

The Heritage Assets of Hastings and St Leonards And Their Suitability for UNESCO World Heritage Status



Summary

In the context of the controversial proposed Harbour development that represents a huge threat to all that makes the seafront and surrounding landscape of Hastings so special, should we consider making a bid for UNESCO World Heritage Status?

It would be a huge task but one that many groups could unify around. The process of gaining World Heritage status generates research and local publicity on the issue of the value of the site, and can be a catalyst to bring about significant improvements to its physical aspects

Overview

World Heritage status represents UNESCO's global recognition of the environmental and/or cultural importance and merit of a site, large or small. It offers a high level of protection of that site for the benefit of posterity, and binds the national government responsible to the maintenance of the integrity and the quality of the site. It becomes a national obligation. The application needs to be a Justification of *Universal Outstanding Value* – UNESCO's overriding criterion¹.

UNESCO's criteria (see end note) for World Heritage status are exacting, and the process therefore is usually long and complex. From its initiation the process requires the bringing together of many interest groups to consider the value of the site from different perspectives, and it is this stage that could be

¹ whc.unesco.org › Culture › World Heritage Centre › The List › Global Strategy

relevant to combating the threat from the Harbour development proposal. As the process gains momentum, the benefits will become broader in scope, long term, and substantial.

The cost of the application can be considerable. PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated it to be in the region of £400,000 (2007) for professional fees etc, but the financial returns are also likely to be significant, as the process itself is certain to attract conservation and heritage based funding².

Summary of the process:

1. Interest groups work together under the leadership of the local council, and with the support of Historic England, to prepare a prospectus that outlines the value of the site. This is presented to the UK's Commission for UNESCO.
2. The commission recommends the application to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. The Department adds this application to its Tentative List of important natural and cultural heritage sites located within its boundaries. This list sits with UNESCO.
3. Periodically (every five to ten years) the UK nominates just one of the sites from its tentative list for UNESCO evaluation.
4. UNESCO evaluates the nomination and makes a decision against a number of criteria that include a combination of natural, cultural, historical and architectural merit.

Sites That Achieve Recognition

Examples of sites range from outstanding architecture such as Canterbury Cathedral and the Palace of Westminster; important landscape such as the Dorset and East Devon Coast “ ... considered to be one of the most important teaching and research sites in the world ... ”; important scientific heritage such as Jodrell Bank (the next site to be submitted from the UK's tentative list); industrial landscape such as the Slate Industry of North Wales (still on the UK's tentative list); through to the art of the Neapolitan ‘Pizzaiuolo’ (pizza maker), that made it onto the UNESCO Intangible Heritage list in December 2017!³

Could Hastings and St Leonards match this?

Hastings and St Leonards is a unique and fascinating town at the centre of one of Britain's most important historical areas and in a unique landscape setting. Rockanore Cliffs are part of an SSSI and RAMSAR site that stretches to Pett Level. Hastings was one of the Cinque Ports – one of the five Norman ports in Britain obliged to provide the feudal Crown with services. Hastings castle was the first fortification established by the conquering Norman army.

² Pricewaterhousecoopers, 2007, *Cost benefit analysis of World Heritage Status to the UK*, commissioned by HMG: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachmentatachment/136111/PwC_fullreport.pdf

³ whc.unesco.org/en/list/

Its historical record goes back to the Iron Age. The town contains architecture that is a superb reflection of late medieval through to Victorian styles.

Although pizza making is not part of the mix, the traditional and current practice of the fishing is a fine illustration of 'Intangible Culture'. Boats have worked from the beach for over a thousand years, and it is now Europe's largest beach launched fishing industry. The net drying sheds are grade II listed buildings, and remain an extraordinary and beautiful feature of the Old Town and beach area. The industry, though diminished in size, continues to adapt to the changing natural and regulatory environment and is an important feature of life in modern Hastings.

The richness of Hastings and St Leonards was summarised in a 2017 report⁴ on the heritage strategy for Hastings as: *"... Hastings is at the very heart of a richly historic area, ... its heritage has enormous unrealised potential. These characteristics and many more give the town and its people their distinct sense of identity - a fierce affection for their physical and cultural heritage, combined with a strong independent, sometimes anti-authoritarian, streak which sits uncomfortably with, for example, planning control or the kind of unthreatening, tidy-minded conformity associated with more conventional tourist destinations. This personality is reflected in its physical fabric, unkempt, but authentic, full of unexpected surprises, hidden corners and dramatic views ..."* a description we would all recognise.

First Steps

The local council and English Heritage normally lead the process, and work through a group of representatives from other interested bodies. In the case of Hastings these could include Hastings Old Town Residents Association, Old Hastings Preservation Society, Hastings Fishermans Protection Society, Hastings Area Archaeological Research Group, Hastings Urban Design Group, Hastings and St Leonards Society among others.

If the process gathered momentum, it is likely funding would need to be sought and a paid and full time CEO appointed. It would bring huge benefits along the way, in particular coordination of all interested parties to achieve long-term outcomes that will benefit the community at large, and preserve for posterity the tremendous heritage value of Hastings and St Leonards.

Conclusions

Hastings potentially fulfils sufficient criteria to be eligible for consideration for the UK's Tentative List of World Heritage sites.

⁴ "Heritage Strategy for Hastings" 2017, Drury McPherson Partnership, commissioned by Hastings Borough Council.
https://www.hastings.gov.uk/content/my_council/consultations/current_consultations/pdfs/draft_HeritageStrategy.pdf

An outline proposal would need to be drawn up by interested parties and presented to the Borough Council and English Heritage to generate their interest and initiate step 1 of the application. This could be an exciting and interesting process in its own right. Even if the process went no further, it would be a way of drawing attention to the likely negative impact of the proposed marina.

The Green Party proposes to convene a meeting of interested parties to discuss this idea and take the proposal forward.

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End Note

UNESCO World Heritage Selection Criteria (at least one has to be met)

- (i) to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;*
- (ii) to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;*
- (iii) to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;*
- (iv) to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;*
- (v) to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;*
- (vi) to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria);*
- (vii) to contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;*
- (viii) to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;*
- (ix) to be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;*
- (x) to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.*

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>