

FEATURE ARTICLE
Farming and the development of the village
by Sue Burnay

I am currently researching aspects of farming in East Ilsley and the development of the village. There is a wealth of information available that I have identified and started to look at. Some of the earliest information on farming comes from aerial photographs, which can show the banks and ditches that originally formed the boundaries of ancient fields. These boundaries may show up as marks in the soil (e.g. where the underlying chalk has been exposed) or as crop marks (differences in the height or ripening of a crop because of different depths of soil) or as low earthworks. The National Monuments Record (NMR) at Swindon holds an enormous collection of aerial photos, from the RAF and from Ordnance Survey flights. I have a full list of the photos available for the area around East Ilsley and have had a quick look at some of them – enough to wet my appetite for a deeper investigation. NMR has also carried out a mapping survey of the Downlands area and transferred onto 6” scale maps all of the earthworks and ditches visible in the aerial photos. I have a copy of the sheets covering East and West Ilsley and Compton, which show an enormous complex of field systems, mainly to the north of the East Ilsley to Compton road. There is virtually nothing visible on the ground now of this system because of ploughing. The field boundaries only remained visible in aerial photos because the area remained as pasture until the 1940’s.

Another vital resource in looking at the village’s development is the tithe map of 1841 and its associated ‘terrier’, which lists all the plots marked on the map and their owners and occupiers. The original parish copy of the map was photographed by Bob Moulton before being deposited in the Berks Record Office. We also have a B&W copy of the map. Because of the importance of this map to everyone’s research, I am currently working on tracing the map for scanning into the computer. This will eventually form a practical resource available to the whole group for customisation for different projects. As part of this, I am also building up a database of place names in the village. The tithe map clearly shows the remnants of the old medieval strip system, which lasted much longer here than in many parishes. Some of the earthworks shown in the NMR mapping survey relate to the boundaries of these strip fields. A few are still visible as earthworks on the ground (e.g. on the east side of the West Ilsley road just past Windmill House).

Title deeds can also provide a snapshot of the strip fields scattered around the village – I have an example for land belonging to the Black Horse inn in 1799, which consists of 21 acres in total, broken down into 28 separate parcels of land, none of which are adjacent.

Another general resource that I am building up as part of this work is a database of the people in East Ilsley named in trade directories through the period 1830 to 1939. These directories listed trades people, farmers, professionals and those considered as gentry and covered every village up to 1939 (later editions only covered towns). The data is a bit variable in quality, but forms a useful starting point for identifying when particular people lived and worked in the village.

Future plans include looking at the 1910 Valuation Survey, which provides information somewhat similar to that in the tithe map and apportionments. A preliminary look at the documents suggests that the survey will be another useful resource for the group. There is also a Farm Survey of 1940, although this will obviously only cover part of the village. Other sources of information on aspects of farming will also come from items like sale catalogues.

So, as you can see, I will have a lot of information to sort through and analyse, and in the process I should be able to develop some more general resources for the working group.