

# Understanding your heritage guidance

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This document provides summary guidance about understanding the heritage of your object, place or site.

By considering all the different aspects of heritage, you will hopefully have all the tools and information you need to help people fully engage with your project. You will also be able to better develop policies to manage and maintain your heritage.

Fully understanding your heritage will help you to:

- know why people value your heritage so you can make sensitive and appropriate decisions about how to look after it in the future
- identify the potential for finding creative solutions and avoiding harmful impacts when changing your heritage
- engage with your staff, volunteers and visitors
- uncover new information and insights or bring fresh and exciting new perspectives to your understanding of your heritage.

In 2005 English Heritage created the “virtuous circle of conservation” as a way to describe how people’s attitude to heritage changes as their engagement with it increases.

For many people the initial connection with heritage arises when they enjoy a visit to a historic place or experience a historic object or collection. Enjoyment leads to a desire to understand the heritage better. Once they understand it better they begin to value it. When people start to value their heritage this creates the possibility that they might be persuaded to take a role in caring for it. It is therefore clear that understanding our heritage is a critical step in the process of helping people to fully engage with it.

It is also important to know why people value your heritage so that you can make sensitive and appropriate decisions about how to look after it in the future. This is especially important when you are thinking about developing a project that will change your heritage in some way, as understanding it better will help you identify the potential for finding creative solutions and avoiding harmful impacts. This can also give you an opportunity to engage with your staff, volunteers and

visitors. You might also uncover new information and insights or bring fresh and exciting new perspectives to your understanding of your heritage. You might also encounter new people who value your heritage and might be willing to help you to care for it in the future.

## **How best to understand your heritage**

**To understand your heritage it may help you to consider these three questions:**

### **Question one: what is it?**

Start by describing your object, collection, building, site or place as it is today. Gather as much information about it as you can. If your project is about physical heritage (such as a building, ship or nature reserve) set out the factual information about the object or site. This will include details about:

- its physical form, e.g. size, shape, colour, materials
- who made it and for what purpose
- when it was created and whether it has changed since that time
- surviving historical or notable features
- verified connections with important people or events
- its geographical context or setting
- its condition
- whether it is featured on recognised lists of important objects or places, e.g. whether it is a listed building or scheduled ancient monument, or a protected species.

If your project is about heritage that is not physical (such as memories or cultural traditions) you should set out information about the subject and the time period it covers.

### **Question two: why does it matter?**

Having established the facts you should now think about why your heritage is considered to be important or significant. There are many reasons why people value heritage objects and places; often there are a variety of reasons why people feel moved to conserve an object or place for future generations. Seek views from a range of people and make sure that you think about all the aspects or elements of your site. The following list of questions offer some ways to think about what

makes objects and places special to people but it is not exhaustive.

- Why is the heritage important to history? Is it associated with important people or events?
- How does the heritage contribute to our understanding of the past? What does it tell us about people and society?
- What are the artistic or aesthetic qualities of the objects, buildings, spaces or designed landscapes?
- How does the building or site contribute to the wider environment in which it sits? Is it a landmark? Does it compliment or contrast with its setting?
- Is the heritage of archaeological significance? What can the buildings, landscape or buried remains tell us about past events? What can we learn from the pattern of construction, use or alteration?
- Is the item of technical importance – does it tell us about innovation? Is it the first of its type?
- Is the heritage of importance to science, for example for its wildlife, geology, biodiversity or ecology?
- Are the materials that it is made from important? Does it display a particular craft skill well? Do the materials have an attractive patina or display evidence of historic graffiti?
- How does the object or site compare with other similar objects or places? Is it a rare or unique example or the best of its type?
- Has the heritage been featured in films, paintings or in literature?
- Is the heritage important for commemorative or spiritual reasons?
- Does the current use of the object or site contribute to its significance?
- Has the value of the heritage changed through time? Was it important for different reasons in the past?
- Is the story of the preservation of the site important?

Heritage objects, sites and buildings are sometimes registered, designated or protected in some way because they have particular significance and need to be protected from harmful changes. For example, buildings are placed on national registers as a way to mark and celebrate their special architectural and historic interest; this is referred to as designation or 'listing'. Often the designation record will provide details about what experts believe to be important about the site.

### **Question three: who does it matter to?**

It is good to gather comments and opinions on the value of the heritage from a range of sources. You might need to commission input from experts in the

relevant field but you should also make sure you have talked to a representative sample of the people who interact with your heritage. This might include:

- the community who live or work around the site
- any groups who take an interest in your heritage, such as Friends or local interest groups
- people who use the heritage site now, perhaps for recreation or enjoyment
- acknowledged experts in the relevant field
- statutory conservation agencies (where relevant), amenity societies, and local authority conservation departments
- volunteers who help look after the site.

## Sharing your understanding

Having gathered information about your heritage, the next step is to collate your findings into a document that you can share with other people and use to support your application to the Heritage Lottery Fund. For small sites or places that are relatively simple, a summary might be sufficient. Such documents are commonly referred to as conservation statements. In the Church of England and some other denominations they may be called Statements of Significance.

Further guidance on writing a Statement of Significance can be found on the [Statements of Significance website](#) or on the [Churchcare website](#).

If your heritage object, collection or site is larger or more complex you might need to expand your initial investigation work into a conservation management plan (sometimes called a conservation plan). Conservation plans can be prepared by volunteers, but you might need to seek help from a skilled and knowledgeable heritage professional who can support you through the conservation planning process.

More about [preparing a conservation plan](#).