

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Traditionally, archaeologists have looked at individual archaeological monuments without giving much attention to the areas between them. The wider landscape that forms their setting has therefore been one of the least understood elements of the historic environment. To rectify this, English Heritage is supporting a programme of Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC), whereby the whole historic landscape of England is being mapped. The essence of HLC is simple – to map today’s landscape by dividing the entire area of a county into parcels of land that share similarities in their overall historic character and then to categorise these parcels into particular HLC types, whilst at the same time noting evidence of any previous historic landscape.

In July 2005, Northumberland joined the growing number of English counties already embarked on this programme since its inception in Cornwall in the early 1990s. In line with most other English projects, it has been carried out by the County Council’s historic environment service, in this instance in partnership with the Northumberland National Park; the project was completed in February 2008. The study area comprises the whole of the modern administrative county of Northumberland which includes the Northumberland National Park.

This report introduces the project and its aims, briefly describes the landscape of the county and its archaeology, explains the methodology, describes the character types and the time depth of the landscape, and summarise the changes it has undergone. Further information is contained in the Appendices, including the project design and database definition queries.

1.2 National Context

The principle of Historic Landscape Characterisation has its origins in the 1960s with the development of landscape archaeology and the concept of ‘character’ which is described in the 1967 Conservation Area legislation. Yet for many years the trend was for landscape evaluation, ie what makes one landscape better than another. But in the 1980s landscape assessment emerged as a new tool and instead of evaluating landscapes it looked at what makes one place different or distinct from another. More recently the role of landscape character has grown further and the process is now described as Landscape Character Assessment to reflect this.

The historic dimension has also been recognised as an important aspect of landscape characterisation and in 1991 the Government White Paper *This Common Inheritance* invited English Heritage to create a register of landscapes of historic importance (English Heritage 1991). The intention was to define areas of landscape judged to be more “historic” and, therefore, more worthy of preservation than those areas surrounding them. However, after a number of pilot projects the conclusion reached was that such a register was impractical and a more holistic approach was needed (Fairclough 1994, Fairclough et al 1999). Historic Landscape Characterisation was pioneered in Cornwall in the early 1990s and since that time English Heritage has gone on to develop and sponsor projects all over England.

This new approach set out to characterise every part of today’s landscape using agreed criteria and to avoid identifying individual ‘historic landscapes’. This is in line with the methodologies of landscape assessments undertaken for non-historical reasons. The general purposes of landscape assessments, which can equally be applied to HLC, are to help:

- understand how and why landscapes are important.
- promote the appreciation of landscape issues.
- successfully accommodate new development within the landscape.
- guide and direct landscape change.

Characterisation as a concept has been recognised and endorsed by government in guidance PPS7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas and PPG15: Planning and the Historic Environment, since the 1990s. HLC is also now a well-established technique and a key component of English Heritage's characterisation programme. Its principles are also endorsed by the European Landscape Convention published in 2000 and adopted by the UK government in 2006.

1.3 Northumberland HLC Project

The Northumberland project has been influenced by those already carried out in Lancashire and Northamptonshire, Devon, Shropshire and Cheshire. The latter are all 'Wave 4' projects which have achieved a higher evolution and consolidation of the HLC methodology developed since the 1990s (Aldred and Fairclough 2003, 11). Northumberland has strived to adopt such a methodology using the template project design (English Heritage 2002), more complex attribute recording, emphasising previous character, using a geographic information system (GIS), digital map base and digital geo-referenced aerial photographs and historic maps. The main tools of the project in Northumberland have been ArcGIS 9 coupled with an Access database, digital mapping (Ordnance Survey MasterMap and historic Ordnance Survey mapping), and digital vertical aerial photographs (Getmapping).

The aim of the project is to characterise and understand the human activities that have shaped the current landscape of Northumberland. This will provide new, wide-ranging information for use by people and organisations involved with making conservation, management and development decisions. This will be a broad and generalised, GIS-based exercise using existing information and understanding of the archaeological and historical attributes of Northumberland's present-day landscape.

In order to achieve this a number of objectives were set out:

- identify and collect relevant data sources,
- produce a GIS-based HLC by characterising the landscape in historic terms using GIS polygons to define areas of land with similar historic character, defining each by collecting attribute data,
- use attributes for each HLC polygon to define and describe HLC character types,
- analyse and interpret the HLC to produce preliminary syntheses and to inform countryside management, spatial planning and outreach, research and evaluation programmes,
- disseminate the results of the project through professional and popular publications and other media,
- assess the potential for further development of HLC and its uses, and for the definition of future historic landscape research strategies.

Early results have already contributed to a number of landscape character initiatives, for example the *Landscape Character Assessment of Coast and Countryside Adjacent to the Northumberland Coast AONB* (2007) and the *Landscape Character Assessment of Tynedale District and Northumberland National Park* (2007). In the future the Northumberland HLC will be used to advise agri-environment schemes, inform new planning policy, planning applications, hedgerow removal applications, Conservation Area Appraisals and Village Design Statements. HLC has also demonstrated its usefulness as a tool to raise questions and establish research agendas and is also emerging as a useful academic tool.

The GIS mapping and database produced by the project are maintained as part of the Northumberland Historic Environment Record.

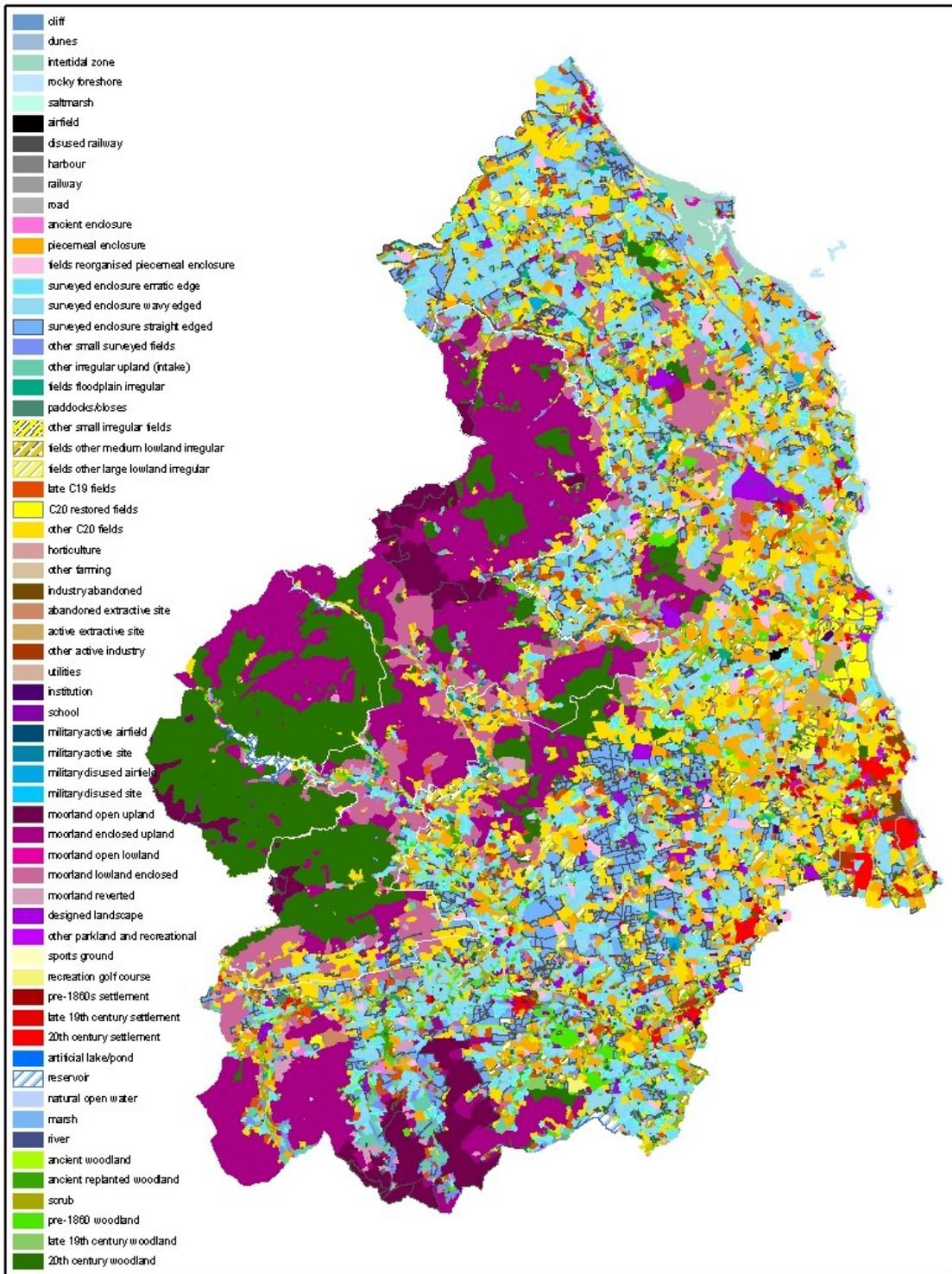


Figure 1: Northumberland historic landscape types