

Event Description Survey Results Report

Summary

There are currently no standards regarding how the free text summary of a HER event record should be compiled. The results of the survey showed that there is a wide variety in the information HERs seek to include in these summaries and what HERs feel should and shouldn't be included. Events appear to be summarised in an ad hoc manner with few HERs consistently always including or never including certain information.

The specifics of the information currently captured varied considerably. The survey showed few areas where HERs predominantly always or predominantly never include specific types of information in their descriptive summaries. Most HERs always include information about any features found during the excavation or if no features were found. Meanwhile most never include the range of dates between which the event took place. Otherwise HERs sometimes included most of the detailed information queried throughout the survey.

Overall most HERs responded that the minimum core information the summary should include: -

- Date
- Location
- Information about the trenches
- Information about features
- Information about finds
- If nothing is found at all

Purpose of the survey

The purpose of the survey was to ascertain whether HERs in the UK broadly record the same information in the summary field of event records. There are currently no standards for compiling this field that could be used for guidance. This information will enable a basic template of what an event record contains to be developed. This is needed for a project to develop a machine learning algorithm to automatically generate summaries for HER records from original reports. The project focuses solely on developing summaries for excavations undertaken as part of the planning process as opposed to any other archaeological interventions e.g. geophysical survey, desk-based assessment, watching briefs etc. Other archaeological interventions are likely to yield different results e.g. a desk-based assessment is unlikely to discuss there being no historic/archaeological features within the area of investigation.

Methodology

In March 2019 HERs in the UK were invited to complete a survey about event summaries created for event records. The survey was conducted via the HER Forum e-mail list as the majority of HERs in the UK are members of the list.

Responders were asked to answer the questions specifically for excavations undertaken as part of the planning process. The summary field in an event record is a free text description, usually derived from reports written by the organisation who undertook the excavation.

The survey asked whether HERs included information about the date of the excavation, organisation undertaking the work, location of the site, land use, geology, reasons for the excavation, trenches excavated and the results of the excavation. Respondents were then asked to consider the minimum core information to be included in the summary description.

Results

48 different HERs across the UK responded to the survey. Of these 85% were from HERs based in England. In addition to this 5 HERs from Scotland, 1 from Wales and 1 from Guernsey completed the survey.

All respondents include a descriptive summary in their event records and all gave permission for their responses to be included in a summary to HER Forum members. As a result, this report will be circulated to the HER Forum e-mail list with a covering e-mail.

Date Information

How information about the date of the excavation is currently recorded in the summary description varies considerably across HERs. Around two thirds of HERs include the year and the month at least some of the time if not always. Over half of HERs do not include the range of dates between which the excavation took place.

Detailed breakdown

The year in which the excavation took place

- Always – 29.2%
- Only if the information is available – 16.7%
- Sometimes – 25.0%
- Never – 29.2%

The month in which the excavation took place

- Always – 8.3%
- Only if the information is available – 33.3%
- Sometimes – 27.1%
- Never – 31.3%

The range of dates between which the excavation took place

- Always – 2.1%
- Only if the information is available – 22.9%
- Sometimes – 18.8%
- Never – 56.3%

Organisation Information

Three quarters of HERs include the name of the organisation who conducted the excavation at least some of the time in the event summary. Of those that do record it only 42% always record it.

Detailed breakdown

The organisation who undertook the excavation

- Always – 31.3%
- Only if the information is available – 10.4%
- Sometimes – 33.3%
- Never – 25%

Location Information

HERs are more likely to include a descriptive location of the site, i.e. land to the west of... , or the address of the site than a National Grid Reference (NGR) locating the site within the summary description. Two thirds of HERs never include a grid reference in their event summaries. Slightly more HERs will include a descriptive location of the site at least some of the time compared to the address. However, looking at the HERs who always include this information slightly more will always include the address rather than a descriptive location.

Detailed breakdown

The NGR (National Grid Reference) of where the excavation took place

- Always – 14.6%
- Only if the information is available – 2.1%
- Sometimes – 16.7%
- Never – 66.7%

The descriptive location of where the excavation took place

- Always – 20.8%
- Only if the information is available – 14.6%
- Sometimes – 41.7%
- Never – 22.9%

The address of where the excavation took place

- Always – 25%
- Only if the information is available – 6.3%
- Sometimes – 37.5%
- Never – 31.3%

Land use and Geology

Half of HERs never include the underlying geology in the summary of the event record. In fact, none of the respondents always include this information. Just over a third of HERs never include the current land use of the excavation site.

Detailed breakdown

The underlying geology of where the excavation took place

- Always – 0%
- Only if the information is available – 14.6%
- Sometimes – 35.4%
- Never – 50%

The current land use of where the excavation took place

- Always – 2.1%
- Only if the information is available – 8.3%
- Sometimes – 52.1%
- Never – 37.5%

Reasons for the excavation

Less than 10% of HERs never include the nature of the development being undertaken that has precipitated the excavation (e.g. new car park, housing estate etc). However less than 20% of HERs always include this information. There is a similar pattern for HERs including any archaeological reasons for the work taking place such as known archaeology in the area.

Fewer HERs always include whether any previous excavations have occurred on the site within the event summary but 25% never include it. More HERs always or sometimes include information about any other archaeological interventions undertaken as part of the same development. Less than 15% never include this information. The reasons for these results may be the fact that not all excavations occur in places where previous work has been undertaken or that form one of several interventions for the same development scheme.

Detailed breakdown

The nature of the development that has precipitated the excavation

- Always – 18.8%
- Only if the information is available – 27.1%
- Sometimes – 47.9%
- Never – 6.3%

Any archaeological reasons for why the excavation is being undertaken

- Always – 12.5%

- Only if the information is available – 20.8%
- Sometimes – 56.3%
- Never – 10.4%

Information on any previous excavations conducted on the same site

- Always – 10.4%
- Only if the information is available – 10.4%
- Sometimes – 54.2%
- Never – 25%

Information on any other archaeological interventions occurring on the same site

- Always – 10.4%
- Only if the information is available – 14.6%
- Sometimes – 60.4%
- Never – 14.6%

Trenches

A third of HERs always include the number of trenches excavated in the event record summary. In all around 90% of HERs always or sometimes include this information. In contrast less than 5% of HERs always include the dimensions of the trenches excavated and a third of HERs never include this information.

Detailed breakdown

The number of trenches excavated

- Always – 33.3%
- Only if the information is available – 27.1%
- Sometimes – 29.2%
- Never – 10.4%

The current land use of where the excavation took place

- Always – 4.2%
- Only if the information is available – 20.8%
- Sometimes – 39.6%
- Never – 35.4%

Results

Some of the clearest survey results came from this part of the survey. Nearly two thirds of HERs always include information about features found and over 80% will state if no

archaeological remains have been found. In contrast only around 20% of HERs will always include information about finds recovered during the excavation.

HERs were asked, if they included information about features what specific details would they include. For the HERs that responded to this the majority would record feature type and date (if known).

HERs who included information about finds tended to include details of the type of finds found, the period they were dated to and the quantity recovered. Several HERs explained they only included information about particularly significant finds. One HER only includes finds dated to the 19th and 20th century that would not warrant their own separate finds record linked to that event record.

Detailed breakdown

Any features found during the excavation

- Always – 62.5%
- Only if the information is available – 12.5%
- Sometimes – 18.8%
- Never – 6.3%

Where HERs record features, they comprise various details including (but not limited to):

- Quantity
- Type
- Specific location (i.e. which part of the site or which trench the feature was found in)
- Dimensions/size
- Alignment
- Degree of survival
- Potential
- Significance

Recording if no archaeological remains were found

- Always – 83.3%
- Only if the information is available – 6.3%
- Sometimes – 8.3%
- Never – 2.1%

Any finds discovered during the excavation

- Always – 20.8%
- Only if the information is available – 16.7%
- Sometimes – 50%
- Never – 12.5%

Where HERs record finds, they comprise various details including (but not limited to):

- Quantity
- Type
- Date/period
- Location (e.g. which trench they came from)
- Material
- Relationship to features found

Minimum Core Information

HERs were asked to consider the minimum core information that should be included in HER event summaries. Most HERs responded that the minimum core information the summary should include: -

- Date
- Location
- Information about the trenches
- Information about features
- Information about finds
- If nothing is found at all

Detailed breakdown

Date

- Always – 47.9%
- Optional – 31.3%
- Never – 20.8%

Organisation who undertook the work

- Always – 39.6%
- Optional – 39.6%
- Never – 20.8%

Location

- Always – 50%
- Optional – 39.6%
- Never – 10.4%

Underlying geology

- Always – 8.3%

- Optional – 52.1%
- Never – 39.6%

Land use

- Always – 4.2%
- Optional – 72.9%
- Never – 22.9%

Nature of the Development

- Always – 18.8%
- Optional – 72.9%
- Never – 8.3%

Previous archaeological finds in the area

- Always – 10.4%
- Optional – 68.8%
- Never – 20.8%

Information about trenches

- Always – 54.2%
- Optional – 37.5%
- Never – 8.3%

Information about features found

- Always – 70.8%
- Optional – 22.9%
- Never – 6.3%

Information about finds discovered

- Always – 50%
- Optional – 43.8%
- Never – 6.3%

If no archaeological features are found

- Always – 70.8%
- Optional – 22.9%
- Never – 6.3%

HER Software

Three quarters of HERs use HBSMR. The remainder predominantly use another set up whilst very few HERs use ARCHES or HEROS

Detailed breakdown

HER Database Software used

- ARCHES – 2.1%
- HBSMR – 75%
- HEROS – 4.2%
- Other– 16.7%

Additional information

HERs were asked to provide any additional information about their event record summaries not already covered by the survey. This included significance of the results, scientific dating, paleo-environmental analysis. However perhaps the most significant information shared at this point was that several of the HERs copy and paste the summaries provided by the organisation who undertook the work either in their report or the associated OASIS record. Whilst this relies heavily on report author to provide sufficient detail in their summary at least one HER reported that if the summary was severely lacking they would enhance it.

Conclusion

Not only does there appear to be a lack of consistency between HERs as to how they compile event record summaries, there seems to be a lack of consistency within individual HERs. For a number of questions the answer 'sometimes' garnered the largest number of responses. This means it is difficult to build a coherent template of what an HER event summary consists of. The lack consistency is further exacerbated by some HERs relying on the summaries provided by archaeological contractors.

One reason for the lack of consistency is that much of the information may be recorded in other fields or connected records. For example, features may be recorded as separate monument records that are linked to the event record. As a result, they do not need to be mentioned in the free text summary. Therefore, it may not be necessary to always include certain information if it is consistently recorded elsewhere.

Despite the difficulties it is clear that generally the summary description includes: -

- Date
- Location
- Information about the trenches
- Information about features
- Information about finds
- If nothing is found at all

Going forward it may be useful to consider building a minimum core template for event record summaries. By encouraging some consistency in recording and ensuring it contains a minimum amount of information it would enable greater use and understanding of these records.

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