



Archaeological fieldwork by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England: a brief history

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The Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (like those in Scotland and Wales) was established in 1908 to 'prepare an Inventory of the ancient and historical monuments and constructions...of the people of England from earliest times, and to specify those which seem most worthy of preservation' (Royal Warrant 1908). The Commissioners decided that the inventory should be a county list in published book form but it immediately became apparent that the inventory volumes had to be descriptive, and illustrated.

The history of the English Royal Commission has been briefly outlined by Andrew Sargent (2001) but he concentrated largely on organisational matters and architectural work. Unfortunately, very little record seems to have been made of the archaeological fieldwork process. Duncan Montgomerie of the 'Earthworks Committee' (who was also on the staff of the VCH) was brought in to lead field survey and provide training for the early Investigators but no detail of their proceedings seems to be known. Even the most distinguished of those early Investigators, Mortimer Wheeler, recorded very little of his experiences with the RCHME (1956, 26-8, 57-62); his biographer adds nothing of substance (Hawkes 1982, 51-2, 54, 77-9). This perhaps reflects the reality that, until the later 1930s at least, archaeology took a very secondary position in relation to architecture in the work of the Commission; where archaeological plans were included in Inventories they were all borrowed from other sources.

The inclusion of increasing numbers of vernacular buildings and extensions to what was considered a 'historical monument' inevitably led to longer gestation periods for the Inventories, larger books and higher costs. Whereas the first volumes had been produced in a matter of months, by the 1930s they were taking years and ultimately the Dorset Inventory, begun shortly before the Second World War, was not completed until 1970. The Royal Commissions were often criticised for this, rather unfairly as the reasons for the extended timescales were clear. Further change followed the Second World War. A new generation of archaeological Investigators, led by Collin Bowen, were moving beyond description and developing a more analytical approach to field remains that was looking increasingly to landscapes rather than individual monuments (e.g. Bowen 1961). Paul Everson's work in NW Lincolnshire (1991) was arguably the first detailed exposition of analytical survey. This was to be of inestimable value to archaeology but had another time cost.

It was obvious that the county inventory programme could not continue as it was (Fowler 1981), so alternative approaches were tried. Specialist surveys of particular groups of monuments, e.g. Civil War earthworks at Newark (RCHME 1964), had already been carried through successfully. Another experiment was to concentrate on particular periods or monument types within

a county, rather than the traditional parish-by-parish approach – Iron Age and Roman sites in Gloucestershire or long barrows in Hampshire, for instance (RCHME 1977; 1979). This was not considered entirely satisfactory, however.

By 1980 more radical changes were occurring. One was the availability of the first generation of electronic surveying equipment – electronic theodolites with separate EDMs – which took a lot of the mundane drudgery out of surveying and enabled more ambitious schemes of work.

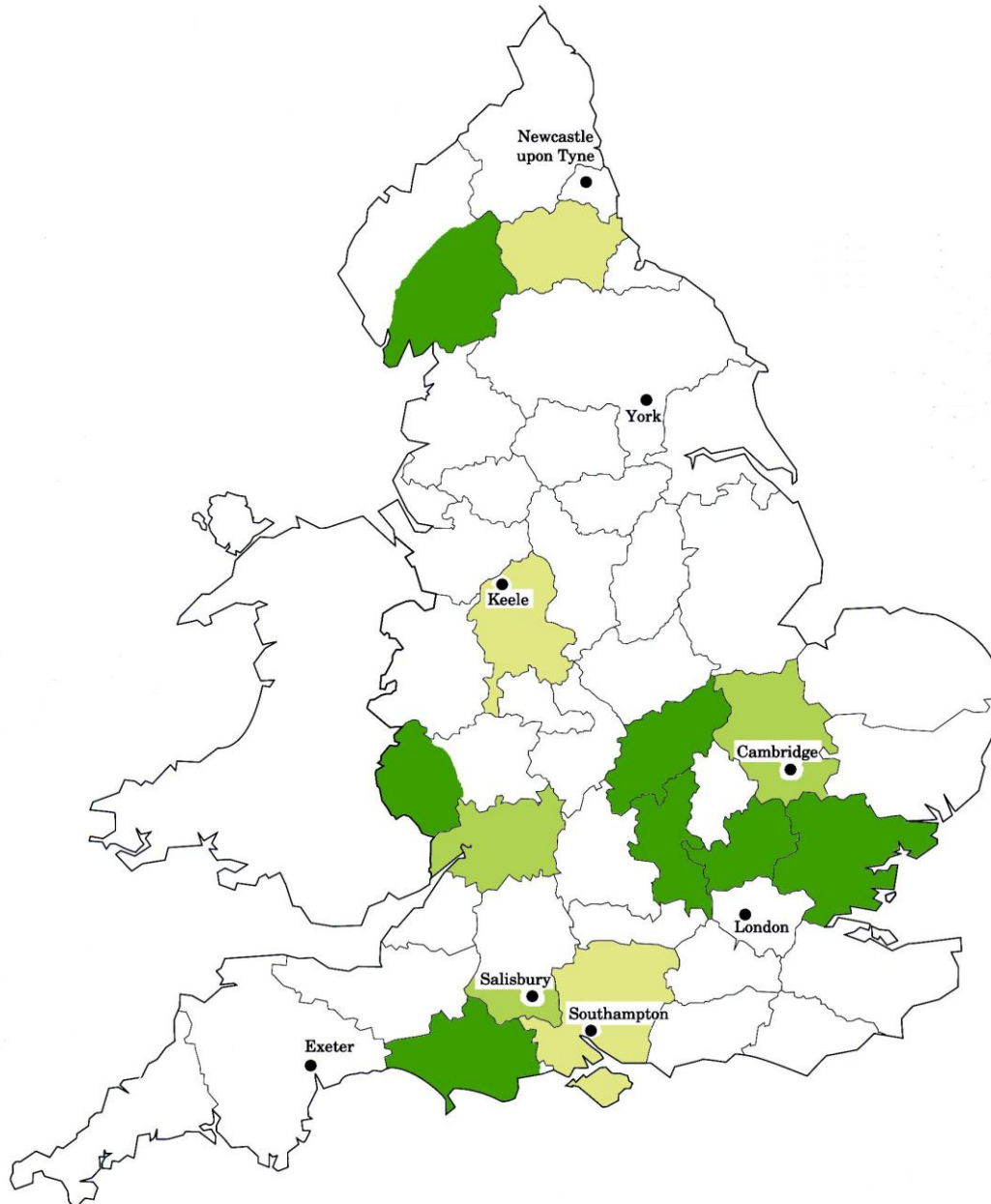


Figure 1: RCHME county inventories (city inventories omitted): dark green, complete or substantially complete; light green, partial or incomplete; yellow, other county-based projects (Durham SAMs, Staffordshire hillforts; Hampshire and Isle of Wight long barrows). RCHME offices are marked

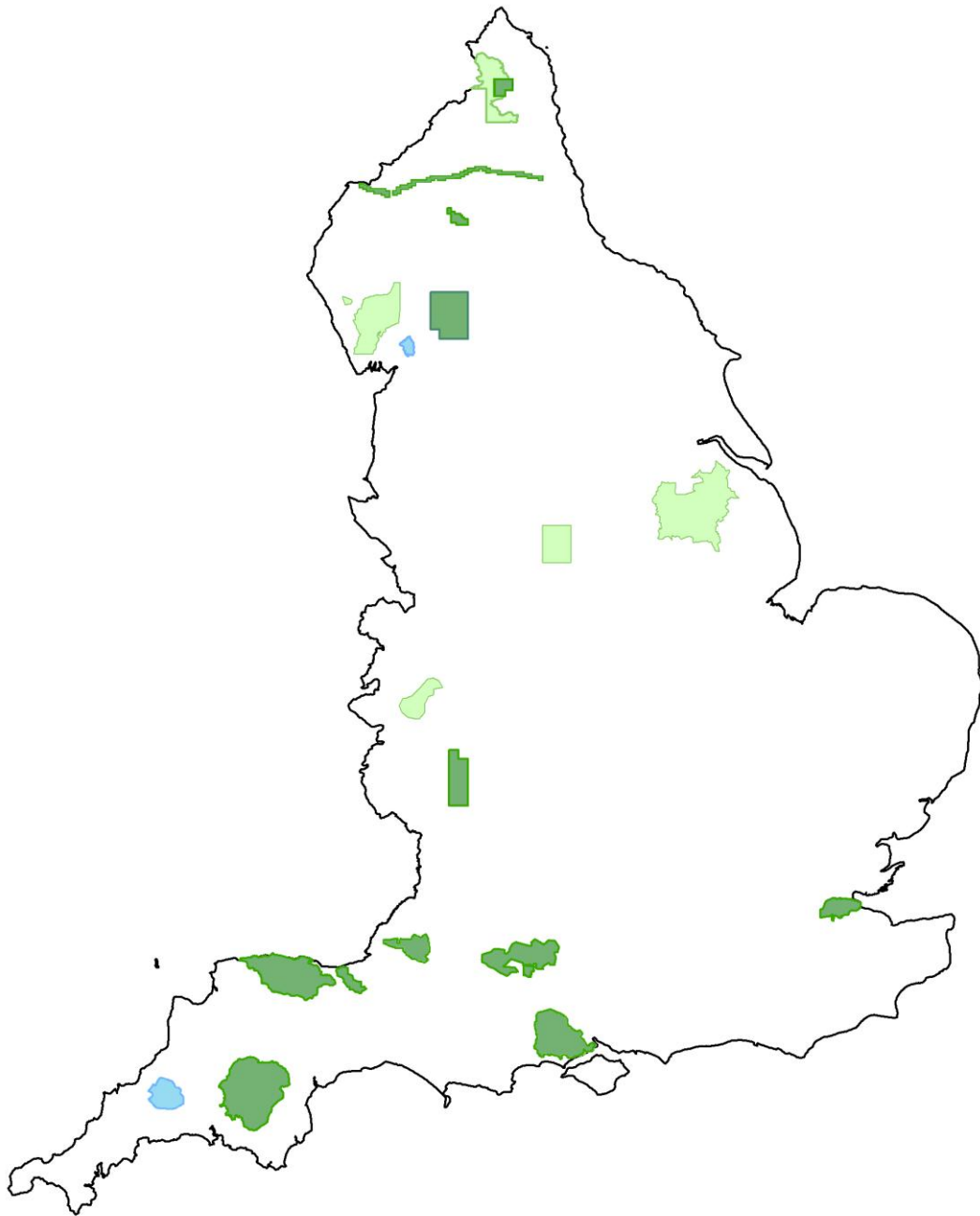


Fig 2: RCHME and EH major landscape projects: dark green, 'holistic' projects; light green, thematic projects (Northumberland National Park hillforts, Furness Iron, medieval NW Lincolnshire; Gritstone Moors; Corvedale); blue, projects contracted out (Arnsdale & Silverdale AONB, former Lancaster Unit; Bodmin Moor, Cornwall Archaeology)

Much more significant, however, was the decision of the Ordnance Survey to close its Archaeology Division (Bowden and Mackay 1999); its records and many members of its staff transferred to the Royal Commissions. This had the effect of bringing together two groups of people with distinct but overlapping skill sets: the Royal Commission Investigators with their newly developed analytical approach to field remains and the ex-OS Investigators with their perhaps more traditional approach to archaeology but highly developed field

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survey skills. Amongst the former the names of Desmond Bonney, Chris Taylor, Peter Fowler, Humphrey Welfare and Paul Everson stand out; amongst the latter Alan Phillips, Keith Blood and perhaps outstandingly Norman Quinnell.

The 1980s were a time of expansion for the RCHME. To the existing offices in London, York, Cambridge, Southampton and Salisbury were added three new 'local' offices in Exeter, Keele and Newcastle, specifically to deal with the well-preserved archaeological landscapes of the highland zone. The staff was also expanding, bringing in another generation of young archaeologists who were able to benefit from the powerful fusion of Royal Commission analytical skills and OS surveying skills.

The county inventory programme was officially brought to a close and a series of new projects concentrated on smaller exemplary geographical areas, e.g. the SE Cheviots (Topping 2008), and national thematic projects, e.g. Roman camps (Welfare and Swan 1995) or Carthusian houses, with occasionally a combination of regional and thematic approaches, e.g. Northumbrian hillforts (Oswald *et al* 2006) and a pioneering study of non-nucleated settlement in Corvedale (Salop). An emphasis on industrial archaeology increased through the 1990s (e.g. Cocroft 2000) and attention was given to parks, gardens and designed landscapes – a topic effectively invented by RCHM Investigators (e.g. Pattison 1998). The areas chosen for major surveys were initially within National Parks and later AONBs. Increasingly, projects were undertaken in collaboration with colleagues in architectural survey, aerial survey and geophysical survey.

At the same time there was a move towards one-off surveys of individual sites or smaller (though still substantial) landscapes, including Clee Hill (Salop), Cockfield Fell (Co Durham), Ryedale (N Yorks) and the London Royal Parks. These projects were driven by threats or opportunities, or for the purpose of up-dating OS mapping; the 'OS sweeps' generated much useful survey work. The one-off surveys included many EH Guardianship sites, National Trust properties, such as Bodiam Castle (Everson 1996), and military ranges. A few SAM casework issues also led to detailed RCHME surveys; there was also a pilot project in County Durham to trial a more strategic approach to recording SAMs. The requirements of excavation reports for a credible 'landscape context' also led to targeted surveys.

The landscape surveys were published as monographs (e.g. Newman 2011; Riley 2006) or substantial journal articles (e.g. Smith 1999), or not at all. Some projects gave rise to spin-off publications, shorter journal articles or even leaflets (e.g. Honister slate mines). *Festschriften* and conference proceedings were also utilised as a means of publishing fieldwork (e.g. Pattison *et al* 1999; Brown *et al* 2005). Surveys tied to excavations were naturally published within the relevant excavation reports (e.g. Corney 2005). The 'so what?' factor was always insisted upon and a piece of fieldwork that had not resulted in real

advances in understanding would remain unpublished and available through the archive only. (Unfortunately some innovative work also remained unpublished.)

Through the 1990s, however, the expansion slowed and stopped, and in 1999 the RCHME was merged with EH. During this decade a series of 'grey literature' client reports had been developed and became the Archaeological Investigation Report Series. After merger this became part of the EH Research Department Report Series. The fieldwork programme continued under what was now called the Archaeological Survey & Investigation team but a series of cuts began to bite into the field sections so that a staff complement of 32 at merger was reduced to 16 by 2010. The deeper cuts and re-organisation of 2011-12 reduced the number of Investigators to 9 and closed the AS&I team, redistributing the remaining staff into 'Assessment' teams. The tradition of RCHME field investigation was broken.

I am grateful to Wayne Cocroft, David McOmish and Chris Taylor for assistance in the preparation of this note. If you have any information, particularly about the early years of RCHME archaeological fieldwork, or any corrections to any of the above, please let me know.

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