Historic Environment Record News

ENGLISH HERITAGE

NATIONAL MONUMENTS RECORD

Editor: Martin Newman **Issue I - January 2003**

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Welcome

Martin Newman, Editor

What's in a name? This first Issue of *Historic Environment Record News* replaces *SMR News* which has come to an end after 13 very successful issues which saw it grow from a few photocopied pages to a multi-colour web based publication. Now with the term Historic Environment Records becoming widely accepted and the results of the readership survey available it has been decided to re-launch with a new name, new look and hopefully from the next issue an ISSN number.

The Forum held a very constructive meeting in Edinburgh hosted by Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) before Christmas. Details of the presentations appear as articles in this issue.

The meeting also had a poster display from MAGIC- Multi Agency Geographic

information for the countryside and software demonstrations by exeGesiS SDM Ltd and Oxford Arch Digital.

At the Edinburgh meeting Emma Jones announced her decision to stand down and at time of going to press we are still looking for a volunteer to take over as chair. The Summer meeting will be in Manchester in July.

I hope you enjoy this first edition of Historic Environment Record News and you will wish to contribute to subsequent publications

Introducing Accessing Scotland's Past

Louise Turner and Rebecca Jones, RCAHMS

The 'Accessing Scotland's Past' (ASP) project began in June 2002, and is currently running as a 'proof of concept' for one year, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. ASP was established because of the need to provide a non-specialist audience with a more user-friendly version of the information held both at local and national level by Scottish Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs) and the National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS).

The need for such a project is illustrated by the NMRS database, which has evolved over the years, encompassing a variety of data from a number of sources. In order to aid retrieval of this computerised record, CANMORE (the Computer Application for National MOnument Record Enquiries) was developed in 1996, and launched on the Internet in 1998. This development has seen a major shift in the way that the NMRS is consulted: the number of personal enquiries to the Record has stabilized, whilst the number of remote enquiries through CANMORE and CANMAP (a GIS version of CANMORE launched in 2002) continues to grow exponentially (from around 30,000 in the first year to over 150,000 last year). For the specialist user, interpreting the data held in CANMORE becomes second nature, but for the non-specialist, it can be daunting, as each of the individual entries that make up the record must be sifted through and assessed in terms of relevance and reliability.

The Accessing Scotland's Past website

The aim of ASP is to provide an interface between the NMRS and the non-specialist user, and, consequently, ASP entries are written with the requirements of an entirely different audience in mind, one which encompasses local communities, lifelong learners, tourists and schoolchildren. It improves accessibility by summarising the information available and presenting it in the form of a short descriptive text, generally of 50 to 200 words in length.

The project is in the pilot stage, and at the moment work is being undertaken over a very limited area. Two target areas have been chosen that reflect the diversity of Scotland's built cultural heritage. The first of these is in the Cairngorms (Aberdeenshire and Moray), an area characterised archaeologically by a predominance of upstanding remains, in particular, depopulated settlements of post-medieval date. The second is in the Merse (Scottish Borders), where a number of fine upstanding remains still survive, but where a large number of cropmark sites have also been identified. Both areas also have a significant number of records of standing buildings, and it is expected that around a third of the captions created for ASP will be concerned with the architectural history of buildings. In both areas, the project is being carried out in partnership with the local authority archaeologists, who are enhancing the project by contributing their local knowledge and expertise, and assisting with outreach in their respective areas.

At the moment, the ASP data appears at the top of the RCAHMS' CANMORE screen, directly beneath the RCAHMS logo. It is complementary to, rather than a replacement of, the existing CANMORE data. In the longer term, ASP will be presented as a freestanding searchable database through which links can be made to relevant information held elsewhere, including local community, educational, biographical and historical websites, as well as CANMORE and SMRs. This will enable the user to enhance their knowledge, not just with

regards to the site itself, but also to wider aspects of the heritage in Scotland.
Information about ASP and some site descriptions are available on the web at www.accessingscotlandspast.org.uk. The ASP team welcomes feedback on the project. Please contact asp@rcahms.gov.uk.

RCAHMS

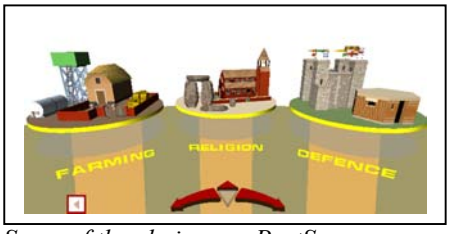
A User-friendly Future for Online Information?

Kieran Byrne and Mike Pringle, English Heritage

At English Heritage's National Monuments Record Centre in Swindon, work has been going on, for several years, looking at ways to improve access to our huge, complex databases, particularly for the public. One of the major problems that we have encountered has been that much of our, highly specialized, data simply does not work if we use commonly accepted web principles. For example, many web sites use the principle of providing lists of links for the user to select from. Selecting an item from such a list will invariably produce another, different, list and so on, until the user finally arrives at his/her desired destination. However, this principle relies on the user having an understanding of the data structure and/or terminology employed on the website and, given that our data structure and terms are really aimed at the highly specialized user, the more general user is consigned to a 'trial and error' approach, which can quickly erode user confidence.

Two projects, PastScape and an Illustrated Heritage Thesaurus (HITITE), are being developed using a 'reverse search' mechanism, in which the system elicits basic information from users, across a variety of distinct subsets of the overall data, in order to present results that accurately match the users' criteria. This approach, by keeping choices extremely high-level, and simple to understand, ensures a high degree of user-confidence in selection and also in the search results.

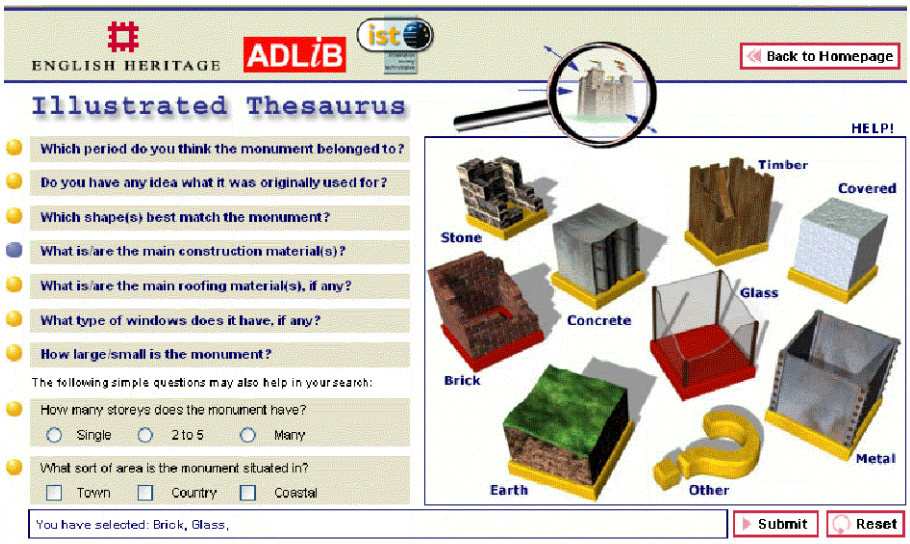
The PastScape system allows users to search the National Monuments Record database, AMIE, for information about England's monuments. Users are offered a simple Where, What, When choice, through a variety of simple interface techniques, and can quickly and easily access a range of pleasingly presented information. The system has been developed over several years and is now



Some of the choices on PastScape

at the final testing phase. A prototype has been made available for Histroic Environment Record News readers to view at www.pastcape.org

One thing that became increasingly apparent during the course of the PastScape project was that a search mechanism of this nature could potentially, be adapted to fit many



HITITE as it appears on the web

different subjects that would lend themselves to interrogation through visual search criteria. As a consequence, English Heritage is now pushing forward with plans to provide more information in this user-friendly format, including

HITITE, the Illustrated Heritage Thesaurus, has been developed in line with one of the main objectives of the Data Standards Team, part of the Data Services Unit (DSU) based at the National Monuments Record Centre: to facilitate the dissemination of information throughout the heritage sector, and make it easier to consult and exchange information. One method of achieving this is through the use of controlled vocabularies, terminologies and thesauri to standardize the information contained within certain elements of a data set. The development and promotion of data standards also serve a broader aim, and one which is shared by a large proportion of the heritage community: to make information accessible to the general public. However, there would appear to be a large, potential audience to whom the very terminology that enables data to be effectively retrieved and exchanged can pose something of a barrier to access.

HITITE is a resource developed by English Heritage in partnership with Adlib Information Systems Ltd. as a project within the framework of the European Commission's specific programme for research, technological development and demonstration on a user-friendly information society (1998-2002), (the IST Programme).

The aim of the project was to develop a working prototype of a web-based visual search mechanism that would, in addition to providing conventional word search facilities, enable users to explore thesaurus terminology (in this case the Thesaurus of Monument Types) through the visualization of a monument's characteristics. Bypassing the need for specialist knowledge of monuments and their associated terminology, the Heritage Illustrated Thesaurus prompts users to answer a short series of questions based upon their perception of a monument's form and function (e.g. shape, size, number of storeys, location etc.). A selection of images are then retrieved, each representing a thesaurus term appropriate to the search criteria used. By identifying an image that closely resembles the particular monument type they had in mind, the user can then use the correct term to search whatever databases or resources they may have at their disposal.

One of the many issues addressed by this approach is the socially exclusive nature of thesauri, which can be perceived as a specialist tool inaccessible to non-expert users. Through the use of clear, direct questions and pleasing, visual representations the search mechanism presents heritage terminology in an enjoyable, easy to use way.

Example of an image from HITITE

This was verified by the results of a programme of system testing. As HITITE was developed for the benefit of non-specialists of every age group, it followed that a testing strategy should be devised to gauge the reactions and opinions of as broad a cross-section of the public as possible. The project was able to demonstrate the prototype to a range of potential users, encompassing all ages and levels of expertise. Their reactions to the resource and its functionality were recorded and analysed and used to revise the specification of the prototype. These users were selected from the groups and individuals known to English Heritage through its various education-based initiatives, and its ongoing programme of promoting awareness of the historic environment.

The overwhelming approval and enthusiasm expressed by the system testing participants indicates the Heritage Illustrated Thesaurus, and PastScape, have the potential to find a large and varied audience within the heritage community and beyond, via the internet.

A prototype version of HITITE was presented alongside PastScape at the meeting in Edinburgh (see picture above). Together these systems could, in the very near future, be part of a completely interoperable, and public-friendly approach to presenting English Heritage's vast wealth of information on the web. Furthermore, there is evidence that acceptance of this novel approach is spreading across the wider Historic Environment Record Community and, no doubt, we shall see more and more, user-friendly, heritage information sites across the Internet.

If you would like to view the HITITE prototype for yourself you can find it at www.heritage-thesauri.org.uk

SMRs, Users and the Web

Kate Fernie, HEIRNET

Until a couple of years ago very few SMRs had websites. Of course there were some notable exceptions but on the whole, most SMR officers had limited access to the Internet and most local authorities had barely begun to develop their websites. How times have changed! The pace has been driven partly by the UK governments' agenda to make sure that all Government services should be available electronically by 2005 and partly by popular enthusiasm for using the Internet for shopping, games playing and a host of other activities. Today most organisations have some sort of website or are thinking about developing services on-line. In the course of developing the HEIRNET register, I have visited around 40 SMR websites across the UK. SMR websites differ considerably in terms of their size, content and style. Some comprise of a single page that provides potential visitors with useful information about how to contact the SMR officer, opening hours, facilities and so on. Other sites consist of a series of pages giving information about the archaeology of an area with a more detailed description of the SMR, its services and the development control process. The most developed of the SMR websites include on-line databases, images, maps, teaching materials, tours and virtual reality models. Those SMRs who have already benefited from funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund or the New Opportunities Fund have developed some impressive resources which are well worth looking at.

It is interesting to compare a series of websites that all serve a similar purpose. This can be a time-consuming exercise and to help SMRs to have a look at each others' sites, I have put together a rolling demonstration of SMR 'entry points'. This is available on the HEIRNET website at: www.britarch.ac.uk/HEIRNET/heirs.html. Why not have a look to see how other SMRs have designed and laid out their information resources.

As SMRs are investing time and energy in developing web-sites, it is worth spending time thinking about how people will find them. An SMR's URL (uniform resource locator) is its address on the Web. Although people can find a website by typing the URL into the navigation bar of their browser this is probably not the way that most will find an SMR's website. Most URLs are simply too hard for people to remember and are impossible to guess – unless of course

your organisation is a household name like the BBC. Some examples of SMR URLs include:
www.wosas.org.uk
www.hants.gov.uk/archaeology
http://unlockingessex.essexcc.gov.uk

www.warwickshire.gov.uk/Web/corporate/pages.nsf/Links/2DC41913EFBDA6C180256A290042E029

People are more likely to find an SMR's site by using search engines, online directories or by 'surfing' using the links from one website to another. The URL is fundamental to all of these mechanisms. For example, the Google search engine (www.google.co.uk) is probably everyone's favourite because it is easy to use and seems to return links to the most useful websites at the top of the list. Google does this by searching through its index of the Web, created by using robot software to trawl the Web to identify websites and then by ranking sites according to their popularity. For Google, the popularity of a website is based on the number of other websites which include links to it and how popular those sites are in turn.

Thus to get your website listed towards the top of the list of results produced by Google, you need other people to provide a link to it – by writing the URL for your site into the HTML of a page on their website. There are several organisations which provide this service for SMRs including the national heritage agencies, the Council for British Archaeology, the HEIRNET register and local authority information pages. It is worth noting that these are organisations that maintain websites which are highly ranked by Google – their sites are widely known, extensively linked to and their URL's have generally remained the same for a number of years.

One of the problems with URLs is that people keep changing them. Most people who use the Web will have experienced 'broken' links – links that look promising but which lead to a 404 error message stating that the page has not been found. Sometimes this is because an organisation has ceased to exist but often it happens because the website has been re-organised. The website might have been designed to reflect the internal structure of an organisation, which is later re-organised. Or the site might be re-designed to improve navigation or to accommodate new information. Or someone might give an updated version of a page a new name resulting in a changed URL.

Another problem is that many organisations use 'content management systems' to maintain their websites. These systems help with the process of updating the content of web-pages. But URLs are dynamically generated by the system, this can give rise to some very long URLs (see the Warwickshire example above) and can make URLs more vulnerable to change.

It is possible to have a permanent URL for a website, even if your site is part of a much larger site that is run by your parent organisation. After all, unlike a postal address your URL is controlled by the organisation that owns the domain name space within which it lies. For example, 'www.hants.gov.uk' is a domain name space and the web-master for Hampshire County Council manages all of the URLs that relate to pages within that site. URLs don't have to reflect the location of a file within a directory on a web-server, instead of this you can have a virtual URL which act as pointer to a file. For example, the URL 'www.hants.gov.uk/archaeology/' could be a virtual URL which points to a file that is actually located at 'www.hants.gov.uk/pages.nsf/Links/2DC41913EFBDA6C180256A290042E029'. All that this requires is for the web-master to manage a list of all permanent URLs which details the current location on the web-server. The benefits of having a short permanent URL are clear. Permanent URLs would make it easier for SMR managers to advertise their websites, much easier for organisations who provide links to SMR web-sites and would boost the site's ranking in search-engines. Permanent URLs would help users who have book-marked SMR web-sites and would also help them to find the sites using search engines, directories or when following links. Permanent URLs are well-worth arguing for!

If you need more information, read the World Wide Web consortium's hypertext style guide, 'Cool URL's don't change' which is online at www.w3.org/Provider/Style/URI.html.

State of the Historic Environment Report

Duncan McCallum, English Heritage

The publication of the first State of the Historic Environment Report (SHER) by English Heritage on behalf of the sector in November 2002 marked the first step in the creation of an annual national snapshot of the historic environment in England. It relied largely on research and information already gathered and painted a picture of variable detail and quality about the condition of the historic environment.

Work is now starting on the information gathering, analysis and dissemination needed for SHER 03. Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs)/Historic Environment Records (HERs) were covered in SHER 02 (paragraph 1.1.1 of the main report) but I am keen to look at ways in which information contained on SMRs can be used to plot change and how SMRs themselves can be measured. The development of a small number of indicators to cover the whole of the historic environment will take some time and will not be without controversy, but currently we have no fixed ideas about how we might best go about this exercise.

The SHER documents can be viewed at www.historicenvironment.org.uk. Paper copies of the main report, summary document and regional fact sheets can be ordered from English Heritage Customer Services on 0870 333 1181. The formal consultation period ends on 28 February, but I am keen to receive suggestions at any time on how change might be measured in this area.

OASIS: Dipping Our Toes In

Catherine Hardman, Archaeology Data Service

The OASIS project aims to provide access to the growing body of archaeological 'grey literature' and to make it available to researchers. OASIS is a collaborative venture between the Archaeology Data Service (ADS), English Heritage's National Monuments Record (EH-NMR), and the Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP).

The advent of PPG16 has led to an increase in the amount of archaeology being undertaken in England, conducted by consultants or contracting field units operating to requirements developed by local government archaeologists. It is usually a requirement that copies of the resultant reports are lodged with the local SMR/HER. Although theoretically available for public consultation these reports are rarely published.

The OASIS project was developed in response to the need to provide a single unified index to archaeological investigations, a means of accessing the associated 'grey literature', and an online method by which the index could be maintained. A major achievement of the project was to integrate the AIP records with the EH Excavation Index to provide a single concorded list. The concordance programme delivered a fully unified record for archaeological interventions in England for the period from 1700 to 2000.

OASIS also aims to use IT to ease the flow of information from those undertaking fieldwork to the wider archaeological community. The current situation involves a duplication of effort. OASIS aims to capture the data once, hold it in a database, and then to allow all those parties who have a legitimate interest in it to access it. An on-line web-based Data Submission Form has been created, which is being used to inform the relevant monument records of the completion of specific field or post-excavation tasks, such as the deposition of 'grey literature' reports or of archives. The report can be completed on-line to provide details of all aspects of the intervention required by the local planning authority.

Once the form has been completed to the satisfaction of the contractor it is then submitted to the database and automated email messages can be generated to alert the different stakeholders to the existence of a new record. SMRs will then participate in checking and enhancing the records on-line. Some may have a validation role in checking for the accuracy of the interpretation, or the correct use of terminology. For example, SMR officers may import an edited version into the county or regional record. The NMR will check for appropriate use of standardised terms and will import the data into the NMR Excavation Index. It is recognised that the diversity of local practices will mean that the information flow may vary according to region and the OASIS form and database holdings module have to be flexible enough to accommodate the various roles required by the different organisations involved. At six-monthly intervals a copy of all new validated Excavation Index records will be supplied to the ADS and made available on-line via ArchSearch.

The OASIS form on the web

In summary, the OASIS project has demonstrated how IT can be used to bridge the research gap and to provide archaeological scholars with up-to-date information about the latest archaeological results. The resulting index can provide on-line access to the increasing mountain of grey literature. Furthermore OASIS records provide pointers to all the elements of the archive. The digital record can act as the metaphorical glue which links together the physical archive, such as the boxes of finds, and the paper record, such as the site notebooks. By these means we can hope to improve the nature of archaeological research and the role of publication and archive in the twenty-first century.

Please visit the OASIS site at http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/project/oasis/ or search the English Heritage Excavation Index at

http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/search/keyRes.cfm.

MAGIC

Brian Hopper, English Heritage

What is *MAGIC*?

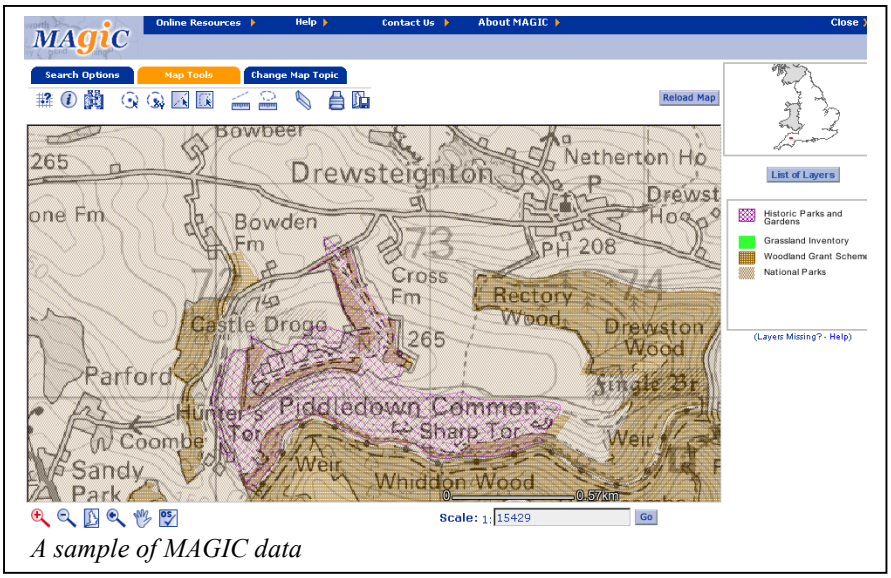
MAGIC stands for Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside. It is an internet based geographic Information System that is now freely available to the seven Central Government partner organisations and the public. It has been funded - in its development phase until April 2003 - by the Treasury's *Invest to Save Budget*. An initiative which provides funding for two or more public bodies to work together to improve existing or encourage new modes of service.

Who is involved?

The project is being led by DEFRA's Geographic Information Unit which is working with English nature, English Heritage, the Environment Agency, the Countryside Agency, the Forestry Commission and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Links are currently being pursued with other organisations - in the first instance as data providers and then as possible partners. For example the National Trust amongst others have recently supplied spatial data on their land holdings on a goodwill basis.

What information is held?
MAGIC holds rural and countryside information, including rural designation boundaries and information about rural land based schemes. The information is split into eight frameworks:

- Administrative Areas
- Classifications of Countryside
- Habitat Inventories
- Joint Character Areas
- Rural Designations (three frameworks including Statutory)
- Rural Land- based Schemes



A sample of MAGIC data

Each framework continues data of a broadly similar nature - for example boundaries includes Boundary Line data, Government Department Regions and NUTS boundaries. English Heritage has supplied data for the Rural Designations frameworks including spatial data on Scheduled Sites and Historic Battlefields and Protected Wreck sites. It is envisaged that this data will be of considerable use to HERs and was introduced at the Edinburgh Meeting with a poster display.

The Present
MAGIC was formally launched by the Minister of State for Rural Affairs Rt Hon Alun Michael MP in London on Thursday 25th July 2002. This was primarily aimed at the partners involved in the project and celebrated the bringing together of rural and countryside information in one place for the first time.

Since the launch MAGIC has won the AGI Central Government Award and the Information Management Award in the GIS category. At present feedback is being received on the application from users in the partner organisations but in addition comments are being gratefully received from those outside the project who are logging in to the site at www.magic.gov.uk

The future
The ISB project finishes in March 2003 but the partners clearly wish MAGIC to continue. DEFRA has a commitment to maintain and fund MAGIC in the future. However possible funding from partners and overall issues concerning resource and funding will require resolution.

Also the question of new partners and possible consideration given to inviting associate partners to participate - for example non-government organisations - is being addressed.

It is also planned to map the boundaries of Historic Environment Records onto MAGIC so users will know which HER to contact to get further detail of sites in the area.

View MAGIC at www.magic.gov.uk. Please complete the online questionnaire and give project your feedback this will assist in improving the service in the future.

Users and their Uses of HEIRs

Kate Fernie, HEIRNET

'Users and their Use of HEIRs' is a report by the Cultural Heritage Consortium, which was commissioned by HEIRNET to provide a review of existing research into the users of Historic Environment Information Resources.

In the last few years, many organisations have recognised the importance of finding more out about the users of public services and their needs when developing those services. This recognition has organisations to collect quantitative and qualitative data about users by asking visitors to complete registration forms or questionnaires or by collecting web-site access statistics, running on-line surveys or by documenting the results of focus group discussions.

As well as these surveys by individual organisations, there have been a number of important national initiatives (such as the MORI survey commissioned by English Heritage) which have explored the opinions of users and non-users of historic environment information services.

In 'Users and their Uses of HEIRs', the Cultural Heritage Consortium provides a review based on existing research which identifies common messages, key trends and issues that are of importance to HEIRs. Their report identifies examples of current good practices in the collection of user statistics and goes on to make recommendations for developing the sector's understanding of users, and non-users, in future.

This report is likely to be of interest to SMRs and HERs who are considering extending public access to their resources and preparing proposals for funding to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). 'Users and their Use of HEIRs' is available online at

www.britarch.ac.uk/HEIRNET/publications.html.

News in Brief

Publications

The Current State of Archaeology in the UK, the First Report of the All-Party Archaeology Group
www.sal.org.uk/appag/report/report.htm

State of the Historic Environment Report 2002 www.historicenvironment.org.uk.

SHER on the Web

Worcestershire Historic Environment Record Newsletter is online at www.worcestershire.gov.uk/home/cs-archeo-her

Users and their Use of HEIRs

www.britarch.ac.uk/HEIRNET/publications.html.

The revised draft of *Historic Environment Records: Benchmarks for Good Practice* is available at www.jiscmail.ac.uk/files/SMRFORUM/Benchmark1.1Nov_2002.doc

Copies of *Informing the Future of the Past: Guidelines for SMRs* are still available from EH. How to order together with details of all other EH publications can be found at www.english-heritage.org.uk.

ALGAO and EH have started work on a replacement for *Unlocking Britains Past*. This will take into account the changes in the HLF's application procedure and the experiences from bids submitted so far and the highly successful training seminars for SMRs/HERs which took

place during December in York and Swindon.

HLF Seminar in York

People

Bill Klemperer is the new Principal Historic Environment Officer at Staffordshire County Council. He has been succeeded at Stoke by David Barker.

Hanna Steyne has left the Greater London SMR to take up a post with Wessex Archaeology to work as a project supervisor with their maritime team.

Talya Bagwell has left the Canterbury Archaeological Trust to become the Archaeological Outreach Officer at Somerset County Council.

Lee White is the new Assistant Archaeology Officer at Durham County Council.

Nigel Pratt will be leaving Essex County Council on the 17th March to join Hampshire County Council to fill the post of Historic Data Manager. He will be continuing as the convenor of FISH until the 1st of May

Diary

6th February, Using SMRs Course, Oxford. This course may be run again in the future.

13th March and 1st May 2003
NMR Resources for Archaeological Desk Based Assessments course, NMRC, Swindon

8th - 12th April, CAA 03, Enter The Past conference Vienna

15th - 17th April, IFA Conference, Bangor. Including a session on the 16th on Planning Archaeology: Inferring Archaeological Potential in Theory and Practice.

20th – 21st May Taking Images Conference, Eltham Palace. Improving access for the visually impaired to museums, galleries and heritage sites, organised by English Heritage.

June, Historic Environment Records Forum Meeting, Manchester University. Details to follow.

May, HBSMR Users Group Meeting. Details to follow.

10th - 11th June, Government Computing Conference and Exhibition, Radically Improving Public Services. Business Design Centre, Islington, London.

17th June, Opening Doors: Web Portals for the Historic Environment. Conference organised by HEIRNET.

31st August - 3rd September Digital Resources for the Humanities Conference, University of Gloucestershire .

10th - 12th September mda Conference, Collections and Creativity, King Alfred's College, Winchester.

And Finally

Hopefully you have enjoyed this first issue of *Historic Environment Record News* and consider it a worthy replacement for *SMR News* and will want to contribute to further editions.

Historic Environment Record News is published twice yearly (January and July) by English Heritage. If you wish to contribute to future editions or to be added to the distribution list please contact the editor.
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