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**Proceedings of the
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Editor Alison Taylor

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Editorial

My first task in this volume is to thank and pay tribute to the retiring editor, Audrey Meaney. She took the Proceedings through several difficult years, from 1993-7, coping in particular with new publishing technology and increasingly complex archaeological reports. In this time she made tremendous efforts to catch up with annual publication, so that, by September 1998, we are only nine months behind the date for which the issue is intended. This is despite the size and professional standards required for the only vehicle for regular reporting of most archaeological discoveries to a wide local and international readership in Cambridgeshire, as well as publishing historical and other antiquarian research.

1996-7 once again had a well-filled programme for the Society, with two conferences, on Fenland Waterways in March and on recent archaeological excavations in November. There was an impressive programme of lectures, headed by Barry Cunliffe and our own ex-President Christopher Taylor, and some enjoyable excursions. It was also a year when the Council, and in particular its President and Secretary, were involved in efforts to protect local services for archives, archaeology and local studies. Sadly, just as this volume was being prepared for the press, we heard of the deaths of two of our stalwart members and supporters. Nesta Rooke, for many years Sites and Monuments Officer for Cambridgeshire, and Brian Charge, Director of the Haverhill and District Archaeological Group, died in July 1998.

This volume contains a few minor changes in design, principally with the intention of making better use of expensive space, and it follows the usual format except for the revival, after several years, of a Reviews section. As a first attempt it perhaps appears rather incestuous, but I hope that in future we will receive a wider range of books, and I would also welcome offers of suitable reviews by other writers. This is an important way to bring works that might easily be missed to the attention of members, and to entice them to read reports which are often more interesting than their titles suggest.

Alison Taylor

Prehistoric Fields into Medieval Furlongs? Evidence from Caxton, Cambridgeshire

Susan Oosthuizen

Introduction

The origins of medieval common field furlongs and their physical links with earlier field systems of prehistoric and Roman Britain has been a puzzle which has exercised historians and archaeologists for many years. For example,

‘Of all the problems concerning Roman fields, one of the most insoluble has been what happened to them at the end of the formal Roman period. Most historians and many archaeologists have seen a complete break, at least in physical terms, between the field systems of Roman Britain and the common or open field systems of medieval England’

(Taylor and Fowler 1978, 159).

Evidence from Caxton, Cambridgeshire, explored in detail below, appears to show a prehistoric field system incorporated into a later medieval open field system, down to divisions into selions ploughed in characteristic ‘C’ and backward ‘C’ curves.

The evidence for continuity from the field patterns of the prehistoric and Roman periods to the initial organisation of medieval common fields is both contradictory and inconclusive. There are many places where prehistoric or Roman field systems survive as cropmarks overlain by later agricultural layouts. A large number of examples are known in Cambridgeshire and elsewhere, (e.g. in Cambridgeshire, Hall 1992; Malim 1993; Wait 1991). Similarly large tracts of Roman or earlier field systems appear to have survived in fenland and are also ignored by medieval open field organisation (Hall 1996). This pessimistic view of continuity appears to be confirmed by excavation. For example, at Maxey, Cambs, excavation suggested that medieval open field furlongs and furrows were laid out over the landscape as if it were a blank page, cutting across earlier settlements and fields (Addyman 1964). This experience has been replicated by those with most experience of medieval common field systems on the ground (Hall 1982, 46).

Nevertheless, a faint blow for occasional examples of continuity has been struck in other places. In Cambridgeshire, at Teversham and Duxford, Roman or earlier ditches have been found consistently to un-

derlie medieval headlands and furlong boundaries (Taylor and Fowler 1978, 159). Rackham has commented that in Carm Field, Cambridge ‘the ways and major balks were the remains of a planned grid, evidently earlier than a Roman main road which sliced across them’ (Rackham 1986, 176).¹ The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (RCHME) has noted that ‘an early date can be inferred’ for a co-axial field system at Tadlow, Cambridgeshire, lying parallel to the Cam valley and respected by both county and parish boundaries (RCHME, 1968). It has, though, as Taylor and others have noted, yet to be proved that these survivals are examples of continuity rather than reuse or simply coincidence.

The argument has been complicated by the notion that champion and woodland settings may be at least partly responsible. Williamson has commented on ‘a long history of **piecemeal alteration**’ (my emphasis) in Essex and other parts of East Anglia which indicates that ‘not only on the fertile and tractable clays, but also in marginal areas, much of the essential layout of the landscape in the “ancient countryside” is of late prehistoric or Romano-British origin’ (Williamson 1986, 242 and 245). The implication has been that continuity was more likely in woodland England than in champion areas since it did not suffer the large-scale destruction of ancient landscapes which occurred when the Midland system of open-field farming was introduced in champion areas.

It is true that many examples of apparently intact ancient landscapes have been found outside the Midland area – in western Britain (Hoskins 1988, 20–22; HMSO 1970 and 1975), and in East Anglia (Wade-Martins 1987, 12–14; Williamson 1986, 243; Williamson 1993, 24–5; Warner 1997, 26). Rackham’s portrait of South Elmham describes a typical example:

‘About 25 square miles divided into little fields by cross-hedges between bundles of parallel, not quite straight, main axes. There is no history of woodland or open-field; the medieval greens and meadows intrude into the semi-regularity’

(Rackham 1986, 156).

At Caxton, in west Cambridgeshire, the fragmented parts of a pre-existing, perhaps prehistoric, co-axial

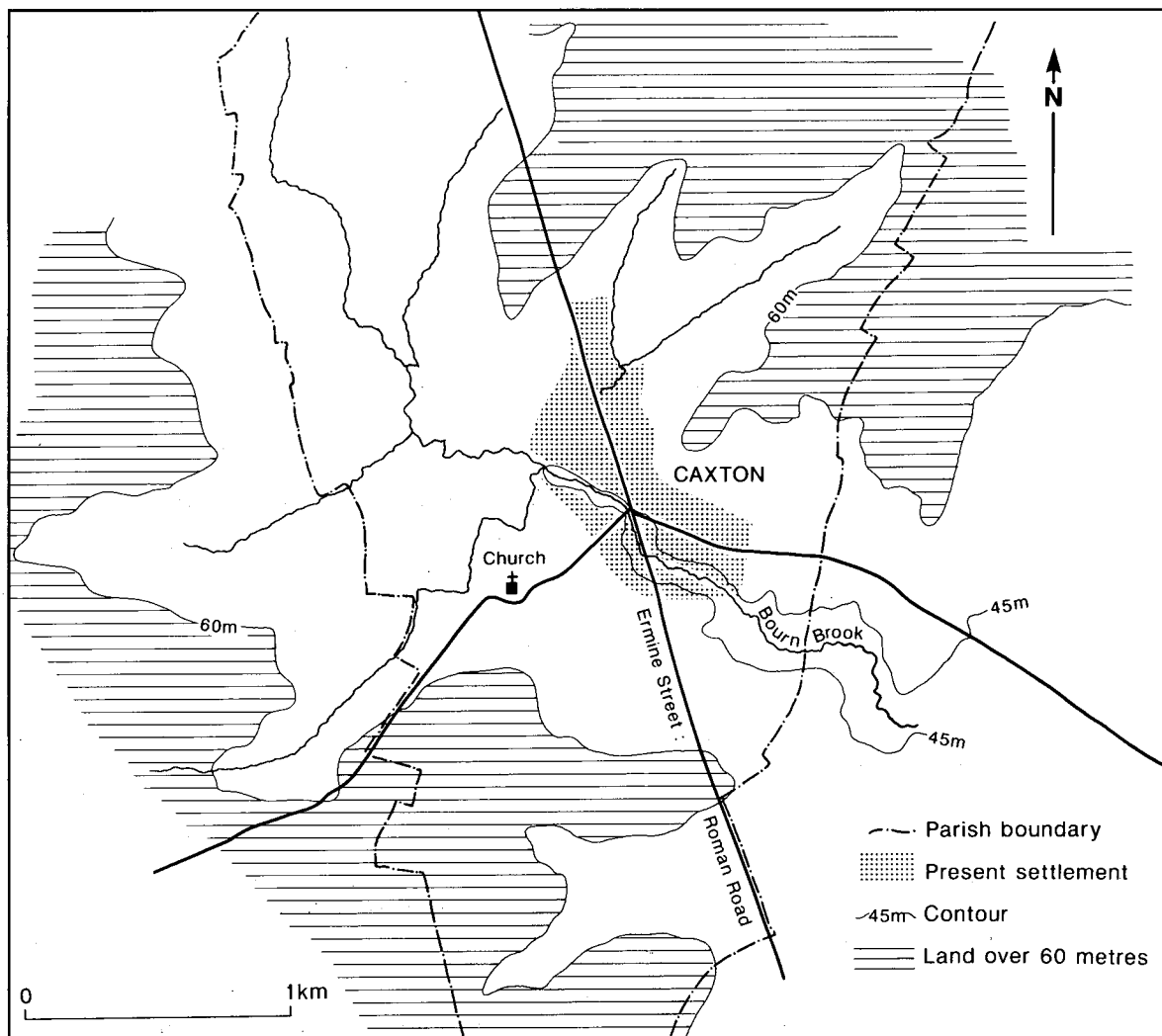


Figure 1. Topography of Caxton parish, South Cambridgeshire

field system appear to have been fossilised within the open field furlongs and selions of its medieval landscape, some of which have survived into the modern period. This conclusion is based on the evidence of surviving field boundaries and medieval ridge and furrow, and is discussed below. If Caxton has been correctly interpreted, it has a dual importance to the debate outlined above: first, it is based on the physical evidence of field archaeology, rather than the early maps on which other reconstructions have necessarily been forced to depend. Second, it lies in the planned countryside of lowland Britain, rather than in the zones of ancient countryside where so much of the physical evidence for co-axial field systems occurs (Rackham 1986, 3 Fig 1.3).

Caxton

Topography (Fig. 1)

The parish lies at the head of a valley whose floor lies at about 45m OD between two ridges running parallel and away to the southeast (TL 25/35). The Bourn Brook, a major tributary of the Cam, flows down this

valley. The northern ridge carried a prehistoric route, later Romanised, between Eltisley and Cambridge, while the southern is a spur reaching out from the Ouse/Cam watershed towards the southeast into the Cam valley. The geology is mostly clay, with some alluvial land along the brook (Victoria County History V (hereafter VCH), 26). The Bourn Brook in Caxton is also the focus of a number of smaller streams which rise within the parish at the spring line about 60m OD. The present village centre lies about 500m east of the medieval church, on either side of Ermine Street, the Roman and later main road from London to York. It seems to have moved from the area around the church to its present site on previous common field land after a mid-13th century market grant (VCH V, 32; Taylor 1982, 25). The 'C' and backward-'C' curved property boundaries of the settlement have fossilised the selions of a furlong which the shifted settlement colonised (RCHME 1968, 34-5; Taylor 1982, 24).

A possible prehistoric field system? (Fig. 2)

A close inspection of the relationship between these property boundaries and Ermine Street appears to re-

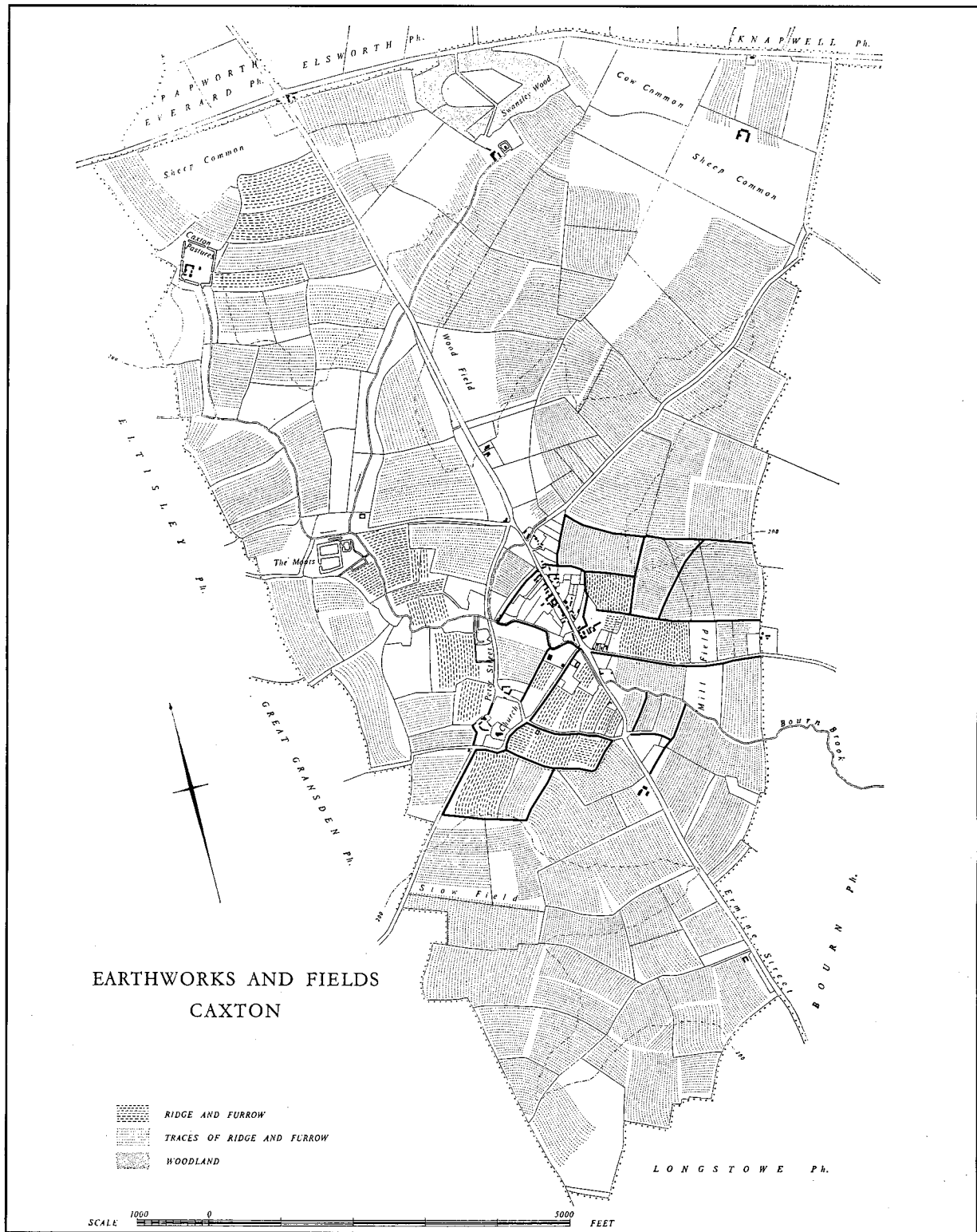


Figure 2. Medieval earthworks and fields, Caxton. Reproduced with kind permission from RCHME (1968) *West Cambridgeshire HMSO p. 43. Emphasis added.*

veal a pattern which has hitherto been masked by interest in medieval village development. The settlement forms a rough square bisected into two triangles by Ermine Street. Other property and field boundaries appear to extend this pattern into a generally co-axial

pattern lying on a roughly southwesterly/northeasterly axis north and south of the Bourn Brook. The orientation and slight irregularities of this system may have been determined by the topography of the area: first, since the Bourn Brook and the ridgeways are

aligned southeast/northwest, patterns based on these natural features will run at right-angles to them. Second, the underlying landscape rises over a series of hills and shallow valleys from the valley bottom – more sharply to the north than to the south of the Bourn Brook – affecting the regularity of the field pattern.

Figure 2 indicates the way in which Ermine Street appears to cut across these topographical patterns and influences.² The relationship between Ermine Street and these boundaries is analogous to the relationships between Roman roads and earlier field systems at Dickleburgh and Yaxley in Norfolk (Wade-Martins 1987, 12–13; Williamson 1997, 24–28), and appears to reveal a pre-existing field system across the head of the Bourn valley. The patterns are rather less neat and extensive than those quoted above, perhaps because it is based on field evidence rather than on reconstructions from early maps. If this complex of fields had been laid out after Ermine Street was constructed, it would have been more likely to have been based on the Roman road, at right-angles to its actual alignment, like the furlong alignments on the higher slopes in Caxton away from the Bourn valley. Since there were only a few years between the Roman conquest and construction of the road, this now-fragmented field pattern is most unlikely to have been laid out in the Roman period, and must predate it (VCH VII, 15). There is a similar example of the same process at Bullocks Haste, Cottenham, where the early 1st century AD Car Dyke transects an earlier co-axial rural settlement (Pattison 1996, 17).

As Fig. 2 shows, medieval furlong boundaries elsewhere in Caxton do not suggest that this apparent co-axial field system continues up the valley slopes towards the higher ground. It is impossible to say whether this is because it has been lost or because it never existed. The evidence of infield/outfield cultivation discovered by Tom Williamson on similar clayland hills and valleys in northwest Essex may be one possible explanation. These prehistoric fields may have formed an infield surrounded by unenclosed outfields on the higher clay slopes, the highest of which remained unenclosed throughout the medieval period as common pasture (Williamson 1984; Oosthuizen 1993).

The survival of this field pattern is doubly interesting. First, the RCHME map of medieval cultivation remains (Fig. 2) suggests that some of these pre-existing boundaries were reused as furlong boundaries when early medieval open field farming was introduced in Caxton (RCHME 1968, 43). The selions within the co-axial field pattern are aligned on the boundaries of these ancient fields; outside the co-axial field pattern they are aligned on other features, often in a completely different alignment, as discussed below. This implies that these earlier boundaries were still in use at the time the Midland system was introduced. Second, this may not have been unusual, given similar examples at, for example, Great Eversden and Haslingfield. (Oosthuizen 1998a, 38;

Oosthuizen 1996b, 19 n.10). The unusual facet of Caxton's history may not be the incorporation of the field system into the open field system, but rather its survival through the modern Enclosure movement simply because it had become fossilised by settlement and the concomitant 'ancient enclosures' which commonly grew up around the outskirts of villages during the later medieval and early modern periods.

Nonetheless, it should be emphasised that this apparent co-axial system is at best fragmentary and incomplete. The finer detail must have been cleared away altogether in the transition to common field farming. This is suggested by evidence from other parts of Britain about the size of prehistoric fields, which are usually considerably smaller than the furlongs considered here. In Dorset, RCHME noted that 'Celtic' fields are generally between 0.25 to 1.5 acres in size, and that 'when they are square or short oval proportions their sides are seldom over 70 yards long. There are however examples of long fields with lengths generally up to 130 yards.' (RCHME 1970, 320). Similarly, at Grassington in North Yorkshire, most field plots are about 115m by 23m (Darvill 1997, 62–3).

It may be, however, that the tofts of the primary nucleated settlement at Caxton fossilised more detail of these prehistoric fields than did the medieval furlongs outside the settlement – in exactly the same way that the property boundaries of the later shifted village preserved ridge and furrow of medieval selions around the market in Caxton.

Figure 3 shows a field immediately south of the church which contains four alignments of medieval ridge and furrow, shown respectively on the map as 1, 2, 3 and 4. These alignments are, in order, approximately 1.8 acres, 3.6 acres, 7.1 acres and 2.6 acres in area.³ RCHME has identified the northeastern boundary of this field as part of the 'Village Street' and the southwestern boundary as the 'Back Lane' of the original late Saxon nucleated settlement in Caxton (RCHME 1968, 43, Monuments 24(a) and (b)). It has suggested that divisions between the orientations of ridge and furrow within it may represent some of the original tofts of this settlement. The irregular sub-divisions of this field suggest that some of the original tofts may have been amalgamated with their neighbours when the plots were converted to arable in the high middle ages, after their inhabitants moved to sites along the main road.

Although these tofts are sited within the apparent co-axial system, they are still too large in area to be the remains of individual prehistoric fields. It is possible, though, that they preserve a palimpsest. The original tofts of the primary nucleation may have been created out of one or two of the possible prehistoric fields. The original length of the tofts between the 'Village Street' and the 'Back Lane' appears to have been about 186 yards. While it is feasible to suggest that this may have been the original length of the earlier fields, it is more likely that they were about half this length, perhaps about 93 yards. This compares well with lengths in other parts of Britain, for example in

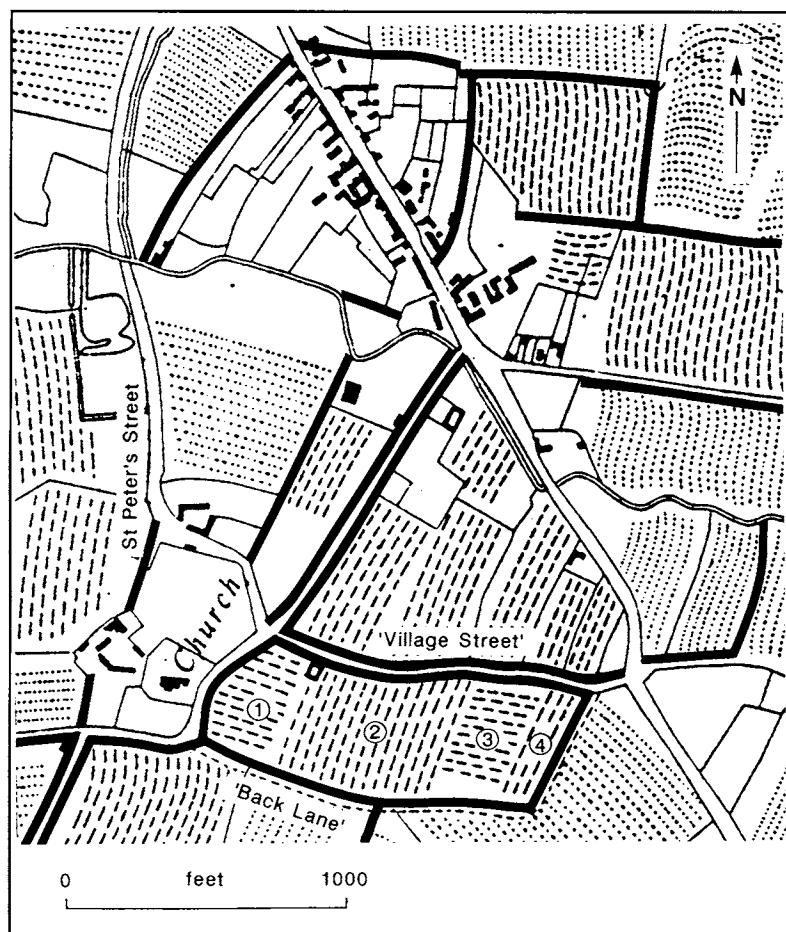


Figure 3. Medieval earthworks and fields, Caxton: detail of potential co-axial field system. Reproduced with kind permission from RCHME (1968) West Cambridgeshire HMSO p.43. Emphasis added.

Dorset and North Yorkshire, where the length of 'Celtic' fields varies from between 70 to 130 yards (RCHME 1970, 320; Darvill 1997, 62–3). The ratio between the length of these areas and their width is remarkably regular in all except the last case, supporting the possibility that they were originally divided into smaller, regular compartments.⁴ In any other context this regularity could be acceptably explained as part of the regularity of the medieval field system; however, the relationship between Ermine Street and these fields suggests a regular co-axial underlying framework.

Relationship between the prehistoric fields and the medieval open field furlongs (Fig. 2)

The orientation of the medieval furlongs to the north and south of these apparently co-axial fields lends some support to this interpretation. To the south, furlong boundaries are aligned on Ermine Street and run northwest/southeast, at right angles to the smaller and perhaps older field boundaries at the heart of the settlement along the Brook. To the north, the medieval furlongs use Ermine Street and the Romanised ridge-way running along the northern ridge as their axis, or the little streams which lead down from the minor

valleys in the northeast towards the Bourn Brook.⁵ These differences in alignment indicate that these furlongs are later extensions of arable up the valley slopes away from the core areas of farming along the Brook.

Continuity from prehistoric to medieval cultivation

The Royal Commission has mapped the medieval cultivation remains in the parish on the basis of surviving ridge and furrow and aerial photographs (RCHME 1968, 43, reproduced here as Fig. 2). These remains occur both inside the suggested prehistoric field system and outside it. Ridge and furrow inside the co-axial field boundaries respects the orientation of these boundaries and masks their earlier origin. The general difference in size between these furlongs and 'Celtic' fields elsewhere suggests that although the wider pattern may be of considerable antiquity, much of the finer detail has been lost.

Without (and even, perhaps, with) excavation it is not possible to say whether these fields were in continuous use from the prehistoric into the Anglo-Saxon period. There are good agricultural grounds for suggesting that these small rectangular fields may have been fairly continuously cultivated, since they lie along the brook on the most tractable land in the parish. Furthermore, an hiatus in cultivation

is unlikely to have occurred in the late Saxon period when open field farming was introduced, since this was a period when arable was being expanded. (e.g. Lewis *et al.* 1997, 175–7). Both these factors make it extremely likely that these small fields *were* still in use when common fields were introduced into Caxton – even if a break in their use had perhaps occurred in earlier, sub-Roman, centuries. VCH has underlined this point by commenting that 'arable farming predominated in Caxton from an early date' (VCH V, 31). Nor do the field names in and near the area in question indicate woodland clearance. Woodland that survived for some time in the parish lay along the northern valley slopes well away from the area in question where a number of field-names indicating medieval woodland survive on these high clays (Rumble 1981, 26:42; VCH V, 29; RCHME 1968, 43). It seems likely that these elements of a potentially early field system may have been converted directly from pre-open field to open field agriculture without a break in cultivation other than that necessitated by the imposition of a new agricultural framework.

The wider context [Fig. 4]

It is an interesting coincidence that the general pat-

tern of parish boundaries in Cambridgeshire between the Mare Way in the south and the Cambridge/Eltisley ridgeway in the north lies on a northeasterly/southwesterly alignment. This pattern is based on the relationship between the Bourn Brook and its flanking ridgeways, and generally tends to ignore the Roman roads unless the parish boundaries are demonstrably late.⁶ Furthermore, not only are the Roman roads in this area often ignored by parish boundaries, but they also cut across this topographically-based pattern (Oosthuizen 1996a, 10; Oosthuizen 1996b, 7). In the Bourn valley, even Ermine Street seems to be almost completely irrelevant. Caxton parish boundaries make virtually no reference to it, while just to the south Longstowe and Bourn were almost certainly once one unit and the use of Ermine Street as a parish boundary between these two parishes is late (Oosthuizen 1998b, forthcoming). Similarly the early-2nd century Roman road between Arrington and Cambridge is used as a parish boundary only once for a short distance in the Bourn valley between Little Eversden and Harlton. Elsewhere it cuts across an older pattern which pays no attention to it.

It is not argued here that the parish boundaries are themselves the remains of older land units. It is more likely that the trackways linking the valley bottom with the prehistoric ridgeways which flanked the Bourn Brook, and the co-axial field systems which ran down the valley sides survived for long enough to be used as boundaries when new Saxon estates came into being (*cf.* Williamson 1986). The importance of the alignment of the parish boundaries of west Cambridgeshire to these small fields at Caxton is simply to underline the point that the underlying settlement and agricultural pattern of this area appears to owe more to the prehistoric period than has previously been realised.

'It is as if a net were lowered gently over the landscape so that where it fell on flat ground the linear pattern of the net remains more or less unchanged, but where it fell on uneven ground the pattern of the net became deformed or distorted by the topography' (Warner 1997, 49-52)

This net seems in west Cambridgeshire to have had its origins in the prehistoric period and to have formed the foundation for later use of the landscape.

Conclusion

Any conclusion must echo the seminal comments of Taylor and Fowler in work undertaken together and separately in the last twenty years (Taylor and Fowler 1978; Taylor 1981). In 1978 Taylor noted that 'it seems possible that some late Roman ditched fields were either taken over as going concerns by Saxon settlers or were still visible as boundaries when later Saxon

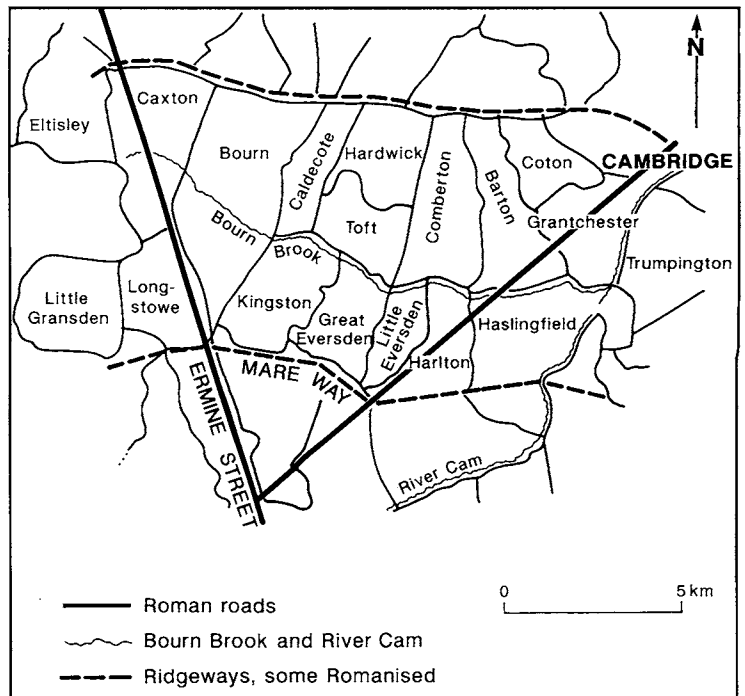


Figure 4. Roman roads and parish boundaries in the Bourn Valley

farmers laid out their fields....These new fields presumably became furlongs and were subdivided into strips' (Taylor and Fowler 1978, 160). In the same paper Fowler suggested that an alternative may simply have been of 'Britons continuing to farm their 'ancient fields' well into the so-called Anglo-Saxon period' (Taylor and Fowler 1978, 161). Three years later Taylor commented that

'Any discussions of the origins of open fields has to take into account the fact that, whenever or however the Saxons developed open fields, these had to be based on a prehistoric system of agriculture and field shapes and did not evolve in an empty countryside devoid of any remains of earlier farming' (Taylor 1981, 20).

These points are as pertinent today when new discussions of the development of villages and fields still often seem to find the question too difficult to confront.

There is some physical evidence to lend support to these hypotheses, although it is not generally found in central and southern Britain, that is, the area committed to Midland cultivation during the Middle Ages. For example, Taylor has noted that 'in Wessex, there are, and were, vast areas of these ['Celtic'] fields, overlain by later, short-lived, medieval ridge and furrow. Though the ridge and furrow is or was only temporary, and not part of a fully-developed open or common field system, it does show well how pre-existing field systems often controlled the layout of the later ridge and furrow...even though many of their boundaries are ploughed away' (C. C. Taylor, pers. comm.).

It is important to reiterate the point that physical or documentary evidence of continuity from earlier field systems to open field systems in the common field

areas of central and southern Britain is generally lacking, since for the first time in Midland England, at Caxton, these hypotheses seem to receive the support of physical evidence.

The importance of Caxton to the debate concerning the process of transition from earlier fields to medieval open fields lies in its two key attributes: first, the apparent survival into the modern period of a fragmentary co-axial field system; and second, the relationship between these ancient field boundaries and medieval cultivation remains which appears to show that these earlier fields were straightforwardly incorporated into the open field layout. At Caxton, where the process of transition is illuminated, it seems that it was the pattern of *farming* rather than the pattern of *fields* which was substantially changed by the introduction of the Midland system.

In Cambridgeshire many parishes lack the early maps which have allowed the reconstructions at places like Dickleburgh, and the enclosure map is often the earliest for the parish. It is possible that pre-existing field systems may well have been more widely incorporated into common field agriculture than has previously been realised, only to be destroyed in the industrialisation of the landscape following the Agricultural Revolution – as this example at Caxton suggests. And perhaps the survival of earlier field systems in woodland areas may as much be because, lacking Midland open field systems, these areas also lacked the vandalism of the late 18th/early 19th century enclosure movement. It might be the latter which is a contributing and significant factor, sweeping away wholesale the evidence of these earlier fields in Midland areas, as much as the intrinsic character of woodland landscapes.

In Dorset, the Royal Commission noted that 'the most important factor governing [the surviving distribution] of 'Celtic' fields is differential post-Roman cultivation...they are notably absent from the vicinity of existing villages' (RCHME 1975, 117). While the system at Caxton may have been preserved because it was incorporated into a late Saxon nucleated settlement and open fields, there is a 'commonsense' element to the Royal Commission's conclusion which 'stands to reason'. It would be interesting to test this finding in Midland areas to see the extent to which the process of transition from dispersed to common field farming at Caxton was anomalous or orthodox.

A further factor in the retention of this ancient landscape in the late Saxon period may have been the local social and political context within which it occurred. Before the Norman Conquest, most of the land in Caxton – that is, 7 of the 10 hides at which the parish was assessed – was in the hand of 22 sokemen, with an average holding of between 18.3 - 37.5 acres each (Rumble 1981, 26:42). A similar situation at Great Eversden (where a large number of sokemen held all the land in the parish) appears to have resulted in the retention of the physical boundaries of some earlier fields within the reorganisation of agriculture into the three-field system.

The implication may be that the introduction of the

Midland system in those parishes which were largely or wholly held by sokemen was achieved by consensus. This consensus may have received physical expression in the retention of the underlying layout of the original field system through the use of some earlier boundaries as furlong boundaries, while the smaller subdivisions of these early fields were 'rubbed out' to create furlongs which were large enough to accommodate selions. Those in west Cambridgeshire usually vary at between 140 and 260 yards in length, which would have been too long for the smaller pre-open fields, so necessitating some adjustment. What seems to have changed at Caxton (and at Great Eversden) at the introduction of the open fields was the way in which fields were used rather than the general outlines of the prehistoric fields themselves (Oosthuizen 1998a, 38).

Further work is needed to throw more light on the social mechanisms involved, and, in particular, whether the occasional retention of ancient fields in the new two or three field systems, as exemplified here, may have been related to the structure of the local social hierarchy and patterns of smallholder ownership.

Acknowledgements

The work reported here owes a very great deal to the illuminating comments and suggestions of Christopher Taylor, for which this acknowledgement makes only inadequate thanks. I would also like to thank Dr Nicholas James for his kind and thoughtful advice, and Phillip Judge, who drew the figures so expertly. Any mistakes are all my own.

Endnotes

- ¹ There may be some doubt about the attribution of this field system since the line of the Roman road from Arrington to Cambridge which underlies it was lost before the medieval field system was laid out. It cannot therefore be shown that the road post-dated the fieldsystem. It may be more likely that the opposite is the case, that is, that the medieval furlongs cut across the line of the Roman road because the latter had become redundant by the time the open fields were laid out. The relationship between this road and the medieval furlongs in the west fields of Cambridge is therefore different from that between Ermine Street and the medieval furlongs in Caxton. The line of Ermine Street appears to have been under fairly consistent use since its construction, implying that the fields which it transects must be of an earlier date.
- ² The antiquity of the field and property boundaries which make up this co-axial system is attested by a map of 1749–50 which shows them as ancient enclosures (Cambridge University Library Maps, R.B.10).
- ³ Their approximate areas are as follows: 1. is about 46.5 x 186 yards; 2. is about 93 x 186 yards; 3. is about 186 yards square and 4. is about 69 x 196 yards.
- ⁴ The ratio between their length and their width is approximately as follows: 1. has a ratio of 1:4; 2. has a ratio of 1:2; 3. has a ratio of 1:1, while 4. has a ratio of 1:2.6.
- ⁵ A similar process appears to have evolved at the Creakes, North Norfolk, where known and likely Roman roads

seem to have influenced the layout of fields which were laid out parallel to these routes (Hesse 1992). I am grateful to Dr Hesse for drawing this example to my attention.

⁶ This contrast is made all the more startling when one looks at other Roman roads in the county: the Godmanchester–Cambridge road is a parish boundary along most of its length, as is Ermine Street south of the Mare Way; Wool Street, the road leading from Cambridge to the southeast, is also extensively used as a parish boundary, and so too is Akeman Street, leading from Cambridge to Ely.

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Abbreviations used

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CCC Rpt	Cambridgeshire County Council Report by the Archaeological Field Unit
PCAS	Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society
RCHME	Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England)

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