

Unearthing the past of floodplain meadows

Like very many stretches of the British landscape, floodplain meadows can reveal a rich history if you know where to look. Here you can read about some of the sources of information that will help you paint a picture of the past of meadows which you know yourself and understand how they have come to be what they are today. Such insights can also prompt ideas about how floodplains might be restored and what meadows they might sustain tomorrow. To illustrate the value of such material, we have used extracts from a case-study of a particular floodplain in South Yorkshire, a landscape until recently dominated by coal-mining but which has a long and fascinating story to tell. The aerial photograph (right) shows the stretch of the floodplain on which the case study concentrates. You can read more about this place and the research into its history in 'Wombwell: The Landscape History of a South Yorkshire Coalfield Township' by David Hey & John Rodwell, *Landscapes*, Volume 7, number 2, pages 24-47.



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Maps ...

A good place to start is with maps. For visualising the present landscape, you can use the **Ordnance Survey Explorer Maps** at 1:25,000 scale - 2½ inches to the mile or 4cms to 1km. As well as revealing the shape of the land and the pattern of rivers and drains in floodplains, such maps will show you existing field boundaries that are perhaps a remnant of older enclosures. They may also have place-names that are very revealing about previous land-use and perhaps extremely ancient. Here, for example, we see 'Wombwell Ings'. The Old Norse *eng* originally meant 'grassland' but in this part of Britain the dialect form *ing* in Middle English came to



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mean 'meadow land' in low-lying places liable to flood. The large areas of open water in the floodplain are the result of mining subsidence. The river is shown embanked and with a dike along the edge to help drainage control.

For a detailed view of an older landscape, you can buy copies of **earlier Ordnance Survey maps** such as The Godfrey Edition

(from www.alangodfrey.com), or Old Maps (from <http://www.old-maps.co.uk/maps>), that were originally at 1:2500 scale or 25 inches to the mile.

Local libraries may also have copies of the first 1:10,000 or 6 inch to the mile edition of the Ordnance Survey, completed in the mid-to late 19th century. Comparing maps of different dates can help you see how floodplains have changed. Here, for example, the 1956 Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 map still shows the flood plain of the Dover and Dearne completely enclosed in separate fields, as it was a century before the map above. The river was embanked in 19th century but still liable to flood.



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... and other documents

Of course, these sources tell us nothing about how the land on floodplains was used at the time the maps were made. Other maps, however, are accompanied by documents which can provide various information about ownership and land-use. For example, the 1836 Tithe Commutation Act aimed to replace the outworn system of tithe payments in kind by farmers to clergy by a rent charge and resulted in the earliest large-scale maps for most of the parishes of England and Wales, together with lists of landowners and tenants for all the enclosures and an indication of whether fields were under grass or arable. In the **1839/40 Tithe Award Map** for Wombwell (extract right), we can see that, even at that time, some of the fields on the flood plain were arable (coloured brown) and, of those that were under grass (green), we do not know if this was meadow or pasture. Tithe Maps vary greatly in quality but they sometimes also show field names: here, for example, all the floodplain fields were called Ings Close. You may find copies of the Tithe Awards for your parish in local archives but they can also be consulted at the National Archive at Kew in London.

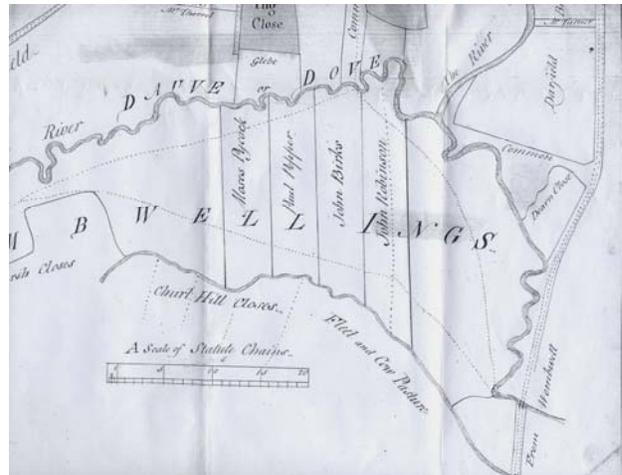


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From 1885, Annual Parish Agricultural Returns also give us an overview of the pattern of farming across England and Wales on a parish scale but, during the Second World War,

the national emergency meant that much more detailed information was required. The **MAFF National Farm Survey** which you can also find at the National Archive provides detailed maps and questionnaire responses from every farm in the country, detailing the extent of meadow and pasture, arable crops and livestock and the condition of the land. All such information helps directly and indirectly understand the dynamic of land-use on floodplains.

Sometimes, **unexpected sources of maps and documentary information** come to light. In their study of Wombwell, Hey & Rodwell discovered that some parts of the floodplain of this town had once been owned by Trinity College, Cambridge. A trip to the lovely Wren Library of that college revealed a very rich source of documents about the township and the use of the land. There was also a large map of the parish, drawn in 1757 with all the fields, their names and sizes recorded. Wombwell Ings was still in part an unenclosed stretch of 113 acres (46 hectares). A more detailed map of 1772 (extract right) showed the property of Trinity College and the tenants on that land at that time, maybe still unenclosed strips within the Ings. The map also reveals the earlier natural course of the river Dove before it was straightened and embanked for flood control in the 19th century.



Section of map reproduced by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge.

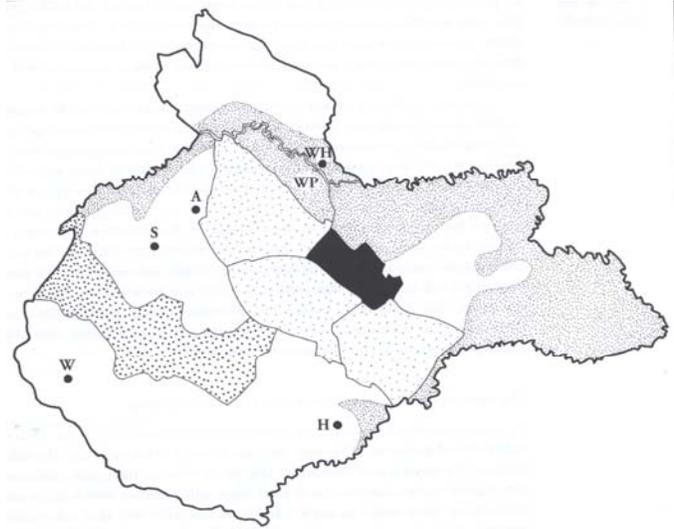
Part of the Trinity College archives consisted

For some grounds called Wombwell Ings, above 120 acres, usually mowed, they formerly paid me no more at the rate of 6 pence in the pound ... Moreover, several acres of the said Ings are being converted to pasture for which I shall receive only 2 pence in the pound. My predecessors always had the same complaint. **Letter from Rev Randolph Marriot 7 January 1767 to the Master & Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.**

of **letters** from the vicar of Wombwell in the 1760s to the Master & Fellows of the College. These are often concerned with complaints by the priest that the tenants farming the land are not paying him their tithes for the hay they cut, or are avoiding the hay tithe by converting their land to pasture or arable. In 1768, the Rev Marriot brought a court case to recoup what he considered his dues, saying that he has been often 'amused

by promises' from the parishioners of Wombwell. A marginal note by the lawyer records that 'Wombwell Ings containing 143 acres have always been considered as liable to pay tithe in hand of hay'. All this evidence shows us that there had been a continuing tradition of using the floodplain as hay meadow.

Many parishes have manorial or estate records that can provide a picture of how the land was used in earlier times. No such records exist for Wombwell, but Hey & Rodwell used two early **charters** to explore the late medieval character of the landscape. One was made in 1516 for Roger Wombwell, the lord of the manor, the other shortly afterwards for the nuns of Healaugh Priory in the Vale of York, a religious house which owned land scattered through the parish. These charters provide place-names connected to the floodplain and the wider landscape, such as *Dearne yngs*, and mention a 'meerstone', a traditional marker of different strips in a common meadow. From their detailed description of particular land-holdings and locations, the charters also enable us to get an overall picture of the economy of the township (shown reconstructed right). There are three large arable fields farmed as strips (open stipple), pasture (unshaded) and woodland (coarse stipple) and the floodplain meadow (fine stipple) is shown as occupying the whole of the flood plain. All of this land would have been farmed in common by the people of the village (shaded black) and its associated settlements (lettered W, H, S, A, WP and WH).



... and some more general sources of useful information

For appreciating the value of different kinds of **maps** for understanding landscapes, you can consult *Maps for Family & Local History* by G. Beech & R. Mitchell (London: The National Archive, 2004). For understanding **place-names**, a good start is *The Landscape of Place-names* by Margaret Gelling & Ann Cole (Shaun Tyas Publishing: Stamford, 2000). This will tell you about the origin and meaning of familiar place-name elements like meadow, mead, holm and ing, giving many examples. The English Place-Name Society has published detailed gazetteers of the settlement, field and road names of many counties of England (see <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~aezins//epns>).