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Official URL: http://www.ihbc.org.uk/context_archive/70/farmsteads/farmsteads.html

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/4049>

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Making the most of historic farmsteads

In the wake of the foot and mouth outbreak, the pace of change in the countryside is greater than ever. The Historic Farmsteads Research Project focuses on a valuable resource.

Historic farm buildings are by far the most numerous type of historic structure in the countryside. They are valued as a prominent part of the landscape in addition to informing present and future generations of the long history of farming and settlement in the English landscape. The physical evidence of farm buildings helps us understand how earlier generations responded to local conditions and materials, as well as the market place, in a way that written history never can, reflecting patterns of landownership and the social and economic development of regions. In their myriad forms and methods of construction, they survive as repositories of the crafts and skills associated with local building materials and techniques. They also graphically illustrate the way in which farming practices and technologies developed over time to meet changing circumstances including the effects of war and peace, surpluses and shortages, new markets and changing patterns of consumption.

In addition, as a fundamental and ubiquitous feature in the countryside, historic farm buildings provide an important contribution to the cherished local scene and to the sense of place of rural communities and visitors alike. As part of the fabric of our finest landscapes, these buildings provide a substantive, although difficult- to define, asset to the tourist industry which is now the mainstay of the rural economy. They also provide an invaluable resource for the future diversification of the farming industry and for wider rural development initiatives. Consequently, their future needs to be planned with care and on the basis of the best information available.

The pace of change in the countryside is accelerating at a rate that is unprecedented in modern times, and historic farm buildings are not immune from this process. The decline of traditional rural employment and small-scale farming and its replacement in many areas by larger capital-intensive enterprises, the problem of declining farm incomes and depopulation in upland areas (invariably those with the greatest number of designated landscape areas) and the effect of national and European policy are all important factors. Massive economic and social pressures are also being brought to bear on the countryside in the context of the

current and severe agricultural depression, now worsened even further through the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. A key feature of the government's response to the structural decline of the agricultural industry in the UK is to encourage and facilitate the diversification of agricultural incomes. In particular, the conversion and reuse of historic farm buildings has been identified as a significant opportunity for farmers to diversify their incomes.

The pressure for residential conversion remains high in accessible lowland areas. More objective analysis is needed to determine the effect of conversions on the architectural and archaeological integrity of listed farm buildings, an area of considerable disagreement and controversy.



The Rural White Paper provides further evidence that the historic farm building resource is likely to be subject to increased development pressures. To a large degree, the White Paper focuses on the conversion rather than the conservation of historic farm buildings through a range of direct and indirect measures. The government is aware that surplus farm buildings can provide accommodation for diversified businesses and is determined that the planning system should be sufficiently flexible to enable this to happen. The DETR has already revised PPG 7 and is in the process of revising PPG 13 to ensure that local authorities are able to take a more positive approach to farm diversification proposals. The government also intends to provide farmers with advice to make them aware of diversification opportunities, and help will be given with planning applications. Financial incentives to encourage the reuse of surplus farm buildings are also being increased with the expansion of the Redundant Farm Building Grant scheme and the introduction of a raft of diversification schemes.

The challenges so clearly posed to the historic farm buildings of the countryside present a particularly acute dilemma for local planning authorities (LPAs). On the one hand farmers and land managers cannot be expected to shoulder the burden of maintaining buildings which have little or no agricultural use. On the other, the largescale dereliction of buildings or, equally, the wholesale, poorly informed, or ill-conceived conversion of surplus buildings could irrevocably damage important and irreplaceable

historic assets, the quality of the wider landscape, and the appeal of the countryside for its inhabitants and its visitors.

If decisions on the management and protection of historic farm buildings are to be well founded, it is essential that the resource is accurately described and changes monitored. Only from this base of knowledge can the impact of modern farming practices and the pressures for development in the countryside be properly assessed. Such understanding is therefore an essential prerequisite to the continuing development of appropriate policies for the historic environment and the management of a sustainable countryside. One answer, which needs further thought over the coming months, is to inform a broad constituency of interests and other strategies for managing change in the countryside through the exchange of information and the publication of frameworks for better understanding the contribution which both the listed and unlisted resource makes to regional distinctiveness and our cultural heritage. Another is to analyse what has happened to the listed resource through systematic audit, thus providing government with much-needed indicators of change to the countryside, and review the effectiveness of the diverse policies, operating at local and national level, that determine the future of all historic farm buildings in the countryside.

Abandonment and dereliction is a major threat to many historic farm buildings, particularly in upland areas.



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Surprisingly little is known about the impact and effectiveness of the planning system on the management of the historic farm building resource. Indicators for the rural historic environment, moreover, are poorly developed, in contrast to the more comprehensive indicators for the natural environment where considerable effort has been directed towards the acquisition of baseline data on species and habitats. This deficiency is clearly evident in the principal set of national sustainability indicators, known as Quality of Life Counts, which were published by the DETR in 1999 and whose only reference to the historic built environment is English Heritage's Register of grade I and II* Buildings at Risk. It is also a deficiency addressed in *Power of Place* (English Heritage, 2000), which recommends the more

systematic auditing of the historic environment, the identification and development of sustainability targets and indicators for the historic built environment, and the measurement of its economic value.

As a consequence English Heritage and the Countryside Agency have decided that there is a need to understand more about the nature of both statutory development policy and non-statutory guidance at a national and local level. In particular, they would like to determine the extent to which these policies and guidance draw upon an assessment of the historic farm building resource at a local level. Also, to what extent do the policies and guidance encourage or discourage conversion and reuse and to what extent do they take account of the variety of farm building types? To find some of the answers, English Heritage and the Countryside Agency have formed a partnership to undertake an audit and evaluation of English farmsteads. The Countryside and Community Research Unit (CCRU) of Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education is conducting the research on their behalf over an 11-month period between March 2001 and January 2002.

The Historic Farmsteads project is divided into two parts:

Part 1: Quantifying the listed resource and identifying trends

Very little information has been collected which can be used to characterise the historic farm building resource at a national level. However, the Listed Building System computer database compiled by English Heritage contains information on over 77,000 agriculture and subsistence building entries. As a first step towards understanding more about the resource, Dr Peter Gaskell and a team of researchers from the CCRU will investigate what has happened to a sample of listed farm building over the last 20 years. To obtain a national and regional picture of the development pressures on listed farm buildings, a number of LPAs will be asked to check their records to identify which of the sample buildings have been subject to planning or listed building consent applications. The results of the survey will provide baseline data on the character, management and changes taking place to listed farm buildings. This will provide robust data to inform the decision making of English Heritage, the Countryside Agency and other policy makers with an interest in the rural environment.

Part 2: Understanding the issues and identifying .best practice

This part of the research will identify and describe the factors that precipitate change in the historic farm building resource. It will provide an opportunity for conservation officers to share their

views and experiences. A postal questionnaire survey of conservation officers and their planning authorities will be used to obtain a comprehensive picture of the management of the historic farm building resource at the local level. This will be complemented by a desk study of development plans and written guidance, and followed by a telephone survey of a sample of conservation officers which will explore in more detail the key issues which have been raised. Ultimately the research will identify and highlight examples of best practice drawn from LPAs across the nation.

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CONTEXT 70 : JUNE 2001