Historic Environment Record

Frequently Asked Questions

Historic Environment Record
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Version 3
06/2024

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What is the Historic Environment?
The Historic Environment is a term used to describe the significant physical traces of the human past in a variety of forms, such as artefacts, ecofacts, sites, monuments, buildings, landscapes etc. As such it is all encompassing of anything that physically existed, even if that feature is now destroyed or moved.

What is the Historic Environment Record (HER)?
The Historic Environment Record (HER) is a hard copy and digital system used to record all aspects of the Historic Environment, to facilitate its management and research.
So, the HER is a record of all the finds, sites, historic buildings etc for a given area. It is used to help protect the sites in an area, and also to help researchers find out more about them.
An HER also includes management information about its area. It records things such as legal designations (is a building Listed? Is an area a Scheduled Monument?).
It also records details of research into the past, including surveys and excavations of all forms.

What makes up the HER?
The HER is made up 2 main *types* of information, and two main *formats* of information.
The *types* of information the HER has are a *spatial* component and a *descriptive* component.
In the past the *spatial* component would have been hard copy maps, showing the location and extents of sites etc. Nowadays this spatial information uses digital maps to show the same information.
The *descriptive* component at first started as a card index to the paper maps, with additional details about the sites. This could include the date or period of a site (eg is it Roman? or Medieval? Etc), the type of site (is it a fort? Or a settlement? Etc), sources of information (eg what books or articles can you use to find out more?), and a textual summary of what the site is (ie a few paragraphs summarising what is known about the site). Again, nowadays most of this information is stored in a digital database.
The two main *formats* of information are the digital and hard copy parts of the system.
Much of the information has been digitised in one form or another and lives in the computer systems. However, the HER is really only a summary index of the information, so in most cases there is also a lot of information that hasn't been fully brought into the computer system, and which needs to be looked at to get the full detail of an area or site.
An example might be a book, which discusses a site in detail, but has only had certain key points entered into the digital summary, or a report where only the key findings are recorded, not every detail.
If these hard copy files aren't used, only a partial or distorted image of an area of period may be formed.

How can I access the HER?
You can ask for information remotely from the HER. This will only include the information that is available digitally and which we have permission to give out, as some of the information the HER has is covered by agreements, regulations or laws limiting our ability to distribute it. This digital information may be enough to answer your enquiry.
If you want to come in and look at the hard copy files, and all the digital files, this can be arranged by appointment. Visiting the HER is the only way you can be sure of accessing all the information available within it.
For some sources of information, though, such as books, it may be possible to access them from other places, such as your local library.
Access to some users may be charged – this only usually applies to commercial inquiries.
You can also view a selection from the HER through the Keys to the Past website.
More details on accessing information from the HER are available in the HER Access Policy, available on the HER web pages.

What is Keys to the Past?
Keys to the Past is a subset of the HER records which are available over the internet.
Keys to the Past is updated regularly, but does not include all records for various reasons.
As such, if you need the information to inform planning permission or to help manage a site in another way, you MUST consult the main HER.

What material is available within the HER?
The HER Reference Collections PDF gives some indication of the hard copy information that the HER holds. This is available on the HER Web page.

My search data contains duplicate records – is that right?
That depends.
It may be that what looks like a duplication is actually records from different modules of the HER (see below for an explanation of modules).
So, for a Listed Building, you may have a record for the Listing (from the Designation module) as well as the Historic aspects of the building (from the Heritage Feature module). If this is the case, then that is correct.
However, you may have two records from the same module that may in fact be the same site (eg two Listings or two Heritage Features). This may still be right, as they may refer to different aspects of a site.
If you are at all confused about possible duplications, please contact the HER directly, as we can hopefully check and explain what has happened.
If you think there is a wrongly duplicated record, do please let us know, as we would want to clean up our data.

How is the HER software structured?

The HER software is designed in line with national standards, mainly MIDAS Heritage.

This describes the types of things that should be recorded in the computer system, as well as what should be recorded about those things.

For example, it recommends that fieldwork should be recorded, and that information about fieldwork should include who did the work, where it was carried out, and when it was done, amongst other things.

At Durham County Council the following modules have been created and will have data which is sent out to inquirers.

Heritage Features – These records contain the details of the actual Historic Environment, the sites, buildings, monuments, finds etc that exist or existed in County Durham and Darlington.

Events – These records contain the details of investigations into the Historic Environment, and includes information on surveys of all kinds, site recording, excavations etc

Designations – This module is used to record Listed Buildings, Scheduled Monuments etc. It will usually be supplied to users split up by type ie one set of files for Listed Buildings, another for Scheduled monuments and so on

Sources – This records where the information in all the other modules came from, eg which books, articles or reports were used in compiling a record