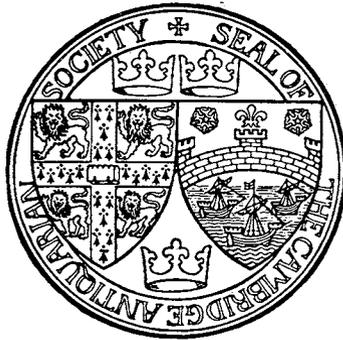


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OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXVII

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Published for the Cambridge Antiquarian Society (incorporating the Cambs and Hunts
Archaeological Society) by Imray Laurie Norie and Wilson Ltd,
Wych House, Saint Ives, Huntingdon

Printed in Great Britain at The Burlington Press, Foxton, Royston, Herts SG8 6SA

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RIDGE-AND-FURROW IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE

ROGER KAIN *and* W. R. MEAD

INTEREST in relict features of the landscape waxes and wanes with fashion. The climax of concern for ridge-and-furrow was probably reached more than a decade ago; but much remains to be done in the simple recording of this familiar rural feature and, as its broader distributional occurrence is revealed, in the detection of significant correlations. The first exercise in recording the distribution of ridge-and-furrow at a county level was undertaken for Buckinghamshire¹ and was subsequently broadened into a four county map². Maps of ridge-and-furrow for Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Kent have also been compiled, though they are unpublished.³ The map reproduced in Figure 2 extends the study into Cambridgeshire.

Cambridgeshire is a county characterised by marked variation in soils which gave rise to the development of distinctive farming and field systems in the past. Its traditional agricultural regions based on soil types, are summarised on Figure 1. At this general level the county can be divided into two parts with the Fenland to the north and the Upland to the south. There is also an important distinction between the heavy soils of west Cambridgeshire that are derived from boulder clay and the light soils of the south and east with parent material of chalks and sands. The one-inch soil map of the Cambridge region published for the Soil Survey of England and Wales in 1963, indicates that there is a great deal of local variation within these main divisions. It identifies some soil series in the west with free drainage and others in the south and east where drainage is imperfect and locally poor.⁴

H. L. Gray in *English Field Systems* (1915) considered that Cambridgeshire occupied a transitional position between his Midland and East Anglian areas and that it possessed elements of the field systems of both. Recent work has tended to support Gray's basic assumptions, if not his opinions on the method of tillage. M. R. Postgate argues that in west Cambridgeshire field systems developed along Midland lines. He reviews documentary evidence from the thirteenth century which shows that assarts from the waste were assimilated directly into the common fields.⁵ Much the same happened in the centre of the county but in the south and east 'it is clear that the development of field systems occurred, not according to Midland custom, but according to that common in East Anglia.'⁶ Here, irregular field systems developed out of the amalgamation of assarts.

The ridge-and-furrow map of Cambridgeshire has been constructed in the same way as those for other counties. It is based upon air photographs flown

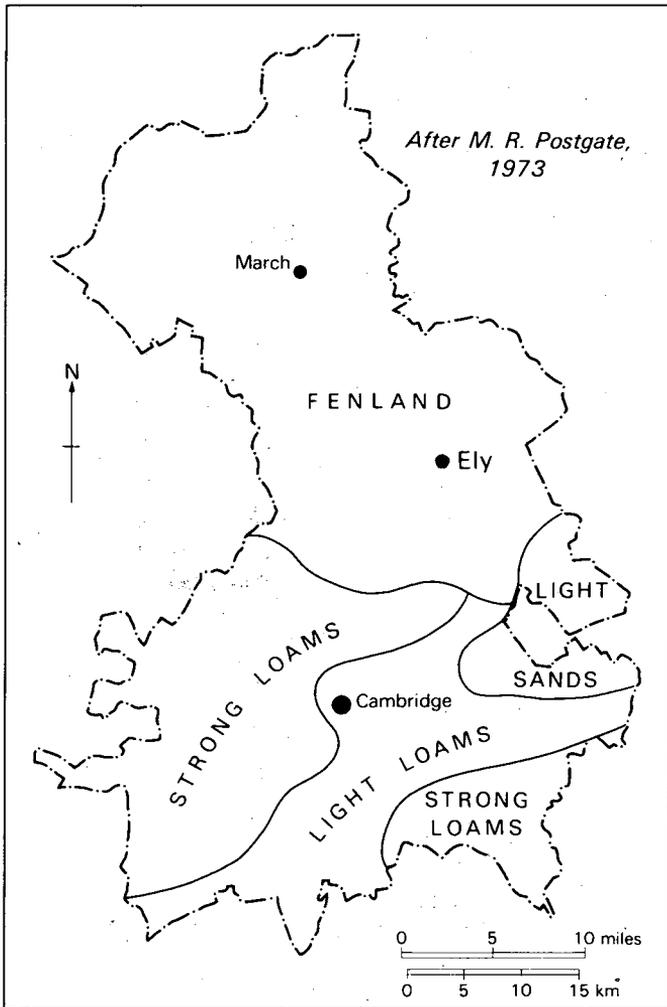


Fig. 1. Agricultural Regions of Cambridgeshire (after M. R. Postgate, 1973).

by the R.A.F. between 1947 and 1963 at a scale of 1:10,000. These photographs cover the whole county with the exception of some narrow strips between adjacent sorties and some military airfields. The patterns of ridge-and-furrow detectable on the photographs have been transferred to 1:25,000 scale Ordnance Survey maps. Since the Second World War, with the development of high-powered tractors and in response to the system of deficiency payments for

cereals, much of the heavy land of Cambridge traditionally laid to permanent pasture has been ploughed up. These facts should be borne in mind when interpreting the map or when comparing it with the distribution of ridge-and-furrow obtained from other sources and from photographs taken at a later date.

Figure 2 is therefore a record of the distribution of a rapidly disappearing micro-relief feature as it existed in the middle years of the twentieth century. No attempt has been made to distinguish between different types of ridge-and-furrow. For thirty-seven parishes on the heavy land of west Cambridgeshire and ten parishes on the fen margin in north-east Cambridgeshire, the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments has produced such a classification.⁷ From aerial photograph and field evidence it recognises three types of ridge-and-furrow. The first type is associated with the open fields, arranged either in straight furlongs or, more usually, in curved furlongs. The second type derives from 'old enclosures'; it is generally similar in shape and form to that of the open fields but different in that headlands were formed within the field boundary. The third type is considered to be of post-enclosure age, is usually straight and commonly aligned downslope. A detailed description of the shape and extent of ridge-and-furrow is given under the heading of 'cultivation remains' in each parish account in the two volumes.

From Figure 2 it can be calculated that over 80% of the fields bearing the imprint of ridge-and-furrow are located on the heavy soils of the western part of the county. While it is absent from the Fenland proper, there is a close correlation between clay soils and the occurrence of ridge-and-furrow on the fen 'islands'. Contrastingly, in the south and south-east of the county, no such simple relationship between ridge-and-furrow and soil type can be found. Although some fields on the river deposits of the river Cam in the parishes of Hinxton, Whittlesford and Sawston are ridged-and-furrowed, very few fields on the heavy soils of the south-east display the feature.

This distinction between the east and west of the county was noticed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century agricultural commentators. Charles Vancouver in his 1794 Board of Agriculture Report on the farming of Cambridgeshire says that in the parish of Shudy Camps in the extreme south east of the county, 'the open field, as well as the enclosures, lie flat; no high back'd lands; they are all hollow drained, and in that respect managed in a very husbandlike manner.'⁸ In the west at Childerley there was a contrasting situation and he bemoaned the difference in quality of crops, 'between the tops of the lands and the furrows; a distinction which must strike the traveller with melancholy, as he traverses the open common fields, of this and some of the neighbouring counties.'⁹

In Cambridgeshire the plough itself was also a variable which could influence the character of ridge-and-furrow. The fenland was cultivated by turn-wrest ploughs and it has been argued that it would be difficult to throw land into

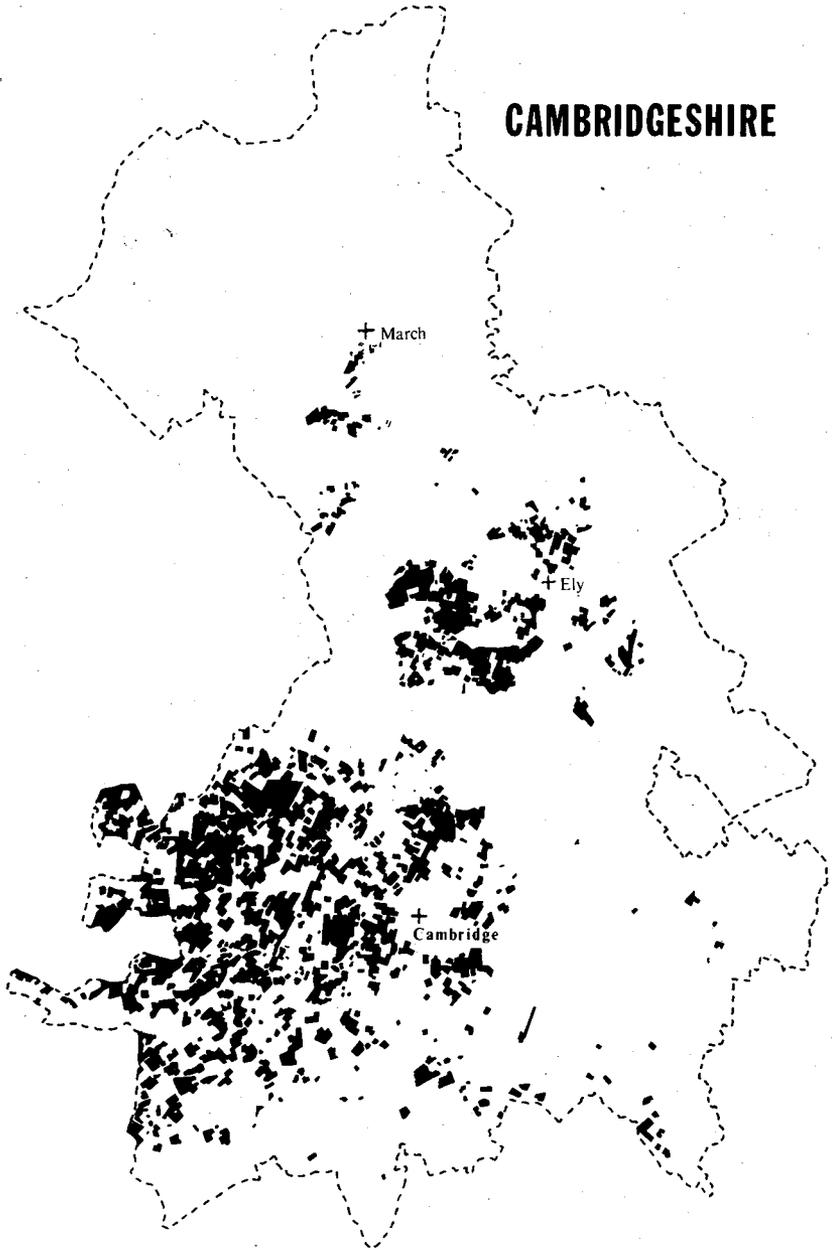
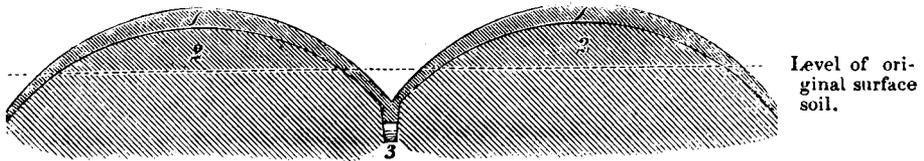


Fig. 2. The Distribution of Ridge-and-Furrow in Cambridgeshire.

ridge-and-furrow with these implements. In upland Cambridgeshire the fixed mouldboard plough was traditionally used and ridge-and-furrow can be considered the direct consequence of its employment. In addition, it is likely that the light soils of Cambridgeshire were never ridged-and-furrowed because of the practice of cross-ploughing. One of the three methods of ploughing common in England at the end of the sixteenth century was to lay land 'flatte and plaine, without ridge or furrow, as in most parts of Cambridgeshire.'¹⁰ This method of treating the light soils of Cambridgeshire is corroborated by Samuel Jonas in his prize essay of the Royal Agricultural Society of England written in 1847. He describes in detail how fields were laid flat by several cross ploughings.¹¹ He

Section of Ends of Lands lying on high Backs.



1. Present surface soil.
2. Land gathered up above original level of surface soil, now become, to a certain extent, dead inert clay.
3. Hollow drain up the middle of old furrows.

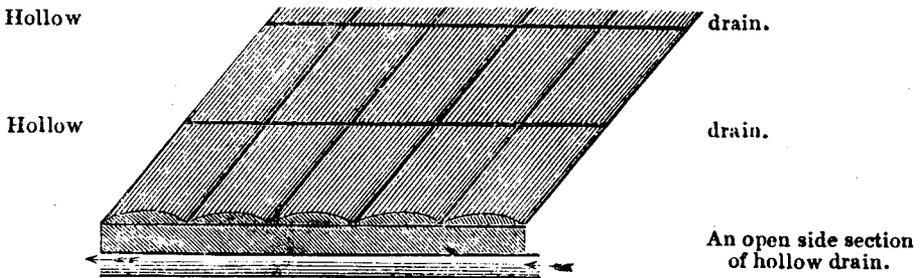


Fig. 3. A comparison of the Landscape Effects of Ridging-and-Furrowing and Hollow Draining by Samuel Jonas in 1847.

also noted the different ploughing on heavy soil in east and west Cambridgeshire. He thought that drainage in the east was much better managed than in the west. In the eastern district every field was ploughed in straight lands of uniform width and fallows were cross-ploughed. Excess water was removed by hollow drains.¹² Jonas severely castigated farmers in the west of the county who continued to plough in ridge-and-furrow. 'You here perceive the plan our forefathers adopted to get rid of the water; for instead of taking the water from the land, they endeavoured to take the land from the water.'¹³ He produced a diagram to illustrate the landscape effects of these two methods of ridding the soil of excess moisture and it is reproduced in Figure 3.

This short note demonstrates that the distribution of ridge-and-furrow in Cambridgeshire is not simply explained. In the first place, there is no direct and universal correlation between heavy soils and the presence of ridge-and-furrow. Some fields on light soils are ridged-and-furrowed, while few fields on the heavy soils of the eastern part of the county bear its imprint. Early observers explained the mass of ridged-and-furrowed fields in the west as a crude attempt to rid soil of excess water while in the east this was not necessary because of the widespread adoption of hollow drains for this purpose. In the second place, a distinction exists between the regular three field system of cultivation practised before enclosure in the west and the irregular multi-field practices of the east; but this is no simple distinction. It would seem that an extension of this study into High Suffolk might yield useful results. High Suffolk is another area of heavy soils with drainage problems, where the past organisation of agriculture was quite different from that of the Midland Plain.

Nor, to put the feature into a wider perspective, is East Anglia so far removed from complementary lands across the North Sea, where ridge-and-furrow continues to attract the attention of investigators. The evidence and approach have different forms in Scandinavia. In Germany, the theme has been intermittently recurrent in academic enquiry for a full century.¹⁴

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9. *idem.* 121.
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13. *idem.* 56.
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