



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

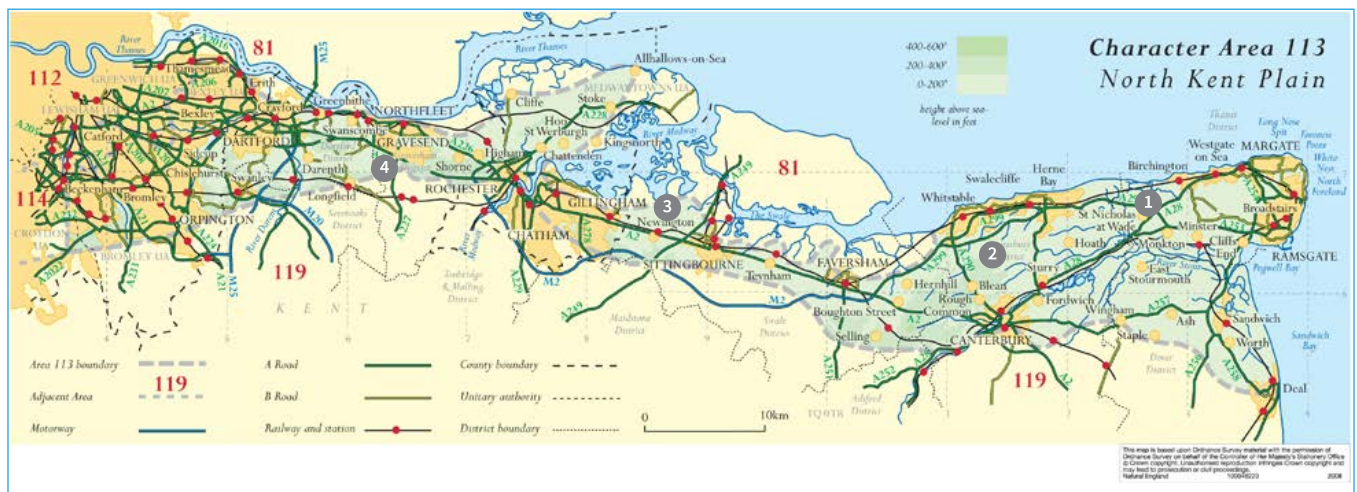
North Kent Plain

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 113



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 map shows the North Kent Plain, with the numbers of neighbouring National Character Areas around it (© Natural England). The area (see Landscape and Settlement for details) subdivides into:

1. Thanet, Wantsum and Lower Stour Marshes
2. The Blean (Forest of Blean and Former Blean Forest to its north)
3. Northern Horticultural Belt (Whitstable to Gillingham)
4. The Western Area, including Rochester/Chatham Hinterland, Dartford/Gravesend Conurbation, and North-Western Foothills of the Downs and the Hoo Peninsula.

Front cover: This group at Chislet, now in residential use, has retained its large-scale layout of two courtyards and its distinctive farmstead buildings with a rare combination of a 17th-century or earlier farmhouse and aisled barns, as well as a complete grouping of later barns and other outbuildings. Photo © Historic England 26979/008

Summary

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

The North Kent Plain occupies the lower slopes between the Thames Estuary to the north and the chalk of the Kent Downs to the south. It is a productive agricultural area, particularly associated with fruit growing. It also has a strong urban influence, with urban areas accounting for just over 30% of the Character Area. There is relatively low woodland cover (7%), predominantly concentrated to the west of the Character Area. A small proportion of the area (2.4%) is within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Historic development

- This has long been an important corn-growing area with medium to large-scale courtyard farmsteads. Farmstead groups are dominated by barns, often large-scale, and stables, granaries, cart sheds and cattle yards.
- The largest farmsteads developed with two or more aisled or unaisled barns.
- Oast houses and other buildings associated with the hop industry are found on some farms.

Significance

- The farmsteads of the North Kent Plain have been subject to high levels of change. Whilst 59% of farmsteads retain some traditional farmstead character, just 33% retain more than 50% of their historic form based on Ordnance Survey maps of c.1900. This is lower than most other areas in the south-east of England, except for the Greater Thames Estuary. These farmsteads sit within landscapes that have also experienced a high degree of 20th-century change.
- This area has a high rate of survival of pre-1700 buildings; 26% of farmsteads retain a pre-1700 farmhouse and 9% a pre-1700 working building, whilst 5% of farmsteads have both a pre-1700 farmhouse and a working building. This is one of the highest percentages recorded in the south-east of England. These farmsteads are of particular significance, especially if they remain substantially intact as traditional groups. Farmsteads with early buildings are concentrated in the central and eastern part of the Character Area. The Hoo Peninsula, and the western part of the area which has been more affected by urbanisation, has a lower rate of survival of early buildings.
- Farmsteads with pre-1700 buildings include some manorial complexes, sometimes moated and often accompanied by a church. They are particularly important elements within the landscape.
- Complete farmstead groups, with 19th-century and earlier barns, granaries, stables and cart sheds that represent the arable-based agriculture of this area, are rare.
- Small-scale, pre-19th-century, loose courtyard groups of a house and barn are rare; surviving

examples are likely to be found east of the Medway.

- Dispersed cluster plans, once common across the North Kent Plain except in Thanet, now rarely survive with little change. They were

associated with small-scale farmsteads that fell out of use over the 20th century.

- There are some rare, surviving examples of straw thatch.

Present and future issues

- This area now has some of the largest corn-producing farms in England.
- In this National Character Area, the Photo Image Project (2006) recorded a medium

proportion of listed working farm buildings converted to non-agricultural use (37.5%, the national average being 32%).

Historic development

- Corn production on the fertile, brickearth soils of the North Kent Plain has been important since at least the Iron Age and, together with the development of brewing and malting from the 15th century, has been stimulated by the ease of access to the London market.
- The Church was a major landowner and the cathedrals of Rochester and Canterbury continued to manage large estates after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century.
- Large numbers of medieval houses and barns by national standards – especially across the Horticultural Belt – testify to a class of prosperous farmers who developed on these estates from the 15th century.
- Larger, arable-based farms developed to the east of the Stour, and elsewhere the diverse economy sustained the development of medium-scale farms.
- Fruit growing was also a major element in the agriculture of the western part of the area in particular from the 13th century, increasing from the 17th century with the establishment of larger orchards to supply the London market and the supply of the naval dockyards.
- The availability of water transport along the coast to London gave north Kent a distinct advantage over other fruit-growing areas. The Roman road of Watling Street also provided a direct link with London.

Landscape and settlement

- Urban areas, including parts of outer London, exert a strong influence on the character of large parts of the area. The west end incorporates parts of outer London plus commuter towns such as Orpington, Bromley and Dartford. Further east are the cathedral cities of Rochester and Canterbury and the towns of Gillingham, Sandwich, Sittingbourne, Faversham, Chatham, and on the Isle of Thanet, Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate.
- Settlement is a mixture of nucleated and dispersed: nucleated settlement becomes dominant in the east of the area.
- Large, manorial farms developed close to parish churches, some being moated.
- The area had been largely cleared of woodland by the 11th century. Woodland is confined to small blocks and copses often on higher ground, and shelter belts of poplars protecting orchards and soft fruit. The only



The large-scale, open landscape of the north-east part of the Character Area has long been predominantly arable. Isolated farmsteads in this landscape could be associated with enclosure and the movement of some farms from the villages. Photo © Bob Edwards

significant areas of woodland are confined to pockets of higher ground with acidic clay soils such as around Shorne, Chattenden and Blean.

- There are few farmsteads that retain pre-1700 buildings, although in the areas at the far western and eastern ends of the Character Area there are greater numbers of farmsteads retaining early fabric.

Thanet, Wantsum and Lower Stour Marshes

- Settlement is strongly nucleated within a very open landscape. Large arable farms with 18th or 19th-century houses developed in tandem with the enlargement and reorganisation of fields, which retain earlier, irregular boundaries.
- Moated sites are found in this area, especially to the south-east of Canterbury where they may be isolated or found in villages. Not all moats survive as earthworks.
- Market gardening is a characteristic of Thanet – where the exposure to wind limits fruit growing – and of the area around Sandwich, sometimes regarded as the home of market gardening, as it was brought to this area by Dutch émigrés.
- There is a strong urban influence, with Margate and Ramsgate within the area and extensive areas of 19th- and 20th-century housing across the area.
- The marshland areas were subject to reclamation by ecclesiastical estates in the

12th to 13th centuries. Improved drainage from the 19th century has resulted in much of these areas being converted to arable, with a mix of regular and irregular medium-scale fields and farms.

The Blean (Forest of Blean and Former Blean Forest to its north)

- This is a coppiced woodland landscape, west and north of Canterbury, of scattered dwellings amongst woodland and wooded heath with occasional moated sites, where smaller farms developed, focused largely on dairying. There are areas of small-scale encroachment and also of large fields and farms.
- To the north is an area of larger farms and fields resulting from the reorganisation of the landscape and more extensive removal of woodland from the 16th century.

Northern Horticultural Belt (Whitstable to Gillingham)

- A rich agricultural landscape of light soils lies either side of The Blean, running from Gillingham towards Thanet around Whitstable, where a mix of small and medium to large-scale farms developed within a wide variety of fields mostly with irregular boundaries that result from piecemeal enclosure and successive alteration. There are some areas with very large fields and large-scale, post-1950 farms.

The Western Area, including Rochester-Chatham Hinterland, Dartford-Gravesham Conurbation, and the North-Western Foothills of the Downs and the Hoo Peninsula.

- Historically, small-scale market gardens were intermixed with medium to large-scale farms. Irregular fields are set within pockets of woodland and some coastal marshland.
- Since the 17th century, the area has been subject to increasing urban influences from London, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, and, with the exception of Hoo Peninsula, is now an area with a predominant urban and suburban character.

Farmstead and building types

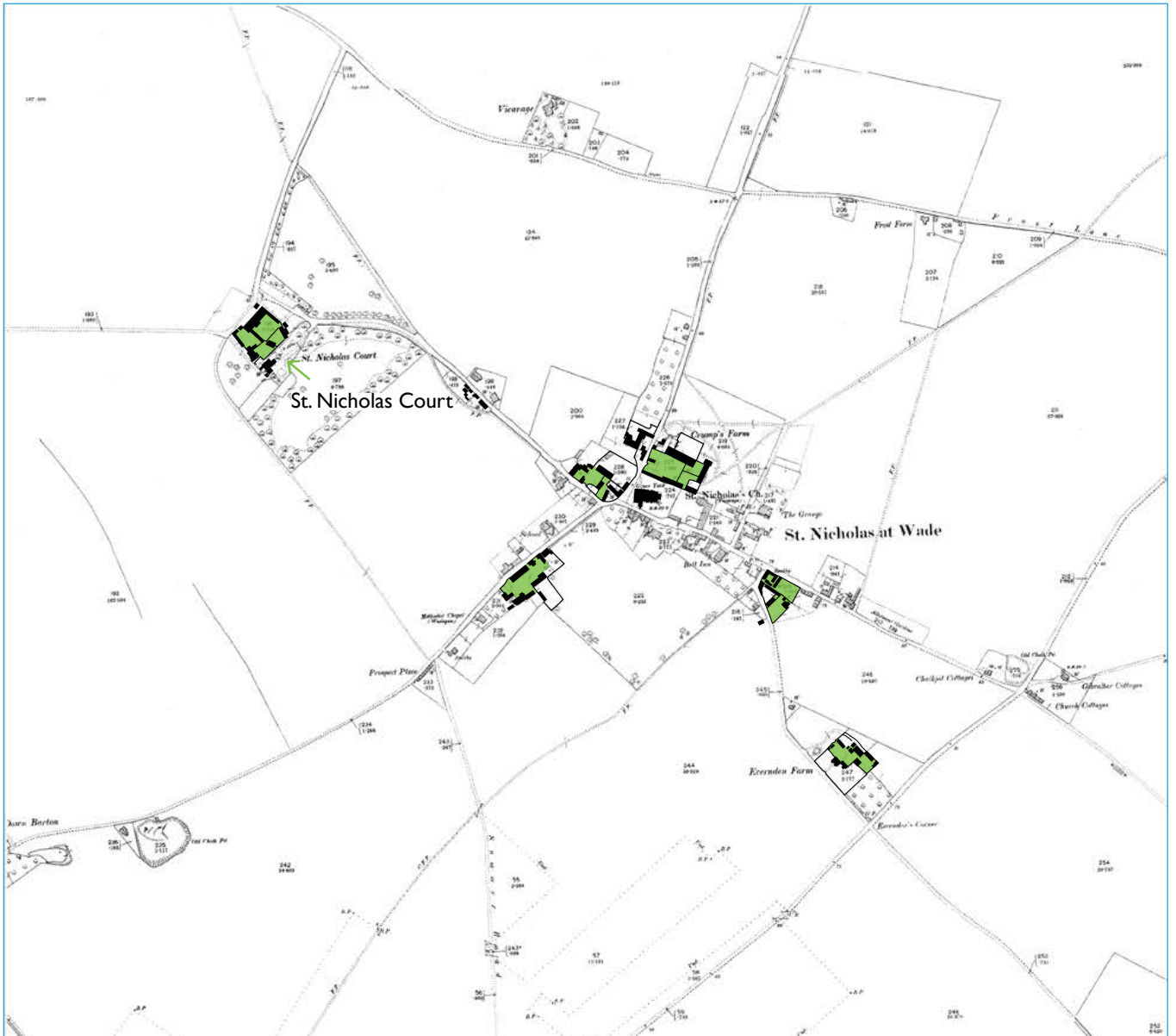
There is a high concentration of pre-1750 farmstead buildings in this area which includes part of one of the main clusters of aisled barns in the south-east of England. The concentration of pre-1750 farm buildings is particularly high in the central part of the Character Area.

Farmstead types

- The predominant pattern is of loose courtyard farmsteads, many of a medium to large-scale including some rare surviving examples of coherent groups of medieval to 18th-century date. Small-scale, pre-19th-century, loose courtyard groups of a house and barn are rare; surviving examples are likely to be found east of the Medway.
- Regular multi-yard plans developed across the area, including on farms with a mix of corn, hop and fruit production. Some farms around the coastal marshes of Hoo and Sheppey in particular developed with extensive farmsteads having many yards for fattening cattle. They are largely absent from the Blean area.
- Regular plan types, generally medium-scale L- and U-plans, are uncommon except in areas of planned regular enclosure, on or close to the coastal marshes. There are some, for example, on the Hoo Peninsula and in the eastern part of the Character Area, where there was a high level of rebuilding of farmsteads using regular plans in the 19th century.
- Courtyard plans with an L-plan element and additional buildings are common across the area, especially in the eastern part of area.
- Dispersed plan types, mainly dispersed cluster plans, were seen across the area, but many have been subject to change leaving few groups unaltered from the late 19th century.
- Outfarms and field barns were particularly common in the Northern Horticultural Belt but have been subject to high levels of loss. Small buildings were often associated with orchards.

Building types

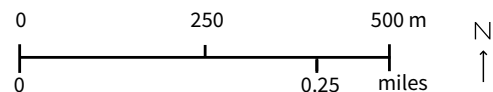
- Aisled barns range from three bays to eight bays or larger, often on manorial farmsteads where there may be two large barns.
- Timber-framed granaries set on staddle stones are typically of late 18th- or 19th-century date, but including some very rare earlier examples.
- Large stables, sometimes of 18th-century or earlier date, are sited on larger corn-producing farms.
- Oast houses and other buildings associated with the hop industry are found on some farms across most of the area except on Thanet and along the north coast towards Herne Bay, within the Blean area and around Sandwich and Deal where oast houses are rare.
- Shelter sheds for cattle usually are a 19th-century addition to earlier plans.



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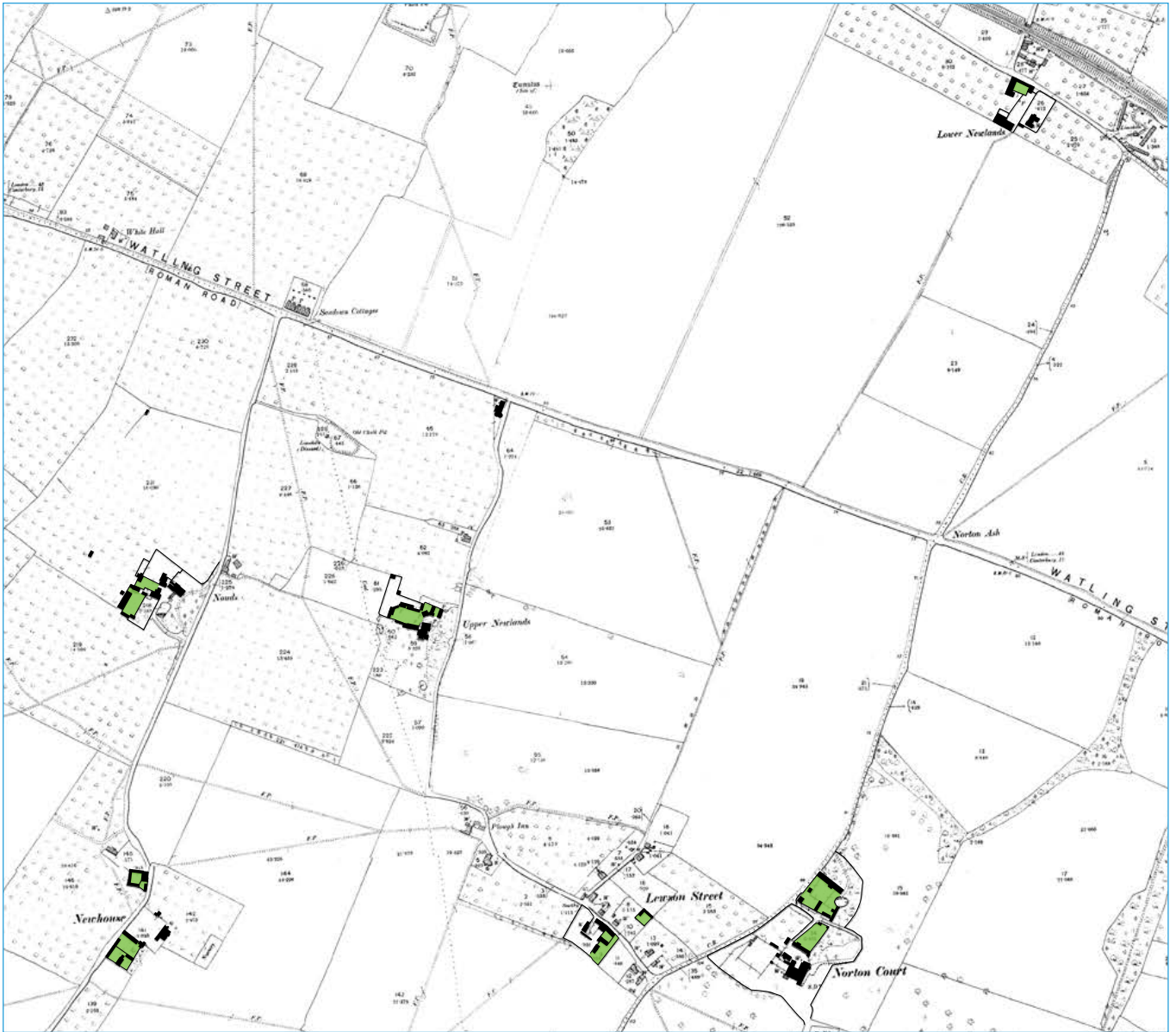
Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.




St Nicholas at Wade

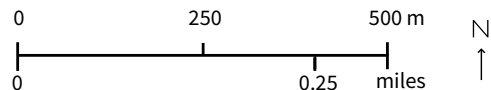
In the eastern part of the North Kent Plain, particularly in the north-east of the area, settlement was predominantly nucleated. Small villages with a high status farmstead (here St Nicholas Court), which were often church-owned, and other large farms lay within an open landscape of fields enclosed from medieval open fields. These large, arable based farmsteads were dominated by large threshing barns, many having two or more barns arranged in loose courtyard groups. Some of these barns date from the 14th and 15th centuries and form part of a group of highly significant early barns in a national context. The addition of cattle housing could result in the creation of additional yards, forming regular multi-yard plans as at St Nicholas Court.

Photo © Bob Edwards



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



Teynham

Within the central part of the Character Area, settlement consisted of a mixture of villages, hamlets and scattered farmsteads. This was a wealthy part of Kent from the medieval period, benefiting from fertile soils and with Watling Street and nearby coastal ports, good access to the London market and the important urban areas of Canterbury and Rochester. This resulted in the building of high quality houses, many of which have survived. This landscape has been the prime agricultural area of Kent since at least the Iron Age and its field patterns have been repeatedly reorganised as the area adapted to the demand for corn crops, hops and fruit. In this map extract, many of the field boundaries are straight but the 'framework' of the enclosures (notably the lanes and tracks running south from Watling Street and the wooded shaws in the south-east) are remnants of an earlier, less regular pattern of enclosures.



Teynham: the photo shows a large, arable field in the background with crop marks showing the lines of former field boundaries and tracks. The farmsteads are typically of medium or large-scale, loose courtyard plan but earlier maps show that dispersed cluster plans were common into the mid-19th century. Photo © Historic England 26979/048



Medium to large-scale, loose courtyard plans were predominant in this area, particularly in the north-east where two or more large threshing barns, stables and granaries would be set around a yard. Photo © Bob Edwards



On the Hoo Peninsula there were smaller scale farmsteads, but surviving examples are now very rare. This loose courtyard group has buildings to two sides of the yard including a three-bay aisled barn of 17th-century date. Photo © Bob Edwards



Also on the Hoo Peninsula, this regular U-plan farmstead reflects the large-scale rebuilding of farmsteads that occurred in parts of the Character Area in the late 19th century. Photo © Historic England 26888/010



Many larger farmsteads, often high-status sites, developed regular multi-yard plans. This example has a late 19th-century covered yard and has lost many of the buildings which defined an adjacent yard area to the right. A third yard was associated with the oast house at the bottom of the shot. Photo © Historic England 27195/010



Large, timber-framed, aisled threshing barns dating from the 14th to 17th centuries are one of the defining building types within this area. Photo © Bob Edwards



One of two large barns on a high-status farmstead, this barn has been partly rebuilt in brick and incorporates stabling with a hayloft above. Photo © Bob Edwards



A three-bay, aisled barn of 17th-century date on a small farmstead, Hoo. Photo © Bob Edwards



A large, mid-19th-century multifunctional barn with two threshing bays. In between there is a shelter shed for cattle and to the right a stable. The left end possibly served as the stowage attached to the hop drying kilns. Photo © Historic England



A small stable, probably 18th-century, on a smaller farmstead, now a rare survival. Photo © Bob Edwards



Staddle granaries were found on many farmsteads.
Photo © Bob Edwards



A large granary raised on a plinth wall rather than staddle stones. © Historic England



A 19th-century, open-fronted shelter shed forming part of an L-plan range with a barn and stables.
Photo © Bob Edwards



Late 19th-century loose boxes for cattle.
Photo © Historic England



Although not found in the same density as in the Weald, oast houses are found across the area.
Photo © Bob Edwards



There are a small number of early 20th-century smallholdings, some of which were constructed for returning soldiers from WWI. Others were council-owned smallholdings. Photo © Historic England

Materials and detail

- Timber-framing is the characteristic building material for medieval houses and barns clad in weatherboard.
- Roofs are hipped, plain clay tile.
- Straw thatch survives on some barns.
- Brick was predominantly used for farm buildings from the late 18th century.



Historic England

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