

Monument and
information board at
Marston Moor (1644)
battlefield. Credit:
Battlefields Trust

Conflict archaeology and managing change on registered battlefields

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Although of often short duration, the military engagements that took place on our historic battlefields saw key moments which changed the course of British history; they are, as Winston Churchill famously observed, 'the punctuation marks of history'. The value of battlefields today is both tangible and intangible. The topography, often with landscape features surviving from the battle, provides a vital resource for understanding where and how the action evolved. Archaeological remains – such as the scatter of lead shot, other discarded objects, or the grave-pits of the dead – can be combined with an understanding of the landscape and documentary evidence to develop our knowledge of what took place there. But there are other, less tangible benefits which battlefields provide. They encourage increased tourism and can consequently bring economic benefits to the surrounding area. They also provide a teaching environment where the past can be brought to life, and they offer a sense of identity and place for those living in locations where, perhaps, very little of major significance has otherwise happened.

Battlefield heritage is arguably both complex and poorly understood. Battlefields are complex because of their scale, the need to understand written, landscape and archaeological evidence to make sense of them, and the challenges of recovering material culture which is both ephemeral and which was set down over a short period. The poor level of understanding possibly reflects the relatively recent official recognition of battlefields as heritage assets. Historic England's Register of Historic Battlefields will only be 30 years old in 2025, while Historic Environment Scotland's Inventory of Historic Battlefields dates from 2011. Both offer limited development protections for battlefields. Cadw's Inventory of Historic Battlefields published in 2017 is only an interpretative, educational and research resource and does not offer any protections.

These accidental and archaeologically sensitive landscapes are at risk. The main threat comes from development, including that which would be unlikely to impact other archaeological sites; any topsoil removal from a battlefield will potentially destroy the archaeologically unstratified layer of metallic artefacts associated with the fighting. Planning rules do not automatically prevent construction on such sites and there is a real risk of incremental development destroying these heritage assets. Some modern agricultural techniques such as deep ploughing or the use of certain fertilisers which change the soil chemistry also have the potential to damage metal artefacts. The practice of spreading 'green waste' on agricultural fields, which can deposit large quantities of metallic debris into the soil, also makes attempts to recover archaeological

information through systematic metal detecting very challenging. Archaeological value can also be denuded through *ad hoc* metal detecting if systematic recording and reporting of finds does not take place.

This complexity and need for better understanding prompted the Battlefields Trust, a national charity dedicated to the promotion of battlefield heritage, to work with ALGAO to organise a conference involving planners and heritage practitioners at the National Civil War Centre in April 2022 to discuss the challenges of managing battlefields within the planning system and explore how this could be improved. The conference covered the local government and Historic England experience of managing development on battlefields, the nature of the heritage resource, battlefield

Battlefield survey underway at Langport (1645). Credit: Battlefields Trust



archaeology, landscape assessment, and interpretation. Conference attendees were clear that one problem was the lack of suitable guidance to help them understand the heritage challenges of battlefields and how best to mitigate developmental change through good practice in conflict landscape assessment and archaeology.

The Battlefields Trust subsequently worked with Historic England and conference attendees to develop such guidance. This was first published in 2023 and has been revised recently to include further feedback. It covers the significance of battlefields, the policy context, and managing development on battlefields, before outlining methods to assess conflict landscapes and conduct archaeological surveys. It is hoped this document will establish a baseline of understanding and good practice for heritage professionals charged with balancing heritage value with development needs. The guidance can be found at <https://www.battlefieldstrust.com/page238.asp>



*Fired musket ball recovered during a survey of Langport (1645) battlefield.
Credit: Sam Wilson*



Baseline of transects set out for a survey at Stow-on-the-Wold (1646) battlefield. Credit: Battlefields Trust

*Sam Wilson.
Credit: Chris van Houts/Waterloo Uncovered*



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