



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

# Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringe

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 146



## 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>).



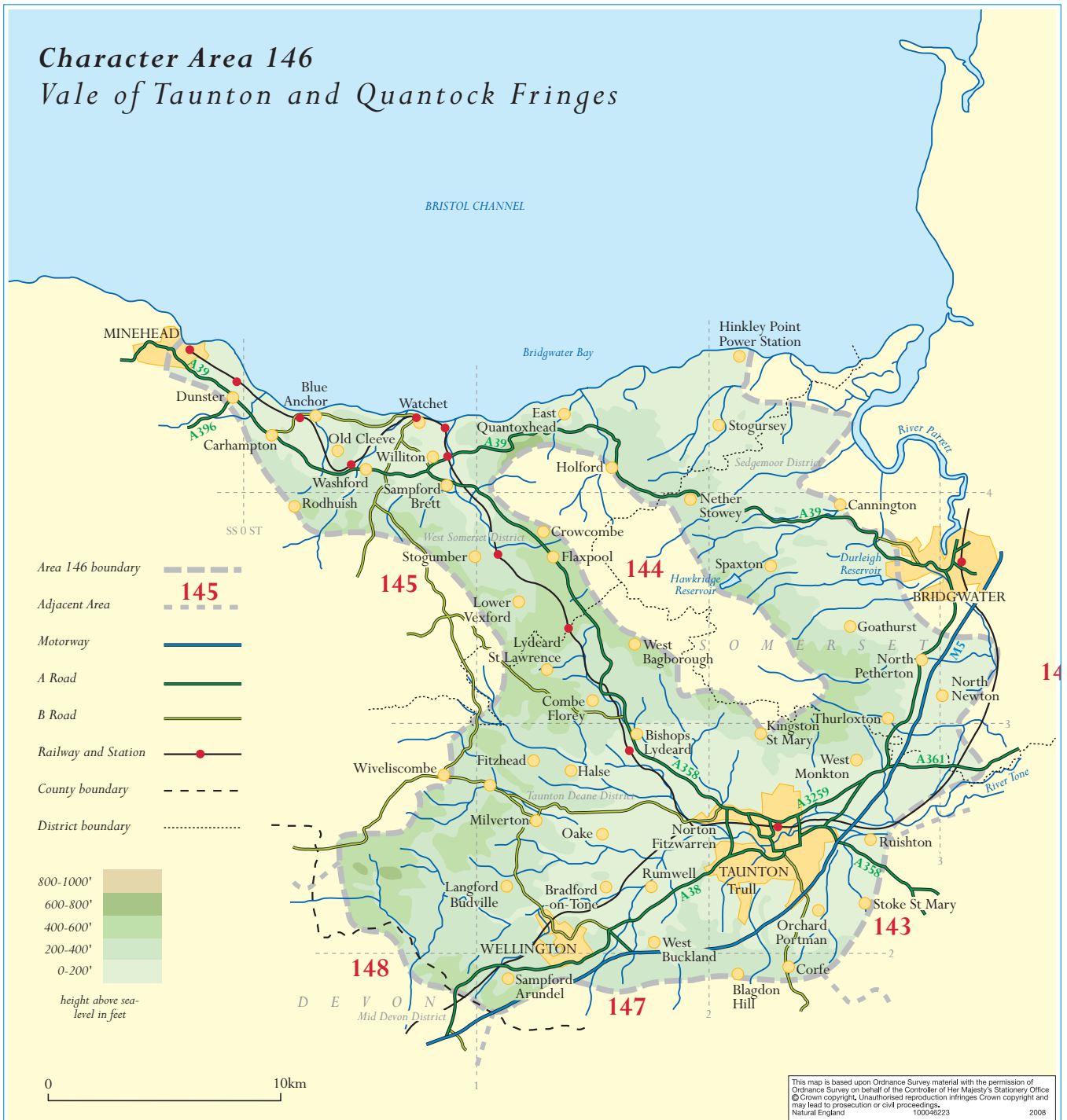
Improving estates have often effected great change in this area, resulting in designed landscapes with courtyard farmsteads, low replanted hedgerows and plantations, as here, on the Fairfield estate in Stogursey. Photo © Historic England 27976/011

---

**Front cover:** Fitzhead (see map on page 6), showing a landscape of scattered, 17th-century and earlier farmsteads in a landscape of early fields which in many cases have been enlarged as a result of farm reorganisation from the late 18th century. Photo © Historic England 27878/025



# Character Area 146 Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes



This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. © Crown copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. Natural England 100046223 2008

This map shows the Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringe 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.

This area lies between the Brendon Hills on the edge of Exmoor to the west and the Somerset Levels and Moors to the east. It overlooks the Bristol Channel to the north and the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) to the south and encircles the Quantock Hills AONB. The area is a densely settled, pastoral landscape. 7% of the land is urban, approximately 82% is farmland and 4% is woodland. Less than 2% of the Character Area falls within the Exmoor National Park and about 5% lies within the Quantock Hills AONB.

The River Tone and its tributaries drain the area to the south, whilst to the north, Doniford Stream – fed by tributaries arising from the Quantocks and Brendon Hill – drains into the sea at Watchet. To the east, many streams drain off the Quantock dip slopes and flow into the River Parrett.

## Historic Character

- The area has a mixed pattern of settlement piecemeal enclosure of the former open fields that surrounded villages, many of these remaining unenclosed into the early 19th century. A distinctive characteristic is the intermixture of scattered farms of 17th-century or earlier date, associated with the piecemeal enclosure of strip fields and field enclosures and (often regular) enclosure of blocks of common land.
- Mixed agriculture including fruit growing is reflected in a wide variety of building types – threshing barns and combination barns including some bank barns, extensive ranges of cattle housing including open-fronted, two-storied lincays, and cider houses.
- The area has a rich variety of building stone, occasionally rendered or limewashed and roofed in Welsh or Cornish slate and with pantiles.

## Significance

- There is a high survival of pre-1750 farmstead buildings by national standards. Many relate to small manor and gentry houses.
- The area has a high survival in a national context of substantially complete farmstead groups with 18th-century or earlier buildings including combination barns and stables.
- Cider houses with internal presses and mills are especially rare.
- Surviving use of timber-frame and thatch is rare, as also is use of cob.

## Present and future issues

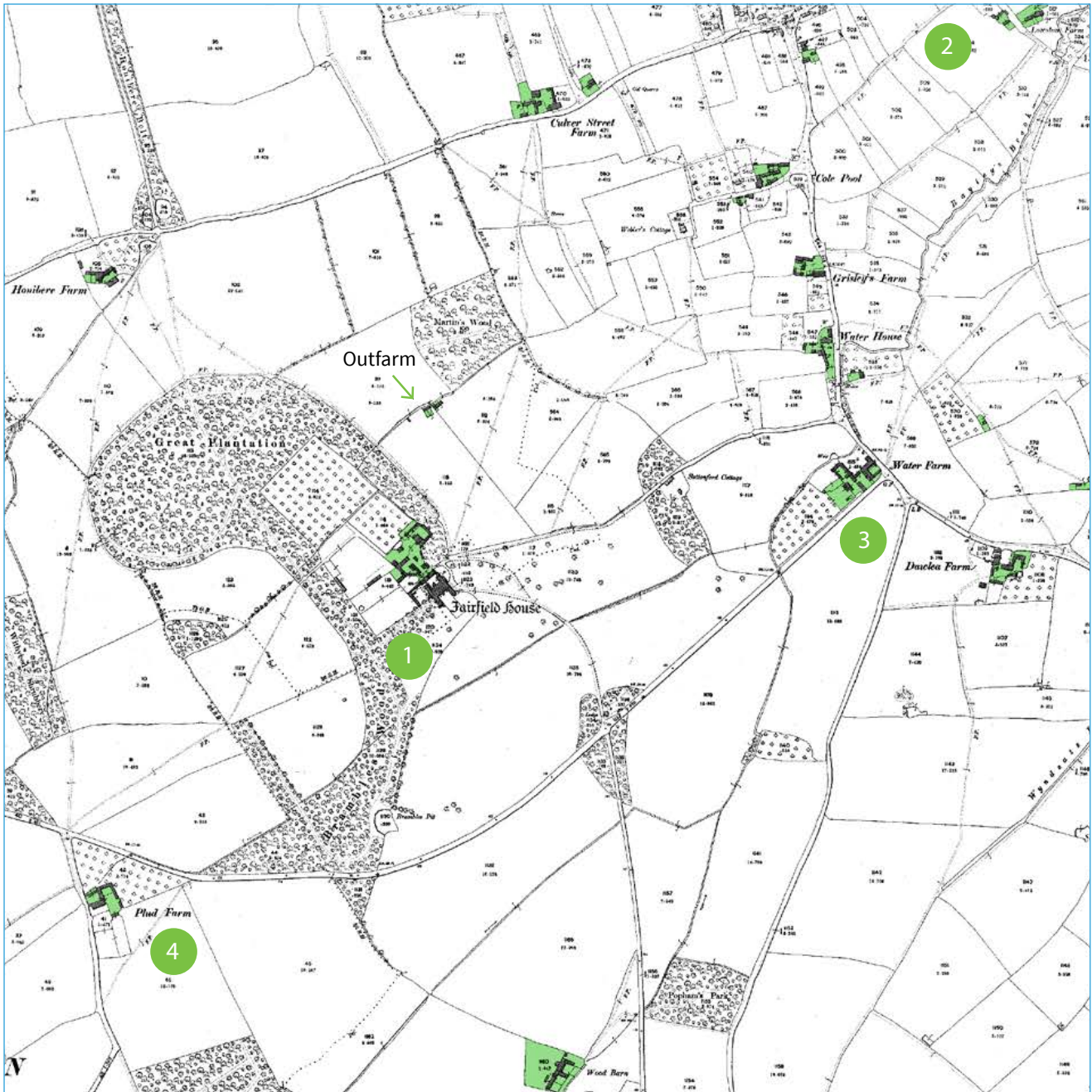
- In this National Character Area, the Photo Image Project (2006) recorded a medium proportion of listed working farm buildings converted to non-agricultural use (34%, the national average being 32%).
- There is a high rate of loss of historic orchards, especially in the lower vale, Tone flood plain and Quantock fringes.

## Historic development

- Mixed agriculture combined with fruit growing has developed from at least the late first millennium AD. The fattening of cattle from Wales had developed as a major industry by the 17th century, and the port of Watchet had developed from the 10th century for the export of grain and the import of livestock. The Vale of Taunton was, until recent times, a major cider apple growing area with many local varieties. At one time, almost every farm had a cider press and every community a cider house. Orchard Portman near Taunton was named 'Orceard' as long ago as 854 AD.
- Large-scale ecclesiastical ownership was important in the medieval period – a large area around Taunton was part of the Bishop of Winchester's holdings. Open fields, mostly found around villages, probably persisted longest on the bishop's estates and on the coastal strip.
- Water meadows developed on the southern and western Quantock fringe, sometimes using the catch meadow system to take water down valley sides. The area's arable lands were, from the 18th century, enclosed and enriched by new crops such as turnips and artificial grasses, and in coastal area were sited close to coastal grazing lands for cattle. The area also benefitted from access to rich grazing lands on the Somerset Levels and moorland grazing on the Quantock Hills and the Brendon Hills.
- The prosperity of the area in the post-medieval period is evident from large numbers of 15th- to 17th-century, small manor houses and gentry houses – a significant characteristic of the area.
- Many high-status houses developed with deer parks which then developed into ornamental landscapes. These often had access to poorer land (especially the Quantock fringe) for grazing their stock. Many are clustered around the county town of Taunton – which developed from the 12th century around its castle; it experienced rapid growth after the opening of rail connections to Bristol and London in 1842.
- The wool trade was especially significant in the 16th to 18th centuries, Wellington developing as a market centre as well as for the manufacture of coarse woollen cloth. This trade declined from the late 18th century with the increasing dominance of mills in northern England
- Nucleated villages such as Bishops Lydeard, Milverton and Bradford-on-Tone also often developed as market centres.
- The Brendon Hills to the west of the area were important for minerals such as iron ore, increasingly exploited from the late 18th century and exported through Watchet.
- The growth in communications was also reflected in population, economic and agricultural growth in this period: the Grand Western Canal in Taunton in 1839; the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal (opened in 1827 and linked to the Bridgwater Dock which was opened in 1841); two railways which crossed the area and terminated at Watchet from the mid-1860s.
- Major development since the Second World War has introduced mineral extraction, industrial development, Hinkley Point nuclear power station (constructed 1957) and the



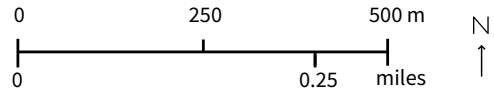




Maps are based on 2nd edition 25" Ordnance Survey maps, which show farmsteads after the last major phase in the building of traditional farmsteads in England. © Crown Copyright [and database rights] 2020. OS 100024900



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



## Stogursey

There is an immediately obvious contrast between the anciently enclosed fields to the right of this map area, and the extended late 18th- and 19th-century designed landscape around the medieval manor at Fairfield House with its fortified house and parkland. A cluster of old farmstead sites with 16th- and 17th-century recorded houses lies along the road – on slightly higher, drier ground, closer to Stogursey village and its castle, and set within the fossilised strip fields. Interspersed amongst the farmsteads are cottages, some of which may themselves be decayed farmsteads. To the north of the map are small farms and smallholdings, many originally built to linear plans and heightened in the 19th century, which relate to an area of poorly drained land subject to mid-19th-century enclosure. Grisley's Farm to the north-east has a 19th-century malthouse.

construction of the M5 motorway which has had

a significant impact on the southern part of the area.

## Landscape and settlement

- Visible evidence for prehistoric settlement (especially hill forts) is confined to the edges of the higher ground adjacent to Exmoor and the Quantock Hills, although aerial survey is revealing increasing evidence for a pattern of scattered farmsteads and their associated fields that continued into the second half of the first millennium AD.
- The present pattern of village-based settlement with associated field systems largely dates from the 8th to 11th centuries, and was established within a landscape that had lost most of its woodland cover by this period. Some of these (for example Kingston St Mary, Bishops Lydeard, Milverton and Bradford-on-Tone) developed as market centres.
- Villages are intermixed with a high density of hamlets and isolated farmsteads. Many hamlets, characteristically with churches, developed from small, manorial centres which typically developed into some of the largest farmsteads in the area. Isolated farmsteads include many established by the 14th century, as part of a diverse settlement pattern, as well as those associated with the 15th-century and later enclosure of open fields and strip fields.
- Open fields, mostly found around villages, probably persisted longest on ecclesiastical estates and on the coastal strip; a large area around Taunton was part of the Bishop of Winchester's holdings.
- The predominant pattern of piecemeal enclosure, with the outlines of medieval strips reflected in distinctive curved boundaries, results from these historic changes. Areas of ancient enclosure (formed by the 14th century) are mostly found on the coastal belt, to the north-west of Wellington (former Forest of Neroche) and bordering the Blackdown Hills to the south.
- These areas contrast with those of 18th- and 19th-century regular enclosure, including the former common pastures around the edges of the Vale and on the flood plains.
- Many fields in areas of piecemeal and ancient enclosure are bounded by thick earth or stone-fast hedges, and have mature hedgerow trees (especially to the south of Taunton). Hedgerows are concentrated in areas of regular enclosure.
- A consequence of the growth of large arable-based farms in the 18th and 19th centuries has been the enlargement of fields and the removal or straightening of boundaries as farms were amalgamated and reorganised. Large fields are now strongly characteristic of the Tone Valley south-west of Taunton, with enclosure resulting in the present pattern of large fields with low hawthorn hedges.
- Many architecturally distinctive gentry manors with their parklands are located along the fringes of the Quantock Hills. In 1918 there were approximately 1,452ha of historic parkland, covering about 3% of the NCA. By 1995 it is estimated that only 508ha of this remained.



# Farmstead and building types

The area has high numbers of 15th- to early 18th-century farmhouses and other dwellings by national standards, the numbers of pre-1750 working buildings being lower but still above-average in a national context.

## Farmstead types

- Farmstead types reflect the richly-varied character of this area. Linear farmsteads with houses and working buildings attached in-line were historically concentrated around areas of common pasture and with by-employment in rural industries. They are now very rare. Dispersed plans are also now rare, although many farmsteads – as found across the south-west peninsula – developed with several scattered yards at the meeting points of routes and tracks. Many farmsteads had cattle yards for fattening added in the mid- to late 19th century.
- Courtyard-plan farmsteads are now dominant, many farmsteads developing with working buildings to three or four sides of the yard or with multiple yards. Regular multi-yards are strongly associated with the larger gentry farms of this area and in areas where the largest fields developed over the 19th century.

## Building types

- There is a high concentration of pre-1750 farmstead buildings by national standards.
- Threshing barns (including combination buildings with cattle at one end), are often of five bays or more. three-bay barns are found on smaller working farms. Granaries, often over cart sheds, and stables also testify to the importance of arable cultivation.
- There are some bank barns dating from the late 18th to mid-19th centuries.
- Many larger farmsteads also developed in the early to mid-19th century into courtyard plans with wheel houses for threshing machinery.
- There is a variety of cattle housing including cow houses for dairy cattle and shelter sheds. These are mostly mid- to late 19th century.
- Open-fronted lincays – some pre-19th century – are also a distinctive feature, facing into cattle yards and often fully enclosed from the late 19th century in order to accommodate dairy cattle.
- Cider houses were typically incorporated with stabling and other functions into combination ranges.
- Some outfarms and field barns are of 19th-century date, which, along with limekilns, offer evidence for agricultural improvement from the late 18th century.



The photograph shows the view towards Fairfield House (see previous page) from the south-west. Aerial image © Historic England 27975/029



The home farm at Fairfield House (see map on page 7) has developed with several farmyards on a piecemeal basis. To the left is a 17th-century barn with a porch; to its right is a pyramidal-roofed granary and close to the house are late 18th-century stables with a dovecote. Cattle yards were added in the early to mid-19th century. Photo © Historic England 27975/038



To the east of the medieval church at East Quantoxhead is the home farm to Court House, the medieval manor. It is one of a number of exceptionally large and prosperous mixed farms that developed to work a range of resources along the north Somerset coast with access to ports for the export of grain. The barn is medieval in origin and along with the group as a whole, results from much remodelling for a corn and fatstock farm in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. A horse-engine house of this date projects from the barn, which was extended and provided with a long line of shelter sheds along one side. The cow house in the foreground, facing the routeway, is recorded as 16th century. Photo © Historic England 27975/021



Successive reworking of fields and farmsteads characterises this area. Plud Farm on the Fairfield estate offers evidence in its formal courtyard layout of the reworking of the estate landscape in the early 19th century. The house is an early 17th-century reworking of a 15th-century dwelling which in the late 16th century belonged to the constable of Stowey Castle. Photo © Historic England 27976/004





Dean Farm (see map on page 6) reflects many of the changes wrought by improved agriculture which affected this area in the late 18th and 19th centuries. It was built c 1800 as an experimental farm to test the most economical and profitable ways of farming and cultivating the soil, for Lord Sommerville of Fitzhead Court, who was President of the Board of Agriculture in 1798 and who introduced Merino sheep into the UK. The high status of the farmhouse is marked by its ornamental grounds and attached stables and coach house. The superior farmhouse has small, ornamental grounds and gardens and attached stables, coach house, etc. The regular multi-yard steading stands at some remove, at the head of a combe; a fine group in red sandstone random rubble with brick dressings and slate roof, its bank barns and yards making use of the slope for water power, drainage, access to first-floor threshing floors and the collection of manure. The group includes a granary, shelter sheds and a waterwheel in a wheelhouse originally linked by a shaft drive to the barn, a cider house over a cattle byre, a granary and attached cart shed. There is a separate yard for pigsties and chicken housing. A second detached yard and cottage stand to the north of the house. Photo © Historic England 27978/040



A very rare surviving grouping of an 18th-century farmstead, with thatched roofs to the house (reworked in brick c 1800) and the cow house. The working buildings on most small farms of this type were swept away in the 19th and 20th centuries, as they fell out of agricultural use. Photo © Eric Berry





A small, three-bay, early 19th-century barn (at Walcombe) devoted to storing and processing the corn crop, typical of smaller farmsteads and as built up to the mid-19th century. Photo © Eric Berry



Open-fronted lincays for cattle, with slight timbers to a hay loft above housing for fatstock, are a feature of this area. Photo © Eric Berry



A range of c 1840 near Watchet, with open-fronted cart sheds attached to a threshing barn with an internal loft. Photo © Eric Berry



A large, mid-19th-century bank barn with ground-floor cattle housing, on the north Somerset coast. Photo © Eric Berry



Holford Photo © Eric Berry





A mid- to late 19th-century smithy at Oake. Photo © Eric Berry



A common-edge group, now a rare survival in this landscape context, at Ash Priors. Photo © Eric Berry



The shelter sheds attached to the tithe barn at East Quantoxhead (see page 3). Photo © Eric Berry



Many buildings that made use of cob, as here, at Holcombe, were built on tall plinths and have been partly or wholly rebuilt in brick or concrete block. Photo © Eric Berry



The outline of an earlier building in a stone-walled gable. Photo © Eric Berry





Jointed crucks – marked here by the pegs driven into the jointing of the lower curved section of crucks and the main rafters – are a distinctive feature of this area and areas extending to the south and west. Photo © Eric Berry



Straight joints, other evidence of phasing and the presence of render as here, on this threshing barn and attached stable can indicate how buildings have gradually been rebuilt or extended in stone or brick from earlier cob-walled buildings. Photo © Eric Berry



Another part-cob and stone building at Halse. Photo © Eric Berry



A typical feature of this area is the relationship of single-storey cattle housing to taller combination barns (to the left) and stables with hay lofts (to the right). Photo © Eric Berry

## Materials and detail

- Building materials reflect rich local variation:
- Red sandstone in the west, brown-grey Lias to the east and near the coast
- Chert/flint in the south
- Some building in cob, especially to the west, sometimes in combination with stone structures
- Thin render coats and lime wash commonly applied to stone and cob
- Some rare surviving timber-frame and jointed-cruck roofs.
- Brick which mostly dates from the late 18th century, and includes Wellington bricks of the mid- 19th century and later.
- Roofing materials mostly comprise slate from north Cornwall or Wales, and some local slate to the west, and also pantiles.





# Historic England

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

Please refer to this document as:  
Historic England 2020 Farmstead and Landscape  
Statement: Vale of Taunton and Quantock  
Fringe. Swindon: Historic England.

We are the public body that looks after  
England's historic environment. We champion  
historic places, helping people understand,  
value and care for them.

Please contact  
[guidance@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:guidance@HistoricEngland.org.uk)  
with any questions about this document.

[HistoricEngland.org.uk](https://HistoricEngland.org.uk)

If you would like this document in a different  
format, please contact our customer services  
department on:

Tel: 0370 333 0607

Email: [customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

All information and weblinks accurate at the  
time of publication.

Please consider the environment before printing  
this document

Product code: 52260 RRL code: 150/2020

Publication date: February 2020 © Historic England  
Design: Historic England and Chantal Freeman, Diva  
Arts