



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

# The Greater Thames Estuary

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 81



# 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>).

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**Front cover:** The manorial site at Mucking Hall. Note the aisled barn and the house, rebuilt in the early 19th century, set within the 12th- or 13th-century moat. Photo © Historic England 29132/022



This map shows the Greater Thames Estuary, with the numbers of neighbouring National Character Areas around it. The area (see Landscape and Settlement for details) subdivides into:

1. The drained coastal marshes behind the unenclosed marshes.
2. The rising clay farmland which includes the islands of Sheppey, Dengie, Canvey, Isle of Grain and Mersea.

# Summary

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

The Greater Thames Estuary is the narrow strip of soft coastline between the Swale Estuary on the Kent coast and the River Stour on the Essex-Suffolk border. This is a low-lying coastal landscape extending along the Thames into inner London. It is a landscape of shallow creeks, drowned estuaries, mudflats and broad tracts of tidal salt-marsh with sand and shingle beaches along the coastal edge. Just over half the land area (56%) is agricultural and 21% is urban, including the riverside part of east London.

## Historic character

- Estates based further inland used the coastal marshes for grazing sheep and cattle, the reclamation of marshland for farmland having a long history documented as far back as the 8th century.
- This area has a low density of farmsteads scattered across the landscape, relating to drainage and enclosure by ditches and hedgerows dating from the medieval period and earlier and set within a landscape that was sparsely settled until the development of coastal towns and industries from the late 19th century.
- Large high-status farmsteads, some of them (especially between Southend and the river Crouch in Essex) moated, are intermixed with relatively high densities of much smaller farmsteads which have been subject to much more change.
- There are many remains of sheep folds and routeways for moving stock in the marshes.

## Significance

- Farmsteads Mapping in Kent has shown that survival of pre-1700 farm buildings is relatively low; 21% of recorded farmsteads in the Kent part of this area retain a pre-1700 farmhouse and 4% retain a pre-1700 working building. The latter are all concentrated in the area east of Gillingham whilst 3% retain both a pre-1700 farmhouse and working building. These sites have potential to be of high significance.
- Farmstead groups that retain some or all of their traditional buildings are very rare in a national context – only 53% of recorded farmsteads in Kent retain some traditional farmstead character. Of recorded farmsteads, 27% retain more than 50% of their historic form, well below the average of 52% for all the mapped areas in the south-east.
- There are some rare survivals of early multi-yard layouts fringing the coastal marshes, with shelter sheds and other buildings relating to the feeding of cattle and growing of corn on higher land.
- Buildings of the 18th century and earlier mostly comprise large aisled or unaisled barns, with some rare surviving examples of small three-bay barns associated with the smaller farms that developed along the fringes of the marshland.



- There are some high-status sites with large houses and barns, and very rarely with other farm buildings.
- There are some very rare examples of pre-19th-century shelter sheds for cattle.

## Present and future issues

- There are high rates of conversion of listed buildings to non-agricultural (primarily domestic) uses – over 40%, the national average being 34%.
- This area has a high percentage (very high in the Thames Estuary) of listed farm buildings with visible structural failure (between 10 and 15%, the national average being 8.9%) strongly contrasting with the remainder of south-eastern England.

## Historic development

- Human activity, utilising the rich resources of the coastal zone, has taken place for millennia and there is considerable evidence for prehistoric activity and Roman estates.
- The reclamation of marshland for farmland has a long history documented as far back as the 8th century. Reclamation for farmland gained momentum in the medieval period. Drained but otherwise unimproved marshes retained economic importance for sheep grazing, the salt preventing foot rot and disease.
- Other coastal activities included fishing. Along the coastal marshes, both salt-making, duck decoys and oyster pits have long histories related to the proximity of London markets
- The area contains four of the nation's historic naval dockyards. Military establishments facing the threat of invasion by sea and defending the port and city of London and the naval dockyards (Deptford, Woolwich, Sheerness and Chatham, the latter two surviving in recognisable form) have made a long-standing impact on the coast.
- Sparse settlement remained the norm until the expansion of the railway system in the mid-19th century, which fed the growing seaside resorts such as Southend and Clacton, and ultimately led to the development of plotland settlements along the coast, the most striking (and well preserved) of which is Jaywick. A range of industries developed at the same time, including munitions factories (as at Cliffe, far removed from populated areas), chemical, and later, petrochemical works, mineral extraction, cement works, papermaking and power stations.

## Landscape and settlement

Medieval settlement was a mixture of:

- small nucleated villages
- isolated high-status sites set back from the marshes on the rising claylands, including manorial and moated sites, which occur in higher numbers (particularly moated sites) in Essex between the river Crouch and Southend
- higher densities of smaller-scale farmsteads scattered across the landscape.
- The high-status sites are sometimes accompanied by a church. Early medieval settlement was extensive and wealthy, drawing on the local resources and the trading links afforded by the sea. The network of minster churches founded by Christian Saxons is still evident in the landscape and the churches form the basis of several settlements.
- Despite the high levels of reworking of fields in the 20th century and earlier, the fundamental pattern of inland agriculture is frequently extremely ancient in origin – strong linear

systems of routeways, drainage ditches and dykes running tangentially to the rivers and reflecting ancient patterns of movement and tenure between the arable clayland and the marshes. The extensive (co-axial), grid-like field system of the Dengie peninsula, for example, is considered to be over 2000 years old, and is not an isolated example.

- Marshland drainage is mentioned in historical charters as early as the 8th century. Although reclamation for farmland gained

momentum in the medieval period, drained but otherwise unimproved marshes retained an economic importance as sheep grazing. Medieval or earlier irregular drained fields are characteristic of Sheppey, the Cliffe marshes, Foulness and the Dengie marshes, interspersed with later more regular drained enclosure of the 18th or 19th century.

- Areas of woodland plantation accompany the few isolated farmsteads and larger settlements along the marshland fringe.

## Farmstead and building types

There have been high levels of 20th century change to the traditional farmsteads. 27% of farmsteads in the Kent part of the area have been totally lost from the landscape and 20% are now only represented by the farmhouse.

### Farmstead types

- Courtyard farmsteads are predominant, with mid- to late 19th-century small and medium-scale regular courtyard plans including courtyards incorporating an L-plan range and a building to the third side of the yard being most common.
- Smaller numbers exist of regular courtyard plans and courtyard plans with an L-plan element.
- In the north part of Sheppey, where the landscape has been most subject to late 18th- and 19th-century reorganisation with straight enclosure boundaries, there are some regular multi-yard plans.
- Large-scale, loose courtyard and multi-yard farmsteads are more common in Essex than in Kent, reflecting the larger numbers of high-status farmsteads that developed in this area from the medieval period.
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### Building Types

- Buildings from the 18th century and earlier mostly comprise large aisled or unaisled barns, with some rare surviving examples of small, three-bay barns associated with the smaller farms that developed along the fringes of the marshland.
- Shelter sheds for cattle are found on most farmsteads, some of which are very large and others are of pre-19th-century date. The presence of these buildings is a testament to the importance of fattening cattle, and some may also have served to shelter sheep.



In the Essex marshes farmsteads are sometimes located on the fringes of villages. Photo © Bob Edwards



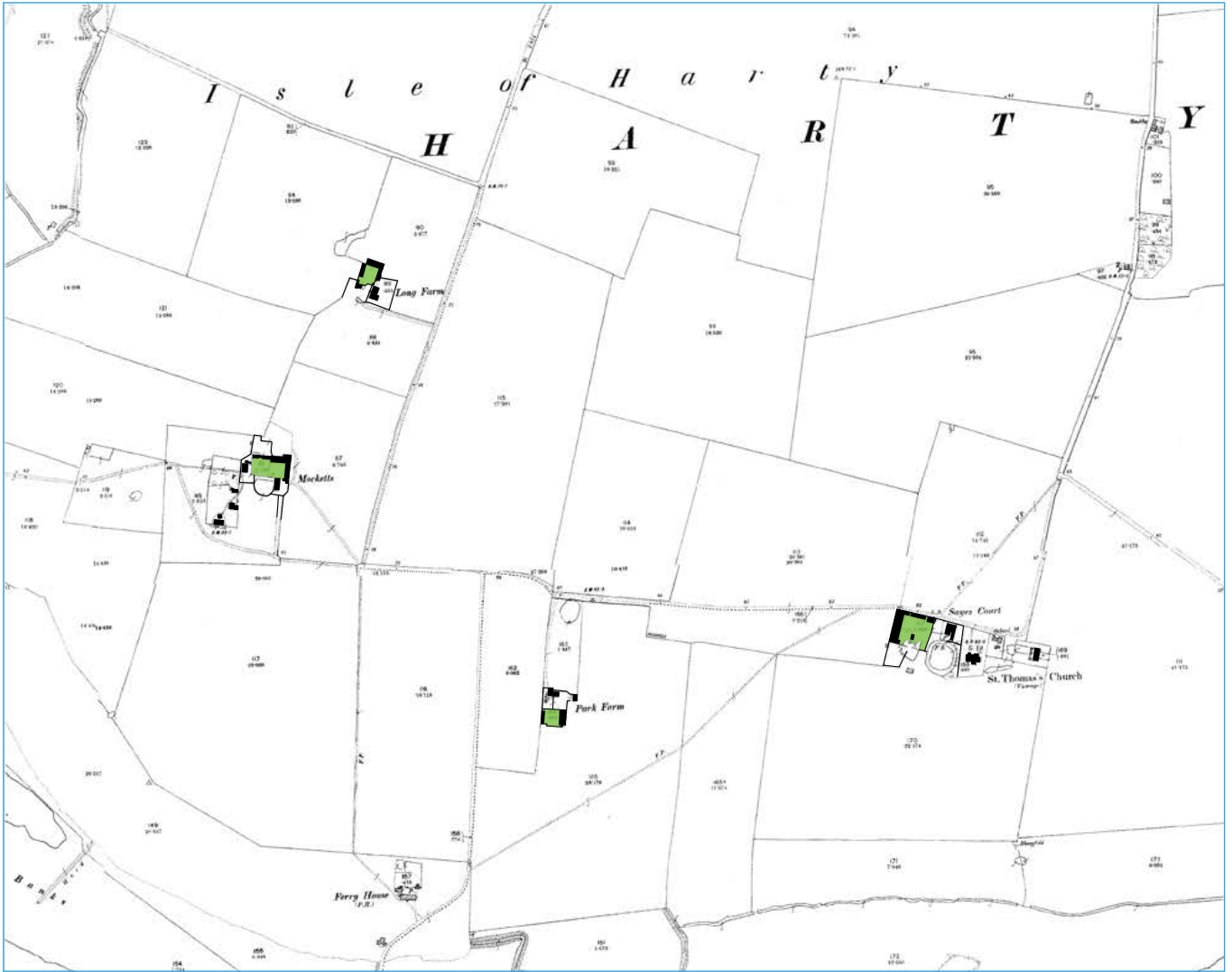
Small loose courtyard plans with buildings to one or two sides of the yard are common on the marshland edge. Photo © Bob Edwards




A loose courtyard plan with buildings, mostly of late 19th-century date, to three sides of the yard on the higher land on the Isle of Sheppey. Photo © Bob Edwards

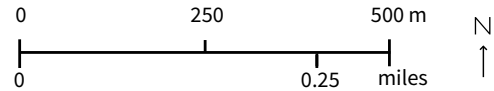


Larger regular plan types such as this E-plan range are rare in the marshlands. Photo © Bob Edwards



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.

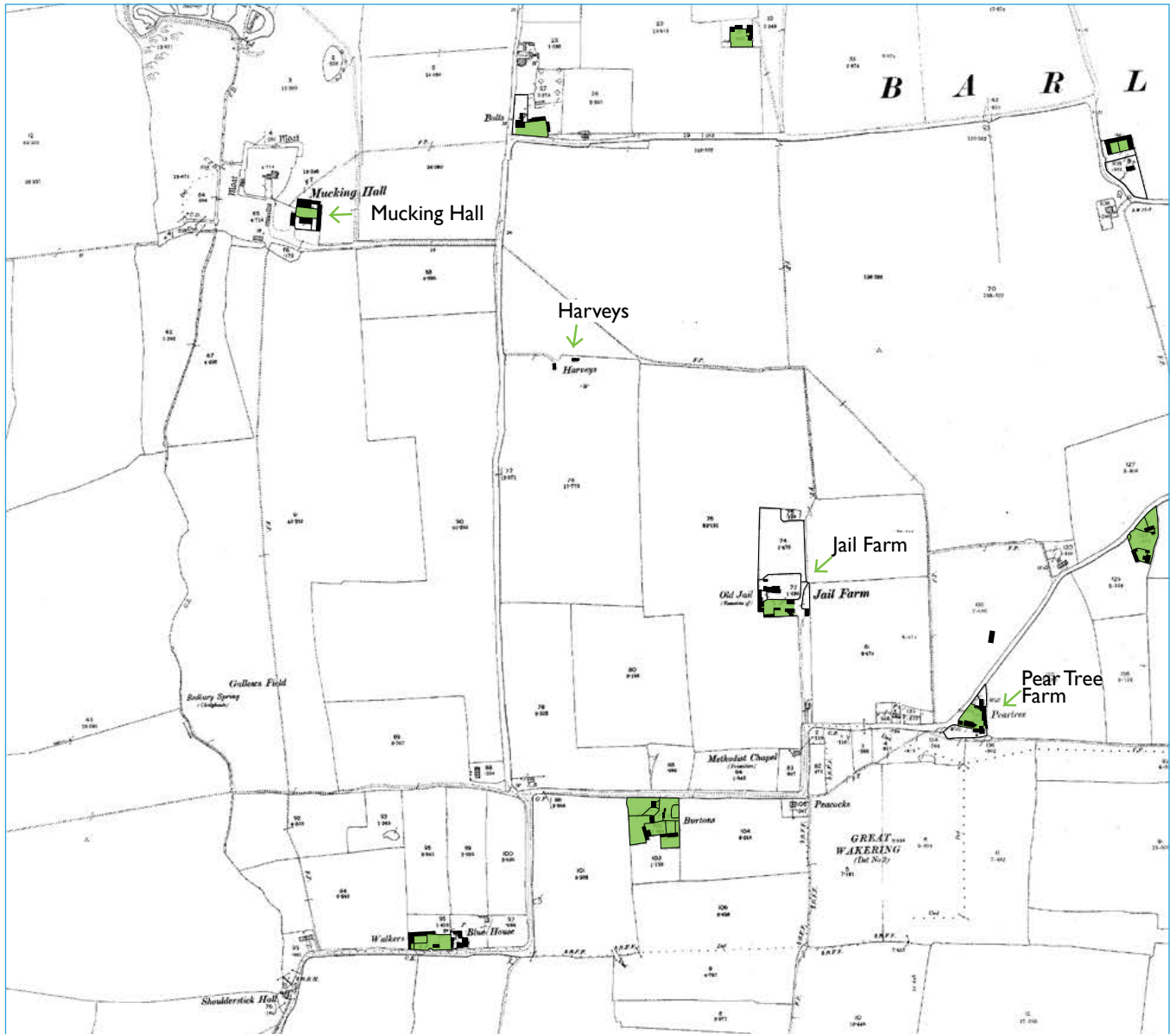


The drained marshlands of Kent rarely contain farmsteads; most are located on the slightly higher ground as here in the south-east of Sheppey where isolated farmsteads over-look the marshes. Although many of the isolated farmsteads are of pre-1700 origin, few early buildings survive with most buildings being of 19th century date and set in loose courtyard or regular L-plan arrangements. These farmsteads were set within a landscape of medium scale regular fields which have been subject to considerable boundary loss as fields have been amalgamated.




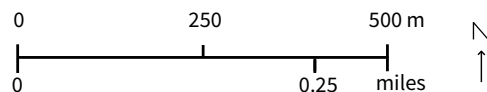
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 Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



## Mucking Hall/Jail Farm

The landscape of much of the higher land within the Essex part of the character area was divided into a series of medium scale fields generally on a north – south alignment set within a framework of roads and tracks that helped define the ‘grain’ of the landscape. Occasionally a road such as that running north-east from Peartree cuts across the alignment and may represent a route-way that predates the field pattern. Although there are some small villages within this area, settlement was predominantly dispersed with small to medium scale farmsteads, often set alongside the roads. Some farmsteads, such as Mucking Hall, are clearly higher status farmsteads of medieval origin as evidenced by the presence of a moat, a pre-1700 farmhouse or, more rarely, a pre-1700 working building. At Mucking Hall the farmhouse dates from the 16th century and its barn forming the north side of the yard is of early 17th century date. This part of the character area has been subject to higher levels of change than further north with high levels of boundary loss and the loss of some farmsteads such as Jail Farm and the possible remnants of a farmstead at Harveys.



There are some larger barns within the Essex marshes. This barn of seven bays was originally timber-framed but has been largely re-built in brick in the 19th century. Photo © Bob Edwards



An early 17th-century five-bay barn on a high status farm in the Essex marshes. The later additions providing stabling or cattle housing. Photo © Bob Edwards



Staddle granaries, usually dating from the 19th century, can be found on some farmsteads. Photo © Bob Edwards



An open-fronted shelter shed, possibly of late 18th-century date. Most shelter sheds date from the 19th century. Earlier examples are rare. Photo © Bob Edwards



A later 19th-century brick stable. Photo © Bob Edwards



A cartshed forming part of a courtyard group with an L-plan range and a building to the third side of the yard. Typically, the cart shed faces out, away from the yard. Photo © Bob Edwards



Sheds with gable end access are found on some farmsteads. These are usually of late 19th-century date. Photo © Bob Edwards

## Materials and detail

- Weatherboard over timber frame used into the 19th century.
- Extensive use of brick, including some of 18th century date.
- Some use of cobbles.
- Plain clay tile roofs.



# Historic England

This guidance has been prepared by  
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