

The development of Heritage Crime Practice in the UK

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Although definitions, legislation and practice vary slightly around the UK, heritage crime is generally defined as ‘any offence which harms the value of heritage assets and their settings to this and future generations’.

Crime and anti-social behaviour relating to historic buildings, archaeological sites (both maritime and terrestrial) and cultural property is not a modern phenomenon. Occurrences have been documented and recorded for hundreds, if not thousands, of years – from the looting of Egyptian tombs in antiquity to contemporary issues leading to the loss and destruction of historic sites and buildings. Crimes include metal theft, unauthorised development, unlawful salvage and the impact of armed conflict and terrorism. What’s new is the sheer scale and extent of the criminality.



A joint UK-wide operation resulting in searches and seizures from properties in North Wales (2017). Credit: Historic England



In 2010, the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime stated that: ‘Where ancient artefacts are stolen and the sites in which they were hidden are destroyed through looting, archaeologists are unable to gather knowledge about the past.’

The conference further identified the trafficking in cultural property as one of the ‘new and emerging crimes of concern. The emergence of these new crime types gives rise to the need for law enforcement response to adapt its efforts and capacities accordingly.’

For more than 100 years, UK legislators have recognised the need to protect our irreplaceable historic sites and buildings. There has been a succession of statutory measures, with shipwrecks, military remains and cultural objects more recently receiving protection.

The challenge set for the authorities charged with the protection of the nation’s heritage has always been very clear: to ensure that the historic and cultural environment is passed to the next generation in as good a condition as we found it, or even in a better condition. This also provides a definition of preservation and sustainability. But in reality, the division of responsibility between heritage protection bodies, local planning authorities and law enforcement agencies was not clearly described or coordinated. The situation was exacerbated by the perceived rarity of incidents and the lack of knowledge and understanding relating to the nature of the loss, and the limited expertise within the law enforcement and heritage sectors. This meant that the task was not being fulfilled to best effect.

As the following articles show, all UK Home Nations now recognise and are addressing approaches to Heritage Crime. Initiatives like the Alliance to Reduce Crimes against Heritage (ARCH) and the ClfA Heritage Crime SIG are bringing together partners from both Heritage and Law Enforcement with promising results.

Members of the ClfA Heritage Crime Special Interest Group with officers from Cheshire and West Mercia Constabularies at the ClfA2024 conference in Chester. Credit: ClfA