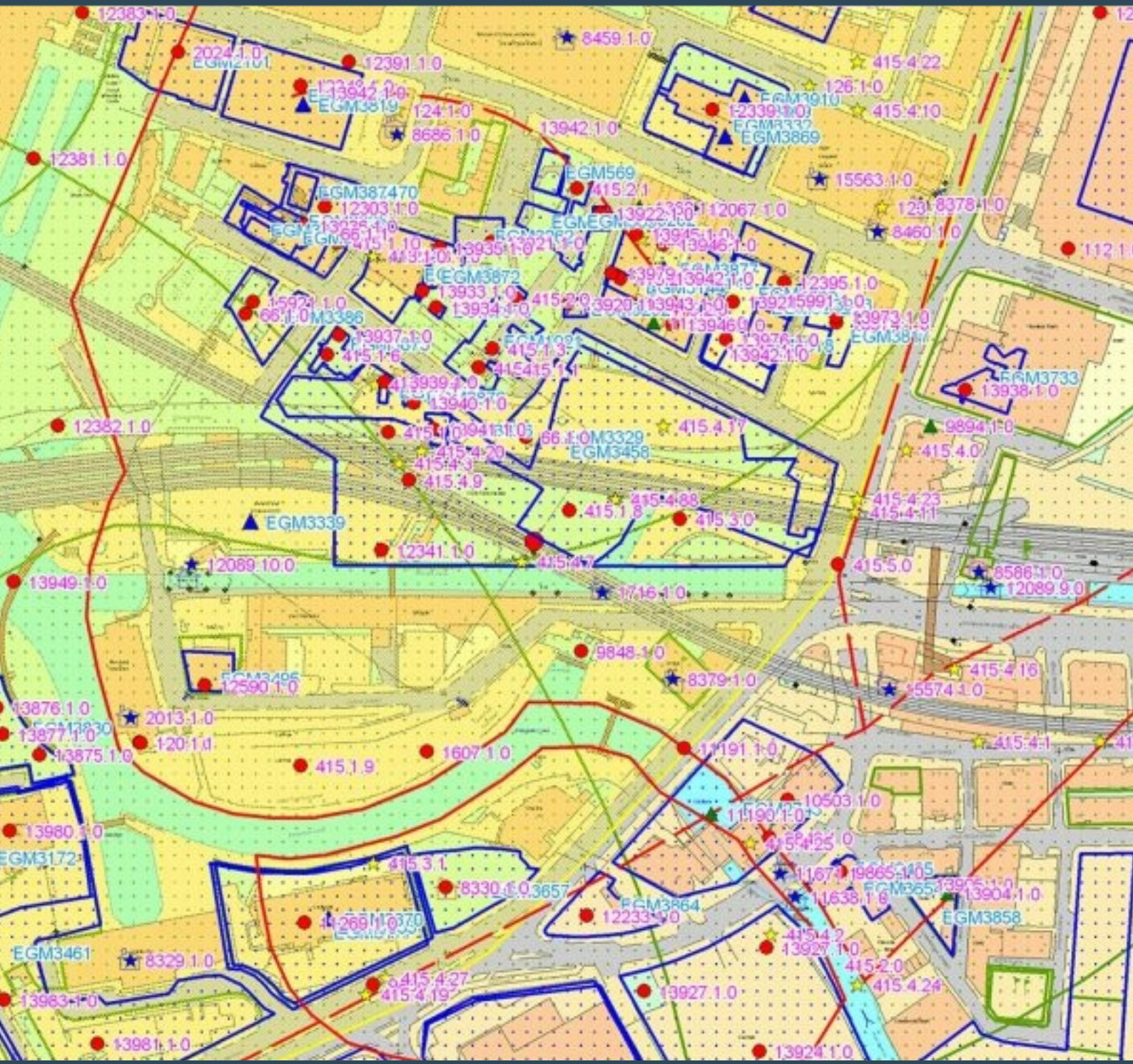
CIfA Information Management Group

Historic Environment Records: Signposts to the past



Ben Wallace, Warwickshire County Council, and
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Historic Environment Records: Signposts to the past

Ben Wallace, MCIfA (2500), Warwickshire County Council, and Keith Elliott, ACIfA (7428) Scottish Borders Council

Whilst most media coverage of archaeology concentrates upon fieldwork discoveries or post-excavation findings, behind the scenes, Historic Environment Records (HERs) are an established part of archaeological practice. We assume that those working professionally in their various roles within archaeology will have some familiarity with HERs, either through accessing or submitting data to them. However, now that HERs are on the cusp of being a statutory requirement for local authorities in England, we feel it is an opportune moment for a recap and to highlight some things readers may not know about them more generally too.

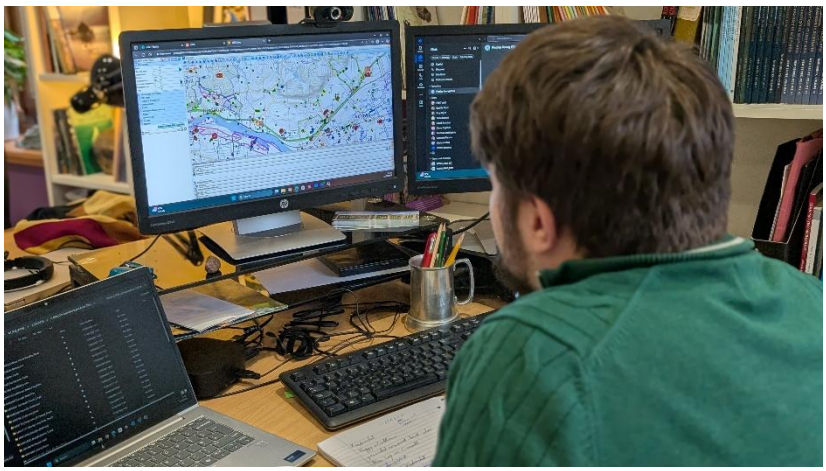
How are HERs organised across the UK?

HERs are found across the whole of the UK although they do vary somewhat between each nation and even on an individual basis. In Northern Ireland the HER is managed directly by the Northern Irish Government, more specifically the Historic Environment Division of the Department for Communities. In Wales they form a statutory duty of Welsh Ministers ensuring there is an HER covering each unitary local authority; this duty is discharged by the HER services of Heneb, the Trust for Welsh Archaeology. In Scotland the 18 individual HERs are hosted by local authorities and one heritage trust. In England there is even more variety, with 83 different HERs hosted by different levels of local authorities, national parks, heritage trusts and shared services. On top of this there are also HERs for Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man and the most recent addition to the HER family is the Marine HER Service for England, established by Historic England in 2024 as the primary source of information about the English marine historic environment.

Within each HER host organisation you will find a variety of staffing levels and locations within departments, with some in planning, place or environmental services, while others form part of museums and record offices.

What are Historic Environment Records?

Developing from Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs) over 50 years ago, HERs have become accessible, dynamic and evolving information services focused on recording the historic environment for defined geographical areas. Covering all periods from Palaeolithic through to modern, dealing with information about both designated and undesignated heritage assets, and more recently landscape-scale concepts such as historic characterisation, these records aim to be comprehensive.



Findlay Young, HER Officer, at work. Credit: Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust (PKHT).

Following the established archaeological practice of locating, recording and classifying the past, HERs contain thousands of known, recorded and mapped entries as core data. These are organised using a simple data model of three main types:

- **monuments** (these deal with finds, sites and landscapes)
- **events** (these detail investigations including dates, types and locations)
- **sources** (these include the published and unpublished sources which form the evidence for monuments, events and other HER records)

Specialised software is often used to record this data in complex databases with associated Geographical Information Systems (GIS).

Alongside the HERs' core digital database and GIS, they often hold a variety of physical and digital sources. These include archaeological reports, books, journals, maps, aerial photos, index cards, letters, slides, photographs and drawings. HERs also point to and can access numerous other sources of information for their work, including such resources as LiDAR, digital maps, other GIS datasets, websites and other online sources. Needless to say, with such a large remit and information base many HERs have backlogs of information to process to enhance their records.

Standards

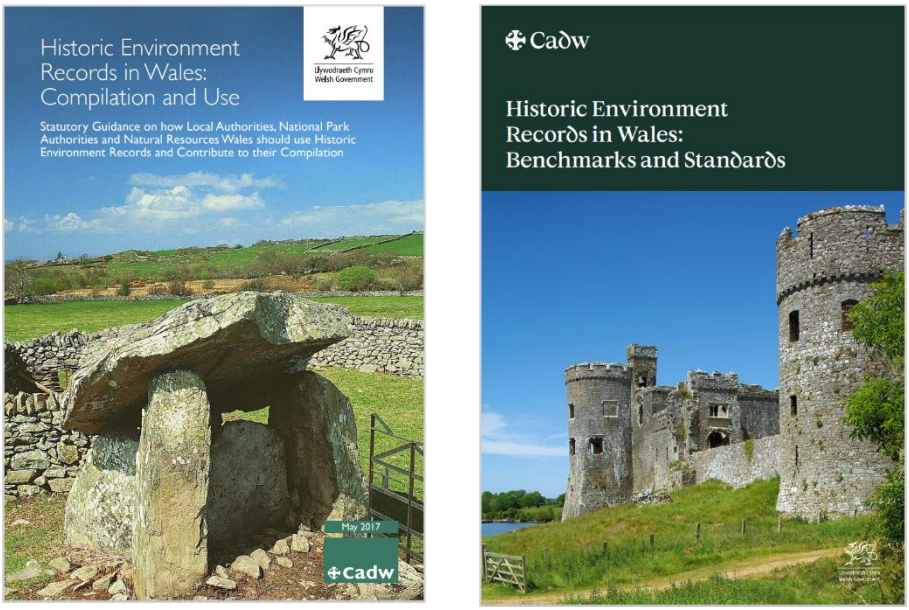
HERs are no stranger to documentation and forming standards. Key sets of data standards and thesauri have been established by the wider heritage community and become the bedrock for HER data recording. These include *MIDAS Heritage* and the *Monument Types* and *Objects* thesauri for definitions, as well as spatial data standards such as for Events in Scotland, amongst others. HERs also hold FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable) as a core part of their function.

A Guide to Historic Environment Records (HERs) in England. Credit: Historic England

Over the decades detailed guidance and manuals have been produced covering HERs across the UK. First, and in paper format, was *Informing the Future of the Past* (IFP and IFP2) which soon developed into a digital wiki version (IFP3) and more recently has been revamped as *The UK Historic Environment Records Manual*. Alongside this a formal *Guide to Historic Environment Records in England* has been published by Historic England in partnership with the ALGAO HER Committee, which has also been adapted and adopted in Scotland as ALGAO Scotland guidance. In Wales statutory guidance and standards and benchmarks have been published by Cadw.

Beyond this, Historic England have also developed, in conjunction with the HER community, a programme of HER Audits to help HERs assess themselves against these agreed standards and put together action plans to improve and develop in the future. The ALGAO Scotland adoption of *A Guide to Historic Environment Records (HERs) in Scotland* replaces previous benchmarks but similarly defines HERs for its work and its users.

Other recent developments in HER standards include the Heritage Information Access Simplified (HIAS) programme in England, which has led to developments in OASIS, Heritage Gateway and a National Security Copy protocol for HERs.



HER guidance documents in Wales: Credit: Cadw

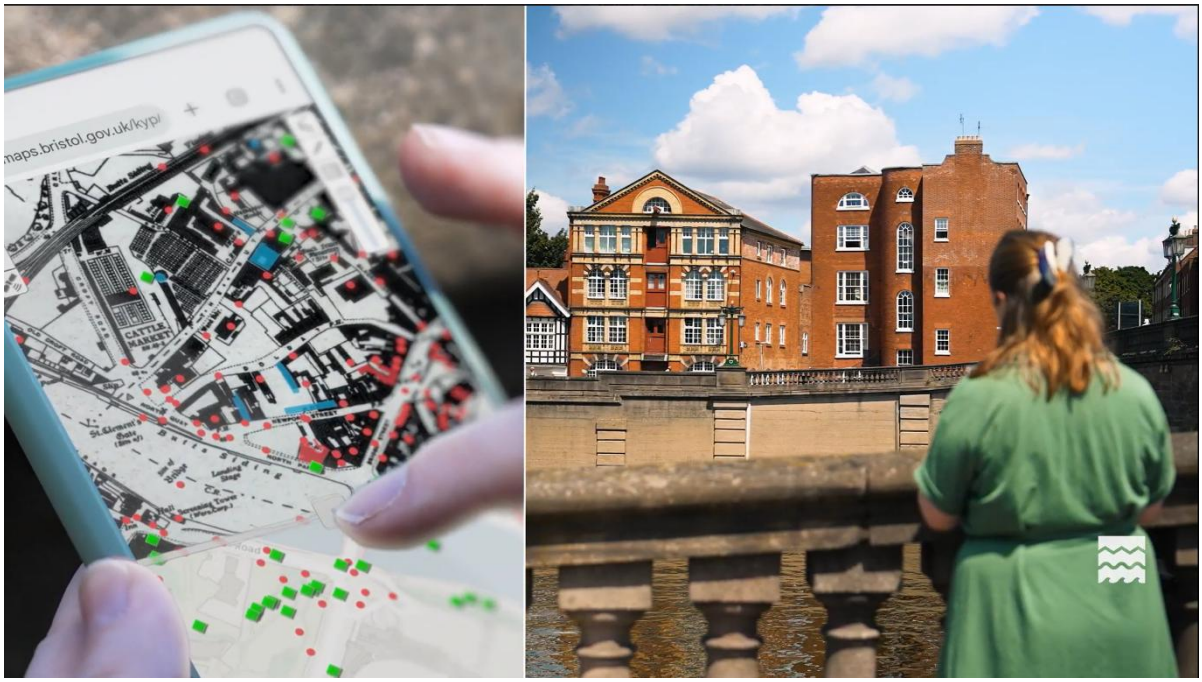
Function of HERs: uses and users

HERs are maintained and updated for public benefit and while they hold a variety of information about the past they have an equally varied user base. Often seen as the most critical role for HERs is that as an evidence base for planners, advisors, commercial archaeologists and many others to appropriately manage archaeology and the broader historic environment in the planning process – as defined in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for England. However, HERs have many other uses and users of their rich data and staffing expertise for both data provision and interpretation. For example, HERs are used to inform agri-environment schemes, woodland planting proposals, Environmental Impact Assessments and more recently habitat restoration and nature recovery schemes. HER data is used equally at a broad landscape and strategic level as well as locally to manage a single site or find.

HERs are used by students, researchers, schools, universities and many others in the academic world, often as part of macro-scale national projects and programmes (such as EngLaID). Enquiries for data can be area-based, thematic or temporally led, or even restricted to a specific monument or object type.

With many HERs hosted by local authorities, you will find they often have links to local communities, from local residents seeking information about the area where they live or work through to volunteers giving up their valuable time to help enhance the HER for their local area.

Some HERs take part in active community engagement through specific projects or programmes or with community groups such as local history or archaeology groups, or even by developing apps and websites for people to discover more about the past in their local area.



Accessing HERs on Tablets to support community engagement. Credit: Historic England

HER data is also often published online through such portals as the Heritage Gateway (for England), Archwilio (for Wales), PastMap (for Scotland) or the individual HERs' own websites.

Of course, HERs would be nothing without the supply of information to them. The rich variety of users often feed new data back to the HER, whether this is structured data and reporting resulting from commercial and planning-led archaeological investigations or an email with a photo of an object found whilst walking the dog. HERs welcome all information as long as it is within their area of geographic coverage and has a link to our human past in some way.

HER support networks and groups

With over 100 individual HERs across the UK and with a variety of models in place, it would be understandable to assume they form quite an unorganised rabble. Thankfully, several supporting groups have emerged over the last three–four decades that have helped build strong, active and, dare we say, organised and structured HER communities. The Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO) was one of those groups that took up the challenge of supporting HERs in 1990s and formed the HER Subject Committee, which since 2006 has been UK-wide. The HER Committee meets three times a year and has representation from all UK nations as well as relevant national groups, forums and other ALGAO committees including the Countryside Committee, Maritime Committee and both the England and UK Executive Committees.

In addition to the UK-wide HER Committee, each region in England forms its own HER Group. These meet regularly at a local level and membership includes all HERs in each region. They in turn ensure a 'Regional Rep' attends the HER Committee to maintain a link between the local and UK-wide groups. In Scotland the HER Forum (Scotland) fulfils a similar role, combining technical discussions with a national overview, as well as opportunities for training and updates regarding recent data projects and opportunities.

The HER community though is more than just those working within local authorities, and the HER

Forum emerged to provide further support and is a great example of partnership working between a national agency and the HER community. The HER Partnerships Team at Historic England facilitate a platform for discussion through an active JiscMail group where the 'Friday afternoon' questions and discussions have become infamous. The team at Historic England, together with a Chair from the HER community, also organise and host two meetings a year with a variety of presentations, discussion points and networking opportunities. Membership of the HER Forum is beyond those that manage and maintain HERs and includes a wide range of the broader sector, such as those from commercial, community and academic backgrounds as well as retired HER Officers (yes, it seems once an HER officer, always an HER officer!).

Beyond these larger groups, there are several specialist and technical groups who are essential to the development of HERs. The three main HER software providers (HBSMR, HEROS and Arches) have user groups or support networks to aid their technical development. There are also groups such as FISH (Forum on Information Standards in Heritage) and the OASIS Management Board, which, although their membership includes the wider heritage sector, are directly linked to HERs and their development.

Formal status

Since their formation there has been an ambition across the broad heritage sector to ensure HERs are on a firm footing regarding their official recognised status. Although this has been achieved somewhat in Northern Ireland and Wales, substantial work has taken place over the last 25 years regarding the other nations. Perseverance has been rewarded when in 2023 the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act put HERs in England on a statutory footing, making it the requirement of local authorities to manage and maintain them. Despite this substantive achievement, a detailed timetable and plan for implementation of this statutory duty is still forthcoming. Scotland recognises that under the INSPIRE Directive, HERs fulfil a duty of ensuring access to environmental information and whilst they also appear within the National Planning Framework 4, they are, however, the final nation left to achieve more formal statutory recognition.

The future?

HERs, their staff and supporters also look ahead to the future.

The ubiquity and size of digital data in all its forms, with the multiplicity of digital packages (often now more readily accessible and freely available) presents both opportunities and challenges for HERs. Artificial Intelligence recognition of sites, data trawling and natural language processing may provide ways to tackle HER backlogs but conversely create more data requiring some form of human validation too. Live feeds and new methods of data presentation and promotion are being actively investigated, whilst early packages and programmes are being replaced and renewed.

New data sources, such as for climate change and resilience, might well be interrogated all the more, with HER data providing new insights into the past, as well as prompts for the future. HER users and enquirers now have greater expectations – such as landscape-scale rewilding to greater object type indexing; public benefit and social value are required, going beyond a purely archaeological focus. Within a period of continued budgetary restraint, ensuring value for money remains a requirement for all HERs – both for users and host authorities. However, as HERs have shown, developing first from card indexes and paper records, indeed often being the first to adopt computerisation in their host organisations, they continue to grow, reflect and adapt.

Conclusion

HER staff have a wide knowledge of periods, places and fieldwork across their areas, applying specialist archaeological knowledge, technical expertise and experience for varied enquirers and varied enquiries. Whilst not all archaeologists might dig, we all delve into the past!

We trust this article has been of interest, both to those who are regular users of HERs and for those that are just discovering who we are. You will find the HER communities a very welcoming and friendly bunch, so please feel free to contact the authors directly with any questions or even better still, contact your local HER officer and discover where the signposts to the past for your interests may take you next!

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How are HERs organised across the UK?

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England: Heritage Gateway https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/chr/default.aspx

Scotland: HER Forum Scotland http://smrforum-scotland.org.uk/her-contacts/

Wales: Heneb: The Trust for Welsh Archaeology https://heneb.org.uk/historic-environment-records-her/

Northern Ireland: Historic Environment Record of Northern Ireland (HERoNI) https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/historic-environment-record-northern-ireland-heroni

Isle of Man: https://isleofmanher.im/

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A Guide to Historic Environment Records (HERs) in England https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/guide-to-historic-environment-records-england/heag266-guide-hers-england/ (and see main page https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/technical-advice/information-management/support-for-hers/)

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Function of HERs: uses and users

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Englaid: https://englaid.wordpress.com/

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Northern Ireland: Historic Environment Record of Northern Ireland (HERoNI) https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/historic-environment-record-northern-ireland-heroni

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Forum on Information Standards in Heritage (FISH) https://heritage-standards.org.uk/

HER Forum JiscMail https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=HERFORUM

HER Forum (Scotland) JiscMail https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=SMRFORUM-SCOTLAND

Information Management Group Special Interest Group (IMSIG) https://www.archaeologists.net/groups/information-management

Formal status

Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, part 12 S. 230 Historic Environment Records https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/55/section/230

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INSPIRE (Scotland) Regulations 2009 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2009/440/contents

Town and Country Planning (Amendment of National Planning Framework) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2024/365/contents/made

Contact details

UK: **A**ssociation of **L**ocal **G**overnment **A**rchaeological **O**fficers (ALGAO) UK HER Committee https://www.algao.org.uk/subject/her

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About the authors

Ben Wallace

Ben Wallace, MCIfA (2500), is Team Manager for Records in the Ecology, Historic Environment and Landscape team at Warwickshire County Council. He manages both the Warwickshire and Solihull Historic Environment Records as well as the Warwickshire Biological Records Centre. He is the current chair of the ALGAO HER Committee and was a founding committee member, and is a current ordinary member, of IMSIG. His career in archaeology has taken him from Cornwall, where he was born and brought up, through to graduating with both a degree and master's in Archaeology at Leicester University and to working on archaeological sites in France, Germany, Portugal and the United States, before finding his niche in the world of HERs in Warwickshire. He has been instrumental in lobbying for the provision of statutory HERs in England and continues to work towards supporting HERs across the UK.

Keith Elliott

Keith Elliott ACIfA (7428) FSA Scot is currently HER Forum (Scotland) Chair and Archaeology Officer at Scottish Borders Council. Prior to this he was Assistant Historic Environment Record (HER) Officer with the council, assisting the then Archaeology Officer in a Historic Environment Scotland and Scottish Forestry funded project to polygonise the Scottish Borders HER (which briefly featured in *The Archaeologist* number 100) from 2016 to 2020. Before this he worked in a number of HER roles across the country, largely to the north of Cyril Fox's Highland–Lowland division of Britain, in data entry and enquiries, making use of data already created and afresh in countryside stewardship and land management schemes, as well as supporting more specific development control and management colleagues, following other fieldwork and desk-based work. This included previous work with Ben Wallace at Warwickshire in a curatorial combination role. As the sole archaeologist within Scottish Borders Council, his remit has expanded across all curatorial roles for an area a quarter the size of Wales.