

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 [UNESCO World Heritage Centre - The Criteria for Selection](http://whc.unesco.org/Culture/WorldHeritageCentre/TheList/GlobalStrategy)
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 UNESCO application 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.

Heritage Assets and the UNESCO World Heritage Conventions

Developing a common understanding of the concept of heritage assets is an essential part of the process of conservation. Historic England considers them beyond monetary value: *“Some parts of the historic environment are important to society as a whole or to a group within it and merit some level of protection or consideration. These are called our heritage assets. They are the elements of the historic environment that we value for more than their money's worth. The generations that follow us are most likely to value them too, for the same or similar reasons. It has therefore long been accepted that we have a responsibility to look after them.”*⁴

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

⁴ <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/hpg/generalintro/heritage-conservation-defined/>

This understanding also establishes the idea of responsibility for care. In UK there is a defined hierarchy of care, that includes Locally Listed Buildings that are the responsibility of local government, up to Scheduled Ancient Monuments that are the responsibility of central government, through to universally recognised UNESCO World Heritage Sites that are the responsibility of both the state and the international community; and this is the significance of the UNESCO convention.

The original UNESCO World Heritage convention was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1972. The convention combined the need for the protection of cultural and natural heritage for the sake of posterity. At the time, the cultural element of the convention emphasised cultural sites - buildings and monuments. Currently 193 of 195 State Parties have ratified this convention⁵.

While buildings and monuments are an important aspect of cultural heritage, the original definition seemed to imply more. Indeed, since then the UNESCO technical teams have developed measures to broaden the understanding of “cultural” heritage, and considered ways that this broader definition can be used in safeguarding heritage. Consequently, a large number of related conventions and safeguarding recommendations has been adopted by UNESCO’s General Assembly of State Parties to the Convention. This paper refers to two that seem particularly relevant to St Leonards and Hastings at this stage: (1) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and (2) Recommendations on the Historic Urban Landscape.

In 2002 the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage⁶ was adopted by the UNESCO General Council, and the definition of heritage was broadened to include “... *traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to descendents ...*” noting that “... *intangible cultural heritage is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization ... (and) helps with intercultural dialogue, and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life*”.⁷ As of 2018 177 State Parties have ratified the convention. Importantly, this does not include the UK.

Intangible heritage is a more difficult concept to define than built and natural heritage and does have legitimate criticism. But if we exclude the social component of culture, the component that embodies the traditions handed down from one generation to the next, we are missing a central element of the concept of heritage, the element that binds people to heritage. UNESCO as a body, and state parties that have ratified the 2002 convention, recognise this. They have continued to develop and refine the concept of heritage, and have built in the community ‘ownership’ and community identity components.

⁵ *Liechtenstein has not taken up its right to membership of UNESCO because UNESCO’s work does not fall within its defined foreign policy priorities. The USA withdrew its membership 2018. Israel is due to withdraw membership end of 2018.*

⁶ <http://www.unesco.org/eri/la/convention.asp?KO=17116&language=E>

⁷ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>

The UK government's failure to recognise intangible heritage means that tradition and cultural components of heritage in their pure form do not fall within the accepted criteria for consideration by UK's Commission to UNESCO. But combining intangible heritage with tangible and natural heritage would seem to be both appropriate and valuable. In particular the value lies in the high level of community engagement that is integral to the process, a point clearly understood by many institutions in the UK. For instance the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) National Heritage Index⁸ includes intangible and tangible heritage assets in its national mapping of heritage. And so, even if the UK's objective criteria for consideration of heritage excludes intangible components, in this paper we propose that there is good reason to utilise a combination of tangible and intangible heritage in the development of a World Heritage status bid. Our argument is that the tangible elements need to be sufficiently strong to fit the UK Commission's criteria. The intangible elements provide coherence to the package and will be well understood by UNESCO and other institutions.

Hastings and St Leonards as a contender for World Heritage status

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. Rock-a-Nore 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 medieval ports in Britain obliged to provide the feudal Crown with services. Hastings castle was the first fortification established by the conquering Norman army, but its historical record goes back to the Iron Age defensive enclosure known as the Ladies' Parlour. Hastings and St Leonards contain architecture that is a superb reflection of late medieval through to Victorian styles.

The traditional and current practice of the fishing industry is a fine illustration of 'Intangible Culture'. Boats have worked from the beach for over a thousand years, and it is now the UK'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.

Equally as important is the extraordinary list of cultural events that take place in the town, many of which are unique to Hastings (e.g. Jack in the Green) and define 'the character of place'.

The richness of Hastings and St Leonards was summarised in a 2017 report⁹ on the heritage strategy for Hastings as: "... *Hastings is at the very heart of a*

⁸ <https://www.thersa.org/action-and-research/rsa-projects/public-services-and-communities-folder/heritage-and-place/England>

⁹ "Heritage Strategy for Hastings" 2017, Drury McPherson Partnership, commissioned by Hastings Borough Council.

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.

The fact that the RSA Heritage Index ranks Hastings as fifth on its list of 331 English locations, in terms of its quantitative asset value, will confirm this for many and suggest that Hastings and St Leonards is a realistic contender for World Heritage Status.

What could such a bid look like?

Deciding on the mix of components may possibly be the most difficult and contentious step in the process. There are innumerable ways of combining sites of archaeological and geological interest, the natural environment, architecture and a rich intangible living heritage. The challenge will be seeking coherence without exclusion.

The following is offered in this paper as a means of highlighting issues:

Castle Hill, the Old Town, the fishing beach and huts, and Hastings Country Park Nature Reserve

This selection seems to fit well with UNESCO’s definition of **Historic Urban Landscape**¹⁰ that incorporates built and urbanised areas and surrounding countryside (including sea and cliffs), and takes into account the context and history of the economic and urban development of the town.

“The Historic Urban Landscape approach moves beyond the preservation of the physical environment and focuses on the entire human environment with all of its tangible and intangible qualities. It seeks to increase the sustainability of planning and design interventions by taking into account the existing built environment, intangible heritage, cultural diversity, socio-economic and environmental factors along with local community values.”¹¹

https://www.hastings.gov.uk/content/my_council/consultations/current_consultations/pdfs/draft_HeritageStrategy.pdf

¹⁰ <https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/activities/documents/activity-638-98.pdf>

¹¹ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1026/>

“Heritage protection without community involvement would be an invitation to failure ...”¹² and engagement with community requires a skill set that is often outside the experience of those technical experts that lead in the conservation of the built and natural environment. Build in the value of intangible heritage and the overlap of community and the built environment is very apparent.

Hastings and St Leonards Hastings is the most deprived borough in East Sussex¹³, with this deprivation focussed in a number of wards. There would be a challenge for any group wishing to engage such communities in activities that are probably beyond the experience of the many who live there, and who are probably deeply preoccupied with their own considerable life challenges. However, it is evident that traditions such as bonfire and Jack in the Green have enormous appeal throughout the borough.

The proposed bid would be a combination of tangible and intangible heritage asset, and could be an ideal conduit for community involvement in the overall process. Grant funding could include the community component e.g. an education programme targeting school children. In addition, as the process gathered momentum, it is likely funding would need to be sought to pay for the overall management of the programme, again perhaps with a community / education officer as part of the package.

The following steps in broad terms would be necessary:

1. In order to take this forward a volunteer technical working group established to delineate the area, and define and assess heritage assets, consult with people affected / interest groups affected by inclusion and exclusion;
2. External consultation with e.g. HBC, HBC Planning Department and English Heritage;
3. An exploratory proposal drawn up leading to a technical survey of assets, with recommendations on how these could be developed and improved;
4. Funding sought in support of recommendations.

Conclusions

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

The application process 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.

¹² https://www.tauma.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/JJokilehto_paper_NWHC2017.pdf

¹³ Equality Profile for Hastings and Rother Clinical commissioning Group, 2017
www.hastingsandrotherccg.nhs.uk/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?allId=411835

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End Note

UNESCO World Heritage Selection Criteria (at least one has to be met)¹⁴

- (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.*

¹⁴ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>