Historic Landscape Characterisation and the Future of the Past

Pete Herring
Assessment Team
English Heritage

The future of landscape characterisation and the future character of landscape

Seminar, March 3-4, 2014

Kungl. Skogs- och Lantbruksakademien, Drottninggatan 95 B, Stockholm, Sweden
What did Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) aim to do in the UK?

‘Characterisation… raises awareness that the whole landscape is historic… all has historic value and all should be involved when considering a sustainable future.’

‘All those with an interest in the future of the landscape, urban as well as rural, will be concerned that its historic character, and the components that help determine it, are included in decision making processes….’
A spatial framework of historical understanding that can aid decision-making

A ‘thing’, where people could gather to debate the past and design the future
Power of Place. The future of the historic environment (2000)

— Everyone has a part to play in caring for the historic environment.

— Because people care about their environment, they want to be involved in decisions affecting it. And, in a multi-cultural society, everybody’s heritage needs to be recognised.

— The historic environment is seen by most people as a totality. They value places, not just a series of individual sites and buildings. What people care about is the whole of their environment. This has implications for the way we identify and evaluate significance.
Pursued further in the UK Government’s response to *Power of Place*:

**The Historic Environment, a force for our future, DCMS 2001**

3.17 The developing concept of character assessment is relevant in this context. Sophisticated techniques for assessing the character of particular areas are already evolving. These include the Historic Landscape Characterisation programme developed by English Heritage.

It identifies management implications and opportunities for change and development, using the historic landscape character to enrich the future landscape.

‘These assessments can play an important role in informing decisions on future sustainable uses.’
HLC developed alongside changes in historical and cultural geography:

- new approaches to and definitions of landscape
- more critical, fluid, subjective, inclusive and plural
Medievalist Matthew Johnson:
Challenging established romantic narratives of English landscape history encouraging alternatives

Prehistorian Chris Tilley:
Using phenomenology to turn objectivised past worlds into something more subjective, fluid, uncertain and thus richer

Swedish writer Karin Altenberg encouraging us to re-imagine how medieval people in Cornwall and Sweden moved through and considered their worlds, thus re-empowering people of the past
Landscape as ‘a constantly emergent perceptual and material milieu’ (2007)

**Landscape**

European Landscape Convention’s definition:
‘An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.’ (2000)
A landscape historian’s Boscastle

Mixed farming with scattered farmsteads and hamlets

Communal strips: in use, long enclosed, and removed

Medieval town, Boscastle, with market place and castle

Distant summer grazings around Roughtor and Brown Willy

Semi-natural woods and grasslands; low banks divide former clifftop grazing

A sheltered harbour difficult to access dominates recent history and is the focus of visitor attention
At Castle Boterel [Boscastle]

As I drive to the junction of lane and highway,
And drizzle bedrenches the waggonette,
I look behind at the fading byway,
And see on its slope, now glistening wet,
Distinctly yet

Myself and a girlish form benighted
In dry March weather. We climb the road
Beside a chaise. We had just alighted
To ease the sturdy pony’s load
When he sighed and slowed….

It filled but a minute. But was there ever
A time of such quality, since or before,
In that hill’s story? To one mind never,
Though it has been climbed, foot swift, foot sore,
By thousands more.

Thomas Hardy, poet, 1840-1928, knew another Boscastle
Landscape is a cultural product
But it is also culturally and individually perceived
Perception as much as fact
Though knowledge and reflection change perception
Landscape is fundamentally transitory, physically, and in how it is understood, perceived and valued.

Never an authentic, or traditional form of any landscape.

Never finished or complete.
Change, or the prospect of change, catalyses opinions about place, which again stimulate further change in perception.

Landscapists are well-placed to help society evaluate and guide the form of future change.

Retaining ‘legibility’ of the past and enabling our successors to build narratives, place and identity from the ever-changing landscape.
Historic: a questioning view of the past as seen in and from the present
Landscape: place, as created, perceived and contested
Characterisation: identification of essential or distinguishing features and qualities
Historic Landscape Characterisation Projects

- Map-based, but also with textual outputs
- Use Geographical Information Systems (GIS)
- Main sources are digitised modern and historic mapping
- Variable scale and ‘resolution’ – fit for purpose
- Databases record various attributes of selected polygons
  - Allows variable querying, searching, display
Harrioja, Norbotten
Skorped, Vasternorrland
Djaknebo, Vasterbotten
Hosta, Orebro
Long, Vastra Gotaland
Husby, Stockholm
Backeby, Ostergotland
Alby, Kalmar
Grevie, Skana
All images from Google Earth
Areas of Worcestershire in some way altered since 1945

Historic Landscape Character Type Broad Groups
- Civic & Commercial
- Communications
- Fields & Enclosed Land
- Industrial and Extractive
- Orchard/Horticulture
- Ornamental, Parkland & Recreational
- Settlement
- Unenclosed Land
- Water and Valley Floor
- Woodland

Copyright, Worcestershire County Council
Surviving time-depth in present landscape

Dynamic and Conservative Change

Copyright, Worcestershire County Council
HLC recognises multiple ways of valuing

• many points of view; expert, community, outsider
  • vary according to issue / scenario
  • values change through time
Hence two separate stages in the application of HLC:

1. Identify, map, describe and interpret

2. Apply different judgements about value or practical priorities in relation to different change scenarios and so feed more intelligently into different strategies and Action Plans
An introduction to the HEAP
The Isle of Wight
Historic Environment Action Plan

Historic Environment Action Plans

Background 1: Introducing the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Historic Environment Action Plans

Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

B1 Background Area Theme Supplementary Material

ISLE OF WIGHT COUNCIL
East Devon AONB Historic Environment Action Plan (HEAP)
Community led critique of ‘official’ HLC in development of a HEAP

Emma Rouse
Wyvern Heritage
and Landscape
emma@wyvernheritage.co.uk
Historic Landscape Characterisation – some uses

- Informing Landscape Character Assessments
- Upstream planning (assessing sensitivity; informing decisions, strategies, policies, master-planning, etc)
- Contextualising and stimulating more detailed character studies and research
- Public engagement and participation
- Land management
- Historic Environment Countryside Advice
- Partnership building
- Historic Environment Action Plans (HEAPs)
National, but local.
Now covers over 95% of England
drawn by GF, 3/2010, from GIS created by many LA HLC project officers 1995-2010
Sources of further information
Historic Landscape Characterisation – what has it done for us?

Can’t assess against established historic environment sector aims

Characterisation has itself redirected those aims

Contextualised ‘assets’

Changed emphases of heritage management – encouraged care for all heritage

Its provisional interpretation of landscape made HLC a spatially organised research framework.
  • Has stimulated investigation and extended identification and understanding

Has helped change attitudes to change – now less defensive in the face of it

Provides a spatial and conceptual framework for action planning, eg HEAPs

Maps and reports understanding at a scale and in a language enabling closer working with key partners – like communities, planners, agriculturalists, foresters and environmentalists.
Triciput – a symbol for landscapists

Of the present, but using the past, to inform the future

Thank you for your attention