

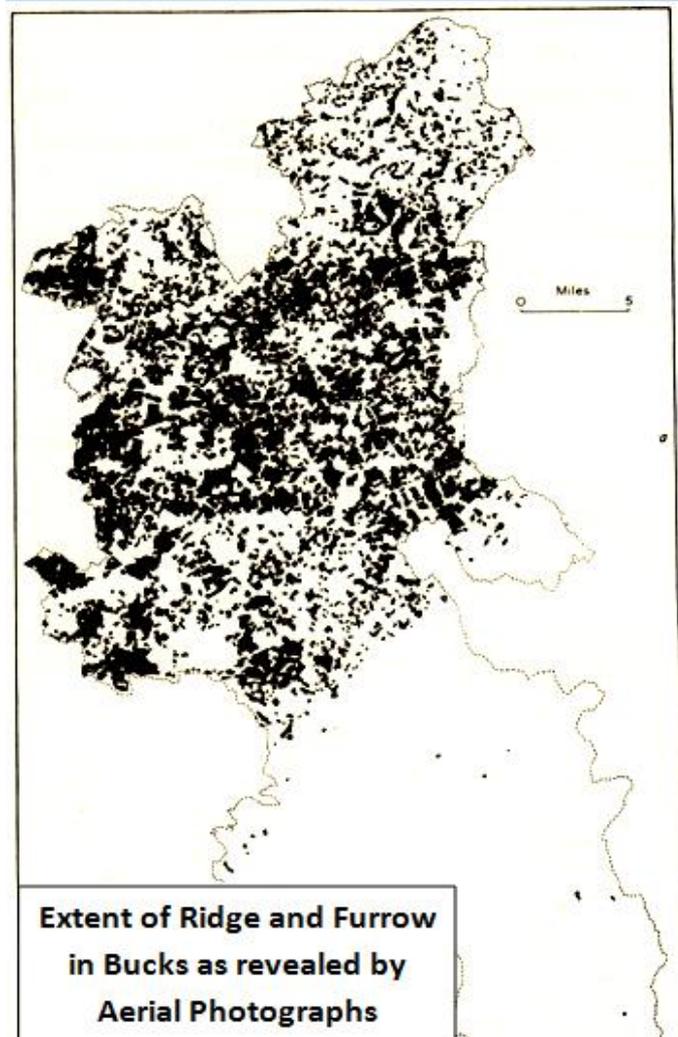
A MAP OF RIDGE AND FURROW IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

A legacy of Research from William Mead

This map is reprinted as a tribute to the former President of BAS, Professor William Mead.

His fascination with the patterns of ridge and furrow on Buckinghamshire fields first arose when, as a boy, he would urge his father to drive the pony and trap thrillingly fast over what he called the “switch-back” fields. The child was clearly father to the man, for years later as an adult, his childhood excitement at the thrill of riding those wave like formations impressed on the pastures near Aylesbury was transformed into an enthusiastic and careful enquiry into their possible origins.

Using aerial photographs taken by the RAF in the 1940s, along with the results of surveys carried out by local schools, he plotted the distribution across the county of the sinuous long ridges that provide evidence of the methods of ploughing arable fields that had been followed for centuries in the common fields across the county until the period of enclosures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



What is most immediately noticeable from Professor Mead’s map is the marked contrast between the north of the county and the south. There is an almost total absence of ridge and furrow in the Chilterns, while the areas beyond the chalk scarp that runs north east to south west across Bucks have a dense mosaic of fields with these distinctive features.

This geographical pattern corresponds closely to the two very different systems of land tenure and agricultural economy that operated in the north and the south from mediaeval times until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The landscape of the Vale of Aylesbury and beyond was described by observers and visitors as *champion* land (from French *champagne*, meaning open

country); in the south, the landscape was of the Chilterns was called *woodland*, a technical term that corresponds to the French landscape known as *bocage*.

Champion areas were great treeless landscapes of broad unhedged open arable fields farmed under the common field system, where every farmer tilled long narrow strips of land that were shaped by the plough into sinuous ridges. A farmer might hold many strips, not adjacent to each other in a single block of land, but rather as scattered holdings interspersed with the strips of his neighbours.

The so-called woodland areas on the other hand were characterised by a pattern of smaller fields, enclosed by hedgerows; trees grew so thick and frequent from the hedges that the landscape gave the impression of being woodland. The layout of farms was as would be familiar to us today and in contrast to those in champion lands; they would each comprise a blocks of fields that lay adjacent to each other, worked by one husbandman, a system of landholding referred to as *severalty*.

At various times through to the nineteenth century, the common fields of the Vale were enclosed by hedges, the scattered landholdings of each farmer were rearranged and amalgamated to form holdings in *severalty*. For the most part, tillage was replaced by pasture. Farmers switched from growing cereals and other arable crops to grazing sheep and cattle on permanent pastures.

It might be assumed, then, that the old arable strips were “frozen” into the pattern of ridge and furrow still to be seen in many areas of the Vale. It might too be assumed that there were never any arable strips farmed as ridges in the areas of *severalty* in the Chilterns. However, Mead warns that these explanations are perhaps too simple.

There were in fact numerous small and scattered areas of common field in the Chilterns which may have been ploughed into ridges. It may be that the absence of ridge and furrow on the Chilterns may result from the prevalence of arable farming over the Chilterns throughout the nineteenth, and that ridges were erased by deliberate cross ploughing.

Mead’s careful comparison of an eighteenth pre-enclosure map of Soulbury with the evidence of aerial photographs showed there is no simple correspondence between the pattern of strips on the map and what is revealed from the air reconnaissance.

What he argued for were more detailed studies of parishes where the pattern of ridge and furrow shown on early estate maps could be compared in detail with the photogrammetric evidence. His research might inspire others to seek a deeper understanding of the origins and history of these now fast disappearing features of the Buckinghamshire landscape.

Michael Ghirelli

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