Assessing the Significance of the key characteristics of Historic Landscape Character Areas: a Discussion Paper

Background

The 11 distinct Historic Landscape Types in the East Devon AONB have been used as a basis to identify the Historic Landscape Character of the AONB. The primary dataset used was the Devon wide Historic Landscape Characterisation. The HLC provided two key pieces of information:

1. The present day historic landscape character present in the AONB.
2. The surviving evidence of the historical development of the area.

Each Historic Landscape Types has had a description prepared which aims to provide an overview which encapsulates the main features of the Historic Environment present and include both the archaeological and historical, the very old and the more recent.

These are designed so that they can be easily fed into the wider landscape character assessment and management guidelines and the management plan review process.

Understanding and articulating the values and significance of an area is necessary to inform decisions about its future. The degree of significance is determined by the historic assets or characteristics of which it is comprised, including but not restricted to statutory designations, and by the relationship between the characteristics.

The next step is therefore identifying the significance of the key historic environment characteristics identified in each Historic Landscape Type

Significance in practice in Historic Environment Management and Policy

Defining ‘significance’ has always been at the heart of the statutory heritage designation system relating for example to Scheduled Monuments, Listed Buildings, World Heritage Sites at an individual site basis or across wider geographically discrete areas. In these instances the site or place has to reach a defined threshold of significance to be designated as nationally or internationally important and thereby worthy of preservation. This threshold is often defined by concepts including rarity, age, quality, group value and intactness. It results in a short written statement of significance or value. A similar process is also undertaken by Local Planning Authorities when compiling local lists of heritage assets or defining areas of archaeological interest

Designation at an international, national or local level is an indicator of the importance of particular value(s) of a place; but the absence of statutory designation does not necessarily imply lack of significance. This point was picked up in 2004 by English Heritage when it published its ‘Conservation Principles’(2008) which amongst other subjects discussed the relationship between places and significance.

Heritage Significance has become also a key component of the formal planning system, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires local panning authorities to identify the significance of all heritage assets affected by a proposal. See case study one below.
Following this lead, increasingly local planning authorities are requesting the production of formal heritage statements or the consideration of such issues within wider Environment Impact Assessments. These ‘statement of significance’ are a summary of the cultural and natural heritage values currently attached to the area affected by the planning proposal and how they inter-relate, which distils the particular character of the place. They explain the relative importance of the heritage values of the place (where appropriate, by reference to criteria for statutory designation), how they relate to its physical fabric, the extent of any uncertainty about its values (particularly in relation to potential for hidden or buried elements), and identify any tensions between potentially conflicting values. So far as possible, they should be agreed by all who have an interest in the place. The result should guide all decisions about material change to a significant place.

It is also important to note that significance is also important not just in relation to heritage assets or places but also in understanding wider character, local distinctiveness and sense of place again a theme picked up in NPPF, and traditionally dealt with separately using mechanisms such as Landscape Character Assessment and Landscape Visual Impact Assessment. The contribution of significant historic characteristics as defined in HLCA assessments has a role to play here too.

Consideration of heritage significance beyond the formal designation systems and has always been an important activity in for example management of heritage, wider land management and strategic landscape management plans such as AONBs. However often this has not been undertaken in a rigorous manor or using a consistent framework.

What should a statement of significance for a Historic Landscape Type include?

Drawing on English Heritage’s Conservation Principles (2008) and the National Planning Policy Framework to determine significance there needs to be a consideration of:

- what is the heritage interest or values of each characteristics and why
- who values the characteristics, and why they do so
- how those values or interest relate to its character
- their relative importance
- whether associated features contribute to them
- the contribution made by the setting and context
- how the area compares with others sharing similar character.

There also needs to be a consistent approach. Understanding a place and assessing its significance demands the application of a systematic and consistent process, which is appropriate and proportionate in scope and depth to the decision to be made, or the purpose of the assessment.

A diverse range of views should be taken into consideration. The significance of the key characteristics of an landscape character type embraces all the diverse cultural and natural heritage values that people associate with it, or which prompt them to respond to it. These values tend to grow in strength and complexity over time, as understanding deepens and people’s perceptions of a place evolve.

To provide a sound basis for management, the people and communities who are likely to attach heritage values to an area should be identified and the range of those values understood and articulated, not just those that may be a focus of contention. This involves engaging with owners,
communities and specialists with a sufficient range of knowledge of the area, subject to the need for proportionality.

Understanding the importance of a area by comparing it with other areas that demonstrate similar values normally involves considering:

- how strongly are the identified heritage areas demonstrated or represented by the area, compared with those other areas?
- how do its values relate to statutory designation criteria, and any existing statutory designations of within the area?

Assessing Significance within the East Devon AONB

The AONB needs to identity and discuss the significance of each of the key characteristics of the Historic Environment present in each of the defined Landscape Character Types in a systematic and methodical way and needs to take into account the full range of values attached to those key characteristics.

There therefore needs to be ideally a two strand approach.

Firstly a Top Down assessment which

- Assess key characteristics of an area against local, regional and national contexts systematically, using standard criteria
- Determined in conjunction with a steering group and consultees

Secondly a bottom up assessment (which dovetails with strand two of the project)

- A dialogue with local people which derives from the meaning of a place/area for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory
- Possible mechanisms or frameworks to facilitate that discussion include recent approaches to discussions of sense of place and local distinctiveness

Some potential frameworks

However the assessment framework through which the AONB undertakes these tasks is up for discussion and depends on the end uses or priorities for which the AONB wishes to use Statements of Significance. These range from the rigid application of significance laid out in the National Planning Framework to more fluid community friendly approaches. The following case studies are presented as a catalyst for discussion.

Case Study One: Significance as defined in the National planning Policy Framework

As can be seen below the framework offered is to split significance into four heritage interests and to include not just a heritage asset’s physical presence but also its setting.
129. Local planning authorities should identify and assess the particular significance of any heritage asset that may be affected by a proposal (including by development affecting the setting of a heritage asset) taking account of the available evidence and any necessary expertise. They should take this assessment into account when considering the impact of a proposal on a heritage asset, to avoid or minimise conflict between the heritage asset’s conservation and any aspect of the proposal.

**Heritage asset:** A building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest. Heritage asset includes designated heritage assets and assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing).

**Significance (for heritage policy):** The value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. That interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. Significance derives not only from a heritage asset’s physical presence, but also from its setting.

The four heritage interests are archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. The practice guide to the now defunct PPS5 currently remains a material consideration in planning and discusses the meaning of these different interests

An Archaeological Interest is a belief that investigating an asset further might reveal more about our past

An historic interest is an interest in what is already known about past lives and events that may be illustrated by or associated with the asset.

Artistic and architectural interests are not defined specifically in the practice guide but relate to the sorts of criteria considered when considering thresholds of importance in designated heritage.

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<tr>
<th>Positive Features</th>
<th>Negative Features</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear relationship to formal planning mechanisms</td>
<td>Very tightly defined definitions may not encapsulate full range of significance of non-designated heritage</td>
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<td>Clear relationship to detailed heritage statements and EIA reports</td>
<td>Top Down Only</td>
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**Case Study Two: Value as laid out in English Heritage Conservation Values**

In this approach the significance of a historic characteristic embraces all the diverse cultural and natural heritage values that people associate with it, or which prompt them to respond to it. Conservation Principles splits significance into four types of value

1. Evidential Value derives from the potential of a place to yield evidence about past human activity.
2. Historical Value derives from the ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present. It tends to be *illustrative* or *associative*.
3. Aesthetic Value derives from the ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place.
4. Communal Value derives from the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory

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<th>Negative Features</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Included top down and bottom up approaches</td>
<td>• At variance with NPPF</td>
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<td>• Useful distinguishing features</td>
<td>• Mechanism for identifying communal value not defined</td>
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**Case Study Three: the Historic Environment Action Plan Approach**

First applied to the Cornwall approach this framework has subsequently been used by the Isle of Wight HEAP and the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs HEAP

The statement of significance for each area was split up into the following sections:

- Coherence, local distinctiveness, rarity and time depth.
- Typical degree of surviving coherence of historic landscape character.
- Features which contribute to the local distinctiveness of the area.
- Key components which are particularly rare.
- The extent to which layers of human activity can be read in the landscape.
- Typical surviving components.

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<tr>
<td>• Clear relationship to other AONB strategies</td>
<td>• No clear relationship to NPPF</td>
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<td>• Nuanced subdivision of significance</td>
<td>• Top down approach only</td>
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<td>• Avoids using value as a term</td>
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**Case Study Four: Defining Communal significance the Common Ground Approach**

Common Ground have developed a series of key concepts to encapsulate the idea of local distinctiveness and sense of place

Local * Meaning * Identity * Detail * Particularity * Patina * Authenticity

These could be used as the start of a framework to work with local communities to identify the importance they attached to places
<table>
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<th>Positive Features</th>
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<td>● Nuanced approach to community significance</td>
<td>● Bottom up approach only</td>
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<td>● Requires further work to apply</td>
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References


