

Project Proposal

HER21: Historic Farms and Fields of Buckinghamshire

Aims: To improve understanding of the distribution, character and condition of farm buildings and farming landscapes across Buckinghamshire, the recording of those assets within the County HER and awareness of their conservation priorities.

Objectives:

1. To map within the HER the character and survival of historic (i.e. 19th century or earlier) farms using the English Heritage Historic Farmsteads methodology.
2. To enhance the HER with information from the Chiltern Historic Building Group (Barns Survey), AVDC listed building condition survey and other sources.
3. Work with volunteers to explore the potential of record office research to define the extent of landholdings historically associated with selected farms.
4. Work with volunteers to undertake site visits to selected farms to ground-test the results of the characterisation survey.
5. To review and summarise the published literature on pre-modern farming practices in Buckinghamshire to identify distinctive historic trends, practices, landscapes and structures which can inform the significance of heritage assets.
6. To analyse farming landscapes through the relationship between farms and fields comparing farm characterisation data with Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) and historical documents to better understand a farm's historic significance, setting and context.

Business case: The modern county of Buckinghamshire is a relatively small administrative county (1500 km²) which nonetheless straddles three contrasting types of rural landscape. In the north (broadly Aylesbury Vale District and the northern extremities of Wycombe District) there is a planned clayland landscape of parliamentary and earlier post-medieval fields with nucleated villages with farms historically located either in the villages or dotted in isolation across the landscape. The north is traditional cattle-rearing country, although extensive ridge and furrow demonstrates the former importance of arable cultivation. Despite modern development pressures, large tracts of the north are still quite remote and rural by the standards of the South East of England. Across the centre of the county is the Chiltern AONB, an area of protected landscape with ancient field systems, commons and woodlands and a more dispersed settlement pattern. South of the Chiltern AONB the landscape of the Thames Valley has been so greatly affected by twentieth century development and related land use changes that agriculture is now for most part a marginal activity. Historically food production for the London market was an important economic driver across Buckinghamshire, but with different and changing emphases.

The Buckinghamshire County Archaeological Service has successfully undertaken historic landscape characterisation projects for the county, the Chiltern AONB and the Colne Valley Regional Park. It is also conducting an extensive urban survey and contributing to the Solent-Thames Research Framework Project. The Buckinghamshire HER has a track record of investment in public engagement, most notably through the HLF-sponsored 'Unlocking Buckinghamshire's Past' website and engagement in the Heritage Gateway project. 'Historic Farms and Fields of Buckinghamshire' would both utilise the expertise of the in-house team and also draw upon a wealth of wider expert contacts and partnerships built up over the past decade.

The particular business case for 'Historic Farms and Fields of Buckinghamshire' is therefore:

- The county straddles three distinct geographical zones with different historic and present day trajectories allowing cross-comparison
- The project will build upon existing characterisation projects which are integrated into the county HER and regularly used to inform land management, planning and conservation
- The County Archaeological Service has a proven track record of delivering comparable projects working closely with a wide range of partners.
- The project has the support of partners through the Buckinghamshire Historic Environment Forum and Chiltern Historic Environment Group.

Method statement: The project would largely follow existing methodologies for farm characterisation developed by English Heritage and implemented by BCAS in the Colne Valley Regional Park (Beckley, 2007) but the work would be fully integrated into the HER from the outset, not undertaken separately and deposited as a 'stand-alone' dataset at the end.

Stages, Products and Tasks: to be completed

Project scope: The project will consider all documented farms with pre-20th century origins within the study area. A sub-set will be selected for documentary study and site visit.

At present there are just over a thousand farm buildings recorded in the HER, the majority of which will be listed. The number of 19th century farms in Buckinghamshire is not known but could range from one to three thousand - further assessment would be necessary.

Interfaces: Aylesbury Vale Buildings at Risk Survey
Chiltern Barns Survey

Proposed Project Team: to be completed

Estimated overall budget: must be <£40,000.

Project officer for 8-9 months

Expenses

Report

Project management

Consultancy? (historic farming/farm buildings specialist)

Estimated overall timescale: report must be submitted by 1st February 2011