



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

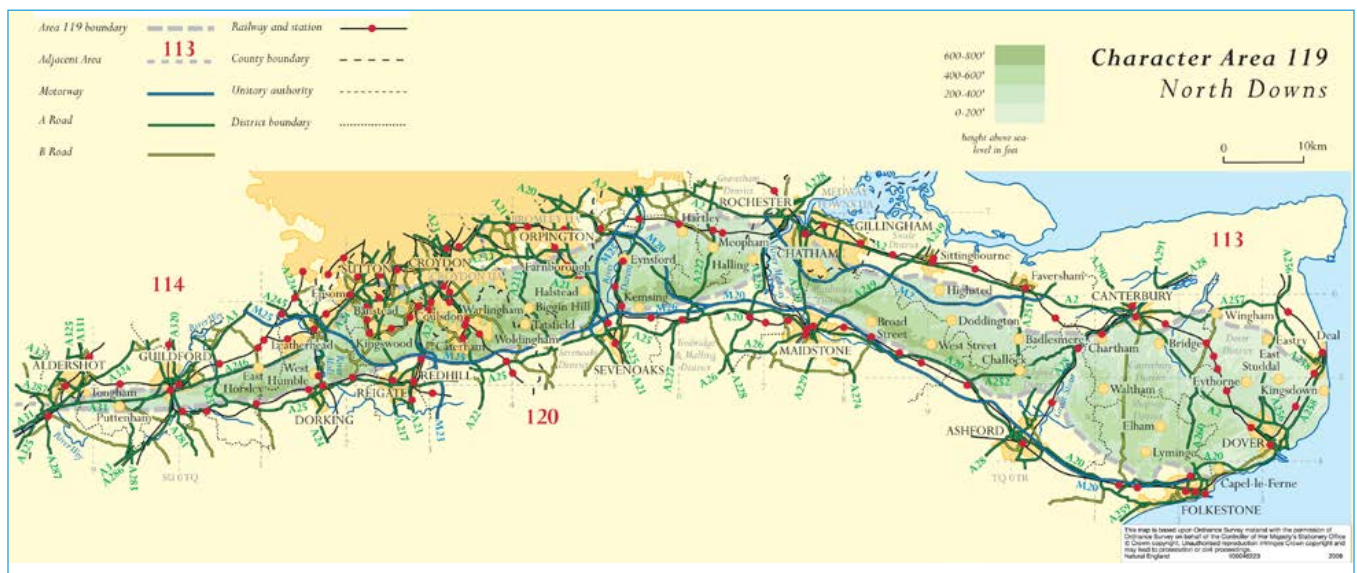
North Downs

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 119



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 map shows the North Downs, with the numbers of neighbouring National Character Areas around it.

Front cover: Large-scale courtyard farmsteads which developed around the medieval church at Nackington, south of Canterbury in the eastern part of the area. Photo © Historic England 27201/017

Summary

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

The North Downs forms a chain of chalk hills extending from the narrow ridge of the Hog's Back in west Surrey into south London and across Kent, widening eastwards and terminating at the White Cliffs of Dover. Around 60% of the Character Area is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), divided between the Surrey Hills to the west and the Kent Downs to the east. The strong chalk topography gives unity to the North Downs landscape. Despite bordering and including several large towns, much of the area remains isolated and undeveloped as a result of the steep topography. Around 13% of the Character Area is classified as urban, with 56% in agricultural use. A relatively high proportion (15%) of the area is wooded.

Historic character

- Before the late 18th century, arable cultivation was a less dominant factor than across the other chalk downland of southern England.
- Medium to large-scale courtyard farmsteads are concentrated to the east and centre of the area, with large barns, stabling, granaries, cart sheds and cattle yards. Small-scale farmsteads have been subject to high rates of change over the 20th century and in the 19th century, when many lost out to larger, arable-based enterprises.
- Some outfarms are of 19th-century date.

Significance

- Of farmsteads recorded in the area, 72% retain some farmstead's character. However, only 42% retain more than 50% of their historic form, based on Ordnance Survey mapping of c.1900. This is below the average recorded in the south-east of England, and means that substantially intact farmstead groups are rare by national standards.
- The area has a high density, in a national context, of pre-1700 farm buildings. Of recorded farmsteads, 33% have a pre-1700 farmhouse and 6.8% have a pre-1700 working building. Of recorded farmsteads, 4.5% have both a pre-1700 farmhouse and one or more working buildings. These farmsteads, which are concentrated in the eastern and central part of Kent, are of particular significance.
- Farmsteads that retain unconverted oast houses, early to mid- 20th-century hop buildings and features such as hop-pickers huts are highly significant.
- Surviving small-scale farmsteads are extremely rare, as most were decoupled from agriculture in the 19th and 20th centuries.
- There are some rare surviving examples of straw thatch.

Present and future issues

- This area now has some of the largest corn-producing farms in England.
- In this National Character Area, the Photo Image Project (2006) recorded a high

proportion of listed working farm buildings converted to non-agricultural use (41.9%, the national average being 32%).

Area subdivisions

East Kent Arable Belt/North Chalk Downs

- The brickearth soils of the East Kent Downs – a triangular area between Dover, Deal and Canterbury with a higher concentration of larger estates – supported a major cereal growing economy. It had been largely stripped of its woodland by the 11th century.
- A small number of large late 14th- to early 16th-century houses relate to the emergence of wealthy farmers on the church estates from the 15th century. Large fields result from a piecemeal process of enclosure and reorganisation (especially in the 19th and 20th centuries).
- This is an area with a higher concentration of larger estates with parks such as Bifrons, Goodnestone and Fredville, where there is evidence of 19th-century farmstead improvements.

Clay-with-Flints – Central North Downs to Dover

- With more woodland, this area was more difficult to farm, and farms were generally smaller in scale. Large-scale, rentier farms developed in pockets of land – particularly the broad valleys and scarps – from the 15th century. There are more early buildings surviving to the west of the Stour, testifying to the prosperity of medium-scale farms extending in a north-south band down the centre of Kent.

- In the mid-19th century, and after 1950, large, arable-based farms developed across this area together with field enlargement and reorganisation, leaving a mix of regular and irregular boundaries.
- The area to the east retains more common, rough ground and downland, and was affected by extensive 19th- and 20th-century housing. The area to the west (south of Canterbury) and west of the Stour Valley has a higher incidence of woodland and less 19th- and 20th-century development.
- Orchards and hop gardens are concentrated in this area.
- Stour Valley has woodland and historic estate centres.

Surrey and West Kent Downs

- This is a more urbanised area with much 19th- and 20th-century settlement, long subject to influences from London, accessed by the M25 and M20.
- Generally, larger fields are linked to large arable farming and market gardening, with pre-18th-century wavy boundaries. Woodland is mixed with some earlier enclosure along scarp and valley sides.

Historic development

- The Kent Downs were more difficult to farm than most of the other chalk downland in southern England, due to large areas of clay with flints that supported woodland areas. Consequently, a smaller proportion of the higher downs was converted to arable than in most other downland areas, except in the richer East Kent Downs. In contrast to other chalk downland areas, large, extensive sheep walks are also a feature of the downs, due to the clay and woods, and tend to occur in smaller pockets on the edge of the scarp and the scarp face.
- The pace of enclosure and ploughing up of the higher downland for arable farming increased in the late 18th to early 19th centuries, when the Napoleonic Wars forced up wheat prices.
- Intensive arable cultivation continued until the late 1870s, when low wheat and wool prices forced some downland farmers to look to dairying, producing liquid milk for urban markets. Other farmers intensified wheat production, replacing sheep flocks with the new artificial fertilizers that were available, which in turn allowed more downland to be ploughed up.
- Since 1940, this area has further developed into one of the most intensely-cultivated arable areas in England.

Landscape and settlement

- There is a predominantly dispersed settlement pattern of isolated farmsteads and hamlets, established by the 9th century and sometimes earlier, set in anciently enclosed landscapes carved out of woodland and wood pasture.
- Large farmsteads, often manorial, can be found in close proximity to a medieval church or chapel representing the historic links between churches and manors.
- Settlement tends towards nucleation in the form of small villages to the east, with hamlets common across the central and western parts of the area. There are a number of small forstals (a place in front of a farmhouse to hold stock, perhaps to be milked) which later became synonymous with greens. The small hamlets around forstals or greens probably indicate the splitting of an original farm holding through gavelkind. In fact, many such hamlets here and in the Weald could have evolved in this way through the extended families dividing up and aggregating land.
- Away from these settlement cores, some of which grew into trading settlements or villages, there are isolated farmsteads and hamlets, some with small chapels and churches linked to mother churches in the Holmesdale valley or the river valleys such as the Stour and Medway.
- Isolated Court and Manor Farms associated with a church may represent shrunken settlement sites.
- Within the pattern of dispersed farmsteads there are small, nucleated villages; some on the higher parts of the area have 'Street' names, usually indicative of the medieval development of secondary settlements.
- There is a low density of very large-scale, isolated farmsteads in the landscape, resulting from the growth of large, capital-based farms and also the removal of the area's many small-scale farmsteads from agriculture in the 19th and 20th centuries.
- In the western part of the area, around and west of Sevenoaks, there is increased urban development.
- There is a high density, by national standards, of pre-1750 and pre-1550 buildings.

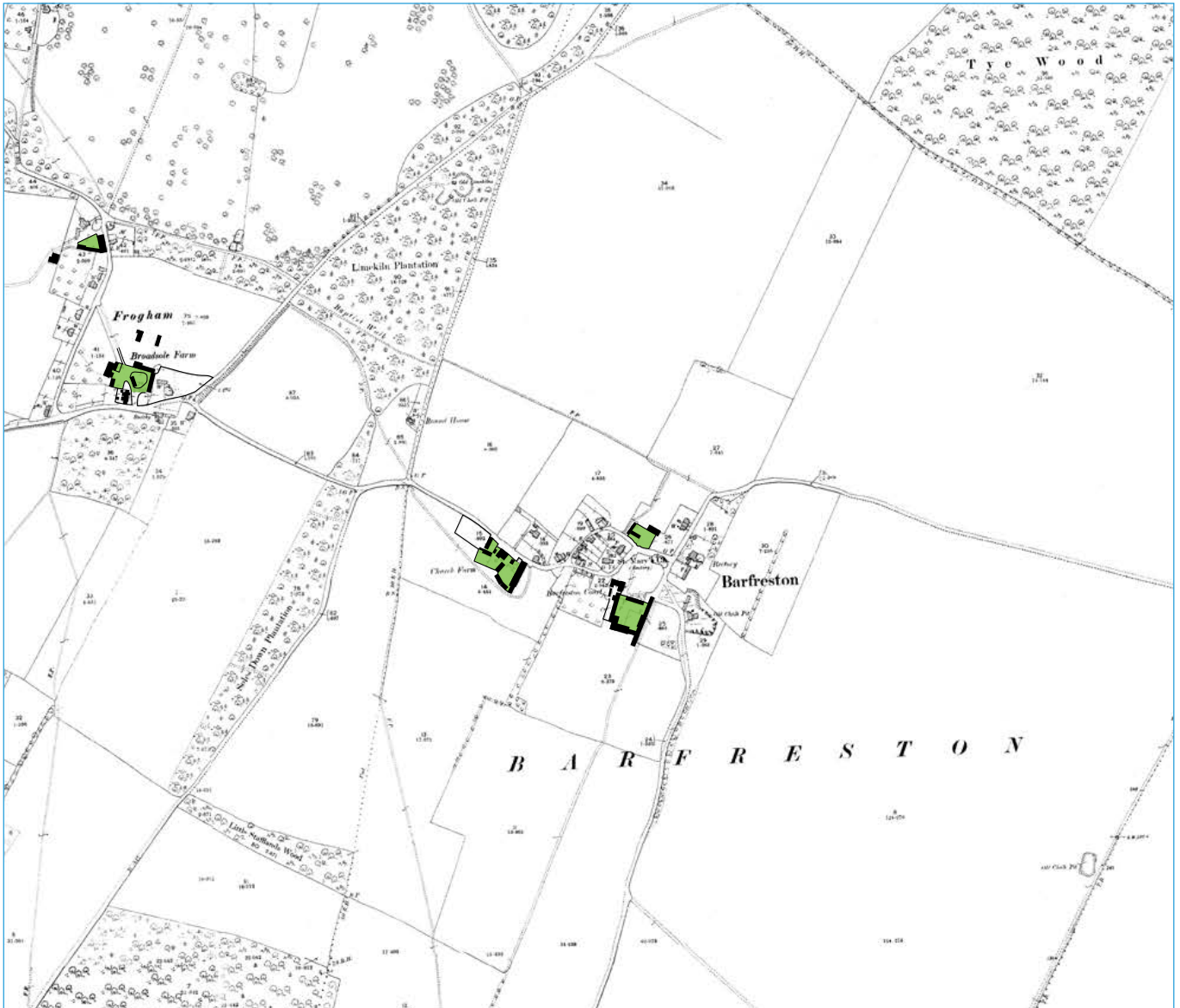
Farmstead and building types

Farmstead types


- Farmhouses are commonly detached and often face into their own garden area. Farmsteads with buildings attached to the house – in a linear plan or with a barn attached making an overall L-plan – are rare and possibly early survivals.
- Medium to large-scale courtyard farmsteads, mainly loose courtyard, are concentrated to the east and centre of the area, with large barns, stabling, granaries, cart sheds and cattle yards.
- Small, L-plan steadings with a barn and a later cattle shed attached at right angles are also widespread.
- Large, regular courtyard farmsteads also developed, especially on the highest parts of the downland, geared to arable production.
- Dispersed cluster and, to a lesser extent, dispersed multi-yard farmsteads are concentrated in the east of the area.
- Regular multi-yard plans are found across the area, but with a slightly higher density in the west.
- Larger, regular courtyard plan farmsteads – comprising full courtyard plans, some E-plans and steadings with covered yards – are rare.

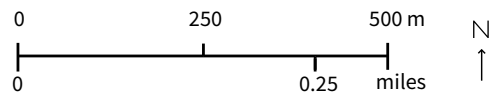
Building types

- In the chalklands and vales, large barns were built for storage and processing of the grain crop, and related to yards where straw and the manure from cattle was trodden down and redistributed to fertilise the fields.
- Increases in grain production and yields in the 18th and early 19th centuries often led to the construction of an additional barn and, in many cases, the enlargement and adaptation of earlier barns.
- Barns, typically of five bays, are mostly of 17th or 18th-century date but with a high concentration by national standards of earlier examples. These may retain evidence, either in partitions and floors or in evidence for lost partitions and floors, for upper-floor granaries or (although a more common feature in the Weald) the stalling of animals (primarily cattle).
- Barns were aisled or, more commonly, provided with a lean-to shed to at least one side, resulting in low eaves-lines, emphasising the mass of the roof over walling.
- Many barns have outshots for cattle added to the end or sides (or both), with separate entrances to the yard and no communication into the barn.
- Mid 19th-century barns built with brick and flint or brick are either unaisled or split-level combination barns.
- Granaries are typically of 18th or 19th century date, timber-framed and set on staddle stones. On larger farms the granary was often incorporated with the oast house or above a cart shed.
- Stables could be built within the ends of barns or as detached structures. Stables mostly date from the late 18th or 19th centuries, earlier examples being very rare.
- Cattle were housed within the yards, or in shelter sheds and cow houses. These are mostly of 19th-century date, and may be found added to an earlier barn or detached and associated with individual yard areas.
- A small number of late 18th or early 19th century outfarms survive on the downs, typically with barn and flanking shelter sheds facing into yards.
- Field barns are mostly 19th century but some may be much earlier in date.



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

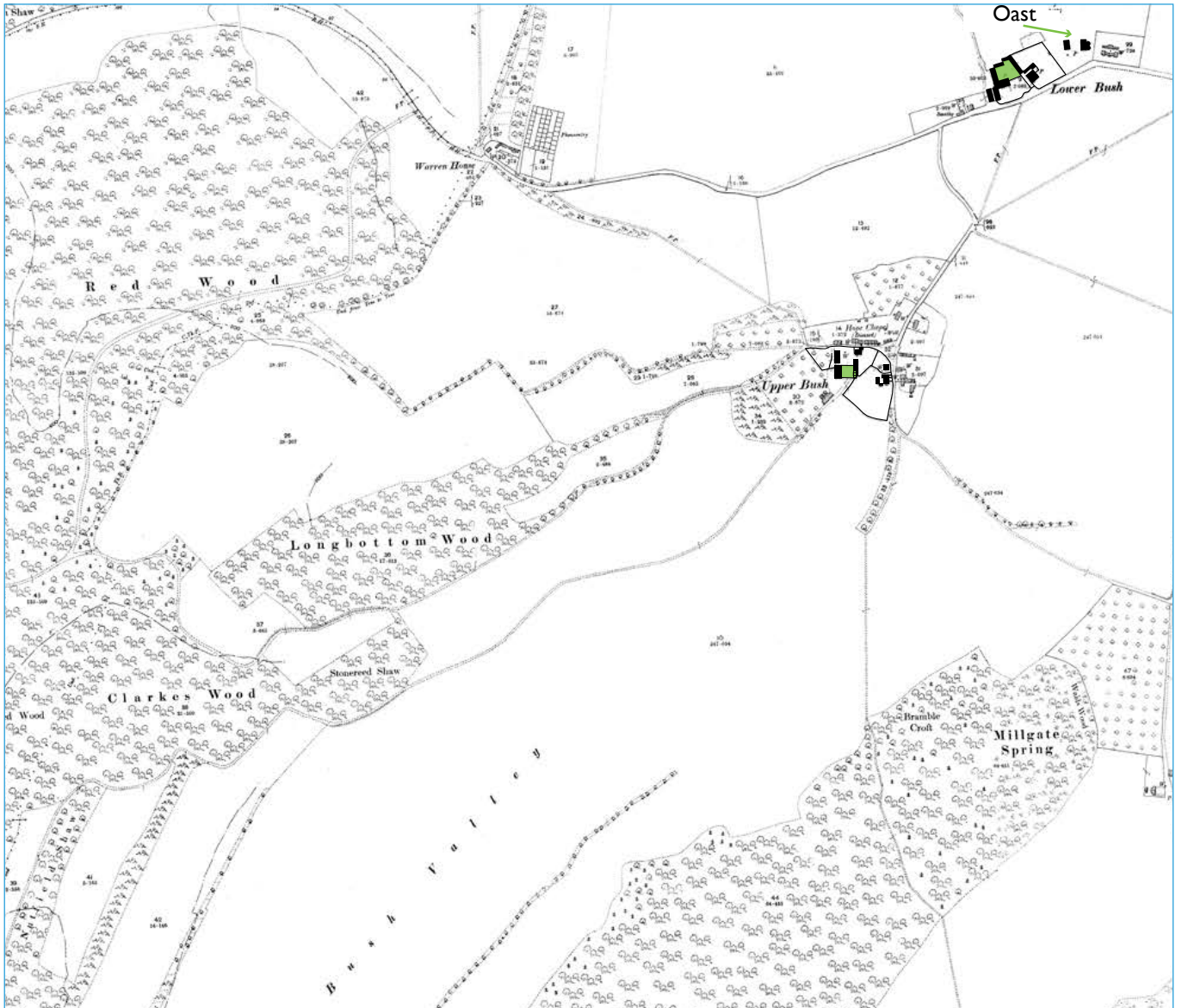
 Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



Barfreston

The small village of Barfreston in the eastern downs lies within a dry valley running south-west to north-east. Within the village there are two large, high-status farmsteads, and Court Farm, with at least one other small farmstead. Whilst the two large farmsteads are probably of medieval date, no medieval buildings survive. Church Farm has lost most of its historic buildings; only the 18th-century house and a staddle granary remain. Court Farm was rebuilt, forming a large loose courtyard with buildings to all sides of the yard in the mid-19th century. Surrounding the village are small closes with larger, regular fields along the valley and on the valley sides. The larger blocks of woodland are typical of the North Downs and contrast to most of the other downland areas of southern England. To the north-west is the hamlet of Frogham, probably of medieval origin.

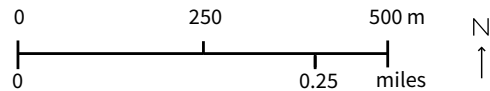




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Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



The North Downs

The North Downs differed from most of the other chalk down areas in southern England in the amount of woodland that survived on the clay with flints capping of the chalk. Although some woodland was cleared in the 18th and 19th centuries much remained. Large farms developed, sometimes in hamlets or in isolation on the downs. They were typically associated with large, arable fields and often regular in form with low, thorn hedges. Farmsteads were predominantly of loose courtyard form with buildings to two or three sides of the yard, although barns could range from three bays to eight or more bays.



Photo © Bob Edwards



A small, loose courtyard plan farmstead with a three-bay barn, aisled to the rear and one end and a stable facing into the yard, with the house on the third side. Along the valley bottom are a series of small closes and paddocks with the larger arable fields beyond. Small-scale examples of this type, which were a highly distinctive feature of the North Downs in contrast to other downland areas of England, are very rare. Photo © Historic England 27201/35



An isolated, loose courtyard group with buildings to two sides of the yard and the house also facing into the yard. Photo © Bob Edwards



Loose courtyard group with working buildings to three sides of the yard. The farmhouse stands detached from the yard on the opposite side of the road. Photo © Bob Edwards



Dispersed cluster plan farmsteads were once relatively common in the North Downs but are now rare. Here, buildings are scattered around an enclosed area but with no defined yard areas. Photo © Bob Edwards



A large, regular U-plan courtyard with two linked threshing barns and a single-storey range to the third side of the U. Photo © Bob Edwards



A church and manor farm group on the downs. Photo © Bob Edwards



A large threshing barn on a high-status farmstead. The threshing bay has been blocked. Photo © Bob Edwards



A three-bay barn, aisled to the front, with a hipped roof. Small-scale examples such as this are rare. Photo © Bob Edwards



An aisled, timber-framed threshing barn of five bays, aisled to all sides. Photo © Bob Edwards



Brick-built barns are relatively uncommon in the North Downs. This example is probably of late 18th or early 19th-century date. Photo © Bob Edwards



A large, mid-19th-century threshing barn built on a Court Farm. Photo © Bob Edwards



This single storey stable range is of early 19th-century date but with possible earlier foundations.



Staddle granaries, sometimes of 18th-century date but more commonly dating from the 19th century, were found on most farms. Photo © Bob Edwards



Unlike the other chalk downland areas of southern England, hops were grown on the North Downs. Oast houses are a characteristic building type, concentrated within the central part of the Character Area, although they are not found in the same density as in the Weald. Attached to the stowage is a stable. Photo © Bob Edwards



The insertion of small stones into the mortar joints of stone walls (a technique known as galleting) can occasionally be found in the North Downs. Here, small pieces of flint have been used. Photo © Bob Edwards

Materials and detail

- Hipped and half-hipped clay tile roofs are a strong feature, to typically large-scale houses, barns and oast houses, and smaller-scale cattle housing and other structures. Gabled roofs were more commonly used from the late 18th century.
- Timber-framing was typically used for houses and farm buildings. Its use for the latter continued in to the 19th century. Framed buildings were usually clad in weatherboard.
- Brick was used for working farm buildings from the late 18th century, and earlier for houses.
- Some rare surviving examples of straw thatch.



Historic England

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