



Some recent Historic England guidance. Credit: Historic England

Twenty-five years of archaeological science advice

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Historic England’s Science Advice team recently celebrated their 25th anniversary. The team provides around 4000 hours of advice of every year to Historic England, local authority archaeologists, archaeological contractors, consultants and community groups, supporting best practice throughout the sector. We reflect on the impact of the 27 past and present postholders and consider the current focus and future directions.

The team was created to provide a single point of contact for archaeological science advice for the sector. This was driven by the increase in archaeological projects following Planning Policy Guidance 16 (PPG16) and the need to ensure that projects were supported by pertinent archaeological science.

What we do

Archaeological science covers a broad range of specialisms including environmental archaeology, human remains and bioarchaeology, scientific dating, preservation of archaeological remains, material science, geophysical survey, and archaeological conservation, to name but a few.

Science Advisors provide impartial advice and support on development-led casework under the National Planning Policy Framework, and for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP). Historic

England colleagues also request advice as part of the Scheduled Monument Consent processes and, as advisors to the Marine Management Organisation, with respect to marine casework. This advice, from the investigation to the analysis and archiving of archaeological work, can be provided at any stage but is most impactful when integrated from the start.

The team also contributes to the production and promotion of Historic England guidance and training within the sector, and supports the delivery of regional research frameworks ensuring that archaeological science is at the forefront of the archaeological agenda.

Our impact

The Science Advisor’s role has evolved from ensuring archaeological science is included in projects towards advising on the effective implementation and application of techniques and methodologies. With an increase in major infrastructure projects (we engaged with over 50 separate NSIP projects last year), the role now encompasses elements of constructive conservation, landscape management and sector support.

Taking a targeted approach driven by research questions has supported innovation and assisted with the appropriate allocation of resources to increase public benefit and realise opportunities. The team stays informed of developments in

archaeological sciences and enables collaborations between commercial projects and research-led institutions, signposting emerging methodologies to address specific research questions.

Science Advisors also provide key support outside of the planning system, advising on archiving issues (such as the creation of the Northamptonshire Archaeological Resource Centre) and on developing extensive deposit models (eg, in York) and Urban Archaeological Databases (eg, Dover).

One of the biggest impacts of the team has been their contributions to the development of Historic England's best practice guidance and cross-collaborative guidance with other agencies and groups. This guidance is familiar to many and has become instrumental in shaping archaeological practice over the past 25 years, underpinning the advice that Science Advisors provide.

What next?

Moving forwards, the team is once again changing with the times and a greater proportion of our advice is becoming focused on non-intrusive methods and preservation of archaeological remains, particularly around nature recovery and climate-based projects. New guidance released in 2025 includes *Peatland restoration and the historic environment* and revisions to *Waterlogged Wood* and *Environmental Archaeology*.

Like many of you reading this magazine, we've been involved in discussions and casework resulting from the increase in development of solar farms. We have an excellent understanding of geoarchaeology and remote sensing, and an appreciation of the ever-changing nature of landscapes in the face of human adaptation and exploitation of the environment over time. This makes us well placed to help others understand how they can maximise the information gathered through non-intrusive means, to better characterise and synthesise the archaeological significance and potential of these large schemes, as advocated in forthcoming sector guidance.



Science Advice supports Historic England funded projects, such as the investigation of the scheduled Tudor Blockhouse on Mersea Island by ARCA. This included developing the brief for the borehole survey, supporting the Inspector of Ancient Monuments to monitor the work on site and to review the resulting report. Credit: Historic England



Science advisors also offer on-site guidance, as illustrated here during fieldwork at Wanlip, Leicestershire. With thanks to ULAS, Severn Trent, Kier, and Leicestershire County Council. Credit: Historic England.

For more information about Historic England's Science Advice team and contact details for Science Advisors in your region visit:

<https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/technical-advice/archaeological-science/science-advisors/>

With thanks to the Science Advice team, who helped to collaboratively author this article.

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Hayley McParland is Historic England's Science Advisor for the South West. Initially working in commercial archaeology before completing a PhD at the University of York, she has an interest in wetland archaeology and environments and a specialism in phytolith analysis.



Jim Williams

Jim Williams is the Senior Science Advisor for Historic England. He leads the team, provides advice on HS2, works on the production and revision of standards and guidance and is currently leading the updating of the Historic England wetland strategy.

