Curation and Conceptualisation: Archaeological Theory and Curatorial Archaeology, strange bed fellows?

by MARTIN NEWMAN

This paper will first briefly consider the gulf between archaeological theory and curatorial archaeology in England. It will then look in greater depth at one particular example of curatorship, the local authority based Historic Environment Records (HERs). This will aim to demonstrate how HERs already utilise ideas which parallel the application of theory to archaeological fieldwork, in particular, the use of recursive and reflexive approaches to their management. It will also then go on to consider the potential contribution of HERs to archaeological theory. This will include how HERs are contributing to post-modern interpretations of the past, and the democratisation of the profession. In conclusion, this paper will consider the future scope for greater co-operation between archaeological theorists and curators to their mutual benefit.

Introduction, the gulf

'Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed' (St Luke [16: 26])

The inspiration for this paper comes from the CHAT (Contemporary History and Archaeology in Theory) conference at Bristol in 2003. There a paper delivered on behalf of Michael Shanks from the Traumwerk web site expressed the view that 'archaeology is not the discovery of the past and the primary role of the archaeologist is not stewardship' (Shanks 2003). Many who have spent their careers on the curatorial side of archaeology would dispute this statement, regarding work to preserve, record, and present archaeology for future generations as one of primary importance. After all it can be argued that all archaeology is ultimately funded by the public, whether directly through taxation, or indirectly as a cost passed on to consumers by commercial companies required by legislation to take heritage into account. Therefore all archaeology is public archaeology. At the same conference I gave a paper on breaking down intellectual barriers to access to heritage data on the internet (Newman 2007), after which I received criticism for 'dumbing down' archaeology.

These two incidences have lead me to consider why there is a divergence between theoretical archaeology and curatorial practice and whether there is some common ground and scope for development of what has been described as a mid-range theory to bridge the divide. Not in the form of an adaptation of Professor Giddens' 'third way' political theory (Giddens 1998) but the explanation of curatorial archaeology in theoretical terms and the development of theory as a result of curatorial practice. Why is there an apparent gulf? Is it that a post-processual archaeologist takes the view that only the individual excavator can properly interpret a feature where as curators are concerned with developer funded archaeology where time is too limited for interpretation at so detailed a level? Curators are therefore using others' data and interpretations stored in HERs. This is a deliberately simplified explanation to demonstrate perceived positions and much excellent developer funded work has been carried out.

From the other side is it that curators in local government are overstretched (Baker and Chitty 2002; Chitty 2002b) and have little time for the niceties of intellectual debate and conceptualisation? Why is it that the closest the majority of those managing HERs get to theory is something with practical application such as the CIDOC (Comité International pour la Documentation, Conseil International des Musées: Documentation Committee of the International Council of Museums) Conceptual Reference Model (Crofts et al 2005? Could it be that theoretical archaeology is associated with academia and the curatorial community would rather university teaching had greater emphasis on

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Cultural Resources Management, something there is increasing pressure to deliver (Hamilakis 2004: 287-309)? This divide in the profession is somewhat odd, as Aitchison notes, the fact that degree holding is a de facto prerequisite for entry into the profession, effectively makes all archaeologists academics (Aitchison 2004: 205).

It is, in part, the closeness of curatorial archaeology to developer funded fieldwork that has impeded its involvement in the academic side of the discipline. There has been considerable criticism of developer funded archaeology in academic publication, for example:

> 'Most archaeological reports have become terse statements of reductionist objectivity, written for developers in the same dry style as engineering and other consultants' reports.' (Chadwick 1998)

This has included some strongly worded criticism of the curatorial sector from those working in commercial archaeology with academic interests for example referring to 'the grotesque imperatives of professional bureaucrats' and 'Thatcherite archaeology' (Blinkhorn and Cumberpatch 1998), whereas official reviews have been more positive (Roger Tym & Partners and Pagoda Associates 1995). Other references have been made to issues concerned with curatorial archaeology and developer funding (for example Biddle 1994; Cumberpatch 2001; Chadwick 2000; Jones 2000: 6; Swain 1991). Blame is often levelled at those curatorial archaeologists who set the briefs for the fieldwork as a result of PPG16 (DoE 1990), using data from the HER for reference. An example of this was the debate at the IFA's Archaeology in Britain conference in 2004 at the Archaeological Science and Site Management session, where criticism was made of the limited level of environmental sampling required by briefs. The results of this fieldwork are entered back into the HER influencing future development control work. Is this closed loop as self-serving as this interpretation would suggest? I would suggest not. Some briefs are better than others and there are guidelines issued setting out what briefs should contain (IFA 2002). Irrespective of the requirements set out in briefs which set the 'level playing field' for contractors, in the modern environment of contractual archaeology all units are working to tight deadlines at as little cost as possible. This is essential in order to secure contract, this however has not prevented some excellent work being carried out that has influenced our interpretation of the past. Framework Archaeology for example has demonstrated how a research design can be integrated into a commercial environment (Andrews, et al. 2000: 525-530) and developer funded work can be contextualised through regional research designs.

Not everyone stands firmly on one side of the divide. Take the following quote from a European perspective for example 'archaeological research and archaeological heritage management are mutually dependant and inseparable' (Willems 1999: 2). An insight into the academia/curatorial divide is given by Francis Pryor when writing about his appointment as the Prehistoric Society's first conservation coordinator in 1985 'In those days scholarly societies such as ours were loath to get openly involved with politics. We saw our role as more as expert witnesses or objective, disinterested observers' (Pryor 2003: 369).

Could it be that we are all guilty of blinkering ourselves to our own narrow sector of the discipline rather than seeing the potential for crossovers from other areas?

Case study, Historic Environment Records

'An inventory of the ancient and historical monuments and constructions connected with or illustrative of the contemporary culture, civilisation or life of the people of England' (Marquess of Salisbury et al 1963: xxvii)

In order to examine these ideas I will look at one area of curatorial archaeology the Historic Environment Record (HER). HERs, formerly known as Sites and Monuments Records or SMRs, are the mainly local authority based records of archaeological sites, historic buildings etc used primarily for planning and development control. (Here HER is used throughout with two exceptions; where a quote is given or where a particular record which has not changed its name is referred to).There are currently circa 100 of these records in England, of which 85 (DCMS 2007: 33) can be considered primary (that is eliminating district level copies and incomplete Urban Archaeological Databases or UADs) using the criteria set out in the SMR Resources Assessment Report (Baker et al 2004: 7). Local authorities employ 11 percent of the archaeological workforce in the UK in 'Historic Environment Advice and Information Services' compared with the 12

percent engaged in 'educational and academic research' service across all organisations (Aitchison and Edwards 2003: 20).

Lee applies Nardi and O'Day's concept of information ecologies (Nardi and O'Day 1999) to heritage systems (Lee 2004: 182). Following Lee's argument I regard HERs as one such ecology and arguably the largest information ecology in English Archaeology. HERs contain 1.34 million records of heritage items (monuments and find spots), on average 7.5 records per square kilometre of England and it's territorial waters to the 12 nautical mile limit (based on a survey conducted for Heritage Counts in 2004). They cover a wide range of material as demonstrated by the 2002 Content and Computing Survey (Newman 2002). This showed a wide range of monument types being recorded and the majority of HERs recording sites up to the present day (Newman 2002: 10-11) though generally with greater selectivity for more recent heritage. Further recent updating of these statistics (English Heritage 2004b: 58-59) shows the percentage of HERs recording the different monument classes rising across the board (see figure 1).
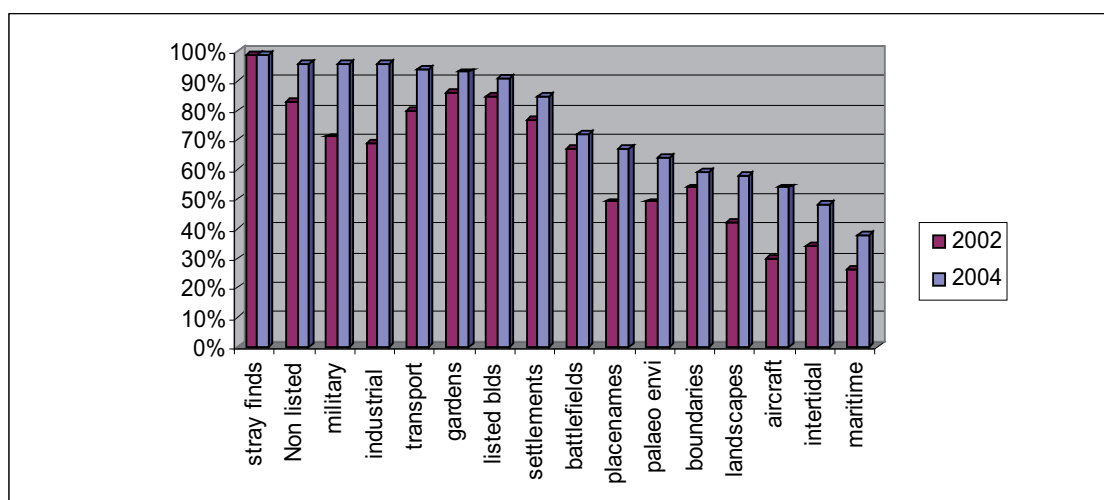

Figure 1: Monuments (other than traditional archaeological sites) recorded in HERs in 2002 and 2004 using data gathered for Heritage Counts.

So why is this area of curatorial practice not better integrated with the theoretical side of archaeology? Could it be that post-processual archaeologists view it as the role of the individual excavator to interpret sites and, as HERs are repositories of others' fieldwork, they are seen as moribund from an interpretive perspective? Are HERs viewed as outdated, having the sort of traditional culture-historical and descriptive approach that pre-dated processual archaeology? Or, is it their closeness to the development control process and developer funded archaeology which results in their lack of consideration? The results of fieldwork are entered back into the HER and inform future development control, in what could be seen as a self-serving closed loop. Another example of the criticism of developer funded archaeology comes from Francis Pryor:

> '...recent changes in planning law have led to an explosion in the number of archaeological projects being carried out before a development can start. Sadly, many of these take pace blindfolded, in a contextual vacuum; and budgetary constraints means it can be impossible to draw results together into a coherent story.' (Pryor 2003: 310)

Though Pryor in the same volume also recognises the importance of HERs, stating:

> 'Usually...SMRs are housed in county or city council offices, and their maintenance, now voluntary, will shortly become a statutory obligation on local authorities – and not before time. They invariably involve computers and are becoming both increasingly sophisticated and user friendly.' (Pryor 2003: 335).

This defence of HERs could, I believe, go further and I will attempt to demonstrate how through their use in planning and involvement with regional research frameworks, HERs can avoid fieldwork taking place in the

'contextual vacuum' to which Pryor refers.

Sometimes, however, it seems to simply be the case that the role of HERs is overlooked. For example, the seemingly definitive text book Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice (Renfrew and Bahn 2000) makes no mention of HERs. This is slightly ironic in that a year later it was Lord Renfrew who tabled an amendment to the Culture and Recreation Bill (HM Government 2001) attempting to get HERs made a statutory requirement of local Authorities (Renfrew 2001), something now proposed in the Draft Heritage Protection Bill (DCMS 2008a) and supporting guidance (DCMS 2008b).

Gilman has described these records as the 'Cinderellas of British archaeology' (Gilman, 2004) and in a sense he is correct, however, since the results of Government consultation on the future of HERs (DCMS 2004: 25-26) their profile has been given a boost. It seems therefore appropriate to suggest that their work can be re-evaluated in relation to current archaeological theory. To illustrate how such approaches might work, I will start by applying two theoretical concepts to HERs which are more commonly applied to archaeological fieldwork.

Recursivity, reflexivity and HERs

'All things...come round in a circle' (Marcus Aurelius Med. II Trans. Long)

Little has been published applying theory to curatorial practice, Darvill outlines four philosophies underpinning conservation approaches: resource conservation, preservationism, moral extensionism and radical environmentalism (Darvill 1993: 5-8). However I intend here to adopt a different approach. By comparison with curation there has been much more work published applying archaeological theory to excavation practice, with lateral thinking could not the same approaches be applied to curation? Hodder suggests a recursive approach to archaeology based on his work at Çatalhöyük (Hodder 1998: 98-102). Earlier I demonstrated how non-curatorial archaeologists could view the role of HERs in development control and developer funded archaeology as a self-serving closed loop. This model was an oversimplification, when properly expanded to better reflect their actual role (see figure 2) it starts to mirror the cycle described by Hodder. Data from HERs is used in development control in order to asses any threat to the historic environment and set briefs for work, the results of which are then entered back into the HER and are used to assist in assessing future casework. Through the lessons learned, these improve future briefs. This is similar to Hodder's explanation of how the results of digging one part of the site are entered into the site database and assist in assessing the next area to be excavated (Hodder 1998: 98-102). Additional loops can then be added to this recursive HER model to cover enhancement, research and outreach activities. This is not, however, how I suspect most curators working in HERs would be familiar with seeing their information flows depicted. A linear depiction of information flows would be more familiar, as shown in figure 3, which depicts the type of information flow commonly seen in HER Audits (English Heritage 2006: 15-16; Newman 2001a; 2001c: 6-7, 2003: 385-389). Both depictions are equally valid but it is the closing of the loops in figure 2 that demonstrates that these records are operating in a recursive fashion. Informing the Future of the Past sets out an idealised information flow and recommends the Event/Monument/Source logical data model for HERs (Gilman and Newman 2007: c2-c3). It further set out the theory behind this, beginning with an event which leads to sources which then lead to the update monuments, which may then be the subject of future events. (Gilman and Newman 2007: b17 figures 4 and c3 figure 10).

The process of undertaking an HER audit could also be viewed as following a linear model, however, as the results feed back into the HER to influence future enhancement through an action plan this can be seen as a side loop in the recursive model (English Heritage 2006). Similarly the audit programme itself is not as simple a linear undertaking as it might first appear as the results of earlier audits have influenced latter ones via a formal review (Newman 2001a). The draft standard for HERs, Benchmarks for Good Practice recommends an 'information audit on quinquennial basis' so they themselves will become a cyclical process (Chitty 2002a: 7).

Similarly parallels can be found with Chadwick's work on applying reflexivity to on site recording (Chadwick 2003: 97-117). Chadwick takes Hodder's definition of reflexivity as the ability to self-criticise (Hodder 1998), and interprets this for onsite recording as the questioning and critical examination of interpretations during excavation and the ability to admit to uncertainties and ambiguities. Taking the same interpretation of reflexivity, curatorial practice akin to reflexivity has
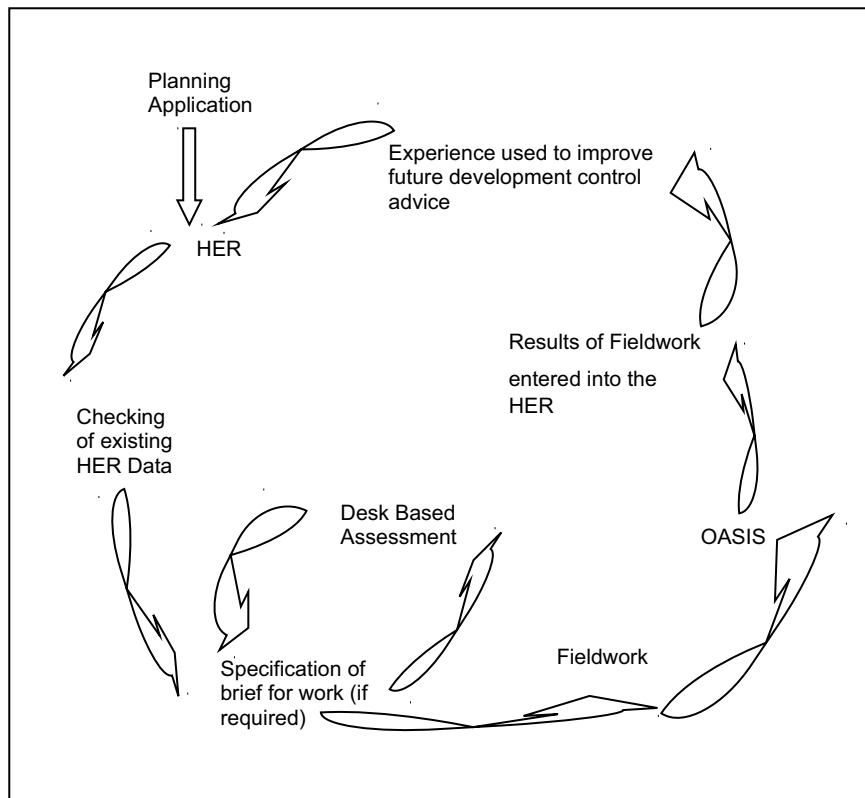
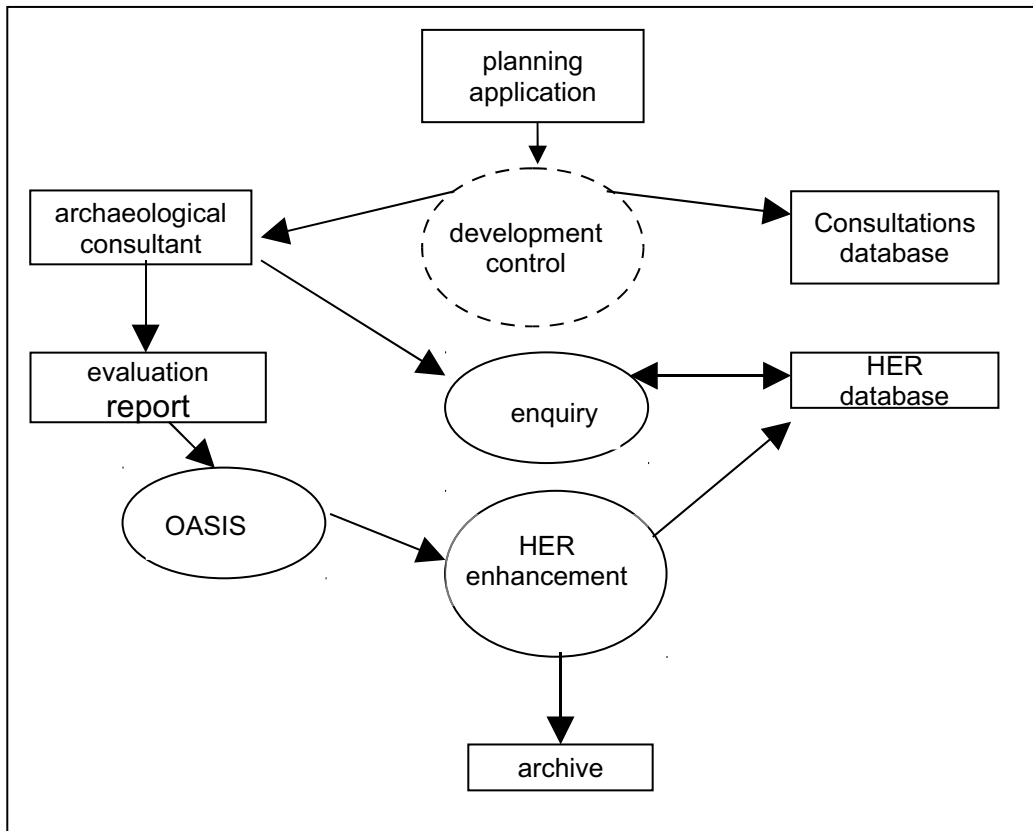Figure 2: An idealised recursive model for basic information flow in an HER.

Figure 3: A linear representation of HER information flows based on those included in HER Audits.

been standard practice in HERs for some time. The Baker Report recommended every HER to 'compile and maintain a history of its development' (Baker 1999: 5). Although, like the National Monuments Record (NMR), the HERs records originate from a common source (the OS card index and antiquity models). There has been considerable divergence as shown by a recent comparison exercise (English Heritage 2004a). These records are the product of those who, over the years, have compiled them and their individual preoccupations.

Much has been written about the evolution of HERs, I personally think my own contribution (Fraser and Newman, 2006: 29-31) is particularly good, but then I would say that, I'm biased and that's exactly the point I'm trying to make. As in the first paragraph where I considered my motivation for writing this paper so it is necessary to recognise the bias in existing records and in our own recording in order manage an HER. These records contain the potential for the recording of uncertainty and to suggest varying interpretations within free text field and to a lesser extent in structured indexing.

Chadwick (2003: 107-110) also assesses the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity within context sheets. I see parallels to this with the computerised data entry forms with their mix of structured indexing fields and free text. Indexing is a discipline in itself of which archaeological indexing is a specialty requiring interpretation and judgement to maximise retrievability. A post-prossesualist might argue that this is simply placing another layer of interpretation between the archaeology and the user, harking back to the days of the 'New Archaeology' which aimed to break a site down into number, measurements and facts, something which recent guidance on the inclusion of Archaeological Science information in HERs might be seen to confirm. I, however, see this as a far more subjective piece of interpretation with the objective ability to stand back and assess the decisions made. This has the opportunity to increase retrievability and understanding in order to better signpost to archive such as original context sheets, rather than place additional barriers between site and reader. Furthermore, it is the ability of these records to contain more than one referenced (and even contradictory) interpretation of a site that makes them a truly post-modern resource which accepts that there is not necessarily one true interpretation of the past. This is a theme I will return to latter when discussing public access and democratisation.

There are other ways in which HERs could benefit from a reflexive approach, 88 percent incorporate a GIS into their system (Newman 2002: 16) and recent research (although based on a smaller sample) suggests that this has risen to 93 percent (Bell and Bevin 2004: 12). This is fundamental to the incorporation of Historic Landscape Characterisation data (Dyson-Bruce, L. 2004). Gillings and Goodrick's work identifies failings in current GIS approaches that need to be addressed if a more reflexive approach to archaeological GIS is to be adopted (Gillings and Goodrick 1996). These issues will be very familiar to anyone using GIS in an HER and could, benefit from a more reflexive approach along the lines of the way that HER data contributes to regional research designs. As the editorial in Assemblage 8 pointed out:

> 'The debate between 'scientific' and 'post-processual' approaches has yet to run its course. One area that continues to be contentious is the ability of Geographical Information Systems to adequately describe and thus model human relationships with the environment.' (Neal and Oliver 2005)

This is a debate which HERs should be well placed to contribute to.

These issues aside, the self analysis required to manage an HER with its subjective and objective components and recursive approach to archaeology, is I believe an example of reflexivity and recursivity in curatorial practice which mirrors developments taking place in other areas of archaeology as mentioned earlier in relation to excavation.

Can Curatorial Archaeologists working in HERs contribute to the development of archaeological theory?

'All the sciences have now to pave the way for the future task of the philosopher' (Nietzsche 1887)

Is it possible for those involved in managing HERs to progress archaeological theory, or are they simply of use for development control and locked into a self perpetuating circle with developer funded fieldwork with no opportunity for contribution to conceptualisation? Are there areas where curators are advancing

theoretical ideas, possibly subconsciously and unnoticed? In terms of the presentation of a post-modern approach and the democratisation of archaeology I think so. The use of HERs for research has been the subject of a post-graduate study by Robinson (1999: 10). At the start of his research he noted that only five percent of enquiries were classified as research. So is there scope for the reinterpretation of HER material by archaeologists trawling data from HERs rather than troweling soil? I think there is and I am not alone, the following view being expressed on behalf of the Archaeology Data Service, a body with a remit to support higher education:

> 'There seems little doubt that carefully considered collaboration between SMRs and the higher education sector could bring considerable benefits for both' (Kilbride 2000: 12).

As mentioned earlier it is skilled indexing that maximises retrieval ensuring researchers using HER data obtain the most relevant information and manipulate their results. HERs can be seen as signposts to archive material held elsewhere rather than archives in their own right. They facilitate access to original material and reinterpret it for dissemination to a wider audience. Here curatorial practice can be seen as leading the way in what had been previously identified as an area of weakness:

> 'The problem with allowing a wide range of interpretive descriptions on record sheets is that it complicates later computerised searches and retrieval. It may thus be better to have a hierarchy of terms from the very general and codified to the more specific and idiosyncratic.' (Hodder 1998: 94)

A thesaurus of archaeological site types was first published by English Heritage and RCHME seven years prior to this quote (RCHME and English Heritage 1992). This has since been expanded into the Thesaurus of Monument Types to including buildings (English Heritage 2002a). This is now available on-line and continually updated together with other heritage thesauri such as building materials and components. These thesauri standardise terminology and are very complex utilising a poly-hierarchical structure. They have been designed to facilitate indexing at a very specific level whilst enabling retrieval using very broad terms (see figure 4). There is wide acceptance by HERs of this and other controlled terminologies supporting the MIDAS (Monument Inventory Data Standard (Lee 1998)) units of Information, recommended by FISH (the Forum on Information Standards in Heritage) via INSCRIPTION (www.fish-forum.info/inscript.htm). Conformity to standards developed by FISH are crucial for interoperability within the HER community and for exchanging data with other information resources (Lee 2003: 6).
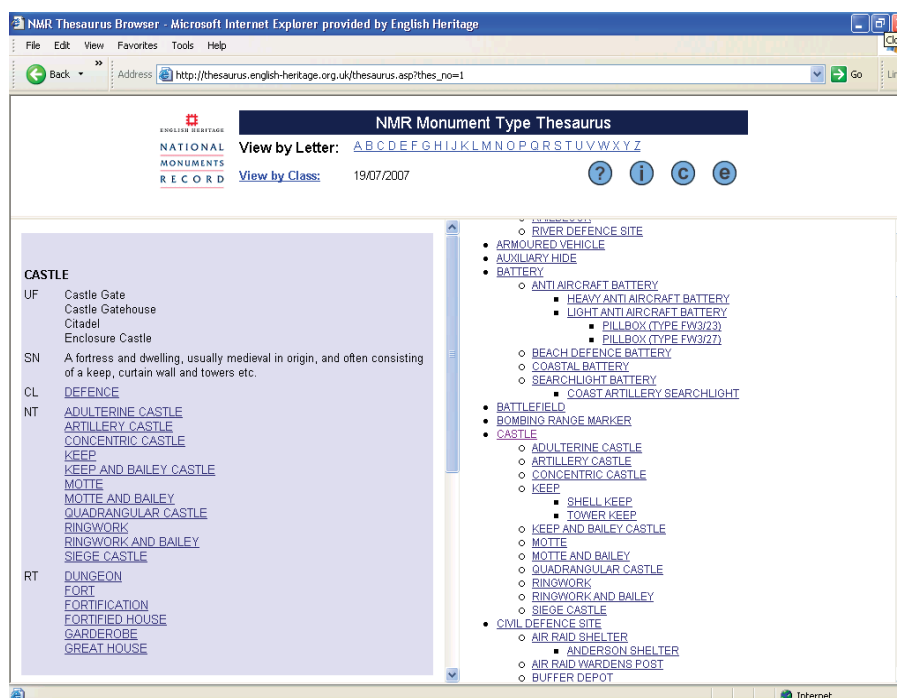

Figure 4: The Thesaurus of Monument Types as it appears on the English Heritage website. © English Heritage 2007.

Gardin discusses the duality between systems for modelling and narrative and a third culture option (Gardin 2003: 5-11). HERs, with their combination of description and data capable of being used for further analysis and modelling, could put them in a position to further progress the middle way for information systems.

The CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model, was briefly mentioned earlier with its ability to model reification (statements about statements). This goes further than the usual concept of metadata, supporting the capture of multiple alternative propositions about facts within databases (Doer 2003: 75-92). The ability to record where interpretations are made and by whom could be used to promote reflexivity and post-modernism in any archaeological databases, not just HERs.

A public record, post-modernism and the democratisation of archaeology

'We demand rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty!' (Douglas Adams 1979: 130. Vroomfondel, a philosopher, addressing Lunkwill, a computer programmer.)

Since Morris commented that 'we archaeologists are neurotically possessive of archaeology' (Morris 1993: 9-13), things have changed. Today HERs are increasingly being seen as a public record, the last HER requiring academic references before granting access removed this barrier some time ago. HERs are developing on-line versions as part of outreach programmes funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). This is in addition to those with information available via the Archaeology Data Services (ADS). This raises many issues concerned with security, authority, risk to sites, copyright, database right and the intellectual barriers to access caused by data written for specialists by specialists (Newman 2007). As Hodder observes 'there are dangers that the internet will simply translate old forms of elite knowledge into new forms' (Hodder 1999). These issues are, however, not insurmountable through friendly retrieval interfaces such as PastScape (Pringle 2001: 329-337; Byrne and Pringle 2003: 3-4) and content mediation utilising recasting, glossaries and introductions to topics. These approaches are enabling HERs to become cognitive systems as well as information repositories (Newman 2007).

This dissemination can give users the opportunity to feedback information to the record as never before. There has been discussion within the HER community of taking this a stage further developing an interactive and evolving resource that enables users to record their own reminiscences and feelings about monuments which will enable them to share their experiences with others alongside the HER information. Such a web 2.0 element could take the form of comment posting or a wiki complimentary to the professionally maintained HER record. In addition to on-line versions of their databases some HERs are providing additional mediated content on specific topics in response to areas of interest highlighted by users, for example the themed essays available on SEAX (a web-site from Essex County Council) which includes access to the HER, http://unlockingessex.essexcc.gov.uk (Wood 2004: 24-27). Feedback forms enable users to suggest other topics for future essays. Hypertext linking to glossaries, such as has been done in Durham and Northumberland's Keys to the Past www.keystothepast.info, which then themselves contain hyperlinks that enable users to move from narrative to read in a non-linear fashion of their own making. This variety of content and access comes back to my earlier point about the potential for HERs to be a truly post-modern record. It also adds another loop to the recursive model for HERs outlined earlier. The wealth of archaeological data available via the internet shows the variety of views and interpretations of the past and demonstrates the current level of interest in the past along with more quantifiable research such as the MORI poll on attitudes to heritage conducted for English Heritage (MORI 2000). Additionally every HER applying for HLF funding for outreach programmes has to demonstrate the requirement via audience research (HLF 1999; Newman 2001b: 4-5; English Heritage 2002b, English Heritage and ALGAO 2005).

This process, which HERs have been going through interacting with interested general public as well as professional users makes HERs ideally placed to enter into a major theoretical debate, 'Whose past is it anyway?'

Joffe has stated that 'archaeology has an identity problem' (Joffe 2003: 77-95), in my opinion, this is growing partly through the increased public (and media) interest in the discipline. I would argue that one area which is being pulled harder and in more directions than most is the HER. At the same time HERs are seeking to satisfy the needs of three very different and contrasting stakeholder groups:

Professionals Development control archaeologists and conservation officers making recommendations on planning applications and setting briefs for fieldwork, consultants working for developers, owners and managers (for example with the Agri-Environment Scheme).

Academic Researchers Students, researchers and commercial archaeologists undertaking centrally funded research projects as well as those involved in drawing up plans such as Regional Research Frameworks.

General Public HERs are a public record and are increasingly being used by members of the general public for their own research carried out to satisfy their own personal interest. Also included with this group are schools, with resources being tailored to support the national curriculum.

A key part of meeting this demand is the creation of online versions of HERs mentioned earlier. A recent critique of HERs on the internet by John Schofield included a quote from an exercise undertaken by one of his students at Southampton University that summed up the benefits of HERs on the internet:

> 'HERs open the field of interpretation outside the academic into public space. The visual re-placement of landscape and location (and sites within them) in a database format illustrates the more active mediating roles of heritage at different levels...This is important for archaeological research as it fosters a more critical, inclusive and anthropological outlook, relating not only to the remains themselves, but also to the contemporary people who give them significance, a fundamental consideration in the context of managing heritage.' (Schofield 2004: 11, quoting a student at Southampton University)

This can be seen as HERs taking forward the democratisation of archaeology and the past in general. There are both advantages and risks to this approach, letting the general public influence recording and enhancement priorities could be at the expense of identified weaknesses in the record shown by audits or priorities set by academic priorities through regional research agendas. Could this approach run the risk of priorities being set by the ethnocentrism of current society to the benefit of more recent periods but to the detriment of say, prehistoric periods which may seem more remote, and less relevant to the lives of people today? As the Director of the Institute of Ideas noted:

> 'People who know about heritage are so defensive about their role that they give over decision-making about what matters to those who don't.' (Fox 2004: 9).

Or could the greater involvement of local people with their heritage result in empowerment, greater appreciation/value and therefore aid their protection? As mentioned earlier, the ability of HERs to be multivocal, containing varying interpretations of a monument could make them a true example of post-modernism. However, there are many interpretations of our past which have little validity but are held by many people, as attested to by the popularity of books by authors such as Graham Hancock and Erich Von Daniken. Many modern pagans see a direct lineage between their beliefs and those of the builders of Britain's prehistoric ritual sites although research indicates otherwise (Hutton 1999). Should these views of our past find their way into HERs in the interest of inclusiveness? There has already been one incident of an HER facing a complaint to the local government ombudsman from a local amateur that his interpretations of monuments were not being included in the record. Should a public record be written by the public? The counter-productive effects of unrestrained post-modernist cultural relativism on other academic disciplines have been much commented on (for example Wheen 2004: 78-116) in particular in relation to the sciences (Dawkins 2003: 17-22, 55-62). In archaeology, however, there have been some practical benefits, but how far should post-modernism be taken by our profession? Post-modernism has encouraged multiple views of the past, this has promoted greater sensitivity to the experiences of groups such as women or ethnic minorities, but also, as Bintliff notes, there is the risk of having to include the interpretations of extremists with views of the past which would be considered by many offensive, for example, racists (Bintliff 1991: 276). However, as Hodder observes in a chapter on Archaeology and the Post-Modern, 'a fragmented past deconstructs historical connections and disempowers those groups who try to use the past to further their social strategies' (Hodder 1992: 278). So, how do we decide which views should be included in a record and which should not? An important issue here is one of authority especially as these records play an important role in the planning process, should contributions from the general public be held separately in the database equivalent of an appendix? Who has intellectual property rights to a record compiled from multiple sources? All of which brings me back to the question: whose past is it? Surely this is a debate to which the experiences of HER managers can contribute.

Conclusions

'Working together towards the same end' (Simpson et al 1989, Oxford English Dictionary definition of co-operation)

I believe curatorial archaeology can be interpreted in theoretical terms and that the way HERs are managed is a good example of this. Additionally, this sector has much to offer theoretical debates and the academic sector in general, particularly in relation to the public perception of our profession and the past. HERs are now, through their involvement with a wide range of users, in a position to put themselves at the centre of the debate about the ownership of the past. So maybe it is time for a critical theoretical review of their position and value. In the same way as HERs have become more holistic in their interpretation of heritage maybe archaeology should be more all embracing as a discipline. How can we have a dialogue with the past if we cannot converse with each other, or contribute to a holistic approach to heritage if we do not have an inclusive approach to our profession? Possibly now, in view of the changing perception of the past, it is time for the profession in its widest sense (including curators, contractors, consultants and academics) to work together and engage with current popular interest.

Many, I am sure, will disagree with my interpretations of reflexivity and recursivity and their application to HERs. To concentrate on this, however, would be to miss the main point of this paper. I did not set out to provide answers, neither is this simply an impassioned plea for greater understanding of curatorial archaeology, instead, I have attempted to provoke thought about the way curatorial archaeology can be viewed from a theoretical viewpoint, to suggest that a theoretical framework can be found for curatorial practice and to consider whether curatorial archaeology can contribute to theoretical debates. Although I have taken my examples from HERs, I believe parallels can be drawn with other aspects of curatorial archaeology. I hope that this paper will stimulate discussion and aid the development of curatorial archaeological theory.

Acknowledgements

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