

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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TOWNSEND CLOSE, ILCHESTER, SOMERSET
An Archaeological Field Survey 1994

by

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1.0: INTRODUCTION

1.1 In July 1994, Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit were commissioned by the Ilchester Town Trust to undertake an archaeological surface survey of a field known as Townsend Close (0032) at Ilchester, Somerset. The survey was prompted by proposals to convert the field for sports facilities following its acquisition by the Town Trust, and on the recommendations of Andrew Davison (Inspector of Ancient Monuments, English Heritage), and Bob Croft (Somerset County Council). The survey comprises a measured instrument survey of all visible earthworks within Townsend Close, and an interpretative commentary on their character and significance. This is required as an accompaniment to any application for a planning consent and Scheduled Ancient Monument consent for the sports field conversion.

2.0: THE SITE

2.1 Townsend Close is a large field (c.6 hectares) of permanent pasture lying within agricultural land just to the south of Ilchester, and centered upon NGR. ST 520223. To the north it is bounded by the slip road which links the A37 with the A303 Ilchester Bypass, construction of which has left a small detached portion of the original field to the north. The Fosse Way forms its northwestern boundary, while to the south and east drainage rhynes separate the field from Wincepool Meadows and Heave Acre, respectively. The whole area is very low-lying and subject to periodic inundation by flooding of the River Yeo. Several sets of earthwork features are currently visible on the surface of the field, indicative of several earlier phases of land use. In the south east corner a semi-circular area has been designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Somerset SAM.512).

2.2 Archaeological evidence from Townsend Close has been obtained and recorded primarily through fieldwork undertaken within the past twenty years. Of this, the most extensive was excavation and field recording carried out in connection with construction of the A37 Ilchester Bypass slip-road in 1975-6 (4.1&2, and Leach 1982). This provided an east-west profile of archaeological remains across what is now the northern boundary of the field, and an indication of what can be expected to survive further to the south. The bulk of this relates to Ilchester's Romano-British suburban development alongside the east side of the Fosse Way, although this is not clearly reflected in surviving surface traces today.

In the early 1980s, fieldwork and the examination of aerial photographs led to the recognition of a large but much degraded earthwork enclosure within these meadows (4.6). This was verified through the recording of public utility pipelines in 1982 and 1983 (Leach & Ellis 1994); the latter across Townsend Close (4.4). These discoveries led to further controlled excavations to sample the site in 1984 and 1985 (Leach and Thew 1985). The second was located close to the 1983 gas pipeline (4.5) and provided some of the clearest evidence of a late pre-Roman Iron Age date for the enclosure. As

a result of these discoveries the whole enclosure is now protected as a scheduled Ancient Monument.

No further archaeological investigations or discoveries are known to have taken place in Townsend Close until the present survey.

3.0: THE SURVEY

3.1 The field survey was undertaken in July 1994 using a Sokkisha Set 3 Total Station electronic distance measurer (EDM). This was employed to obtain an accurate measured survey of all the earthwork remains identified within Townsend Close. The data obtained forms the basis of a hachured survey plan depicting these remains and produced for the purposes of this commission at a scale of 1:1250 (Fig.1). At the time of survey (July) conditions were unfavourable for good observation and recording of earthworks due to ungrazed or mown summer plant growth. Despite this, the survey results and their interpretation could be enhanced with the assistance of aerial photographs and the author's existing detailed knowledge of the ground and the local archaeological context. The archive of original survey drawings and logged data is currently held by the Field Archaeology Unit at the University of Birmingham.

4.0: COMMENTARY

An interpretative commentary relating to the recorded earthworks and other archaeological remains known or postulated to survive within Townsend Close is made with reference to Figure 1. Earthwork features or localities are numbered 1-12 and discussed in that order, with a concluding section on Townsend Close itself as a land unit.

4.1 The remains of Romano-British stone-founded buildings and associated structures were encountered and recorded during excavations in 1975 in advance of road construction (4.2). These remains are part of a suburban ribbon development extending southwards along both sides of the Fosse Way from the core area of the Roman town site at Ilchester (Leach & Dunning 1990).

4.2 Excavations in Townsend Close in 1975 on the proposed line of the A37 slip road revealed not only Romano-British suburban buildings (4.1), but the enclosures and some of the activities associated with them, including part of a 4th-century cemetery. Beneath the Roman remains was evidence of earlier Iron Age occupation, and some later remains of medieval and post-medieval suburban development. Beyond the limits of formal excavation to the east, observation and recording during subsequent road construction suggests a sparser continuation of mainly Romano-British features and deposits surviving beneath a thin mantle of post-Roman alluviation (Leach 1982, Part III).

4.3 Further evidence for the survival of structural remains and associated Romano-British features were recorded from a gas pipeline trench excavated in 1983 (Ellis 1994). This, and the evidence recorded in 1976 (4.2), suggests a zone extending up to 100m back from the Fosse Way road frontage within which archaeological evidence relating to the Roman suburbs may survive.

4.4 The excavation of a gas supply pipeline across Townsend Close in 1983 was archaeologically monitored and recorded. In addition to the remains encountered above (4.3), its line intersected at almost 90 degrees the prehistoric enclosure bank recognised

by previous fieldwork and proven by a similar water pipeline section across the enclosure in Heave Acre the previous year (Leach & Ellis 1994).

4.5 Following the identification of the large embanked enclosure as of probable Iron Age date (4.6), further research excavations were mounted in 1984 and 1985 to obtain more details of the monument (Leach & Thew 1985). A trench cut adjacent to the 1983 gas pipeline (4.4) provided a section through the broad clay rampart and its front drystone revetment of lias limestone. To the rear were the remains of a circular structure containing substantial quantities of late Iron Age pottery, slag and animal bone. This excavation has provided one of the best indicators of the period and social context for the monument as a whole.

4.6 The south east corner of Townsend Close is occupied by part of the large Iron Age enclosure (4.4 & 4.5), first identified in the early 1980s. Here, its visible remains comprise a very broad and low semicircular spread bank, c 30m wide and now standing no more than 0.40m above the adjacent meadows. A concentric outer ditch, 10-12m wide and at least 2m deep has been located to the north west but is no longer visible as a surface earthwork. The area scheduled as an Ancient Monument (Somerset SAM.512) includes both the bank and the now concealed line of the outer ditch, as well as the interior of the enclosure. The bank continues eastwards into Heave Acre as a relatively well marked surface feature, but becomes less pronounced to the west where eventually it seems to have been obliterated by part of the field boundary ditch separating Townsend Close from Wincepool Meadow.

4.7 A large block of medieval ridge and furrow earthworks occupy the north east quadrant of the field. The field survey and aerial photographs suggest that this survived as a complete and homogenous block until cut through by the slip road to the north in 1976. The earthworks are not strongly defined, though relatively clear, and at their southern end appear to conform with the curving alignment of the earlier Iron Age bank remains, upon which they also encroach. A low and apparently separately defined bank, which is concentric with and inside the line of the prehistoric bank, is probably the outermost ridge of this cultivation episode. Evidence from the road construction monitoring and the gas pipeline (4.2 & 4.4) demonstrates that the ridge and furrow was created following an episode of alluviation here which seals a Romano-British land surface.

4.8 The ridge and furrow earthworks (4.7) terminate westwards at a broad, low and sometimes indistinctly defined bank extending south east into the field from near the Fosse Way road frontage. This may represent a ploughing headland created at the southwest end of the ridge and furrow, but also marks a boundary between the latter and the ditched enclosures further to the south west (4.10).

4.9 A low, broadly-spread bank is present alongside and parallel with the Fosse Way to the west. This feature was observed in 1975 during excavations across it in advance of road construction (4.2), and appears to correspond with structural remains and other archaeological deposits still surviving along both sides of the road frontage (4.1). A series of low platforms and undulations towards the north-east end of the earthwork could reflect some underlying structural features of either Roman or later date here, if not the outcome of more modern disturbances. In Townsend Close this feature becomes gradually less prominent towards the south west, suggesting that the density or survival of suburban remains decreases in that direction. The encroachment upon it of what should be earthworks of medieval or later origin (4.7, 4.8 & 4.10) and the evidence from earlier excavation just to the north, suggests that this earthwork is primarily of Romano-British origin. A shallow slope or ditch separating it from the margin of the road is probably a post-medieval drainage feature, possibly originating with the mid-18th-century redefinition of the Fosse Way as a turnpike road (VCH 1975, 182).

4.10 The south west corner of the field is sub-divided by clearly defined ditches into four irregular rectilinear enclosures. The largest central ditch has a broad flat bottom and steep sides, and may originally have been linked with the rhyne which still carries a branch of the Bearley Brook along the southern boundary of the field. The whole system was probably laid out to improve the drainage of this area and create enclosures which could be contemporary with the medieval ridge and furrow (4.7) to the north east.

4.11 A narrow ditch linking two ditches of the larger rectilinear system (4.10) is probably associated with it but appears to be a later addition; more likely of post-medieval date.

4.12 A somewhat irregular system of narrow rectilinear ditches in the southern corner of the field are almost certainly of post-medieval origin. These were also provided to improve drainage in the low-lying meadows, and similar more extensive systems can be seen in adjacent fields.

Finally, Townsend Close itself as a land unit is worthy of some consideration. The field was almost certainly created by post-medieval enclosure of the water meadows south of Ilchester, and bounded originally on three sides by drainage rhyne. The periodic cleaning out of these ditches has resulted in narrow earthwork banks alongside their courses. One of the earliest map depictions of fields in this area (Dutchy of Cornwall 1776) suggests that the branch of the Bearley Brook which separates Townsend Close from Wincepool Meadow to the south still follows a very similar course, although it is not clear whether the division between Heave Acre and Townsend Close existed at that time. By the time of the first 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map edition of 1885 the field had attained its present form, although subdivided into two halves by an east-west hedge or fence boundary, no sign of which survives as a surface feature today. The most recent modification to it has arisen from construction of the A37 link road and the consequent detachment of a small portion of the original field to the north.

5.0: SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 The field known as Townsend Close presents a palimpsest of archaeological features and remains, from the later prehistoric to post-medieval periods, many of which are still reflected in surviving earthworks. Inevitably perhaps, those of later date have the greatest prominence, although it may be argued that the importance of archaeological remains surviving in this area is in inverse proportion to their prominence as earthworks. Quite apart from the effects of superimposition of later features upon earlier remains, alluviation in the valley of the River Yeo has also contributed to the obscuring of older landscapes while at the same time aiding in their preservation. There is now widespread evidence for significant late Iron Age/early Roman and post-Roman alluviation episodes in this part of the valley, the latest phases of a much more extended process (Leach 1988 and Thew 1994). Here, the most dramatic effect has been upon the prehistoric enclosure, whose virtual invisibility today owes much to these latest episodes. Limited excavations have demonstrated the much better preservation of important archaeological features and deposits belied by the insignificant visible surface remains; justifying the scheduling of this monument as a site of national importance.

Of hardly less significance are the remains of suburban roadside development flanking the Fosse Way, which relates to the historic town centre of Ilchester. The most important remains probably lie within the still visible earthwork (4.9) closest to the

road, although to the east further evidence now lies buried invisibly beneath 0.20-0.30m of post-Roman alluviation. Once again, excavation and recording has sampled the potential of these remains, and although not scheduled as an Ancient Monument, it is clear that important sequences of prehistoric, Romano-British and perhaps medieval/post-medieval archaeology survive in this zone.

Excepting the potential for medieval suburban remains close to the Fosse Way, most of the evidence for land use in this period is still visible on the surface of the field today. The ridge and furrow earthworks are representatives of still relatively well preserved evidence of medieval arable strip cultivation on the sites of the former open fields around Ilchester (Ellis & Ellison 1994). To the south west, rectilinear enclosures defined by drainage ditches may well be broadly contemporary, although there is no certain information relating to their origin or specific function. Post-medieval land use involved the creation of Townsend Close itself, in all probability the cutting of surrounding and still operational drainage rhynes, and the cutting of more localised drainage networks within the field. The latter are most apparent in the southern corner (4.12), although the ditched enclosures (4.10) to the south west could equally have been created in this period.

5.2 Proposals to create a range of sporting and recreational facilities in Townsend Close will inevitably have an effect upon the visible pattern of surviving earthworks. The importance of this group as representing so long a span and wide a range of past land use in the near environs of Ilchester must be emphasised. However, in the interests of the potential social requirements and benefit of this site to the local community, the following recommendations for mitigating the effects of such a conversion upon the archaeological resource are proposed.

- i) Any disturbance or removal of surviving earthworks through excavation works should be avoided wherever possible. The area adjacent to the Fosse Way (4.9) is particularly sensitive in this respect. Permission for any such disturbance in the area of the scheduled Ancient Monument is in any event unlikely to be granted.
- ii) Where any excavation works beyond the removal of surface vegetation and turf are unavoidable, this should be preceded by a proper archaeological investigation and be subject to specifications approved by the County Field Archaeologist and/or the Department of the Environment if involving the scheduled area.
- iii) Wherever possible it is desirable that levels be raised to bury upstanding earthwork features in those areas where levelled surfaces or structures are required.
- iv) Further consultation with the County Field Archaeologist is advised before the submission of any detailed planning application, and will be required with English Heritage for any proposals affecting the area of the Scheduled Ancient Monument 512.
- v) Subject to the approval of a satisfactory conversion scheme for Townsend Close, some provision for professional archaeological monitoring may be required at certain stages of the work.

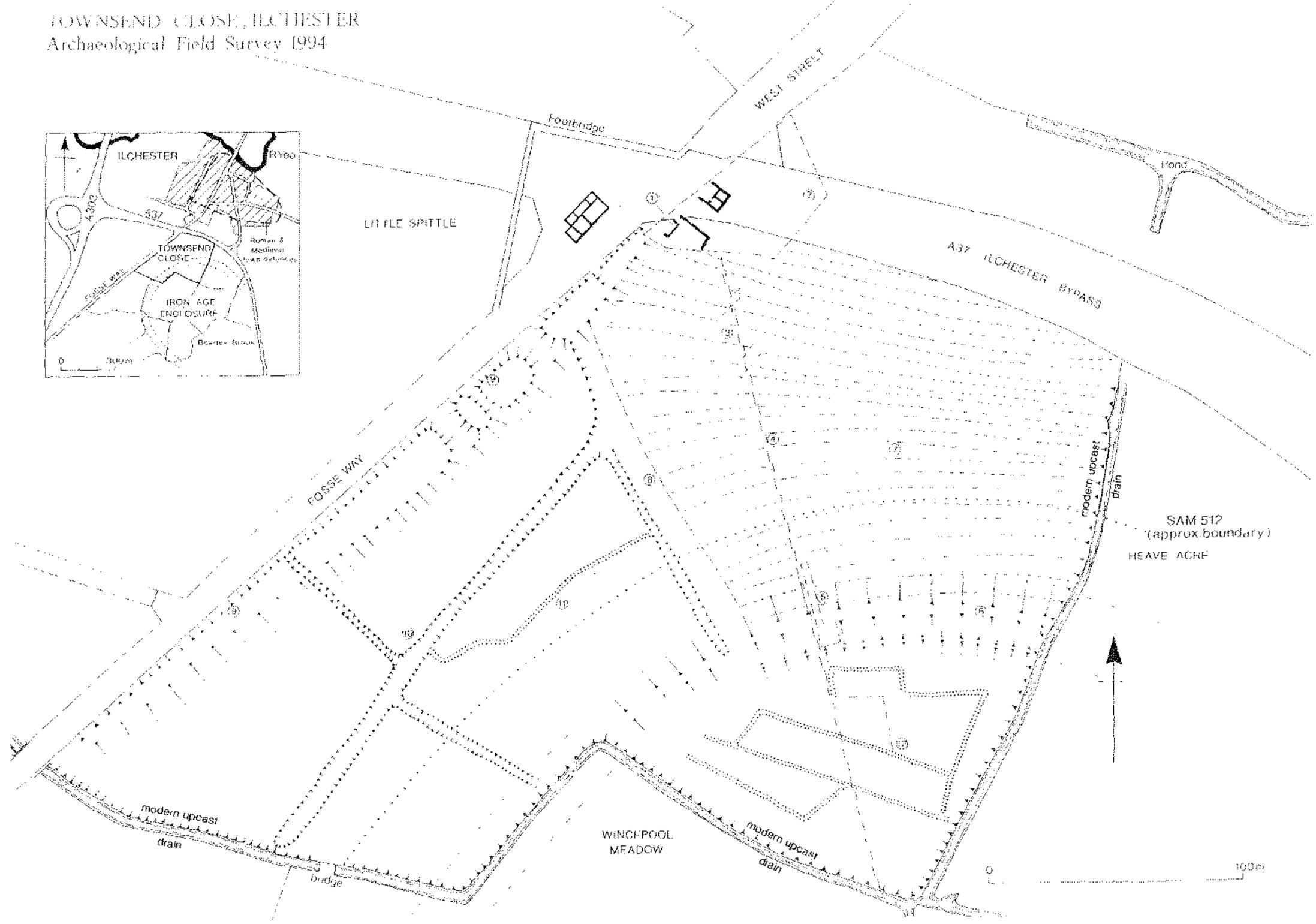
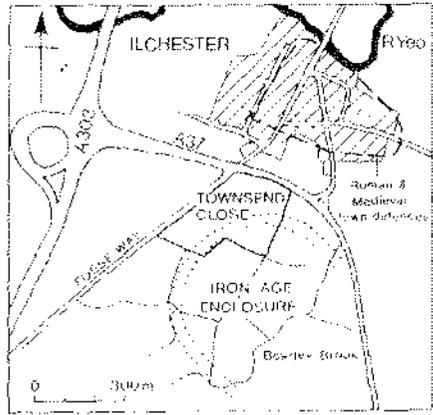
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7.0: Acknowledgements

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SAM 512
 (approx. boundary)
 HEAVE ACRE

100m