Ridge and Furrow

There has been greatly increased interest in Kilsby’s ancient ridge-and-furrow ploughland recently, since it came under sudden threat from proposed housing development; so this issue will explain the historical background ...

Our story commences over 1100 years ago, in the late 800s. At that time, Kilsby did not exist – no-one lived where our village now lies – and Barby parish included all of what is now Kilsby, plus what we now call Barby Nortoft. It was a turbulent time, and the invasion of our land by bands of bloodthirsty Danes was still a very fresh memory. A truce between Danes and Saxons was hammered out at the Treaty of Wedmore in 872AD, and the old Roman road (Watling Street, the modern A5) was agreed as the borderline between Danes and Saxons – which, incidentally, put Barby right in the front line, in the event of any further unrest (by the way, at that time the Watling Street did not run through Kilsby, it followed the original Roman straight-line route north of Kilsby, which you can still see as a footpath running through part of the DIRFT site; the subsequent “detour” that caused it to pass through Kilsby is due to the development of drove-roads in the medieval period, it has no bearing on this story).

Thirty years later, by 900AD, things had settled down somewhat, and Barby folk were coming to terms with their new Danish neighbours over the Watling Street. There were even attempts to build relationships across the new border – and as it happens, Barby was the focus of one such attempt, which turned out to everyone’s benefit.

The name "Barby Nortoft" literally means "the Danish settlement in the north of Barby parish". We can only speculate about precise dates and names – but one thing that seems clear is that a Danish "socman" or freeman (a man not tied by serfdom to his Danish lord, but free to wander and settle where he wished) approached the Saxon lord of the manor of Barby at about this time, and said something like this: "Sir, the land in the north of your lordship is too far away for you to work it effectively – you cannot take your ploughs all that way out every day and all the way back again at night. Suppose that I and my family were to occupy that land, and farm it productively? We could raise a good crop, and I would pay you tribute for it, and we would both profit!"

And this is evidently just what happened – for specific facts in the landscape bear witness to it, right up to the present day:

- Nortoft Lane, from Barby to Barby Nortoft, has no other reason for its existence than to link the two settlements – and it was already many centuries old in 1778AD, at Parliamentary Enclosure, for the Kilsby and Barby Enclosure Awards both refer to “the ancient lane to Nortoft”.
- Even more telling are three fields at the crossroad of Kilsby Lane and Nortoft Lane, which are called "Thingho", "Little Thingho" and "Fingo". In both the old Scandinavian and Germanic languages, this translates as "the assembly place" (compare with the modern Icelandic parliament, or "Thing-vellig"; and the old Isle of Man parliament, or "Tyn(g)wald"; and there are many more examples throughout Britain of "thing" as a placename for “community meeting place”).
- As you can see, the name "Thingho" tells us that this hill, at a point almost exactly midway between Barby and Nortoft, was established in the early 900s as a spot where matters of common interest to the two communities would be debated.
- The next piece of evidence involves Kilsby itself. When the Danish community at Barby Nortoft was established, Kilsby did not exist, as I remarked earlier – but with time the Danes at Nortoft became an accepted part of the community, initial fear/suspicion turned gradually to cautious friendship – and Nortoft evidently prospered, for a marriage was eventually proposed between a daughter of the Danish community and the son of the head of the Saxon community at Barby, to strengthen the bonds of friendship.
You may wonder how we can be so sure of this – but the answer lies in the very name of our village. At Domesday (1086AD), when Kilsby is first mentioned in any document, it was spelled "Cildesby" – and this, translated from Old Saxon, simply means "the settlement of the lord's son ("cilde"), who married a Danish girl" (hence the "-by" ending, the Danish suffix for "settlement", rather than the Saxon suffix "-ton" or "-don"). Incidentally, our village was still spelled "Kildesby" until the mid-1700s.

Finally, a glance at the map on the last page of this article will show that Barby, Kilsby and Barby Nortoft all lie roughly equidistant from "Thingho".

This brings us to about 920-930AD, and the foundation of Kilsby village.

Among the first tasks, along with building a few essential barn-like thatched dwellings, would have been clearing land and starting to plough it and raise crops. Some readers will be familiar with the Saxon/Danish system of agriculture, but to remind you:

- The first land to be cleared of trees and bushes would be that nearest the early village centre – identified today as "the land backing on to Rugby Road".
- When enough land was cleared, it was marked out in parcels of about one acre. Each acre was made up of four strips or "lands", each about 5.5 yards wide (a "perch" in the old land units still taught in school in the 1940s), by about 220 yards in length (NB: that's where the word "furlong" comes from, originally it just meant "the length of the ploughed furrow, or furrow-long").
- All these measurements fit together neatly. Have you ever wondered why a cricket pitch is 22 yards long? – it is 4 perches, or one tenth of a furlong. And 5.5 times 220 – one perch times one furlong – is 1210 square yards, exactly a quarter of an acre (4840 sq.yds.).
- Each "land" was ploughed up and down, working out from its centre to its edge; and because the plough always turns over the soil in the same direction, the soil was always thrown slightly towards the centre of the "land", both on the outward and return journeys. Although the ground would have been relatively level initially, after centuries of this ploughing each "land" became higher at the centre and lower at the edges. And the deepest ridge and furrow is the oldest.
Ancient ridge and furrow in Kilsby, at the junction of Rugby Road and Kilsby Lane

That's the end of this story, and I hope you can now see how and when and why Kilsby came into existence, and how the ridge and furrow developed. Our ridge and furrow is a precious heritage – it has taken about 1000 years of steady ploughing to create; moreover, though the whole of Europe was once covered with this type of ridge and furrow, by World War 2 there was virtually none left in mainland Europe – and since 1945 we have destroyed about 95% of the little of it that remained in England.

These are just facts; it is not my intent to “take sides” or wage a crusade. I just felt that you should understand the relevance of this precious ridge-and-furrow to Kilsby’s heritage, in case it suddenly vanishes forever under tarmac and concrete.