

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HERITAGE CRIME PROGRAMME IN ENGLAND

Mark Harrison, Head of Heritage Crime, Historic England

2011 was the key year for England's approach to Heritage Crime. The partnership now known as the National Heritage and Cultural Property Crime Working Group and chaired by the National Police Lead for Heritage and Cultural Property Crime was established and brought heritage agencies and curators together with law enforcement partners in a coordinated way.

In 2012, Historic England (then known as English Heritage) funded research into the extent of heritage crime (<https://historicengland.org.uk/content/docs/legal/researchpaper-pdf/>). It indicated that in the previous twelve months, '18.7% of all listed buildings were physically affected by criminal activity'. The finding equates to over 70,000 listed buildings! For almost 30,000 listed buildings, the impact was classified as 'substantial'.

More generally, around 20 per cent of listed buildings are harmed by crime every year. This figure is almost double for listed places of worship. The biggest single threat identified by the research was metal theft, in particular from church buildings, with over 14 per cent of buildings being affected.

Since 2012, the working group has made significant progress and stimulated an awareness of the existence of and the significance of protected heritage assets at a national, regional and local level. The partnership has provided law enforcement agencies, heritage practitioners and local communities with the advice, training and expertise they need to protect the historic environment from the impact of crime and anti-social behaviour.



A member of Cheshire Police Rural Crime Team on patrol at Beeston Castle. Credit: Historic England

... around 20 per cent of listed buildings are harmed by crime every year.

The majority of police services in England now have identified officers to act as single points of contact for matters relating to heritage and cultural property crime.

The function is often aligned to the investigation of offences within the rural and natural environment. This network of specialist officers, police staff and support volunteers is helping to provide an effective and efficient response to heritage crime and has been supported by the publication of *Heritage Crime: A Guide for Law Enforcement Officers*

(<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/heritage-crime-guide-for-law-enforcement-officers/>).

In parallel, the Crown Prosecution Service has identified specialist prosecutors to act as Heritage and Wildlife Crime Coordinators (<https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-info/wildlife-rural-and-heritage-crime>).

An increasing number of community safety partnerships and Local and National Park Authorities have added their signatures to



Officers from the Cheltenham Neighbourhood Policing Team, Police Cadets, L to R: DPC Nick Evans, Inspector Simon Ellson, Dr Jon Berry, Inspector Steve Benbow and Sergeant Samantha Swinford. Credit: Gloucestershire Constabulary

Our knowledge and understanding of the threats posed to heritage sites, buildings and cultural property continues to improve through the provision of a bi-annual strategic threat assessment

the associated Memorandum of Understanding (<https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/heritage-crime/memorandum-of-understanding/>) and many others have highlighted their intention to engage in the process. In March 2023, the memorandum was updated to include those offences classified as 'anti-social behaviour'.

Our knowledge and understanding of the threats posed to heritage sites, buildings and cultural property continues to improve through the provision of a bi-annual strategic threat assessment (recently published in spring 2024). As a result of the assessment's findings the working

group has launched a series of national campaigns designed to target specific heritage crime threats. These include:

- Operation Chronos – unlawful metal detecting, sometimes referred to as 'nighthawking'
- Operation Crucible – theft of metal from protected historic sites and buildings
- Operation Birdie – unlawful interference and salvage from historic wreck sites

Across the country, local history and archaeological societies, sub-aqua and metal-detecting clubs and Neighbourhood Watch groups (including Heritage Watch)

have been encouraged to be more aware of and vigilant about the threat of heritage crime. Within their local areas they report any suspicious activities to the police.

Our understanding of the extent and scale of the problem will continue to develop. As the intelligence gathering and assessment process matures and adopts the full range of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, high-risk locations will be identified. An increased level of understanding will allow the implementation of the appropriate preventative and enforcement activities to reduce heritage and cultural property crime. Where offences do occur, it will allow identification of those responsible and to bring them to justice.

Between 2016 and 2019 the Sentencing Council published new sentencing guidelines for theft offences (<https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/publications/item/theft-offences-definitive-guideline/>) which now include the theft, handling and disposal of stolen heritage assets, criminal damage and arson and burglary. The courts are now able to take account of the special nature of offences relating to the loss of and damage to heritage assets and cultural property when sentencing offenders.

The value of our built and cultural heritage cannot be judged in pounds and pence alone. The impact of theft from historic buildings and archaeological sites, including those situated in the maritime environment, has far-reaching consequences over and above the financial cost of what has been stolen.

When thieves steal metal from a church roof or artefacts from a historic wreck or archaeological deposit, they are stealing from all of us and damaging something which is often irreplaceable. The new guidelines will help the courts identify all the relevant factors to include and consider when making their sentencing decisions in relation to heritage and cultural property crime.

Significant progress has been made but the challenge before us has never been greater. A changing climate and global conflict are placing unprecedented pressures on ability to protect the historic environment. The development of the hub



Re-enactor reinforcing our no heritage crime message. Credit: Jon Berry

for Heritage and Wildlife Crime Innovation (HaWCI) offers the opportunity to seek out new and innovative technologies and techniques that will assist in the prevention and investigation of crime within the historic and natural environments.

Mark Harrison

Mark is Head of Heritage Crime for Historic England and Research Fellow at the Centre for Heritage at the University of Kent, with responsibility for the STEM for Heritage and Wildlife Crime Innovation.

Following a career in the police service, where he specialised in the development and delivery of partnerships and interventions to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour in the natural and historic environments of Kent, Mark helped to formulate the Heritage Crime Programme in partnership with Historic England, National Police Chiefs' Council and the Crown Prosecution Service.

Mark is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, Director of Archaeological Research for Whitstable Castle Trust and Director of Research for Timescapes Kent, a community archaeology group that undertakes research to develop the knowledge and understanding of the history of Kent.

