



Historic England

# The Adaptive Reuse of Traditional Farm Buildings

Historic England Advice Note 9



# Summary

Traditional farmsteads and farm buildings make an important contribution to the remarkably varied character of England's landscape. They are fundamental to its sense of place and local distinctiveness but most of them have now become redundant for modern agricultural purposes. Although they lack the agricultural income needed to keep them in good repair many nevertheless have the potential to accommodate a variety of economically viable new uses.

Successful adaptive reuse of any farmstead or building depends on understanding its significance, its relationship to the wider landscape setting and its sensitivity to and capacity for change.

This advice is aimed at owners of farm buildings, building professionals and local authority planning and conservation officers. It explains how significance can be retained and enhanced through well-informed maintenance and sympathetic development, provided that repairs, design and implementation are carried out to a high standard.

This is one of a series of Historic England Advice Notes.

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Further research and advice on traditional farm buildings is available at:

[www.HistoricEngland.org.uk/farmbuildings](http://www.HistoricEngland.org.uk/farmbuildings)

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## Front cover

A new freestanding pod housing a small gallery has been inserted into this stone barn.

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# Introduction

Traditional farmsteads are an irreplaceable source of character in the English countryside. However, without appropriate uses to fund their long-term maintenance and repair, they will disappear from the landscape. While poor adaptation poses a threat, new commercial, residential or other uses that enhance their historic character and significance are to be encouraged.

In accordance with the principles set out in the National Planning Policy Framework, the advice given here:

- Requires an understanding of the historic character and significance of traditional farmsteads and their buildings within their local rural setting
- Considers their potential for and sensitivity to change, including opportunities for adaptation to new uses that will ensure their long-term survival
- Explains how this understanding should inform designs, both traditional and contemporary that reveal, enhance and retain their inherited significance
- Is relevant to all situations, from buildings that will allow only the lightest form of adaptive reuse to entirely new structures that respect the historic layout and character of a site
- Ensure that the significance and setting of the site and its buildings are understood
- Inform good quality adaptation and innovative design, including new buildings, open spaces and access within and around the site
- Save time and costs in preparing applications for detailed planning consents
- Ensure that an application complies with national plan policy, and also local plan policies (including the neighbourhood plan if relevant)
- Identify where professional advice and support would be helpful

The advice is intended for all parties involved in planning and implementing the repair, restoration or adaptation of historic farm buildings. It is addressed equally to owners and commercial developers seeking to secure viable economic futures for their buildings and to the planners and conservation officers responsible for their care as historic assets. If followed from the outset of a restoration or adaptation project the advice will:

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) places good design, enhancement of local distinctiveness and conservation of the historic environment at the heart of sustainable development in rural areas (paragraphs 7-8, 55-64, 126-141). For instance, paragraph 64 states that permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area; and paragraph 126 stresses the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness and opportunities to draw on the contribution made by the historic environment to the character of place.

# 1 Informing and Managing Change

**1.1** Most traditional farm buildings date from the 19th century and only a very small proportion of older and more architecturally significant examples are protected through listing. The vast majority form part of farmsteads that include other traditional buildings.

**1.2** Structural changes in the farming industry have required farmers to construct new buildings that reduce labour costs and conform to animal welfare standards. As a result of this, the majority of traditional farm buildings are redundant for modern agricultural purposes.

**1.3** In future, the pace of change will accelerate in response to the restructuring and diversification of farm businesses and an increasing demand for homes and work spaces in rural landscapes. Maintaining and reusing farm buildings which no longer have a viable agricultural use is a sustainable option, taking into account the wide range of benefits that they afford. In summary they:

- Make an essential contribution to England's remarkably varied landscape character and local distinctiveness, telling us about how the land was settled and how our ancestors farmed and lived
- Represent an historical investment in materials and energy that can be sustained through conservation and careful reuse
- Provide an important economic asset for farm businesses or, where they have become redundant, a high-quality environment for new rural businesses including home-based working

- Are irreplaceable repositories of local crafts and skills, in harmony with their surroundings and using traditional materials, often closely related to the local geology

- May provide important wildlife habitats

**1.4** A small proportion of buildings – whether protected through listing or within the curtilage of a listed building, unlisted but set within designated landscapes or simply unlisted buildings – will have little or no capacity for adaptive reuse. This may be because of their scale, a difficult access, a form that is not readily adaptable or they are of such intrinsic importance that a new use cannot be absorbed without serious compromise to their fabric or the wider landscape setting.

**1.5** When taking planning decisions involving farm buildings, local authorities should consider all relevant matters listed in the NPPF, including wider rural policy, and the need to take account of the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation.

**1.6** Field barns and out farms pose the most significant obstacles to reuse, due to their small scale, lack of vehicular access and landscape setting. However, many of them make a positive contribution to locally valued and nationally designated landscapes. Some are ideal for sustainable rural tourism, thus opening the door to innovative alternative uses as informal camping barns and bunkhouses.

# 2 Traditional Farmsteads

**2.1** Traditional farmsteads comprise the farmhouse and some or all of the working farm buildings. Some farms also have isolated field barns or out-farms. Most traditional buildings date from the first half of the 19th century but will often display evidence of successive episodes of change. A small number continued to be built for individual farmers, estates and county council smallholdings into the 1930s.

**2.2** Farm buildings reflect a combination of local traditions and national influences. Most were the work of local craftsmen but some were built to the more formal designs of agents, architects and engineers. They display an immense variation in scale, layout, architectural form and use of materials. Buildings also relate in varying ways to their yards, other working spaces and the surrounding landscape and settlement.

**2.3** This advice note makes a simple distinction between these traditional farm buildings, nearly all of which predate 1940, and the prefabricated buildings and covered yards that support the modern farming industry. Modern sheds tend to be sited on the farmstead perimeter and are often related to new access routes and concreted areas of hard standings.

## Landscape setting

**2.4** Traditional farmsteads are an integral part of the rural landscape and reflect how it has developed over centuries. Isolated farmsteads tend to be rare in parts of central and eastern England dominated since the medieval period by nucleated villages.

**2.5** In upland and previously wooded regions, the landscape is characterised by hamlets and isolated farmsteads around which blocks of fields were interspersed with rough land and extensive areas of woodland.

## Building types

**2.6** Farmsteads and their buildings have to be understood in terms of the functions they were intended to house. Buildings and whole farmsteads may also express particular vernacular traditions or the desire of farmers and landowners for agricultural improvement.

**2.7** Regardless of local differences in design, farmsteads everywhere needed access to and from farmland, communal land, other settlements and markets. They also needed a farmhouse, accommodation for farm workers, specialist buildings for storing and processing crops, animals and equipment and yards.

**2.8** Large arable farms required more space for stacking, storing and processing corn, for storing carts and housing the horses that pulled ploughs and other vehicles and machinery, than farmsteads which specialised in the rearing of cattle and dairying.

**2.9** Most farms adopted a courtyard plan in which buildings were arranged around one or more yards. The largest developed in arable areas and the smallest in stock-rearing and dairying districts where the yards simply served as areas to move cattle and store their manure.

**2.10** Linear farmsteads, where the house and working buildings are attached in-line, are concentrated in upland and wood-pasture districts. Dispersed plans with multiple yards are also found in these areas and on mixed farms which developed in a piecemeal fashion.

**2.11** The scale, range and form of working buildings reflects their requirements for internal space, lighting and fittings. Some, such as dovecotes and threshing barns, were detached and highly specialised while others combined two or more functions in individual rooms or inter-linked ranges. Minor buildings, such as cartsheds and pigsties, also provide important evidence of how a farmstead has evolved over time.

**2.12** The materials from which farm buildings are constructed reflect not only the local geology but also the status of the farm and its owner. This has led to great contrasts in the way in which walls and roofs were constructed, the evidence for which often survives better in working buildings than in their farmhouses.

**2.13** Most early farm buildings were made from local materials, such as earth, stone, brick, thatch, slate and tiles. From the late-18th century building materials began to be imported onto the farm from further afield via the new network of canals and railways. The 19th century also saw the introduction of a range of standardised architectural elements, such as part-glazed and ventilated windows and the use of cast and wrought iron for columns. However, prefabricated construction in industrial materials did not become widespread until after the 1950s.

# 3 Assessing Character and Significance

**3.1** A practical toolkit for assessing the development potential of historic farm buildings is provided in the Historic England publication *Farmstead Assessment Framework: Informing sustainable development and the conservation of traditional farmsteads*. As well as explaining how to develop a successful scheme, the document describes how good understanding of the site can inform the design and development process.

**3.2** Appraising a site at the pre-application stage helps the applicant and local planning authority to understand the historic evolution of the farmstead in its setting. It will also identify those aspects of its character that will need to be respected if adaptive reuse of buildings is being considered.

**3.3** Early appraisal is the key to identifying opportunities for changes which conserve, enhance or better reveal the distinctive character of a farmstead in its setting. It will save time and costs in preparing an application for new development, change of use or listed building consent and where necessary an accompanying Design and Access Statement and Heritage Statement.

**3.4** Early assessment will help ensure the success of the final application by identifying and resolving as many issues as possible in advance.

**3.5** A high-quality design that makes a positive contribution to its rural context will depend on a well-informed understanding of the evolution of the farmstead, its buildings and surrounding landscape. In particular, this will take account of the extent of past change and help to identify opportunities to retain the significance of what survives, reinstate lost features or develop other parts of the site in an appropriate way.



# 4 Adapting Farm Buildings

**4.1** While there is widespread regional variation in the function, design and materials used for farm buildings, there are a number of issues common to adapting most farm buildings to be addressed at the design stage. These include:

- Understanding the construction and condition
- Respecting the architectural and historic interest of the building
- Understanding the setting
- Achieve high standards of design, repair and craftsmanship
- Minimising alterations and loss to significant historic fabric
- Retaining distinctive features
- How to introduce daylight
- Considering levels of subdivision
- How to incorporate services and insulation
- The necessity for extensions or new buildings
- The reuse or retention of minor outbuildings
- The retention or enhancement of wildlife habitats

# 5 Obtaining Consents

**5.1** Change of use of any traditional farm building generally requires planning permission, although permitted development rights do exist under certain conditions. If the adaptation involves external works then planning permission may be required for that as well as change of use. Planning permission and listed building consent are the responsibility of the local planning authority.

**5.2** The acceptability of adaptation proposals is determined according to the principles set out in the National Planning Policy Framework and the local planning authority's Local Plan, which should take into account the historical significance, character, layout and location of buildings and their contribution to the landscape.

**5.3** In almost all cases the adaptation of a farm building will involve a material change of use under Building Regulations which requires upgrading to meet current regulations, including those around fire safety, ventilation, sanitation, energy efficiency, electrical safety and sound insulation.

**5.4** If the proposed project will disturb bats, predatory birds or reptiles protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) or under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 a licence will need to be obtained from Natural England before the project is started.

**5.5** Converting farm buildings for commercial or residential use will often require consent from the highways authority for improved access to the public highway.

# 6 Further Advice

6.1 Detailed guidance on the assessment, maintenance and adaptive reuse of historic farm buildings is provided in the following Historic England publications:

*Farmstead Assessment Framework: Informing sustainable development and the conservation of traditional farmsteads* (2015)

*The Maintenance and Repair of Traditional Farm Buildings: A guide to good practice* (revised edition, 2017)

*Adapting Traditional Farm Buildings: Best practice guidelines for adaptive reuse* (2017)



# Historic England

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