



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

Weymouth Lowlands

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 138



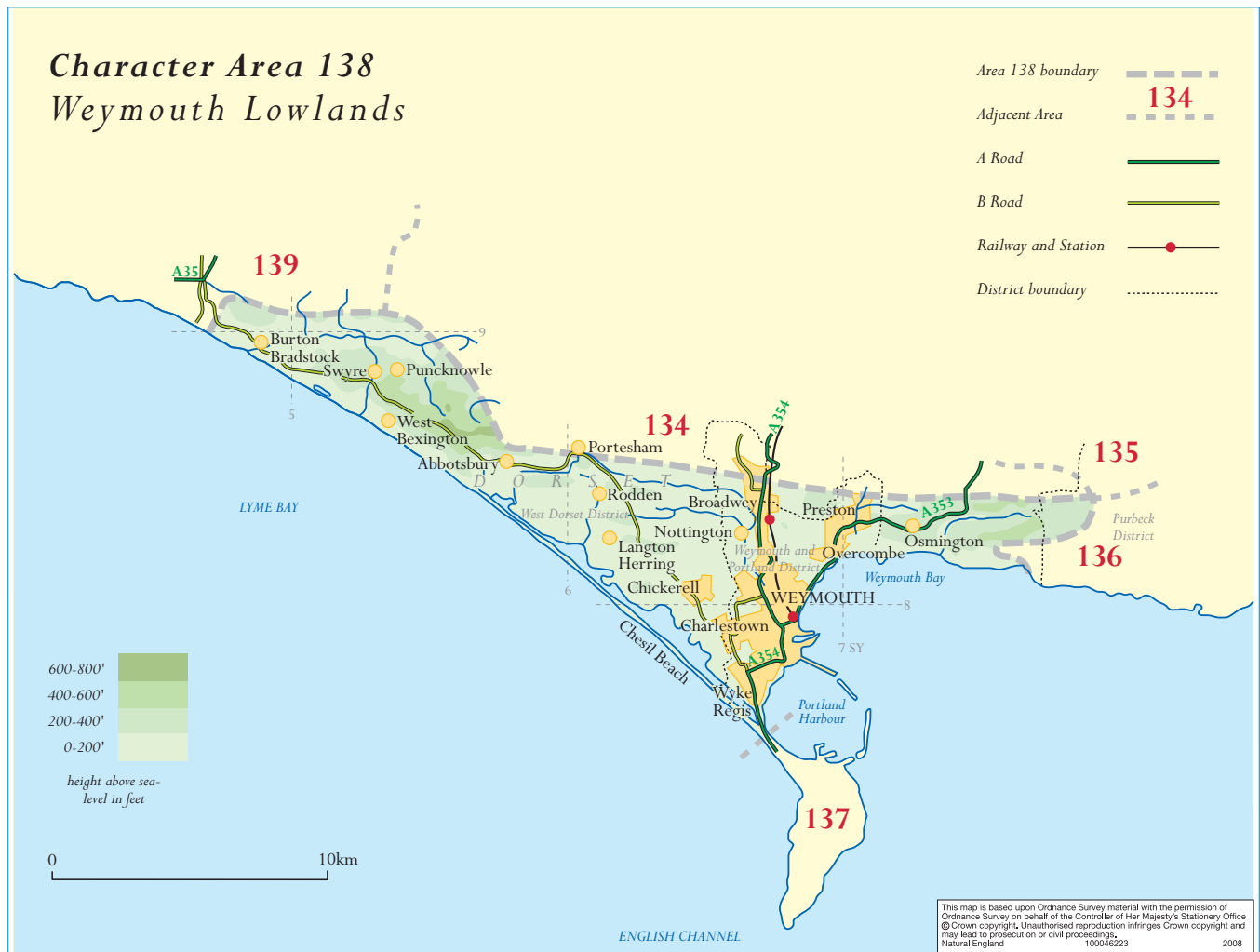
Introduction

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>).



The site of the medieval barn at Abbotsbury includes the remains of the once massive Tithe barn of 23 bays built c 1400, only half of which survives in use as a barn with its great expanse of thatched roof. Associated with the tithe barn is a 19th-century stable opposite the barn and cattle housing. Set within the field to the bottom of the picture is a 15th-century dovecote. To the upper right corner of the lake is a granary built in the 18th century using stone from the abbey, the building raised on stone arches and with a gabled roof. Photo © Historic England 29074/037

Front cover: View looking along the ridge towards Portesham, showing the alignment of medieval and earlier routeways and major field boundaries towards the ridgetop. Bronze Age and earlier burial sites are scattered along the ridge. The former manor farm at Corton Farm in the foreground has a 16th-century house, its working buildings including an 18th-century granary illustrating the development of arable-based agriculture in this area. Photo © Historic England 29073/015



This map shows the Weymouth Lowlands with the numbers of the neighbouring National Character Areas around it.



Manor Farm, Puncknowle, has a regular courtyard plan with a five-bay barn forming one side of the yard with late 19th-century, single-storey buildings providing stabling and cattle housing to the other three sides. Located within the village, the surviving yard is set back from the street; the large modern sheds occupy the area of a second historic yard area which was partly defined by open-fronted cattle sheds. Photo © Historic England 29075/021

Summary

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

The Weymouth Lowlands lies on the south Dorset coast, stretching from just west of Bridport to Weymouth Bay in the east. The chalk ridge of the Dorset Downs rises to the north, the NCA covering the undulating below the scarp stretching down to the sea. A large part of the coast is defined by Chesil Beach. The area falls within the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and the coast is within the Dorset and East Devon Coast World Heritage Site. Of the area, 11% is defined as urban.

Historic Character

- This is a coastal area where arable farming was dominant, with sheep grazed on the downland ridge that runs across the NCA.
- Small nucleated settlements are intermixed with isolated farmsteads, many of high status with 17th-century houses.
- There is a strong 'grain' of rectilinear fields, largely enclosed through piecemeal enclosure
- apart from an area of assarted enclosure in the west of the area.
- There are small to medium-scale farmsteads of loose courtyard or dispersed forms, some of which later developed into regular plan types.
- Stone-built barns are generally of three to five bays accompanied by detached granaries, stables and 19th-century shelter sheds.

Significance

- There is a moderate survival of traditional farmsteads and of pre-1750 farm buildings in a national context.
- Sheep houses with low eaves are a particularly rare feature.

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 (21.4%, the national average being 32%).

Historic development

- There is extensive evidence for prehistoric and Roman activity and settlement including Bronze Age burial mounds set along a ridge of land that runs east-west across the west part of the area, a stone circle, the Iron Age hillfort called Abbotsbury Castle and, north-east of Weymouth, a Roman villa and temple near Preston.
- Abbotsbury developed as a market centre after the foundation of a monastery in the mid-11th century but the dissolution of the monastery hit the fortunes of the village – in the 18th century, even the priest was said to be involved in smuggling.

- The seaside town of Weymouth developed as a popular seaside resort from the 1780s, its reputation enhanced by the frequent visits of George III. Weymouth originated as two separate and rival ports either side of Weymouth Harbour; to the north was Melcombe Regis and Weymouth to the south. Both were in existence by the 13th century, with Melcombe Regis being an important wool port and infamous as the port where the bubonic plague entered England in the 14th century. Both towns had grids of streets and the wool industry and malting were important industries.
- Smaller manor and gentry houses such as Waddon, Rodwell and Corton are a distinctive feature of the area, especially along the ridge that runs across the area.
- Arable farming was the dominant land use. Evidence of medieval field systems surviving on some areas of higher and steeper ground indicates that until the 14th century, arable farming was extensive, combined with sheep grazing on the downland and coastal grassland. From the 14th century, grazing increased and by the 18th and 19th centuries sheep/corn systems of husbandry were the mainstay of the farming economy.

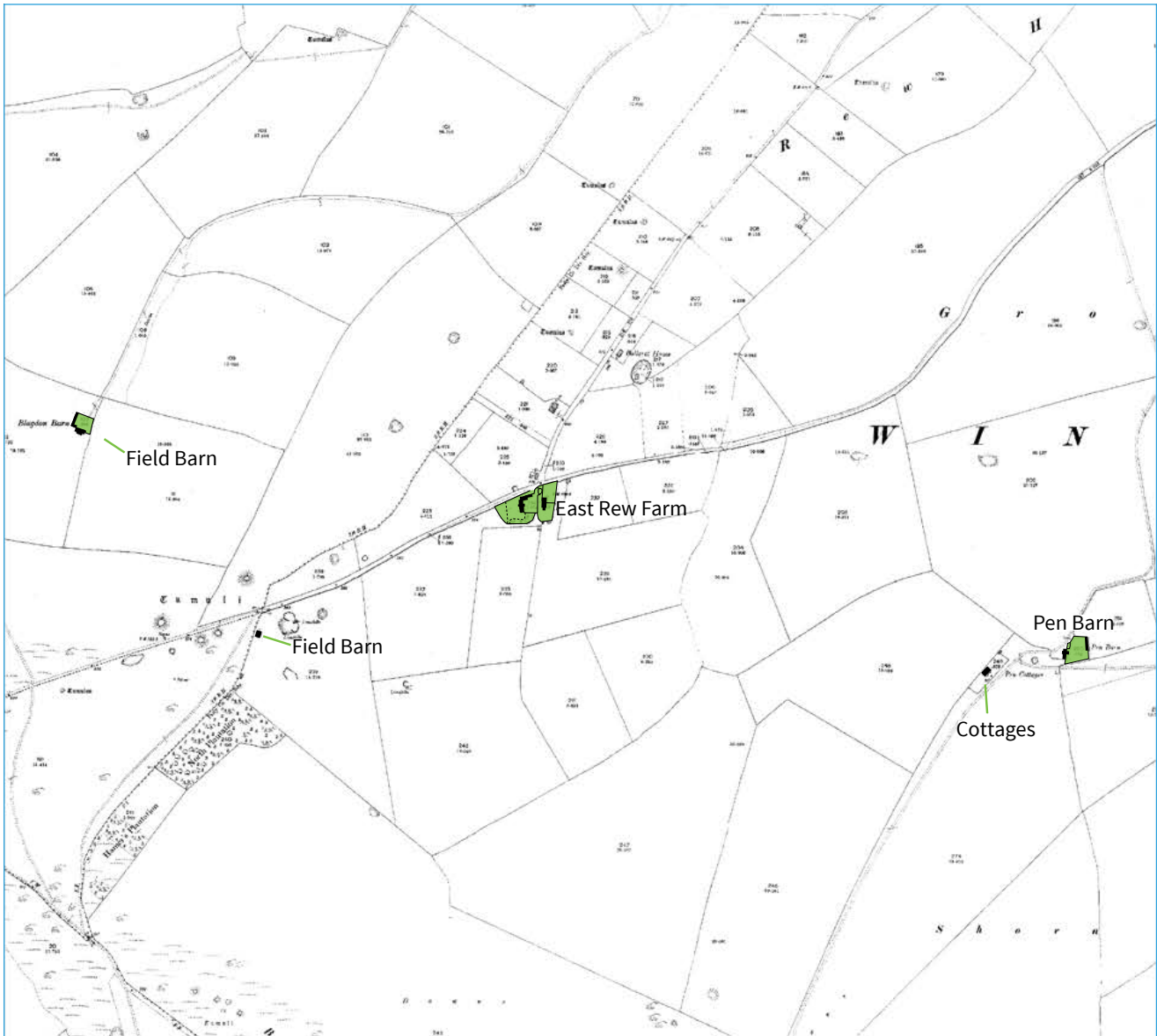
Landscape and settlement

- Settlement comprises a mixture of nucleated villages concentrated in valley bottoms and scattered farmsteads, many of medieval or earlier origin. These settlements were subject to some contraction from the 14th century but not as marked as on the chalk downs to the north (NCA 134). Settlement earthworks survive at West Bexington and West Silvinghampton.
- High status farmsteads including manor and gentry houses are set along the south side of the ridge that runs across the area, particularly in the central part of the NCA.
- Medieval, terraced arable strips survive through a long history of subsequent grassland management.
- Fields of the area are generally rectilinear with a distinct north-south 'grain' and mostly bounded by low, sparse hedges with few hedgerow trees but occasionally by dry stone walls. Along the coast of the western part of the area, the fields are similarly regular but to the north of the coastal strip west of Abbotsbury there is an area where the fields are characteristic of piecemeal enclosure as a result of the 17th-century or earlier clearance of woodland. This small area contains many small copses and woods, representing a large proportion of the woodland of the NCA. Elsewhere, woodland had largely been cleared by the 11th century.

Farmstead and building types

Pre-1750 farmhouses and farm buildings mostly date from rebuilding in the 17th and early 18th centuries.

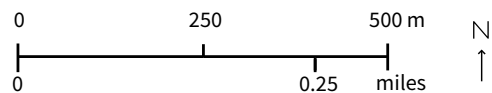
- Dispersed and loose courtyard plan farmsteads predominate.
- Regular courtyard plans are not a strong feature of the area; those that exist are larger L-plans of later 19th-century date or represent development of earlier farmsteads with the addition of shelter shed ranges for cattle of 19th-century date.
- Barns are stone-built; they are typically of three to five bays with a central threshing floor and porches (sometimes full height with first-floor granaries) are common. Examples of the pre-1750 period are concentrated in village centres or areas where there had been enclosure by agreement.



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

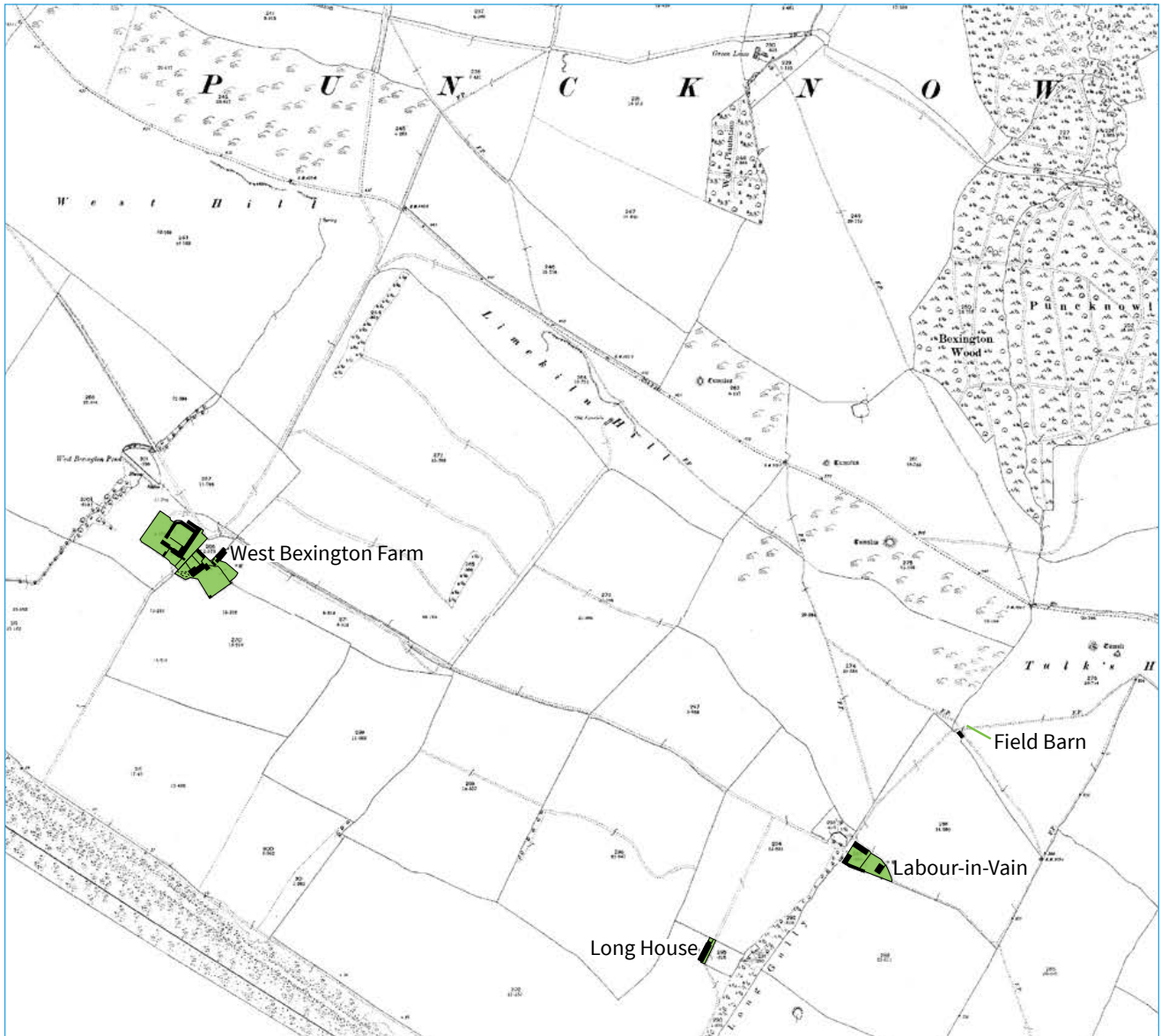


Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



Porterham

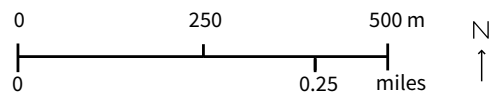
There are only a small number of isolated farmsteads across this area, as working farms continued to be mainly located within the villages. Some of the distant fields were provided with field barns, sometimes with cottages close by for labourers to manage the cattle housed there. The fields range from relatively small closes through medium to large fields of generally piecemeal enclosure. Blagdon Barn and Pen Barn were outfarms serving farmsteads that remained in the village after enclosure. East Rew Farm was one of the few farmsteads to be established within the newly enclosed fields.



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



West Bexington

Along the coastal fringe, the landscape is one of piecemeal enclosures of 17th century and earlier date which run perpendicular to the coast and towards to the ridge, which is scattered with Bronze Age burial sites. Within these fields are isolated farms of varying scale – sometimes shrunken medieval settlements - with West Bexington Farm being a large, full regular courtyard farmstead, mostly dating from the early 19th century but with a 17th-century granary and other buildings. Labour-in-Vain is a medium-scale farm with buildings to three sides of the yard, including an L-plan range.



Above: A rare surviving late 18th- or early 19th-century outfarm on higher ground to the north of this area. It consists of a three-bay thatched barn with a small, open-fronted shelter shed. Typically, the shelter shed would be for cattle, but the height of this building suggests it was for sheep – this being a building type found in other parts of the Dorset chalk downs. Photo © Historic England 29072/041

Left: Fields of piecemeal enclosure descending from higher ground at Merry Hill to the coastal plain with a hamlet located at the foot of the slope. Photo © Historic England 29072/042



The Manor Farm in Swyre is a dispersed multi-yard plan farmstead with two main yard areas either side of the village street. The main yard is across the road from the farmhouse and has a five-bay barn (a very late example of a threshing barn which is internally dated 1888), a small stable (set back to the right of the yard) and an L-plan range of open-fronted shelter sheds for cattle closing two sides of the yard. Across the street is a yard with a second barn and a cart shed with granary over – steps against the gable wall give access to the granary. Photo © Historic England 29076/016



A redundant farm building on the coastal plain. This building was probably a cow house. Photo © Bob Edwards



The small, three-bay thatched barn within the outfarm group shown in the aerial photograph above. Photo © Bob Edwards



Buildings for sheep are of exceptional rarity. Farms on the southern chalk downs made use of barns and walled farmyards for shearing, and the very low eaves height to some shelter sheds suggests that they were constructed for sheep rather than cattle. Notably, the roof is of solid thatch, a rare survival nationally. Photo © Bob Edwards



The partly ruinous tithe barn at Abbotsbury Abbey. Originally, this barn was of 23 bays, reflecting the great wealth of the Abbey. In the distance, strip lynchets remaining from medieval cultivation can be seen on the hillside. Photo © Bob Edwards



The 15th-century dovecote at Abbotsbury Abbey, altered in the 18th century. Photo © Bob Edwards



A 19th-century barn and attached stable forming part of an L-plan farmstead outside of the village of Abbotsbury. The barn is probably partly floored, as suggested by the large pitching door at upper level. The asymmetrical position of the threshing bay suggests that unthreshed corn was pitched into the left-hand side of the barn, the straw being taken straight to the cattle yard. Cart sheds are attached to the left and the stable to the right also has a hayloft. Photo © Bob Edwards



A ten-bay open-fronted shelter shed of late 19th-century date, illustrating the requirement for farms to manage large numbers of fat stock. The use of slate for the roof and cast iron for the posts to the front are typical of this date. Photo © Bob Edwards



A regular L-plan group located on the edge of the village of Abbotsbury, with a small loose box facing the field. Photo © Bob Edwards



The buildings on this farm illustrate the scale and requirements of the large, arable-based farms that developed in this area. To the left is an early to mid-19th-century granary and cart shed range. The later and taller bay to the right may have housed larger equipment such as a traction engine. To the right is an early 19th-century, brick granary built on stone arches, typical of Dorset generally where timber-framed staddle granaries are rare. Photo © Bob Edwards



Large stables also illustrate the scale of arable farming, in some cases from early in the post-medieval period. This large, early 17th-century stable block is sited within an isolated former manor farm, the farmhouse dating from the 16th century: nearby is a 13th-century chapel. The mullioned windows and door with drip moulds over indicate the higher status of this building which may have housed both working and riding horses. Photo © Bob Edwards



A thatched, six-bay threshing barn dating from the 18th century. Photo © Bob Edwards



This five-bay threshing barn dates from the late 19th century and has cattle housing within lean-tos built against the side of the barn either side of the porch. To the rear, there is a horse engine house; a rare feature on Dorset barns, as low wage rates underpinned the continuation of hand threshing well into the 19th century. Photo © Bob Edwards



A granary above a cart shed accessed by external steps against the gable end. Unusually, this building has a hipped roof suggesting that the use of the loft as a granary may be a later conversion. Photo © Bob Edwards

Materials and detail

- Limestone rubble is the characteristic building material.
- Brick is usually only seen used as quoins or dressings for openings in stone buildings.
- Thatch is frequently seen, often using water reed, some of which will have been obtained from the managed reed beds at Abbotsbury. There is a rare example of solid thatch on a shelter shed forming part of an outfarm. Straw thatch would have also been used on farm buildings but is now uncommon.
- Stone slates are most commonly seen used at the eaves of buildings rather than over the whole roof.
- Welsh slate became the standard roofing material in the 19th century.



Historic England

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