



The Conversion of Rural Buildings



Alnwick District Council

Design Guidance

January 2007

We endeavour to make our services accessible to everyone. This text of this leaflet can be made available in a variety of formats including audio tape and large print. For further information contact the Press and Communications office on 01665 511205

Further Sources of Information

English Heritage

Further information regarding the conversion of farm buildings can be obtained from English Heritage.

English Heritage
North East Office
Bessie Surtees House,
41-44 Sandhill,
Newcastle upon Tyne

0191 269 1200
www.english-heritage.org.uk

Images of England

A photographic record of England's listed buildings.
www.imagesofengland.org.uk

Northumberland Records Office

Archival resource holding tithe maps, records and photographs of Northumberland's heritage.

Woodhorn
Northumberland Museum and Archives
Queen Elizabeth II Country Park
Ashington
Northumberland
NE63 9YF
01670 52 80 80

Seven species of bats occur in Northumberland and all are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. It is an offence to kill or injure any bat, to damage, destroy or obstruct access to any place that a bat uses for shelter or protection (a roost), or to disturb a bat while it is using such a place.

Barn owls are similarly protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and again, English Nature must be consulted if it is suspected that barn owls are present.

For advice on bats, barn owls and habitats, please contact English Nature on 0191 229 5500
Or the Bat Advice Line on (01661) 842695

Alnwick District Council
Planning and Building Control Unit
Allerburn House
Alnwick
Northumberland
NE66 1YY
Tel 01665 603312
Website: www.alnwick.gov.uk

Guide to the conversion of rural buildings

Introduction

This guide has been prepared in consultation with interested parties and the wider community with the aim of preserving and enhancing listed and architecturally significant farm buildings. It is the intention to republish the guidance as a supplementary planning document as part of the council's Local Development Framework in due course

In a predominantly rural district such as Alnwick, factors such as changes in farming practices and general de-population of the countryside inevitably produce pressure for the conversion of existing rural buildings.

It is the Council's experience that the greatest pressure in recent times has been for the residential conversion of older farm steadings and outbuildings. These buildings contribute enormously to the appearance of rural settlements and the surrounding landscape. Unfortunately, their character and settings can often be damaged by unsympathetic conversion for residential use.

In recognition of the potentially detrimental impact that residential conversion can have on the character and appearance of traditional farm buildings, the practical design advice in this guide concentrates on conversion. Through these guidelines, the Council hopes to achieve sympathetic, high quality conversions which retain the essential character of the existing buildings. Broad principles are also given for other categories of conversion.

Buildings suitable for conversion

The condition of a rural building will be a key factor in the decision as to whether a conversion will be allowed. Although many rural buildings are typically of robust construction, a period of disuse and neglect can take its toll, often resulting in structural instability.

In order to gain support for a conversion proposal, the building must be capable of conversion without the need for substantial dismantling and reconstruction. In order to assess this, it will be necessary to submit a full structural survey and condition report from a suitably qualified professional at the same time that the planning application is submitted. If the structural survey shows that substantial rebuilding will be necessary, the proposed conversion will be contrary to policy and is unlikely to be permitted. By way of example, a building where the roof and 50% of the walls had gone would not be considered for conversion. Each case will be considered individually.

Listed Buildings

Many rural buildings, particularly traditional agricultural buildings, are listed in their own right, or are listed as curtilage structures to a principal listed building such as a farmhouse. Alterations to listed buildings are subject to special controls, and Listed Building Consent is required for works which might affect their character or appearance. Applicants are strongly advised to seek further advice from the Council if contemplating works to a listed structure.

Hardstanding surfaces should reflect the character of the farm building. Cobbles are a traditional form of surfacing within farmyards, and these should always be retained and supplemented, or reinstated where appropriate. Similarly, existing stone setts, bricks or blocks should be retained and supplemented. Larger areas could be covered with crushed local stone. The use of modern ground surface materials such as tarmac and concrete should be avoided as they are usually out of character with the farm building.

Landscape planting should consist of local, indigenous, robust species that would typically be found around farms giving shelter.

Water supply, drainage, sewerage treatment and the location of fuel storage will be considered on a case by case basis. Advice should be sought from the environment Agency, who can be contacted on 0870 8506506

Bats and Barn Owls

Bats often roost in buildings, and are frequently not visible during a superficial inspection. Different roosts can be used at different times of the year, for summer maternity or winter hibernation. The presence of bats may often be detected by sightings of flying bats entering a building, or from finding droppings (which may be mistaken for mouse droppings). If it is suspected that bats are present in a rural building, a specialist survey is recommended to confirm and locate any roost and its access points. The survey should be carried out by a suitably qualified individual who should hold a relevant licence if bats are to be disturbed. As this is best done when bats are active in the area, advice should be sought at the earliest opportunity and details of a known or suspected roost should be included with any planning application. English Nature's advice will be sought by the Local Authority, to protect both roost and its access, and to minimise the impact of any proposed development.

conversion has taken place. The sustainability of a development proposal will be a key factor in its determination.

Curtilage Treatment

Accesses to traditional farm buildings usually follow field boundaries along the lines of hedges and walls. As a result, they are usually discreet, blending in naturally with the landscape. Proposals for the conversion of farm buildings should retain existing accesses. If this is not possible, any new access should follow natural boundaries and avoid crossing the middle of open spaces.



Boundary Treatments

Parked cars detract from the appearance of farmyards and contribute towards the creation of a domestic appearance. If parking is to be accommodated on a hard standing, it is important that the site is well screened, particularly in exposed locations. Stone or brick walls and hedgerows are effective ways of screening parked vehicles.

Sufficient private amenity space must be provided within the curtilage of a conversion, and such space must be defined in a way which enhances the simple, understated identity of the farm building. Where garaging is likely to be required, it is essential that sufficient provision be made at the outset. All efforts should be made to accommodate garages within the existing buildings. Where new build is required to provide garages, the proposal will be considered against the usual criteria. Curtilages should remain uncluttered, and to achieve this it is standard practice to remove permitted development rights by way of a planning condition attached to any approval.

The importance of good design

The quality of the built environment in Alnwick District is such that the Council attaches the highest priority to good design. This overall aim is the principle against which all planning applications for the conversion of rural buildings will be considered.

As stated in the introduction, residential conversion is potentially the most intrusive in terms of the demand for changes to the character and appearance of a traditional rural building. The design guidance set out below therefore concentrates on the issues which most frequently arise in relation to residential conversion.

A general set of principles are provided which apply to all conversion proposals, followed by more detailed guidelines which apply specifically to traditional rural buildings:

- The re-use or adaptation of rural buildings for new uses should ensure that their overall appearance and access is in keeping with their surroundings, and should protect or enhance the landscape qualities of the countryside;
- Any proposed extensions should be modest, and should complement and respect the original building in terms of design, scale, massing and choice of materials;
- The site should not be so isolated as to be far removed from essential services;
- The proposal should not create a demand for services such as electricity or telephones where overhead cables would be visually harmful;
- The access road serving the site should be of adequate geometry and construction to serve the proposed

development.

General conversion principles

Masonry and Brickwork

The majority of traditional farm buildings in Alnwick District are built of local buff sandstone. Whinstone is used around the Embleton area. Brick is less common within the district.



Stone walling

Where rebuilding of masonry or brickwork is proposed as part of a conversion scheme, the existing materials should be re-used. If it is necessary to make up a shortfall, every effort should be made to use reclaimed materials which match the original as closely as possible. Modern materials should be avoided, as these are likely to be visually obtrusive. The coursing of new stonework or bonding of brickwork should match the existing pattern.

Mortar mix and pointing is very important to the final appearance of the building, and the guidelines set out in the Council's 'Design Guide for Stonework Repairs' should be followed where re-pointing works are required.

Roofs

Most buildings are roofed in natural slate, usually Welsh in origin. There is evidence of thatching, but this form of roofing was gradually replaced with slate during the 19th century. Pantiles used to be common in the district, but now tend to be found more in the coastal areas of the District. The distinctive green-grey Westmorland slate from Cumbria may also be found in some instances.

they are sensitively designed and located. Often, it is possible to provide light unobtrusively to upper floors by introducing new window openings just under the eaves, which has been a traditional location for Yorkshire sliding sash windows. Internal walls and structures such as stairs, forges, etc, should be integrated within the conversion, especially where they are historically significant. New divisions should be kept to a minimum.

Extensions

Current policy states that rural buildings must be capable of conversion without the need for substantial extension. However, where it is deemed that a modest addition may be acceptable, the extension should be subsidiary to the main bulk of the building, small in scale, simple and unobtrusive. Modern domestic conservatory extensions and porches will usually be resisted as being out character with the original building.

Addition of domestic features

The trend of introducing domestic features into agricultural buildings on the basis that they are to be converted to domestic use will be strongly resisted by the Council. These include chimneys (as dealt with above), porches, conservatories, and curtilage treatments which are overly domestic in style. Where such features have been introduced in the past, the result has been the loss of the character of the original building, and the creation of an unattractive hybrid style.

It is of vital importance to make sure that a sufficient number of garages are provided within the initial scheme, as the Council will strongly resist future pressure to provide garages after the

doors may be glazed in with screens. These divisions should be bold in character, and painted in dark, recessive colours. Such openings should be divided into thirds or fifths, as a void at the centre forms a more aesthetically pleasing solution than a central post or column.

As a general principle, all timber frames, doors and windows should be preserved and re-used wherever possible. Where replacements are essential, metal or uPVC materials will be resisted.

Treatment of openings and interior space

Traditional rural buildings are characterised by few window and door openings, often randomly distributed. Every effort should be made to retain and make optimum use of existing openings. In cases where former openings have been blocked up, it may well be possible to re-open these usefully.

When determining the type of accommodation required, the position and size of existing openings should be taken into account. This will dictate how many rooms may be formed, and the uses to which they will be put. Excessive sub-division of internal spaces will create the need for extra lighting, which may in turn require a greater number of additional openings to the exterior elevation than can be supported in terms of impact on the character of the building.

A successful conversion will be one where residential needs are designed to suit the building. Farm buildings will retain their integrity if the interior is left open, giving an impression of the pre-converted space. Preference will be given to open plan designs enabling the roof structure to be appreciated, and allowing maximum benefit from possibly limited light sources. However, some new openings may be acceptable, providing

Long roof planes unbroken by gables or dormers are very characteristic of the area, and should remain undisturbed. In order to benefit from the full volume of a building, it is often proposed to fit an internal upper floor. This can be problematic in terms of providing sufficient lighting. In addition, the structure of the building may be weakened through the structural changes often required to adapt the roof space for accommodation. It may therefore be necessary to accept a lower standard of lighting in order to retain the character of the building.

Roof lights can be very visually intrusive in that they disrupt the roof plane, and introduce an intrusive reflective element.

However, a limited number may be allowed on less prominent pitches. It is often the case that roof lighting has been provided via glass panels inserted into the roof in place of slates. Where these exist, it may be deemed acceptable to replace them with conservation roof lights of the type which are flush with the plane of the roof.



Roof lights

New roof lights should not normally be greater than 500mm in width. Non-reflective glass should be considered in roof lights which can be cleaned from inside the building. Regularity should be avoided, and the lining up of roof lights over openings in the elevation below is to be avoided.

Again, existing roofing materials should be retained and re-used wherever possible. Introduced roofing materials must match the existing, and should be restricted to less prominent slopes, to ensure any differences between new and old materials will be less obvious.

Visual clutter such as aerials, satellite dishes, etc, on the roof planes should be kept to a minimum.

Chimneys

Where chimneys exist on farm buildings, they usually comprise three elements, plinth, main shaft and cornice. Often stone chimneys have been replaced with brick in the past, due to the corrosive effects of coal smoke on sandstone.

Proposals to erect new chimneys where none exist will be strongly resisted. Chimneys are not usually found on traditional farm buildings, and their introduction will be regarded as an inappropriate attempt at domestication.

Where necessary, a small metal flue finished in black and located away from principal elevations will be accepted in place of a chimney.

Gutters and down pipes

Many agricultural buildings do not have rainwater goods. Where they do exist, cast iron has been the most common material for this purpose. Gutters may be attached by means of top fixed brackets embedded into the masonry. Cast iron is the Council's preferred material for use in conversions, as it is such a traditional feature in the District. Extruded aluminium is an acceptable alternative, particularly where it would be easier to fit (for example, on a circular gingang).

If the original building has had no rainwater goods, new gutters and down pipes should be kept to the minimum necessary, and should appear simple and unobtrusive. If possible, they should be located away from main elevations.

Exterior Joinery

Farm buildings display a range of window types. A common type is the combined window and ventilator, where the top third is glazed in small panes, and the bottom section comprises hit and miss slatts. Blacksmith's windows are often made of tall narrow panes with overlapping horticultural glass. New windows should reflect the agricultural nature of the building. For example, glazed/slatted windows may successfully be replaced with new timber windows following the same pattern of subdivision, but replacing the slatts with a single glazed pane. Where ventilation slits or openings exist, these should be retained and glazed behind.



Traditional Openings

Small, simple, unglazed openings are typical of agricultural buildings. Often, plain, uninterrupted glazing set well into the reveal is an appropriate solution, achieving an unfussy reading of the original opening.

Several variations of door may be found. Most are sturdy and functional, often of vertical timber boarding. However, where existing doors are insufficiently weather tight to be re-used, replacements reflecting the original characteristics will be encouraged. Old door furniture should be retained and re-used where possible.

Traditionally, the use of darker coloured paints or stains is common in agricultural buildings, and had the practical advantage of showing dirt less and requiring less maintenance. This practice should be continued in considering finishes to exterior joinery. Large openings such as hemel arches and barn