Conserving heritage and wildlife, and enabling public enjoyment of landscape, in England's National Parks

Field barns and outfarms make a critical contribution to the character of upland landscapes in northern England, and as here (note the stepped lynchets for former arable cultivation) can relate to medieval and earlier earthworks which illustrate the story of farming from the prehistoric period. © 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.

This farmstead is set within the **Yorkshire Dales** NCA in the Pennine uplands. There are over 4,500 field barns and outfarms in the Yorkshire Dales National Park (YDNP), a greater concentration than anywhere else in the British Isles, although only around 60 per cent of those present in around 1900 survive. The field barns and their walled landscapes with routeways leading to summer grazing on moorland are an integral part of the pastoral landscape and economy that has developed in the dales since the medieval period, and they are explicitly recognised in the **National Park Management Plan** as an element of the YDNP's 'special qualities'.

2 Farmstead character

This Countryside Stewardship agreement uses the traditional farm building maintenance option (HS1) to maintain buildings at 12 sites consisting of 11 field barns and one farmstead. Field barns mostly date from the late-18th to mid-19th centuries, and are so numerous because they served as places for milking and housing cattle in scattered holdings over the winter months. This avoided the need to bring the cattle back to farmsteads for these purposes. The farmsteads are mostly small-scale linear plans with the houses and working buildings attached in-line. Some field barns also served as hogg houses for housing yearling sheep over the winter, a type of building found in the upper dales here and also in the Lake District and North Pennines. The field barns also relate to the earthworks of medieval lynchets and other field systems and settlements dating from the prehistoric period which have been preserved because of this long history of pastoral use, and which in turn relate to floristically-rich former hay meadows.

These field barns are sited in a lower dale, where farms specialised in making butter and cheese for export and local consumption by families working in local industries. They are built of locally-quarried stone and slate. Farmsteads Mapping has shown how this area has a higher proportion of farmhouses with 17th century origins which are sited in villages and hamlets or on the edges of in-bye land. The mapping of traditional farmsteads and field barns in the National Park has shown that this area has one of the highest concentrations of field barns, and 68 per cent are still in agricultural use.

A field barn for housing cattle, now used as a sheep shelter. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI

A hogg house for yearling sheep. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI

3 Public benefits

The agri-environment schemes are vital for the conservation of field barn landscapes which, as elsewhere in the Yorkshire Dales, make a critical contribution to sense of place and the 'offer' which draws so many visitors from Britain and abroad into this landscape. They are visually prominent from and close to public footpaths and other publicly accessible land. Many provide habitats for barn owls, a variety of other bird species and bats, and also contribute to the earthwork and built traces of land use, settlement and industry which as in other upland landscapes extend into the prehistoric period and are remarkable for their visual prominence and variety in an international context. The agreement holder noted that the numbers of barn owls seemed to have increased:

> *"There is a barn just there [points to map] we drove up the road one night and there was three hopping about near the moor. Then a few days later we ran some sheep into this barn and there was two in there. We have a barn owl box in that barn but they weren't in the box they were up on the baux (...). It's difficult to talk about bats, they are about, and you see them out of the corner of your eye at night. But whether or not they are in the buildings I'm not so sure."*

The agreement holder described the farmstead as being steeped in history and explained the importance of the Iron Age sites on the farm and the terraces (strip lynchets). Although the farm is now isolated from the main road the family said that it was once on an ancient routeway.

In some ways the condition of the farm buildings reflected the way in which the farm was being managed. Although the field barns were not in daily use the agreement holder felt they provided broader benefits to the local community and visitors:

> *"We have quite a tidy farm and I suppose it's nice to have them looking sound and roofs on (...). They are nice to see (...). It seems a shame to let them go once they're there."*

The agreement helps to deliver the recommendations for conservation and improvement of the natural and historic environment in this National Park, as also set out in the **Statements of Environmental Opportunity** (SEO), particularly SEO 1, which mentions the contribution of field barns to sense of place for this NCA.

A barn owl box in an isolated field barn. © Peter Gaskell/CCRIa

4 Participating in the scheme

The family had been involved with agri-environment schemes for many years dating back to the 1980s. The farm had used capital grants as part of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas scheme and the Environmental Stewardship scheme to restore a number of field barns which were now in excellent condition and had been entered into the Countryside Stewardship scheme.

According to the agreement holder, regularly checking the condition of the buildings was just part of good farming but that the building maintenance plan and log was needed for those farmers who need a reminder:

> *"When you live here all the time, you automatically do it (check the buildings) without thinking (...). Once a year we have a walk round."*

The agreement holder noted that maintenance is no longer a simple matter of 'putting a couple of slates back, due to issues with getting skilled labour:

> *"In the old days you would do the work yourself, but we always get someone in now, just for health and safety, you need a loadall and an extendable boom to get onto the roof, and builders are qualified to do it."*

The agreement holder also said that whilst all the barns that were in good condition had been put into the scheme there were three others that were in poor repair which they would like to put in the scheme. They had applied to the YDNP for a Countryside Stewardship pilot restoration grant. They are very interested in restoring the barns where they need major work.

The agreement holder felt that the mid-tier scheme was very complicated, and they had to get an agent to fill in the forms. He also stressed that the dry stone walls were just as important to the landscape as the field barns and there should be grants for helping to maintain the dry stone walls as well.

Barn and wall landscape. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI

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