



Conserving farming heritage in the Suffolk Coast and Heaths

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The view of the farmstead looking towards the sea. © Jeremy Lake/CCRI

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 illustrated here shows how farms in the **Suffolk Coast and Heaths** NCA benefitted from access to coastal marshes for grazing and fields, which from the medieval period were farmed from villages and isolated high-status farmsteads. Aerial survey has also revealed the cropmarks of routeways and farms with their enclosures dating from the Bronze Age.

2 Farmstead character

This Countryside Stewardship agreement uses the traditional farm building maintenance option (HS1) to maintain buildings on four sites. The farmstead illustrated here is substantially complete, and was rebuilt and extended into its present form between the 1840s and 1880s. It sits alongside a medieval or earlier routeway extending towards the estuary and a quay which was used to export farm produce and import night soil for fertilising the fields, coal and other goods from London and elsewhere.

It is a very large farmstead, its 18th century and earlier timber-framed barns, stables and cattle housing being built and rebuilt in a regular fashion around three separate farmyards. Its scale illustrates how larger farms had emerged in parts of this area in tandem with the drainage of marshland and the reorganisation of farmland over the later 18th and 19th centuries. A fine stable range retaining its harness room, and a building for housing steam engines, used for steam ploughing and threshing corn harvested from other farms in the district, were added to the group later in the 1880s; another building was later converted into a carpenters' shop. There is also a small apple store which took the produce from a small orchard. The whole farmstead displays a variety of forms, from large barns and granaries to low shelter sheds for cattle, which is typical of the largest of the farms that developed with access to grazing marshes as well as mixed farmland.

The range of materials is typical of this area but unusual for its presence on one site – timber frame clad in weatherboard which continued in use into the 19th century, different varieties and bondings for brick which had been used in this area from the 15th century but was seldom used for farm buildings until the 18th century, and for the roofs clay pantiles and Welsh slate imported by sea. These materials are found on the other sites on this agreement, one being an early example of the use of brick.



One of the farmyards with its 18th century threshing barn and later housing for cattle. © Jeremy Lake/CCRI

3 Public benefits

Besides the prominence and contribution to such a distinctive landscape close to the estuary, and its strong sense of place, it is very unusual to find such a complete traditional farmstead in this area. This significance is enhanced by the farmstead having such a wide variety of buildings that illustrate how arable farming developed and became more industrial in this character area in the Victorian High Farming era, and indeed in this part of England's Eastern Arable Agricultural Landscape Type.

The farmstead is part of a rich history of farming that extends into prehistoric period and is legible in the surrounding landscape, this time-depth being core to its sense of place and to increasing and enhancing the 'rich assemblage of historic landscapes' as stated in the **Statements of Environmental Opportunity** for conservation and enhancement of the natural and historic environment in this NCA. Traditional farm buildings on three other sites are also included in this agreement. These include a fine early 18th century barn and listed farmhouses, all of which are visible from public footpaths and minor roads. The owners of the farmsteads have been farming here since the 19th century, and are much involved in the local community, and so the farmsteads are important for the family as well as a source of pride.



This fine early 18th century barn, an early example of a brick-built barn close to later farm buildings and a 16th – 17th century high status house, remains in use as a grain store. © Jeremy Lake/CCRI



Maintenance underway on early-mid 19th century buildings at the site with the 18th century brick barn. © Jeremy Lake/CCRI

4 Participating in the scheme

Participation in the Countryside Stewardship scheme has assisted with the maintenance of the traditional group of buildings on the large farmstead illustrated here, and also the barn and other buildings on one of the other sites.

Whilst the option payments play an important role in continuing to maintain these buildings, the owners are conscious of how the pace of change in modern agriculture may require rethinking of the future use for the two of the sites which are less complete as historic groups.



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