

HERITAGE CRIME: A POLICE OFFICER'S EXPERIENCE

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Some areas of policing can be straightforward and easy to interpret from a law enforcement perspective, whereas others can be more complex, often involving many different pieces of legislation written many years apart. Heritage and cultural property crime most certainly falls into this category and, as such, presents a challenge to police forces both in terms of internal staff training and awareness and also the effective management of reports – from the initial call right the way through to the conclusion of any ensuing investigation. This does, however, present an exciting opportunity for officers, staff and police volunteers to become involved with a rewarding and important area of crime investigation.

Investigations can occur in a wide variety of situations, circumstances and environments – from unlawful salvage of marine protected wrecks through to illegal metal detecting on remote terrestrial sites; from random acts of vandalism of heritage sites to the wholesale theft of heritage metal from a roof. It is an area of policing that directly links to people and place and gives us context through an understanding of the historical events that shaped our landscapes and the society we live in today. In this sense, every heritage crime is a crime committed against all of us as heritage assets are, by definition, unique and irreplaceable parts of our nation's story.

The role of a police officer lies in upholding and enforcing the law. Many of the tactical options available for other crime types readily transfer across to the world of heritage crime and, as a result, opportunities to catch and convict offenders are increasing all the time as technological advancements are made. Police officers and staff are not (in most cases) trained and experienced archaeologists and neither can we be omniscient. Instead, we are assisted by an extensive network of partner agencies, avocational organisations and members of the public who help us to monitor sites and report heritage crime incidents when they occur. Last year, we launched Heritage Watch in Devon and Cornwall and are pleased to see that membership is growing exponentially.

Once a report is made and an investigation is underway, we turn to expert archaeologists to help determine the true impact of a crime. In Devon and Cornwall this crucially important network comes together under the banner of the South West Peninsula

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Scheduled Monument sign at Longstone Manor, NHLE List entry 1415430. Credit: Devon & Cornwall Police



Men Scryfa, an early Christian memorial stone in West Cornwall, damaged by fire after the top section was doused in a flammable liquid, NHLE list entry 1018573. Credit: Ann Preston-Jones, Historic England

Damage to Okehampton Castle caused by antisocial behaviour, West Devon, NHLE list entry 1165647. Credit: Devon & Cornwall Police



Heritage Crime Partnership. Everyone involved has been immensely helpful and their energy and enthusiasm to work with police to target heritage crime is limitless and unwavering.

One of the challenges of working in heritage crime is being able to draw a distinction between the subjective and objective nature of heritage assets. We all have a different interpretation of what 'heritage' means to us as individuals; however, in the context of a crime against a heritage asset, what appears to one person to be a valuable historical object or place providing a tangible link to our past may not be viewed by another with the same degree of importance. Theft from a shop is easy to attach a value to, but heritage assets are not so easy. However, after undergoing initial assessment and triage, heritage crimes are set against all other crime types and police resources are allocated accordingly. It is therefore vital that staff are upskilled in this area, so that heritage crimes can be identified correctly, assessed appropriately, and responded to promptly and efficiently. To assist with this, a cohort of Heritage Crime Liaison Officers now exists thanks to sessions provided by Historic England. These officers and staff are spread across the force area in a variety of workstreams and have a heightened awareness and understanding of heritage and cultural property crime which they can take back to their areas of business.

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Examples of heritage signage being deployed at selected sites in Devon and Cornwall together with new Heritage Watch materials. Credit: Devon & Cornwall Police

Nighthawking activity (illegal metal detecting), West Dartmoor. Credit: Devon & Cornwall Police

Devon & Cornwall Police will continue to work with partners and the public to target and reduce heritage crime. Links with serious and organised crime, and recognition of the wider economic benefits and associated employment coming from heritage tourism, as well as the significant impact offending has on the community, mean that heritage crime will continue to receive the attention and focus it deserves.



PC Julian Fry

Julian has served as a police officer with Devon and Cornwall Police for 22 years. He is a member of the Rural Affairs Team and is leading on work to deliver the force's Heritage and Cultural Property Crime strategy across the Devon and Cornwall peninsula. Before joining the police Julian studied at Oxford Brookes University, achieving a BSc (Hons) and an MSc in Environmental Assessment and Management. Julian is also the national tactical policing lead for Operation Birdie, which targets the unlawful salvage from, or damage caused to, our protected wrecks.