

# The Electronic Revolution

## An overview

Nigel Clubb *Director of the National Monuments Record, English Heritage*

**The e-revolution transcends organisations and national boundaries and will require vision, partnership and an understanding of audiences to make it effective.**

Few would dispute that we are experiencing a global e-revolution and that for the historic environment sector this provides the potential to deliver conservation services with greater efficiency and effectiveness, as well as to engage with communities and individuals in new ways in the provision of learning and leisure opportunities. The first beneficiaries were researchers who had access to the technology, but public and commercial organisations delivering front-line services to a wide public are now in the driving seat. In this process, individuals and communities are becoming empowered through the electronic supply of services and information.

The first two decades of computer applications in the sector were driven by archaeological researchers and curators who created databases at national and local levels, often for their own use and that of peers. The challenges of historic environment data have led to software being exploited to its limit, for example through using geographical information systems to model change through time. More recently, the development of much wider internet access, including broadband and mobile technologies, has attracted the attention of business, which sees the potential of e-commerce, and government, which regards information technology as a way to transform its products and services to create an improved and interactive experience for citizens.

Central to the concept of e-government is a network of shared knowledge and a knowledge economy, global in dimension, with improved opportunities for all. Close to the historic environment sector, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is pressing ahead with the concept of e-planning to simplify the burden of the regulatory system, but also to help achieve the government's social and economic objectives for sustainable communities.

In England, the proposed new heritage

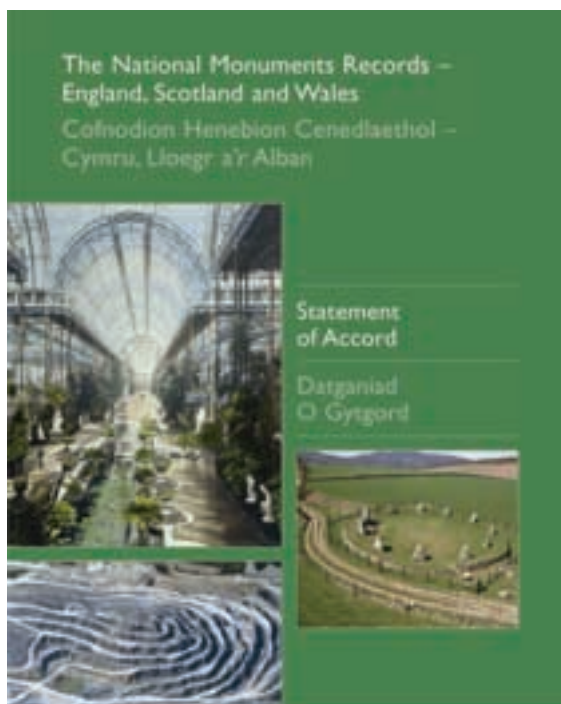
protection system is based on public engagement in the debate about what in the historic environment reinforces our sense of place, belonging and well-being. As well as the potential for greater efficiency and effectiveness in delivering heritage protection services, there is much in the e-revolution to fuel the English Heritage cycle of understanding, valuing, caring for and enjoying the historic environment, both for heritage professionals and for a much wider audience. Perhaps the greatest potential benefit is for users to be able, if they wish, to move seamlessly from front-line casework, advisory, education and leisure services to the conservation principles, research, databases and archives which complement them and back again.

There is much progress to celebrate in our sector and beyond. Local authority Historic Environment Records are moving online. There have been astonishing developments in online resources in the museums and archives sectors. Co-operation in England between English Heritage and local records on future strategy has never been better. The National Monuments Records of England, Scotland and Wales have signed a co-operation statement. At a UK level, the Archaeology Data Service and the Historic Environment Information Resource Network (HEIRNET) have pioneered partnerships beyond national and organisational boundaries. New forms of searching have brought text, images and spatial data much closer together. The best online services are linked to educational and outreach activities. A good example here is the joint DCMS, English Heritage and CABE initiative, *Engaging Places*, designed to inspire learning in the built environment.

There are risks to be managed if the sector is to exploit the technology effectively. The most successful commercial online services have raised the expectations of the customer. Websites must be dynamic and always offer something new. We should avoid a culture that



## NATIONAL MONUMENTS RECORD



In November 2005 the National Monuments Records for England, Scotland and Wales signed a joint *Statement of Accord* that will help to ensure the development of compatible information systems across the three countries.

'dumps' resources on the web and considers the job done, without much thought given to the business need, mediation, interpretation, marketing or promotion. On the other hand, the updated list of historic buildings in England is still not publicly available, although it was computerised with Department of the Environment funding nearly 10 years ago. While the concerns of individuals about details of their homes being placed on the internet must be respected, there are great dangers that the historic environment will be marginalised in the awareness of the public if information is not delivered through the medium expected, whether for planning or learning purposes, including the context of the proposed historic environment reforms.

The key to success for the sector will be understanding the impact of the technology on organisations, communities and individuals and their changing demands and expectations. E-heritage services must be designed around front-line service provision to the user, rather than the convenience of the providing organisation, which may have to learn to associate its corporate identity with other organisations. Indeed, individuals and communities will want to be able to determine and shape the services they require in the form that suits them, irrespective of whether they are provided from the business, public or voluntary sectors.

Impressive statistics of web hits are often quoted as evidence of extensive use, but there is very little systematic market research on existing users, let alone on how audiences are to be

developed. This is where our sector is at its weakest. As users of services personalise them, audiences may become more segmented and harder to reach. 'Blogs', which chronicle the thoughts and times of individuals, and 'Wikis', which enable individuals to re-engineer web content in their own image, may be just the start of this trend. In an age in which individuals may select types of information and entertainment that can follow them around wherever they are in the world, there will be increasing competition to reach new audiences, which will in turn require great creativity on behalf of the providers. On the other hand, like-minded people will seek each other out through the internet and, perhaps, engage more profoundly with the historic environment in a demanding, vocal and democratic way. Developments in search-engines are likely to have a major impact as the established engines provide ever-greater access content, while new ones explore niche markets.

How is the sector to react to the opportunities and challenges? First of all, its numerous component organisations need a broad and shared vision of the potential. They must work in partnership on analysing the business models behind the delivery of more effective systems and on market research, as well as a common understanding of technical change and audience development. Data standards must satisfy all parts of the sector and technical infrastructure must be based on interoperability. Portals, such as the proposed Heritage Gateway for England, provide a firm basis for partnership in delivering at one point a range of services from different organisations. The potential will only be realised if there is common agreement on strategy, which needs to be developed at local, regional, national, European and international levels. We must also ensure that our sector provides itself with the necessary leadership and skills.

Finally, we must never forget that the historic environment is about physical reality, not virtual reality, although virtual experience can complement and enhance real experience. The technology can help us to be more efficient, effective, engaging and enjoyable. It can enable us to generate revenue through e-commerce. While we cannot afford to let it pass us by, we must never go down the road of directing people through a website or telephone system to a call centre abroad as a substitute for real engagement with experts who can communicate the excitement of the historic environment. We must also retain the capability to engage with those who choose not to, or are unable, to consume e-revolution services.