

# Keeping to ancient farming rules

By **BILLY PHILLIPS**

**Striding in West Field, Laxton, you can look out towards Egmanton and eye the hustle and bustle of traffic on the A1.**



The view, on a still day, makes the cars look like children's toys as the mighty power stations of Cottam and West Burton, which loom out on the Tuxford horizon, keep the wheels of industry turning.

On a clear day, it is possible to pick out the majesty of Lincoln Cathedral.

Mr Robert Haigh, whose family have farmed at Laxton since 1960, said: "You can never get lost in Laxton because the church is at one of the highest points in Nottinghamshire, and it has often been used as a landmark by the RAF."

Reflecting on his years as a Laxton farmer, Mr Haigh said: "It is a different world up here. You can be here all day and not see another soul."

This particular day though was different as Laxton's farmers met to observe an ancient tradition, where the talk of pegging in ceremonies and court leets harked back to days of old.

Laxton, ten miles from Newark, is England's only remaining example of the open-field farming system, where tenant farmers for the Crown Estate run the traditional three-field system, farming wheat, barley and rapeseed.

The land comprises about 1,830 acres and each farmer tends on average of between 120 and 140 acres.

Mill Field is recorded in 1189 and the layout of the fields has changed little since about the 12th Century.



It is the only place where the land is still worked according to the customs and rules laid down over many centuries and overseen by a manor court or court leet.

Here, 12 men good and true, who have

to farm in Laxton to qualify, are elected to serve as jurors at Laxton's court leet.

The farmers set off on an annual tour of inspection of the village's wheatfields on the nominated Jury Day.

It was this event that had caused the mild flurry of activity in West Field where the way was led by Mr Haigh in his role as bailiff.

The open fields are without hedges between each strip of land.

So the inspection is held to make sure the farmers are ploughing where they should be and have not exceeded their territory by encroaching on the land of a neighbour.



The farmers are not allowed to plough on the roadways between the fields and the roadways have to be kept clear and to a width of five yards.

Jurors hammer wooden stakes into the ground to act as a guide and to mark troublespots. This is known as pegging in.

Jurors walk the fields for about two hours during which time dykes are inspected to make sure they are clear.

The foreman of the jury, Mr Ernest Noble, who has farmed at Laxton since 1960, summed up Jury Day: "We simply make sure everything is done as it should be done."

His confident pretour prediction the rain would hold off also proved correct.

Jurors decide on fines against farmers for any infringements and fine notices are issued by the bailiff.

Rulings are delivered at the court leet convened at the Dovecote Inn, Laxton, seven days later.

Farmers have a chance to defend themselves against the fines by way of appeal and anyone involved can have a say.

Mr Haigh was pleased with the inspection. He said: "We did not find too many problems, only a few minor infringements.

"Even so court day can still get quite lively and it is also the time when the jury for the following year gets sworn in."

Three fines were handed out. Two were set at £2 each for Mr Alec Raynor and Mr Keith Morton for ploughing too far and were accepted.

But Mr Nick Gent complained about his £5 fine for leaving manure on Radbeck syke and not shovelling back from the roadway.

He appealed to the leet that he felt the fine was harsh for what he said

amounted to a couple forks of muck but the court upheld the fine as there had been a previous warning.

Money collected goes towards conservation work in the village.

Bailiff Mr Haigh said they were meant only as token fines as a couple of pounds was the equivalent of the price of pint of beer.

There was a somewhat solemn air to the court leet, presided over by solicitor Mr Tim Kelway of Tallents Godfrey, Southwell, in his role as steward.

The mood at the court did not stifle debate about the events of Jury Day that all help to ensure a timeless tradition rolls on.

**PICTURE ONE: The court leet convenes at The Dovecote Inn. Facing the camera are, left, solicitor Mr Tim Kelway and the, bailiff, Mr Robert Haigh. 84417**

**PICTURE TWO: The foreman of the jury, Mr Ernest Noble, looks on as farmers return after inspecting the fields. 83780Farmers knock in stakes to mark field boundaries. 83771**

**PICTURE THREE: Mr Bill Haigh of Manor Farm and, right, Mr Colin Cree of Step Farm. 83775**

**PICTURE FOUR: Laxton farmer Mr Robert Haigh knocks in a stake, watched by, left, Mr Ken Shepherd of School Farm and the landlords' agent, Mr John Henniker. 83761**