Is green lane driving compatible with World Heritage status? An expert assessment

by Dr John Carman, expert in Heritage Management

The Lake District was inscribed as a cultural landscape on UNESCO's list of World Heritage in 2017. It was inscribed under three criteria:

- (ii) an important interchange of human values over a span of time…;
- (v) an outstanding example of a traditional… land-use…;
- (vi) to be directly or tangibly associated… with ideas… of universal significance.

The first was justified on the grounds of how "the harmonious beauty of the [distinctive agro-pastoral and spectacular ice-shaped natural] landscape [has the] capacity to inspire and restore the human spirit", ideas which led to the development of the idea of the National Park worldwide.

The second was justified on the grounds of the shaping of the landscape by long-term agro-pastoral use and "initiatives of the 18th and 19th centuries that were based on the early appreciation of the Arcadian and Romantic character". The third criterion was justified on the "outstanding association with the Picturesque and Romantic Movements". The crucial aspect here is the role of aesthetic movements in ascribing qualities to the Lake District landscape that require a response of a particular kind: especially **direct engagement with the outdoor environment** – to see landscape features in relation to one other, to hear the sounds of nature and human agricultural activity, and to feel sun, wind or rain – and to do so without the assistance of motorised vehicles. **It is this direct physical engagement that engenders the emotional and aesthetic response required by the Picturesque and Romantic traditions and continues to attract visitors today**.

The inscription documentation emphasises throughout the *traditional* nature of activities and the deliberate exclusion of modern intrusions. While agriculture is the main economic activity apart from tourism, there is also evidence of mining and quarrying from earlier ages. In particular the Neolithic axe 'factory' of Langdale represents very early quarrying but such activity is no longer carried out in the area and it is recognised that any resumption of quarrying or mining would inevitably damage the quality of experience of the landscape established from the period of the Romantics.

It is notable that no railways or motorways penetrate the Lake District in order to maintain its traditional character and many locations do not have

good road access: the emphasis is upon walking, cycling and riding as the ways to move about outside of settlements.

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Motorised agricultural machinery designed for cross-country use are of course evident in the area as part of the traditional economic activity and private motor vehicles and buses operate on roads but these are to be expected. The green lanes of the area are in themselves traditional routes – some will have long histories, going as far back as Medieval, Roman or even prehistoric times – and provide that direct contact with the environment emphasised by the Romantic tradition of landscape appreciation. The presence of motorised vehicles on these routes directly affects the ability to engage with that physical aesthetic and emotional experience which lies at the core of inscription as a World Heritage site.

The inscription documents emphasise the “remarkable intactness” of the traditional attributes of the Lake District, which have been “maintained through a combination of tradition, practices and conscious conservation efforts”. The latter include an emphasis on the aesthetic and emotional enjoyment of the area by and for visitors and the ongoing exclusion of modern intrusions. The use of green lanes for recreational driving represents a threat to traditions related to maintaining the qualities of the area and therefore the area’s integrity as required by inscription.

In summary, allowing driving on green lanes is incompatible with the terms of inscription as a World Heritage site. It threatens to deny visitors the experience promised by over two centuries of care and maintenance of traditional human activity in a spectacular natural environment. It further threatens the integrity of the area which is a requirement for World Heritage status.

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