

---

## COTSWOLD BARNES

*by Dylan Fee*

Traditionally constructed barns are an important part of the Cotswolds' built heritage. Most of the barns standing today date from the 1600s, although some remain from as early as the 14th and 15th centuries, often with monastic links. Little evidence exists to suggest that barns were built long before this, although granaries have been archaeologically identified in Roman Britain.

Barns have been relatively well preserved because of their strong construction in oolitic limestone, those whether of creamy greys and browns or brighter yellow hues, depending upon where the stone was quarried. Thus the barns blend into the environment and form part of an architectural heritage. This is recognised by the Cotswold District Council, which in the 1978 Structure Plan, placed emphasis on their preservation:

*"In Gloucestershire there is a wide range of buildings scattered throughout the rural landscape, sometimes standing in isolation, that often contribute much to the traditional character of the landscape. Tithe barns in particular have architectural and historical importance, but more mundane buildings or groups often perform a visually significant role."*

Although they vary in size, Cotswold barns are remarkably similar in design. The standard form is a long rectangle, the width limited by the need to support the heavy stone tiled roof. The main doors are found in large porches at the centre of the building on both sides, the porch gables often reaching the height of the apex of the main roof. It was through these doors that the cereal harvest was brought in to be threshed (when harvest was brought into the barn and beaten against the floor, the draught from the two opposite doors removed the chaff).

The multi-bayed, sometimes aisled interior, was in most cases once structurally unpartitioned, although it may have been sectioned-off later. The type of flooring depended on the wealth of the owner and the intended purpose of the barn; it may have simply been bare earth, but often a laid oak floor can be found, used originally for threshing.

The primary function of a barn was normally storage, originally of the cereal harvest; wheat for human consump-

tion, oats and barley from animal feed. Hay was also frequently stored for animal feed. In the early stages of farm mechanisation, barns were used for storing equipment such as chaff-cutters for the preparation of animal feed. Some barns retained their threshing function up to the end of the 19th century, although this function was eventually displaced by mechanisation which made work easier and transferred it to the fields.

Despite their strong construction, after many years of neglect many barns are reaching a crisis-point in terms of structural decay and the possibility of repair. Last year (1988) there were more applications for planning permission to demolish barns than any other type of listed building.

Traditional Cotswold barns were designed to serve a mode of farming very different from that of today and are frequently no longer agriculturally viable. An old barn cannot compete with a purpose-built modern building in terms of convenience; it tends to have restricted access, making the manoeuvring of machinery difficult; it may not be ideally situated on the farm; it may have awkward internal spaces and it does not have the same flexibility of use.

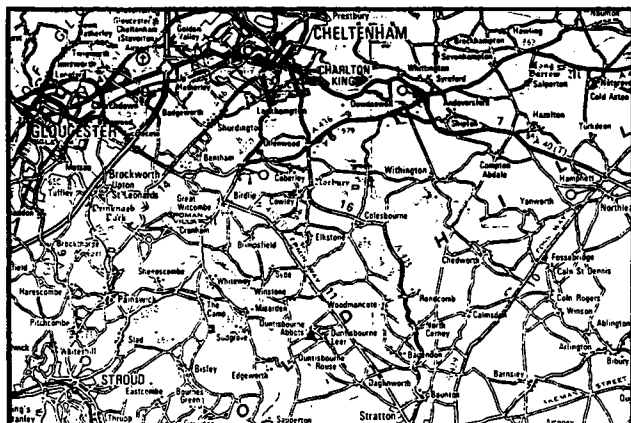
Thus changes in agricultural methods, described in Dr. Celia Miller's article on the previous pages, have resulted in many barns becoming available for a change of use unrelated to farming, and many that are suitably situated have the potential to provide a dwelling or accommodation for a small business.

Entrepreneurs with plans to establish or expand a business in a rural area are frequently limited by the lack of suitable workshops or small factory buildings, either for sale or to let. The high costs and delays in acquiring a site, obtaining planning permission and building can be prohibitive. The solution can often lie in making use of a redundant barn by carefully converting it to a new use. From the owner's point of view a wasting asset is converted to something of value. At the same time a barn conversion makes prestigious and interesting premises available to someone who wants to start a small business in a rural area.

More frequently barns are converted for domestic purposes. Much of the Cotswold countryside is protected from development on the grounds of "outstanding natural beauty", or of "agricultural importance", so redundant barns with planning permission have become attractive as potential homes, with both character and great individuality.

### A SAMPLE STUDY

In recent years there have been many barn conversions scattered across the Cotswolds. To facilitate a more detailed study a sample area of the Cotswolds has been selected covering 14 parishes and spanning an area of 17,418 hectares, its centre being located about 25km south east of the city of Gloucester.



*Study area for barn conversions*

There are about 140 traditional Cotswold barns within this area, 30 of which have been converted to some alternative use. Out of these, only three have been converted for commercial purposes - the remainder have been converted to homes.

Most of the barn conversions within the sample area have been tastefully converted by the joint work of architects in conjunction with Cotswold District Development Control planners. However, if the exterior has been made too elaborate, or if extra windows have been added, this can alter the character of the building - barns are essentially plain, unelaborate buildings, and sensitive conversion is needed to save their eventual partial or complete dereliction.

Several important factors determine the suitability for conversion, such as the size, condition and architecture of the barn, and within the sample area of the Cotswolds taken, the location of the barn has a degree of influence as to whether the barn is liable to be converted. In fact statistical testing shows that there are regions of the sample area that have more than their "fair share" of barn conversions.

### BARN CONVERSIONS

The number of barn conversions in an area depends upon the number of barns in that area; thus parishes which are barn-rich also tend to be conversion-rich. For example, Great Rissington parish has 17 barns, 7 of which have been converted. Hampnet parish has four barns and no conversions.

Further investigation reveals that the position of the barn relative to the farm and other buildings is relevant in determining that barn's potential for conversion. Should the barn be within a group of farm buildings, such as the farmhouse, other barns or outbuildings, then a barn conversion is unlikely to occur. It may be that the barn is still required for agricultural purposes such as the occasional storage of machinery or shelter of animals. The farmer may feel that other people working or living in close proximity to the farmhouse would be an infringement of privacy; conversely, potential purchasers of the barn may feel that being near to the farmhouse infringes on their privacy. Often a farm environment may not be attractive or suitable for the intended purpose of conversion.

Within the sample area, 80% of barn conversions have been found within villages. The underlying reason for this is that there are more barns per unit area in villages than in the open countryside. One would also expect that the amenities found within some villages (post office, shops, school), and the social benefits which a small community has to offer may attract potential purchasers.

The declared policy of the Cotswold District Council is that conversions are preferably located in villages; a recent policy document states: "Within and immediately adjoining existing settlements there will be a presumption in favour of conversion of redundant farm buildings to alternative uses".

Accessibility to a public highway is also an important determinant to whether a barn will be converted. Inaccessible barns will tend to remain unconverted. If converted for commercial purposes, direct access to a public highway may be essential since the provision of a new access road to an isolated barn may be expensive.

Within the sample area, 63% of barn conversions occurred within 30m of a public highway, although in several cases longer access tracks have been constructed at extra expense.

Cotswold District Council planning policy states that: "The conversion to residential use of a barn ... will not normally be permitted if ... the building is situated in an isolated location without close or direct access to a public highway ..."

The degree of shelter a particular barn has from the elements is also relevant - field work confirms that barn

conversions have been in sheltered locations, not greatly exposed to the elements (particularly the north east wind) as this is generally more appealing to potential residents, and may reduce heating costs. Besides, planning policy is that permission will not normally be granted if the "building is in a prominent or exposed location where conversion to residential use would be detrimental to the character and quality of the landscape".

Scenic value is a rather subjective factor influencing the location of barn conversions. One would expect such conversions only to occur in visually attractive areas. With commercial use, attractive surroundings may enhance a company's image, and create a more pleasant environment in which to work. However, within the sample area it is generally true that barns in unattractive settings have not been converted.

In summary, the five main factors that influence the location of barn conversions in the sample area have been:

- the distribution of barns
- the position of the barn
- accessibility to the public highway
- the degree of exposure and visual prominence of the barn
- the visual appeal of the barn and surrounding area.

No attempt has been made to rank these factors in order of

importance, due to their interrelated nature. Each factor is influenced by one or more other factors.

Surprisingly the Cotswold District Council does not seem to have had so far a great deal of influence in regulating the number of barn conversions. During the past ten years only two applications to convert barns in the sample area have been refused on the grounds that the proposed conversion would be detrimental to the character and quality of the landscape. However, early in 1989 applications for permissions to convert barns were resubmitted, and it is possible that consent will be granted. Further investigation into the significance of planning policy supports this view. Cotswold District Council policy "discourages the conversion of barns in the open countryside. However, applicants often appeal to the Department of the Environment when such applications are refused. Increasingly the Council loses the appeal, and permission is granted".

Should the present trend of converting barns continue, within a relatively short period of time there will be few traditional Cotswold barns remaining in their original form. However, if the alternative to conversion is dereliction, perhaps sympathetic conversion is the only way of preserving these interesting and unique buildings from the local agricultural heritage for future generations.



*Barn conversion in progress*