

# OXFORD CHARACTER ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

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## GUIDANCE NOTES



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ENGLISH HERITAGE

# INTRODUCTION TO THE GUIDANCE NOTES

THESE GUIDANCE NOTES ARE PROVIDED TO ASSIST IN THE USE OF THE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT. THEY INCLUDE DETAILED DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS OF TERMINOLOGY USED IN THE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT'S SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRES AND PROVIDE PROMPTS WHEN USING THE QUESTIONNAIRES.

## INTRODUCTION

The Character Assessment Toolkit has been developed to promote understanding of the character of the built environment we live in and to help people articulate what is distinctive and important about that environment. The origins of the Toolkit stem from the need for those involved in the planning process, be it developers, professionals or the general public, to have greater understanding about the historic environment and the intricate layers that have helped form our city and villages. The evidence and understanding provided by the process will enable change to be managed in an effective and positive manner. By understanding what is there, informed decisions can be made on the impact of change i.e. the ability to accommodate change whilst sustaining the significance of a historic building or historic area. However, the Toolkit is applicable to any built environment and can be used to articulate the character or appearance of any area of the city.

### AIMS

- *Promote understanding of the historic environment and inform management of change.*
- *Help people engage with the planning system and articulate their opinions.*
- *To help generate an evidence base to inform the design process.*
- *Make it easier for communities to become involved in local heritage projects.*
- *Heritage Statements & Design and Access Statements.*
- *Assist in the production of conservation management plans.*

### STRUCTURE

The Character Assessment Toolkit is a suite of documents that can be tailored to the user's requirements. The 'guidance notes' give detailed definitions and examples of the terminology used. There is a 'survey questionnaire' that gives a structure with which to analyse the character of street or area. For those more familiar with character assessment techniques there is a 'shorthand questionnaire' that gives the user a briefer structure with hints of what to look out for. An internet based resource with links to further information also forms part of the toolkit suite.

The documents are designed to help people identify what features are present in an area and explain how these contribute to, or detract from its character. Character comprises a number of elements that combine to create the overall significance and value of a place or building. Not all elements are physical features e.g. materials, walls, windows, buildings etc; some are more sensory in nature calling upon an individual's emotions or perceptions of a place to create value e.g. personal or historical associations to a place or building, or smells and sounds, etc. They are also flexible, the terminology is expansive and it may be the case that only some of it is applicable to an individual area. Conversely an individual may identify character traits that have not been defined in the guidance.



## IMPORTANCE OF FURTHER RESEARCH

The Toolkit provides a snap shot of the character. However, character develops over time and is a result of many layers of influence. Further research using historical records is needed to understand how this character has evolved and how it may reflect the historic associations of areas, places or buildings with people, events and longer stories of the area's development. Sources of information for this research may include:

- *Local Record Offices and Local Studies Libraries.*
- *Local Historic Environment Records (HER), Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs) and Urban Archaeological Databases (UAD).*
- *Landscape characterisation studies.*
- *Historic engineer's plans and planning records.*
- *Local history and interest groups collections.*
- *Historic maps.*
- *Historic photographs.*
- *Census records and directories.*



*A wealth of information is also often accessible via internet searches. Details directing you to useful websites are available on the Character Assessment Toolkit website.*

## CHARACTER ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING POLICY

The importance of understanding the character and appearance of an area as part of development proposals is enshrined in the Local Plan and Core Strategy as well as national planning policy. The Toolkit enables the gathering of evidence to provide understanding of the significance of heritage assets, be they designated assets such as listed buildings, conservation areas or parks and gardens or un-designated assets such as buildings of local interest.

Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5): Planning for the Historic Environment (published March 2010) has put a greater emphasis on those proposing development that affects heritage assets or their settings to justify their proposals. Within PPS5 policy HE6 states:

*'Local planning authorities should require an applicant to provide a description of the significance of the heritage assets affected and the contribution of their setting to that significance. The level of detail should be proportionate to the importance of the heritage asset and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on the significance of the heritage asset.'*

*'This information together with an assessment of the impact of the proposal should be set out in the application (within the design and access statement when this is required) as part of the explanation of the design concept. It should detail the sources that have been considered and the expertise that has been consulted.'*

*'Local planning authorities should not validate applications where the extent of the impact of the proposal on the significance of any heritage assets affected cannot adequately be understood from the application and supporting documents.'*

The Toolkit can be used as an evidence gathering tool alongside analysis of historical documents and maps to provide information for Heritage Statements and Design and Access Statements.

# GUIDANCE NOTES

## SPACES

A 'space' is generally defined as being the gap between the built elements or landscape features and can include streets, public squares, gardens and parks, green spaces etc.

### FORMAL / INFORMAL SPACES

A formal space is a designed feature, such as a town square, an architecturally uniform street (e.g. St John Street, below), a college garden, a college quad, or the forecourt of a building.

An informal space is one that has evolved in an organic manner with no planned layout, incorporating a wide range of features that may not have a strong connection with each other and can be used in a variety of ways e.g. Blue Boar Street which is a space that has no uniformity in building lines, building styles and positions, height of walls, materials or road widths.



### GAPS BETWEEN BUILDINGS

The gaps between buildings are important in terms of providing opportunities for creating glimpsed views out of the space and interrupting the continuity of the built elements. Gaps between buildings can be accesses to rear spaces, alleyways leading to other spaces. Are gaps uniform, creating rhythm, as a result of planned development or varied due to more 'organic' development.



### MEANS OF ENCLOSURE

Enclosure can be defined as anything that encloses a space, i.e. giving definition to a place and can include buildings, walls/railings/fences, planting, etc. It is also possible to have various forms of enclosure within the same place adding to an area's more diverse character.



## BUILDING PLOTS

Building plots refers to the land the structures sit within.

How buildings are positioned on their plots is important. Are they built up to the frontage of the plot or set back? Do they fill the entire width, etc?

Is there a variety of plot widths along the street?

Do buildings along the street fill the plot in a uniform way e.g. a continuous built frontage, a more spacious layout or a combination of layouts? Is this the result of a particular process of development or use?



## WIDE / OPEN SPACES

Wide and open spaces e.g. a wide road such as Broad Street or green spaces such as Christ Church Meadow.

The space may be broken up into sections but the overall character is of a wide airy space, e.g. St Giles which is divided into parking bays which has an avenue of trees, clearly defined built edges and wide pavements.

## NARROW / ENCLOSED SPACES

Narrow and enclosed spaces are usually formed by a confined space between the building lines, often accompanied by tall buildings (3+ storeys). A continuous building line emphasises the enclosure. Height/shadow plays an important role.

An enclosed space is not just created by a narrow gap between two building lines, the space can be more substantial but due to a continuous building line and uniform scale of property, there is a clearly defined sense of enclosure to the space.

An enclosed space may be an intentional part of an historic design, such as a college quadrangle, or the result of pressure for development of available land.



## WINDING / STRAIGHT SPACES

What is the layout of the space?

Is it straight with clear views from one end to the other or are there pronounced bends in the layout creating a series of unfolding views and linked spaces?

Does this suggest the imposition of a planned street grid or the influence of earlier features of the landscape on subsequent development.



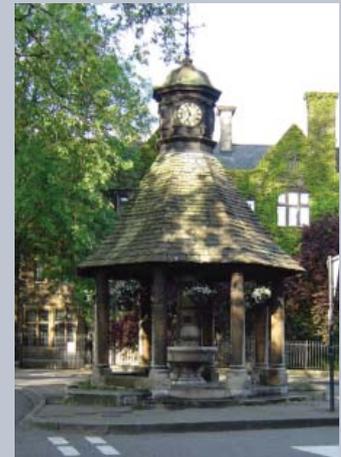
## RELATIONSHIP OF THE SPACE TO BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES

What is the relationship between the space and the built elements?

Do buildings form a major component of the space, creating a clear sense of enclosure or definition or acting as a focal feature?

Are buildings a secondary feature to the space or features within the space?

Is the relationship between built elements and space composite e.g. Radcliffe Square – the college buildings, church and Bodleian create a clearly defined edge to space but the Radcliffe Camera is the dominant feature within the Square.



## USES AND ACTIVITY

The way the buildings are used can impact upon the character and appearance of a place.

Buildings with active frontages such as shops, cafes and evening uses including pubs and theatres can create a vibrant and bustling street scene.

Commercial streets can be busy during the day but quiet at night.



Academic areas maybe quieter out of term or the emphasis of use may alter and they may become tourist attractions during certain times of the year.

Residential areas have changeable characters depending on time of day, time of year, location etc.

Is it a main traffic route or a pedestrian zone?



## PAVING MATERIALS

Road and pavement surfaces may form a significant proportion of the space and can have a strong impact upon the character of an area depending on the type and condition of surface. A pot-holed and patched tarmac road suggests lack of care and can be negative whereas a cobbled street may be seen as a more positive element with a historic character.



Road and pavement surfaces form a major component of a space, physically linking one side of the space to the other.

Materials have changed over the centuries but points to consider include:

Predominant surfacing material – tarmac, cobbles, flagstones.

Condition.

Type of kerb – stone, concrete, granite, iron.



## STREET FURNITURE

Street furniture can enhance or detract from the character, quality and appearance of an area. In assessing the contribution of street furniture, consider the following:

Is the furniture an historic feature of the place?

Does the space appear cluttered due to over provision of street furniture and signage?

Is it of an appropriate design/colour?

Is it located in such a position that it impacts upon the usability of the space?



## IMPACT OF TRAFFIC AND VEHICLES

Do traffic and associated traffic management measures impact on the character, significance and enjoyment of the space?

Is it a main traffic route?

Do delivery vans impact upon the usability and enjoyment of the space?



Does car parking have an impact?

Is there a traffic management scheme that impacts upon the appearance of the space? e.g. road humps, markings, cycle & bus lanes etc?

If it is a pedestrian only route, with vehicles having limited access, is there an absence of movement after the end of the working day that changes its character?



## USABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE SPACE

How easy is the space to use?

Is it a shared use space? e.g. New Inn Hall Street – does this impact on the way and ease with which the space is used?

Are there obstacles along the pavements that hinder use; e.g. cycles locked to railings, advertising boards etc?

Does the road surface preclude access to certain users e.g. wheelchairs, prams, cycles etc.

How does this impact upon the character of a place?



## BUILDINGS

A building is any human-made structure used or intended for supporting or sheltering any use or occupancy. The variety of building types and forms as well as the materials used in their construction, their finer details, their use and their relationship with each other can have a significant affect on the character of an area.

### CONTRIBUTION OF BUILDINGS TO THE SPACE

What is the contribution the buildings make to the space?

Collective contribution or group value due to uniformity of design.

Individual contribution due to diversity of design and materials.

Any historic importance connected to a specific building/group of buildings that increase contribution and significance through associative value?

Any distinctive construction methods e.g. a brick bond or polychromatic brickwork or use of a distinctive material?



### SIZE / SCALE

Is there a uniform of scale and size to the buildings in the street or does it vary?

Is there any conflict between buildings in terms of scale and size?



### AGE

What is the general age of the buildings?

Do they appear historic or modern or a combination of ages?

How does this influence the character and appearance of the street?

Is the street a historic routeway but the buildings more recent e.g. Queen Street dates from the 13th century but the present buildings date from the 19th and 20th centuries?



## MATERIALS

When analysing a space, individual buildings do not require a detailed description, it is their collective character and contribution to the area that is being considered. Where a specific building stands out either for individual design or use of materials (good or bad), this can be mentioned.

Is there a predominant building material?

Is there a wide ranging palette of materials creating a diverse streetscape?

Do the materials complement each other?

Is there uniformity in the range of materials?



## WINDOWS

Windows are often described as ‘the eyes’ of a building and make a significant contribution to a building’s design and character.

Do they appear to be original/traditional windows?

Timber framed, UPVC, metal framed, stone mullions?

Uniform or varied styles?

Traditional shop window or modern replacement?

When considering the contribution of windows, the upper storeys should be looked at too.

The main window types are:

Timber framed sash – frames that slide up and down.

Casements – Hinged windows that open outwards.

Fixed.



## DOORS

Doors also add or detract from a building and a streetscape as a whole. Original doors may have been replaced with inappropriate styles or ‘mock’ designs. The degree of contribution can depend on the use and design of the building, its age, location, whether the building is part of a group and the relationship between building and road.

If a building fronts directly onto the street, the door will be more noticeable.

If buildings being considered are a group of mainly unaltered terraced properties, an incorrect door will be highly prominent.

A door in a building set back from the street has a reduced impact on the street scene but does not reduce the importance and contribution of the door to the building.

Is it a commercial property? Traditional timber shop front with retained door, or altered shop front in a traditional building.



## USE (PAST AND PRESENT)

Is the building occupied or vacant?

Is there a predominant use e.g. commercial, retail, academic, residential, or a mix of uses?

Do the uses contribute positively to the character of the area?

Are previous uses of the buildings identifiable?



## CAN YOU TELL IF A BUILDING HAS BEEN ALTERED?

Some alterations are not immediately apparent e.g. the re-fronting of a timber framed property but others are more obvious and can impact upon the individual building as well as the street scene as a whole:

Replacement windows are often easy to identify as they can be of a different style, size and material to those in neighbouring properties.

A rendered and painted façade in a row of stone or brick houses.

The alteration to a door opening e.g. a front door being brought flush to the façade of a building instead of its original recessed position.



## CONDITION

What condition are the properties in? Well maintained buildings usually make a more positive contribution than rundown and inappropriately maintained properties.



## VIEWS

Views in, out of and within a space are an important element in the character of an area. All spaces have a view though the form and combination varies from space to space. Often it is a cumulative combination of views that influence the character of a space rather than a single defining vista.

### HISTORIC / POPULAR VIEWS

The area may benefit from or is the subject of views of interest and distinction. A view may be well known from a famous painting or written description, or it may be popular with residents as part of a public space.



### FORM OF VIEW: SHORT OR LONG, UNFOLDING, GLIMPSED, CHANNELLED OR WIDE OPEN

Is the view short, does this give an intimate feel to the space?

It may be possible to see from one end of a long space to the other e.g. Broad Street and Cornmarket.

Unfolding views are the result of the layout of the space creating a series of linked short views that emerge as you progress through the space e.g. High Street and Lamb & Flag Passage.

Glimpsed views give a hint of something which gradually reveals itself with progression through the space.

Channelled views are created by drawing your eye to a specific point within or beyond the space. These may be formed by the location of the enclosing architecture that gives the optical illusion of the space between narrowing with distance. Or a specific architectural feature such as an archway may channel the view.

A wide road or an open green space allows light to play a greater role in the character of the space.





## GLIMPSED VIEWS

These are often seen through one or more gaps in the building line or through other openings.

A glimpse of the Radcliffe Camera is possible from the High Street when looking along Catte Street, only gradually revealing itself as you progress along Catte Street.

Glimpses through college gates.

## FOCAL POINTS

This is a feature that draws attention to itself by virtue of its scale, design or prominence. Focal points often dominate a view but are not necessarily the end of the space, with views continuing into the background.



## STREETSCAPE

The streetscape is made up of the visual elements of a street that combine to form the streets character. The view will take into account how the buildings work together, the architectural design, feature, materials, street furniture, trees, use, etc.

How do these features contribute and do any individual features or combinations of features form the basis of the wider character of the space.

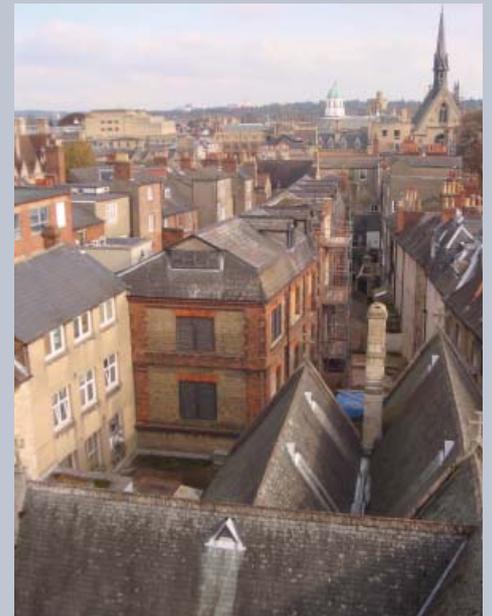


## ROOFSCAPE

The landscape of roofs can have a significant impact on the character of a street.

Are the roofs visible from street level, if so, how do they contribute to the character of the space and the view through the space?

Do the roofs have a variety of interest in materials and shapes, or do uniform roof slopes and materials contribute to the cohesion of groups of building within the view. Have chimneys been removed or alterations made?



## URBAN / RURAL VIEWS

Having considered the view, what is its character? Does it contain typical rural features such as tall trees, hedgerows, green open space and loosely spaced buildings on winding road lines with spacious gardens, or is it more urban, dominated by tall buildings, hard surfaces and a high level of activity?



Urban and rural views are not limited to urban and rural settlements: it is possible to have a rural view in an urban setting and vice versa. For example, Christ Church Meadows benefit from a rural character within a distinctly urban framework, whilst the overhanging greenery in New College Lane adds a softening rural element to the hard built form of the lane.

## VIEWS OUT OF OR IN TO THE SPACE

Views out of and into the space create a context by linking one area to another, highlighting the interrelationships between spaces. This may be between adjoining streets or may feature distinctive elements of the city skyline or that of the surrounding countryside.



## AMBIENCE

A space/street/area is not just characterised by physical elements. Character can also be derived from more intangible aspects. These factors may only be temporary contributors to character but they can influence the way a person responds to a place and can add or detract from the character and enjoyment.

### ACTIVITY

The way a space is used and how busy it is can significantly influence the character of an area. Busy areas may seem vibrant while a lack of activity may be seen as peaceful. Conversely a place may be too busy or the activity within it at odds with its built character. Quiet areas may also be seen as inhospitable, particularly at night.



### TRAFFIC

Cars and vehicles, moving or parked, can have a significant influence on the character of an area. The type of vehicle, volume of traffic or speed can also have an influence.



### DARK / SHADED

The amount of light or presence of shade can make a stark difference to the character of a space. This may vary through the day or be influenced by the weather.

Dark or shaded characteristics can arise from:

- Narrow width of space
- Height and density of buildings, or continuous building line
- Trees
- Where light can enter a space, a series of shadows/silhouettes may form on road and building surfaces adding an extra dimension of character

Light and airy characteristics can arise due to:

- Wider spaces
- Lower buildings
- More spacious development pattern/gaps between buildings



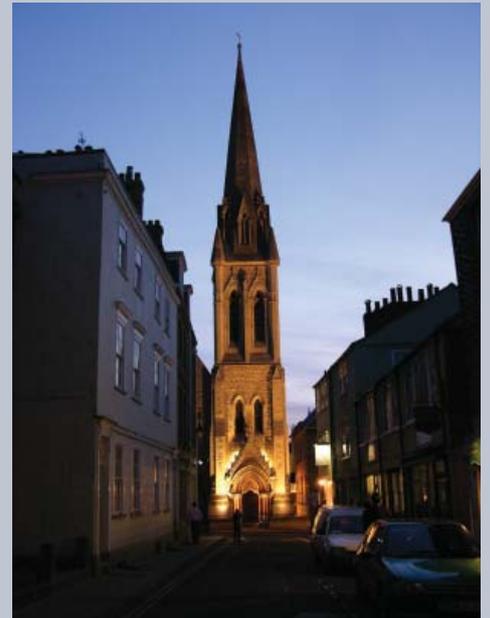
## DAY OR NIGHT

Time of day can have an impact on the character and appearance of a place both in terms of lighting and vitality.

The changing position of the sun during the day.

Lights from buildings at night can add to the atmosphere and lighting of an external space.

Seasonal variations in lighting conditions.



## SMELLS

Smells that are part of an area's character may make a positive or negative contribution to its quality and interest. They often reflect the uses of an area and can be highly emotive.

Are there attractive smells in the area such as fragrant planting and trees, general 'freshness' of the air, or cooking smells (very dependant on personal inclination), or are the smells unattractive, such as engine fumes or blocked drains? Do these change at different times of the day or year?

## NOISES

Noise, or its absence, can have an impact on the character of an area. A busy road may create a lot of traffic noise that detracts from an otherwise attractive location, whilst in a tranquil residential area the sounds of bird song or children playing can make a positive contribution to the impression of an attractive living space.

What noises do you hear in the area and how do they affect your impression of the place? Do they change throughout the day or are they likely to change between different seasons?



## LANDSCAPE

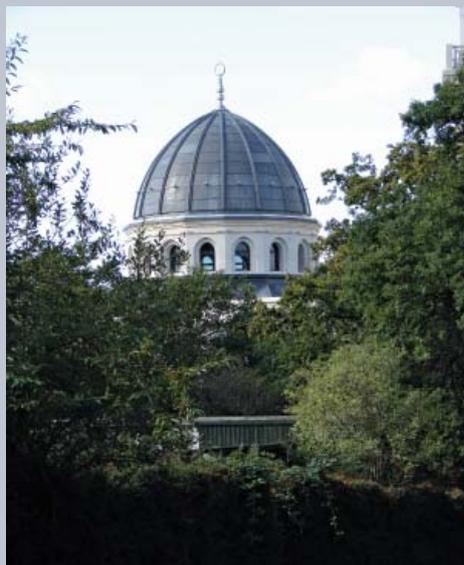
### LEAFY AND/OR GREEN

Is there a prevalent green and leafy quality to the space?

Is the space an open green space where a variety of planting produces the overriding character?

Key trees or groups of trees may make a significant contribution to the varied character of a place.

The time of year may have an influence, with the character changing as trees come into leaf, changing colour in the autumn and falling in the winter.



Vegetation may offer screening during the summer months but in winter views through the canopies of trees may be opened up as leaves fall.

### HARD URBAN LANDSCAPE

There may be areas where trees and other greenery makes little or no contribution to the overall character but this is not necessarily a detracting factor and is reflective of the type of streetscape/space being analysed.



## PUBLIC/PRIVATE GREENERY

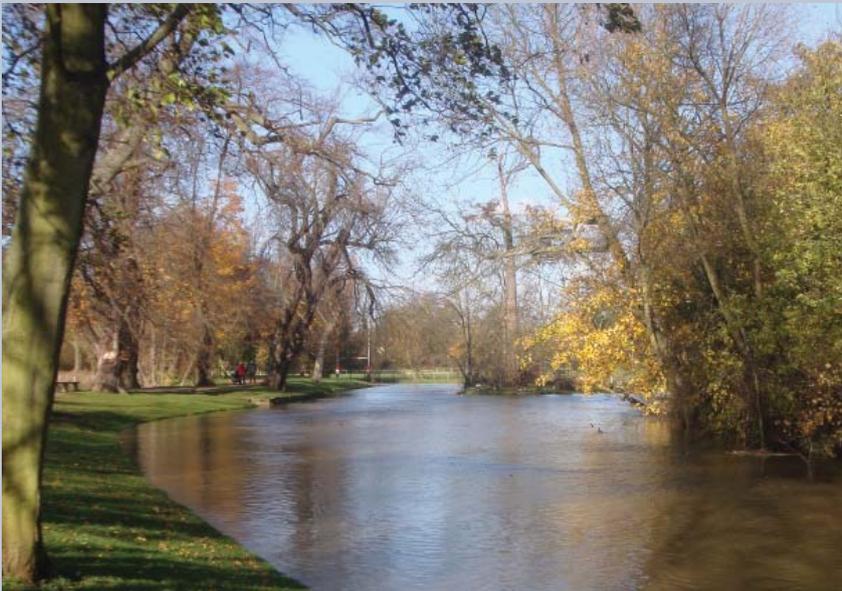
A green character is not only formed by trees planted within a public space. Trees within private spaces such as residential gardens, college grounds, church grounds etc can add to the public character of a place. Trees in private spaces may overhang into public spaces or be planted in openly visible private spaces contributing to the wider character of the area.



## DOES WATER FORM A KEY FEATURE OF THE AREA

Does a river run through the area being assessed?

Does it form part of the setting to the space, impacting upon its character – if so, how?



## TOPOGRAPHY

How level is the land? Is it flat, a hill, or does it include a combination of levels? Does it follow a slope and if so what direction does it face?

Do street lines or other paths run up or along a slope?

Is there a step down from the street level into adjoining spaces?

# GLOSSARY

*HERE IS A LIST OF TERMS COMMONLY USED IN PUBLIC DOCUMENTS TO IDENTIFY OR DESCRIBE ELEMENTS OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT.*

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTEREST

An interest in carrying out an expert investigation at some point in the future into the evidence a heritage asset may hold of past human activity. Heritage assets with archaeological interest are the primary source of evidence about the substance and evolution of places, and of the people and cultures that made them. These heritage assets are part of a record of the past that begins with traces of early humans and continues to be created and destroyed.

## ARCHITECTURAL AND ARTISTIC INTEREST

These are interests in the design and construction aesthetic value of a place. They can arise from conscious design or fortuitously from the way the heritage asset has evolved. More specifically, architectural interest is an interest in the art or science of the design, construction, craftsmanship and decoration of buildings and structures of all types. Artistic interest is an interest in other human creative skills like sculpture.

## CONSERVATION

The process of maintaining and managing change to a heritage asset in a way that sustains and where appropriate enhances its significance.

## DESIGNATED HERITAGE ASSET

A building, place, landscape, etc identified through legislation such as, A World Heritage Site, Scheduled Monument, Listed Building, Protected Wreck Site, Registered Park and Garden, Registered Battlefield or Conservation Area designated as such.

## ENABLING DEVELOPMENT

Development that would be unacceptable in planning terms but for the fact that it would bring heritage benefits sufficient to justify it being carried out, and which could not otherwise be achieved.

## HERITAGE ASSET

A building, monument, site, place, area or landscape positively identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions. Heritage assets are the valued components of the historic environment. They include designated heritage assets and assets identified by the local planning authority during the process of decision-making or through the plan-making process.

## HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

All aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time, including all surviving physical remains of past human activity, whether visible, buried or submerged, and landscaped and planted or managed flora. Those elements of the historic environment that hold significance are called heritage assets.

## HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT RECORD (HER)

Historic environment records are information services that seek to provide access to comprehensive and dynamic resources relating to the historic environment of a defined geographic area for public benefit and use. Typically, they comprise databases linked to a geographic information system (GIS), and associated reference material, together with a dedicated staffing resource.

## HISTORIC INTEREST

An interest in past lives and events (including pre-historic). Heritage assets can illustrate or be associated with them. Heritage assets with historic interest not only provide a material record of our nation's history, but can also provide an emotional meaning for communities derived from their collective experience of a place and can symbolise wider values such as faith and cultural identity.

## SETTING

The surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Elements of a setting may make a positive or negative contribution to the significance of an asset, may affect the ability to appreciate that significance or may be neutral.

## SIGNIFICANCE

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.



