Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

Blackdowns

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 147

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).

A scattered group of buildings, including a 16th-century or earlier cross-passage house, two 18th-century barns and 18th- to 19th-century buildings (cow house, stables and small granary in the yard). Dispersed farmstead plans are typical of this area. Photo © Historic England 27891/026

Front cover: A Blackdowns landscape (Membury parish). Broad valleys with hamlets, farmsteads and their associated earthworks of deserted or shifting settlement date from the medieval period, and are set along the spring line below low ridges of hills. Thick hedgerows mark the early enclosure of medieval strip field systems with curving boundaries; there is remnant woodland on the upper slopes. Upland plateaux are marked by later enclosure – large, more rectangular fields, lower hedges, fewer trees and predominantly 18th- to 19th-century farmsteads. Photo © Historic England 27891/040

This map shows the Blackdown Hills 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 Blackdown Hills straddle the border of Devon and Somerset, wrapping around the eastern edge of the M5 and spanning between Taunton to the north, Chard to the east and southwards to Lyme Bay. It is a remote, tranquil landscape, ranging from dramatic scarp slopes to a flat-topped plateau, incised by valleys and combes. Less than 3% of the Character Area is urban, 12% is woodland and 80% of land is farmland. Approximately 80% of the Character Area falls within the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Historic Character

- Mixed farming developed as a key characteristic of this area from the 15th century, piecemeal enclosure retaining the curved outlines of strip fields which covered much of this area. This contrasts with the regular enclosures of the plateaux which continued into the 1870s.
- Farmsteads typically developed around one or more cattle yards, loose courtyards and dispersed multi-yards reflecting a process of piecemeal development – sometimes around routeways to moorland. Regular courtyards are associated with the late enclosure and reorganisation driven by estates.
- Arable combined with pastoral farming is reflected in threshing and combination barns which can be five or more bays in size, substantial stable ranges and granaries over stables and cart sheds. A dominant feature on all farms is the extent and variety of cattle housing – open-fronted shelter sheds for fatstock, cow houses (usually with hay lofts) and two-storied, open-fronted linhays.
- Cider houses are a distinctive feature, although there has been a sharp decline in the extent of historic orchards.

Significance

- The area has a high concentration of thatch, including early wheat straw thatch.
- There is high survival of 17th-century and earlier buildings, and of complete traditional farmsteads with a wide range of evidence for historic development, by national standards.
- Small farmsteads were strongly characteristic but are now 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 (32.7%, the national average being 32%).
- There has been a change in use of some farm buildings to holiday lets or residential property. Changes in agricultural practice have also seen an emergence of larger-scale agricultural buildings.

Historic development

- This area was cleared of its woodland and extensively settled by the Iron Age. Its extensive iron ore deposits and quarries (notably at Beer) were intensively exploited in the Roman period.

- The patterns of settlement and land use were reorganized in the 8th to 11th centuries, and localised industrial activity continued throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods – especially quarrying (particularly along the coast) and fishing.

- Market centres developed in the medieval period at the new town of Honiton (founded c 1200), Chard and Axminster.

- Arable extended over much of the area until the early 14th century, with coastal salt marshes on the Axe providing rich grazing land. The development of pastoral farming (in particular for dairying) mixed with some arable cultivation developed as a key characteristic in the 15th to 17th centuries on the brown clay and earth soils of the valleys.

- From this period, arable land was concentrated in the valleys. The higher ground (marked by generally poor and acidic soils and woodland, heath, bog and scrub) early encroachment) reverted to grazing and from the late 18th century it was subject to enclosure and rotational cropping with roots. Smaller farms that had developed with access to common land were absorbed into larger farms from this period. The area experienced a marked loss of smaller farm holdings between the 1st and 2nd edition OS maps (1880–1907).

- The textile industries stimulated the growth of some villages and towns in the 18th and 19th centuries, Axminster's wealth mainly deriving from its carpet factories, Honiton (rebuilt after two fires in the mid-18th century) from cloth industry and lace-making. The fishing towns of Lyme Regis, Seaton and Sidmouth were developed as resorts from the early 19th century.

- Second World War airfields including Dunkeswell (one of the best-preserved airfield landscapes of the period) were established on some plateaux. while along the coast there are numerous remnants of anti-invasion defences.

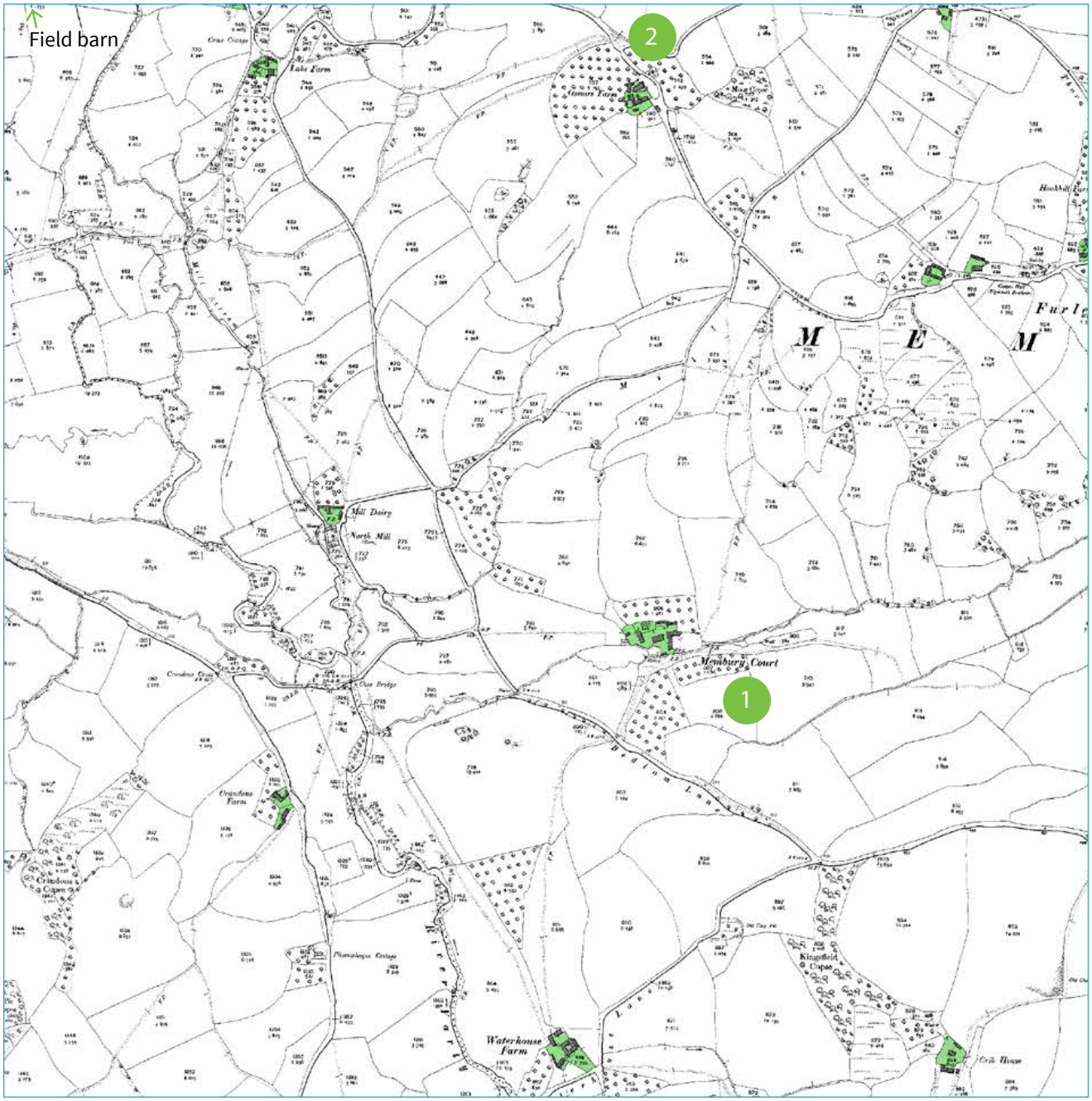
- Agriculture and tourism remain the chief economic activities – the latter continuing to develop with the designation of the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site.

Landscape and settlement

- There is a strong contrast between the ancient (prehistoric and medieval) field enclosures of the valleys and 18th- to 19th-century regular enclosure of the upland commons. This is combined with strong time-depth across the area, evident for example in Bronze Age barrows in elevated positions on the ridges; Iron Age hill forts on the upper valley slopes; Roman roads, including the Fosse Way.

- The predominant settlement pattern includes a high proportion of medieval or earlier scattered farmsteads and hamlets, mostly sited along the spring lines. This pattern of settlement is intermixed with a large amount of nucleated settlements, many of which were established by the late 11th century but which continued to develop in the 12th and 13th centuries. Villages are often located close to rivers.

- There is much documentary and some physical evidence for strip field cultivation in the past, around villages, hamlets and scattered farmsteads. Farmsteads were sited in villages, in hamlets or individually with access to infield areas ploughed into strip fields, the outfield areas being located in large fields or enclosures subject to intermittent cultivation and sometimes retaining strip fields. Enclosures could take in individual strips, fields divided into whole groups of



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.

0 250 500 m

0 0.25 miles

N

Membury

This is a 'classic' landscape of medieval dispersed settlement and enclosure, many field boundaries having the distinctive curves of the strip fields that covered much of this area. Many of the farmsteads with 17th-century or earlier recorded farmhouses have developed at the meeting points of routeways, on spring lines or the edge of valley-floor meadows, and have developed from dispersed layouts. Note the larger barton-field enclosures around the high-status Membury Court. The drainage and enclosure of the wet valleys and moorlands was also associated with the establishment of more formally planned 19th-century farmsteads.

strips or result in the subdivision of large fields which in the medieval period served high-status manor farms (bartons) and estate farms (granges); most of the latter were linked to Cistercian abbeys which influenced agricultural improvements and management.

- Many of the isolated farmsteads on the former upland commons were built in association with its 18th- and 19th-century enclosure. These include the late enclosures of Stockland Hill (1864) and Beacon Hill (1874 – said to be the last area in England to be enclosed), characterised by large-scale and regular enclosures delineated by dense, low hedgerows and beech avenues, plantations and straight roads.
- The field boundaries are generally hedgerows with hedgebanks, the latter comprising a distinctive form of boundary shared with other areas within the south-west peninsula.
- Areas of remnant common, lowland heath and scrub still exist, for example Blackdown Common.
- The slopes and vales retain many hedgerow trees and irregular small-scale enclosures. Ancient woodlands are concentrated on the steeper slopes alongside areas of wet grassland and scrub.
- On the high ground the land is now predominantly pasture, whilst lower down the valley land is in both arable and pasture use. Within the valleys, floodplains are enclosed within large fields. They are mainly used as pasture but some are arable. There is some horticulture, and nearly 30% of farms are smallholdings.
- Although designed landscapes are not widespread, there are some significant sites – especially Victorian designed landscapes in the valleys, and the iconic Wellington Monument, defining the north-west escarpment.

Farmstead and building types

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

Farmstead types

- The area has many dispersed layouts, many of which developed from the medieval period as multi-yard plans at the meeting point of routes and tracks. This is a plan type characteristic of other upland fringe areas in the south west of England.
- Many farmhouses are attached to working buildings. Most have been absorbed into larger farmsteads with other working buildings and yards, but included amongst them are some very rare surviving examples of 15th- to 17th-century longhouses which have a shared entrance for humans and cattle.
- There are some enclosed regular courtyard plans, mostly on larger and high-status (including barton) farms, which were often developed or remodelled in the early to mid-19th century with bank barns and wheel houses for threshing machinery.
- Other predominant farmstead plans comprise dispersed layouts, sometimes with farmhouses attached to working buildings, and regular L- and U-shaped layouts which are concentrated in coastal arable areas.
- Historic orchards surrounding farmsteads are characteristic.
- Small farmsteads were strongly characteristic but are now rare. They can be dispersed plans, courtyards with a building to only one side of a yard or linear plans with houses and working buildings in-line.

Building types

- The area has a good survival rate of pre-1750 farmstead buildings, mostly comprising threshing barns (including combination buildings with cattle at one end), and some early examples of linhays for cattle. There are broad distinctions to be made between the generally later Blackdown Hills farmsteads and those of East Devon and the Jurassic Coast which include a high number of 16th-century and earlier buildings.

- There are some bank barns dating from the late 18th to mid-19th centuries, many farmsteads having cattle yards for fattening added in the mid-late 19th century.

- Open-fronted linhays are a distinctive feature, facing into cattle yards. They were often fully enclosed from the late 19th century in order to accommodate dairy cattle.

- Cider houses are typically incorporated with stabling and other functions into combination ranges.

- Small field barns for housing cattle, their manure fertilising the land around them, are a distinctive characteristic of the Blackdown Hills.

Farmsteads with 17th-century and earlier buildings at Yartyford, which with the earthworks of shrunken settlement are sited around an ancient routeway and within fields retaining the curved outlines of medieval strips. Lanes meeting these farmsteads extend to valley-bottom meadows to the left and the formerly unenclosed land on the plateau to the right. Photo © Historic England 27891/025

Bywood-Dunkeswell. Large 18th- to 19th-century parliamentary enclosure fields, some with curved outlines suggesting that they have been adapted from earlier intakes, this high land was occasionally taken in for arable. The farmstead in the foreground sits at the head of a small combe, the steep, upper reaches of the valley with wetland and woodland leading down into the smaller, older field systems of the lower valley. Photo © Historic England 27979/013

Farmsteads can also have their yards and buildings dispersed along driftways leading to meadows or former common land. This group has an early 16th-century farmhouse, its lower end extended (probably with a dairy and cider house) in the 18th century; an 18th-century barn, stables and cider house form part of the group. The courtyard of buildings to the right, including a barn and stables dated 1871, was built after stopping of the routeway. Photo © Historic England 27891/007

This group at Godworthy, including a 16th-century farmhouse (its size suggesting occupancy by an extended family group), is also strung along a routeway to former common land, and is sited close to earthworks that suggest the shrinkage of a hamlet to an individual farm. Photo © Historic England 27890034

A late 18th- and 19th-century courtyard group at Bywood, also marked by its use of corrugated iron – a material used from the mid-19th century. The early to mid-19th-century farmhouse faces into its own garden area and can also be accessed through the farmyard. This type of large courtyard farm can be found on farms on sites enclosed from common land from the later 18th century. Photo © Historic England 27979/008

A late 18th- or early 19th-century threshing barn, its hipped roof replaced by Welsh slates. Note the raised threshing floor, which would have been boarded. Photo © Eric Berry

Through-entries large enough to admit loaded carts and waggons are a characteristic feature of some courtyard groups; note the cart shed to the right. Photo © Eric Berry

A 17th- to 18th-century threshing barn built of cob, with two threshing floors and partly rebuilt in stone rubble. Photo © Eric Berry

The large size of arable-based farms, as they developed in some parts of the area in the early to mid-19th century, called for large stable ranges. This range was reroofed and converted to a cow house for dairy cattle, with metal-framed windows, in the mid-20th century. Photo © Eric Berry

An 18th-century bank barn is attached to one end of this 17th-century farmhouse. This is an early type of bank barn, built into the slope and with a door to a stable or cow house to the lower gable end. Photo © Eric Berry

Cob was also used for large barns, cattle housing and stable ranges, as here, and has often been repaired and rebuilt in places with stone rubble and, from the later 19th century, in brick. Photo © Eric Berry

An open-fronted linhay. Photo © Eric Berry

Large cart sheds were needed for large arable-based farms. Photo © Eric Berry

A cob barn. Cob barns have often been rebuilt and reroofed, thatch being common until the 19th century. Photo © Eric Berry

A large, mid- to late 19th-century linhay for cattle, with later weatherboarding applied to its originally open-fronted hay lofts. Photo © Eric Berry

Many threshing barns were converted into housing for dairy cattle from the late 19th century. Note how the central threshing bay has been infilled in stone rubble walling. Photo © Eric Berry

Brick was used sparingly in this area from the later 19th century, as here, in these stables with weatherboarding and loading doors to the hay loft. Photo © Eric Berry

An early 19th-century combination barn with an integral stable in the foreground, partly rebuilt in concrete block. Photo © Eric Berry

Materials and detail

- There is a wide variety of traditional building materials reflecting the geology. Cob survives from the medieval period, and is most concentrated in the east. Thatch is still widespread.

- Rubble-stone construction, especially Triassic Sandstone, is locally used and Beer Stone chalk was used for quoins and details from the medieval period, flint also occurring in the southern chalk area. The use of chert is widespread, mainly as rubble and commonly later with brick banding and edging: it is the most characteristic material of much of the area. Iron slag/cinder was used as decoration in localised areas. Colour washed buildings are characteristic along the coastline.

- Brick, Bridgwater double Roman tiles and slate became widespread in the 19th century. Red brick detailing is a noticeable characteristic, with rusty, corrugated-iron roofs on farm buildings.

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Please refer to this document as:
Historic England 2020 Farmstead and Landscape Statement: Blackdowns. Swindon: Historic England.

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Product code: 52261 RRL code: 151/2020
Publication date: February 2020
Design: Historic England and Chantal Freeman, Diva Arts