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Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

Report No. 226

November 1992

**A5(T) Nesscliffe Bypass
Archaeological Survey:
Stage 1 - Desk Top Study**

by
Steve Litherland

For further information please contact:
Simon Buteux (Manager), Peter Leach or Iain Ferris (Assistant Directors)
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 021 414 5513
Fax: 021 414 3952

A5(T) Nesscliffe Bypass Archaeological Survey

Stage 1 - Desk Top Study

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Introduction

The following report outlines the results of the first stage of an archaeological survey carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit on behalf of Frank Graham Consulting Engineers Limited. The preliminary assessment consisted of a 'desk top study' of the primary and secondary documentation for the area affected by the proposed road scheme. The majority of the documentation consulted is held by the County Sites and Monuments Record and County Records and Research Unit of Shropshire County Council.

The principal objectives of the preliminary assessment were to provide an assessment of the archaeological sites initially identified by Shropshire County Council as potentially affected by the road scheme; and to identify from original research further sites of potential archaeological or historical interest, and provide recommendations for further work, if necessary, in order to evaluate these sites. The sites are assessed following the Secretary of State's non-statutory criteria outlined in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16: Archaeology and Planning (DoE 1990).

The Preferred Road Corridor

Following submission of a Technical Appraisal Report and Public Consultation in July 1991, a preferred route for the A5(T) Nesscliffe Bypass was chosen (figure 1). This bypass route skirts the southern flank of the village of Nesscliffe along a corridor approximately 5 kilometres long, from the Wolfshead Junction in the northwest to the Felton Butler Crossroads in the southeast. The width of the corridor varies between c.50m and c.150m, dependant on the incorporation of ancillary features such as road junctions and cuttings or banking. The immediate environs of the chosen route defined the study area of the archaeological survey.

Background: Geology, Topography and Landscape Development

The survey area is located in the northern part of the Welsh Marches and lies within the confluence of the Rivers Severn and Perry on the North Shropshire Plain – an extensive, gently undulating, lowland landscape, heavily overlain by glacial drift and fluvio-glacial deposits. This lowland landscape is interrupted by occasional low red sandstone hills which early man took advantage of for settlement and defence. For example, prominent remains of an Iron Age hillfort are located on Nesscliffe Hill, which overlooks the survey area. However, where the drift geology and soils comprise gravels and well-drained sandy loams, post-war aerial photography has shown that such low-lying areas attracted some of the earliest and most intensive agricultural settlement in Shropshire.

Soil conditions in the vicinity of the survey area are generally conducive to the recovery of archaeological evidence from aerial photography, being a mixture of well-drained brown sands and brown earths. A cluster of archaeological sites: SA862, SA4150, SA2382, SA4300, SA4213, SA4211, SA4212, SA2388, SA2433, SA4210, SA4030, SA2111, SA2427, SA4250, SA2212, SA2413, SA2211 have been identified from aerial photographs in the vicinity of the survey area (figure 1), principally by Chris Musson and the Clywd Powys Archaeological Trust in the dry summers of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The majority of archaeological sites listed above are cropmark enclosures of varying size and form, although earlier funerary and ceremonial monuments may also be represented.

As in many other regions of Britain, the aerial photographic record appears to be strongest when dealing with rural settlement of the Iron Age and Roman periods. At this time the Welsh Marches

has been tentatively described as an open landscape dotted with discrete enclosures and simple field systems (Whimster 1989,64). It is expected that the majority of cropmarks identified inside and around the survey area date from these periods. Excavation of part of Nesscliffe hillfort (TSAS 1959,110) confirmed evidence of Iron Age/Romano-British occupation; a time when the Cornovii tribe occupied the area.

Further archaeological evidence has not been identified in the survey area prior to the Middle Ages. In general the medieval pattern of settlement represents a development of the earlier pattern, with scattered nucleated villages on outcrops of favourable land, and isolated farmsteads and hamlets between.

By Domesday, the manor of Nessham, based at Great Ness, was evidently already an important head-manor with a church (SA1083), a high hidage assessment, and four outlying settlements, including Kinton and Wilcott. In addition, six Welshmen were listed within the manor, showing the mixed population of the Marches. Felton Butler was an independent manor, held briefly by Henry II; the name 'Felton' may give a clue to the origin of the settlement, through enclosure within an open countryside. Several examples of the surviving earthworks of small defensive mottes, common throughout the Marchlands, can be seen at Kinton, Wilcott and Hopton in the Nesscliffe area (SA859, SA1092, SA1090), and are the most recognisable archaeological monuments of this period.

Later medieval examples of economic reorganisation in the form of deserted medieval villages are not found in the immediate survey area, but SA857 is one example located just west of the Wolfshead Junction. Four kilometres south of Nesscliffe the remains of a DMV, Abbey and Priory on the banks of the Severn near Shrawardine is evidence of the influence of the religious houses, which played an important role in establishing a pastoral economy based on sheep-rearing in the region. As late as 1700 Great Ness was one of two parishes singled out by Gough in his History of Myddle as producing the best wool in Shropshire.

However, by the late 17th century man had

begun to improve and tame the landscape more effectively than ever before. The Rocque Map of 1752 shows a landscape in transition (figure 2). Enclosure of commonland was well established in the survey area by this period, and the marshes to the south of Wilcott had begun to be drained in the 18th century. New farming methods rectified the organic deficiency of the light sandy soils, and root crops, clover and oats, and later barley, were grown, especially during the Napoleonic Wars. The basic enclosed field pattern around Nesscliffe did not change substantially for nearly 200 years, although the last decade has witnessed the grubbing out of smaller field boundaries to create larger fields.

The Survey Area

The proposed road corridor cuts through a belt of primarily arable fields which, while based on divisions established by early enclosure in the 17th and 18th centuries, have been widely modified and enlarged, especially in the last decade. The Broomhill is the highest point along the road corridor, to the west the land falls into a slight dip north of Wilcott where a patch of marshy land has survived, then rises again towards Wolfshead. To the east of Broomhill the land undulates slightly rising again towards the woodland of Ensdon Bank Plantation at the eastern end of the road corridor. Another patch of woodland is found at Coney Bank at the western end of the road corridor. Each modern field has been given an individual field number (FN) which is shown on figure 1.

Identified Archaeological Sites

Six archaeological sites were identified by Shropshire County Council from the Sites and Monuments Record. These were:

1. SA2551, a toll-house by Thomas Telford on the north side of Wolfshead Junction.
2. SA4221, a ring ditch, probably representing a ploughed out barrow, situated north of the A5 southeast of Coney Bank. This feature was incorrectly plotted from aerial photographs on the southern side of the road, it is therefore not threatened by the proposed roadscheme.
3. SA2388, a possible pit alignment running north-south, identified from aerial photography.

4. SA2433, an apparently well-preserved double-ditched rectangular enclosure, identified from aerial photographs.
5. SA4030, part of a ring ditch or funerary monument, identified from aerial photographs.
6. SA2413, a cropmark identified from aerial photography comprising a rectangular enclosure with a double ditch to the east, apparently enclosed by an outer ditch, which may be double-ditched at the southeast side, with a possible entrance at this point.

These sites with the exception of SA2551 are presumed to be of prehistoric or Roman date.

Three sites are likely to be directly affected by the proposed road scheme: SA2388, SA2433 and SA2413. In addition to these sites, the most up to date map of land-take for the proposed roadscheme appears to raise the possibility that the western portion of a further cropmark site (SA4030) may be affected by the proposed road scheme, especially given the proximity of the site to a new footbridge. These four sites are discussed in detail below:

**SITE 3: SA2388,
CROPMARK AT SJ37502010**

Description. This cropmark appears as a linear alignment of a series of dark stains which run north-south for approximately 280m, beginning just to the south of the A5(T). Identified in 1979, the cropmark is well defined in the middle of field FN8, but no trace is observable in the small field to the north, which was under a different crop at the time of the photography and has since disappeared. Equally, the cropmark cannot be seen continuing to the south; this may be due to different soil conditions south of a grubbed up field boundary. Overall definition of the cropmark may be characterised as fair.

Period. The date of the feature is unknown at present, although it is likely that the feature predates enclosure in the 17th/18th centuries, and it may be of prehistoric origin.

Rarity. This is the only example of such a linear alignment within the survey area, although by 1989 at least 32 alignments had been identified within the Welsh Marches, at 20 separate locations, notably in the River Perry area (Whimster 1989,59).

Documentation. SA2388; CPAT: 79/7/22, 79/15/7, 66/88, 80/14/28, 81/C/130, 82/01/33, 82/53/30, 82/C/065.

Group Value. While classified as a single feature, SA2388 may form a group with linear cropmarks north and east of Coney Bank, or the cropmark enclosure SA2433 (see below).

Survival/Condition. The feature is known only as a cropmark, and may survive only as a feature cut into the sand and gravel subsoil. The top of the feature has probably been denuded by ploughing, but the extent of erosion cannot be accurately gauged without excavation.

Fragility/Vulnerability. In addition to the site being vulnerable to erosion by further ploughing, the southern end of the pit alignment is likely to be directly affected by the road scheme.

Diversity. The feature is likely to be of single phase and function, although the possibility of minor modification cannot be precluded.

Potential. Interpretation from aerial photographic evidence alone is problematic but the form is indicative of the subclass of non-enclosure-type structures categorised by Whimster (1989) as pit alignments. Almost without exception, examples of this distinctive, but still enigmatic, form of land division are confined to a relatively narrow belt of lowland country around the River Perry, which is about 5km east of SA2388. Pit alignments have been mainly identified close to the banks of rivers or streams, although whether this has a functional significance, or merely reflects the particular sensitivity of certain riverine soils, is as yet unknown. It is interesting to note that a since dried-out stream-bed which fed into the marshland south of Nesscliffe ran close to SA2388. Equally, it has been noted that pit alignments often occur in groups, and frequently join at right angles. North of Coney Bank a linear cropmark (SA4212) runs east-west, and an 'ancient boundary' was noted on an 18th-century map of the common. If a relationship existed between the two sets of features this would probably predate Watling Street. However, the proximity of the double-ditched enclosure SA2433 may also suggest a relationship between the two features. The poor understanding of pit-alignments in the Welsh Marches potentially

provides this example with high potential.

Recommendations. A combination of fieldwalking, geophysical prospection, and trial trenching will be applied to this site to test its potential.

**SITE 4: SA2433,
CROPMARK AT SJ37591989**

Description. This feature is discrete, and wholly defined on the aerial photographs. The cropmark appears as rectangular enclosure measuring c.50m by 100m, apparently defined by straight closely-spaced double-ditches with remarkably square corners. These characteristics place SA2433 with a small group of rectilinear double-ditched enclosures; however, the extreme regularity of the plan suggests the possibility that the cropmark may have been formed by robbed-out wall foundations.

Period. The regular morphology of SA2433, together with the proximity of Watling Street is certainly suggestive of a Roman origin. However, the date of SA2433 is at present unknown, and it may alternatively be of much more recent formation.

Rarity. Double-ditched rectilinear enclosures have been recorded throughout the Welsh Marches. With some significant exceptions this class of enclosure is less frequent in the immediate neighbourhood of Roman military and commercial centres, seeming instead to colonise the peripheries of these territories (Whimster 1989,45). However, the extremely regular form of SA2433 marks the site out as unusual.

Documentation. As SA2388 (above).

Group Value. SA2433 is an apparently discrete enclosure, although its setting near SA2388 and Watling Street gives the cropmark some group value.

Survival/Condition. While the feature survives only as a cropmark and may have been subject to erosion through ploughing, the definition of the feature is relatively good and therefore it may be comparatively well preserved.

Fragility/Vulnerability. The east half of SA2433 will be directly affected by the proposed road scheme. The site is also vulnerable to continued erosion through ploughing.

Diversity. Although the cropmark exhibits little diversity in terms of morphology, geophysical survey or trial excavation may provide evidence of greater complexity.

Potential. Excavation of this general class of enclosure has been limited. Given the anticipated condition of the monument and its unusual form, this enclosure may be deemed to have quite high archaeological potential.

Recommendations. Fieldwalking, geophysical prospection and trial trenching will be used to further assess the archaeological potential of SA2433 in the second phase of archaeological investigations.

**SITE 6: SA2413,
CROPMARKS AT SJ40601753**

Description. SA2413, located in field FN 28, is the most difficult cropmark within the survey area to define adequately from the aerial photographs. The cropmark is not amenable to simple morphological classification, but appears to define a rectilinear enclosure with a double-ditch on the eastern side, which in turn is partially enclosed by a further ditched enclosure, double-ditched on the southeast side through which an entrance may have been placed. Overall definition is poor and the possibility cannot be excluded that SA2413 extends beyond the area currently described by the cropmark, or has a more complicated structure than can at present be defined.

Period. SA2413 is currently undated. However, limited excavation of other quadrilateral-type single-ditched enclosures in the Welsh Marches points to the probability of either an Iron Age or Romano-British date.

Rarity. Quadrilateral enclosures of various types form the largest and least homogeneous class of enclosure in the Welsh Marches. However, SA2413 is unusual because of the suggestion of a second ditch enclosing part of the central enclosure.

Documentation. CPAT: 79/16/4, 79/57/28, 79/CQ/12, 79/CQ/13.

Group Value. Despite the fact that this general class of 'farmstead' enclosure is the commonest throughout the Welsh Marches, SA2413 is the

and Ordnance Survey mapping, the parishes of Great Ness and Montford are well served by estate maps, comprising 12 maps ranging in date from the mid-17th to 19th centuries. The majority of these maps reflect the gradual improvement of the landscape through enclosure and the application of new farming techniques designed to maximise agricultural production.

Given the open nature of the survey area it is not surprising that no evidence was found for buildings or settlement in the fields affected by the proposed road scheme. Apart from elucidating the general historic development of the landscape around Nesscliffe (above), the main results of the documentary review derived from the field name evidence. The results are listed in Appendix 1, against the modern field numbers (FN) to be used in the second phase of the assessment.

The presence of a number of post-medieval quarries or pits is suggested within the survey area; notably in FN9, FN19, FN21, FN26, FN27, FN29 and FN31. These were probably dug to extract the local sands and gravels; most of the fields in the survey area were enclosed by the 18th century and therefore it is likely that this activity pre-dated or was roughly contemporary with enclosure. In addition, a number of fields have names with possible historical implications. Coney Bank (FN5) may indicate the presence of a rabbit warren, Rag or Rig (FN6, FN7) may refer to land covered with large or rough stones (Field 1972). Marker stones of uncertain antiquity are also noted in FN17 near Wilcott. Finally, Bell Meadow (FN32) may be a reference to the rent of the field supporting the maintenance of the bells of Great Ness church.

None of the above evidence necessitates further work not already outlined in the second phase programme.

Summary and Conclusions

The 'desk top assessment' of the proposed route for the Nesscliffe Bypass has provided a preliminary identification of the archaeological and historical potential of the landscape.

The evidence from aerial photography has indicated that the road scheme will potentially affect a varied range of cropmark sites, whose variety offers the possibility of contributing significantly to the understanding of the early history of this part of the Welsh Marches.

Evidence derived from the documentary prospection for new sites not covered by the County Sites and Monuments Record, while not adding any new features of equivalent importance to the cropmark sites identified from aerial reconnaissance, has clarified the nature of the medieval and post-medieval development of the landscape. The second phase of field investigation should further clarify and shed light on many of the outstanding questions raised in this report.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the staff of the Shropshire Sites and Monuments Record, the County Records and Research Unit, and the Local Studies Library for their help during the research stage of this report. At B.U.F.A.U. the report was edited by Gwilym Hughes, project coordinator, and Simon Buteux, unit manager. The figures were drafted by Nigel Dodds.

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|--------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Buteux, S. & Gaffney, V. | forthcoming | The Wroxeter Hinterland: A Research Design |
| Field, J. | 1972 | English Field Names: A Dictionary |
| Gough, R. | 1700 | The History of Myddle |
| Whimster, R. | 1989 | The Emerging Past: Air Photography and the Buried Landscape |

Estate Maps

Held at Shropshire County Record and Research Office

Parish of Great Ness

Hexley Moor, Kynton. 1650. (Bridgwater Collection
212/466/16)

John Edwards Estate, Nesscliffe. c.1690 (Edwards 93/
872)

Felton Butler Township. c.1728 (Powis Colln. 552/8/
300)

Alderton, T.Wingfield esq. 1756 (Powis Colln. 552/8/
30)

Sir H. Bridgeman's Estate, Nesscliffe. 1768 (3657/2/11)

Wilcott Farm. 1799 (Salt Additional Colln.3652/Large
Map Box)

Wilcott Farm. 1811 (4175/5)

T.Jeffrey's Estate. 1820 (Salt Additional Colln.3651/
Jeff 8.27)

Felton Butler. 1820 (Powis Colln. 552/8/308)

Parish of Montford

Montford. 1683 (Powis Colln.552/8/389)

Ensdon. 1728 (Powis Colln. 552/8/303)

Montford/Great Ness. 1825 (Powis Colln. 552/8/327)

Appendix 1 Field Name Catalogue

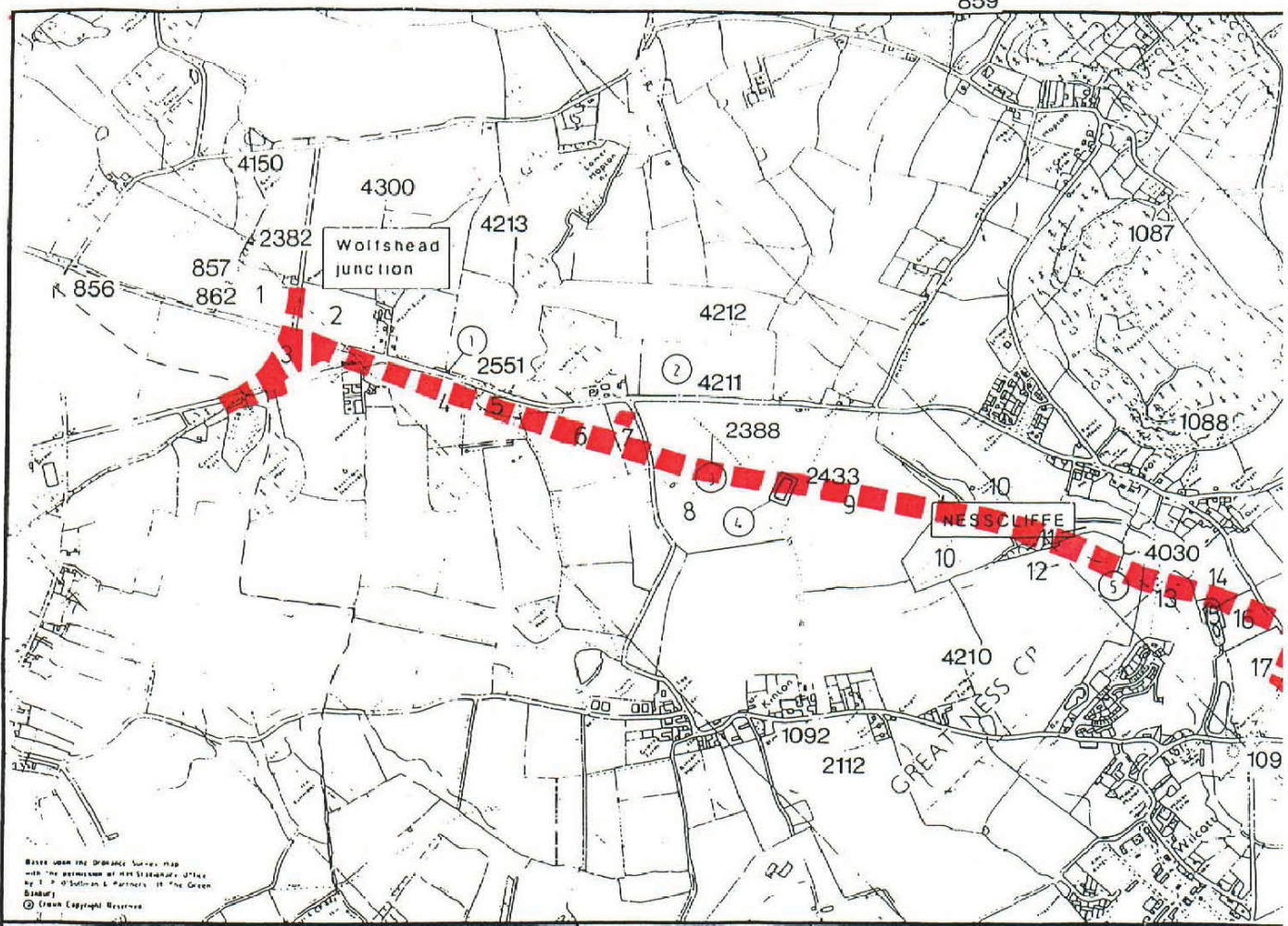
FNo.	Landuse	Significant Field Name
1	Arable	
2	Arable	
3	Arable	
4	Pasture	
5	Woodland	Coney Bank
6	Arable	Raghouse Piece (1768)
7	Arable	Righthouse Croft (1761)
8	Arable	Banky Field, Rughouse Piece
9	Arable	Sandhole and Sut Leasows
10	Arable	(Old Furlongs of Nesscliffe Field)
11	Pasture	(Meadowland)
12	Arable	Big Nesscliffe Field
13	Arable	
14	Pasture	
15	Woodland	Pool and Sling
16	Arable	Pool and Sling
17	Arable	Pool Piece
18	Arable	Crossway Leasow
19	Arable	
20	Arable/Pasture	Clerks Croft, Brickhill Field
21	Arable	Pissing Hill, Broomhill Field
22	Arable	
23	Arable	
24	Arable	
25	Arable	
26	Arable	Gravel Hole Leasow
27	Arable	Gravel Hole Field
28	Arable	
29	Arable	The Pitacres and Quoitings
30	Arable	
31	Arable	Coach Road Field, Gravel Hole Field
32	Arable	Bell Meadow, Millers Gate

List of Figures

Fig.1. Nesscliffe Bypass Proposed Route and Archaeological Survey Area (showing Field Survey Numbers, Shropshire Sites and Monuments numbers, and the approximate line of the proposed road)


Fig.2. Detail of the Rocque County Map of 1751.

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Based upon the Ordnance Survey map with the permission of Her Majesty's Office of Topographical Works, 11 The Green, Reading.

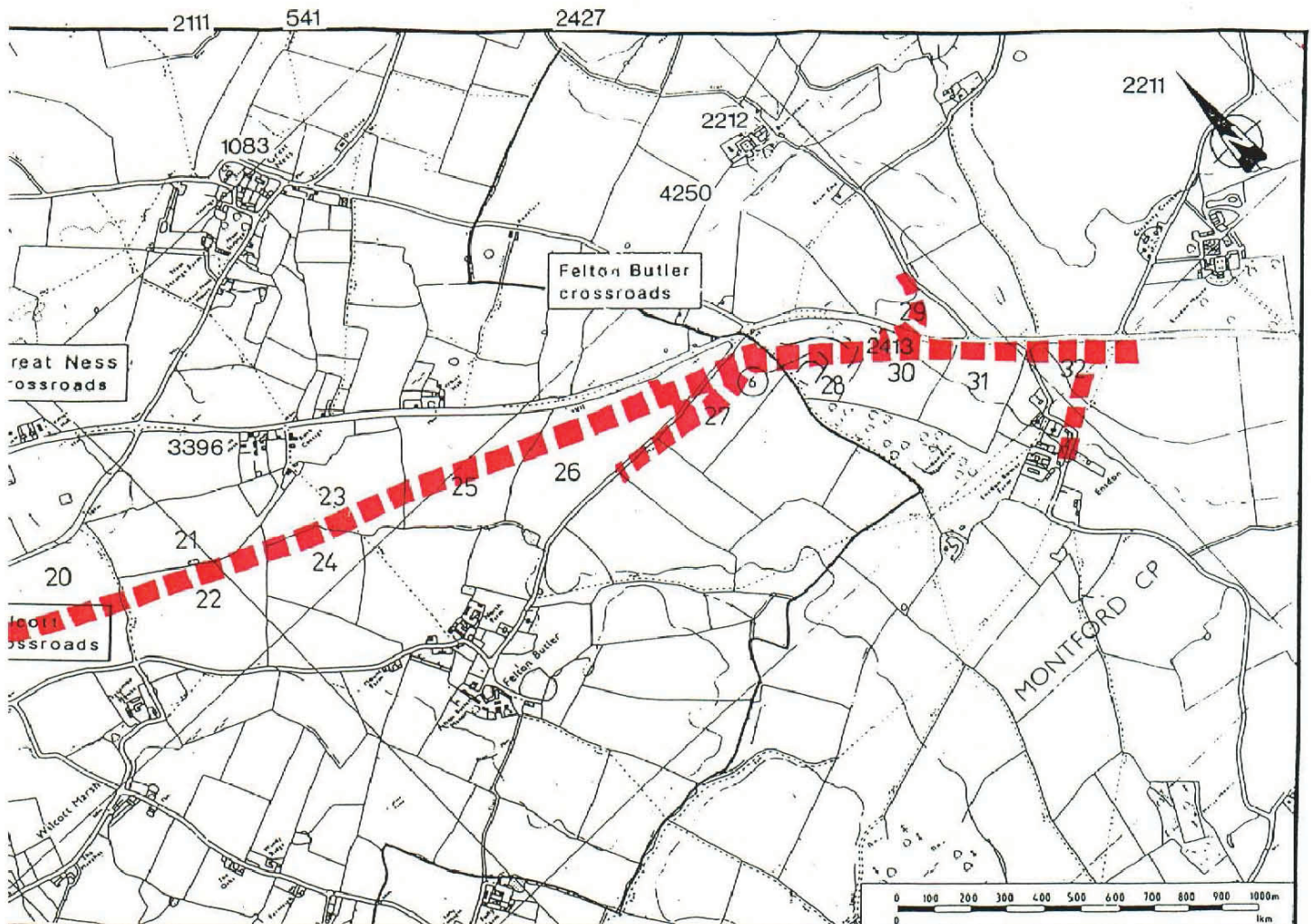
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 THE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT
WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL OFFICE
BIRMINGHAM

A5(T) NESSCLIFFE
BYPASS

SITES



ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTEREST

SCALE 1:10,000

FIGURE B.1



Frank Graham
Consulting Engineers

Figure 1