



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

# Upper Thames Clay Vales and Midvale Ridge

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 108/9



## 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>).

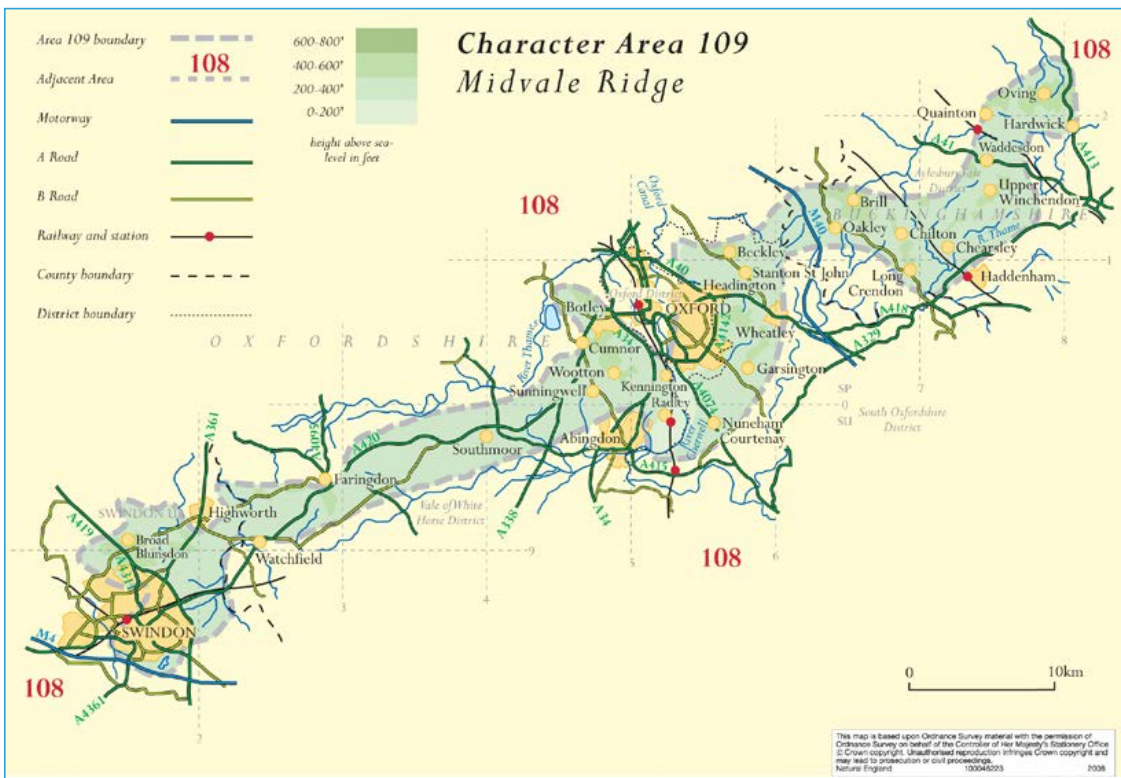
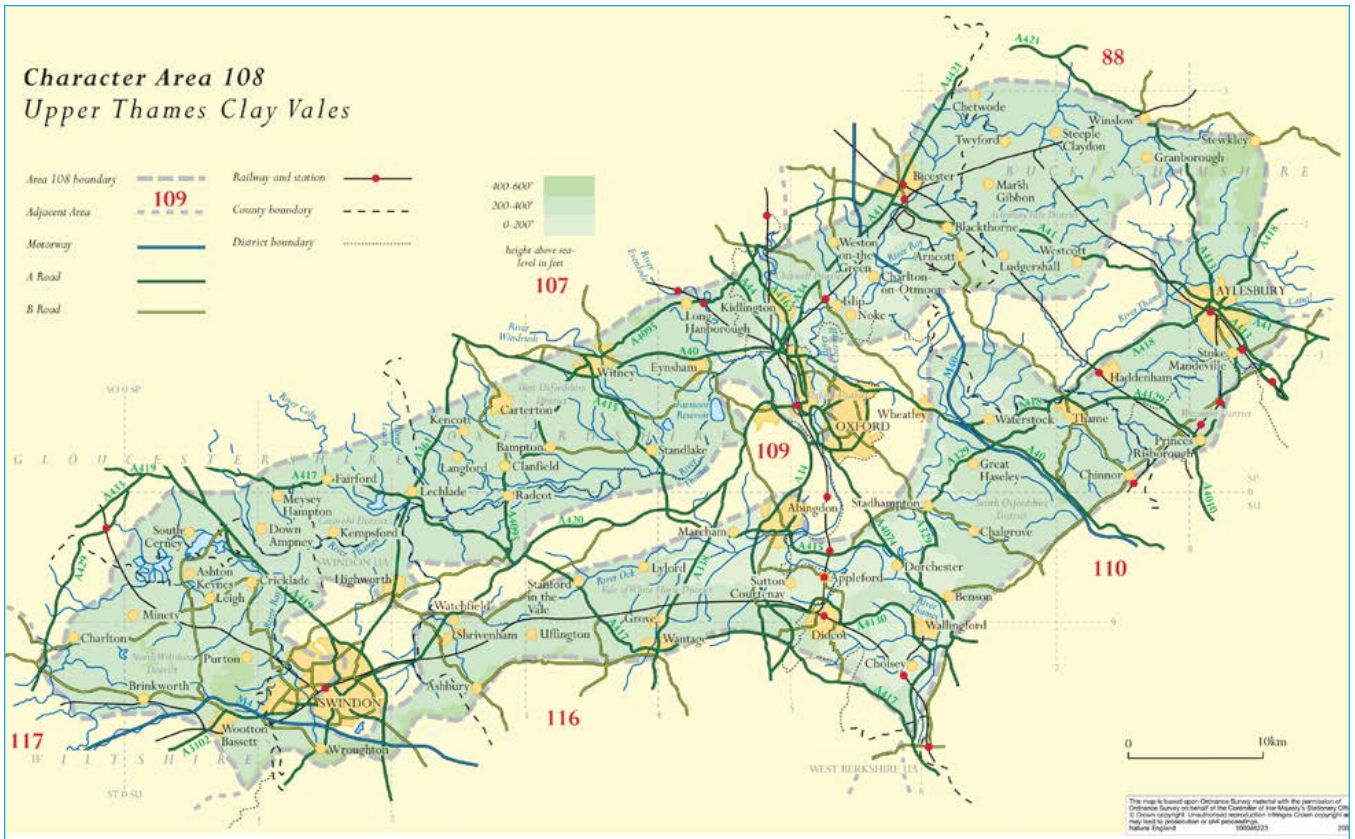


Isolated farmsteads and their landscapes can also reflect the successive growth and reorganisation of arable-based farms across much of this area, as here on the Kirtlington estate south of Bicester in Oxfordshire. Most of the farmland around the farmstead was reorganised with regular and large-scale field enclosures. Photo © Historic England 27293/028

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**Front cover:** The village of Great Coxwell, where most of the parish's farmsteads were located in the medieval period. One of the fields (to the left) still retains the narrow profile of a medieval strip field. The patchwork of straight and wavy field boundaries reflects the successive reorganisation and enlargement of farms, after the piecemeal and planned enclosure of the medieval open fields and common land. At the far end of the photograph is the medieval barn of Great Coxwell which is also illustrated. Photo © Historic England Archive 27293 028





These maps show the Upper Thames Clay Vales (above) and Midvale Ridge (below), with the numbers of neighbouring National Character Areas around them

# Summary

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

The Upper Thames Clay Vales covers an extensive area of low-lying land extending from west of Swindon through to Aylesbury in the east. It includes: Vale of White Horse, Aylesbury Vale, Wiltshire and Oxfordshire Vales and Buckinghamshire Southern Vale. A small portion of this area to the south-east lies in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The Midvale Ridge is a low, irregular outcrop of limestone within Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, rising above the surrounding clay vales. It runs approximately from the 19th-century railway town of Swindon in the west to north of Aylesbury in the east and is cut by the Thames Valley at Oxford.

## Historic character

- These are generally areas of nucleated settlement and there is a low density of farmsteads in the landscape. Most isolated farmsteads date from the movement of farmsteads out of villages in the 18th and early 19th centuries. In the south-east of the area around the former royal forest of Braydon, there is a higher proportion of dispersed settlement associated with piecemeal enclosure in the 16th and 17th centuries and later enclosure of common.
- Medium to large-scale, loose and regular courtyard plans are predominant, often incorporating an L-plan barn range that has been extended over time.
- Farmstead buildings testify to the importance of arable agriculture across much of this area. Barns are typically of five bays with a central threshing floor, but many have been extended in-line or into L-shaped ranges. Shelter sheds for cattle, either free-standing or built against barns, and stables with first-floor granaries are common. There are some outfarms and field barns of 19th-century date.
- The southern fringe of the Midvale Ridge forms the edge of the limestone belt, and borders the Chilterns to the east and the chalk downlands to the south. This line represents a major difference in historic character; the Midvale Ridge and northwards is distinguished by the use of stone rubble walling and stone slate roofing, the use of timber-frame, brick and tile increasing along its southern fringe and becoming dominant to its south. Aisled barns in this latter area mark the north-western border of their concentration in south-east England and southern East Anglia.

## Significance

- Farmsteads Mapping shows that there is a generally low survival of historic farmsteads, with only barns commonly surviving. In the Upper Thames Clay Vales 41% of recorded farmsteads (in Wiltshire) retain more than 50% of their historic form. In the Midvale Ridge, just 17% of recorded farmsteads (in Wiltshire) retain their historic form but this is probably higher than across the remainder of the area due to the growth of Swindon.
- There is a very low survival of pre-1700 working farm buildings in these areas; only 9% of recorded farmsteads in Wiltshire have a pre-

1700 farmhouse, and only 1% have a pre-1700 working building.

- Some very rare examples survive of 17th-century and earlier farmstead groups (most commonly with early barns) which relate to isolated and village-edge manorial and medieval estate farms.
- There are some very rare surviving examples of 18th-century or earlier cow houses and also of combination barns with cattle housing or stabling at one end.
- Timber-framing often survives under later re-facing in stone and brick.
- Some significant of straw thatch for roofing survives, and some very rare survivals of solid thatch.
- Any earth-built unconverted buildings, including 'witchert' as used to the east in Buckinghamshire, are of extreme rarity.

## 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 (32.7%, the

national average being 32%). Observation shows that the rate of conversion, and the intensity of alteration to farmstead buildings, is particularly high across the Midvale Ridge.

## Historic development

- Generally, this was an area of mixed farming where extensive arable cropping was combined with dairying. Arable combined with stock fattening was especially important on the well-drained limestone of the Midvale Ridge. Dairying, particularly in the Buckinghamshire vales where butter was exported for the London market, was a significant element of the farming throughout the clay vales. The vales had extensive meadow land whilst Otmoor north of Oxford provided summer and autumn grazing.
- Major urban centres developed at Oxford from the 13th century – its colleges continuing to hold land inherited from this period – and the railway town of Swindon to the west. Access to navigable rivers, the canal network (for example the Oxford Canal completed in 1790) and the railways stimulated the production of goods for transport to London in particular. Development in the 20th century has been a major factor along the main transport routes, especially in the vicinity of the major urban settlements.

## Landscape and settlement

- Settlement predominantly consists of nucleated villages, most of which were established by the 11th century, with low levels of dispersed hamlets and farmsteads. Farmsteads mostly developed within the villages, and worked open fields on a three-course system of the Midland kind, evidenced by some significant survival of ridge and furrow. Villages changed their form as larger farmsteads developed within or on the edge of them, in the case of the former absorbing the plots of earlier holdings. Fields with species-rich boundaries, sometimes following the curve of medieval plough strips, are concentrated around villages.
- There are areas of pre-18th-century, irregular piecemeal enclosure, particularly in the vales and close to settlements. There are some earlier isolated farmstead groups including medieval high-status (including manorial) farmsteads and some that developed next to the earthworks of villages that were partly or wholly abandoned in the 14th and 15th centuries.

- Extensive enclosure of much of this area was not formalised by parliamentary acts until the late 18th and 19th centuries. Boundary reorganisation and removal in the 19th and 20th centuries has affected large areas, in combination with the development of large isolated farmsteads. As a result, most isolated farmsteads are associated with this late phase of enclosure.
- There is little woodland in the area; much of it was cleared by the 11th century and now small woods, tree clumps and hedgerow trees are typical.
- In the south-west of the Upper Thames Clay Vale there were larger areas of common pasture derived from the royal forest of Braydon. Enclosure commenced in the 17th century but large areas remained unenclosed until the 19th century.

## Farmstead and building types

There is a medium survival of pre-1750 farm buildings within the area.

### Farmstead types

- Medium to large-scale loose and regular courtyard plans are predominant, often incorporating an L-plan barn range that has been extended over time.
- Small farmsteads and small-holdings are found in the area of the former royal forest of Braydon.

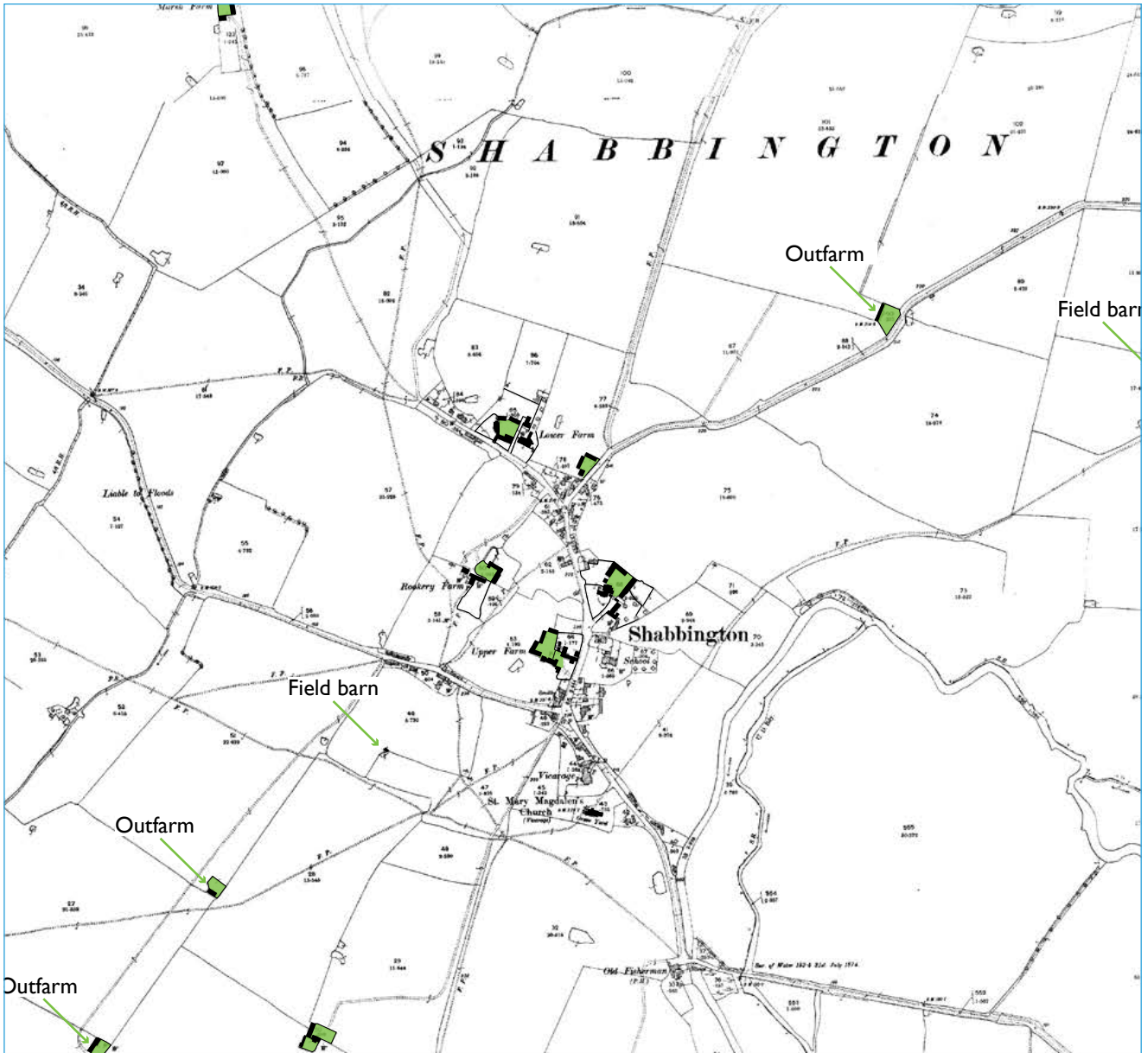
### Building types

- Barns are typically of five bays with central threshing floor and usually of a 19th-century date.
- There are some rare surviving combination barns of 18th-century and earlier date in the Vale of the White Horse, with cattle housing or stabling at one end.
- Shelter sheds for cattle are either free-standing or built against barns.
- Some very rare examples of 18th-century or earlier cow houses survive, and also of combination barns with cattle housing or stabling at one end.
- Stables with first-floor granaries are common.
- Some outfarms and field barns are of 19th-century date.
- Dairies were often incorporated into the farmhouse, in an outshot to the rear or at one end of the house.



Great Coxwell Barn, built in around 1300 during the peak period in the growth of medieval estates, is one of only three barns (the others are at Shilton in Oxfordshire and Beaulieu St Leonards in Hampshire) that have survived out of 27 which the Cistercian monks of Beaulieu Abbey owned on its Dissolution in 1538. It is aisled, and the porch accommodated a granger (who supervised the barn's business) and a stable. It formed the focus of a large farm of several hundred acres. The house and the other working buildings (including a stable and first-floor granary marked by its external steps) survive from the post-Dissolution farmstead. Photo © Historic England

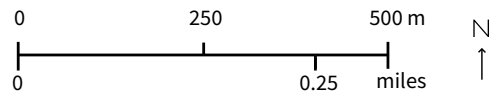




Maps are based on 2nd edition 25" Ordnance Survey maps, which show farmsteads after the last major phase in the building of traditional farmsteads in England. © Crown Copyright [and database rights] 2020. OS 100024900

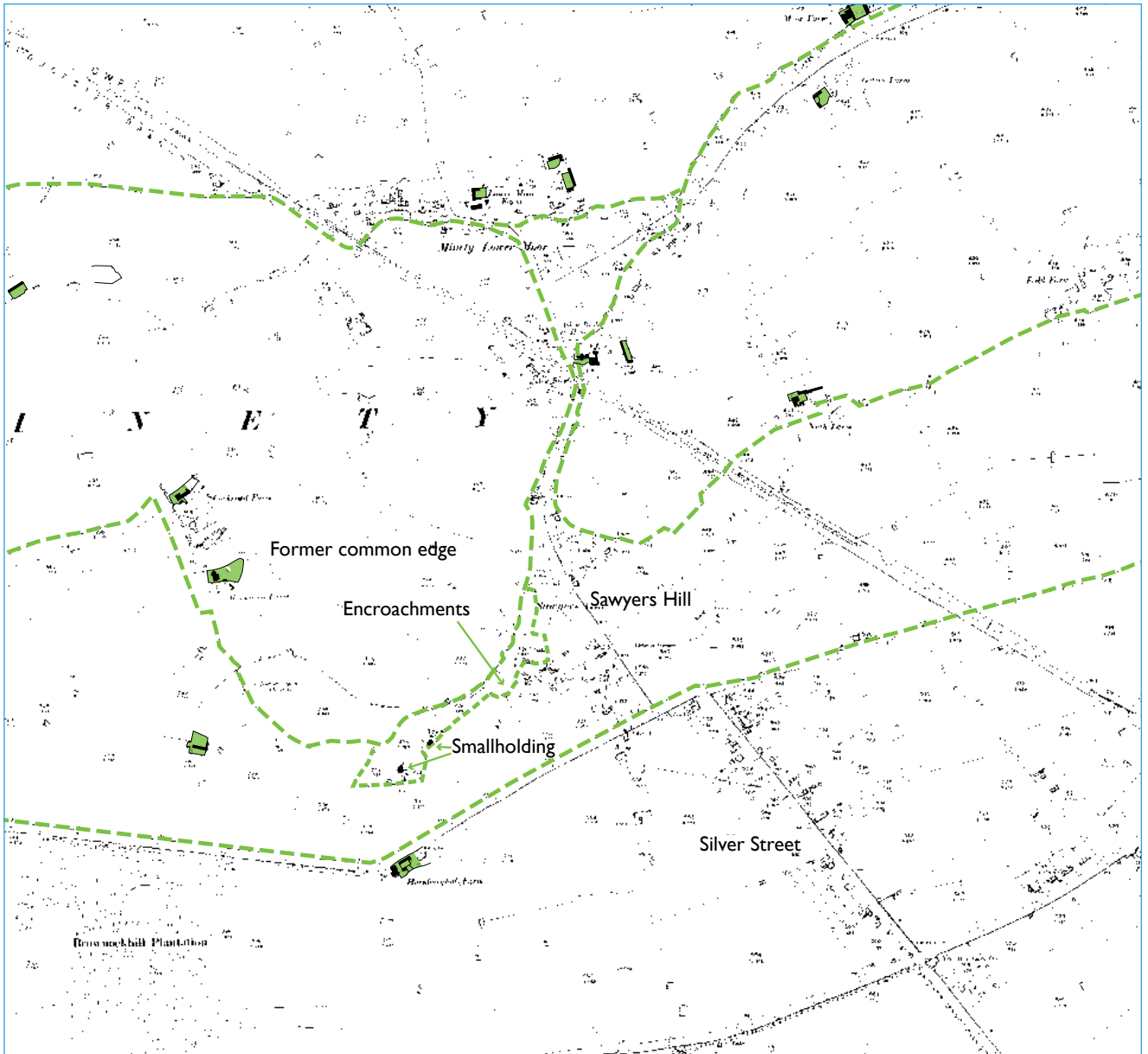


Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



### Shabbington (Midvale Ridge)

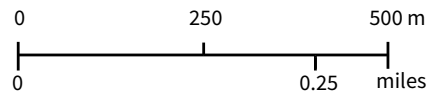
Farmsteads in this character area are predominantly clustered together in nucleated villages. Surrounding the villages are fields which are largely the product of the piecemeal enclosure of the open fields and meadow. After enclosure most farms remained in the village and outfarms or field barns were built in the distant fields although there are some isolated farmsteads, some of earlier origin and some representing movement of the farmstead to the area of new enclosures. Modern development within villages such as Shabbington has often resulted in the loss of complete farmsteads or with just the farmhouse surviving. These houses sometimes contain elements of pre-1700 buildings but externally have the appearance of 18th- or 19th-century houses.



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.



### Lower Minety (Upper Thames Clay Vales)

In the south-west of the Upper Thames Clay Vales there are higher numbers of scattered farmsteads. Fields also tend to be smaller in scale and can reflect a considerable range of ages and forms of enclosure within quite small areas. Minety Lower Moor lies on the edge of an area of former common. It is possible to trace episodes of enclosure and encroachment onto the common: Lower Moor Farm and The Moor Farm are sited on the edge of the medieval common with piecemeal enclosure of strip fields to the north. Piecemeal enclosure of the adjacent common produced medium-sized irregular fields: some of these are sited within an 'island' containing several farms including Gibbs Farm and Field Farm leaving Minety Lower Moor as an open area linked by a driftway which typically fanned out onto the unenclosed common at Sawyers Hill. Small encroachments by squatters on the new edge of the common can be seen north of Hornburyhill Farm. The road running from the west to Silver Street and continuing east along a track probably marks the southern edge of another phase of enclosure with the last phase being completed in the early 19th century and led to the creation of Silver Street with a series of smallholdings and small houses.





This farmstead was provided with a covered yard in 1858, soon after this innovative farmstead plan – which housed fatstock cattle and conserved their manure from the elements – was introduced during the so-called ‘High Farming’ period of the mid 19th century. Photo © Historic England 27293/028



Working buildings within settlements were frequently attached to farmhouses, a feature of farmstead planning found elsewhere in the villages of the limestone belt. The house typically faces the main routeway, and to the rear is the main yard. Photo © Jeremy Lake



In rare circumstances linear farmsteads (where the whole farmstead comprises a house and attached in-line working buildings) are encountered within settlements. They represent the rare survivals of a probably once common type of small farmstead. They are only encountered around heaths and commons in this part of England, but are common in the pastoral north and west of the country. Photo © Historic England 26953/034



The L-shaped range of barns at Cogges Manor, Witney, developed over the late 17th and 18th centuries, leaving the much smaller 17th-century barn (right) to be converted into a stable. This type of development is repeated across the area. The building materials are typical for the limestone belt. Photos © Jeremy Lake





The service ends to some small early 18th-century and earlier houses (to the left of this example Standlake south of Witney) may have originated as working farm buildings. Photo © Jeremy Lake



This oxhouse is an extremely rare example of a building for draught oxen, which had been replaced by horses over most of this area by the 18th century. Photo © Jeremy Lake



This example in the hamlet of Cote has shelter sheds for cattle attached to the threshing barn, again forming an L-plan in the corner of the yard. Note the use of clay tile with limestone rubble walls, a typical feature on the southern fringe of the Midvale Ridge. Photo © Jeremy Lake



Many courtyard farmsteads developed around three or four sides of the yard. This example in the south of the area, in weatherboarded timber frame and tile, has two sides of the yard covered by an L-plan range with a barn and flanking stables and cattle housing. Photo © Jeremy Lake



A combination barn which incorporates a threshing barn and stable along the southern fringe of the Midvale Ridge, again with its characteristic combination of stone rubble walling and clay tile roof. Photo © Jeremy Lake



A barn (centre), dovecote (left) and stable remain from this formerly extensive loose courtyard group on the edge of Steventon. Photo © Jeremy Lake





A timber-framed barn with a thatched roof in Charney Bassett to the south of the Midvale Ridge, where the use and survival of timber frame increases. Photo © Jeremy Lake



The 15th-century aisled barn at Ewelme close to the border with the Chilterns. Photo © Jeremy Lake



Tudor House in East Hagbourne. Attached to this fine late 17th-century house - and with a prominent frontage to the village street - is an L-plan agricultural range including stables, granary and aisled barn which together display the agricultural wealth derived from arable farming. East Hagbourne and other villages in this area supplied cherries and other fruit to London by the 17th century. Photo © Jeremy Lake

## Materials and detail

There are strong distinctions between:

- The southern fringe extending up to the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs and also to the east of Oxford, where the farmstead and rural architecture displays the key characteristics of rural architecture in the south-east of England – hipped as well as half-hipped roofs combined with timber-frame, brick and some walls and buildings in earth.
- The use of limestone for walls and slate roofing along, around and north of the Midvale Ridge, which is part of a building tradition that extends into the Cotswolds and where timber-frame only rarely survives.
- Brick and clay tile were widely used across both areas.
- Timber-framing was extensively used in the clay vales, and often survives under later re-facing in stone and brick.
- There are some significant survivals of straw thatch for roofing, and some very rare survivals of solid thatch.
- Witchert, a chalky marl mixed with straw, is particular to Buckinghamshire whilst earth walling is used across parts of Oxfordshire. Chalk blocks or ‘clunch’ quarried from the chalk hills has some limited use.





# Historic England

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

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