

Towards a Terminology for Strip Lynchets

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THE writings on strip lynchets are many and approach the subject from a variety of standpoints. They reveal in some instances the confusion that exists in the use of the word lynchet, but more important they have led to the creation of many descriptive terms which might be used to form a lynchet terminology. In recent years the literature has paid greater attention to the form and structure of strip lynchets and this has established a clearer understanding of the different constructional aspects of these agricultural features. This paper is an attempt to show how a terminology has slowly come into existence.

The present word 'lynchet' is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word 'hlinc'. There are many instances of 'hlinc' in the old chronicles, and especially in the boundary charters where it was used as a distinguishing point on the boundaries. This is seen in Kemble's *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici* where the delimitation charters are to be found. The boundaries contained therein follow features of the landscape such as streams, highways, foot-paths, and notable stones, and 'hlinc' is used many times to identify a particular point on the boundary. Sometimes it is qualified: 'maerhlinc' and 'stan maeres hlinc', 'maer' being a boundary; 'hafoc hlinc'—Hawk's ridge; 'rahlinc'—roe's ridge; 'brom hlinc'—broom ridge. There is, however, only one instance of a cultivated 'hlinc' in a Worcestershire charter, A.D. 972: "of afene on caldan pyllan . . . on pyrd hlinc"—"from the Avon to the cold spring . . . to the ploughed ridge." There also occurs in several charters the reference to 'thaes Hlinca Heafdun' (viz. Kemble 1035, 1110)—'the headlands of the ridge', which has been taken by some writers as evidence of 'hlinc' having an agricultural connotation at an early period. It is more likely, however, that 'hlinc' here still meant ridge, and that it so happened that in this instance the ridge had a ploughed headland on it.

The first written use of the word lynchet appeared in 1669 in a book called *Systema Agriculturae*. In this book the definition of the word lynchet is given as "A certain line of Green-sword or Bounds, dividing Arable land in Common Fields."¹ Thus the original meaning of the word lynchet was very different from the one it conveys now. Other authors writing between the

¹ J. Worlidge, *Systema Agriculturae*, 1669, p. 273.

year of publication of Worlidge's book and 1797 also used the word lynchet or a local variation of the word, and again there is no hint of the present-day meaning. Three definitions given are: "A bank, Wall or Causey between Land and Land, or Parish and Parish, to distinguish the bounds;"¹ "A green balk to divide lands;"² "the mere green sward dividing two pieces of arable in a common field, called in Hants, a lay-bank."³ It is worth noting that they make no mention of any differentiation between the land on the level and that on the hillside.

Two authors writing in the early 1790's on the subject of lynchets referred to them as terraces, and it can be concluded from this that either they had never heard of the word lynchet or that it was a dialect form which they did not consider worth using.⁴

Writing in 1797, however, Maton drew attention to the terraces to be found on declivities in the chalkland, and added that he was alluding "to the linches, or lynchets, as they are called."⁵ This was the first occurrence of the word in the sense of 'terrace', and it predated a similar usage by nearly 70 years.

In 1799, Marshall writing about the 'Chalk Hills' says, "The artificial surface which meets the eye, in different parts of these hills, forcibly arrests the attention. It occurs on the steeper slopes, which are formed into stages, or platforms, with grassy steeps, provincially 'LYNCHETS', between them."⁶ Here the word was still being used in the sense favoured by Worlidge over a hundred years earlier, though it is possible to see the beginning of the intrusion of a different meaning. In a glossary of Sussex provincialisms written in 1836 a very much restricted meaning was given to lynchet: "a green or wooded bank, always on the side of a hill between two pieces of cultivated land."⁷ In short, although the meaning given by Maton had not yet been used again, this was a definite move away from the earlier definition to one approaching the present use of the term. In a still later glossary both meanings were given: "a ledge of ploughed ground on the side of a hill; or the strip of green ground between two ploughed ledges."⁸

¹ T. Blount, *Glossographia*, 1690. ² J. Ray, *A Collection of English Words*, 1674.

³ T. Davis, *A General View of the Agriculture of Wiltshire*, 1794.

⁴ T. Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland*, 1790, III, p. 283; and an anonymous author in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, LXVI, 1796, p. 821.

⁵ W. G. Maton, *Observations Chiefly Relative to the Natural History, Picturesque Scenery, and Antiquities of the Western Counties of England*, 1797, II, p. 186.

⁶ W. Marshall, *Southern Counties*, 1799, II, p. 300.

⁷ W. D. Cooper, *A Glossary of the Provincialisms in Use in the County of Sussex*, 1836.

⁸ W. Barnes, 'A Grammar and Glossary of the Dorset Dialect', *Trans. Phil. Soc.*, pt 3, 1864, p. 68.

In the period which followed this, lynchets took on the present specific meaning which signifies both the terrace flat and scarp. Scrope¹ and Hardy² in their writings referred to the whole terrace as a lynchet. Halliwell, writing on the use of words in an earlier period, was alone in giving the seemingly original meaning only: "Any bank or boundary for the division of land."³ It is true that Seebohm restricted the term to the dividing risers, but he said also that the word 'lynch' was applied to the terraced strips themselves.⁴

Thus during a period of about 250 years an alteration occurred in the meaning of a word which had had agricultural connections since early times. But for the fact that strip lynchets continue to exist, the word would most probably have died out except for its occurrence in many place names and in the term 'links', for it is the other Anglo-Saxon word for ridge, namely, 'clif', that has survived in the modern names of such natural features as escarpments and steep hills, e.g. Chisman's Cleeve on the southern escarpment of the Vale of Pewsey, and Cleeve Hill near Cheltenham.

It was hoped to locate the first use of the term 'strip lynchet' and thus see if that usage proved a connection between the feature it denoted and the open fields. Although easily found it did not provide any provable connection with this agricultural system. 'Strip lynchet' grew out of several tentative combinations of lynchet and strip used in a qualifying sense, i.e. in order to differentiate it from the 'Celtic' lynchet which appeared in the literature of the second decade of the twentieth century. The first use of the words together was made by Crawford in 1923 when he spoke of 'strip-lynchets'.⁵ Clearly this was merely an attempt to describe the appearance of the lynchets about which he was writing, but the description stuck and the two words became considered as one term. Clay⁶ writing in 1927 and Raistrick and Chapman⁷ in 1929 used strip lynchet as a term with the words no longer inside inverted commas. From that time a new word entered the parlance of geographers, archaeologists, economic historians, and agricultural writers. The term itself describes this feature of the landscape admirably, but it is perhaps unfortunate in as much as it immediately implies a connection with

¹ G. P. Scrope, 'On the Origin of the Terraces, Balks, or Lynchets of the Chalk Downs', *Wilts. Archaeol. Mag.*, XII, 1866, p. 186.

² T. Hardy, *Wessex Tales*, 1888, p. 56; *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 1891, p. 365; *Wessex Poems*, 1898, p. 135.

³ J. O. Halliwell, *Archaic and Provincial Words*, 1874.

⁴ F. Seebohm, *The English Village Community*, 1890, p. 5.

⁵ O. G. S. Crawford, 'Air Survey and Archaeology', *Geog. Jnl.*, LXI, 1923, p. 357.

⁶ R. C. C. Clay, 'Some Prehistoric Ways', *Antiquity*, I, 1927, p. 59.

⁷ A. Raistrick and S. E. Chapman, 'The Lynchet Groups of Upper Wharfedale, Yorkshire', *Antiquity*, III, 1929, p. 173.

the open fields. It is perhaps due to this and earlier ideas of the origin of the open fields¹ that these terraces have been regarded all too readily by many people as being incontrovertibly Anglo-Saxon.

Strip lynchets has now become firmly entrenched in the English language as a complete term but, as shown earlier, lynchets in its various forms, had several meanings in the past, and even today it does not have a single interpretation. Lynchets, when used by itself in present-day English, denotes a bank which has arisen due to agricultural practices, but it also has a specialized meaning which, as the Orwins say, has "been complicated by the application of the name lynchets to something entirely different from the clearly defined terraces of the hillsides, namely, to the little banks enclosing the small crofts or cultivation plots which archaeologists associate with a farming system earlier than that of the Open Fields."² Without use of the qualifying terms strip and Celtic, confusion as to the actual feature being discussed can easily arise.³

Strip lynchets is not, of course, a term used by the inhabitants of the areas in which the terraces are found. Local people have no need to differentiate between types of lynchets because the strip variety is the only one which really stands out in the local landscape; the 'Celtic' lynchets is a much more subdued feature and is usually located out of the sight of most settlements. The word lynchets, by itself, is used commonly in Wiltshire and Dorset but it does not have an exclusive use even in Wessex. Lynch or lince is used in Dorset and Hampshire, while lanchard is still to be found in Somerset. The term wall or whale is used on the Somerset-Dorset border in the neighbourhood of the Cadburys and Compton Pauncefoot. Lynchets and the forms akin to it are common in the south of England but in the north the words *daisse* and *rein*⁴ are also used.

Since strip lynchets was introduced into the literature, several useful terms have been coined which are now vital in describing their component parts. As early as 1927 Curwen⁵ had introduced the terms 'negative lynchets' and 'positive lynchets': the former is a zone at the back of a strip from which

¹ J. Thirsk, 'The Common Fields', *Past and Present*, no. 29, 1964.

² C. S. and C. S. Orwin, *The Open Fields*, 1938, p. 319. Strictly speaking the lynchets associated with the Bronze Age farming system would be better described by some other term but the name 'Celtic Fields' of which the lynchets are a vital part has become entrenched. Thus Celtic continues to be used although it has nothing to do with the modern field patterns of areas like Wales, Ireland, etc.

³ For such a confused use, see D. P. Dobson, *Somerset*, 1939, p. 211 ff.

⁴ It is interesting to note that the word used in the Dresden area of Germany to describe a strip lynchets is 'Raine'.

⁵ E. C. Curwen, 'Prehistoric Agriculture in Britain', *Antiquity*, 1, 1927, p. 264.

material has been moved in order to build the bank of the terrace or positive lynchet.

Clay, writing in 1927, added two new terms to the already existing terminology. He used an obvious collective term for a system of strip lynchets when he referred in his article to a 'flight of steps'. Strip lynchets certainly have the appearance of gigantic stairs, and it now appears quite normal to speak of a 'flight of strip lynchets', that being a more expressive term than a 'series of strip lynchets'.¹ Keeping to the analogy of the stairs, Clay also used the word tread to refer to the ploughed part of the strip lynchet, "the tread of the steps corresponding to the cultivation area."² This is a useful term because 'strip lynchet' includes both the bank and the flat area so that something is needed with which to differentiate one component part from the other.

When describing the excavations at Bishopstone, Wood³ used both tread and flight as part of his nomenclature. In order to describe the part of the strip lynchet which divides one tread from another he introduced the word 'riser', and the phrase 'lip of the riser' to describe that part where the tread and the riser meet.

Thus it can be seen that a change has taken place in the course of time in the meaning of lynchet. But as a result of the suggestions made by various authors there is now in existence a valuable collection of terms which facilitate the description of strip lynchets. Such terms can now be found quite commonly in recent works on strip lynchets.⁴

¹ In France the flight is known as 'Le nid'.

² R. C. C. Clay, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

³ P. D. Wood, 'Strip lynchets at Bishopstone, near Swindon, Wilts., excavated in 1954', *Wilts. Archaeol. Mag.*, LVI, 1956, p. 12.

⁴ H. C. Bowen, *Ancient Fields*, 1961; G. Whittington, 'The Distribution of Strip Lynchets', *Trans. Inst. Brit. Geographers*, xxxi, 1962, p. 119; J. W. McNab, 'British Strip Lynchets', *Antiquity*, xxxix, 1965, p. 279.