



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

North West Norfolk

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 76



Introduction

The Farmstead and Landscape Statements will help you to identify the historic character of traditional farmsteads and their buildings in all parts of England, and how they relate to their surrounding landscapes. They are now available for all of England's National Character Areas (NCAs), and should be read in conjunction with the NCA profiles which have been produced by Natural England using a wide range of environmental information (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-character-area-profiles-data-for-local-decision-making/national-character-area-profiles>). Each Farmstead and Landscape Statement is supported by Historic England's advice on farm buildings (<https://historicengland.org.uk/farmbuildings>), which provides links to the *National Farmsteads Character Statement*, national guidance on **Farm Building Types** and a fully-sourced summary in the *Historic Farmsteads: Preliminary Character Statements*. It also forms part of additional research on historic landscapes, including the mapping of farmsteads in some parts of England (see <https://historicengland.org.uk/characterisation>).



This shows Leicester Square Farm, South Creake, which although converted to domestic use, clearly shows its origins as one of the planned estate farms on the Holkham estate. It was built in about 1800, to the designs of the architect Samuel Wyatt. It is a planned full courtyard layout, with the house facing into its own garden to the south. A barn with pedimented porches is flanked by stables and cattle sheds with pavilions at the corners. Photo © Historic England

Front cover: A regular courtyard-plan farmstead set within a farmed landscape reorganised with straight-sided fields and plantations for the Holkham estate from the late 18th century; the sinuous routeway and some way-edged field boundaries are earlier. To the left is a large, late 18th-century house, with possible earlier origins, that faces into its own garden, as on large tenant farms of this period. The courtyard of farm buildings, built in brick, has a large pair of barns, stables, open-fronted shelter sheds and – a feature found on the largest estate farms – a manager's house, dated 1816, to the right-hand side of the courtyard. Photo © Historic England 29329/001

Character Area 76 North West Norfolk



This map shows the North West Norfolk with the numbers of the neighbouring National Character Areas around it.

Summary

See the National Farmsteads Character Statement for a short introduction to the headings below, including maps and tables.

North West Norfolk lies immediately inland from the Character Areas of the North Norfolk Coast (77) and The Fens (46). It extends from Downham Market on the edge of the Fens, east towards Castle Acre, skirting Fakenham and sweeping further east where it is blocked by the Cromer Ridge. This is a large-scale, arable and grassland landscape over mostly rolling terrain, providing long views over remnant heath and mixed woodland belts. Woodland makes up 8% of the area, whilst 97% of the Character Area is open countryside. Just 1% of the landscape is urban, primarily the town of Hunstanton and the eastern edge of King's Lynn. Almost 20% of the landscape falls within the Norfolk Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Historic Character

- Earlier dispersed settlement has been largely superseded by a nucleated pattern especially in areas subject to post-1750 enclosure.
- There was a high rate of settlement desertion in the 14th and 15th centuries.
- There is a contrast between the isolated farms on the greensand, the later landscapes on the chalk and earlier farms in valley locations.
- The open fields on the 'upland' were enclosed by the 18th century.
- The area is dominated by large estates, for example Holkham, Raynham, Houghton, Sandringham.
- There was much farmstead rebuilding from c 1750, associated with the large estates and the transformation of their landscapes and settlements (including estate villages). This included the construction of large barns, cart shed and granary ranges, often as model farms with regular courtyard plans.

Significance

- Substantially intact pre-1750 farmsteads and buildings in the earlier enclosed (valley) areas are rare.
- Substantially intact post-1750 farmsteads and buildings will also be significant, particularly those built or rebuilt as an integral part of parkland and designed landscapes.
- Any farmsteads surviving in relationship to remaining heathland on the Greensand ridge are rare.

Present and future issues

- In this National Character Area, the Photo Image Project (2006) recorded a low proportion of listed working farm buildings converted to non-agricultural use (11.1%, the national average being 32%).
- Retention of the small-scale pastoral character of the river valleys in the face of unprofitable livestock and grassland farming.

Historic development

- The light and comparatively fertile chalk soils have long supported settlement, with extensive evidence for Romano-British and earlier settlement and cultivation patterns. Anglo-Saxon settlement is also well attested from archaeological evidence such as the major cemetery at Walsingham.
- In the medieval period, larger and more orderly settlements were planned around military and commercial cores, as at Castle Rising, or ecclesiastical centres such as the Cluniac priory at Castle Acre or the pilgrimage centre at Walsingham.
- A process of desertion characterises much of the later medieval history in this area, the consequence of the extension of sheepwalks and rabbit warrens which were both subject to intense manorial control.
- The improved farming techniques of the late 17th century – including manuring by folding sheep and the introduction of the Norfolk four-course rotation – led to a massive improvement in the management of ‘waste’ and marginal land, which was enclosed for the first time in the mid-18th century. Great capital was needed to introduce this farming revolution and the principal landowners – based at Holkham, Raynham, Houghton and Sandringham – developed vast estates focused on these upland areas.
- Across the drained alluvial soils of the valleys, village farmsteads remained viable, with communal open-field systems which continued unenclosed into the 18th century.

Landscape and settlement

Settlement in the medieval period was scattered, with some isolated farmsteads, hamlets and widely spaced villages, the latter often irregular in plan and clustered around commons and greens which proliferated along the rising ground to the east. Now, North West Norfolk displays a strongly nucleated pattern of settlement with a very low density of dispersed settlement, mostly relating to post-1750 enclosure.

- There is a strong contrast between:
 - the ‘upland’ areas of former open heath on the Greensand, where farmsteads typically occupy the sites of settlements subject to desertion and shrinkage after the 14th century
 - the chalk downland converted in the 18th and 19th centuries to a large-scale geometric enclosed landscape of thorn hedges and wide lanes, with newly-established isolated farmsteads
 - areas of earlier piecemeal enclosure with earlier farmsteads in the fertile valleys and villages.
- The area was largely cleared of tree cover by the 17th century. Subsequent planting of large woodland blocks and shelterbelts means these are now characteristic of the open, farming landscapes of the former heath and downland, and more dominant in character along the western fringe amidst the estates on the rolling chalk, unenclosed land (now mostly in use for rough shooting) and Greensand ‘uplands’. The settings of the great houses generally remain well-wooded, although parkland has seen significant conversion to arable (a loss of about 24%) since the First World War.
- The development of enormous landholdings in the 18th and 19th centuries influenced the pattern of settlement, removing some villages and rebuilding others in a variety of estate styles. The presence of estates is also made evident by extensive boundary walls in

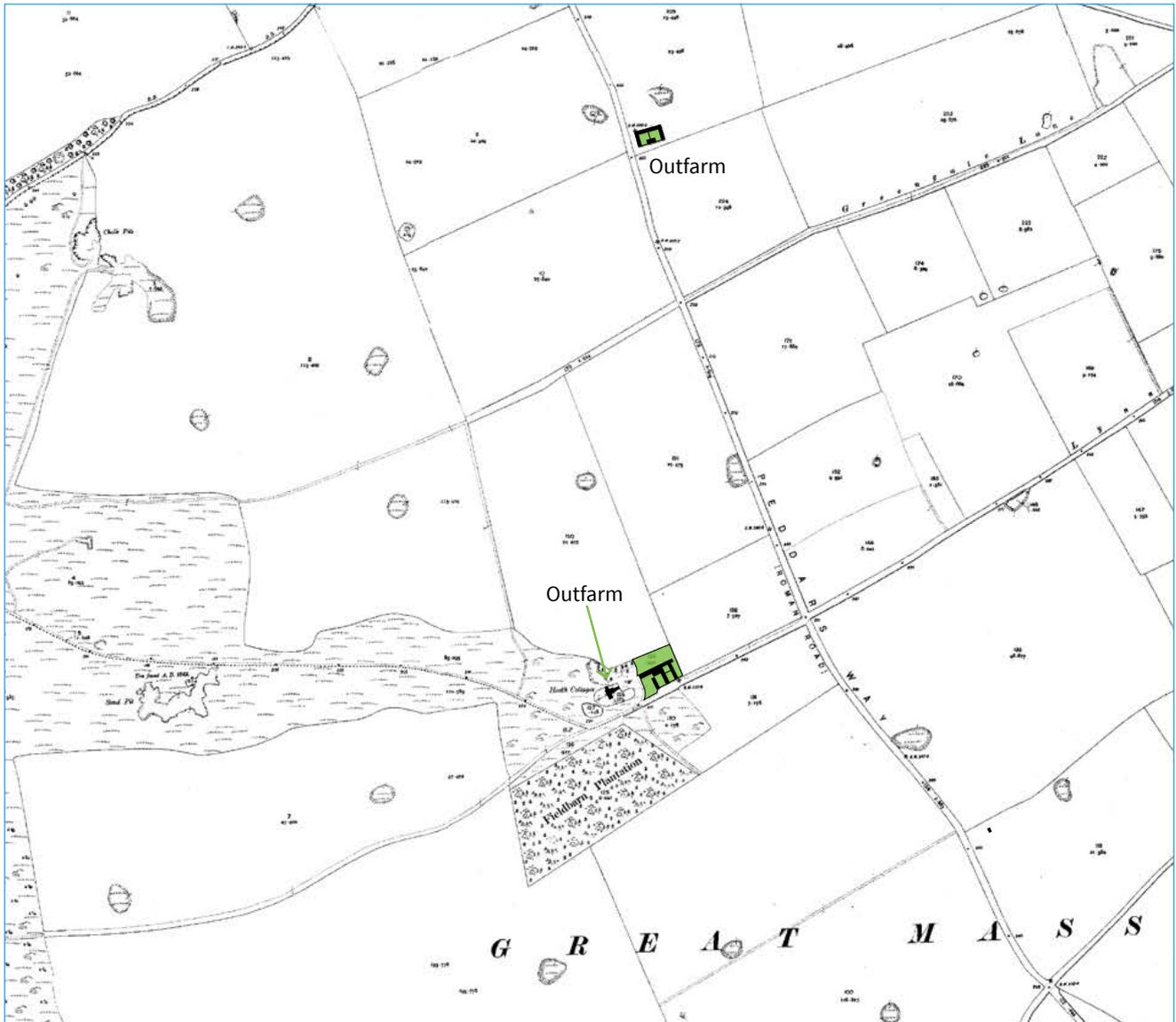
- brick and flint, lodge buildings and parkland plantations.

Farmstead and building types

- There is a medium to low density in a national context of pre-1750 farmstead buildings, concentrated in pockets of early enclosure (such as the pastoral river valleys dissecting the Greensand ridge) and within villages such as Ringstead and Sedgford. Farmhouses mostly date from an initial phase of rebuilding in the 17th and early 18th centuries.
- Farmsteads in areas of early enclosure and within villages were commonly built to loose courtyard plans with barns and cattle ranges to two or three sides of the yard.
- Farmsteads in the 'upland' areas were substantially rebuilt from the mid-18th century, and progressively transformed into U- or E-plan steadings with large barns, combined cart shed/granary ranges and south-facing cattle yards.
- Barns are typically of five bays and have later cattle accommodation added in the form of outshots. Some barns have integral stables at one end.



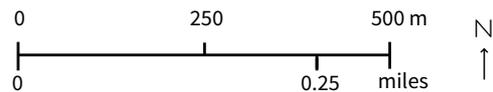
This is Longlands Farm on the Holkham estate. It is a large, regular multi-yard complex. The granaries over cart lodges in the foreground, which date from the 1790s, were built to the designs of the architect Samuel Wyatt. The estate yard was added in the 1850s, to the designs of the estate's agent G.A. Dean. Photo © Historic England 29330/016



Maps are based on 2nd edition 25" Ordnance Survey maps, which show farmsteads after the last major phase in the building of traditional farmsteads in England. © Crown Copyright [and database rights] 2020. OS 100024900



Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



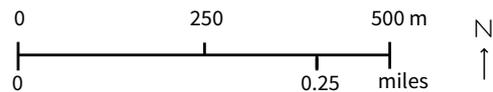
Great Massingham

The 19th-century fieldscape with its outfarms is typified here by large geometric enclosures, many of which have been further enlarged in more recent times. The majority of the pits which once peppered the landscape have been levelled. To the west is Grimston Heath, a reminder that heathland and commons were once widespread in this National Character Area. Field barn Plantation is one of many such woodland blocks planted (along with narrow shelter belts) on the downlands and heaths. Its name points to the occasional occurrence of field barns, while the lack of isolated farmsteads is typical of an area where nucleated villages (such as Great Massingham, just off the map to the east) predominate.



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 Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



Shouldham

Shouldham Hall, at the north-east edge of the map, stands on the site of a medieval priory, and the earthworks continue southwards to the now isolated church (just off the map). The village sits tightly bound along two north-south roads; the houses along Westgate Street have gardens derived from medieval crofts. Plantations and pits are a typical component of the largely geometric landscape; part of the parish boundary is more sinuous in character. To the south-west is the shrunken hamlet of Shouldham Thorpe. Mill Drove would have been the route taken by cattle farmers to the grazing marshes along the River Nar, a little way to the north of Shouldham. Shouldham also boasted a warren, a once-typical feature of this area. The farms which include multi-yard plans developed on a planned and piecemeal basis are largely within the village envelope, but occasional outfarms or field barns are evident.



This farmstead lies close to The Fens at Shouldham Thorpe, and developed in the mid-19th century as a dairy farm with cattle housing set around several regular courtyards. Also shown are more irregular groupings of barns and other working buildings relating to a smaller farmstead of the type swept away in the farm amalgamations of the later 18th and 19th centuries. Photo © Historic England 29327/022



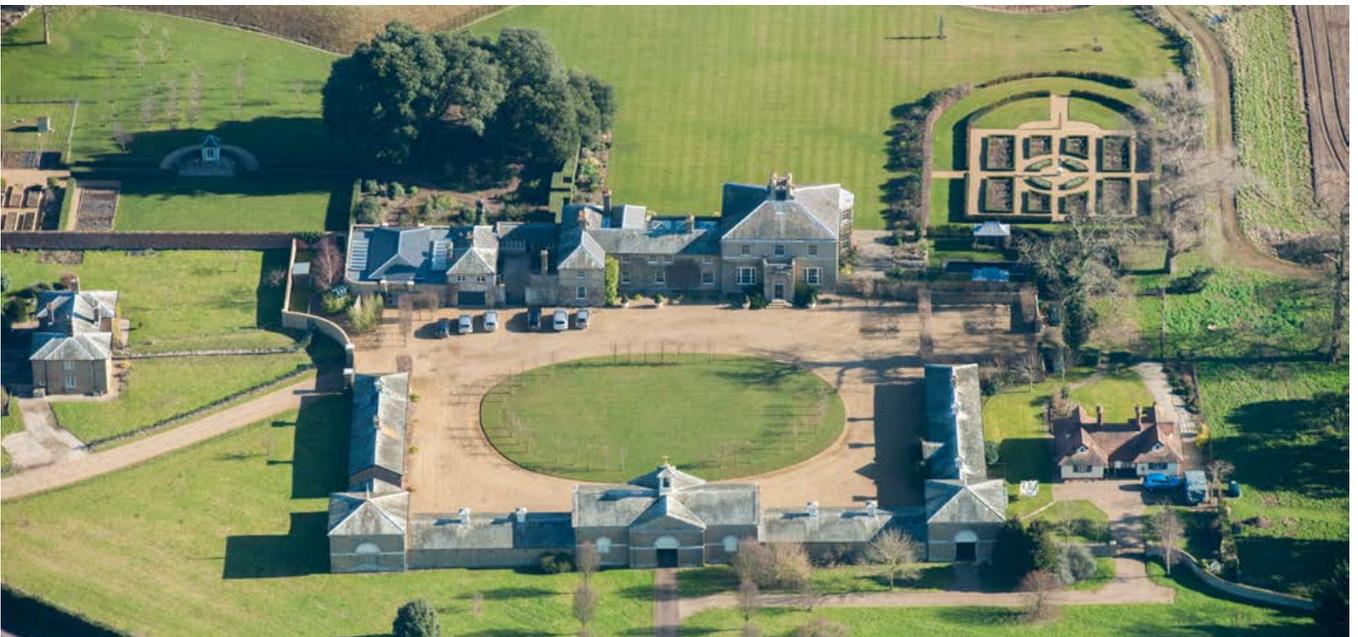
Farm buildings, mostly 19th-century, still sited on the rear of plots extending from the main street in Burnham Overy. Photo © Bob Edwards



Cattle yards with shelter sheds are a highly distinctive feature of this area, either built in a single phase (left) or added to an earlier barn (right). Photo © Bob Edwards



Smaller-scale courtyard farms remained within villages, as here, at Great Massingham. Photo © Bob Edwards



Model Farm on the Holkham estate, another example of application of neo-classical design and of the work of G A Dean, the estate's agent. Photo © Historic England 29331/022



A large, regular courtyard multi-yard farmstead near Burnham Market, most of the single-storey buildings being shelter sheds for cattle facing straw yards placed close to the large threshing barn. Photo © Bob Edwards



View towards a similar large-scale courtyard farmstead at North Creake. Photo © Bob Edwards



An engine house for horse-powered threshing machinery attached to a barn in South Creake. Due to low agricultural wages in this area, as across much of East Anglia, powered threshing was uncommon until the late 19th century. Photo © Mike Williams/Historic England



Very rare 17th- and 18th-century group of timber-framed and clay buildings at Hethel. Photo © S Wade Martins



A fine example of an 18th-century combined cart shed and granary on newly enclosed downland near Barret Ringstead. Large-scale buildings of this type continued to be built in this area into the later 19th century, testifying to the importance of arable farming in this area. Photo © S Wade Martins



Mid-19th-century, five-bay barn with late 19th-century sliding doors and cart shed attached to left. Note, as well as the pantiled roof, the decorative use of brick quoins and dressings and of randomly laid brickwork mingled with flint. Photo © Bob Edwards



The use of brick quoins, dressing and coursing is often employed to decorative effect. Photo © Bob Edwards



A blank wall of carstone presented to the village street. Photo © Bob Edwards



This field barn was built on the Holkham estate in around 1800, to the designs of the architect Samuel Wyatt. The barn was flanked by a formal curve of shelter sheds with root stores resembling pavilions at each end. Photo © Mike Williams/Historic England



Field barn at Burnham Thorpe, now in domestic use. Photo © Bob Edwards



It is also common to find evidence – here, evident in the later use of brick – of threshing barns being extended to increase their capacity, as here in North Creake. Photo © Bob Edwards



The seemingly random use of brick as part of walling in stone and chalk is another key characteristic. Photo © Bob Edwards

Materials and detail

- Extensive rebuilding since the 17th century has removed much of the evidence for earlier timber frame construction from north and west Norfolk, leading to a general dominance of brick mixed with flint from the chalk.
- Carstone is used more extensively nearer to its source in the greensand ridge to the west.
- Roofs are generally of pantile or slate, with more pegtiles nearer to Kings Lynn and Downham Market.



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