

A POSSIBLE CURSUS MONUMENT AT LOVINGTON, ITCHEN VALLEY

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ABSTRACT

This short paper reports on the discovery of a possible Neolithic cursus at Lovington. The potential cursus is a crop-mark site which was discovered on aerial photographs during the Hampshire South Downs Mapping project.

This is a significant outcome as no other cursus monuments have previously been identified in Hampshire. Its relationship with the potential causewayed enclosure is also important given the apparent absence of Early Neolithic enclosures in Hampshire. The paper describes the crop-mark and reviews the evidence for the interpretation of the site as a cursus monument.

INTRODUCTION

Between 2007 and 2010 Cornwall Archaeological Unit (then Historic Environment Projects) carried out the Hampshire South Downs Mapping project. The project was funded by Historic England (formerly English Heritage). The project consisted of an analytical survey of all archaeological features visible on aerial photographs within the Hampshire portion of the South Downs National Park and forms part of Historic England's National Mapping Programme (NMP).

The South Downs National Park covers an area of approximately 525 square kilometres in southeast Hampshire, between the Itchen Valley and the county boundary with West Sussex (Fig 1). In order to conform to NMP guidelines the survey was based on complete kilometre squares and consequently the project area totalled 621 square kilometres and included some parts of the landscape outside the National Park boundary. The area is flanked

by several relatively large urban areas including Winchester, but is predominantly rural, the largest town being Petersfield.

The survey revealed evidence for Bronze Age round barrows, later prehistoric, Iron Age and Romano-British settlement in the form of enclosures and enclosure complexes through to deserted medieval settlements and World War II defences (Young 2011).

In addition, 15 Neolithic or possible Neolithic features were also identified by the mapping project. The identified sites included a possible Early Neolithic causewayed enclosure, long and oval barrows. These sites were of interest as, by contrast with Wiltshire, there is comparatively little evidence for Neolithic settlement in Hampshire (Gardiner 2008) and there is a more limited range of Neolithic ceremonial monuments in Hampshire than in neighbouring counties. Prior to the current project, there were no known cursus monuments or causewayed enclosures (see Oswald *et al.* 2001; Loveday 2015) and only a single henge, recently identified in the northwest (D. Hopkins, pers. comm.). The most visible field remains of Neolithic communities are earthen long barrows. Forty three of these monuments are recorded (RCHME 1979). It should be noted, however, that this absence of evidence may in part be more apparent than real as intensive fieldwork in western Hampshire at Damerham has identified both Neolithic artefacts and plough levelled sites (Wickstead *et al.* 2009; Barber *et al.* 2011), and fieldwalking in the west of the county also led to the recovery of significant flint scatters of Early and Late Neolithic date (Schofield 1991a; 1991b). Activity dating to the middle centuries of the fourth millennium cal BC is

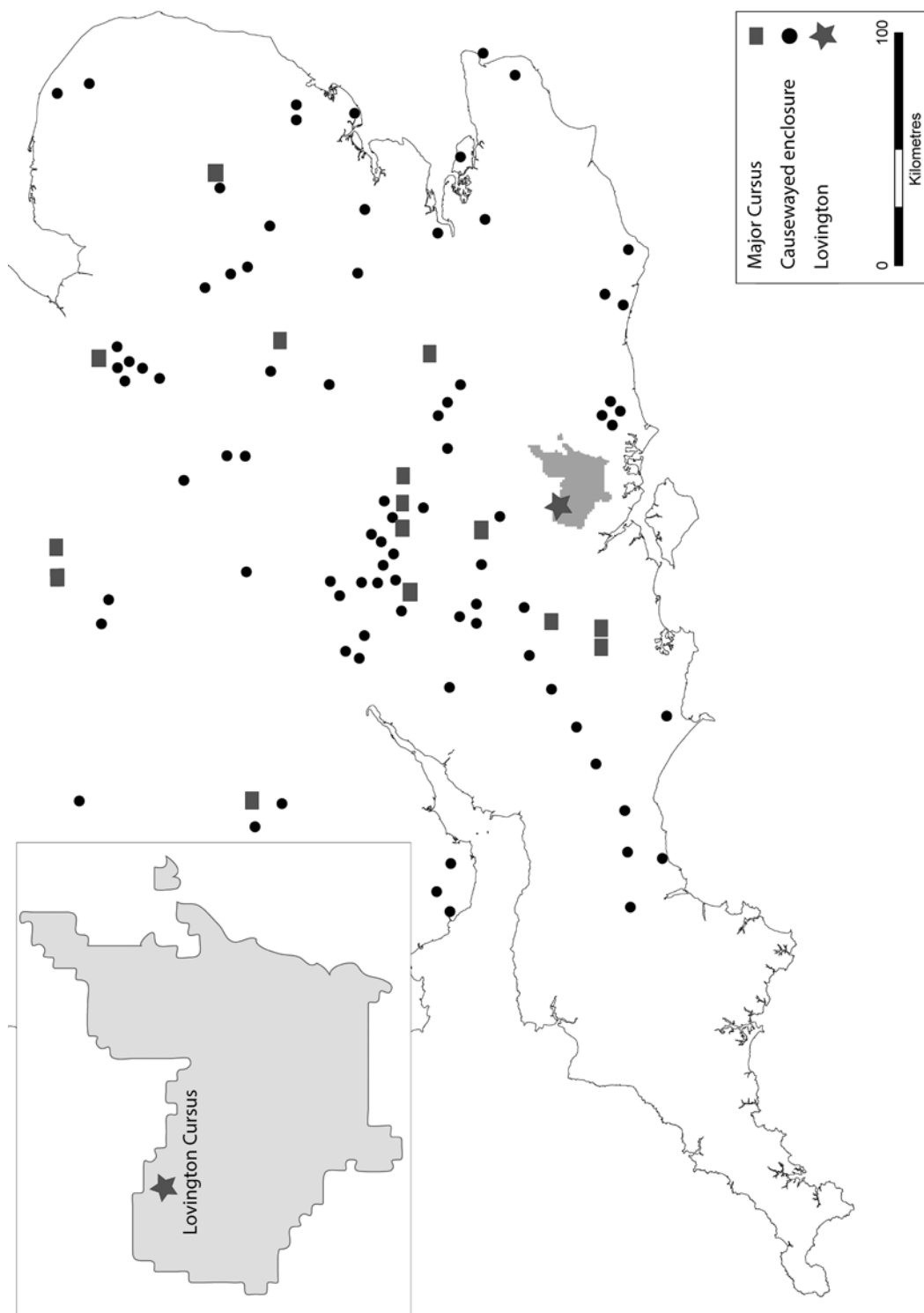


Fig. 1 Location map showing location of the Lovington cursus and the distribution of cursus and Causewayed enclosures in southern Britain (project area shaded)

still, nonetheless, extremely uncommon and it was therefore of particular interest that one of the new crop-mark sites has been identified as a cursus monument.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The most important feature, interpreted as being a potentially Neolithic cursus monument, is located at Lovington, approximately 2.5 km west of New Alresford (SU 455192 131668 centred). The site is situated on the south side of the River Itchen, just a couple of Km to west of the confluence with Candover Brook and the River Ale, and indeed the unlocated western end may have extended closer to the confluence.

The site is comprised of two parallel ditches, spaced approximately 26 m apart, running north eastwards from high ground, between the 90 m and 100 m contours for 650 m towards Ovington on the southern bank of the River Itchen (Figs 2 and 3). The ditches are visible as fine but distinct crop-marks, although the full extent of the site is unknown as the ditch terminals are not visible on the aerial photographs.

Although the site has not been excavated, some indication as to its relative date is provided by a relationship with a curvilinear crop-mark enclosure, which is found towards the western end of the linear crop-mark (SU 455076 131678 centred). Significantly, the northern ditch of the linear crop-mark overlies the curvilinear enclosure, which measures approximately 43 m by 36 m (Figs 2 and 4). The enclosing ditch is segmented or interrupted, with six gaps in its circuit, and it is possible that the missing portion of ditch in the east represents a seventh, albeit much larger gap in the circuit. Some 20 m to the northwest are traces of a second possible concentric outer ditch, also interrupted. The form of the crop-mark is consistent with that of an Early Neolithic causewayed enclosure (see for example, Oswald *et al.* 2001), and this in turn suggests that the linear crop-mark post-dates the Early Neolithic period (*c.* 4000–3500 cal BC).

The relationship between the causewayed enclosure and the Lovington crop-mark does not, however, provide close dating for the

latter site's construction. It is therefore possible that it could be of a post prehistoric date. The Avington deer park, for example, which was imparked in 1306, lies a short distance to the west and it could be suggested that the parallel ditches of the 'cursus' are parkland features. However, the cursus ditches are much less substantial than the earthworks associated with the deer park and are very different in character (Young 2011). A second possibility is that the ditches are a fragment of the uncertain section of a Roman road between Winchester and London (Margary 1967, section 339). However, this uncertain section of road is projected to run more than one kilometre to the south of the Lovington crop-mark, so if the ditches are part of the road, it would imply a major reappraisal of the line of the Roman road (*ibid.*). In light of this, it is more likely that the crop-mark is of an earlier date.

INTERPRETATION AND CONTEXT

The dating of the Lovington cursus is obviously problematic due to a lack of excavation, however, given the morphology of the Lovington crop-mark, the most likely interpretation is that the parallel ditches form a fragment of a cursus monument, which presumably continues uphill towards the southwest, where it is either not visible as a crop-mark or no longer survives.

Geographically cursus monuments are widespread across Britain (Loveday 2006, 34) (Fig 1), with examples being found on the Wessex chalk in Dorset and Wiltshire (Bowden *et al.* 2015; Barrett *et al.* 1991), the Thames Valley (Barclay & Hey 1999), Scotland (Barclay & Russell White 1993) Wales and the West Midlands (Gibson 1999, 154; Ray 2007). However, to date no other examples have been found in Hampshire.

Current available dating evidence would suggest that cursus monuments were constructed during the middle centuries of the fourth millennium cal BC, the Middle Neolithic period (Barclay & Bayliss 1999, 25). Recent radiocarbon dating, for example, of an antler pick from the bottom of the Greater Cursus at Stonehenge, resulted in a weighted mean date calibrating to 3630–3370 cal BC (Thomas *et al.*

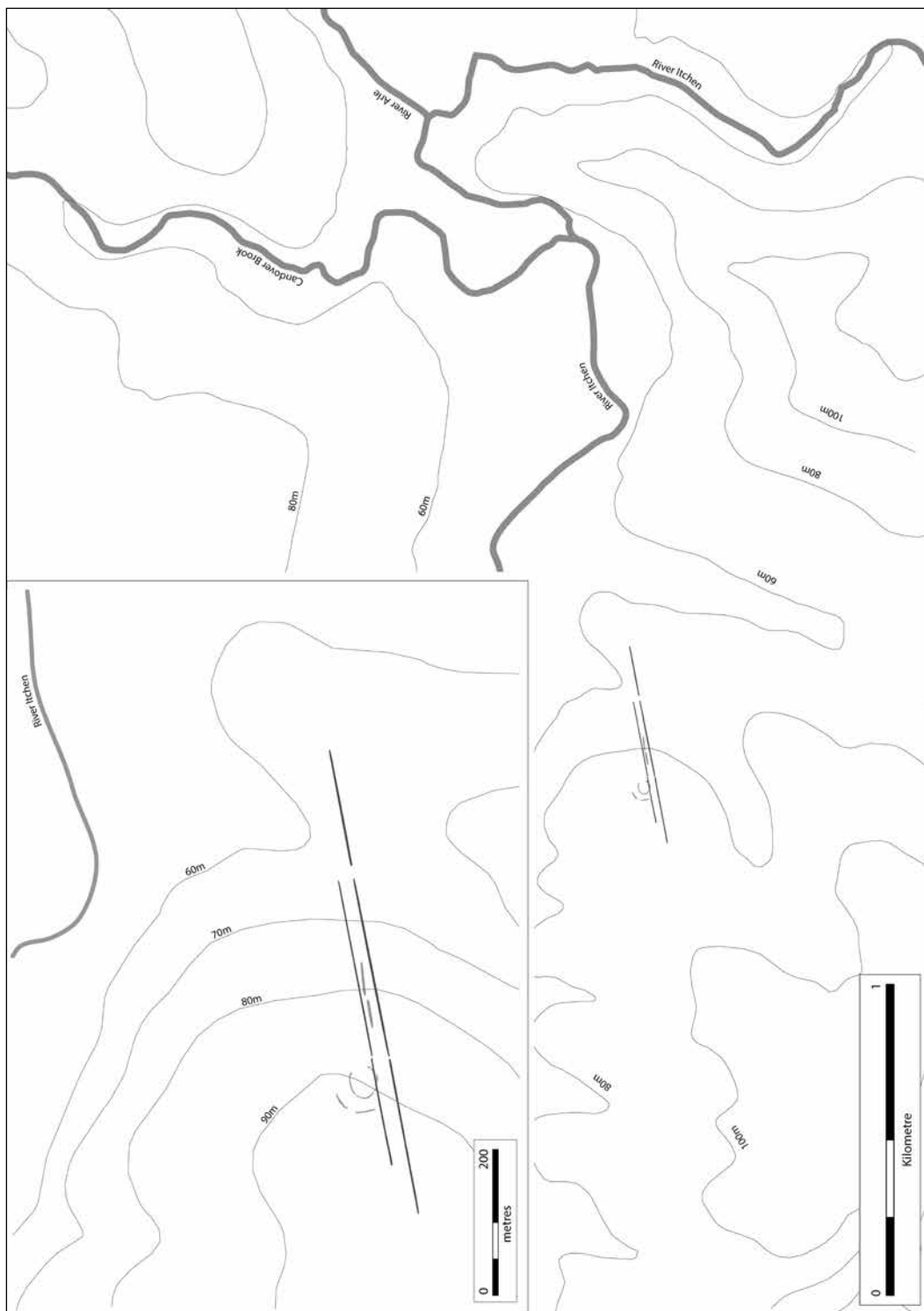


Fig. 2 Plan showing the relationship between the Lovington cursus to the nearest rivers and the topography (inset top right showing contours in more detail)

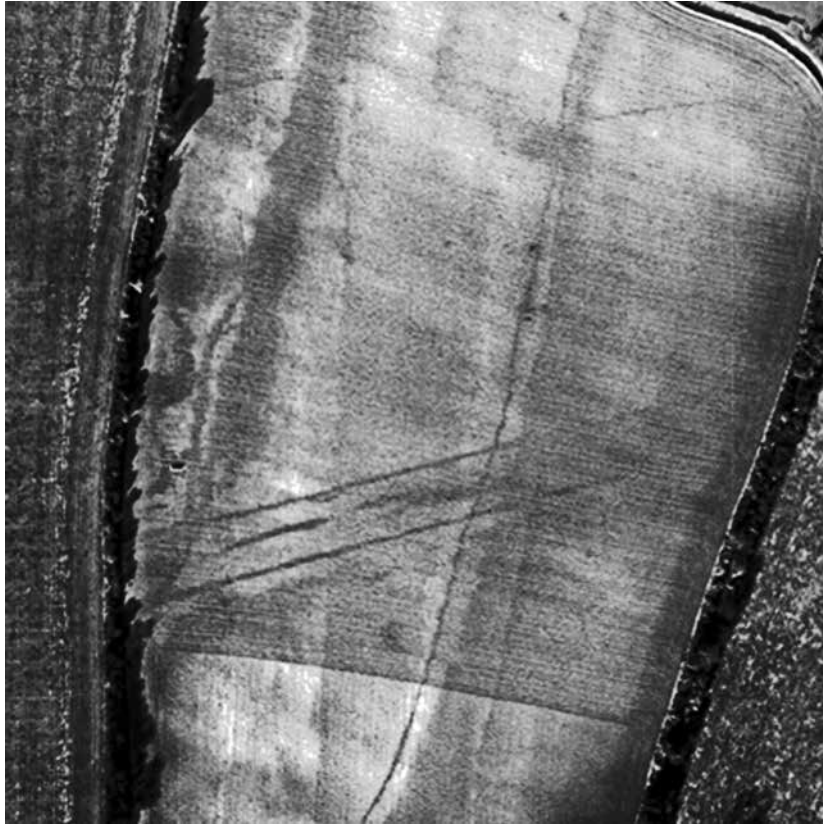


Fig. 3 Aerial photograph showing the Lovington cursus. (Photo: NMR 473 SU5531/5. 7th March 1973. © Crown copyright. NMR)

2009). However, there is still a need to obtain more material for scientific dating (Barclay & Bayliss 1999, 26–27); particularly from areas outside central southern England.

Cursus monuments belong to a Neolithic tradition of linear monuments, which include long mortuary enclosures and other parallel sided sites (Loveday 2006, chapter 3). Cursus sites lie at the larger end of this tradition, although in fact there are huge differences in the size, with sites ranging from a few hundred metres long, as at the Lesser Cursus at Stonehenge, to several kilometres in length as exemplified by the Dorset Cursus on Cranborne Chase (Richards 1990, 72; Barrett *et al.* 1991, 36). With a width of approximately 26 m, the Lovington site is narrower than the best known examples; however, the width of cursus

monuments can also vary substantially from just 20 m to over 120 m. The interior of these sites have also proved to be varied: some monuments have been found to contain post settings and screens, whilst others have proved to be devoid of internal features (Buckley *et al.* 2001; Thomas 1999). Some sites rather than being defined by ditches have been found to be comprised of lines of pits (Loveday 2006; Thomas 2015, chapter 3). The character of the interior of Lovington cursus remains unknown, however, at 26 m wide by at least 680 m long it would fall into Roy Loveday's (2006, 27) 'cursiform long enclosure group'.

In addition to form, the setting of the site is consistent with the interpretation as a cursus. In common with identified cursus sites in both Wessex and the Yorkshire Wolds (Loveday

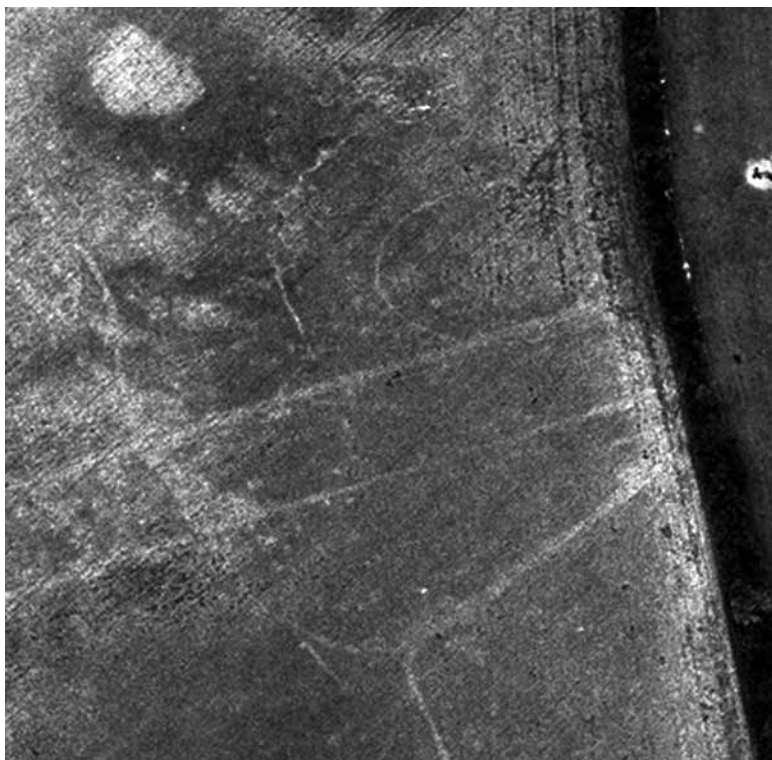


Fig. 4 Aerial photograph showing the possible Neolithic causewayed enclosure at Lovington. (Photo: NMR 888 SU5530/9. 22nd July 1975. © Crown copyright. NMR)

2015), the Lovington ‘cursus’ is aligned so that it runs across the valley and both terminals would have been on the higher ground. The siting of terminals on raised ground is paralleled elsewhere, as for example can be seen with the Dorset Cursus (Barrett *et al.* 1991).

The close proximity of the site to the confluence of several rivers is also a strong indicator of the site being a cursus (for example, Barclay & Hey 1999). Many cursus sites include rivers and springs within them or are aligned onto rivers, and across central and eastern Britain there is a tendency for cursus monuments to be found at a distance of 1.5 km to 3.5 km from river confluences (Loveday 2015). Well-documented examples of cursus monuments being sited close to rivers include the Maxey cursus in the Welland Valley (Pryor *et al.* 1985, 24), and at Dratyton in the Upper Thames Valley (Barclay *et al.* 2003). Indeed, several writers have speculated on

the existence of a metaphorical link between the movement of water and the movement of people along the length of the cursus (for example, Harding & Barclay 1999, 5). The siting of the Lovington cursus therefore fits well with both the cross valley setting of other Wessex cursus monuments and its proximity to a river confluence (Fig 2).

Several studies have highlighted the role of cursus sites in relation to other Neolithic monuments. In particular, the close relationship between cursus monuments and long barrows has been noted as a recurring theme (for example, Tilley 1994, 170–96), No long barrows, however, have been recorded in the near vicinity of the Lovington cursus, which might be considered surprising since they are such a feature of many other Wessex cursus sites (Barrett *et al.* 1991, 49–51; Bowden *et al.* 2015, 23). In the case of the Dorset Cursus, for example, earlier long barrows are

actually incorporated into the monument (Bradley 1993, 52–3). The western section of the Lovington cursus did, however, as noted above, partially overlies a possible Early Neolithic causewayed enclosure (Fig 4). This relationship is paralleled elsewhere, for example at Etton in Cambridgeshire, where one of the cursus ditches bisected the earlier causewayed enclosure, and this was interpreted as indicating the continued significance of the enclosure (Pryor 1998, 112, 373). Only further investigative work on the Lovington Cursus will determine whether it was respecting or slighting the earthworks associated with the earlier enclosure.

Interestingly, however, there is an absence of both Late Neolithic henge monuments and Early Bronze Age round barrows, which are found near to many other cursus monuments, for example as at Springfield Lyons in Essex and Maxey in Cambridgeshire (Buckley *et al.* 2001; Pryor *et al.* 1985). This could be explained in terms of there being a local preference, or that the significance of the monument was short-lived and it did not become a focal point for extended subsequent ceremonial activity. However, the apparent lack of associated activity may be a false impression, as further work in the form of geophysics, fieldwalking or excavation

may reveal smaller scale features, such as smaller ring-ditches, post-rings or artefact scatters, which are not necessarily detectable on aerial photographs.

In summary, on present evidence the linear crop mark at Lovington can most reasonably be considered to be a cursus or cursiform monument, dating to the middle centuries of the fourth Millennium cal BC. This is a significant finding as unlike other parts of the Wessex region, no cursus monuments have previously been identified in Hampshire. Its relationship to the potential causewayed enclosure is also important given the apparent absence of Early Neolithic enclosures in Hampshire. In light of the results of the mapping project, there is a clear need for further archaeological investigation to provide more information about these sites.

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