



NEWSLETTER

## The Geospatial Edge

Helping project stakeholders unlock the full potential of geospatial surveys for efficiency, accuracy, and value.



THE SURVEY  
ASSOCIATION

# The Geospatial Edge - edition 17

## Reclaiming Geospatial: Why the Sector Must Unite — Part 1

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Next week, at the The Survey Association AGM, the UK geospatial surveying community will take a significant step forward with the launch of the Unity Charter — a coordinated national effort to reposition geospatial surveying at the heart of the UK's future. It is an ambitious move, built around visibility, advocacy, recruitment, and a unified voice for a profession that underpins everything from infrastructure and construction to heritage and environmental management.

But the need for this Charter raises a more uncomfortable question. How has a discipline so fundamental — the starting point of design, the reference for engineering, and the record that supports long-term asset management — reached a position where it must explain its value, clarify its identity, and actively reintroduce itself to the industries it supports?

# The Profession That Lost Its Name

It did not happen overnight.

There was no defining moment where the geospatial surveying profession (Land Surveyors, Mineral Surveyors, Engineering Surveyors, Geomatics Surveyors, etc.) lost its place at the centre of the built environment. No announcement, no collapse, no visible fracture. If anything, it is precisely because nothing dramatic happened that we now find ourselves in this position.

What we experienced instead was a slow, almost imperceptible drift. A gradual erosion of clarity. A widening gap between what geospatial surveyors actually do, and what the rest of the industry believes we do.

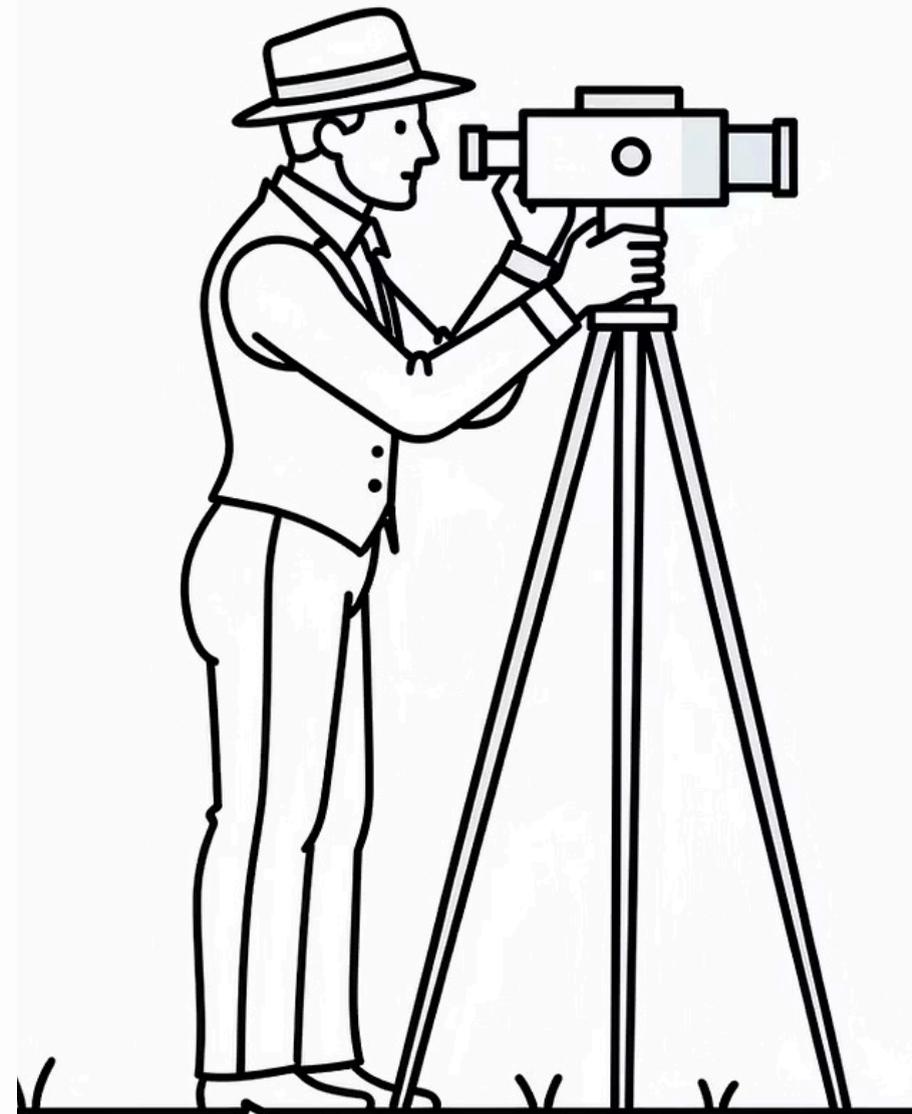
Looking back, the signs were always there. But like many slow-moving shifts, they only become obvious in hindsight.

**For me, the moment of clarity came around 2016.**

By that point, there had already been years of technological acceleration. Laser scanning had moved from specialist application to mainstream tool. GNSS workflows had transformed field operations. Software platforms were rapidly evolving, making data more accessible and more visually compelling than ever before. On the surface, the profession appeared to be thriving.

But beneath that surface, something had changed.

A major 3D laser scanner manufacturer had begun actively positioning their equipment toward non-surveyors. Not as a complementary tool, not as part of a broader professional workflow, but as a standalone solution. The messaging was confident, deliberate, and increasingly difficult to ignore. Complex geospatial data capture was being reframed as something simplified, streamlined, and accessible without the need for specialist expertise.



# The Warning Signs Were Already There

At the same time, we reviewed our own work that year.

Roughly 15% of our turnover had come from one specific type of instruction – not new surveys, not planned commissions, but remedial work. Projects that had already been surveyed. Projects that had already progressed. Projects that had gone wrong.

## Topographical Survey Control Networks

Control networks that did not close, or had gross errors.

## Measured Building Surveys

Produced without any meaningful control - wildly inaccurate.

## Utilities Surveys

That had missed critical services entirely causing huge costs.

## Point Cloud Datasets

That appeared comprehensive, but could not be relied upon when interrogated properly due to misalignments or drift.

These were not isolated incidents. They were recurring patterns.

And the common factor was not necessarily incompetence. It was more 'assumption'.

**The assumption that a "survey" had been carried out correctly.**

That was the moment it became clear that this was not a series of unfortunate mistakes. It was something deeper. Structural. Systemic.

We were no longer dealing with a profession that was misunderstood at the edges.

We were dealing with a profession that had lost control of its own definition.



# The Problem With One Word

At the centre of this issue sits a word we have all used without question for decades.

## "Survey"

It is a word that carries authority, yet offers almost no precision. Within the built environment, it has become an umbrella term applied to an extraordinary range of activities.

A homebuyer report  
is a survey.

A condition inspection  
is a survey.

A drone flight  
is a survey.

A set of photographs  
can be described as a survey.

A sketch, a tape measure exercise, a point  
cloud, a BIM model - even just looking at  
something.  
all can fall under the same label.

On the surface, this might appear harmless. After all, language evolves. Terminology shifts. But in this case, the consequences are significant, because the word "survey" is not just descriptive. It is contractual. It sets expectations. It defines scope. It underpins decision-making.

**When that word becomes ambiguous, everything that follows becomes unstable.**

For example, in some areas of the heritage sector, this ambiguity has been further compounded by a guidance document (HEAG099) that, intentionally or not, allowed for false interpretation. There are situations where what is described as a "survey" bears little resemblance to the specification (HEAG317) that mandates controlled, measured, geospatial data capture for listed buildings and scheduled monuments. Instead, this misinterpretation leads to sketch-based recording or loosely referenced measurement, and poor procurement scopes accepted as sufficient for certain purposes when it is not.

The issue is not that these approaches exist. It is that they are being conflated with geospatial surveying.

And that conflation happens early.

It happens before a project team understands what they need. Before a specification is written. Before accuracy is discussed. By the time a geospatial surveyor is brought into the conversation – if they are brought in at all – the baseline expectation has already been set incorrectly.

At that point, the conversation is no longer about what is required.

It is about cost.

# A Fragmented Identity

This lack of clarity is not helped by the profession's own identity.

For much of its history, the term "land surveyor" served a clear purpose. It described a role focused on boundaries, parcels, and the measurement of land. But that description no longer reflects reality. Modern geospatial surveyors operate across buildings, infrastructure, transport networks, utilities, rivers, coastlines, and complex three-dimensional environments. The term "land" is not just insufficient — it is misleading.

It reduces a multidimensional discipline to a single plane.

Attempts to modernise this identity introduced a different challenge. The adoption of the term "geomatics" was intended to reflect the increasing integration of data, technology, and analysis. In academic contexts, it made sense. But outside of that environment, it introduced a new layer of ambiguity.

## "Land Surveying"

It is not a term that reflects the full scope of modern practice. It reduces a multidimensional discipline to a single plane.

## "Geomatics"

It is not a term widely understood by clients. It is not consistently interpreted within the profession. It disconnects the work from the physical environments it measures.

Between "land surveying" and "geomatics", the profession has, inadvertently, fragmented its own identity.

And in that fragmentation, it has lost something critical.

**A clear, accessible way of explaining what it does, and why it matters.**

# Technology Advanced. The Profession Did Not Keep Pace.

While this identity blurred, technology continued to advance.

Over the past three decades, geospatial surveying has undergone one of the most significant technological transformations of any discipline within the built environment. The shift from manual instruments to robotic total stations, the adoption of GNSS, the emergence of laser scanning, the rapid development of SLAM-based systems, and the evolution of processing software have all fundamentally changed how data is captured and delivered.

Each of these developments brought genuine benefits.



## Increased Efficiency

Faster field operations and turnaround times across all project types.



## Greater Data Density

Richer, more detailed datasets than ever previously possible.



## New Possibilities

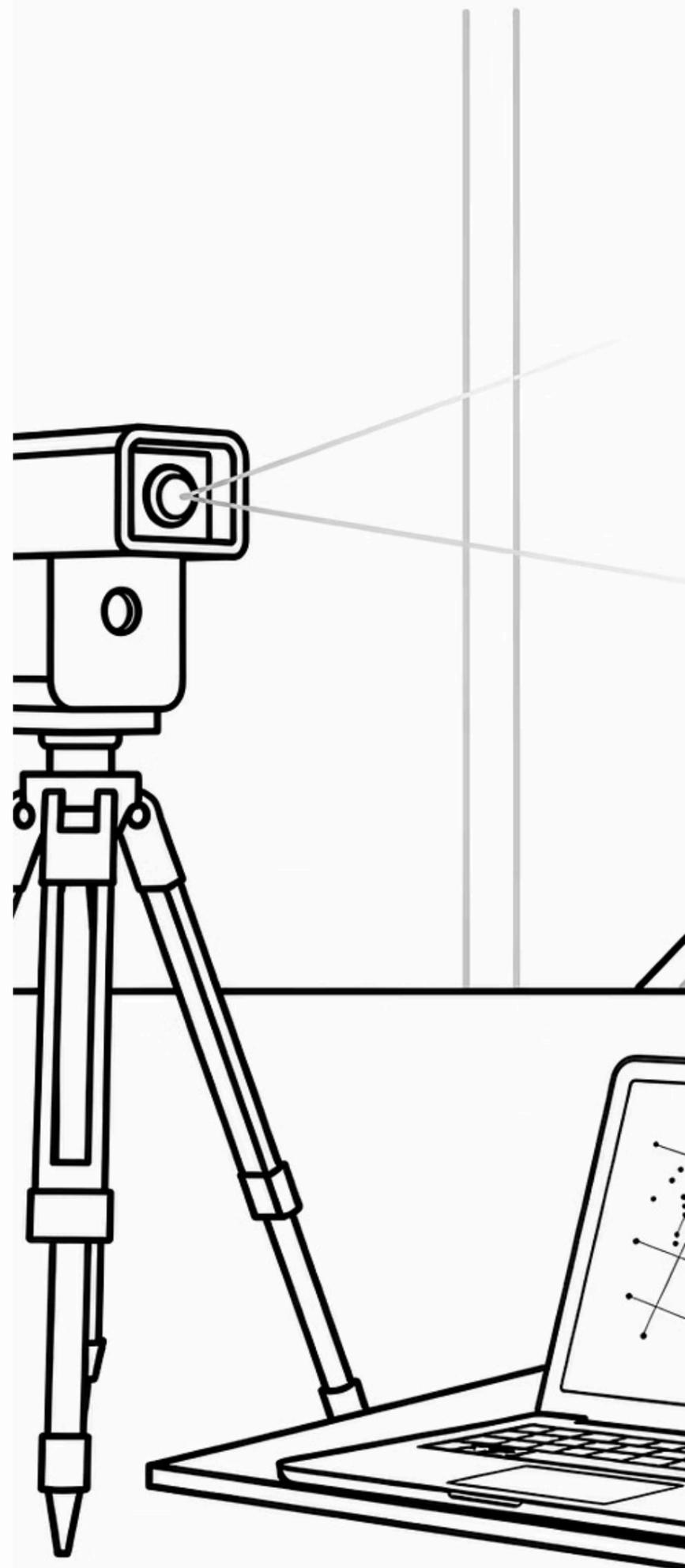
New possibilities for analysis and visualisation of complex environments.

But collectively, they also changed the relationship between the profession and its tools.

**Where once technology was guided by professional methodology, there has been a gradual shift toward methodology being shaped by technology.**

Surveyors, understandably, embraced innovation. But in doing so, the profession did not move at the same pace to redefine its standards, reinforce its principles, or communicate its evolving role to the industries that depend on it.

Into that gap stepped the manufacturers.



# The Manufacturers Stepped In

The financial pressures following the 2008 'credit crunch' crisis accelerated this shift. As markets tightened and competition intensified, the need to differentiate products became more pronounced. Technology was no longer just advanced – it was presented as accessible. Simplified. Intuitive.

The messaging evolved.

- Complex workflows were reframed as **streamlined processes**.
- Specialist knowledge was positioned as **optional**.
- Accuracy was implied to be **inherent**.

You do not need to look far to recognise this narrative. It has been present across conferences, demonstrations, marketing materials, and industry events for years. Often subtle. Occasionally explicit. Always persuasive.

And critically, it has not been countered by a unified voice from within the profession.

There has been no consistent, sector-wide assertion that data capture is not the same as measured survey. That accuracy is not automatic. That control, verification, and professional judgement remain essential.

**Without that distinction being reinforced, the perception has shifted. Surveying has become something that *can* be done. Rather than something that *must* be done correctly.**



# A Quiet Dilution

The result is not a dramatic failure.

It is a quiet dilution.

A profession that still exists, still delivers critical work, still underpins the built environment – but no longer clearly understood, consistently specified, or properly valued.

And within that dilution, a more serious issue has begun to emerge.

## Risk!



### Risk

Not obvious. Not immediate. But present.



### Embedded Within Designs

Carried through construction.  
Locked into assets.



### Largely Invisible

Until it is too late.

That is where the story changes.

Because what has been quietly developing over the past three decades is no longer theoretical.

It is now beginning to surface.

# No Longer Theoretical

The launch of the Unity Charter at the TSA AGM is not the beginning of a conversation – it is a response to one that has been building, largely unspoken, for years.

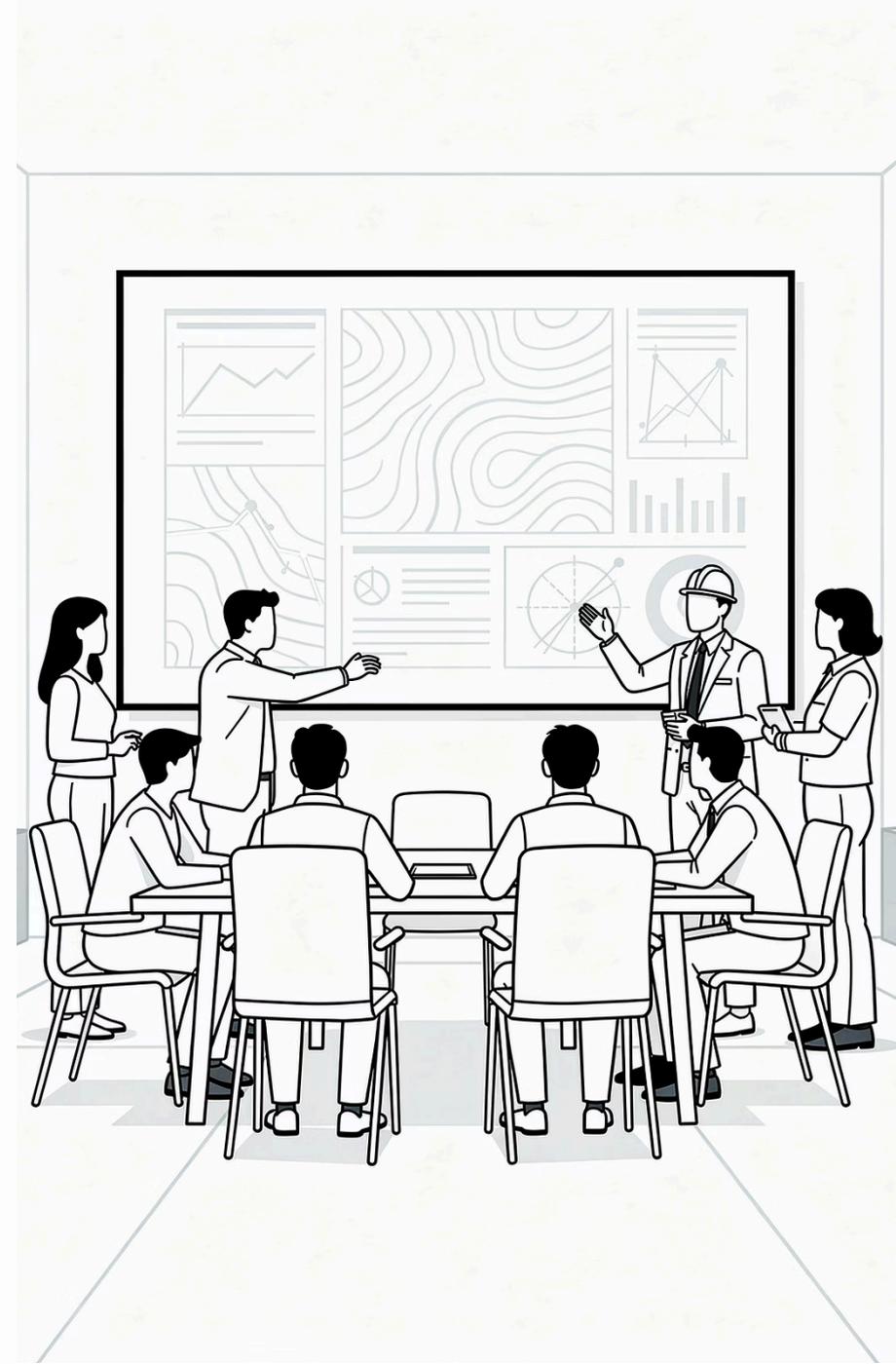
A response to ambiguity, to dilution, and to a gradual loss of control over how geospatial surveying is understood, specified, and valued.

Because when the definition of a survey becomes unclear, so too does the reliability of the data that underpins entire projects. And when that reliability is compromised, the consequences are no longer theoretical – they are physical, financial, and often irreversible.

The Charter exists to bring clarity, visibility, and alignment back to the sector.

But to understand why that is necessary, we need to look more closely at what happens when things go wrong.

And that is where Part 2 begins.



# The Unity Charter

## A Coordinated National Effort

The Unity Charter, launching at the TSA AGM, represents a coordinated national effort to reposition geospatial surveying at the heart of the UK's future – built around four pillars:

1

### Visibility

Making the profession seen and understood across the industries it serves.

2

### Advocacy

Speaking with authority on behalf of the sector at every level.

3

### Recruitment

Attracting the next generation of geospatial professionals.

4

### A Unified Voice

A single, consistent message for a profession that underpins everything from infrastructure and construction to heritage and environmental management.

- ❑ **The Geospatial Edge** is a LinkedIn newsletter exploring the challenges, opportunities, and future of geospatial surveying in the UK (**please subscribe**). **Part 2** will examine what happens when things go wrong – and why the consequences are no longer theoretical.