



Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

South Downs

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 125



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 South Downs, with the numbers of neighbouring National Character Areas around it. The key sub-areas are:

1. East of the Adur
2. West of the Adur, to the Hampshire border
3. Hampshire South Downs.

The historical development of the downs was different to either side of the River Adur. The open downland to the east supported more sheep than to the west, where medieval common fields were often hedged and there was more woodland enabling diversification with cattle rearing, dairying and timber production. Timber-frame survived longer in the west than the east, where flint and cobbles were commonly used for walling. Timber-frame was also more common in the Hampshire South Downs, where cobbles were not used.

Front cover: Aerial view of Saddlescombe, north of Brighton. For more on this, see map on page 6. Photo © Historic England 27301/033

Summary

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

The South Downs is a prominent spine of chalk stretching from the Hampshire Downs to the coastal cliffs of Beachy Head in East Sussex. At intervals, the chalk ridge is traversed by broad river valleys with flat floodplains and water meadows. Of the Character Area, 8% is classified as urban and 84% of the Character Area is in the South Downs National Park.

Historic character

- This area has a low density of farmsteads in the landscape, due to the historic importance of: large-scale arable farming, the resulting large holding size (by national standards) and the concentration of farmsteads in villages and hamlets.
- There are small numbers of isolated farmsteads in the landscape, some of medieval origins but most relating to enclosure of downland in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- Large-scale courtyard farmsteads are typical of downland landscapes with large barns, stabling, granaries, cart sheds and cattle yards.

Significance

- Farmsteads Mapping shows that 83% of recorded farmsteads retain at least some of their historic character, and 67% of farmsteads survive with less than 50% loss of historic form; this is one of the highest proportions within the Character Areas of the South East.
- Around 23% of these farmsteads retain pre-1700 buildings, predominantly farmhouses. There is also a high proportion of farmsteads that have an 18th-century farmhouse or working buildings – this period being significant to the character of farmsteads in the area.
- Complete farmsteads representative of downland farming systems, with one or more aisled or unaisled threshing barns, stabling, cart shed and a granary, and sometimes with shelter sheds to yards, are very rare in a national context.
- Some of these farmsteads with 17th-century and earlier buildings are highly significant in a national context; together with the Hampshire Downs they represent some of the earliest evidence for the development of large-scale, capital-based agriculture in England.
- Detached granaries have been especially vulnerable to loss.
- Some very rare surviving examples in a national context of buildings for sheep, typically open-fronted with low eaves, and rams' pens.
- Outfarms and field barns have been subject to a high rate of loss.

Present and future issues

- The Photo Image Project (2006) recorded in this National Character Area a low proportion of listed, working farm buildings converted

to non-agricultural use (25.6%, the national average being 32%).

Historic development

- During the Saxon period the higher downland, which was extensive arable land from the Iron Age to Roman periods, reverted to pasture with arable concentrated on the lower slopes. Estates, some of which may reflect Roman land units, developed and became the basis for the large, rich estates of the medieval period. These estates were predominantly in the hands of ecclesiastical lords, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishops of Winchester and Chichester. Land held by other monastic institutions up to the 16th century often came into the hands of wealthy, secular lords after the dissolution.
- The South Downs were well known for their corn and wool production, with Winchester –

at the western end of this belt of chalk – being one of the nine staple towns in the country. The flood plains of rivers cut through the chalk and provide rich grazing for sheep and cattle. In some valleys, water meadows constructed in the 17th century allowed the managed flooding of pastures during winter.

- The historical development of the downs was different to either side of the River Adur; the open downland to the east supported more sheep than to the west, where medieval common fields were often hedged and there was more woodland enabling diversification with cattle rearing, dairying and timber production.

Landscape and settlement

- Generally, there is a low density of settlement, particularly in the central section of the area. Settlement density increases at the western and eastern ends of the Character Area.
- Settlement is mainly concentrated in small to medium sized villages, many of which lie along the river valleys although the numbers of isolated farmsteads are greater in the western and eastern ends of the area.
- The predominant pattern of medium to large-scale fields largely reflects the gradual enclosure of open fields and downland through enclosure by agreement which had started by the 15th century. This was often linked to the creation of new farmsteads, and

the development of large-scale, capital-based farming. Extensive areas of common fields survived in the west of the area into the 19th century, and in the rich meadowland of the valley floors until the 19th century.

- In the east of the area, where woodland is concentrated on the lower ground slopes, farmsteads are generally more exposed to view than in the centre – where there is more woodland due to large estates and the creation of beech plantations in the 19th-century – and the west, where woodland was also found on the scarp slopes.

- Most farms in this Character Area were large by national standards, although farmsteads tended to be smaller west of the River Adur.
- Some of the large downland farmsteads represent the sites of medieval hamlets where the small farms have been amalgamated into one holding. Settlement earthworks around these steadings may survive.
- Some isolated outfarms and farmsteads are associated with the surviving cottages of farm labourers, generally of 19th century date.

Farmstead and building types

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.

Farmstead types

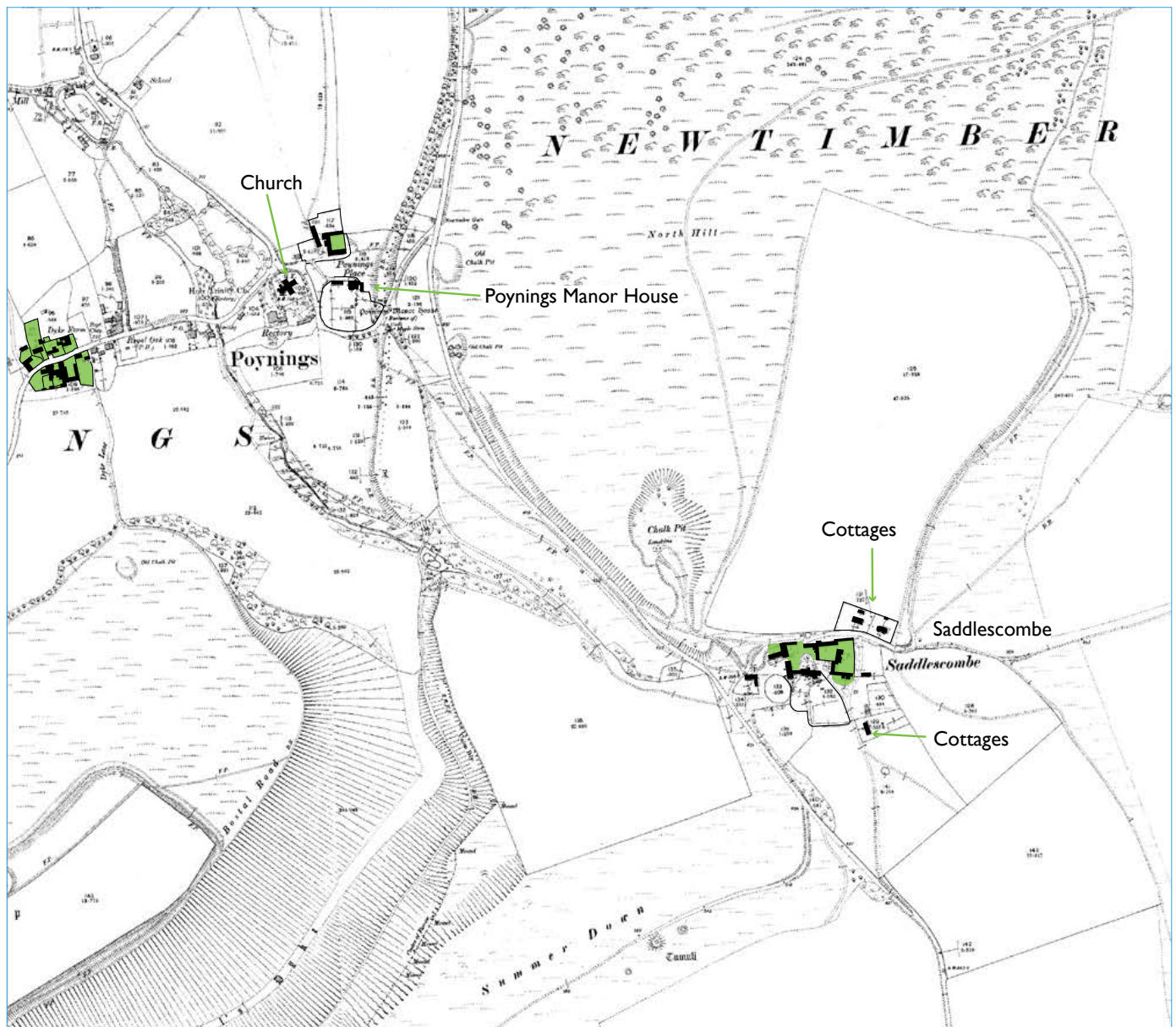
- As with much of south east England, loose courtyard plans, typically with two or three detached, working farm buildings standing around a yard are the most common plan form.
- There are few large regular courtyard plan farmsteads, even though considerable areas of the South Downs lay within large estates. U-plans are the most common regular plan type and there is a particular concentration in the area to the west of the Hampshire-Sussex county boundary but otherwise they do not form a major characteristic of the area.
- Some large farmsteads have ‘regular multi-yard plans’ where there are a number of separate yards grouped together reflecting the management of stock.
- Linear, parallel and L-plans with the farmhouse attached are extremely rare, reflecting the rarity by the late 19th century of small-scale farms in this area.

Building types

- Barns, typically of five or more bays, were often aisled with hipped roofs resulting in low eaves-lines, emphasising the mass of the roof over walling. The re-use of timbers from earlier buildings was commonplace, making the dating of some barns particularly difficult.
- Stables for working horses and, on larger farms, a separate stable for the riding horses are typical. In the Sussex part of the South Downs the use of oxen for ploughing continued into the late 19th and, occasionally, early 20th century and so stabling for oxen may also be found, although few examples have been identified to date.
- Granaries were provided on most farmsteads. These may be free-standing buildings, typically timber-framed and raised on staddle stones, or may be incorporated into another building such as a loft in a barn or above a cart shed.
- Buildings for cattle typically date from the 19th century and include open-fronted shelter sheds and cow houses arranged around yards and often connected to earlier barns.
- Cart sheds were a feature of the majority of farmsteads which would have required several wagons and other implements associated with arable cultivation.
- Pigsties were found on many farms, especially where dairying became a part of the farming enterprise in the 19th century. Many pigsties have been lost, therefore good surviving examples are becoming rare.

- Sheep were rarely provided with buildings in the farmstead as the yards and shelter sheds could be used for shearing or lambing.

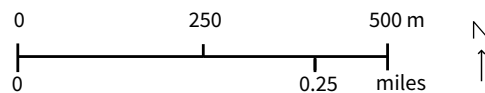
Pens and shelters for rams were occasionally provided and are now extremely rare.



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

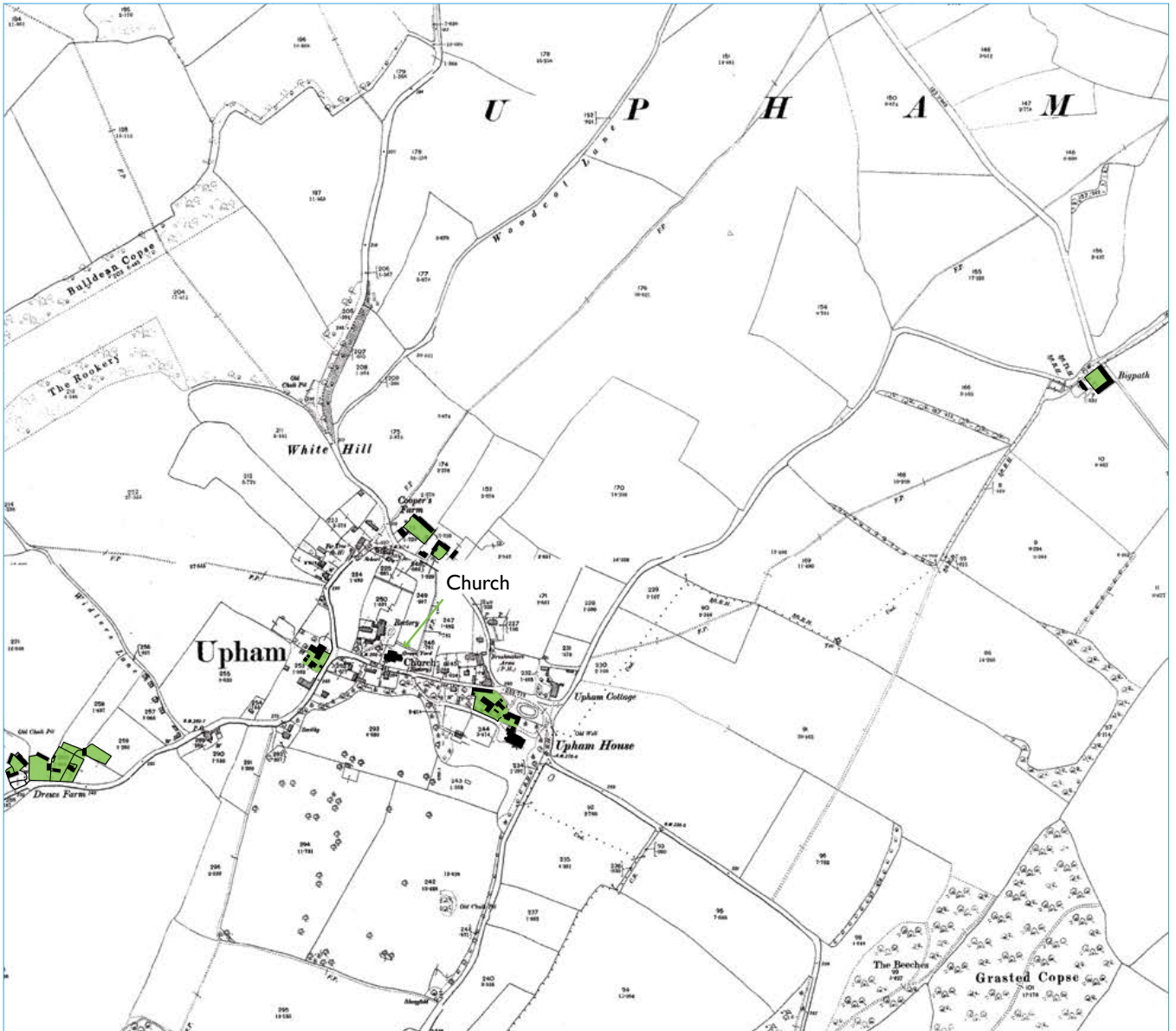


Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.



Saddlescombe

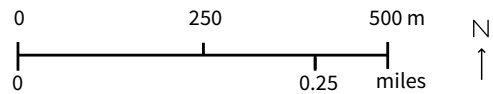
Saddlescombe is a large farmstead set above the scarp of the South Downs where sheep and corn farming was supplemented by an increase in dairying in the later 19th century. The farmstead contains three threshing barns, large stables and several ranges of shelter sheds, cow houses and a dairy. The documentary sources and earthworks around the farmstead show that Saddlescombe was a hamlet in the medieval period and even into the 19th century the farmstead was associated with a number of cottages for farm labourers. Surrounding the farmstead were fields of piecemeal enclosure that may have originated by the 13th century but which have been subject to some reorganisation, suggested by straight boundaries. The downland of North Hill was enclosed in the 20th century, possibly during World War II when there was great pressure to increase corn production. The village of Poynings set near the foot of the scarp contained a number of farmsteads which would have had access to the downs to the south and arable on the greensand to the north.



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.



Upham

Upham is a village on the dip slope of the western part of the South Downs. The village was surrounded by fields of piecemeal enclosure, the slightly curving boundaries probably reflecting the former strips of the open field systems. After enclosure of the open fields, several farms remained located within the village, but some farms did move out from the village to new sites within the newly enclosed fields. The farms that remained in villages were medium scale rather than the larger scale farmsteads usually associated with the South Downs. These farmsteads were typically of loose courtyard form, although some contained an L-shaped range, often a barn and an attached shelter shed.



The majority of the earliest farmsteads are located within villages where their buildings often make an important contribution to the character of the settlement, as here at Amberley in West Sussex. Photo © Bob Edwards



Loose courtyard plans with detached buildings set around a yard were the predominant farmstead type across the Character Area. Photo © Bob Edwards



A barn with a later shelter shed attached to form an L-plan is a common arrangement. Photo © Bob Edwards



A large regular multi-yard farmstead with at least five yard areas and three threshing barns. This is Saddlescombe, now in the ownership of the National Trust and shown as one of the maps in this statement. Photo © Historic England 27301/034



A large aisled threshing barn built in the 15th century on one of the Bishop of Winchester's estates, at Hensting in Hampshire. In the 17th century, a bay was added to provide stabling. Photo © Bob Edwards



A typical five-bay barn, aisled to the rear and built in flint cobble. Photo © Bob Edwards



In an area that was dominated by large, capital farms, many of the smaller farms were amalgamated into larger holdings and their buildings demolished, leaving the houses which became cottages. Surviving smaller barns such as this three-bay example are rare. Photo © Bob Edwards



A large stable reflecting the need for large teams of horses on the arable farms of the area. The small window and loft above for storage of fodder indicates that it was built in the 18th or early 19th century. Photo © Bob Edwards



A very large cart shed of nine bays. Examples such as this served large arable-based farms. The cart shed typically faces away from the farmyard and onto the street. Photo © Bob Edwards



A two-storey granary and cart shed built by one of the large estates. Photo © Bob Edwards



Pigsties were found on most farms. On farms that moved into dairying in the later 19th century, larger ranges of sties can be found. Pigsties are an increasingly rare building type. Photo © Bob Edwards



Sheep were rarely provided with specific buildings on farmsteads; these low shelter sheds with small yards were provided for rams. Photo © Bob Edwards



Large downland farms could be provided with a carpenter's workshop (with the large windows) and a smithy so that repairs to equipment could be made on site and a visiting farrier could shoe the horses. Photo © Bob Edwards



A surviving example of a donkey wheel for drawing water from a well. Photo © Bob Edwards



Where the chalk downs are cut by river valleys there is good pastureland for cattle which were sometimes provided with isolated cow houses such as this U-plan range. Photo © Bob Edwards

Materials and detail

- In the western part of the area, timber-framing was predominant for most buildings until the 17th century, and continued in use until the 19th century for some farm buildings.
- Flint and cobbles were used more widely in Sussex, including for farm buildings from the medieval period and more generally for farm buildings from the late 18th century.
- Flint combined with brick for quoins, dressings to windows and as banding within the flintwork is particularly characteristic of the 18th and 19th centuries across the whole of the area.
- Brick was often used for some farm buildings such as stables from the 18th century and was more widely used in the 19th century although it did not replace other local materials until the late 19th century.
- Straw thatch was the traditional roofing material but is now rare on farm buildings.
- Plain clay tiles, available from the nearby clay lowlands to the north of parts of the South Downs are a widespread and dominant characteristic.



The use of cobbles for walling is characteristic of the area. Photo © Bob Edwards



Flint walling, with flint galleting infilling the mortar joints, is rarely seen in other downland areas of southern England. © Photo © Bob Edwards



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Jeremy Lake with Bob Edwards.

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