
The World Heritage List



Ironbridge Gorge - one of the UK's World Heritage Sites. Image courtesy of Skyscan Balloon Photography

The World Heritage List, upon which hundreds of culturally significant destinations and monuments have been inscribed, has been with us since 1972. But few seem to know exactly what makes a World Heritage Site, who decides, and what benefits the process of inscription is supposed to bring. Jess Harris, a Consultant with Locum Destination Consulting, investigates.

The idea of establishing an international movement for protecting heritage sites around the world first emerged after World War I. In 1959, widespread concern was voiced over the decision to build the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, which would have flooded the valley containing the Abu Simbel temples, dating from c.1200 BCE. After an appeal from the governments of Egypt and Sudan, UNESCO decided to launch an international campaign. Archaeological research in the

area to be flooded was hastened and the Abu Simbel and Philae temples were dismantled, moved to higher ground and reassembled.

The campaign cost in the region of US\$80 million, half of which was donated by around 50 countries, showing the importance of nations' shared responsibility in conserving outstanding cultural sites. Its success led to other safeguarding campaigns such as Venice in Italy, Moenjodaro in Pakistan and Borobodur in Indonesia.

Consequently UNESCO, with the help of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), initiated the preparation of a draft convention on the protection of cultural heritage.

In 1972, a proposal for protecting both cultural and natural heritage together was presented to the United Nations conference on Human Environment in Stockholm. The *Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage* was adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO on 16 November 1972. Since its inception, its primary mission has been to identify cultural and natural heritage of exceptional universal value throughout the world, and to ensure its protection through international cooperation.

What is the World Heritage List?

The World Heritage List was born in 1972, with the inception of the new UNESCO Convention. The List comprises sites of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity. It currently contains 690 such sites, of which 12 are in the UK (see map). According to the UNESCO Convention, all World Heritage Sites and Monuments belong to the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located.

By signing the Convention, a country pledges to protect the whole of its national heritage, whether or not it is recognised as World Heritage. The recent ratification of the World Heritage Convention by Chad, Israel and Namibia brought the total number of State Parties to 159, leaving approximately 30 countries that have not yet joined the treaty. Any country may ratify the Convention, even if it is not a UNESCO Member State.

Obtaining status

So how does a site or monument become inscribed on the World Heritage List? Perhaps surprisingly, UNESCO itself makes no recommendations for listing. Rather, applications for World Heritage are made by host countries. Every application must include a plan detailing how the site is managed and protected.

The World Heritage Committee meets once a year and examines nominations on the basis of independent technical evaluations of proposed sites, which are provided by two advisory bodies: the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN). The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) provides expert advice on restoring monuments and organises training courses. In order to qualify, a site must satisfy all selection criteria, as outlined in the table below.

What are the supposed benefits?

According to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, there are three main benefits to gaining World Heritage status.

- *Public awareness.* Inscribing a site for heritage preservation on the World Heritage List can serve as a catalyst to raising awareness for heritage preservation on the part of governments and citizens alike. Heightened awareness, in turn, should lead to greater consideration and a general rise in the level of protection and conservation afforded to heritage properties. The World Heritage Committee can provide financial assistance and expert advice as support for promotional activities for the preservation of sites as well as for developing educational materials.
- *International assistance.* It is the State Parties' responsibility to provide adequate protection and management for their sites. In this regard, a key benefit of ratification, particularly for developing countries, is access to the World Heritage Fund. Annually, about US\$3 million is made available, mainly to Least Developed Countries and Low Income Countries, to finance technical assistance and training projects, as well as for assistance to States Parties requesting help to prepare their nomination proposals or to develop conservation projects. Emergency assistance may also be made available for urgent action to repair damage caused by human-made or natural disasters. Inscription of a site on the World Heritage List may also open the way for financial assistance from a variety of sources in heritage conservation projects.
- *International recognition.* The overarching benefit of joining the World Heritage Convention is that of belonging to an international community of appreciation and concern for unique, universally significant properties that embody a world of outstanding examples of cultural diversity and natural wealth.

World Heritage List: Criteria for selection

Cultural properties should:

- represent a masterpiece of human creative genius; or
- exhibit an important interchange of human values over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design; or
- bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilisation which is living or has disappeared; or
- be an outstanding example of a type of building or architectural or technological ensemble, or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history; or
- be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement or land-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change; or
- be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance (a criterion applied only in exceptional circumstances, and together with other criteria).

Equally important is the authenticity of the site and the way it is protected and managed.

Natural properties should:

- be outstanding examples representing major stages of Earth's history, including the record of life, significant ongoing geological processes in the development of land forms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features; or
- be outstanding examples representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals; or
- contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance; or
- contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

The protection, management and integrity of the site are also important considerations.

Funding and support

The World Heritage Fund receives the majority of its income from compulsory contributions from States Parties - amounting to 1% of their UNESCO dues - and voluntary contributions. Other sources of income include funds-in-trust donated by countries for specific purposes and profits derived from sales of World Heritage publications.

The total amount received each year is just under US\$3.5 million, a modest sum considering the enormity of the task. The onus is very much on the World Heritage Committee to allocate funding according to the urgency of the request. For this reason, priority is necessarily given to the most threatened sites, including those in the List of World Heritage in Danger, currently comprising 27 of the 690 World Heritage Sites. These sites are recognised as being under constant threat from natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, or human intervention leading to, for instance, pollution, armed conflict, poaching and unplanned construction. All of the sites on this special List are entitled to particular attention and emergency conservation action.

The List of World Heritage in Danger is designed to inform the international community of conditions that threaten the very

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characteristics for which a site was originally inscribed on the World Heritage List, and assist the administration of corrective preservation measures.

Dangers can be 'ascertained', referring to specific and proven imminent threats, or 'potential', when a property is faced with threats which could have negative effects on its World Heritage values. Inscription of any site on the List of World Heritage in Danger requires the Committee to develop and adopt, in consultation with the State Party concerned, a programme for corrective measures, and subsequently to monitor the situation of the site. All efforts must be made to restore the site's values in order to enable its removal from the List of World Heritage in Danger as soon as possible.

UK World Heritage Sites



- 1 The Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast
- 2 Durham Castle and Cathedral
- 3 Ironbridge Gorge
- 4 Studley Royal Park, including the Ruins of Fountain Abbey
- 5 Stonehenge, Avebury and associated sites
- 6 The Castles and Town Walls of King Edward in Gwynedd
- 7 St Kilda
- 8 Blenheim Palace
- 9 City of Bath
- 10 Hadrian's Wall
- 11 Palace of Westminster, Abbey of Westminster and St Margaret's Church
- 12 The Tower of London
- 13 Canterbury Cathedral, St Augustine's Abbey and St Martin's Church
- 14 Old and New Towns of Edinburgh
- 15 Maritime Greenwich
- 16 Blaenavon Industrial Landscape

Non-mainland UK World Heritage Sites

- 1 Henderson Island
- 2 Gough Island Wildlife Reserve
- 3 Heart of Neolithic Orkney
- 4 The Historic Town of St George and Related Fortifications, Bermuda