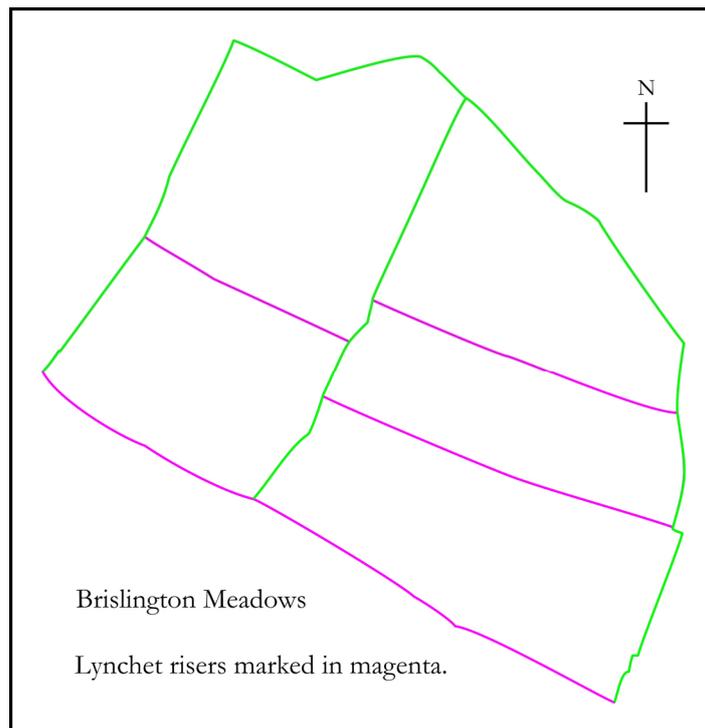


Brislington Meadows - hedges and lynchets

Ken Taylor (2022)

The hedgerows that edge the fields of the hillside that Homes England has dubbed Brislington Meadows are fabulous habitats for wildlife because they've been left to sprawl, but that welcome overgrowth conceals an important clue to their history. There's also a tell-tale indicator literally under our feet at the entrance to the fields where the public footpath from School Road emerges into the field - the short steep climb that's so memorably tricky to negotiate when muddy.

The five fields that until recently were used as pasture for cattle, all share an usual feature hidden in their lower hedge - these are the hedges that run along the contours (as opposed to those that run straight up and down the hillside. The traditional footpaths established by local people over many decades cut through these hedges and reveal their unusual cross section - a change in ground level. On the uphill side of the hedge the ground is at least half a metre higher (sometimes twice that, or even more). It would take an enormous amount of time and effort to build that sort of field boundary, but that's not how these structures came into being.



Sketch map of the open fields in Brislington Meadows.

This sort of linear feature is created by ploughing on a hillside. The plough lifts the soil and, as it drops back down to the ground, gravity makes the earth fall slightly downhill (erosion by rain also plays a part in this downward migration). Little by little, year after year, these inexorable processes take soil away from the top of the field, spread it across the slope, and gradually allow it to accumulate at the bottom of the field.

The 1840s tithe survey informs us the higher fields were indeed ploughed arable land, while the lower fields were pasture - this difference is still reflected in the different plant species that are found in them. The physical evidence of the field boundaries themselves though, tell us the lower fields were also ploughed for many years.

These unusual field terraces - known to archaeologists as lynchets - are difficult to date (excavation would help). They could be 20th century, but similar features in the landscape have been created by ploughing since before this country was invaded by the Roman Empire, so the importance and significance of these local structures remains an open question.



Looking southeast from the kissing gate - the original right of way continues straight ahead, the modern route turns up the riser to the left.

So, next time you face the slippery slope at the entrance to the fields, at least you'll understand why it's there, and you'll also know why this steep part of the lynchet is called a riser - it's because on a really steep hillside the lynchets can be narrow and look like a giant flight of stairs. Incidentally, the riser here doesn't coincide with the actual field boundary - the hedge of ancient hazels, hawthorns and oak trees is a short distance downhill - at the level of the public footpath from School Road. The gap between the riser and the boundary appears to be the route of the original ancient footpath that ran along the full length of this old hedgerow.