

Cultural Landscape - View from Europe*

by Graham Fairclough

English Heritage's Monuments Protection Programme has for some years been coordinating a national programme of Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) by county council archaeology departments (see Conservation Bulletin 40, 23-6). But we also look beyond England, to other parts of the UK and Europe for a wider context for cultural landscape. Already, our HLC work is delivering many of the aims of the new European Landscape Convention

People often start to value something when it is threatened, and the recent consequences of Foot and Mouth Disease, its long-term consequences still not clear, raised the stakes on the future of the rural landscape. The countryside has long been highly valued, but rural policy has tended to focus on its natural attributes. Its historic dimension is neither well understood nor, as a result, adequately managed. Heritage conservationists have until recently been strongly focused on sites and monuments, treating landscape as the background rather than significant in itself.

In its own right, however, the historic landscape is perhaps the most fundamental, diverse and readily accessible part of the cultural heritage. It is the human habitat affecting everyone, extensively adapted over thousands of years. It is cultural, not just natural. It comprises farm buildings, woodland and villages, and everything in between, from land cover to hedges and roads - the whole of the countryside. It embraces both the physical remains of past human activity and intangible associations.

European Landscape Convention

There is now a solid framework for helping to look after this valuable legacy: the European Landscape Convention, launched in October 2000 by the Council of Europe. It is not yet in force (first needing ratification by ten countries), but more than 20 countries have signed it and one (Norway) has formally ratified it. The Council of Europe has established an annual Signatories Conference to promote its implementation, and it is already influencing thought and policy across Europe. In the UK, current practice already mainly meets its aims, and it is hoped that the Government will soon agree to be added to the list of signatories.

The Convention defines landscape as 'an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors'. The concept of 'action and interaction, by people in the past' emphasises the importance of cultural and historic landscape, and its changes. The definition also emphasises the cultural aspect of landscape, its material remains created over a long period by human activity. More than 'environment', landscape exists only after people have imagined it.

The Convention also emphasises that landscape exists everywhere, not just in special places: it can be urban as well as rural, maritime as well as terrestrial, 'degraded' as well as well-preserved, everyday as well as outstanding, typical as well as special. Landscape in all its diversity contributes to the formation of local cultures and is a basic component of cultural heritage as well as collective and personal identity. The strong theme of personal involvement in landscape, which runs through the Convention, supports the view that democratic participation is essential in landscape management.

The Convention sets out both specific and general measures that countries should adopt to achieve landscape protection, management and planning. Specific measures include awareness-raising, training and education and the use of landscape character assessment to measure its social value and monitor the forces for changes.

General measures include recognition in law of the idea of landscape, and the need for landscape policies to be integrated with other aspects of policy, including spatial planning, and cultural, environmental, agricultural, social and economic policies.

European vantage point

The Convention places England's countryside in a wider context. Looking at the English historic landscape from a European vantage point gives new insights. Some parts of England - our uplands with their extensive prehistoric remains, the medieval ridge and furrow of the eastern midlands, or the dense long-established hedgerow patterns of western England - are unique or outstanding at a European level. Other parts provide background and context for important landscape elsewhere, underlining European diversity. They form a contrast with other areas: the open landscapes of the Alentejo, for instance, contrast stunningly with those of Scania and both have little in common with Norfolk, yet all are distinctively European. This unifying diversity reflects several thousand years of common cultural practices that are arguably more important in forming perceptions of landscape than the natural differences of topography or geography.

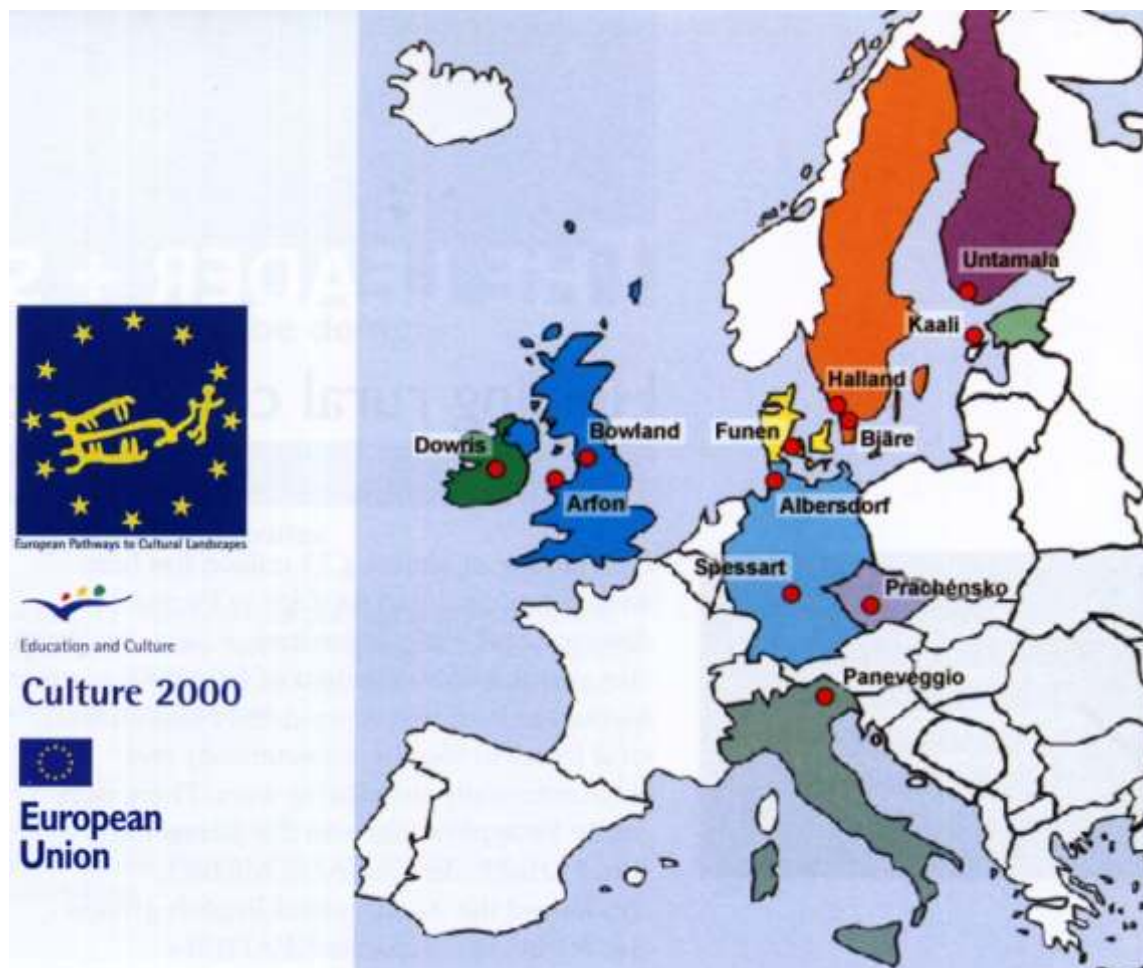
Diversity of approach for understanding and managing the landscape is also important, and the exchange of ideas and experience across Europe is a central concern of the Convention. Other parts of the UK, for example, use English HLC-type approaches, modified to suit local needs and different landscape types - in Wales as part of a selective 'special area' approach to archaeological landscape, in Scotland to capture both modern and abandoned land use patterns. Outside the UK, Ireland and Sweden are starting to experiment with HLC, further modifying techniques to suit their circumstances. Indeed, a wide range of useful and diverse techniques are being developed by archaeologists and cultural geographers throughout Europe, many described in *Europe's Cultural Landscape: archaeologists and the management of change*, a recent joint publication by English Heritage and the Europae Archaeologiae Consilium (European Archaeological Council).

European Pathways to the Cultural Landscape

A Culture 2000 project called European Pathways to the Cultural Landscape (EPCL) is also exploring this diversity of approach. This three-year networking project covers ten countries from Ireland to Estonia and 12 areas spanning a wide range of different landscape types and cultural milieu. These studies have common aims and will produce joint results, but the methods used will vary. The principles of the European Landscape Convention will underpin them all, as will a desire to manage change sensibly within the whole European landscape in ways that respect both diversity and unity, both rare and typical areas. EPCL could be a model for a more formal European observatory to understand and monitor the historic landscape. It also shows what is needed locally for countryside conservation in England: a clear appreciation that the landscape contains our roots and our stories but that it offers many different narratives and identities.



Upland hay meadows in the Pradi de Togola, Parco Naturale of Paneveggio Pale di son Martino, Eastern Trentino, Italy, one of the 12 EPCL projects. A component of a complex landscape in the territory of Caoria, but representative of much of the Alpine zone, the meadows reflect the history and culture of trie area's community over several centuries



The scope of the Culture 2000 European Pathways to the Cultural Landscape project



Changing landscape near Castellones, Lot et Garonne, France. Small hedged fields slowly succumbing to landscape change from the pressures of intensified arable cultivation.

*This article has been published in English Heritages Conservation Bulletin, March 2002