



Historic Environment Record Services and Research Projects in England

This advice note is for anyone planning to undertake academic research projects using data from Historic Environment Records (HERs). It outlines the current situation regarding HERs in England and identifies approaches that will facilitate the collection and use of HER data for research purposes.

What are Historic Environment Records (HERs)?

HERs provide an important starting point for almost all archaeological research in England. They are sophisticated information systems that comprise databases linked to a geographic information system (GIS), and associated reference material, together with a dedicated specialist staffing resource. Current Government policy in The National Planning Policy Framework defines HERs as “*information services that seek to provide access to comprehensive and dynamic resources relating to the historic environment of a defined geographic area for public benefit and use*” (2012, 52). HERs are used as the basis for historic environment conservation and management advice (e.g. for planning proposals and environmental grant schemes to farmers) as well as providing a valuable resource for education and research. There are over 80 HERs in England, giving national coverage comprising over 1.5 million sites. Contact details for all HERs in England are available on the Heritage Gateway website (see below).



Figure 1, entering data onto a Historic Environment Record: East Berkshire HER

The importance of the local authority context

To maximise the research potential of HER data it is important to understand the principles, processes and context in which individual HERs operate. HERs and their staff work to nationally accepted standards and agreed working practices. However, since each HER has developed over the course of the last 30 to 40 years in relation to specific local factors - research agendas, expertise, funding parameters and so on - their structure, content, management and resourcing can differ significantly. It is also important to recognise that the people that manage HERs (HER Officers) are an important research resource in their own right as a source of information and advice to researchers. They will have a specific expertise in the historic environment data for their area, and many have research backgrounds.

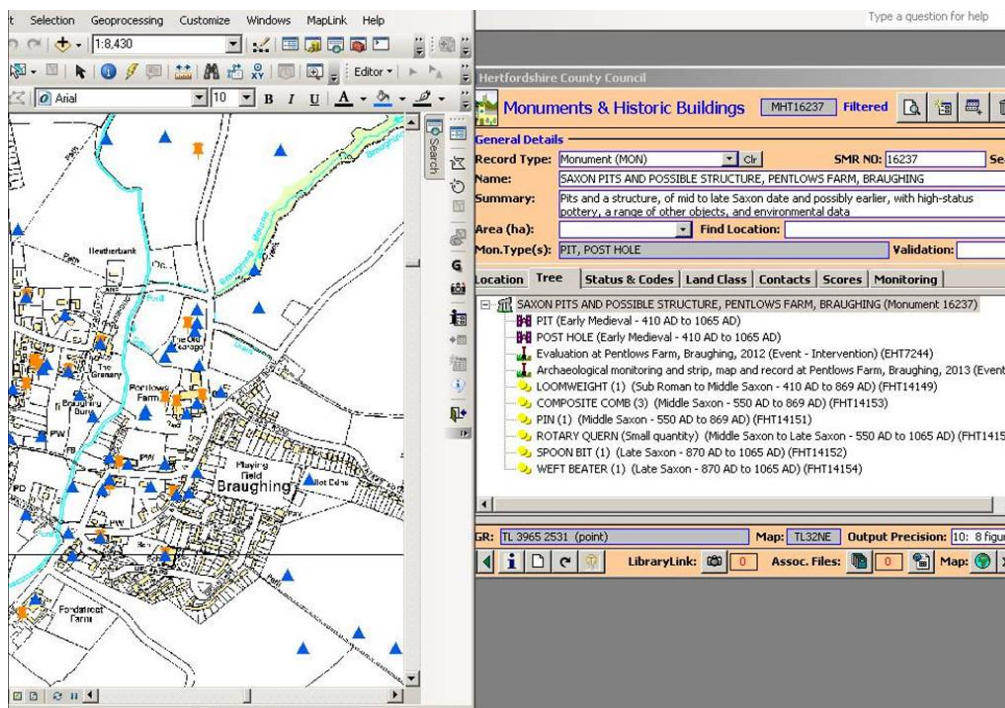


Figure 2, a typical HER computer display of linked GIS and a database record, Hertfordshire HER

The local authorities hosting and managing HERs can also differ greatly in terms of their structure, and how they fund the maintenance and development of HERs. Understandably, this affects the levels of service provided, in particular relating to timescales and charging for data provision, and the ability of HER officers to actively engage with a research project. Reductions in central government funding, and subsequent ongoing cuts to services, mean that all aspects of local authority historic environment advisory services are increasingly stretched in terms of resource, and HERs have to prioritise workloads while concentrating on core duties. As such, there is generally little or no spare capacity to engage with research projects without a clear public benefit (in some cases even if funding is made available). Levels of service are usually agreed locally and often subject to formal and/or legal agreement. Therefore, researchers are strongly advised to consult HERs as early as possible in the process of putting together project proposals.

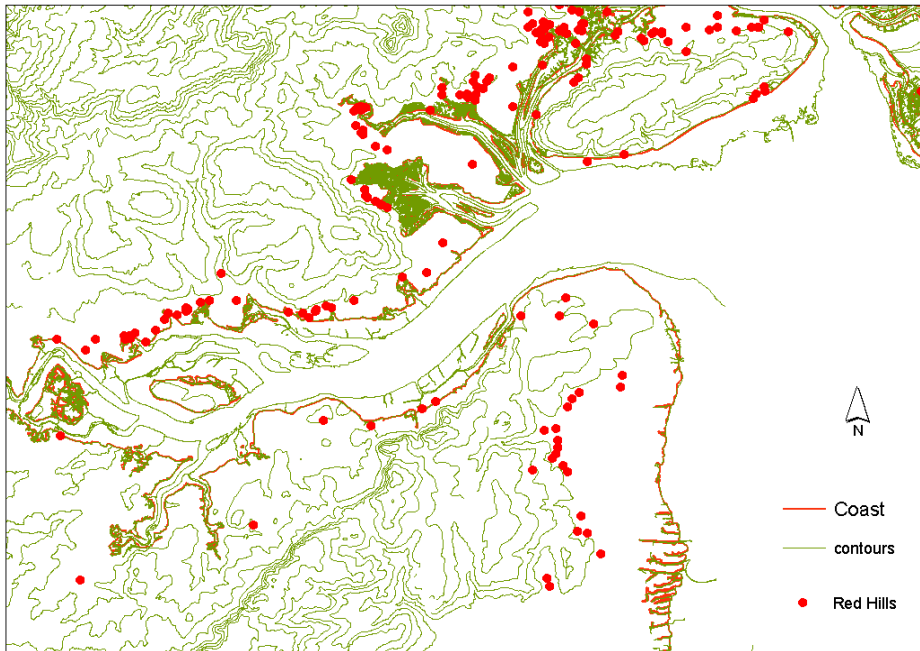


Figure 3, a plot of HER sites on GIS: the distribution of red hills (salt working sites) around the Blackwater Estuary from the Essex HER.

The content and coverage of HERs

Due to the factors outlined above, there is variability in the datasets HERs hold in terms of their sophistication, interpretation and presentation although currently almost all HERs hold data for monuments, archaeological events, stray finds and designated heritage assets. Most also have information on designated and undesignated historic buildings.

Almost three-quarters of HERs currently use ExeGesIS HBSMR, a specialist software and data management system which gives a degree of standardisation in terms of data structures and formats. However amongst the other 25% of HERs, a number of different bespoke systems are used. For projects that require data collation and processing on a national or regional scale, early discussions with ExeGesIS, (subsequent to contact with HER Officers) will therefore be helpful in flagging up any technical solutions for data extraction. For instance the English Landscape and Identities project (Oxford University) recently commissioned ExeGesIS to produce a query specifically for the purposes of their project to facilitate data extraction. Non-HBSMR users are represented by the Bespoke HER Users Group. If specific comparable datasets are crucial to the success of a research project, care should be taken to ensure at the outset that these can be provided. Due to the origins of their datasets some HERs will provide data with a clause regarding potential inaccuracies or the incomplete state of some records, and in some cases there will be data only available in hard copy.

Charging

HERs can charge for the provision of data that they have collated and developed and the parameters of HER charging policies are varied. Most charge by the hour and the rates are typically identified on HER websites or in promotional literature. **Most HERs do not currently charge for data provision to research projects, particularly those with clear public benefits, although this situation may well change in coming years due to factors such as funding cuts and changes in policy.** The length of time allowed and level of resources required to supply the data will also have a bearing on charging – short deadlines for large projects are more likely to incur a charge. The potential resources

required for HER data provision should therefore be identified by researchers as early as possible and where possible, built into funding proposals. It is also important to note that charging policies for HER data are often beyond the control of the HER Officer or service manager and cannot be waived for projects where prior advice was not sought.

Licensing

Most HERs will retain IPR and copyright over their data, but arrange for licensing for its use. Terms of licences may differ and will relate to the end product of a research project i.e. its publication and dissemination. Acknowledgement of the HER as a source will normally be required, and links the HER or service website if appropriate.

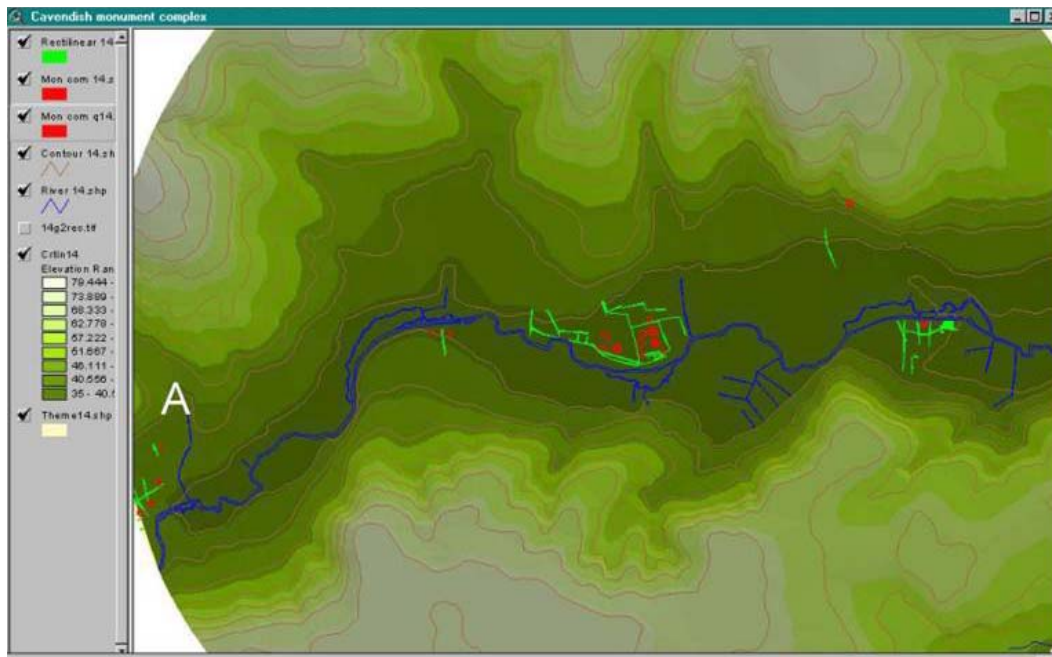


Figure 4, use of a Digital Terrain Model by Essex and Suffolk HERs: part of the Stour Valley with cropmarks

Heritage Gateway and other online data

The Heritage Gateway is an online portal that gives access to many local and national historic environment datasets, including approximately half of the HERs. It is managed by English Heritage, in partnership with the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO) and the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC). The Gateway acts as an extremely useful first port of call, particularly for smaller projects, and also as a central source for further information and contacts. It is constantly developing as a resource in terms of incorporating new functions (e.g. mapping) and additional sets of data, although the fields of HER data and detail available online will usually be more limited than those available direct via the HER officer. A number of HERs are also available online outside of the Heritage Gateway.

Maximising the research potential of HER data

In order to make the most effective use of HER data, early consultation with HER officers in locations where research is proposed is highly advisable.

In the case of larger research projects, consultation with ALGAO (usually through their Executive Committee) is also prudent. This will provide a broader (regional and national) overview of the contemporary situation within the HERs. ALGAO may also be able to

advise on general approaches to HER data as well as strategies for engaging with the HER community. Researchers planning substantial projects should consider building in costs for ALGAO support, advice and attendance at board or steering group meetings etc. However it should be noted that ALGAO has no authority to agree terms on behalf of HER officers, who will be bound by policies and procedures within their own organisations.

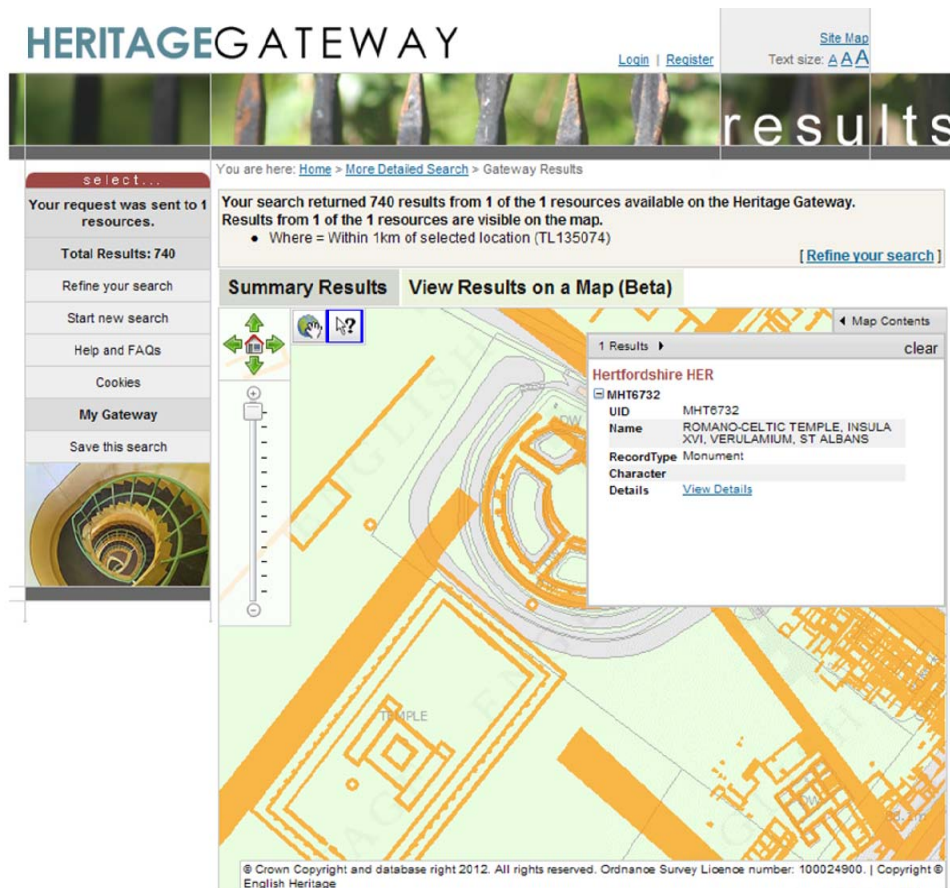


Figure 5, display of HER data on the Heritage Gateway website, Hertfordshire HER

HER requirements

In order to make decisions about what data can be provided and how, individual HER Officers will need as much detail as possible in advance about various aspects of the proposed project. This includes:

- The purpose and scope of the project
- The rationale behind it
- Funding sources
- Data requirements and what is needed from the relevant HERs
- Who is involved and the role the HER officer is expected to play (e.g. data provider, research partner etc.)
- Stages of work and overall timescales
- End product – will there be a publication or online resource; will it be updated in the future
- Potential benefits for HERs such as data cleaning, enhancement, and feedback (projects with clear benefits of this kind will usually be prioritised)
- Formats for feeding data and information back to the HERs at the end of the project

- Potential benefits for the broader public (e.g. public outreach initiatives)

Informing the Future of the Past (IFP)

IFP is an online manual or set of guidelines developed to assist those who manage and use Historic Environment records (HERs). As such, it is an invaluable tool to help researchers who may be new to working with HERs. It provides an introduction to the HERs and the services they provide, sets out agreed guidelines for working practices, supports delivery of training, information and advice and provides a guide to all aspects of HER management, working practices, standards, systems and services. It is available online and its new 'wiki' format is intended to aid the regular updating of the advice it contains.

Links

<http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/>

<http://www.algao.org.uk/>

<http://www.ifp-plus.info/>