

Rectory Farm, Pirton

The ridge and furrow which covers the northern part of the field known as *Davis Meadow* in Pirton has long been recognised as amongst the best examples of this class of field monument in Hertfordshire, and when de-turfing began on 4 March 1987 it became a cause for concern to several members of the local community who contacted Gil Burleigh at Letchworth Museum to inform him of it. David Bell of the Planning Office also informed him on the same day. Gil Burleigh visited the site and took photographs of the machinery in action before informing David Hillelson of this development, and it was arranged for a team to visit the site on the following day to undertake a rapid survey of the earthworks before their possible destruction.

On 5 March a team of four people measured the ridge and furrow. This was achieved by laying out a base line across the centre of the field, along its long axis and roughly parallel to the direction of the strips. The base line consisted of six steel pegs spaced 50 metres apart and surveyed in by theodolite and steel tape to ensure the greatest possible accuracy. Where the field slopes downwards toward the south this presented some difficulty and the pegs had to be plumbed in while the tape was held as close as possible to horizontal. Once the length of the ridge and furrow had been covered by the base line it was simple to set up right-angled offsets at intervals of 25m along the line using a cross-head and measure the distance of each ridge and furrow along the offset line, and also the edges of the field.

The rapid survey located a straight headland at the north-western end of the field, parallel to and just south of the modern boundary, and a more sinuous headland at the south-eastern end of the ridge and furrow which, owing to the nature of the survey, could not be surveyed in the time available. There was also what appears to be an earlier headland about 100 metres south of the surviving headland, and on the crest of the hill. It is overlain and damaged by the later strips, but one strip runs only as far as this former headland, north of which its two neighbours encroach on it until it disappears completely.

A second field, opposite *Davis Meadow* across Shillington Road and called *The Park*, which also contains ridge and furrow was also to be de-turfed, and so a survey of this smaller area was undertaken on 9 - 10 March 1987, again while the machinery was operating. The triangular shape of this field made rapid survey using a cross-head more awkward, but it was decided to set up a baseline from the centre of one side to the apex of the triangle which cut obliquely across the ridge and furrow. This was laid out with steel pins placed 50 metres apart and surveyed in by theodolite. Most of the field was surveyed by means of right-angled offsets from this line established by cross-head, although towards the western end of the field, two lines parallel to the base line also had to be set up to cover stretches of the earthworks which right-angled offsets were unable to reach.

The survey was undertaken under very difficult conditions, with turf-cutting machinery operating in the same general area of the surveyors who often had to move quickly to prevent their tapes from being swallowed up with the turf. Although neither grid was tied in to the Ordnance Survey by theodolite, the high standard of accuracy achieved enable field boundaries to be drawn up and these can be related to the boundaries marked by the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map. It was clear, however, that the earthworks in the southern part of the field could not be surveyed in the same way and that, so long as the area was being used by lorries for loading, it could not be surveyed at all. It was therefore decided to survey this end of the field later in the year, when the excavation programme had finished.

In general, the earthworks survived the de-turfing well, although where the southern end of the field had been used by lorries as a turning and loading point, there is still some evidence of churning, especially in the softer low-lying ground around the water-trough and also immediately to the south of the bank marking the former field boundary. The process of de-turfing has also, presumably, rounded off and obscured some of the less prominent earthworks. On the morning of 22 December 1987 in strong low sunlight it was possible to observe very slight, parallel linear ridges approximately 0.3m apart. These appear to represent the lines of turf removed by machine.

A measured survey of the southern end of *Davis Meadow* (formerly called *The Grove Close*) was carried out by a team of up to six people between 8 December and 22 December 1987 in order to complete the rapid survey of the upper part of the field (formerly part of *The Grove Shot*). A base line consisting of wooden pegs set at twenty-metre intervals was laid out by theodolite roughly parallel to the eastern boundary fence, and a second line at right angles to this was also surveyed, again using wooden pegs but with an interval of forty metres. Further steel grid pegs were added as required by a combination of triangulation and cross-head survey.

During the first week of surveying the weather was extremely cold and the ground surface remained reasonably hard throughout the day, although for the second week, slightly higher temperatures meant that low-lying and heavily-trampled parts of the field became unpleasantly boggy. The grass-cover in the field is good, despite the de-turfing, and has been re-seeded¹; there are also large thistles, particularly in the area of ridge-and-furrow which tend to obscure the earthworks.

The most noticeable feature - apart from the ridge-and-furrow - is a headland to the south of the strips and a bank running parallel to it. The space between the two banks resembles a narrow, winding track running across the field, and there are gates giving access to the field where this feature reaches the field edges. On the 1882 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of Pirton² the bank is shown as a current boundary, with the field to the north-west containing the ridge-and-furrow having parcel number 47, and the south-eastern field parcel number 36. To the west of Shillington Road the line continues as the present public footpath and follows the southern boundaries of *The Park* (formerly *Rack Pit Shot*) and *Long Yard* (formerly *Long Yard Shot and Cow and Pigs*). This is shown on the 1882 map as a lane. On the Enclosure map of Pirton (c1814) this line is shown as a water-course marked "Public Drain #13" which empties into the north-western corner of the moated complex surrounding Rectory Farm³. It is, of course, not incompatible with early nineteenth-century farming practice to allow a drain and farm track to run side by side. South of this feature in *Davis Meadow* there is no trace of ridge-and-furrow, and the earthworks are generally less clearly defined.

One exception to this is a subrectangular enclosure in the south-west corner of the field, in which a small building platform can be distinguished, and there are traces of further possible areas of activity within the enclosure. Elsewhere in the field, particularly to the north-east and east of the cattle trough, there are poorly-defined low platforms which may represent further buildings and low banks which may represent other enclosures. Particularly noticeable is a bank overlain by the southern bank of the possible lane, which appears to be an earlier headland or field boundary.

Running from the water-trough and much obscured by surface water and trampling is a shallow linear gully running roughly south-west to north-east and turning towards a more north-south alignment parallel to the boundary fence at around ten metres from the fence. This may be connected with the water supply to the cattle trough, vehicle damage rather obscuring its exact shape, although its winding character perhaps indicates some other origin, possibly connected with drainage since it runs into a very low-lying area which was waterlogged and contained surface water throughout the period of the survey.

Along the southern edge of the field there is a ditch which, although dry when investigated in December 1987, débouches into the south-western corner of the moated complex surrounding Rectory Farm and which provides at least some of the water for it, the water presumably being culverted or otherwise piped below the modern ground surface. A similar ditch runs along the southern boundary of *The Park* and *Long Yard*, appearing to line up with the ditch in *Davis Meadow* and is marked on the Ordnance Survey maps as a drain.

To the east of the main earthworks and cut by the ditch of the moated complex is a long, low platform and an irregular hollow, of which no trace survives east of the ditch. These presumably represent activity on the site pre-dating the moat on this side, and therefore of mediæval (or, less likely, earlier) date. The moat itself is rather complex and may well have a number of phases of construction. There is a smaller moated area to the north-east, now partly overlain by the present farmhouse which is itself of sixteenth-century origin, with a larger area to the west and south which may represent either a later addition or a separate enclosure containing farm buildings and other outbuildings.

To the east of the moat a small strip of meadow also containing earthworks was investigated on 4 March 1988. Most of these earthworks seem to represent upcast from cleaning the moat ditches, although towards the east there is a low bank which may be part of a former property boundary. A drainage trench cut across the field was open at the time of investigation and afforded an opportunity to look for buried features; none could be seen, although the clayey nature of the soil may well have obscured them. One piece of pottery was recovered, a rim sherd of a thick shell-gritted fabric which appears to be Romano-British. This, together with Romano-British pottery and Roman coins from gardens immediately to the east, suggests that a habitation existed in the vicinity during the Roman period.

The current name for the whole field, *Davis Meadow*, is derived from the name of the purchaser of Rectory Farm in 1870, one Daniel Davis of Hexton, who acquired the farm for £17,500; prior to this date the north-western part of the field had been part of a series of fields comprising the *Grove Shot* (the name suggests that all the fields in this group were divided into furlongs⁴), while the south-eastern portion had been known as the *Grove Close*. Both these fields were part of *Windmill Field* (one of five open fields in existence by the start of the Nineteenth Century; a document of 1663 indicates that there were only three then) before the enclosure of the parish was completed in 1818. In the early nineteenth century *Grove Close* was owned by one Rev. Sir John Filmer Bart., and had earlier been part of the Manor of Pirton Rectory. The current Rectory Farm is the site of the Manor House, and the moated enclosure perhaps dates from shortly after the separation of the Manor of Pirton Rectory from the Manor of Pirton during the early thirteenth century when the de Limesy family was extinguished in the male line and the original Manor of Pirton was divided between the heirs of two female branches and Pirton Rectory.⁵

A map in the publication *A Foot on Three Daisies*¹ also shows the line of Shillington Road (then called Grove Lane) diverging towards the west along what is now the footpath for about 100 feet (i.e. 30m) before turning northwards to rejoin the modern line of the road near the north-western corner of *Davis Meadow*. The rapid survey of the eastern end of *The Park*, now enclosed separately, suggests that the deviation was rather smaller than the map suggests, perhaps in the region of 10 to 15m, since the headland to the ridge and furrow is no more than 15m from the field boundary. The eastern boundary of *Davis Meadow* has also clearly encroached on at least one field strip. It is probable that a much smaller kink in the road has been exaggerated by an early map maker. A document in the County Sessions Rolls for September 1768 mentions Grove Close among other fields affected by a proposed road enclosure which was initially thought to refer to this road straightening: the other field names are unidentifiable, but other details seem to locate the road in the south-western corner of the parish, so the Grove Close under consideration here is probably another field.

Notes

¹ Personal communication to KJM by Mr Baines of Pirton Parish Council, 14.1.88.

² Reproduced in *A Foot on Three Daisies*, compiled by the Pirton Society (1987).

³ The original of the Enclosure map of Pirton (c1814), now in somewhat tattered condition, is deposited at Hitchin Museum, and a better photocopy is kept at Hertfordshire County Records Office (PC 528).

⁴ An estate map of 1771 in the County Records Office (D/E Ha P1) shows The Grove Shot as still being cultivated in strips at that date.

⁵ Information on the dynastic history of the Lords of the various Manors can be found in any of the older county historians; I have used Robert Clutterbuck's *The Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire*, published in 1827.

⁶ The map of "Pirton in the Nineteenth Century" has been compiled anonymously and is reproduced in the Pirton Society's book. Its sources are not, however, indicated.

RECTORY FARM, PIRTON

MEASURED SURVEYS

MARCH & DECEMBER 1987

