
A reassessment of the 'relict field system' in Tadlow, Cambridgeshire

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The survival of apparently ancient fieldscapes in the modern agricultural landscape has been used as evidence of prehistoric landscape planning and for the continuity of agricultural use, into medieval and modern periods. One example of a seemingly orderly and planned prehistoric landscape can be found in the West Cambridgeshire parish of Tadlow. This article will explore the Tadlow field system in the light of recent scholarship, particularly considering the origin of the grid and what its survival means for subsequent land use.

The survival of apparently ancient fieldscapes in the modern agricultural landscape has been used as evidence of prehistoric landscape planning and for the continuity of agricultural use, and therefore society, through the turbulent centuries following the Roman withdrawal from Britain. In the final decades of the twentieth century a counter argument developed questioning this explanation of the origin and survival of apparently ancient field patterns (Williamson 1998, 2016). One example of a seemingly orderly and planned prehistoric landscape can be found in the West Cambridgeshire parish of Tadlow, which Oliver Rackham identified and briefly discussed in *The History of the Countryside* (Rackham 1986, 176–7). This article will explore the Tadlow field system in the light of recent scholarship, particularly considering the origin of the grid and what its survival means for subsequent land use.

Prehistoric fields and 'relict landscapes'

Rackham's identification of the "Tadlow Grid" coincided with a period of great interest in the discovery and discussion of ancient field systems which had apparently survived and been fossilised in modern boundaries in Lowland England. In the early 1970s Andrew Fleming discovered the Reaves, a Bronze Age system of walled fields on Dartmoor (Fleming 1988, 2008). The Reaves were formed of numerous stone walls that shared a consistent alignment, travelling upslope from the valley to end at the watershed or upon a 'terminal reave', a wall running along a contour. The repetitive and parallel nature of the walls as

they followed the direct path upslope from the watercourse led Fleming to describe them as 'co-axial boundaries'. Fleming further noted how in taking the direct path from river to moorland the boundary walls often ignored small scale topography, leading to his description of the Reaves as 'terrain oblivious' (Fleming 1988, 57).

The Dartmoor Reaves had survived in the form of tumbled walls as the upland moor had been long abandoned for intensive agriculture; it seemed unlikely that similar field systems could have survived where the land had continued to be farmed. However, research undertaken in Essex in the late 1970s by Warwick Rodwell and Peter Drury showed that a modern agricultural landscape could also contain elements that appeared to predate the medieval settlement pattern. Rodwell and Drury identified several of these 'relict landscapes' across South Essex and, over the course of several articles, explained the techniques of morphological analysis and horizontal stratigraphy they employed (Rodwell 1978, Drury and Rodwell 1980). A vital technique in dating the 'relict landscape' was the analysis of the relationship between the field pattern and a feature of a known date, which in the South Essex examples was typically a Roman road. An unconformable relationship, particularly one where the Roman road cut through or 'slighted' the fields at an oblique angle, indicated that the fields must predate the construction of the Roman road.

Using this and other methods Rodwell dated the "relict landscapes" of South Essex to two periods. The Dengie peninsula and Thurrock grids were both conformable with Roman roads and therefore must have originated in the early Romano-British period. The other examples, including the field patterns of the Chelmer and Brain valleys, had unconformable relationships with Roman Roads which 'slighted' fields and therefore must predate the Roman invasion, and were attributed to the later Iron Age. To Rodwell and Drury, the regularity of all the field systems, both Iron Age and Roman, was evidence for landscape planning. They further concluded that as the orderly land division covered an area far greater than a single farmstead the landscape organisation must have

taken place at a civic or tribal level. Furthermore, to Rodwell and Drury, the existence of the late prehistoric and Romano-British fields fossilised within the modern landscape represented “land which has remained in continuous agricultural usage since the end of the Roman period” (Drury and Rodwell 1980, 62).

The suggestion that large areas of planned prehistoric and Romano-British boundaries survived fossilized in the modern agricultural landscape awaiting rediscovery inspired further investigation and in the next two decades “relict field systems” were discovered across lowland England (Rackham 1986, 156–161, Williamson 1987). The discoveries of Fleming and Rodwell and Drury were combined and terms initially used to describe the prehistoric field system such as ‘co-axial’ and ‘terrain oblivious’ became widely used in discussion of relict landscapes. In the absence of a conveniently situated antecedent feature, relict field systems could be dated through morphological similarity to the extant prehistoric fields on Dartmoor (Rackham 1986, 156).

Unintentional designs

Towards the end of the twentieth century this consensus view began to be challenged, with alternative arguments proposing that the regular field patterns were not the result of landscape planning (Williamson 1998). Instead, the simple topography of valley and watershed was argued to have led to the development of numerous parallel transhumance routes that travelled directly upslope from the riverbank to the interflaves. These ‘resource linkage routes’ (Harrison 2005, 91), provided direct access from settlements and farmsteads situated in the valley to the watershed resources, typically woodland and wood pasture for grazing. As established features in the local landscape the ‘resource linkage routes’ were used as boundary markers dividing territories and eventually became fossilised in the landscape as field, farm and parish boundaries (Harrison 2002, 56). Over subsequent centuries the landscape was not static, but the parallel or ‘co-axial’ nature of the long boundaries created a general alignment within which subsequent divisions were inserted and adjusted.

Despite fundamental disagreement on the origin of the field patterns, until recently the survival of ancient field boundaries was still considered to be evidence of continuity of farming from the Roman to early medieval periods. As recently as 2015 the authors of *Fields of Britannia* argued that almost three-quarters of modern field boundaries could be directly related to Romano-British ditches (Rippon *et al.* 2015, 330). Alternative interpretative scenarios are outlined including “gradual evolution” in some regions rather than discontinuity (Rippon *et al.* 2015, 334–42). However, doubts have been raised about these conclusions by questioning the reliability of the techniques employed to date ‘relict landscapes’. Reconsidering the relict field system he identified in

Scole-Dickleburgh in Norfolk, Tom Williamson commented that if the earliest elements of the field system were formed as parallel drove-ways then these lanes could have crossed the Roman road, or been crossed by it, without the function of either being impeded (Williamson 1998, 26). Williamson further concluded that the Roman relict field system on the Dengie peninsula resulted from the conjunction of two perpendicular resource linkage routes resulting from the distinctive topography and resources of the peninsula and which developed in the medieval period (Williamson 2016,12).

Tadlow’s relict field system

In *The History of the Countryside* Oliver Rackham briefly discussed the regular field pattern found in a west Cambridgeshire parish.

“At Tadlow (Cams) the whole parish – fields, the nearly deserted village, even the orientation of the church – obeys a semi-regular grid of either Bronze Age or Iron Age type. This grid is certainly older than the parish and county boundaries, both of which zigzag in obedience to it; its extensions into neighbouring parishes did not survive the unmaking of their open fields.” (Rackham 1986,176).

Since Rackham’s identification of the ‘relict field system’ in Tadlow in 1986 the boundary pattern has not been subject to further examination. The “Tadlow grid” has a superficial similarity to the field pattern in the Dengie Hundred, however it is very small by comparison, incorporating only a few hundred hectares in the southern portion of the parish, while the area of the Dengie peninsula field system covers more than 350 sq. km.

The Tadlow field system is also interesting because the parish was subject to regular open-field farming, a system which persisted in the parish until the final enclosures in the seventeenth century. The origins of this system are still debated, but its operation in broad outline is accepted (Williamson 2003, 1–21). By the twelfth century at latest large areas of England were cultivated in a semi-communal manner. The arable land of the parish or township would be divided into two or three large open fields. Each farmer held land in the form of strips or selions which were evenly distributed across the open fields in groups of strips called furlongs. The land was farmed in rotation with one field left fallow each year to provide grazing for the village livestock and the other ploughed for arable cropping. The two field system, the form practised in Tadlow, has typically been considered to be the most rigidly ‘midland’ or regular in form, and is characteristic of the English Midlands region. Regular open-field farming has been associated with “a great re-planning” of the early medieval landscape and settlements to facilitate introduction of the new agricultural methods (Foard and Brown 1998).

A large proportion of the land in Tadlow experienced piecemeal enclosure beginning in the medieval period, but the southern portion of the parish

continued to be farmed as open fields until the seventeenth century (Postgate 1964, 16). The survival of the "Tadlow grid" into the eighteenth century was argued by Rackham to indicate that in Tadlow the open-field strips and furlongs were slotted into, and perpetuated, a pre-existing ancient field pattern of "either Bronze Age or Iron Age type" (Rackham 1986, 176).

In common with many contemporary authors writing about 'relict field systems', Rackham did not discuss the local topography when commenting upon the Tadlow boundaries. The ancient parish of Tadlow stretches from the valley of the river Rhee or Cam in the south up to a watershed at 80m OD. The parish territory continues beyond the watershed into an area of complex topography to the north. Although 80m OD is barely even a hillock in a national context, the elevation in Tadlow and neighbouring parishes forms a locally distinct 'upland' landscape, known as the Western Clay Plateau formation, in contrast to adjacent flat lands and fen. The settlement pattern, which includes hamlets and farmsteads, combined with *wold*, *weald* and other woodland derived place names, indicates a history of colonisation in a marginal and well-wooded landscape (Hooke 2013, 43).

Rackham described the field pattern in Tadlow

as a "semi-regular" grid (Fig. 1) and when observed from the perspective of the Second Edition Ordnance Survey map it conforms to this description (Fig. 2). The parish and county boundaries are unmistakably stepped in form as they follow the field divisions. The most obvious and consistent area of 'zigzag' or stepped boundaries occurs between the 80m contour and the river Rhee or Cam on the east of the parish (Fig. 2 B) and between 50m and the river on the western boundary (Fig. 2 A). Further north the western parish boundary follows a lost road called Bar or Burr Lane which linked Ashwell to St Ives and the Fens (RCHM West Cambridgeshire 1968, 145). Both the "Tadlow grid" and Bar Lane must have been in existence before the county and parish boundaries were fixed in order for the borders to follow the stepped path. It can further be deduced that the field system must have been established following the abandonment of the southern extension of Bar or Burr Lane, because it is inconceivable that a route significant enough to form the boundaries of several parishes would have diverted around individual fields in Tadlow.

The earliest record of Cambridgeshire or 'Grantabric-scir(e)' dates from the first half of the eleventh century (Reaney 1943, 1), and it has been argued

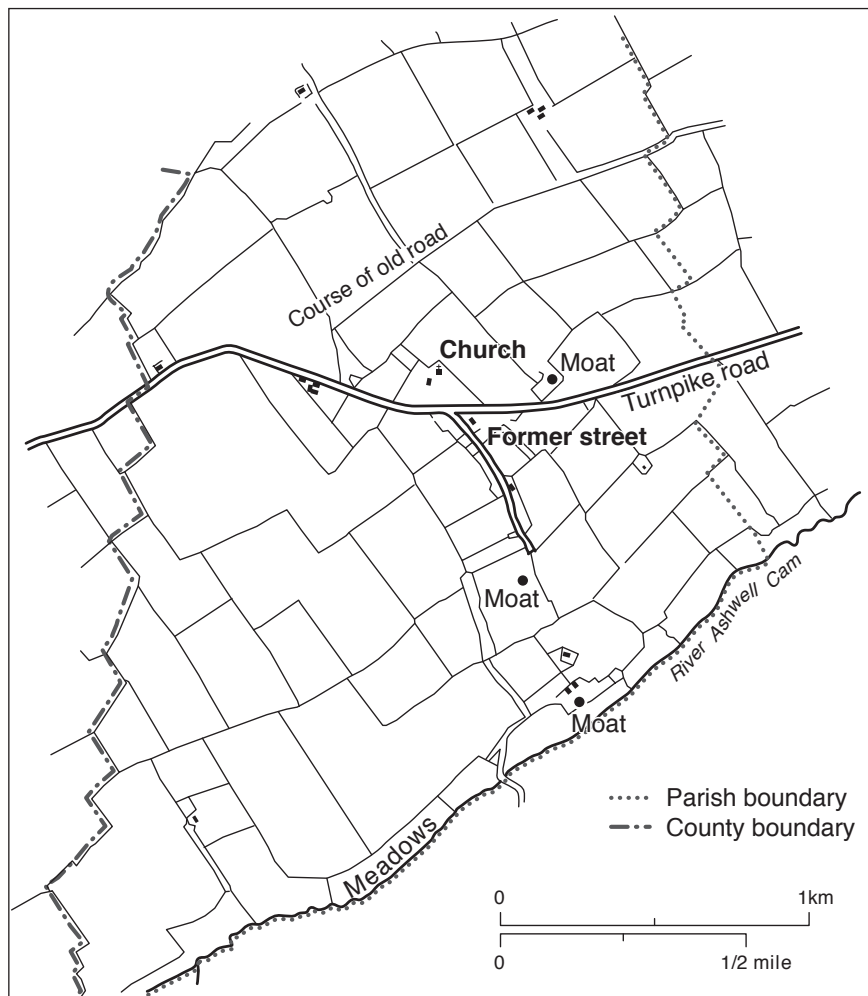


Figure 1. The semi-regular grid in Tadlow. Redrawn from The History of the Countryside ((Rackham 1986, 176) Fig 8.10).

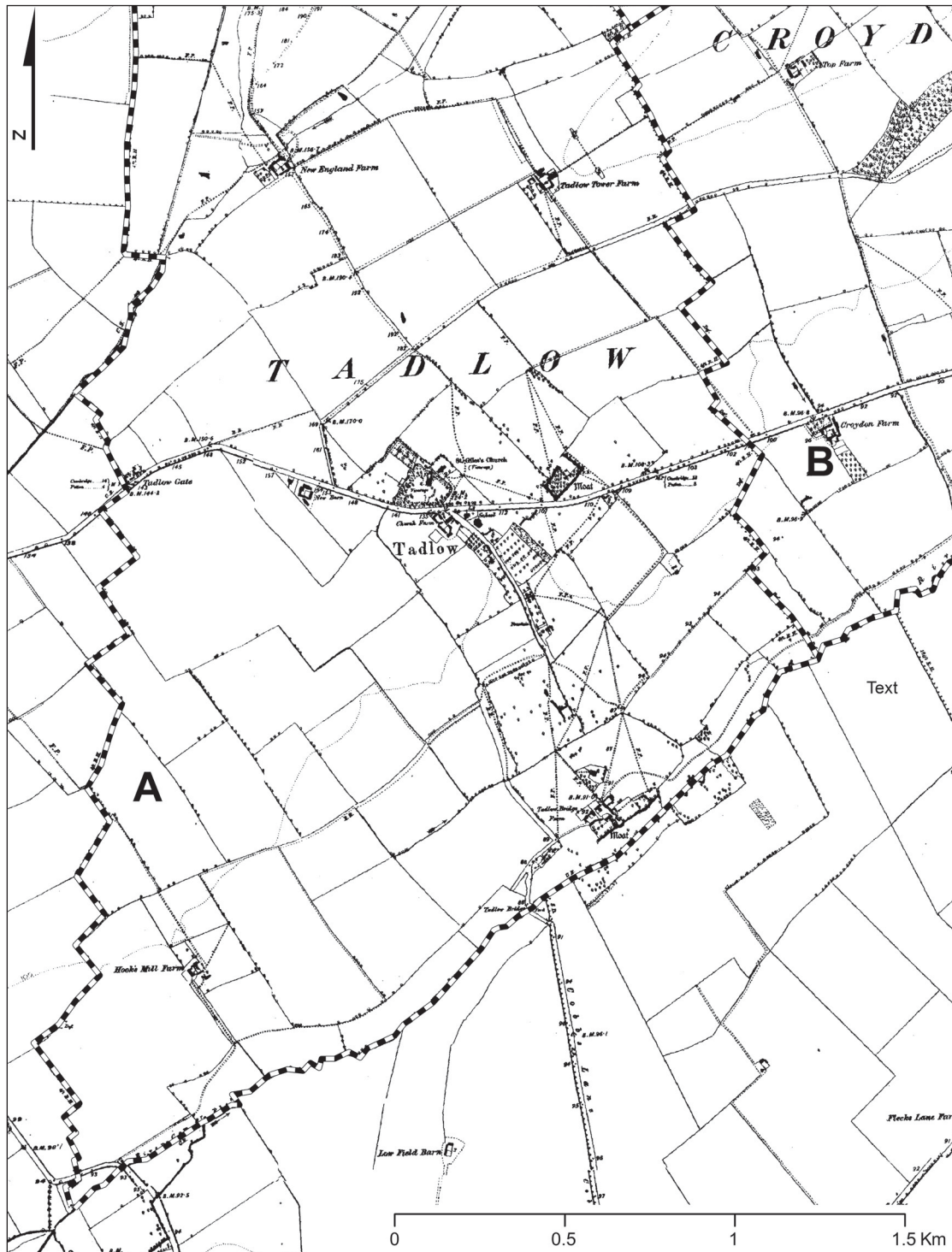


Figure 2. 1880 Edition Ordnance Survey.

that the local hundredal division dates from the Danish invasion in the tenth century (Oosthuizen 2006, 100). This would suggest that both Bar Lane and the field grid have early origins. However, as a note of caution, there are at least two separate instances where the Cambridgeshire county borders were not set until the eighteenth and nineteenth century. These are the division between Papworth Everard (Huntingdonshire)

and Papworth St Agnes (Cambridgeshire) (RCHM 1968,199), and the boundary between Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire through the shared heathland common between Sandy and Waresley. The modern boundary runs along the route of a droveway between St Ives in Huntingdonshire and Biggleswade, in Bedfordshire. Neither the county boundaries nor the droveway are shown in the heath-

land common on early maps (BRO BMB 8/9/13, BRO MA80/2 and CRO TR274/P1). Both of these examples are within six miles of Tadlow. In general, the precise details of parish boundaries are known only from post medieval maps.

The 1880 Edition Ordnance Survey map shows that the individual steps of the parish and county boundaries correlate with some but not all of the surviving field divisions (Fig. 2). A map of the Downing Estate in the Downing College archives (DCAR/1/1/3/10/1), dated to 1814 but based upon a survey taken in 1796 and 1797, covers Tadlow and neighbouring parishes to the east. In this earlier map the field divisions appear to have a more direct relationship with the stepped boundaries. The late eighteenth-century field pattern appears to be unaltered from an earlier survey of the individual farms of the same estate from 1750 (DCAR/1/1/3/10a). The mid eighteenth-century field pattern for Tadlow and the neighbouring parishes has been reconstructed using the farm surveys above and contemporary plans of three farms in Croydon belonging to Thomas Gape Esq. (CRO L88/13–16) (Fig. 3).

The eighteenth-century field pattern in Tadlow formed a loose grid with parcel boundaries that followed two principal alignments. One took the typical coaxial path up the slope from the river to the watershed whilst the other axis ran roughly parallel to the river and watershed passing from east to west. The mid eighteenth-century maps also confirm that Rackham was correct in believing that the field grid extended beyond Tadlow as the same general alignment is repeated in the parishes of Croydon cum Clopton and Arrington to the east (Fig. 4). The enlarged field grid is still comparatively small, covering an area of less than fifteen square kilometres. In common with many "relict field systems" the grid becomes less regular as it extends across the landscape. Although the alignments of the boundaries in Clopton, Croydon and Arrington at first glance appear to repeat the pattern found in Tadlow, further inspection reveals significant differences. The orientation of the coaxial boundaries, those passing from the river to the wold, shifts slightly from north-north-west in Tadlow to due north as the grid extends east through Clopton, as they respond to changes in the local topography.

Even within the parish of Tadlow, the superficially regular field pattern is inconsistent. On the east of the parish bordering Clopton several fields are roughly square in shape while those found in the west of the parish have the rectangular form more typically found within coaxial field systems (Fleming 2008, 44). This disparity of field shapes also highlights the significant variation between the west and east boundaries; there are nearly twice as many steps in the county boundary as in the eastern parish boundary. If the Tadlow grid was the product of a planned land division then it should have resulted in a greater correlation between the stepped boundaries than existed by the mid eighteenth century, but if it was not planned, how did the distinctive field pattern arise?

Origin of the Tadlow grid

Further analysis of the Downing Estate maps indicates that the "Tadlow grid" contained many shorter sections of boundaries which form the edge of two or three enclosures, but only a few long sinuous coaxial boundaries forming the boundary for numerous individual fields. As previously discussed the presence of long boundaries in the landscape has been interpreted in other contexts as fossilizing earlier "resource linkage routes" linking the resources of the river and wold. Typically resource linkage routes terminated at the watershed but in regions with large areas of shared common they tended to fade away as they reached the periphery of the collective resource, as they do in Tadlow. Although there is no indication in any early documentary sources that the area to the north of Tadlow was intercommoned, Susan Oosthuizen considered the area might have been a zone of common woodland resources when discussing the neighbouring Bourn Valley (Oosthuizen 2006, 26).

With one questionable exception, the long co-axial boundaries in Tadlow all ended before they reached the watershed. Most terminated on an east-west track called the Ridgeway that ran parallel to the river and watershed along the 50m contour (Wright, ed. 1982, 127–135), not to be confused with the better-known Ridgeway that ran along the watershed between Caxton and Cambridge, further north in the county. To the north of the Tadlow Ridgeway, although the grid pattern continued on the same alignment to the watershed, the individual coaxial boundaries were interrupted and travelled briefly along the contour before turning north again. This pattern was repeated in the neighbouring parish of Croydon cum Clopton, which suggests that the Ridgeway is likely to be the earliest feature in the grid. The relationship of the Ridgeway to the sites of the medieval parish churches is instructive (Fig. 4). It links the villages of Clopton and Croydon with neighbouring Arrington, and their parish churches are all adjacent or close to the lane, but Tadlow's church is situated 300m to the south. The extension of the Ridgeway to the east also seems to link the churches of Wimpole and Wratworth. It is impossible to see how far west the field grid extended across the county boundary into Bedfordshire, because no maps survive for Wrestlingworth's open fields before they were enclosed by Parliamentary Act in 1801.

In addition to the Ridgeway almost a kilometre south lies another very long boundary that fossilizes another route, the "Portway". Unlike the more northerly track the Portway does not interrupt the fossilised resource linkage routes and rarely disturbs the shorter lengths of field boundaries, nor is its path disrupted by them. The 'Portway' is almost certainly the secondary route. It formed one of the village streets in Tadlow but this area had already been deserted by the 1750 survey. The 'Portway' lay over six hundred metres south of Tadlow parish church and it is therefore likely that the original settlement was further north around the church before later migrating south

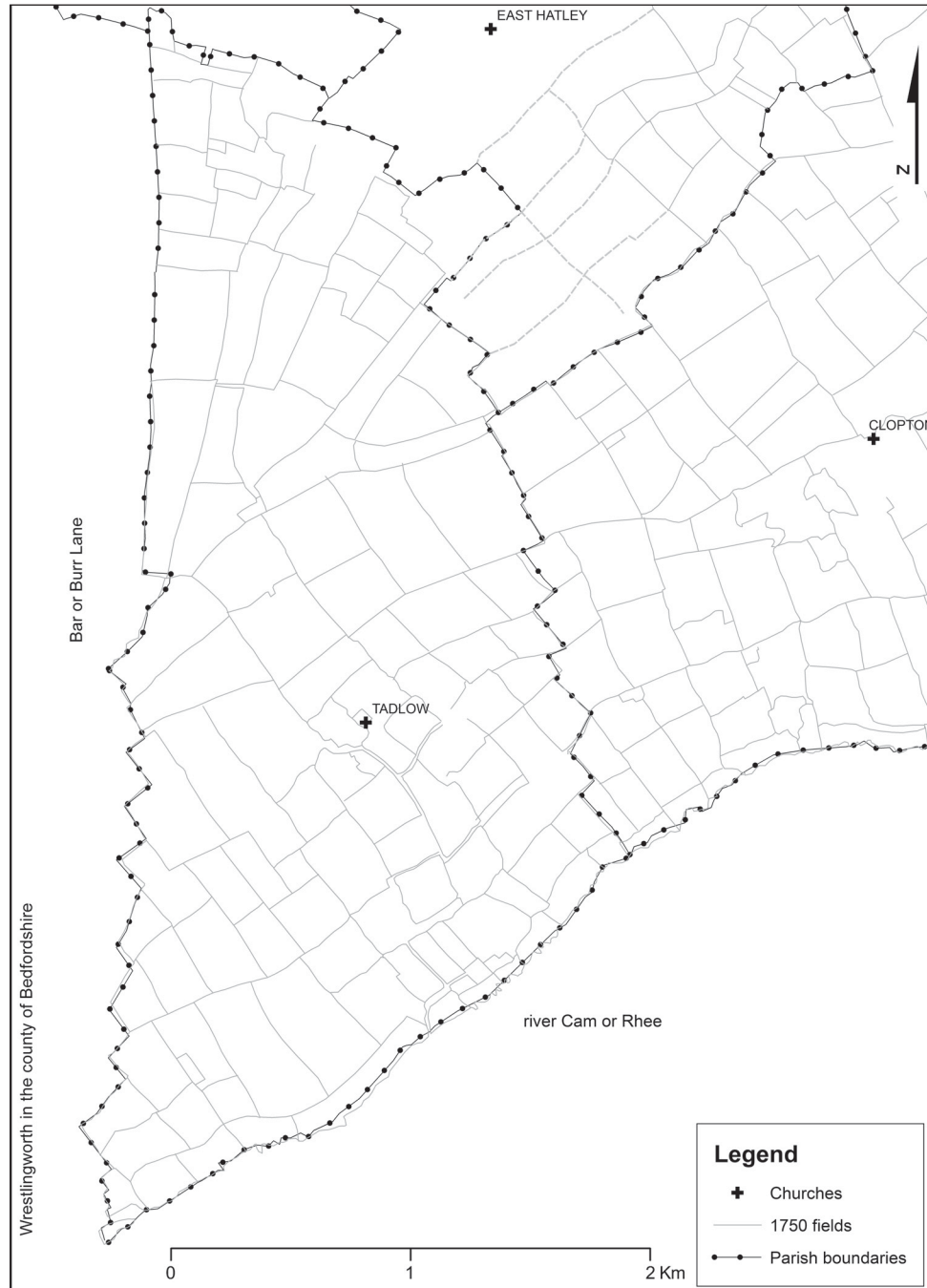


Figure 3. The mid eighteenth-century field pattern in Tadlow after a Survey of the Estate of the Hon. Sir Jacob Garrard Downing Bart., by Joseph Cole 1750.

to be adjacent to the road. By the mid eighteenth century farmsteads were strung along both lanes, which were now called the Upper and Lower Cambridge Ways (Wright, ed. 1982, 127–135).

Analysis of the individual features of the Tadlow landscape and their relationship to the topography and wider area indicates that the grid did not originate as a single planned field system. Instead Rackham's "semi-regular grid" developed organically through the conjunction of resource linkage routes

that led up the slope from river to watershed with lanes that passed along the watershed and contours of the low lying ridge. As with the relict landscape on the Dengie peninsula the basic framework of the landscape was set by the relationship of the two directions of travel, with the small detail of the modern grid resulting from subsequent insertion and adjustment of field boundaries.

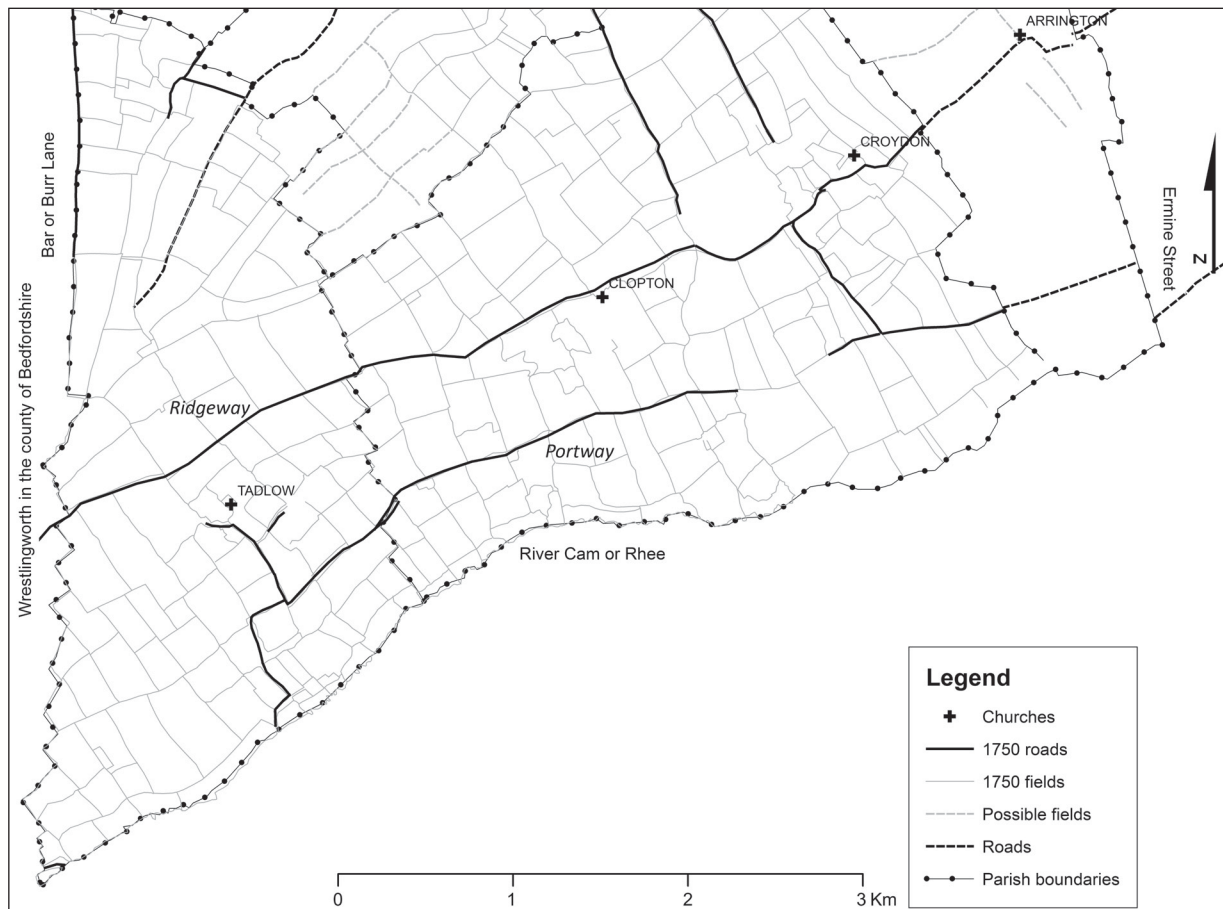


Figure 4. The wider grid pattern: The mid eighteenth-century field pattern in Tadlow, Clopton and Croydon after a Survey of the Estate of Hon. Sir Jacob Garrard Downing Bart., by Joseph Cole 1750 and Surveys of three farms belonging to Thomas Gape Esq, by T & I Wing 1747.

How old is the Tadlow grid?

Rackham dated the Tadlow grid to either the Bronze Age or the Iron Age (Rackham 1986, 176), but both these proposed dates are problematic. The Ridgeway and Portway both continue for a further four and a half kilometres along the contours of the slope until they reach the Roman road, Ermine Street, in Arrington. Although their routes continue east of the Roman road each lane travels for a short distance along Ermine Street before branching off again, suggesting they originated after the road was built in the first century AD. This in turn might suggest that as the Ridgeway is the earliest feature in the Tadlow grid the fields cannot therefore be earlier than the Romano-British period.

However what explains the origins of the 'Ridgeway' and 'Portway'? In particular the Ridgeway has long been considered an ancient feature in the local landscape as it passes to the western boundary of Tadlow (Wright, ed. 1982, 127) and the Portway was apparently contemporary with, or predated, the local resource linkage routes that were fossilised as long field boundaries.

Analysis of place names found in the watershed

zone in Tadlow and the neighbouring parishes indicates that the land was wooded during the early medieval colonization period. The area to the north of the Ridgeway contained a cluster of 'wold', 'wild', 'cote' and 'ley' place names, all indicative of woodland and woodland clearance during the early medieval period (Hooke 2013, 43). This is also one of the few areas within the county where significant woodland was recorded in Domesday book (Rackham 2000). However the woodland recorded in Tadlow and the parishes to the east was described only as "wood for repairing fences" (Williams and Martin 2002, 538–549). The lack of woodland was even more acute for settlements further east around Cambridge where the Fens to the north and eastern heath lands contained few woodland resources.

By contrast the western half of the Western Clay Plateau retained large areas of woodland (Darby 1952, 298). This relatively large area of woodland resources was the probable original destination for the 'Ridgeway' at least. The lane could have originated as an intermediate "resource linkage route", connecting the poorly wooded settlements in the east with the western woodlands. There is evidence that these intermediate resource linkage routes or oth-

ers following a similar path continued to be used. Around Christmas in 1309 a large amount of wood from Gamlingay on the western edges of the Western Clay Plateau was transported to Grantchester on the eastern fringes, taking advantage of frosty weather to make the journey (Rackham 1986, 265).

The Tadlow grid supports many of the arguments recently made about the much larger grid pattern in the Dengie Hundred. As with the Dengie system, the evidence suggests that the Tadlow grid developed through colonisation and clearance of the woodland during the early medieval period. The fields were established within the existing arrangement of tracks linking woodland resources with both local settlements and more distant communities to the east of the region (Williamson 2016, 9). Later adjustments to field boundaries and farms respected the grain of this landscape and contributed to the small scale detail of the field pattern (Williamson 1998, 420).

Wider implications of the Tadlow grid.

As touched upon above the survival of an early medieval field layout in an open-field parish is contrary to the argument that fields, farms and villages were reorganised to allow the introduction of regular open-field farming. In Tadlow open-field farming was established within the semi-regular grid pattern of early medieval lanes and fields without the need for re-planning the landscape. The settlements and parish churches of Clopton, Croydon and Arrington also follow and respect the alignment of the field grid, suggesting that they too were not subject to reorganisation.

The survival of the field grid indicates that the fields, furlongs and strips of the new farming system were inserted within the pre-existing landscape framework of lanes and paths. Similar evidence for landscape continuity has been found elsewhere in Cambridgeshire. Susan Oosthuizen has carried out extensive research into the landscape history of the Bourn Valley, an area much larger than Tadlow, covering many parishes on either side of the Bourn Brook. She identifies an early medieval "proto-common field" layout surviving in the modern agricultural landscape in the Bourn valley (Oosthuizen 2006). The "relict field system" Oosthuizen identified in the Bourn Valley incorporated tracks linking the river and watershed resources and the "linear greens" which followed the contours of the valley and ran parallel to the Bourn Brook which survived the making of the open fields. The relict landscape caused several villages to develop a grid-like street plan as they expanded along the tracks and over the former open fields.

Further evidence against open fields requiring the reorganisation of the local landscape comes from Sarah Harrison, who concluded that the open fields in six parishes in southwest Cambridgeshire had been slotted into an earlier framework of paths, (Harrison 2002, 40) and from Taylor, who excavated an earlier field ditch under a medieval headland (Taylor 1981,

20). What makes Tadlow so unusual is that the earlier landscape framework survived the introduction of the two field system. In Tadlow not only was this most regular of open field farming systems undertaken within a framework of earlier boundaries, but it continued to be farmed in this manner until the seventeenth century.

Conclusion

The regular field pattern in Tadlow and the neighbouring parishes has its origins in early medieval resource use and colonisation of a marginal woodland zone. The rough grid originated through the conjunction of local resource tracks linking the river, settlements, and the wold, with intermediate resource routes which linked more distant settlements and woodland resources. Later field and farm boundaries respected or slotted into the sparse framework created by the tracks and the insertion, removal and alteration of boundaries continued well into the nineteenth century. Evidence for similar modification and addition of boundaries has been found in other relict field systems, a reminder that fields have not remained unchanged for centuries.

The piecemeal enclosure history of Tadlow fossilised the boundaries of the earlier open field furlongs and highlighted their origins in the landscape framework of local and intermediate resource linkage tracks. In parishes of the Tadlow grid, as in the nearby Bourn Valley and elsewhere in Cambridgeshire, the introduction of midland open-field farming did not lead to a "great re-planning" of the landscape but instead the open field furlongs appear to have been slotted into the existing network of access routes and resources.

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MA 80/2 Map of Potton in Bedfordshire showing the lands of Viscount Torrington and others 1754.
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