

Historic Environment Records: *Signposts to the past*

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Whilst most media coverage of archaeology concentrates upon fieldwork discoveries or post-excavation findings, behind the scenes, Historic Environment Records (HERs) are an established part of archaeological practice. Many readers may have some familiarity with HERs in either accessing or submitting data to them. This article provides an opportune moment to recap but also highlights things that may not be known.

A Guide to Historic Environment Records (HERs) in England. Credit: Historic England



UK coverage

HERs are found across the UK although they vary between each nation and individually. In Northern Ireland the Historic Environment Division of the Department for Communities manages the HER (HERoNI) directly (<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/historic-environment-record-northern-ireland-heroni>). In Wales they form a statutory duty of Welsh Ministers ensuring an HER covers each unitary local authority; this duty is discharged by the HER services of Heneb (<https://heneb.org.uk/historic-environment-records-her/>), the Trust for Welsh Archaeology. In Scotland, 18 individual HERs are hosted by local authorities and one heritage trust. In England there is more variety, with 83 HERs hosted by local authorities, national parks, heritage trusts and shared services. There are also HERs for Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, and the most recent HER is the Marine HER Service for England, established by Historic England in 2024.

What are HERs?

Developing from Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs) over 50 years ago, HERs have become accessible, dynamic and evolving information services focused on recording the historic environment for defined geographical areas. Covering all periods from Palaeolithic to modern, they deal with both designated and undesignated heritage assets, and more recently landscape-scale concepts such as historic characterisation.

HERs contain thousands of known, recorded and mapped entries as core data, organised using a model of:

- **monuments** (sites, finds and landscapes)
- **events** (investigations)
- **sources** (published and unpublished sources forming the evidence for HER records)

Specialised software is often used to record this data in complex databases with associated Geographical Information Systems (GIS).

Alongside this, HERs often hold a variety of physical and digital sources, including archaeological reports, books, journals, maps, aerial photos, index cards, letters, photographs and drawings. HERs also point to and can access numerous other sources of information including LiDAR, digital maps and other online sources. With such a large remit and information base, many HERs have backlogs of information to process to enhance their records.

Standards

Data standards and thesauri have been established by the wider heritage community, becoming the bedrock for HER data recording. These include *MIDAS Heritage*, the *Monument Types* and *Objects* thesauri, and spatial data

standards. HERs also hold FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable) as a core part of their function.

Over the decades detailed guidance and manuals have been produced for UK HERs. First, and in paper format, was *Informing the Future of the Past* (IFP), which developed into a digital wiki version (IFP3) and more recently revamped as *The UK Historic Environment Records Manual*. Alongside this a formal *Guide to Historic Environment Records in England* has been published by Historic England, in partnership with the ALGAO HER Committee, which has also been adapted and adopted in Scotland as ALGAO Scotland guidance. In Wales, statutory guidance, standards and benchmarks are published by Cadw.

Historic England has developed a programme of HER Audits to help HERs assess themselves against these agreed standards and form action plans to improve and develop.



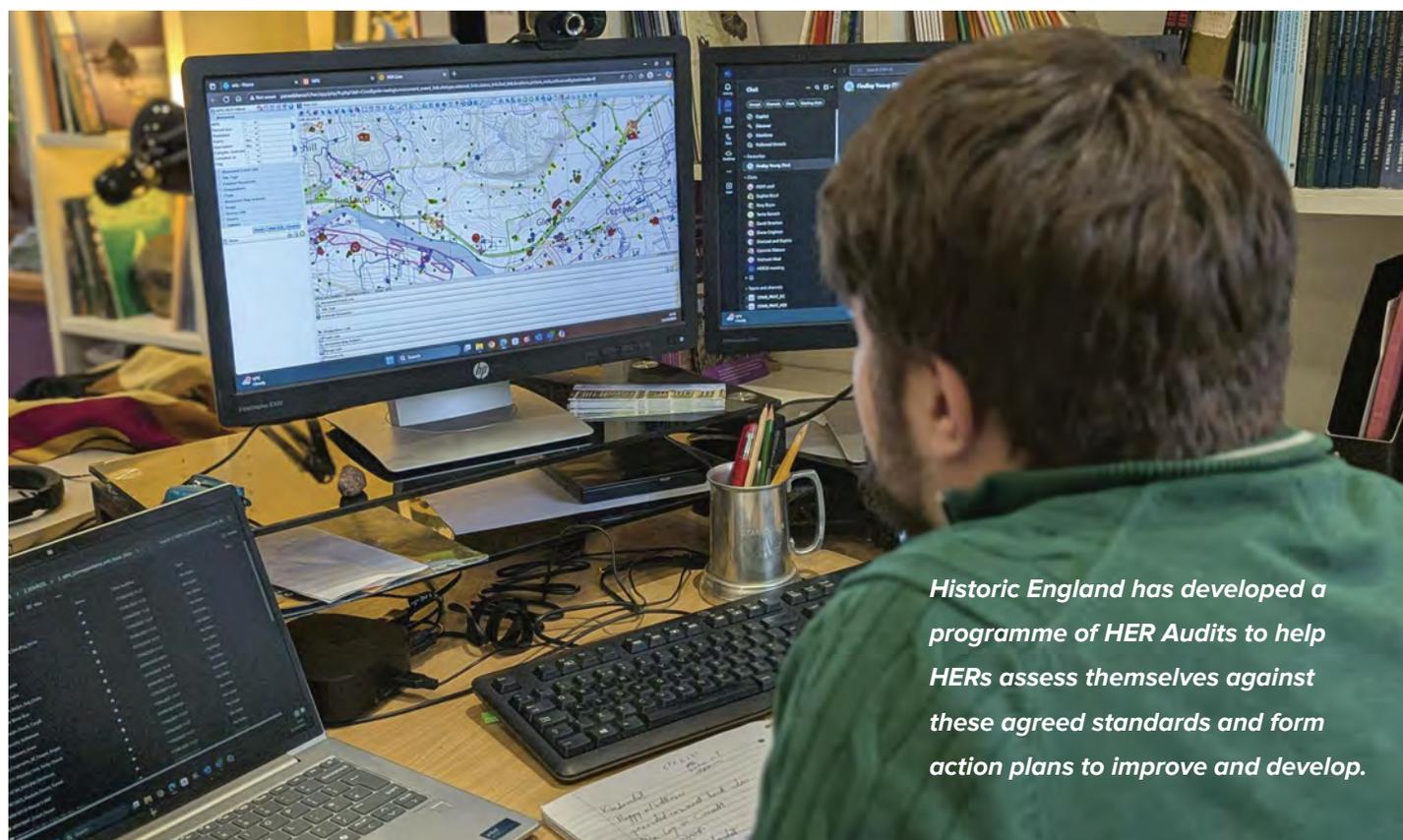
Uses and users

HERs are maintained and updated for public benefit but they are also critical as an evidence base for planners, advisors, commercial archaeologists and others to appropriately manage archaeology and the historic environment in the planning process. However, HERs have many other uses and users too, for example, to inform agri-environment schemes, woodland planting proposals, Environmental Impact Assessments and, more recently, habitat restoration and nature recovery schemes.

HERs are used by students, researchers and others in academia, often as part of macro-scale national projects and programmes (such as EngLaID). Enquiries for data can be area-based, thematic or temporally led or even restricted to a specific monument or object type.

HERs also have links to local communities, from local residents seeking information about the area where they live through to volunteers helping enhance the HER for their locality. Some HERs deliver community engagement through specific projects and programmes or by developing apps and websites for people to discover more about the past in their local area.

HER data is also published online through such portals as the Heritage Gateway (for England), Archwilio (for Wales), PastMap (for Scotland) or individual HER websites.



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Findlay Young, HER Officer, at work. Credit: Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust (PKHT)

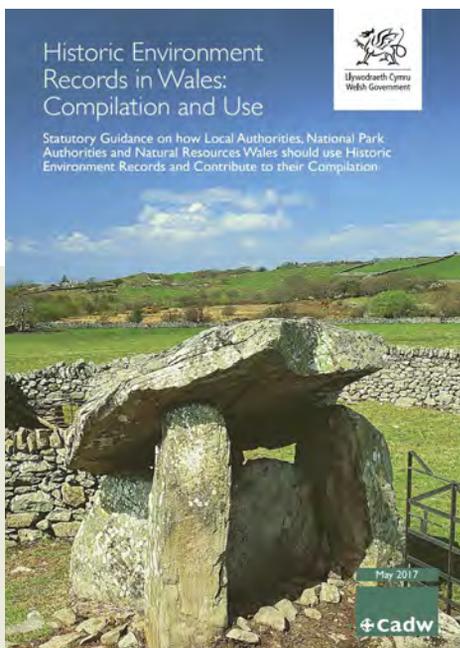
The rich variety of users often feed new data back to the HER, whether this is resulting from commercial and planning-led archaeological investigations or a photo of an object found whilst walking the dog. HERs welcome all information within their area of geographic coverage and that has a link to our human past in some way.

HER support

With over 100 individual HERs across the UK and a variety of models in place it would be understandable to assume they were unorganised. Thankfully, several supporting groups have emerged that have built active and organised HER communities. The Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO) formed the HER Committee (<https://www.algao.org.uk/subject/her>) in the 1990s. It meets three times a year, with representation from all UK nations, each English region, and relevant national groups, forums and other ALGAO committees.

Looking beyond those working within local authorities, the HER Forum emerged to provide further support. The HER Partnerships Team at Historic England facilitates a platform for discussion through an active JiscMail group where the 'Friday afternoon' questions and discussions have become infamous. Two meetings a year are held with a variety of presentations, discussion points and networking opportunities. Membership of the HER Forum is wide ranging and includes those from commercial, community and academic backgrounds, as well as retired HER officers!

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HER guidance documents in Wales: Credit: Cadw

In Scotland the HER Forum (<https://smrforum-scotland.org.uk/her-contacts/>) fulfils a similar role, combining technical discussions with a national overview, as well as opportunities for training and updates regarding recent data projects and opportunities.

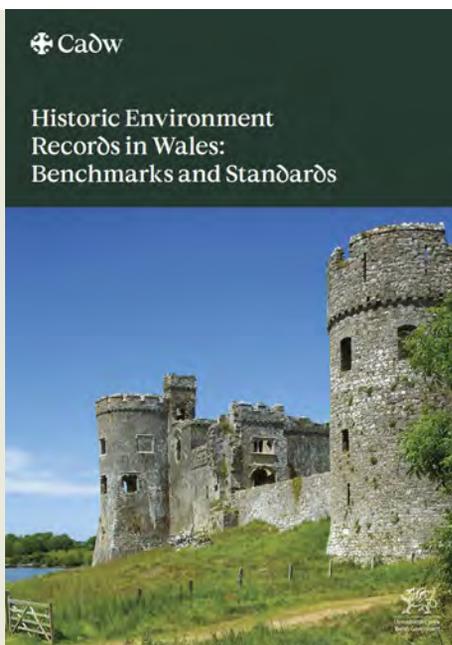
There are also several specialist and technical groups are essential to the development of HERs, including FISH (Forum on Information Standards in Heritage) and the OASIS Management Board. The three main HER software providers (HBSMR, HEROS and Arches) also have user groups to aid their technical development.

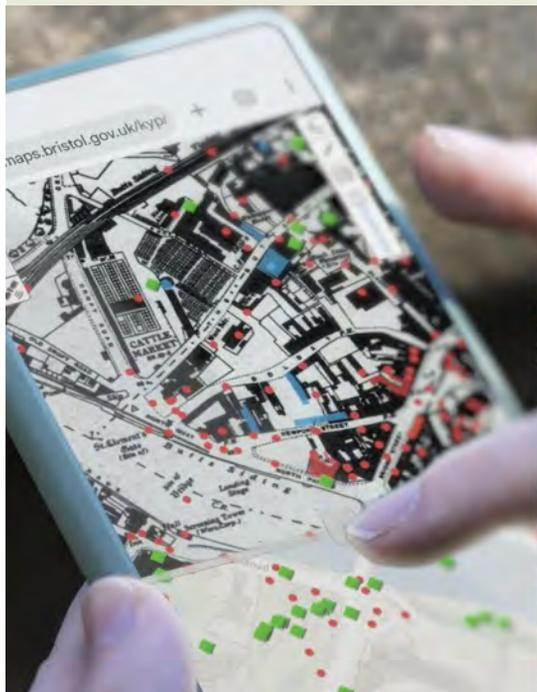
Formal status

The ambition across the heritage sector has been to ensure HERs are on a firm footing regarding their official recognised status. Although this has been achieved somewhat in Northern Ireland and Wales, substantial work has taken place over the last 25 years regarding the other nations. Perseverance was rewarded when in 2023 the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act put HERs in England on a statutory footing, making it a requirement for local authorities to manage and maintain the HER (although a timetable and plan for implementation is still forthcoming). Scotland recognises (under the INSPIRE Directive) that HERs fulfil a duty of ensuring access to environmental information and they also appear within the National Planning Framework 4; however, they are the final nation to achieve more formal statutory recognition.

The future?

The ubiquity and size of digital data in all its forms, with the multiplicity of digital packages, presents opportunities and challenges for HERs. AI recognition of sites, data trawling and natural language processing may provide





You will find HER teams welcoming and friendly, so please do contact your local HER officer and discover where the signposts to the past may take you next!

Accessing HERs on tablets to support community engagement. Credit: Historic England

ways to tackle HER backlogs but conversely create more data requiring some form of human validation too.

New data sources might well be interrogated all the more with HER data, providing new insights into the past, as well as prompts for the future. HER users and enquirers now have greater expectations – such as landscape-scale rewilding and greater object type indexing; public benefit and social value are required, going beyond a

purely archaeological focus. Within a period of continued budgetary restraint, ensuring value for money remains a requirement for all HERs – both for users and host authorities. However, as HERs have shown, developing first from card indexes and paper records, they continue to grow, reflect and adapt. You will find HER teams welcoming and friendly, so please do contact your local HER officer and discover where the signposts to the past may take you next!

A more in-depth version of this article including useful links to resource and contact information can be found here: <https://www.archaeologists.net/groups/information-management>

Ben Wallace

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Keith Elliott

Keith is HER Forum (Scotland) Chair and Archaeology Officer at Scottish Borders Council. Prior to this he was Assistant Historic Environment Record (HER) Officer with the council, assisting the then Archaeology Officer in a Historic Environment Scotland and Scottish Forestry funded project to polygonise the Scottish Borders HER (which briefly featured in *The Archaeologist* number 100). As the sole archaeologist within Scottish Borders Council, his remit has expanded across all curatorial roles for an area a quarter the size of Wales.

