Working Sustainably with AI in Digital Heritage Research: A Case-Based Walkthrough

Workshop Proposal (ca. 450 words)

This workshop presents a detailed, practice-based walkthrough of *Heritage Lens*, an AI-assisted research prototype developed to support access to complex digital heritage materials. The session uses Heritage Lens as a concrete case to explore what "working sustainably" with AI actually looks like in day-to-day digital heritage research, focusing on practical decisions, limits, and responsibilities rather than abstract principles or technical optimisation.

The workshop is grounded in ongoing research practice that involves working with dense textual sources alongside visual material such as site maps, diagrams, and photographs. Heritage Lens was developed to help navigate this material through AI-assisted retrieval, but its use quickly raised questions that go beyond efficiency: how time is redistributed rather than simply saved; how cognitive load shifts rather than disappears; how source reliability must be constantly checked; and where interpretation cannot, and should not, be automated.

The core of the workshop consists of a step-by-step walkthrough of the Heritage Lens workflow. Using screenshots and concrete examples, the facilitator will show how research materials are ingested, queried, and interpreted within the system. Particular attention is given to the moments where human judgement remains essential: deciding what counts as a reliable source, recognising when retrieved material is misleading or incomplete, and choosing when not to rely on AI-assisted outputs. The walkthrough explicitly highlights design choices made to limit automation, keep sources visible, and maintain control over interpretation.

Rather than functioning as a software demonstration or training session, the walkthrough is presented as an open case. Participants are invited to observe how the system is actually used in practice, including its constraints, frictions, and unresolved issues. This case-based approach allows sustainability to be examined as something that emerges through real research work: managing time and effort, maintaining interpretive responsibility, and deciding what kinds of tasks are appropriate to delegate to AI and which are not.

The interactive component of the workshop is discussion-based and follows the case walkthrough. Participants are invited to reflect on the Heritage Lens example in relation to their own contexts, whether in academic research, GLAM institutions, teaching, or interdisciplinary projects. Discussion prompts focus on practical questions such as: Where does AI genuinely reduce effort, and where does it introduce new work? What kinds of responsibility remain firmly human? How do similar decisions play out in different digital heritage settings?

The workshop concludes with a reflective closing section that explicitly outlines open questions and current uncertainties in the Heritage Lens project, inviting critique, comparison, and shared reflection rather than consensus.

The session requires no specialist equipment beyond standard projection facilities and is suitable for participants from a range of digital humanities and cultural heritage backgrounds.