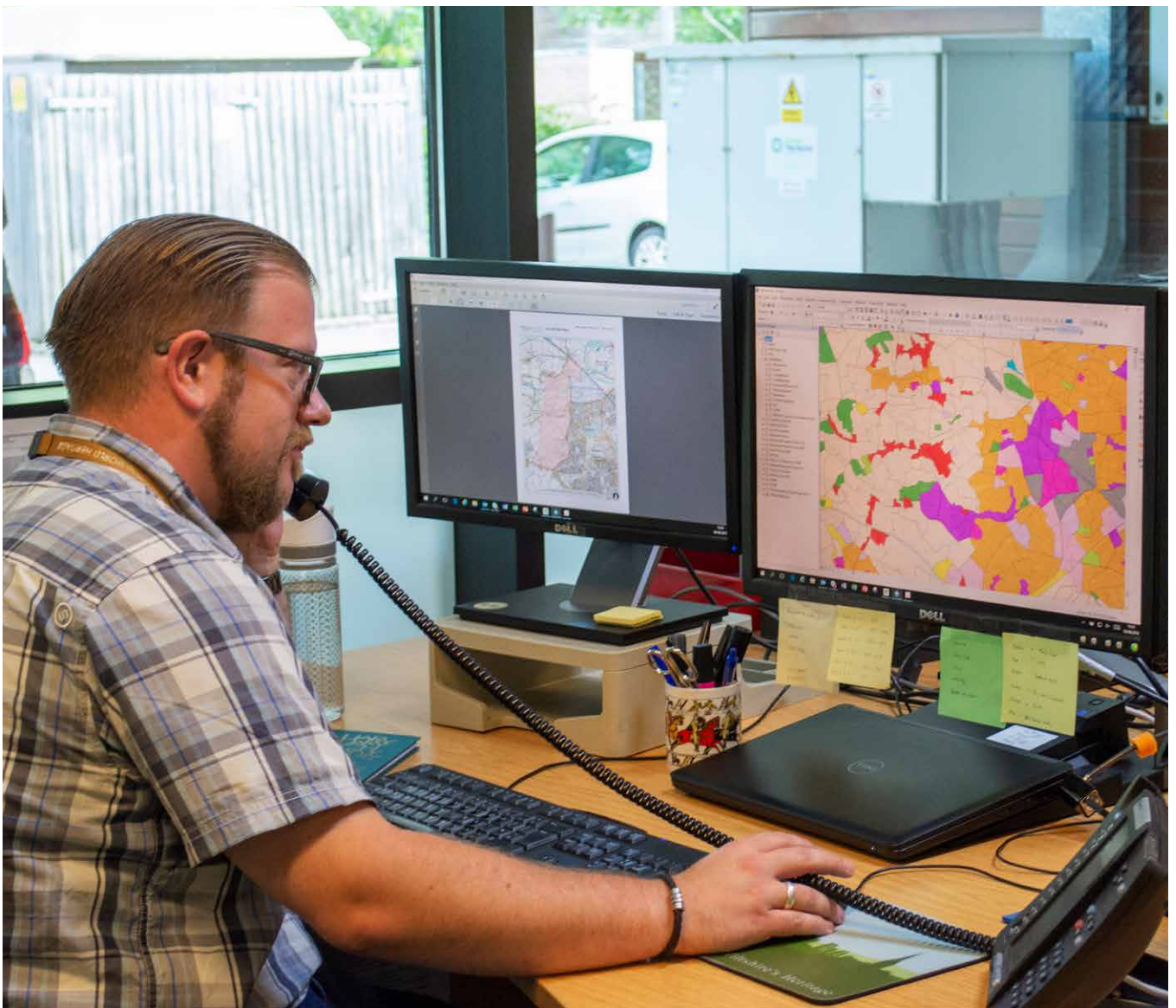# Historic England

A Guide to Historic Environment Records (HERs) in England

Summary

Historic Environment Records (HERs) provide detailed information about the historic environment of a given area. The historic environment records in England have been created as a result of decades of research and investigation. They are maintained and updated for public benefit and used in accordance with national and international standards.

This guidance sets out the specification for Historic Environment Records (HERs) and replaces the *Benchmarks for Good Practice* (ALGAO 2002). It defines the scope of the content and coverage of an HER, its temporal and geographical limits, and how the public can access records. It also includes information about service delivery, the requirements for staffing, and HER infrastructure. In short, it sets out how an HER host authority needs to ensure that the record is kept up-to-date with accurate information in order to meet the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), resulting in better support and an improved information base for the planning system.

The specification for HERs set out in this guidance forms the backbone to the HER Audit Programme managed by Historic England. The guidance supports HER host authorities in ensuring that they are managing their records in line with best practice and accepted standards, thereby raising quality and consistency across the network of English HERs. Participation in the HER Audit Programme helps each HER achieve this.

Whilst this guidance has been prepared specifically for bodies that host, manage, maintain and make accessible the HER, it will be of relevance to a range of other public, voluntary and private sector bodies, and individuals with an interest in the historic environment of England.

Contents

1 Introduction

Historic environment: all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time, including all surviving physical remains of past human activity, whether visible, buried or submerged, and landscaped and planted or managed flora.

Historic Environment Records (HERs) provide detailed information about the historic environment of a given area. The historic environment records in England have been created as a result of decades of research and investigation. They are maintained and updated for public benefit and used in accordance with national and international standards.

A list of Historic Environment Records in England can be found on the Heritage Gateway. The majority are hosted by public bodies, typically the local authority for the area.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) paragraph 187 states that local planning authorities should maintain or have access to a historic environment record. This should contain up-to-date evidence about the historic environment in their area and be used to:

a) assess the significance of heritage assets and the contribution they make to their environment; and

b) predict the likelihood that currently unidentified heritage assets, particularly sites of historic and archaeological interest, will be discovered in the future.

Consistency of data and standards across the network of English HERs is central to the delivery of the Heritage Information Access Strategy (HIAS). HIAS is a partnership programme led by Historic England on behalf of the sector, which aims to improve and simplify access to heritage data to support the planning process and for use by local communities. At the heart of the strategy is the role of local HERs as the first point of call and primary trusted source of information about the historic environment.

2 Historic Environment Records (HERs)

Effective protection and management of the historic environment relies on access to good quality, authoritative information: Historic Environment Records provide this information.

2.1 What is a Historic Environment Record?

An HER is an information service with systematically organised information about the historic environment in a given area and can be accessed by anyone. It is maintained and updated for public benefit. HERs contain and signpost information about historic landscapes, buildings, archaeological sites and finds. HERs also contain information from planning led research such as archaeological intervention reports or historic building records. HER content represents decades of collection and collation of information from a wide range of sources, including those from Ordnance Survey, Historic England, museums, archives and libraries. They are sources of information about their areas and the conservation management process.

An HER underpins the work of local authority historic environment services. They are generally hosted by single tier and county councils and by National Park Authorities. (Greater London HER is one exception in that it is managed by Historic England.) A list of Historic Environment Records in England can be found on the Heritage Gateway. Similar HERs exist in Scotland and in Wales.

An HER comprises a maintained digital database linked to a geographic information system (GIS) which is supported by associated reference material. Reference material may be digital or paper and include aerial photographs, copies of early maps, antiquarian reports, characterisation studies, unpublished 'grey' literature and a reference library of secondary sources.

An HER is a dynamic and constantly evolving resource which requires continuous maintenance and enhancement as new information about the historic environment comes to light. An HER requires appropriately qualified and dedicated staff for its upkeep and use by the public.

HERs have developed from Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs), information sources which were created in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the lack of archaeological information available to owners, developers and planners.

2.2 What is a Historic Environment Record used for?

HER services provide access to information about the historic environment of the particular area of England they cover to fulfil a wide variety of functions. These include:

- Advancing knowledge and understanding of the historic environment.

- Informing strategic policies and decision-making relating to local plans, neighbourhood plans and land management.

- Informing development management decisions and streamlining planning processes.

- Supporting heritage-led regeneration, environmental improvement and cultural tourism initiatives.

- Supporting the conservation, management, enhancement and protection of the historic environment.

- Informing countryside management such as forestry and agricultural land management.

- Contributing to research, education and social inclusion.

- Promoting public participation in the exploration, appreciation and enjoyment of local heritage.

Figure 1: Responding to HER enquiries. © Lauren Alice Golding

Figure 2: HER Officer consulting aerial photographs. © Lauren Alice Golding

2.3 How does a Historic Environment Record relate to other records?

In addition to HERs, there are other sources of information about the historic environment. At a national level Historic England is the primary source for records relating to designated historic assets of national importance including listed buildings, scheduled monuments, designated wrecks, registered battlefields and registered parks and gardens, as well as the National Marine Heritage dataset. Public access to mapped and description data for these designated historic assets is through the National Heritage List for England.

HERs signpost to other relevant data sources, whether this is local records held in archives or museums, or national records such as the Library of Unpublished Fieldwork Reports held by the Archaeology Data Service, or the Church Heritage Record.

3 Roles and responsibilities

3.1 Local Planning Authorities

Under the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), local planning authorities should maintain or have access to an HER. Furthermore, local planning authorities should have "up-to-date evidence about the historic environment in their area and use it to assess the significance of heritage assets and the contribution they make to their environment. They should also use it to predict the likelihood that currently unidentified heritage assets, particularly sites of historic and archaeological interest, will be discovered in the future.''

The NPPF explains the information a planning applicant should provide to allow a local authority to decide on a planning application. It states that "as a minimum the relevant Historic Environment Record should have been consulted".

The NPPF also covers the responsibility of the local planning authority to make historic environment data acquired as part of the planning process publicly accessible, noting "copies of evidence should be deposited within the relevant Historic Environment Record".

The planning practice guidance (PPG) on conserving and enhancing the historic environment notes that "historic environment records are publicly-accessible and dynamic sources of information about the local historic environment. They provide core information for plan-making and designation decisions (such as information about designated and non-designated heritage assets, and information that helps predict the likelihood of current unrecorded assets being discovered during development) and will also assist in informing planning decisions by providing appropriate information about the historic environment to communities, owners and developers as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework."

3.2   Historic England

Historic England monitors the standards of all HERs by coordinating and validating audits on a five-year cycle to review data quality and evidence compliance against national standards and indicators. Historic England also identifies the need for any enhancements. A summary of each audit is published on the Historic England website.

Historic England has a responsibility for setting standards in heritage data and collaborate with partners nationally and internationally to promote common standards, including specialist vocabularies.

Historic England are also responsible for the operational management of the Heritage Gateway in partnership with ALGAO and IHBC.

Historic England is responsible for working with partners to improve access to historic environment information through the Heritage Information Access Strategy.

3.3   Other organisations

Some other organisations also hold records of the historic environment. These are often tools created for management of the historic environment under their responsibility. Examples of these records are those held by the National Trust and the Church of England (The Church Heritage Record). These complement HERs but often contain more management-specific information.

Figure 3: Maersk House construction site. Braham Street, Whitechapel, London, 2015. © Historic England Archive

4 Content and coverage

4.1 Content

An HER contains, or provides links to, information on the following:

- Nationally and internationally designated heritage assets

- Locally designated heritage assets

- Undesignated heritage assets with archaeological interest (including assets that are known to have been demolished or destroyed or known only from antiquarian sources, and assets which do not meet the criteria for national or local designation)

- Other heritage assets with historic, architectural and artistic interest that are of local significance (including undesignated historic buildings, parks and gardens and historic places commemorating events and people)

- Archaeological objects and their findspots

- Investigations of the archaeological, architectural, historic or artistic interest of a place or landscape, including such things as desk-based assessments, field evaluations, excavation reports, archaeological watching briefs, environmental assessments, conservation management plans and assessments, reports on significance from Design and Access Statements, Historic Building Recording reports on buildings, conference notes and proceedings, etc

- Historic area assessments and characterisation studies such as Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC), historic farmstead characterisation, extensive urban surveys, urban archaeological databases, conservation area appraisals and management plans

- Output from relevant national and local research projects

- Scientific data relevant to the understanding of heritage assets such as borehole logs, absolute dating and palaeo-environmental data

4.2   Temporal limits

An HER includes significant data relating to all periods, from the earliest human activity to the present day. There are no temporal limits on the information recorded in an HER.

4.3   Geographic limits

The geographic limits are defined by the administrative boundaries (whether terrestrial, inter-tidal or marine) of the local authority or authorities that an HER covers.

4.4   Maintaining a dynamic Historic Environment Record

HERs require active management if they are to properly reflect the changing nature of the historic environment and our understanding of its significance. HERs must be kept up to date with accurate information, including:

- New discoveries and interpretations

- New and amended designations

- Latest research and publications

- Records and outcomes of new investigations

- Significant changes to historic assets already recorded

Such information will come from a variety of sources, ranging from developer-funded fieldwork and recording, systematic investigations undertaken as part of national surveys, university-led research, community projects and private research to chance finds by members of the public and unexpected discoveries by property owners, developers and land managers.

In particular, local planning authorities should ensure that information about heritage assets and the wider historic environment which is generated as part of the planning process is deposited into the appropriate HER.

4.5   Supporting reference collections

An HER makes accessible relevant collections of published and unpublished reference materials that supplement the information contained in its database. Supporting reference collections serve a valuable role to answer enquiries.

Figure 4: HER Officer using the reference collection. © Lauren Alice Golding

4.6 Deposit of primary archive material

HERs are not usually responsible for primary archaeological archive material or primary documentary material. Original archive material that is acquired by HERs (where the HER is not the appropriate receiving archive, where the data creator does not have responsibility for deposition and/or no enforcement options are available) should be deposited with an accredited archive. Digital primary archival material should be deposited with a Trusted Digital Repository.

5 Data standards and security

5.1 Compliance with UK national data standards

The information content of an HER must be compliant with current national data standards for historic environment information, as set out by the Forum on Information Standards in Heritage (FISH). As such, an HER will comprise a digital database recording monument, event and source records. This is linked to a geographic information system (GIS) for recording spatial data.

5.2 Data sharing

HERs are capable of providing, and of receiving and incorporating digital data in formats designed to assist the exchange of data between appropriate compatible information systems. The Heritage Information Access Strategy (HIAS) states that "Local Authority HERs should be the first point of call for and primary trusted source of investigative research data and knowledge", and data sharing is integral to HIAS. HERs follow the HIAS principles, as well as guidance for data sharing set out in Informing the Future of the Past.

5.3 Data backup and security

Local Authorities will ensure adequate data backup and security procedures as defined in Informing the Future of the Past are in place for HERs. Historic England will ensure a security copy of all such data exists.

In addition, HER host organisations also need to provide adequate support for IT hardware and software (including GIS), and training opportunities in these for staff.

Figure 5: Consulting the HER database and GIS. © Lauren Alice Golding

6 Public access and engagement

The information held in HERs will, with few exceptions, be publicly accessible and HERs are proactive in promoting access and allowing others to contribute to it.

Users of HERs typically include developers, planning/environmental consultants, statutory consultees, property owners, land managers, farmers, academic researchers, local societies, amateur historians/archaeologists, teachers, students and interested members of the public — as well as historic environment professionals working in the public, private and voluntary sectors. Consequently, both conventional and online content may require further interpretation, depending on the user.

Each user is likely to have specific needs that require different solutions and levels of support so the HER will provide a range of options for accessing information, including, for example, web based, electronic, telephone access, and where necessary, visitor access.

Figure 6: A member of the public using HER resources. © Lauren Alice Golding
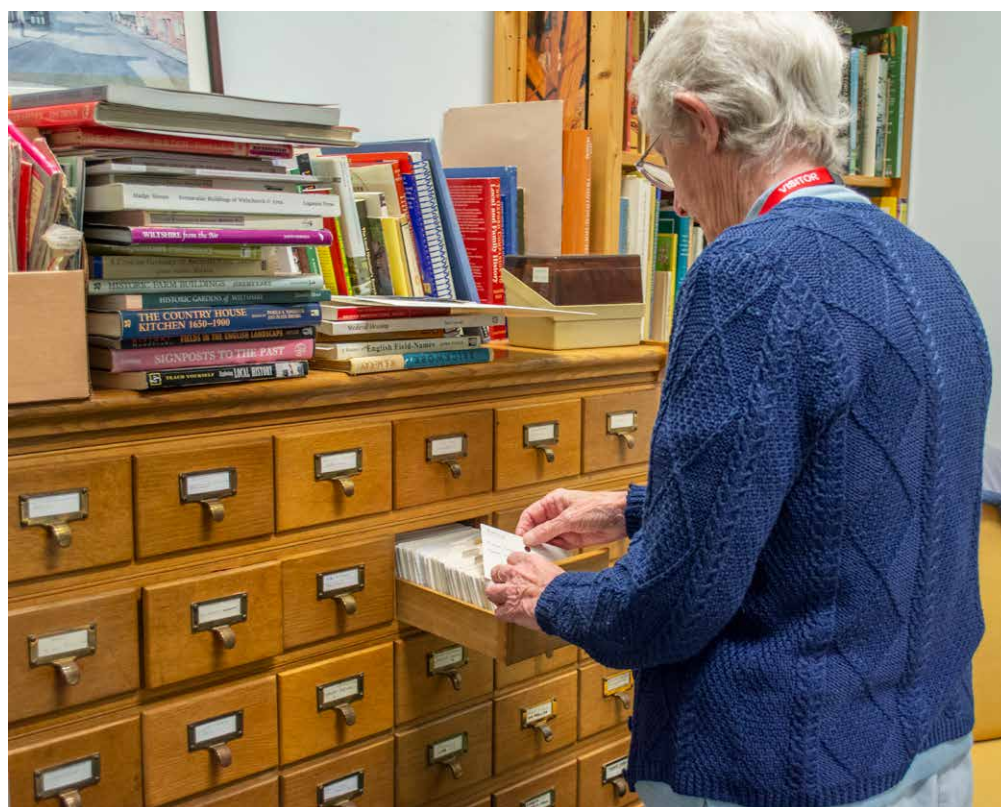
HER host authorities are expected to support and provide resources for HER staff to be capable of delivering an effective service to all users. HERs will be proactive in improving their service for users by collecting and acting upon feedback.

Local planning authorities will be proactive in promoting access to HERs. It is good practice to develop an outreach programme that advocates the HER and promotes its wider use. This is essential for:

■ Identifying and targeting new audiences for the HER

■ Retaining and encouraging existing HER users

■ Creating opportunities for the participation of local communities in the maintenance and enhancement of the HER

■ Developing joint outreach projects with other heritage and environmental agencies

Local planning authorities often signpost their HER services on their websites. Relevant online content will also be made accessible through the Heritage Gateway.

Service delivery

7.1 Local priorities and outcomes

In order to effectively manage their Historic Environment Record, host authorities will use the HER Outcomes Framework to ensure local priorities and stakeholder needs are met. An Outcomes Framework allows the HER to demonstrate what their work achieves and how they contribute to the wider corporate goals of their parent organisation.

7.2 National priorities and outcomes

In accordance with accepted best practice and national and international standards, HERs are expected to achieve national recognised Service Outcomes in the following key areas:

- Content and coverage

- Data standards and security

- Access and engagement

- Infrastructure (service delivery)

Achievement is measured against a series of Indicators and is assessed as part of the five-year HER Audit cycle.

7.3 Plans, policies and services

Relevant plans and policies for HERs are developed and regularly reviewed. In line with good business practice, these include: a forward plan; an information policy; recording guidelines, a disposals policy; an access and charging policy; an information services policy; a disaster plan; a succession plan and a statement of purpose.

HERs are expected to satisfy themselves that plans and policies relating to their record are compliant with relevant legislation.

7.4 Staff

HER service providers are expected to employ and support dedicated, appropriately qualified and competent curatorial staff to create their record and keep it up to date. The staff should also be able to communicate effectively with the diverse audiences that use it.

Staffing will include personnel with the qualifications and/or experience appropriate for compiling, curating, interpreting and mediating access to an extended range of historic environment information resources.

Maintaining the skills of HER staff is essential if they are to provide high-quality services. They will therefore have access to relevant continuing professional development (CPD) and training.

7.5 Infrastructure

Sufficient resources to enable effective daily operation will include (but not be limited to):

■ Licences and IT support for HER specific software that enable HER staff to maintain the HER, search the HER and provide HER data on request

■ Provision and maintenance of appropriate IT hardware to enable HER staff to maintain the HER, search the HER and provide HER data on request

■ Resource and support for public access to HER information, including enabling HER data to be provided online

■ Where HERs charge for services, adequate support for raising purchase orders and processing invoices will be provided

8 Further reading

- **Heritage Gateway** provides access to over 60 resources and enables cross searching of both national and local information relating to England's heritage, including the majority of HER datasets. A full list of **HER contact details** is also available

- **Heritage Information Access Strategy** (HIAS) is a partnership programme led by Historic England on behalf of the sector, which aims to improve and simplify access to heritage data to support the planning process and for use by local communities. At the heart of the strategy is the role of local HERs as the first point of call and primary trusted source of information about the historic environment

- **Informing the Future of Our Past** is a set of working guidelines for staff and others involved in managing, running, using or supporting an HER

- **MIDAS Heritage** – the UK Historic Environment Data Standard is a British cultural heritage standard for recording information on buildings, archaeological sites, shipwrecks, parks and gardens, battlefields, areas of interest and artefacts

9 Where to get advice

Historic England's Heritage Information Partnerships Team supports the development of HERs and offers advice and assistance to HERs and HER host authorities on managing their records in line with best practice and accepted standards. The team manages the HER Audit Programme and can be contacted with regard to all HER related matters.

The ALGAO-UK HER Committee informs, advises and acts for the ALGAO Executive Committee and membership of ALGAO UK on the development and maintenance of HERs, standards and the role of HERs in informing activities such as planning, land management, academic research and public outreach.

The Historic Environment Record Forum (HER Forum): promotes best practice among HERs and it open to anyone with an interest in HERs.

The Forum on Information Standards in Heritage (FISH) is a professional discussion forum for the further development of heritage data standards.

9.1 Contact Historic England

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10 Acknowledgements

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Images

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