

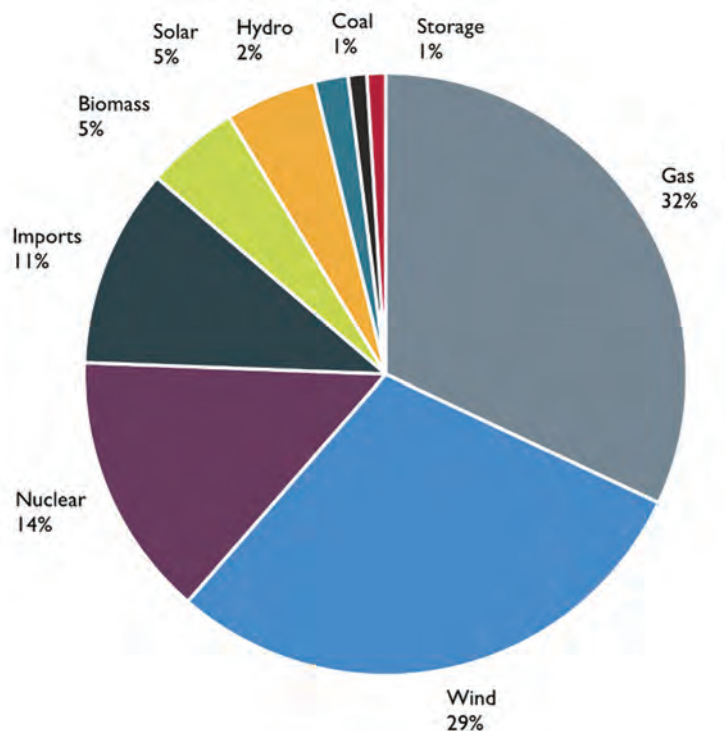
ARCHAEOLOGY AND SOLAR

working together to develop understanding and consensus

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The Labour government in Westminster was elected last year with a mandate to stimulate a rapid expansion in the scale of the country's renewable energy generation. Kier Starmer has articulated his mission to make Britain a 'clean energy superpower' and a 'milestone' to put the country 'on track to at least 95 per cent clean power by 2030'. Other UK national governments have made similar pledges, and are on similar trajectories, as the UK responds to the climate crisis and aims for net zero.





Sources of Britain's electricity. Data from National Energy System Operator, 'Britain's electricity explained: 2023 review', January 2024

Whether through the £4.7bn funding pledge in the Green Prosperity Plan, the establishment of Great British Energy to invest in private sector projects, or the reforming of the planning system to enable the expansion of solar and wind schemes, the response is already leading to an increase in activity for archaeologists involved in advising clients or working in development management.

In terms of raw numbers, we can expect a tripling of solar power generation and quadrupling of offshore wind by 2030, as well as new nuclear projects at locations such as Sizewell and Hinkley Point.

Given these huge aspirations for development, intense scrutiny has been placed on the Town and Country Planning Act (TCPA) and Nationally Strategic Infrastructure Project (NSIP) systems' ability to enable and process applications.

Already, ClfA members are grappling with the impacts. In 2021, research by DRP Archaeology identified that there had been 750 renewable energy projects across TCPA and NSIP regimes in the preceding three-year period. From 2021 to 2024, this more than quadrupled to 3400 projects. And projects are not confined to areas where they were previously common. Solar is often seen as an issue for South East England, but there are currently seven active NSIP solar projects being progressed in Yorkshire – more than any other region – and a clear sign that

solar is heading north at an ever-greater rate. And while some areas' archaeological advisers are now highly experienced in dealing with renewable energy schemes, others are experiencing the effects of this national expansion for the first time.

Impacts of renewable development on the historic environment

Renewable energy is treated as development like any other within the UK's planning systems, and it needs to satisfy planning policy requirements relating to impact on the historic environment. There is robust policy in each UK nation to ensure that the impact of such schemes is managed sustainably.

In England, National Policy Statement EN-3 (which relates to NSIPs) describes requirements for archaeological assessment and outlines various risks to archaeological heritage assets that can arise on renewable schemes. However, it also judges that below-ground impacts of solar schemes are 'generally limited' and cites the potentially positive effect the solar developments may have due to removing sites from ploughing.

All types of renewable energy scheme can also have impacts on the historic landscape and the setting of heritage assets, and these landscape impacts often form part of wider community concern that can influence local political decision-making about schemes.

ClfA research into solar farm evaluation challenges

It is in this context that ClfA commissioned research to review current practice in the evaluation of impact of solar farm developments on the historic environment, with a particular focus on archaeological remains. The research collated views from those who advise on, commission and undertake field evaluation in advance of solar farm development to identify the issues that are specific to this type of development, and to identify current good practice. The research was funded by Historic England and built on earlier work to better understand the factors influencing choice of evaluation strategy across infrastructure, minerals extraction and housing development.¹

The research examines the type of evaluation techniques in use, when in the process they are required and the specific impacts of solar farm development, and considers potential benefits that may accrue to archaeological remains – for example, through removing land from ploughing. It found that a fairly narrow range of evaluation techniques were being used in many cases, and that there may be potential for newer and/or less intrusive techniques to be combined to enable efficient evaluation in relation to patterns of impacts unique to solar farms. It also

identified a need for better understanding, across both archaeology and solar sectors, of the whole life cycle impact of solar farm development and the range of variables involved, including the

- nature, extent, preservation and significance of archaeological remains anticipated
- construction methods, including nature of foundations, of the proposed development
- quality and availability of sufficient information on both the above to inform decision making

Further, it recognised that financial constraints on developers made it a clear benefit if trial trenching could be substantially delivered post-determination. While there are clear archaeological reasons for undertaking trial trenching pre-determination, this concern around timing was highlighted as an area where work needed to be done.

On impact, the report identified a range of views on the scale of impact of the metal piles used to mount solar arrays on different types of features, as well as more easily agreed impacts of roads and cable runs.

Clearly, there will be no one-size-fits-all solution to balancing the need to conserve the significance of heritage assets against impacts of solar farm development, but what is evident is the need for a

better, shared, understanding of the nature of solar farm development and its potential impacts on the historic environment, and the establishment of common principles that both industries can sign up to. More detailed guidance to support both sectors can then flow from this.

Collaborative next steps

ClfA has been leading a collaborative effort to discuss next steps with stakeholders including ALGAO, FAME, Solar Energy UK, the Local Government Association, Historic England, Historic Environment Scotland and Cadw. At the time of writing the intention is to host a workshop early in the spring. The aim of the workshop is to identify and agree common principles for archaeological evaluation, mitigation and offsetting on solar farm projects, leading to the production, if appropriate, of multi-badged guidance to support future decision-making.

It is excellent to see stakeholders engaging positively to improve mutual understanding and seek viable solutions to concerns within this politically charged environment. We look forward to providing updates to ClfA members in the near future.

¹ WSP 2022 *Evaluation Strategies (EVALS 1): understanding current practice and encouraging sector engagement. Report and Recommendations*

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Wind turbines. Credit: Rob Lennox