

Eastward Farmhouse and attached barns, The Lake District

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Front elevation of the farmhouse, with the south barn to the left
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As a national amenity society, the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) assesses hundreds of applications for proposed changes to the historic environment each week. The majority are for adaptation of listed buildings to better meet contemporary needs. The principle of change is accepted; it just needs to be informed by an understanding of which aspects of a site contribute towards its significance and therefore where opportunities for alterations lie. Good Listed Building Consent (LBC) applications use an assessment process to understand a site and identify those areas that can be altered with no or minimal harm to those features of a site that hold value or special interest. Well-considered schemes also seek to retain the legibility of how a place has evolved over time.

The CBA's criteria for commenting centres around a site's archaeological interest, or evidential value. As a result, we often comment on multi-phased buildings which contain considerable quantities of archaeological interest (or evidential value) about how past people have lived and worked at a site, adapting them with changes in technologies, fashions, wants and needs.

In early 2022 an application for Eastward Farm in the Lake District landed in our inbox. It is an exceptionally well-preserved site, with many layers going back to at least the 17th century, and has evidence for a substantial 18th-century expansion. These layers illustrate the ways of life and agricultural practices that have typified the Lake District for centuries. The farm is crying out for the skills of a buildings archaeologist to get to grips with the full extent of its archaeological and historical interest.

Kitchen range
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South barn interior
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The house has retained many features that have commonly been ripped out and have little or no record. The fragile, 18th-century timber panel partition walls are intact and the worn groove in the flagstones demonstrates how long it has defined the movement of people between the kitchen and parlour. A large inglenook in the old kitchen contains a tidy 19th-century range within an earlier stone fireplace. Within the inglenook there are multiple metal hooks, and the inner face of the fire beam has a series of crude cupboards, some with butterfly hinges. Fitted stone benches and shelving survive in the cold butteries/dairies to the rear, showing how, up until the recent past, most Lakeland farms made their own butter and cheese. The contrast between these functional aspects of the house and the quality of the 18th-century joinery in fitted cupboards, shutters and window reveals in the 18th-century extension how farmers aspired towards the aesthetic tastes of polite society during this period.

The large 18th-century threshing barn and combination barn also demonstrate the prosperity of the farm and the importance of mixed agriculture in an area that, since the late 19th-century, has been best-known for its pastoral landscape grazed by sheep and cattle. In the 18th-century barns, timber stall partitions and a manger are still in place in the cattle housing. Unusually, there is still a stone-flagged threshing floor. This is so often replaced by a more practical concrete screed. Substantial numbers of roof timbers and trusses are still in good order across the site. With reference to Historic England's Farmstead and Landscape Statement for the High Fells (<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/current/discover-and-understand/rural-heritage/farmsteads-character/>), it is clear that the whole group is outstanding for its evidential interest, the way that it illustrates how farming developed in the Lake District and also for the architectural and aesthetic interest of its fabric and detail.

Kitchen parlour
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Eastward Farm presents a challenge to those of us who are familiar with rural heritage – a site which has been in the same family, either tenanted or owner-occupied, for generations until its sale and then is at risk from alterations which, however well-intentioned, could cause cumulative harm to the site’s historical and archaeological interest. In this case, new owners have applied to upgrade the site into a single holiday unit and are prepared to make a considerable investment in conserving the historic fabric and sympathetically bringing Eastward Farm into the 21st century.

So how best to move forward? This is where the skills of a buildings archaeologist are critical in providing an illustrated and written record that identifies the different phases of a site and its significance in a national and local context, and reaching a balanced judgement on how it can be adapted for future use while minimising harm to its legibility and character.

National and local planning legislation, policies and guidance protect the historic environment from unjustified levels of harm and seek to conserve sites so that their significance is retained and enhanced. In this case, the CBA decided that the listing of the farmhouse with its attached barns at Grade II – the most common listing grade, which affects 92 per cent of buildings on the statutory list – did not adequately capture its outstanding degree of preservation and interest. In order for a balanced planning judgement to be proportional to Eastward Farm’s historical and archaeological interest the CBA applied to Historic England for the site’s designation to be reassessed.

Historic England has since carried out a full inspection and the Secretary of State has decided to amend Eastward Farm’s designation to Grade II*. This will ensure that works to upgrade the site will be proportionate to its outstanding historical and archaeological interest. The CBA’s hope is that a Level 4 Building Recording of the site (see *Understanding Historic Buildings: A Guide to Good Recording Practice*, Historic England, 2009) will inform a revised scheme that retains more of the extant fabric and character as a proportionate response to Eastward Farm’s significance and potential for sensitive adaptation



Interior view
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