



Making History: the Once and Future Roles of the Royal Commissions

Jennifer Stewart

Introduction

1. The Royal Commissions (of England, Scotland, and Wales) were established by Royal Warrant in 1908 with the stated aim of the preservation of antiquities by inventory. Since that time the Commissions have continued making significant contributions in heritage information through the collection, curation and management of archaeological information, as well as expanding their dissemination and access facilities and roles. The following short notes, which form this section, will look at how the Commissions are addressing the challenges of the electronic age. This is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the totality of the work of the three Commissions, but to describe work in progress germane to the theme of archaeological computing.

2. This is the first time that all three Commissions have organised a joint session at the Computer Applications in Archaeology conference. Next year, the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of all three Commissions, an Anniversary CD will be launched to illustrate the current work of the three Commissions as well as looking to future challenges.

3. During this century the role of the three Commissions has gradually changed and evolved into the following three main activities.

3.1 Data collection: either by acquiring physical collections of records and images or via survey work. Robert Bewley of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) describes the work of the National Mapping Programme, which since its inception in 1988, includes all archaeological features seen on aerial photographs. As he notes the NMP is not just about creating maps and images, but to aid the understanding of the archaeological sites in their landscape context.

Hazel Riley in her article describes recent work utilising Global Positioning System (GPS)

to survey and record the archaeological sites within the Exmoor National Park. This landscape-based approach has ensured integration not only into the RCHME's text-based database but also into the National Park's GIS.

3.2 Information management: all three separate National Monuments Records carry out this activity. Chris Watkins in his paper describes the processes whereby the English Commission prepared a new strategy to guide its future use and development of information systems and information technology, to support the changing business needs of the organisation and to develop the business benefits which will accrue from an IS Strategy. Bryne in her article describes current and planned developments to increase public access

facilities into the National Monuments Records of Scotland. The underlying aim is this work as she notes is to present the user with logically connected pieces of information while making the underlying 'mechanics' invisible. An innovative pilot is mentioned which will look at ways of managing queries across multiple distributed databases using metadata as an intermediary across the Web.

Loretta Nicolich describes the situation in Wales, where the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales is gathering and exchanging data with the Welsh SMRs, CADW and the National Parks to set up a national index of every known site in Wales, called ENDEX. ENDEX is part of the Extended National Database (END) of Wales, which also provides a forum to establish core data standards and database structures. She also sets out the Welsh Commission's plans in imaging and GIS – while such plans will greatly facilitate their public access, she rightly underlines the need for long term management strategies for the future preservation of digital data.

3.3 Dissemination of this information can be facilitated through the Commissions' public search facilities, by conventional publications and increasingly, by electronic means. Robin Taylor in his paper describes the English Commission's experience in setting up its Web site (www.rchme.gov.uk), where electronic access is seen as an active response to the challenge of the information society. RCHME's Web site was launched in October 1995 and acts as an electronic brochure for the Commission's work and information services. He notes the interesting statistic that the resource required to set up the Web site and provide it for one year is equivalent to the cost of producing one printed book, this making more information available for less cost.

4 Within these three main activities, the main challenges for the three Commissions in archaeological computing include the following:

increasing digital access (and especially meeting the demand for digital products);

balancing a complex plural funding arena based on central government funding, partnerships, Lottery bids and income generation from the selling of services and informational assets while still maintaining free access at point of access;

maintaining technical innovation and integration with existing systems;

managing complex copyright issues.

Neil Beagrie carried out for the RCHME a wide-ranging review of its rights management procedures and the implications of current and proposed changes to copyright

legislation. This survey was viewed as critical underpinning to RCHME's plans for developing its 'Electronic Commission' by increasing electronic access. As he notes in his paper, all archaeologists now have to address copyright as part of a project bid and when drawing up contracts, and he reinforces that copyright needs to be addressed right at the beginning of a project rather than at the end.

5. This summary of the work in progress within the three Commissions shows their commitment not only to archaeological computing but also to one of their main roles, of reaching a wider, national and global audience through the means of electronic access.

Contact details

Jennifer Stewart
Director of Information Services and Development
RCHME
National Monuments Record Centre
Great Western Village
Kemble Drive
Swindon SN2 2GZ
UK
email: swncsd@rchme.gov.uk