

THE LAKE DISTRICT

Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

Summary

The distinctive farming landscape of the Lake District is of outstanding universal value because its terrain inspired fundamental and worldwide changes in the way humans view, value and conserve landscape. A fusion of mountains, valleys and lakes, each with its own specific character, it is one of the world's most beautiful areas and the birthplace of what landscape means to the modern world.

Overview

A compact, glaciated upland landscape of radiating U-shaped valleys – many of which contain long narrow lakes – the Lake District is home to England's highest mountain and its deepest lake. Rocky mountain tops, open fell pasture and heather-covered slopes contrast with the native woodland, exotic plantations and stone-walled fields. The dominant land use is upland pastoral farming, often based on the local sheep breed, the Herdwick. This distinctive farming system reached a peak of prosperity in the 17th and 18th Centuries when a tradition of independent farming emerged. The resulting landscape has a distinctive aesthetic unity marked by contrasts in detail: mountains, moors, lakes, woods, streams, fields, stone walls, farms, villages and small scale industry, which reflect its slow and gradual development since the 12th century.

For almost 250 years the Lake District has attracted visitors, admirers and thinkers. This process began during the late 18th and early 19th centuries with a conscious 'discovery' of the Lake District by the wealthy, leisured and cultured classes. This coincided with the emergence of the Picturesque aesthetic ideal. Writers and artists began to seek out scenery in the uplands of Britain that satisfied the Picturesque ideal – literally that which was fit to be made into a picture. This movement was accompanied by an aesthetic urge to enhance the picturesque qualities of the landscape through architectural creation and planting. A number of significant properties and designed landscapes from this period survive in the Lake District together with a series of 'viewing stations' – locations chosen for their Picturesque outlook of lake and mountain scenery. Picturesque aesthetic principles, a crucial part of the emerging Romantic sensibility of the later 18th century, now underpin much of modern regional planning throughout the world.

The beauty and sublime qualities of the Lake District combined with the perceived admirably collaborative yet self-reliant way of life of its inhabitants led to the area becoming the cradle of English Romanticism. This revolution in the intellectual arts, particularly poetry, placed emotion at the centre of the aesthetic experience, especially in relation to perceptions of landscape. Nowhere is this more profoundly illustrated than in the work of William Wordsworth (1770-1850), the central poet and writer of the age of English Romanticism. Wordsworth grew up amongst the hills of the Lake District and lived there for much of his life. The landscape of the Lake District and the lives of its inhabitants are the foundation of

the poet's work.. He also wrote a *Guide to the Lakes* (1810) which included the famous assertion that the Lake District stood as **“a sort of national property in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy”**. This sentiment, the foundation stone of the international concept of protected landscapes, would be taken up with vigor in the fight to protect the Lake District from large scale development in the later 19th century.

Wordsworth's Romantic vision, shaped by the landscape and people of the Lake District, has had wide international influence. His work particularly inspired the American Transcendental Movement, including writers such as Emerson and Thoreau, and John Muir, founder of the American national park movement. Of even greater universal importance is the increasing recognition that Wordsworth and fellow 'Lakes Poets' such as Coleridge were primary exponents of the intrinsic value of landscape and nature that underpins much of modern ecological thought.

The modern conservation movement also springs from this association of the Lake District with powerful ideas. In 1873, the artist, philosopher and philanthropist John Ruskin (1819 –1900) came to live in the Lake District. His ideas, together with those of Wordsworth, underpinned campaigns in the second half of the 19th century to protect the area from damaging development. It was through protests against railways, reservoirs and creeping industrialisation that the idea of environmentalism and notions of national ownership of areas of scenic beauty began to be widely articulated, leading to the creation of organisations such as the Lake District Defence Society (1883).

Ruskin's concern for protecting important landscapes influenced his friends Octavia Hill and Canon Rawnsley, who – with Sir Robert Hunter – went on to found the National Trust in 1895. In addition to being the home of one of its founders, Rawnsley, the Lake District has been central to the development of the National Trust. Numerous farms and extensive tracts of land were gifted to the National Trust by the author and artist Beatrix Potter and other donors and today the organisation owns and manages 25% of the area of the Lake District National Park. The National Trust has had extensive international influence as a model for similar bodies including in the USA, India and Japan. It is also the 'mother' organisation for the recently formed International National Trust Organisation (2007).

The battles to protect the Lake District and the organisations which were formed as a result, eventually led to the 1949 UK National Parks legislation, which saw the designation of the Lake District as a National Park in 1951. The UK's National Parks, of which the Lake District is the prime example, are recognised internationally as exemplars of protected, lived-in, working landscapes. As a result of earlier nominations for World Heritage Site inscription, the Lake District itself provided the stimulus for the definition of the category of World Heritage cultural landscape

All the key elements of the dramatic late 18th century farmed landscape that so inspired early visitors in search of Picturesque scenery, as well as Wordsworth and his Romantic contemporaries, still survive in the Lake District as a testimony to the effectiveness of the conservation movement.