

Guide to Historic Environment Records (HERs)

What is an HER?

HERs hold information about all known historic sites and finds, both designated (Listed Buildings, Scheduled monuments etc) and undesignated, within a local area usually based on a county or National Park. The information is held in a database which is linked to GIS (Geographical Information System) mapping. GIS map layers usually include aerial photographs and Lidar, which can be overlaid with HER maps and historic OS mapping.

Some (but not all) HERs are accessible online via the Heritage Gateway (<http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/>), but for any which are not, the Heritage Gateway will have contact details and/or a link to an online version elsewhere. Online HERs often have only summary information and are unlikely to include spatial data, apart from mapping of HER records; for more detailed information you will need to contact the relevant HER and either make an appointment to visit, or ask for copies of the records you are interested in. Most HERs will be able to email these to you, and do not charge for compiling and sending out information for research enquiries.

What an HER can provide

There are a number of ways in which HERs can provide useful information for designed landscape research:

- As background information for the area you are researching to indicate, for example, whether there was medieval settlement before the designed landscape was created or whether there are known earthwork features from an earlier period within the later parkland. If there are records, there are likely also to be links to further sources of information, some of which the HER may hold as hard copies if there are no digital ones.
- To show whether there has been any previous investigations or survey in your area of interest. Archaeological surveys for other purposes may have identified features which it was not possible to interpret with certainty at the time, but which you may be able to tie in with the designed landscape you are researching. There will be links to any excavation or survey reports arising from the work and the HER may hold hard copies of the reports if they are not available digitally.
- To view features mapped by the National Mapping Programme (NMP) from aerial photographs going back to the 1940s. NMP mapping can be viewed via Historic England's Aerial Archaeology Mapping Explorer website (<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/aerial-archaeology-mapping-explorer/>). However, if an HER holds NMP digital mapping, you will also be able to view it using their GIS which will allow you to overlay with historic OS mapping as well as a range of aerial photographs which may be of higher resolution than those available through the HE Mapping Explorer.
- To view Lidar mapping. The National Library of Scotland website holds some Lidar imagery, but HERs may have better resolution mapping (up to 25cm) which can be viewed with the HER map as an overlay so that you can see easily whether features have previously been identified and recorded on the HER.

How to use an HER

A quick way in to access HER records is to use the Heritage Gateway. Go to the Heritage Gateway website and select 'Historic Environment Record' from the menu on the left hand side. This will enable you to identify which HER covers the area you are interested in. Click on the relevant HER

in the list and you will see information about the HER, including contact details and a link to access their online database.

Searches for different HERs will each operate in a different way and show differing levels of detail so you may want more information than your initial search can provide. Identify the HER numbers for the site or sites you are interested in and then contact the HER to ask for further information. They will be able to supply you with pdf copies of the detailed HER records and sometimes an accompanying map (also as a pdf). Ask what additional information they hold (eg Lidar or aerial photographs) which might be relevant.

Alternatively you can make an appointment to visit the HER which will give you the opportunity to view spatial data through their GIS system. Visiting in person also has the advantage that the HER officer will be on hand to answer questions and point you in the direction of further sources of information, and you will have access to any non-digital reference material which they hold (eg unpublished reports).

Things to be aware of:

- HERs often have more detailed and/or up-to-date information than centralised records (eg Historic England Research Records), but the detailed information may need to be accessed by contacting the HER directly rather than through the Heritage Gateway.
- An interpretation of a feature in the HER might not be correct. If you observe something during a site visit which appears to be the same as a feature on the HER, but you think it would be more sensibly interpreted as part of a historic parkland, then you may be right (particularly if the feature also appears on the historic maps you have seen).
- A general search from the first page of the Heritage Gateway website will not return any local HER results if the HER is not searchable via the Heritage Gateway.
- There is no centralised HER numbering. Each individual HER will have its own sequence of numbering for local sites. A site which is recorded in the Historic England Research Records will have a different monument number in that dataset from the corresponding record in the local HER.

Mags Waughman
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