

Historic Farmsteads

New approaches

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Measures are underway to manage change in historic farm buildings while maintaining local character.

Historic farmsteads are closely related to the richly varied patterns of land use and settlement in England. Those patterns have been analysed using the method of HLC, but it has so far not been possible to carry out similar studies of farmsteads, which in the coming years will play an increasingly important role in the diversification of farm incomes, rural regeneration, and the maintenance and enhancement of a high quality rural environment.

Audit and Evaluation Project

The rural issue of *Conservation Bulletin* (March 2002) outlined English Heritage's approach to traditional farm buildings, summarised the threats to that finite resource and described the Historic Farmsteads Audit and Evaluation Project, carried out jointly by English Heritage and the Countryside Agency.

Since then, extensive consultation with groups that have included the Government, farm advisers, and representatives of landowners and farmers has confirmed that there needs to be a positive engagement with the value of the whole resource, its relationship to landscape, sensitivity to change and broader context, in order to guide future decision-making and the targeting of resources and priorities. Above all, it is essential to avoid standard solutions that take no account of the diversity of regional and local character and circumstance.

The first step in this process will be a series of regional character and policy statements – containing a new policy on traditional farm buildings – jointly published by English Heritage and the Countryside Agency. These will be published as leaflets aimed at raising awareness among policy- and decision-makers in the government regions, in order to develop policies that take into account the importance,

diversity and character of historic farm buildings. The leaflets will be supported by web-based documents that relate each region's character and development to a national framework and can serve as an information base for owners and their agents. In addition, we are working at rapid and succinct definitions of the resource within the framework of the 159 Joint Character Areas now used for the Countryside Quality Counts project and as a targeting framework for the roll-out of the new agri-environment schemes.

A pilot project in Hampshire has also explored how farmsteads can be mapped as a layer in GIS, and is already providing fresh insights into the relation between farmsteads, land use and landscape. In 2005, the project will be piloted in other areas of the country, and its applications to planning strategies, Whole Farm Plans and agri-environment schemes explored.

It will also serve as a basis for further work, such as a study of the impact of residential conversion not only on the fabric of the building but on the historic character of the landscape.

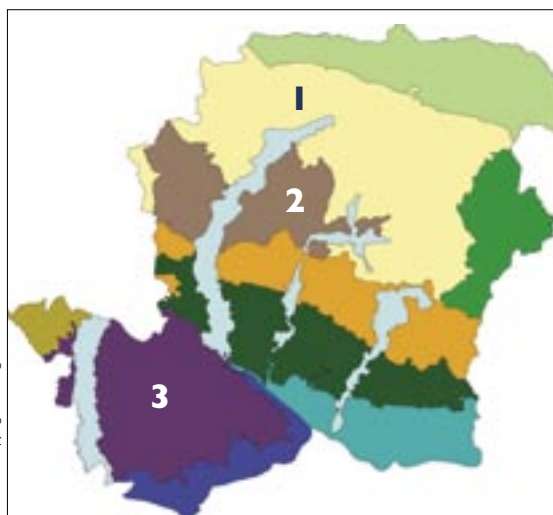
Traditional farm buildings in the Hampshire landscape (right).

1. Hampshire Downs Character Area. Two large-aisled straw-thatched barns arranged around a courtyard with stables and granary, reflecting the importance of corn production in this area. No buildings for cattle are present within this farmstead.

2. Mid Hampshire Downs Character Area. A large 19th-century timber-framed barn on a planned farmstead within a regular landscape created through Parliamentary enclosure.

3. New Forest Lowland and Heath Character Area. A small cob animal shed of a New Forest commoner. The small-scale buildings of commoners practicing subsistence farming are rarely recognised by designation and are thus a vulnerable element of the historic farm building resource and landscape character.

Historic Landscape Characterisation of Hampshire (left), for a pilot project on the local character and circumstances of traditional farmsteads.



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Measuring change and the impact of policy

The completion of the Historic Farmsteads Audit and Evaluation Project (available at www.english-heritage.org.uk/characterisation), commissioned from the University of Gloucestershire, has provided a valuable insight into the character of the listed resource, the pressures upon it and the effectiveness of current policy.

Pressure for conversion to non-agricultural use varies according to region (the East Midlands is under the most pressure, and the North East the least) and degree (pressure being greatest in the most accessible rural areas). Despite policies designed to resist residential conversion in favour of commercial and economic use, a preference that appears in 84% of development plans, the overwhelming majority of listed building consents are for conversion to permanent residential buildings (71%). Half of all agricultural listed entries have been subject to planning applications since 1980, and (using the CBA database for the period 1998–2000) there is clearly much greater pressure on the unlisted resource. Nine out of ten Listed Building Consent applications affecting domestic listed entries – farmhouses and farm cottages – were for works to curtilage buildings, invariably farm buildings.

These statistics are matched by direct observation. Comparison of two photographic surveys in the late 1980s and 2001 demonstrates that 24% of working listed farm buildings have been converted to a new use – primarily domestic – during that period. This has been confirmed by other independent work and will by Spring 2005 provide statistics relating to each of the Joint Character Areas.

The way forward will be an emphasis on better design and a development of locally sensitive policy and guidance. The majority of regional planning guidance, structure plans and local plans, however, are largely dependent on national PPG notes and reveal a limited knowledge of local or regional character. There is clearly a need for regional and local characterisation to provide more nuanced understanding.

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