

David Pannett's History of Bicton part 42

Our crooked and straight landscape

Each October, somewhere in our area, the 'Cruckton' ploughing matches take place with competitive classes for both tractors and traditional horse power. Marks are awarded for straightness and regularity of furrow width and the clean overturning of the soil.

Today many tractor mounted ploughs are not only multifurrowed, but also reversible, so that the work can simply proceed across the width of the field in one direction, even though the unit must go alternatively 'up and down'. However, the traditional 'fixed mouldboard' ploughs had to be worked in a series of 'lands', ploughed up one side and down the other, turning the soil towards the middle.

Traditional horse ploughing, demonstrated so well at such matches, involves a pair of heavy horses, usually 'Shires', controlled with reins and voice by the ploughman on his own, (although for competition purposes he may have an assistant.) At the headland, well trained horses can step sideways to the right when turning the plough for its return journey down the other side of the 'land'.

Historically, the origin of such 'heavy horses' lay not so much with farming as with the needs of heavily armoured knights in the Middle Ages. Then, ploughing was more often done with oxen (which could also be eaten after their working life). As weaker animals, they had to be worked in larger teams and therefore needed a driver to manage them. Since such drivers were normally 'right handed' it was better for them to walk on the left side of the team. As it was also better to walk on smoother unploughed ground, the plough mouldboard was set to push soil to the right, in a position where it has remained ever since. Then, at the headland the driver initially turned the team around to the left, before doubling back towards the other side of the land and for this reason it was convenient to the curve the plough lands into the headland in this direction. Oxen also needed such a regular pause in the heavy work and therefore the plough lands were normally no more than 220 yards in length: the 'furrow-long' or 'furlong', measure still used in horseracing (200 metres).

TRADITIONAL HORSE PLOUGHING



MEDIEVAL OX PLOUGHING



The simple wooden mouldboards could not turn the soil right over or bury turf in the same way as those smooth curving blades developed by John Deere or Ransome in the 19th century.

Any 'convertible' husbandry, with the use of long leys in a rotation was out of the question. Even in the early 19th century grassland could only be broken up by first paring the turf by hand with a breast plough and then burning it.

In the open field system the plough lands, complete with curves, became permanent features locked in a pattern of grassy furrows and headlands and could therefore become the basic units of tenure. On heavy soils they acquired ridged profiles to help the drainage. In later centuries new hedges often followed these old curving shapes and furlong lengths, thus preserving a sort of ghost of mediaeval patterns, even when original ridges became obliterated by later ploughing.

In any case, the mediaeval world did not worry about straight lines, often following natural water courses or breaks in slope for convenience.

'Straightness' was always an essentially 'classical' idea, as shown by Roman roads, and did not come fully back to us until the renaissance and the rise of professional surveyors. In the fields so much sowing and harvesting was done by hand that curving or irregular shapes presented no practical problems. Eventually seed drills and harvesting machinery certainly favoured straight lines and encouraged some landlords to redesign their estates, as around Montford, for instance.

So much for general principles, what can we see in Bicton? The landscape here certainly contains both old and new elements, although patterns are less clear with the removal of many hedges, so that the best clues must come from older maps. The 1902 - 1925 six inch map of the For Crosses area shows a good mixture close together: ancient crooked boundary hedges, between Bicton, Rossall and Udlington, an enclosed 'parcel' of the Bicton medieval fields and the straight roads and hedges laid out on the heaths of Bicton and Rossall in 1768 and 1830. Between, some old small fields were created as encroachments from the heathland before these dates. Indeed one can 'read' a great deal in this landscape when one has learned the 'language' in which it is written. Otherwise just take care driving too fast down straight roads which then become crooked!

