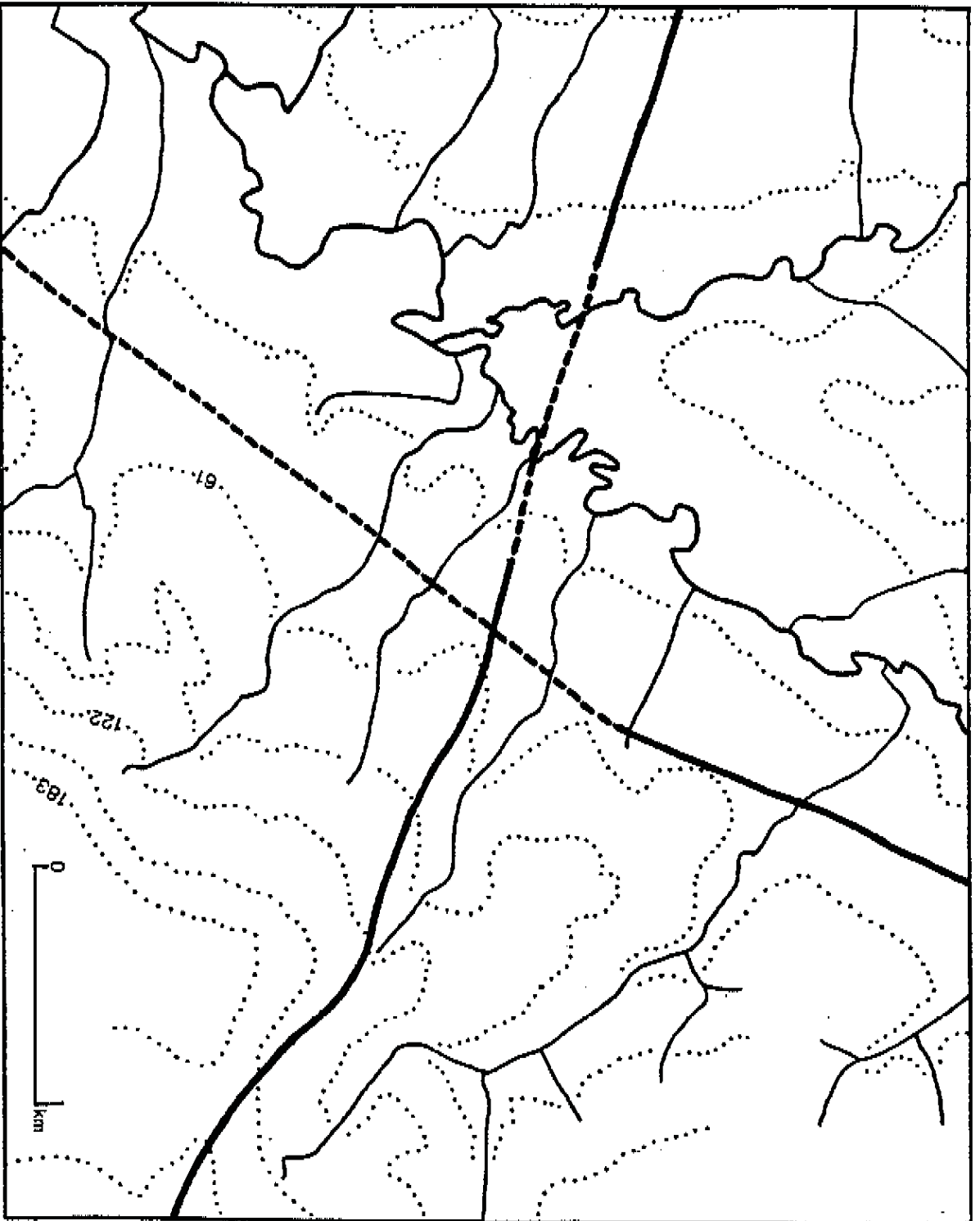


Fig. 2 Roman roads in relation to topography

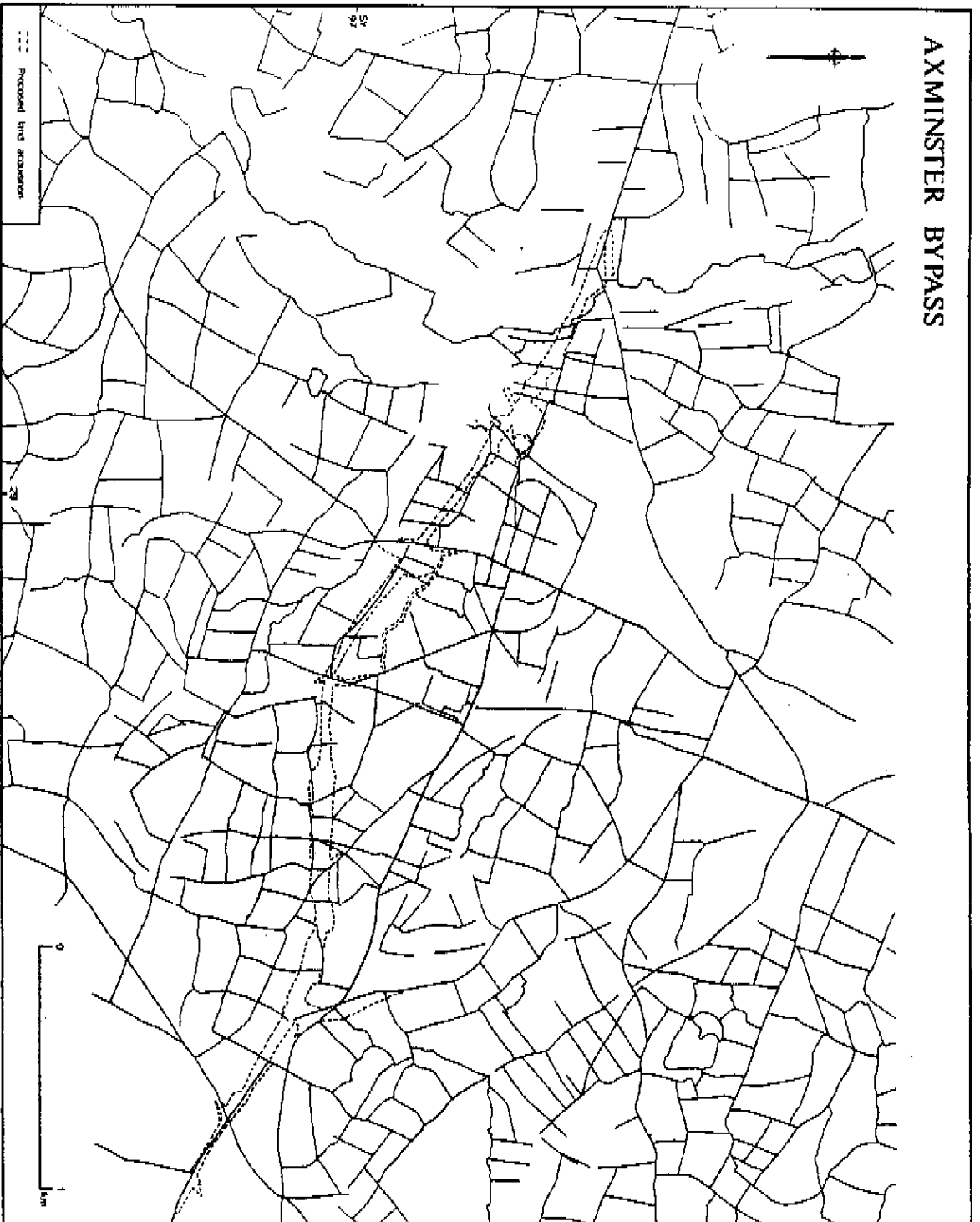


Fig. 3 Boundary alignments in the vicinity of the bypass (see Ch.2)



Fig. 4 Boundaries which reflect the alignments of the Roman roads

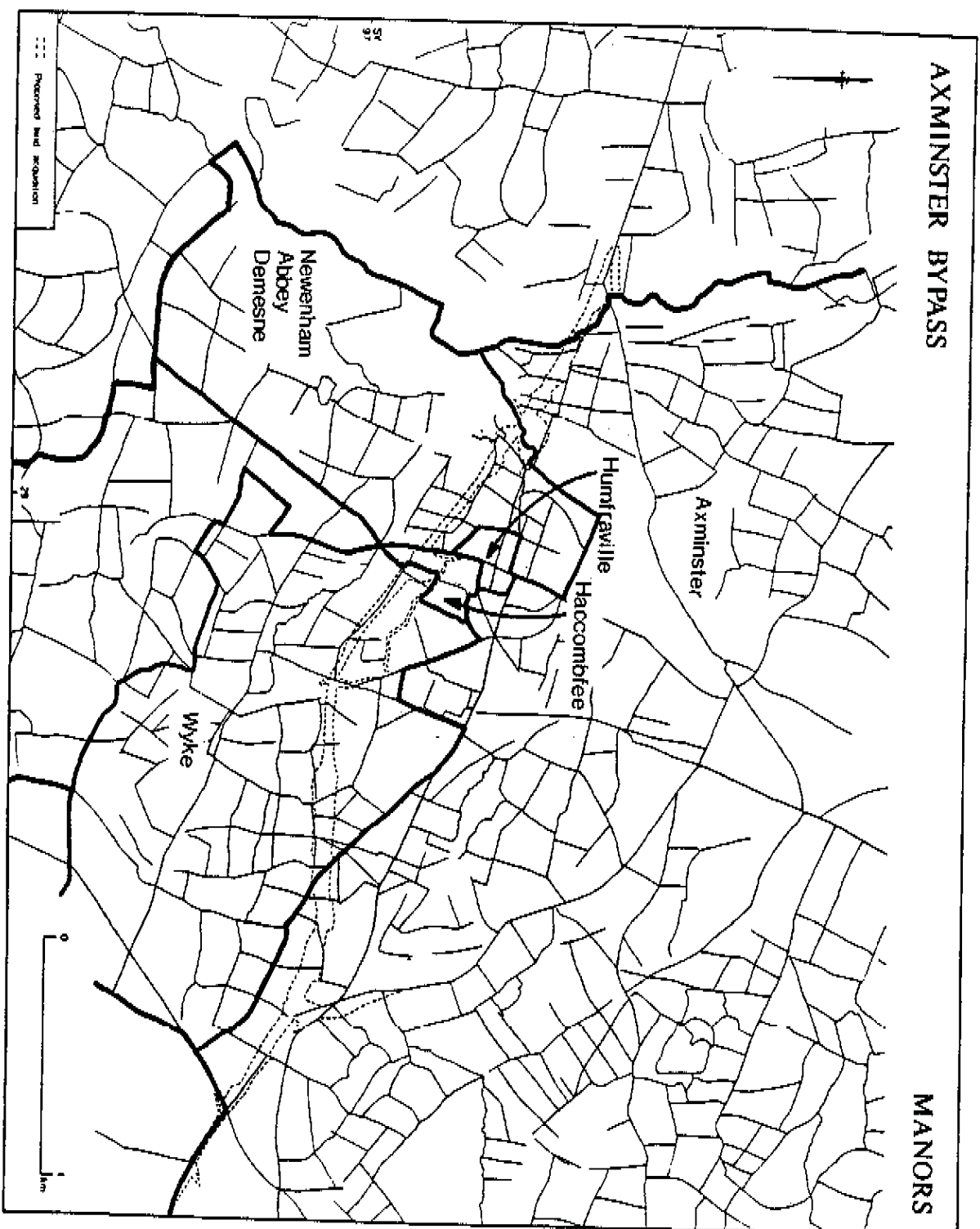


Fig. 5 Manorial boundaries superimposed on Fig. 3

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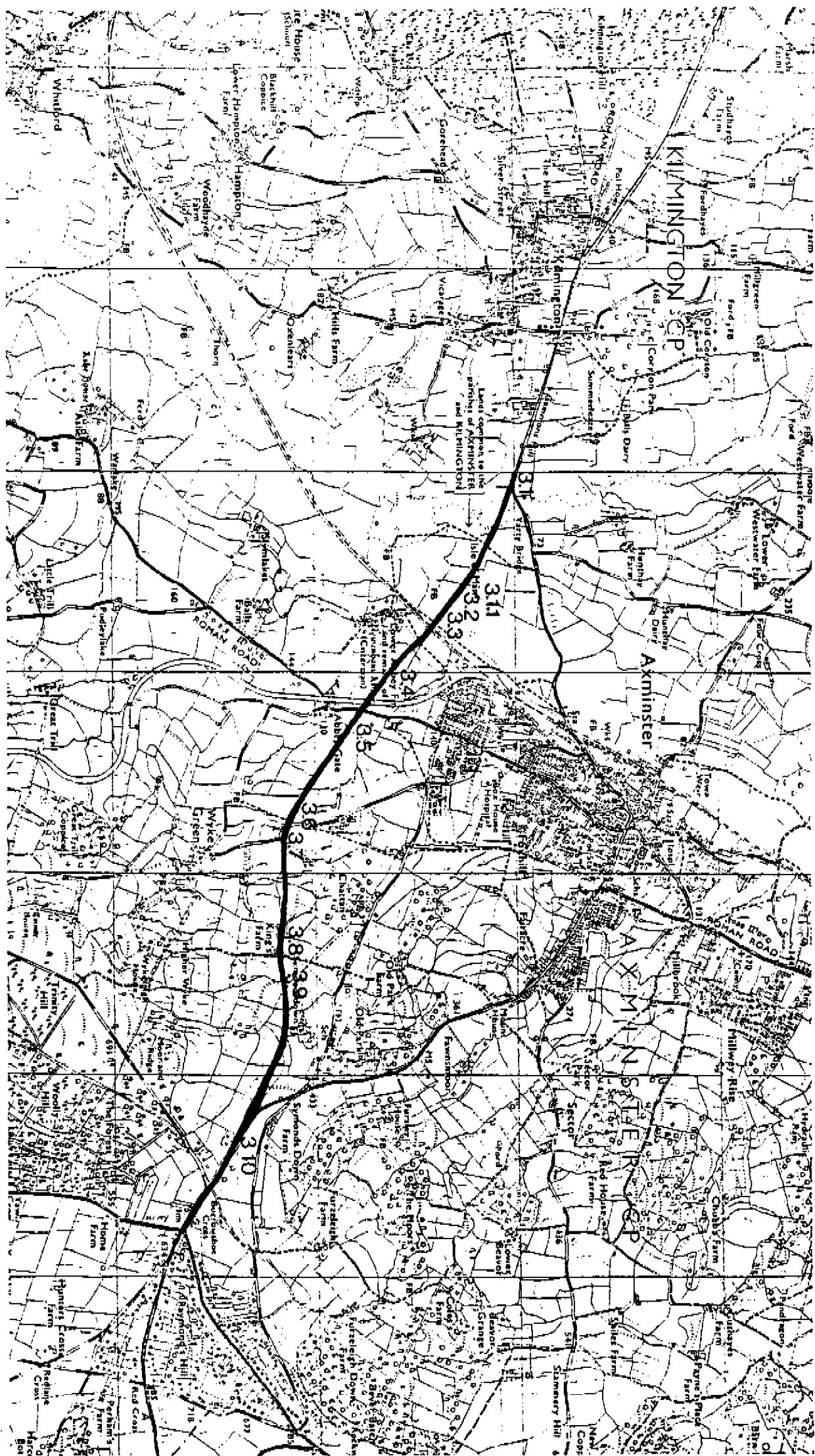


Fig. 6 The sites