

Hybrids and heritage resources: rethinking the social foundation of historic environment records in England

Hybrids and
heritage
resources in
English HERs

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Abstract

Purpose – By reconsidering the concept of the historic environment, the aim of this study is to better understand how heritage is expressed by examining the networks within which the cultural performances of the historic environment take place. The goal is to move beyond a purely material expression and seek the expansion of the cultural dimension of the historic environment.

Design/methodology/approach – Conceptually, the historic environment is considered a valuable resource for heritage expression and exploration. The databases and records that house historic environment data are venerated and frequented entities for archeologists, but arguably less so for non-specialist users. In inventorying the historic environment, databases fulfill a major role in the planning process and asset management that is often considered to be more than just perfunctory. This paper approaches historic environment records (HERs) from an actor network perspective, particularizing the social foundation and relationships within the networks governing the historic environment and the environment's associated records.

Findings – The paper concludes that the performance of HERs from an actor-network perspective is a hegemonic process that is biased toward the supply and input to and from professional users. Furthermore, the paper provides a schematic for how many of the flaws in heritage transmission have come about.

Originality/value – The relevance here is largely belied by the fact that HERs as both public digital resources and as heritage networks were awaiting to be addressed in depth from a theoretical point of view.

Keywords Historic environment, Actor-network theory, Heritage stewardship, Digitality, Placemaking

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Under current guidelines and policies, governed by inventories and databases, the concept of the historic environment has enabled the landscape to be viewed as a historic artefact in its own right. In England, these operations are conducted by historic environment records (HERs). Although there exist similar datasets that could be categorized as HERs, not least through Cadw (Wales) and Historic Environment Scotland, few international analogs specifically adhere to the terminology “historic environment.” There are a multitude of datasets that have similar expression, via spatial data and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software linked to database contents, but the majority focus on the expression of archeological data, rather than the historic environment as a holistic concept. Therefore, the focus of this paper explicitly refers to English practice as a consequence of conceptual breadth and as a case study for guiding future service improvements.

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For integrity, HERs function within a wider network of protective and preventative measures in terms of land usage. Listing, scheduling, registers and local heritage designations are just some of the apparatuses of policy that inform and draw upon the historic environment and its records. In the main, it is to translate the physical historic environment into a framework where it can be collected and packaged for defining the physical traces of the past and inventorying it as either an asset to be protected or as a record for perpetuity. The founding philosophy was the creation of a descriptive record as point of departure for the qualitative evaluations that draw other types of information and contexts into play.

Timothy Darvill (2009) relates the historic environment to “All the physical evidence for past human activity, and its associations, that people can see, feel, find, and understand in the present world.” Furthermore, in terms of heritage, a later clause in his definition highlights the explicit government usage of the term historic environment in *preference* to the term heritage. However, if heritage is a set of current attitudes and values “formed as a result of the relationships between people and other human and non-human actors,” relating to “objects, places and practices” (Harrison, 2013b, p. 14), the two terminologies are not clearly interchangeable synonyms.

If the historic environment was a purely material consideration, then this would be unproblematic. In terms of realizing a historic environment, the material aspect is only one portion of the concept. As a concept, the historic environment should encapsulate more than both the cultural landscape and landscape archeology. Given the propensity for the diffuse and the poorly defined bounding of landscapes, both physically and culturally (Denham, 2017, p. 464), a historic environment is representative of both the physical and cultural, denoting the conceptual space in which heritage exists and is performed – apropos of *both* the fidelity to the material remnants of the past and the abstract and intangible aspects of spatially defined heritage.

When considering HERs as heritage resources, it must be highlighted that their primary remit is part of a preservation paradigm in archeology (Holtorf, 2014). The societal desire to retain traces of its existence for posterity is well meaning, but in order to avoid a “shift from stewardship to self-gratification” (Lowenthal, 2006, p. 21) more could be done in terms of contemporary enrichment. While the land use planning system’s priority is which bits of the past to keep, record or preserve, public facing improvements could further the connection made between the past and the lived present. The material presence of the past is only one part of the picture, and as Holtorf argues, “the story heritage can tell us is not damaged or diminished but actually enriched when something is added, modified, or taken away” (Holtorf, 2014).

The goal of this paper is then primarily to visualize the networks and agency within the mechanisms employed in socializing HERs, assessing how heritage is determined and valorized through inventories as primary points of access to heritage.

2. Stewardship and authorized heritage discourse

The establishment of protection for monuments throughout the 19th and 20th centuries distinguished policy and practice from antiquarianism (Morel, 2019, p. 2). Through this recognition, the mechanisms that characterize the contemporary stewardship of the historic environment arose. Principally, local authorities, and previously heritage boards, created attribute-based criteria and agendas as to what is recorded, favoring archaeological data. While this added rigor and consistency, it also established the specialist’s role interpreting what does or does not belong in the inventory, risking the omission of local knowledge and cultural association with the site or monument (McKeague *et al.*, 2017).

Superficially, this recollects Laurajane Smith’s authorized heritage discourse (AHD) (2006, p. 29), lending primacy to “aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that current generations ‘must’ care for, protect and revere.” Whilst it has been

long acknowledged that “historic environment,” “cultural resource” and “heritage” are rather general terminologies (Baker, 1977, p. 1), archeological assets and markers of land uses ought to be automatically considered as heritage requires a critical approach. Stewardship of data is an necessary aspect of decision-making processes but ought to also be discussed in terms of responsibility and equity (Wright and Richards, 2018, pp. 560-561), especially if heritage making is to be considered more than simply consequential.

Early assessment of survey programs and systems of recording (Baker, 1977, pp. 1-3) highlighted the potential for broad and inclusive uses of the historic environment, through perception, utilization and transmission of heritage. The positive efforts of historic environment stewardship have somewhat offset the accusatory gaze of AHD (Newman, 2009), having utilized digital dissemination, online interaction and aggregation. Through digital media, the reflexivity and openness of the inventorying process counter the notion that archeology is fundamentally a part of AHD. Furthermore, HERs operate within a system of checks and balances, constrained by the public sector, as a means of negotiating public interest in land use development, which is indeed indicative of democratic principles.

Historic England’s *Conservation Principles* (Drury and McPherson, 2008, pp. 35–40) outlines that democratic principles are inclusive of the fabric and evolution of the place, who values the place and why, alongside the related heritage value of the spatial fabric and associated objects and collections and their relative contexts. While it is not necessarily more meritorious to focus on the public facing aspects of the inventory process, it is upheld that these systems are maintained in the public interest. Thus, the *Conservation Principles* relay a need to articulate significance in a manner that mitigates changes and reduces damage to heritage value where possible.

However, while the guidance and systems in place appear to promote democratic equipoise regarding public interest and development, this does not necessarily equate to accountability, transparency and egalitarian access. There is little means of enforcing the benchmarks highlighted by *A Guide to Historic Environment Records (HERs) in England* (Tait and Wallace, 2019, p. 3) across the board. Many “big concepts’ in recent heritage theory, such as identity, authenticity or dissonance (Waterton and Watson, 2013 p. 456) could be acknowledged in a manner which articulates significance from the bottom up more clearly.

3. Ontological perspectives

If “the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future” (Derrida, 1998, p. 17), then the preservational and communicative structure and ontological perspectives of HERs is need of some examination. A HER’s field of vision broadly focuses on the use and reuse of archaeological data. An optimistic view would be that by drawing sites and monuments together, these inventories function as the “oligotopica” of Latour’s thinking (2005, p. 181), in essence, the spaces where consensus and knowledge are born. However, in characterizing the landscape as organizational assets of value, their focus on “spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately” (Foucault, 1995, p. 200) is panoptic.

For ease of management and dissemination, HERs are organized by appropriate metadata standards in abbreviate form when compared to site reports. While being less open ended than data and information, as records, HERs are representations. For example, a piece of information may be recognized as a proposition or way of asserting a view of the world, but rarely has it the capacity to show more than one perspective by itself. Records do not exist only within formal systems, and while they frequently encounter the need for formality, to be representational records must concern events and not just the systems they are managed within (Yeo, 2018, 130).

Formality in this context is the Monument Inventory Data Standard (MIDAS), which explicitly avoids dictating what indexing terms to use, outlining flexibility as a necessity. As part of these guidelines, there is overt guidance regarding historic events that alternative interpretations should be recorded as separate linked entities ([English Heritage, 2012](#), p. 56). As much can be said about monument types, (2012, p. 28) albeit with the caveat that clarity should be given in the documentation. Likewise, as part of the underpinning literature for the MIDAS Heritage standard, *Informing the Future of the Past: Guidelines for Historic Environment Records* explicitly recommends sustained contact with local groups and societies as part of HER enhancement projects, potentially allowing for alternative interpretation, but holds that this ideally “reflects national data standards” ([Gilman and Newman, 2007](#)).

This is a viable approach in terms to archeological evidence, but improvements could be made regarding the intangible elements of spatial use that may be community specific. Recommendations could be usefully updated to allow for heritage that cannot be mapped to national standards, giving greater emphasis to justification as paradata and providing a clearer evidence base to the significance of alternative appropriations of the historic environment.

A record cannot be outside of the historic environment and seek to define it. As common spaces, the mechanisms of inventorying are themselves contra-environments, which are subject to the wider network of a historic environment as a whole. In order to explicate this, this paper turns to actor-network theory’s (ANT) ([Latour, 2005](#)) principle that humans and objects act and co-act within their extended networks. As an ontological intervention, ANT is a means of creating the conditions through which knowledge creation is viewed. This process of revealing entails not how one sees things, but what there is to see in the first place ([Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017](#), p. 5). If the network can be laid bare, then the practicalities of representation can be better explored.

4. ANT and its principles

Where other forms of sociology are primarily concerned with the “whys”, ANT explores the “hows” ([Law, 2009](#), p. 148). To apply ANT is “to interrogate the relationships within networks simply by providing the who and the where” ([Roberts and Sheppard, 2020](#), p. 4) allowing the focus to move away from actants as individuals, rendering them visible as a whole network without hindering their movement or introducing personal politics. As well as envisioning the historic environment as a social entity, visualizing the social composition of HER mechanisms can reveal the limitations of equitable and egalitarian usability across the span of its social structure.

One necessary excursion is Latour’s lexicon, in particular the term “hybrid”. Originally, it was used to designate objects or beings “as hybrids of both culture and nature” ([Latour, 1993](#), p. 10) to deny the “Modern” distinction of attempting to “slice the world cleanly into two purified districts” ([Harman, 2009](#), p. 63). However, the term is now somewhat problematic, so much so that Latour himself has moved away from its usage ([Latour, 2013b](#), p. 561). The term quasi-object is also used to avoid what Harman describes as the “false overtones of a mixture of two pristine ingredients” as implied by “hybrid,” but in portraying a far more ephemeral subject this too is misleading. Instead, in the ontology of Latour and Harman, there are only actants ([Harman, 2009](#), p. 63). Nevertheless, to highlight both the ontologically elevated status of objects of human and non-human nature and the “contamination” between the original objects and their subsequent interpretation/collation, the term “hybrid” is used here.

Latour has impacted archeology as part of paradigm shift away from a humanist hegemony toward a post-humanist, object-centered approach to agency ([Gosden, 2005](#); [Olsen, 2012](#), p. 20). However, despite its broad focus, the historic environment as an entity has yet to

be appreciated in the same manner, nor have the locations, in this case the inventories, has been drawn together. Newman (2011) lifts the lid on the “black box” (Latour, 1999, p. 304) of the HER when comparing digital databases to their analog predecessors, identifying the material terms of HERs. These databases, in any format, represent historic documents, if not monuments in their own right. After all, they have their own historiographies, formed by long lasting experiential associations with the professional archeological sector for decades (see Figures 1 and 2). However, despite acknowledgment of the materiality of databases, its social processes are rendered invisible by its own successes and the objects within them remain locked away.

Accessibility, in terms of data re-use or research, is a primary concern. This does not, however, necessarily mean that all the aspects are accessible to a wider public, nor does it mean that any in-depth studies of usefulness to non-specialists have taken place. Where they have taken place, the focus has been on land development or on the enrichment of spatial content (McKeague et al., 2020, p. 21). This, of course, relates to the core principles of the inventory. This is very definitely true for the Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), the predecessor of the HER. However, as Paul Gilman highlighted in reviewing the consolidation of the SMR within the then newly formed HER, “two-way flow of information between SMRs and local people with an interest in learning more about, and recording, their local historic environment” (Gilman, 2004). Therefore, consideration of access and education is an established principle.

5. Hybridity in the historic environment

As the history is “extended to include not only the ancient but the only recently passed” (Harrison and Schofield, 2010, p. 235), it may seem self-evident that the purpose of such

HER Record

HER ID: 27148, Long Barrow Sw Of Vernditch Chase

HER Summary: Long barrow with an oval mound orientated SE-NW, surviving to a length of 36m, 25m width and 2m high.

HER Category: Monument

HER Web Link: No link available

Investigation Activities

Type: Recorded Observation

Description: No information available

Date Range: 1991 - 1991

Type: Scheduling

Description: The monument includes a long barrow set below the crest of a gentle southfacing slope in an area of unbuilding chalk downland. The barrow mound is oval in plan and orientated SE-NW. It survives to a length of 36m, is 25m wide and 2m high. It is flanked by ditches, from which mound remains was quarried, to the east and west. These survive to a depth of 0.6m and are 7.5m wide on the west side, 5m wide on the east. The bank and ditch constituted to mark the post-1865 county boundary have partly obscured the outer edge of the NE ditch.

Date Range: 1991 - 1991



Antiquity No.	County	Parish	HER Ref	OS Grid
51 03552042	Long Barrow	Long Barrow	S.A.M 430	70E 479
(SU 03552042) Long Barrow (OS)				
<p>This is situated on the boundary between Hants and Wilts but is actually in Hants. The mound is 110 ft long and 60 ft wide and is 6 ft high. The flank ditches are 18 ft wide and about 2 ft deep. It is a well preserved example with the mound gently increasing in height towards the SE. The ditch is better preserved on the W.</p> <p>This barrow measures 36 metres NW-SE and 24m from SW-NE. There is a ditch on the W side but only rather vague traces of one on the E side. The barrow is 1.6m in height (slightly higher at the SE end) and 2.4m above the bottom of the ditch.</p> <p>OS 485</p>				
<p>1. M Hopper 2 2 53 Pt OS 6th 1926</p> <p>2. M Hopper 2 2 53 Pt Ref to (3) I V Grinstead 2 & Proc Hants 70 & 48 Vol 14; pt 2 p 203.</p> <p>3. R L B Worle Fl 3 2 54 OS 1:2500 Hants 56A 3.</p> <p>In the Eastern Long Barrow Schedule 186.</p>				

Source(s): Hampshire County Council, 2009

Figure 1. An example of a contemporary HERs entry, including the ordnance survey antiquity card, reproduced as supporting content and published with kind permission from ordnance survey

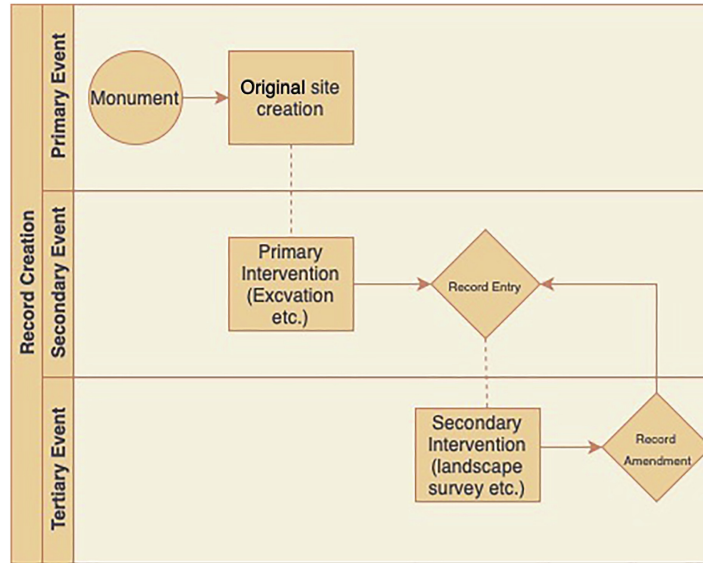


Figure 2.
Simplified flow
diagram of HER
creation

Source(s): Figure created by author

databases is to inventory the physical evidence within the cultural landscape within that span. As well as the monument itself, it is common to record events, often characterized as interventions, observations or investigations, such as contemporary archaeological fieldwork. An event entails:

a single episode of primary data collection over a discrete area of land. This single recording event can only consist of one investigative technique and is therefore a unique entity in time and space. (Catney, 1997, p. 3)

Like Geoffrey Yeo's (2018, p. 130) occurrent terminology, events are perceived to have an ending in time, rendering them inert and persistent spaces within the inventory. However there are events regarding land use that become difficult to ascertain finite points of commencement and conclusion, such as occupation. Persistent usage, especially less formal usage, for instance, dog walking, is also hard to define. While this is clearly non-archeological in spatial and event terms, in a public sense, these activities frequently account for the majority of non-specialist interactions with monuments. Contemporary activity is primarily accounted for by the activity of specialists.

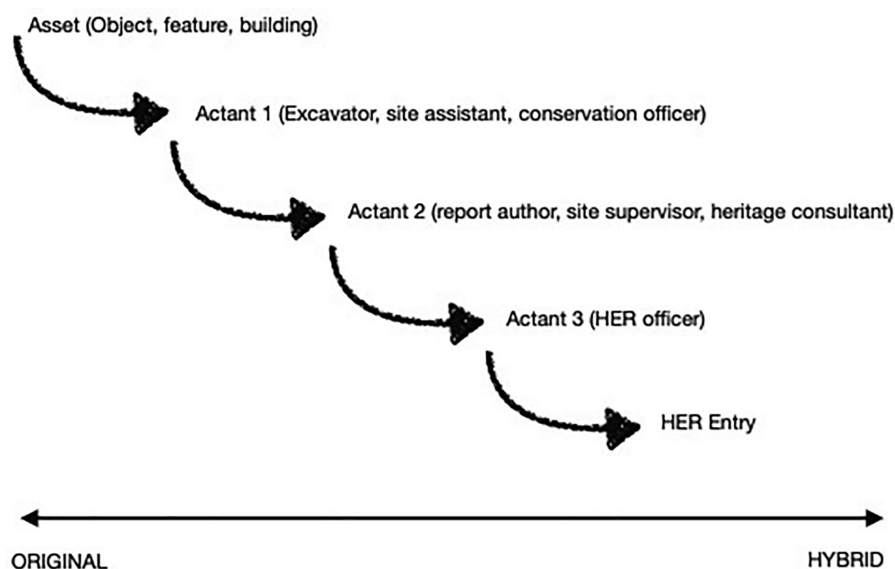
Perhaps as a result of the routinization of their performance, it is often overlooked what these entries are on a theoretical level. It is generally understood that they are digital translations of the analog systems of the 20th century, such as the Ordnance Survey Card System (Phillips, 1959). These paper records were often copied verbatim into digital format or where budgets have permitted, translated via optical character recognition. In this format, entries are augmented by controlled vocabularies (Forum on Information Standards in Heritage, 2020). This not only standardizes, but further speeds up the process of describing object's identity and properties. The inventory format permits this process of translation, as well as a process of reproduction, holding facsimiles of the cards themselves, alongside photographic images, taken on location and reproduced as part of the database entry's documentation. But less overtly, they are also highly creative and social products of an

archaeological system of “literary inscription” (Latour and Woolgar, 1986). These translations are themselves the translated form of the original source material used to populate the record. They are the abbreviated, core details from site reports, publications and archaeological literature of all forms, translated into short forms for the purpose of bringing the perceived key aspects directly to the reader.

Both the purpose and the effect are the further removal of an object from its context, and in doing so, they create a new object in the form of the database entry (see Figure 3). It is removed from “superimposed structures, artefacts and debris mixed together, different pasts and different dates” (Olsen, 2012, pp. 25-26). Plucked from the site report, it manifests itself in the database as part of a “compatible, standardized and ocular-centric” dataset (Witmore, 2007, p. 248), epistemologically moving toward the recorded format and away from the lived and felt experience. What results is a hybrid – the object, the excavating archaeologist, the report writer and the archivist, all revealing themselves together in the database as a new ontological actant.

The creation is a process of mediation, translated via various steps, agents and their intentions and goals until it has reached a new goal and digital state of being. In lieu, a digital object embodies the real object and its observers, taken out of context and time in a liminal state of existence within the database. In reifying these objects, the process at which they came into existence is removed. All intermediary steps are forgotten and the entry is inscribed with values from wider archeological operations, routinized, rendered non-controversial (Latour and Woolgar, 1986, p. 63) and crucially for future processes, which are readily synthesizable.

These hybrids have a strange existence, as dually authentic and inauthentic, as both facsimiles and new reproductions of the original physical object at the same time. In the creation of a database entry, there is no inherent value or quality in the original until it is excavated and handled by the relevant expert or professional. Their enrollment and incorporation into a corpus (Latour and Woolgar, 1986, p. 106) lends weight to the entry’s



Source(s): Figure created by author

Figure 3.
Hybridization process,
from object to entry

validity and factuality. This is further reinforced by the addition of references to the original report, gray literature, photographs or site plans. In many cases, these entries are the product of numerous excavations or processes of work, becoming palimpsests of the work of numerous practitioners, in both the field and behind the desk, further garnering validity, reliability and authenticity. Yet at the same time, this is not an archeological object but a digital representation (metadata, reproduction and all). Surely then, are they little more than placeholders for the original objects or features? They are not far removed from the network the originals were recovered from nor does its production bears resemblance to that of the original form. The gap between the object and the entry is enormous and fundamentally impassable, removing the element of the physical and replacing it with the digital. How any aura of authenticity could possibly be migrated is difficult to see!

Digital negotiation of authenticity is a complex process. Walter Benjamin's response to the mechanical reproduction of art in the 1930s is a starting point of sorts. To Benjamin (2015, p. 214), "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." Age and the fabric of time and history are key in this argument. In the historic environment, the emphasis is placed on the material substance as "it is this material substance, after all, that was constructed or made in the past" (Holtorf, 2013, p. 430). Contrary to Benjamin, Latour and Lowe (2011) establish that context, effort and sophistication can determine a migration of the aura of authenticity. Furthermore, the evidence presented by the ACCORD Project (Archaeological Community Co-Production of Research Resources) would also suggest that co-production and community heritage production can also distil a sense of authenticity (Jones *et al.*, 2017). And yet so deeply entangled within institutional and authorized heritage structures, despite the relatively low effort and cost to producing entries, as well as a lack of sophistication in sensory terms, the manifestations of the historic environment invested digitally within databases still hold sway.

Although digital may imply virtual to many (Latour and Lowe, 2011, p. 287), there is nothing especially virtual about these entries. Instead, the speed and ease at which these hybrids can be inscribed and enrolled moves the subject closer toward immutability. A case in point would be those entries whereby the original object has been lost, the original literature is unavailable or of inadequate quality or even those enrolled by word of mouth – objects that are only known in their hybrid form. Their presence in a database enrolls the trusted position of an established public institution to its claim for existence. As things, entries possess agency and their praxis formulates human action in a tangible and meaningful way. This does not necessarily confirm the notion that these entries are constitutive of heritage, but neither does it undermine it. As gateways, highlighting the path to the understanding of a landscape or urban area, this should function for professionals, academics or community usage and as such it warrants critical analysis.

6. Human hegemony or actor-network?

Despite regularly intervening in human processes, the role of these hybrid entities is often overlooked. Returning to Latour's lexicon, HERs epitomize "double-click" intellection – seemingly "free, indisputable, and immediate access to pure, untransformed information" (Latour, 2013a, p. 93). They are curated and made available democratically for people to browse at will. The only social complexities are on Bourdieusian terms (Dolwick, 2009, p. 30), through which a combination of one or all of one's symbolic, cultural, economic and social capital impacts the access to heritage.

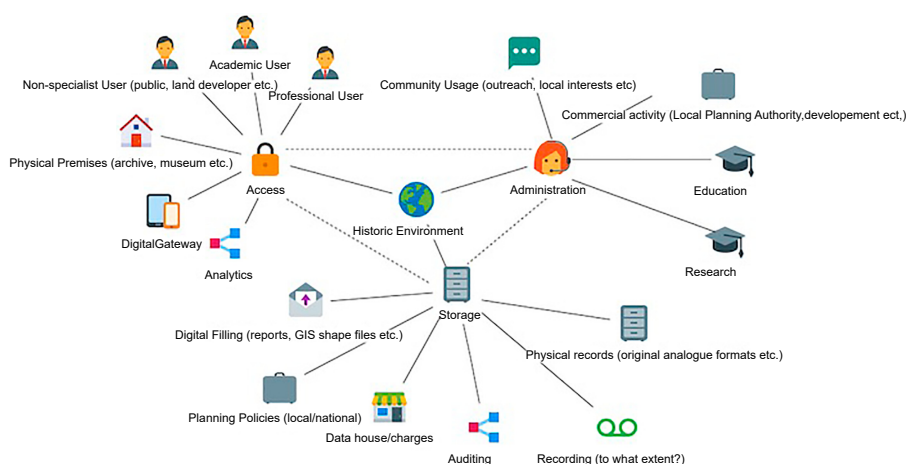
The curious non-specialist can access the database freely; their only inhibitions may be technical jargon or issues with context, at which point the curator fulfills an outreach role. Students and academics likewise regularly have free access to data (though not always). Finally, there are professional users, with economic imperatives for retrieving historic

environment data tied to the land use planning system. These are the individuals and entities associated with development and planning that may be charged for accessing data. Regardless of cultural capital, the archival format is a resource that functions as its human consumer dictates.

Although public cognitive ownership (Carman, 2009, pp. 204-205) is often associated with archeological sites as extensions of the monuments or buildings they represent, HERs rarely hold the same symbolic sense of place and community. While there is potential analytic value to the academic, enabling the scrutiny and evaluation of a landscape by monument, object type or period, the professional community is the focal point. Commercial practice is endorsed by gazetteers of the known historic landscape and negotiation with the planning authority. The impact of austerity measures and local government cuts has led to these commercial users becoming the benefactors in kind, propping up local databases by paying access charges for data. Commercial archeology (and academic archeology to an extent) is also a data producer, influencing the addition of new entries or augmenting previous entries. While this can be described as part of a recursive archeological process of continual flow and circulation by Ian Hodder (1999, p. 99), it still relies on the agency of human actants, defining the historic environment as an intermediate resource, i.e. assets of latent heritage value to be identified, categorized and distributed.

This ontology of visualizing the management and functionality of the historic environment is not especially useful for understanding the mechanisms and actors involved in the process (see Figure 4). However, when the social aggregates and the processes of data mediation and enrollment within HERs is visualized, critique of these networks as a means of bi-directional heritage production becomes possible. As an aspect of the land use planning system, the sum of the performative process of accessing the HER is most frequently explored, i.e. its role as the evidence bases for planning decisions, bound to the processes and products of impact assessment, evaluation and negotiation. The weight of the HER as an assemblage is balanced against the demands of the planning system and the interests of the local planning authority.

If “the object is either nothing but a screen on which to project human free will . . . or so powerful that it causally determines what humans think and do” (Latour, 2004, p. 241),



Source(s): Figure created by author

Figure 4.
A simple visualization
of the historic
environment network
as established through
database management

awareness of the role of non-humans and an HER entry's effect on human perception within the network is also necessary. Entries represent a culmination of a number of translations through a number of formats, from the object, feature or building in a physical format, through literature into digital media (Westin, 2012, p. 3). This not only alters object perception, but object interaction too. An entry is no more the physical object it represents than the map it is superimposed upon represents the landscape, nor is it attached to the same networks as its physical counterpart. It is merely an asset's representation in a digital format. Yet within this network, it is this format that mediates our interaction.

However, this is somewhat contingent. Numerous monuments and historic buildings do not rely on representation to "endure beyond the circumstances of their creation" (Yeo, 2018, 130). Yet, what of those features not on display in museums or visible in the landscape, those that were realized during excavation and are now backfilled below solar farms, housing developments or industrial estates? A sizable proportion of the historic environment consists of these features, and it is only through their mediation as database entries or as gray literature that they form part of the public consciousness. It is also, therefore, in this format that they can function as mediators affecting the outcomes of human decisions.

While the network is inactive, these objects are dormant intermediaries. Yet when they are enrolled by another actant, they become mediators, informing human responses to their being. Objects that can only exist or be manipulated in this format are thus indicative that the historic environment is more than the physical sum of the cultural landscape. However, it also raises issues about non-discriminatory heritage agendas. By including such objects, where physical evidence may not have been recognized by human actants for decades, centuries or even millennia, and by enrolling them in decision-making processes, HER administrators are able to produce value in objects via the networks they operate in. However, there are important processes that become hidden. Who defines what is historically/archeologically important and how are they accountable? How and where is it adopted and by whom? What is the policy for justifying record creation? Is it exclusively determined by specialists or is community input feasible? Once entries have attained fact status, how immutable is the fact? The blackboxing of this information is troublesome if HER data are counterweighed against accusations of AHD on the basis of accessibility.

To visualize a flatter ontology, the same circumstances and the same categorization of actant (academic, professional and non-specialist) must be considered. In their current format, entries are all but indisputable due to their reified and commoditized status within the inventory (Byrne, 2008, pp. 159–60), which is the result of being situated in a position of trust. Importantly, they are also highly combinable and superimposable (Latour, 1986). Through their associated metadata, entries can be grouped spatially using GIS software by period, object type, find type, material etc. Academics, at least in advance of fieldwork, and professionals enroll this data in similar ways as a form of preliminary research into the landscapes' past prior to intervention.

This is best exemplified by gazetteer production stimulated by commercial activity. Lacunae in the records need not tally with the historic environment. Through association with known records, these gazetteers are what enable a plot of land with no known archeological remains to retain legitimate archeological interest (Hinton, 2013, p. 14). To determine the impact of development on the historic environment as required by the planning guidelines, it is the combination of entries that are assessed by archeological or historic building consultants in submitting planning applications for approval. The proposals for mitigation are, in turn, received by the curatorial archeologist who determines an acceptable course of action.

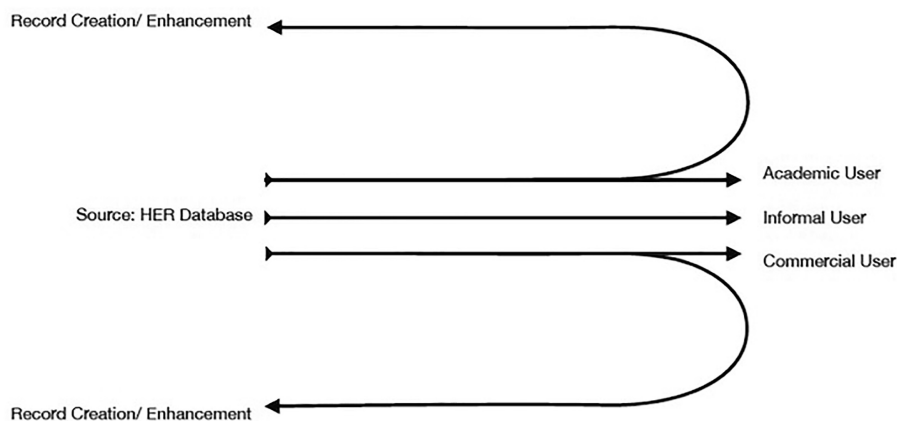
Now consider the network without the combination of sites presented by the gazetteer; where would the information to allow for heritage mitigation and intervention come from? While the standing of heritage related professions in legislation and society has improved, the

development would likely continue without archaeological intervention as in the past, for e.g. prior to the introduction of Planning Policy Guidance 16 (Department for Communities and Local Government, 1990). At the best, less-targeted excavation is the outcome. For the great many *in situ* assets, there is no agency to provoke human response. In these situations, it is the database entries that stimulate an archeological response and not the archeology itself. As an actor-network, undiscovered archeological sites and objects are intermediaries prior to their investigation. It is their representations within the database that mediate further discovery.

After the unearthing of archeology and its subsequent processing, it has become a matter of course that the findings are processed as gray literature and used to inform, create and update a HER entry. The process begins with the planning application, following the data from the database through to the fieldwork and back into the database as a newly enhanced entry. Dissemination and user feedback then creates a recursive loop, demonstrating the bidirectional function of both an entry and the user as mediators, affecting each other's action and content. Crucially in network terms, the physical feature itself is unrepresented; it cannot mediate without the actants in its network.

In specialist contexts, this is established as a well-established network, but where in that loop does the non-specialist user fit? While the historic environment sector has taken care to make information available for the non-specialist user, the social emphasis on the user who has a casual interest in their local historic environment is where most improvements could be made. The network no longer functions in a reflexive manner when the user returns no feedback (see Figure 5). There are exceptions through community archeology projects or even the work of amateur metal detectorists, who have a feedback mechanism over varying degrees of directness. For example, through the UK via the Portable Antiquities Schemes, which is made available to local HERs on a regular basis.

While community archeology programs are about far more than cultural resource management or heritage management, such projects are regular contributors to the HER, frequently mediated through a professional archeologist as the voice of the amateur within the feedback mechanism. The casual reader remains an intermediary, however, rendered invisible as the weakest link in the network with no way to socially reconnect to the rest of the network. The network is no longer bidirectional, moving in linear direction from source to destination.



Source(s): Figure created by author

Figure 5.
Performative feedback
in the historic
environment network

The most efficient networks require a degree of symmetry between both hybrid actant and human actant in their performative routines. This is not to say that both actants are of equal standing. How could they be? HERs are designed and maintained by humans; the entries and much of their source material (though not necessarily all) is the work of human hands and the gazetteer process is initiated by humans for the purpose of human cultural practices. However, without the hybrid actants in this network, the HER cannot perform its primary function. Likewise, the capital of the human actant also impacts the functionality of the network. Without both data circulation and collection, the network is abruptly terminated.

7. Heritage implications: reinforcing AHD?

Not everything relating to the historic element of the historic environment is heritage by default. However, returning to Harrison's earlier cited exploration of heritage (2013b, p. 14), the relationship element is crucial. Meaningful associations have an interactive value and character in and of themselves – thus, “relationship is the cumulative experience of interacting” (Saunders, 2005, p. 60). In this context, however, this value and character is restricted by the limited ability for expression within the network.

The relationship between place and identity is a key association in the dynamic between heritage and the historic environment. Monuments, buildings and places in the landscape are inscribed with memories and are consequently valorized as heritage assets through memorialization and commemoration (Ashworth *et al.*, 2007, p. 56). The issue with the organizing the historic environment via geo-spatial datasets is the de-centralization of looking, not through a perspective of interests but through the perspective of stewardship. This is, of course, the primary purpose. However, by organizing the digital representation of place by access to its contents, and not its inhabitants, the emphasis upon relating those contents to a meaningful, lived experience is then placed elsewhere, beyond the responsibility of the steward.

Although there are invariably multiple publics, be it on a global, national or local scale, access to the historic environment on archival terms privileges a commoditized specialist stance. The notions of visibility (Watson, 2009) and experience (Harrison, 2013a) are also closely linked, but in a geospatially determined view of the historic environment the visibility and the associated social depth of a monument or site is poorly qualified in the present. As the REFIT project (Resituating Europe's first towns: A case study in enhancing knowledge transfer and developing sustainable management of cultural landscapes) details (Tully *et al.*, 2019), even at high-profile archeological monuments such as Iron Age *oppida*, there are variety of complex and interweaving activities taking place. A conclusion of the project was that archeological sites such as these cannot be managed as monuments based on their historic elements alone, and as a resource for the management process, monuments should not be recorded solely as such either. Greater focus on community and cultural and natural occurrences are required.

Considering this, the authorized heritage debate is still relevant. Accessing these networks can be done freely, digitally and at speed, but it is arguable that this works against its usefulness as a “popular” heritage tool. The database functions well scientifically because of its combinability. It is not the responsibility of the steward to produce data in a synthesized, narrative format. As with most disciplines, these databases are inscribed in their own vernacular; MIDAS terminologies are designed to allow for accessibility and reuse. This is a necessity for speed and combinability. However, this could literally be construed as the “voice of authorized heritage” (Högberg, 2012). As a trade-off, digital accessibility is widely enacted, but this also limits the framing or integration of data from more colloquial sources of the historic environment data.

Recognition of these colloquial and localized sources is possible. Positive moves toward this have been made, typified by the Know Your Place and CITiZAN projects (Museum of London Archaeology, 2023), which have become archetypes for a community turn within the

historic environment sector. In the former, goals to enable local communities in Bristol to undertake their own local context analysis for the co-production of knowledge by facilitating direct input from the public for validation within the local historic environment were explicit (City Design Group, 2011: 2). Since its inauguration, the Layers of London and New Forest Knowledge projects have followed suite with similar aspirations, focusing their content toward communicating history, memory and sense of place to their inhabitants. Crucially, projects of this nature offer learning objectives, recruiting and training volunteers and individuals to contribute their own experiences to the recorded historic environment. One such example is “Outstories’ from the LGBT + community, for e.g. [Outstories Bristol \(2011\)](#) is defined by the community and merely hosted as a platform by the local authority, enabling the bi-directional flow of historic environment data previously so difficult to obtain because of the lack of mediation processes.

8. Concluding discussion

How to appreciate and experience the historic environment is problematic in this format. As hybrids composed of both the physical and interpretational, removed from space and time, these are not objects as one would traditionally consider, nor has this previously been the political context of the design and upkeep of HERs. Relating them to the landscape is impossible; they were never in a landscape. The cognitive dissonance between the database entries, their 2D representation in GIS format and the real world is too great to effectively formulate a meaningful sense of heritage in visual terms alone as this is not a lived and embodied space.

As heritage is becoming increasingly mobile and open to interpretation, the historic environment sector can no longer focus simply on the ancient and aging. The rise of contemporary archeology studies and counter-archeology studies ([Schofield, 2017](#)) shows that memory is becoming an increasingly important aspect. Our experience of the past, in a meaningful, capacious and communal sense, depends on our knowledge of the past, but recollection in societal terms requires the input of the public alongside the institution. There is still room for both, but, as the historic environment itself broadens, the process of recording it must coevolve.

In visualizing the networks that create the space of the HER, ANT shows how and by whom the network is accessed, equally depicting its strengths and weakness in terms of recursive feedback. The aim of this paper was to show a flatter ontology of human actants can be achieved. Controlled vocabularies, in terms of the social functionality, allows the HER mechanism to aid the protective aspect of heritage stewardship but to some extent; by mapping to national standards and trajectories, a local element can be lost. Working with communities to develop and integrate their own metadata and paradata engenders exploration of intangible heritage and how communities interact with the landscape. The “routinized set of procedures” ([Cumberpatch and Roberts, 2012](#), p. 26) that comprise the commercial archeological process work, and should not be tampered with, but there is a greater call for localized nuance that perhaps dictates more *ad hoc* solutions.

The question is not “whose sense of place” ([Waterton, 2005](#)) does this system protect and nurture, but rather how can it do more for those under represented? There is the latent potential for social cohesion and placemaking in the historic environment but the system is principally designed with maintenance and loss aversion in mind. There is, however, definitive recognition that this is a space where improvements can be made in terms of providing solutions. While “recognition is one thing; delivery is quite another” ([Belford, 2011](#), p. 51) and resources are limited, the guidelines in place, via Historic England and MIDAS Heritage, make evident that duty of care extends beyond the heritage consultants, architects and commercial archeologists. This is not to suggest that the discipline succumbs to epistemic populism or as [González-Ruibal et al. \(2018\)](#), p. 509) summarize it “What the People

say is correct because it is they who say it". Instead, community claims ought to be critically scrutinized in the same manner that all forms of heritage making are scrutinized (Harrison, 2018).

The processes kickstarted by Know Your Place show that greater mediation between the heritage preserved by inventories and the heritage of the communities. The public can legitimately claim some sense of ownership to the historic environment. As archeologists "confidently study both the very earliest period of human history as well as the contemporary past" (Lucas, 2010, p. 344), this is rightly reflected in the material inclusivity of HERs. However, much of that is still defined by the tangible cultural landscape. Therefore, the HER must embrace a material of a more intangible, cultural nature. By expanding the nature of content, more favorable conditions for inclusion of lived heritage can be created.

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