

# IMSIG and the quest for FAIR data

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**I**n 2007, a proposal to establish the Information Management Special Interest Group (IMSIG) was agreed by the (then) Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA) Council. The original constitution was developed by a steering committee that included Edmund Lee. Nearly 20 years on, IMSIG is going from strength to strength, with an overarching aim to promote standards and good practice for the management of all aspects of historic environment and wider heritage sector information through the activities of ClfA.

Between 1996 and 2005 I worked on the development and application of standards for the data held by English Historic Environment Records. With sector partners on the Forum on Information Standards in Heritage (FISH), this work created the MIDAS data standard, and the MIDAS-based data exchange formats that underpin data sharing through the Heritage Gateway portal. One motivation I had for helping to set up IMSIG was to see if the experience learned from MIDAS and FISH could be applied to the records from archaeological investigations. Context record sheets and recording systems were similar across the sector, but the differences meant it was not easy to compare data from investigations by different units, as documented by the Roman Rural Settlements Project 2015-17 – see ADS archive (<https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/romangl/index.cfm>). The 2025 ‘Trowel and error’ report on public user needs highlighted the disparate nature of datasets as an issue reducing wider engagement with archaeology. The aim was (and remains, in my opinion) the production of FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable) data in line with the principles for research data adopted in other disciplines. My paper presented at the 2019 ClfA conference, ‘But it’s not FAIR! Making data findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable’ outlines my thoughts on this topic – see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doGk7keDbwQ>.

Commercial and project grant competition, and limits on time and expertise, mean FAIR data from archaeology is still a challenge. The technological solutions are well established; what is needed is a dialogue between excavators, archivists, researchers, IT developers and end users to develop expertise, trust and a common agenda for development. Promoting this conversation remains among the objectives for IMSIG.

Back in 1993 when I was working at the National Archaeological Record, I received an enquiry asking if I could send a printout of all Roman sites where fish bones had been found in wells. I remain optimistic that I will be able to answer that query in a few years’ time...



**Edmund Lee**

Edmund is a retired archaeologist who worked mainly in the national heritage agencies in England between the 1990s and 2025. He has published on data standards issues, project management and knowledge management for the UK heritage sector.