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## Northamptonshire Archaeology

Archaeological Walkover Earthwork Survey at

Owston Big Wood

Leicestershire

January 2007



Carol Simmonds

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Report 07/18

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**QUALITY CONTROL**

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**OASIS REPORT FORM**

PROJECT DETAILS		
Project name	Walkover Earthwork Survey at Owston Big Wood, Leicestershire	
Short description	Northamptonshire Archaeology was commissioned by the Forestry Commission to carry out a walkover survey in Owston Big Wood, Leicestershire. During the survey, accessibility to areas of woodland and flora coverage was assessed. The features noted included an extensive probable multi-phased layout of an earlier enclosure system, and a series of woodland earthworks and drainage ditches.	
Project type	Walkover Earthwork survey	
Site status		
Previous work		
Current Land use	Woodland	
Future work	Unknown	
Monument type/ period	Enclosure system and woodland earthworks	
Significant finds		
PROJECT LOCATION		
County	Leicestershire	
Site address	Owston Big Wood, nr Owston, Leicestershire	
Study area	101ha	
OS Easting & Northing	SK 790 065	
Height OD	200m	
PROJECT CREATORS		
Organisation	Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Project brief originator		
Project Design originator		
Supervisor	Carol Simmonds Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Project Manager	Anthony Maull Northamptonshire Archaeology	
Sponsor or funding body	Forestry Commission	
PROJECT DATE		
Start date	22/1/07	
End date	26/1/07	
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**Archaeological Walkover Earthwork Survey**  
**at Owston Big Wood**  
**Leicestershire**  
**January 2007**

***Abstract***

*Northamptonshire Archaeology was commissioned by the Forestry Commission to carry out a walkover survey in Owston Big Wood, Leicestershire. During the survey, accessibility to areas of woodland and flora coverage was assessed in order to identify potential archaeological features. A number of features were noted including an early multi-phased enclosure system, and a series of woodland earthworks and drainage ditches.*

**1 INTRODUCTION**

Northamptonshire Archaeology was commissioned by the Forestry Commission to undertake a walkover survey encompassing 102ha at Owston Big Wood, Leicestershire (Fig 1 centred on NGR SK 760 065). The site is situated south of the villages of Owston and Knossington, about 2km west of the county boundary between Leicestershire and Rutland.

The woodland is managed by the Forestry Commission but is owned by a separate landowner who retains shooting rights. Owston Big Wood is not open to the public.

The woodland area is divided into several woodland management areas including a MB 45 defined by rides, tracks or fencelines. The geology of the area comprises Diamicton Till overlying lias clays (<http://www.bgms.ac.uk>). The elevation is at an average height of 200m OD (Fig 2).

**2 OBJECTIVES**

The overall objective, as defined by the Forestry Commission, is to aid and inform the Commission's long term management of Northamptonshire Forest District woodlands through a programme of rapid documentary research and field survey. This will include the identification of location, extent, nature, importance and management requirements of visible archaeological and historic remains. The counties of Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, Rutland and Lincolnshire all come under the umbrella of Northamptonshire Forest District.

**3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

No previous archaeological survey has been conducted in Owston Big Wood. However, at the time of survey it was pointed out by staff from the Forestry Commission that there were potential anomalies in the middle part of the survey area.

The first edition Ordnance Survey map dating from 1889-1891 (Fig 3, [www.oldmaps.com](http://www.oldmaps.com)) illustrates that the landscape features have not changed with the

exception of some additional possible rides or tracks in the area of c MB/RC 45/45. This is in addition to a 'Pheasantry' enclosure, which presumably was a hut or fenced area to control pheasants for sport.

During the reporting stage a search of the National Monuments Record (NMR) data for the woodland area and its environs was undertaken (Fig 4). This indicated a broad range of activity from prehistoric times until the 20th century.

#### **National Monuments Records (NMR)**

NMR data was collected using the online Arts and Humanities Data Service (Archaeology Data Service) for an area 3km around Owston Big Wood (Fig 4). A total of nine sites were identified and they are referenced by their NMR number unless otherwise stated.

**CBA\_DOB-524-** Type FW3/22 pillbox dating from World War II

**321115-** Alleged site of Roman settlement

**321118-** Sauvey Castle is a Scheduled Ancient Monument comprising a ringwork and bailey castle built in the reign of Stephen (1135-54)

**321135-** Withcote Parish Church, medieval in origin with later additional features

**527239-** Withcote Chaple, medieval in origin with later additional features

**964898-** Owston Park, a medieval deer park, extant in 1279, but fell into disuse after the Black Death (14th century)

**965093-** Withcote Hall, early 18th century country house with 19th century restoration

**965094-** A 15th century manorial chapel, refurbished c 1744

**965095-** An alleged deserted medieval village at Withcote

## **4 METHODOLOGY**

The archaeological walkover survey was undertaken in January 2007 to allow for optimum visibility of the woodland landscape. Surveying conditions were generally good, although there were areas of impaired visibility due to heavy undergrowth or impassable ground (Fig 5). Ground conditions were at times wet especially the woodland rides which were in the process of being re-defined by contractors at the time of survey (Plate 2). Certain areas were also impossible to survey owing to lines of felled trees blocking transects and lines of sight.

The results are listed according to the Forestry Commission woodland management areas and sub-areas to enable ease of reference, eg *a MB 45* (Fig 2). They are listed in full as a heading for any archaeological features, but thereafter they are abbreviated to their first two phrases. Where necessary an assessment of ground visibility was undertaken, the results of which listed in the text under the relevant management division (Fig 5).

A small area of woodland to the south of *f AH/AR/~ 45/62/~* was not surveyed as this fell outside of the contracted survey area.

The walkover survey methodology followed the general technique developed for the Salcey Forest Survey and other woodland surveys in Northamptonshire, Peterborough and Milton Keynes forests (Hall 1996 and 2001, Simco 2003, NA 2006).

Each section of the woodland, as defined by present ridings, paths or woodland management areas, was walked in transects of approximately 50m intervals. Earthworks and other features were sketch plotted and located onto a series of base maps, with an indication as to preservation and condition. Where earthworks were identified the full outline was measured and plotted.

A qualitative record of the tree and vegetation cover of each section was made indicated by colour shading the ground visibility. This indicated where the undergrowth was so thick that walking was impossible, and also recording 'good', 'fair' and 'poor' categories (Fig 5).

Overall photographs of each woodland area and potential feature were taken using a digital camera from a variety of directions. A record of photographs taken was entered on a cross-referenced index sheet.

## 5 WALKOVER SURVEY RESULTS

### General Introduction

A woodland boundary defined by a bank and ditch, encloses the entire site (Fig 6). Its overall condition was very good with well defined earthworks, where the bank has a maximum width of 5m and is 1m high. The ditch has a maximum width of 5m and depth of 1m. In places, the ditch had been recut to aid drainage, especially where woodland drainage ditches feed into it. However, the eastern boundary of the north-western segment of management area *a MB 45* was defined by a broad shallow ditch, some 3m wide and 0.5m deep (Fig 6).

Within the woodland boundary a series of coppice enclosures, defined by ditches and banks have been identified. Unless otherwise stated, the ditch is on the outside of the enclosure with the bank just within it. On average the ditches have a gradual to steeply sloped profile with a sharp break of slope and are between 0.5m-1m wide. The banks have rounded profiles and average between 2-3m wide.

A network of rides and tracks and associated drainage ditches divide the wood and these are listed where pertinent. Some of the mapped rides and tracks could not be identified on the ground when the survey was undertaken due to undergrowth, disturbance or the discrete nature of the tracks.

### Management Areas

#### *Area a MB 45* (Figs 2, 5 and 6, Plate 2)

This area is located in the eastern part of the wood and is divided into four unequal segments but is divided by the rides (Fig 2). The tree cover is mainly deciduous with occasional evergreen. Topographically this area is extremely variable with some natural steep gradients especially within the southern half. At the base of many of these valleys are shallow water-bearing channels which appear to reflect the topography. In places they may have been recut to aid drainage of the woodland floor. The streams and ditches tend to be sinuous and vary in width from 0.25-0.75m wide. The surface visibility was predominantly fair with the occasional areas of heavy undergrowth and piled felled logs especially along the edge of the central east to west aligned ride.

No distinct archaeological remains other than woodland management boundaries were

identified. Coppice ditches and banks, with the ditch on the outside of the enclosure were recorded in three areas. Preservation varied considerably and the south-western segment has the most extensive coppice boundary. The other areas where ditch and bank earthworks occur are partially extant.

*Areas e AH/-/OK/~45/-/66/~ & g SY/MB/-67/40/-* (Figs 2, 5 and 6)

The tree cover for these two areas is mixed deciduous and evergreen and surface visibility was good (Fig 2). The area slopes upwards from the north-east corner to the south-west and the western side. There is a deep sloping valley aligned roughly south-east to north-west with a stream at its base. This begins about 100m north from the south-eastern boundary. A small part of the area measuring 45m by 45m was not walked due to it being enclosed by wire fencing. Also, an area measuring 150m long and 10m wide along the north-eastern boundary and side was not surveyed, due to the presence of piles of felled logs.

There is a coppice ditch and bank enclosing the 7ha area. For the most part it is well defined and in excellent condition, the only part where it is less well defined is on the south-western edge.

*Areas c MB/RC 45/45, h SY 66, b MB/- 30/-, f AH/-/AR/~45/-62/~, g, j AR 45 & d AH/-/OK/~ 62/-/45/~* (Figs 2, 5-7)

These areas located in the central part of the surveyed woodland (encompassing 34ha in total) have been grouped together as they comprise a landscape of earthwork enclosures, which if isolated would make little sense (Fig 2).

Area *c MB/RC* was an area of dense evergreen plantation which meant that visibility for location of features was limited (Fig 5). Surface visibility and use varied considerably across the area. However, the lack of other ground cover such as brambles meant that archaeological remains were well preserved. The other areas were all mixed woodland and varied from good to fair visibility.

A network of broad shallow ditches, and bank and ditches were plotted (Fig 6). Of note is Feature 1 which possibly forms a south-eastern corner of an incomplete enclosure defined by a bank and ditch. A second adjoining enclosure, defined by a bank and ditch is located to the south (Fig 7). The eastern arm of the secondary enclosure was noted entering the survey area from the south-east. There are other north-west to south-east linear ditches which are aligned parallel to the eastern arm of Feature 1. Feature 2 comprises two linear shallow ditches each measuring around 4m wide, and they appear to truncate Feature 1. The last feature within the area is Feature 3, which comprises a 600m long bank and ditch aligned east to west, truncating Feature 1.

Where they exist, coppice bank and ditches truncate or cut earlier features. The network of drainage ditches or streams again reflect the landscape topography, with streams lying at the base of valleys.

*Area to the north of c MB/RC 45/45* (Figs 2, 5 and 6)

This is an oblong area defined by the woodland boundary on three sides and a track or ride along the southern edge (Fig 2). Surface visibility was good with the only features of note being a network of drainage ditches reflecting the local topography.

*Areas h EM/AH 40/40, j EL 61 & I SY/RC/- 61/61/-* (Figs 2, 5 and 6)



This comprises three mixed use management areas located in the north-west of the wood (Fig 2). The ground was generally fair with an area of poor visibility owing to heavy undergrowth (Fig 5). Little was noted apart from a mapped drainage ditch along the woodland boundary, and a shallow *c* 50m long east to west aligned ditch.

*Areas d EL/BE/- 60/60/-, c & c BE/MB/EM/~ 61/40/40/~* (Figs 2, 5 and 6)

This comprises three mixed use management areas located in the west of the wood. Visibility was fair with isolated areas of heavy undergrowth or fallen trees.

A clearly defined coppice ditch and bank delineates the area. The enclosure or woodland enclosure systems noted in *c* MB/RC etc possibly continue with four north to south aligned bank and ditches identified. The most notable is Feature 5 on the western edge of the area, a north-east to south-west aligned bank and ditch parallel with the western edge of the woodland boundary. Here there is a discreet bank outside of the woodland in the adjacent field with the woodland ditch and bank within it. Further to the east is an additional ditch and bank with the ditch measuring 2m wide and less than 0.5m deep. The bank measures 2.5m wide and is 0.50m high (Fig 6).

Of the other earthworks Feature 6 is a north-west to south-east aligned ditch and bank measuring 130m long, which appears to be on the same alignment as a field boundary to the north. The bank measures 5m wide and 0.5m high and the ditch measures 5m wide and 0.5m deep.

Feature 7 comprises a 43m long, north-east to south-west aligned bank and ditch which may have joined with Feature 3 (Fig 7).

*Area a MB/RC/BE/~ 40/62/62/~* (Figs 2, 5 and 6, Plate 1)

This trapezoidal area slopes down from the north-eastern ride to the south-western ride and comprises mixed woodland (Fig 2). Visibility was for the most part fair with occasional poor areas due to heavy tree and undergrowth cover. Piles of felled logs mask about 100m along the north-eastern ride and 70m along the northern arm of the trapezoid.

A clearly defined coppice bank and ditch exists along the southern boundary of the area and on the north-eastern corner. It is generally in good condition for much of the southern stretch but dissipates towards the east. There are three shallow linear depressions each one averaging around 30m in length. It is possible that they are animal, naturally occurring anomalies or hollow-ways.

*Area e CP/MB/- 64/40/-* (Figs 2, 5 and 6)

This area is located in the south-western corner of the wood and comprises two areas divided by a track with ditch/stream parallel to a north-east to south-west aligned track (Fig 2). The area slopes down from north-east to south-west to a stream at the base of slope and which forms part of the woodland boundary. The woodland boundary ditch in this area is a deep cutting stream with a discreet bank in places.

The western part of the area was largely inaccessible and was not surveyed apart from around its fringes. This was due to the often dense mixed woodland with blackthorn and bramble bush. There were areas which were clear of cover and no features were noted in these areas.

The eastern part of the area had been largely felled at the time of survey so cover was

light. However, the survey was hampered by areas of piled felled logs and by modern vehicle tracks disturbing the ground surface.

The only possible individual archaeological element was an isolated zone on the eastern edge of this area of two or three low linear parallel banks measuring 4m wide and less than 0.25m high. They exist on average for 15m to 20m and are aligned north-west to south-east. It is possible that they represent ridge and furrow belonging to an earlier agricultural landscape.

*Areas f MB/RC 40/66, g MB/SY 64/40, b CP/MB/- 66/40/- & f* (Figs 2, 5 and 6)

This is located in the western part of the wood, and comprises four areas of 9ha mixed woodland with a valley aligned north-east to south-west through the centre (Fig 2). A stream is at the base of the valley and turns towards the east at about 50m from the eastern ride. A secondary stream feeds into it on the western side of the valley (Fig 6). The visibility was on the whole fair with only small parts covered by piles of felled logs. There were also several disused modern track ways cutting across the areas.

The woodland boundary exists with a 50m long shallow but wide depression on the inside of the bank. A shallow drainage ditch associated with the rides or possible coppice boundary exists in places. It is of little note except for the fact that in two isolated areas there are ditch and banks feeding into or relating to it. There are also two long linear depressions adjacent to the western ride which may be geological. Each averages between 4m and 6m wide and follow the gradient of the slope down into the valley.

## 6 DISCUSSION

The walkover survey at Owston Big Wood achieved a relative chronology for the area, mainly through looking at the cutting and truncation of earthworks by later features. No absolute dating was possible.

The full research potential of the survey could be achieved if a thorough archive search was undertaken to ascertain its potential status as Ancient Woodland. In particular how the woodland relates to the Domesday Survey and the post-Norman landscape. The presence of Owston Park, a medieval deer park identified during the NMR search, should also be looked at as this may account for some of the archaeological features identified.

The presence of potential ridge and furrow was identified in a single isolated area, defined by a series of linear banks. The preservation of the ridge and furrow is by and large good, despite the fact that some examples may represent where flora activity has affected the surface.

The woodland boundary varies in condition and in nature. In places the outer ditch utilises a natural stream, into which woodland ditches and streams feed. In others a bank is more extant, presumably made from the upcast of ditch cutting. It is difficult to say whether a bank originally circumvented the perimeter or whether part of the stream that acts as a woodland ditch is naturally occurring. Where applicable, a selection of trial archaeological trenches and environmental sampling may be undertaken to clarify usage over time and any identify any potential buried palaeo-environmental data. The woodland boundary is likely to be of importance to the local landscape. However, this is dependent on any further research into its status as ancient woodland and its long and

continual use. If Owston Big Wood had been larger in the past it might offer an indication into how the wood and landscape has altered.

The mapped enclosure system in the middle third of the wood is of unknown date and function. It is probable that there are three phases of activity forming regular and irregular enclosed landscapes. It is also probable that at least two systems, features 1 and 2, pre-date the woodland (). Features 3, 4, 5 and 7 may represent early woodland boundaries, whilst feature 6 may represent a continuation in an existing field boundary.

Many of the earthworks are well preserved and would benefit from a full detailed earthwork survey with subsequent limited archaeological test excavation of the bank and ditch system may be sufficient. This exercise may be successful in characterising the earthworks further and provide any dating by finds retrieval to elucidate any potential chronology. Aerial photography of adjoining fields to the north may, in the right conditions, reveal whether the earthwork continues as a potential negative feature. The enclosure system's significance is likely to have only local importance at this stage. It may have been part of the wider local landscape of either the prehistoric to medieval periods. What makes it more interesting is its survival in woodland as a positive feature as opposed to a negative ploughed out ditch. The presence of archaeological features on ridges and higher ground overlooking valleys with ditches or streams at the base is also interesting.

Of the coppice enclosures it is unclear as to what age they could belong to. This presents a difficulty when trying to assign a measure of importance. If it could be proven that the coppice enclosures were early (Domesday or later medieval) then they would have regional significance in the management of an Ancient Woodland. If, on the other hand, they are post-medieval then they would likely be of only local significance. The indication given by the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map (Fig 3) is that the existing rides and general areas were certainly in use in the latter part of the 19th century.

The drainage ditch network within the survey area was extensive. In most cases the drainage ditches lie at the base of deep valleys within the woodland which are not accounted for on the contour survey of the Ordnance Survey maps. It is likely that most of these are natural streams or have been deliberately cut to allow for the flow of water along the forest floor. In places around the base of the valleys the ground was wet and boggy. They are of more importance from a geological or topographical point of view rather than archaeological.

7 **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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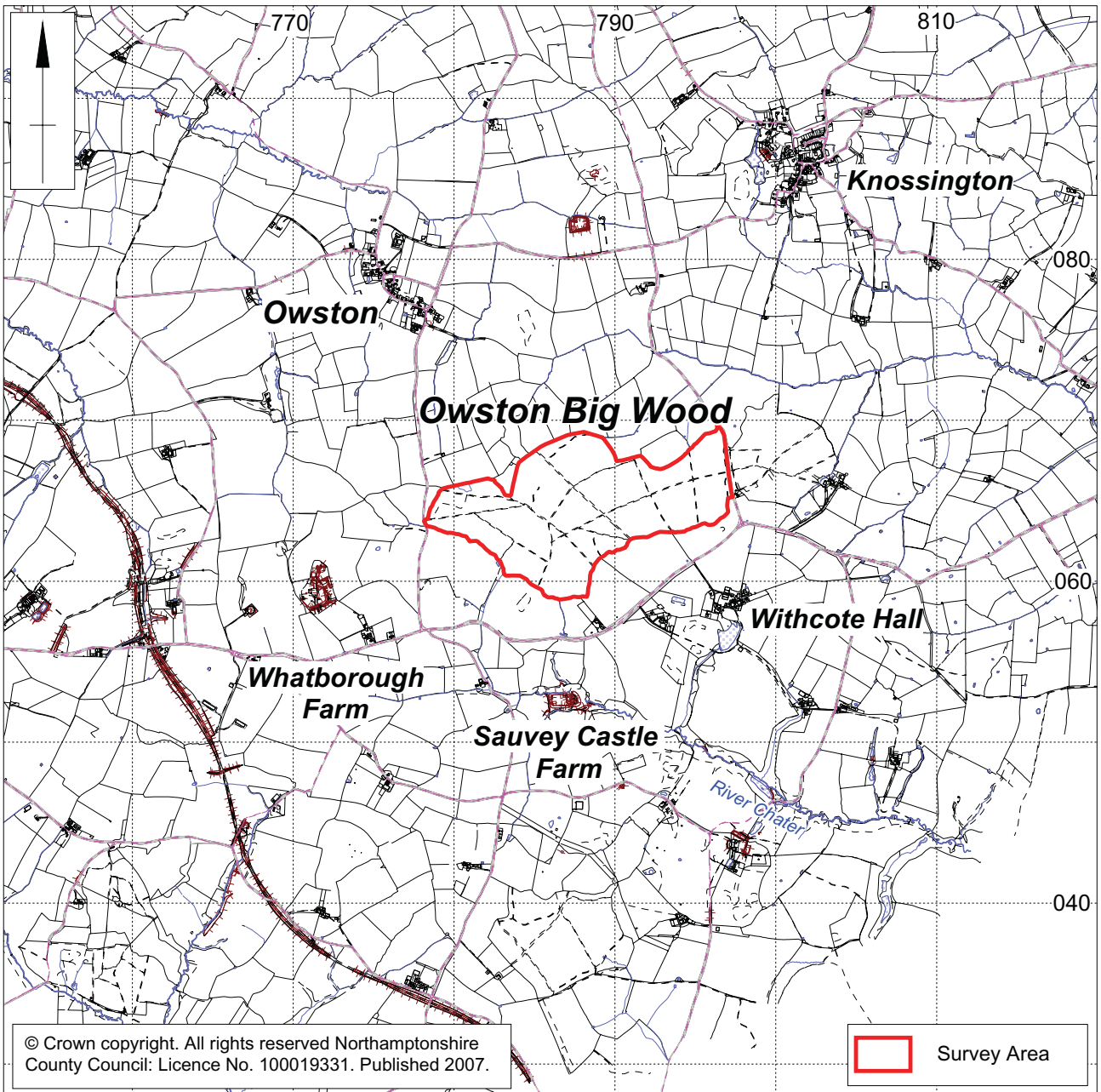
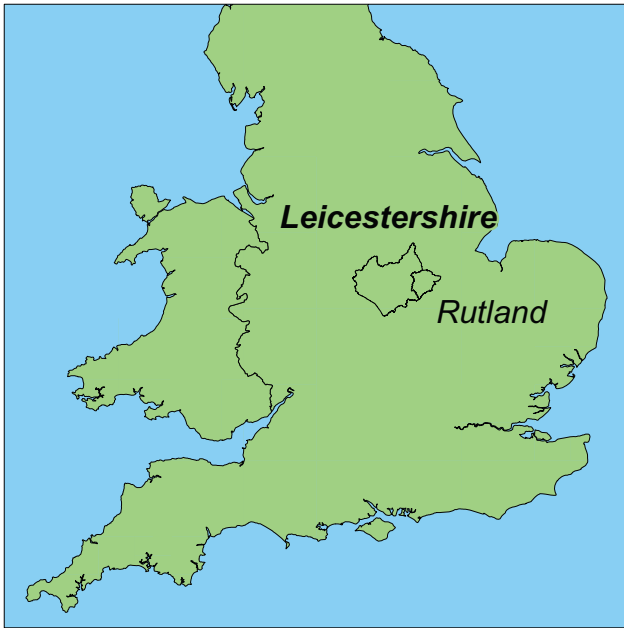
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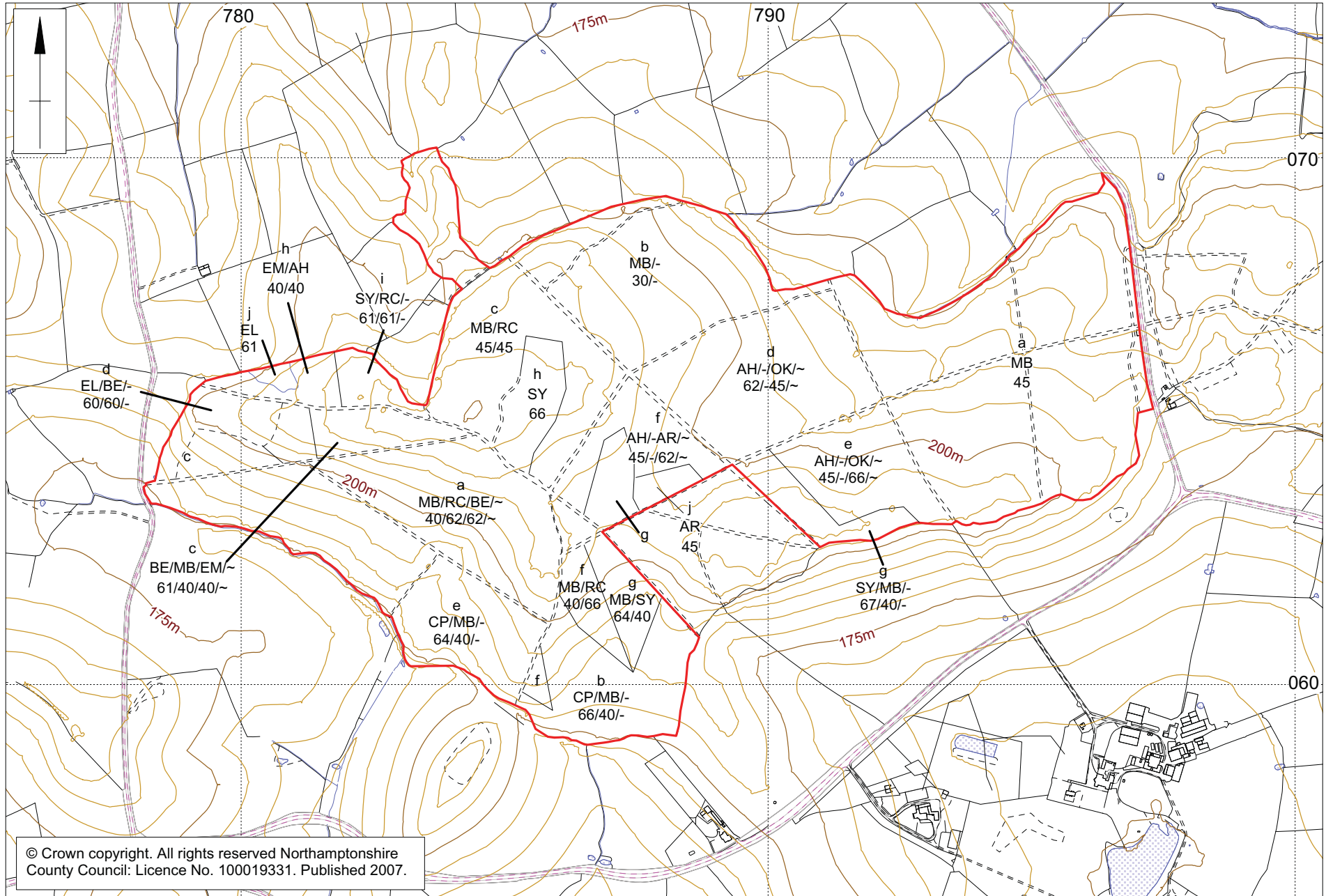
NMR database <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk>

BGMS <http://www.bgms.ac.uk>



1:4,000 Location of Owston Big Wood Fig 1





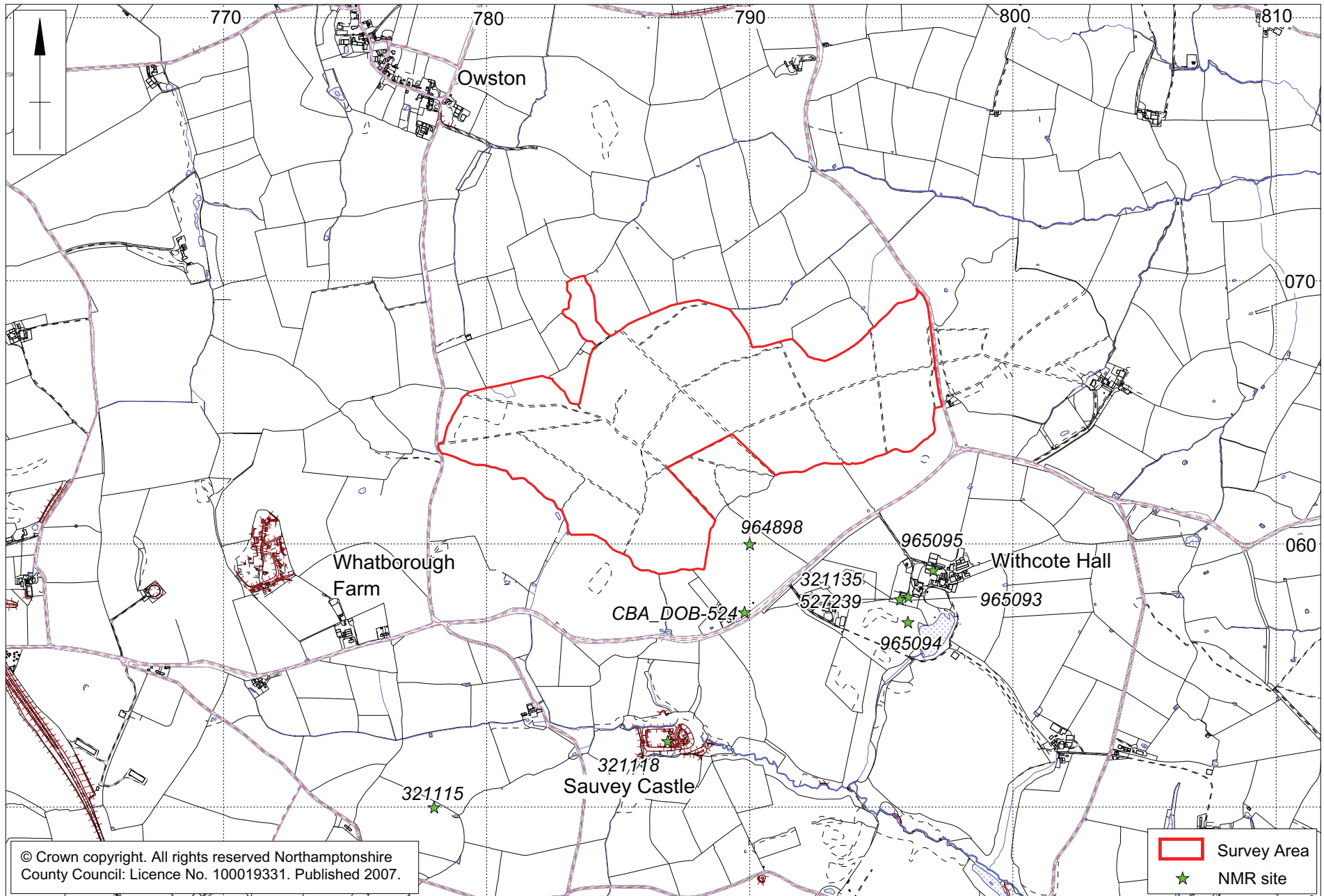
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Management Areas and Topography Fig 2



1st edition Ordnance Survey map (1881-1891) Fig 3



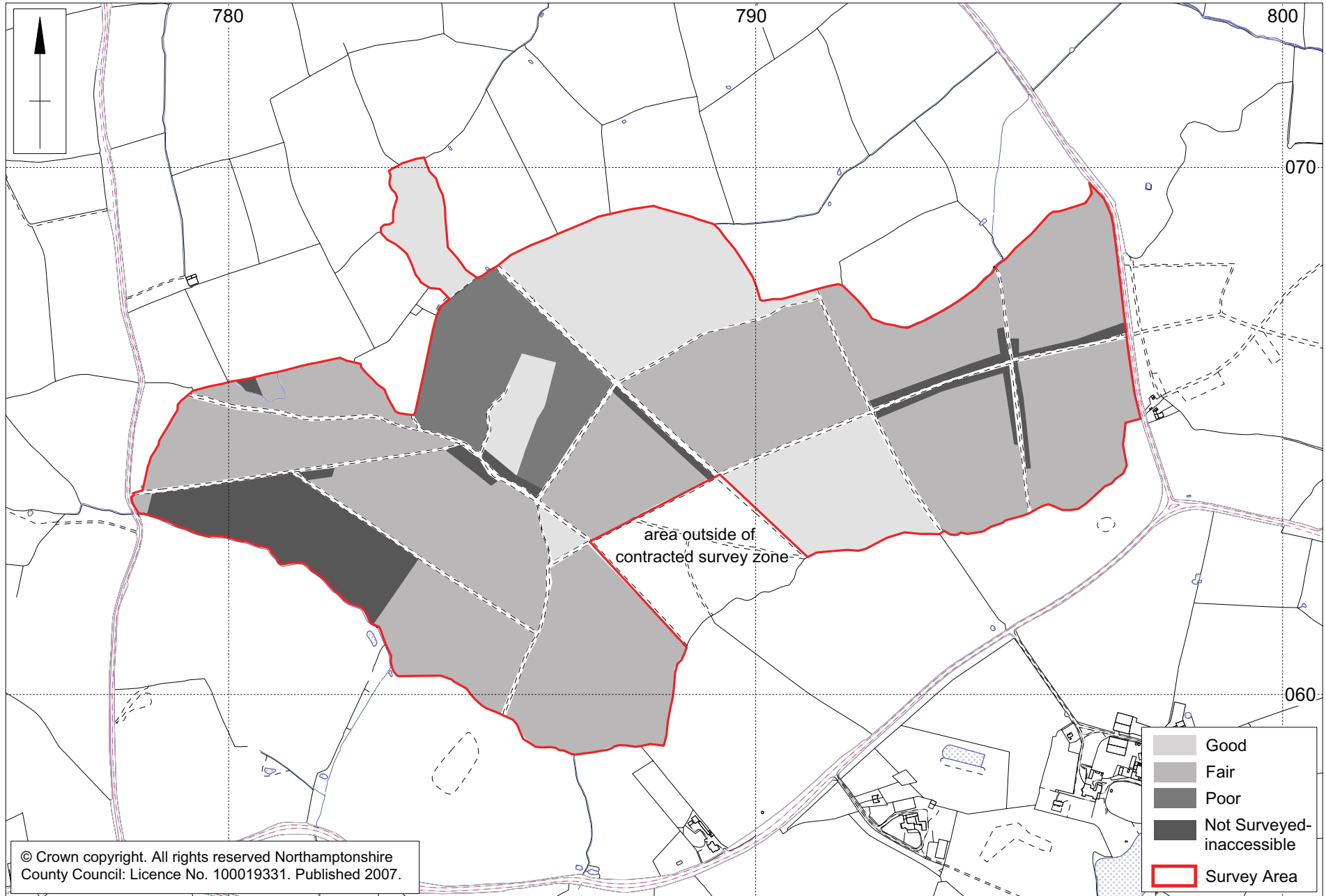


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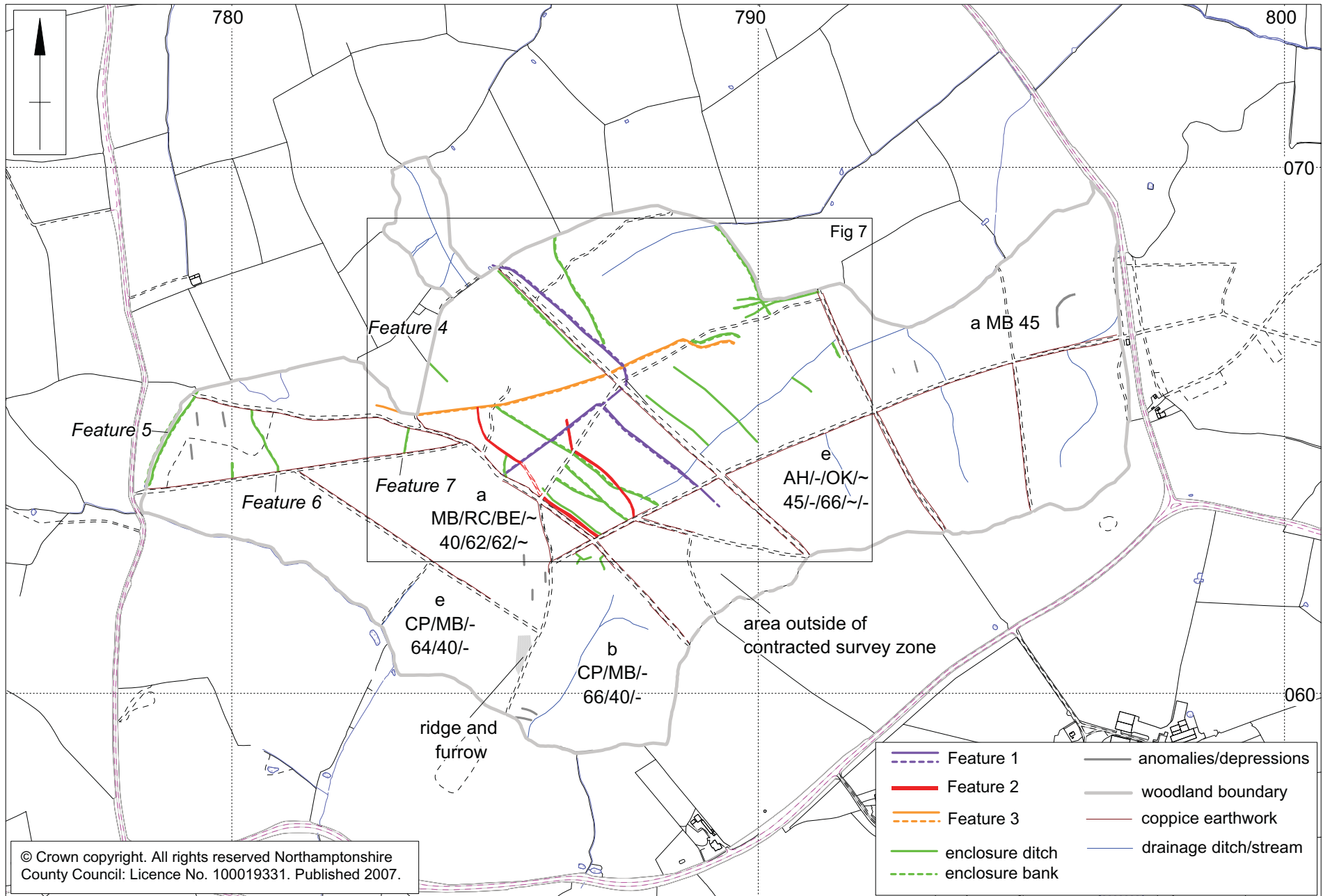
National Monuments Record data Fig 4





Scale 1: 10,000

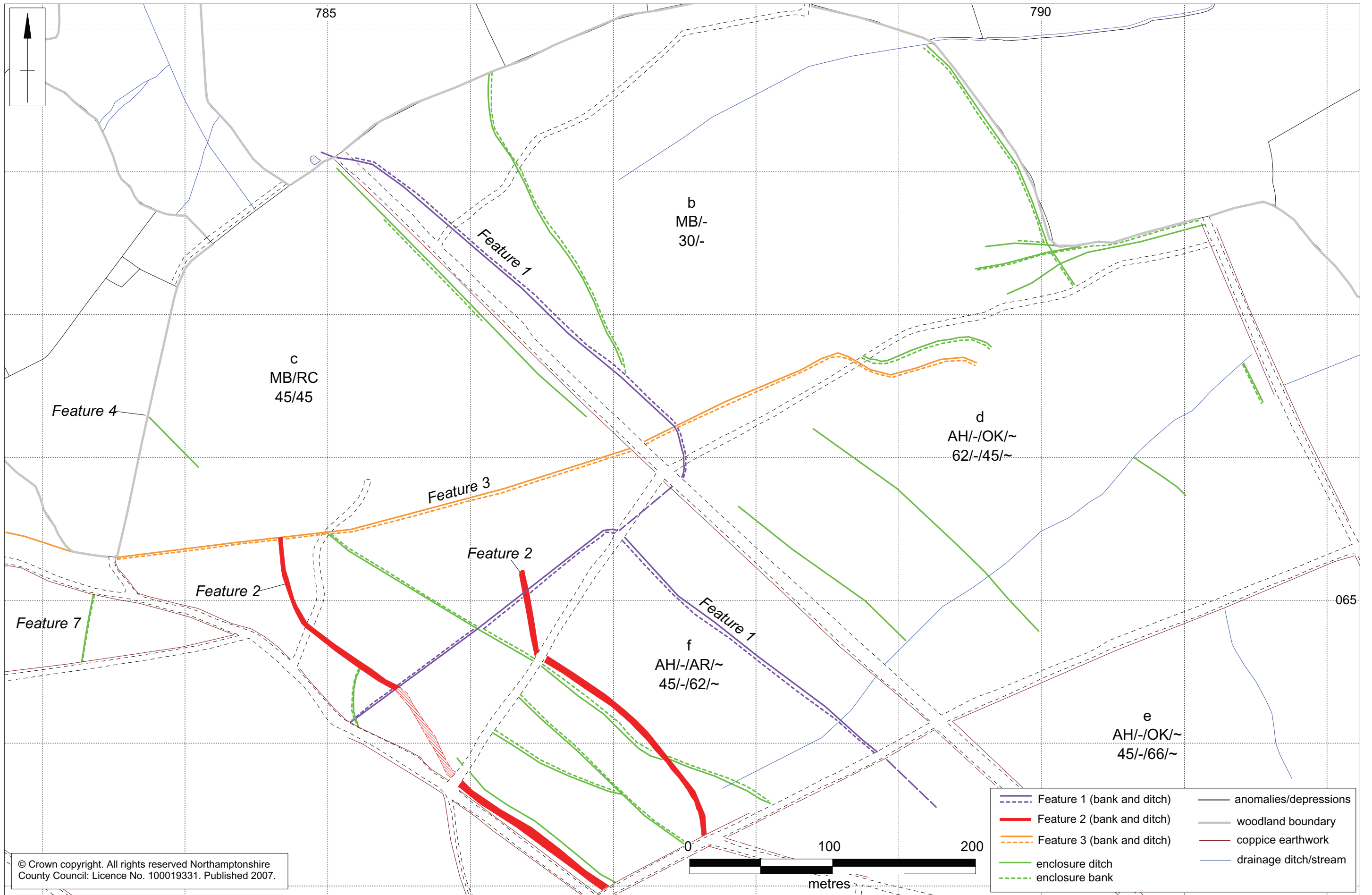
Level of visibility for survey Fig 5



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Scale 1: 10,000

Archaeological features Fig 6



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Scale 1: 2,500

Detailed plan of central area c MB/RC 45/45 - d AH/-/OK 62/45 Fig 7





Plate 1: Ride dividing areas a MB/RC/BE~ 40/62/62/~(left with coppice boundary parallel with ride) and e CP/MB/- 64/40/-, looking south-east

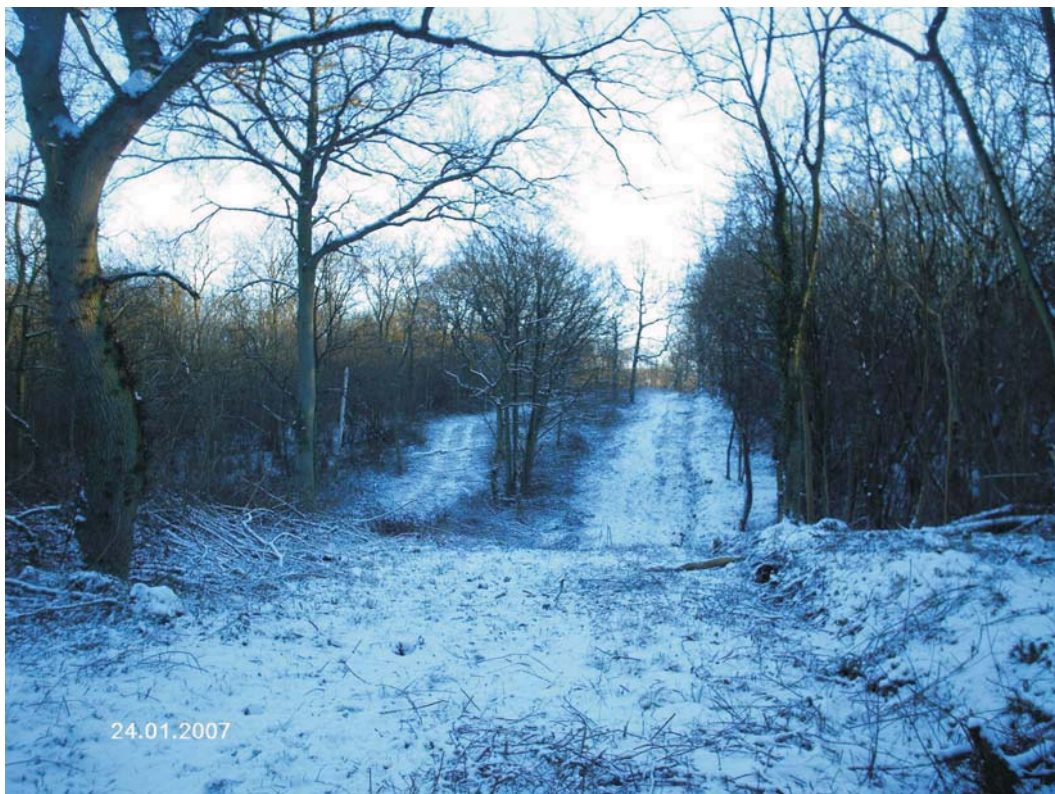


Plate 2: Central ride through area a MB 45 with cleared ride to the left, looking east