File Note

London's Historic Character Thesaurus – Project Summary

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The revised London Plan will place understanding the character of places at the core of informing and shaping change to them. Character is inherently derived from the human activity that has shaped an area in the past, including in the very recent past. This activity can be analysed and its effects mapped through the process of historic characterisation. Historic characterisation is the mapping of type and date of evolution of current character and, where evidence remains, preceding characters.

Aside from a rapid and high-level study in 2006, there is no comprehensive baseline assessment of Greater London's historic character. Where more detailed characterisation studies have been prepared, they have been on a borough or site-specific basis. Consequently, the studies vary greatly in scope, content and consideration of the historic depth of observed character. It has been recognised that this lack of consistent information on historic character will constrain the development of properly informed proposals for development within boroughs and will also limit the ability both to manage change and understand its effects at Greater London scale. The need for this London-wide understanding is now particularly pressing due to the role of character in the revised London Plan and with the introduction of new initiatives to alleviate London's shortage of new homes.

This project will develop a publicly-accessible London Historic Characterisation Thesaurus ('the Thesaurus') which will set out consistent terms that cover the kinds of historic character that exist in Greater London. This will allow future characterisation studies, whether undertaken within or across boroughs or even spanning the entire city, to speak consistently about historic character and be understood clearly by as wide an audience as possible. In addition, it will also enable these separate studies to be used together as an evidence base that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Thesaurus will be developed through review of existing characterisations (within Greater London, neighbouring county historic landscape characterisations (HLCs) and other metropolitan HLCs) and with reference to existing historic character thesauri prepared by Historic England. Consultation will also be undertaken with those who manage London's historic environment within Historic England, Boroughs and the Greater London Authority to inform identification of Thesaurus terms and design of the resulting outputs.

The Thesaurus will be supported by a User Guide providing scope notes (short non-technical descriptions) for all the terms used and showing how to use them to record current and previous historic character types, including illustrative examples. These will be the key outputs from the project and will be designed to be made available digitally and to be readily updatable should the need for new historic character terms emerge as a result of subsequent characterisation studies. The process by which the Thesaurus was prepared will be detailed in an accompanying project report, published as part of the Historic England Research Report series.