

Heritage Watch and public engagement

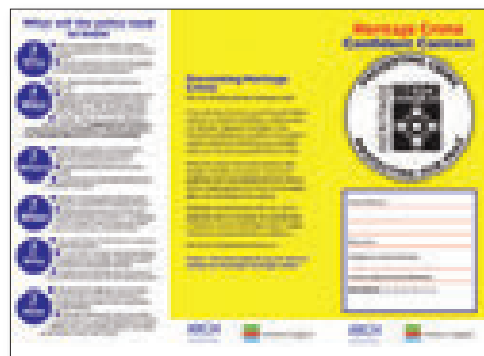
Andy Bliss,
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The looting of historic sites is an international problem. When a rural Roman villa site was identified in the Midlands in an area where illicit metal detecting was prevalent, Andy Bliss and Stuart Orton, former police officers and specialist heritage crime advisers, were asked by Mark Harrison, Head of Heritage Crime Strategy at Historic England, to recommend how the site could be protected pending excavation. Andy and Stuart were already coordinating a project for Historic England to expand the Heritage Watch approach nationally, beyond 'early adopter' police force areas.

Within two weeks of an initial community meeting involving archaeologists, landowners, police and representatives of Leicestershire Heritage Watch, a team of some 30 volunteers had stepped forward to maintain a high-visibility and watchful eye on the site at all hours to protect it from crime and consequential damage to the archaeological record. This provided a vital overlay to other security measures and ensured that no crime occurred at the site; just one suspicious visitor was encountered by the team over a period of several months.

Modelled on the generic Neighbourhood Watch approach, Heritage Watch is intended to engage local communities, working with archaeologists and heritage professionals, to monitor and prevent crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) risks at historic sites. Information is shared with police and other heritage protection organisations to ensure an appropriate response. Often police or fire officers will not appreciate the significance, value or particular vulnerability of heritage assets or the existence of legal protections such as scheduling or listing of historic places; a key element of Heritage Watch is to ensure that this information is appropriately communicated to optimise the response. This enhanced flow of intelligence to the emergency services builds on the existing Heritage Crime Liaison Officer network of specially trained officers in each police force.

Heritage Watch now operates in 12 of the 43 police forces in England and Wales, covering buildings, landscapes and maritime assets, with a similar approach, developed by MSDS Marine, for protected wrecks. Some schemes cover all heritage assets in a police area; in others the scheme is more locally focused.



Confident Contact checklist design



Community meeting, involving archaeologists, landowners, police and representatives of Leicestershire Heritage Watch. Credit: Andy Bliss, Aldwic Research Consultancy Ltd

The overall aim of the scheme is to protect and preserve a particular historic asset or group of assets from heritage crime. It offers four principal advantages:

- reporting of heritage crime and ASB allows heritage protection agencies and local communities to assess and better understand local heritage crime risks and deploy resources to counter them
- analysis of community-generated information, perhaps previously not reported, allows law enforcement agencies to develop intelligence and respond appropriately



Signage designed for Scheduled Monument sites in Leicestershire

- preventive measures deployed at particular sites signal to criminals that locations are cared for, increase the effort and risks of committing crime and remove potential excuses or defences for offending
- collateral benefits from engagement in terms of condition and climate impact monitoring, wider volunteer involvement in heritage projects and potential grant funding opportunities for volunteering and community participation

While encouraging local initiative and adaption to suit particular circumstances or specialist heritage assets, a baseline level of consistency needs to operate across all schemes. For a scheme to be effective, the following factors need to exist:

- an individual, community group or organisation with the motivation and means to establish and maintain a scheme
- active engagement from police, with fire service, local authority and/or Maritime and Coastguard Agency support, as appropriate. Other national bodies (such as the National Trust or Church of England) also have a role to play
- a structure to ensure that information is collected and passed lawfully to those operating the scheme and/or the local police and other partners, depending on urgency (e.g. 999, 101, webchat, etc)

- a structure to ensure that preventive messages from participating agencies are shared lawfully with and acted upon by those operating the scheme
- a means for members to communicate with each other and their local policing team, supported by a scheme administrator who is able to monitor content and ensure that relevant information is shared appropriately

A key tool developed to support schemes – ‘Confident Contact’ – explains how best to report heritage crimes to ensure the most apt response. It provides a checklist of key points to convey when reporting crime and outlines initial steps to preserve forensic evidence to assist with identification of suspects.

Alongside this, a range of other resources are available to support local schemes, including guidance for establish a scheme, signage, badged fluorescent jackets, emergency contact templates, measuring scales (to record images showing damage or artefacts at risk of theft) and other publicity materials.

Andy Bliss said, ‘Many people are passionate about historic places and Heritage Watch enables everyone to play their part, alongside heritage professionals, the police and others, to prevent crime and protect them for future generations.’

Andy Bliss QPM

Andy has 34 years’ policing experience and for a number of years was the police chief with national responsibility for Heritage Crime policy. He read History and Archaeology at Durham University and in 2018 he was awarded a master’s degree (Distinction) in Medieval Archaeology by York University. He is an experienced archaeologist and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. He has recently updated the heritage crime guidance suite for Historic England, including specialist guidance on crime risk assessment and crime prevention for heritage and law enforcement professionals. During 2021 he led a multi-agency team on behalf of Historic England which produced a national analysis of metal theft from historic church roofs. He undertakes specialist heritage crime risk surveys at archaeological and historic sites around the country. He is an EU Horizon Programme accredited expert for heritage crime and law enforcement matters.

