

# HISTORIC BARN CONVERSIONS

## A WAY FORWARD



Policy Guidelines



## HISTORIC BARN CONVERSIONS - A Way Forward

### Introduction

This document refers to those barns which are listed as being of special Architectural and Historic interest. The future for unlisted barns poses parallel problems and is also seen as a cause for concern but is not addressed in this document.

The intention is that this document may be adopted as policy by a local planning authority possibly with local amendments or used as supplementary planning guidance the former method being preferable.

Essex has a substantial number of historic farm buildings predominantly timber framed barns, many of which are statutorily protected as buildings of Special Architectural or Historic interest. Many of these buildings belong to archaeologically important domestic and agricultural settlements, dating back in some cases to the Norman Conquest.

As a result of changes in general farming produce many of these barns and other structures are effectively redundant, although are frequently utilised for low key storage and other uses.

Inevitably, without an economic use, many are now suffering decay and some have already disappeared.

In the long term this process will result in an unacceptable loss of the County's historic building stock unless a satisfactory solution can be found.

In 1979 the County Council published 'The Essex Countryside, Historic Barns', as a detailed appraisal of the, then current, situation. This publication drew attention to relevant policies in the Essex Structure Plan which made special provision for redundant farm buildings:-

Policy C3 "In areas where development will not otherwise be allowed, the conversion of buildings of architectural or historic interest may be permitted in appropriate circumstances where this would preserve a building."

Advice in Government Circulars is also relevant but in many cases the barns which are the subject of this document have particular and Special Qualities which are not fully addressed in these circulars, some of which give conflicting advice.

The general intention of the appraisal document, was to encourage the retention and sympathetic re-use of all such buildings. In addition it contained some interesting examples of suitable new uses and an outline study showing the developments of the carpentry.

In the years following this critical publication a change in attitude was perceived and numerous proposals were submitted for consideration. Few of these were for the most favoured uses i.e. Community, Workshop recreation or studios.

The vast majority was for residential conversion, many of which were approved and implemented. It soon became apparent that the quality of residential conversion was a matter for concern. The County Council then published 'Residential Barn Conversions' as Supplementary Planning Guidance in an attempt to improve the general design standards. In addition this booklet stressed the need to prove redundancy and underlined the general feeling that house conversions were the least sympathetic alternative use.

In the rare instances of changes of use to purposes other than residential it has been possible to achieve schemes which have had minimum impact upon the building and its setting.

Since 1983 the County Council's Specialist Advisory team have examined 222 applications for residential conversion of which approximately 150 were given consent. Of these, it is known that 74 have been implemented or are in the process of implementation. The records are incomplete and it is thought that a further 15 or so schemes have been approved and completed.

As a result of all these implemented schemes it is now possible to make a critical appraisal of the overall problem and to gain a thorough understanding of the level of success. Despite some much needed improvements as a result of the second publication the results have continued to be far from satisfactory. In addition similar residential conversions elsewhere in Britain have been studied and the conclusion that has to be drawn is that the problems with large cereal barns are identical, despite obvious regional variations in the design of the barns.

The whole question of barn conversion has recently been addressed by the Council for the Preservation of Rural England in their publication "Superb Conversions: Farm diversification - the farm building experience". In this book the CPRE have studied barn conversions in two English Districts, unfortunately both were in areas where stone barns are the norm, but the results are nonetheless comparable. The CPRE identified five arguments for the conversion of farm buildings:

1. the provision of employment;
2. the supply of rural housing;
3. farm income support;
4. the preservation of traditional and historic buildings;
5. the encouragement of farm diversification and new land uses.

In its conclusions the CPRE stated that, "our research shows that in many instances some of the objectives are not achieved, or at best, only to a limited extent.... The biggest problem is that the most uncreative and frequent new use for farm buildings, residential use, is probably the least likely to satisfy the five objectives".

In a number of Essex cases the change to residential use has been so dramatic as to mean that the building no longer qualifies for 'listing'. The result is that the very reason for allowing an exceptional change - the historic and architectural character - is destroyed in the process of change.

It could be said that the very process of listing encourages damage by identifying the building as being suitable for reuse.

The only argument that seems relevant is whether a residentially converted barn has any real value to the community. It is general policy to discourage new dwellings in rural areas unless a justifiable exception can be made. For this to be the case the completed barn has to retain its historic value and to continue to make a contribution to the Essex Landscape.

With house conversions the degree of change is necessarily great, whatever the particularities of any individual scheme. In Essex the majority of barns can be described as, 'large black boxes with steeply pitched roofs'. The box itself is a simple container with large doors and virtually no windows. When viewed in the landscape the old barn is a strong geometrical solid structure with textured planes and with a clear and unbroken profile. In contrast to this a house requires numerous windows and a variety of excrescencies related to its function. It is soon apparent that these aspects are visually incompatible despite all efforts to find a satisfactory solution.

### Archaeological Implications

It is important to assess the archaeological implications of each barn conversion. Both on the groundworks required to convert the structure for domestic habitation (underpinning, new floors, services and extensions) and many of the items mentioned in (a): the provision of garages, oil tanks, swimming pools, patios and landscaping, not only affect the setting of these historic complexes, but may result in the disturbance of important archaeological deposits. The barn in question is likely to be one element in a long building sequence stretching back over hundreds of years. In some cases it will occupy the new site, but often it will be found to have been preceded by earlier structures (this will be particularly true of the physically constricted moated complexes), and the evidence of these sites is crucial to our understanding of the origins and development of rural settlement in the county.

With this in mind, it is desirable that disturbance to archaeological deposits is avoided or kept to a minimum. The assessment of a likely archaeological constraint can be easily affected by commissioning a small archaeological evaluation (one or two 1m<sup>3</sup> test pits) to determine the extent and depth of modern made ground, undisturbed archaeological levels and the depth of the natural subsoil. It will then be possible to design the layout and the construction methods so as to minimize disturbance. Where an important archaeological site is identified and disturbance is unavoidable, there will be a need for archaeological recording to form a part of the scheme. Depending on the results of the evaluation, this may take the form of excavation of necessary groundworks archaeological by hand and/or the observation of contractors' groundworks to record any features or finds revealed.

## The Fundamental Problem

It is clearly apparent from experience that of all alternative uses residential conversion is the one which is inevitably damaging to the character of a barn. All conversions involve a measure of change which varies with the intended use.

There are two different approaches to residential use that have been applied to this problem:-

### (1) The House Character Dominates

Here the domestic elements are freely expressed and take their customary place, as in a vernacular house. Such features as elaborate chimney stacks, dormer windows or eye catching porches all tend to stress the house-like character. This approach appeals to many prospective converters as providing a practical house in an attractive farmland setting. The disadvantages are also apparent, with a complete loss of the barn's character and likely damage to its historic structure. Visually, this approach works best with a small barn, where its barn origins can be completely disguised. However, most barns are bulkier than a house and the domestic elements cannot be so readily eliminated. Such conversions appear as over-inflated cottages, a kind of awkward hybrid.

### (2) The Barn Character Dominates

This approach was described in 'Residential Barn Conversions' the previous Supplementary Planning Guidance.

Here all efforts are made to suppress the domestic aspects and to conceal, as far as possible, the necessary window openings. By applying this philosophy it is usually possible to achieve minimal changes to the structure and to retain the simple overall profile. At their best such schemes work well in the distance, when the changes are not readily apparent. At close quarters however the result can be alarming when the peculiarity of these contrived features can finally be detected.

The major disadvantage of this method is that it fails to appeal to the majority of converters. Usually they desire a more 'welcoming' building with the familiar attributes of a domestic character.

Such conversions are often seen as 'less convenient', and the open internal layout and relative lack of windows and views are unwelcome features.

In practice many converters will reluctantly pursue this minimal change approach as the only way to achieve a Listed Building Consent. Obviously such reluctance will tend to influence the process of discussion and to find an expression in the final result.

It has been noticed that barns often change ownership during the process of conversion and this usually results in further pressure for change. Barns also seem to change hands frequently after conversion, indicating their practical limitations and leading to requests for a further round of alterations.

It can be seen that the best barn conversions have only occurred where the circumstances have been near to ideal. A skilled architect is obviously required together with an excellent contractor, but the clients role is vital. Such an individual will value the building as an historic barn and will wish to alter it as little as possible. In addition our perfect barn converter will employ first rate specialists and will be prepared to put up with a measure of inconvenience. The very small number of such enthusiasts (with adequate means) is evident when examining the recent house conversions.

The following notes identify some of the more prevalent detailed problems:-

#### Observations on More Detailed Aspects of Residential Conversions

##### (a) Unsuitable Changes to Setting

Although it is possible to achieve some measures of screening by design, the usual items of a domestic curtilage are clearly a problem. Washing lines, oil tanks, swimming pools or climbing frames are thought necessary or desirable, but are most decidedly 'out of place' in the environs of a barn. Most people's idea of a garden is also inappropriate with many

converted barns, sitting in a sea of cupresses, neatly mown lawns and little geometrical beds of flowers and shrubs. Other 'clip on extras' such as conspicuous burglar alarms, coach lamps or even full size street lamps are not unknown and effectively destroy a farmyard feel. All these items are obviously outside of planning control, but some features that are within control give rise to problems. Screen walls and gates may look suitable, drawn at a small scale, but the execution is seldom without its pitfalls. So often the result has been a fatal pretty-fying with changes of material, inappropriate detailing and a complete lack of that utilitarian simplicity which is the customary attribute of the vernacular farmyard.

(b) External Cladding

Although some success has been secured in achieving the recladding of barns with their original materials some difficulties have arisen. All too often replacement weatherboarding has been far too small in section and far too neatly arranged with a resultant loss in scale and character. In a few examples, converters have determined to creosote the boarding rather than tar it. Thus, in one part of the county these 'ginger' barns are much in evidence distorting the vernacular tradition. In one classic case the rendered parts of a barn were painted bright pink, a solecism vigorously defended by the converter!

Roofs have presented less difficulties but the use of old pantiles and pegtiles of the Cambridgeshire colour has caused some concern.

(c) New Door and Window Openings

Even after applying great care in siting these elements are initially damaging to a barns character. Any first floor windows will imply internal sub-divisions, and a group of small openings, bathrooms and toilets. The relationship of window openings to the form of a building has always been a subtle architectural task. Disposing a pattern of openings on a simple rectangular box poses a quite impossible task which can defeat the finest architectural minds. Thus it is not at all surprising that barns look so odd where an arbitrary pattern of holes puncture a simple homogeneous form.



The tendency to make use of standard, off-the-peg windows is also unfortunate, in that they appear unduly domestic and lacking in appropriate detail.

Concentrating the glazing in the old waggon door openings is a simple way of avoiding damage to the building's fabric. Nevertheless, this does present visual problems in avoiding 'scale' discrepancies with other, smaller openings.

Painting all doors and window frames black makes them much less evident, but cannot be expected to conceal the basic faults. When attempting to minimise all signs of change scrupulous care is required with all the details. Unless the new elements are well proportioned and suitably shaped they are unduly prominent against the simple plain background. In this situation a single badly placed ventpipe can assume a ludicrous self importance. Experience has shown that a well considered drawing can still lead to a coarse and ill proportioned building due to the lack of adequate site supervision. The achievement of careful day-to-day site guidance and supervision is beyond the scope of the planning authority and is more often than not totally absent due to the lack of suitably qualified staff.

The previous Supplementary Planning Guidance argues strongly against all forms of roof windows. Dormer windows present an unduly domestic effect and rooflights reflect the sky and are an instantly recognisable late C20 artifact. However, in practice it has proved difficult to restrict the odd rooflight, with a damaging effect on the overall appearance. Larger areas of 'patent glazing' have been suggested and have occasionally been included in successful applications. In one completed building this became a row of rooflights, and in another, an inappropriate row of dormer windows! This patent glazing concept seemed to offer a useful alternative, but has so far proved unpalatable.

(d) Existing Timber Frames

The retention of the existing timber frame is perhaps the most obvious success of the present approach. In most converted barns a great deal has remained intact, reflecting the importance given to this aspect in the

Supplementary Guidance. However, there have been some notable exceptions where frames have been unsuitably filled with blockwork, structural timbers needlessly removed, or even the frame reinforced with structural steelwork. More in evidence is the loss of characterfull ancillary features such as doors, fittings and other original details.

(e) The Interior

Barns are important historic buildings and changes to their interiors are of public concern. It is suggested that the interiors of the barns so far converted are generally even less satisfactory than their external appearance. Efforts to require at least one large unsubdivided space has met with increasing success. The majority of recent examples show the value of this approach but provide only a shadow of the former spatial glory. The difficulties arise out of other, less easily controlled, aspects which also require careful treatment. The general standard of detailed design is seldom adequate and has produced nightmarish results. This seems again to arise where a conventional domestic attitude rubs shoulders with the robust timber structure. Without skilled design the two are incompatible, and that level of design skill seems rarely available. Staircases seem to give great problems and are usually far too fussy and encumbered with inappropriate 'historic' detail. An elaborate brick fireplace can be found in many barn conversions and is usually in dubious taste. A particularly disagreeable feature often seen is a very large room with a normal flat ceiling of domestic height, which inevitably appears quite painfully claustrophobic.

(f) Chimney Stacks

The present Supplementary Guidance discourages the provision of visible external brick chimney stacks. The use of metal chimney flues is by no means desirable, but these certainly look more appropriate and are much less obtrusive. Sadly some have been provided with a shiny reflective sleeve which evidently destroys the visual advantages. Unfortunately the provision of brick flues has received some support and this inappropriate feature, which gives the building an immediate domestic stamp, is to be found in some areas of the county.

## Conclusions

It is evident that other observers both locally and nationally are also concerned about the damage caused by domestic barn conversions. Unease has been expressed in a number of national publications and one Essex Amenity body has strongly campaigned against such consents. Conversely, the Secretary of State has supported many proposals on appeal but may not be fully aware of all the difficulties encountered. However, investigators from the Department of the Environment have delisted some house conversions, on the basis that their historic worth has been seriously reduced.

It seems also to be the case that the ready market for house conversions has actually discouraged owners from finding less damaging uses and has diverted attention from this more justifiable exercise. There are uses such as craft workshops, storage facilities, light industry and community uses which might be more compatible with the retention of the architectural, historic and landscape qualities of the barn.

## POLICY GUIDELINES

- (A) THERE IS A PRESUMPTION AGAINST RESIDENTIAL CONVERSION OF ANY BARN WHICH IS OF ARCHITECTURAL OR HISTORIC INTEREST.
- (B) THE PROPOSED CONVERSION DOES NOT ALTER THE CHARACTER OF THE ORIGINAL BUILDING PARTICULARLY IN THE FOLLOWING RESPECTS.
  - (I) THE ORIGINAL STRUCTURE
  - (II) THE ORIGINAL EXTERNAL CLADDING MATERIALS
  - (III) THE INTERNAL SPATIAL CHARACTER
  - (IV) ALL ORIGINAL EXTERNAL OPENINGS
  - (V) THE SKYLINE SILHOUETTE AND ROOF PLANES
  - (VI) THE IMMEDIATE AND THE LANDSCAPE SETTING OF THE BUILDING

- (C) THE PROPOSED USE DOES NOT CONFLICT WITH AGRICULTURAL INTERESTS IN THE AREA:
- (D) THE PROPOSED USE IS NOT DETRIMENTAL TO THE CHARACTER OR APPEARANCE OF THE SURROUNDING AREA OR, AS THE CASE MAY BE, THE GROUP VALUE WITH THE ADJOINING BUILDINGS:
- (E) THE PROPOSED USE DOES NOT GENERATE TRAFFIC OF A MAGNITUDE OR TYPE THAT MIGHT BE LIKELY TO CAUSE ADDITIONAL TRAFFIC HAZARDS AND/OR DAMAGE TO MINOR ROADS;
- (F) THERE IS STRICT CONTROL OVER THE CURTILAGE AND SETTING OF THE LISTED BUILDING AND PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS UNDER THE GENERAL DEVELOPMENT ORDER WILL BE WITHDRAWN.
- (G) THE INTRODUCTION OF NEW ALIEN STRUCTURAL MEMBERS WILL NOT BE PERMITTED.
- (H) ONLY FULL PLANNING APPLICATIONS FOR CHANGE OF USE ACCOMPANIED BY AN APPLICATION FOR LISTED BUILDING CONSENT SHOWING ALL PROPOSED WORKS AND A COMPLETE STRUCTURAL SURVEY WILL NORMALLY BE CONSIDERED.
- (J) WHERE THE SITE IS IDENTIFIED AS BEING OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTEREST, THE APPLICANT DISCUSSES THE PROPOSALS WITH THE COUNTY ARCHAEOLOGICAL OFFICER AT AN EARLY STAGE AND TAKES MEASURES TO AVOID UNNECESSARY ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISTURBANCE.
- (K) WHERE ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISTURBANCE IS UNAVOIDABLE ARRANGEMENTS SHOULD BE MADE FOR AN ADEQUATE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD TO BE MADE IN ADVANCE OF THE WORKS.

By the implementation of the policies which have been suggested building owners can be encouraged to retain their barns in agricultural use or to seek alternative uses less damaging than residential. In truth people do not want to live in barns, but rather use the conversion of a barn and the "saving of an historic building" as an excuse for a new dwelling where, in other circumstances, planning policies rule against a new house. Such proposals affecting historic farm buildings should be resisted as they will inevitably result in an unacceptable degree of damage to the character of the building and its setting.

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