



# Village-based farmsteads in the Leicestershire Vales

A typical farmstead built of brick and including a 17th century timber-framed barn set around a courtyard on the edge of a village and close to medieval ridge and furrow (not the case study).

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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 farmstead is sited in the **Leicestershire Vales** NCA, in the heartland of 'village England' where from the medieval period village-based farms worked large open fields around them. Some farms remained in villages, but relatively few as here survive.

## 2 Farmstead character

This Countryside Stewardship agreement uses the traditional farm building maintenance option (HS1) to maintain buildings at two sites; a central farmstead located in the village and an outlying field barn. The buildings are typical examples of brick and slate structures of the type built in the early to mid-19th century, probably soon after the grade II listed house had been built in around 1800, they are thus remarkable as survivals of village-based farm buildings still in agricultural use. There is also a small single-storey field barn for housing cattle, built to serve some of the fields at a distance from the farmstead, noted as a distinctive type of building in the Farmstead and Landscape Statement, which were built in relationship to 'village-based farms in landscapes of piecemeal enclosure'.



The mid-19th century stables. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI

### 3 Public benefits

A working farm within a village is an increasingly rare sight. Most farmsteads still in farming use – typically large and more formally-planned courtyard groups – are sited away from villages to manage farmland that was enclosed either gradually or as part of a planned phase including by parliamentary act. It follows that although 69 per cent of farmsteads recorded from late 19th-century maps in part of this area retain more than half of their historic form, there has been a high rate of loss for the last 200 years in villages.

The farm family has a personal connection to the buildings which has been a motivation to protect and maintain them:

*“We like the old buildings they’re part of the farm, we want to keep them for posterity (...). We’ve had enquiries from people who want to convert them, we don’t want to (...). They are part of the history of the farm (...). When they are gone they are gone (...). Many are not really usable, but they are beautiful and we should keep them.”*

The farmstead is highly visible. The Leicestershire Round long-distance footpath passes within 100 metres of the farmstead, which can be seen from two roads and houses in the village. The field barn can also be seen from nearby paths.

Swallows and martins regularly nest in the buildings and the agreement holder makes sure that they always have access.

In this respect, the agreement helps to deliver the recommendations for conservation and enhancement of the natural and historic environment set out in the **Statements of Environmental Opportunity** (SEO) for this NCA - particularly SEO 1 to:

Protect and appropriately manage the strong historic character and heritage assets within the rural and urban landscapes maintaining the evidence of past land use and connections between agriculture, settlement pattern and topography, and the significant places and events that took place within the area so that the area can be enjoyed by all.



The field barn. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI

## 4 Participating in the scheme

The agreement holder joined the Countryside Stewardship scheme because it supports the way in which the farm is managed along traditional principles. The buildings are maintained because it is the right way to farm and the agreement holder does not like to see buildings falling down and being neglected. The agreement holder was brought up to look after the farm, whether it be laying the hedges in the traditional manner or keeping the buildings in good condition. HRH Prince Charles once stopped when he was passing to congratulate him on the state of his farm.

*"We love it here, I was born here, it's our history. This farm is in our blood. I try and farm it how it should be, our main priority is the cattle and sheep, our animals, and keeping it. This is our history, why rip it all out, why?"*

The payments provided by the HS1 option have helped to maintain the buildings, but maintenance can be a challenge for the remote building:

*"They used to milk cows across the road by hand in that building [field barn]. But it's the vandals, you can't put anything in it because of the vandals, so we have had to seal it up. They frequently take slate off the roof. We sealed it up, so it doesn't get wrecked, and it is there for posterity."*

The agreement holder has spent a lot of money maintaining the buildings and appreciates the financial help. He does not want to see the field barns disappear from the countryside because there are very few of them left in the area.

Maintenance is viewed as good farming practice, and the agreement holder checks the buildings after every storm and replaces slates and cleans gutters as he has always done. He has also replaced some of the doors to the buildings with traditional materials because they needed replacing.

All the fixtures and fittings in the oldest buildings have been retained as it's all part of the farm's history.

The agreement holder is concerned about the future of traditional farming in and around the villages:

*"In the village all the buildings have been converted, \_\_\_\_ farm has gone, so has \_\_\_\_, all their buildings have gone, it's all gone. We are the last man standing in the middle, I'm the only farmer going. I'm the last of the Mohicans."*



Dairy with Lister water milk cooler. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI



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