Assessing the value of community-generated historic environment research

Executive Summary

2016

Assessing the Value of Community-Generated Historic Environment Research

Executive Summary
Project No: 7178

www.worcestershire.gov.uk/waas

CIfA REGISTERED ORGANISATION

worcestershire
county council

"While some of us debate what history is or was, others take it into their own hands"

Michel-Rolph Trouillot

Contents

The raw (.csv) and summary (.ods) anonymised survey data is freely available on request from:

Rob Hedge: rhedge@worcestershire.gov.uk

Aisling Nash: anash@worcestershire.gov.uk

Worcestershire County Council: archaeology@worcestershire.gov.uk

Dan Miles: Daniel.Miles@HistoricEngland.org.uk

Note: *On 1st April 2015 the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England changed its common name from English Heritage to Historic England. This document therefore contains references to publications and policies produced under both titles: these should be understood to pertain to the same organisation. Likewise, most survey responses mentioning the organisation use 'English Heritage', but refer to functions now performed by Historic England.*

Acknowledgements

1 Executive summary

1.1 Project background

The project was commissioned by Historic England, whose specific aims were to assess:

- The amount of historic environment research being undertaken by community groups

- The potential scholarly value that this research could offer to enhance research resources, in particular those used to support the planning system.

The communal and social value of community group heritage research is well recognised and supported by organisations such as the Council for British Archaeology – underpinned by its mission statement *"Archaeology for All"*. The impact of heritage on individuals and communities is highlighted in Heritage Counts 2014 and includes findings from the 2013 review of the value and benefits of heritage by the Heritage Lottery Fund. We understand and support the social benefits that this brings to communities. Beyond the social benefit, however, this project focuses on assessing the added scholarly or research value of community-generated research, and the potential benefits to research resources, in particular Research Frameworks.

Historic England, formerly as English Heritage, has been funding the creation of Research Frameworks and Reference Resources for over twenty years. One of the primary objectives of developing Research Frameworks was to promote collaboration across the sector, bringing together the academic, local authority and commercial sectors. The intention has been to produce frameworks that could be used to coordinate and promote historic environment research.

Up until now, however, local societies and community groups have not been so well engaged with this process, nor has their research been as valued as that produced academically and through the planning system. Community groups have not been targeted as users of these frameworks and the language and accessibility has been focused on professional and academic sectors.

We assess the quantity, focus and format of research being undertaken by community groups across England, whether they are already engaging with Research Frameworks and Historic Environment Records (HERs) and what the value of this research is/could be to the sector as a whole.

This project is not about assessing the **quality** of people's research. Rather, it is about the potential **value** of their work to the resources that are used by the historic environment sector to determine priorities and inform decisions on planning issues, research priorities and strategies for safeguarding heritage assets.

1.2 Definitions

HER (Historic Environment Record)	HERs are information services that provide access to resources relating to the archaeology and historic built environment of a defined geographic area.
	HERs contain details on local archaeological sites and finds, historic buildings and historic landscapes and are regularly updated. This information is usually held in a database with a digital mapping system (Geographic Information System). They are maintained and managed by local authorities.

OASIS (Online AccesS to the Index of archaeological investigationS)	OASIS is a project to provide online access to archaeological reports produced by archaeological work in both developer-funded and voluntary sectors. It is linked to the Archaeology Data Service's ArchSearch catalogue.
Research Frameworks (RFs)	Research Frameworks draw together information on the historic environment from a wide range of sources to provide an up-to-date overview of regional and/or subject-specific understanding. The resulting research agendas highlight gaps in our knowledge, and suggest avenues of research to answer these
Research resources	Research resources are sources of information about the Historic Environment used by Historic Environment professionals and researchers in order to assess current understanding, support the planning system and develop future strategies. They include Research Frameworks, reference collections of artefacts and works of synthesis.
Outputs	Research 'outputs' are the products of historic environment research. Within this project they are defined as pieces of work relating to a project, which are shared beyond the group. Examples could include reports, articles in local journals, leaflets, books, audio CDs, websites or online databases.

1.3 Methods & scope

The project looked at a wide range of research investigating the historic environment, covering archaeology, historic building, maritime and local history research, undertaken by any group, organisation, society, association or individual engaged in research, for which the participants do not receive payment for their services.

The project was undertaken in partnership with the British Association for Local History in order to ensure that the perspective of local historians was adequately represented.

- Literature reviews looked at existing analyses of voluntary and community archaeology and its contribution within existing research resources, and an overview of the local history sector. Recipients of HLF grants within the case study areas were collated in order to assess the availability and visibility of associated outputs.

- An online survey was circulated to relevant groups and individuals in England in order to obtain quantitative data on the amount and nature of research undertaken, and the destinations of resulting research outputs.

- In-depth case studies were carried out for three regions: Vale of Evesham, West Yorkshire and Norfolk. The areas were chosen to capture a broad cross-section of different regions, environments and approaches to managing the historic environment. The case studies looked at examples of voluntary research and sought to qualitatively assess the potential of this work to enhance research resources.

1.4 Findings

Review

The **literature review** found that despite extensive crossover in participants and activities, considerable differences do exist in the production and dissemination of archaeological and 'local history' research, partly due to a perceived fragmentation into professional ≠ amateur and history ≠ archaeology that occurred post-PPG16. Recipients of grant funding within the study areas were found to be undertaking activities associated with a wide range of 'heritage values'; generally, in accordance with the priorities of the HLF, outcomes were prioritised over research outputs, and **online availability and accessibility of associated research was poor**.

Who is undertaking research?

The **nationwide survey received 619 responses**. Local history and archaeology societies comprised 26% and 27% of the respondents respectively. Among other well-represented categories were individual researchers (12%) and local heritage/conservation groups (6%). The vast majority (94%) of respondents had undertaken research within the last 5 years, with a broad range of activities from archive research (68%) and archaeological excavation (45%) to industrial history (21%). Many groups undertake a broad range of activities, spanning multiple categories and making their classification into 'local history' or 'archaeology' somewhat arbitrary.

Quantity of research

Across England within the last five years, a total of **3357 projects** and **5192 individual outputs** were reported. Extrapolating this to national estimates of the number of active researchers suggests that **in 2010-2015, 12,000 projects contributed a total of over 20,000 research outputs.** This is likely to be a very conservative estimate, due to the difficulties inherent in quantifying research which, in contrast to that recorded through the planning system, is not systematically collated by any particular process or body.

Research Frameworks

Only 45% of respondents were aware of existing Research Frameworks (RFs), but among those who had heard of them, 78% had consulted them. **94% felt that their research could contribute to a wider understanding of their area of research.** Only 26% of groups with a local history focus were familiar with existing RFs.

Where does research go?

Research is published in a variety of formats from **websites (56%)** to interpretation boards (23%). **40% of respondents fed their research back into HERs, but only 12% upload to OASIS.**

Figure 1   Barriers to publication

Comments on the experience of publication and dissemination revealed a broad range of issues, including time, costs, funding and difficulty in accessing appropriate expertise. Many cited a **lack of digital skills**, and the difficulty in developing or obtaining the expertise needed to produce sustainable and accessible digital outputs.

Professional support makes a big difference to the destination of the research. Among respondents undertaking specifically archaeological research, **around 2/3 of those who had received support or advice from professional archaeologists sent research to an HER**. By contrast, the figure among those who'd had no professional support or advice was just 37%.

Support and advice

Overall, 49% received support or advice from Local Authority Archaeology Services/HERS. Archive Services (40%), museums (29%), university departments (28%) and national heritage bodies (28%) were also consulted. A significant number also cited valuable support from professional freelance archaeologists (32%) and historians (29%). **Of those conducting archaeological excavations (51%) received advice from freelance professionals.**

Funding

The majority of respondents (75%) are at least partly self-funding, **although 43% have received project funding from an external body**. Motivations for research are dominated by group (69%) and local (85%) interest, but also include conservation (24%) and planning/development issues (16%).

Cross-tabulation of results highlighted that recipients of external project funding are much more likely to consult HERs or Advisory Services, although **only 51.8% of respondents receiving project funding are sending their results to HERs.**

The fate of physical archives, which form a crucial component of the research resource for thematic Research Frameworks such as those for pottery studies, is cause for more concern, as **only 23.4% of respondents undertaking intrusive fieldwork without project funding are sending material to museums**.

Planning and development

There appears to be a growth in the volume of research undertaken at least partly in order to attempt to take ownership of planning and development issues, often in response to perceived shortcomings and capacity issues within local authorities. However, much of this appears to be undertaken on a case-by-case basis with little opportunity for researchers to feed into strategic plans; **potentially valuable research that could feed into local placemaking and planning initiatives is therefore not entering research resources.**

Case studies

Evaluation of outputs from the case study areas demonstrated that across a broad range of research, there is **clear and significant potential benefit to research resources, beyond that which is being currently achieved**. This is in part due to researchers often being unaware of the value of their outputs, and the importance to the historic environment in maintaining effective and comprehensive research resources. In some cases HER staff have also underestimated the scale and value of this research. Capacity issues within local authorities are also a barrier to communication and collaboration, and an increasing cause for concern.

1.5 Summary of conclusions and recommendations

Conclusion 1:

Voluntary and community historic environment research over the past five years has covered a vast range of topics and investigative techniques. The volume is estimated to be in the region of 12,000 projects, contributing a total of over 20,000 discrete research outputs. The difficulties in accurately quantifying such research, which is not systematically collated, mean that this is likely to be a very conservative estimate.

The research generated has significant value and largely untapped potential to enhance research resources and HERs, which could have a positive impact on the sector's ability to manage and protect the historic environment.

Recommendations:

Historic environment professionals need to take this value into consideration in developing and enhancing research resources. Community-generated research is frequently seen in terms of the outcomes and the value of the process, but all-too-often the research value of the outputs has not been recognised.

Conclusion 2:

Dissemination of research is currently haphazard and largely contingent upon the focus of the researchers, existing networks of contact, and the funding of the project.

Local history groups are far less likely than those with a focus on archaeology to send research to HERs.

Recommendations:

The sector urgently needs to examine how the wide range of outputs generated by voluntary sector research can best be captured and incorporated into historic environment research resources in a systematic and efficient manner.

Conclusion 3:

The local history sector is largely disassociated from the process of creating and updating historic environment research resources. Relations between parts of the historic environment sector are at times unequal and unsatisfactory, with too little appreciation for the value of others' roles.

Recommendations:

Closer links between different services and bodies that are recipients of historic environment research outputs, including but not limited to HERs, Record Offices/Archives, local studies libraries and national heritage bodies, should be encouraged.

County-level working groups or forums to discuss and share information on voluntary and community-generated research received and in progress would help to disseminate information and help to prevent duplication of effort and the problem of information silos.

Conclusion 4:

Awareness of Research Frameworks is currently low in the voluntary and community sector. Efforts to improve accessibility and promotion are essential if wider use and more inclusive development of Research Frameworks is to be achieved.

Recommendations:

A concerted campaign to raise the profile of Research Frameworks is needed, ideally coordinated at a national level by Historic England, if efforts to strengthen national ownership are to be successful.

The presentation of the resulting documents needs attention: distillation into short accessible documents, available online, would help to encourage consultation of Research Frameworks at an early stage of project planning, and enable researchers to see how their work may contribute to broader research goals.

Further development of Research Frameworks should involve voluntary researchers as active participants. Their involvement, for the benefit of all parties, should be sought at an early stage of the process.

Conclusion 5:

Use of existing platforms for the integration of research outputs into research resources is limited by awareness and usability of those mechanisms. Besides the difficulties in using the system, there appears to be an issue with lack of awareness of the resources and platforms available.

Recommendations:

The sector should build on and support the progress made by the HERALD project in streamlining the process of using OASIS; use of OASIS should be promoted as an effective way to both ensure a lasting legacy for voluntary research and to ensure an efficient transmission of research outputs to relevant HERs.

Conclusion 6:

Access to, and development of, digital skills and expertise are major potential barriers to the dissemination and integration of valuable work into research resources

There remain few digital report templates, software tutorials or guides to digital publication readily available.

Recommendations:

The historic environment sector should actively seek to enhance the provision of support to voluntary researchers to enhance relevant digital skills.

Templates, software tutorials and lists of useful free and open-source software should be developed and made available online.

Conclusion 7:

Projects in receipt of professional support or advice are significantly more likely to produce outputs that are integrated into research resources.

Recommendations:

Efforts should be made to ensure that access to qualified and experienced professional practitioners is available to voluntary and community researchers.

External funding bodies should be made aware of the impact of funding and professional support on the value of resulting research to the historic environment.

It would be beneficial if seed-funding were more widely available for project development and/or mentoring at the planning stages of research. This initial outlay would lead to better

long-term value for money, as the survey results demonstrate that project outputs fare better with professional support.

Conclusion 8:

Voluntary and community researchers' ability to champion the cause of their local heritage is frequently undermined by the confusing nature of roles and responsibilities for heritage within the planning process.

The case for the importance of comprehensive research resources to the planning process is not universally appreciated. Increasing limitations on local authority capacity as a result of budget cuts are also perceived to be a threat to respondents' ability to effectively champion their heritage.

Recommendations:

There is an urgent need for clear pathways, guidance and transparency regarding the role of the historic environment in the planning process, and for the sector to improve communication of relevant bodies' roles and responsibilities.

The goal should be the provision of clear, concise, accessible information about the management of the historic environment, promoted and signposted through local networks.