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## Celebrating our distinctive heritage

How the historic environment of York, North Yorkshire  
and the East Riding can help achieve Good Growth

## Executive Summary



Historic England

**Prepared by LUC**

for Historic England and the York and North Yorkshire LEP

2021

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## Forewords

### Historic England

As the public body helping people care for and celebrate England's historic environment, Historic England believes that our shared heritage has the power to enrich all of our lives. It brings beauty and history into our everyday experience. It provides us with homes, workplaces and leisure opportunities. It helps us to define our place in the world. And it provides us with economic assets that can fuel good growth for our distinctive places.

Our connections to the past are central to the sense of place and quality of life for residents and visitors alike. Critically they are also a major source of added value for business. For example, Malton has shown how a town's character, location and historic environment can drive growth, reinventing itself as Yorkshire's food capital – a process which as this report makes clear could be replicated in other places. Individual sites like Bolton Abbey Tithe Barn in Skipton and Woodend Creative Workspace in Scarborough show how heritage assets can be 'attractions' that draw users and deliver valuable, unique experiences.

Historic places are important to our identity, our wellbeing and our ecosystems. We should use successes from the past to provide inspiration for reinvigorating them today and make them serve the future in the best way they can. We can do this by facilitating desirable new homes, inspiring workspaces, attractive and accessible green spaces, all well-connected both physically and digitally. All of our vacant and under-used heritage assets are stalled sites which could be contributing to good growth. Our towns are well-placed to become the hearts of inclusive, carbon-neutral circular economies.

I would like to thank LUC as well as all the LEP and Historic England staff who have advised on the work. We want to move on now to see how we can help to turn this report's recommendations into actions which will create sustainable new futures for our beautiful old places across York, North Yorkshire and the East Riding.



**Trevor Mitchell**

*Regional Director North East and Yorkshire, Historic England*

### York and North Yorkshire LEP

York, North Yorkshire and the East Riding feature a rich array of historic assets situated across its cities, towns, countryside, and coastline. Our diverse and distinctive natural and built environment tells the tale of both the area's geological formation and historic patterns of settlement. However, at the forefront of our historic environment are people; places and communities have been built by our people over time and continue to be developed by people now and into the future.

This pioneering report looks at how we can make the very most of our historical assets, exploring a range of opportunities across our geography to enhance the socio-economic contribution of our historic environment and cultural heritage. As the report emphasises, the historic environment and the economy are not mutually exclusive. Rather than being seen as a constraint, the area's historic environment can be a significant driver for growth, increasing the economic value of our visitor offer, aiding business development through better utilisation of heritage buildings, creating job and training opportunities, improving the desirability and attractiveness of our places, and so much more. Successful places are places where people want to live, work, learn, play and visit. How we unlock the potential of our heritage assets and historic places will be crucial for the continued success and economic resilience of our area.

I would like to extend my thanks to Historic England for their collaboration in undertaking this piece of work. Great places have heritage at their core – an ethos that underpins Historic England's work. How we manage change in a way that not only respects and enhances our understanding of the historic environment, but also enables opportunities for economic and social development is vital to the continued success of our places. May I also highlight the important contribution of my predecessor, David A Kerfoot MBE DL, who drove forward the place agenda during his time as chair of the York & North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership.

As a Local Enterprise Partnership, we look forward to strengthening our partnership with Historic England, realising the opportunities presented by our historic environment in collaboration with our local authorities, key stakeholders and private sector partners.



**Helen Simpson OBE**

*Chair of York and North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership*

# Chapter 1

## Background

**1.1** York, North Yorkshire and the East Riding (YNYER) has a fantastically rich cultural heritage, ranging from the prehistoric, Roman, Viking and medieval history of York itself, to the industries and agriculture that helped build the region's places from the earliest times. The diversity and distinctiveness that has developed over centuries combines to create an unmistakable sense of place, and of community identity.

**1.2** YNYER is an area where heritage is highly valued and economically important – with heritage estimated to account for GVA of £2.1bn and 41,000 jobs across the wider region – but this contribution could be much more significant. Good Growth – as defined in the York and North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership's (LEP) Local Industrial Strategy – offers a range of opportunities to enhance the contribution made by the historic environment and cultural heritage, and to steer the right growth to the right places.

### Process

**1.3** The project, and its outputs, were developed through collaborative working between LUC, and key staff from the LEP and Historic England. Responding to themes emerging from the research, a series of workshops and interviews with upwards of 30 individual stakeholders were held to understand issues, opportunities and heritage-led regeneration work already underway. The outcomes of this process were pulled together into a draft report, and the emerging recommendations tested and reviewed by Historic England, the LEP and key stakeholders. The main document, and this executive summary, are the final outputs of the initial project – but just the first step in delivering the interventions the region's historic places need.

### Heritage and the economy

**1.4** The historic environment is far more than just a pleasant backdrop for contemporary activity, or evocative places to visit at the weekend. It is the places in which communities have been built by people over time and continue to be built and changed by people now.

**1.5** The historic environment delivers a wide range of social, economic and environmental benefits, including supporting

community identities, contributing to quality of life and providing a route to participation and wellbeing for many people. The sustainability benefit of reusing heritage assets is a key opportunity.

### Context

**1.6** This work is intended to support and compliment the York and North Yorkshire Local Industrial Strategy developed by the LEP, which sets out the framework for 'good growth' in the region. In addition, the LEP commissioned research into the opportunities presented by the region's market towns and aiding their transition to becoming effective '21<sup>st</sup> Century Towns'.<sup>1</sup> The project was delivered during the Covid-19 pandemic, therefore the need to 'build back better' was central to the partners' and stakeholders' thinking and priorities. The pandemic has, in many ways, highlighted pressures that were already acting on the region's historic towns and villages. It has also drawn greater attention to existing vulnerabilities – and opportunities – that need to be better understood to help deliver fairer, more resilient and greener regeneration.

### Heritage and regeneration

**1.7** The historic environment has an important role to play in promoting and, in some cases, driving regeneration. Historic England's Heritage Action Zone programme, and particularly the most recent strand focusing on high streets, can provide exemplar approaches to refurbishment and sustainable, creative reuse of buildings, regenerating spaces and engaging the public with heritage and cultural activities.

**1.8** Sub-regional devolution offers a major opportunity to bring the value and benefits delivered by the historic environment to the fore – aiding the development of locally-specific approaches to heritage-led regeneration that works for people, the economy and the environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Metro-Dynamics (2019) *21<sup>st</sup> Century Towns: a report from Metro Dynamics to the York, North Yorkshire & East Riding LEP*.

## Chapter 2

# York, North Yorkshire and the East Riding's historic environment

### What's there, and why it's important

**2.1** The area has an almost unparalleled diversity of heritage assets and historic places. Many of these, like Roman, Viking and medieval York, the castles and abbeys of North Yorkshire and the great stately homes that define large parts of the countryside, are widely recognised, well understood and play an important role in the heritage and visitor economy. However, the history of the area contains far more diverse stories, and is more intimately woven through the fabric of where people live, work and take time out to visit, than most people – either locally or nationally – often appreciate.

**2.2** The towns, villages and countryside of the area are a living document of the history of Britain, played out at a landscape scale. Human activity, from the earliest times through to the present day, was shaped by the landscape and underlying geology – channelling the first settlers after the Ice Age to suitable hunting grounds, influencing the pattern of conquest and settlement by the Romans, Saxons and Vikings, shaping the course of medieval history and facilitating the development of industry, communications and commerce.

**2.3** Exploitation of the region's natural resources, whether for agriculture, fisheries, mineral and metal working, have created a series of distinctive, characterful working landscapes. Although the Dales and the North York Moors are valued in part today as tranquil, rural and 'wild' landscapes, their pasts include periods of much more intensive exploitation, with histories of mining and metal processing and production in both areas. The patterns of estates and landholdings we see today are principally economic features, reflecting the importance of agriculture to the wealth of major landowners from the medieval period onwards. So familiar are many aspects of these landscapes that they just 'disappear' from our consciousness, becoming an almost generic countryside backdrop – rather than the rich tapestry of historical influences it can be. Similarly, our historic places can recede into the background of daily activity. The diversity of forms and character of towns, villages and hamlets across the area is a key strength: from settlement patterns established in the later prehistoric, Romano-British, Saxon and Norse periods, through to medieval planned villages and Victorian coastal resorts.

**2.4** The sub-region has a distinct character and identity all its own – but this is a product of the wide range of influences

on the place and its people through its long history. That conflict has been a fundamental part of the area's history underlines its strategic importance: as a major centre of agricultural production and wealth; as a seat and symbol of power (of the Archbishops of York, the major monastic houses and of the local aristocracy); as an international trading hub; as a point of convergence of key transport networks; and, as the key to the north through much of history.



From top: Creative reuse of Horace Mills, Cononley, for housing; Ribbleshead Viaduct; oblique aerial view of Whitby from the east.

## Seeing the opportunities

**2.5** It is easy not to really see or appreciate the places where we live; but the pandemic and the need to stay close to home is fuelling a renewed appreciation of the special qualities and characteristics of so many of the region's towns, villages and countryside. The overriding sense of history that so much heritage, so clearly legible and accessible, creates is what makes York, North Yorkshire and the East Riding so much more than the sum of its parts.

**2.6** From discussions with stakeholders, six main areas emerged as the key locations that opportunities for good growth were likely to be focused:

### Market towns

**2.7** Aside from York, and the historic spa towns of Harrogate and Scarborough, the region's principal settlements are market towns, ranging from the large (Beverley) down to the compact (e.g. Leyburn). While having strongly individual characteristics and attributes, these market towns have much in common – presenting both opportunities and issues to be addressed.

**2.8** Historically, these places developed as the 'right' locations for larger settlements – with sufficient connections to the villages and farms in their rural hinterland, and onwards to larger commercial hubs, to enable the all-important market to function.

**2.9** As local centres of economic and community gravity, market towns are a natural location for dispersed, diverse growth. In addition to taking some of the housing and employment development pressure away from York, the connectivity of the market towns opens a range of opportunities for business and people. The challenge for the historic environment is steering this change to the right locations, and taking cues from historic fabric and urban grain to enable development to fit within its context effectively and make a positive contribution to character. Similarly, understanding and anticipating the challenges and opportunities that the regional economy faces is key to unlocking the potential of under-used and under-appreciated historic building stock.

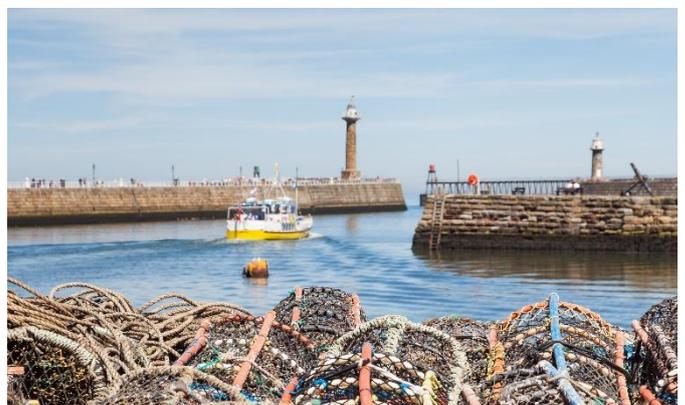


Northallerton on market day – a thriving commercial link to the town's history and development.

### Coastal towns

**2.10** From their roots as fishing settlements and market towns, the area's coastal towns have a particularly strong identity and a special place in the consciousness of the region (and the country's) population. While their significance as tourist destinations may have faded a little from their heyday, the visitor economy is of critical importance – and will remain so – unlocking the potential of these towns for non-seasonal business is important to secure good growth.

**2.11** The key challenges for the historic environment include identifying positive uses for under-used building stock, and ensuring the significant built legacy of the tourist industry remains in use and appreciated. Much of the heritage of the coastal area has strong links to the natural resources provided by the marine environment. This creates the potential for the development of strong, interlinked offers focused on high-quality local seafood, nature-watching experiences, recreation activities on and near the water and cultural events celebrating the maritime heritage.



Whitby Harbour: the heart of the town's historic fishing industry, and a key opportunity to link cultural heritage with high quality local produce

### Lowland agricultural landscapes

**2.12** The area remains a predominantly rural area; from the sparsely populated and remote-feeling rolling landscapes of the Wolds and the big skies and long views of Holderness, to the intricate ancient field patterns of the Dales, farming remains central to the economy and identity of much of the region.

**2.13** Producers, processors and distributors of agricultural products face uncertain times, with the effects of Brexit on the rural support regime still opaque, changes in consumer and commercial buying patterns and preferences, and the effects of climate change. Building resilience and diversifying income streams – particularly as the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need for greater local self-reliance – are therefore critical.

**2.14** So much of the region's historic development is legible in the historic field patterns that survive across so much of the agricultural landscape – along with the important archaeological remains therein – that large-scale intensification or land use change can be harmful to these historic landscapes and assets, wider character and the setting of individual assets. Working with the historic grain of the landscape, and maximising the heritage value of the region's crop and livestock varieties offers a range of opportunities.

### Estate landscapes

**2.15** Many of the rural landscapes of the region revolve around major estate centres that evolved from medieval seats of local power. The development of extensive designed landscapes, providing a range of economic as well as aesthetic functions, created some of the region's most distinctive landscapes – and enduring physical and cultural legacy.

**2.16** While these landscapes have much in common with other agricultural areas, the unique combination of built and 'natural' heritage of designed landscapes brings its own challenges and opportunities. The key challenge for the historic environment is retaining the identity and distinctiveness of designed landscapes; securing resilience to the effects of climate change, conserving the settings of some of the country's finest stately homes and ensuring such places remain relevant – including through critical engagement with their sometimes-problematic history and sources of founding wealth.



Historic farm buildings and field barns, Yorkshire Dales

### The uplands

**2.17** The upland masses of the North York Moors and the Yorkshire Dales are the defining features of the region; providing the 'skeleton' around which the rest of the region's landscapes form. While often perceived as 'remote' natural landscapes, they are heavily modified and have a long history of intensive exploitation, settlement and culture.

**2.18** Pastoral agriculture remains important in both areas, with tourism providing major seasonal income. Grouse shooting is a major land use, and has a significant influence on the character and appearance of heather moorland through patterns of burning for vegetation management. The key challenge for the historic environment in both areas is ensuring that historic landscapes can be conserved while the land can be worked productively, natural heritage respected and critical challenges posed by climate change are addressed.

## York

**2.19** As the historical, cultural and economic heart of the region, York's significance cannot be overstated. Its archaeological and historical value are matched only by its importance as the engine of the regional economy, a major source of talent and also – in some ways – a threat to the diversity and distinctiveness of satellite towns.

**2.20** York faces many challenges, but perhaps the key issue for its historic environment is the need to positively manage its unique heritage in the face of the need to radically decarbonise in the coming decades. While the urban fabric of the city centre is unlikely to change significantly, the ways in which people and goods access the centre needs to change – in line with City of York Council's aspiration to be carbon neutral by 2030. As a key commuter hub, commercial centre and university city this poses many questions – the answers to which have significant potential, but also risks.



Creative re-use of historic buildings for residential use: former St. Joseph's Convent, York.

## Chapter 3

### Main messages

## What are the ‘take home’ points of the work?

**3.1** Given the size of the area and the complexity of its historic environment, coupled with its diverse social and economic profile, the findings of the report are necessarily lengthy and detailed. To help cut to the chase, the big messages arising from the research and strategy work are as follows:

**1. The scale of the opportunity is huge:**

The sheer numbers and diversity of our historic sites, and the quality of the environments in which they are located, creates opportunities for good growth throughout the area. Heritage assets have the potential to support sustainable economic reuse, and there are ample opportunities that creative approaches could unlock.

**2. Thinking and acting differently is imperative:**

The Coronavirus pandemic has provided a range of stark lessons on the resilience, potential – and vulnerabilities – of the region’s historic places. We must learn from them; adapting to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the challenges we will face, not least in terms of decarbonisation and adapting to the effects of climate change.

**3. People, places and the economy benefit from a well-maintained historic environment:**

The strength of the synergies between improving quality of place, quality of life and economic development, and looking after our heritage is striking. Conservation and adaptation of historic buildings has major benefits in terms of sustainability, can contribute to regenerating town centres and can help unlock local economic opportunities.

**4. York, North Yorkshire and the East Riding – strong and distinctive brands:**

The area is well known as a historic part of the country, and is renowned for its environmental quality. This is an excellent hook from which to hang marketing and promotion at a variety of scales.

**5. Value of diversity:**

While the region has many places with similar origin

stories, they retain clear and distinct characters – informed by local geology, industries and buildings styles. This diversity of place is an important strength which can add value to specific and complementary economic and experiential offers.

**6. This report is the start, not the end, of the process!**

The full report, and this summary, represent the beginning of a much longer process. In providing the evidence base, and initial thoughts and suggestions, this work allows the project partners to bring together the right people and organisations to begin to address the challenge laid down in the actions. Clearly, not everything suggested can or will happen – but the intention is to provide a catalyst for ongoing collaboration and targeted intervention.

## Chapter 4

# Conclusions & recommendations

The historic environment has a critically important role to play in making life better for the region's people and contributing to more resilient places and economies.

We need to think and act in new ways to capture the benefits of our rich and varied heritage. Success depends on innovation, collaboration and energy.

**4.1** As we have seen, the historic environment of York, North Yorkshire and the East Riding is unparalleled in its diversity. That local and sub-regional distinctiveness is a major strength that can be exploited through locally-specific and focused approaches.

**4.2** The full report provides a detailed exploration of opportunities across each of the six thematic areas. These can be brought together by a series of overarching recommendations intended to:

- Improve appreciation of the area's historic environment and the value it adds;
- Build partnerships to unlock the potential of our historic places; and
- Deliver strategic interventions to steer investment, demonstrate leadership and deliver results.

### Area-wide conclusions

**4.3** This section focuses on the overarching issues and processes affecting the area, and sets out high-level conclusions that will influence subsequent planning and action across the area. Each of these conclusions is supported by a series of recommendations to aid their delivery, set out in the main report.

1. **Facilitating economic evolution:** decentralisation of service industries is a major opportunity for people to choose where they live and work – but evidence and a dynamic plan is required to understand and steer businesses and people to locations with suitable connectivity, appropriate housing stock and capacity for economic activity.

To be a success there needs to be a breadth of economic development that supports and reinforces the value added by professional services – most notably in relation to the arts, culture and food-related business that have the potential to create vibrant, attractive and sustainable places to live and work.

#### – Summary recommendations:

Partnership working is required to build the evidence base to support economic diversification and identify opportunities for regeneration of historic buildings and spaces. This is best delivered through a strategic approach to steer the necessary investment.

Understanding the scale of the resource of under-utilised historic buildings with potential to support sustainable reuse is a priority, along with understanding the necessary skills development to support heritage-led regeneration.

2. **Distinctiveness is key:** just as the historic places of the area have a distinct character, the 'new high street economy' of those places must reflect that. Not every market town can have an identikit assemblage of start-ups, artisan food producers and cultural venues. There needs to be strong partnership working between towns and businesses to ensure that they develop a complementary offer, both in managing competition so that enterprises can get off the ground, and also to enable intelligent, targeted marketing – drawing on the heritage and culture of the place – to attract and retain visitors and investment.

#### – Summary recommendations:

Developing and growing distinct 'brands' for the area's historic places is necessary to understand the key opportunities to maintain distinctiveness, promote cooperation and avoid potentially harmful competition between places.

Arts, culture, heritage and high-quality experiences are a major strength, with considerable potential for enhancement. The public realm of our historic places plays an important role in supporting potential regeneration – but needs to be refocused on people, sustainability and versatility of use.

- 3. Heritage needs help:** for all its richness and significance, some of the area's historic environment is underappreciated – partly because there is so much of it, and the internationally important 'honeypot' assets can obscure the value and potential of the rest. Improved evidence and promotion of the full suite of the area's historic environment, its benefits and potential are required to engage stakeholders and investors, and inform creative responses. For historic town centres and high streets, patterns of decline in traditional retailing have been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic – but this has also highlighted the level of untapped opportunity for reimagining what these places could be.

– **Summary recommendations:**

While the history and assets of the area are relatively well understood, there is only fragmentary evidence on the benefits delivered by the historic environment and the value added by related business. Understanding this contribution in more detail would be helpful in making the political, sustainability and business case for action and investment. Similarly, a stronger understanding of risks would help drive interventions and identify opportunities for creative reuse.

Identifying opportunities for 'anchor' projects, around which wider regeneration work could be focused, has the potential to drive real change.

- 4. Thinking differently:** Given the pressures acting on local communities, economies and the historic environment, standing still is not an option. Stakeholders, investors and regulators need to think more expansively about the potential of assets and places – drawing on their history and physical characteristics rather than necessarily what assets were or 'should be'. The evolution of high streets to a stronger mixed-use model will require difficult decisions – but a proactive strategic approach, guided by a strong understanding of the significance and potential of assets can be effective. This is less about attempting to arrest macro-scale social and economic processes at the local level, and more about helping sustainable alternative uses to develop appropriately.

Whatever approach is taken will require extensive engagement and careful communication with communities to bring them along and retain and enhance their sense of identity.

– **Summary recommendations:**

Embedding creative, and appropriately informed, thinking on the historic environment in the planning and delivery of regeneration and investment decisions will be valuable in maintaining local distinctiveness. Similarly, resident involvement is crucial to ensure that projects and programmes understand and conserve what they value about their local historic environment.

Forthcoming planning reforms potentially offer an opportunity to provide clarity, through new design codes and sustainability guidance, on the expectations on new design in historic places.



Selby Abbey, dramatically lit during 2019's festivities to celebrate the 950<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation. Social and cultural events that connect people to their places and heritage are valuable in building appreciation of the value of local assets – and in generating business opportunities.

## Thematic recommendations

**4.4** A series of detailed recommendations for each of the six broad geographical areas, addressing the issues and opportunities identified, are set out in the main report and are supported by a series of illustrative case studies.

**4.5** These 'priorities for action' are intended to form the basis of an ongoing process of dialogue and collaborative working between the LEP, Historic England and other key partners and stakeholders.

## Next steps

**4.6** It is anticipated that a steering group, drawn from the project and other regional partners will be assembled to guide strategy and drive delivery. This will be crucial in identifying and targeting funding streams, ensuring that investment unlocks multiple benefits, and in providing effective advocacy for the historic environment through the place agenda.

There is considerable potential to build on this work to create a springboard for greater understanding and appreciation of the region's historic environment in economic development decision-making and ensuring that heritage priorities are reflected in stakeholders' plans and delivery actions.