



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

Mendip Hills

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 141



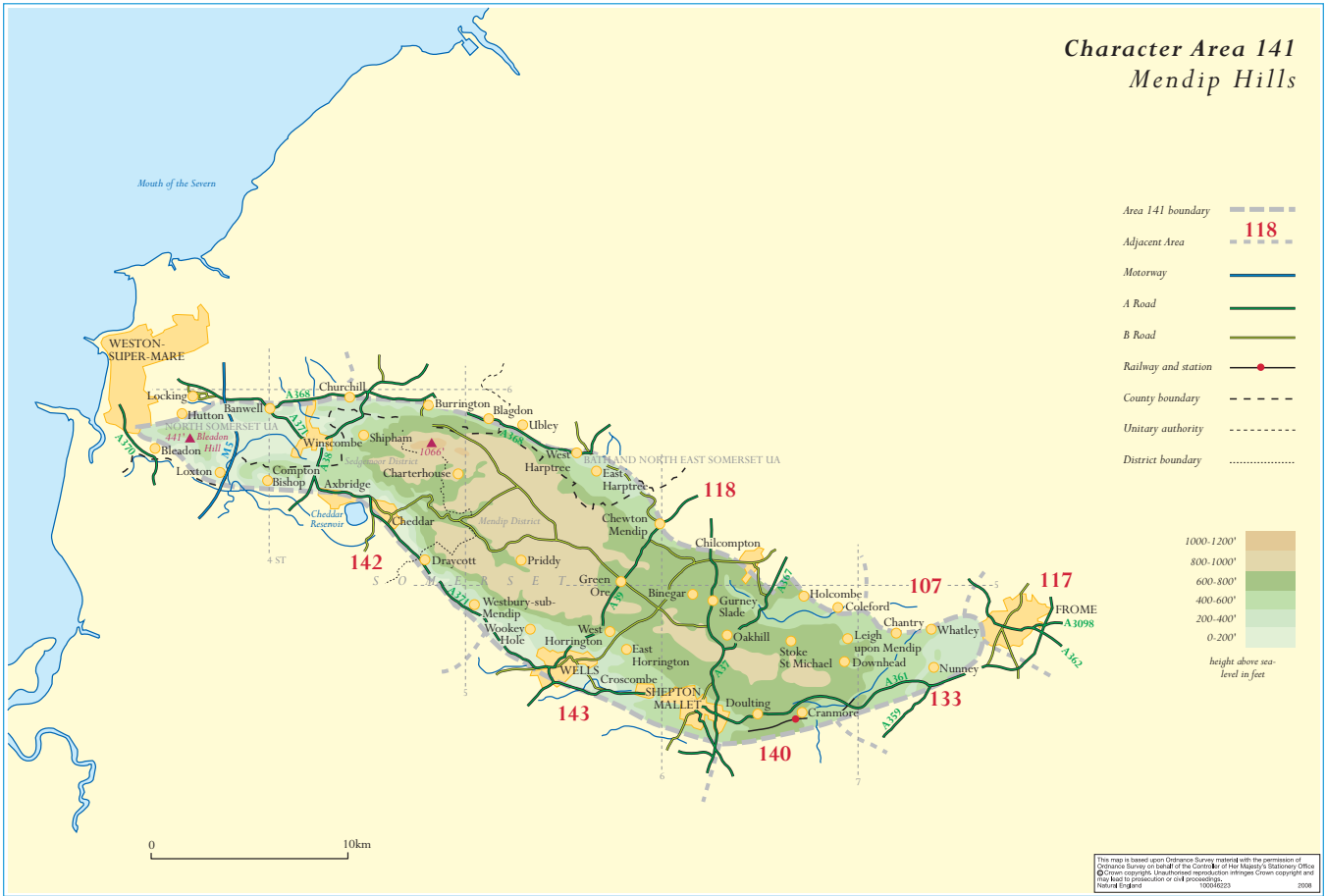
Introduction

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 village of Doultling, the large fields resulting from 17th- to 19th-century enclosure. Manor Farm to the south (left) has a 15th-century barn (see p 8). Photo © Historic England 27885/014

Front cover: Mendips landscape at Priddy, showing Chancellor's Farm (see p 7). This is a medieval grange site with traces of lead mining and its fields resulting from 18th-century improvement. The unimproved grassland is a rare surviving and very important survival, with a rich variety of grassland and flowers. Photo © Historic England 27903/012



This map shows the Mendip Hills with the numbers of the neighbouring National Character Areas around it.



A 17th-century or earlier farmstead site at Ashwick to the north of the area, within a framework of post-medieval enclosure, with a landscape of pre-14th century enclosure from woodland with some woodland strips surviving. The fields around the farmstead with its late 17th-century house were enlarged in the 19th and 20th centuries. The farmhouse was built in about 1700 with an attached dairy, and to the rear a long cow house attached to an early to mid-19th-century stable and barn. Photo © Historic England 27969/005

Summary

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

The Mendip Hills lie to the south of Bristol, rising dramatically out of the flat Somerset Levels and Moors landscape to the west. To the east, the area gradually merges with the southern end of the Cotswolds, the Yeovil Scarplands and the Avon Vales. Around 53% of the area lies within the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and 3.6% is defined as urban.

Historic Character

- This area is characterised by villages in more fertile soils around plateaux used for grazing sheep and cattle from prehistoric period, which has some early farms but was mostly enclosed with isolated farmsteads in the late 18th and 19th centuries for mixed arable farming.
- Some areas of small farms and smallholding are associated with lead mining and other rural industries.
- There are 18th-century and earlier dispersed-plan and loose courtyard farmsteads set within landscapes of piecemeal enclosure and some medieval irregular enclosure, with regular courtyard plans in areas of late 18th- and 19th-century enclosure.
- 18th-century and earlier threshing barns of three to five bays, are concentrated in villages and village-edge farms, and there is some evidence for stables of this period. Most farm buildings are of mid-to-late 19th-century date, including bank barns with animal housing on the ground floor, shelter sheds, sheep yards, granaries and some covered yards for cattle.
- There are some small field barns on the plateau.
- The predominant building materials are stone and 19th-century brick, with pantile roofs.

Significance

- There is a moderate proportion of 18th century and earlier working farm buildings, which are rare by national standards. Any farmstead groups with barns and other buildings of this period are particularly significant.
- Coherent examples of early-mid 19th century farmstead groups also relate to a significant period of landscape change. 18th-century and earlier farm buildings mostly comprise threshing barns (including combination buildings with cattle at one end), farmhouses and some early examples of lincays for cattle. Farmhouses mostly date from the 17th century, this area not being as agriculturally prosperous as the Devon Redlands or South Devon, but still having a high survival of earlier periods by national standards. There are some longhouses.
- Rare building types are cider houses, those with internal presses and mills being especially rare.

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 (27.8%, the national average being 32%).

Historic development

- Evidence of prehistoric settlement and activity is abundant, including barrows, earthwork enclosures and henge monuments, forming a ritual landscape of national significance, and trees were felled to make way for blocks of planned fields. Large hill forts form evidence of a complex pattern of territories and lordship.
- Veins of lead (especially), silver and other metals were mined from at least the Iron Age and expanded in the Roman period. There is much evidence of Roman industry and settlement.
- Lead mines, and the Mendip plateau on which they are situated, were mostly owned in medieval period by Glastonbury Abbey and the Bishop of Bath and Wells which also established grange farms. The post-medieval period saw the development of an independent class of miner, lead mining peaking as an activity in the 17th century and continuing into the early 20th century.
- For centuries, there was quarrying of stone for building, and to produce lime as a major feature. In the 20th century the older activities disappeared while massive quarries expanded greatly, particularly in the eastern Mendips.
- Other industries developed in the post-medieval period such as paper making and edged tools (notably along the Mells valley) but the coal industry was a dominant influence on the eastern Mendip, only coming to an end in the 1970s.
- The plateau was used as grazing lands for sheep and cattle from the Neolithic period and in the medieval period and later as open sheep walks for the supply of wool to the cloth industry in surrounding towns and villages.
- From the late Saxon period to the 14th century, the plateau and much of the surrounding land was also a royal forest.
- A prosperous textile industry developed in the surrounding villages, and towns grew up around the edge of the area – for example Wells (where a bishop's see was established in the 8th century) and Shepton Mallet.
- Surrounding areas are marked by the predominance of deeper, more fertile, loamy soils. Cultivation of the land around the villages intensified in the 12th and 13th centuries, with a complex pattern of cultivation, partly in open fields, locally extending up the hills as lynchets. There was a mix of arable, fattening of cattle and dairying from the 15th century, with arable cultivation using root crops becoming an increasing feature from the late 18th century.
- Much of the plateau area was enclosed as mixed arable farmland in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.
- Reclamation of the land for agriculture was poorly managed and by the 1930s much of it was scrub and rough pasture; changes in agriculture since the 1940s saw a dramatic increase in the productivity of better land together with a decline in the use of marginal land, although, much more marginal land is now being grazed.

Landscape and settlement

- There are no rivers rising on the limestone hills, the karst landscape draining water down through the rocks which then emerges at the springline at the base of the hills; this has been a major factor in shaping the settlement pattern.
- The centre and west of the area is characterised by unimproved grassland, acid heathland on the sandstone hill tops and broken and undulating ground, known locally as 'gruffy ground', resulting from the lead industry.
- The plateau and hill tops are largely treeless, except for a few old ash pollards, wind-shaped shelter belts and conifer plantations.
- There is a distinction between rectangular 18th-century field patterns bounded by dry stone walls on the plateau and smaller, irregular fields with hedgerows on the scarp slopes. The slopes and valleys surrounding the plateau also have a wide range of woodlands, particularly to the east, where large parks around country houses are a feature.
- Long-standing areas of grassland and unimproved pasture are both rich in species and in the surviving visible evidence of earlier cultivation and settlement: ridge and furrow, lynchets and village earthworks as at Tor and Westbury-sub-Mendip.
- To the west of the plateau, the land breaks up into groups of individual hills such as Bleadon and Crook Peak. These western hills still retain much of the open downland character of the 18th-century open sheep walks.
- There is some horticulture in the south-west from Axbridge to Rodney Stoke and high-quality agricultural land (the 'Strawberry Belt') but in decline since loss of the railway in the 1960s.
- The predominant settlement pattern is a mixture of dispersed and nucleated settlement; major villages developed along edges of the slopes and the spring lines to north and south. Open-fields to villages were mostly enclosed by agreement by the 18th century, leaving clear evidence in boundary features of long cultivation strips (for example at Draycott).
- Earlier isolated farmstead sites relate to smaller and more irregular pre-18th-century enclosure on escarpment slopes, especially at lower levels and to eastern and western slopes, and to the establishment of medieval grange farms throughout the area. On the plateau, earlier farmsteads can relate to rectilinear medium to large-scale fields of medieval date.
- The plateau was subject to a very extensive programme of large-scale enclosure from the late 18th century, initially managed by farmsteads based in villages but from the 1820s increasingly by new farmsteads with shelterbelts and conifer plantations. This resulted in loss of common and allotment of land with cottages in some areas.
- There are some distinctive post-medieval field layouts associated with miners' smallholdings – for example Shipdam, and around Priddy.

Farmstead and building types

- Early farmhouses, mostly dating from late 16th- and 17th-century rebuilding but also including some medieval houses, are concentrated in villages and have lost their working buildings due to falling out of agricultural use over the last two hundred years. There are also early houses and some 17th-century and earlier working buildings in isolated farmsteads, including those on the sites of medieval grange farms. Most recently-enclosed parts of the plateau were subject to extensive rebuilding in the later 20th century.

Farmstead types

- Dispersed layouts are associated with pre-18th-century steading sites. Loose courtyard plans are also common, and on the plateau, many regular layouts (mostly U-plans and full

courtyards) date from the 19th century. Some were farmsteads rebuilt with covered yards, to house cattle and conserve their manure, in the mid- to late 19th century.

Building types

- There are some 18th-century and earlier threshing barns in villages.
- There are threshing barns with shelter sheds to cattle yards and granary/cart shed ranges. Some bank barns date from the early to mid-19th century, these also being found around Exmoor and in other upland-fringe areas of south-west England.
- There are open sheep yards.
- Some small field barns survive on the plateau.



Manor Farm at Doultling (see p 2) one of four 14th- to 15th-century barns with upper-cruce roofs built to serve the estates of Glastonbury Abbey. The whole group was built to a courtyard plan, but the other medieval buildings including the granary and stables have long gone. The house dates from the late 17th century, and the present full regular courtyard mostly dates from rebuilding in the mid-19th century, and by the 1870s an additional regular courtyard had been built to the north. This has a combination barn comprising a threshing barn over a stable, and to the right a granary over a cart shed, and single-storey cattle housing surrounding the yard. Photo © Historic England 27885/012



Chancellor's Farm in Priddy (see cover and p 7). The buildings here date from different phases. The house probably dates from the latter part of the 17th century, and includes re-used medieval and 16th-century fabric. It was extended in the 18th century, with a back kitchen built over an earlier well, and a stable completing the buildings of the upper yard. Alongside are the farmhouse gardens, former orchards, pigsty and cart shed, along with a small byre or animal shelter attached to the house.



Bank barns were rarely built to this scale, but their construction across the Mendips between the late 18th and mid-19th centuries testifies to two significant drivers for change in its landscape: housing and processing corn (on the upper floor, accessed by a bank or steps to the rear) and housing fatstock (in the open-fronted sheds) and horses for working the land below. Photo © Eric Berry



This farmstead facing the green in Priddy was probably rebuilt in the 1830s, retaining the core of a 17th-century house; an L-plan bank barn and stables were put up in two phases, presumably only a matter of a few years apart. The rear entry is reached from the pasture via a set of steps, not by an incline or bank. Photo © Eric Berry



Across the area, there is extensive evidence for the rebuilding of houses in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, although working buildings are rarely of this date. This may be due to the importance of a dairying economy in this area which required few working buildings other than small threshing barns. Photos © Eric Berry



Another one of the Glastonbury barns, this is the example at Pilton which has been restored by the Pilton Barn Trust with the assistance of Michael Eavis, founder and organiser of the Glastonbury Festival. Photo © Eric Berry



An early 19th-century farmstead. Note the large scale of the bank barn and the whole overlooked by a classical-style farmhouse. Photo © Eric Berry



Mid-19th-century farmworkers' cottages at East Harptree, some of which have been converted from earlier farm buildings. These testify to the emergence of large capital farms requiring large workforces over the 19th century. Photo © Historic England DP0864



A mid-19th-century farmstead near Charterhouse, note the large size of the farmhouse and barn, and the low cattle-housing range. Photo © Eric Berry

Materials and detail

- A wide variety of stone is the predominant building material – pale grey Douling Stone, limestone (oolite to the east, White Lias around Stone Easton and Chilcompton, red conglomerate).
- Orange-red pantile roofs are predominant; there is some thatch in the east.
- Older buildings in the Mendips are built in rough, exposed stone with almost no detailing to windows and doorways.



Historic England

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