

Some Interesting Patterns in Leicestershire Ridge and Furrow

By Ronan O'Donnell

Leicestershire, as a Midland county, had medieval landscapes typical of champion country. In most townships, usually co-terminus with parishes, arable was predominant. Each township usually had two or three fields, divided into furlongs. We usually imagine that typical open-fields have a chequer-board furlong pattern. However, examination of plans of open fields often reveals much more regularity. This is clearest on a 1760 plan of the open fields of Sileby (Fig. 1, LRO DE 2/4). This shows a common alignment of the majority of strips. The fields seem to have been divided into furlongs, as furlong names appear on the map, but these furlongs do not seem to have been marked by physical boundaries. Sileby is atypical because it is in the Leicestershire wolds. This area, in the north-east of the county, had lower quality arable land and a particularly pastoral economy. Parishes outside the wolds display different furlong patterns, but still have some regularity. Harby, to the north of Sileby, is a good example (LRO DE 279/2-3). It had many small, square or rectangular furlongs, which were late additions to its fields (O'Donnell 2012). The furlongs which lie underneath them contain large areas in which strips have a single alignment. This is particularly clear in the northern and south eastern parts of the parish, where the strips run north-west to south-east and east to west respectively. Similarly, at the neighbouring parish of Hose there are large areas of east west strips in the north-east of the parish and north south strips in its south (LRO PP 370). It has been shown elsewhere that alternations to furlong patterns were least frequent in the Leicestershire wolds, where a pastoral economy necessitated less attention to arable landscapes (O'Donnell 2012, 72–3). Thus, it is possible that the clear evidence for regular furlong patterns at Sileby represents better survival of an originally regular furlong pattern. This in turn suggests that such regular patterns may once have been common within Leicestershire.

Ridge and furrow provides more evidence. Excellent maps of ridge and furrow across approximately two thirds of Leicestershire have been produced by Hartley (Hartley 1984, 1987, 1989, 2008). These reveal extensive areas of parallel strips. A particularly large area survives in the wolds (Fig. 2), where the furlongs form an almost radial pattern. These regular furlong patterns often extend beyond parish boundaries (Fig. 2) and therefore probably predate the form which open-field systems took in the later middle-ages. Importantly the strips themselves are often cut by parish boundaries showing that strips also predate the formation of townships. However, there is no reason to assume that the regular furlongs were divided into strips from their creation. Furthermore, these field systems appear to be cut by the boundaries of a multiple-estate centred on Market Bosworth (Foss 1996, 83–107). The earliest evidence for this multiple-estate is Domesday Book, which describes manors in this area as comprising 'the

Queens Fee', and implies that Market Bosworth had a minster. This means that the estate is at least late Saxon: probably 8th-century and possibly earlier (Foss 1996, 92–7). It appears, then, that the furlong boundaries of the regular areas of the open-field system are at least middle Saxon, as they are earlier than the multiple-estate.

The boundaries of the furlongs are often marked by substantial features. A particularly clear example is found at Thurlaston (Fig. 3). Here a boundary within one of the regular systems is marked by the remains of a hollow-way. The feature does not continue into the next field, though the boundary is continued by a hedge. This hedge is particularly species rich, containing Field Maple (*Acer campestre*), Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), Oak (*Quercus* sp.), Ash (*Fraxinus* sp.), Elm (*Ulmus*) and Hazel (*Corylus avellana*). While it is probably not possible to date a hedge precisely by counting the number of species there is agreement that rich hedges are usually old (Barnes and Williamson 2006). The boundary continues into the field north of this where it is marked by a very broad track (around 30 m) which has species rich hedges on both sides. Similarly, at Orton-on-the-Hill a modern road follows a boundary within another area of regular open-field system. This road has very wide verges and has rich hedges. These contain dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) which indicates age. Further on this road becomes a wide footpath, similar that at Thurlaston. Similar features have been found on boundaries of the regular field systems at Seagrave and at Hoton.

To sum up, there appears to have been a pattern of regular fields, containing very long roughly parallel boundaries. These are marked by substantial features, many of which are roads or tracks, and which incorporate old hedges. Explaining these systems is more difficult.

One possibility is that they are planned field systems. This would explain their regularity. Some have interpreted the regular layout and sequences of tenants within townships as resulting from the planned creation of fully-formed open fields in the late Saxon period (Hall 2013, 191). The planning event was dated using fieldwalking, since middle-late Saxon sites were found in areas which later had open fields in them (Parry 2006, 127). This, however, only directly dates the strips: the application of this date to the furlong boundaries, cycles of tenure and cropping systems depends on the assumption that the creation of these elements in their later medieval form was part of the planning event, as Hall (2013) took to be demonstrated by their regular form. The fact that the regular furlongs often extend beyond the townships may argue against such explanations for our phenomenon. It is possible that strips were created within the regular boundaries which we have already observed and therefore that they may predate a Saxon origin of the strips themselves.

Another possibility is that the regular field boundaries are prehistoric but were reused within medieval field



Figure 1 Plan of open-fields at Sileby. This shows a very regular furlong pattern in which most strips run north-west to south-east. The direction of the strips is shown by the grey lines, though no attempt has been made to represent all strips. Based on LRO DE 2/4.

systems. Prehistoric fields have been found elsewhere, in both champion and in woodland landscapes, and are characterised by parallel linear alignments. A prehistoric field system within the open-field systems of the Bourn Valley is similar to the field systems found in Leicestershire (Oosthuizen 2006, 72–87). In some cases the boundaries of the Bourn Valley field system were marked by hollow ways, similar to the features found in Leicestershire. The identification of prehistoric field systems has come under some criticism (Hall 2013, Hinton 1997), and Hall suggests that prehistoric populations were unlikely

to have required as extensive field systems as have been implied. While this is an important consideration it is difficult to assess without a clear understanding of prehistoric husbandry and land tenure. Hall (2013, 157) has also pointed out that aerial photographs often reveal medieval field systems which overly completely different prehistoric landscapes. This certainly restricts the extent of continuity. Hinton criticised the use of relationships between Roman roads and proposed prehistoric field systems by showing that fields in the Scole-Dickleburgh area were the product of topography



Figure 2 A particularly large area of regular furlongs in the Leicestershire Wolds. A parish boundary cutting across the a regular furlong is marked 'A'. Based on data from Hartley 1989.

rather than early planning, meaning that they could have been placed around Roman roads. Oosthuizen's (2006) work however is supported by stronger relationships than those at Scole-Dickleburgh as, rather than just relying on a general difference of alignment, particular Bourn Valley furlongs are bisected by Roman roads. Consequently, recent criticism may restrict the frequency with which prehistoric field systems survived, but does not prevent the possibility that it occurred in some cases. Without any clear dating evidence for the Leicestershire features, however, any attempt to assign a pre-medieval date remains speculative.

Evidence of prehistoric land division has been found in Leicestershire, though none of the published examples coincide with areas of surviving ridge-and-furrow. Excavation of boundaries at Kirby Muxloe, Elms Farm and Ratby has produced Bronze and Iron Age dates (Cooper 1994, 162–5, Charles *et al.* 2000, 113–220). Pickering and Hartley have identified several more on aerial photographs one of which survives as an earthwork called 'King Luds Entrenchments'. They also found that, in some cases, pit alignments, which are usually Neolithic, were revealed during hedgerow removal (Pickering and Hartley 1986, 24; 48–9).



Figure 3 The remains of a hollow-way on the boundary within an area of regular furlongs near Thurlaston.

There is, however, little direct evidence that the regular furlong patterns are prehistoric. In one case, near Wymeswold, fieldwalking has found Roman manuring scatter in areas of regular furlong patterns, suggesting that these areas were cultivated before the medieval period, though this may simply be coincidence (Trubshaw n.d., 10–16). Unfortunately, no Roman roads show a clear relationship to the regular furlongs. The Foss Way is on a different alignment to a large area of regular fields to the west of it (Fig. 2), perhaps suggesting that they are of different ages, but, as it is not in contact with the field system their relationship cannot be established confidently. A smaller stretch of Roman road near Countesthorpe, which Margery numbered 572, forms a boundary within a regular field system (Margery 1967, 127). This means that the road either followed an existing boundary or that it is earlier than the field system. However, this road is not certainly Roman and its course may have changed since the Roman period.

Whatever their date these patterns are substantial and will reward further investigation. They are clearly a feature of the earliest phases of the Midland field system and therefore may have implications for the ongoing debate on open-field origins. It is likely that they represent a phase of planning, though whether this occurred during the creation of subdivided holdings in the Saxon period or during prehistory remains unclear.

References

Abbreviations

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