



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

# Breckland

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 85



## 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>).

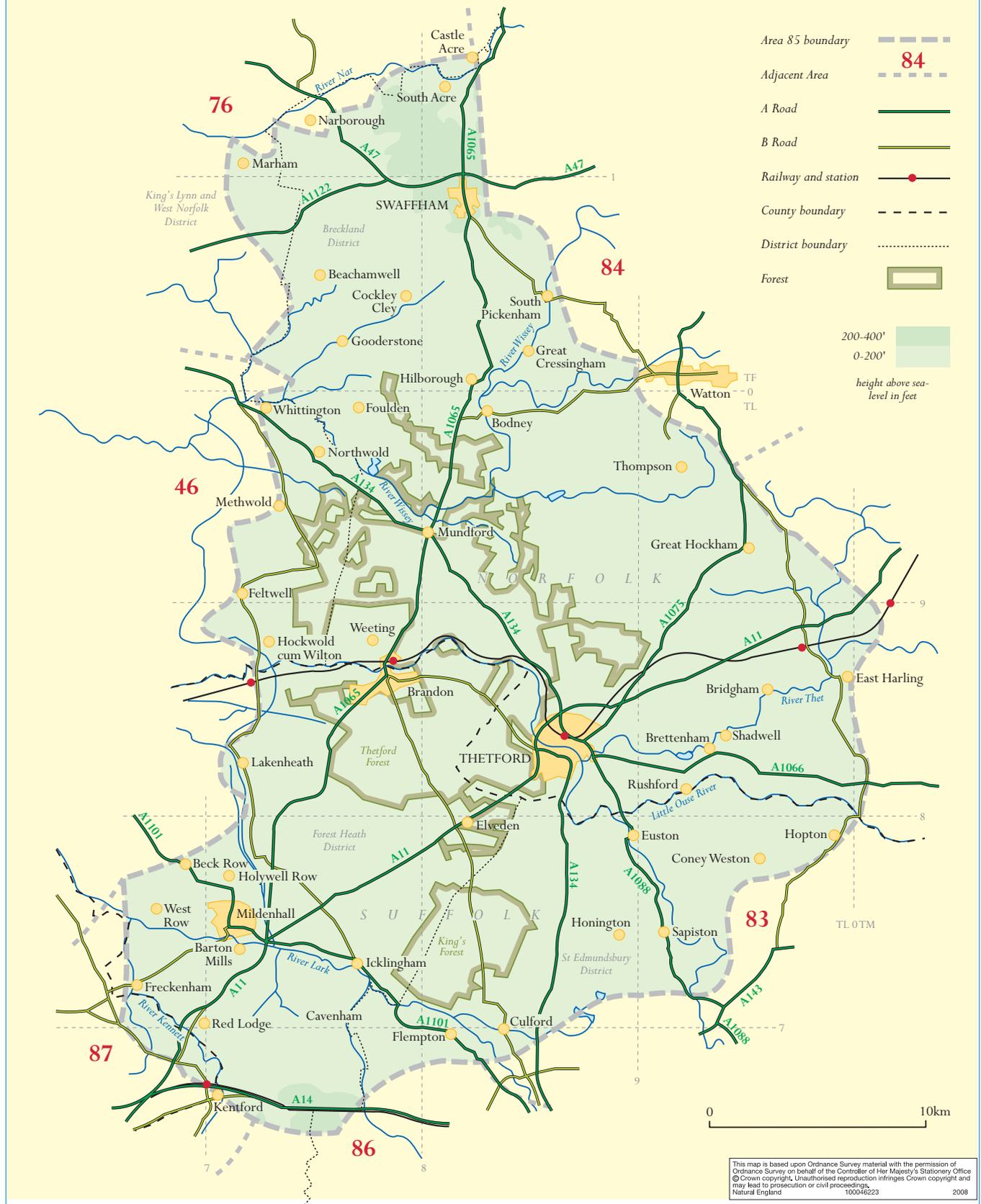


The farmstead at Croxton (see cover) was built as part of the mid-19th-century improvement of the estate for Samuel Newton, son of a Liverpool merchant, who bought the estate in 1820. Photo © Historic England 29188/037

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**Front cover:** A mid-Breckland farmstead at Croxton, with a large barn, stables, granary and cattle housing built to a regular courtyard plan. Large rectangular enclosures dominate much of this landscape, and geometric plantations and shelter belts, the latter typically planted with Scots pine, divide the fields. Note the remnant areas of heath. The presence of many clay pits attests to the attempts to improve the poor acid soils by the addition of marl. Map based on 2nd edition 25" Ordnance Survey maps, compiled after the last major phase in the building of traditional farmsteads in England. Photo © Historic England 29188/042

# Character Area 85 Breckland



This map shows the Breckland 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.

The Breckland Character Area falls within Norfolk and Suffolk and is located where the two counties intersect, south-east of the Wash. The area exhibits a complex mosaic of soils, dominated by poor, blowing sands over chalk, with occasional pockets of clay, and with larger areas of more calcareous soils in the north-west and to the east of Thetford. Just over 95% of the landscape is countryside, 67% of which is cultivated; the remaining 5% is urban. There are no parts of the landscape falling within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) or having National Park status. The landscape contains a considerable amount of woodland – covering just over 27% of the Character Area.

## Historic Character

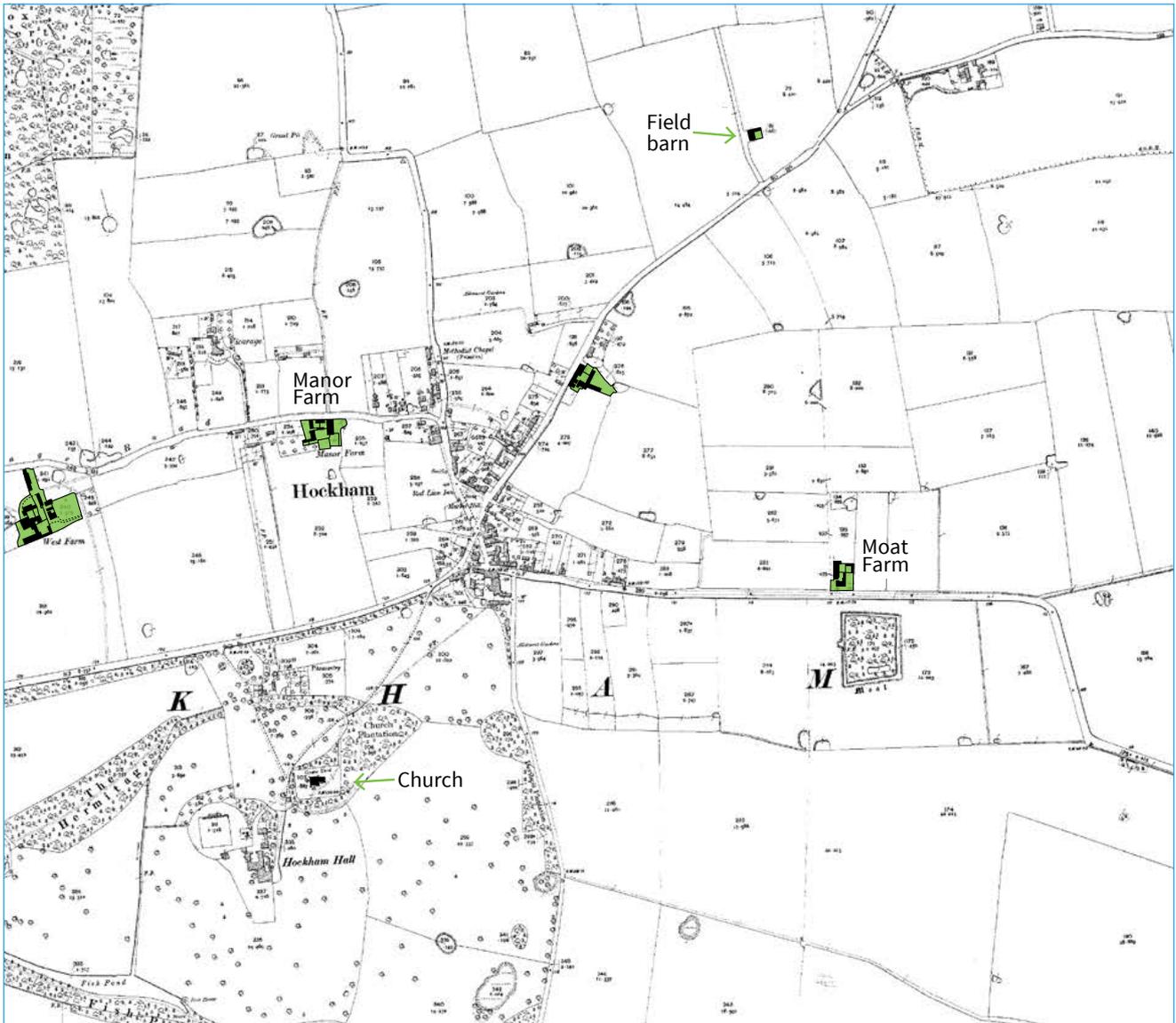
- This is an area of poor, sandy soil over chalk.
- The character of the Breckland landscape, with extensive areas of infertile heathland, results from Neolithic settlement and clearance.
- The heathland was maintained through warrening and sheep grazing, with short rotational spells under crops.
- Some earlier farms survive on the better valley soils.
- Some open fields were enclosed by parliamentary act or private agreement before 1800, but those on the better lands to the west were not enclosed until the 19th century, along with much of the heathland.
- By the 18th century, much of this area was in the hands of large estates, divided into large farms, giving rise to the development of large courtyard farms with substantial buildings.
- After World War I, large areas of the Breckland were bought by the state and planted with trees. These areas constitute what is now Thetford Forest.
- A large part of the Breckland was taken over by the military in 1942 to provide a battle training area, which is still used as such today.

## Significance

- Large, 17th-century or earlier barns are rare and therefore very significant, whilst the area has some farmhouses of this period.
- Intact 19th-century farmsteads that exemplify agricultural improvement may survive in their associated landscape context.
- There are some rare surviving field barns.

## Present and future issues

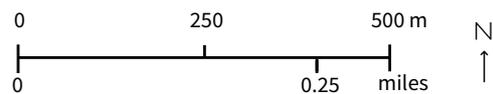
- In this National Character Area, the Photo Image Project (2006) recorded a high proportion of listed working farm buildings converted to non-agricultural use (45.8%, the national average being 32%).



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.



## Hockham

A different side of Breckland is shown at Hockham, where the fields are generally smaller than those at Croxton (front cover), and there are few shelterbelts dividing the fields. Clay pits are numerous, the result of marling the sandy soils to improve them. Typically for Breckland, settlement is concentrated in a nucleated village, with a few detached farms – mostly of post-medieval date – located along the radiating roads. An unusual feature is the moat (centre right), but Hockham Hall, set in its landscape park and dating from the 18th century, is representative of the large estates found in Breckland. West Farm in particular (to the left of the map) has a large range of buildings, with the regular multi-yard layout being the preferred layout for large, arable-based farms. Field barns were common in Breckland, and are represented here by Pammets Barn (centre top).

## Historic development

- The character of the Breckland landscape, with extensive areas of infertile heathland, results from Neolithic settlement and clearance.
- Thetford, with origins as an Iron Age settlement located at a fording point on the River Thet, is the only sizeable town within the Brecks. A late Saxon town grew to become the episcopal seat for East Anglia and was subsequently a Norman stronghold and market centre.
- Breckland is dominated by poor, blowing sands over chalk, interspersed with small pockets of sand over clay. By the 18th century, much of this area was in the hands of large estates, some of these being of medieval origin.
- Historically, the heathland was maintained from the medieval period through rabbit warrening and sheep grazing, with short rotational spells under crops before being allowed to revert to heathland again. The boundaries created around the area's rabbit warrens influenced later property boundaries, including those of forestry plantations.
- The area's open fields remained in use into the 18th century, and it was known for the long use of the foldcourse system as practised in the north of Norfolk – where the fields were manured by manorial sheep flocks over the winter. More than 70% of Breckland was enclosed after 1750, reaching a high-water mark during the Napoleonic Wars, when regular field systems were imposed both on former common arable around settlements and across wide areas of the open heaths.
- From 1922, with the great estates struggling after World War 1 – especially on these poor soils – large areas of the Breckland were bought by the state in order to make up the timber stocks which were heavily depleted in the war. These areas constitute what is now Thetford Forest.
- A large part of the Breckland, including six whole villages, was taken over by the military in 1942 to provide a battle training area, which is still used as such today.
- A few earlier farms survive on better valley soils.

## Landscape and settlement

- Medieval and later settlement was primarily nucleated – with villages clustered along the river valleys and fen edge to the west of the heath.
- There are few isolated farmsteads.
- With the exception of narrow, linear patterns of irregular enclosures of mainly meadow pasture along the river valleys, the large-scale and regular fieldscapes of the area are the product of 18th- and 19th-century enclosure. These are typically associated with large estates; late 18th- to early 20th-century estate architecture is also a strong feature of this area, particularly to the east (Ickworth, Culford, Euston, Elveden).
- Thick pine and beech shelter belts are common boundary features in the Brecks, planted in the late enclosure period to counter the 'blow' of light soils from the former heaths. Extensive areas of coniferous woodland were created by the Forestry Commission from 1922, creating what is now Thetford Forest.

## Farmstead and building types

Pre-1750 farm buildings are rare in this area, although there are some farmhouses, often of manorial status, that are 17th century or earlier. Pre-19th-century farmstead buildings, mostly farmhouses and barns (including large-scale and aisled barns), are concentrated in village centres, on the area's few manorial sites on islands of better soils, and along the more fertile and arable-based river valleys.

- Many farmsteads – particularly in East Breckland – were redeveloped in the mid- to late 19th century as U- or E-plan steadings with large barns, combined cart shed and granary ranges and south-facing cattle yards.
- The area between Thetford and Bury St Edmunds is characterised by large, regular courtyard farms and fine houses dating from the enclosure period.
- Earlier barns are of four or five bays, occasionally aisled to at least one side. Larger barns of 19th-century date, some with two threshing floors, reflect the importance of arable in the west of the area.
- Field barns and outfarms are characteristic of this area.



Many farmsteads have granaries built over cart sheds, this mid-19th-century example at Mildenhall having doors to implement sheds. Photo © Bob Edwards



An 18th-century, five-bay barn with lean-tos for cattle on the same farmstead in Mildenhall. Photo © Bob Edwards



Brick quoins and lacing to flint walls, at Castle Acre. Photo © Stephen Podd



Large threshing barns continued to be built in this area into the mid-19th century, as here, in Thompson. Photo © Stephen Podd



This fine example of a granary built over a cart shed and stable, near Mildenhall, dates from the late 17th century. It is a very rare surviving example from this period, testifying to the importance of mixed arable farming in this area from the 17th century at least. Photo © Mike Williams/Historic England



Detail of a late 19th-century planned farmstead at Culford. Note the sliding doors which are a feature introduced onto farms from the 1850s. Photo © Mike Williams/Historic England



The largest threshing barns tend to be found on the most high-status farms, as here, at Manor Farm in Brettenham (note the chimney stacks of the 17th-century house to the background), and the largest enclosure-period farms. Note the use of brick (in contrast to the earlier flint) to the lean-tos for cattle which flank the gabled porch to the threshing floor, such additions being a typical feature of this area. Photo © Stephen Podd



Large threshing barns continued to be built in this area into the mid-19th century, as here, on this flint and brick barn near Castle Acre. Photo © Bob Edwards

## Materials and detail

- The predominant materials are brick with flint, and plain tile roofs.
- There are some rare examples of surviving timber framed farm buildings; mainly barns dating from the 17th or early 18th century.
- Chalk clunch can be found, usually used as an internal lining to brick buildings but occasionally found in external faces of buildings or in boundary walls.
- A few thatched houses remain, for example Euston.
- Some 19th century farmsteads retain evidence of the use of mechanisation.



# Historic England

This guidance has been prepared by  
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First published by English Heritage 2013. This  
edition published by Historic England 2020.

Please refer to this document as:  
Historic England 2020 Farmstead and Landscape  
Statement: Breckland. Swindon: Historic  
England.

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Product code: 52199 RRL code: 089/2020

Publication date: February 2020 © Historic England  
Design: Historic England and Chantal Freeman, Diva  
Arts