

SHORTER NOTICES

RIDGE AND FURROW IN NORFOLK

by R. J. Silvester

During the last twenty years the study of Norfolk's medieval field systems has been largely the preserve of economic historians and historical geographers (e.g. Postgate 1973, Campbell 1981a), the major emphasis being on such aspects as function, tenurial practices and the social and economic implications of commonfield agriculture. In contrast to an overriding interest in morphology that is the hallmark of the archaeological study of prehistoric and Roman field systems (see for instance, Bowen and Fowler 1978), little curiosity has been shown in the physical form of our medieval fields, though, as Rackham has pointed out (1986, 155), this is hardly a recent trend. It can be argued, with some justification, that the availability of written sources permits sophisticated studies to which the analysis of form can add very little. Nevertheless, fields and their boundaries are an integral element of the visible landscape and there will always be local topographical problems to resolve. One of these, the ridge-and-furrow phenomenon, is considered here.

Ridge and furrow is, of course, a familiar component of the medieval landscape in some parts of the country. From the early controversy between Beresford and Kerridge (Jackson 1961), through the surveys of south-Midlands counties by Professor Mead and his associates to the more recent reviews by Hall (1982) and Astill (1988, 70) amongst others, the nature and distribution of ridge and furrow has materialised as a significant indicator of medieval farming practice. Nobody can now doubt that it was once widespread in England and beyond. No overall distribution map has ever been published, but it occurs all over the Midland counties and into Lincolnshire, along the Welsh border and on the eastern coastal plain from Yorkshire to Northumberland (Beresford and St Joseph 1979, 28), in Westmorland (Rahtz 1972, 4) and in the lower-lying regions of Scotland and Wales (Hall 1982, 5).

But in Norfolk and Suffolk remarkably little ridge and furrow has been recognised. For some years now, local archaeologists and historians in Norfolk have consistently referred to only a handful of ridge-and-furrow survivals in the west of the county: Babingley (Yaxley 1980, 581; Dymond 1985, 105) and Caldecote, Oxborough, where the ridges were erased by the bulldozer in 1959 (Wade-Martins 1980, 78), are the two most often cited. Such is the rarity of this traditionally 'Midland' method of medieval cultivation that at least one writer has wrongly assumed that it never existed in East Anglia (Hall 1982, 5), a contention which found some support in the situation apparent beyond the borders of the county. In west Cambridgeshire, where the Midland farming system prevailed (Postgate 1973, 290), ridge and furrow is common (Kain and Mead 1977, fig. 2), but further east, farming practices accorded with those of East Anglia — as defined by Postgate — and ridges are much scarcer. Although relict ridges sealed by blown sand have been claimed at West Stow (West 1985, 10), extant ridge and furrow appears to be absent in Suffolk (E. Martin: pers. comm.).

The present paper sets out to provide a local perspective on this differential distribution. During fieldwork for the Fenland Project in the Nar Valley a local landowner drew the writer's attention to a small patch of ridge and furrow at Thieves Bridge, Tottenhill (Silvester 1988,

138). Shortly afterwards a survey of Hilgay, south of Downham Market, revealed numerous ridged strips down the west side of that fen island. A more detailed search for further examples was initiated and it became evident that relict ridges were not as rare as had previously been surmised.

It must be stressed here that no attempt has been made to emulate W. R. Mead's ridge and furrow maps for Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire and other central counties (Mead 1954; Harrison, Mead and Pannett 1965; Kain and Mead 1977). These surveys of regions where ridge and furrow was already well documented, were based on a systematic study of all the available aerial photography taken by the Royal Air Force after the Second World War and can reasonably claim to provide a complete picture of ridge and furrow survival forty years ago.

In contrast this survey makes no claims for comprehensiveness. A preliminary interrogation of the Norfolk Sites and Monuments Record revealed about twenty reports of ridge and furrow although several of these are unconvincing and have since been deleted from the list. The main source of data was the R.A.F. aerial cover of 1946/47 held by the Norfolk Museums Service. Unfortunately this is far from complete; for some 10km grid-square areas there is near total cover, for others there is not a single photograph. Normally the coverage lies between these two extremes. In addition two sets of vertical aerial photographs of the Norfolk Fens (taken in 1969 and 1982) which covered limited areas of the adjacent uplands were also examined and the aerial photograph archive of the Norfolk Museums Service was checked in specific cases.

Even where the R.A.F. cover is available it cannot be assumed that the photography reveals the full extent of relict ridge and furrow. In several places such as Thieves Bridge, Tottenhill, where furlongs lie at right angles to each other, one group of ridges is virtually invisible on the photograph because of the angle of the sun. In fields where only a single furlong survives there is no guarantee that it will be visible. Secondly some sets of photographs were taken in July 1946, the most unsatisfactory period of the year for the recognition of low earthworks. Thirdly interpretational problems exist. There are general difficulties such as distinguishing narrow rig of late-18th/early-19th century date, and being unable to check the evidence on the ground because of the widespread change from pasture to arable in the last forty years. And there are more specific problems. In north-east Norfolk a number of R.A.F. photos show marks that are superficially reminiscent of medieval ridge and furrow except that in almost every instance the marks appear too regular and straight and are seemingly related to some modern agricultural practice. Conversely, what appears to be perfectly acceptable ridge and furrow may also be the subject of misinterpretation. David Yaxley (581) has claimed ridge and furrow at the deserted medieval village of Godwick on the evidence of an aerial photograph accompanying Allison's article on the lost villages of Norfolk (1955, pl. 4). The photo does indeed suggest a furlong of curved ridges just behind the farmhouse, yet among the considerable number of aerial photos relating to this site in the Norfolk Museums Service archives no other shot shows this ridge and furrow, even though earthworks in the same field are clearly visible. At Godwick the early photo reveals no more than a pattern derived from rolling the surface of the pasture, the angle of the photograph and the alignment of the agricultural operation producing a completely misleading effect.

There can be no doubt that much of what is visible on our aerial photographs is typical medieval ridge and furrow. The reverse-S or aratral curve is frequently prominent and there are examples in Stradsett, Ryston and Shouldham amongst other villages where present field divisions cut across blocks of ridge and furrow. But in many instances field boundaries do follow the ridges, sometimes adopting their curves, and in parishes such as Downham Market, the former presence

of ridge and furrow can be assumed from surviving field boundaries of reverse-S form which appear on Ordnance Survey maps (as at TF619029).

Surviving ridges have been examined in Hilgay, Stow Bardolph, Tottenhill and Ryston. At Hilgay the width of the ridges falls between 6.5 m - 13 m with a mean of c.8.3 m. 85% of those examined were between 7 m - 9 m wide. At Stow Bardolph the ridges in one small field had a width range of 5 m - 7 m with a mean of 6.25 m. Comparisons with Midland ridge and furrow are close if not exact. In Buckinghamshire, Mead (38) found that the most common width was 9 yds - 10 yds (8.2 m - 9.1 m), while Hall has claimed 7 m as about the average width in the Midlands. On the Midland clays the ridges can be up to one metre high (Hall 1982, 6), but in Norfolk, as in west Cambridgeshire (RCHM 1968, lxvii), the height is usually much less impressive, generally between 0.2 m - 0.4 m and rarely more than 0.5 m, a function perhaps

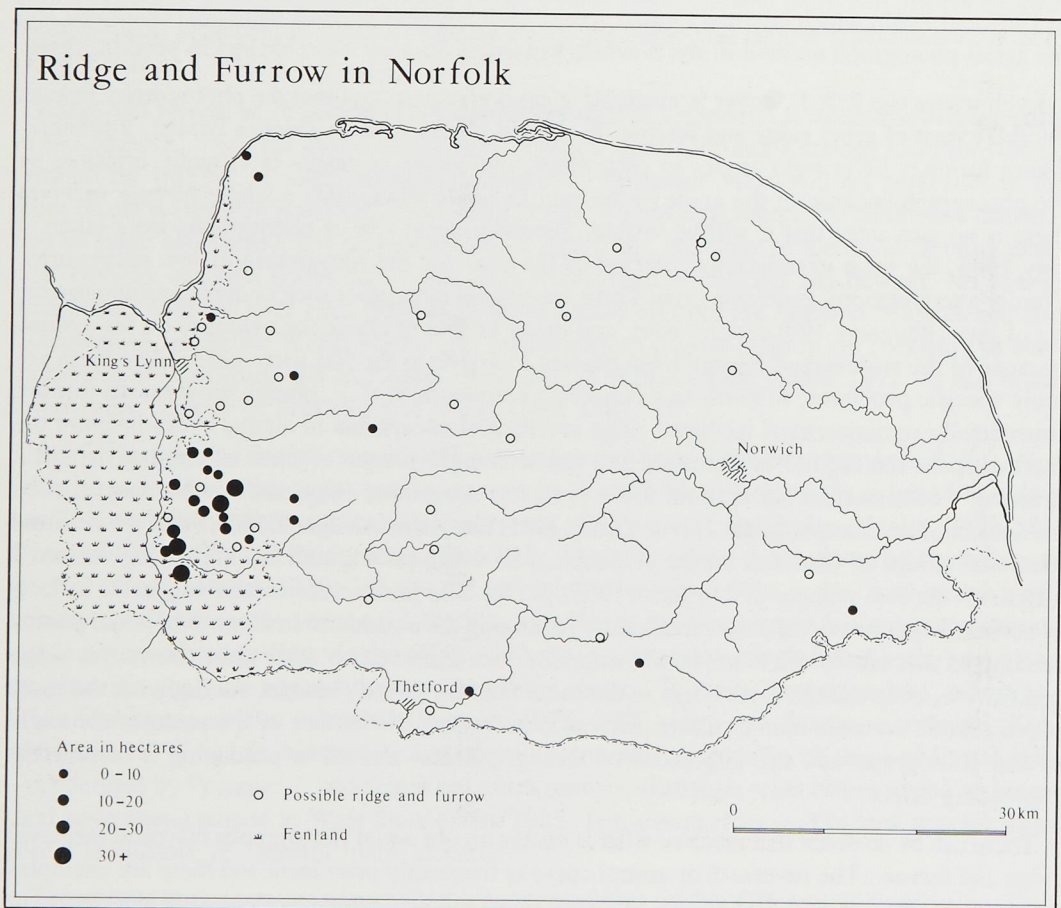


Fig. 1
Distribution of ridge and furrow in Norfolk

of the lighter soils of the region. Aerial photography does reveal considerable variation in the length of individual furlongs in west Norfolk. At Stradsett there appears to have been furlongs of 350 m or more and at South Wootton, 320 m. However, in general the lengths are shorter, usually between 180 m - 250 m, which compares well with the west Cambridgeshire range from 128 m - 238 m (RCHM lxvii) and in the Midlands of 180 m (Hall 1982, 5).

The writer is satisfied that the sources which have been consulted provide a reasonably accurate record of the geographical extent of ridge and furrow as it existed in 1946 and which in a few places remain today. The distribution map (Fig. 1) has been styled to distinguish those settlements with irrefutable evidence of ridge and furrow (in the form of distinctive traces on aerial photographs, reliable reports in the Norfolk Sites and Monuments Record and personal confirmation), from those where the evidence is tenuous or unreliable. The map also attempts a crude quantification of the amount of ridge and furrow recognised in each parish. It is possible that a parish with two or more communities had discrete areas of ridged furlongs separated by commons or waste in the Middle Ages: Oxborough may be an example of this for ridges were visible both in the village and at the deserted medieval settlement of Caldecote, some 2 km to the north. But the differentiation of each settlement's fields cannot really be determined without considerably more research and for the sake of clarity on Fig. 1 the parish has been used as

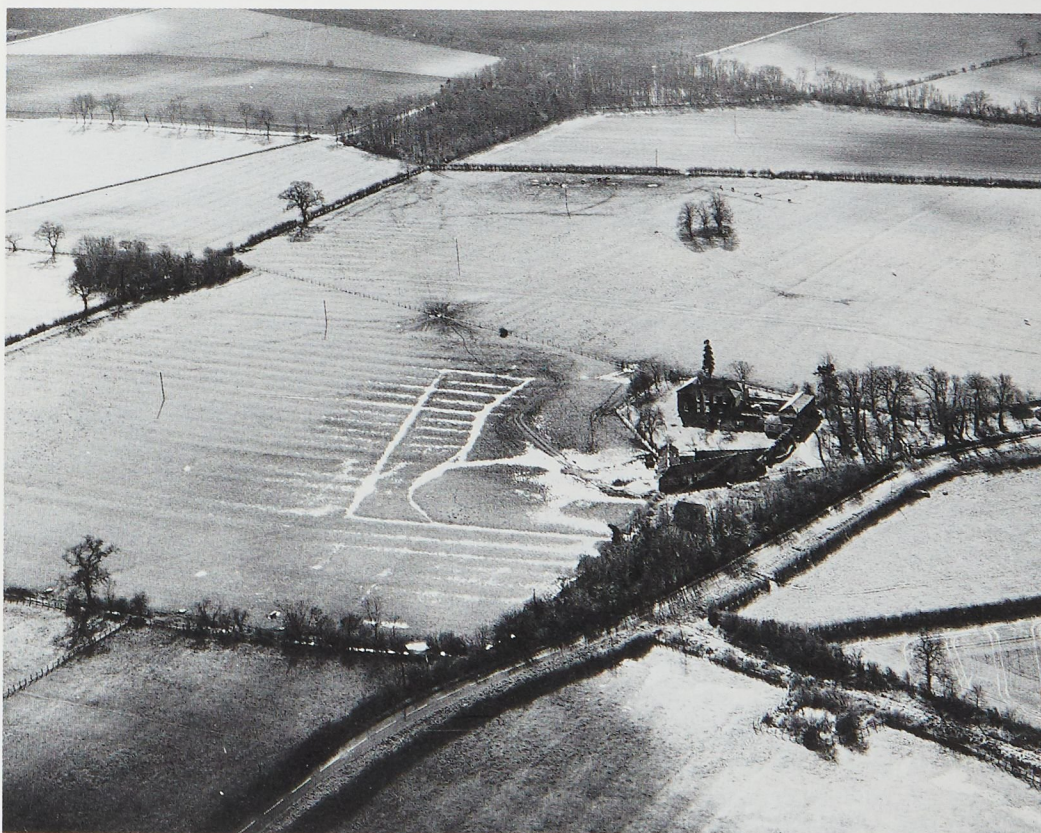


Plate I

Ridge and furrow to the south and east of Lodge Farm, Hilgay.

Photograph by D. A. Edwards (23 February 1989)

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Plate II

Ridge and furrow lying to the west of Stradsett Hall.

Photograph by D. A. Edwards (23 February 1989)

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the unit of definition. Appendix 1 lists those parishes where the writer is satisfied as to the presence (or former presence) of ridge and furrow, together with some indication of the hectareage recognised on aerial photographs.

Even a casual glance at Fig. 1 reveals a distinct western bias which is enhanced but certainly not created by the greater availability of photos for the fen-edge region. In several west Norfolk parishes the number of modern fields enclosing ridge and furrow is considerable.

Four parishes show sufficient traces to suggest that a large portion of each was ridged. The western edge of Hilgay, an island parish surrounded by peat fen to the south of Downham Market, retains the best preserved group of ridges in Norfolk. Visible from the A10 trunk road linking King's Lynn and Cambridge, the ridges are virtually continuous for c. 1.5 km and cover an area of c. 40 ha (Plate I). That they survive at all is a result of a combination of factors: the natural slope and the inhibited drainage coupled with the presence of the spring line which today makes the island edge unattractive for cultivation. One field where ridge and furrow is no longer visible reflects a failed attempt at cultivation in the recent past (Mr R. Dent: pers. comm.). The slope of the island with the land falling away to the fen dictates the direction of the ridge and furrow and only in the south are there furlongs at right angles to each other (Plate I). The former

ubiquity of the ridges is suggested by a field west of the bypass which is level and must have been partially peat-covered in the medieval period, an altogether unusual place for ridge and furrow. Further low ridges are fossilised in landscaped gardens in front of Wood Hall in the centre of the island, demonstrating that it was not only ill-drained slopes that were formed into ridges but that much of the island was originally covered with them.

Two other west Norfolk parishes, Fincham and Tottenhill, reveal a similar picture with enough ridge and furrow surviving in closes and pasture fields around the village centres to support the view that originally most of the arable land was ridged. In Fincham the R.A.F. photo indicates survivals in five or six locations, while at Tottenhill a minimum of six fields on the south side of the village green showed ridge and furrow on 1969 photographs. Now, however, only the field adjacent to Thieves Bridge retains these features.



Fig. 2

Incidence of ridge and furrow around the villages of Fincham and Stradsett. Patches of ridge and furrow are shown by heavier lines against the modern field pattern.

By far the most extensive system was at Stradsett (Fig. 2) next to Fincham, where, around the church, in the parkland to the north and in outlying pasture fields beyond, the amount of ridge and furrow visible in 1946 was remarkable. Again much of this has now gone, but some survives in pasture to the west of Stradsett Hall (Plate II). It is no exaggeration to suggest that a generation ago Stradsett would have borne comparison with a typical Midlands parish.

When we also take account of the much more limited patches of ridge and furrow in Ryston (Wade-Martins 1987, pl. 56) and the survival of furlongs in Denver, Crimplesham, Runcton Holme, and West Dereham amongst others, it becomes evident that in this corner of west Norfolk, hemmed in by the Fens and the Brecklands and with the River Nar to the north, ridging of the arable in the Middle Ages was standard practice.

Further to the north there are several villages close to the Wash with traces that are more or less convincing: at Castle Rising, at both North and South Wootton and perhaps at Hillington. The first of these is in a low-lying location near the Babingley River but, with a moated site less than 200 m away, we can assume that ridge and furrow must have been eradicated from the more favoured agricultural lands around the village. Medieval ridges were supposedly

encountered during the excavation of a Neolithic site at Old Hunstanton in 1970-71 (Healy, Cleal and Kinnes: forthcoming) and there is an independent report of a ridged field elsewhere in that parish. In the nearby village of Ringstead a patch of ridge and furrow lies just to the south of the church (J. Smallwood: pers. comm.).

However, moving eastwards a different picture emerges. There is aerial photograph evidence, more or less convincing, for small areas of ridge and furrow at Great Palgrave, near Sporle (see Allison 1955, pl. 5), at Beeston and at Hindolveston and ambivalent evidence in one or two places in the North Walsham area. In the south of the county there are seemingly reliable reports of ridges at Harling, Tibenham and perhaps at Buckenham. Recently a small patch consisting of no more than four ridges has been located at Kirby Cane in the south-east of the county (T. Williamson: pers. comm.). There can be no doubt that ridge and furrow did exist in central and east Norfolk, but what survives points to sparse and perhaps atypical ridging — very different from the pattern detected in the region around Downham Market.

What explanation is there for this irregular distribution which largely bears out the prevailing view that ridge and furrow is rare in Norfolk; and why does this small area close to the Fens reveal such a high density of ridged furlongs? Any solution has first to cope with the difficulty of subsequent land-use. A distinction has been made between the wood pasture region of central and east Norfolk which was largely enclosed by the end of the 17th century (Allison 1957, fig. 1; Postgate 1973, 288) and the sheep-corn region of open fields in west Norfolk which underwent later enclosure. It is quite evident that once enclosure occurred the destruction of existing open-field ridge and furrow would rapidly have gathered momentum, presuming that the land was not converted to pasture. Thus the late enclosure of west Norfolk would offer better opportunities for the survival of ridges. On this basis alone we would expect relatively more ridge and furrow to show in west Norfolk. Yet none has been recognised in central and east Norfolk in the parkland of private estates where it might have been fossilised by a change in land use. The survey of gardens and parks by the Centre of East Anglian Studies at the University of East Anglia has turned up only the small patch of ridge and furrow at Kirby Cane and the surveys within the county's National Trust properties have also drawn a blank (Peter Wade-Martins: pers. comm.). As Tom Williamson has pointed out to the writer, there could well have been a time-lapse between the abandonment of medieval ridging and the emparkment of land in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sufficient for the erasure from the landscape of low ridge and furrow. Yet, where detailed landscape surveys have been completed as around Morningthorpe, south of Norwich (Addington 1982) and Hales and Loddon, to the south-east (Davison: forthcoming), no instances of ridge and furrow have been recorded. If ridges had been widespread in the east of the county we are justified in assuming that some would have been detected by now in locations similar to the parks of Ryston and Stradsett in the west. Complete eradication of all traces seems unlikely.

It is generally held that the primary function of ridge and furrow was to assist the drainage of arable land, particularly on the heavier soils of the Midlands. Limited fieldwork by the writer suggests that extant ridge and furrow in west Norfolk occurs on both light sandy soils, as at Thieves Bridge, Tottenhill and on more poorly drained areas such as the west flank of Hilgay island. From the mapping conducted by the Soil Survey (1983) it is evident that west Norfolk sports a wide range of soils, although this is not so evident from the generalised soil maps that have been published (e.g. Lawson *et al.* 1981, fig. 7). Edging the fens, to the north and south of Downham Market, are the deep sandy and coarse loamy soils of the Downham Association (Hodge *et al.* 1984, 164) which are normally well-drained. Around Stow Bardolph, Stradsett and Fincham, however, the soils are classified as loamy soils of the Burlingham 1 and Beccles

Associations (Hodge *et al.* 132, 121). These are heavier soils, prone to waterlogging, and in the Middle Ages drainage would have been facilitated by ridging the ground.

But the significant point here is that over much of central Norfolk, from the River Waveney in the south, to Norwich and East Dereham, and almost as far north as the coast, the soils are similarly classified within these two associations. Central Norfolk would be exactly where one might expect ridge and furrow. These boulder clay regions were inherently suitable for the development of good grassland (Allison 1957, 14) and thus the enclosure of the common fields might have led to the preservation of earthworks including ridge and furrow. That no such ridge and furrow has been recognised even where there is good earthwork survival implies that it was never present. As some deserted medieval settlements such as Godwick lie on ill-drained flat tracts of boulder clay (Cushion *et al.* 1982, 40), ridge and furrow would undoubtedly have been of considerable use. But while local maps of sixteenth and seventeenth-century date show the open fields divided into strips (see for instance Wade-Martins 1980, figs 15 and 37), there is no convincing evidence that these were ridged and we must presume that ploughing techniques were designed to keep a flat surface.

This dichotomy seems to be mirrored in the commentaries of earlier writers. Arthur Young in his assessment of Norfolk agriculture published at the beginning of the nineteenth century noted that:

'In June 1776, being at Wallington adjoining Marshland, I found the high broad ridges begin, which thence spread over a great tract of country, nearly perhaps across the island . . .' (Young 1804, 190).

William Marshall, on the other hand, wrote:

' . . . the Norfolk soil is sufficiently absorbent to require neither ridge nor furrow' (Marshall 1795, 148).

In passing we should notice a curious reference, two centuries earlier, by the surveyor William Folkingham. In his *Feudigraphia* (1610), he recorded that narrow ridges (or stitches) were 'common in Norfolke and Suffolke even in their light grounds . . .' (quoted by Beresford 1984, 83).

Thus, while drainage requirements may well have played a subsidiary role in the creation of ridge and furrow in west Norfolk, there must be some other reason for this restricted distribution. The most likely explanation invokes a regional concept rather than a functional requirement. We appear to be witnessing a basic tradition of cultivation practice extending from the Midland homeland of ridge and furrow across the Fens and then adopted in only a limited part of Norfolk.

This is not as remarkable as it first appears, even though it militates against the conventional picture of the black fens as a barrier in the Middle Ages. All of the intervening fen islands in Cambridgeshire — March, Thorney and Ely — have or had ridge and furrow (Hall 1987, 11). It can be seen, too, in old pasture along the western edge of the Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire Fens. The dissemination of a tradition across to Hilgay no more than 10 miles north-east of Ely and 12 miles east of March appears quite plausible. This in itself is significant. As we have already noted, the countrywide distribution of ridge and furrow is far from even and it is perhaps in the fringe areas such as west Norfolk that the reasons for the development of ridges are more susceptible to analysis than in the Midlands core. Rowley (1982, 52) has similarly claimed that tradition lies behind the creation of ridge and furrow in the well-drained river valleys of central England, an extension from the heavier soils where drainage was necessary.

Bruce Campbell has remarked on other aspects of medieval farming practice that set this western

area of Norfolk apart. Dredge, a mixture of oats and barley, was commonly grown in the counties of the east Midlands and was also an important crop in the Downham Market region, accounting for more than 25% of the cereal acreage in villis such as Stradsett and Fordham. In the rest of Norfolk its cultivation was generally negligible. In company with the east Midlands and Suffolk, west and south Norfolk favoured the swing plough, the rest of the county being dominated by the wheeled plough (Langdon 1988, fig. 5.2). There is evidence, too, for the retention of large plough teams in which oxen predominated, during the later Middle Ages, again setting the area apart from the rest of the county. Together these aspects point to the region having its own agricultural identity (B. Campbell: pers. comm.).

Finally we cannot leave this subject without some consideration of the agricultural system which produced ridge and furrow in west Norfolk. In the Midlands there can be no doubt that ridging is intimately associated with the classic open-field or commonfield system (usually with two or three fields) and known sometimes as the Midland system (Rowley, 28). But whether this interrelationship extends to other regions is an aspect rarely touched upon. Campbell (1981b, 113) has argued the existence of a variety of commonfield systems, with considerable variation in the elements of farming practice adopted. It is pertinent to ask how many of these have ridge and furrow associated, but in this direction much work has yet to be done on what is clearly a multi-disciplinary problem.

In Breckland there must be the possibility that villages such as Caldecote had an infield/outfield system as described by Postgate (1973, 302) and that the limited area of ridged land reflects part of the intensively cultivated infield. For the rest, although the widespread adoption of a three-field system seems improbable and no evidence has been produced to suggest the Midland system took hold in East Anglia (Postgate 1973, 292), the nature of commonfield agriculture in this small area of Norfolk has never been assessed (B. Campbell: pers. comm.). A detailed assessment of the documentary evidence is beyond the scope of this paper which has attempted no more than to highlight the local presence of ridge and furrow. Undoubtedly further traces remain to be detected and the writer and his colleagues at the Norfolk Archaeological Unit would welcome information about any further survivals in the county.

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Table 1

Norfolk ridge and furrow is listed here by parish and, where there are several foci within one parish, by place. Grid references provide a general guide only. The final column shows the level of confidence in the identification of details on aerial photographs from Poss(ible) to Cert(ain).

Parish	Site	Grid Ref.	Area (ha)	Conf.
Aldborough		TG184339	2	Poss
Ashill	Panworth Hall	TF898047	2.5	Poss
Bacton	Edingthorpe Green	TG310319	?	?
Beachamwell		TF746056	2.5	Prob
Beeston	St. Peter's	TF936175	?	??
Beeston		TF921169	?	??
Beeston		TF910151	5+	Poss
Boughton		TF698024	<1	Poss
Castle Rising		TF659254	9	Cert
Crimplesham	Village	TF647041	12.5	Prob
Crimplesham	Coldhams Fm	TF648023	1.5	Prob
Denver	Bypass	TF619020	8.5	Cert
Denver	Sluice Common	TF606002	12.5	Cert
Dersingham		TF693302	?	?
Dilham		TG319246	1.5	?

Downham Market		TF610035	3	Poss
East Dereham		TF983124	3	Poss
East Winch		TF698165	1.5	Poss
Edgefield	Ramsgate Street	TG094330	2	Poss
Erpingham		TG202321	?	Poss
Fincham		TF680064	42	Cert
Fordham		TF613999	12	Prob
Gayton		TF731186	3	Poss
Gayton Thorpe		TF745190	3	Prob
Guestwick		TG041276	1	Poss
Hainford		TG225201	< 1	Poss
Harling		TL943840	1	Prob
Hilgay	West End	TL617975	40	Cert
Hilgay	Woodhall	TL628970	6	Cert
Hillington		TF718254	2	Poss
Hunstanton		TF678398	?	Exc
Kilverstone	Kilverstone Hall	TF890836	3	Poss
Kirby Cane		cTM368938	?	Prob
Middleton	Blackborough End	TF662148	1	Poss
Narford	Narford Hall	TF767141	2.5	?
North Wootton		TF636242	1	Poss
Old Buckenham		TM083908	?	Poss
Oxborough	Caldecote	TF746032	3	Cert
Oxborough	Oxborough Village	TF747014	3	Prob
Pentney		TF734137	1	?
Raynham	Raynham Hall	TF877257	11	Prob?
Ringstead		TF706403	4	Prob
Runcton Holme	Wallington	TF617070	3.5	?
Runcton Holme	Village	TF620097	11	Prob
Ryston	Ryston Park	TF623000	33.5	Cert
Ryston	Crossways Fm	TF638000	1.5+	Prob
Seething		TM319978		Poss
Shouldham		TF671080	1.5	Prob
Shouldham	Fair Stead	TF673095	1	Poss
Shouldham	Orsgates Plantation	TF691088	1.5	Prob
Shouldham Thorpe		TF651087	6	Prob
Southrepps	Lower Street	TG265353	3	?
South Runcton	Chiswick's Fm	TF645070	1.5	Poss
South Wootton		TF638224	6.5	Poss
Sporle	Little Palgrave	TF832134	1.5	Prob
Stanford		TL824948	1.5	Poss
Stoke Ferry		TF699015	2	Prob
Stow Bardolph		TF635056	13.5	Cert
Stradsett		TF662053	65	Cert
Threxton		cTF899001	?	Poss
Tibenham	Dyson's Fm	TM126879	1	Poss
Tottenhill	Manor Fm	TF637103	11	Cert
Wereham	Village	TF671022	1	Poss
Wereham	Wereham Row	TF681006	12	Prob
West Dereham	Grange Fm	TF670034	7.5	Prob
West Dereham	Whitehouse Fm	TF664020	?	?
West Winch		TF630150	4	Poss
Wormegay	West Briggs	TF654109	5	Cert
Wretton		TL689997	3.5	Poss