

Characterisation-Based Approaches and Historic Landscape Management in England (An Overview)

Abstract: *The concept of Historic Landscape was developed in England in the 1990s and refers to historical attributes and remains in the present landscape with potential to inform about changes in a landscape's character. In order to identify these changes, characterisation-based approaches have been developed to study and interpret the historic dimension of present landscapes. The objective of this short article is to describe and discuss the ways in which characterisation-based approaches are affecting the management of historic landscapes in England today in its possible evolution in the future. The article argues that the adoption of current characterisation-based approaches implies the adoption of the ideas and principles embedded within them (i.e. time-depth; change; multidisciplinary approach; value-neutral methodologies; and sense of place) and they, in turn, affect historic landscape management in three dimensions: the nature of the historic unit to be managed; management focus; and interpretation.*

Key Words: Historic Landscape; Characterisation-Based Approaches; Historic Landscape Management

Characterisation-Based Approaches

According to Macinnes (2004, 155) and Turner (2006, 389), lack of adequate protection of historic landscapes in England continued until the early 1990s. However, the idea that the totality of landscape character and change needs to be dealt with has surfaced since the 1970s (Roberts 1979, 157; Lake, 2007, 29). As a result, a number of characterisation-based approaches have been proposed since the second half of the 1980s (Swanwick, 2004, 111; Lake, 2007, 29).

The first formal approach dealing with the issue of landscape characterisation was introduced in the mid-1980s and is referred to as *Landscape Assessment* (LA) (Swanwick, 2004, 110). While LA was not normally used in assisting heritage conservation (Fairclough et al., 2002, 69), it is considered a building block for further developments that have been employed for this purpose. One of them is the Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) which is a form of LA that puts the emphasis on landscape character (Swanwick, 2004, 111). The concept of characterisation and related terms that are considered by this approach are summarised in Figure 1.

<p>Character: A distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another, rather than better or worse.</p>

Characteristics: Elements, or combination of elements, which make a particular contribution to distinctive character.

Elements: Individual components which make up the landscape, such as trees and hedges.

Features: Particular prominent or eye-catching, like tree clumps, church towers, or wooded skylines.

Characterisation: The process of identifying areas of similar character, classifying and mapping them and describing their character.

Figure 1. Words related to landscape character (source: Swanwick, 2002, 8).

The idea behind the LCA is to identify patterns of elements in the landscape in order to classify and describe areas of either similar or different character. This approach is clearly different from the traditional focus on conserving isolated monuments and small areas. Indeed, this change in focus is evidence of the fact that the way in which historic management was carried out was starting to face an important change.

The LCA is still being used by a number of researchers and policymakers (see for example James and Gittins, 2007). However, it has been criticised because it oversimplifies the complexity of the ways in which the landscape is impacted by humans and fails to account for the historical dimension of the landscape (Macinnes, 2004, 156). In recognising these problems, other characterisation-based approaches were developed in the 1990s. In general terms, these approaches have incorporated some principles and ideas that have been debated since the 1970s and that are currently considered as desirable for historic management, namely: time-depth; change; multidisciplinary approach; value-neutral methodologies; and sense of place. They are described as follows.

Time-depth refers to the historical dimension of the landscape and has the potential to inform about historic changes such as sites' development over time and historical development patterns (English Heritage and Homes Communities Agency, 2009, 7). Given the key role of time-depth in providing this information, it is argued both that time-depth is the most important characteristic of landscape, and that archaeology is the most suitable discipline for this characterisation (Clark et al., 2004, 6; Lake, 2007, 33).

The idea of change refers to the changes in landscape's character caused by the interaction between human actions and the environment over long periods of time (Fairclough et al., 2002, 69).

Regarding multidisciplinary approach, it is argued that the landscape is in itself an integrating concept. This is why the academic community has recognised that the study of historic landscapes requires multi-disciplinary and holistic approaches (Macinnes and Wickham-Jones, 1992; Fairclough, 2004; Turner, 2007).

A potential problem that may arise when working with multidisciplinary approaches is that individuals might assign higher value to characteristics that are linked to their respective disciplines. The idea of value-neutral methodologies was introduced with the objective of preventing different individuals from placing greater emphasis on aspects of the landscape that are considered more important by them (Herring, 2007, 17).

Finally, the idea of sense of place refers to the unique historical trajectory in the landscape that provides identity. This identity contributes to the survival of the past in the present landscape and to maintaining a sense of continuity and belonging (Alfrey, 2007, 90).

The majority of the existing characterisation-based approaches have adopted the ideas and thoughts described above. According to English Heritage (2012a, 3) these approaches are: (i) Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC); Historic Seascape Characterisation (HSC); Urban Historic Characterisation (UHC); Historic Area Assessment (HAA); Conservation Area Appraisal (CAA); and Conservation Management Plan (CMP). The main characteristics of these approaches are summarised in Figure 2:

	HLC	HSC	UHC	HAA	CAA	CMP
Main focus	Map-based framework used to gain an understanding of the whole landscape highlighting historical land use	Maps an understanding of the cultural processes shaping the present landscape in coastal and marine areas	Approach used to assess small towns through an analysis of existing archaeological, topographical and historic sources	Method focussed on the historic built landscape and used to understand in a short period of time heritage interest of small/medium areas	Addresses the needs of England's designated conservation areas. It incorporates some form of HAA	Tool for understanding, planning and managing large sites such as historic parks and gardens
Coverage and landscape type	High level covering whole landscapes (e.g. Counties)	Coast and marine areas	Small areas	Small/medium size towns, suburbs, villages	Designated conservation areas	Management plans are set out for each distinct character area of the site defined by an appraisal similar to HAA

Figure 2. Existing Characterisation-Based Approaches (source: English Heritage, 2012; English Heritage, 2012b; English Heritage, 2013).

According to this figure, the main differences between these approaches are their coverage and their focus. However, they share in common the ideas described above. In order to illustrate this fact, a brief description of the commonly used HLC approach is given as follows.

The HLC is defined as “*the process of representing and interpreting predominant historic character across the whole of a region*” (Herring, 2007, 15). Its aims are to map the character and time-depth of the whole landscape, to manage change rather than protection, and to serve as a platform for understanding change by means of landscape characterisation (Lake, 2007, 28). This approach is aligned with the principles of accessibility, inclusivity (i.e. involving a wide range of communities) and flexibility underpinned by the European Landscape Convention (Finch, 2007, 50; Herring, 2007, 16). The HLC is based on GIS to map the landscape and used to create generalisations in order to understand patterns in the landscape in broader scales (Turner, 2007, 44).

Ways in which characterisation-based approaches are affecting the management of historic landscapes

The previous section detailed how current characterisation-based approaches have incorporated some ideas and thoughts that have been debated over a long period of time, namely: time-depth; change; multidisciplinary approach; value-neutral methodologies; and sense of place. As discussed in this section, the introduction of these ideas has strongly affected the means by which Historic Landscape Management is carried out. The main effects are on the nature of the historic unit to be managed; management focus; and interpretation.

The nature of the historic unit to be managed has been influenced by the idea of time-depth. That is, the emphasis of historic management has changed from a selective conservation approach of single monuments and small areas to a whole landscape perspective because historical patterns and historic dimension (i.e. time-depth) can be better understood when considering large landscape scales (Lake, 2007, 33). In this new perspective, historic characterisation is seen a fundamental exercise as it provides the basis for interpreting and understanding historic landscapes before the implementation of planning, conserving and management initiatives (English Heritage and Homes and Communities Agency, 2009, 6).

Regarding management focus, this focus has been influenced by the idea of change. That is, the Historic Landscape Management approach that has been implemented in England since the 1990s is flexible and holistic allowing change rather than keeping the landscape fixed¹ (Fairclough, 2004, unpagged). This is formally pointed out by Lake (2007) who argues that “*the challenge is to inform and even facilitate sustainable change based on understanding of the inter-related patterns of the landscape, settlement and architecture in response to a widespread demand to capitalise on local character and distinctiveness*” (p. 34). In this context the existing characterisation-based approaches that have incorporated the idea of change (see the previous section) serve as platforms for understanding change at subsequent stages by means of landscape characterisation in order to evaluate and assess the sensitivity of proposed changes (Fairclough, 2004, unpagged; Herring, 2007, 18; Turner, 2007, 46).

Finally, regarding interpretation, this term is associated with the ideas of a multidisciplinary approach; value-neutral methodologies; and sense of place described in the previous section. In terms of multidisciplinary approach and value-neutral methodologies, Historic Landscape Management in England has adopted a flexible approach in which the output obtained from a characterisation study is used in posterior stages as an input for further interpretation made by a multidisciplinary team. The work carried out by this team uses maps and GIS to plot gathered information on geology, landform, soils, vegetation, trees/woodland, land use, enclosure/field patterns, and settlement patterns. This information is then used to make decisions regarding, for example, agri-environment scheme targets, woodland expansion, and historic landscape conservation, among others (Swanwick, 2002, 3, 18, 21 and 22). Interpretation is supposed to be carried out in a democratic fashion in order to avoid biases in favour of determined disciplines. This is a reflection of the idea of value-neutral methodologies described above. However, this idea does not

¹ Some researchers call this form of historic management the *management of change* (Belcher, 2007, 27; Williamson, 2007, 68-69).

mean that the landscape is itself value-neutral, but that any interpretation has to reflect the value agreed by a multidisciplinary team or by those who will work with the results² (English Heritage, 1997, 5). This flexibility in terms of interpretation is demonstrated in the diversity of applications that have been carried out with the assistance of characterisation-based approaches. Examples of these applications are local planning, large-scale planning, community engagement, development management, conservation areas, and green infrastructure (English Heritage, 2012a, 25). Interpretation is also related to the idea of sense of place because it is a way of recognising significance and a sense of place defined by communities along with any value offered by experts (Finch, 2007, 51).

Current Criticisms

A number of criticisms have been raised regarding existing characterisation-based approaches that might affect Historic Landscape Management in the future. Some of them are described as follows.

It is argued that these approaches do not capture the complexity of the landscape and are used for political programmes seeking regional planning and development of an undemocratic nature (Austin, 2007, 94; Williamson, 2007, 64). It is also argued that different counties have adopted their own methodologies developed by people with different background making it difficult to compare landscapes across counties. Another criticism is that characterisation-based approaches map field or blocks but not linear features within. As a consequence, two blocks considered as different may have much in common when considering their linear features. A related criticism is that landscape characterisation is misleading because characteristics features are plotted in a plan as if seen from above. But in reality people experience the landscape from the ground (Williamson, 2007, 65). Finally, it is argued that characterisation-based approaches are supposed to be value-neutral methodologies for mapping material forms in the landscape. However, these approaches do not recognise subjective perspectives of landscapes constructed through perception rather than materiality (Finch, 2007, 51). In line with this view, Fairclough (2004, unpagged) argues that Historic Landscape Management should also include managing perceptions by means of knowledge.

Conclusions

To conclude, it is argued that a possible evolution of Historic Landscape Management in England will include methodological improvements of existing characterisation-based approaches rather than changes to the ideas and principles embedded within them. This prediction is based on the current criticisms described in the previous section. That is, most of these criticisms are focussed solely on methodological aspects of characterisation-based models. Consequently, it is anticipated that a possible evolution of Historic Landscape Management will include methodological improvements of existing approaches and management practices. In

² In this respect, the English Heritage promotes four broad sets of values set out in Conservation Principles through which a site or place should be interpreted, namely: evidential, historical, communal and aesthetic (English Heritage, 2012c, 9).

particular, the following is anticipated: more emphasis in homogenising methodologies in order to facilitate the comparison between landscapes across counties; extensions to existing methodologies in order to include linear features into the mapping process; an increase in the number of field visits during characterisation studies with the purpose of reducing to some extent the chance of making misleading characterisations; and the development of ways to manage perceptions in order to introduce subjective perspectives into Historic Landscape Management.

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