



Historic character in the Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands

One of the planned courtyard Victorian farmsteads on the Duke of Bedford estate, a chimneystack marking the position of a steam-powered threshing machine and set in a landscape of large fields suited here to steam ploughing (not the case study). © Mike Williams/Historic England

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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 in the **Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands National Character Area** (NCA). This is an area of contrasts. There are village-based farmsteads which worked fields enclosed from medieval open fields. There are 17th century and earlier aisled barns and other buildings including some set in earlier enclosed landscapes and next to the earthworks of medieval settlements and there are some large-scale estate farmsteads of the 1840s-1870s set in estate landscapes with thorn hedgerows bounding large regular fields. These estate landscapes and farmstead types extend into the Bedfordshire Greensand Ridge.

2 Farmstead character

This large E-plan farmstead is typical of the estate farms found in this area which date from the Victorian High Farming period. The farmhouse is listed at grade II, and there are four building ranges, the largest of which is the E-plan comprising cattle yards facing south and attached to a barn with attached granaries and cart sheds. This is a type of plan which is most commonly found in the Eastern Arable part of England and Chalk and Limestone Mixed areas extending from the East Midlands into Scotland. The use of brick and Welsh slate was typical of the estate farms of this period in this area, and the style of the whole group complements that of the estate workers' cottages of this period.



Part of an E plan multi-functional range with cart sheds, granaries and a large central threshing barn. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI



Internal fixtures and fittings in the cow housing. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI

3 Public benefits

This is a virtually intact large planned farmstead from the 'high farming' period that is still used as part of a working farm. The cow houses, stables and other buildings retain their internal fixtures and fittings. The whole group has historical significance for illustrating the way in which these large-scale and industrial farmsteads were planned to save on the labour that was needed, process harvested crops with steam power, produce meat for growing urban markets and the large quantities of manure that were essential to maintain and enhance fertility of the soil. These farmsteads are an integral part of the 'open, arable landscape of planned and regular fields' on the estate lands of this NCA and the agreement helps to deliver one of the **Statements of Environmental Opportunities** (SEO 4) for conserving and enhancing the natural and historic environment of the NCA.

The farmstead is accessible with a public road passing within 100 metres on two sides of the farmstead. The farmstead holds a prominent position in the landscape and can be viewed at a distance from a public footpath. The agreement holder enjoys providing informal access to the buildings:

"We walked them round and they were blown away by it all, we were three or four hours walking round, it was lovely. It was not just the buildings it was the tractors and everything (...). We've had three or four families walking round from the village."

The wildlife potential of the buildings is being realised with owls nesting in the east range and smaller birds nest in many of the buildings.



Stable block and tack room with horse harnesses and collars in situ. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI



Farm forge with implements still hanging from the walls. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI

4 Participating in the scheme

The agreement holder, having had a positive experience of the Entry Level Scheme in Environmental Stewardship, decided to use the traditional farm building maintenance option (HS1) to maintain the buildings. The buildings on the farmstead have been in the family for over a hundred years and the agreement holder hopes they will be in the family for another hundred years.

The agreement holder achieves a lot of satisfaction from seeing people appreciate buildings. He recognises that the buildings are visually very impressive, being part of an extensive estate which invested a lot of money in developing the farmsteads in the 19th century.

The agreement holder's father told him how the buildings were constructed and where the claypits were on the farm that were used to make the bricks:

"I've known about it since I was probably 10 or 12 years old. That sort of thing interests me. About the actual farm buildings, what they were used for, I suppose I've known since a young age."

Although the traditional farm buildings are part of a working farmstead the agreement holder estimates less than 10 per cent of the floor space is used on a daily basis and pays for its upkeep. The maintenance option payments have enabled the buildings to be maintained to a higher standard:

"I'd be investing the time but certainly not the money into it if it wasn't for the scheme now. I wouldn't be doing it to the same scale or the same standard."

As part of the option the agreement holder has undertaken some major work on the buildings as well as regular maintenance. The work has involved re-roofing on the middle part of the E plan range, new gutters to some of the buildings, and replacing some rotten doors. Advice on how to maintain the buildings was sought from the specialist contractors who did the work.

The agreement holder used the farm building maintenance plan and log for organising maintenance work but thought it would be more efficient if it could be accessed and updated online:

"Have it online, so you just login every now and again when you do it, and it's as easy as snapping a photo and uploading it so it's all on the cloud. Then you can see that they can see it. I think that would be a lot more useful and up-to-date than perhaps the booklet. And there is a photo record as you go, isn't there?"

The agreement holder would be interested in entering his buildings into a successor scheme.



Roof repairs. © Peter Gaskell/CCRI



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