DAY IN THE LIFE OF A HERO

July 29, 2011   Helen Wells   Commercial Archaeology,Community Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011, Museum Archaeology   Anthropology, Antiquities Scheme officer,Archaeological record, Archaeological sub-disciplines, Archaeology,Archaeology Warden, county council archaeologist, County Hall,Excavation, geophysics, Groby, Helen Wells, Historic Environment Record, Historic Environment Record Officer, HTML, Hunt Stables,industrial site, Leicester University, Leicestershire County Council,Massachusetts, PDF, Portable Antiquities Scheme officer, Public archaeology, Rutland, Rutland County Council, Senior Planning Archaeologist, Spit, the Heritage, Tolethorpe Hall, Trial trenching,Warden, Wendy Scott

My name is Helen Wells and I'm the Historic Environment RecordOfficer (HERO) at Leicestershire County Council. There are archaeologists here in both the Museums and Planning sections – I'm based in the latter. I do work with the Museums archaeologists though, including Wendy Scott (the Portable Antiquities Scheme officer).   My job is basically to look after a database of all the county's known archaeological remains and historic buildings. It's a fascinating job – I've been here since 2004 and I'm still enjoying it!

Before I start describing my day, I thought I'd give a bit of background about how I became a county council archaeologist. As far back as I can remember I've had an interest in history and archaeology. My Dad used to take us to as many castles, Roman villas and old houses as he could. My GCSEs included History and Latin, my A-levels included History and Classical Civilisation, and from there I went to Leicester University to do an Archaeology BA. Following that I had a couple of years off to save up my money, then went back to Leicester to do an MA in Professional Archaeological Practice. As part of this I had a placement working on the Leicester City HER. When my MA was over I volunteered to do more work with the HER and that led to a proper job at Leicestershire County Council. There aren't many HER jobs so I know I'm really lucky to have ended up with one…

County Hall, where I work!

The HER is mainly used as a planning tool. Whenever people want to build new things or alter buildings their application is checked against the HER, to see whether or not there are likely to be archaeological remains present, or to see if a building is of historic interest. If it looks like there will be an impact on buried archaeological remains or an interesting building then the planning archaeologists recommend that a 'programme of work' is carried out. Any new information that comes out of this work, whether it's building recording, trial trenching or geophysical survey, is added to the HER.

The HER is also used by members of the public. The information is used by community groups and individuals to help them with their fieldwork. New information from fieldwalking etc. is added to the HER. Students ask various questions for their research. At present public enquiries are free, though commercial archaeologists are charged.

So, I'm hoping that my 'day in the life' will reflect all of these areas. The variety of things I do in a day is one of the things that I find most appealing about my job. Hopefully you won't find it too boring!

My (slightly messy) desk

First thing to do in the morning is check e-mails. Today it seems to have been quiet overnight, so there's not much to deal with. And so it's on the first task of the day!
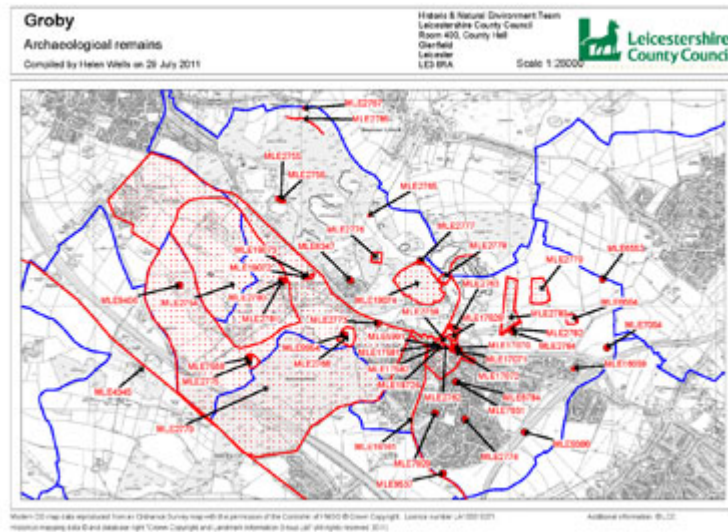
The things I do can pretty much be divided into three categories:

. Inputting new information onto the HER
. Outputting data to various people
. Data cleaning

The first task I have to do today is an outputting task. It's an area proposed for woodland planting – they want to know if there are any archaeological remains that could be damaged by tree planting. I start off by looking at the mapping on my computer and checking to see if there's anything there, but it soons becomes obvious that some of the data's a bit dodgy. The next step is to get the old pre-computer maps out, and the old summary sheets, and check the sites. With that done, I make maps showing the archaeological remains and also one for the Historic Landscape Character, export a gazetteer with the site summary information, and write a quite bit of advice. The site does have one fairly interesting site – Iron Age enclosures with a field system, showing as cropmarks – so there's a bit to say.

While I'm still writing my woodland response the Senior Planning Archaeologist returns from a site visit. An excavation has found a Roman industrial site and what look like two human burials. We have a chat about it and do a bit of HER tweaking. I'll do everything properly when we receive the final report. It looks like a great site though.

The next task is more outputting, this time for an Archaeology Warden. They'd like an up to date HER map and gazetteer for Groby. The system we use is called HBSMR (a database with Mapinfo integrated). It's the most popular software for HERs. Using it I select all the records in the parish of Groby, separate them into two categories (buildings and archaeological remains), create pdf maps and an html gazetteer. That done, I e-mail the information off to the Warden. Hopefully he'll find it useful!

Map of the archaeological records in Groby parish

After lunch I have a look at a couple of e-mails about a village called Great Bowden. I've been sent some documents relating to the Fernie Hunt – conveyancing documents for Fernie Hunt Stables and Nether Green Farm. They're definitely worth noting on the records, so I've put the information onto the HER and e-mailed to say thanks. Hopefully at some point the new info will be loaded onto the Heritage Gateway (where our data is made public online) though we're having some IT issues at the moment…

The next job is reading a geophysical survey report sent in by a commercial company and adding it to the HER. Having read it and examined the prinouts, it doesn't look tremendously exciting. There is one area that might have a group of earthworks, so I've made that into a record on the system. The next step is trial trenching, so we'll see if it really is archaeology or if something else has caused the geophysics readings. With the report logged on the system and the new 'monument' record created, the report gets filed away into the reference library.

Next is a bit of data enhancement. For several years I've been cleaning up data so that it can go onto the Heritage Gateway. As of now (14:03pm) there are 16,589 records on the database and 10,687 are cleaned up so that they can go public (64%). 115 parishes have been finished but due to the aforementioned IT problems only 109 have been uploaded so far – you can see which have been checked and uploaded on the county council website. The next parish I've decided to do is Little Casterton in Rutland. (Although we're Leicestershire County Council we also look after the HER for Rutland County Council.)

The enhancement work isn't creating perfect records, but it should get rid of the most serious errors. The main sources are the old maps and paper summary sheets, though I also use books (such as 'The Medieval Earthworks of Rutland', which is survey work carried out by one of the Museums staff, and Pevsner) and (sometimes) deeper paper files.

Little Casterton has sites such as:

A Neolithic burial found 17′ 6″ down during quarrying in 1905 (HER Ref. No. MLE5466)

A deserted settlement called Tolethorpe, once the site of a medieval hospital and chantry (HER Ref. No. MLE5473)

Prehistoric cropmarks such as enclosures and a ring ditch (HER Ref. No. MLE5471)

Tolethorpe Hall, a C16th/C17th country house (HER Ref. No. MLE5477)

An Anglo-Saxon oven, probably for drying grain, found during excavation in 2010 (HER Ref. No. MLE18738)

Excavation of an Anglo-Saxon oven, Little Casterton (2010)

By the end of the day everything in the parish has been checked, so when we do the next upload it'll go onto the Heritage Gateway.

So, that's a day in my life. It might not seem overly exciting, but I love the variety and the chance to sit here and read site reports about interesting things. And I like the job satisfaction from tidying up data and putting it online for everyone to see. When described, the job of a HERO is never going to seem as amazing as digging (I wonder if that's why we've been called HEROs, to make it sound less boring?), but someone has to look after all the information – otherwise there's not much point doing archaeological fieldwork!