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**Book review : J. Richards, D. Robinson, Digital Archives from Excavation and Fieldwork: A Guide to Good Practice**  
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**Citation**

Kamermans, H. (2003). Book review : J. Richards, D. Robinson, Digital Archives from Excavation and Fieldwork: A Guide to Good Practice. *History And Computing*, 13, 99-100. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16708>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)  
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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16708>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# HISTORY and COMPUTING

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Volume 13  
(No 1 2001)  
PUBLISHED 2003

EDITOR

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Published by Edinburgh University Press  
for the  
Association for History and Computing

## REVIEW

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Julian Richards & Damian Robinson, eds, *Digital archives from excavation and fieldwork: a guide to good practice*. (Oxford, Oxbow Books, 2000).

In 1974 archaeological excavations started on the Hazendonk, a fossil river dune in the Alblasserwaard in the central western part of the Netherlands. It was, for those days, a very modern type of excavation. Every find, layer and feature was recorded in such a way that part of the analysis could be performed with the help of a computer. Not a PC, they were not very common in those days, but a mainframe computer. The analysis had to take place at the University of Amsterdam, at that time the only university in the Netherlands with archaeologists with some experience with computers. The data proved very stubborn and the analysis stranded. In the second half of the 1980s the data was transported on a reel to reel tape to the mainframe computer of Leiden University with a view to proceed with the analysis. Not much was achieved though. Only the data from one excavation unit was moved to a PC and analysed by a student. After that the data on the mainframe was effectively forgotten. Years later, Leiden University wished to dispose of the redundant mainframe and asked all users if there was any valuable information still on the mainframe. The archaeologists, under the impression that all the data had been transported to a PC, said that there was nothing of value. Recently the excavator wanted to go back to the original data of the excavation and discovered that only a small portion was available in a digital format. The reel to reel tape does still exist but has not been run for over 15 years and no information is available on the programs used or the way the data is stored. In short the data on the tape is lost. The excavator will have to go back to the handwritten forms. This example of how archaeologists deal with digital data

is not an exception. Dozens of digital archives from excavations are lost every year. And not only in the Netherlands but all over the world.

To help archaeologists take care of their digital excavation data, the British Archaeology Data Service has published a booklet called *Digital archives from excavation and fieldwork: a guide to good practice*. It gives the essentials of good digital practice. Not only on how to maintain the data during excavations and analysis but also on how to store it and keep it alive. The media on which data is stored degrades, and software and hardware change rapidly, which makes digital archiving very different from traditional archiving. Digital archiving is about preserving information regardless of the media on which that information is stored. In the example I described above the information is still available on paper, but nowadays archaeological excavations produce lots of data only in a digital format. A so-called Total Station, an electronic measuring device, stores its data digitally and transfers it afterwards directly to a computer. Often no hardcopies are made.

Important topics dealt with in this publication are data refreshment, data migration, data documentation, data management tools, depositing digital archives and re-use and copyright considerations.

The book is written to address archaeological practice in the United Kingdom but it is also very useful for archaeologists from other countries. In the Netherlands the State Service for Archaeological Heritage Management has protocols for the deposition of digital archives but many universities and commercial units do not. As a consequence of the 1992 Valletta Convention the protection of both the recorded and the as yet unrecorded archaeological heritage is now an important topic. The aim of the Valletta Convention is to protect the archaeological heritage as a source of the European collective memory and as an instrument for historical and scientific study. Archaeology has now become part of the spatial planning process and has become socially relevant. The new Dutch monument act will make it possible for archaeological units to compete in a free market. The authorities are at this moment formulating requirements for good archaeological research. Part of this will be concerned with archiving archaeological digital data. So this booklet is highly relevant.

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