

Avonmouth, Western Approach Plot 6030

Watching Brief Report

March 2018

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Avonmouth Western Approach Plot 6030Archaeological Watching Brief Report

Written by Tom Black

With contributions from John Cotter and Ian Scott and illustrations by Ben Brown

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Summary

In January of 2018 Oxford Archaeology undertook a targeted watching brief at the site of a proposed warehouse development at Plot 6030, Avonmouth Western Approach Distribution Park on behalf of Curtis Hall Limited/UMC Architects. Undated ditches and pits were uncovered that are probably associated with Romano-British settlement that had previously been excavated to the south-east. The features appeared to be petering out and this may represent the north-western extent of the settlement.



Acknowledgements

Oxford Archaeology would like to thank Curtis Hall Limited/UMC Architects for commissioning this project. Thanks are also extended to Paul Driscoll who monitored the work on behalf of Gloucestershire County Council for his advice and guidance.

The project was managed for Oxford Archaeology by Carl Champness. The fieldwork was directed by Tom Black. Survey was carried out by Tom Black and digitizing was carried out by Benjamin Brown. Thanks are also extended to the teams of OA staff that cleaned and packaged the finds under the management of Leigh Allen and prepared the archive under the management of Nicola Scott.



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope of work

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) was commissioned by Curtis Hall Limited/UMC Architects to undertake a targeted watching brief at the site of a proposed warehouse development at Plot 6030, Avonmouth Western Approach Distribution Park (Fig. 1). The work is in respect of a planning application for warehouse development, associated offices and car parking facilities.
- 1.1.2 The work was undertaken as a condition of planning permission (planning ref: PT12/1659/EXT). Although the Local Planning Authority (South Gloucestershire Council) did not set a brief for the work, discussions with Paul Driscoll, South Gloucestershire Council Archaeology and Historic Environment Record Officer, established the scope of work required. This document outlines how OA implemented the specified requirements.
- 1.1.3 Plot 6030 (the south-eastern part of which was formerly known as Plot 6040) had been subject to evaluation trenching on two occasions (Fig. 2, WA 1998; OA 2007). It was situated at the edge of a Romano-British settlement that had been previously investigated at Plot 5000, from which some outlying enclosure ditches extend into the south-eastern end of Plot 6030.

1.2 Location, topography and geology

- 1.2.1 Plot 6030 lies within the Avonmouth Western Approach Distribution Park, to the north-west of Collins Drive, Avonmouth, Bristol.
- 1.2.2 The site lies on the Henbury Level, part of the Avonmouth Levels, located 0.75km from the Severn Channel at NGR ST 55050 83400 (Fig. 1). Plot 6030 encompasses an area of *c* 2.7ha, lying at 6m aOD. Prior to the excavation it was occupied by scrubland surrounded by recently built warehouse developments.
- 1.2.3 The solid geology consists of Triassic marl Mercia Mudstone which is overlain by marine alluvium and gravel and a band of post-glacial alluvial deposits known as the Wentlooge Formation, which can be up to 15m thick.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

1.3.1 The topography of the Henbury Level has undergone significant modification, and now bears little resemblance to the prehistoric landscape. Evidence of early prehistoric surfaces and sites can be deeply buried beneath later accumulations of alluvium and made ground. The upper Wentlooge sequence had been assessed previously within the Distribution Park at Plots 6010, 6020, 4000, 7000 and 8000. This sedimentary sequence consists of greyish brown to olive grey clays, a double peat band and greenish grey clays (Moore *et al.* 2002). The peat has been radiocarbon dated to the later Neolithic to middle Bronze Age. The palaeoenvironmental data suggests a potential sea-level index point of Bronze Age date (1520-1310 cal BC) at 3.69m aOD. No features or finds pre-dating the Iron Age have been found within the Distribution Park.



- 1.3.2 The earliest known occupation within the Levels dates from the Iron Age and is best represented by the settlement at Hallen, some 2.5 km to the south (Gardiner *et al.* 2002). Evidence for Iron Age activity has also been recovered at Green Lane, Redwick, *c* 1.8 km to the north, and at Brynleaze Farm, a similar distance to the east (Barnes *et al.* 1993; Russet 1991).
- 1.3.3 Work by Wessex Archaeology on Plot 4000, to the east of Plot 6030, exposed Roman enclosures, containing at least three roundhouses and possible evidence for metalworking (Ritchie *et al.* 2007). Prior to the excavations on Plot 4000, the only other recorded evidence for Roman activity within the Distribution Park was the discovery of a V-shaped Roman ditch from a trial pit to the north of Plot 5000 (Lawler *et al.* 1992). Roman activity had been thought to be concentrated on the higher ground to the east of the Levels, although sites were known at Rookery Farm, *c* 2km to the north and Elmington Manor Farm, *c* 1km to the south-east (Rippon 2000). Later activity is recorded at Ellinghurst Farm, *c* 0.8km to the north-east, and, dating to the 4th century AD, Crook's Marsh Farm, *c* 1.5km to the south-west (Everton and Everton 1981; Juggins 1982). Evidence of Roman activity dating from the 2nd-4th centuries was also identified at Farm Lane and Lower Knole Farm, on the edge of the Levels.
- 1.3.4 Excavation by OA at Plot 5000, which lies immediately south-east of Plot 6030, uncovered a series of interconnecting coaxial enclosures and droveways dating to the mid-late Roman period (2nd to 4th century AD), probably forming part of a permanent settlement. The presence of several phases of enclosure suggest that this was part of a managed landscape that saw frequent periods of re-organisation, perhaps in response to environmental and sedimentary change. No clear structural evidence was identified at Plot 5000 and it seems likely that the remains in this area were agricultural enclosures related to the settlement identified at Plot 4000.
- 1.3.5 Environmental and sedimentary evidence from the Roman ditches from Plots 4000 and 5000 indicate that the Roman landscape comprised brackish conditions within an open landscape. The environmental indicators suggest a gradual transition from a high salt marsh to a slightly drier and more open environment on an alluvial island within the Levels. The presence of domestic refuse, including crop processing waste and pottery, indicates that the site was predominantly dry, and that the settlements represent more than just a seasonal pastoral occupation.
- 1.3.6 Although the evidence from Plot 5000 provides no conclusive evidence for systematic reclamation in this part of the Levels, the appearance of permanent settlements demonstrates that drainage and settlement did occur in the later Roman period. Such settlement could, however, have been opportunistic, and was probably dependent upon local hydrological conditions. Drainage may have been assisted by a slowdown in the rate of sea level rise during this period. In any case, little alluvial sedimentation occurred at Plots 4000 and 5000 after the Roman period, although the area may still have been prone to occasional flooding. The changes evidenced at Plot 5000 formed part of a process of modification and transformation of the Levels that was played out in many regions of the Severn Estuary.
- 1.3.7 Place name and documentary evidence suggests that the Levels were exploited as meadowland during the late Saxon period, when they were largely unsettled but were



utilised for seasonal grazing (Lawler 1994; BaRAS 1998). The late 13th century was characterised by extensive drainage and management of the Levels, and extensive areas of ridge and furrow have been mapped (Champness 2013). Dyer's Farmhouse, located in the south-eastern part Plot 6030, was a converted longhouse with possible medieval origins, remodeled in the 17th and 19th centuries.



2 EVALUATION AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Aims

- 2.1.1 The project aims and objectives were as follows:
 - i. To determine or confirm the general nature of any remains present;
 - ii. To determine or confirm the approximate date or date range of any remains, by means of artefactual or other evidence;
 - iii. To map the extent of Romano-British features;
 - iv. To map and characterise the medieval and post-medieval farms and attempt to establish their period of origin.

2.2 Methodology

- 2.2.1 The targeted watching brief was undertaken in localised parts of the site where significant features had been identified during the evaluation. This involved an archaeologically controlled soil strip in the south-eastern part of Plot 6030 (formerly known as Plot 6040).
- 2.2.3 The area was stripped by a mechanical excavator in controlled spits no greater than 0.20m to the surface of the archaeological horizon, which was encountered at a depth of *c* 0.50m.
- 2.2.4 Modern features (a pond and drainage channels) were identified within the area to be stripped and were avoided in order to avoid flooding the stripped area.
- 2.2.5 The south-east edge could not be stripped due to overhead power cables and pylon to the south and the modern features to the north-east.

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3 RESULTS

3.1 Introduction and presentation of results

3.1.1 The results of the watching brief are presented below and include a description of the archaeological remains. The full details of all features, with dimensions and depths of all deposits, can be found in Appendix A. Finds data and spot dates are tabulated in Appendix B.

3.2 General soils and ground conditions

- 3.2.1 The soil sequence across the watching brief area was fairly uniform, though the surface had clearly been disturbed in some areas which had resulted in the truncation of the subsoil in places and the ground level being raised in others by the deposition of modern waste (tyres, rubble, plastic objects, old tarmac, concrete). The natural geology of blue alluvial clay was overlain by a greyish brown silty clay subsoil, which in turn was overlain by topsoil with made ground to the north-east.
- 3.2.2 Ground conditions were generally wet (Plates 1 and 2) and a portion of topsoil had already been removed prior to the start of the watching brief. In this area and in areas where the subsoil had been truncated, water pooled significantly and the strip was taken deeper in order to achieve a clean finish. Features in these areas were unavoidably truncated. These lower areas of the strip were also prone to flooding by rising groundwater and this prevented several of the features identified from being excavated.
- 3.2.3 Archaeological features, where present, were easy to identify against the underlying natural geology and all were filled by redeposited material derived from the alluvial clay through which they were cut.

3.3 General distribution of archaeological deposits

Possible Roman features

- 3.3.1 Four ditches (5, 7, 9, 23) and four pits (13, 17, 19, 21) were identified that were cut by modern ditches and may have been associated with the Romano-British ditched enclosures to the south-east, but no datable artefacts were recovered.
- 3.3.2 Ditches 5 and 7 were located in the north-east corner of the excavation area (Plate 4). Ditch 7 was a little over 3m wide but was only 0.32m deep. Ditch 5 lay on the east side of ditch 7 and was a narrow curvilinear feature that entered the excavation area from the north-east and curved toward the south.
- 3.3.3 Ditch 9 extended into the excavation area on a NW-SE alignment but was rapidly inundated with water and could not be excavated.
- 3.3.4 Ditch 23 (Plate 5) was located at the south-west end of the excavation area and was truncated by a modern land drain. It was rapidly inundated with water shortly after stripping and could not be excavated.
- 3.3.5 Four pits (13, 17, 19, 21) were uncovered that may be of archaeological origin, although all were rapidly inundated with water shortly after stripping and could not



be excavated. Pits 13 and 18 had a lot of animal bone on the surface but no datable artefacts. Pit 6 also contained animal bone, which appeared to be vertical in the fill.

Modern features

- 3.3.6 A modern ditch (Plate 3), filled with plastic and other modern debris, extended throughout the length of the excavation area on a NE-SW alignment with a number of returns branching off its north-west side. Excavation of one of the returns (15) revealed that it was 0.20m deep and contained a coin dated to the 18th or early 19th century. The features are most likely related to the post-medieval Dyers Farm, which was located within the plot prior to demolition in the 1990s (Oxford Archaeology 2007; Fig. 4). No structural remains of Dyer's Farmhouse were observed within the stripped area.
- 3.3.7 Pit 11 was excavated to a depth of 0.60m before excavation was curtailed by ingress of groundwater. Fragments of roof tile of 18th-20th century date were recovered.

3.4 Finds summary

3.4.1 Artefactual material was limited to modern roof tile and a coin dating from the 18th or early 19th century.



4 **DISCUSSION**

4.1 Reliability of field investigation

- 4.1.1 Despite the modern truncation and wet nature of the site, the archaeological features present were very obvious and were generally very well defined.
- 4.1.2 The ditches in the north-eastern portion of the site align very well with the orientation and alignment of ditches excavated in Trench 3 of the evaluation (OA 2017) as well as the settlement activity identified in plot 5000 to the south-east of Collins Drive (Fig. 3).
- 4.1.3 Several features could not be excavated due to flooding by groundwater.

4.2 Watching Brief objectives and results

- 4.2.1 This watching brief has confirmed that the Roman settlement activity identified under plot 5000 does not continue significantly into plot 6030. The general nature of the archaeology in plot 6030 is sporadic and relatively shallow, comprising ditches and pits with no evidence for structures.
- 4.2.2 Very few of the features produced any dating material and this was entirely postmedieval and modern.
- 4.2.3 Apart from the obviously modern ditch (Plate 3) running through the strip there was no evidence for remains associated with the former Dyers Farm.

4.3 Interpretation

- 4.3.1 The archaeological features were undated but are similar in character to the features of the Romano-British settlement that had previously been excavated to the southeast (Champness 2013). The features appeared to be petering out and this may represent the north-western extent of the settlement.
- 4.3.2 The modern features were associated with Dyer's Farm, which stood a short distance to the north-west of the watching brief area until the 1990s.

4.4 Significance

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4.4.1 The watching brief demonstrated that the Romano-British settlement does not significantly continue into plot 6030. The features present were sporadic and shallow with little or no artefactual material.



APPENDIX A CONTEXT INVENTORY

Context No.	Туре	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
1	Layer	-	0.10	Topsoil; dark greyish brown clayey silt.	-	-
2	Layer	-	0.20 – 0.40	Subsoil; mid brownish grey silty clay	-	-
3	Layer	-	-	Made Ground	-	-
4	Layer	-	-	Natural; alluvium, light brownish grey clay with blue and red streaks.	-	-
5	Cut	0.80	0.21	Curvilinear, NE-SW ditch.	-	-
6	Fill	0.80	0.21	Fill of 5; mid blue grey silty clay with occasional red streaks.	-	-
7	Cut	3.07	0.32	NE-SW ditch.	-	-
8	Fill	3.07	0.32	Fill of 7; mid blue grey silty clay with occasional red streaks.	-	-
9	Cut	2.78	-	NW-SE ditch. Unexcavated.	-	-
10	Fill	2.78	-	Fill of 9; mid blue grey silty clay with occasional red streaks.	-	-
11	Cut	0.85	0.60	Pit.	-	-
12	Fill	0.85	0.60	Fill of 11; mid blue grey silty clay with occasional red streaks.	CBM	18th – 20th century
13	Cut	0.33	-	Pit. Unexcavated.	-	-
14	Fill	0.33	-	Fill of 13; mid blue grey silty clay with occasional red streaks.	-	-
15	Cut	0.57	0.20	NW-SE ditch.	-	-
16	Fill	0.57	0.20	Fill of 15; mid blue grey silty clay with occasional red streaks.	CBM Cu Alloy Coin	18th – 20th century (possibly 19th- 20th century)
17	Cut	1.12	-	Pit.	-	-
18	Fill	1.12	-	Fill of 17; mid blue grey silty clay with occasional red streaks.	-	-
19	Cut	1.36	-	Pit. Unexcavated.	-	-
20	Fill	1.36	-	Fill of 19; mid blue grey silty clay with occasional red streaks.	-	-



Context No.	Туре	Width (m)	Depth (m)	Description	Finds	Date
21	Cut	2.81	-	Pit. Unexcavated.	-	-
22	Fill	2.81	-	Fill of 21; mid blue grey silty clay with occasional red streaks.	-	-
23	Cut	1.99	-	Curvilinear, NW-SE ditch.	-	-
24	Fill	1.99	-	Fill of 23; mid blue grey silty clay with occasional red streaks.	-	-



APPENDIX B FINDS REPORTS

B.1 Ceramic building material

By John Cotter

Introduction

B.1.1 Table of CBM:

Context	Description	Date
12	2 pieces CBM from same tile in a	18th-20th century
	hard pink-buff fabric, 11g	
16	1 piece of curved tile in hard orange-	18th-20th century
	red fabric, probably from a pantile or	(possibly 19th-20th
	land drain, 35g	century)

B.2 Metalwork

By Ian Scott

Introduction

B.2.1 Copper alloy coin (16). Possibly a halfpenny of one of the Hanoverian Georges (I-III, 1714-1820). This identification is based solely on size and weight.

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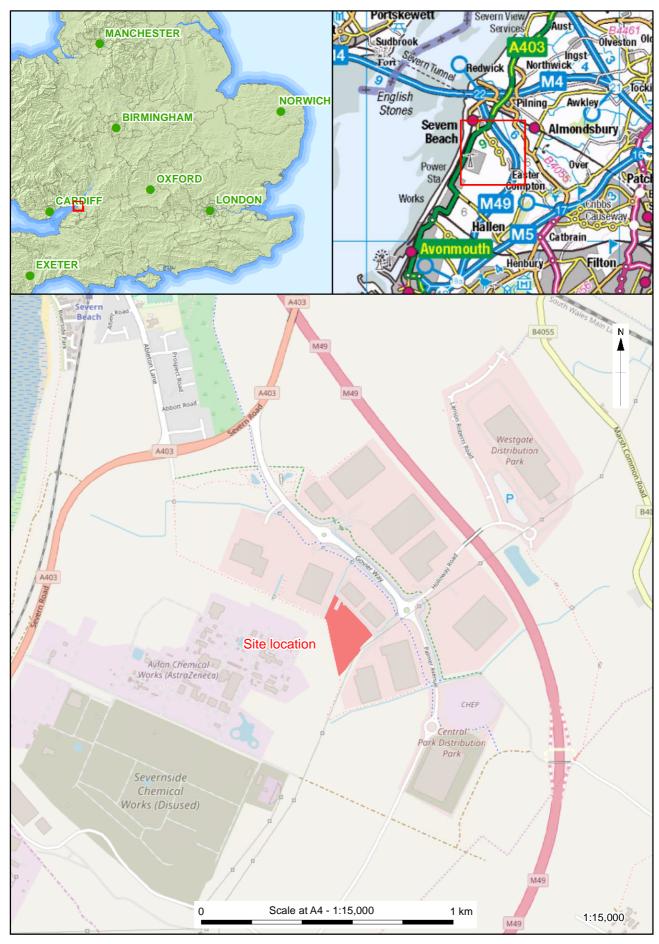
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APPENDIX D

SITE SUMMARY DETAILS

Site name: Site code: Grid Reference	Avonmouth Western Approach Plot 6030 BRSMG:2018.1 ST 55050 83400
Туре:	Watching Brief
Date and duration:	January 2018, 1 week
Area of Site	0.2ha
Location of archive:	The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 OES, and will be deposited with Bristol Museum and Art Gallery in due course, under the following accession number: BRSMG:2018.1.
Summary of Results:	In January 2018 Oxford Archaeology undertook a targeted watching brief at the site of a proposed warehouse development at Plot 6030, Avonmouth Western Approach Distribution Park on behalf of Curtis Hall Limited/UMC Architects. Undated ditches and pits were uncovered that probably form part of Romano-British settlement activity previously excavated to the south-east.



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Figure 1: Site location

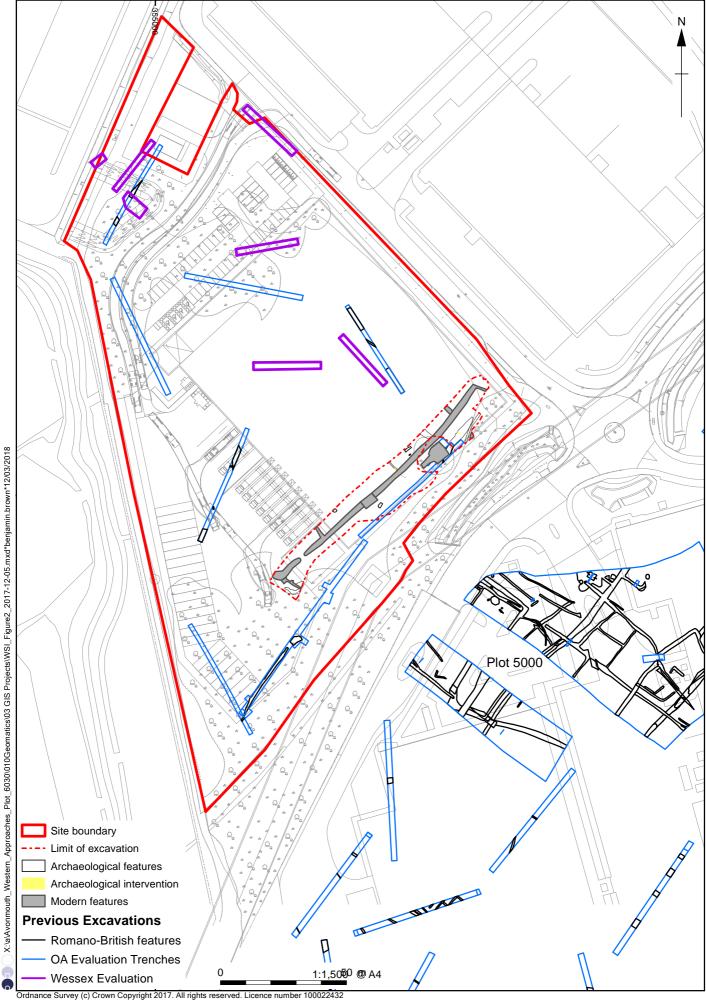
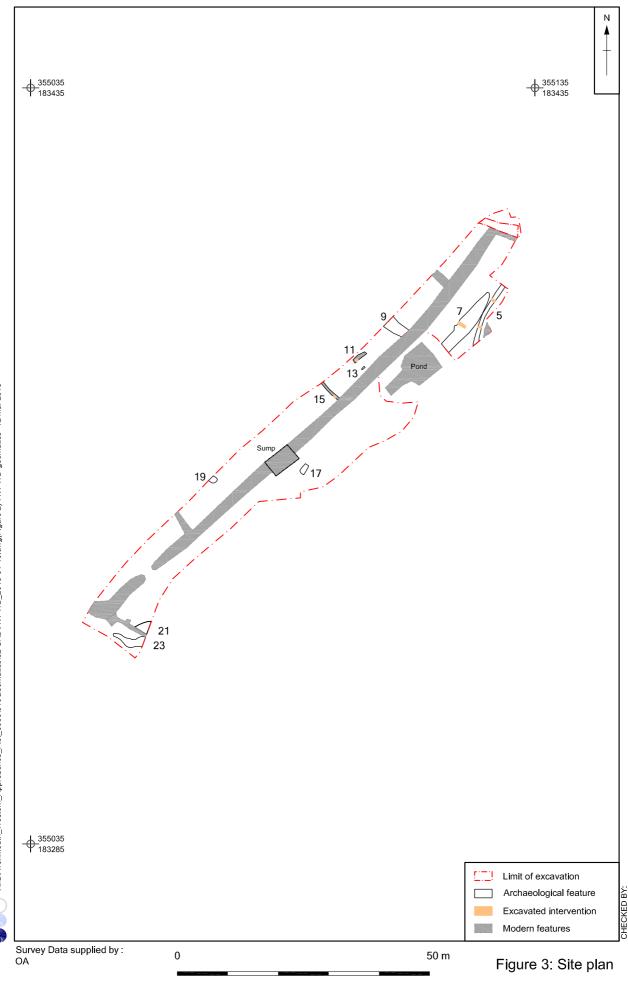
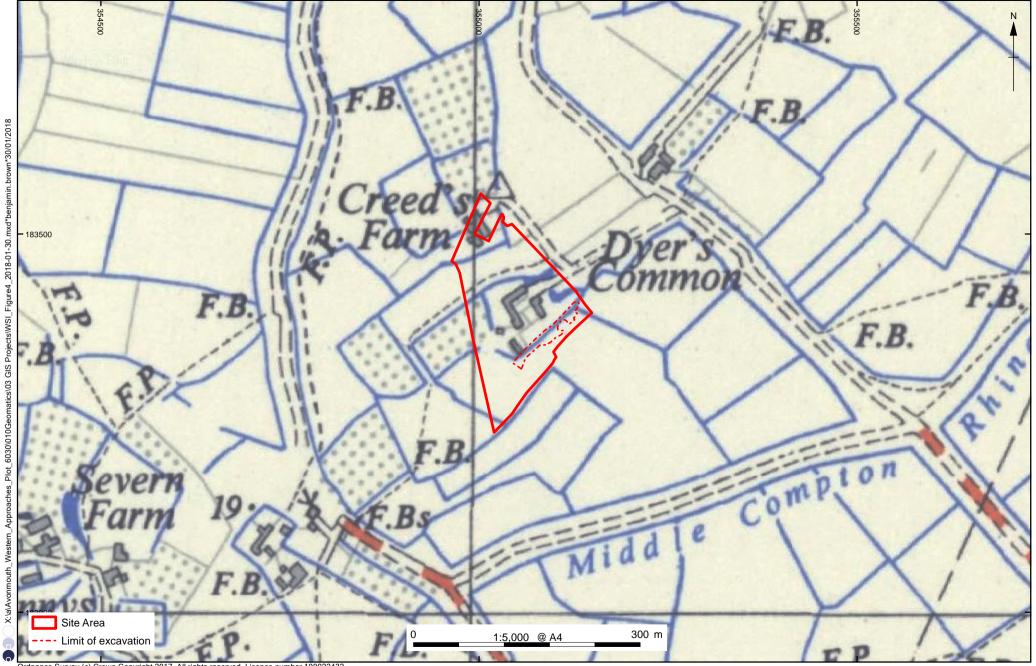


Figure 2: Plan of site, with previous works





Scale at A4 1:750



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Figure 4: Dyer's Farm location



Plate 1: General view of site, looking SW



Plate 2: General view of site, looking E

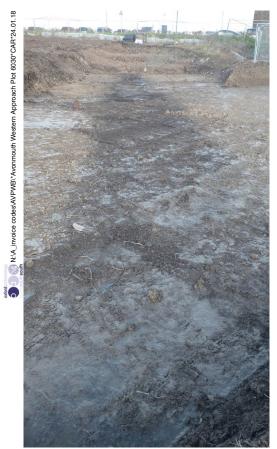


Plate 3: Modern ditch, looking NE



Plate 4: Ditches 5 and 7, looking N



Plate 5: Pit 21 and ditch 23 with modern truncation, looking SE









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