



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

West Penwith

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 156



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 West Penwith Area, with the numbers of neighbouring National Character Areas around it.

Front cover: West Penwith landscape: an ancient farming plateau dominated by stone-hedged fields – some at least Bronze Age in date – set between coastal and upland rough ground, with an overlay of 19th-century mining. Photo © Historic Environment, Cornwall Council, 2008; F88-036

Summary

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

This Character Area lies at the western tip of Cornwall and includes Land's End. It is bounded to the north, south and west by the Atlantic Ocean. West Penwith is a sparsely populated peninsula, ringed by high cliffs and rising to high, rocky moorland at its centre, with better quality land on the coastal plains. Its character is perhaps more clearly determined by its geology than most areas – a single large granite outcrop giving thin soils on high moorland ridge, with the surrounding rocks mainly Devonian slate rocks, the margins of the granite are associated with mineral veins of tin and copper.

The settlement pattern is sparse, and limited mainly to the sheltered valleys and the coastal plateaux. Of the Character Area, 78% is farmland, 2% is defined as urban (mainly St Ives and St Just – although Penzance, the largest, and dominant town in the area, stands just outside the boundaries of the NCA). Approximately 67% of the area lies within the Cornwall Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Much of the area (the world-famous St Just Mining District) now makes up a significant portion of the Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape World Heritage Site.

Historic character

- The coastal plateaux are the main agricultural areas – narrow and with limited access in the north and west, broader and generally more fertile in the south around St Buryan (extensive areas of Grade 2 land).
- Historically there has been a heavy emphasis on pastoral farming, with extensive grazing on rough ground, and limited mixed arable farming particularly in the St Buryan and southern area, with horticulture growing from the 19th century in coastal areas and around the Mount's Bay fringes.
- The softer, more fertile southern plain has deep wooded valleys (providing most of the area's 4% woodland cover in addition to the heathland sycamore copses), leading to sheltered coves long associated with fishing and quarrying.
- The area includes a number of small villages and towns based on fishing or mining, the largest being St Ives, Newlyn, Mousehole and St Just.
- The close associations with the maritime and industrial environment have affected agricultural settlement and use: part-time fishermen, miners and farmers were often one and the same: there was extensive exploitation of sea sand and seaweed to improve land; movable sand-dune systems and salt-laden winds restrict agricultural fertility; large areas of waste ground associated with mineral working; intensive semi-subsistence agriculture to feed an industrial population, etc.
- Extensive areas of lowland heath, rough, species-rich grassland linked by lichen-encrusted granite walls and sycamore-

dominated copses provide niches for a wide range of species.

- These areas of heath, cliff and moorland were always a critical element in the agricultural regime of the area, and as much a managed landscape as more obvious 'farmland' (exploited for grazing, furze, heather, peat, etc.).
- There is good survival of early farmhouses, but extensive 19th-century reconstruction of

farmsteads and buildings. Dispersed layouts, especially associated with townplaces, are one of the most distinctive aspects of the area, typically with multiple yards for holding cattle, as are many small-scale miner-farmer linear smallholdings around St Just. Typical buildings are two-storey combination barns, low and small-scale buildings, commonly pigsties and calf houses, small buildings such as crows and goose houses, and recesses such as bee boles built into or against consumption hedges, with some field barns.

Significance

- This is one of the most significant areas in England for viewing and understanding how farmsteads developed within a framework of prehistoric field systems. Farmstead plans are typically dispersed around multiple yards, and developed from the medieval farming hamlets that typified this area.
 - A longstanding relationship exists between upland and marginal land and lowland farms. Contrasting areas to the south and east of high grade farmland within a predominantly medieval field pattern, potentially overlaying fragments of prehistoric fields in places.
 - There are some well-defined areas of miners' smallholdings of a very regular pattern, which include some rare surviving linear farmsteads around St Just.
 - Small or medium-sized fields are divided by very distinctive field boundaries, mainly dry stone and in places large vertically set, free-standing stones, and are often associated with later features built within the boundaries themselves.
 - There are consumption walls (wide walls made from clearing rocks from fields), particularly in the north-west of the area.
 - In very well-defined areas around the St Just mining villages, mine waste and finger dumps were utilised for field boundaries.
 - There is a high number of mining related features which can be confused with agricultural buildings.
 - Farming is mainly stock farming, with seasonal use of downland and cliff pastures.
 - Market gardening and horticulture is found in the south and east of the Area and on southern coastal slopes →→ early establishment was made through packet ships, followed by railway.
 - Larger fields to the south of the Character Area were created through hedge removal, associated with arable production.
 - Parks and gardens are associated particularly with the hinterland of prosperous industrial and port towns of Penzance, St Ives and Hayle.
 - For 100 to 150 years, the area has been a significant tourist destination.
- ### 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 (34.6%, the national average being 32%).
 - The Photo Image Project also recorded an above-average percentage (9.1%, the national average being 7.5%) of listed working farm buildings that show obvious signs of structural disrepair.
 - Middle-sized farms are increasingly under pressure; the area having seen an increase in the size of commercial farms and of small-scale 'hobby farms'.

Historic development

- From the Neolithic age, farmers made use of upland and coastal moors and heathland for seasonal grazing and fuel. These areas retain the highest concentrations of prehistoric to medieval settlement and the features associated with the expansion and contraction of land use. These include an extensive range of prehistoric field systems, hut circles, enclosed farms and courtyard houses (for example Chysauster), along with important, iconic, early-prehistoric ritual monuments like quoits, stone circles and standing stones.
- There was rapid growth from the late 18th to mid-19th centuries of rural industrial communities associated with the development of tin and copper mining – part of Cornwall’s globally important heritage resulting from its history of deep mining. Expanding or new settlements were particularly dense in the St Just area, and unimproved moorland was colonised by miner-farmer smallholders.
- The class of small, independent tenant farmer, so characteristic of Cornwall in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had evolved from tenancy agreements operated by large estates in the medieval period. The 19th century saw the rapid amalgamation of many of these small tenanted farms into larger holdings.
- Cattle-rearing was the principal form of farming in west Penwith, with arable and stock fattening historically concentrated in the south. Dairying became more common from the 1950s.
- Potato growing developed from at least the 18th century, and became important for smallholdings of miner-farmers.
- Early season crops (vegetables and flowers) became important in the early 19th century with steamship and rail links to urban markets in England. Much was located on rich farmland around Mount’s Bay (NCA 152), but many old cliff-top grazing enclosures to the south converted to ‘cliff gardens’.
- Penwith has developed as a significant visitor destination; for 100 to 150 years it has been a draw for artists, writers and photographers who came to experience the distinctive landscape and settlement character inextricably linked to its wild, rugged and remote character.
- The area’s character and history of visiting has created opportunities for diversification; numerous old farm buildings have been converted for accommodation, and local produce is valued.

Landscape and settlement

- The coastal plateaux are green, predominantly pastoral, farmed landscapes with generally small- or medium-sized fields divided by Cornish hedges and stone walls.
- The predominant dispersed settlement pattern has a high density of farmsteads, intermixed with hamlets and also fishing and mining villages and small towns.
- The majority of settlements are of medieval or earlier origin, often located on or adjacent to the prehistoric settlements that formed the extant field patterns, but a number are the result of population increase in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- Some settlements comprised isolated groupings known as townplaces – hamlet groups of two or three farmsteads surrounded by early field systems.
- Higher-status barton farms were often sited in isolation or next to the church.

- Evidence from deserted settlements and from present farms indicates that farming hamlets formed the basic unit of settlement, many of which continued to contract from the 14th to the 19th centuries to form the farmsteads of today.
- The prehistoric field systems, particularly well defined on the northern coastal fringe, comprise one of the oldest farmed landscapes in the world.
- Extensive areas of uncultivated heath, cliff and moorland remain. There is hardly any settlement on the open moorland, although there is much evidence of previous periods of settlement.
- Rural-industrial areas are associated with typically small-scale enclosures of miner-farmer smallholdings, for example around St Just and the planned settlement of Halsetown.
- There are areas of 18th- and 19th-century enclosures with rectilinear boundaries, often dry stone; these tend to be found as intake fields on the edges of downland, associated with small, simple farmyards, often comprising little more than a house and small outbuilding.
- In the southern part of the Character Area, medieval fields have been rationalised into larger enclosures, associated with larger farmsteads and arable production.
- Along the south coast between Mousehole and Gwynver (Sennen), are cliff gardens – clusters of very small enclosures, often on the cliff slopes themselves, generally of late 19th- or early 20th-century date, associated with potatoes and early-cropping vegetables and flowers. A very few are still in cultivation (as gardens or smallholdings).
- Horticulture crops retain a high market value and are still distributed throughout the country, but now grown within anciently established farming land.

Farmstead and building types

- Most farmsteads contained a mowhay for ricking corn, hay, turf and furze; all have a kitchen garden, and many have orchards, especially in the more sheltered parts of the lowlands. Surviving pre-18th-century farmstead buildings are predominantly farmhouses, most dating from the late 17th century. There is archaeological evidence for pre-18th-century farming hamlets, linear farmsteads being characteristic of the later 18th and 19th centuries on smaller farms. The widespread rebuilding of farmsteads proceeded in parallel with the amalgamation of holdings and yard feeding of cattle in the 19th century.
- Survival of pre-19th-century farmstead buildings predominantly comprises farmhouses, most dating from the late 17th century; farm buildings of 18th-century origin are very rare.
- almost fitting within extant small field pattern. These dispersed plans, typically with multiple yards for holding cattle, are usually found around the fringes of former rough ground and often at the meeting point of routeways. They are a distinctive feature of south-west England, and of other upland and wood pasture areas in England. Some appear scattered due to being sited as the land lies, whilst others are amalgamated from hamlets.
- Some loose courtyard layouts, most commonly with a combination barn to one side of the yard but including some higher-status layouts.
- Linear smallholdings with working buildings attached in-line to houses include many small-scale miner-farmer examples. These are present in the immediate vicinity of St Just. They tend to be of 19th-century date.

The predominant pattern is of:

- Dispersed layouts with working buildings often relating to yards scattered around two or more farmhouses. They are often very contained,
- There is a small number of regular courtyard layouts, mostly U- and L-shaped plans set within regular or enlarged reorganised enclosures.

- Most farmsteads contain a mowhay for ricking corn, hay, turf and furze; some have a garden.

Key buildings are:

- Two-storey combination barns with upper threshing floors or granaries very similar to bank barns but accessed by ramps or external steps.
- Some barns retain evidence for machinery introduced over the 19th century.

- Low and small-scale buildings, commonly pigsties and calf houses, which are a highly distinctive feature of this area.

- Small buildings such as crows and goose houses, and recesses such as bee boles built into or against consumption hedges (built up by clearing off surface stones, and sometimes mine waste, from the fields) beyond the main farmyard.

- Field barns, representing a rebuilding of earlier or more impermanent field shelters which are scattered across the landscape, now mostly ruined or fossilised in boundaries.



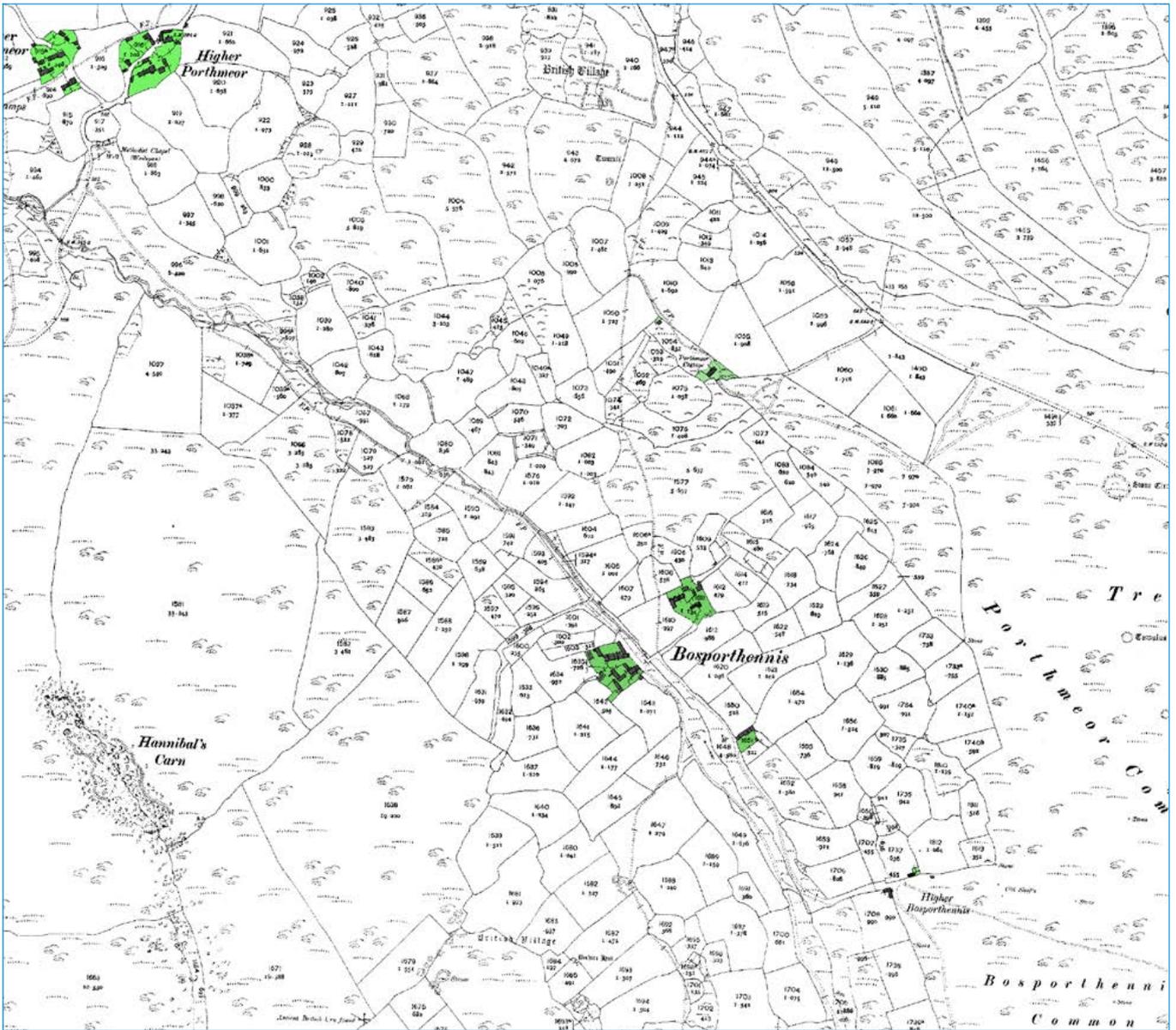
Small farmsteads, often merely a cottage and one or two general purpose combination barns or shippons, are clustered in small hamlets with standing evidence of both abandonment and re-use of cottages and farm buildings. Photo © Ann Reynolds.



The cliff gardens by Tater Du lighthouse. These unique late 19th- and early 20th-century features are typically terraced, with massive clearance and contour boundaries to retain the soil and protect from salt-laden winds, often with dense hedges of escallonia, pittosporum, privet and tamarisk. Formed by sub-division of old grazing enclosures, they are usually linked by ancient droveways to farmsteads just inland. Photo © Historic Environment, Cornwall Council.



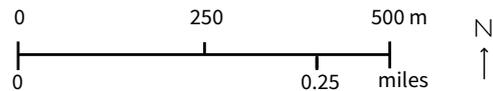
The photograph shows other typical – but often difficult to identify – features: the large garden area at the top of the picture is a former mowhay (area for stacking hay or corn) serving the courtyard at centre-left; also visible is a WWII radar bunker at top centre-right, re-used for farm storage. The vulnerable coastal lands of Cornwall abound in relict military installations. Photo © Historic England 29036/033.



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.
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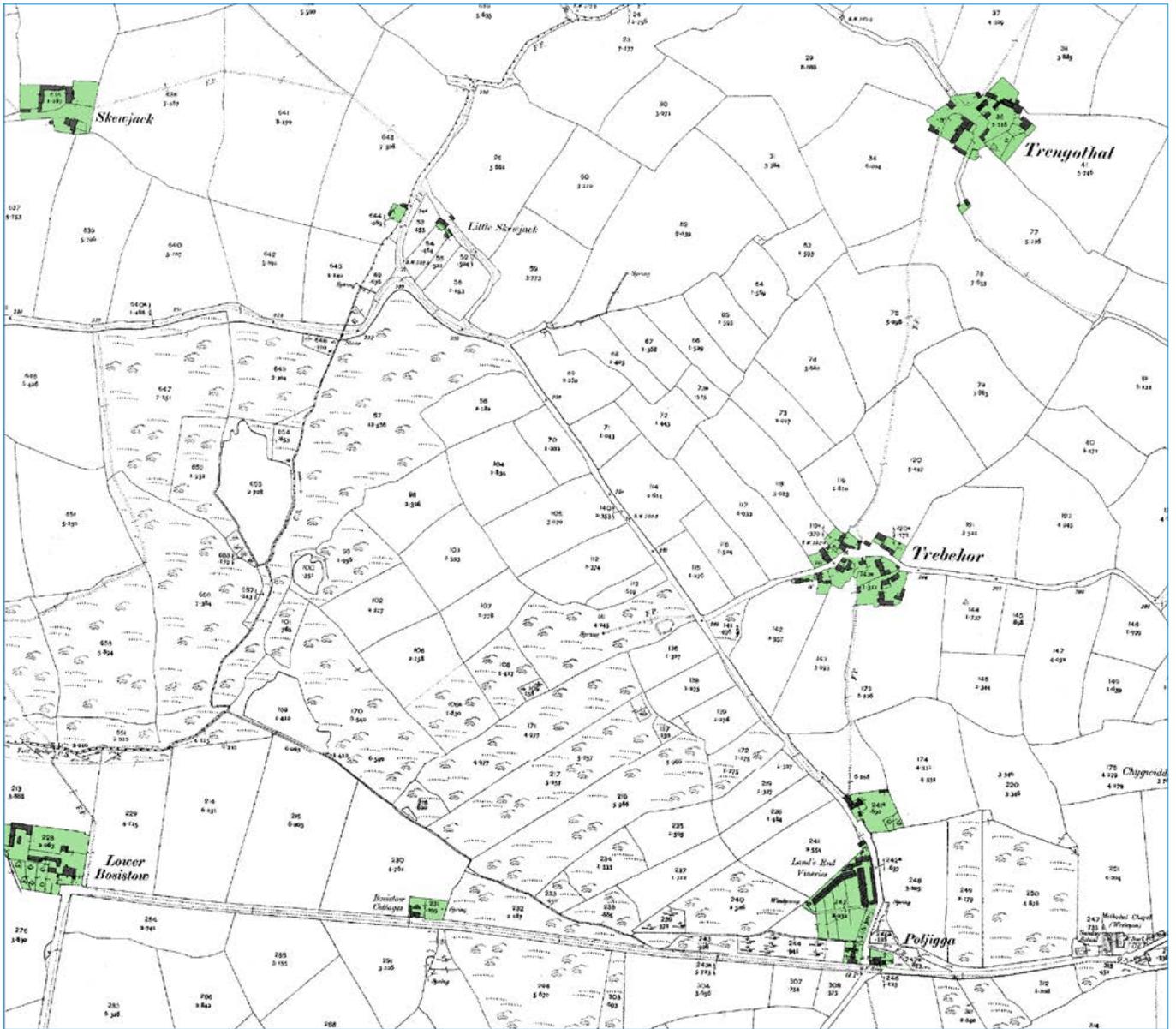


Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



West Penwith – the northern coastal plain

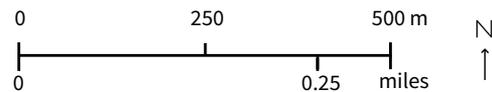
A complex landscape of unrivalled time-depth, stretching back in parts to the Bronze Age; continuity of land-use based on extensive upland and coastal grazing, pastoralism, small, boulder-strewn fields, but within it evidence of centuries of shifting settlement sites. All is overlain with evidence of the localised population increase associated with 19th-century mining.



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



The broad, relatively fertile lands around and south of St Buryan are based upon medieval field systems in various degrees of intake, amalgamation and enclosure; an area of mixed farming, with generally larger farms and farmsteads which developed into dispersed multi-yard plans. Hamlets, often based around a townplace, consisting of two or more farmsteads with dispersed yards and buildings (traditional combination barns and low ranges of animal houses), predominate. The overlay of 19th-century mining cottages and smallholdings is generally absent. Note the areas of enlarged fields to the north, west and south, relating to more regular layouts including the regular U-plan farmstead at Skewjack.



A characteristic 17th- or 18th-century historic farmhouse at Treen, its relatively high status shown by the carefully selected and laid stone work as much as its scale – large by local vernacular standards. The re-use of houses as farm buildings is a distinctive feature of this area, this house being replaced by a new farmhouse in the 19th century. Photo © Eric Berry.



Complete abandonment of post-medieval sites is rare, but old farmsteads do occur, either as complete ruins, or adapted as field barns. This image shows the old farmhouse at Botallack in the foreground. Such settlement shift is more notable in the north and west and central moorlands of the area than the richer farmland in the south. Photo © Eric Berry



Linear plans – and the variant parallel – are typical of the area, not necessarily just small or early farms; at this barton farm (Boskennal) the house (an 18th- or early 19th-century remodelling of a 17th-century group) is attached to combination barns and outbuildings. A later courtyard stands nearby. Photo © Eric Berry.



A typical hamlet at Rosemergy, a group of small farms, often the result of partible inheritance traditions that saw farms continuously divided among heirs, to be later drawn together again. Set around a townplace within a pattern of ancient fields, lanes and funnel-shaped drove ways. Photo © Historic Environment, Cornwall Council, 2008; F88-032.



Porthmeor, north coast. Classic West Penwith dispersed farmsteads and hamlets, focussed around townplace. Photo © Historic England 29041/014.



Classic West Penwith dispersed multi-yard farmstead/hamlets – Trengothal, south coast (a richer farmland). Photo © Historic England 29036/009.



Tremedda. The earlier linear and dispersed pattern, as seen in the old farmstead at top left, was expanded with more regular courtyards (although still with very traditional scale and design of buildings) as later 19th-century amalgamation and improvement of farmland took place. The process continues today with a completely new scale of sheds for both animals and crops. Photo © Historic England 29043/003.



In the St Just mining area, near Trewellard, a small farm is set amongst rectangular fields and mine dump. The farmhouse located to the right, there is an abandoned barn/piggery nearby, while two former engine houses have been adapted as barns, and an all-purpose shed built at some distance – an irregular layout, fitted into the available space, adapting former mine buildings. Photo © Historic Environment, Cornwall Council, 2007; F78-105.



More examples of re-use of early houses in farm buildings (many farms near the mining district in St Just have clear evidence of numerous cottages converted to farm buildings, and indeed the other way round, to house the boom population of the early 19th century). Large dispersed multi-yard plan. Photo © Historic England 29037/029.



Towednack. An isolated churchtown – just church and principal manor or barton farm – the neighbouring hamlets are all appreciably bigger. This is an area of amalgamated fields and holdings, with an old hamlet (that once filled the enclosures, centre right) significantly reduced in size compared with an 1840 Tithe map, and a large, carefully planned regular multi-yard laid out between 1880 and 1907. Photo © Historic Environment, Cornwall Council, 2008; F86-165.



The most dominant building type is the two-storey combination, or chall barn; sometimes a true bank barn, more often the upper, threshing or storage floor is accessed by stairs or ramps. Typically, the ground floor is a shippon (cow house). Photo © Eric Berry.

Most other buildings are typically low and small-scale; pigsties and calf houses and root stores predominate, even in the larger and more regularly laid-out farmsteads. Photo © Eric Berry.



A former cottage, converted and extended in the late 19th century to a combination barn, with a ramp to the first-floor threshing barn and a lean-to piggery attached – a classic example of adaptation and re-use in an area much marked by the ebb and flow of farm holdings, inheritance patterns and economic change. Photo © Eric Berry.

Even on the bigger farms in the mixed arable areas in the south of the NCA, the farm buildings are of the same broad type – a combination barn, storage and threshing on the first floor, cattle on the lower. The hay and straw was dropped directly into the cattle yard below. Photo © Eric Berry.



Small buildings such as crows and bee boles, or, as here, goose holes, tend to be on the outer edges of the farmyard – often built into or against consumption hedges using dry-stone and corbelling techniques. Photo © Eric Berry.



Pigsties. Granite is the almost universal building material, often set in rab – a clay-rich earth mortar derived from the granite. Photo © Eric Berry.



Slate roofs are the norm – traditionally wet-laid (i.e. set in mortar), with diminished courses getting smaller as they rise to the ridge, and typically lime or cement washed as added protection. Photo © Eric Berry.



Corrugated roofs, tin as much as iron, are widely found replacing older slate roofs, often now an indication of a working farm building. New slate roofs tend to be on conversions and holiday-lets. Photo © Eric Berry.



Very distinctive field boundaries, often bare, dry stone rather than the stone-faced earthen and planted Cornish hedges – part of the farmyard complex as much of the fields; access through traditional local style gates and granite styles and cattle grids. Photo © Eric Berry.



Particularly near to the moorland areas, field boundaries can be made of large, vertically set stones ('orthostats'). Photo © Eric Berry.



The West Penwith gate, a distinctive design of farm gate historically produced by local foundries (Holman Brothers). Photo © Ann Reynolds.

Materials and detail

- Granite (historically lime-washed) with local slate roofing (again often lime or cement washed for added weathering against Atlantic storms) is the predominant building material.
- Earlier buildings are more likely to be of 'moor stone' – rounded, weathered stones carefully picked for size and taken direct from the surface; later buildings and alterations often use sharper-edged, less regularly quarried stone, sometimes squared and dressed.
- Rab-based or earth mortars was often used; rab is a clay-rich earth derived from degenerating granite used as a type of cob base and as a matrix for building, often with simple lime additive, as an alternative to mortar.
- Thatched roofs were historically more predominant – evidence for slate roofs for vernacular buildings, and even relatively higher status farmhouses, is limited before the 18th and 19th centuries – even in 'urban' centres such as Newlyn and Mousehole.
- Corrugated metal roofs are widely found replacing thatch and older slate roofs from the 19th century onwards.
- Brick is very rare but can be seen from the early 19th century in chimney stacks (the change-over from stone stacks to brick stacks can be closely dated to the first two decades of the 19th century in settlements such as St Just), door and window surrounds and small 19th century outbuildings such as privies.
- Very distinctive field boundaries, in the north and west, are often bare dry-stone clearance walls rather than the stone-faced earthen and planted Cornish hedges – part of the farmyard scene as well as characteristic of the fields.
- Other characteristic West Penwith features include hedges of large vertically-set free standing stones (orthostatic), granite styles and cattle grids and a distinctive design of farm gate historically produced by local foundries (Holman Brothers).
- Surprising amounts of building materials have been re-used from old mine sites, and some military sites, to use on farm buildings (for example corrugated iron), and even more notable is extensive re-use of whole mine buildings and complexes as farm buildings (an engine house re-used as a barn at Trewellard, for instance).



Historic England

This guidance has been prepared by Jeremy Lake and the Cornwall Historic Environment Service (Nick Cahill, Emma Trevarthen and Ann Reynolds) with Eric Berry.

Please refer to this document as:
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For more guidance on farmsteads and landscapes in Cornwall see the Cornwall Historic Farmsteads Guidance at <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/environment-and-planning/strategic-historic-environment-service/guidance/technical-guidance/cornwall-historic-farmsteads-guidance/>

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