

# About the Downs Barn

On this page you can read about the history of the Barn, how it was used in the past, how it was converted and how it is used now.

## Right: What the Barn site used to look like.

The Sompting Downs Barn was built in the early 1800s. It was a side barn attached to a threshing barn and yard. The site was then called 'Coombe Barn', as it is in a 'coombe', which is a hollow in a hillside.

This photo shows the barnyard (with threshing barn and side barn) probably about 1920, with tall elms behind, and to their left a holly tree which is still there.

Above the barnyard is Seventeen Acres Field, and Upton Down which leads up to Cissbury.

In front of the barnyard is Square Coombe Field.



## Left: Grain from these fields was threshed in the barnyard.

Before World War Two, men with horses ploughed Square Coombe Field in front of the Barn. The line of tall elms marks the farm track that is now the Sompting-Steypning road.

Above the trees on the left is Furze Field, with the gorse bushes that were harvested there for centuries. To the right is Steepdown hill, also

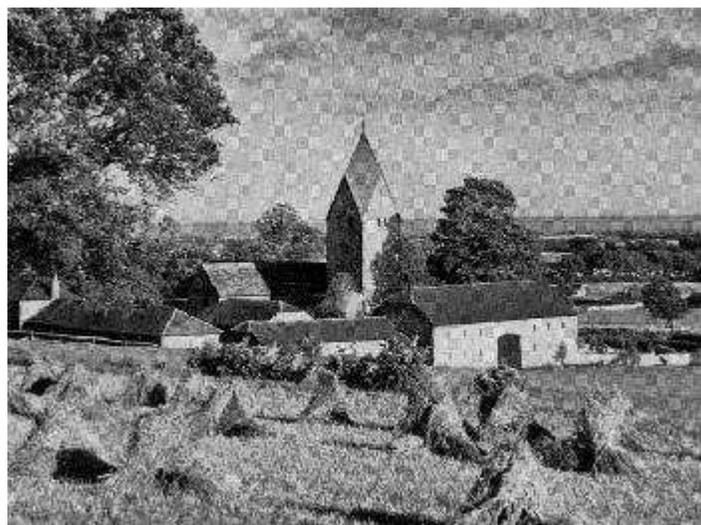
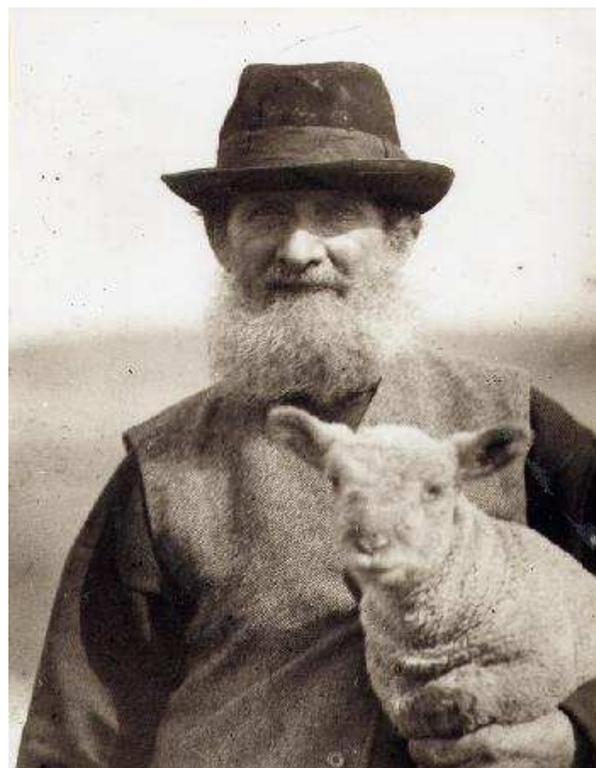


**Right: the fields were fertilized by the sheep.**

After ploughing came sowing. This barnyard site was built for grain crops - and cattle - rather than sheep, but it was part of an integrated farming system which depended on the sheeps' dung for fertiliser. So much so, that people called the sheep golden-hooved, or, 'walking dung-barrows'.

The sheep grazed the permanent grass on the hills by day, drinking water from the dewponds. They were watched over by the shepherds and their dogs, who walked with them because there were then no fenced fields on the high downs. At night the shepherds moved the sheep into folds on the arable fields, temporarily fenced in by wooden hurdles or hazel-rod wattles, to shed their dung there. The Southdown sheep were the favoured strain.

The shepherd in the photo on the right is George Humphrey, who worked on the Sompting farms and was photographed and written about in the books of Barclay Wills, a Worthing historian who knew and wrote about many of the old shepherds of Sussex.



**Left: sheaves of wheat barley or oats were stood in stooks before bringing to the barnyard to thresh.**

After reaping, the sheaves were stood in stooks to keep dry. (The photo on the left shows stooks on a neighbouring Sompting Estate farm, beside St Mary's Church, the Saxon 'cathedral of the Downs'.)

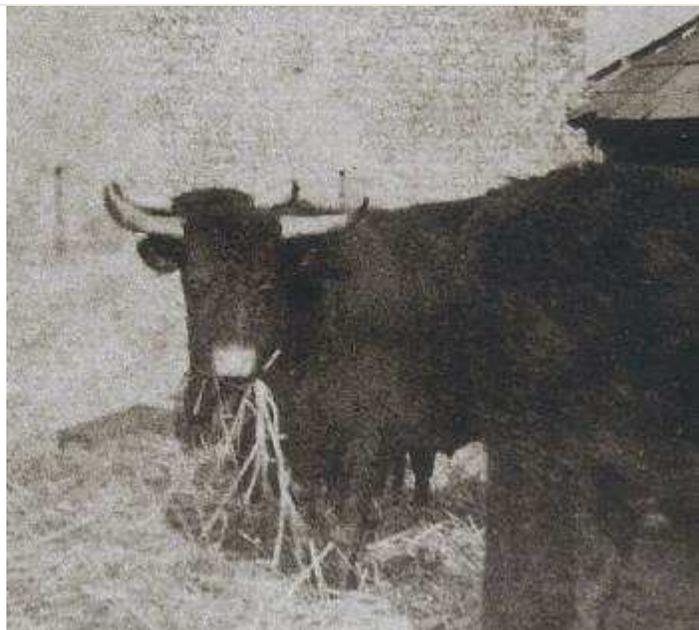
The sheaves were then lifted up on to wooden wagons to bring them to the barnyard, where they were built up into thatched ricks to keep them dry. There were several such barnyards dotted across the Sompting downland, so the wagons carrying bulky sheaves did not have too far to travel. Bringing the last sheaf in was the occasion for Harvest Home celebrations, drinks and songs.

**Right: threshing was done with a hand flail.**

Farm labourers worked through winter in the threshing barns. They thrashed the grain off from the straw, using a hand flail (a pair of wooden sticks joined by a leather hinge) - hard work indeed.

The thresherman on the right is holding his flail, and wears a traditional 'chummy' hat. His coat and 'frail' or food-basket hangs on the wall.

There is a thatched rick behind the barn. In front is the threshold. This is a plank that keeps the grain inside the barn while the chaff from the threshing floor blows out, and the straw is thrown out, over the threshold.



**Left: cattle were kept in the yard and side barn, feeding through the winter on the straw that was left after the grain had been threshed off it.**

On the left, Sussex cattle or oxen feed on the straw that is put out into the yard.

*These two pictures, left and above, are from our Binsted threshing yard near Arundel, about 1890 (Pethers family photo).*

The Coombe Barn yard and buildings were built at the same period to the same design, and the use would have been just the same.

**Right: machines replaced the hard labour of hand threshing.**

Later this was done with threshing machines powered by pedals, then steam, then diesel. This would often still be done at the traditional threshing barnyard sites, but other work had to be found for late winter.

On the right is a threshing machine gang having their break at the Sompting Estate's neighbouring Lychpole Farm.





**Left: the side barn that is now the Downs Barn gave shelter from the weather for cattle eating the straw, also for wooden carts, etc, and it was also useful for calving and lambing.**

This photo, also provided by Bill Lindfield, shows the barn soon after the main threshing barn was sadly destroyed by the Great Storm in 1987.

### **How the Downs Barn was converted**

The remaining side barn was not suitable for mechanized farming operations. It was preserved by being converted in 2008 by the Sompting Estate. A Sustainable Development Fund grant from the South Downs Joint Committee contributed an essential 15% of the cost.

So far as practical, natural and local materials were used in the conversion, and as much of the historic structure as possible was kept visible. The front wall is insulated with sheeps wool. Timber for the internal fittings is from larch trees planted by the Sompting Estate a few hundred metres away, on the Mountain, in about 1900.



### **What it is used for now**

The Downs Barn is used by the family and trustees, who own and manage the Estate, for meetings to do with agriculture and conservation, and as a base for monitoring the farmland, downland studies and practical conservation work.

The Downs Barn can also be hired by organizations, such as the Sussex Wildlife Trust and the RSPB, for environment education courses and meetings. Course topics include the farming and history of the downland, and its wonderful flora and fauna.