



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

# East Anglian Chalk

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 87



## Introduction

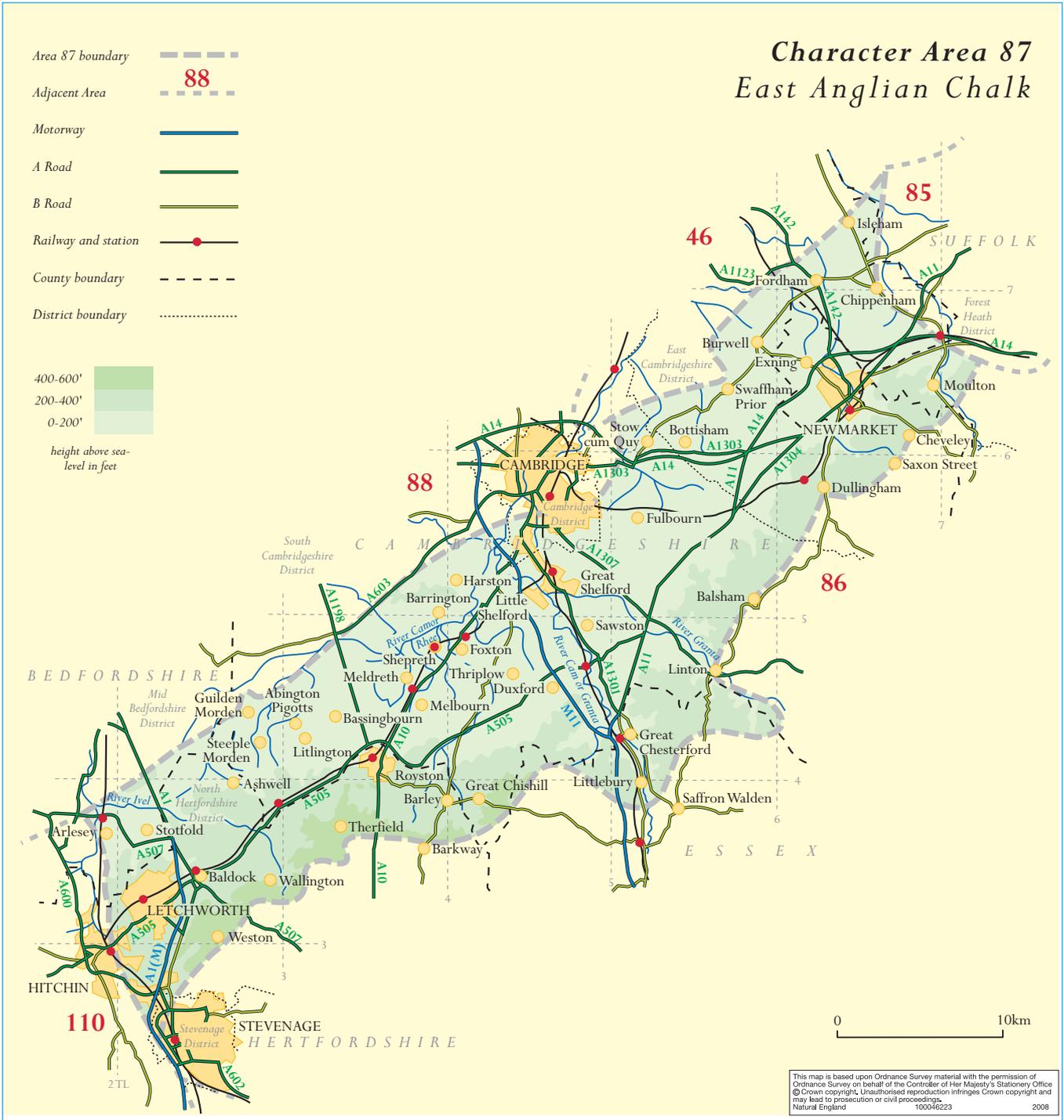
The Farmstead and Landscape Statements will help you to identify the historic character of traditional farmsteads and their buildings in all parts of England, and how they relate to their surrounding landscapes. They are now available for all of England's National Character Areas (NCAs), and should be 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 farmstead on the edge of Bottisham is typical of many larger farmsteads in this area in that the large 16th- or 17th-century house and barn provide evidence for the emergence of wealthy mixed farms by this period, the other buildings mostly dating from the mid-19th century and providing shelter for fatstock cattle. Photo © Historic England 29115/034

---

**Front cover:** A post-medieval farmstead with a 17th-century house set within later straight-sided fields at Great Wilbraham (see map on p 8). Photo © Historic England 29116/023



This map shows the East Anglian Chalk 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 East Anglian Chalk of Cambridgeshire and north-west Essex forms a narrow continuation of the rolling chalk ridge that runs south-west–north-east across southern England. Of the landscape, 92.7% is open countryside, 88.3% of which is cultivated. There are no parts of the landscape falling within an AONB or having National Park status. The landscape contains a small percentage of woodland, covering only 2.7% of the Character Area.

## Historic Character

- Early farmsteads developed within villages with their open fields and unenclosed pastures. Nucleated villages are concentrated on the dip slope edge, in river valleys and on reliable springs.
- Reorganisation and enlargement of village-based farmsteads, and establishment of some isolated farmsteads, associated with mostly 18th- to 19th-century enclosure and the creation of a landscape of straight roads, tree belts, copses and large, regular enclosures. Shelter belts typify the horse-racing hub around Newmarket
- There was formerly much open downland grazed by sheep (reared for the London market), but this was increasingly converted to arable when enclosed; surviving chalk grassland is very rare.

## Significance

- This Character Area has a moderate survival in a national context of 17th-century and earlier farmhouses and barns, including some highly significant medieval aisled barns.
- Malthouses are highly distinctive and significant in a national context.
- Pre-1750 granaries, stables and cart sheds – particularly rare being any built of timber frame – are very rare in this area.
- Some significant use of earth walling, clay lump and clunch.

## 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 (46%, the national average being 32%).

## Historic development

- The anciently cleared and grazed upland plateau and slopes show extensive evidence for former land use (linear earthworks) and settlement (crop marks) from the Romano-British and earlier periods.
- Religious houses formed the core of many of the larger medieval settlements, although few have left highly visible evidence in the landscape. The larger market towns have seen considerable expansion in the 20th century. Likewise, villages have shared in the expansion of dormitory and commuter housing.
- The light chalk soils were traditional barley country, farmed in open fields surrounding the pattern of medieval village and hamlets, or else remained unenclosed downland pasture until the late 18th century. The towns of Baldock, Ashwell, Royston and Hitchin were major malting centres.
- The area around Newmarket has a long history of stud farming related to the downland racing and later formalised racetracks.
- A general trend towards enclosure accelerated as a result of rising land value during the Napoleonic Wars, and the process continued under improving landowners until completed around the middle of the 19th century. With the exception of areas devoted to stud farms and racing, the enclosed landscape became, in the 19th century, a major breadbasket and mutton fattening area for London, reflected in the distribution of isolated farmsteads controlling huge areas.

## Landscape and settlement

- Nucleated villages, developed from the late Saxon period onwards, are still the characteristic settlement type along the dip slope edge, within the bisecting river valleys and wherever reliable springs break from the chalk. There is a very low density of dispersed settlement in the landscape, comprising enclosure-period farmsteads and some earlier, high-status sites.
- The mixture of complex holdings with open downland and common arable fields was largely overwritten between the late 18th and mid-19th centuries, and the dominant field pattern today is one of regular large-scale enclosure and thorn boundaries. Fragments of earlier open landscapes still survive in the unenclosed fields east of Baldock, and in narrow, sporadic areas of open chalk grassland such as Therfield Heath. Despite the large enclosure fields, the level of post-1950 boundary loss was high, but the former downland is still dotted with beech hangers, shelter belts and other broadleaved copses planted in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- The areas immediately surrounding the smaller villages and within the narrow river margins retain more ancient and intricate landscapes of small enclosures, albeit now frequently modified to horse paddocks and stabling.
- Ancient woodland accompanied by spring-fed meadows is concentrated to the north-east, bordering the Breckland.

## Farmstead and building types

- There is moderate survival in a national context of pre-1750 farmstead buildings, particularly farmhouses, but also including medieval and later aisled barns.
- Barns are typically of five bays (with some larger and aisled examples) and have later cattle accommodation added on in the form of outshots. Early (pre-1750) three-bay barns are concentrated in villages.

- Larger farmsteads developed as loose courtyard complexes, with two or more aisled or unaisled barns and other buildings to three or four sides of the yard. Many farmsteads were redeveloped in the 19th century as U- or E-plan regular courtyard steadings with large barns/mixing ranges, combined cart shed and granary ranges and south-facing cattle yards.
- Granaries, cart sheds and stables mostly date from the early to mid-19th century but there are some notable earlier survivals.
- Outfarms are characteristic of this area.



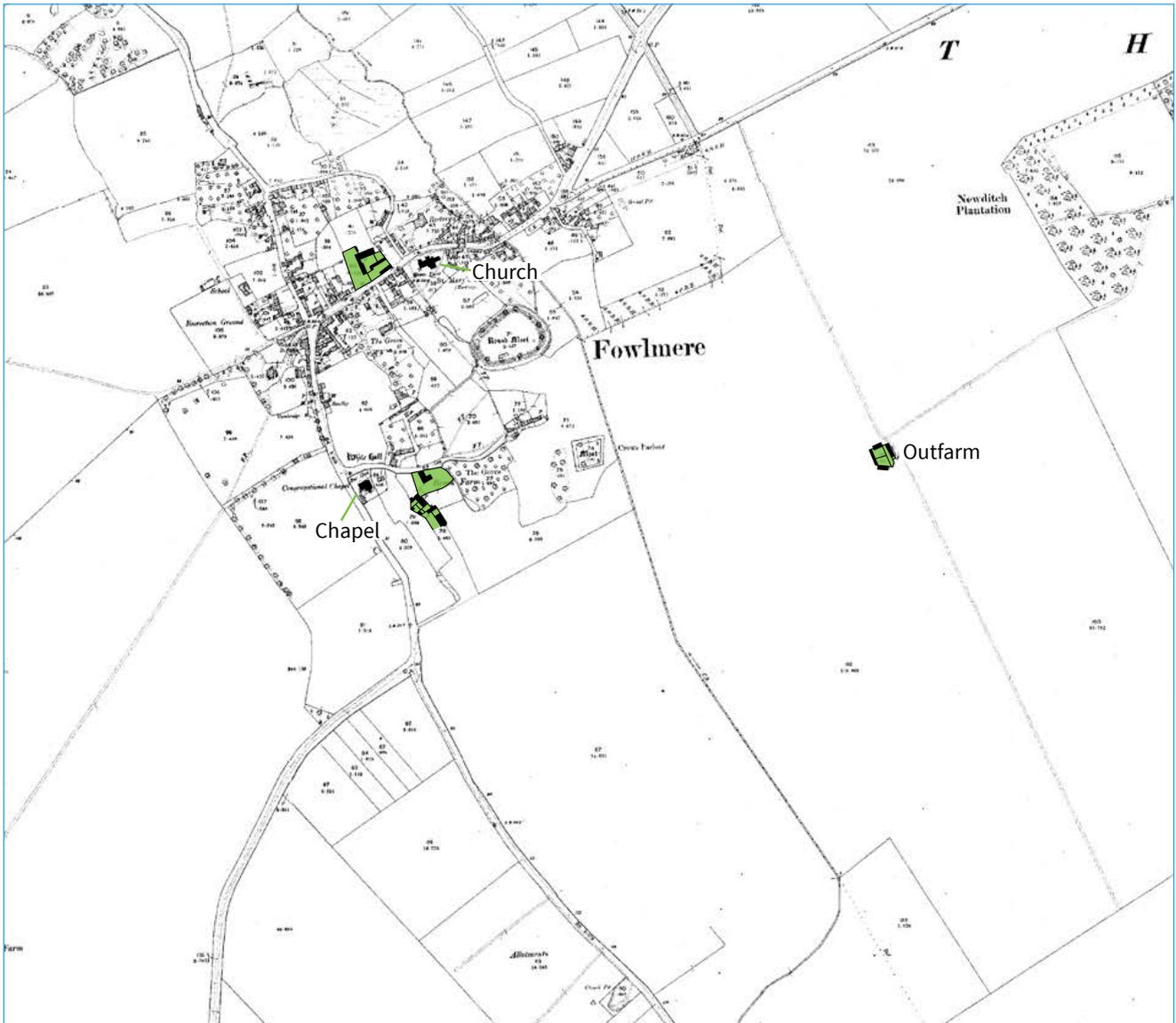
An inter-war county council smallholding near Baldock, one of several built in this area. Photo © Historic England 29114/038



Barns and other farm buildings strung along a street at Balsham in Cambridgeshire. Photo © Bob Edwards



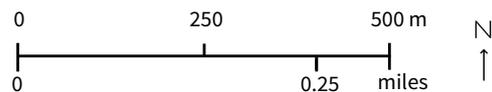
A five-bay, early 19th-century, barn converted to domestic use and typical with its low-pitched roof of barns of this period. Photo © Bob Edwards



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

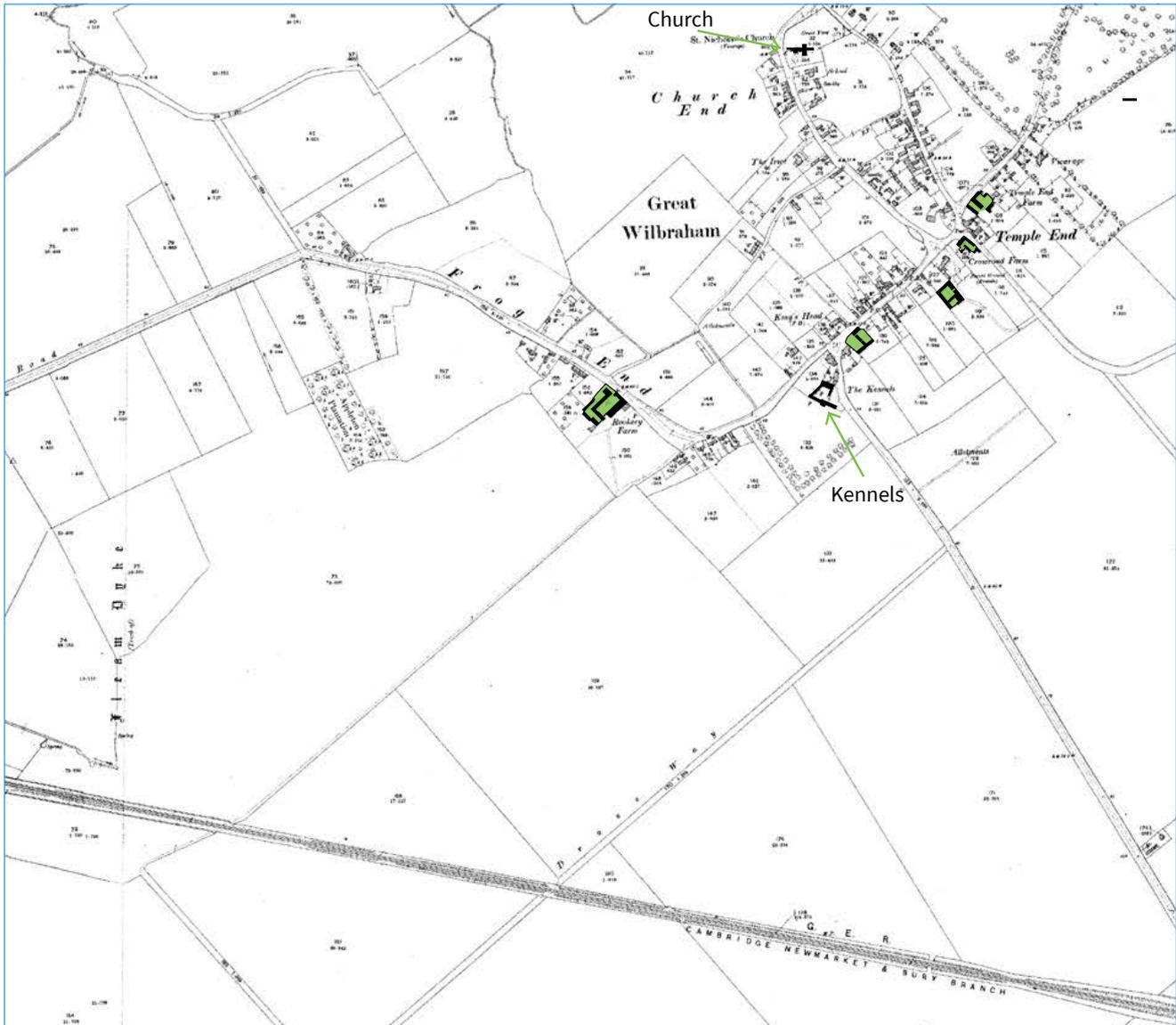


Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



## Fowlmere

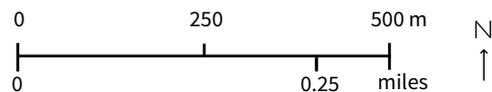
A typical nucleated village surrounded by small enclosures, and with large enclosures beyond, the more distant ones accessed by straight, open trackways. A field barn complex (now gone) sits in isolation towards the east, otherwise all farmsteads and buildings are within the village. Towards the north-east, a plantation complex breaks up the otherwise wide open fieldscape. A 12th-century or earlier defensible ringwork lies approximately equidistant between the 14th-century parish church to the north-west and a small moated site (known as Crow's Parlour) to the south-east. There is an interesting group of buildings to the east of the nonconformist chapel of c 1780: to the north of the road, a barn converted to a school c 1780 by the Wedd family who were dissenters and educators, and to the south, farmsteads that developed around 16th- and 17th-century houses. As elsewhere in this area, by the later 19th century most farmsteads had moved out of the village to new sites in newly enclosed fields.



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 Wilbraham

Great Wilbraham is a typical nucleated village, but with three 'Ends' – the hamlet at Frog End in particular being distinct from the village core. Very few buildings lie outside the village envelope, and in contrast to Fowlmere many farmsteads remained within this loose arrangement of plots. The Fleam Dyke earthwork to the west is representative of the survival of numerous archaeological features, both large and small scale, in this landscape. Close to the village, the roads are meandering in character, but roads and tracks through the large fields are typically straight.



A rare surviving example of a small 17th-century barn, typical in its form of early barns in villages in this area. Photo © Bob Edwards



A mid-19th-century cart shed with an attached stable to its right. Photo © Bob Edwards



The importance of malting in this area is demonstrated by these late 18th-century maltings at Burwell, one of nine in this village in the 19th century. It has been converted into offices. Photo © Mike Williams/Historic England



A rare surviving example of a 17th- to 18th-century granary raised on a stone plinth wall. Photo © Bob Edwards



Clunch, coursed and set on a brick plinth. Photo © Bob Edwards

## Materials and detail

- Fine examples of late medieval timber-framed houses can be found in many parts of the area, frequently re-clad in the 17th and early 18th centuries.
- Predominant materials are timber-frame with weatherboard and plaster, with historic thatch concentrated to the west.
- Yellow brick is found to the west and red brick and flints to the east, with plain tile roofs.
- There are some earth-walled buildings, predominantly of 19th-century date, in clay lump and cob. 'Clunch' (building chalk) is also commonly found.



# Historic England

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

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: East Anglian Chalk. Swindon: Historic  
England.

We are the public body that looks after  
England's historic environment. We champion  
historic places, helping people understand,  
value and care for them.

Please contact  
[guidance@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:guidance@HistoricEngland.org.uk)  
with any questions about this document.

[HistoricEngland.org.uk](https://HistoricEngland.org.uk)

If you would like this document in a different  
format, please contact our customer services  
department on:

Tel: 0370 333 0607

Email: [customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

All information and weblinks accurate at the  
time of publication.

Please consider the environment before printing  
this document

Product code: 52201 RRL code: 091/2020

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