



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

# The Fens

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 46



## 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>).



This large, planned farmstead near Wainfleet was clearly designed to handle large volumes of cereal crops, as indicated by the large, five-bay cart shed and the three-storey granary building. The provision of line shafting in the granary indicates that grain was processed on site. Photo © Locus Consultants

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**Front cover:** An early 19th-century fenland landscape in Lincolnshire, showing a regular courtyard plan farmstead in the foreground and smallholdings. Photo © Historic England 29326/001



This map shows the Fens 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.

This area surrounds and extends inland north, south and west, from the open waters of The Wash (England's largest tidal estuary). Mostly reclaimed from both freshwater fen and sea marsh, The Fens is a large scale, open and expansive low lying landscape. It is a very rural Character Area and, agriculturally, hugely productive. Almost 97% of this Character Area is open countryside with 91% of that land cultivated. Woodland is sparse, covering less than 1% of the total area, while 3% of the landscape is urban and just under 1% of the Character Area falls within the Norfolk Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

## Historic character

- Farmsteads divide into two broad groups: village farmsteads on low elevated silt or gravel banks, and isolated farmsteads in the former fens and marshes.
- Village farmsteads are often set within areas of anciently enclosed land, reflecting patterns of early medieval colonisation and associated arable cultivation.
- In areas of reclaimed land the location of farmsteads is strongly tied to the historic patterns of drove roads and flood embankments.
- Isolated smallholdings show much evidence of enlargement and improvement on a piecemeal basis, perhaps reflecting growing prosperity and capabilities.
- The Character Area incorporates a wide variety of farmstead types, evidencing its wide variety of farm sizes and landscape contexts. In particular, there are high levels of survival of dispersed, linear, parallel and L-plan farmsteads of potentially early date. Many farmsteads show evidence of expansion and alteration, including the addition of granaries and combination barns, demonstrating adaptation to new farming methods.
- Stone is exceptionally rare and is almost entirely limited to high-status, civic and ecclesiastical buildings.

## Significance

- The mapping of farmsteads in Lincolnshire has shown that the area has, in a national context, a very low survival of traditional farmsteads from around 1900 – 29% have more than 50% of their historic form surviving (42.85% in Greater Lincolnshire) and 32% (28% in Greater Lincolnshire) retaining some but less than 50% of their historic form. Any pre-19th-century buildings are rare by national standards, but more frequently found in this area than in other parts of Lincolnshire.
- Farm buildings pre-dating 1750 are very rare in the drained fens away from village cores, due to the marginal quality of the land until steam-powered drainage was introduced in the 19th century.

- Historic farmhouses in villages are often well preserved, although outbuildings occasionally suffer from dereliction or neglect.
- Surviving structures associated with historic agriculture include occasional field barns and outfarms, as well as 19th-century farm workers' cottages in varying states of repair.
- The area has notable examples of inter-war smallholdings.

## Present and future issues

- Agricultural intensification in this highly productive landscape leads to amalgamation of many holdings, and the expansion and modernisation of farm infrastructure.
- Holdings of more than 100ha make up 77% of farmed land, with holding sizes on an increasing trend. Consequently there are ongoing requirements for large-scale sheds and a decline in the number of small to medium scale enterprises.
- Erosion and shrinkage of peat soils leads to structural instability and subsequent repairs, especially adjacent to field drains and dykes.
- A dispersed settlement pattern creates issues for the delivery of services and utilities to more remote dwellings and businesses.
- In this National Character Area, the Photo Image Project (2006) recorded a low proportion of listed working farm buildings converted to non-agricultural use (29.6%, the national average being 32%).

## Historic development

- The northern silt-based fens, which stretch in an arc from King's Lynn towards Boston and are known as the 'Siltlands' or 'Townlands', have a long settlement history going back to the Romano-British period and beyond, including drainage and farming settlements set along the western fen edge, as illustrated by extensive cropmark complexes throughout the Character Area. Whole landscapes that pre-date the expansion of the Fens have been submerged and preserved beneath the peat, and are now being exposed as the drained peat shrinks.
- Salt making was a widespread and important industry in both Roman and medieval times. Remains of the process, large mounds known as salterns, remain highly legible in the present-day landscape, and played an important part in the reclamation of coastal areas. Some salterns are to be found at great distances from the present-day shoreline, and provide archaeological evidence for the ever-changing nature of the coastline. As well as salt making, the fens supported thriving industries of fishing, wildfowling and peat extraction until the extensive post-medieval drainage of the area.
- Before the 18th-century reclamations, the seaward fens were largely used for livestock grazing and fattening. Historically significant droveways were extended from the townlands towards the sea, and in many cases daughter settlements of the historic villages were established in remote marshland areas.
- The inland freshwater fens formed over many centuries, as the seasonal inundations of the main rivers crossing the area (the Nene, the Ouse, the Witham and the Welland) were too great to be fully drained, leading to standing water and the formation of peat. These freshwater peat fens were reclaimed during the 18th and 19th centuries, and a pattern of isolated farmsteads was established throughout the drained land. This is most clearly visible in the East, West and Wildmore Fens, which were the last to be drained, and still retain strong elements of their 19th-century character. The hierarchy of drains, from the great Forty Foot Drain down

to individual field drains, is a major and distinctive component of the character of the area. The lack of hedges provides wide views across large areas, and ensures that isolated dwellings are often intervisible.

- Some of the greatest changes to the open inland fen landscape were those brought about in the 17th century, when the Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden attempted the drainage of the southern fens. Although limited in success initially, the linear landscape of straightened rivers and artificial water channels drawing the water from the dark and peaty fens developed through the 17th to the 19th centuries, with the creation of the North, Middle and South 'Bedford' Levels. The productivity of the reclaimed fen soils was found to be such that the original intention simply to support summer grazing was soon overtaken by extensive areas of high-grade arable cultivation.
- Monastic institutions played an important role in the management of the fens from the 7th century, with numerous religious houses established in relative isolation along the fen edge and on the major islands such as Crowland and Ely. These institutions instigated measures to drain areas of fen, such as the 'Mortons Leam' between Peterborough and Guyhirn. In Greater Lincolnshire, and especially on the Witham Fens, monastic institutions are thought to have controlled

important crossings and causeways, enabling communication throughout an otherwise impermeable area.

- Over time, the settlements established sea banks to enable the intake of areas of marshland to their seaward side, the earliest of which, the Roman Bank, was likely constructed in the 14th century and runs along the edge of the Townlands in an arc from Skegness to Long Sutton and beyond. The Roman Bank marks the beginning of the salt marsh reclamation to the seaward side of the settlement line. Further inland, in the fens of Cambridgeshire and around Peterborough, early settlements were established on terraces of sand and gravel such as those north of Peterborough at Baston, or small clay hills as seen at Ely and March.
- The larger towns, either located on higher ground or positioned on navigable rivers, are the major historic settlements in The Fens, with origins as centres of religious and secular administration, coastal or inland ports, and markets. Parishes and townships played an important role in the colonisation of the surrounding fens and marshes by founding daughter settlements which acted as hubs for later reclamation throughout the area. Connecting roads between the settlements and improvements in drainage then allowed for the construction of farmsteads and outfarms in more remote places.

## Landscape and settlement

- The Fens surround the Wash, the largest estuarine system in Britain, into which drain the Rivers Witham, Welland, Nene and Ouse. The landscape of the Fens is dependent on the interconnected networks of ditches and dykes that drain the surrounding farmland into these rivers. In essence, the Fens as seen today are the product of centuries of engineering and ingenuity.
- Some of the earliest surviving settlements in The Fens are situated on the bank of high, silty ground known locally as the 'Siltlands' or 'Townlands' between the freshwater fens to the landward side and the salt fens and

marshes to the seaward side. This bank, stretching from Kings Lynn, through Boston and along to Skegness was deposited by marine inundation in the 4th century and rises approximately 3m above the surrounding landscape. Settlements were established here to take advantage of the excellent grazing opportunities provided by the adjacent wetlands, although some arable cultivation was established on high ground, as evidenced by extensive traces of ridge and furrow style earthworks known locally as dylings. This area of the Fens is notable for the presence of a strongly nucleated settlement pattern, with

linear expansion of settlements found along main lines of communication.

- The reclaimed fens lying landward of the raised siltlands and gravel terraces demonstrate a markedly contrasting pattern of settlement. Where the high ground of the Townlands and gravel islands is characterised by nucleated villages, the reclamation of both the fens and the marshes has resulted in an open landscape of isolated farmsteads and other dwellings situated at regular intervals along straight roads and drains, themselves indicative of the extensive engineering of the countryside. While the Character Area as a whole is not well wooded, there are isolated blocks of woodland plantation as well as many long, thin shelter belts around isolated farmsteads.
- Newer roads such as the A17 have disrupted this pattern to some extent, but elements of the medieval agricultural systems, such as

droveways and irregular fields, are still legible in the landscape. The 18th- and 19th-century reclamation of the Fens resulted in a largely planned rectilinear landscape of ditched fields, but pockets of ancient, irregular fields are still to be found around settlements on higher ground, such as Holbeach, Ely and March.

- Settlements and isolated farmsteads are mostly located on modestly elevated 'islands' and low banks, as well as roddons – silted ancient watercourses that are now elevated above the surrounding peat. Elsewhere, villages tend to be dispersed ribbon settlements along the main arterial routes through the settled Fens, and scattered farmsteads remain as relics of earlier agricultural settlements. Domestic architecture mostly dates from after 1750 and comprises a mix of late Georgian-style brick houses and 20th-century bungalows.

## Farmstead and building types

- Farm buildings in the area are representative of several periods. There are examples of 18th-century and earlier farmhouses and barns, but improved productivity in the 19th century led to rebuilding and the addition

of new buildings to many complexes. Many of these later buildings have often been replaced as their foundations cracked on the unstable ground which followed drainage and reclamation.

### Farmstead types

- Small farmsteads, including those recorded as linear and dispersed plan types (nearly 11% of the total recorded in Lincolnshire), have for centuries been amalgamated into larger farms. Row plans (where working buildings are built in a long line), parallel plans (with a working range sited parallel to the farmhouse) and dispersed multi-yard plans, also farmstead types found around heathlands and marshland in other parts of lowland England, are also found in the Fens.
- Most farmsteads were newly-built, extended or remodelled as courtyard plans in the 19th

century to allow for more effective arable cultivation – 72% being regular courtyard plans (L-plans with working buildings to an additional third or fourth side are more common than in other parts of Lincolnshire), and over 17% as loose courtyard plans. In the 19th century, estate farmsteads were typically designed as E-plan layouts with south-facing cattle yards.

- Some inter-war county council smallholdings persist as a nationally coherent survival of an important movement in English agricultural and social history.

## Building types

- Threshing barns, usually of early 19th-century or earlier date, are now rare due to the introduction of mechanised threshing across large parts of the Fens in the mid- to late 19th century.
- Mixing barns, with cart entries to one side of lofted end for threshed straw and mixing fodder, are most commonly of mid-19th-century date.
- Combination barns with integral cattle housing and stables are mostly of mid-19th century-date.
- Granaries are commonly sited over stables or cart sheds.
- Shelter sheds for cattle mostly date from the mid- to late 19th century.
- There are extensive ranges of pigsties.
- Some field barns and outfarms have threshing barns and shelter sheds to single or multiple cattle yards.
- Nissen huts and large hangar-type sheds date from the mid-20th century.



Priory Farm, Bridge End. A dispersed multi-yard complex with 18th-century buildings set at one end of an ancient causeway across the western fens. The farmhouse appears to be an older, linear farmstead with working buildings attached in line. Large, modern buildings have been added to the complex while historic buildings typically used for housing livestock are disused. Photo © Historic England 28555/018

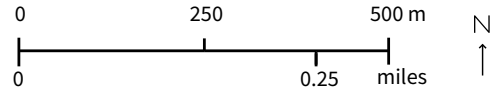




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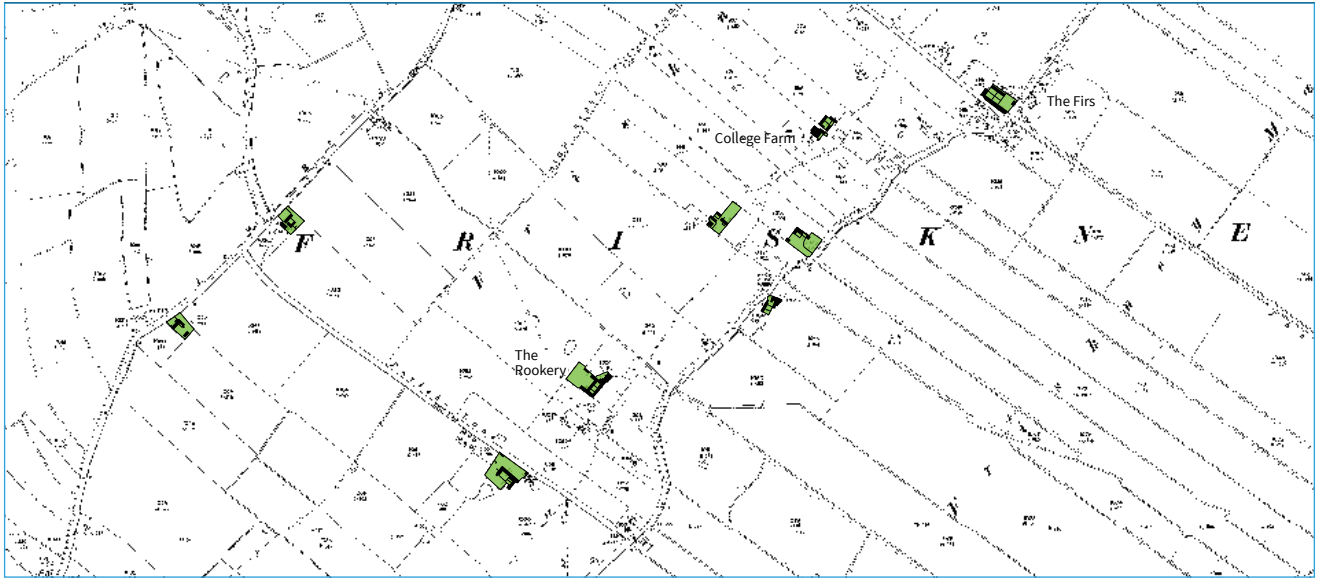


Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.




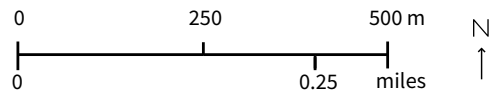
## Quadring Eaudike

This map shows the surprisingly varied landscape of the Fens, from sinuous former creeks, 16th-century piecemeal enclosure of high ground, and 19th-century planned enclosure (with a sole outfarm) of drained fens. Farmsteads sit among these features, those within piecemeal enclosures often displaying significant change and adaptation within their own built form.



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.



### Friskney Tofts

Linear landholdings stretch across several phases of reclamation in Friskney Tofts, indicating a continuity of ownership over many years. Each strip of land has an associated farmstead, with some evidence of consolidation in the wider strips. Most of these farmsteads are small-scale regular courtyards, but may incorporate older farmhouses and farm buildings.



Farmsteads in the medieval settlement of Swaton were all rebuilt in the early to mid-19th century, with barns, stables with granaries and shelter sheds to regular courtyard layouts. Note the hedged boundaries to the earlier plots, contrasting with the typical fenland enclosures bounded by ditches. Photo © Historic England 28554/056



The High Farming years of the mid-19th century saw investment by estates in many farmsteads with barns for processing corn and feed for livestock, with two or more yards for cattle in E-shaped or even double-E plans as here at Knarr Cross, within an area drained and enclosed in the early 17th century. Pre-19th-century buildings are very rare in these landscapes. Photo © Historic England 29327/016



Wykes Manor Farm, Donington, set amid a typical open fenland landscape of ancient irregular enclosure and open treeless fields. The farm itself is an example of a dispersed multi-yard farmstead, indicative of development over centuries in contrast to the regular courtyards that dominate this area. The farmhouse was built in 1680 by Thomas Cowley, the founder of Donington School, and there are several phases of addition and adaptation to the farm buildings. Photo © Historic England 28555/029



Disused combination barn with a gable-end loading door to a first-floor granary over stables, Donington Fen. The barn comprises one side of a regular L-plan courtyard with cattle sheds in the adjacent range, indicating a typical mixed or arable farming operation. The farmhouse itself is set behind the complex facing into the wider landscape and away from the working buildings. Photo © Locus Consultants



Neslam Fen Farm, a small field barn with modern cattle sheds attached. Although in some disrepair, the building is still in agricultural use. Photo © Locus Consultants

## Materials and detail

- Historically, building materials in the pre-drainage fenlands would have comprised mud and stud buildings with thatched roofs, reflecting the wide availability of these materials in the fenland landscape. The widespread former use of mud and stud walling has almost wholly disappeared.
- 18th- and 19th-century buildings are typically constructed in locally produced red brick and pantile with occasional use of stone at the Fen Edge.
- Imported materials such as yellow gault brick and welsh slate are more common in later 19th-century buildings, reflecting increased prosperity.
- Repairs to historic buildings often include the addition of brick or stone buttresses to leaning walls, patch repairs to roofs with corrugated iron, and the addition of newer features in light wood.



# Historic England

This guidance has been prepared by Alastair Macintosh and Adam Partington, Locus Consultants, with Jeremy Lake.

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The **Greater Lincolnshire Farmsteads and Landscapes Project**, led by Historic England, has mapped the historic character, survival and use of farmsteads. For the Assessment Framework and reports of 2015 see [https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/lincsfarm\\_he\\_2015/](https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/lincsfarm_he_2015/)

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