



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

Exmoor

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 145



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>).

Front cover: View from south of Luccombe towards Porlock. This is a landscape of early enclosure, formed by the 17th century, where fields and historic buildings testify to farmsteads developing as others contracted and disappeared from the medieval period. This is a rich mixed farming landscape, and many farms and their fields were enlarged in later centuries. Photo © Historic England 27981/008



This map shows Exmoor, with the numbers of the neighbouring National Character Areas around it. The area subdivides into:

The high moor and its valleys, the latter with high densities of historic farmsteads set in irregular fields resulting from medieval woodland clearance and the enclosure of strip fields. Significantly, the moorland core is where larger farmsteads developed within reorganised landscapes enclosed by beech hedges. The coastal headlands and combes feature mixes of medieval enclosure, including those from strip fields, and with later, rectilinear fields often enclosed from moor and heath.

The south-eastern fringe, which extends south into the Culm lands and includes the Brendon Hills to the east, where late enclosures give way to smaller, curvilinear, irregular fields in the sheltered, rounded valley edges.

The Vale of Porlock is the low-lying area open to the sea and tapering inland to Wootton Courtney and round to Dunster. From the coast, strip fields, later enclosed, give way to larger medieval fields contained by extensive woodland to the north and in the south by Worthy and Horner woods.

The western farmlands extending from Martinhoe on the western edge of the moor to the Torrridge estuary, with larger enclosures, many of them barton fields. There are lower densities of farmsteads than the eastern valleys.

Summary

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

Exmoor is an extensive upland landscape bounded by the coast to the north, the Culm and Devon Redlands to the south and the Vale of Taunton to the east. Short, steep-sided river valleys cut dramatically into the central moorlands from the north and similar, but longer rivers intrude from the south. Only 2% of the Character Area is defined as urban, and 80% is agricultural land, whilst 52% forms part of Exmoor National Park, and 16% is defined as Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Historic character

- The largely dispersed settlement pattern retains traces of deserted and shrunken settlements in individual farmsteads and in the wider landscape.
- Exmoor has a relatively high number by national standards of 17th-century and earlier farmstead buildings which relate to a farmed landscape that has retained enclosures from strip fields, outfield and moorland from the same period. These include longhouses dating from the late 14th century, mainly in the south and east.
- Predominant farmstead plans comprise small-scale courtyard including U- and especially L-plan layouts, sometimes with the farmhouse attached to the working buildings. There are also significant numbers of linear and parallel farmsteads, the latter with their working buildings set in parallel to the house and sometimes attached working buildings.
- Larger farmsteads, mostly regular U-plan but also dispersed and regular multi-yard plans, developed in some areas. These are associated with larger fields that retain the irregular forms of ancient and piecemeal enclosure. Some areas are dominated by regular enclosures with regular-plan farmsteads.
- Building materials are essentially sandstone and slate, but cob is found around fringes in Culm and Redlands. Buildings were mainly roofed in local slate (now rare) and with 19th-century Welsh slate, particularly in the north.

Significance

- Exmoor has a high survival of traditional farmsteads. This significance is heightened by the fact that in a national context the area has an exceptionally high survival of buildings (predominantly farmhouses) of 17th-century or earlier date sited within landscapes whose character derives from medieval and occasionally prehistoric land use and clearance. Exmoor also has a high proportion of 18th-century working farm buildings, which are rare by national standards.
- There are farmsteads which retain clear evidence, in the form of standing buildings and buried archaeology, for their development from farming hamlets.
- The survival of 17th-century and earlier farmstead buildings within their enclosed landscapes is highly rare and distinctive in a national context.

- There are high numbers of 18th-century and earlier working buildings by national standards, mostly comprising barns and some early examples of lincays for cattle.
- Longhouses are less studied than in Dartmoor but clearly survive as a major concentration of a highly rare, early farmstead type which was common across the south-west peninsula in the medieval period.
- Barton farms (farms directly linked with local manors or sometimes the remnants of the manor itself), are often sited close to medieval churches, often retain early and high-status surviving buildings within larger-scale, semi-regular fields that date from the 14th to 16th centuries.

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 (28.8%, the national average being 32%). The extent of estate ownership may also have contributed to lower conversion rates, combined with more restrictive policies for the area within the National Park. National Park designation has enabled the funding of maintenance and repair through the agri-environment schemes, reflected in the fact that the project also noted below-average percentage (6.3%, the national average being 7.5%) of listed working buildings showing obvious signs of structural disrepair. However, neglect remains an ongoing issue for farm building survival.

Historic development

- Early farmers made use of the upland moors of Exmoor for seasonal grazing, fuel and heather for roofing. These areas resulted from clearance in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages onwards and retain many sites of prehistoric settlement, particularly from the Bronze Age, as well as medieval mining and features such as strip fields, lynchets and ridge and furrow, resulting from the expansion and contraction of land use.
- In the late medieval period, the Royal Forest of Exmoor was surrounded by common land, which was subject to intermittent cultivation and managed from valley-based communities. The Royal Forest was (with the exception of Simonsbath House and its deer park) uninhabited until enclosure and the establishment of new farms from the 1840s, after its purchase by John Knight of Worcester in 1818.
- There is a long history of pastoral grazing for cattle and sheep, with some arable in coastal vales and headlands. Cattle fattening, and later dairying, developed away from the moorland valleys in the 19th century.
- Arable cultivation expanded considerably from the late 18th century, with limekilns of late 18th- or 19th-century date built for enriching acid soils with lime. Estates were very active in this development and in the reorganisation of the farmed landscape, farmsteads and in some cases estate villages (for example the Acland estate in and around Selworthy).
- The 19th century saw the major period of arable exploitation of the former Royal Forest of Exmoor, after its enclosure, but it largely reverted to sheep grazing from the 1870s. There was much post-1940 improvement of pasture and extension of arable in places, on the highest hills of Exmoor.

Landscape and settlement

- The present settlement pattern of high levels of dispersed farmsteads and hamlets was present by the late 11th century. High-status medieval barton farms were often sited next to parish churches. Many of the area's villages developed as market centres, and are commonly made up of several foci.
- Evidence from deserted settlements and from surviving farms indicates that hamlets of longhouses, cow houses and barns formed the basic unit of settlement before the 16th century, many of which continued to contract or amalgamate from the 14th to the 19th centuries to form the farmsteads of today.
- Strong, irregular field patterns, characterised by dry stone walls, stone-faced hedgebanks and hedgerows, represent a mix of piecemeal enclosure of medieval strips, which were sited around farming hamlets, and of outfields in occasional arable use. This enclosure was generally complete by the 18th century, after which fields were further reorganised through being subdivided or, more rarely, enlarged. Most of the area's farmland displayed a separation between the 'infield' which was cropped for corn and hay and the 'outfield' which was mostly used for grazing and was occasionally ploughed for corn: later enclosure may have retained the distinctive curved profiles of the strips into which they were subdivided.
- Many stone-faced banks, planted with beech in long straight lengths, are a 19th-century feature.
- Extensive field systems for water management, known as catchworks, developed in the 18th and 19th centuries and are concentrated particularly to the eastern half on the valley sides.
- Some larger farmsteads relate to their own enclosed fields, usually rectilinear or semi-regular in form, which are of 15th to 18th-century date (so-called 'barton fields'). There are distinctive areas of barton farms and their fields around West Down, Parracombe, Arlington and Challacombe, for example Barton Town and Swincombe.
- This predominant pattern of piecemeal enclosure is intermixed with blocks of late 18th- and 19th-century regular enclosure, sometimes associated with the establishment of new farmsteads and concentrated in areas of newly reclaimed moorland and the estate lands to the north.

The High Moor

- The largely unenclosed upland core is incised deeply by the valleys of the rivers Exe and Barle. The valley areas were enclosed from medieval times onwards in irregular fields.
- Farmsteads can relate to medieval and post-medieval intakes from the moor, with the 'inbye fields' (closest to them) bounded by 'corn ditches' redolent of those in Dartmoor, which are stone-faced banks sometimes topped by a hedge and with a ditch.
- Large, rectilinear enclosures intruding from the moorland edges are mainly 19th century, mostly significantly from John Knight's purchase of the former Royal Forest of Exmoor. Inbye fields to his new farms typically feature tapering boundaries so that more fields are accessible from the farmyards. Many beech-planted hedges result from the building of new Knight farmsteads after 1840.
- Some farmsteads have evidence for water power brought to the steading, with the majority along the rivers Exe, Quarme and Barle.

The South and Eastern Fringe

- To the east, the Brendon Hills have a relatively low density of isolated farmsteads, partly due to the heavily wooded hills and combes.
- On the highest land south of the B3224, post-medieval, late 18th- and 19th-century enclosure and modern field division are a particular feature. The landscape southwards into the combes gives way to smaller fields, and some piecemeal enclosure.
- The Brendon Hills were mined for Ironstone from the Roman times and up until the 20th

century. Much of this area is now mixed woodland and plantation.

- Larger farmsteads and fields developed along the southern fringe which extends from Clayhanger in the Vale of Taunton Redlands to Barnstaple along the edge of the Culm lands (Area 149).
- Cob (earth) building is a distinctive feature.

The Vale of Porlock

- In the low-lying Vale of Redland, mudstone and Breccia influenced the use of building materials, most notably cob.
- Open field agriculture was practised to a greater degree in Porlock and Dunster Vales, and along the coastal fringe to the west.
- High hedges of predominantly maple and wych elm create a distinct sense of enclosure to an improved modern farming area.

The Western Downs

- The extensive rolling hills of former downland and valleys, stretching from the National Park boundary to the west coast at Croyde, are now much cultivated. Villages here equal in number those within the National Park but in less than half the area.
- In contrast, farms are less densely spread and Branton Great Field survives to the present day as an important historic strip field landscape.
- Few remnants of strip fields co-exist with large areas of Barton Fields enclosed from the 16th century onwards. Barton farms developed here, at least partly resulting from the wealth gained from Barnstaple's importance as a staple wool port.

Farmstead and building types

Exmoor is a mostly pastoral area of isolated and hamlet farmsteads, with high numbers of 18th-century and earlier working buildings by national standards. The latter mostly comprise barns and some early examples of lincages for cattle.

Many estates (as in Dartmoor, and unusually in a national context) remained active in building farmsteads into the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Farmstead types

Farmsteads across this area primarily served to store and thresh harvested grain and to house cattle and their fodder in yards and associated buildings: bank barns, cattle buildings and enclosed yards are the dominant feature of Exmoor's farmsteads, with stables, cart sheds and other ancillary buildings commonly small in scale. All traditional farmsteads in Exmoor developed in their final form over the 19th and into the early 20th centuries. Evolution from simple, linear and parallel forms to courtyard and dispersed plan forms is a common development. Evidence can be found in changing architectural style, joints between buildings and constructional differences.

The key farmstead types that had developed up to the end of the 19th century, and that are still evident today, are:

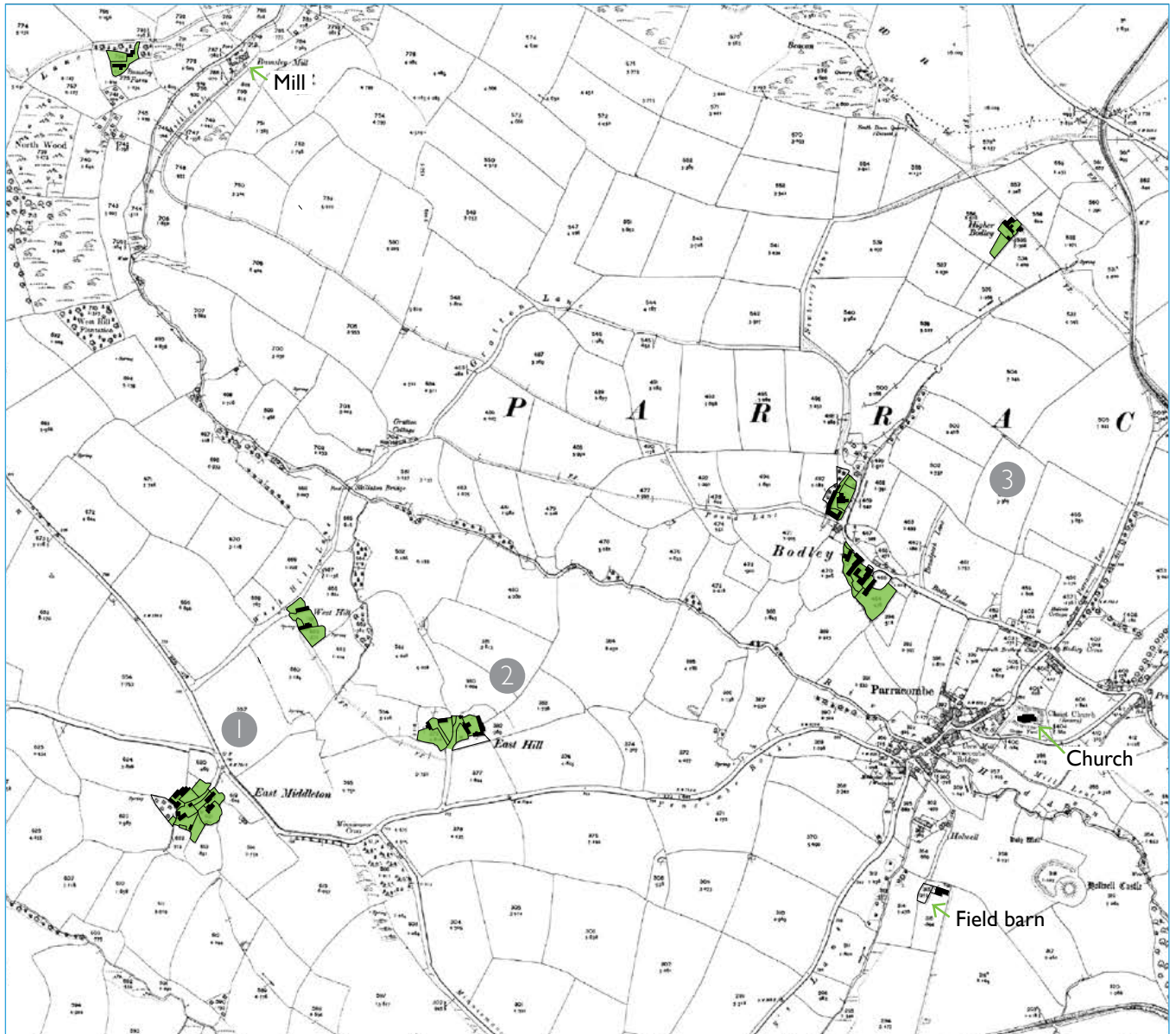
- Linear and L-plan farmsteads with attached or integral farmhouses such as longhouses. These were most probably the dominant farmstead types up to the 17th century, and many have been absorbed into the larger

farmstead types outlined below. These are now most strongly concentrated in the vales of Exmoor, and recent work to the east has demonstrated the survival of late medieval longhouses.

- Courtyard plans, either loose or fully enclosed, are now the most common plan form found. The farmhouse is frequently sited to one side of the yard, either attached or separately and the working buildings may be further extended by attachments to the range. Loose courtyards comprising detached, working buildings most commonly have one or two working buildings around the yard and regular courtyards of interlinked buildings are most found in U- or L-shaped arrangements.
- Regular courtyard and U-shaped farmsteads are the most likely to have been planned in the early to mid-19th century. Larger farmsteads in the fertile Porlock Vale, notably those on the Acland estate, developed in the early to mid-19th century into courtyard plans with bank barns, wheel houses for threshing machinery and linhays facing into yards. Many substantial, planned 19th-century farmsteads occur in the former Royal Forest of Exmoor as part of the Knight estate. Other large farmsteads are found west of the National Park in the Western Farmlands
- Dispersed pattern farmsteads roughly equate in number with the linear and parallel plan types. Many of the latter are not simple layouts and have been developed into loose groups or ranges. From evidence of longhouses in Selworthy parish, and around the peripheral Dulverton parishes, linear layouts are undoubtedly the early type of layout.

Building types

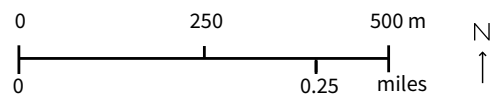
- Threshing barns tend to be earlier than bank barns and are widely distributed across the area. Few are of great size except when associated with estates, for example Acland, Cleeve Abbey and Nettlecombe.
- There are multifunctional barns and ranges including stables, cow houses and some bank barns dating from late 18th to mid-19th centuries. Bank barns are a highly distinctive feature of this area, and in their fully-developed form reflect the requirements of agricultural improvement in combining many key functions (the dry storage of harvested corn and threshed grain and straw with the housing of cattle, horses and sometimes carts and implements).
- Shelter sheds are found throughout; whilst many feature round stone piers, these are found much more commonly in the east.
- Open-fronted linhays are frequently found facing into cattle yards. They are concentrated in the eastern half of the area, where they form part of the major concentration of this distinctive building type in south-west England. Linhays developed from the 16th century and possibly earlier, to shelter cattle and their hay.
- Granaries are most typically found as upper floors of farm buildings or as part of a threshing barn. Unusually, free-standing granaries are known, for example at Perry farm and Stetfold Rocks farm.
- Cider houses occur usually as equipment housed in existing buildings. As many such features are now removed, their function can go easily unrecognised.
- Water wheels on farms are often roofed or enclosed in their own outshot.
- Ash houses, typically square, are only rarely found, but are known in the north-east.
- Turf stalls (buildings for storing turf as fuel, usually attached to the house) have been found only rarely. They feature relatively small hatches for loading, or unloading to the farmhouse.
- There is a large number of 19th-century field barns and occasional outfarms. These are distinctive features of the landscape, occurring even at the coast, for example a distinctive group at Braunton, on land reclaimed from the sea.



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.




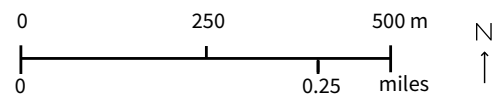
Parracombe

Dispersed multi-yard plans, where buildings and their yards developed at the nodal points of routeways, are a characteristic feature of farmsteads and farming hamlets dating from the medieval period, as at East Middleton (1) and Toot Hill (2). Both sites were substantially rebuilt in the 19th century, but earlier buildings and the medieval church survive in Parracombe, which developed as a residential and service centre from the 17th century. Houses in the farming hamlet at Bodley to its north (3) date from the early 17th century.



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



Marwood, north of Barnstaple

The distinctive, large fields of two barton farms – farms directly linked with local manors or sometimes the remnants of the manor itself – contrast with smaller-scale fields to the south and enlarged strips to the east around Middle Marwood (3), here with the curved profiles of the medieval strips from which they were enclosed. Another characteristic of barton farms is their development – as here – into larger-scale dispersed or courtyard-plan multi-yard plans. The farmhouse at Bear Charter Barton (1) to the west dates from the 16th century, and at Westcott Barton (2) to the east the farmstead developed around the 16th-century or earlier farmhouse and a group of service buildings including a cider house: the courtyard to the south has a barn with a mill wheel, and to the east is an early 17th-century barn and stables (a notable survival) facing the routeway.



One of the Knight farmsteads on the high moor, protected by a shelter belt of trees, built within land newly enclosed from the former Royal Forest from the 1840s. The house is built into, and faces away from, a quadrangle of farm buildings. Photo © Historic England/Mike Williams



Holt Ball Farm on the Selworthy estate, where farms were amalgamated and restructured from the 1820s. The farmhouse is the earliest building, attached to a dairy and linhay for cattle, cattle and horses also being housed in the ground floor of the threshing barn, which was built with two threshing bays. Note the cart shed facing the entrance routeway. Photo © Historic England 27981/016



This regular courtyard farmstead at Upton developed next to the long-derelict 14th-century church. It results from a comprehensive scheme of rebuilding in about 1860, and is typical of the largest-scale courtyard plans of this type in having separate access to the farmhouse which enjoys views looking away from the farmyard over its own garden. Photo © Historic England 23829/003



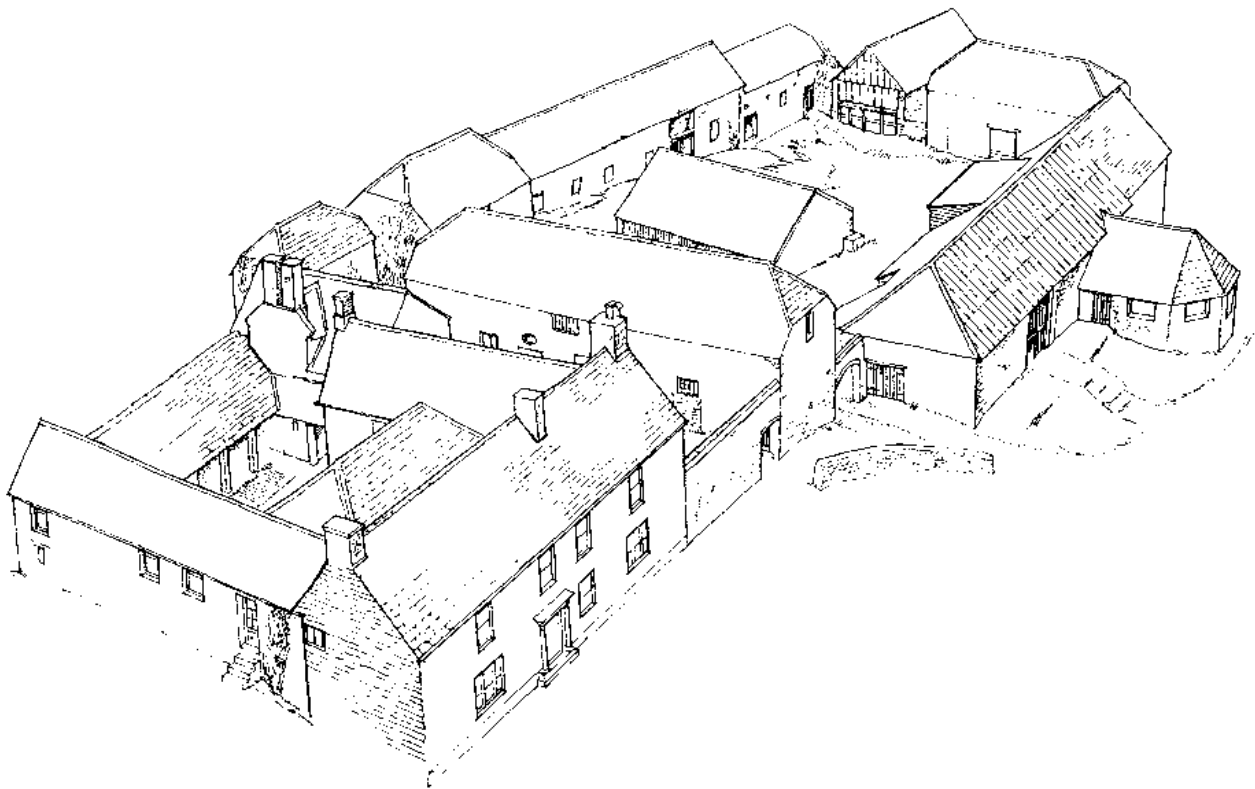
West Harwood Farm, north of Cutcombe, has a 17th-century farmhouse and linhay. The manure from the farmyards, reordered in the 19th century, was channelled into the downslope catch meadows – a characteristic feature of Exmoor. Photo © Historic England 26879/019



Linear and parallel plans This small farm shows the loosely parallel layout of many farms, and the small amount of development available to hillside farmsteads. Photo © Philip White



Courtyard plans A loose courtyard plan. To the right of the house is a yard now flanked by two opposing buildings, and prominent to the right is a bank barn. There are small buildings, possibly for calves, to the left of the house. Photo © Philip White



Leigh Barton is a fine example of a large courtyard farmstead, typical in its scale, and the early date of its buildings, of those that developed on high-status sites (including barton farms) in this area. It was sustained by the wealth of the Poyntz family. The house is 17th century. Three of the buildings around the yard, including the large threshing barn with its wheel house, added in the early 19th century, and early cattle housing, are 17th or early 18th century, and the oxen house and granary (closest to the house) is probably c.1700. Another cattle yard with shelter sheds was built in the mid-19th century. Drawing © Historic England



This regular, multi-yard plan developed with two yards. The stabling and main barn with cattle housing is housed in the tall buildings which, together with the house, enclose the main yard. Downslope is an additional cattle yard. This multi-yard arrangement is repeated across Exmoor, with many variations. Photo © Philip White



This late 19th-century, smaller-scale group has also developed around two yards. Many farmsteads were rebuilt in the late 19th century, after the 1870s, which often marks the last phase of farm building in England. Photo © Philip White



Barns This small bank barn is typical of the many small, courtyard farmsteads on Exmoor. It provides evidence of the regional character seen in Exmoor buildings. The low cattle arches may indicate use by calves. Attached to the right is a stable with a hay loft. Photo © Philip White



This is another typical arrangement – a barn with attached linhay. The barn is a bank barn. The upper threshing and crop storage area is accessed from the bank to the rear: next to the threshing floor is a platform for a horse walk, for powering a threshing machine inside the barn. A cart shed and a stable face the farmyard, and pigeon holes are also built into the front elevation. Photo © Jeremy Lake



This large bank barn, dating from c.1800 served an estate farm. It had two threshing floors and one winnowing door, later reduced in size. To the rear is a rare, two-storey round house. The cow house below opened on to one large yard. Photo © Philip White



A typical medium-size bank barn in a courtyard layout. The external lime plastering still shows evidence of the trowel marks found on many Exmoor buildings. Photo © Philip White



The traditional threshing barn is widely found on Exmoor. This example from the southern fringe is a good size for its small farmstead, and indicates the expansion in corn farming during the boom times of the late 18th and the 19th centuries. Attached at the corner is the granary. Photo © Philip White



An engine house for horse-powered threshing machinery. Historic maps show that many barns had attached engine houses, but surviving examples are now rare. Photo © Jeremy Lake



Cattle housing These otherwise typical Exmoor shelter sheds with round piers have an unusual, curved layout only known at one other location. Photo © Philip White



This shelter is unusual in having rectangular section piers but internally they are curved. Photo © Philip White



Some shelter sheds are designed both to provide greater protection and for feeding, whilst still allowing free access to animals. They are generally found in more exposed yards. Most openings in this building have been partly blocked up. Note the feed passage door in the gable. Photo © Philip White



Linways with timber posts occur more often around the high moor than on it and this shows a typical three- to five-bay arrangement with curved braces. Oak was the obvious choice originally but softwood posts are found, usually as replacements. Photo © Philip White



Stone piers are found commonly to shelter sheds but those to lincays occur occasionally, and more so towards the south and eastern fringe. This linhay has lost much of its upper floor. Photo © Philip White



The vertical joint in this construction is indicative of a later phase of extension to the original work. The position of the larger, former quoin stones shows the earlier work. Many buildings were extended to provide additional housing for cattle. Photo © Philip White



This form of lofted cattle house with full-height narrow entrance is found only occasionally in the West Country. The arched cattle entrances to the cow house were infilled when its use changed. Photo © Philip White



Granaries Granaries at first-floor level are the most typical type on Exmoor. They always feature steps and are most often found over animal houses, from dog kennels to stables. The steps shown have a recess for a dog or goose, intended to ward off rats. Photo © Philip White



This is a rare example of a freestanding granary within a courtyard layout. It dates from the mid-19th century. Such examples are typical of central-southern England, but are very rare in the south-west. Photo © Philip White



Other building types Pigsties usually take a similar form to the typical Devon or Cornwall style. This pigsty has a separate access on the right to provide feed without entering the sty itself. Photo © Philip White



Another pigsty, typical of the south-west, with low eaves and no external feeders or runs. Photo © Philip White



An open-fronted cart shed, with one closed, lockable bay, typically facing onto a track. It caters for carts, field implements and more valuable equipment. Photo © Philip White



Cart sheds will generally house one or two carts and are often attached to, or as here, are part of another building. They are also found as lean-tos. Photo © Philip White



Field barns built in 1815-20 in Branton Great Field, which served to shelter cattle and their fodder for farmers whose holdings – as in the medieval period – were widely dispersed. Branton Marsh was probably reclaimed in the Middle Ages from tidal waters of the River Taw, but from 1811 to 1815 the marsh was more extensively drained after authorization by Act of Parliament. This is one of only three open field systems to survive in England. Photo © Historic England 27981/040



Stone cobbling is a significant feature of farmyards. It informs us about animal buildings, housing arrangements and movement in the yards. Photo © Philip White



Original Exmoor slate is now a rare find. This old, failing roof, covered in a mix of mostly local slates, has been fixed without battens, directly to rafters, akin to a form of rag work. Photo © Philip White



Preserved within a privy, this plaster trowelling finish is typical of that found on many farm buildings of the Exmoor area. Photo © Philip White



Materials and detail

- Traditional architecture is dominated by Devonian sandstones, slates and shales, with minor amounts of limestone. Cob is found in suitable areas such as Vale of Porlock and the Culm lands to the south.
- Combed wheat thatch was formerly widespread except on the high moor. Roofs were often half-hipped and may be steeper than later slated roofs. There is some survival of thatch, including the early 19th-century 'picturesque' village of Selworthy on the Acland estate. Thatch was historically used with cob construction in order to save on building costs, but its use with cob is now very rare.
- Treborough slate quarries were documented from the medieval period and developed in the 19th and 20th centuries. Former pegged and torched roofs appear now to be entirely superseded by regular (tally) nailed slate.
- Oak structural timber was used almost solely to roofs, until softwood came into use from around the early 19th century.
- There is distinctive use of circular stone piers for lincays and shelter sheds; they are rarely square. Late lincays and shelters are typically found with timber posts.
- Lime plaster coats were typically used for weather protection, notably finished in compressed, trowelled lines particularly in the east. Limewash was commonly used as further protection.
- Roofs were left unguttered, deliberately to allow rainwater to fall onto yards as an expedient to cleaning. Rainwater disposal generally appeared in the later 19th century.



Historic England

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