



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

# North East Norfolk and the Flegg

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 79



## 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>).

# Character Area 79 North East Norfolk and Flegg



This map shows North East Norfolk and the Flegg, with the numbers of 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 small Character Area is a low-lying, fertile landscape, flatter than central Norfolk and hidden from the North Sea behind high sea walls or sand dunes. The Character Area is divided into three parts by the river valleys that form part of The Broads (NCA 80); two parts abut the coast with the third lying entirely inland between the valleys of the Bure and Yare. Of the landscape, 89% is open countryside and 86% of that land is under cultivation, while 2.4% falls within the North Norfolk Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Of the Character Area, 4% is wooded and 11% is urban.

## Historic character

- Farmsteads mostly relate to fields created through piecemeal enclosure by hedgerows that was largely completed by the 14th century, which is exceptionally early in a national context. Some areas of heathland were not enclosed until the 19th century. Field boundaries in the coastal areas tend to be low hedgerows or earth banks. Inland, boundaries tend to be larger with more trees. There have been high levels of boundary removal since the 1950s across most of the Character Area.
- Most farmsteads originated as loose courtyard plans but the addition of cattle housing to earlier buildings has often resulted in the development of regular courtyard plan types, often with an L-plan range and detached buildings to additional third or fourth sides. There are occasional examples of larger regular plans including regular multi-yard plans, which are again, usually the result of development over time.
- The barns, stables and cattle housing reflects the mixed agriculture practised by farmsteads located on the edges of the marshes. Cattle housing can include a locally characteristic building type that consists of a storage area for turnips with housing for cattle, often in loose boxes.

## Significance

- There is a high survival of traditional farmsteads in a national in this area.
- There is a medium survival in a national context of pre-1750 farm buildings, mostly high-status farm houses and some barns including some important examples of 16th-century secular barns. Farmsteads that have both a pre-1700 farmhouse and one or more early working buildings are of high significance.
- Examples of the locally distinctive combined turnip stores and cow houses are significant.
- Farmsteads with windmills are distinctive and very rare in a national context.
- Reed thatch was the predominant roofing material for most farm buildings. Surviving examples are important to the local distinctiveness of the Character Area.



Parish churches often stand in isolation from other settlement or are accompanied by a high-status farmstead. These churches are usually located on areas of slightly higher ground, which increases their prominence in the landscape. Photo © Bob Edwards

## Present and future issues

- In this National Character Area, the Photo Image Project (2006) recorded an average proportion of listed working farm buildings converted to non-agricultural use (30.8%, the national average being 32%). The project also noted an above-average percentage (12.5%, the national average being 7.5%) as showing obvious signs of structural disrepair.
- Fieldwork suggests that the deterioration of fabric and the related loss of small agricultural buildings is more commonplace than in surrounding areas – more than the small sample result of 4.2% (lower than the national average of 7.5%) noted from the Photo Image Project as exhibiting obvious signs of structural disrepair.

## Historic development

- By the late Saxon period, this area, with its sandy loams being amongst the most fertile soils in England, was one of the most densely populated areas in the country. Numerous small farmsteads developed at this early date which later precluded the development of large estates or parkland.
- The management of farms in this area was often closely linked to the marshland of the Broads (NCA 80). Even farms set away from the marshland edge often have access to the grazing of the marshlands which were being drained from the medieval period. Sheep were the dominant stock of the marshes in the medieval period and wool production was a major economic activity. From the mid-14th century until the 18th century the production of textiles was central to many villages, the village of Worstead giving its name to this type of cloth.
- The landscape was enclosed early, and from the 13th to the 18th centuries, supported some of the most advanced agricultural practices in England. The pattern of agriculture which developed to exploit the fertility of the area in the medieval period was intricate and complex. It included open arable fields around the villages as well as a plethora of individual holdings within patterns of irregular enclosure.
- Further enclosure, prompted by the development of dairying and fattening livestock which were brought into the area from the west of England, Scotland and Ireland, took place in the 16th and 17th centuries, and still more took place after the drainage of more low-lying areas in the late 18th century.

- Areas of heathland remained largely unenclosed until the 19th century when they were enclosed with regular fields and straight boundaries. Some very small remnants of heath and common survive.
- Late 19th- and 20th-century development has been concentrated on the coastal fringe and around a few of the larger villages such as Acle and Stalham.

## Landscape and settlement

- Settlement within the Character Area consists of numerous scattered farmsteads intermixed with generally small villages and hamlets.
- A highly characteristic feature of this area is the presence of isolated churches, many with round towers and some thatched. Ruined churches are also a striking feature of the area. Given the flat or gently undulating character of the landscape, these isolated churches are highly prominent in most views. Some churches are accompanied by a high-status farmstead.
- Although the predominant pattern enclosure is the result of medieval piecemeal enclosure, the fields frequently have relatively straight boundaries which are often low, thorn hedgerows or, nearer the coast, earthen banks, which give parts of the landscape a greater appearance of regularity and planning than is actually the case. This feeling is increased by the relatively high rate of post-1950 boundary removal, especially along the coastal fringe.
- Further inland, small-scale fields with tall hedgerows with hedgerow trees, particularly oak, survive in greater numbers and, together with small blocks of woodland, give an appearance of more ancient enclosure.

## Farmstead and building types

There is a high concentration of pre-1750 farmstead buildings. The large number of substantial 17th- and 18th-century farmhouses, often with contemporary barns and sometimes other buildings beside them, are an indication of the importance and prosperity of owner-occupier farmers in the area.

### Farmstead types

- Most farmsteads developed as loose courtyard plans, and surviving examples commonly have detached working buildings to two sides of the yard.
- The addition of ranges (mostly housing for cattle) in the 19th century to an earlier barn resulted in the present predominance of regular courtyard plan types, typically L- or U-plans and, occasionally, E-plans. There are some regular multi-yard plans.
- Regular courtyard groups, despite their planned appearance, are usually the result of more than one phase of building.

### Building types

- Threshing barns are typically of five bays with later cattle accommodation added on in the form of outshots.
- There are a number of large and high-status, pre-1700 barns in the area. Some built on manorial sites can extend up to eight bays in length.
- Some threshing barns have integral stables to one end.

- Smaller barns of three to four bays survive in some of the villages and smaller farmsteads.
- A particular feature, now very rare, is the winter cattle shed in which rows of animals were tethered to one or both sides of a central turnip store. Examples lie along the coastal grazing grounds and date from the mid- to late 18th century to the late 19th century.
- Stables are found on most farmsteads, either two storey buildings of 18th- or early 19th-century date or single storey in later examples. Lunette windows are often used. Stables sometimes form part of multifunctional ranges combined with cart sheds, granaries or cow houses.
- Granaries are not a common building type in the area, and where found they are usually located over cart sheds.
- The importance of arable farming can be reflected in large cart sheds of six or seven bays, although four-bay sheds are typical.
- Occasionally a farmstead will contain a windmill for milling corn.




This view to the west from the edge of the village of Happisburgh shows the characteristic flat landscape of the northern coastal area with its isolated farmsteads, semi-regular arable fields with low boundaries and a prominent church tower. In the distance is the rising ground of the Central North Norfolk Character Area (NCA 78).  
Photo © Bob Edwards

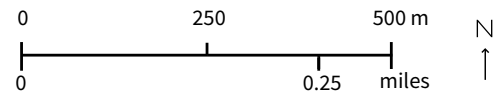


Former farmsteads are often an important element of the character of the villages of the area. Many retain some or all of their former working buildings, although their barns have often been converted to residential use. This house in Bacton dates from a complete remodelling or rebuilding in the early 17th century. Note the early 19th-century kitchen extension to its right. Photo © Bob Edwards



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

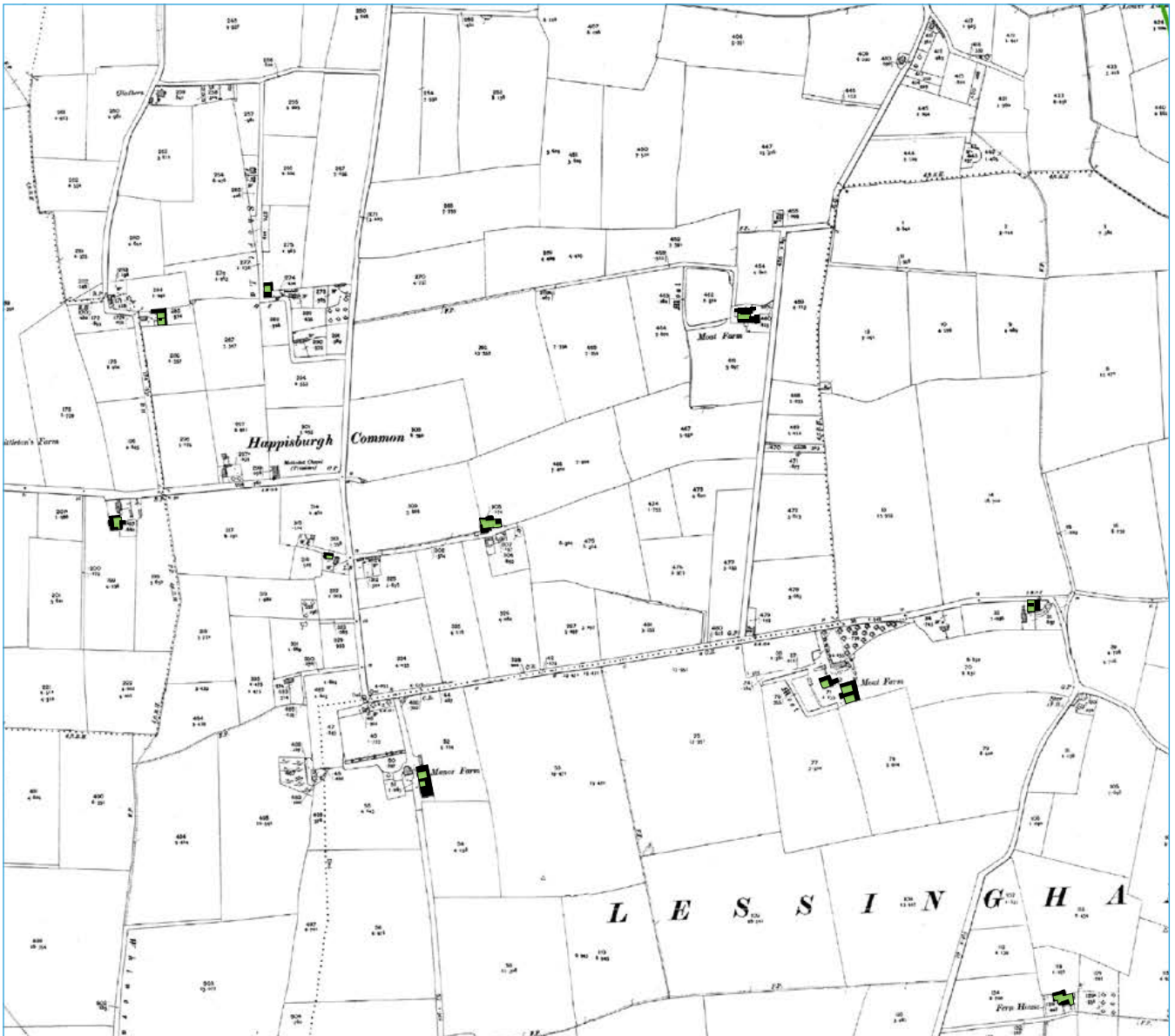
 Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



### Enclosed common

Within this Character Area there were areas of common heath, much of which was subject to enclosure in the 19th century. This area of heathland was subdivided into a landscape of regular fields with straight boundaries, some of the new enclosures being given over to plantations. Several new farmsteads such as Mill Hill Farm and Mussel Farm were built within these new fields with courtyard plans. Mousehold Heath Farm to the east of the extract is an earlier farmstead which sat on the edge of the open heath and retains some earlier buildings.

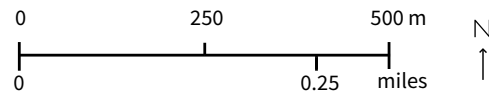




Maps are based on 2nd edition 25" Ordnance Survey maps, which show farmsteads after the last major phase in the building of traditional farmsteads in England. © Crown Copyright [and database rights] 2020. OS 100024900



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



## Happisburgh Common

This extract reflects the characteristic pattern of settlement and fields across much of North East Norfolk and the Flegg Character Area. Numerous small and medium scale farmsteads are scattered across the landscape set within this the pattern of generally small and medium scale fields, largely created through piecemeal enclosure dating from the 15th or 16th centuries. Two farmsteads are associated with moated sites indicating their probable medieval origins. The land of three parishes falls within the extract, and differences between the two parishes to the north-west and Lessingham to the south-east can clearly be seen. The fields of Lessingham are larger and more regular, suggesting that an earlier pattern of piecemeal enclosure had been reorganised, possibly associated with the amalgamation of farms, leaving Manor Farm and Moat Farm as the principal steadings in this part of the parish. The name Happisburgh reflects the former existence of a small area of common which appears to have been enclosed, creating small fields with straight, regular boundaries. The alignment of the road and slight irregularities in a few of the boundaries hint at this being an area of reorganised, earlier enclosure.



In the central part of the Character Area there is a higher survival of woodland and larger hedgerows, which are more reflective of the medieval piecemeal enclosure of much of the landscape. Farmsteads in this area are the most likely to have retained pre-1700 fabric although many barns – as here – were rebuilt in the 18th century using brick with thatched, steep-pitched roofs. Photo © Bob Edwards



#### Loose courtyard plans

Most farmsteads developed from loose courtyard plan forms which had detached buildings set around a yard area. As these farmsteads developed, buildings were often linked or attached ranges were added. Photo © Bob Edwards

Most farmsteads developed from loose courtyard plan forms which had detached buildings set around a yard area. As these farmsteads developed, buildings were often linked or attached ranges were added. Photo © Bob Edwards



A small-scale early to mid- 19th century farmstead at Ridlington Witton, showing a three-bay reed-thatch barn. Photo © Historic England 29192/038



At the core of this large-scale farmstead is a threshing barn with two threshing bays, flanked by two cattle yards. The barn, like the granary/stable to the left, dates from the mid- to late 18th century. Photo © Historic England 29125/050



The Manor Farm at Freethorpe was rebuilt in the 18th and 19th centuries. The large threshing barn and the house date from the early 18th century. In the foreground, and shaped like a basilica, is the stock house dated 1828. This is the best-preserved of probably not more than half a dozen surviving stock houses of a type described in this area on the marshland fringe, by William Marshall in his *Agriculture of Norfolk 1787*, vol 2 pp.274-5. Cattle were housed in the aisles, facing into a central turnip house. Photo © Historic England 29128/035



There is a good survival of farmsteads that retain 17th-century and earlier houses and barns in this area. This group consists of a late 16th-century house and barn, a smaller 17th-century barn and an 18th-century building with a granary above a probable stable.  
Photo © Bob Edwards



#### L-plan courtyards

Courtyard farmsteads with an L-plan element and a building to the third side of the yard are common within this area. Here, the range attached to the barn has partially collapsed. Photo © Bob Edwards

#### U-plan courtyards

This small farmstead was originally a regular U-plan but the central range has partially collapsed. This range may have served a small dairy farm, given that there is no barn. Photo © Bob Edwards



#### Barns

The Great Barn at Paston Hall is one of the important early barns in the Character Area. This large, eight-bay threshing barn was built in 1561. In the 19th century, three ranges of shelter sheds were built against its east elevation, creating two cattle yards. On the opposite side of the barn a stable was built with a horse yard between it and the barn – effectively creating a regular multi-yard plan group. Photo © Bob Edwards

An 18th-century barn which has an extended porch effectively creating a T-plan. Photo © Bob Edwards



This 19th-century, five-bay barn lies near the coast and is largely constructed from cobbles with brick dressings. Although it has coped gables, it is probable that it has always been roofed with pantiles. As is commonly seen in the area, an attached shelter shed creates an L-plan range. Photo © Bob Edwards



This large 19th-century barn of six or seven bays in length was built with an aisle to the rear, possibly providing additional storage area within the barn rather than animal housing. Aisled barns are extremely rare in this area, although they are a distinctive feature of much of East Anglia. Photo © Bob Edwards



This five-bay barn also has a contemporary aisle to the rear although the end door suggests that the aisle provided cattle housing. As in most cases where the aisle provided animal housing, there is a change in the pitch of the roof over the aisle in order to ensure sufficient headroom for cattle. The barn is one of a relatively small number in the area that incorporate timber-framing in the front wall. The large door in the gable is a later insertion. Photo © Bob Edwards.



### Stables

A large, two-storey stable on a Manor Farm. The size of the building indicates that this farm had a large team of horses to work the arable lands. Closer inspection of the building, which initially appears to be 18th or early 19th century in date, shows that it is a building of at least two phases with thinner, early bricks to the lower part of the rear wall and later brickwork above, showing that the stable was raised to two storeys. Photo © Bob Edwards



A small stable with an attached cart or trap house. This farm is called Dairy Farm and the small stable may reflect that there was limited arable on this farm. Photo © Bob Edwards



This single-storey stable with a single-bay trap house at the end is typical of stables of the mid to late 19th century when the importance of good ventilation for the horses was better understood. This led to the construction of single-storey buildings without a hay loft and often the use of ridge vents. The use of lunette windows is a feature often found on stables in this area. Photo © Bob Edwards



**Granaries** are not a common feature of farmsteads in this area. Where found, they are usually of 19th-century date and located over a cart shed. This example forms part of a long range with stables which have a hay loft over. An additional two bays for carts and equipment have been added against the gable wall of the range. Photo © Bob Edwards



**Cart sheds** Large farms with extensive arable required numerous carts, ploughs, harrows and other implements for working the land. This cart shed lies on one side of a loose courtyard group but typically faces away from the yard and onto a track. Photo © Bob Edwards



The hipped roof and aisles to this building at Freethorpe (see p. 10), give it a very distinctive form. The double doors provide access to a root store for feeding turnips to cattle which are housed in loose boxes in the aisles. This building type, recorded in the late 18th century but mostly 19th century in date, is confined to The Broads (NCA 80) and the area around it. Photo © Susanna Wade Martins



**Shelter sheds** From the 18th century, but more commonly in the 19th century, single-storey, open-fronted buildings were constructed for cattle. These shelter sheds usually faced into cattle yards and were often attached to an earlier barn, resulting in regular courtyard plan types. Photo © Bob Edwards



**Other buildings** Two small buildings that probably provided stabling and cattle housing on a coastal village farmstead. Photo © Bob Edwards



This large, barn-like building provided storage in the main body of the building, probably for root crops, particularly turnips, and cattle housing in loose boxes in the aisles. This is a building type that is characteristic of this area. Photo © Bob Edwards



Outfarms or field barns do not appear to have been numerous in the landscape, but there are surviving examples. This building provided housing for cattle near the fields where their manure would be used as fertiliser. Photo © Bob Edwards



Whilst windmills are a common feature of the adjacent Broadlands where they were used to power drainage pumps, a small number of farmsteads in this Character Area also have windmills which were used for milling grain. These are very rare survivals in a national context. Photo © Bob Edwards



Reed thatch on a brick barn with coped gables incorporating tumbled brickwork, these being highly characteristic materials and features found across the area. Photo © Bob Edwards



Pantiles, as commonly used from the late 18th century, are now the predominant roofing material on farm buildings. Usually red in colour, there are occasional examples of black glazed pantiles.

Photo © Bob Edwards



It is not uncommon to find farm buildings in poor condition in this area. Barns in the villages are often converted to residential use but buildings on isolated farms are more likely to be showing signs of structural failure or collapse. This example is of late 17th-century date, listed Grade II and is important in the setting of the listed farmhouse. Photo © Bob Edwards

## Materials and detail

- Brick is the dominant building material of the area. The area includes some early examples of brickwork, where it can be combined with pebbles. Features of brick buildings include tumbled brickwork to gables with brick copings.
- In coastal areas, cobbles were often used to form the majority of the walling with brick used only for quoins and openings.
- There is some limited use of flint in farm buildings, again combined with brick.
- Reed thatch was the traditional roofing material for most farm buildings. Although thatch has often been replaced by pantiles, there are numerous surviving examples of thatch.
- Pantiles are now the predominant roofing material of the area. Occasionally, black glazed pantiles were used.
- There is limited timber-framing within the area. Framing can be found used in combination with brickwork on barns where the gable walls and plinth are of brick with the sides in-filled with framing or for smaller buildings.





# Historic England

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Jeremy Lake with Bob Edwards.

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