

3. The management issues of the World Heritage Site

3.1 Current pressures on the site's outstanding values and significance

3.1.1 Introduction

3.1.1.1 There are a number of management issues which need to be addressed if the values for which the site was inscribed are to be safeguarded for future generations. It is important to understand the ways in which the issues closely interrelate and how they may pose threats, both to the outstanding values and the appreciation of those values.

- The maintenance of the architectural significance depends on good conservation practice but a poor visitor experience, which is dominated by noisy traffic, congested footpaths and inadequate orientation, will mean that the architectural significance cannot be appreciated to the full and tourism revenue, which helps to fund conservation works, may fall.
- The appreciation of the symbolic significance, which depends so much on the setting of the site, the views of key buildings and the dignity of the area, would be undermined by building development, which did not respect these qualities in the WHS.
- The political significance, which depends on the many intangible attributes, including the very long continuity of uses and public access to the Strangers' Galleries, would be undermined if security issues forced the closure of buildings or the stopping of public access.
- The historic significance, which depends on the uses of the buildings and their very long continuity, will be undermined if there was to be a radical change in the uses or key activities were to cease. The historic significance also depends on being well understood and communicated to as wide an audience as possible. This will never be fully realised if the history and culture of the site is not presented and interpreted to a world class standard.

3.1.1.2 Thus the issues, which now or in the future, might undermine the outstanding values of Westminster can be grouped under the following headings:

- Pressures on the architectural significance: the care and protection of the historic fabric
- Pressures on the significance of the symbolic fabric: the setting and views
- Pressures on the historic significance: the activities and uses
- Pressures on the tourism value
- Pressures on the educational value
- Traffic
- Security

3.1.2 Pressures on the architectural significance: the care and protection of the historic fabric

3.1.2.1 The Westminster WHS is a large complex assemblage of buildings and spaces, serving a multitude of purposes. Inevitably it is subject to frequent and ongoing programmes of maintenance, repairs and conservation. Without proper coordination, these works, together with occasional new developments, can combine to cause cumulative impacts on the architectural significance of the site. It is important to ensure that careful consideration is given to the potential impact of all works, however small, on the Outstanding Universal Values of the site.

3.1.2.2 Although the removal of any buildings in the WHS without due consideration is highly unlikely, the intrusion of inappropriate structures may lead to a gradual erosion of the architectural quality of the area. The temporary kiosk on Abingdon Street Gardens for ticket sales during summer access to the Palace is a relatively substantial addition. The design is of high quality and appropriate to the context. However it may be argued that other trading kiosks around the WHS, in their design and siting, do not enhance the setting or dignity of the WHS. The striped awnings on the riverside terrace of the Palace of Westminster are a large scale example of once temporary features, now considered of significant impact and their design is currently under review.

- 3.1.2.3 A lack of maintenance or poor maintenance and repair techniques could lead to gradual degradation of the fabric and architectural quality. However the standard of restoration and improvement works for the Palace of Westminster is generally considered exemplary in compliance with Government provisions for Conservation. The Abbey, Chapter House/Pyx Chamber, Westminster School and Jewel Tower buildings suffer considerably more wear and tear from visitors.
- 3.1.2.4 The pressures of increasing tourist numbers on the sensitive fabric of the buildings present a conservation problem that must be considered as part of the normal conservation and maintenance arrangements. Tourist visitors impose wear and tear on the fabric, by direct physical contact, by raising the humidity and temperature in enclosed spaces and by incidental damage and more rarely, by casual vandalism or theft of items. Wear and tear is of particular concern in relation to sensitive floor finishes, such as soft paving stone and memorials and all painted surfaces in smaller spaces. Externally, paving and grass can also suffer serious erosion. Examples of where visitor numbers exceed path capacities and in some cases, due to poor alignments for desire lines, can be seen throughout the area. The Abbey has a particular challenge in that it is dependent on tourist numbers for its income and therefore needs to both increase numbers as far as possible but also control their impact.
- 3.1.2.5 The effects of environmental noise and air pollution on the buildings are complex and constantly changing. The pollution of the late 19th to 20th century, caused primarily by coal smoke has been replaced in part by other industrial effluents and particularly by traffic fumes as well as traffic noise and vibration. There is continuing research into the effects of pollutants on brick and stone buildings but at present the only effective remedies are the traditional ones of routine maintenance of surfaces and joints, drips and flashings. There are no effective chemical shields that can be applied to moderate the effects of chemical pollution and stonework or brickwork that has become eroded must be repaired or replaced when it no longer performs either as drip moulding or as an effective component of the structural whole.

Cleaning to remove surface grime is an undertaking that must be very carefully considered as all the currently available treatments inflict some damage on the surfaces of stone and brick.

- 3.1.2.6 Low frequency heavy vehicle vibration can cause damage to delicate surface fabric and also structural components of historic structures. Continuing work and research is necessary to establish the effects of noise vibration on the fabric of the buildings in the area.

3.1.3 Pressures on the significance of the symbolic fabric: the setting and views

- 3.1.3.1 Through television, film, radio broadcasts of the chimes of Big Ben and newspaper reports, the WHS is presented every day to a worldwide audience. Some 150 journalists are accredited to the parliamentary press gallery and many others work from the Millbank media centre. The setting and iconic views of the WHS are a regular backdrop for reports to camera and for press photography. This setting and symbolism could be damaged by inappropriate nearby intrusions.
- 3.1.3.2 There is currently no buffer zone which would help to sustain the special qualities of the setting of the WHS. Without appropriate consideration of the sensitivities of the WHS and its setting, development beyond the WHS boundary of a large scale may pose risks to this key element of the Outstanding Universal Values. Any changes to the style or backdrop of the WHS from many angles, must be carefully balanced against the need to preserve the iconic value of the site.
- 3.1.3.4 There has been a gradual loss of appreciation of the architecture and spaces resulting from the steadily increasing vehicle traffic, and in the changes that are necessitated in the streetscape without a targeted planning strategy. The impact of the diagonal routes of Abingdon Street/St Margaret's Street between the Abbey and the Palace, Parliament Square and Victoria Street across Broad Sanctuary between the Abbey and the QE II Centre are examples of this issue. Changes to current landscape setting may result from the proposed traffic management and urban design proposals contained in the World Squares for all Masterplan.

- 3.1.3.5 Street furniture, security and lighting equipment, traffic signals, guardrail, and signage directly related to the architecture and spaces around the WHS are important areas for improvement in the reduction of poorly designed clutter. In the worst examples the effect is to limit or block local views of importance to the buildings and monuments.
- 3.1.3.6 One significant aspect of a Site's character that is often overlooked is the ambient noise. The quality and level of noise surrounding and penetrating the buildings and open spaces of Westminster is different to that experienced by the area's residents and workers in the past, and therefore has an unnoticed but significant effect on the experience of the WHS. It is the quality of noise rather than the level that is of concern. The City of London has been described in many medieval documents as an astonishingly noisy place, and it is likely that Westminster was little different. In the 15th century Thomas Dekker described the noise of London as an incessant din: "...carts and coaches make such a thundering, ...in the open streetes is such walking, such talking, such running, such riding, such clapping too of windows, such rapping at chamber doors, such crying out for drink. The cries of vendors, the wagons, dogs, cattle, horses, pigs, sheep and chickens, the sound of running water in the channels and streams but above all the church bells, rung constantly and indeed in competition between churches to see which could make itself heard furthest away. The effect was a constant reverberating roar in the narrow streets..."
- 3.1.3.7 This multifaceted human din has now been obliterated by the constant, and relatively monotone, mechanical roar of traffic, engines and tyre noise on the tarmac roads. According to studies carried out in the past by the British Medical Association, the noise of the city now has an impersonal quality that is both wearying and dehumanising. Instead of a sign of vitality, it can be a deadening monotony.

3.1.4 Pressures on the historic significance: the activities and uses

- 3.1.4.1 The WHS is a place of both continuity and change. Continuity, in the status and pre-eminence as the seat of national sovereignty, political debate, worship and celebration. Change, in the constant evolution

of the organisations, and systems embodied in the buildings.

Fundamental to this tradition and evolution is the character of activities within the site. It is this very evolution that is the source of the symbolic and historic significance of Westminster. Yet some changes, where they affect the activities, may undermine the outstanding values of the heritage of the WHS. For example, the current reforms of the House of Lords and the judicial system may end some of the functions of the Palace of Westminster which have developed there, existed since the medieval period and influenced the development of systems of government and the law across the world.

- 3.1.4.2 Conversely, the practicalities of continuing some activities within the site may also lead to detrimental changes. For example, the increasing pressure on space within the Palace of Westminster may in the future lead to the establishment of satellite sites, perhaps undermining the coherence and unity of the Parliamentary buildings.
- 3.1.4.3 Other changes are less likely but not impossible. For example, disestablishment of the Church of England might lead to the loosening of the historic ties between the monarchy and Westminster and diminution of the Abbeys function and status as the site of national ceremony. Potential external sources of political change, such as an increase in the role of the European Parliament might lessen Westminster's continuing pre-eminent status as a symbol of democracy.
- 3.1.4.4 The control of these real and potential changes must necessarily lie outside the remit of this Management Plan. However it is important to understand and draw attention to the ways in which they may threaten to the historic and symbolic significance of Westminster.

3.1.5 Pressures on the tourism value

- 3.1.5.5 Visitors and tourists are one of the key user groups of the WHS, with at least 1.4 million visits being made each year to the area. Moreover, the revenue generated from visitors and tourists makes an important contribution towards sustaining the Abbey's mission, as well as property maintenance costs across the WHS.

- 3.1.5.6 However, it should be noted that the working and student population of the WHS and its environs, estimated at between 8,000 and 9,000, will make over 2 million trips each year into the WHS, a figure some 40% higher than the level of activity generated in the four main WHS buildings by tourists. It is thus important that pressures associated with tourism activity around the WHS are managed as effectively as possible, in order to ensure a sustainable, mixed-use economy within the area.
- 3.1.5.7 Certainly the highly seasonal nature of tourism visits to the area, and the concentration of visitor activity at certain key points within the World Heritage Site, leads to a number of localised pressures. The footpaths around the outside of Parliament Square, and the pavements outside the Palace and Abbey, are often congested and at pinch points, visitors are often in conflict with traffic. Access to the green on Parliament Square, a location which is so important for appreciating the majesty of the site and for taking photographs, is made dangerous by the lack of crossings.
- 3.1.5.8 Parts of the WHS can become extremely busy and crowded and there is evidence from the visitor data of particular daily and seasonal peaks. Long queues can be found at some visitor 'honeypots' in the WHS. This is detrimental to both the historic fabric and enjoyment of the visitor experience. There is also a lack of proper refreshment places within and close to the WHS, a situation partly resolved by the presence of concession vans, although these can undermine the dignity of the area and generate litter which detracts from the site's appeal.
- 3.1.5.9 Thinking in the longer term, the predicted growth in international and domestic tourism to London over the next 20 years is likely to generate an increase in visitors to Westminster, which, without appropriate management, may put at risk the very historic fabric that visitors have come to see.
- 3.1.5.10 At the same time, short-term declines in tourism activity due to global events such as health scares and Foot and Mouth and terrorist acts as well as local events, such as demonstrations in Parliament Square, may decrease income at Abbey and other paid-entry sites, potentially reducing the funds available to spend on conservation and protection.

3.1.5.11 Historic sites often pose particular challenges for those with mobility difficulties, such as wheelchair users and those with young children. Around the WHS there are numerous changes in level, uneven surfaces, narrow pedestrian areas, narrow doorways and flights of steps.

3.1.6 Pressures on the educational value

3.1.6.1 It should be possible for visitors to gain a broad overview of the WHS and its values, with a focussed insight into the historic and contemporary functions and significance of individual buildings within their wider context. Currently, it is not obvious to visitors (or indeed workers and residents) that Westminster is inscribed as a World Heritage Site. Much more could be done to raise awareness of the site's status. However, at present there is no single overall guide to the World Heritage Site and, apart from a display within the Jewel Tower, which presents a brief history of Thorney Island, the WHS is not presented as a unified destination of outstanding significance.

3.1.6.2 The involvement of a number of different agencies in managing the key buildings has, to date, worked against the provision of a unified approach to access, presentation and interpretation across the site. This makes it more difficult to access, during just one visit, the information needed fully to understand the scale and rich complexity of the site and its long history. Variability in the availability of foreign language interpretive materials makes it difficult for some overseas visitors to access information on aspects of the culture and history of the WHS.

3.1.7 Traffic

3.1.7.1 Traffic dominates the whole experience of the visiting the WHS quite unpleasantly, particularly around Parliament Square, Broad Sanctuary and on St Margaret's Street, undermining the visitor experience, visual appeal and dignity of the site. At busy times, the fast vehicle speeds and weaving traffic is dangerous for pedestrians, particularly where footpaths are too narrow for congregating visitors.

3.1.7.2 The traffic congestion can cause accidents, air and noise pollution, all unpleasant for visitors and other users and potentially dangerous and damaging to the historic fabric.

3.1.8 Security

3.1.8.1 The symbolic and international political significance of Westminster means that, as a result of international events, there are increasing security concerns for the historic fabric, as well as workers, visitors and residents. However, the measures needed to increase and maintain security, such as the installation of new CCTV cameras and associated equipment and the temporary concrete road blocks, can also undermine the visual appearance of the site.

3.1.8.2 Large numbers of visitors can sometimes lead to antisocial behaviour, pick-pocketing, random actions of wilful damage and theft, both minor and major, to fabric, collections and public safety.



Current external security measures around the Palace of Westminster

