



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

Somerset Levels and Moors

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 142



Introduction

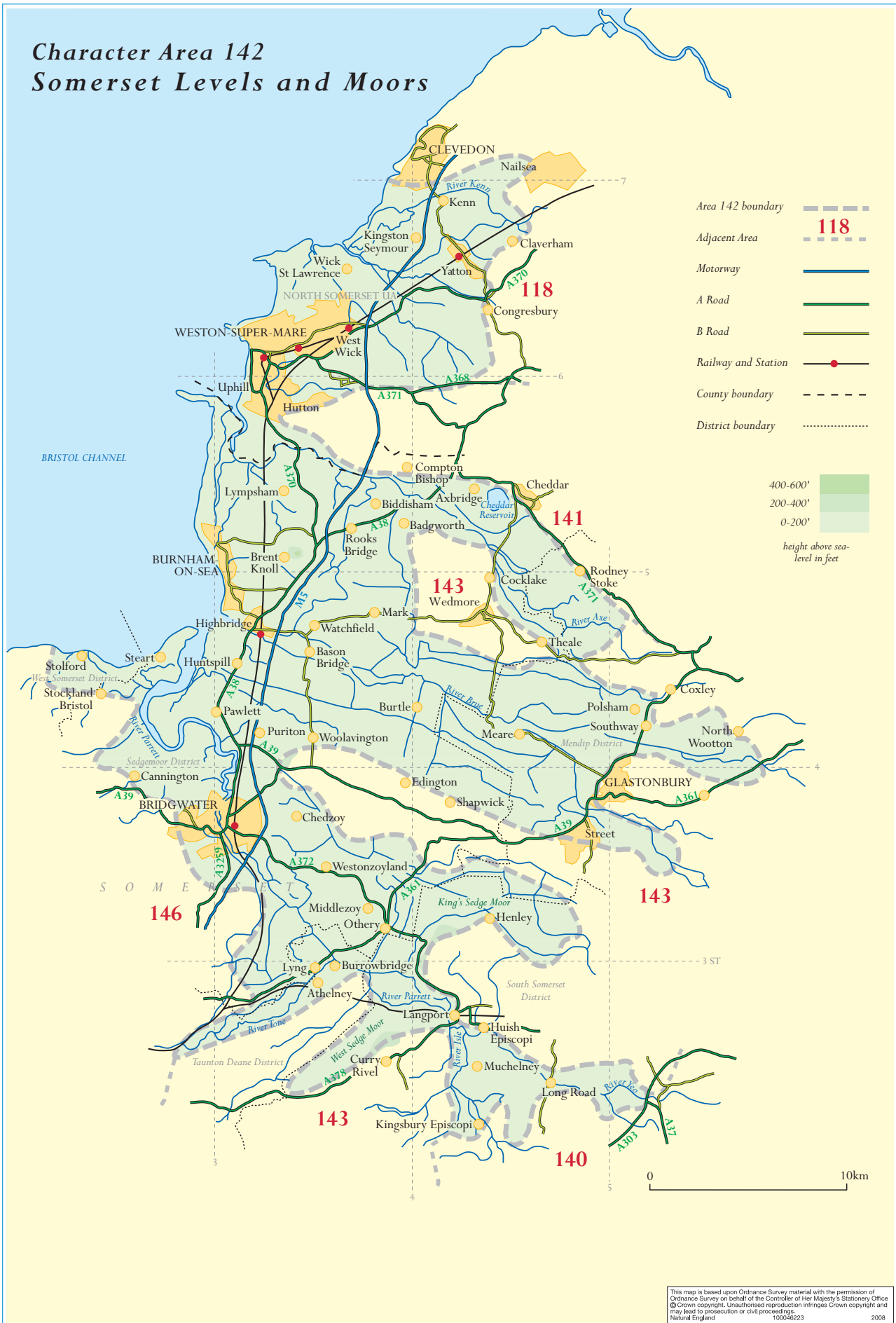
The Farmstead and Landscape Statements will help you to identify the historic character of traditional farmsteads and their buildings in all parts of England, and how they relate to their surrounding landscapes. They are now available for all of England's National Character Areas (NCAs), and should be 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>).



Chedzoy (see map on p 7) in January 2014. An anciently settled island within the marshes and in contrast to the notable ridge of the Polden Hills behind, the big late enclosure fields still reveal something of the underlying pattern of older, curving field patterns. The site of the battle of Sedgemoor lies under the flood waters at centre right. Photo © Historic England 27896/001

Front cover: Wick St Lawrence, the detached northern portion of the Levels with Worlesbury Hill and Weston-super-Mare in the background. Photo © Historic England 29085 006

Character Area 142 Somerset Levels and Moors



This map shows the Somerset Levels and Moors 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 Somerset Levels and Moors form a broad area of low-lying farmland divided by low hills and ridges forming the Mid Somerset Hills. Rivers draining into the Levels and Moors include the Axe and Brue (draining the central levels), the Parrett (southern levels) and the Kenn and Congresbury Yeo (northern levels). To the north, rise the Mendip Hills, and to the south, the Blackdowns Hills, whilst along the area's western edge is the Bristol Channel. Over 8% of the area is urban, nearly 71% of the land is cultivated and 1% is woodland. A very small percentage of the Character Area (0.3%) falls within Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural beauty (AONB), while approximately 13% of the land is designated as Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Historic character

- This is an area with much evidence for prehistoric activity and reclamation from at least the Roman period, its use for summer grazing being closely interlinked with farms based in the Mendip Hills (NCA 141), Mid Somerset Hills (NCA 143) and the Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes (NCA 146).
- It is historically dominated by nucleated settlement with a mix of early and post-enclosure isolated farmsteads.
- Most farmsteads have been rebuilt, often several times, during the 19th century.
- Courtyard-plan farmsteads are dominant, with loose courtyard plans concentrated in settlements and farmsteads in areas of older enclosure, the latter with linear and some dispersed-plan farmsteads. Regular courtyard plans are concentrated in landscapes of 19th-century enclosure. Many larger farmsteads developed with two or more cattle yards into regular multiple yard plans.
- Key building types are threshing barns, often with integral housing for horses and cattle, cider houses, stables, shelter sheds and some ranges of loose boxes for cattle.
- Most buildings are constructed from stone and in particular brick with pantile roofs.

Significance

- Farmstead groups with 18th-century or earlier fabric are very rare.
- Buildings with surviving cob, timber frame and thatch will be rare.
- Cider houses, particularly those with internal presses and mills, are rare.

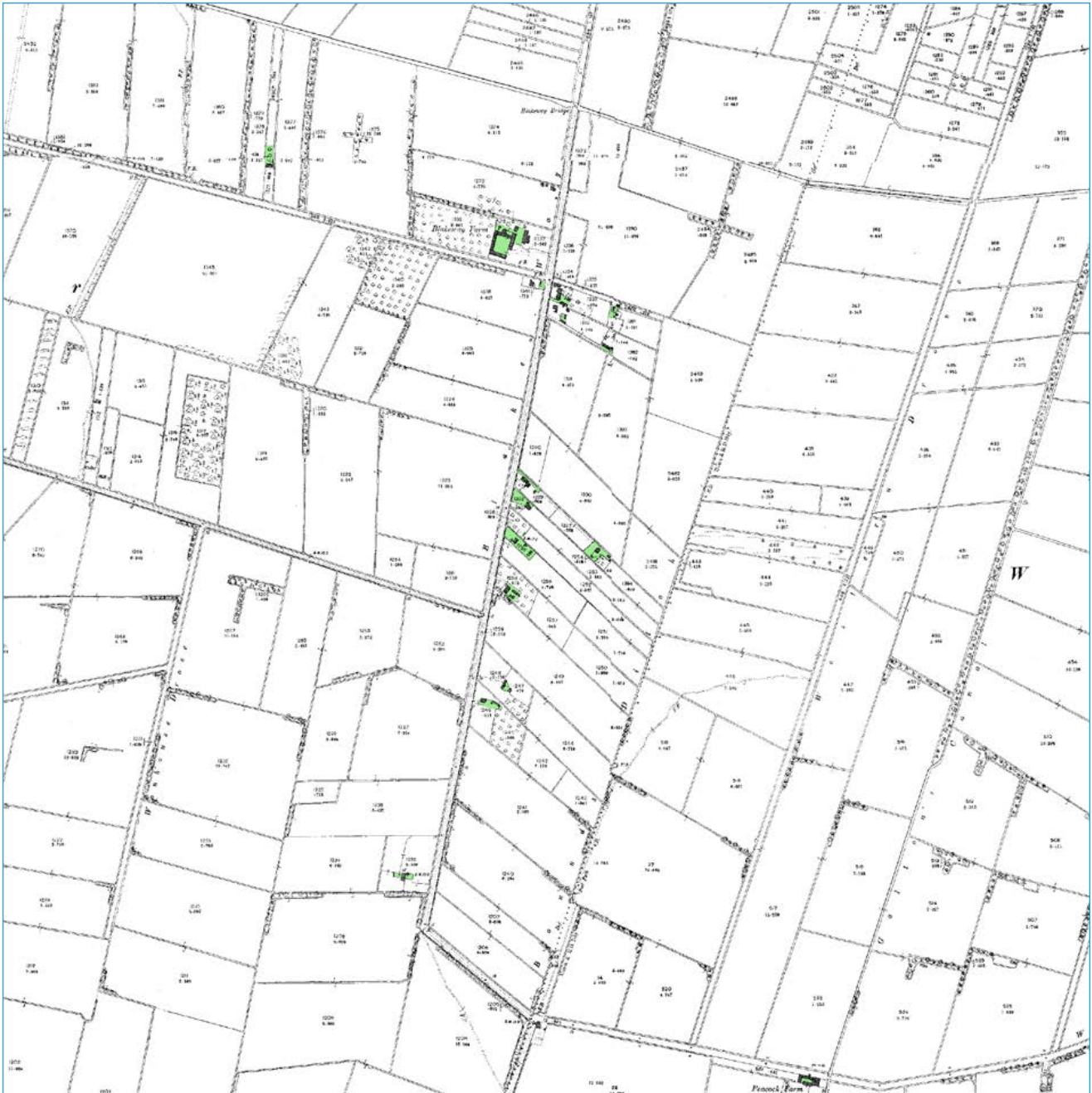
Present and future issues

- In this National Character Area, the Photo Image Project (2006) recorded a medium proportion of listed working farm buildings

converted to non-agricultural use (29.4%, the national average being 32%).

Historic development

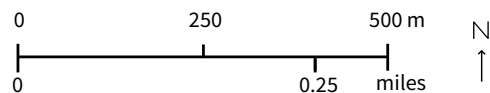
- The Somerset Levels and Moors National Character Area (NCA) is intrinsically linked, both geographically and historically, with the adjacent Mid Somerset Hills and Mendip Hills NCAs. Communities living on the higher ground have utilised – and continue to use – the natural fertility of the Somerset Levels and Moors since prehistoric times.
- The name Somerset comes from this relationship between the two areas – the Saxon Sumersaeta, meaning ‘summer man’s land’.
- The Levels, which originated as broad estuaries after the last Ice Age, have been the focus of thousands of years of drainage and reclamation using embankments, sea walls and the digging of drainage ditches – much evidence survives for prehistoric to first millennium AD activity.
- Medieval and earlier settlements developed on island sites within the wetlands. Larger settlements, whether Roman or early medieval in date, were sited on the edge of the surrounding hills in the adjacent Mid Somerset Hills and Mendip Hills NCAs. These managed and exploited the fishing and wildfowling and other resources offered by the Levels and Moors, such as common pasture shared between surrounding settlements, peat beds, salt pans, pollarded willow and material from the osier beds for making fish traps and basketwork.
- A major period of reclamation was largely driven by ecclesiastical estates (especially Glastonbury Abbey) from the late 11th to the 13th and early 14th centuries. Following floods and the population decline in the 14th century, reclamation activity renewed in the 17th century, including the drainage of Meare Pool and Aller Moor from the 1620s. Drainage was again renewed between the 1770s and the 1840s – enabled by steam power (commencing with the stations at Westonzoyland in 1830 which drained the Parret valley) – and again from World War II (for example the Blind Yeo outfall of 1949–50).
- Medieval and later towns stand on the borders of the area (see Mid Somerset Hills), at Langport, Glastonbury and Street.
- Bridgewater developed as a port in the medieval period. It expanded and was rebuilt in the late 17th and 18th centuries and as an industrial centre linked to the growth of the coal trade in the 19th century. Weston-super-Mare developed rapidly into a large seaside resort for the region after the rail link was completed in 1841, as too, although to a lesser extent, did the spa of Burnham-on-Sea after 1858. Weston’s airfield provided another driver behind its expansion from the inter-war period. The Second World War saw the building of extensive defensive structures as part of the Taunton Stop-line.
- Major active peat extraction sites are in the Brue valley where former peat works are being developed as nature reserves.
- Causeways became a major feature of this area in the medieval period. The rivers have also enabled navigation into Somerset’s inland towns (Chard, Ilminster, Taunton and Glastonbury). The Bridgewater and Taunton canal had its main dock at Bridgewater and took Welsh slate and coal inland.
- Fattening and dairying became the major industry on the Levels and Moors, with a greater historical diversity of farming on the higher ground. The land is mainly pasture but there are some areas of arable cropping.



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

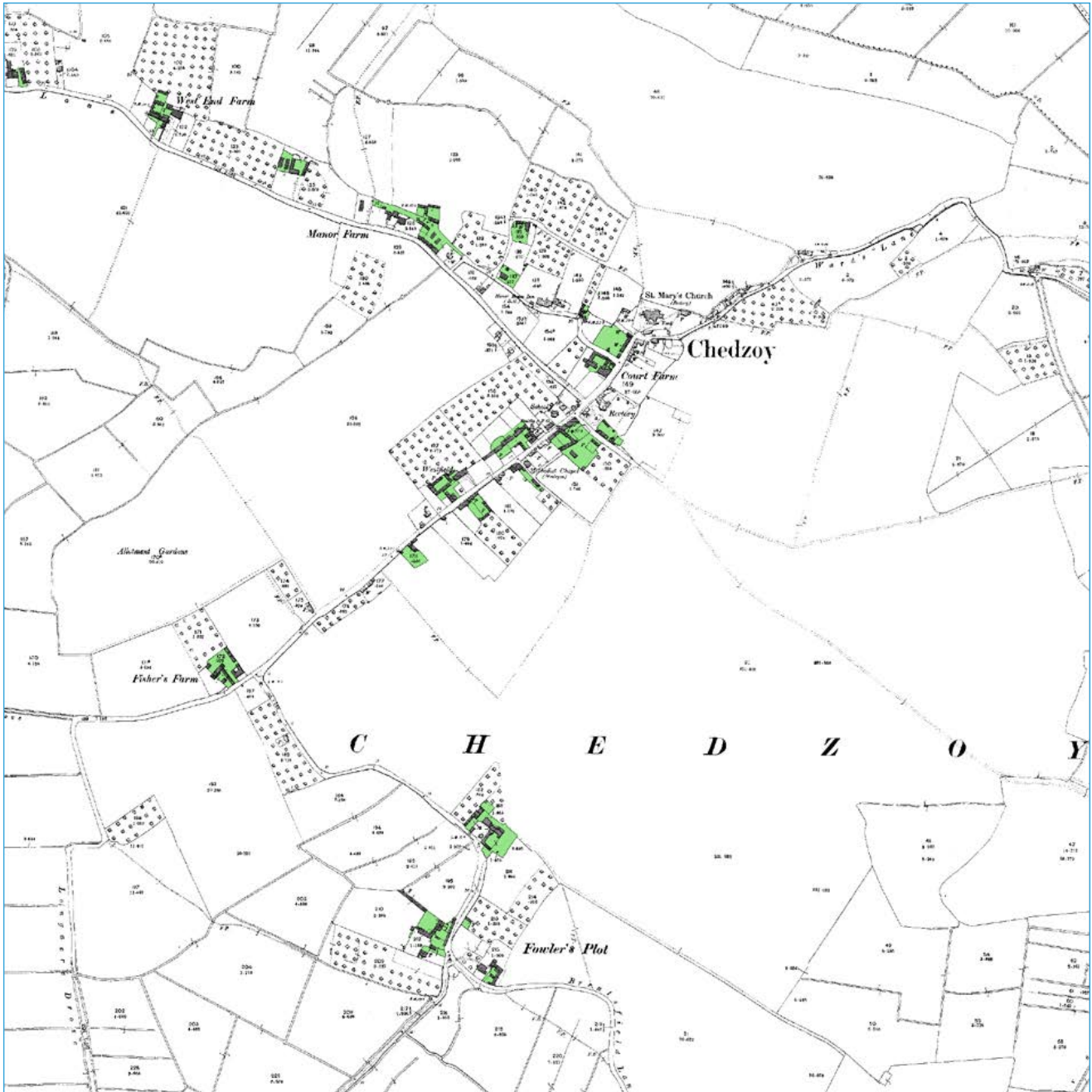


Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.




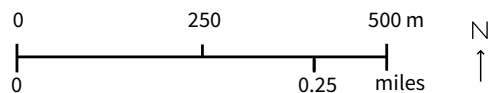
Westhay

Here is a classic 19th-century enclosure landscape, drainage channels defining the boundaries of straight fields and routeways – all called 'Drove'. The farmstead with its orchards to the centre matches this formality in its full regular courtyard plan, the map also showing the allotment of smallholdings with narrow, regular strips. Each of the houses has its own orchard as well, and sits within a very irregular scatter of just a few outbuildings – although with a superficial appearance of regular layouts because of the tight constraints of the plots.



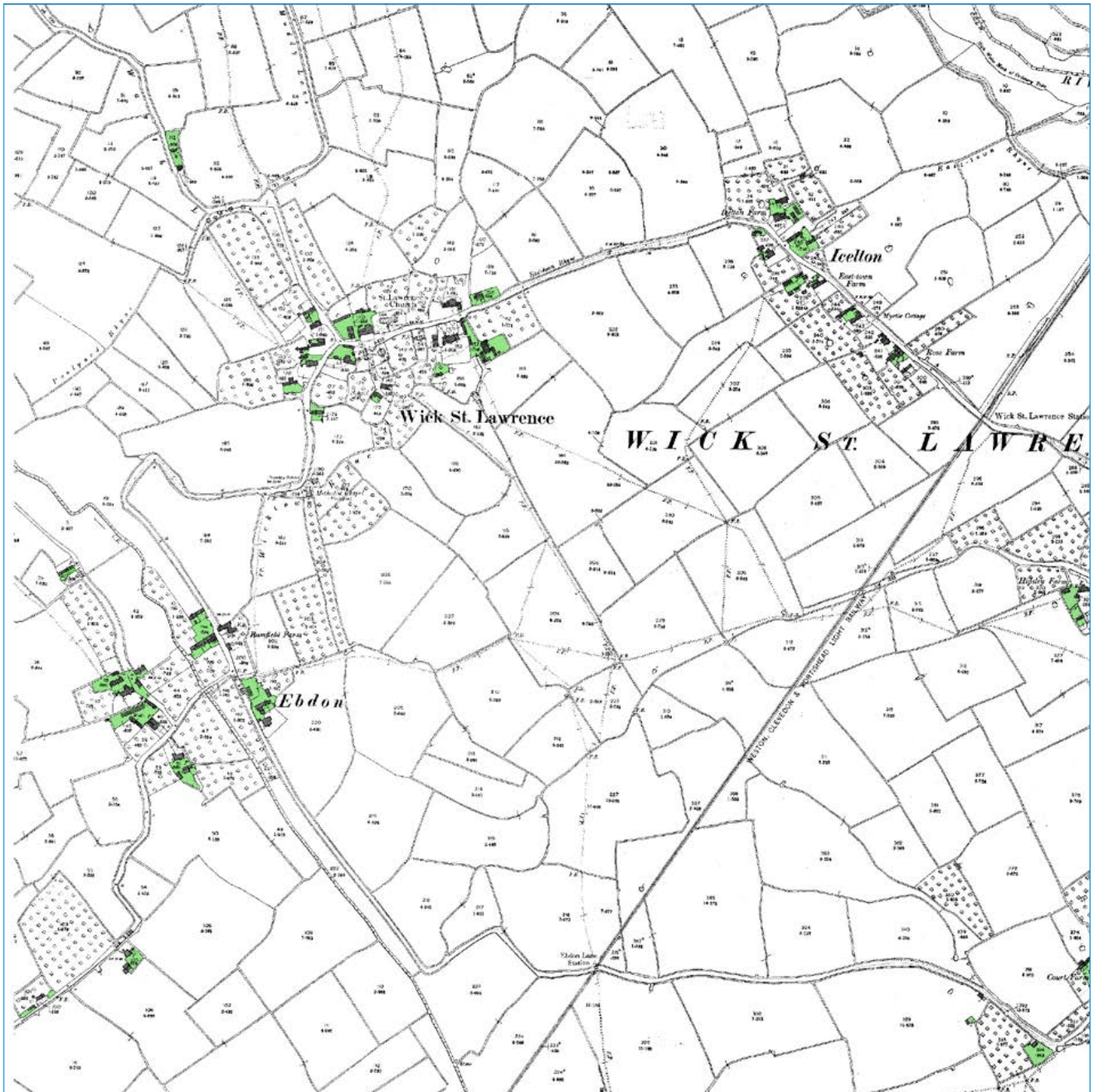
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 Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



Chedzoy

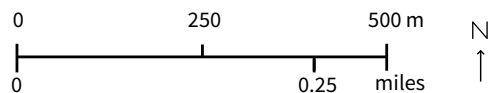
Chedzoy (see page 2) is sited on a moorland ‘burtle’ or island. The older medieval farmsteads are grouped around the church, and, like some of the outlying farmsteads, developed into multi-yard plans from linear ranges set in large stock-holding enclosures. The enlargement of fields around the village has removed many traces of medieval strip fields other than some curved field boundaries (to the north-west of Fowler’s Plot), leaving as more intact the wetland field pattern of small, sometimes irregular, enclosures. Farmsteads associated with this enclosure tend to be outliers on the edge of the dry land.



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



Wick St Lawrence

A contrasting landscape of older, irregular enclosures on the Levels. The farmsteads, again marked by surrounding orchards, are grouped in small villages and hamlets strung out along the few roads. The farmsteads, mostly with 17th-century houses and 19th-century working buildings, are also generally smaller and less formal in their layouts: they are mostly dispersed farmstead plans, although the farmhouses typically have a linear form typical of early layouts with attached outbuildings.

Landscape and settlement

The Mid Somerset Hills and Mendip Hills surround and divide the Levels and Moors from the east and to the north, and form a distinctive part of the skyline.

There are three broad distinctions within the area:

1. The north Levels and Moors beyond Weston-Super-Mare and the Mendip Hills: a flat open landscape of planned, reclaimed wet pasture, arable and wetland; relatively treeless, divided by ditches and rhynes, often forming a chequer-board pattern marked by occasional hedgerows and lines of pollard willows.
 2. The western moors lying within inland basins formed by the Mid Somerset Hills, punctuated by low hills or 'burtles' (the 'fossilised' sand banks of marine deposits). While some parts are largely treeless, others are more enclosed by overgrown hedgerows and pollard willows, and dominated by strong, rectilinear patterns of rhynes (larger ditches) and major rivers (Axe, Brue and Parrett). Near the edges of wetland islands and the Poldens, there is a slow transition to a landscape of hedgerows, older farmsteads, villages and orchards as the land rises.
 3. The Levels: a low belt of marine clay which runs parallel to a coastline of extensive mudflats and sand dunes in the north, and borders the western moors behind. Intermittent areas of irregular fields and sinuous lanes. The Levels is an older landscape than the reclaimed Moors, and more densely populated.
- The predominant pattern of nucleated settlement was present by the late 11th century. Villages are commonly sited on the wetland edge of the surrounding hills, although some modest-sized villages also stand in former islands (burtles) within the moors as at Meare and Wookey, Chedzoy and Burtle (the 'ey' place-name in Atheleney and Muchelney means 'isle'). From here, trackways (droves) extend into low-lying pastures.
 - Otherwise there are low levels of dispersed settlement associated with the ancient enclosure of the coastal strip, and with the enclosure of the peat fens from the 17th century.
 - The extension of settlement was also linked to the construction of embankments and sea walls, and the digging of drainage ditches.
 - The drained medieval field systems of the Levels and Moors comprise one of the best-preserved medieval enclosure landscapes in England. These are characterised by irregular patterns of enclosure with raised droveways and evidence for oval infields bordered or girdled by medieval or earlier farmstead sites.
 - Other areas of large-scale and small-scale rectilinear enclosure are associated with drainage and enclosure from the late 18th century, a process often complicated by the complexity of small-scale ownership and tenancy and often enforced by Parliamentary and Drainage Acts.
 - Reflecting this history of reclamation, roads on the Levels are often sinuous, following the line of rhynes that were once salt marsh creeks; others are straight droves, causeways and flood embankments, slightly raised and related to the drainage channels of the 18th-century landscape of the inland Moors.
 - Although very clearly a man-made landscape, there has never been much opportunity for extensive ornamental landscapes.
 - Most 20th-century development can be found around the edge of the area. Along the coastal strip, holiday caravans and chalets extend southwards from Brea. Highbridge, Burnham-on-Sea and Bridgwater are substantial settlements and residential and industrial development extends across the open landscape.

Farmstead and building types

Farmsteads often developed with relatively few buildings other than barns until the 19th century, due to the importance of summer grazing and many farms selling on their cattle before the winter. As a result, and whilst many houses are of 17th- and early 18th-century date and origin, pre-1750 working buildings are very rare.

Farmstead types

- Dispersed and loose courtyard farmsteads, with regular courtyard plans (U and E-shaped plans) concentrated in landscapes of 19th-century enclosure. Many larger regular-plan and dispersed-plan farmsteads developed with multiple yards.
- Regular courtyards are associated with late (early to mid- 19th century) enclosure and re-organisation. There are some covered yards of the type built from the 1850s to house cattle and conserve their manure.

Building types

- Survival of pre-1750 farmstead buildings is low, the principal exception being medieval barns of Glastonbury Abbey in and around Glastonbury.
- There are stables, shelter sheds and some ranges of loose boxes for cattle.
- Combination ranges include barns, first-floor granaries and stables are common.
- Cider houses, often integrated into combination ranges, date from the late 17th and, most commonly, the 19th centuries.



Three farmsteads dating from the late 18th to mid-19th centuries in a landscape enclosed in the late 18th century at Chedzoy. Note the late 19th-century farmworker's housing to bottom left. Photo © Historic England 27896 016



Detail of a regular multi-yard farmstead built in the early to mid-19th century, with a south-facing farmhouse and linked yards. It is subdivided from left into a stock yard with shelter sheds and a dairy, the house with its garden and cart shed facing the road, and a barn and stockyard to the right. Photo © Historic England 27896/014



Farmstead at Wick St Lawrence, with a double-pile, late 17th-century house and attached dairy/cheese room and working buildings. These dominated one side of a courtyard with a detached pigsty in the former orchard area. Photo © Historic England 29085/014



The importance of housing cattle is again evident in this group at Puxton Moor. The house with its dairy was rebuilt in the early to mid-19th century around an earlier 17th-century core. The central building with its aisles bears a resemblance to aisled buildings erected to house cattle and root crops in the Broads of East Anglia. Photo © Historic England 29085/031



A dramatic landscape showing late 18th- and 19th-century farmsteads on drained and enclosed land with strip fields rising up from a linear band of medieval settlement to Brent Knoll with its Iron Age hillfort and associated field system. Photo © Historic England 27975/019



The view from above Brent Knoll southwards towards Burnham on Sea, showing successive lines of Roman and post-Roman reclamation marked by parallel routeways. Photo © Historic England 27975/016



Some houses survive from the 18th-century and earlier farmsteads clustered within Westhay and its orchards, a marshland village surrounded by extensive evidence for prehistoric trackways and lake settlements dating from the Neolithic period. Most farmsteads moved out of the settlement after drainage and enclosure of the surrounding land from the late 18th century. Photo © Historic England 27894/048



A 17th-century or earlier farmstead, next to a 12th-century motte and bailey castle, at Locking Head near Weston-super-Mare. The house dates from the late 17th century, and the buildings have a dispersed layout characteristic of earlier layouts in this area. Photo © Historic England 29086/038



An early 19th-century combination barn at Buscott. Note the doveholes above the door to the threshing floor, with its winnowing door; to the right is a hay loft over stables. Photo © Eric Berry



This early to mid-19th-century range at Upper Godney comprises a threshing barn, a hay barn and a cow house with a later lean-to addition. Note the steps to the churn stand, for loading milk onto lorries; these were commonly introduced from the 1920s. Photo © Eric Berry



A rare-surviving, late 18th-century combined stables, cart shed and first-floor granary with its external steps. This is near Meare; note the dog kennel below the granary steps and the ball finials to the stone-coped gable ends. Photo © Eric Berry



A large, early to mid-19th-century hay barn to one side of a cattle yard at Upper Godney, demonstrating the importance of cattle, fed and fattened on the rich pastures of the Levels. Photo © Eric Berry



Slough Farm at Stoke St Gregory developed within and around its medieval moat. An oratory was recorded here in the 14th century. The house, remodelled in the 17th century, retains its 15th-century hall and an early 16th-century gateway next to the remains of the moat. The farmstead developed outside the moat, and retains a large, seven-bay, 17th-century barn with a mid-19th-century tiled lean-to for cattle. Photo © Eric Berry



Some linear farmstead groups survive within the area, as here, at High Ham with a 19th-century range added to a 17th-century or earlier house,. They do not appear, as in other areas of England, to be only associated with small and roadside or common-edge farms. Large, 17th-century and earlier houses with access to rich grazing pastures might have few farm buildings, as cattle were sold on in the autumn. Photo © Eric Berry



Early to mid-19th-century farmstead groups are typically arranged with houses facing away from the farmyards, as here. Photo © Eric Berry



An enclosure-period farm of the early to mid-19th century. Note how the house faces away from the farmyard, its dairy being placed to the rear, where the pantiles of its working buildings contrast with the Welsh slates used for the house. Photo © Eric Berry

Materials and detail

- There is a diverse mixture of building materials.
- Timber-frame is rare and confined to urban areas (principally Bridgewater).
- Predominant building stones are Blue Lias, and also a mix of oolitic limestone, sandstone and conglomerate.
- Brick was increasingly used from the late 17th century and is now predominant, as also is the use of pantiles for roofing. Bridgewater produced and exported most of the pantiles used in this and adjacent areas.
- There is some rare surviving thatch, and also cob, which survives with buildings reclad and partially rebuilt in the 19th century.
- Buildings on the open Levels and Moors are scarce, with a few farmsteads, again mainly in brick, or Blue Lias, with clay pantile roofs.



Historic England

This guidance has been prepared by
Jeremy Lake with Eric Berry and Nick Cahill,
Cornwall Historic Environment Service.

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