Ridge and Furrow in Ludgershall

During the Medieval period, throughout the Midlands area of England, including North Buckinghamshire, arable farming was carried out using a method of ‘open fields’ and strip cultivation. These ‘open fields’ were tracts of land often with no hedges to show their boundaries which were divided into strips. In most villages there were three ‘open fields’ but in some there were four. In Ludgershall there were three fields, Mill Field, Middle Field and Tetchwick Field. Sadly I know of no map in existence which shows quite where these fields began or ended or their extent. However we are able to place them roughly in the landscape by their names alone. Mill Field stretched from the boundary with Piddington eastwards towards the village settlement. It certainly encompassed what is now known as Kings Farm where it is quite certain there was a mill in medieval times. Past this point towards the village came Middle Field which it is thought covered most of the settlement itself and the area to the north and south. Tetchwick Field began at some point along Bit Lane and continued eastwards until the parish boundary with Grendon Underwood.

Each of these fields was sub-divided into strips, in legal documents these are often called yardlands, although in the north of the country they are known as oxgangs, referring to the original source of power used to plough facilitate ploughing. More commonly they are Known as furlongs. Although there was no set length or width for a yardland set down in statute at this time it has been established that they typically measured roughly a quarter of an acre in area. It is notable that strips vary from village to village often dependant on the type of underlying soil. Sandy soils are much easier to plough whereas the clays soils which we have in Ludgershall are notoriously difficult especially in a wet season. However an average strip could be said to measure eleven yards wide and two hundred and twenty yards long. This measurement, as those of us who were taught under the imperial system will note is the length of a furlong. (For those who are metrically minded it is about 200m!) This standard length is of course still used by in horse racing. Thus the arable lands of the village were divided up within the three fields. The question is often asked as to why farming was conducted in this manner. One of the main reasons was to make sure that by rotating the leasehold of the strip the better land was not used by the same people every year. Each year lots would be drawn to decide who got which strips, and although certain people may have been unlucky the element of random distribution at least gave a façade of equality and fairness. It was I suppose you could say a form of social engineering which helped to ensure a certain degree of fairness for all the residents of the village. It should not be forgotten that these strips and their successful cultivation were the main form of food production for each family. If they had a bad harvest caused by inclement weather of inefficient husbandry they literally starved. It was a time when there was little surplus, what surplus there was used to prepare for the next season. Another reason was to ensure the rotation of crops. This meant that in year one the strips on Mill Field may have been used to grow cereals, in Middle Field to grow legumes and Tetchwick Field would have been manured and left fallow to rest. In year two; Mill Field would have been used to grow legumes, Middle Field would have been fallow and Tetchwick Field would have been used to grow cereals. Each ‘farmer’ whether he be the Lord of the Manor or a simple peasant would be allotted strips in each of the three fields. The drawback to this was the movement of machinery and workers between each strip, which made the process time consuming and laborious. At a later date those who wanted to end this system, generally the richer members of the community, used this as a primary argument to force Enclosure on the village. A process which would have a profound effect on both the geography and the people of Ludgershall. However during the medieval period this was the system in use.
The ridges which we can still see in the landscape today are the remnants of the system. That they have lasted hundreds of years is testament not to the willingness of farmers to preserve our history but to the fact that agricultural practise in the area has changed little for many years. The ridge was made by the action of the farmer ploughing in such a way that the earth was thrown up to produce what was a very good seed bed. Perhaps by accident, especially on clay soils, they discovered that the furrow provided an excellent drainage channel. Often the strips are set at angles to nearby stream so that the excess water can run off directly into the stream and not leave the land waterlogged. Sometimes the strips have an appearance of an elongated reverse ‘S’ this is thought to have been caused by the ploughman allowing the plough team to pull to the left as they prepared to make the turn at the top of the strip. The ploughs which created these ridges were single share wooden shafted ploughs. It would have been hard work at the best of times on sandy easily worked soil but in Ludgershall where there is clay it must have been extremely hard work.

The strips like modern day fields had names so that the farmers would know where their strips were. The names they were given sometimes described their physical attribute, sometimes a natural connection, and sometimes previous ownerships. Costen furlong which is near the Church describes the ridges within the field; they are very prominent and are likened to ‘ribs’. This furlough was described in a Land Grant of 1288. This was in Middle Field. Its present day name is Costalls which is also remembered in a present day house in the village. A furlong in Mill Field noted in 1300 in details of the Royal Brill Estate is known as le Dedequene. Today it is known as Dead Queens. There is some conjecture among experts as to how this name is derived; some suggest that it is commemorating a dead Queen who perhaps owned to land, to others it is an indication that a dead woman was found in the field. Since Queen Eleanor was thought to have flown her hawks in the parish during her lifetime we might assume the former. In Tetchwick Field, now commemorated by the pair of Cottages known as Redlands Cottages was Redlands furlong. This does not describe the colour of the soil but is a corruption of the word reed and was mentioned in an Indenture of 1696.

As well as all the arable land there was also an area of pasture land on which the livestock of the village was grazed. In Ludgershall this was across the A41 near the confluence of the three streams which form the beginnings of the River Ray. One of the furlong here was known as Gosham it is thought that this name related to the keeping of geese which were an important part of medieval diet.

As alluded to earlier in this article the ridge and furrow has remained so intact because there has never been a need to plough it out. There is in existence an ariel photograph from 1943 which shows the corrugations quite clearly. Sadly some of them have now disappeared. In ploughed fields in the village you can with some practise see where they once were. However there is still a significant amount that hopefully will remain for further generations to study. In part this is due to the fact that most of the farms in the parish are livestock farms, growing crops is not easy in clay soil. Grass, whilst not easy to grow is a more forgiving crop. During the Second World War the local War Ag. Committees insisted that some fields were ploughed up; farmers in this village had to comply, but decided to plough with the ridges rather than against them and thus did little damage to their structure.

The remains of the ridge and furrow in Ludgershall are regarded as of national importance and rightly so. There is even an example of ‘double ridge and furrow’, this is ridge and furrow which has
been created over more ancient ridge and furrow. Such a find is extremely rare and no other examples are known in Buckinghamshire although there are a few in Oxfordshire. There are few parishes which have such a comprehensive collection of ridge and furrow remaining from a period of English agriculture when villagers lived or died as a result of what they were able to grow for themselves. When we compare the advances made today with those medieval times, I for one am glad that I do not have to suffer the hardship of the drudgery which they did in order to survive.

Coming next: Field Names in Ludgershall