

## RIDGE AND FURROW - A TALK BY BARRY SMITH

The society met on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2012 to hear a talk by Barry Smith on “**RIDGE AND FURROW**”. Although there was a good attendance from Whilton, our numbers were swelled by a large company from other villages mainly from the farming community, who were keen to hear Barry speak. They were not disappointed, although the hall was so full that there was standing room only at the back!

With his experience of farming and his training in historical geography, Barry gave a lively and educational account of the landscape which surrounds Whilton and many other West Northamptonshire villages. He explained the system of communal farming in great open fields, which were probably laid out as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Each farmer's “yardland” consisted of many strips in different parts of the fields, so that, at least at first, each had a fair share of fertile, poor, boggy or well drained soil. He described how the ploughing by a team of oxen created the long s-shaped raised strips, the ridges, and how the furrows beside them were good for drainage, and also helped to mark one strip from another, delineating ownership.

Medieval farmers sowed their seed by broadcasting or scattering it by hand, and then treading it in, perhaps a job for children. The harvest was very limited, providing only a tiny fraction of what would be expected today, and a run of bad weather, or a season of poor seed could decimate these poor crops. As agricultural improvements began to create new possibilities, there was more discontent with this old system, until finally the open fields were enclosed by fences and hedges and came into private ownership. Whilton was enclosed in 1778. This was done by Act of Parliament and organised and supervised by commissioners. This caused problems in some places, where especially the poorer people saw there was disadvantage to them.

As enclosing of open fields became more common, so too the canals were being built, and these were the means by which grain from the Baltic and Europe could be brought into the Midlands. There was less demand for home grown grain. Thus enclosed pasture for meat production took over from the huge open arable fields. However, when Napoleon's blockade led to a drop in imports to 5% of what had been coming in, there was a sudden need to provide more wheat for bread and barley for beer. In some parishes the ridge and furrow was adjusted to be flatter for new grain growing; where this was successful it brought huge wealth to the farmers who could do this. In fact they sometimes incorporated the name “Gold” into their field names, giving an indication of how good their profits were!

Throughout the talk Barry illustrated his points with slides of local places. We saw aerial and ground level views of ridges and furrows, examples of baulks and headlands, and the flat areas where grain would have been stored in thatched ricks before being threshed during the winter.

After taking in all this fascinating information, we were provided with refreshments and delicious cakes by Mary Emery to end a very successful evening.