FORMER FARM BUILDINGS,

at LITTLE THORNHAM FARM, SEEND

Heritage Assessment



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Carefully managing change

in the historic environment

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Frontpiece – Photo 1. The east facing front of the buildings

1. Introduction

1.1 I have been asked to prepare a Heritage Assessment of a disused building at Little Thornham Farm, New Lane, Seend, Melksham, Wiltshire, SN12 6PQ. The buildings form part of a farmstead that lies at an isolated position south of The Stocks and Seend Cleeve, which are themselves located about three quarters of a miles west of Seend village. The buildings in question are redundant for their original purpose and the owner is considering seeking planning permission to convert to holiday accommodation.

1.2 The structures are listed as having architectural or historic interest. National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) places an obligation on planning applicants to provide information on heritage significance to help Local Planning Authorities make decisions on the impact of any proposals for change [i]. An appropriate level of specialist expertise is expected to be applied in assessing the significance of the heritage assets involved. I propose to apply the framework recommended in *Statements of Heritage Significance* - an Advice Note issued by Historic England [ii]. This advocates a staged approach which starts with understanding the significance of affected assets, before moving on to understanding possible impacts on that significance while avoiding, minimising and mitigating them when pursuing opportunities to better reveal or enhance significance, all therefore leading to the justification for any unavoidable harmful impacts.

1.3 The level of detail in a statement of heritage significance is expected to be proportionate, and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of any proposals on the significance of the building.

1.4 I am a retired chartered town planner with over 40 years experience of appraising development proposals in the historic environment. I am a member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation and a past member of the Central Council, and Chairman of the South West Branch. I recently joined the Disciplinary Panel of the Institute. The assessment has been carried out in accordance with *Conservation Professional Practice Principle*s [iii] published by the IHBC.

1.5 The report is largely based upon research, and an inspection of the building and surroundings, undertaken during April 2022.

2. Identifying which heritage assets are affected

2.1 In addition to the subject structures, the nearby farmhouse – Little Thornham Farm - is also a designated heritage asset. This lies about 30m to the north of the farm structures and its setting needs to be taken into account.

2.2 There are a small number of nearby agricultural structures but none hold heritage interest. The Wiltshire and Swindon Historic Environment Record notes Little Thornham as a partially extant 18th century farmstead. The subject structures are the only potential survivals from that time. One of the nearby buildings was probably an open-fronted cow skilling but is now converted into a residential annex.

2.3 There are no other statutory listed buildings, or locally listed buildings, to be taken into account. Neither are there any designated heritage assets such as Scheduled Ancient Monuments, or wider designations such Conservation Areas, Historic Parks and Gardens, Historic Battlefields or World Heritage Sites relevant to the subject building.

2.4 From the perspective of the historic environment, therefore, the subject buildings and the setting of Little Thornham Farmhouse are the relevant heritage assets that need to be taken into account.

3 Beginning to Understand the Building

3.1 The buildings sit on slightly raised land above the Semington Brook. Little Thornham Farm however has never been associated with milling, which took place locally a little further downstream at Seend Head.

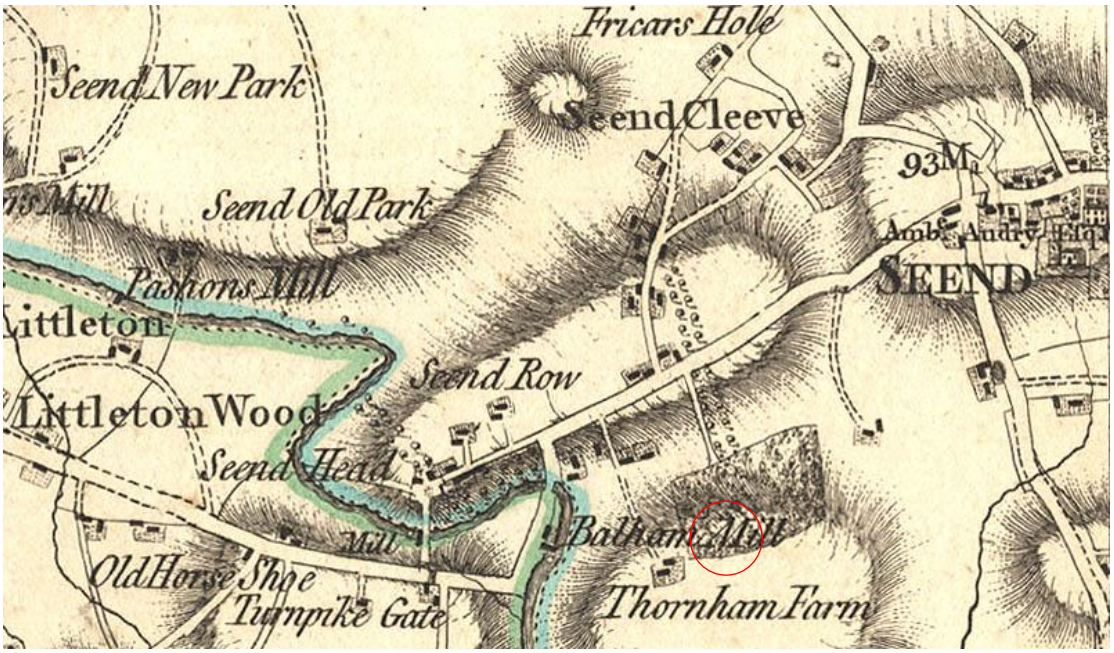
3.2 At one time Seend Cleeve was well known for its iron-ore field. Following the arrival of the Kennet and Avon canal, and later the railway, it became possible to exploit the hermatite during the second half of the 19th century. Quarrying and smelting had a considerable impact on the hamlet but land to the south of Trowbridge Road, where Little Thornham is located, was not impacted.

3.3 In a brief history of Seend, the Parish Council have pointed out that throughout history farming has been the dominant activity :

In the early 19c many of the houses along the High Street were in fact farmhouses, although few now retain the old names. Dairy farming and beef cattle dominated. Ownership of the land was mostly in the hands of the farmers,

although two centuries earlier the Dukes of Somerset owned a lot of land around Seend. In 1954 they sold the last of their holdings in Seend, Egypt Farm, to the Wiltshire family who were tenant farmers. There remain a number of traditional barns, many have been adapted to other uses, but they remain as a continuity of historic character and a link to the agricultural heritage of the Parish. Farmers play an active role in the life of the Parish, and there is usually one or more on the Parish Council.

3.4 Little Thornham Farm however was not part of ancient history. Almost certainly it was a planted small holding from the late 18th century, when a larger farm unit was sub-divided. The "sister" holding at Great Thornham Farm is accessed from a separate track about a third of a mile west in the direction of Seend Head.



Map 1. Andrews and Dury survey of 1773 with the site of Little Thornham Farm circled

3.5 The Farmhouse at Little Thornham is a polite, symmetrical house built of brick beneath a roof covered by Welsh slates. As implied above traditionally farms were grouped at village locations but more remote locations were sometimes developed from the second half of the 18th century when rationalisation of fields was facilitated during the final stages of enclosure. New farmhouses built during this period, as here

at Little Thornham, were part of the fashion aimed at taking advantage of a good view or 'prospect'.

3.6 The electoral roll at the time of the Great Reform Act (1832) confirms its existence when the owner was James Beaven Esq. He leased the property to James Willis (poss Willies).



Photo 2. The farmhouse is centre stage, with the unconnected, modern Thornham House to the right, and the subject structures at the end of the track.

3.6 The First Edition of the Ordnance Survey map published in the 1880s provides the first clear mapping evidence of the farmstead at Little Thornham Farm. The layout is much as we find it today, although the footprint of the farmhouse has since doubled in size. The map also implies that the main access to the site was obtained from the east whereas the footpath to the north has now been widened to take vehicular traffic.



Map 2. Extract from the First Edition Ordnance survey map, with the subject building circled

3.7 The map shows that the subject building is slightly wider at the south end than the north. This reflects the three sections of the building. A northern two-storey section, a southern two-storey section, and a single storey lean-to against the northern gable.

3.8 A couple of minor structures are attached to the southern end and the western (rear) flank of the building. Those at the south end are known as the milking parlour but are modern additions outside the scope of this report, and they are not considered any further.

3.9 The southern section seems to be a little younger than the northern end. Although not obvious externally, there is a chimney stack within the building. This heated the northern two-storey section and once projected from its southern gable end. The timber beams in the northern half are slightly cruder, and roof is half hipped. The external stonework of each section is similar and it is probable the structures were all erected within a few years of each other.



Photo 3 (top) The northern gable of the cheese room, and lean-to

Photo 4 (centre) The chimney stack rising through the stable loft

Photo 5 The northern hip end of the roof from within the cheese room, where the timbers of the roof structure are slightly cruder than over the stable





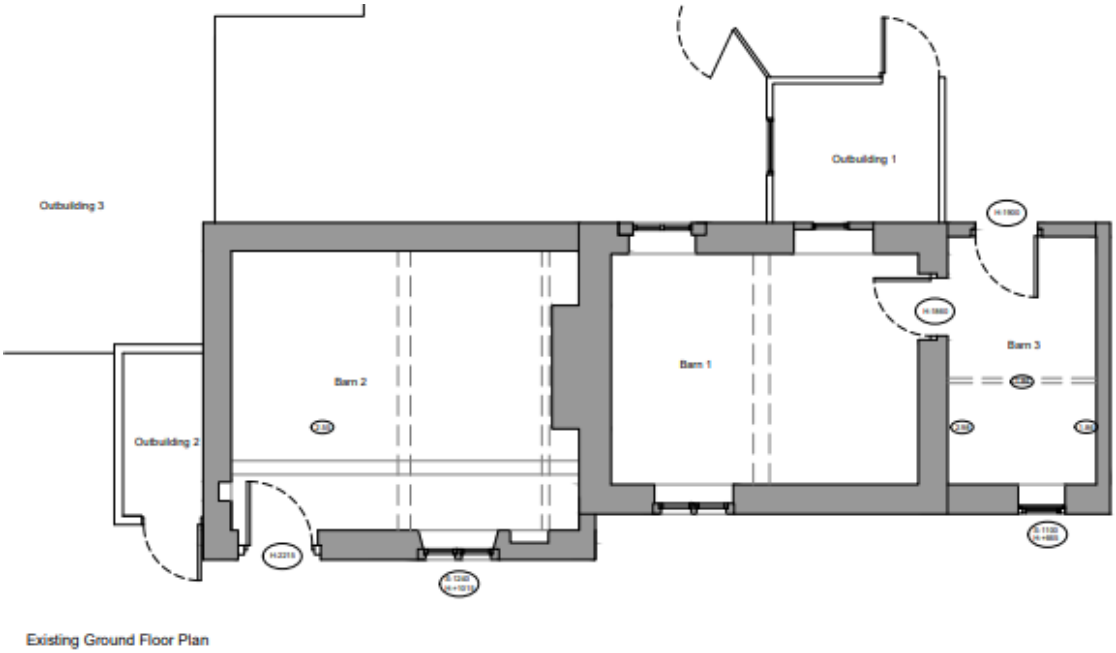


Diagram 1. Survey of the ground floor by Dolman Building Surveyors with stable to the left, the diary in the centre, and the lean-to at the right, northern end

3.10 The southern section of the building appears to have been designed as a horse stable. Although many of the fittings have been lost some characteristics of a stable survive : a loft floor, a pitching eye to receive hay tossed up from a wagon, the remnants of a void through which the hay could be swept down to a manger, and stable blocked ground floor.



Photo 6 Looking up from the stable with the empty mortice slots of a wooden manger in the centre, and unplastered lower walls that were once lined by timber boards

3.11 There is evidence that the ground floor walls were once lined with timber boards but no clear indication of stalling. In her research of historic farm buildings in Wiltshire Slocombe noted “Carthorse stables were larger than riding horse stables and the animals themselves were larger. Carthorse stables were not always divided into separate stalls. They were in any case more open plan in their interior layout than nag (riding or coach horse) stables.” [iv] This may suggest that the stable was mainly intended for farm animals rather than a domestic nag.

3.12 The original purpose of the northern two-storey section is more enigmatic. The current owners refer to the ground floor as the “killing room”. However, it is probable it gained notoriety in more recent years when poultry was dispatched there. There is evidence of a blocked door (now converted to a window) leading directly to the rear yard. The fireplaces might have provided heat for the drying of tack but, as noted above, it appears to have been built before the stable was constructed. It is possible it may have been used as brewhouse, but more likely it was a dairy with cheese room in the first floor. It is not at all uncommon to find a cheeseroom in combination with the dairy although typically these were located within or attached to the farmhouse.

3.13 The main indicating features are a smooth paved stone floor on the ground floor and the remnants of supports for timber racking. This is typical of a cheese room where the cheeses would have laid down to mature. The heat would have been necessary to warm the milk and to keep frosts from damaging the end product.

Photo 7. The flagstone floor within the former dairy, plus children’s equipment





Photo 8. Remnants of racking used for the storage of cheeses

3.14 The ground floor lean-to may have been an adjunct where milk could be brought and left under cover. Now, however, it provides the main entrance to the northern two storey section. When it was constructed it may have rendered the original doorway to the rear yard redundant.

4. The Significance of the Building

4.1 It is important to consider what status should be attributed to the building. Annex 2 to the National Planning Policy Framework defines a Heritage Asset as "A building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest. It includes designated heritage assets and assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing)".

4.2 Where heritage assets are involved the NPPF requires the applicant to describe their significance, including the contribution of their setting to that significance. Significance is defined in the NPPF as 'the value of a heritage assets to this and future generations because of its heritage interest'.

4.3 The NPPF identifies four types of heritage value that an asset may hold archaeological, architectural, artistic and historic interest. This is simply a way of analysing its significance. Understanding the extent of that significance is important because this can, among other things, lead to a better understanding of how adaptable the asset may be to change.

4.4 The building is constructed from locally sourced vernacular building materials. The rubble stone walling is typical of the Lower Cretaceous stone found in the immediate vicinity and clay pantiles were produced in the nearby Cheverell area. These place the building firmly in the vernacular zone. There is little sign of architectural or artistic intent. However, Historic England has commented generally : “The value of horses as draught animals meant that stables were generally well built and often ……. given a certain level of architectural and decorative treatment.” [v] The sturdy quality of the build is borne out here and round pitching eye formed of ashlar limestone elevates the design above commonplace.

4.5 Whilst the general condition of the building is structurally fair, there are aspects requiring attention. The lath and plaster ceiling in the former dairy room in particular has suffered a major collapse, and externally the absence of a rain water disposal system has caused erosion of the lime pointing at the foot of the external walls.

Photo 9. Collapsed section of lath and plaster ceiling in the dairy



4.6 The building is approximately 200 years old and has been listed as having special architectural or historic interest. It has Grade II status with the following accompanying description:

Stable and loft, C18 or early C19, rubble stone with brick dressings and Bridgwater tile roofs. Two storeys, two sections, that to north apparently earlier, with brick quoins, roof half- hipped to north and 2-light beaded stone mullion window each floor, both with brick sides. South section projects on east front with brick quoins, door to left and, to right, a 2-light beaded mullion window and circular pitching-eye above.

4.7 The description concentrates on architectural character, and fails to pick-up the dairy and cheese room uses. Whereas, arguably, it is the historic interest of the building, rather than architectural prowess, that is of particular importance. It represents physical evidence of the small farmstead that was planted here when the larger farm was broken up towards around the turn of the 18th century. The considered form of the farmstead, with the dairy and stable set away from the living quarters, is comparatively rare thus adding to historic interest.

4.8 Setting can also contribute to significance although setting is not itself a heritage asset, nor a heritage designation. However it is generally accepted that its importance can lie in what it contributes to the significance of the heritage asset or to the ability to appreciate that significance. The setting of a heritage asset is defined in the Glossary of the NPPF: "The surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Elements of a setting may make a positive or negative contribution to the significance of an asset, may affect the ability to appreciate that significance or may be neutral."

4.9 As a utilitarian farm structure the building never had a planned setting. There are no significant vistas that need to be respected. The main aspect of relevance is its location in a transitional zone where it was relatively close for supervision from the farmhouse, and yet readily accessible to the former farmyard and the open fields.

4.10 The main physical items of significance of the buildings are

The external shell consisting of the rubble stone walls, roof structures, and pantile roof coverings
The stone pitching eye
The smooth flagstone floor found in the dairy
The remnants of the shelf racking found in the cheese room
The remnants of the manger in the stable

4.11 In reaching a conclusion on the heritage status of the building its age, historic interest, and use of vernacular building materials justifies its inclusion as a protected building. The NPPF is constructed on the basis that some heritage assets will have greater significance than others. Para 199 points out that the more important an asset, the greater weight it should receive in the decision-making process. It is possible to identify a continuum with World Heritage Sites, Scheduled Ancient Monuments, and Grade I listed buildings near the top, other nationally designated assets somewhere near the middle, and locally listed buildings, conservation areas and damaged archaeological sites at the bottom. Grade II listed buildings are often attributed medium to high heritage significance. Grade II buildings however cover a very wide range types and quality. Clearly Grade I and Grade II* listed buildings sit higher up the heritage continuum, but ascribing a rank in the middle seems to be an appropriate classification for the former stables and dairy.

5. Impact of Proposals on Heritage Significance

5.1 The above fulfils the obligations under para 194 of the NPPF. Subsequent steps are normally undertaken by the Local Planning Authority. However, it can be helpful if the applicant for planning permission is aware of potential impacts so they can be minimised.

5.2 Understanding the historic context allows significance to be taken into account hopefully leading to better outcomes for the applicant by influencing the final design

by mitigating harmful impacts, enhancing significance where possible, and showing how any remaining harm is justified.

5.3 A draft scheme is being prepared for conversion of the former stable and dairy into a lettable holiday accommodation under the control of the occupants of the farmhouse. No extensions or major works are proposed. In many ways this would be an ideal outcome for a redundant rural building. Holiday accommodation can accept the limitations posed by, for example, the restricted headroom in the loft area over the stable.

5.4 Provided the important aspects outlined under 4.10 above are respected the significance of the building will be maintained. The new use would breathe new life into the structure and create a positive reason for repairs and on-going maintenance.

6 Explore ways to maximise enhancement and avoid or minimise harm

6.1 Historic England's Advice Note *Statements of Heritage Significance* continues with an open-ended approach to determine if there are any possibilities of improving the situation. Understanding heritage significance should inform designs, both traditional and contemporary, that reveal, enhance and retain their significance.

6.2 There will inevitably be a need for a degree of alteration and useful help is given in *Adapting Traditional Farm Buildings - Best Practice Guidelines for Adaptive Reuse* [vi]. The overriding aim should be to identify opportunities for changes which conserve, enhance or better reveal the distinctive character of the building in its setting.

6.3 The preliminary scheme minimises the sub-division of existing internal spaces, and avoids the introduction of overtly domestic features such as porches and conservatories. An equally important objective, however, should be the retention of as much significant historic fabric as possible, together with the use of compatible materials and methods of repair. The shelf racking in the cheese room, for example, could be restored and put to use in the accommodation. The ground floor manger could also be restored as a feature.

6.4 A detailed scheme of conversion should also take account of the provision of insulation suitable for the new use. The roof should not present a difficulty, and it should be noted that exemptions and 'special considerations' apply for historic and buildings of traditional construction. Reinstatement of timber boarding to the external

walls in the stable section could provide a convenient means of hiding thermal insulation.

6.5 The accommodation will need to have a heating system to deal with extreme temperatures. Bringing the existing chimneystack back into use would appear to be the least intrusive option. Back-up provided by electric powered radiators would also avoid the need for extensive new plumbing works.

6.6 There will be a need to introduce improved daylighting within the building. This could be achieved with minimal harm by the use of simple rooflights on the rear roof slopes. The stable loft might also benefit from a wall window. This should avoid conflicting with the pitching eye on the front elevation. It would probably be best designed as a contemporary alteration. Visual impact can be minimised by setting the glazing deep with the recess. It might also be desirable to fit external timber shutters which could be closed when the window is not required. Side hung shutters would be generally compatible with the former stable use.

6.7 Consideration will also need to be given to how damp can be controlled. Fortunately ground conditions are generally favaourable, and the introduction of rain water gutters and downpipes is likely to be sufficient. If necessary ground drainage in the form of French drains, which are simple trenches filled with gravel, perforated pipes and a geotextile lining, can be particularly effective in maintaining dry walls within traditional buildings. The use of lime plaster where repairs are necessary internally will also mitigate future harm from rising damp.

6.8 There is also a need to be mindful of the rural scene in detailing the external areas. Boundary treatments to the building should be carefully specified and be restricted to the rear, farmyard side of the building where they will be visually unobtrusive. External lighting should also been minimised to avoid light pollution beyond the site boundaries and ensure the setting of the listed farmhouse, and the stable itself, is maintained. It is likely that stable block flooring will be displaced from the former stable and this could be usefully re-set either within the rear yard or perhaps near the main entrance door to provide an interesting and convenient external floorscape.

7 Update and Conclusion

7.1 The subject building has a medium level of heritage importance but needs to find a sympathetic new use if its contribution to local history and visual distinctiveness is to be maintained into the future.

7.2 Since this report was first drafted a more detailed scheme of conversion has emerged, encapsulated on Dolman Building Surveyors drawings 3928-01A, 02C and 03B. Whilst not every detailed suggestion noted in Section 6 (above) has proved practical the scheme is based on an understanding of the original purpose and character of the site. Accordingly the proposals will not cause heritage harm. Careful implementation of the scheme will, in fact, provide the building with a new purpose justifying on-going repair and maintenance. The Wiltshire Farmsteads Project (sponsored by Wiltshire Council, The Wiltshire Buildings Record, and Historic England) noted :

Traditional farmsteads and buildings are heritage assets which make a significant contribution to both landscape character and local distinctiveness. They are also, through a diversity of uses, assets for local communities and economies. Future change in historic farmsteads is inevitable if they are to be retained as a distinctive part of the rural landscape: otherwise, they risk decay and dereliction.

7.3 The developed scheme for holiday accommodation should preserve the existing level of heritage significance and maintain the setting of LittleThornham Farmhouse.

8 The main References and Sources used

8.1 The following outlines the framework of research and documents consulted considered in the preparation of this assessment**:**

i) The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) MHCLG 2021
ii) Statements of Heritage Significance - an Advice Note, Historic England 2019
iii) Conservation Professional Practice Principles, IHBC 2017
iv) Wiltshire Farm Buildings 1500-1900, Pamela M Slocombe 1989
v) National Farm Building Types Historic England 2014
vi) Adapting Traditional Farm Buildings - Best Practice Guidelines for Adaptive Reuse, Historic England September 2017

Photo 10. The south gable of the stable with the modern milking parlour in the foreground

