

## **PLOUGHLANDS IN THE ACT**

This presentation derives from a study I undertook for the Heritage Unit in 2002.

Ploughlands are areas of land cultivated with ploughs for the planting of crops. They are most commonly associated with cereal crop production and orchards. The best known (and probably the only) study of ploughlands in Australia to date was that undertaken by the geographer Twidale in South Australia in the early 1970s.

A large percentage of the ploughlands of the ACT have been destroyed due to the development of Canberra, or have been reworked by later agricultural or grazing activity. Over 90 former (pre 1915) cultivated areas (in 30 groups) have been identified as having been destroyed by urban development or agricultural activity, and another 28 (in 19 groups) pre-1915 cultivated areas, while still agricultural or pastoral land, have been found not to contain surviving ploughland features. In all only 16 examples of ploughlands have been found retaining substantial evidence of ridge and furrow plough features.

Of the surviving ploughlands, most have poor integrity, in that their ridge and furrows have been eroded almost flat over time, or they had been physically disturbed (but not destroyed) by development or subsequent mechanical ploughing or harrowing. The most significant ploughlands are those associated with other components of rural cultural landscapes, to which they contribute to create a richer whole.

The best are:

- Old Orroral ploughland and homestead site
- Glenburn group
- Booroomba (Blythburn group)
- Well Station #2 ploughland
- Orroral Homestead ploughland
- Mulligans Flat #1 ploughland

Ploughlands are not the sort of places that most people think of as 'heritage'. The study of ploughlands initially appears esoteric in the extreme, but once their story and their rarity is

explained most people are fascinated. Ploughlands are usually very subtle landscape features that go unnoticed by most observers, and it is unlikely, even with raised awareness, that the conservation of extensive areas of ploughlands, at the cost of other landuses, would be viewed by the community as essential. However, the retention and presentation of a representative sample does seem to be justified, in the interests of conserving evidence of significant former landuses of the ACT and as elements of specific historical stories of early European land settlement. The threshold for assessment of significance needs therefore to be set reasonably high, giving emphasis to exemplary characteristics and strong historical associations.

The old ploughlands were created primarily through the use of single-share mouldboard ploughs. This ploughing technique results in broad parallel ridges (c. 2-10 m wide) separated by deep furrows, and is a direct descendent of the British traditional ridge and furrow ploughing which extends back many centuries into medieval and Saxon Britain, surviving through the nineteenth century until steam and internal combustion tractor ploughing took over. These simple ploughing techniques were imported into Australia as part of the farming practices brought by the farmer and ploughmen migrants. They were progressively superseded from the 1870s by the use of multiple-share ploughs and disc ploughs, and by the advent of steam ploughing (using traction engines and winches) from the 1870s and internal combustion tractors from the first decade of the twentieth century, all of which resulted in a major change in the patterning of ploughlands.

The characteristic profile of simple ridge and furrow ploughlands in Australia is a broad, roughly level-topped, ridge, 2 to 6 or more metres wide, separated by 'V'-shaped furrows cut to the full depth of the plough and two plough widths wide. The broad parallel ridges, often referred to as the '*lands*', ran the length of the field being ploughed, a narrow space being left at each end in which to turn the plough for the next run. The *lands* were created by the ploughman ploughing up and down the field in an anti-clockwise direction, making each successive furrow close to the edge of the proceeding furrow, alternately on either side of the first cuts. The ridges of soil turned by the mould board therefore overlapped each other, creating a raised platform of ploughed soil, the *land*.

The edge of each *land* was defined by another double cut, where the plough was taken both ways in the same furrow, creating a wide deep furrow. The ploughman then moved the desired distance across the field to start the next *land*.

A number of the ACT ploughlands have (or had, in the case of a number of recorded but now destroyed examples) ploughed embankments surrounding them, or marking one or more sides of the ploughed area (as at Lanyon). These banks often had fencelines running along them. In at least one case, natural breaks in slope served the same purpose of demarking the ploughland and being the location for fencing (as at the old Orroral Homestead site). This feature is not referred to in the South Australian examples.

The long axis of *lands* observed in South Australia run across or at an oblique angle to the contours (ie down slope) except in a couple of cases. Most are curved to retain relationship to contours. A ploughman operating a team with a single share plough found it was much easier to maintain a down-slope angle than to try to plough across a slope along the contours. This is because the weight of the plough and the natural tendency of both ploughman and team to trend downslope, together with the problem of the weight of soil on the mouldboard when throwing the soil uphill on a steep slope, combined to make contour ploughing very difficult before the advent of tractors. On flat land the problem of controlling the plough did not apply, and in several flat-land sites there are traces of successive lands overlapping at right angles.

The decision in 1908 to make Canberra the national capital led to major changes in the land use of what was to become the ACT. Land acquisitions commenced in the central Canberra area, with Acton being acquired in 1911, and Duntroon and Yarralumla (which included land in Belconnen) in 1913. Properties in the Ginninderra and Gungahlin districts were acquired between 1913 and 1917. While leases were offered for the properties, many chose to leave the district rather than stay on as lessees, and the depopulation of the closely settled district of Ginninderra/ Gungahlin commenced.<sup>1</sup> Rural landuses survive in a shrinking number of properties around the Canberra urban edges.

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<sup>1</sup> Gillespie 1991: 175.

The larger properties were subdivided into smaller lease areas, and on these and the smaller intact properties many lessees continued to grow oats and wheat, though the overall area under crop fell, for example at Weetangera dropping from 1,500 acres in 1914 to 300 acres by 1918. The mountain runs remained in pastoral production, though crop production probably dropped off. 'Orroral' was taken up by the Commonwealth in 1964 for use for the space tracking station, 'Tidbinbilla' was resumed in the 1980s and other runs were absorbed into the Namadgi National Park at about the same time. Other properties remain in production today.

Ploughlands are interesting relics of a pre-mechanical pastoral past. The ACT may have a good surviving collection because of the peculiar history of land resumption by the Commonwealth which discouraged cropping at the start of the tractor era, and may be uniquely placed to conserve some of these examples in a near-urban area.