



Although agriculture reached Britain just before 4000 BC the earliest field systems with remains that we can see date to shortly after 2000 BC. In the intervening period there must have been methods of recognising the right of particular communities or individuals to grow and harvest their crops, as well as keeping stock away from growing plants, but little evidence has been found other than occasional lines of stakes (and very early systems at Céide Fields in County Mayo, Eire).

In the Early/Middle Bronze Age all that changed and large areas of land were enclosed in rectilinear grids of small rectangular fields. The nature of the boundaries varies with ditches in valleys and lower lying land, banks on sandy heathlands, and lynchets ('steps') where plough soil accumulated against a hedge or fence on downland slopes. The rigidity of the pattern of fields, the scale of enclosure and their similarity over much of southern Britain attest both a strong social imperative and a general acceptance of the new norm. Movement of people and stock was constrained by the need to keep to narrow, predictable tracks. The land would now have appeared as a patchwork of ploughed land, growing crops, fallow and possibly ill kept weedy plots.

Settlements are relatively difficult to locate in these landscapes but appear to have been scattered among the fields; agreements must have been made at a local level about access to possibly communally held resources like water and woodland. It may have been that, to some extent at least, control over large areas of land was one aspect of high status but it is impossible to be sure that these field systems were not cropped communally.

Land organisation changed fundamentally, at least in parts of Britain, possibly about 1000–800 BC. On the chalk downs of Salisbury Plain, the Tabular Hills of the North York Moors and elsewhere series of major banks and ditches, like the 'Wessex Linears' divided the land into relatively large areas more suitable for stock

farming than crop growing. On the South Downs the problem which necessitated this change was addressed differently – short lengths of bank and ditch cross the ridges and spurs as though to control and, perhaps limit, movement. The amount of land enclosed in small parcels suitable for arable use declined and the rigid rectilinear pattern was lost as small group of fields developed.

These changes must reflect socio-economic factors but two points are relatively clear. Firstly there was a change in emphasis from crop production to stock raising and, secondly, there was an increase in violence. Swords are found for the first time, a weapon with no other purpose than warfare, and their design changes rapidly indicating improvements due to experience during use. Horses came into use for riding and were sometimes given tack decorated with enamel inlaid metal mounts. The impression is of a raiding culture, not unlike that described in the much later Irish Annals, in which armed and mounted warriors stole cattle from their neighbours and the ownership of large herds, together with a following of young men, denoted high status.

But, clearly farming survived. Some new field systems were created and many of the small groups of fields persisted or were brought back into use during the Iron Age. By the end of that period Britain was known as an exporter of grain.

Further Reading

<http://www.butserancientfarm.co.uk/>

Rippon, S., Smart, C. & Pears, B. 2015. *Fields of Britannia, Continuity and Change in the Late Roman and Early Medieval Landscape*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Yates, D.T. 2007. *Land, Power and Prestige – Bronze Age field systems in southern England*. Oxford: Oxbow Books



Dartmoor Reaves – a Late Bronze Age rectilinear field system.



Pook's Dyke – a cross-ridge dyke near Newhaven, East Sussex.



Aerial photograph of lynchets on Tenantry Ground, and Lullington Heath, East Sussex (With kind permission of the Sussex Archaeological Society).

This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Judie English