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The next issue will feature: Handheld audio interpretation.

'Interpretation enriches our lives through engaging emotions, enhancing experiences and deepening understanding of people, places, events and objects from past and present.'

For more information about the Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI), log on to www.ahi.org.uk or write to the Administrator AHI, 18 Rose Crescent, Perth PH1 1NS.

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FOREWORD: TEAM SPIRIT

Reading through the comments from each of the award and commendation winners I was struck by the number of times the words 'team', 'people' and 'we' were used. In turn they all commented on the team effort made by the sites, councils, rangers, planners, designers, interpreters, local communities, educators and staff.

Phrases such as 'working closely together', 'holistic approaches', 'relating to the local community', 'working in partnership with target audiences', echoed throughout. It is this spirit of cooperation that has led to these particular sites achieving recognition for the interpretation they have achieved. 'People were at the centre of everything we did' said Sue Latimer from Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum and this appears true for each entrant.

These attitudes have been at the core of the Awards scheme and it is heartening to read the following reports: 'to engage with the residents of Runnymede ... consulting widely with what the community wanted and expected' from Emma Warren and, 'working closely with appropriate stake holders' from Dan Boys from the Paws on the Moors project. The word 'team' is also strongly emphasised by Dirk Bennett in the Battle Abbey entry and reinforced with this statement from Colin Baker at the Bath Postal Museum, 'we also realised we would not be able to do this alone ...'.

There have been key lessons learnt by the AHI judges team:

- Working together and sharing ideas and feedback have been invaluable for us all.
- It is not necessarily those with the biggest budgets that provide the best interpretation.
- The hours spent visiting and then agonising over the judges' reports and results are well worth the effort in getting it right for the entrants.
- However hard we try we cannot please all of the people all of the time and entrants will be disappointed if they do not receive an award. Honest and constructive feedback is vital to help overcome that disappointment.
- It is vital to update our judging criteria in order to develop an even more professional and objective system of judging.
- Interpretation is moving forward constantly and is now embracing new innovative technologies, podcasts, navigation systems and mobile phones to enhance the communication possibilities with a wider spread of the community, including the hard-to-reach teenage years.

The friendship and hospitality we have received at the Awards ceremonies over the years have become legendary. It is going to be difficult to top this year's in Ireland at the Foynes Flying Boat Museum: Irish coffee at 9.30 am followed by the magnificent drive to the west coast to the Cliffs of Moher and the awards presented by Frank Kelly ('Father Jack' and well known Irish actor and broadcaster), was unforgettable.

On that note this is my last year as Chair of the Judges for the Awards Scheme for Interpret Britain and Ireland and I hand it on to Jo Scott, who with the Committee, will be planning new ways forward.

Rose Horspool is outgoing Chair of the AHI Judges for the Awards Scheme Interpret Britain and Ireland.

KELVINGROVE: A MUSEUM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Sue Latimer recounts the journey of Kelvingrove from a worthy, but tired, museum, to one of the most exciting and popular in the country.

Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum reopened in July 2006 after three years of extensive building repairs and a total redisplay of its wide-ranging collections. And after more than 15 years of discussion and planning. Sixteen months later, more than four million visitors have experienced the new storytelling, visitor-centred and object-focused displays.

Kelvingrove has always had a special place in Glaswegian life and, even before it closed, visitor figures were around one million a year. But by 2000, the building and its contents were looking tired and, though the objects and art still inspired visitors, it was practically a museum of display and interpretation styles of the last 50 years. The Kelvingrove New Century Project set out to create a museum fit for the 21st century.

'PEOPLE WERE AT THE CENTRE OF EVERYTHING WE DID'

BELOW:
Kelvingrove tackles difficult issues such as the sectarian divide between some Protestant and Roman Catholic Glaswegians.

OBJECTS, STORIES AND PEOPLE

The need to redisplay Kelvingrove had been recognised in the early 1990s, and the lengthy search for funding allowed Glasgow Museums staff to develop and refine the ideas that underpinned the project.

In the new Kelvingrove the collections are at the core of the displays. The interpretation and displays are designed to inspire visitors to look more closely and think about how and why these objects and art exist. We subverted traditional collection boundaries – mixing rocks and art, guns and animals. There were themes that we, and our visitors, would have liked to see, but we don't have the collections, so there was no point.

The storytelling approach allowed us to choose groups of objects to tell a particular tale or focus on just one issue. We know that telling stories is a powerful and effective way to communicate. The focus on one story – of the many that each object could tell – was also a useful discipline in creating concise and meaningful interpretation.

And, most importantly, people were at the centre of everything we did. We held extensive consultation on the overall themes and the individual story displays with everyone from non-visitors to museum professionals. Advisory panels guided us on access, community engagement and learning. The Junior Board's unsparing opinions on interactives, text and retail products helped to create a museum experience that works for families and children. And we made sure that the interpretation is about people – the people who created the art, used the objects and have an impact on the natural history.

ABOVE:
The rutting deer draw visitors into the heart of the Scotland's Wildlife gallery and a story about grouse, bluebells, salmon and other iconic wildlife.

Every story is targeted primarily at a single lay audience – families, children, teenagers, schools or non-experts. We also focused some elements on under-fives and visitors with sensory impairments. The chosen audience impacted on every aspect of the story – the heights of the plinths and interactives, the writing of the text and the design of the graphics.

CREATIVE DESIGN

The years of development created a very clear philosophy and vision for Kelvingrove, detailed interpretation plans for every story and comprehensive display standards specifying our accessibility requirements. This clarity helped to build a solid framework for our designers' inspiration and creativity to flourish within.

We wanted designers who would challenge our brief and bring their creative thinking to this huge project. Event Communications were appointed as designers for the entire redisplay in autumn 2003. Event worked wonders with – as they regularly reminded us – a budget substantially less than usual for a project of this scale.

'CLARITY HELPED TO BUILD A SOLID FRAMEWORK FOR OUR DESIGNERS' INSPIRATION AND CREATIVITY TO FLOURISH'

They created big effects in the galleries, especially the two courts dominated by the Spitfire and 'The Heads'. But they brought the same imagination and attention to every object and every case layout. Scottish jewellery is mounted on a thistle-shaped stand. Endangered animals are turning away from the animal parade in the Life Court on their way towards the dinosaur and other fossils, while the wolf and bear appear ready to rejoin Scotland's wildlife – if and when they're allowed to.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

One effect of the limited budget (noted by the Interpret Britain judges) was our reliance on the written word. We therefore made every word count. In fact, we did a lot of word counting – sticking to strict limits of 100 words for graphic panels, 30 for labels and 20 for image captions.

The judges praised the 'clear, concise and engaging' text, which resulted from a text-writing process designed to develop the skills of staff throughout Glasgow Museums. Everyone – story curators, research managers, editors and the Education & Access team – did two days, training with James Carter. A small team then worked hard to create inspiring content for the graphics, using simple language, not simple ideas.

We've tried out different styles of writing. One story curator used verse to engage a child audience with *Animal Speak*, another was inspired by graphic novels in interpreting Ancient Egyptian gods for teenagers. *The Fish's Tale* mixes a child's storybook approach with bullet-point myths and facts for a family audience. And sometimes we avoided words altogether, using only images to interpret how Glasgow Style designers were inspired by the natural world.

BELOW:
The painting of *A Marriage of Convenience* inspires visitors of all ages to imagine the thoughts of the young wife and her much older husband.

DISCOVERY AND INTERACTION

IT, audio and interactive interpretation was carefully located for maximum impact with a limited budget – clustered in galleries such as Every Picture Tells a Story to create a lively atmosphere, or conveying essential messages in a story, like the film comparing human and other animal defences in Animal Armoury.

The three discovery centres are full of interactive learning – and carefully positioned in corner galleries to draw visitors through the displays. In the History Discovery Centre visitors can handle objects with our Learning Assistants. The Environment Discovery Centre encourages investigation of animals and plants. And we hope that visitors will look at art with more understanding after a visit to the Art Discovery Centre.

'AN ABSOLUTELY FANTASTIC EXPERIENCE'

So what do visitors think? The visitor who wrote the comment above went on to note that: 'The provision for kids was particularly impressive, as was the accessibility of the material for the adult layperson'. This is the breadth of appeal that we aimed for.

Not everyone loves the approach. In particular, some visitors – and critics – have taken a strong dislike to the art interpretation. We're doing further research into this, but we also know that plenty of visitors have remarked that Kelvingrove has made them look at art properly for the first time. We haven't yet carried out detailed evaluation of the interpretation, but initial visitor research shows that 98% of visitors think Kelvingrove is very good or good. 91% think the amount of information is just right and 89% feel we've found the right balance between complexity and simplification. And 65% say we've achieved our aim of making the displays more thought-provoking.

'TELLING STORIES IS A POWERFUL AND EFFECTIVE WAY TO COMMUNICATE'

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

- Solid planning and a clear vision are essential – both to guide and inspire designers and other contractors, but also to help decision-making as the project develops.
- Good interpretation should challenge visitors to think and discover, but the process of creating it should also involve challenges. If it's too easy, it probably isn't going to work as well as it could.
- The project team have to have clear individual responsibilities and provide firm decision-making – in any creative process, designing by committee is dangerous.
- Investing time and energy in developing good text is vital. It's easy to overlook the written word in favour of more 'sexy' interpretation, but it's our most used interpretative tool, available to every display whatever the budget (and it doesn't break down).

The Kelvingrove redisplay has aimed high – to use the latest research into our collections, establish a new museum philosophy, place visitor studies and learning at the heart of the displays, and apply best practice in interpretation. Our visitors seem to approve and we're proud that fellow interpreters think so too.

Sue Latimer is Senior Education & Access Curator at Glasgow Museums and was responsible for the graphics, discovery centres and manual interactives at Kelvingrove.

NEW EDGE AT THE CLIFFS OF MOHER

Katherine Webster looks at the route taken by the Cliffs of Moher from viewing point to an award-winning exhibition.

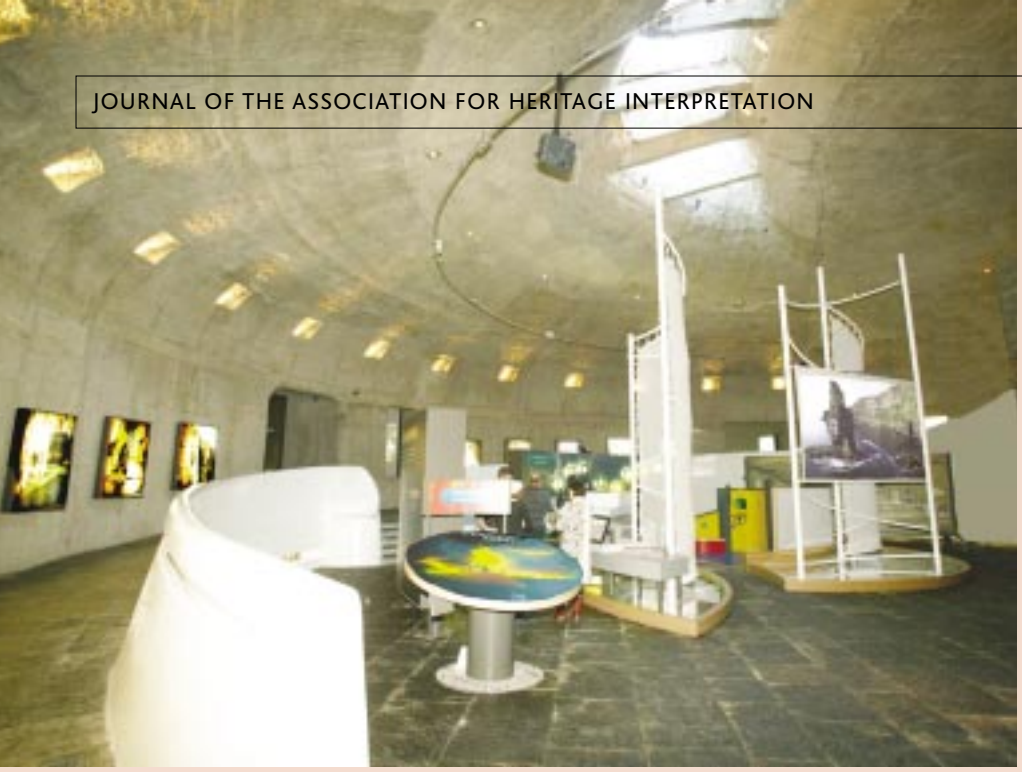
The Cliffs of Moher are Ireland's most visited tourist site, attracting almost one million visitors each year. Stretching for eight kilometres along the wild Atlantic coastline of County Clare, they rise at the highest point to just over 200 metres. For centuries, visitors have come to the cliffs to marvel at the splendour of nature and enjoy their spectacular setting. The 19th-century landowner, Cornelius O'Brien, built O'Brien's Tower in 1835 as a viewing point and stables to house the carriage tours already flocking to this iconic site. In the 1970s, the regional tourist authority built a small visitor centre on the site of these stables containing toilets, a gift shop and small tearooms.

'THE PREVIOUS FACILITIES HAD SEEN NO INTERPRETATION WHATSOEVER, OTHER THAN SOME PANELS SHOWING INFORMATION ON THE SEABIRDS'

THE LONG ROAD OF DEVELOPMENT

In the 1980s Clare County Council recognised the need to provide improved facilities and visitor management at the location that was then attracting a quarter of a million visitors a year. A project was launched in 1988 to build a new visitor centre at the Cliffs of Moher that would provide state-of-the-art facilities for the growing number of tourists flocking to the cliffs, while ensuring that the natural environment that is the main attraction would not be impacted negatively by mass tourism. However, the development of the project was complicated, including as it did engagement of a considerable number of stakeholders, gaining planning approval and, of course, funding for what would turn out to be a €31.5 million project. At times it seemed that the task at hand was too much to tackle, but finally, in June 2005, construction began on the new visitor facilities. The Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience opened to the public in February 2007.

BELOW:
The Visitor Centre.



LEFT
The Atlantic Edge Exhibition: the dome floor.

INTERPRETING THE CLIFFS

An integral part of the development saw the provision of interpretation for those visitors who wish to learn more about the vast natural and cultural heritage of the Cliffs of Moher. The previous facilities had seen no interpretation whatsoever, other than some panels showing information on the seabirds. Martello Media Design had won the tender process to design the interpretive exhibition and they worked closely with Clare County Council and with members of the project design team to adopt a holistic approach to the complex task of distilling everything one could say about the Cliffs of Moher into an informative, engaging and coherent exhibition.

Originally the design concept had seen all visitors accessing the cliff edge through the visitor centre building and the exhibition. However, this approach was abandoned due to the operational difficulties of channelling such a vast number of visitors through a gateway building. Instead, the exhibition became an optional visit and only those visitors who wished to do so would go through the exhibition area, which would attract an admission charge. This meant that the exhibition had to stand on its own merits and form a sufficient draw for visitors to meet the revenue targets for admission fees.

'THE PROJECT WAS COMPLICATED BY A CONSIDERABLE NUMBER OF STAKEHOLDERS, GAINING PLANNING APPROVAL AND FUNDING FOR WHAT WOULD TURN OUT TO BE A €31.5 MILLION PROJECT'

THE ATLANTIC EDGE EXHIBITION

The Atlantic Edge Exhibition is housed within the central part of the underground visitor centre building, a vast artificial cave that echoes the cave systems throughout the locality. It is entered via a ramp rising from the ground to the first floor and circling the central dome floor. Along the ramp are located a series of stunning images that follow the themes of the exhibition area. The main part of the Atlantic Edge Exhibition is located on the dome floor, which is accessed at two points from the ramp, and this area is zoned into four key areas touching on aspects of the cliffs – Ocean, Rock, Nature & Man.

WITHIN THE DOME

In addition to the interactive multimedia exhibits, the dome also houses a soft floor children's play zone and the Clare Journey, a stunning visual tour of the landscapes of the county set to haunting music. The Clare Journey is one element that contributes to a key objective of the entire site – to promote the county and encourage visitors to spend more time in County Clare than a brief visit to the Cliffs of Moher. This it does in a subtle way by showcasing a selection of spectacular landscapes using mainly aerial, but also underwater and underground, footage to follow a route around the county that is reflected in a small map in the corner of the screen. There is a small seating area in front of the giant screen, which allows visitors to relax while viewing. The four zones within the dome floor house a total of 12 multimedia exhibits, including a soft floor area for small children. The exhibits range from traditional wall panels with information displays to interactive touch tables and screens, to hands-on displays that engage the senses. The computer game where players rise up the Atlantic food chain to the ultimate goal of becoming a great white shark was originally aimed at younger visitors but it has proved popular with children of all ages. The mermaid jigsaw wall where children must race the clock to find the correct habitats for all of the characters also crosses age boundaries in its appeal, despite being located in the children's play area. In fact, the child-focused displays are also among the most popular with adults.

BEYOND THE EDGE

Beyond the dome floor, a winding cave-like corridor takes the visitor through a series of panels about the local cave systems. In a lobby area, screens display more underwater and underground footage before visitors pass through the doors into the main audiovisual theatre. This houses the Ledge, a virtual reality bird's-eye journey over the cliffs and below the surface of the ocean. Using CGI technology with a series of wall and floor screens, the Ledge gives viewers the sensation of flying through the air and allows them to meet members of a cast of characters from the seabird and marine life living at the cliffs. Originally designed for visitors to stand throughout the short (less than five minutes)

experience, it has been necessary to introduce some seating into the area to allow some visitors the chance to sit while viewing what can be a somewhat dizzying experience.

Returning to the ramp, visitors conclude their journey through the Atlantic Edge with a set of small tableau displays depicting life at the cliffs during harsh times in the past. The exhibition is exited through an array of changing images entitled the Infinity Cascade, which is actually outside of the admission controlled area.

OUTSIDE THE CENTRE

Interpretation at the Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience is not limited to the exhibition. Rangers also conduct guided tours of the cliff edge and the building at off-peak times. During busier times they are on patrol at the cliffside with binoculars and answer questions from the visitors about the wildlife and history. Customised guided tours are also conducted for students and special interest groups.

The Rangers also fulfil a safety, first aid and conservation role. They stop visitors crossing the walls onto the Special Protected Area at the cliff edge, which is also highly dangerous due to winds and erosion. They form the first line of response to accidents or crises at the cliff edge. They conduct bird counts and wildlife monitoring throughout the year. The period during which they have been in operation has seen wildlife return to the top of the cliffs.

LESSONS FROM THE FIRST SEASON

While it is always difficult for any artificial display to rival nature, the Atlantic Edge exhibition has drawn visitors well in the first year with almost 25% of all visitors choosing to pay the optional exhibition admission. This has been despite a number of challenges – not least the fact that much of the dome floor can be seen from outside of the admission controlled area: the Clare Journey, in particular, is viewed by many visitors from a balcony adjoining the lift or from the top of the stairwell. In 2008, a means of shielding this from the area outside the exhibition will be introduced using hanging panels. Other areas of development in the near future will include improving lighting for some of the exhibits, creating a defined itinerary through the exhibition and the introduction of more appropriate seating in the Ledge theatre.

'USING CGI TECHNOLOGY WITH A SERIES OF WALL AND FLOOR SCREENS, THE LEDGE GIVES VIEWERS THE SENSATION OF FLYING THROUGH THE AIR AND ALLOWS THEM TO MEET MEMBERS OF A CAST OF CHARACTERS FROM THE SEABIRD AND MARINE LIFE LIVING AT THE CLIFFS'

An early survey among tourism studies students from the Limerick Institute of Technology saw high ratings with 82% giving positive ratings and 44% giving top two box ratings despite the participants in the survey being asked to be as critical as possible. Average dwell time in the exhibition is 25 minutes, although some visitors have been known to spend almost 90 minutes. The main difficulty that visitors encounter is arriving at the top of the ramp and exiting the exhibition before they have seen both areas. Improved signage and the development of a defined itinerary using either lighting or floor trails should help address this issue.

CONCLUSION

Although early days, initial visitor reactions have been overwhelmingly positive. The response of younger visitors is particularly encouraging and the visitor centre has also seen an increase in visitors with disabilities, older age groups and student groups in the past year. More people than ever before are now reaching the Atlantic Edge.

Katherine Webster is the Director of the Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience.

LEFT:
The Clare Journey.

REMEMBERING THE LUXURY DAYS OF FLYING

Margaret O'Shaughnessy describes how the decision to rebuild a *Yankee Clipper* flying boat turned around the fortunes of the Foynes Flying Boat Museum in Ireland.

Recently a British exhibition designer visited Foynes Flying Boat Museum. After walking through the exhibition he told me that there was a point in the exhibition when he turned a corner and unexpectedly came across the full-size replica of a the *Yankee Clipper* flying boat, a major element of our new exhibition. He said that he suddenly had a deep feeling for what it must have been like to be a passenger during the luxury days of flying and that he felt that this should be the aim of every heritage exhibition – but few achieve it. It is this ready evocation of the era that makes Foynes special.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF FLIGHT

In the 1930s and 40s people crossed the Atlantic Ocean in flying boats in the lap of luxury. This was the golden age of flight. The routes across the Atlantic had only recently been tested and approved for passenger travel but, by 1939, flying boats were regularly crossing the Atlantic. Politicians, movie stars, royalty and refugees from many war-torn countries all passed through the small rural village of Foynes in County Limerick.

But if you had visited Foynes before 1989 you would never have known that it played such a major role in world aviation. Nothing remained from that historical time from1937 to 1945 when war raged throughout Europe, and when this sleepy Irish village became an important hub in the development of long-distance international air travel.

The Foynes Flying Boat Museum opened in July 1989 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the first passenger flights across the north Atlantic. The museum was housed in part of the original airport terminal building and across the road from the port of Foynes. It was originally just four rooms – a 32-seater cinema showing a 17-minute film 'Atlantic Conquest' made from original footage from that time, a radio and weather room, a war room and displays describing the first flights and a special exhibition on Captain Charles Blair. It was a great success but there was one major element missing – a *Yankee Clipper* flying boat. Though there were several period *Sunderlands* and *Catalinas* surviving (mostly in military configuration), the real icon of the age was the *Yankee Clipper* Boeing B314 – the ultimate in luxury and safety at the time and the aircraft of choice for many people crossing the Atlantic. The problem was that there were none left. The museum tried to buy several, but despite many false hopes, none could be sourced. Without a flying boat the museum could never fulfill its true potential.

'POLITICIANS, MOVIE STARS, ROYALTY AND REFUGEES FROM MANY WAR-TORN COUNTRIES ALL PASSED THROUGH THE SMALL RURAL VILLAGE OF FOYNES IN COUNTY LIMERICK'

THE *YANKEE CLIPPER* ARRIVES

In the course of planning our new extension and phase two of our museum, we planned to recreate the interior of the *Yankee Clipper*. But as plans proceeded, Jack Harrison, our museum designer, along with Bill Fallover, a cinema set designer, decided that it might be possible to build a full-size replica. We certainly never thought for one minute that it could be done. But Jack and Bill persisted and showed us how it might be achieved and, with funding from the Department of Arts Sport & Tourism, we set about designing and building our new exhibit – a full-size replica of a B314 with all external and internal details to be copied from the original designer's drawings. Within a short time, Jack and Bill produced a scale model, budgets and a suggested time frame.

BELOW:
The rebuilt Yankee Clipper Boeing B314 flying boat.

It took over nine months to build and transport the replica to Foynes. We installed it in July 2006 and surrounded it by water so that visitors would have to cross water to enter the flying boat.

What a sight! Now visitors could see for themselves what a *Yankee Clipper* looked like, how enormous it was and the luxury enjoyed by passengers such as the 14-seater dining room, the galley and fold-out beds. It even had a honeymoon suite to the rear! While the exhibit was being built, we commissioned a documentary film to chart the progress of the creation of what was to become the only true, full size replica of *Yankee Clipper* in the world. The documentary will be launched in 2008.

WHAT A DIFFERENCE IT MADE!

Up to 2006, museum visitors were mostly in the 40+ age bracket. There was nothing special to bring younger visitors and families to see the museum and we also found the fact that it was the only museum dedicated to the history of flying boats and passenger travel difficult to sell.

Today, we have many more families and students visiting our museum. We have introduced a number of flight simulators, which allow children and adults to get a feel for what it was like to pilot the huge aircraft. Visitors are now able to sit in the pilot's seat, or the engineer's station, look at the original weather maps displayed on the map table and get a genuine feeling for what it was like to come aboard the most luxurious flying boat ever made. Our conventional museum showcases and exhibits were also expanded to include information about the exotic ports the aircraft pulled into. Our special children's section has fun elements, such as an optical illusion which allows you to shake hands with a ghostly 'captain', and includes an invitation to enter our weekly art competition to draw a flying boat. The museum constantly features in local, national and overseas media. We have facilitated a funeral service (for former flying boat crew), a ruby wedding celebration and soon we will have our first christening on board our unique flying boat.

'HE SUDDENLY HAD A DEEP FEELING FOR WHAT IT MUST HAVE BEEN LIKE TO BE A PASSENGER DURING THE LUXURY DAYS OF FLYING AND THAT HE FELT THAT THIS SHOULD BE THE AIM OF EVERY HERITAGE EXHIBITION – BUT FEW ACHIEVE IT'

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The next phase of development is to rebuild the control tower, which sat on top of the building and was demolished in the 1960s. Luckily we have some good photographs of the original tower and the Irish Aviation Authority has agreed to sponsor this development. We hope to have it finished for summer 2008.

BOXED SECTIONS

Maureen O'Hara Blair was born in 1920 in Dublin and became a world-famous film star, with 59 movies to her credit. In 1968 she married aviator Captain Charles Blair, who flew the first non-stop passenger flight on the Atlantic and who had piloted the last scheduled flight out of Foynes. Maureen O'Hara Blair has been a patron of the museum since it opened.

In 1942, in Brendan O'Regan's restaurant at Foynes, Chef Joe Sheridan made a mixture of coffee, Irish whiskey and cream for flying boat passengers who had just come in from the cold north Atlantic. One passenger asked if this special coffee was Brazilian Coffee and the chef replied, 'No, actually it's Irish Coffee'. The name has stuck.

ABOVE:
left to right Louise Nicholson, Michael McCarthy and Fiona Enright.

Because of the unpredictable weather, flights could arrive in Foynes at any time. If news came in the middle of the night that a flying boat was about to land, a local horseman was given the job of galloping around to the various lodging houses to alert the B.O.A.C. ground crew. The horseman's name was Milo McMahon, the grandfather of the Director of the museum.

Margaret O'Shaughnessy is Curator/ Director of Foynes Flying Boat Museum.

TRAVEL THROUGH TIME AND TOUCH THE PAST

Gillian Wilson explains that though the expectations of visitors to historic houses can vary dramatically, the experience at Staircase House shows that using an innovative approach can help meet basic aims whilst exciting and engaging new audiences.

ABOVE:
The staircase which gives Staircase House its name.

Staircase House, opened in 2005, is a restored town house situated in Stockport's historic marketplace. Our hands-on approach invites visitors to learn about the history of the house and Stockport in an accessible, multi-sensory and engaging way using an audio guide.
As you travel around the house, you journey through time, from its beginnings as a cruck-framed building in 1460 to the splendour of the 17th-century townhouse and on to the Second World War (the last time the house was continuously occupied).

UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETING

An early decision was taken to interpret the house using an audio guide. The main aim of this was to avoid the clutter of interpretative text and other intrusive methods. As the house had not been opened to the public before, we had a unique opportunity to take a fresh approach and to challenge preconceptions about how a historic house should be presented and accessed.

This 'blank canvas' gave us great flexibility as to how the visitor route should be arranged to allow maximum access and user-friendliness. The positioning of doorways, ramps and walkways and provision of new stairways and lift were all determined by the desire to move visitors through on a logical route and provide greater physical access than might ordinarily be possible.

TOUCH, SMELL, HEAR

A key feature is the emphasis on sensory exploration. With few physical distractions such as barriers, signs and text panels, visitors can focus on key features of the rooms, assisted by the audio descriptions and opportunities/encouragement to interact with their surroundings.

Rare amongst historic houses is the invitation to touch, smell, hear and experience the special qualities of the house; its atmosphere, warmth, intimacy and the sense that it is still being lived in. The audio guide provides information on each room and period depicted, and invites people to explore and use their imaginations; it also directs them to objects they can touch and smell. Dramatisations are provided to help add to the atmosphere, using local accents and wording to give a sense of the period, while still being understandable to a general audience. The mixture of narrative, drama, interviews and the invitation to touch, provided in the audio guide, was designed to convey different types of information to appeal to different target audiences.

SO WHAT DO YOU THINK OF IT SO FAR?

Visitors often use the audio guide randomly, revisiting rooms as a result of information gained later. We have also observed visitors sharing a guide with companions and discussing the contents. 96% of respondents considered that they would not have got as much out of their visit if they had not used the audio guide.

There has been a steady increase in the number of people spending more time at Staircase House. This probably reflects an increase in use of the additional information or greater comfort in handling the objects and taking part in the activities. Lone visitors are as comfortable with the interactives as those in groups.

The satisfaction ratings for the audio guide itself have increased to 74% in 2006/7; 71% rated the 'hands-on element' as excellent over the same period.

GETTING THEM THROUGH THE DOOR

The interpretation has enhanced access and developed new audiences for Stockport Heritage Service.

The audio tour is designed to have layers of information that visitors can choose to access or not according to their interests. The provision of the audio tour in a variety of formats ensures all visitors can access the same information but in formats that suit them best: it is available in English, French, German, Cantonese and Urdu. A British Sign Language PDA is available as is a Step and Stair Free Route and a Visually Impaired Persons' tour. In addition, touch tours and bespoke tours are arranged upon request for groups with special needs or special interests. We also offer guided tours out of normal opening hours and a full events programme, including living history, throughout the year.

Throughout the development process, we consulted with a local disability advocacy group, Disability Stockport, on how to ensure Staircase House and its interpretation was as accessible as possible to a wide range of people. They provided advice on the formats of the audio tour, the route around the house, the positioning of furniture and displays to allow for wheelchair/pushchair turning circles and the sensory opportunities the house provides. Disability Stockport's assistance has improved access for all our visitors, not just those with a disability.

An unexpected outcome of this process was the support provided by Disability Stockport in promoting Staircase House to its service users. Based on completion of evaluation forms, we have established that 5% of respondents in 2006/7 considered themselves to have a disability compared with 19% so far for 2007/8.

LOCAL LANGUAGES

The decision to provide the audio guide in languages other than English was taken in an effort to ensure the house was accessible to Stockport's local population and also to provide a service to tourists. We consulted with the Council's Ethnic Diversity Service on the most popular community languages spoken in Stockport other than English and ensured that the audio commentary was culturally relevant and understandable to people choosing to access it in Cantonese or Urdu. We also draw attention to Stockport's historic overseas connections at relevant points throughout the house, for example trade in silk and ceramics with India and China during the 17th and 18th centuries.

ABOVE:
The Staircase Stitchers.

While the uptake of the community language audio tours has been limited, feedback suggests that people appreciate the effort made. Contact with the Ethnic Diversity Service and with local community groups has led to a group of Muslim women visiting the house for a guided tour and the local mosque is seeking funding to work with the Staircase Stitchers, a historic textiles group, to make replica textiles for display in Staircase House. The house is also used as a teaching resource for an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) class.

RIGHT:
Learning to write with a quill.

BELOW:
A low-tech interactive of the house.

'WE ARE DEVELOPING A "FILTHY HISTORIES" PROJECT LINKING THE TUDOR AND VICTORIAN PERIODS AND THE MODERN DAY THROUGH AN INVESTIGATION OF SEX, CRIME AND DRUGS WITH A GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE OFFENDED'

LESSONS LEARNT

- We considered two audio tours, an adults' and children's, but opted for a family tour. On reflection we feel we should perhaps have commissioned a separate children's audio tour.
- Making your interpretation accessible does not have to be complicated – go with your best instincts but then double check with users.
- By working in partnership with your target audiences you can build up mutual understanding and encourage a sense of ownership.
- Technology moves quickly – be very clear about the specification and features you want.
- Interactives can soon look tired and therefore need to be refreshed frequently.

- The house tour is perhaps too long if all layers of interpretation are accessed but because we purchased the software that allows us to edit, we have the ability to make changes as required.
- A multi-disciplinary interpretation group was formed at the start (educationalists, curators and operational staff) that helped to identify the different expectations/needs of a wide variety of users and also has the benefit of combined creativity.

LOOKING AHEAD

We constantly review visitor feedback in an effort to improve Staircase House. We intend to refresh and adapt facilities in light of feedback and consultation.

Dependent on funding, we hope that the local mosque will be able to link with the Staircase Stitchers community embroidery group and that this will widen the appeal and accessibility of the house.

Currently, we are developing a 'Filthy Histories' project linking the Tudor and Victorian periods and the modern day through an investigation of sex, crime and drugs with a group of young people who have offended. We hope to extend this project to young people's health & well-being initiatives being run as part of Stockport's Extended Schools service. In addition, we hope to further improve the provision for family groups in the house.

The aims of the project were many and included the 'saving' of this important historic building, but the restoration of Staircase House has shown that a project of this type can meet the needs and expectations of many interest groups and that, carefully managed, can exceed the expectations of most.

Gillian Wilson is the Informal Learning and Inclusion Manager, Stockport Heritage Service.

THE RUNNYMEDE ROOM

Emma Warren explains how the Runnymede Room was created primarily for the residents of the local area.

Chertsey Museum has been the museum for the Borough of Runnymede in Surrey since the borough's creation in 1974, but prior to the Runnymede Room there was no permanent display on the area's notable past. The main aim of the project was to create a permanent display on Runnymede's history from prehistoric times to the present, to engage with all residents of the borough (traditional users and non-users), all within a very limited space and budget.

Within the timeline of the history of the borough, we sought to highlight periods in history which support the National Curriculum, thereby appealing to schools and families. The aim was to teach residents of the borough a greater knowledge of the history of their town and the surrounding towns, and to stimulate interest in their heritage. Also, as an exhibition on the general history of the area had not been previously attempted, this was an opportunity to showcase objects previously not on display.

PROJECT CONCEPT

We have long suspected that large number of residents of the borough were not fully aware that we had material relating to their town or area, so we aimed to undertake a residents' survey to prove or disprove this theory. Consulting widely with our community – users and non-users – we discovered what they wanted their local museum to do and how they wanted that information displayed.

The idea of the project was to produce a new display that engaged with the 78,000 residents of Runnymede – all of whom are our target audience. To this end there was a need for it to be accessible to all people, but it was particularly aimed at three distinct groups. The Room was designed to be fun for families, with interactives for the children if they did not want to read the display panels with the adults. It was also designed so that it could be used to teach most of the Key Stage 1 (5–7 years), Key Stage 2 (7–11 years) National Curriculum subjects, and in such a way that made it fun and memorable to the children to explore on their own. The final target audience group was the casual visitor who was not overly interested in history but lived in the area.

> 'WE WANTED TO CREATE A LOCAL HISTORY GALLERY THAT WAS VERY DIFFERENT TO OTHERS IN THE REGION'

DESIGN

Space was very limited in the gallery and new displays had to make good use of a small area, be innovative in the way they interpreted the history of the area to maximise the amount of information that could be used, whilst still being interesting and accessible to all ages.

Working with an experienced designer, Mike Cashman, we were able to achieve our objectives. Local residents were also given the opportunity to meet the designer and comment on the designs, before they were submitted for an access audit undertaken by outside professionals. After this consultation process, this scheme was decided upon because it looks fun and engaging, and it neatly summarises the main historical timeline but gives additional information for visitors wishing to learn more. To assist with the space issue, oral history, an audio guide and a PC interactive were used to ensure the maximum amount of information was available in the smallest amount of space. We wanted to create a local history gallery that was very different to others in the region so that it would be memorable to visitors as well as informative.

BELOW:
Inside the 'tree': using audio guides to develop the story of Chertsey Abbey.

BELOW:
The 'tree' showcasing star objects including the rare Viking sword.

Traditional text panels were chosen to impart the main timeline history as this is still what most visitors to Chertsey Museum wanted and expected. The colour scheme for the panels themselves was chosen to reflect the subject matter and to show a change in storyline. The fibreglass tree was chosen as it offered increased display space together and created a magical 'dell' feel to the gallery. It also enables the use of audio information within the tree structure so that the sound did not carry to the rest of the gallery. The PC interactive, audio guide and oral history elements were introduced to expand on areas of particular importance where space was limited, and to do them justice, and to add variety to the way information was presented, as some visitors prefer auditory ways of learning.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The introduction of the new display has been the catalyst for other dynamic changes in the building. It has spurred us on to be more family-friendly throughout the organisation, to create a more informal learning environment and to produce temporary exhibitions, which also interpret the collections and history in an imaginative and informative way.

CONCLUSION

Work started on the project in November 2005, although the consultation exercise began before this, and the gallery opened to the public on 1 May 2006. At the end of the first month it was open to the public, we had a 37% increase on museum users for the same month the previous year. The project was undertaken by two members of staff who worked full-time on the project from November to May to achieve a substantial amount of research and resources for inclusion. The gallery, which cost £84,000 and was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Runnymede Borough Council, was a remarkable achievement given the limited time and staff resources available, and was excellent value for money.

The Runnymede Room was an exciting project to work on. The design is a good use of space and an imaginative interpretation of the borough's history. It brought the community together to work on it, introduced us to new volunteers, and increased the museum's profile and standing within the community.

'WE HAVE LONG SUSPECTED THAT LARGE NUMBER OF RESIDENTS FROM THE BOROUGH WERE NOT FULLY AWARE THAT WE HAD MATERIAL RELATING TO THEIR TOWN OR AREA'

KEY LESSONS LEARNT

- Try to find a designer who you feel you can work well with, who seems enthusiastic, who 'gets' what you are trying to achieve and who has a good reputation with other museums of a similar size or nature to your organisation.
- As soon as possible draw up a rough object list; that way, your designer knows what objects could be on display and can build creative ideas around them to show them off to their best.
- Don't be afraid to adopt a surprising or less traditional look – the innovative design enables us to have lots of information available in a very small space.
- Consult as widely as you can on the project before you start. Although this can be tedious, it helps generate interest and support, and there may be local knowledge out there that you can draw upon.
- Be realistic about what can be achieved with a limited budget and within the time available.
- Recognise the limitations of your collections. If you can do something to rectify imbalances in subject areas then do so. If not, find other ways of telling the same story.

Emma Warren is curator of Chertsey Museum.

PAWS ON THE MOORS

Dan Boys describes winning ways in which to explain to dog owners the problems of uncontrolled animals in the Peak District.

I have to admit, I am no dog lover. I don't necessarily mind other people's dogs, but I can safely say that I will never own one. That doesn't mean that a little roleplay cannot put you into the mindset of those that concur with the phrase 'man's best friend'. After all, I have three young children and preventing them weeing up the neighbour's wheelie-bin and sniffing each other's bottoms is a shared problem!

GET ORF MY LAAANND!!!

Listen to any moorland landowner in the Peak District and they will tell you there are two major conservation threats; summer wildfires and the presence of uncontrolled dogs (or is that owners?) disturbing wildlife, especially ground-nesting birds. My new role, back in 2004, for the Moors for the Future Partnership was to influence the behaviour of six million visitors to Britain's first National Park.

History tells us that the traditional way to tackle the issue of 'dogs off the lead' is to make dog owners feel unwelcome in the countryside. At many access points, seasonal signage, often left out all year long, discourages them.

ANDREX PUPPIES (THE SOFTLY, SOFTLY APPROACH)

We wanted to try something different and all together more 'new age'; our aim was to inform dog owners innovatively and positively that letting their pets running around like, well, dogs, was not particularly beneficial to moorland wildlife.

Looking for a source of inspiration, I began to leaf through a copy of Natural England's 'You and your dog in the countryside' when I read a page of the booklet I had always skipped. Page 2 invites you to photocopy and insert important details about your dog (insurance details, microchip number etc.), so you have them to hand if your dog gets lost.

In my newly found 'dog lover' role, I decided I was unlikely to keep a tatty piece of photocopied paper in my pocket, but liked the idea of having this information to hand, especially if I could stick a picture of old 'fido' in there too; just to show other people what he looked like if he did go missing. Although I should tell you now, my dog is the best-behaved dog in the world and never gets into trouble!

PET 'PASSPORTS'

Working on the principle that 'freebies' are a good ice-breaker, we armed Rangers with wallet-sized 'passport' cards replicating some of the details found on the inside cover of that booklet.

The card was launched at the start of the birdnesting season in 2006 and deemed an instant success by all parties; staff on the ground reporting that dog owners became more receptive to dialogue on this subject. Besides the extra publicity it gained from the media, the card delivered three, very carefully worded key messages devised with great assistance from the Kennel Club.

FICTITIOUS DOG BLOGS

Further initiatives followed, firstly with the launch of the Paws on the Moors podcast, a 25 minute radio-style play at Crufts, in March 2007. This recorded over 200 downloads in its first week and found its way to a number of podcasting sites as far as North America.

RIGHT:
'Tom' asks the audience if they have seen 'Bingo' during the live theatre production.

BELOW:
Poor 'Barney' finds himself locked in the hot car. An animated version of the play launched in April 2008.

BELOW:
A personable appearance of the characters was important.

'HISTORY TELLS US THAT THE TRADITIONAL WAY TO TACKLE THE ISSUE OF "DOGS OFF THE LEAD" IS TO MAKE DOG OWNERS FEEL UNWELCOME TO THE COUNTRYSIDE'

The objective here was to relay the facts from the dog's perspective. The story follows a young puppy learning about the delights and dangers of the moors over the course of a year. Through his online 'dog-blog' he makes new friends, including two experienced working dogs that help reform a mischievous terrier who likes to bite off more than he can chew.

This was followed two months later (to coincide with the period when birds are hatching from the nest), by live theatre performances of the podcast at eight moorland locations across the Peak District.

A dedicated page on our website (http://www.moorsforthefuture.org.uk/mftf/information/dogs.htm) was developed to provide a central point for all the initiatives. In addition, listings of dog-friendly B&Bs in the Peak District, doggie first aid and restrictions to access land ensured a one-stop-shop of dog-relevant information for moorland visitors.

BEST IN SHOW?

Is the initiative working? Well this is a hard question to answer in such a comparatively short time. The use of innovative methods has certainly attracted the attention of the media, raising the profile of the project.

The use of new media that is accessed remotely (i.e. not from face-to-face contact), can make evaluation difficult; the return rate for online feedback forms in our experience has been very low, but ongoing downloads indicate the podcast's popularity.

The performances, during a rather wet May in 2007, were attended by over 400 people and provided more conclusive results. The 10% share of the audience we interviewed not only found the show fun, informative and educational, but actually took away the messages delivered in the play, as well as the wallet-sized card as an aide memoir.

TEACHING OLD DOGS NEW TRICKS

So what have we learnt so far?

- Delivering messages to your target audience must, above all else, be engaging, relevant and accessible.
- Using a variety of innovative approaches can raise the profile of projects and reach audiences that may not engage with traditional methods.
- Working closely with appropriate stakeholders (e.g. the Kennel Club) ensures consensus and appropriate messages.
- Positive messages and 'freebies' engage with owners' primary concern of keeping their dogs safe and happy.
- Live theatre clearly influenced owners' perspectives on the issue but only reached a small audience.
- The web page meets the wider needs of the target audience and continues to be among the top three most popular pages on the site.

PAWS FOR THE FUTURE

On the back of these successes we have more plans in the pipeline, including the launch of an animated version of the play in time for the 2008 birdnesting season, enabling these crucial messages to be spread further afield. This will be shown in visitor centres, sent to schools and will no doubt end up on 'You Tube'.

Dan Boys is Moor Care Project Officer for Moors for the Future Partnership
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PUSHING THE RIGHT BUTTONS

Colin Baker describes how the Bath Postal Museum was forced to move to a smaller site – but has come up trumps.

I suppose there's a little bit of a child in all of us, for if we are honest with ourselves we love nothing better than pushing buttons or pulling levers to make things work. This childhood passion has been used in Bath to help to create a new museum of communications.

FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The Bath Postal Museum has been in existence since 1979. It started in the basement of a private house, which it quickly outgrew, and moved to 8 Broad Street in 1985. This historic building was Bath's post office in 1840, from where the first postage stamp in the world, the famous Penny Black, was used on a letter on 2 May 1840, four days before it was officially valid.

Unfortunately in 2004 our landlord, Bath & North East Somerset Council, decided to redevelop the building and we were forced to find a new home. The trustees saw this not as a disaster, but as an opportunity to enhance and modernise the museum. It was not long before we had been offered new premises beneath the City of Bath Post Office, a focal point both for local residents and visitors to Bath. Our new home would be much smaller than we had been used to, but most importantly it was at an affordable rent. It also allowed full access for the disabled, something we had not be able to provide in our old premises.

LOTTERY FUND HELP

We knew that moving to a new home was not going to be cheap. An application was made to the Heritage Lottery Fund, who awarded us 90% of the £265,000 cost of the project. Our own fundraising efforts more than made up the difference. With sufficient funds in place we could now concentrate on creating buttons for future visitors to push. But we also realised we would not be able to do this alone.

From the outset we knew that we would need professional help and we engaged the firm of Imagemakers as our museum designers. Having listened to our aims and ideas, they proposed several innovative solutions for recreating a new Postal Museum.

The museum has always relied upon volunteers and trustees, supported by a group of Friends. With a move just around the corner, many other people also offered help. The move could not have been achieved without these people, some of whom worked extremely hard. It was no easy task squeezing our collections and displays into a much smaller space. There was a great deal of sorting to be done and rubbish to be disposed of, apart from finding storage space for our collections that would not be on show.

INNOVATIVE SONS OF BATH

Ideas proposed by our designers included portraits that come to life at the touch of a button – talking heads. Three Bathonians are featured: John Palmer, who organised the mail coach system; Ralph Allen, who developed the inland post; and Thomas Moore Musgrave, the postmaster in Bath in 1840 when the Penny Black was used for the very first time. All these men played important roles in the development of the post. They tell their own stories and explain what they had to overcome to improve the postal service. Other postal characters relate tales of their working lives.

In addition, visitors are able to perforate their own sheet of 'stamps' and cancel envelopes. Children can play the Potholes and Pitfalls game based on a coach journey from Bath to London. The coachman falling asleep might delay them, or perhaps the coach wheel could fall off! Alternatively, with a fresh team in the reins, the coach would make up time.

BELOW:
The Red and Green Wall is a display of post boxes that were conveniently located in walls or fixed to lamp posts.

BELOW:
The Museum Shop is an important area where visitors can buy mementoes of their visit and meet our dedicated volunteers.

One of the Friends of the museum recorded six melodies on a 19th-century coaching horn and explained what each tune meant. Visitors are able to select them in turn and learn that the tunes might indicate:

- the coach is about to depart;
- the coach is stopping to change its team of horses;
- open the toll gates for the mail coach to pass.

Tunes might also be played to entertain the passengers. Button pushing was now firmly established.

KEEPING UP WITH THE NEWS

One important part of our story is how we kept everyone informed of our progress, what we had achieved and where we needed more help. We did this through a monthly staff newsletter and by encouraging the local newspaper, *The Bath Chronicle*, to publish reports about the progress we were making.

This and much more was achieved in less than a year. One of the important factors was the relationship between ourselves and Imagemakers, which was excellent. We were each determined to create a museum that would be modern, educational and entertaining. From the numerous comments made since we opened our doors to visitors, we know that we have achieved this. One article in *The Bath Chronicle* described us as 'the brightest and best museum in Bath'.

A SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION

Visitors are impressed by so much to see and do in such a relatively small area. By the time they leave the museum they have learnt what impact men of Bath had on the postal service. The influence of these men became international and our world would be a different place today had it not been for their determination and beliefs.

'WE LOVE NOTHING BETTER THAN PUSHING BUTTONS OR PULLING LEVERS TO MAKE THINGS WORK'

Children have a great deal of fun with all those buttons to push, while at the same time they learn the history of the postal system and its importance in the development of communications. It is often hard for their parents to persuade them to leave.

FUTURE PLANS

It would be easy for us to rest on our laurels and tell ourselves that we have a museum that will last another 25 years, but the Bath Postal Museum is not like that. We have already created two new display cabinets and we have changed our exhibitions several times to match national events. Changes like these will continue to be made. Backed by other funding our website has been relaunched. Our collections of photographs and paper objects are being added to it on a regular basis and we will soon be including images of our three-dimensional collections, such as balances, postal ephemera and Post Office objects.

THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

The Bath Postal Museum is the only registered postal museum in the country that is regularly open to the public. It was important that when the threat of closure loomed in 2004 the trustees made sure that it continued to serve the community. This was achieved by:

- employing professionals who had a great deal of experience;
- getting everyone to work together as a team;
- making sure all those involved were regularly kept aware of progress;
- having a programme that was achievable and was adhered to.

Button pushing and lever pulling makes visiting a museum fun, and that is what education should be about. Visitors to the Bath Postal Museum leave having had a good time, and often unbeknown to them with a little more knowledge than when they arrived.

Colin Baker is Project Manager of Bath Postal Museum.

NEW LIFE FOR AN OLD BATTLEFIELD

Dirk Bennett looks at how English Heritage has injected new life into a battlefield.

RIGHT:
Young vistors are getting hands-on with English and Norman weapons on the 'Military Wall'.

Battle Abbey has been under English Heritage guardianship since 1976. During the 1990s, discussions had taken place between the various stakeholders about how to improve the increasingly tired-looking presentation of the site. A significant slump in visitor numbers in the early 2000s added further urgency to the talks.

BACKGROUND

This is one of the iconic sites in Britain: the Battle of Hastings, fought here on 14 October 1066, remains one of the turning points of British history. Its short-and long-term effects in terms of culture, language, and politics has fascinated generations of historians, writers and visitors alike.

And then, there are the connections with the town. It did not exist before and sprung up when building works started on the abbey a few years after the battle. The mutual links have been maintained ever since: the abbey is still providing employment and, increasingly since the 19th century, has become a focus of tourism.

'A REPORTER INTERVIEWS THE COMBATANTS AND THE OCCUPANTS OF THE ABBEY – A BIT OF A PROBLEM AS THE MONKS LIVED UNDER AN OATH OF SILENCE AND ARE APPARENTLY NOT ALLOWED TO ANSWER THE INCREASINGLY INSISTENT QUESTIONS OF THE REPORTER!'

ABOVE:
The Normans and the English join battle on the laminated glass front of the visitor centre.

THE INTERPRETIVE SCHEME

The central element of the scheme was to provide a visitor centre with facilities and an introductory exhibition. The location of the building was difficult to find but a discrete place was agreed on the west side of the site near the gatehouse. Works began in earnest in 2005.

The interpretation team consisted of the interpretation manager, project historians, curators and representatives from the learning and marketing departments. External consultees included the Battlefields Trust and the town panel. The interpretation plan took into account factors like recent historical research, presentation of similar sites, legislation, visitors and site parameters such as conservation, comprehension and access. This was accompanied by a rigorous audit of the existing interpretive provision.

The proposals suggested a chronological journey: setting the scene in the visitor centre, recreating the battle on the battlefield, experiencing its short-and long-term effects on the abbey and later country house. The existing museum in the gatehouse, not included in this scheme, continues to consolidate the visit and provide further information for interested visitors on the finds from excavations.

IMPLEMENTATION

The visitor centre sits in the slope of the hill near the battlefield. Visitors enter it on the ground floor to find the restaurant and facilities, and proceed to the exhibition on the lower ground floor. It has a glass front which carries laminates of scenes from the Bayeux Tapestry: the effect of their reflections on the inside of the building on a sunny day is quite breathtaking, Norman and English soldiers join in battle on the white walls. Historic quotes about the battle from the 12th to the 20th century – yes, including the famous one from Sellar and Yeatman [1] – underline its importance. Along the corridor visitors follow a timeline showing events, historic characters and artworks from the present back to the year 1066. The intention is to provide a loose chronological framework, which allows visitors to relate their own history to the events here and to guide them back through time.

Down the stairs visitors arrive in the year 1066. Norman and English sides are in opposite sections of the room, colour coded to make the distinction clearer. Graphic panels aligning the walls display the achievements of each culture, emphasising their distinctive characters: England, a culturally diverse country, coveted for its wealth of natural resources and the skill of its craftsmen; the Normans, a young and energetic people, with accomplished architecture and sophisticated political administration.

Each section also contains computer interactives, where visitors can choose between different activities. They can play a name game, exploring the origin of English surnames, such as Beckham, Fletcher or Disney; they can explore the events between January and December 1066 from the Norman or English point of view on an interactive calendar; or they can follow the progress of Norman colonisation and the waves of medieval immigration into England on animated maps. Particularly successful is the standalone interactive, 'March to Battle', where they can join the respective army making their way from Stamford Bridge and Rouen to the battlefield.

The two sides come together in the middle of the exhibition on the Military Wall where hands-on weapons illustrate the defences of both sides, and on the Listening Bench where visitors can listen to two of the most famous songs in their original languages, *Beowulf* in Old English and the *Song of Roland* in old French.

Central to the experience is a dramatic film viewed in a purpose built theatre behind the Military Wall. It is 10 minutes long, and traces the events of the year from the death of Edward in January to the date of the battle and, finally, the coronation of William the Conqueror on Christmas Day at Westminster Abbey. Using re-enactments, CGI and animated scenes from the Bayeux Tapestry, the idea was to create a cinematic experience without compromising historic accuracy, making sense of the complicated historic setting and preparing visitors for a visit to the battlefield itself. It uses two voices, a contemporary narrator – David Starkey – and the account of our main contemporary source of the events, William of Poitiers – spoken by Samuel West.

Leaving the centre, the main thrust of the interpretation onsite is through graphic panels and audio guides – in six languages together with a tour for visually impaired visitors and a special version for children. The guide for children is inspired by reportage; a reporter interviews the combatants and the occupants of the abbey – a bit of a problem as the monks lived under an oath of silence and are apparently not allowed to answer the increasingly insistent questions of the reporter!

BELOW:
Something for everyone: two generations explore one of the interactive tables in the visitor centre.

'A GLASS FRONT WHICH CARRIES LAMINATES WITH SCENES FROM THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY: THE EFFECT OF THEIR REFLECTIONS ON THE INSIDE OF THE BUILDING ON A SUNNY DAY IS QUITE BREATHTAKING: NORMAN AND ENGLISH SOLDIERS JOIN IN BATTLE ON THE WHITE WALLS'

AUDIENCE RESPONSE AND LESSONS LEARNT

The interpretation scheme was based on clear objectives and targeted towards visitors identified by audience research. An evaluation of the new exhibition was carried out in December before the opening, which allowed us to address some issues, namely improving signage. The main finds were:

- the English side of the room got more attention than the French;
- people were hesitant to go into the film but glad when they did;
- the weapons wall inspired lots of hands-on interaction;
- most people played with at least one of the interactives;
- the March to Battle was a magnet, once you spotted it;
- the Old French/Old English voice installation was ignored.

Overall, it concluded that the experience is modern, appealing and entertaining. And, so far, the signs have been encouraging: visitor figures have been significantly up, and membership sales have improved dramatically.

Dirk Bennett is Interpretation Manager for English Heritage.

1 'The Norman Conquest was a Good Thing, as from this time onwards England stopped being conquered and thus was able to become top nation' (Sellar & Yeatman, *1066 and All That*, 1930).

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