



# Historic farmsteads on the North Northumberland Coastal Plain

A typical large-scale planned farmstead set in the large-scale enclosures with hawthorn hedgerows and plantations and the sea forming the backdrop (not the case study). © Peter Gaskell/CCRI

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## 1 Introduction

From its inception over 30 years ago Agri-Environment Scheme (AES) policy has consistently recognised the importance of protecting and managing the historic environment, including traditional farm buildings, to secure a range of public goods for society. In 2021 Natural England commissioned research to review the uptake and values of AES options designed to support the maintenance of traditional farm buildings. This case study is one of a suite designed to illustrate the range of public benefits provided by this investment. Actual site locations are anonymised but are described with reference to the National Character Areas (NCA) in which they are located. Understanding the success and value of such funding is crucial in supporting future conservation decision making, especially for AES development.

The farmsteads sited in the **North Northumberland Coastal Plain** NCA, and the **Northumberland Sandstone Hills** NCA, include some of the largest courtyard-plan farmsteads in England. These are often distinguished by the housing of farm workers ('hinds') in terrace rows and by the 1820s the use of threshing and fodder-processing machines powered by horses, steam, water and wind. This is a designed landscape of large-scale regular enclosures with some earlier sinuous boundaries, plantations and straight routeways, intermixed with the earthworks of medieval villages and earlier cultivation and prehistoric settlement concentrated on areas that survived as common land.

## 2 Farmstead character

Two farmsteads are included in this Countryside Stewardship agreement using the traditional farm building maintenance option (HS1), and both survive as extant traditional farmstead groups dating from around 1860; the farmhouses and some buildings are listed at grade II, the houses facing south into their own gardens and each group having also a row of hinds' cottages. The largest one of these sites comprises a regular multi-yard plan, typical of the large mechanised farmsteads of this area, and includes a U-shaped yard with a barn, granary and housing for cattle, and additional detached ranges – pigsties, stables and a long cart and implement shed range with a smithy. The scale and range of building types illustrates the range of functions needed for large arable farms in this area, and the need to house beef and later dairy cattle. The dovecote is an ornamental device used by estates across this area. At the core of the farmstead was the threshing barn and also a straw barn for the receipt of the large quantities of straw from the sheaves of corn which were fed into the threshing machine. The survival of an in-situ threshing machine, which was powered by a water wheel, is a remarkable and exceptionally rare survival, enhanced by 19th and early 20th century graffiti. In addition, the stables have retained their stalls.

Another farmstead in this agreement is a more compact arrangement, also with a dovecote sited over the main entrance to the farm buildings which are set around a courtyard and are listed at grade II. A chimneystack indicates that the threshing and fodder-processing machinery was steam powered, and – again – the survival of stalls, fixtures and an in-situ threshing machine is a remarkable and exceptionally rare survival.





A view into one of the farmyards, showing the fine detail to the masonry and the tall dovecot which was used as a symbol of high status on farmsteads in this area.

© Peter Gaskell/CCRI



Stables and wide-span building for fattening cattle, typical of this area. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI

### 3 Public benefits

These large-scale farmsteads with early evidence for mechanisation have considerable historic value in illustrating the wholesale remodelling of farmed landscapes by large estates from around the 1780s, part of a pattern that extends into the Lothians and other parts of Scotland and complementing also the evidence for local industries including coastal fishing which is such a distinctive part of this area. Retaining the integrity of such farmsteads in the landscape, and features of exceptional rarity such as threshing machines, is key to interpreting the story of agriculture in this landscape and how it has shaped habitats and complements the rich heritage of its coastal and other industries.

The sites are accessible and hold prominent positions in the landscape. Both sites are within 100 metres of roads and adjacent to other publicly accessible land.

Barn owl boxes have been erected in the buildings at both farmsteads and although it is early days one of the boxes is already occupied. The agreement holder received advice from a local bird group about the siting of the boxes. The bird group surveys the buildings each spring. The agreement holder explained the value of the buildings for wildlife:

*“Yes, bats and birds and barn owls, they are all regular users. That’s one of the advantages of quite a lot of our buildings being disused (...). There are definitely bats and owls and swallows and martins and there probably is other stuff as well.”*

The agreement holder has a deep understanding of the features and history of the farmsteads and how they have developed over the centuries:

*“This farm has been in the records for a very long time. It was mentioned by Edward III in 1215. There has never been a lot of money around and they just added buildings over the centuries. There is a big variation in quality and use. Whereas at [the other site] it was very different. It was sold in about 1860, and they flattened it and started again from scratch, so it’s like a model steading. They have both got threshing machines in them. This [site] was powered by water, there is a disused lake out the back (...). [The other site] has an engine house and chimney for steam powered threshing (...). They both have a lot of features in place, remarkable really.”*

As set out in one of the headline **Statements of Environmental Opportunity** for the conservation and enhancement of this NCA, the continued maintenance of the farmsteads and their presence in the landscape helps to:

Improve public enjoyment and understanding of this wild coastal landscape, enabling people to experience the peace and beauty of the area and learn more about its coastal processes and biological, geological and heritage assets. (SEO 1)





The threshing machine is still in-situ, an exceptionally rare survival. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI

## 4 Participating in the scheme

Both of the farmsteads are still used for farming, although only 40 per cent of the floor area is actively used, mainly for housing cattle in the winter. The agreement holder has many years' experience of working with agri-environment schemes, but Countryside Stewardship is the first scheme that has included the traditional farm building maintenance option. The maintenance payments are helpful, but the agreement holder thinks the farmsteads would benefit from a restoration capital grant as many of the buildings had suffered badly in the recent storms that devastated the North East.

The farm has a good roofer and joiner who has been working on the buildings on and off for the past couple of years. The main activities are replacing slates and gutters with some door replacement as well. There was significant damage to the roofs in the autumn storms, which will require a lot of work.

The agreement holder thought that the maintenance option was good value for money for the taxpayer:

*"For the taxpayer, that's a good question, is it a public good? (...). Yes, in my opinion yes, I like old buildings."*

However, the agreement holder fears that the payments for maintenance are too low and that and the maintenance rules for farm buildings can be over specified. They are working buildings rather than domestic houses. Over specification can double the costs.



Nesting boxes for poultry. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI



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