

**CONSERVATION OF MEDIEVAL OPEN FIELDS IN NORTH
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE**

To: Buckinghamshire Countywide Archaeological Advisory Committee

Date: 26th September 2000

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A. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1 To inform the Committee of the publication of an English Heritage report (*Turning the Plough*) on the survival and management of Midland open fields and seek support for current efforts to preserve these remains in North Buckinghamshire.

B. PROPOSED ACTION

- 2 **The Committee is invited to:**

WELCOME the publication of the *Turning the Plough* report

SUPPORT efforts to ensure the preservation in-situ of the best examples of Buckinghamshire's medieval open field systems.

INSTRUCT the Secretary to write to DEFRA on the Committee's behalf expressing support for the proposed implementation of the Uncultivated Land and Semi-Natural Areas provisions of the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive seeking proper recognition for the role of County Sites and Monuments Records in this regard and emphasising the desirability of providing further targeted support for farmers through agri-environment schemes.

C. RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

- 3 Administrative costs are covered by existing budgets and the proposed growth of the service.

D. SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 4 The archetypal English medieval village encountered in generations of school history books consists of a "nucleated" cluster of peasant's dwellings huddled around the twin centres of their lives, the church and manor. Around this village lay typically three great open fields which the peasants worked in strips in accordance with a strict rotation of corn, beans and fallow. The heartland of these classic Midland open field systems is to be found in the South and East Midlands, although variants existed across most of medieval England and

much of North-Western Europe. Recent archaeological research based in Northamptonshire, but extending from the Chiltern scarp as far north as Warwickshire and Leicestershire, has sought to characterise the survival and diversity of the remains of these open field systems. The study, entitled *“Turning the Plough. Midland open fields: landscape character and proposals for management”* was published jointly by English Heritage and Northamptonshire Heritage in May 2001.

5 The main physical remains of Midlands open fields are the well known and characteristic “ridge and furrow” earthworks – these were the strips of the arable fields which have survived where the land use has changed to pasture. In many cases ridge and furrow covered most of a village’s “township” but some villages also had sizeable woods, meadows and heaths. The study has focussed principally on mapping of the survival of ridge and furrow earthworks from countywide vertical aerial photographs taken in the mid 1990s (1995 in Bucks) supplemented by selective aerial photography of key sites in 1999. Following standard English Heritage procedure, a “Monument Class Description” was prepared to provide clear assessment criteria. A GIS system was then used to calculate the survival of ridge and other scoring factors for each of 1,577 civil parishes. A large proportion of townships were found to have only fair or poor survival (normally <18% coverage) – 140 parishes had good survival of which the best 43 were identified as “priority townships”. The priority townships are considered to be of national importance whilst the other short-listed townships can be thought of as being of county/regional importance. Buckinghamshire has 9 of the 43 priority townships – more than any other county except Leicestershire – and at Ludgershall has the township with the largest surviving area of ridge and furrow. The Buckinghamshire townships in each category are listed in Appendix A.

6 Although ridge and furrow was once widespread across the Midlands this study has demonstrated such severe losses that extensive areas of open fields (as opposed to isolated fields of ridge and furrow) are now very rare and amongst the most endangered elements of England’s archaeological heritage. The main agent of destruction has been conversion to arable, although development of all kinds has also taken its toll. In contrast, the past economic viability of livestock farming has been the main cause of the survival of ridge and furrow and makes its current decline particularly worrying. The report makes 6 principal recommendations (Appendix B) and concludes that:

“In conclusion, some action is imperative, or ploughing and other destruction will continue and none of the large sites will survive”

7 It is understood that English Heritage is considering recommending some of the 43 priority townships for scheduling under the provisions of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. This would protect the sites from ploughing and development threats but has rarely been applied to such extensive areas of agricultural land before. Some of the Buckinghamshire sites are sufficiently outstanding that they are likely to be recommended for scheduling if a policy decision is taken to do so.

8. Development threats can be managed through the planning system. All of the important sites have been identified on the archaeological notification maps issued to Aylesbury Vale District Council and the service is regularly consulted on applications affecting them. Fortunately, the important sites lie in areas of general planning restraint and so normally only face relatively small-scale threat from agricultural or recreational development. In such circumstances a satisfactory outcome can normally be achieved, although some small-scale loss may have to be accepted – for example to retain the viability of a livestock farm. The possibility of supplementary planning guidance could be considered further, either as a free-standing document or as a part of an SPG covering wider landscape or historic landscape issues.
- 8 Non-development threats can be more difficult to manage. As livestock farming becomes less viable threats have arisen from diversification such as the stripping of turf and proposals to convert to woodland. However, ploughing is still the principal problem. There are currently no legal controls on conversion of permanent pasture to arable. Land can be voluntarily entered into DEFRA's Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Areas agri-environment schemes. The preservation of ridge and furrow is a specific target of these schemes but unfortunately most townships are in multiple ownership making it difficult to get adequate coverage. There is scope to improve these schemes by making them more attractive and by proactively target priority sites. A consultation process is currently underway on the implementation of an Environmental Impact Assessment Directive on this issue which will require prior assessment of the environmental effects the use of uncultivated land and semi-natural areas for intensive agricultural purposes. This is a very important new provision which will for the first time provide a legally enforceable framework for protecting ridge and furrow and other ancient earthworks and landscapes from ploughing. The Committee is urged to support this initiative.
- 9 The remains of our medieval open fields have already gained recognition in emerging policies, such as the Landscape Plan for Buckinghamshire and their public profile is being raised by publicity through the Bernwood Project. With the prospect of legal safeguards on the horizon it will be important to ensure that their cultural and landscape value is more widely promoted in future as a distinctive, nationally important, aspect of north Buckinghamshire's landscape.

E. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Implementation of the Uncultivated Land and and Semi-Natural Areas provisions of the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive (DEFRA Second Consultation Paper, September 2001)

Turning the Plough. Midland open fields: landscape character and proposals for management. (English Heritage and Northamptonshire Heritage, May 2001)

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