



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

# Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 88

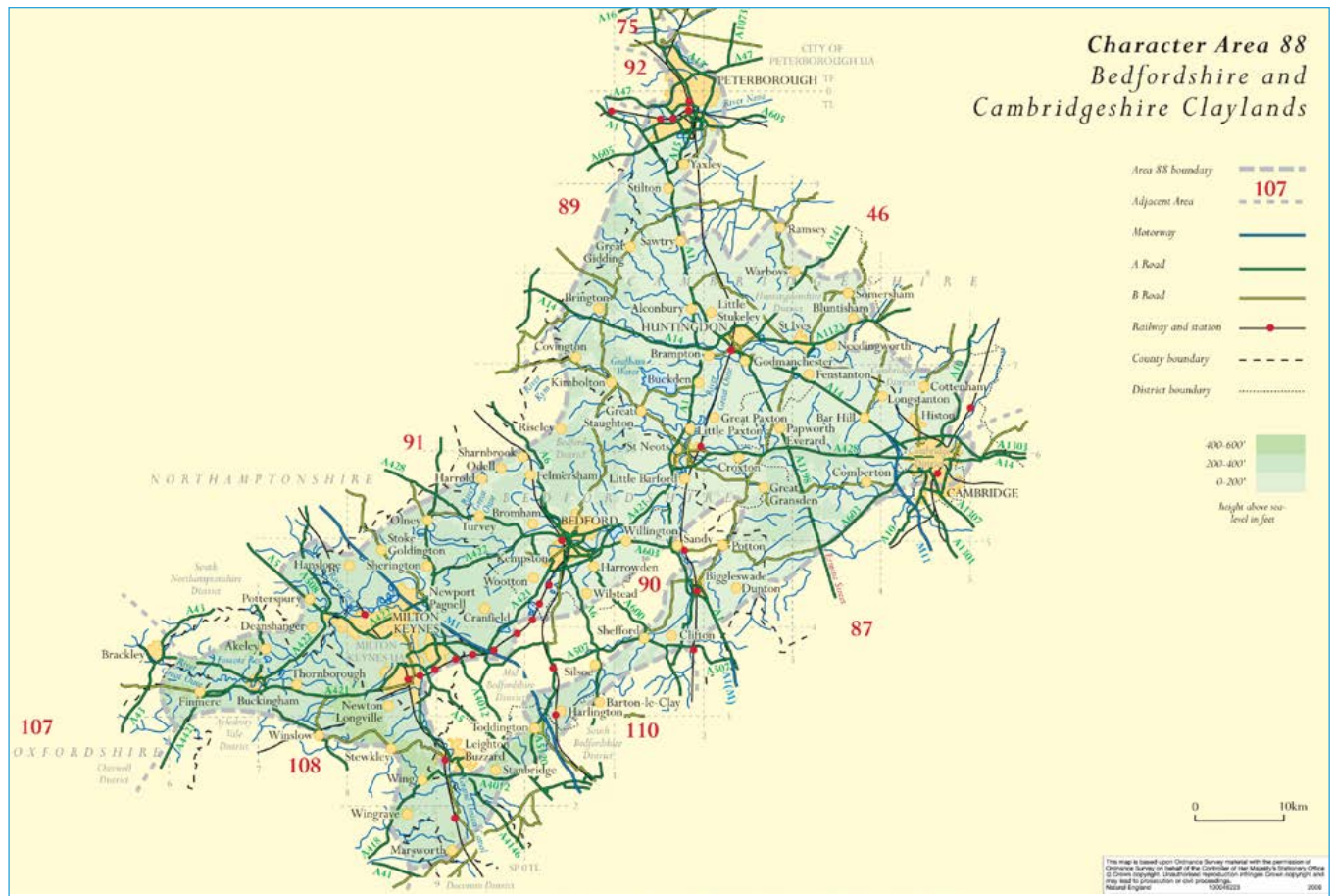


# Introduction

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 village of Weston Underwood, overlooking the valley of the Great Ouse, showing the curved profiles of field boundaries and routeways responding to the form of medieval strip fields: much of the medieval ridge and furrow remains in fields close to the village. Many of the houses and farmsteads were rebuilt, often on amalgamated plots, in the 16th to 18th centuries. In the foreground are the earthworks of a moated manorial enclosure and fishponds dating from the early 14th century. Photo © Historic England 29337/016



This map shows the Bedfordshire and Cambridge Claylands, with the numbers of 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.

These claylands comprise most of central and northern Bedfordshire and western Cambridgeshire. It is a gently undulating lowland landscape with expansive views of large-scale arable farmland. More than 12% of the Character Area is urban and 2.4% is woodland, particularly clustered in a band to the north of the area. A very small percentage (0.1%) is within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

## Historic character

- Farmsteads developed within villages, on the sites of shrunken medieval settlements in the wolds and within fields enclosed by hedgerows from open fields from the 15th century and sometimes earlier.
- Farmsteads and their buildings testify to the historic importance of arable agriculture across this area. Medium to large-scale courtyard plans are predominant, the largest and most regular in their plan form being concentrated in landscapes of large-scale and regular enclosure by low thorn hedgerows. Large barns, often two or even more to a farmstead, stables, cart sheds and granaries comprise the key building types.
- The use of limestone for stone walling and slate roofing is a highly distinctive feature of the area within and bordering the limestone belt to the north. The widespread use of brick and tile on farmsteads rebuilt in the 19th century lends a strong 'Midlands' character to the farmsteads of this area. The area to the south and east of the Bedfordshire Greensand Ridge, and extending from Bedford to Huntingdon, has a distinct historic character which it shares with adjacent areas in East Anglia and the south-east of England – aisled barns, including some of medieval date, timber-frame clad in weatherboarding, the use of colour-washed render and long straw thatch.

## Significance

- Traditional farmsteads have been subject to much 20th-century change, as farms restructured and fields were enlarged. Substantially complete examples are rare.
- Farmsteads built for estates, of notable importance being the Bedford estate, include some of the most complete examples of planned farmstead layouts of the 'High Farming' period of the 1840s to 1870s in England.
- Barns of the 17th century and earlier are of particular rarity in a national context, and aisled barns form part of the major concentration of these building types in England (extending into southern East Anglia and the South East).
- There are some rare surviving examples of pre-1750 small-scale (typically three-bay) village-based barns.
- Earth-walled buildings, which survive in this area, are rare in a national context.

## 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 (33.3%, the national average being 32%).

## Historic development

- There is extensive evidence for prehistoric cultivation and settlement, especially on the lighter soils of the Ivel and Ouse valleys. Corn production, often boosted by the folding of large flocks of sheep, developed across large parts of this area from the medieval period.
- The fragmentation of village-based farming began with the increase in the value of sheep pasture and enforced depopulations in the 15th and 16th centuries. It concluded with reapportionment of the townships by general enclosure (private agreements and parliamentary acts) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.
- Good transport by road and river, with access to the London market, aided the export of farm produce. Huntingdon, Bedford and

Peterborough, all crossing points on major rivers, developed as centres of administration, commerce and religious authority from the medieval period onwards. In recent decades, new residential and commercial developments have encircled the historic cores. Transport and commercial development are now major components of the area's character - with particular nodes along the corridors of the A1, M1 and A14 – and Milton Keynes developed from the 1970s as a new urban development.

- Post-medieval and modern industry is a significant factor across much of the area, including the historic and active brickworks of Marston Vale and Peterborough, and the extensive gravel quarries following the terraces of the Rivers Ouse and Ivel.

## Landscape and settlement

- There is a strong contrast between those areas historically dominated by villages and those where, in particular to the north of the Ouse, villages are intermixed with medium to high levels of dispersed settlement (isolated farmsteads, moated medieval sites and secondary 'End' settlements) which date from the 12th and 13th centuries.
- Throughout the area there are fragmentary survivals of remnant ridge and furrow. Farmsteads can be found sited close to abandoned medieval settlements or remaining on the sites of shrunken settlements.
- Ancient woodland survives in numerous small fragments, clustered on parish boundaries and river margins, in areas related to ancient deer parks and chases, such as Salcey Forest or Yardley Chase, and in larger areas of managed estate woodland.

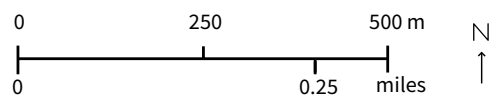
- The patterns of historic enclosure, although fragmented by considerable post-1950 boundary loss, display strong contrasts between:
  - irregular enclosures of pre-18th century origin, reflecting both the variety of medieval land holdings and the early (15th-16th century) enclosure for pasture from former common arable
  - the characteristic ruler-straight boundaries and medium-scale fields brought about by general enclosure, where pre-1750 farmstead buildings are very rare.



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



## East End

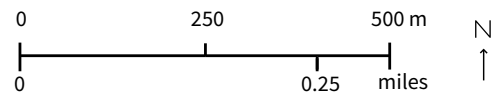
East End is a loose cluster of farmsteads which, although bearing a place name, are not sufficiently clustered to be regarded as a hamlet. The farmsteads are surrounded by generally small to medium-sized, irregular fields representing piecemeal enclosure and possibly some assarting from woodland, a process that was largely completed by the 14th century. The medieval origins of the site of the Manor House are indicated by the presence of a moat. The farmsteads are all of courtyard plan, the two largest being the regular multi-yard groups and the others having linked ranges to form an L-plan element with other detached buildings.



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



## Eltisley

Eltisley is a polyfocal settlement consisting of three 'Ends' and the focal point of the green around which several farmsteads were clustered. Manor Farm, between Potton End and Caxton End, was a moated site, evidently of medieval origins. Additionally, the site of the abbey to the south of the church and Pond Farm on the east side of the green were also moated and there is an abandoned moated site within the woodland south of Manor Farm. Most of the farmsteads consist of a single yard with buildings to three or four sides, sometimes including linked ranges to form an L-plan element although two of the larger farms are regular multi-yard plan groups. Some of the boundaries of the fields around the settlement have a slight wave to their line, for example in the south-east corner of the area, suggesting that these fields were enclosed by agreement from the common fields. Former strip fields may also be indicated by the jagged field boundaries in the area to the east of Eltisley which may mark the lines of the headlands of the strip fields. The presence of some straight boundaries suggests that there has been some reorganisation of the earlier enclosed fields.



Barns and former farmhouses are a distinctive feature of the villages across the area. Photo © Bob Edwards

## Farmstead and building types

There is medium survival of pre-1750 farmstead buildings in a national context, particularly farmhouses but also including medieval and later barns.

### Farmstead types

- Medium to large-scale courtyard farmsteads are dominant, which either evidence piecemeal rebuilding over centuries or planned development by estates.
- Brick-built estate and model farms belonging to large landowners such as the Duke of Bedford are a significant feature of the reorganised farming landscapes of the late 18th to mid-19th century. These were often

redeveloped in the 19th century (mostly in the High Farming period of the 1840s to '70s) as U- or E-plan steadings with large barns, combined cart shed and granary ranges and south-facing cattle courts. Some had steam-powered engine houses incorporated into large 'mixing barn' ranges for powering machinery for threshing corn and preparing animal feed.

### Building Types

- The character of the farmsteads south and east of the Bedfordshire Greensand Ridge, and east of a line from Bedford to Huntingdon (where the farming landscapes retains earlier patterns of piecemeal enclosure), has a markedly 'East Anglian' character, with a higher survival of early timber-framed barns, with stables and detached granaries or cart shed-granaries. Barns often have later cattle accommodation added on in the form of lean-tos or outshots.
- Elsewhere there is the same mix of building types, but the impact of rebuilding in the 19th century is far more evident as earlier barns are far rarer.
- There are some rare surviving examples of 18th-century field barns which were worked from village-based farmsteads.
- Dairying developed in small areas, the evidence for this being more evident in the plan form of houses than in working farm buildings. Some onion sheds dating from the mid-19th century survive from the horticultural industry that developed around Bedford, a unique grouping of these buildings in a national context.





Mid-19th-century, loose courtyard farmstead at Eltisley, contrasting with the 17th-century or earlier farmhouse with its thatched roof to the rear. Most smaller farmsteads in this area have lost their working buildings. Photo © Historic England 27927/045



Manor Farm at Eltisley, showing the 15th- to 17th-century house and threshing barns set within a 12th- or 13th-century moated site. The date of the buildings indicates that the loose courtyard form had been established at an early date, later buildings responding to this overall layout. Photo © Historic England 27927/067





A farmstead on the Duke of Bedford estate at Millbrook south of Bedford. The seventh Duke was responsible for a programme of rebuilding on most of his farms between the 1840s and 1870s, the result being the development of a distinctive, planned farming landscape with regular courtyard farmsteads in the parishes surrounding Woburn. Note the straight thorn hedges, the house facing away from the farmstead and towards the main drive, and the chimney stack that served the engine house. Many of the fields around these farmsteads were enlarged and reorganised at the same time, sometimes for steam-powered ploughs. Photos © Mike Williams/Historic England



Loose courtyard farmsteads with working buildings to three or four sides of the yard are dominant across the area. The importance of arable farming can be evidenced by the survival of two or even more barns of 18th-century or earlier date. Cattle trod down straw within these yards, and sheltered in the lee of these barns against which lean-to shelter sheds might be built. This is a typical type of arrangement found in south-east England and southern East Anglia. Photo © Bob Edwards





Early barns could also be integrated into large-scale regular courtyard layouts that mostly date from rebuilding in the early to mid-19th century. Here a relatively small-scale three-bay barn with a half-hipped roof (another distinctive characteristic of traditional architecture in the south-east of England and southern East Anglia) is attached to a large, five-bay cart shed that faces into the road and away from the internal cattle yard. Photo © Bob Edwards



A large, medieval aisled barn on a manor farm at the centre of a Cambridgeshire village. The barn has a later attached shelter shed for cattle. Photo © Bob Edwards



Barns from the 15th to 18th centuries are often associated with timber-framed houses of 17th-century or earlier date. Photo © Bob Edwards



Large, 19th-century combination barns, which incorporated crop storage, mixing houses for steam-powered threshing and feed positioned in proximity to stables and cattle yards, are found throughout the area, reflecting the influence of great estates. Photo © Bob Edwards



The use of yellow brick reflects the importance of the area's brickworks, as here combined with red brick detail in this stable and cartshed range in the south of the area. Photo © Bob Edwards



Late 19th-century hay and straw barns, which stored this produce for export to towns as well as use on farms, are a feature of this area. Photos © Bob Edwards

## Materials and detail

- Traditional building materials vary considerably across the area, from dominance of limestone (including very fine barns) north of the River Ouse to the subtle distinctions in clay tile and brick found to the south and east.
- Timber-frame is commonly clad in weatherboarding. There is some occasional use of colour-washed render to the east of Bedford, part of a tradition that is concentrated in the claylands of East Anglia and most commonly survives on houses.
- There are some rare surviving examples of long straw thatch.
- Some earth walling survives, in clay lump and cob, of mostly 19th-century date.





# Historic England

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Jeremy Lake with Bob Edwards.

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Landscapes Project**, led by English Heritage  
(now Historic England), has mapped the historic  
character, survival and use of farmsteads  
across the whole region which includes this  
NCA. For the Summary Report of 2009 see  
[https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/  
publications/west-midlands-farmsteads-  
landscapes/](https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/west-midlands-farmsteads-landscapes/)

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