

9. Helmsley

9.1 Location, Landscape Context and Setting

Helmsley is located on the south-west boundary of the North York Moors National Park, on the River Rye, and at the meeting point of the A170 (Thirsk – Scarborough) and the B1257 (Middlesbrough – Malton and York). The northern and western parts of the town are within the National Park, and the Howardian Hills AONB extends up to the southern edge of the town.

The town nestles in a hollow of the landform, encircled by higher land on three sides. This reflects its location at the junction of Ryedale (LCA 1a) to the west; the Limestone Hills (LCT 5) which rise up to the north and south-west of the town; the Howardian Hills to the south, and the lowlands of the Vale of Pickering which stretch eastwards towards Malton.

The farmland which surrounds Helmsley is gentle and well-treed, and the pastoral appearance of the setting is enhanced by the designed estate parkland of Duncombe Park adjoining the town to the west.

9.2 Settlement form and character

Helmsley is a nucleated settlement, centred on the Market Square, and its overall character is of a well-preserved market town.

The location of the town is likely to have been a crossroads since prehistoric times, and there is evidence for prehistoric and Roman occupation. The origins of the current settlement are medieval, with a church here by the 10th Century. The roads, the confluence of the Borough Beck and the River Rye, and the crossing point over the River Rye were integral to the development of Helmsley as a market town. The construction of a Norman castle on a knoll to the west of the town allowed control of the town and the river crossing. The original ‘Borough’ was constructed in 1190, comprising long, narrow plots on the eastern side of present-day Market Street and Bridge Street. This was followed by the construction of Castlegate and Church Street, then the Market Place, Bondgate, High Street and Ryegate. By the early 17th century the layout of the historic core of Helmsley was largely complete. The Market Square remains a key feature of the town and is still used for a weekly market. There are many attractive streets, including High Street and Castlegate, where the Borough Brook runs through a green corridor next to the road. Many of the historic burgage plots survive, with property boundaries extending back from roads in narrow strips.

The town expanded further in the 19th Century following construction of the railway, and again in the 20th and 21st Centuries. Development of the town has been constrained by the presence of Duncombe Park to the west, the River Rye to the south, and steepening topography to the north-west. Therefore, expansion of the town beyond the historic core has taken place to the east, north and north-east. Nevertheless, the town has largely remained within its topographic ‘bowl’.

9.3 Key views, approaches and gateways

The castle (on the western side of the town) and the tower of the parish church (in the centre) are key elements in views of the town. They can be seen in many views from within the town, and also in elevated views from the north, west and south.

In views from outside the town, Helmsley is remarkably well hidden by landform and vegetation, with the red pantile roofs of new developments the most prominent feature. From within the town there are frequent glimpsed views towards the surrounding rising land, trees, Duncombe Park and the castle and church. These all make a major contribution to the town's sense of place.

Approaching Helmsley from the east on the A170 from Pickering, the new development on the north-east side of the town is very visible, but the materials will hopefully gradually mellow over the coming years. Screening of the new development particularly along the eastern boundary by trees or hedgerows is very limited but the rest of the town is well screened on this approach, notably the line of protected trees alongside the A170.

Approaching from the south on the A170 there is a glimpse of the town in its setting of rising land. This initial view is from the first 'Helmsley' sign, and it is the new buildings which are most apparent. The town is then out of view for the descent of the hill through woodland. The road then passes meadows on the valley floor, before crossing the bridge over the River Rye which forms the southern gateway to the town. There is a sudden sense of arrival at the built-up area rather than a gradual approach. The water meadows and views of Duncombe Park add to the character of the approach.

Approaching from the north-west along the B1257, the road drops down into the town towards the Borough Beck. There is a framed view of historic buildings along High Street, and on this approach one is straight into the historic core of Helmsley.

Approaching along minor roads from the north (Baxton's Sprunt and Carlton Road) there are long views of the town in its landscape setting. As in other views, it is the new development on the north and north-east which is most apparent.

9.4 Settlement edges

The rear edges of properties on the western edge of the town (including those backing on to the castle) are particularly notable, with irregular plot boundaries, garden vegetation, walls, outbuildings and hedges. There are views across the open parts of these plots to the castle, church and surrounding hills. Meadows and trees on the western edge of the town add to the softness and organic quality of this edge.

Elsewhere, the historic core of the town lies against newer development, so the historic edge has been lost. Later edges are generally straight lines, following former field boundaries, and without the distinctive character of the older edges. The edges of developments to the south of the A170 have some screening by vegetation, but those to the north of the A170 are very harsh, making the new developments particularly prominent.

9.5 Heritage and nature conservation sites

Helmsley and its environs contain an abundance of designated sites. The Conservation Area covers the historic core of the town, as well as an extension to the north to include a highly-regarded 1950s development at Elmslac Road. The Conservation Area includes approx. 450 buildings, including 51 Listed Buildings (mostly Grade II).

The Conservation Area also includes Helmsley Castle, which is a Scheduled Monument. The Castle is located on an outcrop and dominates the town. It has been a Medieval fortress, Tudor mansion, Civil War stronghold and later a picturesque ruin within Duncombe Park. To the west of the castle is a walled garden which is also included in the Conservation Area.

Helmsley Castle is part of the wider Duncombe Park, home of the Duncombe family from 1713. Duncombe Park includes a neo-classical mansion set within parkland grounds incorporating ornamental trees, an earlier medieval deer park, woodland, garden structures including gatehouses and ionic and Tuscan temples, and the old castle as a 'romantic ruin'. It is a Registered Historic Park and Garden, Site of Special Scientific Interest, and a National Nature Reserve.

There are several Tree Protection Orders, covering trees lining the A170 on the eastern edge of the town; a cluster of trees to the north of Orchard Way, and trees alongside the Recreation Ground.

9.6 Summary of key elements and features which may be sensitive to development

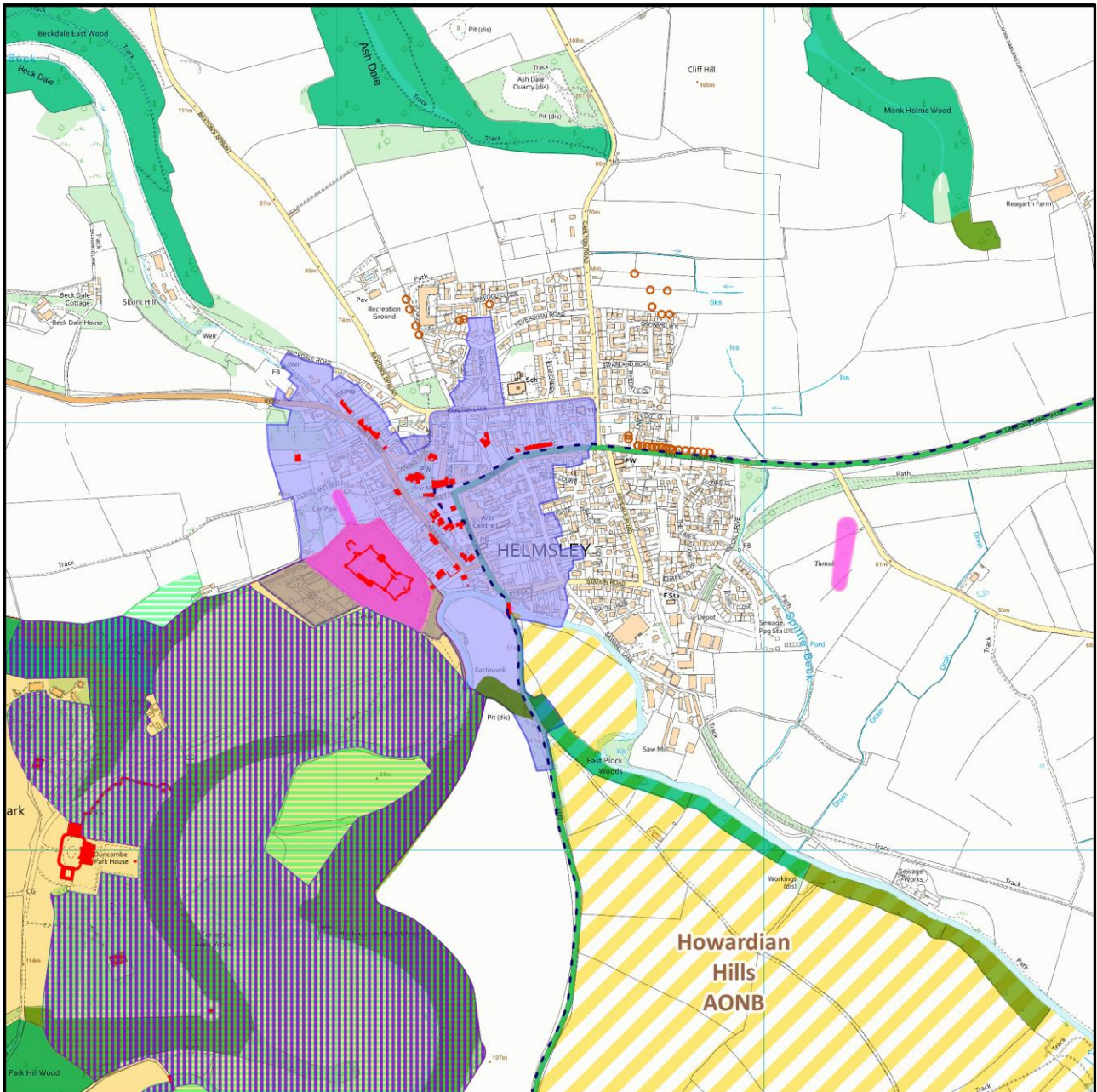
- The designated historic landscapes and nature conservation sites associated with Duncombe Park.
- The wooded / farmed ridges which surround the town and form its setting.
- The mature trees which contribute to the town's setting, and which are features in their own right, including those in Duncombe Park.
- The historic surviving burgage plots and the meadows and trees which contribute to the attractive and distinctive western edge of the town.
- Views to the church and castle from within the town and its surrounding area.
- Green spaces within and immediately surrounding the town such as the meadows on the western edge, and the green spaces alongside the Borough Beck.
- Water meadows in the Rye Valley on the southern edge of the town (outside the National Park).
- Protected trees; Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and their settings.



Helmsley as seen from the north, from Baxton's Sprunt. New housing to the north of the town is prominent towards the left of the picture. The tower of Helmsley Castle can be seen amongst the trees on the right of the picture. Most of the town is hidden by landform and trees.



Helmsley Castle and trees in Duncombe Park seen from the junction of Bridge Street and Castlegate



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North York Moors Landscape Character Assessment Update 2021

Settlement Sensitivity Study
 Helmsley



- - National Park Boundary
- ▨ Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
- Scheduled Monuments
- Listed Buildings
- Conservation Areas
- Parks And Gardens
- ▨ National Nature Reserves
- ▨ Sites of Special Scientific Interest
- Ancient Semi-natural Woodlands
- Plantations on Ancient Woodland Site
- Tree Preservation Orders

Map showing designated sites in Helmsley and its environs