Rigg and furrow **Ian Pearce May 2011**

Until the mid-twentieth century, fields were ploughed using a single-furrow plough drawn by a team of oxen, or later on a team of horses. The field was ploughed in long strips called lands. The length of the furrow gave rise to the furlong (220 yards) and the distance it took to turn the plough at the end of the field, determining the width of the land, was a chain (22 yards). The area thus enclosed was an acre.

Ploughing might start in the lower left-hand corner of the field, with a furrow being made along the length of the left-hand boundary. When the top boundary was reached, the plough with its team of oxen or horses had to be turned round in order to start the return furrow. Consequently this return furrow would be at a distance from the first furrow. Back at the lower field boundary, the plough would again be turned round and a second outward furrow ploughed alongside and to the right of the first furrow. Work would continue in this manner until the outward furrows met the first return furrow. The next section of the field would then be ploughed in a similar manner.

A plough traditionally turns the soil over to the right. Therefore, ploughing a set of parallel furrows in the same direction will result in a build-up of soil to the right. It was this that gave rise to a pattern of shallow ridges across the field, generally known as 'rigg and furrow'. The best time to see these patterns is when overnight frost still remains on the shaded side of the ridges.

Although the rig and furrow pattern was an inevitable result of the agricultural methods of its time, it did offer some advantages to the farmer. It encouraged better drainage of the heavy Cleveland clay soils, and it has been claimed that the marginally-greater surface area increased yields.

Ironically, since rigg and furrow was produced by ploughing, today it can only be seen in fields which have been left as pasture. After the Second World War, tractors working with the new reversible ploughs meant that all the furrows could be made in the same direction. Also, machinery such as the combine harvester had trouble with the up-and-down surface of rigg and furrow. In arable fields the old rigg and furrow patterns were ploughed out to give a flat surface, and it was only in the fields left undisturbed, as pasture, that the patterns remained.

In some places the ridges and furrows are laid out in a gentle 'S' plan. This arose from the considerable distance it took to turn a team of oxen at the end of a furrow. The turn was begun before the boundary was reached, and completed after the next furrow had started.

Rigg and furrow was laid down at the time of the open fields. Then enclosure brought much smaller fields, separated by hedges, with the new boundaries cutting across the existing rig and furrow. So, where there are adjacent pasture fields, it is sometimes possible to see the rigg and furrow continuing in the same pattern on the other side of a hedge.

The best place to see rigg and furrow in Great Ayton today is in Suggitt's field, between the waterfall and the cricket ground.