

Outstanding Universal Value

Brief synthesis

Blenheim Palace, in Oxfordshire, was designed by John Vanbrugh. The English nation presented the site to John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough, in recognition of his victory in 1704 over French and Bavarian troops, a victory which decided the future of the Empire and, in doing so, made him a figure of international importance. The Palace sits within a large walled landscape park, the structure by Vanbrugh overlaid by the designs of Lancelot "Capability" Brown from 1761 onwards.

The design and building of the Palace between 1705 and 1722 represented the beginning of a new style of architecture and its landscaped Park, designed by Lancelot "Capability" Brown, is considered "a naturalistic Versailles".

In tangible form, Blenheim is an outstanding example of the work of John Vanbrugh and Nicholas Hawksmoor, two of England's most notable architects. It represents a unique architectural achievement celebrating the triumph of the English armies over the French, and the Palace and its associated Park have exerted great influence on the English Romantic movement which was characterised by the eclecticism of its inspiration, its return to natural sources and its love of nature.

The original landscape set out by John Vanbrugh, who regulated the course of the River Glyme, was later modified by Lancelot "Capability" Brown who created two lakes, seen as one of the greatest examples of naturalistic landscape design.

Blenheim Palace was built by the nation to honour one of its heroes John Churchill, the first Duke of Marlborough, and is also closely associated with Sir Winston Churchill.

Criterion (ii): By their refusal of the French models of classicism, the Palace and Park illustrate the beginnings of the English Romantic movement, which was characterised by the eclecticism of its inspiration, its return to national sources and its love of nature. The influence of Blenheim on the architecture and organisation of space in the 18th and 19th centuries was greatly felt both in England and abroad.

Criterion (iv): Built by the nation to honour one of its heroes, Blenheim is, above all, the home of an English aristocrat, the 1st Duke of Marlborough, who was also Prince of the Germanic Holy Roman Empire, as we are reminded in the decoration of the Great Drawing Room [the Saloon] by Louis Laguerre (1719-20).

Like the World Heritage properties Residence of Würzburg and the Castles of Augustusburg and Falkenlust in Brühl, Blenheim is typical of 18th century European princely residences.

Integrity

The property is enclosed by an 18th century dry stone wall which defines its extent and maintains its physical integrity. Within the wall, the layout of the principal buildings remains unaltered since their construction, and the overall structure of the landscaped park layout remains largely as set out by Vanbrugh and Brown. The buildings and Park were laid out over an earlier Roman and medieval landscape, remnants of which are still visible through the Vanbrugh and Brown landscapes. Changes to the landscape and buildings by their owners have continued to the present day though these have not detracted from the Outstanding Universal Value of the property.

The Park contains important veteran trees. Disease and time have caused some loss of original tree specimens but these have been replanted with the same species where possible and appropriate. Because of climate change and the greater incidence of drought, adjustments have to be made to the mix of species used in conserving the park landscape.

The integrity of the property is well protected by its enclosing wall but important visual links do exist between the gates, the parkland buildings, buildings in the surrounding villages and landscape, and care needs to be taken to ensure these key visual links are protected.

Authenticity

The overall relationship between the Baroque Palace and its Park is still clearly in place and the Outstanding Universal Value of the property can be very readily understood despite the early 20th century changes to the landscape. The form and design of the Palace and Park survive well and there is a high degree of survival of fabric and indeed original fittings and furnishings.

Protection and management requirements

The UK Government protects World Heritage properties in England in two ways. Firstly, individual buildings, monuments, gardens and landscapes are designated under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and the 1979 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act and secondly, through the UK Spatial Planning system under the provisions of the Town and Country Planning Acts.

Government guidance on protecting the Historic Environment and World Heritage is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework and Circular 07/09. Policies to protect, promote, conserve and enhance World Heritage properties, their settings and buffer zones are also found in statutory planning documents. World Heritage status is a key material consideration when planning applications are considered by the Local Authority planning authority. The West Oxfordshire Local Plan contains policies to protect the property.

The property as a whole is designated as a Grade 1 registered Park and Garden and was given National Heritage tax exemption status in 1999 in recognition of its important architecture, its outstanding scenic, historic landscape, and the outstanding importance of the buildings' contents and their intimate association with the property. Forty five key buildings on the site are Grade 1 and Grade 2* Listed Buildings, with the park wall designated Grade 2. There are 5 scheduled ancient monuments within the Park.

The lakes and High Park are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the ancient woodland and hedgerows are both protected. Part of the setting of the property is within the Conservation Areas of Woodstock and Bladon and part is in the Cotswold's Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

A Management Plan has been in place since 2006 and is monitored on an annual basis by a Steering Group which includes representatives from English Heritage, ICOMOS-UK, DCMS, Natural England, the County Council and the local planning authority. Relevant Management Plan policies carry weight in the planning system. There is a comprehensive and successful visitor management plan. The Steering Group is coordinated by the Blenheim Palace and Estate Chief Executive who has responsibility for implementing the Management Plan Action Plan. There is an ongoing programme of repair and regular maintenance of the buildings and structures. Recent work has included the strengthening and reinstatement of the Blenheim Dam during 2009 to comply with safety legislation.

The Park is open through the year and the Palace and Formal Gardens are open from mid-February to mid-December each year. The property has a long tradition of public access (going back to at least Easter 1950) and it provides the setting for informal recreation as well as a series of activities including sporting events, craft and country fairs and entertainment events such as music concerts and historical re-enactments. The property also offers a very high quality resource for a variety of educational uses.

Firm implementation of existing policies is important to provide effective protection of the setting of the World Heritage property and it will be important to ensure that the management of the Park prioritises conservation of the elements of the landscape that reflect the work of Vanbrugh and Brown. The Steering Group meets annually to monitor progress and implementation with regard to the 33 stated objectives in the Management Plan and to check awareness with regard to risk preparedness and to monitor any issues regarding the integrity of the property – particularly with regard to the continuous monitoring of the key visual links.



9 May 2016

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Dear Christine

Blenheim Palace and Park – World Heritage Site

Thank you for your letter dated 28 April 2016 and for your request for a broader explanation regarding the Blenheim Palace and Park World Heritage Site (“WHS”) and the fact that it does not have a Buffer Zone.

Under the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* issued by UNESCO, a Buffer Zone should be provided where it is deemed necessary for the adequate ‘protection’ of the inscribed site. Such ‘protection’ relates solely to negative impacts on the sites Outstanding Universal Value (the cultural or natural significance) for which a site has been inscribed by UNESCO.

UNESCO considers that if the existing protection arrangements for the setting of World Heritage Sites (WHS) are sufficiently robust to give this protection, then a special Buffer Zone is **not** necessary. In support of this position, UK planning guidance indicates that it may be appropriate to protect the setting of WHS in other ways, for example, by the protection of specific views and viewpoints, whilst other landscape designations may also prove effective in protecting the setting of a WHS (planning circular 07/09).

The UK Government protects World Heritage Sites in England in two ways: firstly, individual buildings, monuments and landscapes are designated under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and the 1979 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act; and secondly, through the UK Spatial Planning system under the provisions of the Town and Country Planning Acts. As the UNESCO World Heritage Centre website states “the West Oxfordshire District Council Local Plan contains policies to protect the property”

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At a local level, Blenheim Palace and Park WHS is protected by the legal designation of all its principal buildings and monuments, through numerous other designations including SSSI legislation, the register of historic parks and gardens of special interest in England, ancient woodlands and through wider designations such as the Oxford Green Belt, the Cotswolds AONB, the Wychwood Project Area, conservation area legislation and other local planning policies. All of these national and local spatial planning systems include policies for the protection for the heritage asset and its setting.

As a result of strong legal policies, conservation designation and the spatial planning system established in the UK, a significant number of UK and UK territory World Heritage Sites do not have formal Buffer Zones. In 2015, and in addition to Blenheim Palace, at least 12 World Heritage Sites in the UK did not have formal Buffer Zones - these sites included Blaenavon Industrial Landscape, Ironbridge Gorge, Old and New Towns of Edinburgh, the Palace of Westminster, Stonehenge and Avebury, and the Tower of London.

Unlike other World Heritage Sites, Blenheim Palace is in the extremely rare position, both national and internationally, of being a WHS in single ownership. As such the property has very effective control and direct management of the WHS and has an unprecedented ability to conserve the Outstanding Universal Value of Blenheim for which it is inscribed. A robust management plan for the WHS has been in place since 2006 and it is monitored on an annual basis by ICOMOS-UK, Historic England, Natural England and the local planning authorities amongst others. The WHS Management Plan, which is in the process of being reviewed and updated, is supplemented by other comprehensive management plans for visitor management, conservation of the historic park and the SSSI/ancient woodland interests within the setting.

As UNESCO state, the Estates firm implementation of the existing policies in the WHS management is important to provide effective protection for Blenheim and its setting. It is 'important to ensure that the management of the Park prioritizes the conservation of the elements of the landscape that reflect the work of Vanbrugh and Brown'.

As noted above, UNESCO considers that if existing protection arrangements for the setting of a WHS are sufficiently robust, then a special Buffer Zone is **not** necessary. While the UK Government supports appropriate measures to protect the setting of a WHS, for example by the protection of specific views and viewpoints, specifically in reference to Blenheim Palace and Park, the WHS Management Plan 2006 assessed the setting and highlighted key views and viewpoints that needed to be conserved.

The annual monitoring by ICOMOS-UK, Historic England and others monitors progress and implementation with regard to the 33 stated objectives in the WHS Management Plan 2006 and checks awareness with regard to monitoring any issues regarding the integrity of the property, particularly with regard to the continuous monitoring of the key visual links.

While UNESCO and ICOMOS prefer to have a Buffer Zone established at the time of inscription, many sites were inscribed before the developing concept of Buffer Zones was established. However, it is correct to say that a zone can be established at a later date.

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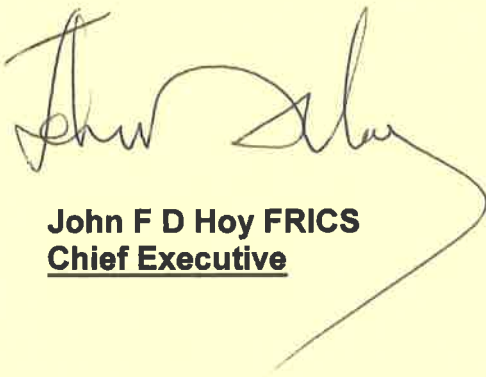
Whilst the ability to establish a buffer zone sits with the Estate, its purpose would be to protect the Outstanding Universal Value of the WHS and its wider context. If the Estate felt it necessary to promote the establishment of a buffer zone, then in the UK this could only be done through designations and the local planning system and as such the mechanism for introducing that protection would fall on the local planning authority.

To establish a Buffer Zone would imply that the local development framework documents are not up to the task of conserving heritage assets and their setting, which is firmly not our view and it is also not the view expressed by UNESCO and other advisors.

The concept of a Buffer Zone and setting will be part of the WHS management plan review and the Estate will not pre-empt the recommendations and conclusions of that review. However, given the strong statutory and local plan protections for heritage assets, the Oxford Green Belt and natural environment features such as the Cotswold AONB coupled with the fact that the local authorities have recently produced, or are in the process of producing, new core strategies as part of the Local Development Framework, it would be our very firm view that Blenheim Palace and Park WHS is already provided with a very high degree of protection for the WHS Outstanding Universal Value and thus an additional level of designated protection is unnecessary.

I hope that the above helps by way of a broader explanation on this matter but please do not hesitate to revert back to me if you wish to discuss this further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John F D Hoy', with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

John F D Hoy FRICS
Chief Executive

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5 April 2013

Dear Mr Hargraves

BLENHEIM PALACE WHS

Thank you for your letter of 13 March. I apologise for the delay in my reply.

The need for a buffer zone was extensively discussed during the preparation of the last management plan and we concluded that any impacts from development that might adversely affect the property by detracting from its setting could be adequately managed through other planning policies. English Heritage therefore considers that there is no need for a buffer zone in this instance.

Yours sincerely



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The National Monuments Record is the public archive of English Heritage

