

Historic Environment Records: A Brief Introduction



What is a Historic Environment Record?

A Historic Environment Record (HER), sometimes known as a Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), is a curated database of information relating to historic buildings, archaeological sites, archaeological finds and sites of historic value in a given area. This is the definitive record for a given area, often at county level. HERs are often maintained by a local council, joint service, or national body such as the National Trust. In Wales the role of a HER is covered by the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts.

HERs are a great source of information and often accessible to members of the public by appointment. This vital resource is often overlooked but can be a valuable primary source for any research project.

HER Officers strive to ensure their records are frequently updated to ensure the information they provide is accurate. However, given the large number of sites held in the HER some records, such as those relating to Second World War heritage assets, may not be updated as frequently.

HER/SMR data is often used to inform planning applications and development work to ensure significant archaeological sites, historic buildings and other important features are not damaged and, where possible, incorporated into new developments. HER data is also often used to inform the process of applying Listed/Scheduled status to significant monuments.

If a site isn't recorded on the HER/SMR it won't be included in any planning consultation if development is to take place. It is often too late to save a site or structure if development has already started, so please do contact your her/SMR at the first opportunity if you have any concerns.

There are several organisations across the UK responsible for processing applications to have a structure or site Listed/Scheduled. Applications to have a site or building Listed/Scheduled can often be submitted online. However, it is important to read and understand the required criteria to ensure an application is successful.

Further information about the Listing/Scheduling process can be found on [Historic England's website](#), [Historic Environment Scotland's website](#), the [CADW website for Wales](#), and the [Department for Communities website](#) for Northern Ireland.

HER/SMRs and their equivalents across the UK

Information regarding HER/SMRs and their equivalents across the UK can be found on the [Association of Local Government Archaeology Officers](#) (ALGAO) website and via the links presented below.

England

The records held in most HER/SMRs in England can be searched online through the [Heritage Gateway website](#).

Further information about HERs in England can be found on [Historic England's website](#).

The Historic England Archive (formerly the National Monument Record) can be searched via Heritage Gateway (see link above) and the [Historic England Archive website](#).

Scotland

Scotland has its own Historic Environment Records and Sites and Monuments records.

HER/SMR data for Scotland can be searched via the [Pastmap website](#)

Scotland's National Record of the Historic Environment record can be searched using the [Canmore website](#)

Wales

Four Welsh archaeological Trusts fulfil the role of the Historic Environment Records for Wales.

The records held by the Welsh Archaeological Trusts can be searched via the [Archwilio website](#)

The national record for Wales is curated by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) and can be searched online via the [Coflein website](#)

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's historic environment information is curated by the Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record (NISMR).

The NISMR's data can be searched via the [NISMR website](#).

Why is it important to record sites through the HER?

Direct contact with local Historic Environment Records is very important and is encouraged by the [UK Second World War Heritage group](#).

HERs often require up to date and accurate information regarding Second World War sites, especially regarding their current condition and threats to their long-term preservation.

Members of the public can help HERs to keep records up to date by submitting their information and observations. This up to date information can then be used to ensure surviving wartime heritage assets are adequately recorded and if possible preserved.

As information within HERs is used to inform planning decisions at a local level, stressing the significance of surviving sites/structures can ensure they are retained for the future. Also, buildings at risk can be highlighted and action may be taken before it's too late.

How do I contact a local HER?

Contact details for HER/SMRs across the UK can be found online. Please be aware that HER Officers are often very busy and if your request for information is urgent it may be best to contact your local HER by phone.

Contact details for HERs in England can be found on the [Heritage Gateway website contact page](#).

Contact details for Scotland's HER/SMRs can be found [HERE](#)

The relevant Welsh Archaeological Trust can be contacted via the [Arhwilio Website](#)

Contact details for the Northern Ireland SMR can be found on [NISMR website](#) by clicking on the 'Contact Us' link at the bottom of the page.

Some HERs also have their own dedicated websites featuring further information about the services they offer.

Most HERs can be contacted by email, phone or by post.

Submitting information to the HER

HER Officers will be able to advise you on the best way to record a site. However, there are a couple of things you can do to ensure your information can be easily incorporated into the record.

Our [Site Recording Form](#) can also be used to compile your data into an easy to use format.

Here are a couple of examples of useful information that is often required when submitting data to the HER/SMR-

Grid References

Having an accurate grid reference for your site will make it easier for the HER Officer to find your site on a map or Geographical Information System.

Online apps, such as [Grid Reference Finder](#), make gaining an accurate grid reference very simple. There are several free grid reference apps available for Android smart phones and tablets.

The industry standard is based on the British National Grid (BNG). A BNG reference consists of a two-letter prefix followed by a series of numbers e.g. TA 111 111. Easting and Northing can also be used to express a BNG reference. Easting and Northing are purely numerical, having converted the two-letter prefix to a numerical value, e.g 5111 4111.

Coordinates, such as those provided by Google Earth or Google Maps which are commonly used online, are not the industry standard and should be converted to either a BNG Reference or Easting/Northing to aid transition of data to the HER.

You can use handheld GPS devices or smartphone apps to gain a relatively accurate grid reference while on site. If possible, aim to provide a 10-figure grid reference for your site. This will be accurate to within 1 metre but will need to be checked for accuracy if using a handheld GPS device.

Directions

Simple directions are also useful when recording a site, especially if your site may be difficult to find on the ground. Directions don't have to be massively detailed, just as long as someone else can find your site using them.

Street names, local landmarks and prominent permanent features can be used.

HER/SMR number

A quick check of Heritage Gateway (for sites in England) should tell you whether your site is already recorded or not.

Quoting the HER numbers for known sites will make it easier for the HER officer to attach information to an existing record. Checking the information in known HER records is recommended. You may spot a piece of information that is no longer accurate, such as the condition of a structure.

Remember, providing new or up to date information about known sites is also very useful.

Site Description

Providing a simple description of the site is recommended. This can be a description of the site's type, or what you think it is, as well as some historical background about the feature.

Example-

Second World War pillbox located to the south of the Black Bull pub, High Street, Anywheretown (grid reference: ST 11111 11111). The pillbox is a hexagonal infantry pillbox with bullet proof walls (30cm thick), possibly a DFW3 Type 22.

Eye witness accounts claim the pillbox was constructed in June 1940 as part of the local Nodal Point defences of Anywheretown.

There is some possible wartime graffiti located on the left-hand side of the pillbox's South facing entrance. The graffiti reads 'Sgt. Smith 6th Batt. RE'.

This pillbox appears to have been sited to cover a roadblock located to the North on High Street. The roadblock is recorded as HER reference AHER:2100.

Pillbox visited on 1 January and 5 March 2018.

Once the site is recorded in the HER you can always provide more information at a later date.

Photographs

Photographs are a great way of showing a site's location, type and current condition.

If possible, change the file name to the name of your site if you are providing images for more than one site e.g. *Pillbox_Anywheretown_01.jpg*

This will show the HER Officer which photographs relate to which site.

A brief description of what the photographs show will also come in useful. If you have renamed your files you can create a basic photographic record.

Example-

Pillbox_Anywheretown_01.jpg- Location of Pillbox on High Street, Anywheretown. Image taken 01 January 2018

Pillbox_Anywheretown_02.jpg- Photograph of the South facing entrance of the pillbox. Image taken 01 January 2018

Pillbox_Anywheretown_03.jpg- Photograph showing wartime graffiti on the left hand side of the entrance. Image taken 05 March 2018

Dates

Aim to provide the dates of when your photographs or observations were taken. This makes it possible to see the condition of a site at a known date; which is always useful if the condition of the site changes later.

Dates are also required by HER Officers so they can create an event for the HER record.

Over to You

This information should help you to create simple records that you can submit to your local HER.

If you have any further questions please do post them to the [UK Second World War Heritage](#) Facebook group.

If you have any other recommendations for guides please let us know.