Ridge and furrow in Highbury Park - Mike Hodder

Ridge and furrow, a “corrugated” ground surface, is the remnant of former cultivation in which the ground was built up into ridges. In some cases the ridges corresponded to strips in a medieval open field system, but not all medieval agriculture was in open fields, and ridge cultivation also took place before the medieval period and in recent centuries and. Ridge and furrow is very difficult to date. In general terms, medieval ridge and furrow, particularly when it was part of an open field, consists of high, wide ridges which have a “reversed-S” curve, and later ridges tend to be straight and narrow, but this is very much a rule-of-thumb. Relative dates are provided by other features which cross or are crossed by ridge and furrow, such as at Shannon Road in Kings Norton where the ridge and furrow is overlain by spoil from a canal tunnel, or documentary evidence for past land use.

Ridge and furrow is probably the most common archaeological earthwork in the country but in urban areas like Birmingham it only survives in parks and other open areas and well-preserved and extensive ridge and furrow is relatively rare. In Highbury Park the ridge and furrow is part of the long history of the landscape, along with prehistoric burnt mounds and of course the gardens of Highbury Hall and the Hemburys.

The survey undertaken by the Friends in March 2009 provides more details about the extent and form of the ridge and furrow, and this information has now been included in the Sites and Monuments Record, Birmingham City Council’s archaeological database. Measurement of the width of the ridges revealed the variations in ridge width within each area of ridge and furrow and between different areas. Much of the ridge and furrow is fairly narrow, around 2.5 to 3.5 metres wide, and is likely to be 18th or 19th century in date. Wider ridges occur north of the stream (about 5.2 metres) and in the south part of the park (5.3 metres and 4.7 metres) and these could be earlier in date, possibly medieval but probably not part of open field systems. The only relative dating for Highbury’s ridge and furrow is in the former garden of The Hemburys, where the ridge and furrow is cut though by a sunken garden feature or pond, therefore predates the garden layout.