

Local Character

Village, neighbourhood and green space

Introduced and compiled by **Dave Hooley** *Characterisation Team*

Characterisation enables local communities to manage change in an informed way.

Much historic characterisation covers large areas such as cities, counties and sub-regions. This indeed was the starting point for characterisation: the search for the big picture, the context that was often overlooked when dealing with monuments and buildings in isolation.

Circumstances, however, may often require more detailed examination of particular areas, especially when they are subject to redevelopment pressures. There is no reason why the rewards of characterisation – its emphasis on the commonplace as well as the special, and its focus on place and landscape – cannot equally be won at a more local level. Indeed, it is at this local level that characterisation should be able most effectively to express the views of the local community.

This section presents a few examples of work in this new area: community involvement in Greater York, new methods of assessment in Liverpool, a study of the dedicated settlement at Bletchley Park, as well as a report on the contribution to local character of public open spaces.

Greater York

In the mid 1990s, the Countryside Commission (now the Countryside Agency) encouraged local communities to produce Village Design Statements (VDSs). Residents described the cherished aspects of their local environment and how new development should be designed to maintain and enhance them. Since 1997, VDSs have been recognised as Supplementary Planning Guidance. In 2000, the Countryside Agency shifted its focus to the Vital Villages initiative, and it now encourages communities to engage more widely with the planning process by drawing up Parish Plans. Not only

do such documents relate to entire parishes, rather than to the main settlement within them, but they also go beyond design to consider issues such as employment prospects, the need for affordable housing and land management. Drafts of Planning Policy Statements 7 (Sustainable Development in Rural Areas) and 12 (Local Development Frameworks) indicate that both VDSs and Parish Plans are expected to continue into the future.

Take-up of both schemes has been patchy, however, and there has never been a complete audit either of the VDSs completed or of the kinds of guidance available to local communities. In 2003, English Heritage commissioned the York Archaeological Trust to undertake research into how the rural and semi-rural communities in the outer area of the York Unitary Authority are approaching the task. The reason for selecting York was partly that it is an area where the process had only recently started in earnest, and partly that it offered opportunities to see whether VDSs might be applicable in areas now within the main built-up area that still retain a strong local character and sense of community.

The early findings of this project indicate that the historic environment is generally perceived in terms of listed buildings and conservation areas (mostly, in Greater York, after 1700). While the importance of open spaces, field patterns and ancient footpaths is appreciated, communities do not always recognise the significance of the earlier phases of the places where they live, and they find the formative impact of those earlier phases more difficult to understand than that of more recent development.

Archaeological remains are generally not considered as relevant to design considerations unless they are prominently visible. In addition,

while both the historic and the natural environment are considered important in forming the character of places, the relationship between them is poorly understood. During the later stages of the project, consideration will be given to the appropriate form of advice on these and other matters, and the agency or agencies best suited to creating and disseminating it.

Paul Barnwell,
Head of Rural Research Programmes

Liverpool

The ODPM Housing Market Renewal Initiative (HMRI) proposes large-scale intervention – indeed, wholesale renewal – of a series of northern and midland English towns where low property values are symptomatic of a wider economic malaise (see pages 7–8). English Heritage is providing guidance on how the character of the historic environment can be assessed, so that renewal can take advantage of, not destroy, its value and regenerative potential. The guidance takes the form of two types of assessment, offering templates for further work that HMRI partnerships or local planning authorities may wish to commission from others. Both types fit within the broader pattern of HLC (see pages 20–2) and provide strategic information promptly to ensure that historical understanding informs management of change.

The first model – whirlwind assessment – is designed to cope with the sheer magnitude and urgency of the Initiative. Developed in Liverpool, it provides a quick overview of the areas where the most drastic intervention is proposed, and its purpose is to give a first view of the character, significance and survival of the historic townscape. The methodology is simplified: brief field examination (perhaps

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half a day for an area of one or two square kilometres) and documentary research limited to historic Ordnance Survey maps. This simplicity, however, can be deceptive: distinguishing what is genuinely unusual, significant or well-preserved requires judgement and breadth of knowledge.

The second model – rapid area assessment – addresses areas of demonstrable historical and architectural interest (which sometimes will have been identified already by a ‘whirlwind assessment’). Again the approach is streamlined, though visual inspection is more detailed, and the range of documentary sources consulted is greater. The additional depth allows chronology to be refined, historical narrative to be amplified and the social basis of architectural expression to be explored in ways that a purely map-based analysis cannot emulate. The purpose is to present a reasoned and concise account of an area’s evolution, together with observations on its current state and future value. An area-based, or street-by-street, narrative approach, emphasising the

Architectural analysis, supported by map and trade directory sources, can build a revealing picture of functional and social variations within an area. A simplified classification of house size reveals the persistence of villa enclaves, buttressed by the more substantial terraced houses, while the plotting of shops and pubs illustrates the infrastructural developments that accompanied the spread of mass housing.



Anfield Stadium, home of Liverpool Football Club, is internationally renowned, but its setting – a diverse late-19th-century urban landscape now scarred by dereliction – is on the brink of major change. A rapid assessment of the area has provided a framework for its historical development, highlighted features of particular quality and interest and will help to shape plans for renewal.

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main lines of development that give meaning to individual buildings and streets, is preferred to the building-by-building accumulation of data. It draws attention to individual buildings of distinction and important groupings of buildings representing the character of the historic environment, and to the building types, styles, materials and features that contribute to an area's character. Finally, it identifies smaller 'character areas' unified by a range of historical, architectural and morphological characteristics, so that policies can be tailored to the fine grain of the historic environment.

The model has been trialled in an area of Liverpool straddling the modern districts of Anfield and Breckfield.¹ Once vibrant, diverse and, in some quarters, affluent, this area now suffers from intractable economic and social problems. The character of the area is primarily residential, but although most surviving buildings date from the second half of the 19th century, they are far from homogeneous. The earliest houses were substantial, semi-rural villas built for wealthy merchants quitting the cramped, unhealthy centre of Liverpool. By the 1850s, more modest paired villas, often in regimented rows, became more common. From the 1860s, terraces were built on a huge scale, ranging from substantial three-storeyed examples to small four-roomed houses, filling nearly all the available land by 1900. The terraces were occupied by lesser merchants and officials at one extreme, labourers and craftsmen at the other, but the dominant group was Liverpool's growing army of clerks. With mass housing came essential infrastructure development: shops and pubs on the main thoroughfares, schools, churches and chapels, and dairies established by cowkeepers to supply neighbourhoods with milk. Some earlier buildings were swept away by the new grid of terraced streets, but others survived in genteel villa enclaves. This mixture of building types and dates is characteristic of suburban development across much of 19th-century England, but it also reflects factors peculiar to Liverpool, such as the proliferation of churches and chapels representing both English and Welsh denominations.

The pressing economic and social difficulties mean that heritage issues will seldom be paramount in weighing alternative solutions. The purpose of both types of historic assessment, however, is to help those implementing change. The assessments deal with qualitative issues, since these are fundamental to the health and vitality of communities, now and in the future. It is important to know which parts of an area may



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be lost without too much detriment or with positive benefit, but it is even more important to know which parts or facets of an area have the power to engage hearts and minds, and which are important visual assets, underpinning the overall character and rendering it historically intelligible.

Adam Menuge, Senior Investigator, Buildings and Landscapes Survey and Investigation

1. Adam Menuge and Simon Taylor, 'Anfield and Breckfield, Liverpool: A rapid area assessment of the built environment', English Heritage Architectural Investigation Reports and Papers, B/006/2004.

Bletchley Park

Bletchley Park is globally renowned for the contribution of its codebreakers to the outcome of World War II, the birth of the Information Age and advances in a wide range of subjects from mathematics to linguistics. Its evolution from a small cryptographic research centre into a global communications and intelligence hub, in addition to underpinning its wartime success, shaped the development of signals intelligence as a vital contributor to the global mission of Britain and its allies in the Cold War period and beyond. Finding ways to maintain the site and its significance, however, is beset with problems. Both English Heritage and English Partnerships, the government's regeneration agency, are working closely to ensure that an informed understanding of character can contribute positively to a sustainable future.

A considerable body of documentary and survey work recently completed by English

Buildings of architectural quality, such as the Anfield Road Board Schools of 1886, particularly where they are the focus for wider survivals of historic integrity, can be powerful beacons, helping to consolidate the fragile early stages of regeneration and underpin the long-term vitality of communities.

Heritage's Research and Standards Team now provides a much clearer idea of how significance, and its historical development, is reflected in the surviving fabric and landscape of the site. Home at its peak to nearly 10,000 people, and now located midway along the Oxford–Cambridge technology arc, it has rich potential to build on its past to inspire new technologies and innovations. It could thereby contribute to the economic and social well-being not just of the Bletchley area but also of the wider Milton Keynes conurbation, one of the ODPM's main Growth Areas (pages 6–7).

The development of a constantly evolving character-based approach has been underpinned by a Values paper, which, through distribution on the Internet and at public meetings, has been used as a focus for discussion by the site's diverse stakeholders, including the Bletchley Park Trust, the local community and those throughout the world with an interest in the site. This distils the complexity of the site into its broadest possible context, including its cultural values, context and historic character, and outlines the extent to which its landscape and fabric provides a tangible reflection of its major historic themes. The Values paper has contributed

to a Conservation Management Plan and a Masterplan, commissioned by English Partnerships and funded through the ODPM's Sustainable Communities programme, to provide the basis for the sustainable future development of the site.

The Values methodology has the potential to act as a preliminary step in the management of complex historic areas and sites, and can be developed at different degrees and levels. It contributes to an understanding of how research can inform development proposals, and it provides the link between cultural and economic values, the key to sustainable development.

It also stands at the core of a close working relationship between the South East Team, Characterisation Team and Historic Buildings and Areas Research Department, and between English Heritage, English Partnerships and other key players in both the Masterplan process and the inclusion of Bletchley Park as a fitting subject for Designation Review.

Jeremy Lake, Characterisation Team
Graham Steaggles, Historic Areas Advisor
Alan Bates, English Partnerships



Bletchley Park, with the late Victorian mansion above centre. The wartime huts, including the famous huts built for the decryption and evaluation of Enigma, are located close to the mansion. Clear from this aerial view is the extent of the post-1942 building phase, with its flat-roofed blocks. The parkland setting of the late-Victorian and early 18th-century planting within the grounds of the medieval manor is still traceable in the lake set in front of the mansion and the deer park extending to the north.

Planning urban green spaces

The ODPM’s Sustainable Communities plan and PPG17 (Sport, Open Space and Recreation) both call for a reversal of the decline of our urban green spaces. CABESpace has published guidance on preparing green space strategies (www.cabespace.org.uk). The emphasis is on an integrated approach to all aspects of green space provision and management; cross-departmental support from preparation to delivery is seen as the key to a successful strategy. The development and character of the historic environment should be the basis for planning. Urban green spaces have often influenced the character of a place and provided important areas for nature conservation.

Our green spaces suffer from split responsibilities at national and local government levels. There is also growing pressure on them as development increases. Understanding the significance of green spaces is a necessary first step in protection and management, but the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce found that a lack of information about parks and other urban spaces had contributed to their decline. HLC and land-use assessment are useful tools in developing an understanding of the green space character, and they can help to identify the most sensitive areas as well as those where opportunities exist to enhance local character.

In the last ten years, there have been a number of urban landscape characterisation studies exploring the townscape and its landscape setting. Studies such as those in Hampshire (Gosport, Fareham and Winchester) and the Thames Landscape Strategy were intended to help develop planning policies linking the local and the strategic landscape, and to understand the sensitivities and capacity for change.

In 2002, those principles of landscape character assessment were applied to the historic city of Oxford in the Countryside Agency’s research project with Oxford City Council. In looking at the quality of the whole of Oxford’s landscape, Land Use Consultants divided the city and its immediate hinterland into 52 character areas, describing each in terms of landscape quality, biodiversity value, historic integrity, inter-visibility, presence or absence of open space, re-creatability of the landscape/townscape, and sensitivity. The city’s small open spaces – playing fields, allotments and recreation grounds – were identified as one of the most sensitive areas.

This assessment can be used by Oxford City Council to develop strategies and programmes

Typology suitable for planning purposes and open space strategies		More detailed classification for open space audits and academic research
Green spaces	Parks and gardens	Urban parks • Country parks • Formal gardens (including designed landscapes)
	Provision for children and teenagers	Play areas (including LAPs, LEAPs and NEAPs) • Skateboard parks • Outdoor baseball goals • Hanging out areas (including teenage shelters)
	Amenity greenspace (most commonly, but not necessarily) in housing areas	Informal recreational spaces • Housing green spaces • Domestic gardens • Village greens • Other incidental space
	Outdoor sports facilities (with natural or artificial surfaces)	Tennis courts • Bowling greens • Sports pitches (including artificial surfaces) • Golf courses • Athletics tracks • School playing fields • Other institutional playing fields • Other outdoor sports areas
	Allotments, community gardens and urban farms	Allotments • Community gardens • City (urban) farms
	Cemeteries and churchyards	Churchyards • Cemeteries
	Natural and semi-natural urban greenspaces, including woodland or urban forestry	Woodland (coniferous, deciduous, mixed) and scrub • Grassland (downland, meadow) • Heath or moor • Wetlands (marsh, fen) • Open and running water • Wastelands (including disturbed ground) • Bare rock habitats (cliffs, quarries, pits)
	Green corridors	River and canal banks • Road and rail corridors • Cycling routes within towns and cities • Pedestrian paths within towns and cities • Rights of way and permissive paths
Civic spaces	Civic spaces	Sea fronts (including promenades) • Civic squares (including plazas) • Market squares • Pedestrian streets • Other hard-surfaced pedestrian areas

of work as well as planning briefs and urban design studies. It categorises green spaces by type, contribution to local character, accessibility, and by management issues and recommendations. The assessment also considers the contribution to local character of public and private trees, characteristic species and landmark trees, and it identifies opportunities for new planting.

Urban open spaces typology, from *Green Spaces, Better Places: Final Report of the Urban Green Spaces Taskforce*.

Jenifer White, Senior Landscape Advisor

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Land Use Consultants (2002) *A character assessment of Oxford and its landscape setting*. Prepared for The Countryside Agency and Oxford City Council. Unpublished report. (For information, please contact Virginia Hinze or Graham Steaggles at www.english-heritage.org.uk.)
 DTLR (2002) *Green Spaces, Better Place: Final report of The Urban Green Spaces Taskforce*. www.odpm.gov.uk.
 CABESpace (2004) *Green Space Strategies: A Good Practice Guide*. www.cabespace.org.uk.
 See also the Countryside Character network for guidance and papers at www.ccnetwork.org.uk.