

The Leicestershire sites and monuments record at the crossroads

by R. P. Jarrett

The practice of keeping central records on all aspects of a county's archaeological knowledge is one which has come into being comparatively recently. Before the 1960s, the accumulation of information was dispersed amongst many bodies, e.g. county archaeological units, museums, universities, county planning departments, and sometimes even private individuals. The 'old archaeology', being more concerned with artefacts, did at least recognise the need to bring together information for a given geographical area; the obsession with distribution maps shows this very clearly. With the post-war development boom it became increasingly necessary to assess, quickly and easily, from one given record, the archaeological potential of any given place. Thus the concept of the Sites and Monuments Record (hereafter SMR) was born.

Every county in England now holds central records in this way, although the completeness, quality and accessibility of the information held varies considerably. Leicestershire can be justly proud of its SMR, being not only one of the first to establish such a record, but also to complete a computerisation programme (with which the writer has been involved from the beginning). In view of this achievement it now seems an opportune moment to publish this account and to set out the possibilities for the future.

The Leicestershire Sites and Monuments Record, which is housed at Jewry Wall Museum, had its inception with the late Frank Cottrill, who started the Leicester City Museum Topographical Index in 1938. A major element in the building of the record was the inclusion of Ordnance Survey archaeological information, which then formed the basis of the early record. Between 1969 and 72, J. B. Whitwell, then County Field Archaeologist, introduced a card index conflating the City and the County records. R. A. Rutland, the present Keeper of Archaeology, later collated this information into one card per site, indexed by modern parishes. In 1976 a full-time Archaeological Survey Officer (Peter Liddle) was appointed and a complete review of the SMR was carried out. A4-sized site summary sheets were used for the first time and the coverage of the whole county was brought up to date. Unfortunately, the city was not covered in this way; the task was enormous and had to wait until a full-time post was created in order to undertake the work. In June 1985 the writer was appointed as SMR Assistant, funded by grant-aid from the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, with the primary responsibility of computerising the whole record. Computerisation of the City records was achieved by the aid of a grant from Leicester City Council. An atlas of the City of Leicester, currently under preparation for publication by the writer, is based on material generated from the computerised SMR.

The Leicestershire record contains a comprehensive coverage of information on all known sites to the end of the medieval period. A 'site' in this context consists of any archaeological information which is considered to be of sufficient value to be given an SMR number. This could be evidence of occupation or a single artefact find spot, although generally most unprovenanced finds are not thought to be of sufficient significance to be so recorded. For practical purposes a date of AD 1600 has been set for

the end of the medieval period; this is the period covered by the collections at the Jewry Wall Museum. The two exceptions to this are post-medieval watermill and windmill sites which may occupy older sites. Later information is held at Newarke Houses Museum (Social History) and the Technology Museum (Industrial History).

The scope and quality of the SMR is demonstrated by the fact that the records range from single artefacts found in fields or domestic gardens, through to the results of professionally organised excavations. Although the former may only be of limited use (except for researchers of that particular type of artefact) they may be the sole indication of a site's being of archaeological significance and therefore of prime importance in the event of there being building development in the area. Where there is no field monument surviving, documentary evidence is included in the record. The monument may have been destroyed or, more importantly, there is a suspected occupation site which has never been confirmed.

The additions to the record contributed by the Leicestershire Museums Field Survey team and many amateur field-work groups, along with the contribution of the results of field-walking, are also of prime importance to our knowledge of the landscape and have been recorded elsewhere (Liddle 1985). Survey work is constantly being carried out on earthworks and crop-marks and, although this field-work is widely published, the SMR is the only place where current information may be found. Records of listed buildings are, at present, only covered in piecemeal fashion, this is being rectified and the computerised record, which is at present being compiled at County Hall, will eventually be integrated into the SMR.

The quality and quantity of the information which is contained in the SMR varies tremendously. Details of well-recorded excavations and watching briefs are included, alongside the barest of details which may be all there is available. These details may consist of newspaper cuttings, oral evidence, or an ancient reference to the finding of archaeological evidence. The occasional reference can raise a smile, e.g. in 1869 'an ancient wall was seen crossing the High Street' and gloomy field-workers found worked flint 'in a depression'!

The construction of the Sites and Monuments Record

The SMR comprises three main parts, the paper record, maps, and the machine record.

(i) The paper record

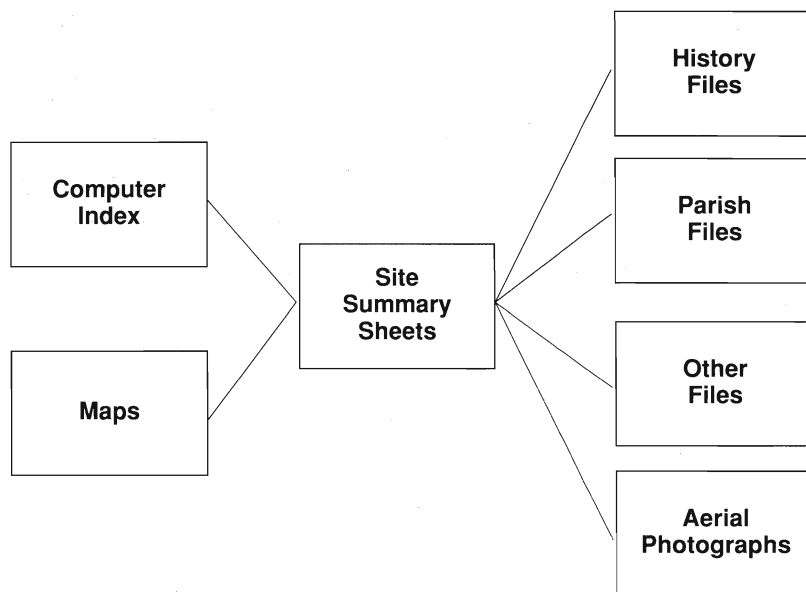
This consists of a set of A4-sized Site Summary Sheets on which is recorded everything that is known about the site. New sheets were designed in 1985 to be compatible with the classes of information contained in the machine record. A back-up system of parish and history files is also kept. The parish files contain a wide range of material on sites whilst the history files contain only accessed material. There are, in addition to these three categories, a miscellaneous collection of files which have been established over the years. The contents of these vary widely and may contain information not found elsewhere.

(ii) Maps

The maps comprise a complete series of Ordnance Survey 1:10,560 maps (the equivalent of the 1:10,000 metric scale). These maps, which mark every known site, are in the process of being revised using standardised symbols. It is on these maps that the system of assigning SMR numbers is based. The medieval town area of the City of

Leicester is covered by a series of maps to the scale 1:1250 compiled in 1988–89. These maps use the same conventionalised symbols as the county maps and have the site and finds marked in colour on an acetate overlay. Archaeological Constraint Maps were issued to District authorities several years ago and it is hoped that a set showing current information will be issued in the near future. These constraint maps, which are issued to planners, indicate sites on which it is important that consultation is made if a development threat occurs.

Additional to these maps is an extensive collection of aerial photographs comprising both colour transparencies and prints. These have been accumulated over many years, some having been taken by the museum survey team and some by James Pickering, an experienced pilot who has been taking aerial photographs since before the last war. The features which these photographs show are mainly crop-marks, some of which are faint and difficult to interpret, and earth-works, which are also, where faint, best viewed from the air.



1. Flow-chart showing make-up of the SMR

(iii) The machine record

The most recent and, in some respects the most important, element of the record is the one now contained on computer. The County Council main-frame computer is used for this with the MAPPER software package. Although not specifically designed for SMR usage an adaptation of MAPPER offers a fully searchable record which is available quickly and easily.

The record consists of an index and list of sites (and artefacts, as described above). There are twenty fully searchable fields on the index which has been designed to use as few abbreviated keywords as possible. The means that the record can be read without the necessity of having access to the manual. The four most important fields are the SMR

	BLABY	CHARNWOOD	HARBOROUGH	HINCKLEY AND BOSWORTH	LEICESTER (CITY)	MELTON	NORTH-WEST LEICESTERSHIRE	OADBY AND WIGSTON	RUTLAND
Number of individual sites	379	564	159	844	580	680	398	53	622
Nos of lines of information									
Buildings	45	101	198	73	40	107	95	5	96
Structures(Structures, below ground features etc.)	43	79	103	44	142	76	45	3	89
Earthworks	72	120	417	133	27	237	134	2	168
Cropmarks	76	83	185	115	13	115	107	4	197
Finds	427	738	1458	300	2013	946	339	85	646
Documentary info only	79	159	280	150	93	155	125	8	123
Prehistoric	66	85	198	49	27	101	55	5	106
Palaeolithic	3	8	3	2	3	1	1	-	2
Mesolithic	13	28	154	17	5	41	34	1	30
Neolithic	21	58	130	17	30	41	23	1	37
Bronze Age	48	405	90	45	31	102	36	7	82
Iron Age	29	45	78	29	26	80	66	4	59
Roman	179	240	492	124	1312	336	117	33	272
Anglo-Saxon	32	111	153	11	46	113	19	20	131
Saxo-Norman	21	30	79	15	41	74	21	-	62
Medieval	240	408	887	351	596	605	352	22	440
Post Medieval	52	114	223	125	40	136	106	9	101
Undated	62	107	268	73	217	106	58	5	87

Table 1. Examples of Computerised Information on Types of Site by District (January 1990)

number, period, site type, and the present form of the site (e.g. earthwork). Some fields, such as geology and site-area, have been established, although as yet they contain little information; this is because of constraints of time and readily available information. For simplicity, types of pottery are not recorded but are subsumed under the generic keyword 'pottery', qualified only by period (e.g. Roman). Artefact types are also listed in the singular with a number on the right-hand side of the site-type field indicating the actual number found. The computer record enables a print-out of any particular area or type of find to be produced quickly and easily. Numeric calculations of different site-types are also easily carried out (see Table 1).

There are many advantages in having this information readily available in one central place, perhaps the most important of which is its use as a planning tool. All planning applications for the county of Leicestershire are monitored at Jewry Wall Museum where, with the computerised record, it is easy to establish a threat to archaeological remains if planning permission is applied for. The planning applications cover both housing and industrial sites, although other types of landscape disturbance such as sand and gravel extraction, quarrying, road schemes, and so on, are also watched. Researchers from many backgrounds are also regular users of the SMR, the computer print-out providing a good starting point for further study.

Future developments

With the record in its computerised form now complete, this is an important time to reflect on the achievements of the Leicestershire SMR and to ascertain how it may best go forward in providing a service to the public in the future. As described above, both the county and the city of Leicester are covered by the paper record, maps and photographs and a retrievable machine-based index. When the computer record was designed in 1985 this goal was regarded as a sufficient objective. Subsequent technological advances have developed, and many counties throughout the country are now using them with the SMRs. Map digitising systems for example are now in use and laser discs and video-still cameras which provide instant colour pictures of artefacts will soon be available. There are also fully integrated packages, such as GIS (Geographic Information Systems), which include the input of colour photographs, maps and plans. Such a system would transform a basic index into a complete record with the saving of a great deal of time which is at present spent on manual searching. This sophisticated technology may seem to be almost unattainable in 1990 but, as has been the case with earlier electronic developments, within a short space of time it will become a commonplace.

It is imperative that the record is updated constantly as new information comes in. The SMR is central in the provision of essential protection and conservation of archaeological remains and the establishment of a framework within which future generations will be able to interpret Leicestershire's past history.

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