

Barn Conversions in the Yorkshire Dales National Park

A few years ago, a rare opportunity arose to monitor a potentially significant change in the landscape of the Yorkshire Dales National Park, arising from an increase in barn conversions to dwellings. Now incorporated into the new Local Plan, the new policy addresses the government's insistence that NP authorities relax planning constraints on barn conversions.

The authority faces several difficulties, many of them common to rural areas across the country, such as the closure of schools, shops and other services. These planning issues were discussed in more detail in the Winter 2018 issue of the Review, but key factors are a low wage economy, combined with relatively high house prices driven up by external demand. This makes it difficult for local people to get into the housing market. While there is clearly a need for affordable housing, housing associations and developers are not taking the allocated sites, which are often small and in remote places offering marginal viability. Barn conversions could be part of the solution, but they tend to be complex, slow and unpredictable in their timescales, and expensive.

The Yorkshire Dales National Park has unique and internationally important landscapes of stone walls and field barns, created by livestock farmers and miners with smallholdings over several centuries. These are key to the special qualities of the

national park. More specifically, Swaledale and Arkengarthdale were designated as a Conservation Area, the first time this level of protection has been extended to historic assets on a landscape scale.

Finding ways of maintaining the estimated 4,500 barns, which are largely unsuited to modern farming methods, has always been problematic. They vary from small field barns, simple in form and with few openings, to more substantial structures. Many contain valuable historic features revealing how they were built and used. Their value as historic assets is considerable, and goes far beyond the very few that are designated as Listed Buildings.

Agri-environment schemes have provided some resources, notably the Pennine Dales Environmentally Sensitive Areas scheme, which ran from 1998 till 2004, and brought over £3.5m to barn restoration. But now there is only uncertainty about future agri-environment schemes once the UK leaves the European Union.

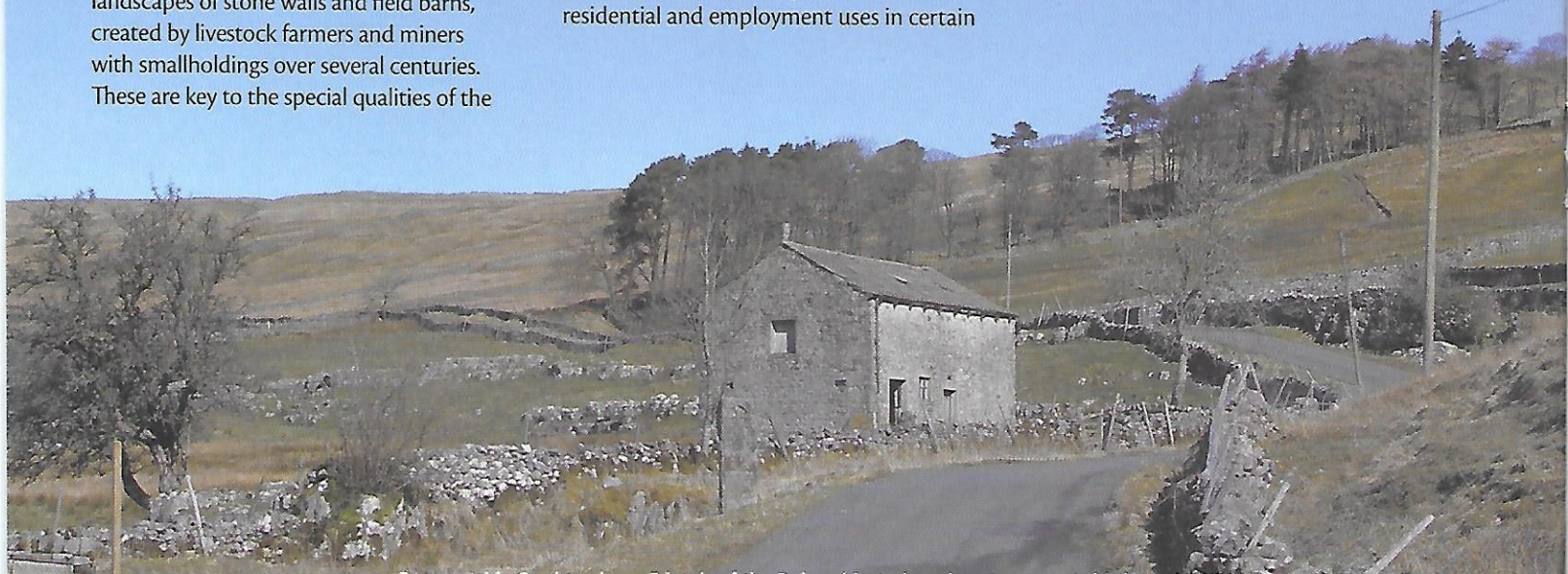
The review of the Local Plan gave rise to much debate, and eventually three linked policies were included. Policy L1 covers the conversion of traditional buildings that are designated Listed Buildings or are considered to be heritage assets. L2 is a strategic spatial planning policy, allowing conversions to residential and employment uses in certain

locations – within existing settlements, building groups or suitable roadside locations (within 50m). Dwellings are limited to 'local occupancy' or holiday lets. Policy L3 ensures that proposals will not be allowed where they undermine the architectural and historic character of the building and its landscape setting.

The new policy is aimed at securing the long-term future of traditional buildings while conserving their intrinsic historic interest and value; it is a conservation policy. It is not a housing policy, although it will undoubtedly contribute to the Authority's target of 55 new dwellings per annum.

Over 100 applications have now been received, and over 60 of these have been approved, but even after three years only three have been completed. Many of the applications are for barns that are within hamlets or farmsteads. Some, however, are out in open countryside and have given rise to considerable debate and disagreement.

Tug Gill Lathe, lying between Kettlewell and Starbottle, was originally refused by the Planning Committee, but allowed on appeal. FOTD lodged a formal complaint with the Inspectorate, as it was considered that the Inspector's assessment failed to acknowledge the special qualities of the national park.





Low Oxnop Barn near Gunnerside: YDNPA approved an application for conversion

A particularly contentious proposal was the proposal to convert a small field barn outside the village of Oughtershaw, to which FOTD objected, largely on the basis that the proposed extension was excessively large and did not maintain the integrity of the barn. This was also the view of the planning officers, but the members of the Planning Committee decided to approve the application. FOTD considered seeking a judicial review of the decision, as it did not meet the requirements of all three of the linked policies. Legal advice supported this view, but with very limited resources and a possible risk of losing, it was reluctantly decided not to pursue this.

Barn conversions raise many questions:

- Do they conserve the buildings, or is there an adverse impact on their historic character?
- With the large number of applications, will there be an unacceptable impact on landscape character, a 'suburbanisation' of a rural area?
- Will they rejuvenate small communities, or simply provide more holiday lets?
- Will they lead to more local trade, a boost to local economies, or create more traffic, more demand on already stretched services?
- There are genuine barriers to providing affordable housing – is this the solution?
- How will occupation be monitored, and breaches enforced?

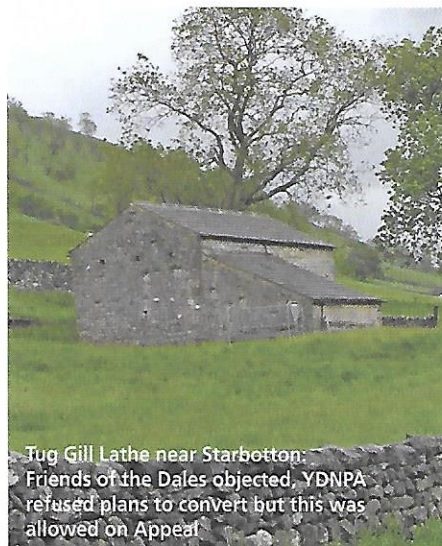
With only three conversions so far, what is of concern is that decisions are being taken when it is not yet possible to see the effects of the change in policy, or its efficacy in bringing benefits to local people and communities.

FOTD has called for an early review of the new planning policy, as it appears that inappropriate and irrevocable decisions are being made.

News from the meeting of the Planning Committee on 11 December has just come through – three of the more contentious barn applications have now been refused planning permission. This is an excellent decision. It demonstrates that the members of the committee are following their own Local Plan, and are taking the conservation of the national park seriously. The conversion of barns is not a solution to providing 'affordable housing' for those who need it and those on low incomes in an area with high house prices.

I wish to record my thanks to FOTD and PLACE (People, Landscapes and Cultural Environments) for supporting this research, and to the planners at YDNPA for their help in providing information.

Nancy Stedman, Trustee, Friends of the Dales



Tug Gill Lathe near Starbottle: Friends of the Dales objected, YDNPA refused plans to convert but this was allowed on Appeal

Planning Refusals

In late December 2018, YDNPA Planning Committee refused permission to convert three barns near Appersett, Hawes and Grinton because of the harm they would do to the landscape.

Before the meeting, officers warned members that they could be acting unlawfully if they went ahead and gave approval, because the work did not fall within their Local Plan policies. The proposals were considered to have a "significant harmful impact", thus failing to conserve the landscape and historic interest of the park. The officers said that granting permissions would leave the planning committee "in a position where it has difficulty in refusing other applications".

"I need to stress that we are permitting lots of barn conversions – 99 of them since 2015, against eight refusals," said YDNPA chairman Carl Lis. "But they do need to be in the right locations.

"Approvals for the three applications today would have led to landscape harm, in part because such developments would bring with them new tracks, car parking, lighting, overhead lines and the other facilities necessary for residential use.

"Some members argued that we should have approved the applications in order to help the applicants find an affordable home. I think it is not a case of deciding between looking after the landscape and looking after local people. The two must be taken together as it is the fantastic landscape of the park that provides the engine for the local economy."

"This is an excellent decision," said FOTD chair Mark Corner. "It demonstrates that the committee members are following their own Local Plan and are taking the conservation of the national park seriously.

"The conversion of barns is not a solution to providing 'affordable housing' for those who need it. While we appreciate that authority members are trying to sustain communities, we risk damaging the area's special qualities. We are acutely concerned at the significant harmful impact on the landscape and scenic beauty of the Dales posed by the inappropriate conversion of traditional farm buildings since the planning rules were relaxed. Most have not provided affordable housing or boosted the local economy as holiday accommodation."