

RECORDING TO CONSERVE: THE HEREFORDSHIRE EXPERIENCE



Aymestrey Methodist chapel. There are about 200 nonconformist chapels in Herefordshire, 25 of which are listed. Photograph Miranda Greene



A parish boundary bank with lime trees, important as both an archaeological and a wildlife site. Photograph Gerald Dawe



Almeley Station on the Kington–Eardisley line. There were 57 stations in Herefordshire at the end of the nineteenth century (today there are four). Only two are listed. Photograph Miranda Greene

Sites and monuments records (SMRs) were developed as a way of protecting the past through the planning system, and this has remained their primary role. Recently however, the emphasis has shifted slightly towards making the information available to the general public. Herefordshire SMR has very much embraced this accessibility angle and, with the help of a Heritage Lottery award, has been online since September 2002. An SMR New Audiences Officer and an SMR Education Officer work exclusively on 'Historic Herefordshire on Line', developing education and general interest pages specifically aimed at gaining new audiences for the local historic environment.

Accessibility of course can also help protection, for a community that cares about its local environment will protect it. Government recognises this, and planning and environmental law at local and national level is increasingly required to consult with the community. Local Structure, Transport and Biodiversity Plans and a whole range of other planning documents are now drawn up after much consultation with stakeholders. If this consultation is to be meaningful, people need access to information, quickly, clearly and freely. Our visitor numbers show that people increasingly value the contribution of the SMR, as we now have around 600 website visits a day.

The down side to accessibility is increased vulnerability to metal detectorists. We do protect sensitive sites to some extent by giving less exact grid references, and we provide a clear link to the Portable Antiquities Scheme and give guidance on metal detecting. Even so, it has to be said that the conflict between protection and freedom of information is unresolved – but all that can be said is that SMRs are not the only institution to face this kind of dilemma.

Archaeological sites are currently protected from development through planning guidance, and the traditional role of the SMR is to inform the archaeological advisor (in our case Julian Cotton). Currently about 3500 planning applications are looked at each year in Herefordshire, of which about 150 require archaeological work. The judgement of what requires further investigation (or plan adjustment) is based on evidence in the SMR.

The SMR is also involved in conservation in the countryside, governing the advice we give on hedgerows, countryside stewardship, woodland grant schemes and the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for uncultivated and semi-natural areas. For example, since June 1997 'important' hedges have been protected, and one designation of 'important' is if the hedge forms part of an archaeological site and/or a parish boundary and/or is an integral part of a field pattern pre-dating the Enclosure Acts. The SMR holds the relevant records that will determine this and is always consulted by the officer dealing with hedgerows. FWAG and Woodland advisors use the on line SMR when putting together their CSS applications and woodland planting and management schemes. Archaeology is also considered at every stage of the three-part EIA Regulations process (screening, scoping and EIA) in applications for change of use. In theory, sites on the SMR, which have developed semi-natural vegetation over the past 100 years, should also be protected, following new legislation in force since February 2002. Herefordshire is handicapped in that it hasn't yet completed a countywide Phase I habitat survey that would clearly identify semi-natural areas, and we still need to spread the word amongst farmers and the general public that this legislation exists and is serious.

All these protective and access schemes require good information, and the SMR's main role is to record sites. Over the past five years we have entered about 1000 new sites per year. We are currently concentrating on the post-medieval. Buildings and earthworks dating from 1800 to the present day, such as squatting cottages, chapels, brickworks and old railway lines are curiously particularly vulnerable, being considered too common to need recording. Now many of these features are quite scarce and we are in danger of losing them completely. SMR volunteers are currently working through a whole range of these features. Earlier sites if not recorded are even more vulnerable because they can't even be seen except through aerial photography. We are lucky to have Chris Musson working in Herefordshire and his photographs have revealed a remarkable number of important prehistoric and medieval sites. No doubt many more remain to be found and I would hope that our current total of sites (about 15,000) will increase significantly over the next few years.

The Herefordshire SMR is run by Rebecca Roseff and Melissa Seddon (job share). Laura Shakespeare, SMR Assistant, is working on a one-year 'New Apprenticeship' scheme. The Historic Herefordshire on Line project is run by Miranda Greene, SMR New Audiences Officer and Toria Forsyth-Moser, SMR Education Officer.

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