



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

# Isle of Portland

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 137



## 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>).




Possibly one of the only identifiable farmsteads which survives on Portland is now abandoned and partly ruinous. The 19th-century house is accompanied by a few small buildings, including a single-storey lofted building, now roofless, which may have functioned as a barn. Photo © Bob Edwards


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**Front cover:** This view southwards towards Portland Bill, showing the earthworks of the medieval open field system. The field system to the west (right) of the road survives as a series of long, sinuous, reversed S-shaped strips divided by low banks of unploughed turf or lynchets of up to 1.3m high called 'lawnsheds', within large fields. There are also remains of prehistoric settlement and land use within this landscape. Photo © Historic England 24690/008

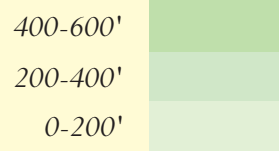
# Character Area 137

## Isle of Portland

Area 137 boundary 

Adjacent Area **138** 

A Road 



height above sea-level in feet



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This map shows the Isle of Portland 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 area is located off the south Dorset coast, attached to the mainland by the shingle of Chesil Beach. Around half of the Isle of Portland is designated as Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and 29% is defined as urban. The coast lies within the Dorset and East Devon Coast World Heritage Site.

## Historic Character

- Quarrying since Roman times has had an important and increasing influence on the character of the landscape.
- Rare survivals of fossilised strip fields represent the historic field patterns that once existed across much of the Isle but which have been largely erased through quarrying.
- Small farmsteads were probably located within the several hamlets that existed but there are few surviving historic farm buildings.

## Significance

- Any traditional farm buildings on the Isle are extremely rare and significant in a local context.

## Present and future issues

- The island is heavily developed and historic change has resulted in the loss of its smallholdings and farmsteads.

## Historic development

- Evidence for prehistoric and Roman activity and settlement has been found, including stone 'beehive' chambers and Roman burials in sarcophagi. Portland was a royal manor from the Saxon period and was attacked by Vikings several times during the 9th and 10th centuries.
- The high quality Portland limestone has been quarried since the Roman period at least. By the 12th century, it was being used extensively in the local area but its use spread in the 13th century, being used in the construction of Westminster Palace, Tower of London and Exeter Cathedral, exported by coastal shipping. Portland stone was famously the material of choice of architects Inigo Jones for the Banqueting House and Sir Christopher Wren for St Paul's Cathedral and his other post-fire London churches.
- The island has had a strategic defensive importance since the medieval period, leading to the construction of fortification including Rufus Castle which was in existence by 1142, Portland Castle, one of a pair of Tudor coastal

forts built in the mid-16th century guarding Weymouth Harbour and The Verne, a large fort built in response to expected French invasion c 1860. The biggest impact on the landscape and settlement growth was consequent to the development from the 1850s of the royal naval dockyard (in origin a coaling station) and its

associated breakwaters, as a counterpoint to the French naval dock at Cherbourg.

- The strip fields of the Isle suggest that arable farming was practised on the plateau but it is probable that grazing formed the mainstay of the farming economy from the 17th century at least.

## Landscape and settlement

- The principal settlement, at the north-west of the island, was the village of Chesil. Fortune's Well developed on higher ground above the village and is now the main urban area. Elsewhere, there were small hamlets including Easton, Weston and Wakeham. Reforne was a later, post-medieval development. Easton, Wakeham and Reforne have now merged to form the present-day Easton. There is little dispersed settlement.
- Historically, the Isle of Portland had little woodland cover. Open-field farming took up the majority of the agricultural land on the

island and there are nationally significant areas that still survive with strips or 'lawns' separated by 'balks' or 'lawns' of unploughed turf, predominantly on the southern part of the island. The strips were fossilised through piecemeal enclosure from the 16th century, retaining the shape of former strips with their distinctive curving boundaries.

- Across most of the northern part of the island, quarrying and suburban expansion has largely obliterated the earlier field patterns.

## Farmstead and building types

- There are few identifiable farmsteads or farm buildings surviving on the island. Most farms were small and farmsteads consisted of small combination buildings or cow houses forming loose courtyard or dispersed groups.

- In the villages and hamlets farm buildings could easily be converted to workshops or be demolished when the farmsteads were detached from agriculture. It is possible that examination of outbuildings in the historic settlement cores could identify former farm buildings.



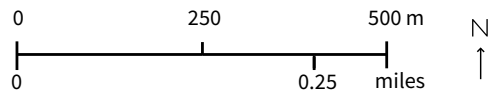
A glimpse towards an outbuilding behind a village house of uncertain function but possibly originating as an agricultural building. Photo © Bob Edwards



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.



## Portland

The survival of the medieval strip fields across Portland – farmed from the historic settlement at Southwell – is one of the remarkable features of the landscape of the southern part of the Isle; to the north, quarrying has largely destroyed the field pattern. Even into the late 19th century, there had been little amalgamation of strips to create large fields. Although these fields must have been farmed by the community living in Southwell, there are no evident farmsteads within the village or the other small nucleated villages on the Isle, and no identifiable farm buildings located within the fields. This lack of evidence for agricultural buildings requires further investigation.

## Materials and detail

- Limestone rubble, with stone slate roofs, is the characteristic building material for most vernacular buildings.



# Historic England

This guidance has been prepared by  
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