Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

South Norfolk and High Suffolk Claylands

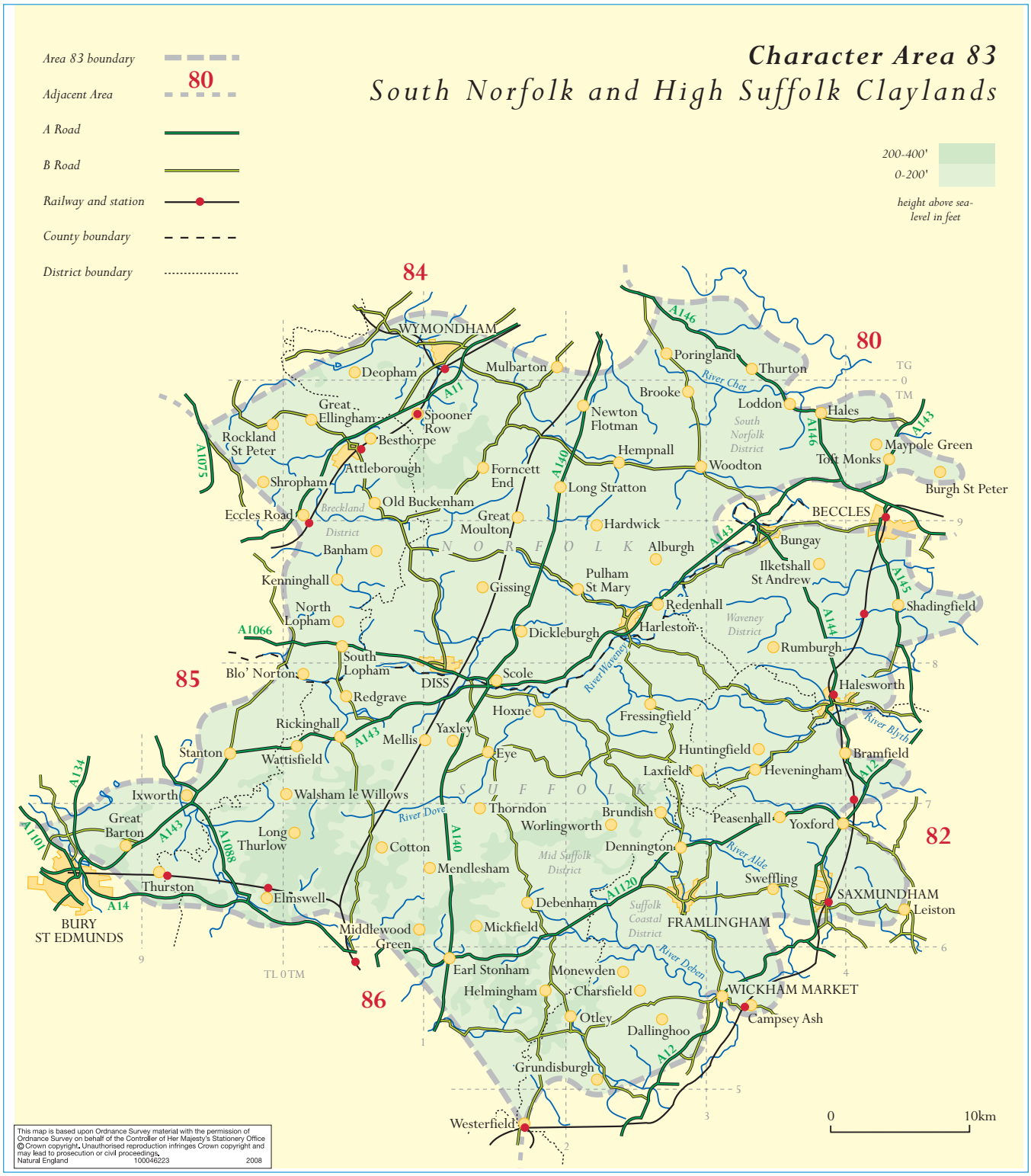
NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 83

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 whole farmstead at Forncett End was built in clay lump in about 1840, all rendered and painted white. The large barn with its two threshing floors served two cattle yards, with a two-storey granary/stable to its left. The 16th- to17th-century farmhouse is shown on the left side of the photograph. Photo © Historic England 29190/041

Front cover: This is a medieval manorial site next to the church at Winston, with a range of buildings typical of high-status groups in this area. By the late 19th century, it had developed around cattle yards into a large-scale regular multi-yard group. The earliest (16th to 17th- century) buildings are the threshing barn to the right (with two cattle yards attached to it) and a long stable and cow house range across the top of the photograph. Photo © Historic England 29150/058



This map shows the South Norfolk and High Suffolk Claylands 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.

This Character Area occupies a large part of central East Anglia, stretching from just below Norwich in the north down to the River Gipping in the south. This is a clay plateau landscape predominantly under arable cultivation. It is bound to the south-west by the town of Bury St Edmunds and to the north-east by Beccles. It is a sparsely settled and intensively farmed landscape; 98% of the Character Area is open countryside with 90% of that land under cultivation. Less than 2% of the Character Area is urban or classified as non-agricultural, while 3% is wooded. A very small part of this area falls within the Broads National Park.

Historic Character

- This is an area of mixed settlement patterns with nucleated villages found in the west and along river valleys, intermixed with dispersed farmsteads and hamlets.
- Farming in this complex landscape was also varied with distinct dairying areas (especially north central Suffolk) interspersed with areas of smaller mixed farms and areas where arable was more important.
- The landscape underwent significant change following World War II, but many important landscape features survive.
- Most farmsteads originated as dispersed or loose courtyard plans, with a barn, stable and perhaps a detached cow house (locally-termed as a neat-house).
- The late 18th- early 19th-century requirement for more barn space to accommodate produce from the increased arable area led to the conversion of earlier buildings and/or the addition of dedicated buildings for cattle and grain, often creating regular courtyard plans.
- Although the landscape underwent significant change following World War II, mostly in the form of boundary removal, much still survives from earlier centuries – for example, greens and their ditches, moats, medieval or earlier lanes and field boundaries.

Significance

- There is a high survival of traditional farmsteads in this area, significance being enhanced in the context of medieval moated sites, coherent patterns of early enclosure, commons and greens.
- There is a high survival of pre-1750 farm buildings, mostly farmhouses and barns. Farmsteads that have both a pre-1750 farmhouse and one or more early working buildings are of high significance. Their significance is enhanced in the context of medieval field boundaries.
- This area, and to a lesser extent the claylands of NCA 86 to the south, have some examples of early cattle housing which survive as smaller timber-frame structures; these date from the later 17th century, and are termed ‘neat-houses’ in Suffolk.

- Surviving examples of 18th-century and earlier neat-houses, combination buildings, early stables and cart sheds, detached kitchens, malthouses and hay barns are very significant.
- Some barns in this area, as elsewhere in East Anglia, display an exceptionally early use of brick by national standards.
- Hay barns and neat-houses were once prominent buildings in this landscape, but recorded examples are very rare. Many early examples have been lost, but some must have been converted to alternative uses, especially around the late 18th to early19th centuries.
- Thatch (longstraw) was the predominant roofing material for most farm buildings into the 19th century. Surviving examples are important to the local distinctiveness of the Character Area.
- Surviving wattle and daub infill is significant.
- Clay lump buildings (mostly 19th-century) are significant survivals.

Present and future issues

- In this National Character Area, the Photo Image Project (2006) recorded a medium proportion of listed working farm buildings converted to non-agricultural use (34.8%, the national average being 32%).
- The accelerated rate of conversion of farm buildings risks the loss of previously undiscovered evidence for past use. For example, we are only just beginning to recognise the evidence for original neat-houses and hay houses which were converted to other uses in the early 19th century.
- Despite high losses, much of the present landscape consists of medieval boundaries. Their future retention and management is a priority. Planting appropriate replacement boundary tree species (for example hornbeam, field maple, lime – including potential new pollards) is an increasingly important issue.

Historic development

- Settlement was extensive in the Iron Age and Roman periods and expanded again in the Saxon period, so that by the late 11th century most present villages were established and the area was one of the most densely populated in England.
- Areas of coaxial fields, which may originate from the Roman period, have been much rationalised, but pockets still remain intact.
- The market towns in the area such as Debenham, Diss, Eye and Framlingham are small in comparison with those in adjacent areas, but their high proportions of 15th- to 17th-century buildings testify to prosperity in that period.
- A mixed farming economy of arable and dairying (the latter of particular importance in High Suffolk, until eclipsed by other areas in the 18th century) brought wealth and supported a broad spectrum of middling gentry and yeoman farmers.
- From the late 18th century, improved drainage methods and increasing grain prices led to widespread arable conversion across the dairy lands of High Suffolk.
- Numerous owner-occupied, small-scale holdings survived into the early 20th century, contributing to one of the country's highest concentrations of surviving pre-1750 farm houses and barns.

Landscape and settlement

This is a complex landscape with a number of identifiable sub-regions which has undergone major changes over the centuries. In places, remnants of an irregular, open-field system survive in the form of enclosed strip fields or sinuous 'reverse-S' boundaries. Areas of coaxial fields have been much rationalised, but pockets still remain intact. Much woodland was grubbed out over the centuries.

- The settlement pattern is a mixture of villages, mainly in the west and in the river valleys, with numerous scattered farmsteads and hamlets set around greens in the hinterland, the latter representing a marked and widespread shift of settlement in the medieval period.

- There is a high survival of moats of 12th- to 13th-century date in this area, generally associated with high-status sites and 'free' tenements – particularly near the Dove Valley around Eye and Hoxne.

- Beneath the pattern of medieval and post-medieval enclosure in some places are sinuous co-axial fields marked by principal parallel boundaries, of uncertain date, but possibly Roman or earlier.

- The late medieval and early modern periods were characterised by larger manorial farms, some with relatively big, early-enclosed fields (mostly 20–30 acres, but some could be over 100 acres), contrasting with the multitude of smaller farms with equally small fields, often including strips enclosed piecemeal from earlier, irregular open fields.

- From the later middle ages, the dairy areas (especially north-central Suffolk) were typified by demesne farms with large pasture closes studded with pollards. Interspersed with the dairy farms were smaller mixed farms with equally small fields. In some areas, (for example Denton, Norfolk) remnants of an irregular open field system survive in the form of enclosed strip fields or sinuous 'reverse-S' boundaries. Areas of coaxial fields have been much rationalised, but pockets still remain intact. The 18th and 19th centuries saw the advent of more arable and the introduction of more scientific drainage, which led to the redrawing of some field boundaries, and particularly to the subdivision of former large closes. Much woodland was grubbed out over the centuries.

- The decline of dairy farming through the 18th century often led to the subdivision of earlier, large pasture enclosures, creating a pattern of straight field boundaries within a more irregular outer boundary.

- In the 18th and 19th centuries, regular enclosure took place on a very limited scale, mainly affecting greens and commons, although many irregular field boundaries were straightened or removed when land was underdrained during and after the Napoleonic Wars.

- Around Helmingham (Suffolk) is an atypical late 19th-century (High Farming), remodelled fieldscape. Many of the associated farm buildings also date from that period.

- Although the landscape underwent significant change following World War II, mostly in the form of boundary removal (very marked in some areas), much still survives from earlier centuries: for example, commons which survive best in the western part of the area, greens and their ditches, moats, medieval or earlier lanes and field boundaries. A significant loss in the last 60 years has been that of narrow, stream-side ribbons of meadow, ploughed out for arable or planted with poplars. Elm was one of the most common trees, both as pollard and standard, as well as a hedgerow plant; Dutch elm disease has accentuated the post-war loss of hedges and still rumbles on.

- Historically, the area had an abundance of trees in the form of woods, infield trees in pastures, 'rows' or belts along the edge of arable fields, and in hedgerows (pollards). These were intensively used for building materials and fuel. Many trees and much of this woodland was grubbed out in the Napoleonic period and the later 19th century, although the history of depletion is a much longer one. Ancient woodland is now largely confined to small patches dotted along the river valleys. The high rate of post-1950 boundary loss has sometimes led to former hedgerow oaks being left isolated

in fields. Boundary trees (mainly oak and ash) are still a characteristic of much of the NCA.

Farmstead and building types

There is a high survival in a national context of pre-1750 farmstead buildings, particularly farmhouses (which can include cheese rooms and detached kitchens), but also including medieval-and-later aisled and unaisled barns, stables, cart sheds and granaries.

Farmstead types

- Larger farmsteads developed as loose courtyard complexes from the medieval period, with two or more aisled or unaisled barns and buildings to three or four sides of the yard. Some developed as dispersed and dispersed multi-yard complexes, as in other clayland areas of England with high survival of 17th century and earlier buildings.
- Regular-plan farmsteads to U- and E-plan layouts are generally concentrated on estates which undertook improvements later in the 19th century.

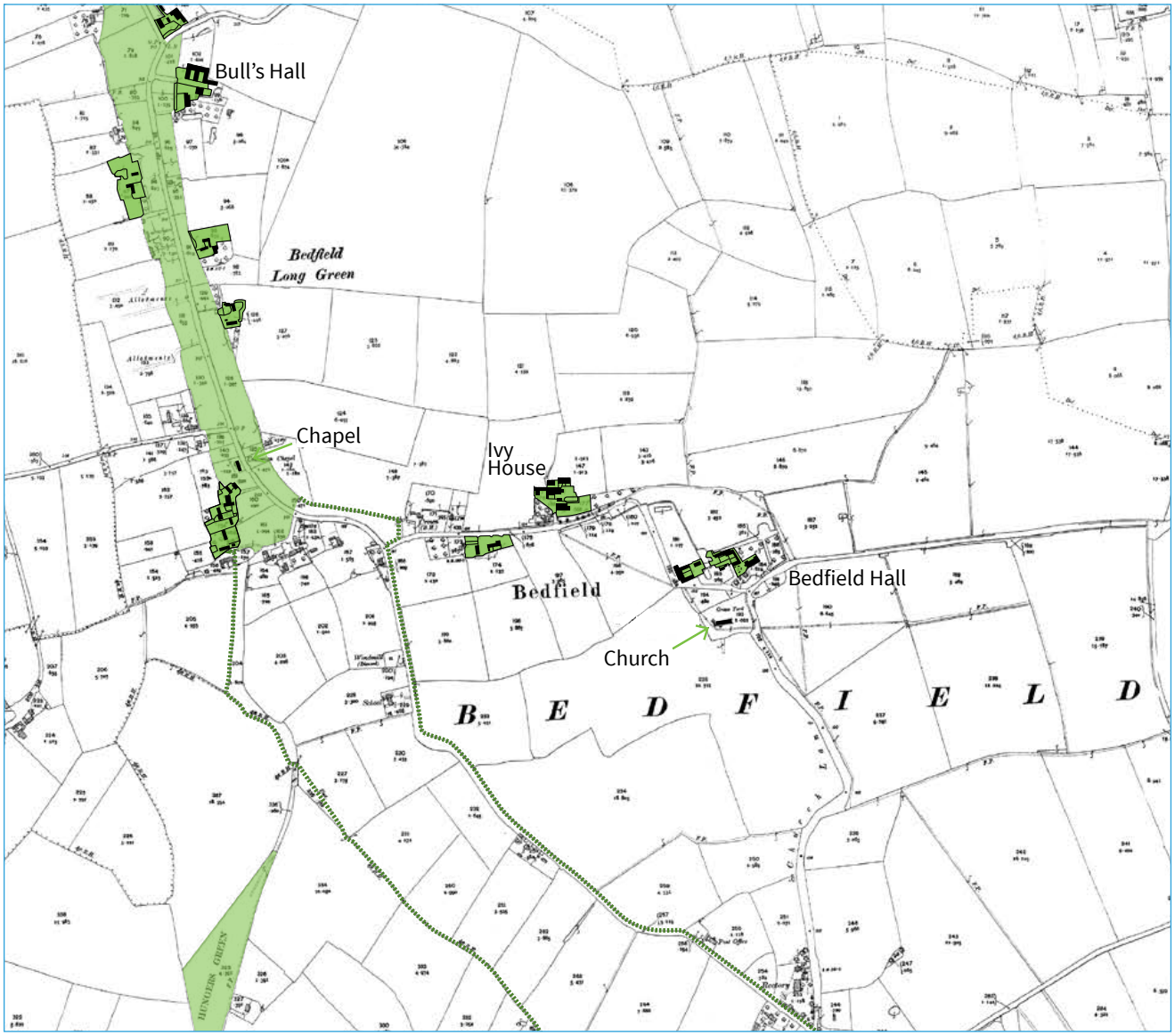
Building types

- Barns mostly date from a rebuilding in the late 16th- to 17th centuries, and many have contemporary or later lean-tos (locally termed 'ladens' or 'ladings') for cattle. A distinctive feature is the area's combination barns. On the dairy farms of the South Norfolk and High Suffolk Claylands, pre-1750 barns were typically of three bays with a central threshing floor and a fourth bay containing a lofted stable or cattle accommodation. Other combinations (e.g. neat-house/stable, stable/hay house, but others too) are frequently mentioned in contemporary documents.
- The area (and NCA 86, to the south) has some extensive single- or two-storey timber-framed ranges for housing cattle and horses, and two-storey stables, dating from late 16th century (early by national standards).
- This area, and to a lesser extent the claylands of NCA 86 to the south, have some examples of early cattle housing which survive as smaller timber-frame structures; these date from the later 17th century, and are termed 'neat-houses' in Suffolk. Some are detached, others extend as wings from barns; or they may have been part of a combination building. They might be linked to the introduction (early by national standards) of turnips and cabbage as a winter fodder. Early examples were usually located just outside the farmyard, in the 'home' meadow or pasture, and may be documented as field barns. These are locally distinctive and highly significant where they survive as rare examples of early cattle housing.
- Another rare (by national standards) building type is the detached 'back kitchen' or back house, sited close to the house and serving as a detached lower end for baking, brewing and food preparation. Some housed horse-mills. (Separate mill houses – for horse mills – are mentioned in early 17th-century documents, but no surviving examples have been identified). Malt and hop processing was another widespread use for the detached kitchen, but no surviving, separate malthouses or hophouses (which certainly existed in some number in the 17th century) have been identified.
- Intensification of arable farming in the later 18th and early 19th centuries led to the removal of internal partitioning in existing buildings and the construction of more threshing barns. Bolted 'knees' typically replaced the original tie-beam braces in older buildings. This early conversion of some buildings may make the recognition of the original use difficult.

- Field barns are mentioned frequently in 17th-century documents, but it is unlikely that many survive. Survivors will be very significant. Most appear to have been hay barns (locally called hay houses), although some may have been threshing barns retained when redundant farmsteads were demolished following amalgamation of holdings.

This group at Bredfield, with buildings set around dispersed yards, has developed since at least the recorded (17th-century) date of the house. The house originally faced towards the working yards, but when extended in the mid-19th century, its orientation was changed to face the other way towards its own garden. There is a 17th-century detached kitchen to the rear of the house. Photo © Historic England 29152/035

The regular courtyard arrangement and multiple yards at this farmstead just to the south of the remains of Sibton Abbey (Cistercian, founded 1150) are also typical of large-scale and high-status farmsteads in this area. The house dates from the early 17th century, the 18th-century or earlier barn being the earliest farm building. Photo © Historic England 29151/054



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

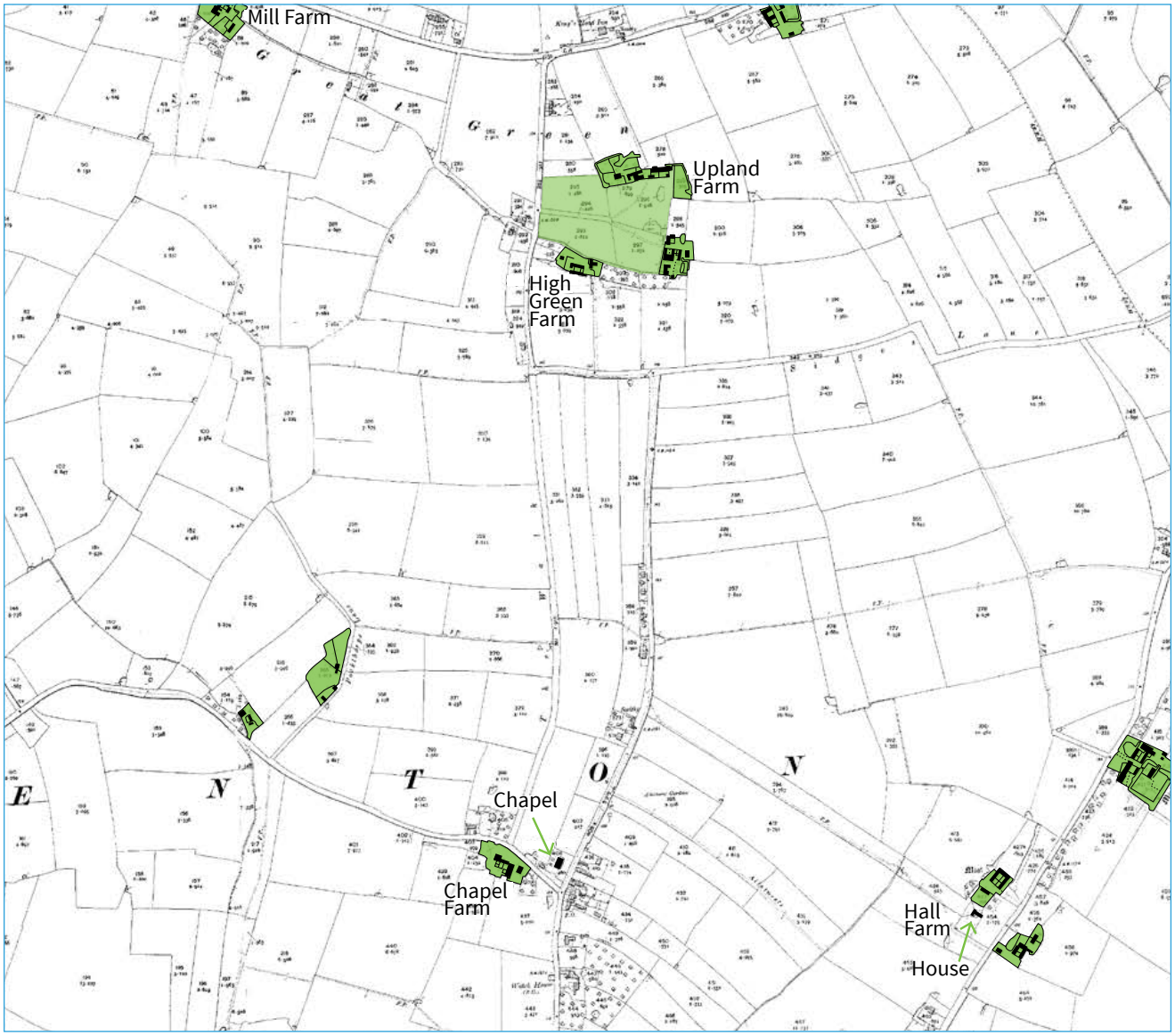
0 250 500 m

0 0.25 miles

N

Bedfield

The core settlement area has typically drifted from the church-and-manor house complex to Long Green (and other greens within the parish). Broad 'green ditch' water features and remnants of moats abound. There is little surviving evidence of piecemeal enclosure of strips, although the slightly curving nature of many of the smaller rectangular fields may indicate past purchase or exchange of strips in order to consolidate them in enclosures held in severalty (by individual farms). Straight boundaries may represent realignment of earlier curvilinear ones, perhaps encouraged by widespread adoption of tile drainage in the 19th century. Here, older farms (including some demesne farms), tended to be quite small, with a limited number of buildings (but often including combination buildings), usually in loose courtyard configuration. By the 19th century, virtually all field barns (mostly hay houses and neat-houses, once common in the area) had disappeared, the result of the switch from dairying to arable production. This change was accompanied by the building or redevelopment of farmsteads with cattle yards placed with regular courtyard plans.



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

Denton

North of the Waveney are a number of villages where piecemeal enclosure of strips was evident (and still is, but to a lesser extent). Farms tend to be strung out along roads and green edges, with green ditch and moat remnants indicating the longevity of many sites. Away from the areas of enclosed strips are generally small, irregularly shaped fields, many of which would have been under grass in previous centuries. There are no field barns, and generally the farms have relatively few (but often old) buildings and have loose courtyard and dispersed layouts.

This farmstead near Framsden has a 16th- to 17th-century house and barn facing the road, the latter with cow houses and stables added to make an overall U-shaped plan. Photo © Historic England 29150/029

A rare surviving grouping (at Saxted) of a farmhouse and barn of 17th- to18th-century date facing a green. Photo © Bob Edwards

Early stables built of clay lump at Forncett End. Photo © Mike Williams/Historic England

Rare example of 18th-century stables, built of timber-frame clad in weatherboard, attached to a small barn (to the left) and a cow house (to the right). The whole group is a rare example of pre-improvement farmstead architecture in this area. Photo © S Wade Martins

A three-bay barn, typical of 16th- to 19th-century smaller farms in this area, at Dickleburgh. Photo © S Wade Martins

This fine example of a 16th-century barn at Framsden Hall is one of a number of large, early barns built on high-status sites in this area. Photo © Mike Williams/ Historic England.

Cart shed, probably late 18th-century as built of light timber studding with clay walling. Photo © S Wade Martins

Clay lump, with a weather-protective coating of tar. Photo © Mike Williams/Historic England

Detail of clay lump construction. Photo © Mike Williams/Historic England

A stud partition with wattle and daub infill. Photo © Mike Williams/Historic England

Materials and detail

- There is a strong diversity of building materials. For houses, extensive use is made of timber-framing with colourwashed plaster walls. Timber-framing was also widely used for farm buildings well into the 19th century, albeit in increasing combination with brick. The re-use of timber-frame components can make dating difficult. Weatherboarding often replaced earlier wattle and daub infill panels from the 19th century.
- Pegtiles and thatch (mostly 'longstraw') are typical roofing materials for older houses.
- Brick (and to a lesser extent, flint) was increasingly used from the later 17th century for vernacular buildings.
- Most farm buildings were thatched up to the 19th century, when pantiles became common on farm buildings and cottages. Thatch is increasingly rare on farm buildings.
- Clay-lump and cob walling were used for farm buildings, mainly in the 19th century.

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This guidance has been prepared by Jeremy Lake with Bob Edwards.

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