

Measuring Change in Conservation Areas:

A research report for English Heritage



The Woodgrange Estate, Newham

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CONTENTS

- 1. SUMMARY**
- 2. INTRODUCTION**
 - Background
 - Purpose of research
 - Aims and objectives
- 3. METHODOLOGY**
 - Project management
 - Published sources
 - Survey
 - Public realm
 - Consultation
 - Conclusions
- 4. CHANGE**
 - Evolution
 - Drivers of change
 - Erosion
 - Implications for research
 - Conclusions
- 5. ANALYSIS**
 - Statistics
 - Weighting
 - The case studies
 - Review of methodology
 - Practical issues
 - Resource implications
 - Conclusions
- 6. CURRENT and BEST PRACTICE**
 - Local authority performance
 - A managerial approach
 - Conclusions
- 7. KEY ISSUES and RECOMMENDATIONS**

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------------|
| Annex 1: | Survey proforma |
| Annex 2: | Survey data |
| Annex 3: | Survey mapping |
| Annex 4: | References |

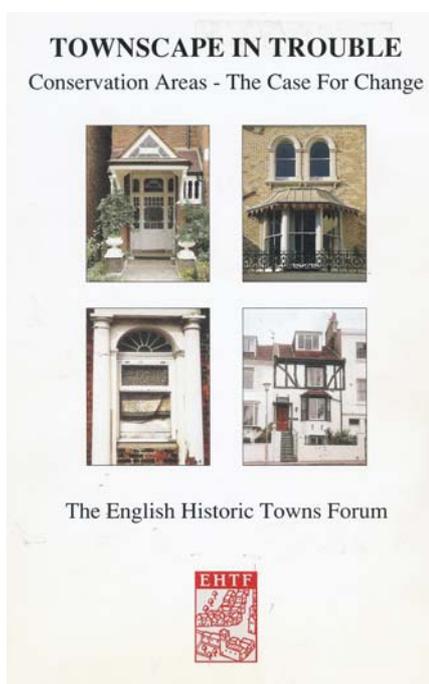
1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 Concerns have often been expressed about the cumulative effect of small-scale changes on the townscape of conservation areas. However, these claims have not generally been supported with objective evidence either to quantify the changes or to measure the rate of change.
- 1.2 This highlights an important issue for historic environment conservation where the subjective nature of many necessary judgements defies the managerial convention 'if you can't count it, it doesn't count'. This puts conservation at a disadvantage when it comes to competing for resources.
- 1.3 This research has assessed the physical change of a thousand houses in four conservation areas and, as a control, in two areas that are not conservation areas. This was achieved by comparing the existing form and materials of a range of building elements – chimneys, roofs, rainwater goods, walls, doors, windows – with a previous known condition.
- 1.4 The methodology converted data into survival rates from which an index of change can be calculated for each element or, indeed, for the conservation area as a whole. These can be used to identify management priorities such as additional controls, levels of compliance and funding for repairs and enhancements.
- 1.5 The research was limited by the lack of a pre-existing baseline, so it concentrated on planned settlements where the original condition could be readily discerned. Clearly, it would be less simple to apply the method to evolved areas with evidence of different architectural periods. The method is also labour-intensive and, therefore, costly.
- 1.6 As with any statistical approach, what matters are the issues that lie behind the peaks and troughs. A high survival rate can equally indicate good management or extreme vulnerability. There is a case, therefore, for simplifying the scientific rigour of the method and concentrating on developing community commitment to conservation principles.

2. INTRODUCTION

Background

- 2.1 There has been much anecdotal evidence about the cumulative effect of small-scale change on the character of conservation areas. While some change is to be expected as a natural product of social development, it is generally accepted that the degree of change can reach a level where character is regarded as being eroded.
- 2.2 In 1992, rising concern about the erosion of conservation areas led the English Historic Towns Forum (EHTF) to publish a report¹ to highlight the problem. Also in the 1990s, English Heritage challenged the replacement window industry with its *Framing Opinions* campaign², which argued that wholesale change of windows was unnecessary and damaging. However, while *Townscape in Trouble* and *Framing Opinions* both made extensive use of photographic evidence to demonstrate the adverse effects of change, there was very little statistical information on the nature and extent of the problems.



Townscape in Trouble was the first major acknowledgement of the effect of change on historic areas.

¹ EHTF – *Townscape in Trouble* – March 1992

² See, for instance:

English Heritage – *Framing Opinions* – Supplement to Conservation Bulletin No.14 – June 1991

- 2.3 In 2002, English Heritage published the first *State of the Historic Environment Report*³ (SHER). It noted that:

‘...almost nothing is known about loss of character by piecemeal change, which is anecdotally considered to be the biggest threat.’⁴

The lack of any indicators of change was also noted:

‘Whilst the proportion of conservation areas covered by Conservation Area Appraisals is useful in demonstrating commitment on the part of the local authority to understand and manage character, it does not measure what actually happens in the area.’⁵

- 2.4 Recognition of a gap between objective (measured) and subjective (anecdotal) knowledge prompted English Heritage to commission The Conservation Studio to research the potential for measuring change.

Purpose of research

- 2.5 The intention was to establish the extent to which systematic information might be gathered and how a methodology for measuring change in conservation areas could be developed.
- 2.6 The findings will be used to inform future guidance on conservation area management and further assessments of the state of the historic environment, now known as *Heritage Counts*.⁶

Aims and objectives

- 2.7 The overall objective was *‘to begin to develop a way of measuring change in historic Areas’*.⁷ The work was to build on a pilot project, undertaken by English Heritage, which examined change in one area in west London.
- 2.8 The twin objectives were:
- i. to continue with the existing methodology in specific conservation areas and non-designated areas of similar date and architectural style; and

³ English Heritage – *State of the Historic Environment Report* – November 2002

⁴ SHER 2002, 1.2.4, page 26

⁵ Ibid

⁶ See, for instance: English Heritage – *Heritage Counts* – November 2003

⁷ English Heritage brief: *Proposed research for SHER 2003* – May 2003

- ii. to consider the usefulness of the methodology and how it might be applied to other more diverse historic areas in rural and urban locations, or whether modifications would be necessary in practice.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 A formal management structure for the project was agreed at the outset and thereafter the work comprised:

- a brief review of relevant publications
- detailed survey of 1,000 buildings in the agreed study areas
- a database of the survey findings
- statistical analysis of the survey findings
- desk-based understanding of the implications of change
- interpretation of the survey findings
- application of the method to current and best practice

Project management

3.2 The research was commissioned by David Pickles, Senior Architect in English Heritage's Research and Standards Group. A Steering Group of English Heritage staff was set up to monitor the project:

David Pickles	- Research and Standards
Duncan McCallum	- Head of Planning and Urban Regeneration
Sheila Stones	- Historic Areas Adviser
Charles Wagner	- Historic Areas Adviser
Ben Cowell	- Head of Social and Economic Research

3.3 Work at The Conservation Studio was undertaken by Eddie Booth assisted by Deborah Gardner of DG Conservation. A series of meetings between the Steering Group and the consultants was established to monitor progress and to discuss the emerging issues.

Published sources

3.4 Remarkably little has been written about the process of change in historic areas even though the cumulative effect of small-scale

change has been generally acknowledged in, for instance, pressure to make Article 4 directions more accessible.⁸

- 3.5 Commentary in *Context*, the journal of the Association of Conservation Officers⁹, has tended to take low-level managerial matters for granted. Instead, it has addressed what may have been considered the larger issues affecting conservation areas, such as designation, enhancement, new development and regeneration, or specific topics, such as windows and shopfronts.
- 3.6 The *English Heritage Monitor*, published annually by the English Tourist Board, until it was superseded by SHER, recorded the financial and human resources applied to conservation and the actions taken, such as grant-aid or urgent works notices. These may have been responses to change, but they do not chronicle the change itself.
- 3.7 The English Historic Towns Forum report, *Townscape in Trouble*, was based on an attitude survey of its, then, 45 member Councils. Its findings included: that 97% thought the character of their conservation areas was adversely affected by permitted development, yet 71% knew there was political support for further controls. Awareness of the negative effects of change was evident, therefore, but it was still not quantified.
- 3.8 *Townscape in Trouble* was effective in securing changes to Article 4 directions. The direction was split so that some permitted development could be brought under planning control by local authorities without reference to Government Regional Offices.
- 3.9 The Framing Opinions campaign did gather quantities. It estimated in 1991 that there were some 750,000 unlisted buildings in 8,000 conservation areas, which represented about 4 million windows at risk of unsympathetic replacement. This change was being fuelled by a home improvement industry in which the window replacement market alone was worth nearly £3bn.
- 3.10 In 1993, English Heritage published a guidance leaflet on conservation area practice.¹⁰ This is perhaps the first public promotion of record-keeping as a means to monitor change:

‘Creation of a dated photographic record of the appearance of the conservation area will prove an invaluable aid to

⁸ Article 4 directions remove permitted development rights and so bring many minor works under planning control. Until the 1990s, any proposal for such a direction had to be confirmed by the Government Regional Office.

⁹ Now the Institute of Historic Building Conservation.

¹⁰ English Heritage – Conservation Area Practice – 1993

subsequent enforcement action and a useful check in monitoring change.'

- 3.11 A year later, the Government's guidance in PPG15 echoed this by introducing the need to justify conservation area designations by periodic review so that:

*'Cancellation of designation should be considered where an area or part of an area is no longer considered to possess the special interest which led to its original designation.'*¹¹

- 3.12 This implied an understanding of the special interest of an area and the monitoring of any deterioration. Understanding could be gained through a conservation area appraisal, but there was no guidance on understanding the dynamics of change.

- 3.13 English Heritage maintained its position in the second edition of the guidance published in 1995, which included a paragraph on monitoring change¹². This was echoed in subsequent guidance on conservation area appraisal.¹³

- 3.14 In 1998, the English Historic Towns Forum published a guide to the management of conservation areas.¹⁴ This acknowledged the need to understand how a town works in different ways for different interest groups – residential, commercial, retail, visitors. It also noted the importance of photographic surveys for evidence in prosecution and enforcement cases:

*'They enable authorities to monitor changes and to assess the effectiveness of the management of the conservation area by reviewing how its appearance and character have changed over time.'*¹⁵

- 3.15 By the time English Heritage published *Informed Conservation*¹⁶, the need to understand the dynamics of change was a fully accepted element of conservation plans. 'Understanding' is seen as the key to policy-making, management, development and, where necessary, mitigation. This applies whether the subject is a building or a settlement:

'Conservation area appraisals, like conservation plans, depend upon an understanding of the area which draws upon the techniques of conservation-based research and

¹¹ PPG15 – *Planning and the Historic Environment* – 1994 – paragraph 4.3

¹² English Heritage – *Conservation Area Practice* – 2nd edition, 1995 – Paragraph 2.6

¹³ English Heritage – *Conservation Area Appraisals* – 1997

¹⁴ EHTF – *Conservation Area Management* - 1998

¹⁵ Ibid Section 3.3

¹⁶ Kate Clark – *Informed Conservation* – English Heritage 2001

analysis. Conservation area appraisals could also, like conservation plans, include a more specific assessment of significance and some analysis of how that significance is vulnerable as a basis for defining policies for preserving or enhancing their character.’¹⁷

- 3.16 The most recent guidance, published by Planning Aid for London¹⁸ but with national relevance, fully recognises the importance of understanding a conservation area. It notes the need to take account of change in appraising areas ‘to ensure that the designation is still justified.’



Hangar Hill Gardens, Ealing: Distinctive mock-timber frame style

Survey

- 3.17 Because change is a dynamic process, it always involves two considerations: the state from which change has evolved, or departed, and the changed state itself. For the purposes of a pilot study, it was necessary to select areas where the pre-existing state was readily discernible. Otherwise, too much of the survey’s resources would be spent on speculating where a baseline should be drawn.
- 3.18 For this reason, areas were selected where there was a relatively high level of homogeneity and where the origins were reasonably clear. This pointed to planned estates of a single build with a known history.
- 3.19 The original pilot area was a garden suburb in Ealing, so a further two areas in London were selected for comparison. However, the

¹⁷ Ibid Section 6.10

¹⁸ Ruth Richards and Maggie Urquart – *Conservation Planning* – Planning Aid for London 2003

need to reflect the position outside London led to the addition of an area in the North West of England.

3.20 It was also necessary, for comparison, to select control areas that were not designated as conservation areas. Two areas were chosen adjacent to two of the conservation areas.

3.21 The selected areas were:

Conservation areas:

- The Hanger Hill Garden Estate, Ealing, West London
- The Alexandra Cottages Estate, Bromley, South London
- The Woodgrange Estate, Newham, East London
- Maryport, Cumbria¹⁹

Control areas:

- Saxon Drive, Ealing, West London
- South Maryport, Cumbria



Alexandra Cottages, Bromley: Paired houses with gables facing the street

3.22 The number of buildings to be surveyed had to be sufficient to achieve reasonably representative statistics without overburdening limited resources. The Steering Group considered that a total of 1,000 properties would be appropriate. In the event, the following numbers were surveyed:

¹⁹ Maryport was laid out in a planned grid in the mid-18th century but was not seriously developed until the mid-to-late-19th century

▫ Hanger Hill	363
▫ Woodgrange	181
▫ Alexandra Cottages	155
▫ Maryport	150
▫ Saxon Drive	100
▫ South Maryport	100
Total:	1,049

- 3.23 The survey method was to record the existing material, and the degree of alteration, of a series of elements for each property. These were restricted to elements on the front elevation, partly so that the survey work could be undertaken from the public highway without the need to request entry onto private land, and partly because the contribution buildings make to the character and appearance of conservation areas does derive in large measure from the frontages.



Woodgrange Estate, Newham: Influence of railway architecture

- 3.24 A proforma was developed²⁰ that needed to be sufficiently flexible to apply in all cases. It lists the main elements to be expected with any building – chimneys, roof, rainwater goods, wall, windows and door. It then adds some elements that might be found – mouldings, porch, verandah, ironwork, front garden, boundary wall. It was accepted that not all the elements are necessarily present in all conservation areas. Irrelevant fields can, therefore, be struck out, while a ‘Miscellaneous’ field allows any further features that are distinctive to a particular area to be added.

²⁰ See Annex 1

- 3.25 It was also clear that the change might sometimes have to be explained, so space was provided in each line for comment where necessary.
- 3.26 It was important that the level of detail to be recorded was relevant to the perception of change and that it was commensurate with the degree of complexity necessary for analysis. There is little point in disaggregating survey information beyond what is to be expressed in the findings. Accordingly, a number of minor elements were not recorded, such as burglar alarm boxes, ventilating grilles and satellite dishes. It is accepted, however, that these might be relevant fields in some cases.



Maryport, Cumbria: Late C19th sandstone terraces

- 3.27 The fields included on the proforma were:
- Chimneys
 - Roof
 - Rainwater goods
 - Wall
 - Windows
 - Door
 - Mouldings
 - Porch/verandah
 - Ironwork
 - Front garden
 - Boundary wall
 - Miscellaneous
- 3.28 The survey proforma also includes columns for recording the degree of survival (%) for each element, and systems for weighting

and scoring. These are part of the desk-based analysis, rather than the field survey, and they are considered in Section 5 below.

- 3.29 Digital photographs were taken of each property at the time the proforma data were recorded.



Saxon Drive, Ealing: The GWR Estate is not a conservation area.

Public realm

- 3.30 The survey method can also be used to address changes to the public realm. Notes were made in the course of the survey work as to how street changes have affected the character of the conservation areas. However, as these changes are brought about by fundamentally different circumstances of ownership, procurement and control, comparisons with changes to property are of little assistance and must be considered incidental.
- 3.31 While it is important that changes to the public realm should be recorded and quantified, it is suggested that this does not need to be linked directly with the measurement of change to property. Instead, the guidance of English Heritage's *Streets for All*²¹ initiative should be followed. This advocates audits of the public realm in order to establish:
- The original form and materials
 - The degree of change from the original state
 - The extent to which the changes are justified by the need to adapt to modern usage
 - Elements of the public realm that are not necessary
 - Elements that could be enhanced

²¹ English Heritage – *Streets for All* - 2000

An audit can then be used as the basis for a design process.²²

Consultation

3.32 The collective knowledge and experience of the Steering Group, made available through progress meetings, was invaluable to the development and analysis of the research. Further soundings were taken from the Conservation Officers for the survey areas:

- Ealing (Hanger Hill gardens): Sarah Harper
- Newham (Woodgrange): Jackie Morrison
- Bromley (Alexandra Cottages): Douglas Black
- Allerdale (Maryport): Andrew Tegg
Paul Barker²³

3.33 Responses to the publication of interim findings in *Heritage Counts*²⁴ and to a conference of town planners²⁵ revealed a strong interest in the research. This indicates the need for post-research publicity and for the development of further guidance on better understanding and management of change.



Maryport, Cumbria: Control area outside the conservation area

²² The regional volumes of *Streets for All* (2004 forthcoming) include guidance on carrying out streetscape audits.

²³ Now at Wealden District Council, Paul Barker undertook some survey work at Maryport in his previous post at Allerdale DC.

²⁴ English Heritage – *Heritage Counts* – November 2003

²⁵ Royal Town Planning Institute conference on Conservation Area Management – 3 March 2004

Conclusions

- 3.34 Guidance in the past has tended to address the effect of change rather than the process of change itself. Although English Heritage has been advocating the measurement of change by photographic survey for almost a dozen years, there is little evidence that this practice is widespread.
- 3.35 The lack of a baseline means that, for the purposes of this research, change has been measured from the 'as built' state. Accordingly, areas had to be selected where the original form was readily discernible. The problems of translating the methodology to areas with a complex evolved history are discussed in the next section.
- 3.36 Measuring change from the 'as built' state is useful for relatively recent planned settlements, where a return to a near-original form may be a reasonable planning objective. However, it does not necessarily distinguish between changes that have taken place before or after the conservation area was designated. Only with the periodic setting of a baseline can the effectiveness of conservation area management be assessed.
- 3.37 It is essential to recognise the distinctiveness of different areas by adopting suitably flexible survey methods. At the same time, there is a danger of overloading the analysis of data with too much detail and a relatively simple approach is necessary.
- 3.38 However much the survey can be mechanised, through the use of a proforma or even hand-held computers, there will always be a considerable need for discernment in understanding the pre-existing details and assessing the degree of change. The difference, for instance, between original timber sashes and 'near-miss' replacements can often be a matter of fine judgement. It is unlikely, therefore, that the methodology can be readily handed to a non-specialist workforce.
- 3.39 A specialist input is also necessary before embarking on a survey in order to determine the range of fields that are appropriate to the physical form and character of the area. Thus, while an assessment of change might usefully feed into a conservation area appraisal, a degree of appraisal is necessary first.

