

Developing Historic Environment Records for the 21st Century

HER21 18 months on (October 2012)

6015 Heritage Asset Information Management in Kent, Kent County Council

Prior to the HER21 project the HER team had very little idea how Kent's Conservation Officers worked and what their concerns were and Conservation Officers likewise saw no real need for HER information. There was, in essence, the classic distinction between 'the archaeologists' and the 'buildings people'.

HER21 proved invaluable in that it allowed the HER team to work closely with Conservation Officers, understand their information needs and identify ways in which co-operation might prove beneficial. A series of protocols were developed to underpin this understanding.

Developing beyond this point has, however, proved problematical. Carrying out the project required a substantial commitment of resource and the ensuing backlog of work had to be dealt with before the protocols could be implemented. In the meantime the announcement that PPS5 was to be replaced by the NPPF imposed a further delay as it seemed unwise to initiate reforms to working practices in the face of such uncertainty. The continuing impact of the recession has further limited opportunities to progress.

Nevertheless, progress has been made. We have worked closely with Kent's Conservation Officers to improve the quality of the Designation information, and co-ordinate dissemination across the different stakeholders. We have more-or-less established a system whereby errors or omissions in Designated data are passed to the HER for reporting to English Heritage. This has involved a very large amount of work, led by the HER team and supported with an innovative volunteering programme. The benefits have been substantial although there is still work to be done, particularly on establishing consistent lines of communication with English Heritage.

We have also begun to use the protocols developed to help community heritage projects capture survey information for the HER. This year a project recording the 20th century military and civil defence sites in Swale will use forms and guidance developed based on the protocols. A winter Community Archaeology conference will also further promote their use by local groups and societies.

The main area where we would like to make greater progress, but have so far been unable to do so, concerns Heritage Statements. During the project itself we wanted to write guidance that could be used by all the planning authorities in Kent to help standardise approaches. In fact we found that the approaches of the different authorities was simply too varied for this to be workable. Some have essentially merged Heritage Statements with the Validation process making it a tick-box exercise whilst others try to make Heritage Statements a key part of the process. The main problem is that the decision as to which approach to take usually lies in

the hands of planning policy officers over whom Conservation Officers sometimes seem to have relatively little influence.

Our intention over the next year is to consolidate our partnership working with Conservation Officers, both using the HER21 protocols and by other means, and use the understanding we have reached to work to deliver more joined up and integrated services.