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# Heritage Data Info Sheet



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## Historic Environment Records, A guide for Users

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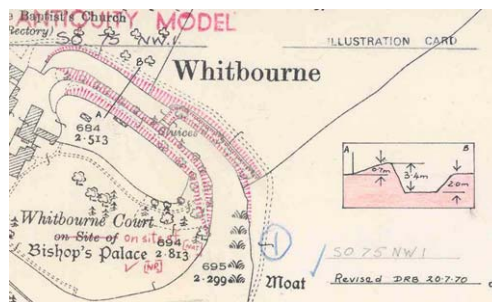
This information sheet is designed to assist anyone interested in finding out more about their local historic environment by explaining what resources exist in Historic Environment Records, how they can be accessed and what they can expect to find.

### What Are Historic Environment Records?

Historic Environment Records (HERs) are mainly local authority-based services used for planning, but they also operate a public information service and play a role in education. These records were previously known as Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs): the name has changed to reflect the wider scope of the data they now contain.

### Background

The first SMR was set up by Oxfordshire County Council in the mid 1960s, and coverage of England was completed with Kent in the 1980s. The data originated from the Ordnance Survey (OS) archaeological record of sites depicted on maps. This systematic field observation was then enhanced by local discoveries and documentary trawl of published information of all kinds, including academic reports, journals and statutory notifications such as scheduling and listing descriptions.



Initially SMRs were maintained using card indexes and annotated OS maps. The introduction of computerised databases and then Geographic Information Systems (GIS) has revolutionised the way these records have been stored and used. With the development of databases, standardisation became more important and this area was taken on by the former Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME, now part of English Heritage), which was given the lead role for these records in England. One of RCHME's first actions in this role was to sponsor the first review of these records, *An Assessment of English Sites and Monuments Records*, on behalf of the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO).

The emphasis on standardisation has resulted in the adoption of the *Monument Inventory Data Standard (MIDAS)*, shared reference data such as the *Thesaurus of Monument Types* and a manual of recording guidelines for HERs *Informing the Future of the Past*.

In the 1990s the network of SMRs was augmented by the creation of a network of Urban Archaeological Databases (UADs). These new records had a more specific remit and were designed to address identified weakness in SMRs for the major historic towns. Some of these were completely new databases held by city or district councils, others were enhancements of parts of existing SMRs.

The term Historic Environment Record (HER) first appears in English Heritage's report *Power of Place* and reflects the fact that these records are now wider in content than the more traditional concept of archaeology implied by "SMR". This term has since been used by the Government for its consultation on the future of HERs which included *Benchmarks for Good Practice*, a standard developed by EH and ALGAO, which sets out the basic level all HERs should attain and an advanced standard which they should aspire to. The profile of these records is now higher than ever before, their content is more wide-ranging and their user base wider.

## Who Uses HERs?

HERs are used internally by local authorities for conservation of the historic environment through including planning and development-control work. They are also consulted by developers in advance of development proposals. HERs have a role to play in education, being consulted by students at all levels from school children working on projects to post-graduate academic research. HERs operate public services for anyone interested in the archaeology, built heritage and history of an area.

## How do I contact an HER?

There are over 80 HERs in England. These are mainly county council based but include joint services (i.e. more than one authority together) district councils, unitary authorities, national parks and major land owners such as the National Trust. English Heritage maintains contact details for all English HERs on the Heritage Gateway website: [www.heritagegateway.org.uk](http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk)

## What services can I expect to find in an HER?

HERs provide a range of services to the public. These vary between HERs and include:

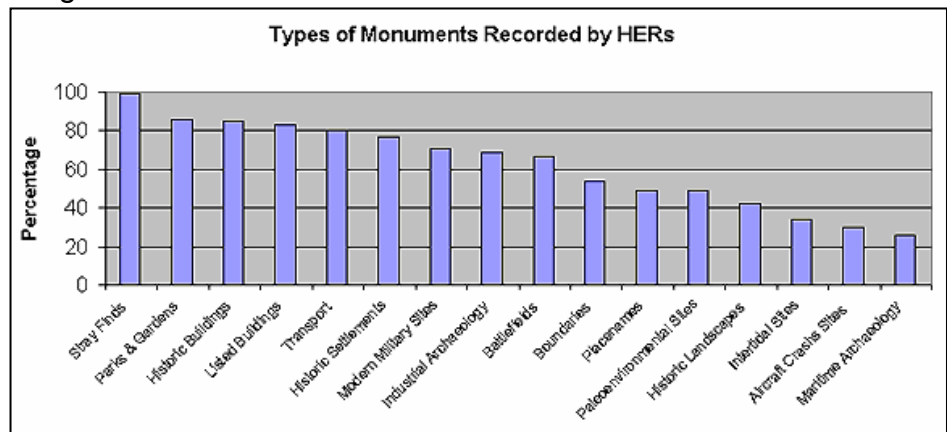
- Desk space and terminal (which may need to be booked in advance)
- Expert staff on hand to assist, advise and answer queries
- Remote access answering enquiries by post, phone, fax and email
- Websites with interpreted information and an online version of the HER database (only a handful offer this service at present but the number are growing).
- Outreach programmes with travelling displays, leaflets, books, newsletters and lectures



Most HERs do not charge members of the public for routine enquiries. They do, however tend to charge commercial users. Where such charges are made these are usually only for staff time, photocopies, printouts etc rather than the data itself. The role being played by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in supporting outreach programmes for HERs, including websites and online databases, can not be understated.

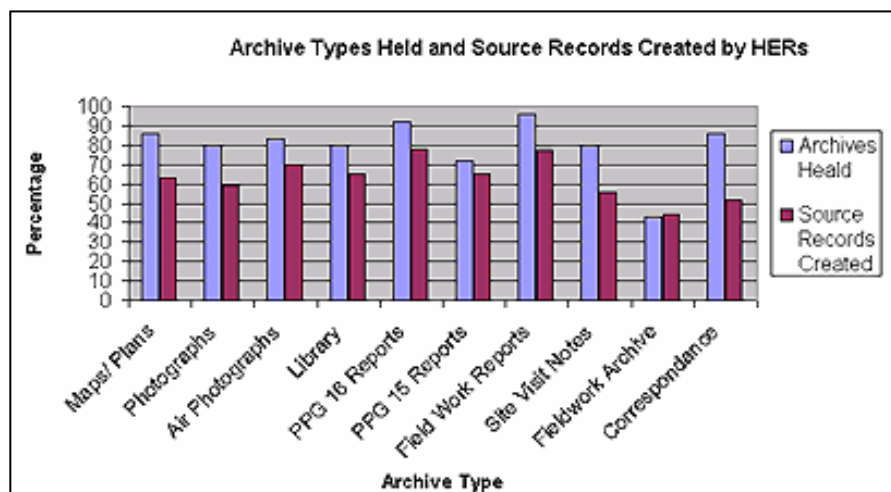
## What information can I expect to find in an HER?

Most HERs maintain three types of record: *monuments* (the heritage sites themselves e.g. barrows, castles etc), *events* (investigative fieldwork such as excavations or surveys) and *sources/archives* (where further information can be found e.g. books, maps, reports etc). These are then linked together to form the *monument/event/archive* model which is recommended by the manual *Informing the Future of the Past*. In 2002 English Heritage conducted a content and computing survey, which showed the diverse nature of sites being recorded and archive material available for consultation.



To accompany "Type of Monument" it is important to know at what age monuments are deemed worthy of inclusion in the HER. The survey showed that 74% of HERs had no cut off date and the largest grouping in the remainder recorded sites up until the end of the second World War.

As well as database records HERs have physical archives that can be consulted. The chart below shows the percentage of HERs that hold each type of archive and whether these have had source records created so that they can be searched for via a database and whether they will be linked to the monuments or fieldwork records to which they refer. PPG (Planning Policy Guidance) 16 and 15 from archaeological and building investigations respectively as a result of planning applications.



Virtually all HERs are computerised with the majority conforming to standards developed by EH and agreed with ALGEO. GIS is available in most HERs although some still use paper-based maps either annotated or using overlays in addition.

## How do HERs relate to the National Monuments Record?

The National Monuments Record (NMR) is the public archive of English Heritage and predates the network of HERs. It originated from the amalgamation of the National Archaeological Record (NAR) which started, like the HERs, with the OS archaeological record, and the National Buildings Record (NBR) which was a recording initiative in response to the historic buildings being lost during the Second World War. The NMR has developed separately to the HERs, focussing on its own recording, fieldwork, and archive collecting, the systematic trawl of publications, enhancement projects addressing identified areas of weakness and public access initiatives.



The NMR also supports the network of HERs by providing a range of services through the Heritage Information Partnerships team as well as developing the [Heritage Gateway](#) as an online resource.

## Further Information

### Publications

Baker, D, 1999, *An Assessment of English Sites and Monuments Records*  
EH & ALGEO, 2002, *Historic Environment Records, Benchmarks for Good Practice*  
Ferne, K. & Gilman, P. eds, 2000, *Informing the Future of the Past: Guidelines for SMRs*  
Fraser, D. & Newman, M., forthcoming, *The British Archaeological Database in Hunter & Ralston Archaeological Resource Management in the UK, an Introduction, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*  
Lee, E. ed, 1998, *MIDAS – A Manual and Data Standard for Monument Inventories*  
Newman, M, 2002, *SMR Content and Computing Survey 2002*

### Websites

[www.heritagegateway.org.uk](http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk) contact details for all English HERs and related information  
[www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk) further details on the work of English Heritage  
[www.algao.org.uk](http://www.algao.org.uk) the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers UK  
<http://ads.ahds.ac.uk> hosts online data for some HERs and details of other resources

## For any further details contact:

Heritage Data Management  
English Heritage  
National Monuments Record Centre  
Swindon, SN2 2GZ

Tel: 01793 414883  
Fax: 01793 414770  
Email: [hadminfo@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:hadminfo@english-heritage.org.uk)  
Website: [www.english-heritage.org.uk/heritagedata](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/heritagedata)