

Exmoor Farmyards

The severe winters and wet summers, which are characteristic of English upland regions like Exmoor, limited the potential for arable cultivation and created an economy based on rearing livestock. The farming year on Exmoor therefore required seasonal movement of animals to make maximum use of grass growth during the summer months and to provide the livestock and cultivated crops with shelter from Exmoor's climate during the winter months. These harsh conditions and changing seasonal requirements created a distinctive type of farmyard on Exmoor during the second half of the 19th century.

The farmyards were clearly influenced by the model farms of the mid-19th century whose buildings were arranged in a logical sequence to maximise output. The larger storage buildings were often positioned to provide the uncovered yards with added protection from the elements. The upland topography was utilised in the form of bank barns which were terraced into the hillside so that the upper floors could be entered from ground level and the lower floor from the yard. The steep slopes provided a sufficient head of water for waterpower to be harnessed to drive the threshing machines and chaff cutters vital for turning the summer crops into manageable lengths for cattle and horse feed.

The hill farming year required the farm buildings to be adapted during the different seasons. The reconstruction drawings opposite show Ashway

Farm, Dulverton, as it may have looked at the end of the 19th century. In the summer the sheep would have been driven to the farm for sorting and shearing, making use of the cart store and upper yard and possibly buildings which would otherwise be in use for the cattle. Several Exmoor farmers testify to the use of threshing barns for shearing sheep (Lyshwell, Stetfold Rocks and Silcombe). In the winter the cattle were housed and fed in buildings around the main yard, including the shippens below the threshing barn in the west range and the granary in the north range. This was when the threshing machine and chaff cutter, powered by a waterwheel and launder, were used the most, preparing food for distribution to cattle and the horses stabled in the east range. During the winter, sheep were kept on pastures close to the farm and although Exmoor horn sheep could lamb outdoors, less hardy breeds needed lambing sheds. The only known purpose-built lambing shed at Exmoor is at Stetfold Rocks.

Farms like Ashway were also heavily reliant on horses, which had replaced oxen and ponies as the principal draught beasts on Exmoor in the 19th century. Shire horses were expensive to house and feed and could not be left outside like the native ponies so purpose built stables, such as those which form Ashway's east range, also became a common and prominent feature of the Exmoor farmyard.

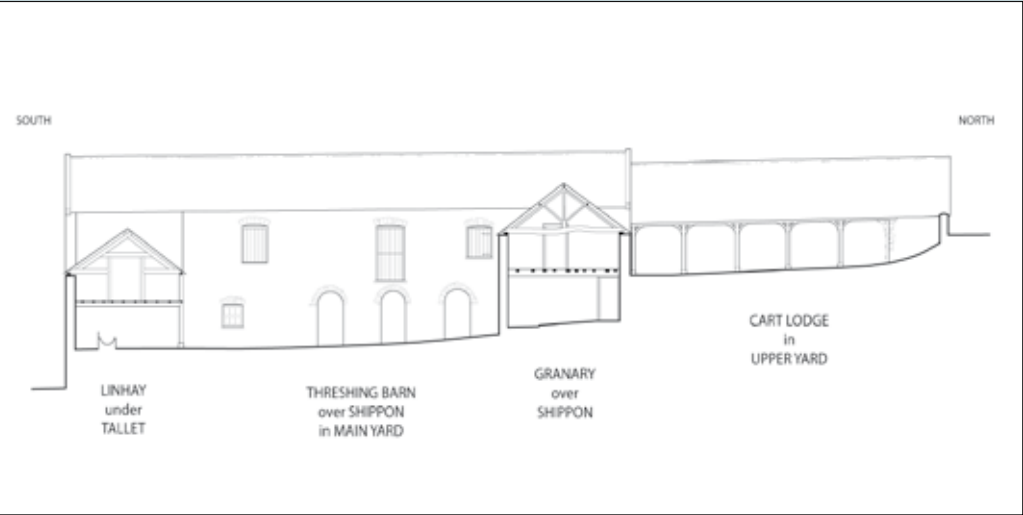
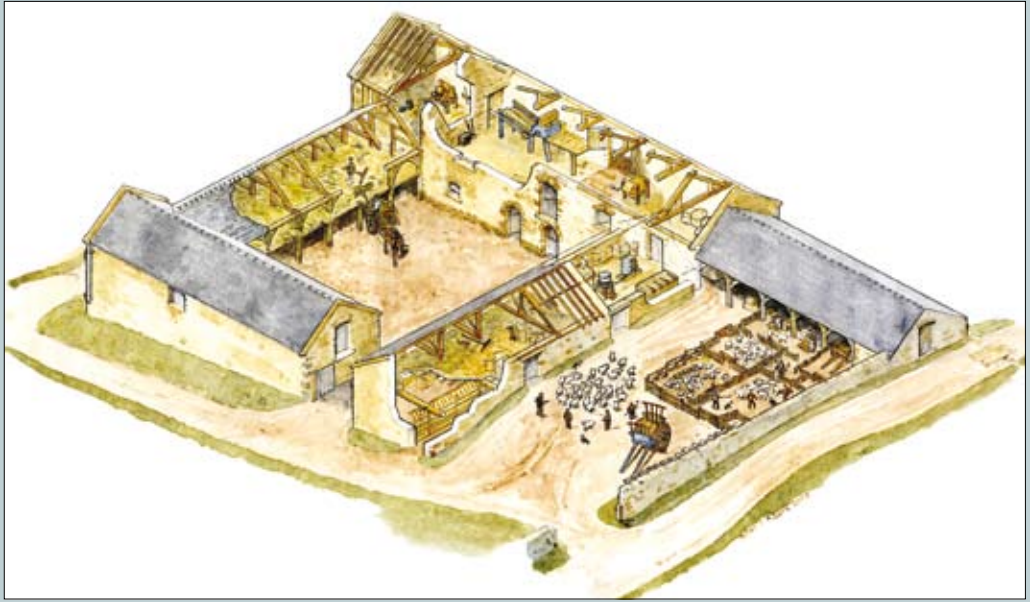


Figure A The east elevation of the west range at Ashway farm, Dulverton. The principal range of buildings at Ashway was terraced into the hillside to allow carts to enter the threshing floor at ground-floor level whilst still allowing cattle access to the shippin from the yard. The waterwheel pit and metal launder were situated behind the threshing barn and were replaced as the farm's motive power by a tractor in the 1960s.



Figures B and C Reconstruction drawings of the yard at Ashway during the summer and winter seasons. The new yard was arranged to give protection to livestock and crops from Exmoor winters and enable fodder to be distributed efficiently under cover.

