



## Chapter 4: Understanding significance

## 4. Understanding Significance

### The aims of this chapter

- To define and explain the concept of ‘significance.’
- To explain the associated concepts of ‘heritage assets’ and ‘heritage value.’
- To explain how the concept of ‘significance’ relates to national planning policy.
- To explain how to assess the significance of a heritage asset.
- To explain how the concept of ‘significance’ is used by the council in determining applications that impact heritage assets.

### This chapter should be read in conjunction with:

- Selection Criteria for Undesignated Heritage Assets – Chapter 5

### The Definition of Significance

- 4.1 ‘Significance’ is the concept that underpins current conservation philosophy. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, 2012) defines the ‘significance’ of heritage assets as: **“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. Significance derives not only from a heritage asset’s physical presence, but also from its setting.”**
- 4.2 **“Value”**(or “heritage value”), is the importance that people attach to a heritage asset. For example, a conservation area will be valued by the people who live in it, work in it or visit it, and they would not want the area to lose those features, qualities or characteristics which make it special to them. The “value” of a heritage asset might not be immediately apparent and a professional building historian, conservation architect, landscape historian or archaeologist may be required to identify the value of an asset. An expert is usually needed to ascertain the heritage value of buried archaeology or the machinery and workings of historic industrial or farm buildings.
- 4.3 The following guidance expands on the concepts encompassed in this definition: A **“heritage asset”** is any part of the historic environment that is of heritage value. There is a wide range of heritage asset types because the historic environment encompasses 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 (buildings and structures), buried or submerged (archaeology) and landscaped and planted or managed flora. The specific definition of a heritage asset, in terms of planning policy, is discussed in more detail in the next section of this chapter.



- 4.4 **“to this and future generations”** – England’s historic environment is our inheritance from past generations that span pre-history to the modern age. The principle aim of heritage conservation is to ensure that future generations inherit a historic environment that retains its value. The nation’s heritage is irreplaceable once it is lost.
- 4.5 The heritage value of a heritage asset is underpinned by its **“heritage interest”** – this interest will be archaeological, architectural, artistic and/or historic. The greater the interest, the greater is the significance of the asset. Significance is essentially a way of measuring or emphasising the interest (i.e. the overall heritage value) of a heritage asset, in other words its ‘specialness’. The more significant a heritage asset is, the greater its value to society is and the greater the effort should be made to conserve its heritage value for future generations. In terms of planning applications this means ensuring new development helps to conserve the heritage asset rather than to remove, harm or compromise its heritage value.
- 4.6 The **“setting”** of a heritage asset is the surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. This concept is explored in more detail in Chapter 2 of this document.
- 4.7 Therefore, significance can be said to be the sum of a heritage asset’s parts. The significance of a building, landscape or monument is often confused with factors like its grandeur, scale, age, degree of ornament or whether it is accessible or visible by the public. However, the significance of a building is not just its ornate stone façade, but also its secondary elevations, interior, doors and windows; a private hall and parkland may be of similar or greater significance than one nearby that is open to the public; most conservation areas feature different phases of historical development that each add to its heritage value; and so on. While what is pleasing to the eye will have aesthetic value it does not follow that something is of low significance just because it is plain, secondary or not seen by most people.



*The viaduct over the River Nidd at Knaresborough – an asset of national interest that contributes substantially to the appearance of the conservation area, and impacted on the development of the town. The viaduct is of very high architectural and historic significance.*



*Holly Tree House, a listed building on the green in Fearby conservation area – of national interest, but it is not of such high architectural or historic interest as the viaduct. The property may incorporate unseen archaeological interest.*

## Significance and National Planning Policy

- 4.8 The NPPF (2012) and the national heritage policy that it replaced (Planning Policy Statement 5, 2009) have changed the way the historic environment is managed in England.
- 4.9 Prior to 2009, national heritage policy only related to designated heritage assets, such as listed buildings or conservation areas and was arguably a 'rules based' approach. This approach failed to recognise that no two heritage assets are the same: for example listed buildings can range from a milestone to a bridge to a cottage to a large industrial building. Each heritage asset is different and has a different sensitivity to change.
- 4.10 Now, the NPPF (annexe 2) provides a definition for a heritage asset as "a building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest. Heritage asset includes designated heritage assets and assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing)."
- 4.11 The term "asset" does not relate to its financial value, but the fact that a building, monument, site, place area of landscape is of heritage value makes it a "heritage asset". A heritage asset may not necessarily be listed, scheduled, registered and so on for it to be of heritage value. This is because there are many heritage assets that might not reach the criteria for national designation but are nonetheless of local heritage value.
- 4.12 As set out in the above definition, in order to be classed as a "heritage asset" the building, monument, site, place, area or landscape must have heritage



*The Bay Horse in Kirk Deighton, a non-designated heritage asset of clear heritage value.*

interest. This interest can be of archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic interest (these areas of interest are discussed below in paragraphs 4.14 to 4.20).

- 4.13 With the change to include a wider range of heritage assets has come the means by which to assess the impact of development upon such assets; hence why current national heritage policy is led by the concept of 'significance' (as defined above in paragraph 4.1); understanding the value of a heritage asset and using this to determine whether the impact of a proposal is acceptable or unacceptable based on the degree of harm (if any) that a proposal might have on the significance of the heritage asset.
- 4.14 The NPPF places obligation on local planning authorities to identify heritage assets and to define the significance of these assets. The council has therefore produced criteria for identifying non-designated heritage assets (i.e. assets that are not already formally designated). Details of these criteria can be found in Chapter 5 of this document.

## How to Assess Significance

- 4.15 The definition of significance in the NPPF gives the archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic interest of a heritage asset as the factors that determine the heritage value of a heritage asset and assessing this interest should be the first step in understanding the overall significance of the heritage asset. This section will briefly summarise what is meant by the four types of interest. It should be read in conjunction with the following sections 'Assessing the degree of Significance' and 'Contributing Factors'.

## The Four Types of Heritage Interest

- 4.16 **Archaeological Interest** – Archaeological remains are the primary, sometimes only, sources of information about past cultures, societies and economic activity. The district contains, for example, evidence of post-Ice Age hunter-gatherers through to the obsolete machinery and fittings that show past agricultural practices and industrial activity. Archaeological remains can range from found objects, through to carved stones, earthworks and the workings of historic mills or breweries. Because archaeological remains are often the primary or only link to the people that created and used them, their alteration, removal or destruction would cause substantial harm to their interest.



- 4.17 Further information on the district’s archaeological interest can be found in Appendix N of this document. Details of Scheduled Monuments, finds and archaeological remains can be found on the North Yorkshire Historic Environment Record (HER) and other websites such as the Heritage Gateway, which is maintained by English Heritage to be known as Historic England. Web links can be found in Appendix N.



*Spofforth Castle – a heritage asset of very high archaeological interest.*

- 4.18 **Architectural Interest** – This encompasses any designed heritage asset, whether it is a building, structure, landscape, park, townscape and so on. For a building or structure the architectural interest can include the construction, craftsmanship, detailing or decoration as well as the overarching design of the heritage asset. For landscapes, open spaces and townscape the architectural interest can include purposefully designed or fortuitous views and vistas and the experience of travelling through a place.
- 4.19 While formal designed features, such as a formal garden or a composed elevation of a building, will be of architectural interest, the locally or regionally distinctive design of vernacular buildings such as farmsteads, cottages and industrial buildings can be of architectural interest, as can the way in which local materials or details have been applied.
- 4.20 **Artistic Interest** – The chief difference between artistic interest and architectural interest is that artistic works are usually conceived and made



*Building facades to James Street and the Victoria monument, Harrogate – all exhibiting high architectural and historic interest, the monument additionally has the association with Queen Victoria adding to its significance.*

by the same artist or craftsman (or is at least made under the close eye of its creator). Artistic interest is therefore applicable to sculpture, memorials, paintings, statuary, as well as the decoration made by a skilled mason, carpenter, smith, plasterer or sign-maker. Heritage assets, or components of heritage assets that are of artistic interest are likely, therefore, to be bespoke pieces of art or design made with a specific regard to their context.

- 4.21 **Historic Interest** – Any place that provides evidence of, or illustrates past cultures, ways of life and activity will be of historic interest. Historic Interest can include heritage assets that:
- Have associations with historically important people, organisations, movements or events;
  - Illustrate past ways of life and culture;
  - Illustrate the historical use of a place or site and how this evolved over time;
  - Contribute to the distinctiveness of a place, locality or region.
- 4.22 Heritage assets that are of historic interest can provide us with primary evidence of a particular time and place as well as how these places since

evolved to accommodate changing cultures and activity. An example might include the expansion, re-ordering, 'restoration' and alteration of a medieval church over the following centuries or the evolution of farmsteads that reflect changes in farming practice, technology and, in some cases, legislation.



*The Old Workhouse in Pateley Bridge – now workshops, offices and a museum. Despite the alteration to the lower windows, the building has architectural interest, its historic value to the town is particularly high.*

### Assessing the Degree of Significance

- 4.23 Once it has been established whether a heritage asset is of archaeological, architectural, artistic and/or historic interest, the next step is to assess the relative importance of the asset's interest and hence ascertain its overall significance.
- 4.24 For designated heritage assets such as listings, scheduled ancient monuments or conservation areas, the list description, schedule entry or conservation area appraisal aids understanding of both the interest and significance of a particular heritage asset. The descriptions of all nationally designated heritage assets can be found online at the National Heritage List for England (accessed through English Heritage's website). The Character Appraisals for the district's conservation areas can be found on the council's website. Links to these pages can be found within Appendix H.

- 4.25 For buildings and structures, whether they are designated or not, the Listing Selection Guides, published by English Heritage in 2011, provide a historical context for different building types and they help to identify general and specific features or characteristics that enhance their significance.
- 4.26 The Selection Guides cover virtually all building types and many types of structure. The Selection Guides are listed in Appendix P, Bibliography, which includes web links.
- 4.27 For archaeological remains, English Heritage has to date published 40 'Introductions to Heritage Assets'. These documents cover, for example, earthworks, enclosures and structures dating from prehistory through to the medieval period through to modern military installations. For each asset type the 'Introductions' provide a historical context and background as well as a general assessment of what might make some examples of the same asset more significant than others. A web link to these documents can be found within Appendix N.

### Contributing Factors to Significance

- 4.28 The following is a general checklist of things to consider when assessing the degree of significance of a heritage asset:
- 4.29 **Rarity** – it generally follows that the rarer a particular heritage asset is, the greater is its significance. This rarity could be in terms of:
- An asset's age, for example there are much fewer medieval houses in existence compared to Victorian houses. In the same vein there are far fewer early twentieth century small country houses in existence than Georgian ones;
  - The design of the asset is distinct from similar assets, making it a rarity or unique example within the same type of heritage asset. For example, few historic parks and gardens have been designed to accommodate large numbers of spa visitors and provide free access to numerous wells as Harrogate's Valley Gardens has, or the Druid's Temple at Ilton is fairly unique in the context of stone circles and Georgian follies;
  - The asset's uniqueness to a locality or region. This might include the grouping of henges, tumuli, barrows and standing stones between the Rivers Ure and Swale. Few groupings of this type exist nationally. Other more common heritage assets might have a particularly distinctive character, such as the design and layout of Pennine farmsteads or the design code that informed the development of Harrogate's Duchy estate;



d) The rarity of an asset type. This relates to the age of heritage assets, but is also reflective of how heritage assets have historically been demolished or adapted over time. For example, defensive houses, towers and fortifications have not been required for centuries and hence many have been completely or partially demolished or left to decay making such heritage assets rarer than otherwise. Similarly, where courthouses have become redundant and adapted for new uses or demolished, as such the significance of the remaining examples is enhanced.



*The former town hall, 1862, Knarborough. As a former civic building, located at the heart of the town, this building was designed to have a strong presence in the Market Place, as demonstrated by the high degree of detailing, both external and internal. It is grade II listed.*



*Tewit Well Cover, Harrogate. Dating from the beginning of the 19th century, this is a good example of a rare type of building, having been built specifically to cover the Tewit Well. The well was first discovered in 1571, the original cover having been replaced by this one, which was taken from the Old Sulphur Well when the Royal Pump Room was erected in 1842. It is grade II\* listed which denotes it has a high degree of interest.*

4.30 **Representativeness** – a heritage asset might not be rare in any sense, but could provide a good illustration of past ways of life, culture or economic activity. They might be representative examples of a particular asset type such as a nineteenth century Methodist Chapel, vale farmstead, Quaker burial ground or eighteenth century bridge. Many non-designated heritage assets and modest listings will be of interest because of their representativeness rather than being a rare or groundbreaking example of their asset type. A heritage asset that is of representative value is therefore significant.

*Odeon Cinema, Harrogate. Dating from 1936, this is representative of the type of cinemas being built by Odeon in the 1920/30's, this one being in the Modern Movement style. The cinema is grade II listed.*



- 4.31 **Aesthetic Appeal** – the aesthetic appeal of a heritage asset can enhance its significance. A heritage asset may evoke positive feelings of worth by reason of its architectural, design or artistic quality or in its form and layout. It may also have either a harmonious or diverse use of materials and design features to give an overall attractive external appearance in the streetscene, townscape or landscape.
- 4.32 Aesthetic appeal can lie in the design of polite architecture or formal pieces of design, but it is just as applicable to settlements and farmsteads that have expanded incrementally to form pleasingly harmonious compositions. Similarly aesthetic appeal may lie in the deep relationship between the asset and its context: the use of local materials, details and building techniques, the relationship between the asset and its setting.
- 4.33 The patina of age can in some cases contribute to aesthetic appeal as can the maturity of trees and landscaping, giving heritage assets a sense of permanence and longevity. Landmarks and key features of the skyline or roovescape can also contribute to aesthetic appeal, as can the character and quality of open spaces and the routes through a place.
- 4.34 Aesthetic appeal should not be confused with taste and subjectivity, particularly as different styles and approaches to design fall in and out of fashion over time. Aesthetic appeal should be judged in terms of design quality rather than whether it conforms to a preferred architectural style or urban or landscape design philosophy.
- 4.35 **Integrity** – whether a building, structure, monument, designed open space or landscape, the more complete it is in terms of its fabric, layout, character and appearance, the greater its significance will be. Integrity could also apply to heritage assets that have had different historically important phases of development and alteration. Indeed in the case of some assets, subsequent



*Leathley Chapel, grade II\* listed, dating from 1826. Although a simple building, it displays a high degree of integrity, particularly internally where the original pews, surviving pulpit and communion rail still remain.*

and later phases of development may add to its overall significance. The concept of integrity also applies to groups of heritage assets; the more complete and intact the group is, the greater their significance will be.

- 4.36 **Association** – a heritage asset that was designed or occupied by a historically significant person or organisation or is associated with a historically important event is likely to be of enhanced significance. Historic battlefields derive much of their significance from the importance of one event to national and military history. There are countless examples of buildings, structures and landscapes that have been designed by locally or nationally important designers for patrons who themselves might be locally or nationally important historically. Associations with locally prominent individuals, families and organisations or local traditions can also enhance the significance of heritage assets.



*Harrogate Cenotaph. This war memorial, dating from 1923, carries the names of the fallen from WW1 and WW2 and therefore has a high degree of association with past events in history. It also has architectural interest and makes a positive contribution to the street scene – it can therefore be classed as a non-designated heritage asset.*

## How the Council Assesses the Impact of a Development Proposal on the Significance of a Heritage Asset

- 4.37 In order to inform planning decisions, the council will use the selection criteria (found within Chapter 5 of this document) to inform the identification of non-designated heritage assets and to assess their significance.
- 4.38 Once the significance of a heritage asset is understood, it should become clear whether and to what degree repair, restoration, alteration, extension or demolition would harm, maintain or enhance the heritage asset. Therefore, when planning applications affect heritage assets, their ‘significance’ is used to determine to what degree the proposal would harm or benefit the heritage asset.
- 4.39 It follows that designated heritage assets like listed buildings, scheduled monuments and registered parks and gardens are clearly of some heritage value as they have all undergone expert assessment and evaluation against national criteria prior to their designation. With listings it also follows that Grade I and II\* listings are of the highest significance. Even so, non-designated heritage assets will nonetheless be of heritage value (i.e. be of significance) that should be maintained or enhanced where possible.
- 4.40 While heritage assets that are of high significance will need particular care to ensure they are conserved for future generations, the principles of ‘significance’ apply to development affecting humbler heritage assets such as traditional farmsteads, pre-historic earthworks, locally valued historic landscapes, old boundary stones and so on. In making any decision on works that will impact a heritage asset the council will always use the significance of the heritage asset to inform its decision.