

How to get the most out of Durham County Council's Historic Environment Record

Historic Environment Record
Archaeology Section
Environment & Design,
Environment,
Neighbourhoods and Climate Change
Durham County Council
Council Offices
Green Lane
Spennymoor
County Durham
DL16 6JQ
Tel: 03000 267013
Email: archaeology@durham.gov.uk
www.durham.gov.uk/archaeology

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*Contents Page***Contents**

Contents Page	2
Introduction	3
Our suggested way to get the most out of an HER inquiry	4
How to use and make sense of the digital records	6
Quoting Reference Numbers.....	6
Dirty Data	6
Validation Levels	6
Record fields	7
Broad Term.....	7
Changes to Form and Function	7
Event Type.....	7
Descriptions and Sources	7
Geographical locations.....	7
Cross referencing	7
External references	8
Source Record: Storage Location	8
HER Mapping.....	8

Introduction

If you are reading this we are assuming that you already have worked out that you want information from the Durham County Council (DCC) Historic Environment Record (HER) and have some familiarity with HER's and their data.

Whilst HERs nationally operate in accordance with the same national standards and guidance, there are still differences in implementation for various historical and local reasons.

With that in mind, this guide is aimed to help you understand some of the quirks of the DCC system, and help you use our data more effectively.

For information on what data is available, charges, etc please see the HER web pages "Charges" section, our Information Services Policy, and the Frequently Asked Questions section.

The web pages are at <http://www.durham.gov.uk/article/2012/Historic-Environment-Record>

As improvements and changes are made to the HER, this document will be updated to explain them.

Our suggested way to get the most out of an HER inquiry

The HER contains digital, index level data, and hard copy and digital collections with further information. There is also a backlog of information to be added to the HER.

This means if you just look at the HER records, you may well be missing out on information which could improve your research.

Our suggested way to carry out a search is detailed below. This is based on what we believe is the most efficient way of querying the HER to make sure you get the most information from it, and assumes a reasonable time scale.

1. You might want to start your search by checking out our Keys to the Past (K2P) website at <http://www.keystothepast.info/Pages/Home.aspx>. This is a PARTIAL online version of the HER. It does not include all records for various reasons, but this is still often a good place to start and may even answer your query.

NOTE: If you are submitting information in support of a Planning Application, using K2P without consulting the full HER will NOT be sufficient.

2. Request a remote search from the HER. You will be sent out the relevant digital records by email. Details on how to do this are in the Information Services Policy on our web page.
3. Check through the digital data sent out to you making a note of any HER record numbers you are interested in finding out more about (including any prefix letters – eg E12345 or S67890)
4. There may be sources of information about these records available online. Links to these will be provided in the records themselves or in the email sent with the data, in many cases. Check these out as they may contain enough detail to answer your query.
5. You will probably be left with a group of HER numbers you still want to find out more about. Email the numbers (with prefixes) to the HER officer.
6. The HER officer will check the system to see if we have any potential sources of further information in our collections. Note we can only do this checking for a small number of records. If there are more than 30 or so, it's a fair bet we'll have additional information on at least some of them.
7. The HER officer will, on request, send you a PDF of the Source records (prefixed S) you're interested in. This might provide enough

detail for you to access some Sources locally to you eg via your local library.

8. Arrange an HER visit. Having gone through the process above, you can focus this visit to access the hard copy records of particular interest which you can only really get from the HER (eg Grey literature reports, or hard to access articles etc).

NOTE: We don't have a copy of everything that has been used to compile the HER, so some things may not be available.

How to use and make sense of the digital records

Quoting Reference Numbers

When quoting HER numbers you should always quote the PRN and include the prefix letter eg E12345 for Events, H12345 for Heritage Features, and S12345 for Sources.

When quoting Designated sites, you should always quote the List Entry number (if one exists) from the National Heritage List for England.

Dirty Data

The main thing to understand is that our data is dirty. Over the years, the data has been filled in by different people at different times, with, until recently, no formal manual on how to record things. This means that different people have recorded similar things differently at different times.

The Database structure has also changed over time, with data being migrated to different places, and changes to standardised lists of terms.

This has meant that bits of information have sometimes been lumped together, and may need to be cleaned up to make them user friendly. Also some information is still in the wrong place, or has been accidentally moved to the wrong place. Finally, some data still uses out of date terminology.

There are also duplicate records – ie more than one record for the same feature or site. The worst “offenders” are the Listed Building records within Heritage features, but there are others.

Finally, whilst this guide tells you how field *should* have been used, it’s worth bearing in mind that as the data is dirty, they might not previously have been used in that way.

Enhancement is ongoing to clean the data, but will take time, with over 35000 records in different parts of the database to work through.

Validation Levels

One attempt to give users confidence in the data is the use of Validation Levels. On most PDF output for records there is a section “Compilations”, under which the Validation Status is listed.

This shows the date the record was validated, and also the level of Validation – as explained below. The list goes from lowest to highest level of validation.

Unchecked – the record has not been looked at recently. This is the default setting for all records.

Cleaned – the record has been edited by a Volunteer or other member of staff, but not checked by the HER Officer

Checked – the record has been checked and is internally consistent, and has data in all the required fields to the current DCC HER Standard. NOTE: this does not mean the record is correct, as it is an exercise done without referring to the Sources

Validated – the record has been checked against the Sources used to compile it and is a correct representation of what those Sources contain

Record fields

Broad Term

This is a very high level type of record meant to give a very broad view of the record type. Only one type should be selected per record. There are seven types: Aircraft Crash site; Site; Finds Spot; Historic Building; Maritime; Parks and Gardens, Structure.

Changes to Form and Function

This is the indexing section of the Heritage Feature, and is mainly there to help aid retrieval of records. It should give an idea of ALL the things people have thought the feature might have been, and ALL the periods it might relate to. As we index all suggested interpretations, some of the indexing may no longer be thought to be correct, or may be conjectural.

Event Type

This indexes the methods used during an investigation

Descriptions and Sources

The Technical Description aims to give information from all Sources used, including changing views of what the feature was over time.

When reading the Description, there *should* periodically be numbers in brackets in the text eg (1). What this means is that everything just before that number comes from the Source Record with that Reference number.

There are also likely to be additional Sources which are not noted in the text, but are cross referenced to a record. This means that they have not been used to update the description, and may contain additional information.

Some Descriptions have text without numbers, so it is sometimes unclear where the information came from. We can often work this out, so let us know if this is an issue for you.

If the text is followed by a (0), this means that we haven't yet been able to work out which Source this information came from

You will sometimes see numbers in different shaped brackets – these are just older records which haven't been cleaned to our current standard.

Geographical locations

In this section we record the current Civil Parish of the record.

Under the Map type the Grid Reference will give an indication on the Precision of the grid reference, if compared to the GIS Reference.

GIS references *always* have twelve figures, implying one metre accuracy.

However, if the Grid Reference is only to six figures, for example, this means the accuracy is only actually within a hundred metres.

Cross referencing

This section records the relationship between records within the HER. It is known to have been input inconsistently in the past and is quite dirty. It is mainly used to show the relationship between Events, Sources and Heritage Features, but also between Heritage Features and Designated sites.

External references

This records relationships to records in external systems, where known. If the external record is online, a link to it will often be provided here.

Source Record: Storage Location

This records the location of the relevant source in the HER collections. If it is blank, we may still have a copy of the Source (it just hasn't been indexed as such), as we actively record if a record is "Not Held".

HER Mapping

The HER Software since 2019 has been able to record point, polygon and line data. Not all records have been reviewed to have appropriate polygons or lines created, so some records are mapped with multiple points to try and give some indication of their extent. Also, as most records relate to things that aren't points in reality (areas of fieldwork, extents of a site, etc) then the mapped point(s) usually represent the centre of the area covered.