

How to Photograph Heritage Assets

Get Permission

When preparing to go out and photograph your nominated asset, think about the asset's current use and ownership. If possible try to photograph the asset from the road/public land. If you need to enter the property, you'll need to ask permission from the owner to take photos. Try not to include people or personal belongings in the picture and, unless it's a general street scene, get permission if they do appear in your photo. Respect the owner's wishes on access to their property.



Use a decent camera

You don't need to go out and buy a full professional photographers kit, but it's worth checking that your camera is up to the job of photographing heritage assets. As the photos will need to be uploaded to the online nomination form, using a digital camera is advisable, this could either be a phone, compact or DSLR camera. Whatever you choose to use, make sure it gives a clear picture of your asset when viewed on a computer screen. If you're not sure, try a few practice shots out to see how they look.

Get clear shots of the whole asset

In order to judge each nomination the assessors will need to have a really clear idea of the condition and character of the asset, so it's important that your photos make this possible. Try and make sure that none of the asset is cropped off the edges of the picture or obscured by people, trees, vehicles, buildings etc. This can be very difficult if the asset is set within a town or wooded area, so just try to get as much of it in the picture as possible in these circumstances.



Although the second photo shows the doorway more clearly, it is more difficult to get a sense of the character of the building without being able to see the roof.

Get a variety of shots

Heritage assets often have as much visual interest as historic interest and the purpose of adding photos to your nomination is to highlight as much of this interest as possible. To do this you'll need to take photos from different angles and get a mixture of full views and close-ups, focusing on any special or relevant features. Try to include each side of the asset, if it is a standing structure, and get several views across a park, garden or landscape. The more visual information you can supply, the more this will help your nomination at the assessment stage.



These photos are all of Cusworth Hall and its park, taken from different angles and distances.

Take more photos than you need

At present the nomination form only allows you to upload 4 photos but it can be difficult to decide which pictures show your asset in the best light when you're out photographing. It's also possible that some of your shots may not come out exactly as you had hoped. To ensure you have the best pictures to include in your nomination, take more photos than you need, with a variety of shots as described previously. That way, when you come to add them to your nomination form, you'll be able to choose the photos that highlight the asset's character and any special details in the most illustrative way.

Think about using a scale

If your asset covers a large area, such as a landscape or archaeological site, or if there is no visible indication of the size of the asset, it would be worth including something in your photos to indicate its scale. This doesn't have to be anything elaborate, straightforward things like a person, a tape measure/metre stick or the boundary wall/gate of the asset can give an idea of its size and convey the extent of the asset for the purposes of candidate assessment.



As simple as it is, the tape measure gives an idea of how large the stones in the photo are.

Think about the time of day and the light available

Although a bright sunny day is perfect for a stroll around your favourite heritage asset, it's no good for taking photos of it. Bright sunlight can often bleach out the colours in a photograph or create deep shadows that hide more subtle features. Clouds are the photographer's friend in these situations as photographs taken on a bright but overcast day usually turn out the clearest. Early morning and just before dusk can be good times as well, when the sun is not directly overhead, but be careful that any shadows cast by the setting/rising sun don't obscure your asset.



This photo shows how difficult it is to see features in direct sunlight and the difficulty of dappled shadows. The features on the right of the photo are more difficult to see because the definition has been lost in the bright light, whereas on the left the shadows allow the features to stand out more clearly. Beware though, shadows cast by trees or other buildings can cause just as many problems!

Make notes to describe each photo

If you're out and about photographing assets, it can sometimes get confusing if you've got a lot of similar looking pictures of doorways or features. To avoid this, it can be helpful to number your photos and make a note of the subject of each one as you take it. That way, you can be sure you're uploading the correct photo to the right nomination form.

This photo is a good way to highlight the different fabrics of the building but would need a shot of the whole structure submitting too.



This photo shows clearly the full site of the buried remains of a wire works, plus the associated standing remains in the background.

Here are some tips from Historic England on photographing buildings:

1. Before taking a picture, walk all the way round the building, acquaint yourself with the site.
2. Decide exactly what you want to say about the building, what it is you want to communicate through the photograph.
3. Use the ambient light and time your photograph accordingly. Watch how a building responds by the way light changes from dawn till nightfall.
4. Try to keep the composition simple. Try not to over complicate the frame. Remove unwanted clutter and remove superfluous items.
5. Look for even illumination across an elevation and beware the elevation that's half in shadow. Try to shoot either early morning or late evening when the the light is more sympathetic.
6. If shooting whole elevations, don't truncate the building, step back, use space and let the building breathe.
7. Photographs don't always have to be taken from eye level, look for elevation, this will give a better sense of proportion.
8. Keep looking. Your initial ideas and viewpoint may well encompass everything you want to say, but don't rely on it. By changing position and watching how the light changes other shots may present themselves.
9. Be persistent. Successful photographs take time, so slow down and never rush a photograph. If the conditions are against you don't succumb to the act of taking the image, return the next day, the next week; the building and architect deserve the best.
10. Shoot RAW files, use a prime aperture, use a tripod and endeavour to keep verticals true. Use your eyes and feet to compose the image before setting up the camera.
11. Remember, the perfect picture doesn't exist, but you can get close!

If you have any questions or need any further information feel free to

contact us at syorks.archservice@sheffield.gov.uk

or check the Local Heritage List online platform: <https://local-heritage-list.org.uk/south-yorkshire>