Historic landscape characterisation (HLC) is a method used to characterise landscapes from an archaeological perspective. It was devised in the UK in the 1990s, a time when archaeologists grew increasingly aware that historic processes had shaped all landscapes and contributed in fundamental ways to their character in the present day. At the same time, they had become increasingly uncomfortable that archaeological and heritage management policies and practices only covered a small subset of the traces of past human interactions with the environment. This chapter describes the development, principles and use of HLC, but first explores the close relationship between changing perceptions of heritage and of landscape. It also considers HLC’s relationship with Landscape Character Assessment (LCA), although only briefly because that is treated at greater length in a different chapter in this book.

Archaeology, heritage and landscape: changing relationships

At first glance, a character-based approach may seem at odds with popular views of archaeology, whose image in the media is shaped by spectacular individual finds which are all the more appealing if unique in some way – ‘the oldest’, ‘the biggest’ or ‘most perfectly preserved’. This is an image reinforced by museums which offer up individual, beautifully conserved objects to delight the public: the kind of static displays that scholars have criticised as ‘authorised’ heritage (Smith 2006). An alternative view, also frequent in the media, has earthy fieldworkers solving mysteries at particular sites, usually with an impressive combination of physical effort and high-tech gadgets. Whilst these archaeologists may be grubbier than their museum colleagues – and also out and about in the landscape – their investigations are generally resolved in an equally tidy fashion.

The need for neat explanations was an early feature of the discipline’s history. Archaeologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries spent much time hunting for material evidence that would illustrate the ‘facts’ attested by ancient written sources and underpin the certainties provided by the sort of culture history that was dominant at the time. Luxurious remains from Roman villas confirmed their expectations that Mediterranean conquerors brought civilisation...
to the dark corners of prehistoric Europe; glittering treasures from early medieval graves showed
the creativity and essential vitality of their modern nations’ forebears. Museums filled with
prestigious artefacts provided links between past and present empires and the scholarly gravitas
of art historians and archaeologists legitimised this ‘authorised heritage discourse’ (Smith 2012).
This kind of archaeology does not fit well with the ordinary, run-of-the-mill and everyday
experience of landscape, and 70 years of archaeological work since the Second World War has
also revealed a more complex reality. When cities of Roman origin like London, Exeter and
Canterbury were redeveloped during the 1950s and 1960s, academics and amateur archaeolo-
gists were often overwhelmed by the volume of work they faced when large areas of ruinous
buildings were cleared to reveal deeply stratified layers accumulated over nearly 2,000 years.
Diggers recognised that significant urban deposits lay above the Roman occupation layers on
which they focussed most of their efforts. Choices were frequently made to destroy or ignore
deposits from medieval and post-medieval times because resources were limited. From the later
1960s, archaeological work linked to the boom in motorway construction drove home a similar
message for rural landscapes: archaeological evidence of one type or another could be found
wherever the diggers looked for it.
In Britain and elsewhere the growing social pressure to ‘rescue’ material remains from the
past eventually led to the development of an archaeological profession. Initially, in the 1950s and
1960s, this development was fostered by national government, and from the later 1960s usually
through local government often pioneered by academics in partnership with local authori-
ties. Responsibility for monitoring and controlling how archaeological remains are affected by
development still sits with public bodies in the UK, although changes to planning guidance in
the early 1990s created a commercial archaeology sector that now deals with the practical work
(Flatman and Perring 2013; Hinton 2013). The increase in fieldwork – often with the support
and interest of local communities – led to a corresponding explosion in archaeological data
whose origins range from deep in prehistory to the very recent past. As the number of archaeo-
logical finds grew and the choices behind their discovery, survival, conservation or destruction
were laid bare, it became increasingly clear that all types of archaeological discoveries were not
automatically valued or recognised equally. Instead, the survival of sites and finds often involved
some kind of conflict; intellectual conflicts were created by the competing priorities of different
researchers, whereas social and economic conflicts could arise when developers clashed with
local authorities or community interests.
What was recognised and valued as heritage by the general public and by scholars began to
change. It was no longer confined to the types of objects and monuments that were formerly the
province of the ‘authorised heritage discourse’, but came to include the ordinary and everyday
heritage of run-down cities and industrial sites, hedgerows and barns on increasingly mechanised
farms, or the untidy remains of wartime defences. At the same time an increasing awareness of
post-colonial perspectives encouraged recognition of the ‘intangible’ heritage of cultures includ-
ing the practices, customs, languages, traditions and oral histories linked to places (exemplified
in the Burra Charter: ICOMOS Australia 1979). The recognition that colonisers and colonised
or outsiders and locals might see different values in the same places highlighted the importance
of perception, understanding, knowledge and above all societal context in the creation of herit-
age: different values were created through people’s social relationships.
In turn, the hard lines between ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’ (and even ‘digital’) heritage started
to be eroded, since the values associated with physical places and objects are just as much
culturally and socially contingent as the values attached to beliefs, languages or creative prac-
tices. ‘Tangible’ heritage has no more inherent value than a song or a story: its importance is
defined, negotiated and agreed through the social interactions and relationships which lead
to the attribution of values. The value of all types of cultural heritage changes constantly (or ‘emerges’) as the relationships between people and communities are redefined: heritage is therefore created, used or forgotten through processes which unfold over time.

These changes to the way heritage is understood were reflected in changing ‘official’ definitions and policies. For example, UNESCO’s 1972 World Heritage convention was designed to safeguard outstanding examples of ‘natural’ and ‘cultural heritage’, the latter defined as monuments, groups of buildings and sites which were to be selected for inclusion on the list of World Heritage according to criteria such as exceptional artistic or aesthetic merit, historic significance, or rarity. By contrast the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage laid greater emphasis on safeguarding and on the full and informed engagement of the people concerned (though it still entailed composition of a list: UNESCO 2003). Between those dates, the Council of Europe had elaborated and published two conventions which took a significantly different approach to the existing UNESCO conventions. The perspectives of the ‘Florence’ European Landscape Convention (ELC) (Council of Europe 2000) and the ‘Faro’ Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage to Society (Council of Europe 2005) were aligned much more closely to the developments in thinking about heritage summarised above. By 2011, therefore, when UNESCO issued its ‘Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape’ (HUL), a rather different approach to its earlier conventions was presented. HUL suggested that city planners might use participatory methods to achieve consensus about proposed changes following assessments of urban character based on comprehensive surveys of natural, cultural and human heritage resources: in short, HUL recommended a landscape approach. This perspective is closely related to the stance taken in the ELC and the Faro Convention, which links knowledge and use of heritage (broadly understood) to the fundamental right to participate in cultural life (defined in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; UN 1948). A key difference between the HUL position and the earlier UNESCO conventions is the implication that heritage is ubiquitous. Heritage is not confined to specific sites and monuments that can be ‘listed’ or circumscribed, but instead it can be expected everywhere because it is created through people’s constantly unfolding social interactions.

Changing understandings of heritage are mirrored closely in changing ideas about landscape. Like heritage, landscape is ubiquitous: it is anywhere that is inhabited, experienced, remembered or imagined. Landscape also shares the temporal dimensions of heritage: both are constantly re-created and changed through processes that unfold over time and connect individual experience and community values. Both ideas are encapsulated in the European Landscape Convention’s definition of landscape as ‘an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors’ (Council of Europe 2000, Article 1). ‘Landscape’ has no more essential, inherent value than ‘heritage’: its significance is bound up with social factors such as memory and emotion, and it is negotiated through relationships between people and groups. As a result, ideas about landscape can be messy and uncertain, providing an arena for conflict and argument between people with differing perspectives, and a space in which power can be exercised. Like heritage, the relative importance of landscape depends on the context (Harvey 2015a).

The ELC (2000) put ‘character’ firmly on the landscape agenda, and the policies of some administrations have consequently placed ‘character’ in a central position (e.g. the United Kingdom’s National Planning Policy Framework and Catalonia’s Landscape Act: DCLG 2012; Generalitat de Catalunya 2006). But neither the ELC nor Faro are prescriptive, and HUL is guidance that is voluntary for UNESCO’s member states; it does not have the same status as the earlier conventions on World Heritage and Intangible Heritage (UNESCO 2011). Furthermore, the tools required to implement the goals of community engagement and character-based planning are not yet fully developed.
Historic landscape characterisation: development and principles

Within the concept of ‘character’ just discussed, this chapter is concerned with a method that was originally devised by archaeologists in Britain to address aspects of this challenge related to the historic elements of landscape character, and which is consequently known as ‘historic landscape characterisation’ (HLC). HLC was developed as a tool for communicating knowledge about the historic aspects of landscapes to bring a deeper level of understanding to landscape studies in general, because all aspects of landscape (including their ecological, economic and social aspects) emerge through historic processes. Indeed, landscape and heritage can be understood as closely related concepts, both of which emerge through social processes that depend on the interrelationships between perceptual aspects and material elements over time. Neither have absolute or inherent value but instead have significance which is contingent on specific histories and contexts. Knowledge of the ways places have changed over time can contribute to understanding not only the current physical characteristics of landscapes but also the ways they contribute to people’s individual experience, and their cultural value to society in general.

There are a couple of reasons why it was archaeologists who developed a method for management of historic landscapes in Britain rather than historians, historical geographers or landscape planners. As noted above, efforts to study the burgeoning archaeological evidence unearthed during post-war reconstruction and development in Britain from 1945–1975 led to the recognition of far more archaeology with ‘heritage’ value than had previously been the case. Responsibility for dealing with this archaeological heritage fell to government agencies at national but especially at local levels, whose wider duties included planning and architectural conservation alongside maintenance of other cultural resources such as museums and archives. Archaeologists were therefore embedded in most local authorities from the 1970s onwards where they were involved in assessing the extent to which development would affect historic sites, not only in towns and cities but also in rural areas.

In practical terms, British archaeologists had been involved in the study of historic features beyond archaeological excavations for many decades (Bowden and McOmish 2011). Pioneers of aerial survey like O.G.S. Crawford in the 1920s recognised that the ‘business of the field archaeologist’ was to ‘decipher’ the history of landscapes from fragmentary remains which survived in the present (Crawford 1953, 51). As Archaeology Officer for the United Kingdom’s state mapping agency, the Ordnance Survey (OS), Crawford’s work as a ‘field archaeologist’ entailed accurate survey but not excavation: he was an archaeologist, but not a digger. Meanwhile Royal Commissions on Historic Monuments (RCHM) established in England, Wales and Scotland in 1908 had developed the art of earthwork survey into a precise analytical technique. The research undertaken by subsequent generations of ‘field archaeologists’ includes detailed surveys of huge areas such as Salisbury Plain and Dartmoor (McOmish et al. 2002; Newman 2011). The rapid development of survey technologies over recent decades (including terrestrial geophysics and aerial remote sensing, e.g. Darvill et al. 2013; Challis et al. 2008) has led to the identification of increasingly huge numbers of individual archaeological features. The recognition that such features are never isolated but exist in relation to one another provides a challenge to the very concept of ‘the archaeological site’.

In the late 1980s archaeologists realised that although some individual monuments could be protected from alteration, the historic fabric of the landscape more broadly was poorly understood and susceptible to destruction through both piecemeal and large-scale changes. Conventional methods for cataloguing archaeological ‘sites’ did not provide a satisfactory way to visualise or manage the historic features of the landscape. In the databases maintained by local authority archaeologists, each entry was usually represented as a numbered dot on a transparent
Historic landscape characterisation

map overlay (geographical information systems (GIS) were rarely used at the time). Detailed landscape surveys might record many individual earthworks but nevertheless omit other historic features like hedgerows, roads or buildings dating from recent centuries. Individual sites were presented as if they were unrelated to each other and disconnected from their settings more generally. Whilst the rapid development of new survey methods led to an exponential growth in the number of features that might be included in such databases, at the same time pressure on public finances militated against the employment of more archaeologists in local government (culminating in the devastating cuts of the decade following the global financial crisis of 2008). Although it was widely recognised that historic processes had shaped the form of the landscape, there was no effective way to represent the resulting ‘historic character’ so that it could be taken into account when changes were being proposed.

In the early 1990s a series of experiments was coordinated in different parts of England by the national heritage agency, then known as English Heritage, to test emerging methods which might be able to address these problems (Fairclough et al. 1999). The first pilot study of HLC was carried out on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall (Fairclough and Herring 2016) as part of a bigger project of Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) coordinated by English Heritage and the Countryside Commission (Land Use Consultants 1994). The HLC method that emerged shared several elements of the LCA approach and many of the principles developed at that time have remained integral to HLC as it has developed over the last two decades. For example, HLC is a spatial method which presents its interpretations in the form of a character map similar to the ones used in LCA and other spatial disciplines such as landscape ecology and soil science. Unlike many earlier studies in the fields of archaeology and heritage which were concerned with identifying specific sites, one of the fundamental principles of HLC is that all areas have historic character of one type or another: HLC maps of today’s landscape do not have gaps or areas of white space. Another common element was the tendency for LCA and HLC maps to be created solely by experts: the challenge of widening participation in the way envisaged by the ELC, Faro or the HUL guidelines has yet to be satisfactorily addressed.

Despite the close links with LCA, the HLC method developed along slightly different lines from the outset (Fairclough and McInnes 2003; Fairclough and Herring 2016, 193). The most significant difference between HLC and LCA is the way they identify and map character. HLC uses a defined and limited number of categories or ‘historic landscape character types’ to identify different areas whose landscape character has been shaped by similar and recognisable historic processes. Each HLC project therefore identifies many separate blocks of historic character but only uses a limited number of character types. LCA can also identify many different character areas or regions, but each area is defined by mapping the combination of characteristics that makes it unique in comparison to all the others.

In practice, this difference also results in application of the two approaches at different scales (though either method can actually be adapted to work at any scale). The character areas identified in LCA tend to be rather large since they often relate to topography and land cover, whereas the blocks of different character types mapped in HLC are commonly quite small. In comparison to other landscape archaeology approaches, HLC operates at a mid-range scale between detailed site-based approaches which map individual finds or features (e.g. from excavations or field survey: Francovich et al. 2000) and very broad or global generalisations (for example, models based on palaeo-environmental data derived from widely separated sites: Klein Goldewijk et al. 2011; Kaplan et al. 2011; Fyfe et al. 2015). One of the strengths of HLC data is its capacity to be used alongside other spatial information in the GIS environment and therefore to bridge the gaps between analyses at different scales or to contextualise information from specific places or times. In the sphere of landscape as much
as in heritage the ability to focus on scales between the very local and the national or global can provide a valuable route to scrutinising and sometimes challenging dominant narratives, whether scholarly or popular (Harvey 2015b). A valuable quality of HLC lies in its capacity to connect people and places that are otherwise separated by highlighting common elements in their histories.

The orientation of HLC towards historically informed explanation provides another contrast to LCA, as well as an important connection to heritage. LCA tends to focus on the contemporary landscape: when past changes are considered they are often connected to the shaping of landforms at the scale of geological time or more recent and most easily recognisable human activity. By contrast, the aim of HLC is to present an interpretation of the historical processes that have shaped the landscape character that is experienced everywhere at the human scale. Change is a fundamental aspect of landscape and the processes of landscape change, whether fast or slow, ancient or recent are always recognised in HLC – and, to a greater or lesser extent, they are also always ongoing. In most areas of Britain and Europe today’s landscapes have been shaped most obviously by historic processes over the last millennium, though in some areas the contribution of more ancient and even prehistoric activity is sufficiently well understood that it can also be identified and mapped.

There are different ways to include this temporal aspect of historic character in HLC, and to some extent the method chosen will depend on issues that are specific to each project, such as the purposes intended for the data or the planned scale of use. In some projects the process of change is simply encapsulated in the narrative descriptions of historic character types (as in the original Cornish example: Herring 1998). In other examples the GIS database is structured to enable aspects of historic change to be modelled and presented for different points in the past (Turner et al. 2013; Collins 2014). Although the second approach makes the database more complicated to use, it has a number of advantages. For example, it can help clarify the extent and pace of change over time, and enable the identification of key contributions to landscape character in different periods. It can also be valuable for informing historical analyses of landscapes as they were experienced in the past (Turner 2006).

A final principle of HLC is that it does not normally present an ‘assessment’ but a ‘characterisation’: it is not a judgement on the relative value or significance of different parts of the landscape, but an interpretation of how character has emerged over time. As with other categories of heritage, the values attached to landscape character are negotiated through relationships between individuals and communities and are contingent on specific contexts. When out-of-the-ordinary landscape changes are foreseen, the value of landscape heritage can be considered by people with different interests using the historic character of the landscape as a focus for debate – perhaps by creating a characterisation tailored specifically to the particular region or problem under investigation, or perhaps by drawing on an HLC that has already been completed. HLC does not present simple solutions to planning problems based on implicit judgements of value. Instead, it provides a tool that can be used to help reach consensus. That, at least, is the aspiration: as yet there are relatively few examples in reality.

**HLC methods**

The basis of the HLC method remains much as it was described by Peter Herring in 1998 in his report on the Cornwall HLC which developed the original work undertaken on Bodmin Moor:
Closer examination [of the landscape] reveals that particular groupings and patterns of components which recur throughout the county can be seen to have been determined by similar histories. Cornwall’s historic landscape can, therefore, be characterised, mapped and described, using a finite number of categories or types of ‘historic landscape character’.

Herring 1998, 11

The key feature of this method is that it relates not only to the physical form of today’s landscape, but also encompasses interpretations of the processes and practices – the ‘similar histories’ – which have shaped the characteristics of each landscape type over centuries and millennia. Before starting to map the historic character of Cornwall, a largely rural county in south-west England, Herring and his colleagues identified seventeen ‘HLC types’. To create this classification the team drew on archaeological and historical research into the development of the county’s landscape to identify distinctive patterns and other recognisable characteristics. Using this pre-defined classification of HLC types, they characterised the whole landscape of the county using printed Ordnance Survey 1:25,000 maps as the base map and the primary source of information. The publication of the project included discussion of the decisions that led to the identification and selection of each ‘type’ (Herring 1998). Since the HLC was intended to inform debate about landscape management and planning, there was also discussion of the development pressures facing each type.

One major difference between the Cornwall HLC and subsequent projects has been the routine use of GIS to create and manage the HLC data. In the mid-1990s GIS was still unusual in local authorities, whereas today it is a standard tool across professions dealing with the environment and is familiar to the general public through web-based applications such as Google Earth. The key advantages of GIS are that it provides great flexibility to include additional data, to compare the HLC to other datasets, and to perform spatial analyses.

Alongside the principles outlined in the previous section, the interpretation and mapping of each study area using a defined set of well-researched character types has continued to be the basis of the HLC method. In other respects, the method can be very flexible. For the sake of convenience most HLC projects use stand-alone databases to store the data related to each block (or ‘polygon’) of each character type, which means it is possible to record a large amount of supplementary information about changes in landscape character or other attributes of each polygon. The scale of the characterisation can also be varied according to the aims of the project. HLC projects can be undertaken at the level of whole countries (as in Scotland and England) or for much smaller case-study areas. The individual blocks (‘polygons’) of each character area recorded in HLC datasets usually have a minimum size of around 1 hectare, but much smaller or larger thresholds could be selected depending on the uses foreseen for the resulting data and the sources used to underpin the characterisation.

In order to ensure internal consistency across each HLC study area, it is common practice to try to ensure that the same kinds of spatial data sources are used across each region. Most HLC projects base their characterisations on the interpretation of modern digital maps, normally supplemented with other data sources including historic maps, modern and historic air photographs, and satellite imagery. In some cases, detailed archaeological surveys like those of Dartmoor or Salisbury Plain have also been used as supplementary sources. New types of spatial data such as Lidar have considerable potential for increasing the precision and reliability of interpretations mapped using HLC, since they often add significantly to our ability to recognise earthwork features like cultivation ridges and water channels that are only partially visible in air photographs.
Once an HLC has been created, it can be analysed alongside other spatial data to investigate myriad relationships with different aspects of landscape. Interdisciplinary comparison and action involving HLC holds out the possibility of placing the human and social perspectives of heritage and landscape at the centre of academic and public debates on how places should be managed or developed in the future.

**HLC: examples and applications**

HLC remains a flexible technique. Besides adherence to the key principles described in the previous section there is no single, standardised methodology. This can be a significant strength since it enables characterisations to be designed to address particular questions and problems in landscape management, planning and research.

The work undertaken by Peter Herring and his colleagues in Cornwall marked the beginnings of a national programme of HLC with funding from English Heritage (and its successor from April 2015, Historic England). The English programme of HLC developed rapidly with the application of GIS (Fairclough 2002). Early projects in the counties of Somerset, Herefordshire, Lancashire and Hampshire experimented with various different scales and different ways to record and organise the interpretations linked to the spatial database (Aldred and Fairclough 2003). In the next phase, projects in Devon, Cheshire, Cumbria and Shropshire refined these methods by structuring data more consistently, but still stressed the important of understanding and mapping regionally distinctive elements of historic character (English Heritage 2002).

The HLC programme in England was mainly carried out by staff in local authority archaeology or ‘historic environment’ departments. This was a deliberate strategy which aimed to embed the characterisation from the outset in the day-to-day work of the local planning authority and thereby promote familiarity with and use of the data and the character-based approach. Although English Heritage issued a ‘template’ project design, it did not seek to inhibit development of the method since the ability to respond to different contexts was deemed important in a country with many different types of urban and rural landscape (English Heritage 2002). As a result, the projects sponsored by English Heritage in different counties often use quite different lists of HLC character types. One problem with this is that data from different counties can be hard to compare, or to combine to make characterisations at a regional scale.

In Scotland the ‘Historic Land-use Assessment’ (HLA) was carried out according to a much more uniform method (Millican et al. 2017). The HLA programme was developed and undertaken by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland in partnership with Historic Scotland (now merged as Historic Environment Scotland). It was intended from the outset to provide nationwide data mapped according to a consistent method. This approach has delivered some significant benefits at the national scale, for example the ability to identify the regional distribution of particular character types or the ways global pressures impact across the country. It is less clear whether the centralisation of the project has served to inhibit use by local authorities and communities, but the publication of the full dataset online must be considered a significant step in encouraging greater dissemination and uptake.

The national programmes of HLC were quickly extended beyond rural landscapes to include urban and maritime areas, underlining the flexibility of the method and the core principal that landscape is ubiquitous. The urban HLC projects pioneered in major cities like Liverpool, Sheffield and Birmingham have highlighted the processes which shaped the character of these rapidly growing conurbations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Thomas 2006; Quigley and Shaw 2010). In addition, by taking the long-term perspective of the archaeologist, such projects have enabled better appreciation of the ways earlier patterns of roads and fields sometimes
influenced the structure of developing cities (Fairclough 2008). For coastal and offshore regions, a programme of ‘Historic Seascape Characterisation’ (HSC) has adapted the method used on land to map the historic character of maritime landscapes by understanding how historical processes have contributed to shaping the present maritime environment, including its ecology and geomorphology (Tapper 2008; Hooley 2012).

The HLC datasets created through national programmes in the UK have the potential to inform various practical applications ranging from relatively small-scale landscape management projects, such as farm plans as part of agri-environment schemes, to much larger-scale landscape planning in advance of major infrastructure developments (Clark et al. 2004). The use of historic characterisation has been integrated directly into policy guidance in a number of environmental domains in the UK, for example in the planning of new highways (Highways Agency 2007) and marine management (Natural England 2012). More broadly, the National Planning Policy Framework lays considerable stress on a character-based approach to planning, including the use of up-to-date assessments of historic landscape character (DCLG 2012, 170). Because HLC data is created using GIS it can be included in environmental assessments alongside data about the natural environment, visual assessment, and other spatial information.

HLC and related methods were originally developed in the UK, but like LCA they have now been trialled and implemented in a number of other countries. Application as a research tool has provided a channel to demonstrate the method’s relevance for understanding historic landscapes, for example through case-studies in Greece and Turkey (Crow and Turner 2009, Crow et al. 2011). In south-east Spain, a pilot project supported by the Catalan Landscape Observatory focussed on understanding long-term processes of landscape change since the Roman period (Bolòs 2010); the method developed in that project has informed the creation of historic characterisations in partnership with local municipalities which in turn feed into their broader assessments of landscape character (e.g. Bolòs and Bonales 2015). Heritage agencies in countries including Ireland and the Netherlands have developed methodologies applicable to specific challenges from the local to national levels (Lambrick et al. 2013; RCE 2017).

**Criticisms and responses**

Since it first began to develop over 20 years ago, HLC has been scrutinised by effective critics who have identified a range of methodological and theoretical weaknesses (e.g. Austin 2007; Williamson 2007). Some of the problems they have highlighted have been solved, but others – particularly in relation to meaningful public participation – remain to be addressed.

Some basic criticism relates to the validity of individual characterisations. The interpretation of landscape character presented in every HLC draws on underpinning landscape research by historians, archaeologists and geographers which has investigated the processes that have shaped patterns of historic features. Sometimes these patterns are well understood and well documented, but in other cases the evidence can be debatable or uncertain. The field-banks of south-west England provide a good example: whilst they are generally thought to be pre-modern in date, it has not yet been possible to document their origins and development with any precision. As a result, there are considerable divergences of opinion amongst specialists about their age and the processes that led to their creation (Turner 2007; cf. Rippon 2012). Such problems can be compounded in HLC project reports if they fail to include sufficiently detailed or precise summaries of their methodology, since the results will be hard to replicate or use (Williamson 2007, 66). The character of GIS can also be misleading for users: commentators note that the apparent objectivity of digital data can obscure the qualitative nature of HLC maps (Williamson 2006, 59; Austin 2007, 103–4).
A series of important criticisms relate to the generalising nature of characterisations. One of the principal aims of characterisation is to simplify complex patterns in order to make them comprehensible. Nevertheless, critics have argued that there is a tendency to gloss over complexity and present simplistic interpretations of complex processes (Williamson 2007, 67). On the other hand, the use of HLC data by researchers from other landscape practitioners or planners has sometimes been limited by the perception that it is too fine-grained to be combined with other approaches. Difficulties often arise if an HLC is used at scales beyond its planned range: it is therefore very important that the metadata or reports that accompany the GIS make the intended thresholds clear. It is also important to recognise that any HLC project is designed for a particular range of applications, and that it may not be fit for other purposes. Use of data at an unplanned scale or to address questions that were not anticipated by the creators is likely to result in unsatisfactory results (see e.g. Finch 2007). As with any type of research, the specific HLC methodology must be designed in relation to the research questions or intended applications. Once again, it is of paramount importance that mapping produced during HLC projects is explained through clear and comprehensive method statements.

The generalising nature of characterisation can be problematic in other ways. GIS maps tend to reduce complex landscapes to two dimensions; their vertical perspective can obscure many of the subtleties of character provided by structures, building materials, vegetation and topography (Williamson 2007, 69–70). They also normally fail to convey the experiential aspects of landscape whose significance has been stressed in landscape phenomenology and emotional geography (Austin 2007). Whilst HLC projects can be designed to include interpretations of affective or other relational aspects of landscape, there is a risk that the processual, historically informed character of their mapping might be overridden by solipsistic, even narcissistic, responses that would in turn be even more reductive (Harvey 2015a, 916–8). Peter Herring and Graham Fairclough have noted that the most solid path towards a more comprehensive methodology might lie in devising effective ways to bring different people together through interdisciplinary work, rather than attempting to create all-encompassing ‘integrative’ methods (Fairclough and Herring 2016, 195–6).

This point also relates to one of the most important and difficult criticisms of HLC, which concerns its failure to include historical knowledge and interpretations that lie beyond the view of the individual specialists who create the maps (Dalglish and Leslie 2016, 215–6). Such knowledge is hard to capture, but not impossible: it demands engagement with different specialists and with residents, visitors and other interested people. Oral histories and participatory methods like workshops or photo-elicitation can provide effective ways to gather relevant information to underpin richer spatial datasets (Primdahl and Kristensen 2016). Emerging digital techniques like participatory GIS with mobile phones could provide intuitive and cost-effective ways to include the contributions of a wide spectrum of collaborators. Nevertheless, the current lack of IT capacity in many local authorities (including lack of GIS specialists) is likely to provide a barrier to this kind of innovative solution in the short term.

At the moment, HLC databases tend to present apparently straightforward and uncontroversial historical interpretations. As noted above, conflict, tension and competition are fundamental characteristics of landscape and heritage, whose social values often emerge through the discussion and negotiation of conflicting perspectives. For HLC to be genuinely useful for landscape management and planning, it needs to be accessible and available to inform debate. In this model, historic landscape characterisation would provide an important stream of information which would be used alongside others by communities and local authorities to debate and agree priorities for future landscape planning based on a sound understanding of past processes and their shared significance.
Conclusion: HLC opportunities

HLC continues to develop as an innovative tool. It offers an expanding range of conceptual and practical opportunities which will in future enable archaeologists and historians to engage more effectively in debates about future landscapes as well as understand how places were created in the past.

There is a fast-growing appreciation amongst archaeologists and historians that past landscapes and the societies that shaped them cannot be understood fully if they are solely considered through the lens of isolated archaeological ‘sites’. Using HLC has encouraged researchers to experiment by combining the landscape approach with established or emerging research methods to provide this wider perspective. The terraced agricultural landscapes of the Mediterranean provide an interesting example. Terraces have been a perennial problem for researchers working on historic landscapes because few methods suitable for dating their origins and development have been developed to date even though many are clearly of considerable antiquity. The problem came into sharp focus as part of HLC projects in rural Catalonia, since it proved difficult to interpret the processes that had shaped the landscape without knowing more about the history of terraces. A collaboration between medieval historians, archaeologists and earth scientists led to the development of a new methodology which combines HLC interpretation with optically stimulated luminescence profiling and dating of terraced sediment profiles to understand the evolution of different types of terraced landscapes (Kinnaird et al. 2017; Turner et al. 2017).

Many similar opportunities exist for research on past landscapes which might apply HLC at different scales and in combination with different types of data. Statistical analysis and modelling of landscape change using GIS, which has almost never been attempted using interpretations from HLC, is an area of particularly high potential – for example to examine the factors behind urban development and its trajectories (see e.g. Stanilov 2013). Such research might not only furnish better understanding of the reasons past landscapes changed as they did, but also enable more accurate modelling of likely change in future landscapes.

HLC provides opportunities to deliver historical knowledge about landscape in a way that is suitable for working in partnership with other disciplines. This has important potential not only in research but also for practical applications. The close relationships between the concepts of heritage and landscape described above are increasingly recognised in national and international policy, providing imperatives to find new ways to bring different disciplinary standpoints into fruitful conversation. A good example is the revised European Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Directive, which had to be implemented by European Union member states before 16 May 2017 (EU 2014). The new text of Article 3 of the EIA Directive explicitly requires assessment of impacts on ‘material assets, cultural heritage and the landscape’ alongside impacts on land, soil, water, air and climate, biodiversity, population and human health, as well as consideration of the interactions between all these factors. In effect, the new European EIA Directive takes a landscape approach which will require multi- and interdisciplinary action, including perspectives which are historically informed and which reflect on heritage issues. HLC is well placed to deliver such perspectives in a practical and usable form.

HLC has excellent potential in the academic and professional spheres, but its flexibility means that there are also many opportunities for uses which inform and engage a wider public constituency. Because HLC has the capacity to be combined with other approaches, it can provide innovative pathways to involve people with an interest in landscapes in a meaningful dialogue about their cultural heritage. This dialogue might be achieved effectively in different ways. For example, the spatial approach to historic character presented through HLC might be combined with approaches like ‘landscape biography’ (discussed in another chapter in this
book) which bring narrative history to the foreground. Alternatively, HLC could be presented through digital means (such as the ubiquitous technology of mobile phones) and used to enable and encourage people to contribute their own perspectives on landscapes. Already, Historic Environment Scotland’s complete HLA dataset is available for consultation online at http://hlamap.org.uk/, and the data and project reports from many English Heritage HLC projects can be accessed through the UK Archaeology Data Service webpage at http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/HLC/index.cfm. One of the most important applications of HLC (and related landscape approaches) could be to promote wider acknowledgement that people’s engagement in landscape is not only a human right (according to the Faro Convention) but also a fundamental aspect of their contribution to the heritage of the future.

References


Historic landscape characterisation


