



Community engagement in the Mid Severn Sandstone Plateau

A typical courtyard farmstead resulting from piecemeal development (not the case study). © Historic England 2900/03

NATURAL
ENGLAND

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.

This farmstead is set within the **Mid Severn Sandstone Plateau** NCA in an area where most courtyard farmsteads either developed in a piecemeal fashion after the enclosure of medieval open fields set around villages or were built in designed landscapes as large-scale courtyard farmsteads for large farms and estates in the late 18th and 19th centuries.



The exterior of the barn range, showing the brick infill to the exposed timber frame. Part adapted as an education centre for school children.
© Peter Gaskell/CCRI

2 Farmstead character

This Countryside Stewardship agreement has a single site with buildings covered by the HS1 option. The farmstead had developed in a piecemeal fashion around all sides of a courtyard, to one side of which is a large 18th century farmhouse (listed grade II) which has retained a smokeroom and granary. Part of the courtyard was destroyed by fire in the 1960s but over 50 per cent of the traditional buildings remain. The threshing barn range is notable as a survival of an earlier timber-framed barn. It shows that a farmstead has been here since at least the early-18th century, and with its later attached granary and stables illustrates the growing importance of arable farming in the area. The threshing barn also retains the flywheel and drive shaft from a mobile steam engine. This farmstead illustrates how it was common in the area to continue building barns in timber frame whilst houses were built in fashionable brick, and also for the daubed or open wattle infill in the timber frames to be replaced by brick.

3 Public benefits

Despite partial destruction by fire, this group retains more than 50 per cent of its historic form. The threshing barn range also contributes to local distinctiveness through the way that it complements the later brick farmhouse, in its use of timber frame with brick infill and in its high visibility within the landscape. Two footpaths meet in the farmyard and the buildings can be viewed in their landscape setting from the public road which passes within 500 metres.

There has been a high level of public engagement and access on the farm for over 20 years. This includes educational access, permissive access, school visits, open days for the public and the press. Part of the threshing barn range has been converted into an educational space, with a kitchen, toilets and washing facilities. The agreement holder is passionate about informing school children and the general public about the farmstead, farming, and environmental management:

“Some of the children can’t believe how old the buildings are and that we used to have horses on the farm before the tractors. We talk to them about the working horses and that opens up a whole new world for the kids. They go back to school and tell the teacher all about it.”

Barn owls, kestrels, and bats are currently breeding on the farm, but not in the buildings. A variety of small birds, particularly dunnocks and sparrows, regularly use the old buildings in the winter. A bat survey was undertaken when adapting part of the threshing barn range for educational use.

The agreement holder is very proud of the traditional buildings and that they are protected for the next generation to enjoy:

“When my grandfather came a hundred years ago I imagined the buildings would look pretty swish. It would have been busy the buildings would have been housing horses and not tractors. It’s been nice to put something back.”

In this respect, the agreement delivers one of the **Statements of Environmental Opportunities** (SEO 4) for conserving and enhancing the natural and historic environment of this NCA, specifically in encouraging visitors and interpreting the role that habitats, artefacts and historic buildings have had in the development of the landscape over time.



The interior of the threshing barn range, showing the flywheel and drive shaft from a mobile steam engine which powered threshing and fodder-processing machinery inside the barn. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI

4 Participating in the scheme

The agreement holder has over 40 years' experience of agri-environment schemes and the threshing barn range benefitted from an Environmental Stewardship traditional farm building restoration capital grant to stabilise and reroof the structure. The agreement holder learned a lot about the history and construction of the traditional buildings during the restoration project which now helps him with the maintenance regime:

"We wanted to (...) have buildings that were part of our history if you like. And it was (...) the project officer who showed us where we could potentially be. We learnt a lot about the building, the structure of the building, and about how it had evolved, where the timber had come from, the fact it had been used previously on ships."

The threshing barn range was restored to a very high standard using traditional materials so current maintenance is quite light touch, such as keeping the gutters clear:

"We check the gutters, the drains, the roof caps, the pointing. We've done some work on the pointing, it's traditional lime mortar and the sand washes out, so we've had a local craftsman doing some repointing during lockdown. We have a problem with the little birds sharpening their beaks. We also have some problems with bees living in the bricks because the bricks are hundreds of years old. We've done some joinery as well, we've had to rehang a door and had to replace the stable door completely because it was hanging off, it was built on site using traditional methods and that'll be safe for another hundred years."

The building maintenance plan and log and the building wildlife assessment forms, which were required as part of the HS1 option, helped the agreement holder manage the buildings and the option provided good value for money, both for himself and the taxpayer:

"As long as people are investing the money on keeping the buildings looking good. I think it's important, I think it's great value. You have to bear in mind we have a footpath that walks right through the middle of the yard. So we have people from all over literally walking right past that building on a regular basis and they would notice."

Being part of Countryside Stewardship and using the maintenance option has helped the agreement holder think through his approach to environment management:

"It's kind of formalised the way we think about the countryside... I think more so now, particularly with people's mental health. How important it is for people to be in the countryside and out of their own home. I think it's formalised it a bit more in our heads."



Timber framing with carpenters' joint marks © Peter Gaskell/CCRI



NATURAL
ENGLAND

This publication has been prepared by Peter Gaskell
and Jeremy Lake
Publication date: July 2023 © Natural England
Design: Natural England and Chantal Freeman, Diva Arts