Final version

Historic Farm Buildings Group One Day Conference

Rural Regeneration: A Sustainable Future for Farm Buildings

(Sponsored by English Heritage, the Countryside Agency and the University of Gloucestershire)

Finding a Future for Historic Farm Buildings

Sir Neil Cossons, Chairman, English Heritage

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure to be invited to speak at this important conference, because English Heritage has always had close links with the Historic Farm Buildings Group. English Heritage staff participated in the founding of the Group in 1985, not long after our own creation as an Agency. We have maintained good relations ever since, and grown up together over two decades in which approaches to management of the historic environment have evolved and matured.

It is wholly appropriate, therefore, to participate today in a conference whose themes are very central to the emerging new agenda for conservation and management of the historic environment, and we are delighted to be a sponsor of this event.

Last year the heritage sector - co-ordinated by English Heritage - submitted the *Power of Place* report to Government. This set out a common agenda for future policy on the historic environment. At the start of this year, having considered this report, the Government issued its own statement, in *"The Historic Environment: a Force for Our Future"* and the challenging task of implementation has now begun.

I am therefore particularly pleased to share the platform today with three other organisations who were involved in the production and

implementation of these ground-breaking documents - the Countryside Agency and the Country Landowner's Association for *Power of Place*, and DEFRA for *Force for Our Future.*

For today's purposes, I want to pick up on three of the key issues identified by both of the reports:

- Firstly, the need for us to recognise the value of the historic environment as a whole and learn to appreciate the "ordinary" and the "locally significant", as well as the "extraordinary" and the "nationally important";

- Secondly – and stemming directly from the previous point – the pressing need to develop far better *tools* for describing and understanding the "ordinary" in the historic environment and for determining what it is that *communities* as well as *experts* value about their heritage;

- And thirdly, the need to recognise and fully unlock the importance of the historic environment as a catalyst for regeneration in both town and countryside.

What could provide a better illustration of these three propositions than our stock of historic farm buildings? They are by far the most numerous type of historic structure in the countryside and, at face value, their ubiquity makes them seem unremarkable.

And yet these buildings provide us with unparalleled evidence for the history of farming, land tenure, social organisation and economic development in the English countryside in a way that written history never can.

In addition they are pivotal to our appreciation of the landscape, whether they are dominant features such as the field barns of the Yorkshire Dales, or rather more subtle contributors to the local scene.

Moreover, they are valued by local communities, as well as by visitors and experts, for their important contribution to sense-of-place. It was particularly notable, when the post-Foot and Mouth disinfection programme began last year, that it was concerned farmers and local residents, as well as expert groups, who contacted English Heritage to alert us to the potentially

damaging effects of this process, and the need to discuss safeguards with DEFRA.

Nor can the importance of these buildings in promoting rural regeneration be in doubt, as government urges farmers to diversify and broaden the economic base of their businesses. They represent a large and often untapped reservoir of potential for accommodating new farm or non-farm businesses or for providing much needed community buildings, such as these examples from Hampshire.

Yet these important assets are under threat as a result of structural changes in the farming industry, driven by intensification, globalisation and foreign competition. While this threat is not new, its scale and pace may be about to dramatically intensify. Lord Haskins, the Government's Rural Recovery Co-ordinator, recently suggested that, without intervention, half of the UK's farms could disappear within the next 20 years.

These changes will pose a particularly acute dilemma for those managing the historic environment, for local planning authorities, and for all those concerned with the quality of our countryside.

On one hand, without assistance, hard-pressed farmers cannot be expected to shoulder the burden of maintaining buildings that have limited agricultural use. This "at risk" grade II listed barn at Lower Lanham in Hampshire illustrates the problem. Deprived of its original function, this barn now provides only "low-key" use as a general store building, yet faces a bill of over £50,000 for repairs to its traditional thatch. Finding a viable future for buildings such as this one will not be easy.

On the other hand, it is clear that widespread dereliction of these buildings or - equally - wholesale poorly-designed conversion, could irrevocably damage irreplaceable historic assets, could impair the quality of the wider landscape, and could diminish the appeal of the countryside for inhabitants and visitors alike.

Doing nothing, therefore, should not be an option.

With the economic fabric of the industry which provides the raison d'être for these buildings under such pressure, we must recognise that approaches to their conservation will need to go far wider than simply extending protective measures such as listing. We need "smarter" solutions.

If we are to develop a truly effective new strategy for the conservation of this resource, we must adopt a more holistic approach that is - above all - evidence-based. It must be responsive both to regional variations in the building stock and to differing regional economic circumstances. It should integrate grant-aid streams intended for repair with those that support conversion. It needs enhanced conservation advice which is based on informed understanding of the ***entire*** historic resource, not just protective designation of the architecturally significant. Finally, it must recognise that these structures embody a whole series of values, as well as historical interest.

Many of the building blocks for such a strategy are already in place, but they require better co-ordination and further elaboration. I want to consider some of them in more detail.

Firstly, the evidence base.

English Heritage's last policy statement on farm buildings was issued in 1993. We fully accept the need to update this as soon as possible.

However, despite many years of concern within the historic environment sector about our farm buildings, we still have very limited systematic evidence for trends in the historic building stock, the pressures driving those trends, and their long-term implications. Perhaps the scale of the problem has simply overwhelmed us.

We are, therefore, extremely pleased to be joining forces with the Countryside Agency - the lead agency responsible for rural affairs - as we seek to define a new and evidence-based strategy for historic farm buildings.

As a first step, we have jointly sponsored a major research project from the University of Gloucestershire. This project is examining current pressures on, and policy towards, traditional farm buildings, and it is synthesising data from a wide variety of sources to understand trends, particularly in the listed building stock.

Because we are trying to ensure that we develop a more locally responsive basis for future policy, our project is analysing these pressures and trends not only at a national and regional level, but also in terms of remote, accessible and peri-urban countryside.

This work has, and will continue, to involve close liaison with our colleagues at the "coal face" in local authorities, and we are extremely grateful for the excellent levels of response and interest they have provided to date.

The project will report in August and be jointly published thereafter by the two Agencies. As Peter Gaskell will be presenting the preliminary findings of his work in this afternoon's session, I won't discuss the project in any more detail but I will say that this is only part of a wider initiative within English Heritage to create systematic "State of the Historic Environment" reports.

I want to turn now to the issues of grant-aid and expert advice. Before doing so, however, I want to remind you that one critical recommendation in *Power of Place* - on the need for equality between the rate of VAT levied on building repair and refurbishment and that levied on new build – remains to be implemented. Without this, owners face a major disincentive to conserve their historic building stock, and the value of all of the grant-aid schemes available for this work – already inadequate for the task - is severely reduced.

As many of you will be aware, English Heritage has calculated that the cost of backlog repairs to "at risk" buildings in the higher grades alone to be about £400 million. Therefore, although we *do* grant-aid farm buildings, of necessity our assistance has to be focused on grade I and II* buildings, such as this Medieval aisled barn at Snape, in East Suffolk.

Fortunately - as Jane Brown has described - other grant-aid sources are available to fund work to grade II and unlisted structures. Jane outlined the important work that MAFF - now DEFRA - has achieved through its agri-environment schemes, which - since 1998 - have stimulated the repair of over 1100 buildings. This is no mean feat by any measure.

Importantly, DEFRA can now also part-fund the *conversion* of agricultural buildings, as part of farm diversification or community projects, through the new Rural Enterprise Scheme.

English Heritage hopes that further rounds of reform of the Common Agricultural Policy will see additional large-scale resources directed towards "second pillar" rural development measures. We must ensure that, if this occurs, government continues to place heritage-led regeneration at the heart of its rural development policy. This is a point to which I will return in my closing remarks.

The key to achieving the maximum beneficial environmental and regenerative effect from this funding must lie in the skilful co-ordination of the various grant-schemes available; in access to high-quality specialist advice; and in the targeting of resources on the most important and most "at risk" structures and landscapes.

The provision of good-quality specialist advice is, I believe, central to the success of rural regeneration schemes, and I believe we could be achieving more on this front.

Firstly, we need to ensure the closest possible working between DEFRA and the network of local authority historic environment advisory staff.

In some cases, this *is* working extremely well. The Lake District Environmentally Sensitive Area provides an example of best practice. Here, close co-operation between DEFRA and the National Park Conservation Officer, Andrew Lowe, has resulted in some 600 farm buildings being cost-effectively repaired and returned to agricultural, or low-key alternative use.

We need learn from this best practice and ensure it is extended to other areas and schemes.

Secondly, DEFRA should consider whether its own "in-house" sources of historic environment advice are adequate. English Heritage has warmly welcomed DEFRA's recent decision to employ additional historic environment advisers within its Rural Development Service. However, when its body of eight specialists are compared to DEFRA's 44 in-house ecologists, we might be forgiven for seeing the *historic* environment as still very much the poor relation of the *natural* in terms of DEFRA's mission.

But our sector also needs to examine its own track record. We can certainly do more to raise our profile within rural development programmes. For example, there is currently no clear and nationally available guidance available to DEFRA on which categories of farm buildings are most at risk of dereliction and which may be too sensitive to convert. Nor do we have clear and consistent guidance on which buildings are best suited to adaptive re-use or how to achieve *real quality* in farm building conversion projects. English Heritage and the Countryside Agency are already discussing how to rectify this, and there may also be a role here for our colleagues in CABE. We all need to do far more in this area if we are to ensure that grant-aid from all sources is being used as effectively as possible.

This need for better targeting of resources and better informed decision making on repair and conversion, brings me to the issue of listing and enhanced understanding.

The statutory lists now include some 60,000 farm buildings. Some of these - such as this 13th century Wheat Barn at Cressing Temple, in Essex - are architecturally significant in their own right. Others - such as this 18th century barn at Probus in Cornwall, adapted for the world's first agricultural steam engine by Richard Trevithick - are critical to our understanding of the development of agricultural practices and technologies.

However, few farm buildings are so architecturally pretentious or so clearly critical to the mainstream historical narrative. Most buildings included on the lists are at grade II, and the strictly defined listing criteria inevitably exclude many more thousands of buildings that are nonetheless highly contributory to local distinctiveness. This is confirmed by Peter Gaskell's

research, which shows that 46% of Conservation Officers do not believe the statutory lists reflect the full variety of the farm building stock in their area.

Given this - and mindful of the immediate pressures acting on the resource - English Heritage and the Countryside Agency have been considering how we can jointly provide useful and timely guidance to local planning authorities, DEFRA, and the Development Agencies which will *support and inform* decisions on conservation, repair and conversion of their farm building stock.

We believe that the answer must lie in rapid characterisation exercises, which enhance understanding of the farm building stock as a whole, and provide a wider context for the statutory lists.

This is very much work in progress. Our Listing Team has already piloted a handful of detailed county studies and published a summary of their work to date in East Anglia. In addition, we are today publishing - jointly with the Countryside Agency - a pioneering thematic study of model farmsteads, a peculiarly British phenomenon, which symbolised the cutting edge of agricultural development.

This work has convinced us that, while designation has a role to play, our immediate priority must be to extend this work nationally through a series of regional studies, and selected county-level studies. These will be carried out in close partnership with the Countryside Agency and will provide frameworks for guiding change designed to inform the work of all our partners. They will reflect the economic circumstances and landscape character of each region, and draw on a considered view of the typological range, relative significance and capacity for change of the built environment.

We believe that frameworks for understanding of this type will help rural communities become more involved in decisions on their locally distinctive traditional building stock. This will not only be in accordance with government policy set out in *"Force for our Future",* but also has resonance with the Rural White Paper and the current Planning Green Paper.

In my concluding remarks, I wish to return to the issue of the multiple values inherent in these buildings.

Firstly, with our countryside under greater development pressure than ever before, they represent an enormous economic asset, whether they continue to be used for agriculture or are adapted to a new use. If we skilfully address the issue of *quality* in conversions, these buildings can provide workspaces for a whole new generation of rural businesses which are in harmony with their surrounding landscape and avoid the need for unsustainable land-take or intrusive new-build.

However, the economic value of this building stock goes well beyond their potential for adaptive re-use. They also have a tangible economic value in terms of what they bring to the wider landscape.

A recent series of regional studies by our colleagues in the National Trust have demonstrated the economic value - at the macro-scale - of high quality conserved landscapes, in terms of local jobs, tourism and inward investment. They have calculated, for example, that in rural areas 60% or more of employment in tourism is stimulated by *landscape quality*.

At a more local scale it can be demonstrated that farm buildings play an important part in this equation. In the Lake District National Park, for example, approximately £6 million of ESA funding has been directed to the repair of farm buildings since 1993. All the contractors involved in these low-cost repairs have come from a 10 to 15 mile radius. This has kept the cash in the local economy and created employment, while enhancing a high-quality landscape that attracted tourism worth £800 million in 2000.

Similarly, a 1999 study by the Countryside and Community Research Unit included an economic appraisal of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Barns and Walls Conservation Project. Opinion polling here has shown that a large majority of the Park's eight million annual visitors are attracted by its barn and wall landscape and wish to see it maintained. By 1999, the Conservation Project had repaired 250 barns using a variety of funds from amongst others the predecessors of DEFRA and the Countryside Agency, the National Park, English Heritage, the Lottery and the owners themselves.

This programme has safeguarded as many as 100 jobs and led to an improvement in craft skills. It has supported local blacksmithing and

forestry businesses and even stimulated the reopening of a small building stone quarry. Most importantly, as the employment generated was local – specific to each Dale – it helped to stem out-migration of the local population.

To us, this work provides an excellent example of sustainable development, a concept to which we all aspire but which, so often, seems elusive in practice. It effectively integrates concern for the landscape and careful stewardship of the historic environment with clear economic and social benefits and it illustrates how partnership between a wide variety of bodies can work effectively.

In the next few months DEFRA will be evaluating its agri-environment and rural development schemes. In addition, colleagues at DTLR will be redrafting PPG 7 on “The Countryside”. Both the planning and grant-aid regimes pertaining to historic farm buildings will, therefore, be under review. We hope that the policy makers engaged in these reviews will be alert to the wider values represented by our traditional farm building stock, as well as to their undoubted historic importance. We trust that the outcome of their deliberations will fully reflect the importance to society that this invaluable and fragile legacy represents.