

# National Character Area 94 **Leicestershire Vales**

---

## **Summary**

The Leicestershire Vales extend between the towns of Hinkley, Leicester and Market Harborough, and comprises a series of low-lying clay vales and river valleys. Farmsteads mostly developed within settlements in the medieval period after which the present pattern of isolated farmsteads developed.

### **Landscape and Settlement**

- Strong pattern of nucleated settlement, with (in Warwickshire) 15.4% of farmsteads in villages.
- Medium density of farmsteads in the landscape.
- Large (49.6%) and very large scale farmsteads (34.1%) predominant, the small-scale concentrated in the villages.

### **Farmstead and Building Types**

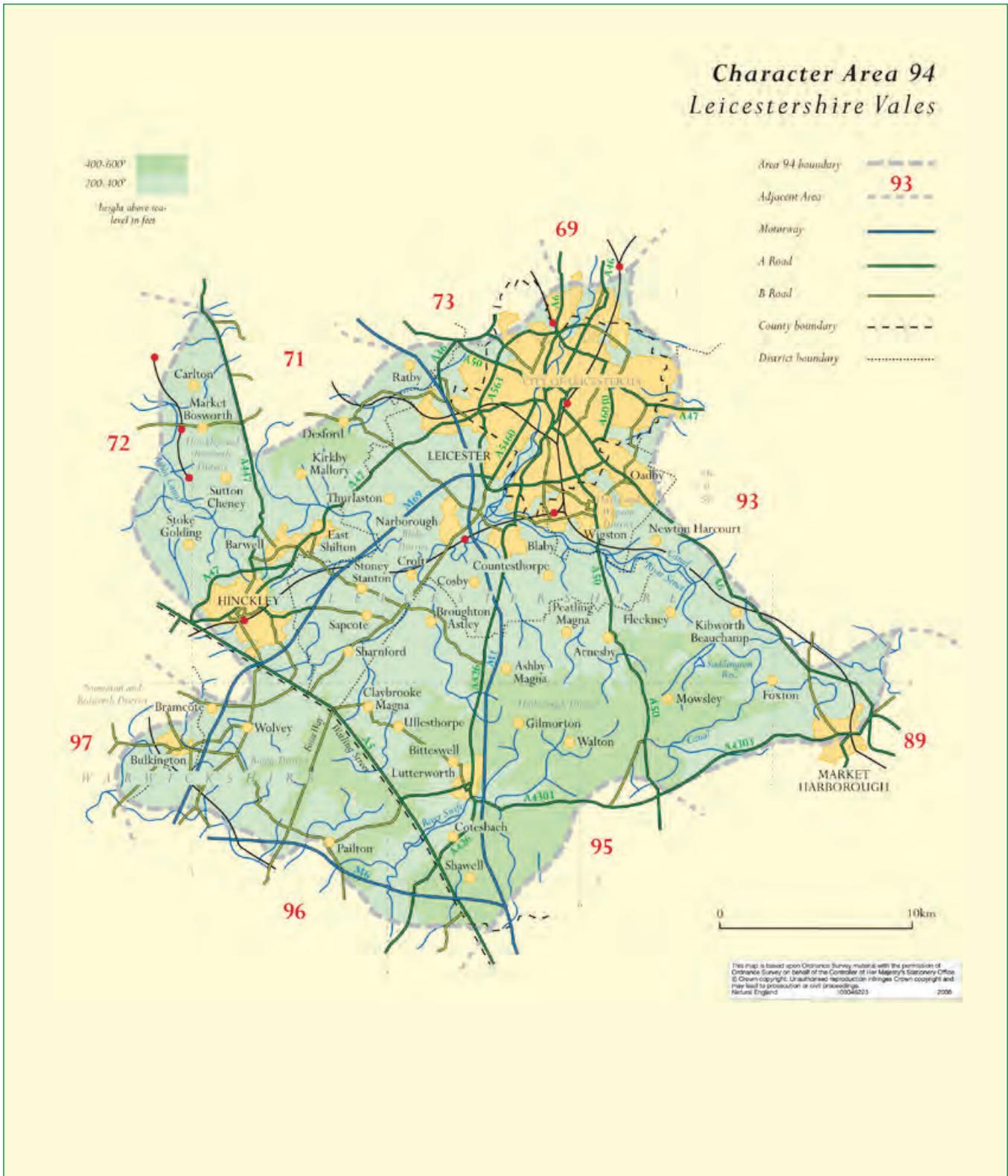
- Medium-large scale courtyard farmsteads are characteristic of this area, mostly with working buildings to three sides of the yard and with U-shaped, full regular courtyard and multi-yard plans.
- Some threshing barns, mostly surviving within villages. Most farmstead buildings comprise 19th century cattle housing. Smaller historic farmsteads, including linear farmsteads, mostly survive within the villages.

### **Rarity and Significance**

- Medium-low rates of survival, due to the historical movement of farmsteads away from villages and the continuing development of larger isolated farms.

### **Drivers for Change**

- Very few village-based farmsteads survive in agricultural use. A high proportion of isolated farmsteads remained as the foci of enlarged agricultural holdings over the 20th century, and remain in farming use.
- 0.0-0.5 % of listed working buildings have obvious signs of structural disrepair, and 30–40% with visible adaptive reuse.



## I HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

- The river valleys, and the Nene terraces in particular, contain a dense and varied array of archaeological evidence representing clearance and settlement from the Neolithic onwards. Romano-British settlement was equally if not more dense, with villas and hamlets associated with the larger centres such as Leicester. The network of Roman roads still influences the character of the area.
- Anglo-Saxon settlements colonised the post-Roman landscapes within the valleys, establishing estates and later townships which would define the landscape of the early medieval period.
- The elaboration of manors and the development of grand houses (eg Kimbolton Hall) was a particular feature of the area in the 18th and 19th centuries, reflecting agricultural, industrial and commercial wealth generated both within the county and abroad by the major landowning families of the day. Parkland remains a significant component of the valley landscapes.
- Agricultural production developed in relation to the expanding markets of the industrial towns, and was heavily biased towards livestock for meat and dairy produce, combined with corn production.
- The principal towns developed as market centres from the medieval period, and as stopovers on the Great North Road: they expanded rapidly as industrial centres in the late 18th and 19th centuries, and many farm buildings around Hinckley to the west were adapted into workshops as the local stocking-knitting industry moved from domestic to industrial production.
- 20th century development has been a major factor along the main transport routes, especially in the vicinity of the major urban settlements.



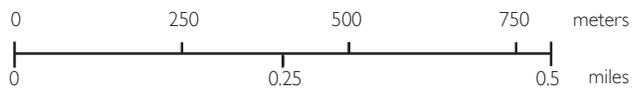
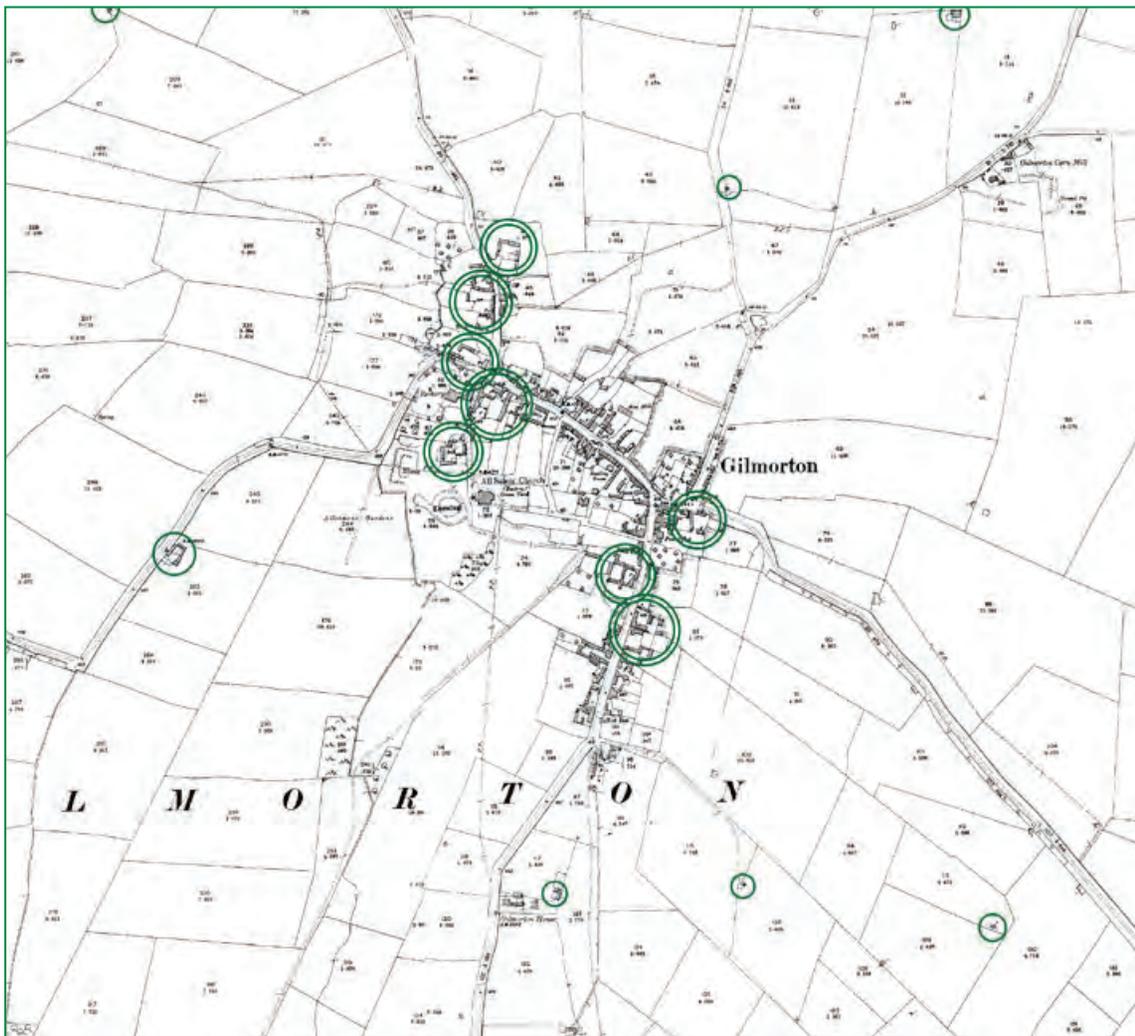
A large number of farmsteads have remained within villages, but relatively few remain in agricultural use. This is Priors Marston.

## 2 LANDSCAPE AND SETTLEMENT

- Medieval settlement was predominantly nucleated - villages and hamlets - and this has remained the main characteristic of the valleys, lowlands and hills in this area, where the separate villages can be seen clustered around tall church spires. Low densities of isolated farmsteads date from the enclosure of the open fields that extended across most of the landscape in the medieval period.
- Although significant enclosure had certainly taken place before 1750, many open fields remained and the dominant settlement type was the linear village with farms concentrated within it.
- Enclosure across this area displays a mix of regular and piecemeal patterns, and was usually linked to the conversion of ploughland to pasture. There are areas of pre-18th century irregular piecemeal enclosure, particularly in the valley sides and close to settlements, but extensive enclosure of much of this area was not formalised by parliamentary acts until the late 18th and 19th centuries. 19th and 20th century boundary reorganisation and removal has affected large areas, in combination with the development of large isolated farmsteads.
- There are some areas with well-retained ridge and furrow cultivation strips, and isolated farmsteads sited next to the earthwork remains of shrunken settlement.
- Ancient woodland is scattered and fragmentary, and often relates to the boundaries and margins of medieval and later open field townships. Large wooded areas are principally those maintained in parkland by the estates.



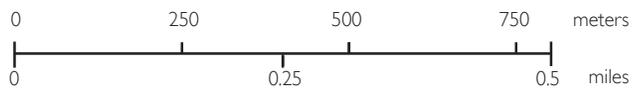
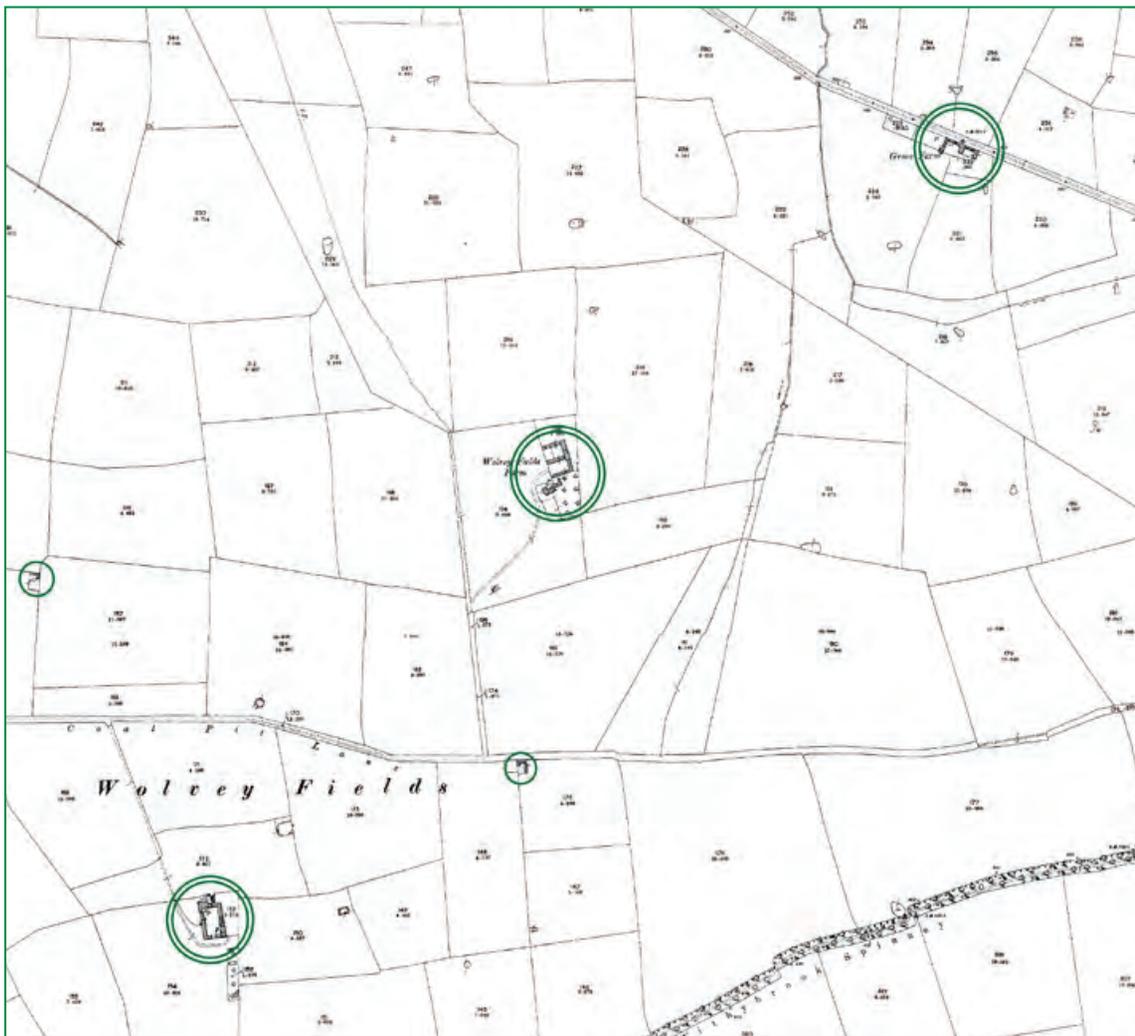
The great majority of isolated farmsteads date from the 18th and in particular the 19th centuries and are sited either along the road or down their own tracks, the latter being commonly associated with farmsteads in areas of late regular enclosure. This example dates from the later 18th century.



-  Farmstead
-  Outfarm

#### Gilmorton

The Leicestershire Vales is one of the classic landscapes of central England where nucleated settlement had developed by the 11th century. Villages were surrounded by their open fields which extended across most of the landscape. Enclosure of the open fields was underway before 1750, and many of the boundaries of the fields around Gilmorton retain the curved forms of medieval strips into which the great open fields were subdivided. Most of the farmsteads remained in the village, and developed into large courtyard groups which also required small field barns or outfarms out in the fields. The houses within these villages were subject to a first phase of rebuilding in the late 16th/early 17th centuries, followed by another major phase of enlargement and rebuilding in the mid-late 18th century and finally the rebuilding of farmstead buildings in the early-mid 19th century. These marked the final phase of enlargement of village-based farmsteads. In contrast smaller groups which developed along the roads leading to the village, and the largest farms in the post-1950 period developed on larger isolated farmsteads. Map based on OS 2nd Edition 25" map © and database right Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Ltd (All rights reserved 2005) Licence numbers 000394 and TP0024



-  Farmstead
-  Outfarm

#### Wolvey Fields

The Leicestershire Vales is an area of nucleated settlement where villages were surrounded by their open fields. Enclosure of the open fields was underway before 1750 but many were not enclosed until the late 18th/early 19th century. Wolvey Fields reflects the name of one of the former open fields to the village of Wolvey. The fields south of Coal Pit Lane have less regularity in their shape and boundaries than the fields to the north of the lane suggesting they are either of different phases of enclosure or the area to the north had been reorganised by the late 19th century, although slight curves in some of the boundaries still hint at the earlier pattern of open field strips. Two new large regular plan farmsteads have been built within the new enclosures replacing farmsteads that were once located in the village; Wolvey Fields Farm having an E-plan, the second a full courtyard plan. Map based on OS 2nd Edition 25" map © and database right Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Ltd (All rights reserved 2005) Licence numbers 000394 and TP0024

### 3 FARMSTEAD AND BUILDING TYPES

Medium-large scale courtyard farmsteads are characteristic of this area and mostly comprise:

- Loose courtyard plans with working buildings to two or more sides
- L-shaped plans with working buildings to three or four sides
- U-shaped, full regular courtyard and multi-yard plans.

Smaller historic farmsteads, including linear farmsteads, mostly survive within the villages.

Early working buildings are mostly 3-5 bay threshing barns, as well as some larger and high-status timber-

framed barns (including aisled barns), mostly of 16th to 18th century date. Many barns with integral stables.

Field barns and outfarms concentrated in landscapes of regular enclosure.

### 4 BUILDING MATERIALS

Red brick construction, with limestone and use of render, is typical of the area, both in the older village cores and in the more regimented terraces of the area's industrial towns and villages.

Timber framing is largely confined to the villages.



An example of a roadside regular courtyard farmstead now in residential use, the low profile of the buildings being typical of mid-late 19th century farmstead architecture in this area. The smallest farmsteads often developed in roadside locations in this area, sometimes adjoining areas of common land which remained into the 19th century.



Loose courtyard plans were commonly rebuilt in the early-mid 19th century. They usually had working buildings facing three or four sides of the yard and were formally planned.



Large village-based courtyard farmsteads may require covered driftways to provide access to the yard. This range of mid 19th century buildings are attached to a large symmetrically planned mid 18th century house, testament to the growing wealth of this area. It is clear that almost all earlier buildings were swept away in the mid 19th century, as farms expanded in size and arable farming placed new demands on farmstead infrastructure. Earlier timber-framed cores are most likely to survive in village-based farmsteads.



Small-scale field barns for sheltering cattle and sheep were a common feature of the area, but are not capable of reuse. Few remain.

This is one of the **Farmsteads Character Statements** for the National Character Areas. Further illustrated guidance on historic character and significance, under the same headings, is provided in the **West Midlands Farmsteads Character Statement**. They result from *The West Midlands Farmsteads and Landscapes Project*, which has mapped the historic character and use of farmsteads across the region, and developed planning tools to inform future change. A *Summary Report* summarises the results of the whole project for the whole region and sets out policy and land use implications, and recommendations and next steps for further work.

The *Rarity and Significance* and *Drivers for Change* headings, and other elements of the main text, are based upon the mapping and interpretation of historic character. These records are stored in the relevant local authority *Historic Environment Record* and there is a *Historic Farmstead Characterisation Report* for each county and the Central Conurbation. These have been used as a baseline to determine the patterns of current use, as summarised for each area in the *Drivers for Change* section. There is a *Farmstead Use Report* for the region.

Also under the *Drivers for Change* heading are percentages of listed working farm buildings with visible structural failure and evidence of adaptive reuse. These are based on comparison of 1980s with 1999-2006 photographs, from the *Photo Image Survey* (University of Gloucestershire for English Heritage, 2009). In the West Midlands 27% of listed working farm buildings have evidence for residential reuse (national level 30%), 3% other (national 4%) and 70% (national 66%) have no other evidence for other use. 18.9% have evidence for structural failure (national 8.9%).

**The West Midlands Farmsteads and Landscapes Project** is a collaborative project led by English Heritage with the county and metropolitan authorities. This document has been written by Jeremy Lake of English Heritage's Characterisation Team with assistance from Bob Edwards of Forum Heritage Services. All photographs are by English Heritage and Forum Heritage Services unless otherwise acknowledged.



---

If you would like this document in a different format, please contact the English Heritage Customer Services Department:

Telephone 0870 333 1181

Text phone 01793 414878

Email: [customers@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:customers@english-heritage.org.uk)