

The effects of residential re-use on the character and appearance of traditional farm buildings in the Malvern Hills District

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Abstract: *This paper summarises the findings of research carried out into the gap between policy and practice in relation to the re-use of traditional farm buildings within the Malvern Hills District. It reviews the effectiveness of planning policy in delivering the conservation outcomes sought and identifies ways of improving its implementation. It explores the motives of residents for maintaining or significantly changing the character and appearance of traditional farm buildings and questions whether the residential conversion of these buildings leads to a loss of rural heritage. The research presents a method for measuring change in the historic built environment and tests the hypothesis that residents fail to truly appreciate the importance of conservation in planning for the re-use of rural buildings.*

Keywords: barn conversions, traditional farm buildings, rural heritage, Malvern Hills District

Introduction

The ‘guiding and shaping’ approach to planning is widely accepted by all political parties (Gilg, 1996). As a consequence of this more responsive approach, multi-functional rural space has emerged in Britain over the last twenty years, with residential, recreation and economic activities interspersed with agriculture. Nevertheless, the man-made rural landscape, on the whole, still comprises farms and farming. Given that traditional but redundant farm buildings retain an important role in the image of the countryside, the challenge faced by planners is to allow for their re-use, in accordance with widespread principles of sustainability, whilst preserving their contribution to landscape character.

The aim of this research is to measure the extent to which the character and setting of traditional farm buildings in the Malvern Hills District has been eroded through their conversion to residential use, and to

develop an understanding of the underlying reasons for this in order to suggest ways of addressing this process of attrition. The research sought to test the hypothesis that residential use leads to significant erosion of character and that residents’ attitudes and expectations are the principal cause of the problem. A quantitative appraisal of converted barns was undertaken in order to measure change in their character and setting. Residents were then interviewed to survey attitudes towards, and perceptions of, conservation and to identify ways the local authority can incentivise a sense of custodianship.

The principles of conservation

A rationale for the conservation of buildings is put forward by Hobson (2004), who suggests that the protection of historic buildings in order to illustrate the superiority of the past can be viewed as a regressive perspective. Highfield (1987, p. 8) agrees that conserving an old building

through refurbishment is “generally preferable to replacing it, especially as many of our older buildings are more attractive and possess greater character than their modern counterparts”. The principles of conservation are thus brought into question when the character and appearance of a traditional farm building is eroded by poorly designed alterations and extensions induced by the demands of residential or commercial re-use.

Notwithstanding this, it is recognised that the loss of elements of our rural built heritage must be weighed against redundant farm buildings becoming derelict. As in all building conservation projects, there is a need to question the motives behind the behaviour of the various actors. Earl (2003, p. 80) stresses that “some developers will push as far as they can toward total destruction and renewal, making only those concessions they deem to be necessary to avoid lengthy confrontations”. Conversely, conservation officers exude “an unquestionable, self-evident belief that the past ought to be preserved in the public interest” (Hobson, 2004, p. 53). It is then frequently the role of the planner to adjudicate on whether there are sufficient grounds to prevent the loss of a valuable historic feature.

Previous research and the need for localised policies

Traditional farm buildings are one of the defining characteristics of Britain’s rural landscape. However, research into change brought about through the re-use of these buildings is relatively scarce, which is regrettable as Van der Vaart (2003, p. 143) points out: “the lessons that can be learnt from the changes in these buildings in the recent past can provide valuable insights for future strategies on sustainable development of rural areas”. The more recent studies into the re-use of rural buildings have made little attempt quantify

the erosional effects of conversion on their character.

Instead, research has sought to survey opinion as to whether planning has succeeded in balancing protection of our rural built heritage with the pressures of economic and social change. For instance, English Heritage commissioned a study in 2000 to provide baseline data on the character, management and threats to listed farm buildings and to improve understanding of the factors that precipitate change in rural areas. The research involved a study of 16 local authorities across the country and interviews with a range of stakeholders involved in decisions on the re-use of historic farm buildings. The key issues identified were the perceived failure of national policy, policies not delivering the right outcomes, the issue of residential use and the need for discrimination in local policy (Gaskell and Owen, 2005).

Whilst it is often the ordinary vernacular architecture that gives the landscape its identity, the planning system has instead focused on the qualities of individual buildings and settlements. Various solutions have been suggested over the years, with many studies citing the need to tailor policy to meet local circumstances. For instance, Gaskell and Tanner (1998) explored the effectiveness of policies intended to protect the beauty of the farmed landscape in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Furthermore, Forsyth (2007) highlights research into Hampshire farmsteads, which showed that the distribution of different types of buildings in the landscape and their rates of survival are strongly linked to patterns of landscape character and type. More recent work by English Heritage (2010a) has sought to enhance historic building records concerning farmsteads in the West Midlands and thereby inform local policy as to their re-use and adaptation.

Agricultural decline and the propagation of residential re-use

Candura *et al.* (2008) and Van Der Vaart (2005) show that the continuous migration from the countryside to the city during the nineteenth century led to the abandonment and resultant deterioration of rural areas and farm buildings. However, the decline in agriculture and its associated adverse effect on landscape character are not unique to England. Over the last 50 years the number of farms has decreased all over Europe. Indeed, more than half of all the farm buildings in the Netherlands are no longer in agricultural use, having been converted to dwellings or live-work units, which raises the question as to whether their re-use is a form of urbanisation or part of a process of rural revitalisation (Van der Vaart, 2005).

In England, in order to explore the processes of agricultural decline and associated landscape change, Riley and Harvey (2007) drew on case studies from the Peak District and Devon to paint a picture of change from the ground and identify where the future of countryside management may lie. The need for increased emphasis on rural matters was recognised by the Labour Government in 2000, who made a formal commitment to ensure its domestic policies took account of rural circumstances (Atterton, 2008). In addition, agencies such as Defra and Natural England were made responsible for managing agri-environment incentive scheme funds for the protection of historic landscape features.

Although the decline in agriculture made farm diversification an increasingly relevant strategy for farmers, the renting-out of farm buildings is the only activity that saw a substantial increase during the late-twentieth century (McNally, 2001). This has led to the vast majority of barn conversions being for residential use, placing local authorities under pressure to

relent from the sequential approach set out in Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 7 (ODPM, 2006). Indeed, one of the issues raised by Owen and White (2003) is whether the marketing process for employment, tourism or recreational uses is sufficiently robust. Moreover, Bentley (2003) has challenged the presumption that business use is more sustainable than residential and questioned whether the conversion of rural buildings for business conflicts with urban regeneration policies.

Concern over the rationale for pursuing such a policy may have contributed to changes in national guidance. Indeed, given that the sequential approach is no longer explicitly set out within the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (DCLG, 2012b), as well as ministerial support for the ‘homes on the farm’ concept (DCLG, 2012a), it appears that local authorities now have more discretion to permit residential conversions. This may be viewed positively in light of rural housing having accrued an increasing scarcity value due to policy restrictions on the release of land for development (Gallent *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, the average house price in rural England has more than doubled over the past decade to over £250,000, which has caused a significant disparity between the financial viability of commercial and residential re-use (DCLG, 2012a). However, the drawback of residential re-use is often a greater impact on the character of our traditional farm buildings.

Research methods

Case study area

A case study approach provided increased certainty over the ability to access data and the opportunity for the subject matter to be studied in some depth within a relatively limited timescale. Yin (2003, p. 6) advises that case studies “deal with operational

links which need to be traced over time rather than just establishing frequencies of occurrence". Moreover, George and Bennett (2005) argue that they are most effectively used to support a researcher's argument, and as in this case, when there is no up-to-date information regarding the aim of the research project. Perhaps more importantly, the use of a case study can provide a real life example to which readers of the study can relate more easily (Bell, 1993).

A study of farmsteads in the West Midlands region (English Heritage, 2010a) recorded 3,703 historic farmsteads in Worcestershire, which was too large a population to sample. However, the Malvern Hills District afforded a more manageable area in which to carry out a study of change in traditional farm buildings converted to residential use. There is a fairly even mix of farmstead scales that display a strong degree of local variation and 72% of historic farmsteads retain more than half of their historic footprint (English Heritage, 2010b). Moreover, three out of every four farmsteads have been converted to residential use (English Heritage, 2010b). Most traditional farm buildings within the district are of brick construction with small plain clay tiled roofs and many lie within the designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. They predominantly take the form of hop kilns, cider mills and hay barns due to the area's historic association with hop farming, fruit growing and stock rearing.



Field research design

A selective sampling strategy was used, given the prohibitive time and cost implications of surveying all the barns converted to residential use in the district. This resulted in a sample of 91 properties being prepared, encompassing both listed buildings and unlisted buildings with

permitted development rights removed. Moreover, only barns of traditional brick, stone or timber frame construction pre-dating 1948, whose conversion was permitted between 1998 and 2007, were selected. The District Council's Building Control records and property address points were checked to confirm the permission had been implemented. The sample of 91 properties equates to 52% of the barns for which permission had been granted for a residential conversion during this period.

Buildings were chosen on the basis of their proximity to a road or public right of way so that the surveys could be undertaken from the public realm, without any need to access private land. The survey drawings of the barns prior to conversion were used as a baseline for comparison and a site visit undertaken to record any subsequent changes in the buildings' condition or setting. Clearly, there is a subjective element in assessing erosion of character. Consequently, in order to structure the surveying process a system was devised that categorised the five most prevalent aspects of farm building character, as shown at Table 1. Weighting was necessary because some changes are more apparent than others and have more influence on the perception of change.

Accordingly, the importance of the alteration to the perception of change was assessed on a scale of 0 to 15, with 15 being the most significant change. This process was aided by six planning officers working at the District Council, who were asked to rank the alterations in terms of their importance to the conservation of traditional farm buildings and then agree the various scoring options for each alteration. A survey proforma was developed to enable alterations to be recorded on site, with the associated erosion of character dependent on the magnitude of the change. For instance, the blocking-up of a principal opening or

Character element	Description
1. Original building form	<p>The extent of modern extensions or additions, assessed by reference to their size, design and prominence. The picture below highlights how the addition of a conservatory has altered the linear form of this barn and eroded its agricultural character and appearance.</p> 
2. External openings	<p>The extent of changes to a building's original openings, such as PVC replacement windows or the creation of new openings. The picture below is an example of a high quality conversion with glazing recessed into principal openings and its original openings retained.</p> 

<p>3. Roof profile</p>	<p>The addition of domestic features, such as rooflights, chimneys/flues, dormer windows or solar panels. The picture below shows how adding dormer windows can domesticate a farm building's appearance.</p> 
<p>4. Setting</p>	<p>Changes that result in a reduction in the openness of the rural setting, such as suburban outbuildings or subdivision of the original farmyard. The picture below shows how a new build domestic garage with modern 'up and over' doors can adversely affect the farmstead setting.</p> 


<p>5. Detailing</p>	<p>Smaller details necessitated by residential use that can harm the appearance of a barn, such as TV antennae or PVC rainwater goods. The picture below shows how the introduction of domestic paraphernalia has adversely affected the agricultural character of this barn.</p> 
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Table 1: Character element descriptions

erection of a conservatory can cause significant harm. The overall score enabled an assessment to be made of the cumulative impact of the changes on the character and setting of the original farm building

Interview design

The research focus not only required a quantitative appraisal of change, but also a qualitative investigation into the drivers of change. On this basis the research used semi-structured interviews to explore the behaviours and opinions of residents and collect data on their personal perspectives. As well as providing the flexibility to probe initial responses, interviewing is a “powerful way of helping people make explicit things that have hitherto been implicit, and to articulate their tacit

perceptions, feelings and understandings” (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p. 32).

Carrying out interviews with open questions enabled residents to give much richer, qualitative responses and express their point of view with minimal influence from the researcher (see Finch, 1990). All interviews were carried out at residents’ properties in order to create an informal setting, particularly as “there are areas that

people are prepared to discuss and those they will not, areas of which they are aware and areas they hide or are unaware of” (Wisker, 2008, p. 197). A sample of 15 converted barns, whose residents had submitted planning applications for alterations or extensions, was considered sufficient to ensure that a representative mix of views was obtained.

Given that the interviews were intended to signify whether there are any ways of halting the process of attrition, and in order to ensure the desired quality and range of data was obtained, it was important to achieve a balance between open and closed questions (see May, 2001). The interviews were structured in themed sections based on the research objectives and at the start of each interview the nature of the research, its objectives and how its findings were to be disseminated were explained to obtain informed consent from participants (see Bell, 2005). All information derived from the interviews has been treated anonymously, with residents' names and property location not being disclosed.

Field research findings and analysis

The field research data lent itself to statistical analysis and interpretation, which was able to be cross-referenced with the findings of the literature review. For instance, the study by Owen and White (2003) is of particular relevance. On the basis that the conversion of traditional farm buildings to residential use leads to a loss of character their survey respondents deemed such conversions to be inappropriate, albeit they concurred that this may be the only viable option as barns are frequently located in areas with poor facilities, public transport and access. While there is disagreement about what constitutes a successful outcome, most stakeholders agreed that retaining as much historic fabric as possible and minimising alterations helps to preserve character (Owen and Gaskell, 2005).

In approaching this research, the author recognised that the conversion of a farm building to residential use has a positive effect on its upkeep in the short to medium term and that erosion of character must be balanced against the alternative of redundant buildings not finding a new use.

This was demonstrated in the Yorkshire Dales where certain landscapes were designated as conservation areas and repair grants made available to slow the rate of farm building dereliction (Forsyth, 2007). These measures were largely unsuccessful and it was found that few of the changes in buildings' condition were the result of deliberate neglect.

In undertaking the field research for this study the scoring of erosionary features has enabled properties to be grouped according to the significance of their overall change. Furthermore, through categorising alterations the research has revealed the most harmful elements of change and the underlying reasons for them. It was hoped to ascertain whether changes are more prevalent within certain types of building re-use and to establish the significance of the age of the conversion. For instance, in the case of surveys relating to annexe and holiday let properties, there was generally less evidence of subsequent change beyond the scope of the original conversion scheme.

Converted barns that formed part of a wider farmstead conversion also appeared better preserved than those on their own, perhaps a result of neighbours' resistance to change and an increased likelihood of objections to applications. The interview responses revealed that neighbours want to protect their property value, so will often object to any changes to the farmstead setting in which they have invested. In addition, any changes undertaken without permission are more likely to be reported to the local authority. In respect of listed barns, these made up 38% of the total number that were surveyed (35/91), and as might be expected, the agricultural character of these buildings was far better preserved. The interview responses suggested that this was due to increased awareness of conservation and owners anticipating that alterations would be resisted by the local authority.

In seeking to gauge the architectural effects of change through the building surveys the overall findings were that 59 of the properties studied broadly retained their character, whereas 32 properties had suffered significant erosion. This equates to around 65% of the converted farm buildings surveyed still evoking a traditional agricultural appearance and 35% having undergone a major change in their character. However, on a positive note, none had concealed their agricultural past so profoundly that they might better be characterised as country houses that no longer contribute to the agricultural image of the countryside.

It is also evident from the field research findings that time plays a significant role in the process of attrition. Indeed, Table 2 reveals that barn conversions that had been permitted between 1998 and 2002 were far more likely than more recent conversions to have had a major change in their external appearance. It is logical that, if even older properties were studied, this trend would become even more apparent. Ultimately, if over time the efforts of planners to preserve a building's character are undone, it brings into question the benefits of resisting change at the conversion stage. Part of the problem is that once one alteration or extension has been permitted this undermines subsequent efforts to conserve the appearance of the original farm building. Moreover, even small changes can cumulatively serve to substantially alter the agricultural character of a building.

It can be seen from Table 3 that works within the setting of a traditional farm building previously converted to residential use have a significant impact and will often compromise the openness of the original farmyard and its rural surroundings. Surprisingly, alterations to the original building form are not the major issue, which can perhaps be

1998 - 2002 (49 properties surveyed)		
No. of properties	Erosion rating	Percentage
19	Significant erosion	39%
30	Broadly retains character	61%
0	Character lost entirely	0%
2003 - 2007 (42 properties surveyed)		
No. of properties	Erosion rating	Percentage
13	Significant erosion	31%
29	Broadly retains character	69%
0	Character lost entirely	0%

Table 2: Influence of time on degree of erosional change

attributed to tighter enforcement of the additional planning controls. It would appear that rather more attention needs to be paid by local authority planners to the adverse impact of new domestic outbuildings and suburban garden features. It can be the cumulative impact of lots of minor changes that have a significant effect, as borne out by this survey.

Character element	Score sub-total	Contribution
Original building form	688	19%
External openings	672	18%
Roof profile	874	24%
Setting	1026	28%
Detailing	456	12%
Total	3716	100%

Table 3: Contribution of character elements to erosion of agricultural appearance

Interestingly, 55% of the properties studied had been subject to an extension either during the conversion process or

subsequently, which alludes to the amount of pressure exerted on the local authority to permit change. Whilst it is not possible to reveal every aspect of the survey results, it can be summarised that high proportions of properties had seen changes in their setting such as new outbuildings (57%), suburban boundary treatments (43%) or ornamental garden features (55%).

Another area of concern is alterations to the original roof profile, which highlighted a large number of properties with rooflights (64%) and flues or chimneys (46%). Such changes are made necessary by the high proportion of barn conversions making use of their roof space.

Nevertheless, aspects such as external openings were well preserved, particularly in respect of principal openings.

Moreover, whilst a large number of properties had seen more detailed changes, such as the use of PVC rainwater goods (52%), these did not serve to substantially alter the character of the original farm building.

The consequence of these findings is that, notwithstanding the policy guidance issued by the District Council, alterations to rural buildings previously converted to residential use are permitted. The impact of these alterations is to erode their contribution to the landscape character and local distinctiveness of the Malvern Hills District. Even more recent conversions permitted between 2003 and 2007 can be considered to have suffered significant erosion of character, either through permitted change or unauthorised alterations. This appears to indicate that restrictive policies are not entirely effective, and that over a period of time even small changes can substantially alter a building's character and setting, which resonates with the findings of research in the Netherlands by Van der Vaart (2005).

The pressure to permit alterations, over and above those necessitated by the Building Regulations, has led to

supplementary planning documents becoming widely adopted by local authorities. Whilst planners will recognise residents' desire to change their homes, this must be weighed against the fact that even minor works can cumulatively undermine the conservation objectives of the original conversion. Research by English Heritage (2005) into the effects of permitted development on the character and appearance of conservation areas is of relevance to this matter. Like this study, the conservation area research utilised a quantitative scoring system to measure incremental change, with some changes considered benign and others more damaging, depending on the sensitivity of the area to change and the magnitude and rate of change.

It is acknowledged that one aspect of character that was not surveyed is the interior of the buildings, which is almost as important as the outside in retaining a sense of its original agricultural function. Van der Vaart (2005) argues that new internal layouts for residential re-use largely necessitate the removal of features that contribute to a building's agricultural heritage, and as such, internal effects are usually more dramatic than external unless the building is designated as a heritage asset. Often the internal spaces are best left open rather than being subdivided, which means that planners sometimes weigh this benefit against allowing a discreet, modestly-sized extension.

The views of owners/occupiers

Conservation is commonly argued to be second only to the green belt in terms of popular support for planning activity (Larkham, 1999). The interviews were designed to gauge the importance that residents place on the conservation of traditional farm buildings and the extent to which their domestication, when converted to residential use, is due to the attitudes

and expectations of their occupiers. A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken to identify links and the frequency of the main issues arising from the qualitative data. Biggam (2008) advises that “it is important not to view these themes as separate topics, rather they are interrelated”. Moreover, whilst textual analysis was advantageous in that it allowed both quantitative and qualitative analysis, it is important not to disregard the context that produced the text, as is argued by Neuendorf (2002).

Although much has been written over the years about the technical aspects of farm building conservation there is little concerning residents’ motives and attitudes toward conservation. However, looking further afield, case studies undertaken by Larkham and Lodge (1999) have sought to discover whether conservation area residents really understand what conservation means. Moreover, Harris and Larkham (1999) have argued that the extensive nature of piecemeal change in mature residential areas is given little heed and the amount of small-scale change is rarely monitored. Finally, Ahlfeldt *et al.* (2012) assert that, to date, there has been no rigorous study of the effects of designation of conservation areas in England. Nevertheless, their research concluded that conservation areas remain a popular planning tool and that the extra constraints placed on householders are generally not perceived as overly burdensome. On the basis of the interviews undertaken for this study the same cannot be said for the additional restrictions placed on occupiers of barn conversions.

Knowledge and awareness of planning restrictions

Larkham (1986) explored the agents of urban change through a range of case studies. These include those directly

involved in the development process such as the landowner or architect, as well as other influential factors such as the public, architectural fashion and planning policies. Many of these agents of change are also applicable to rural areas, but of more concern is that the interviews established that many residents are unaware of additional planning restrictions relating to barn conversions and the underlying reasons for allowing such buildings to be converted to residential use. This reinforces the suggestion that the piecemeal erosion of character is, to some extent, due to a lack of awareness and understanding amongst residents. Notwithstanding this, it became evident that there is support for conservation amongst those who were aware of the additional planning restrictions.

The problem identified is that not enough residents were made aware of these restrictions during the conveyance process, with the exception of owners of listed buildings. Even those who were made aware assumed that employing a ‘good’ architect would allow any objections from the local authority to be overcome. In response to a question regarding motivations for living in a barn conversion, the most prevalent answer was the space it provides for pursuing personal interests and hobbies. As had been suspected, residents chose a converted farm building for its physical characteristics and its open rural surroundings, reinforcing the premise that farm buildings have a high symbolic value contributing to the sense of living in the countryside.

One-third of respondents even admitted that they might be likely to carry out works without realising the requirement for planning permission. Even though most people knew their property had its permitted development rights removed, the perception was still that minor changes, such as erecting a boundary fence or

changing the windows, would not require permission. The answers to these questions highlighted a lack of awareness and understanding of additional planning restrictions. However, one third (5/15) of the barn conversions studied were statutorily listed and, of these five properties, only one occupier did not realise that listed building consent is required to carry out internal works, suggesting that awareness of restrictions was greater due to the criminal implications.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of people (13/15) appreciated that the reason for these additional restrictions was to provide the Council with a reasonable degree of control over changes to a traditional farm building and its open rural setting. In terms of awareness of the District Council's conservation policies, most people (12/15) were unaware that detailed guidance has published in the form of a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on the Re-Use of Rural Buildings. The key message to be derived from this is that applications are unlikely to be informed by the Council's guidance, unless the applicant has sought pre-application advice. Moreover, 6 out of 15 owners said they would have reconsidered their decision to buy a barn conversion had they known more about the policy on extensions and alterations.

Experiences and perceptions of the planning system

The experiences of owner/occupiers in applying for planning permission and their associated perceptions of the development management process were surveyed. By exploring their experiences it was hoped to identify ways in which the local authority can promote conservation within the district. One of the main findings was that, although residents felt that current restrictions are somewhat disproportionate,

they agreed with some level of restriction on changes that might significantly erode a building's character. The importance of consistency in decision making also came through in responses, with 11 out of 15 residents stating that they were not satisfied with the fairness of the system as the regulations did not seem to be consistently applied.

All the respondents had submitted a planning application to either alter or extend their property or to erect an outbuilding. Of these applications the majority (12/15) were made after August 2006 when the Council's SPD on the Re-Use of Rural Buildings was adopted. The most significant finding was that of the eight refused applications only two residents conceded that the reason for refusal was justified. When probed further, the recurring theme was that the decision largely appeared to be at the whim of the planner and that the vast majority of the refusal reasons were based on subjective design grounds. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the hypocrisy in that residents claimed to be concerned about conservation, but then appeared reluctant for the restrictions to be applied to themselves.

Six people (6/15) said that they had objected to a neighbour's application, with the most common reason being concern about the proposal's impact on their property value. Indeed, self-interest seems to take precedence over the wider public interest as only one person (1/6) cited concern about a proposal's impact on the building's character and appearance. Moreover, those living within farmsteads comprising more than one conversion were more conscious of works undertaken by their neighbours and thereby likely to object to applications. This was mainly due to a desire to protect their outlook, rather than any sense of paternalism to the heritage of the farmstead, and reflects the

growth of the ‘NIMBY’ syndrome over the past 30 years.

Whilst there were some generally positive responses to open questions, such as residents agreeing that some restraints on extensions are reasonable, much was negative. Indeed, those people who thought that the correct balance has been struck between conservation and allowing people to make changes to their property were in the minority. Furthermore, although views were mixed, more people than not agreed that the constraints placed on property owners regarding planning permission are a significantly negative attribute to living in a converted barn, as shown in Table 4.

Rating scale	<i>“The constraints placed on property owners regarding planning permission are a significantly negative attribute to living in a converted barn”</i>
Strongly agree	4
Agree	2
Neither agree nor disagree	5
Disagree	3
Strongly disagree	1

Table 4: Number of responses to a rating scale question

In respect of planning enforcement, one resident said that “a lot depends on the vigilance of neighbours and the parish council, as the planning office does not seem to check on building works”. The perception was that “large scale developers get away with building whatever they want as the Council don’t want the expense of fighting them”. Moreover, some claimed that it was almost impossible to get hold of a planning officer, and when they did, officers were very non-committal. It was also alleged that there was conflicting

officer advice as to what might be acceptable, with some residents angry the planning process had put them to unnecessary expense. It is for the local authority to work to change these perceptions and alter the mindset of residents.

Attitudes to conservation and opinions on possible incentives

Historic buildings link us to our past as they “provide us with an irreplaceable record, which contributes to our understanding of our present and our past” (Owen and White, 2003, p319). The successful re-use of a farm building therefore depends as much on understanding the potential of the building as on understanding the needs of the potential user. Walshe (1981) and Gaskell and Tanner (1998) argue that traditional farm buildings are central to the beauty of the countryside and that it is often the ordinary vernacular architecture that gives a landscape its distinctiveness. The 1930s represent a watershed, marking the final demise of largely traditional building styles using local materials and their replacement by modern concrete and steel structures (Gaskell and Owen, 2005).

It is, therefore, important to preserve traditional farm buildings’ contribution to landscape character. Through carrying out interviews with residents a range of views on conservation were revealed. Once again, the study findings resonate with the research undertaken by Van der Vaart (2005), which explored the effects of residential re-use in the province of Friesland in the north of the Netherlands and asked how public authorities look at this rural change phenomenon. It is evident in both cases that the owner/occupier is the most important actor in the process of re-use of farm buildings and that the restrictive policy approach

currently taken is ineffective in conserving character.

In this case, the interview findings reinforced a belief that changes to buildings and their settings can, in part, be attributed to the affluence of their new residents, with a significant proportion participating in substantial business at high level, as highlighted by the West Midlands Farmstead Study (English Heritage, 2010a). Furthermore, in order to more fully understand motives, residents were asked their reasons for choosing to live in a converted barn, with the most popular responses being its rural location and its character and appearance, as illustrated by Figure 1.

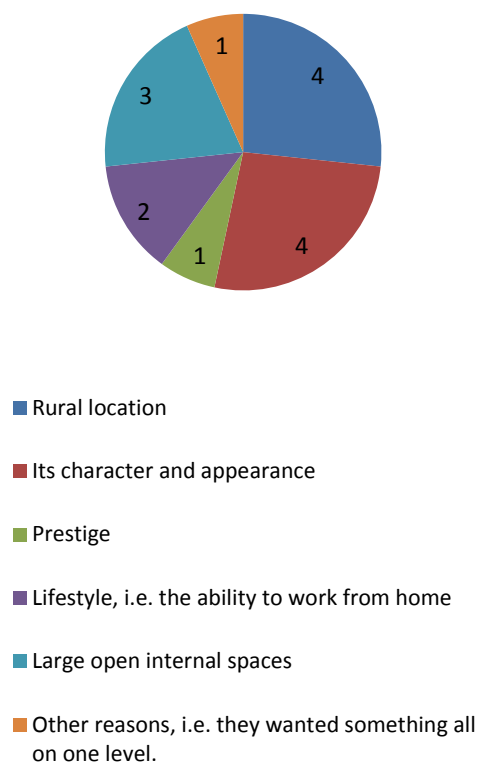


Figure 1: Number of responses to a question regarding reasons for choosing to live in a converted barn

A high proportion of residents (12/15) stated that their property had been altered or extended over the years, either by them

or by a previous owner. It should be recognised that these buildings are not monuments in a 'countryside museum', rather they are peoples' homes having to adapt to changing needs and circumstances. Reinforcing this assertion, the most popular responses to a question concerning the motivation of owners in extending their property was to increase the utility of the dwelling and improve outdoor storage space, as illustrated by Figure 2. This also highlights the importance of the planner in getting the original conversion scheme right, so that the likelihood of subsequent alterations being required is reduced.

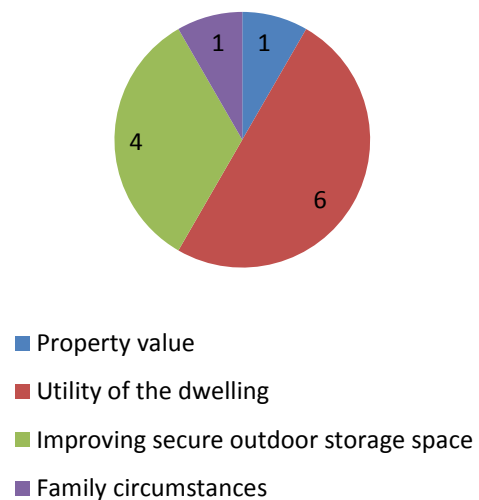


Figure 2: Number of responses to a question regarding reasons for extending or altering their property

Only three people (3/15) deemed the additional planning controls exerted over barn conversions to be insufficiently powerful to protect their contribution to local distinctiveness. Moreover, one respondent claimed that ineffective enforcement of planning control was undermining the public perception of the whole system. Of the six people that argued that the system was too restrictive, the reasons given were the perceived bureaucracy, excessive time taken and overall cost of the planning process.

Although views were mixed, more people than not felt that additional planning controls are not the best way of preserving the contribution of converted farm buildings to local distinctiveness, as shown in Table 5.

Rating scale	<i>“Additional planning controls are the best way of preserving the contribution of converted farm buildings to local distinctiveness”</i>
Strongly agree	2
Agree	1
Neither agree nor disagree	6
Disagree	2
Strongly disagree	4

Table 5: Number of responses to a rating scale question

On this basis, it was established that certain improvements need to be made to encourage residents to adopt more of a custodian mindset. For instance, through launching a council-led stewardship scheme, residents may be more reluctant to make alterations and extensions that adversely affect the quality of the original conversion. Four respondents (4/15) realised the value of such a scheme, offering financial incentives to preserve or enhance the form, character and appearance of their barn. However, most people (7/15) thought that the way forward was through improved education and policy guidance rather than restrictive policies. The key appears to be engaging owners and occupiers and changing their mindset, as without their commitment planning rules and regulations will not be enough.

Indeed, whilst the Council’s SPD on the Re-Use of Rural Buildings (MHDC, 2006) states that extensions will only be

permitted in exceptional circumstances, the findings of the field research suggest that this policy has been difficult to enforce. The majority of respondents queried whether examples of best practice in extending a traditional farm building could be cited, together with more constructive advice on the siting and design of outbuildings. This was on the basis that more pro-active design guidance would help to reduce uncertainty and application costs. On the other hand, some residents claimed that an overly prescriptive approach would be counterproductive and recognised that it is impossible to legislate for every different scenario.

Conclusions

Although the rural landscape in an urbanising society is currently under enormous pressure, the agricultural activities of past and present still play an important role in shaping the English countryside. The successful re-use of our rural built heritage is, therefore, of great importance. Research by Owen and White (2003) revealed the perception that the sequential approach advocated within PPS7 (ODPM, 2006) has, in practice, had limited success in aiding rural regeneration. In light of this, and given the increasing pressure on local authorities to allow residential re-use, a case by case approach based on sustainability principles should be adopted by planning officers in considering the re-use of rural buildings. Alongside this, greater emphasis should be placed on the technical design merits of the conversion and its impact on the local environment.

This study has added to the debate over the effectiveness of planning policy in conserving our landscape heritage in rural areas. On the one hand, conversions will often contribute to the survival of the more ordinary rural buildings which are not of

listable quality. Moreover, new inhabitants and new economic activity can contribute to the vitality of rural areas and a more varied local economy. On the other hand, the field research has shown that there is a distinct chance of the architectural qualities of buildings being significantly eroded over time. To this extent, some parallels may be drawn with Harris and Larkham's (1999) assertion that urban landscape management in England over the last three decades can largely be characterised as mis-management. However, the issue of erosion of traditional rural buildings' character has not been subject to as much academic research, with the focus instead being on wider landscape change.

In light of the publication of the NPPF (DCLG, 2012b), with its pro-growth agenda, the task of halting the suburbanisation of farm buildings and the rural landscape appears more challenging than ever. Indeed, the more development-orientated approach set out within the NPPF could be at the expense of buildings' historic character. It raises the question as to how local authorities can incentivise conservation and educate residents to realise the value of our rural heritage. Certainly, in the absence of detailed national guidance greater emphasis is placed on local policy, for instance those contained in supplementary planning documents. It is essential that such guidance, whilst providing clarity on what changes can be made, is balanced to ensure the protection of important historic fabric, internal spaces and features of unlisted buildings, both during their initial conversion and their subsequent occupation.

The building surveys undertaken have shown that significant erosion of traditional farm buildings' character has occurred within the Malvern Hills District over the past fifteen years, largely due to their residential re-use. When read in

conjunction with the interviews, these findings have led the author to the conclusion that the owner/occupier is the most important actor in this process. Moreover, it is only possible to look after our rural built heritage if the occupiers of converted barns know what it is they are being asked to look after and why it is important. Indeed, as the success of conservation objectives following the initial conversion relies heavily on the support of residents, it is important to understand their motives for changing the appearance of traditional farm buildings.

Furthermore, given that local distinctiveness is largely derived from the contributions of ordinary farm buildings, protection has become unduly focused on small numbers of buildings. The erosive effects of works to unlisted buildings can cause just as much harm to local distinctiveness as those to designated heritage assets. This resonates with the findings of Forsyth (2007), who argues that the designation of individual barns and farmsteads as listed buildings has failed to achieve its wider objective of conservation of our rural built heritage. Accordingly, local authorities need to take a more holistic view of the whole rural building resource, as opposed to focusing unduly on individual buildings without regard to their wider context.

Van der Vaart (2005) surmises that if we are sure about the type of landscape values and perceptions that we want to maintain then we need to recognise the importance of the owner/occupier and adopt an incentive-based approach to the conservation of traditional farm buildings. Indeed, the interviews with residents carried out for this study suggest that incentives may be better placed than restrictive policies to preserve character, alongside greater emphasis on educating the owner/occupier and producing local guidance with examples of best practice. As many residents claimed to be

concerned with conservation matters and expressed a willingness to retain the distinct character and form of rural buildings, it is possible that such changes could help to maintain the contribution of traditional farm buildings to the English countryside.

Recommendations for future research

The findings of this case study are, to some extent, likely to be context-bound and may reflect some of the assumptions that the researcher brought to the project. On this basis, it is acknowledged that it would be beneficial to carry out a wider survey across a greater number of local authority areas to enable comparison and critical analysis of the reasons for differentiation. Moreover, other research, such as that carried out into West Midlands farmsteads by English Heritage (2010a), should be translated into locally differentiated guidance that actually informs decisions on applications relating to disused farm buildings.

In looking to influence the future direction of policies affecting rural areas, the architectural, economic, social and landscape effects of re-use need to be carefully considered. Coincidentally, at the time of writing this paper the DCLG (2013) had recently issued a consultation paper on potential changes to permitted development rights to enable change of use of redundant farm buildings to residential. It is proposed that a prior approval procedure be used in respect of the associated physical conversion works. Nevertheless, if the proposals make their way into legislation it would be interesting to carry out a wider study in ten years time to gauge whether this control has proven sufficient to preserve the agricultural character of buildings. Moreover, the whole idea of 'homes on the farm' has resonances with research by Van den Berg and Wintjes (2000) into the

concept of rural lifestyle estates in the Netherlands. This study highlighted the difficulty in finding alternative users for land no longer required for agriculture, and at the same time, recognised that many companies and families are looking for building plots away from compact urban areas. Although the study promoted the development of rural lifestyle estates as a way of bringing this supply and demand together in a landscape-friendly way, since its publication the concept has not become widely adopted. Nevertheless, research comparisons could be made with the English countryside in order to explore whether the 'homes on the farm' concept can be developed further.

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