

# Born digital: recording rebooted

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Historic England's Archaeological Projects team undertaking excavation and digital recording at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire. Credit: Tony Wilmott)

**Direct-to-digital field recording is becoming increasingly common in the commercial sector, with the real potential to create a more accessible and comprehensive archive, as well as significant cost and time efficiencies. The archaeological sector has independently developed various systems and approaches; these are often incompatible in both application and resulting data. One area where there is agreement is that accurate metadata are essential to data longevity. Deposition rates for digital data remain low, with current estimates for 2013–2018 at around 3 per cent. As archaeologists, we have the responsibility to produce accurate, usable data, and to curate data appropriately to preserve archaeological remains through record – creating greater public benefit from excavations, and offering the potential for the re-use of generated data for wider interpretation.**

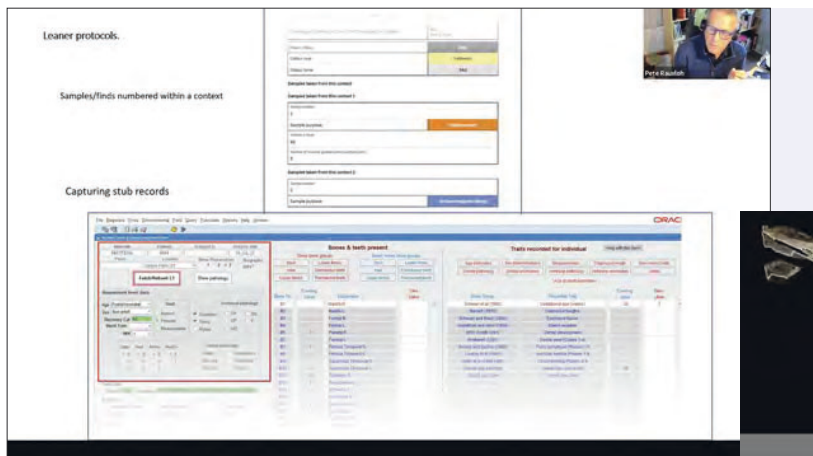
A digital archive is commonly considered a 'voluntary' deliverable, although is stated as a requirement within some counties, resulting in a lack of cohesion within the archaeological record. Developer-led archaeology is undertaken on a competitive basis, so there is a

perceived risk that any work over and above contractual requirements will lead to uncompetitive tenders. Adopting digital recording itself involves risk; there are considerable cost and resource considerations to procure or build a digital recording system. Updating and administering a system is an additional cost, which currently is difficult to estimate.

Digital recording brings undeniable benefits. Where software such as SharePoint is also used, data integrates seamlessly with the MS Office suite. Querying both inter- and intra-site data is possible, as well as supporting post-ex activities. The immediate nature of such data uploads has project management advantages too, allowing the generation of accurate daily reports. The issue of 'big data' has for some time been part of wider conversations between Historic England, ClfA and DigVentures – as seen for example in the funding of the *Work Digital/Think Archive* guide as part of Historic England's *Creating a sectoral standard and guidance for managing digital data* project. Whilst new skills are required as we move into the digital age, there is also concern that some archaeological skills considered traditional, such as producing site drawings, may be lost and with them some of the normal means through which interpretation is established.

Historic England commissioned ClfA with ALGAO to undertake the *Building capacity through innovation* project with the aim of 'exploring the perceived lack of innovation in developer-led archaeology, identifying potential barriers and/or issues inhibiting the wider implementation of innovative approaches and to present recommendations for improvement'. As part of this project, ClfA held an Innovation Festival in January this year. Historic England's Archaeological Projects team organised the session *Born digital: recording rebooted* to understand the position of digital recording within the archaeological sector and share our own experiences. The outcome was beneficial, providing education, comprehension and discussion. The session was followed up with a ClfA Tea Break in February to continue the conversation.

Our session engagement was broad, with representatives from commercial archaeology, academia and national and local government. Papers were presented by Historic England, Archaeology Data Service, MOLA, AOC and Wessex Archaeology, demonstrating a wide-ranging practice within the UK. Additionally, a case study from Norway was presented where photogrammetry was integrated into the digital site record to provide a European comparison of deployment.



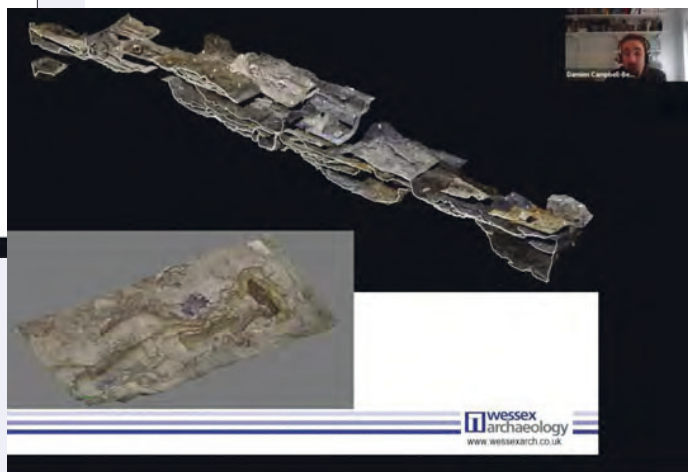
Peter Rauxloh presenting an overview of MOLA's Digital Recording System. Credit: MOLA

Historic England's Archaeological Projects team's central concept is to start with the archive and work backwards to define a methodology. The team began recording digitally three decades ago through early adoption and adaption. We use Intrasis, a tool designed by National Historical Museums, Sweden, with whom we have worked closely with to modify the system to suit our needs. As the public body for the historic environment, the methodology we have designed aims for best practice. Our paper highlighted both what we do and what we do not do, and whether this is by design or due to system functionality – both of which are contributing factors affecting development.

Overall, many of the insights throughout the sessions were recurrent. Given the stark contrast between current systems and capabilities, unification was considered vital by those in attendance, and would likely include the development of standards and/or guidance. The latter would allow organisations wanting to start down the route of digital recording to learn from our collective experience to date. The concern for the future of digital recording within archaeology is accessibility and interoperability. Not all factors were considered equal, and the 'worthiness' of data was cause for debate.

Historic England's Archaeological Projects team continue to facilitate these discussions. Our aim is to promote an open dialogue and a collaborative approach to support the sector in navigating these new challenges. We thank the presenters who made the session possible, ClfA for hosting the festival, and everyone who attended. The session is available to view on ClfA's event recordings webpage – [www.archaeologists.net/events/event-recordings](http://www.archaeologists.net/events/event-recordings)

Photogrammetric recording of a complex cemetery site at Castle Combe, Chippenham. Credit: Wessex Archaeology



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**Lucy Parker**

Lucy is an archaeologist with extensive project management and survey experience. She has been active in the archaeological and geophysics sectors for 15 years. Her research interests include standards and guidance, digital archaeology and non-intrusive techniques. Lucy is Chair of the ClfA Advisory Council and the Geophysics Special Interest Group.



**Thomas Cromwell**

Tom has been an archaeologist for over three decades, developing and running field excavations. Tom's research interests cover medieval and post-medieval archaeology and buildings, especially medieval church/monastic development, fortresses, and post-medieval gardens. Having provided expertise in metric survey and CAD skills for the team for over two decades, he is also heavily involved in the development of digital recording techniques for excavations.

