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A WAY WITH WORDS

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FOREWORD: A LESSON IN ECONOMY

Welcome to your new-look *Interpretation Journal*!

This edition embodies one of the crucial lessons of good interpretation – the need for economy.

In order to be prudent with our finances we are making some cost savings with the journal. To reduce print and distribution costs we will now be producing two editions a year rather than three. However, this gives us scope to expand to 32 pages.

The first section of this new journal is dedicated to news, reviews, occasional articles, opinion and debate. The second, main section will remain 'thematic' (all offers of material gratefully received – Ed).

In this edition we explore one of the most fundamental aspects of effective interpretation – the need for good copy. Here we are proud to have assembled a range of articles from some of the leading UK and US interpretive writers and heritage institutions. Their most consistent message is the need for brevity. They also champion the often un-heralded skill of writing good copy: take your time to read and digest this material for there is a wealth of good sense and advice here.

If you want to hone your writing skills there are some highly regarded training courses around (see www.ahi.org). However, to really improve your 'way with words' and take it to another level, there is only one answer: as a visitor to New York once asked a guitarist busking on the sidewalk, 'Can you tell me the way to Carnegie Hall?' The busker replied, 'Practice, baby, practice.'

David Masters, Commissioning Editor

PS Our thanks go to the guest editors of this edition, James Carter and Susan Cross, for their invaluable time and effort.

OPINION&DEBATE

THIS HOUSE BELIEVES THAT THE INTERPRETIVE PANEL IS REDUNDANT

This is our first AHI debate feature. If you feel strongly ab§ue the pros and cons? Email david.masters@zen.co.uk for more details.

Verity Walker, proposing the motion, is the Director of Interpretation (www.interpretation.com), a Highlands-based interpretation and heritage education consultancy which has associates throughout the UK. Opposing her view is Eleanor Bird, a regular Interpretation associate based in South Wales (www.wordbird.biz).

THE INTERPRETIVE PANEL IS REDUNDANT...

The office phone rings. There has been a meeting, the committee has voted and the caller explains they now 'need' a panel. So begins the long discussion – which, increasingly frequently, leads me to talk myself out of a contract.

If an out-of-date panel needs replacement, usually no one considers any alternative to a like-for-like approach. Many see panels as a way of 'delivering learning objectives' to otherwise insufficiently appreciative visitors. All a bit Nanny State? Panel installation can also be perceived as the only possible vindication of that special place's true significance.

Many panels are, let's face it, written by committee in polished BBC English prose: little scope for a local accent. Guidelines abound, like those offered on the Scottish Natural Heritage website at www.snh.org.uk/wwo/interpretation/pdf/panels.pdf. While these encourage us to refer to the reader chummily as 'you', the words 'I', 'we' and 'our' are often unthinkingly banished, leaving a bland lack of identity behind. A panel may be written to 'provoke, reveal and relate', but those painstakingly crafted 100-or-so words will be read on average for about 15 seconds – before being almost instantly and almost entirely forgotten. Money well spent? John Veverka makes the good point that interpretive panels should provide value for money – if it costs £3000 it should provide £3000-worth of value during its 8 –10 year lifetime (although many are simply left to rot to the point of illegibility). But it's tricky to quantify that financial benefit. How much do you rate one passer-by saying 'yeah, quite interesting really'? £0.0005p? 50p? £5?

And there are other more significant and often unconsidered costs. Imagine taking several thick sheets of plastic, some toxic waterproof coloured inks, composite board, clunky metal fixings and a good dollop of concrete to hold it all in place – and tipping it out into the middle of a National Park SSSI. There would be an outcry. Assemble these ingredients as a panel, however, and there is a perception that their value magically outweighs their environmental impact – all in the name of making the world and its secrets 'accessible'!

Photo: Eleanor Bird

RIGHT:
It's a seat, a windbreaker – and a great interpretation. © British Waterways, Brecon/Imagemakers

Designers Ross Associates are sometimes asked to ensure that materials used in the production of panels are themselves recycled, but have never yet been asked to produce a detailed disposal plan for a panel as part of a contract. To achieve good quality printing of colour images and weather/vandalism resistance, most panels are plastified and are not going to biodegrade easily. The carbon footprint for manufacture, delivery and installation – especially where the panel is installed off the beaten track – can also be colossal.

And panels breed panels. If one small community has one, the one next door will want one. This encourages a general expectation for on-site static interpretation – and panel blight spreads.

Just imagine: you are admiring a blessedly panel-free view or cityscape, and your phone bleeps. So you ignore it or turn it off – your choice! Or you check it, and select from a menu of site-specific information: a map; a farmer's reminiscences on the landscape; seasonal images for flora and fauna; toposcope data with a zoom feature on specific hills; the sound of a local ceilidh band playing on a canal boat nearby. Digital media offers optional, easy, personalised, portable access.

This isn't science fiction: these solutions are well beyond their infancy and use basic communication technology most possess already. MP3 downloads from a website can provide fascinating and highly site-specific data straight to your ipod. Hypertagging from a localised transmitter allows a mobile phone to access a download of site-specific information – images, text, music, voice. The transmitter is low maintenance, need not be visible, and can be solar powered.

Downloads can be tailored to specific areas of interest or times of the year and are easy to update. Similar systems operate by dialling a specific number for information, where there is network coverage. As you choose to dial or upload, you are engaged in a positive choice to find out more – active learning, not passive.

As interpreters we often start from an arts perspective with a deep love of the written word. But this must not make us technophobes in the face of new, flexible and innovative technology. We need to embrace new approaches even if they challenge our own personal mindset and skills.

Start counting the real, hidden, costs and stem the march of panels across our landscapes, I say.

THE INTERPRETIVE PANEL IS NOT REDUNDANT...

The interpretive panel. We still love it, don't we? I believe for very good reason. Despite all the amazing technology now being developed, which gives us a range of options for interpreting sites, there are still times when the good ol' panel is just the thing. It is certainly true that another board can be an easy solution, but by analysing a site and the people who use it, interpreters can decide what's right for the spirit of a place and its users.

Imagine you're up in the Dales, an hour's walk from 'civilisation', and you find yourself marching past evidence of a very different civilisation – a Roman fort or the remnants of a medieval settlement. There's no mobile signal here, no electricity, and the rangers haven't got time to visit regularly to maintain something which might not survive the weather or run low on solar power. You're curious about the place. What would you like to see? An interpretive board! Not a huge thing ruining the view, but a discreet panel, well sited and informative.

A well-conceived panel, even one intended primarily for orientation, can bring a little local colour. A straightforward 'Look out for...' linked to certain parts of a map will give visitors a taste of the wildlife, plants and historical features they may encounter. Drawings or poems by community artists or schools can enliven a trail; a few sentences (incorporating intriguing dialect words) from a local myth or ghost story can whet the appetite for exploration (or perhaps an extension of the visit: 'Find out what happens at the Visitor Centre'); a clear board or contoured surface can put the names to the hills in the panorama before a visitor's eyes as effectively as anything high tech – and places the viewer firmly in the landscape context – 'There's where we live, over there.'

An interpretive panel perhaps caters better for engaging the 15-second (or even three-second) viewer than anything else. These visitors don't have to make the effort to pick anything up or press anything: all they have to do is glance. If a picture (and pictures definitely speak louder with only a few related words) catches their eye, they might just read a 20-word caption and find something that intrigues. At the same time, the board has also provided information for the three-minute reader who is actively seeking information.

Panels can be sited imaginatively to enhance the interpretive element – on chunks of local rock or timber; on a bench; round a corner where you don't expect them; on a box of 'coal' on a model of a canal-side tram (said one 20-something visitor in surprise of just such a panel at Brecon, 'It's quite good. I actually stopped and looked at it.') Panels don't have to be flat, they can be made of a variety of elements with local flavour and, even within those darn corporate guidelines, can avoid looking homogeneous and dull if done well.

My learned friend argues that the future lies in turning on your mobile to receive a range of interpretive information. This is a splendid idea if you're someone who doesn't mind

Photo: Eleanor Bird

ABOVE:
A great use of local stone combined with perspex. © Forestry Commission, Scotland.

reconnecting with the rest of the world when you're out communing with nature. But that's the last thing some of us want to do. Imagine, the phone's been on for two seconds and beep beep, there's the office with a 'quick' query or the spouse worrying about the car insurance. You could ignore it, but now you've read it...

Other technological solutions are also marvellous if you enjoy them – the listening post, the computer screen in the entrance building to a great estate. But I think we are in danger of getting ahead of ourselves: there are still a lot of people, and I'm one of them, who tend a bit towards the Luddite. We are of every age and gender, although bear in mind the older-age bias in many visitor groups, and you may still find resistance to newer technologies (not that I'm suggesting the silver surfers are all fellow Luddites!). We don't want to be faced with technology we're not sure of. We just want to glance briefly at a panel which gives us straightforward, perhaps provoking, definitely revealing, intelligence about a place, to add something extra to our visit or our walk.

So don't write off the interpretive panel just yet.

With thanks to the GEM/AHI e-list, Jonathan Morgan (www.hypertag.com), Alistair Milligan (www.rossassociates.org.uk) and John Veverka (www.heritageinterp.com)

FEATURE NEWS

UPDATE FROM CULLODEN

The Battle of Culloden may have taken place 264 years ago, but it still sparks heated discussions and is very much part of many people's sense of identity. The following presents some lessons learnt during the first two years of live interpretation at the National Trust for Scotland's new visitor centre at the battlefield.

Many people bring a lot of emotions to the site, independent of which side of the conflict they identify with. Our interpretation is guided by the principle of presenting a balanced view, and so interpreting the emotionally charged aftermath experiences and the battle's consequences was a particularly sensitive task. Choosing a third-person storytelling format that mixed contemporary stories of courage, death, prosecution and forgiveness from both sides of the conflict gave visitors room to empathise and express their own feelings. This became a very popular presentation that never raised concerns about perceived bias.

Visitors' beliefs aren't always historically accurate – for example those about Highland clans. We quickly learnt that addressing inaccuracies as the primary motivation for a presentation doesn't work. Instead, where deemed necessary we introduced facts that contradicted visitors' heritage beliefs in a subtle and indirect way. This gave visitors plenty of room for their own evaluation of history and their resulting sense of heritage. Issues of supplantive learning and perceived expert disregard for public heritage values were mitigated, and visitors began to respond positively where, previously, they had failed to engage.

Visitors' need to discuss their views and feelings while on site was very obvious. Facilitating conversation between visitors, particularly where an audience consisted of Highland locals and visitors from elsewhere, often turned out to be an immediate and powerful way of showing the site's historical importance and its relevance to our present. Personal stories emerged, comparisons were drawn to other countries' histories, and discussions started that often continued after a presentation or tour was finished. Of course, delicate control was required to ensure that conversations remained positive, respectful and free of blatant misrepresentations of facts. However, when this was achieved, the comments that visitors made suggest this provided a personal experience that went beyond interpretive intervention.

Given the site's sensitivities and visitors' relatively high level of prior knowledge (factual or not), it was particularly important to have clear objectives for each presentation. Evaluation was key to ensure we achieved these objectives. We trialled each presentation and used observation and informal visitor surveys as evaluation tools during development. Once presentations were in their final form, we started formal evaluation through self-administered surveys to test visitors' learning directly. Where necessary, changes were made accordingly. The evaluation process also provided a better understanding of our visitors, which, in turn, influenced new provision.

Nicole Deufel, Educator and Interpreter
Nicola@steminterpretation.co.uk

LEFT:
Moments before the ill-fated charge. A still from the immersion film, Culloden Visitor Centre. © Colin MacConnachie.

TACTILE INTERPRETATION LAUNCHED IN SURREY

During 2009 heritage organisations across Surrey created ten tactile storybooks to explain aspects of their collections to children with visual impairments. The stories included *Aircraft Structures*, *The Princess in Guildford Castle* and *The Witch Bottle*. Tactile books are similar to regular print books but they are specially adapted for blind and partially sighted children with simple imagery that uses extra senses such as touch or smell.

Brooklands Museum, Farnham Museum, Godalming Museum, Guildford Museum, The Lightbox, Watts Gallery and Surrey Heritage challenged their own perceptions to create sensory books about an aspect of their museum, gallery or archive collection.

As part of the process, new partnerships were established whose support and expertise proved invaluable. Surrey Association for Visual Impairment (SAVI) provided training on visual impairment and Marion Ripley of the Tactile Book Advancement Group showed us tactile book examples and offered practical advice on how to put them together. Barefoot Books were also involved to ensure that stories were creative and used appropriate language.

Museum staff and volunteers worked with local families and visually impaired children to create stunning handcrafted books, with a rich variety of contrasting colours, textures and smells to support the children's understanding.

This project met many learning and social outcomes, helping those involved to learn new skills, improve awareness of the needs of visually impaired people and gain greater knowledge of how to improve access to collections.

The tactile books are currently touring Waterstone's bookshops and Surrey libraries to facilitate storytelling sessions and promote the project. The books have already been taken to the visual impairment unit at Sythwood Primary School for children to explore, and further school visits are planned. But the books will ultimately be used at their home organisation to explain an aspect of the collection that otherwise may have been inaccessible to visually impaired children.

This project was coordinated and funded by Surrey Museums Consultative Committee (SMCC) in association with Surrey Heritage.

Kate Stuart is Outreach Support Assistant at Surrey Heritage;
Haidee Thomas is Museums Learning Support Officer for Surrey Museums Consultative Committee.
Tel: 01483 518737

Links

The books are available to view on Flickr
http://www.flickr.com/photos/surreycountycouncil/collections/72157622887042099/

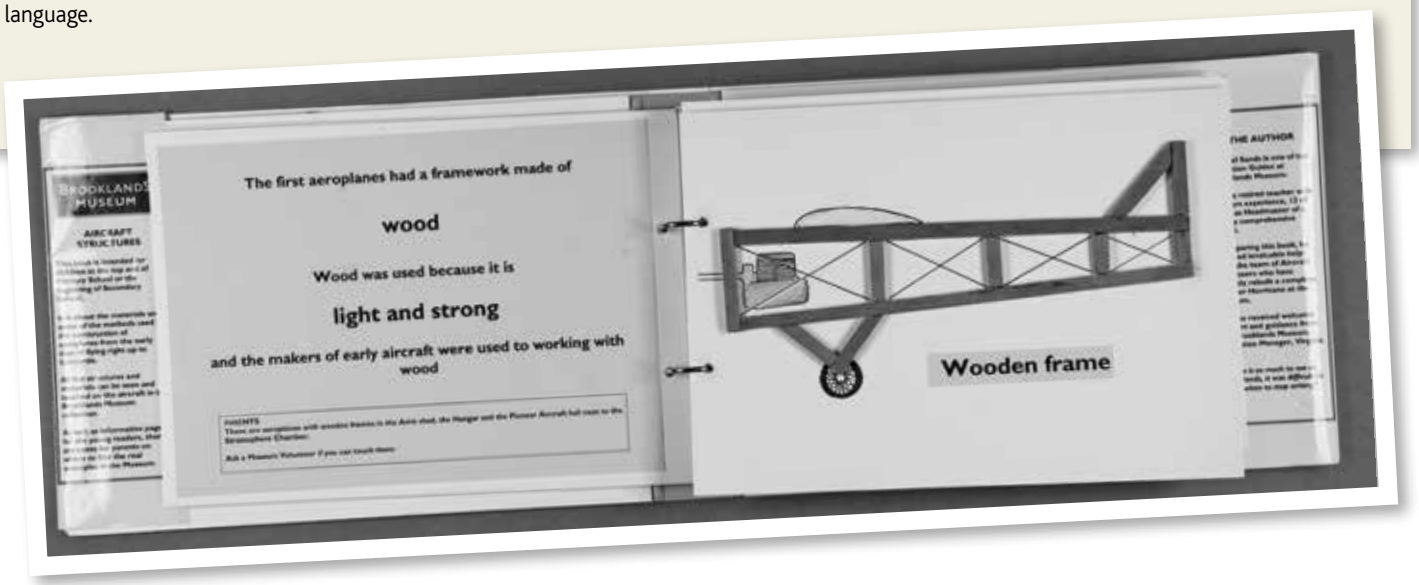
Surrey Museums Consultative Committee (SMCC)
http://www.surreymuseums.org.uk/

The Tactile Book Advancement Group
http://www.tactilebooks.org/

Surrey Association of the Visually Impaired (SAVI)
http://www.surreywebsight.org.uk/home/

Barefoot Books
http://www.barefootbooks.com/uk/

BELOW:
***Aircraft Structures*.**



REPORTING RESEARCH

DOES THE DESIGN OF LABELS[1] AFFECT THE WAY VISITORS LEARN?

This article is the first of a regular feature, reporting from research.

Most people head to the desolate and sublime mountainous regions of Eastern California in search of solitude, self-discovery, or as part of the quintessential American family road trip. In the summer of 2006, Kari Jensen ventured to this scenic region of the country to investigate a research question regarding visitor learning and interpretive panels.

Interpretive communications are widely used as a regulatory technique, to orient visitors, and for educational purposes at naturally and culturally significant places such as national parks and forests, museums and historic sites. The majority of visitors to interpretive sites receive information from non-personal interpretive media, such as signs, exhibits and brochures, as opposed to personal interactions with staff members or educators. With interpretive labels (panels) reaching such a large percentage of visitors, there is a great incentive to examine them more closely in order to understand exactly what factors contribute to a label's effectiveness.

Interpretation expert Sam Ham makes a distinction between two aspects of interpretive labels: the conceptual component and the artistic component. The conceptual component refers to the design of the text copy. Interpretive writers face the challenge of communicating complex messages by using engaging yet clear and concise wording that is pleasurable to read and requires minimal effort for visitors to understand. The artistic component encompasses numerous factors including layout, typography, illustrations, photographs and other graphics, inclusion of multi-sensory components, colour choice, and the physical shape and dimensions of the sign. Together, the conceptual and artistic components must spark visitor interest, encourage visitors to pay conscious attention, and communicate the message effectively.

Over the years, much attention has been given to techniques for writing interpretive labels that lead to increased visitor learning in informal settings. Interpretive guides generally stress the importance of using content themes or 'big ideas', helping visitors to make connections by using verbal imagery, and making text accessible to multiple types of learners by writing in short sentences and limiting the number and complexity of words. Field research has supported these practices as being integral to creating effective labels. The artistic display of label copy has received far less attention, despite the fact that it is a major contributing factor for visitors choosing to attend to labels in the first place. After all, in order to learn from labels, visitors must first approach and choose to pay attention to them.

'For long term learning to occur, there must be short term learning; in order to have short term learning, there must be attention, and attention takes time.'
Beverly Serrell, author of *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (1996)

This study was designed to tease apart the conceptual (text) component and the artistic component to explore the effect that the artistic design of labels had on indicators of visitor learning such as attracting power (percent of visitors walking by the sign that stopped for at least one second), holding time (number of seconds that a subject attended to the label), and short-term memory recall. This comparative study tested two versions of an outdoor interpretive sign. Both signs used in the experiment had the same conceptual component – the wording and punctuation remained identical on both versions of the sign. Only the artistic design was manipulated. The 'original' version of the sign had been designed for the US Forest Service years prior, while the 'best practices' version was created specifically for this study.

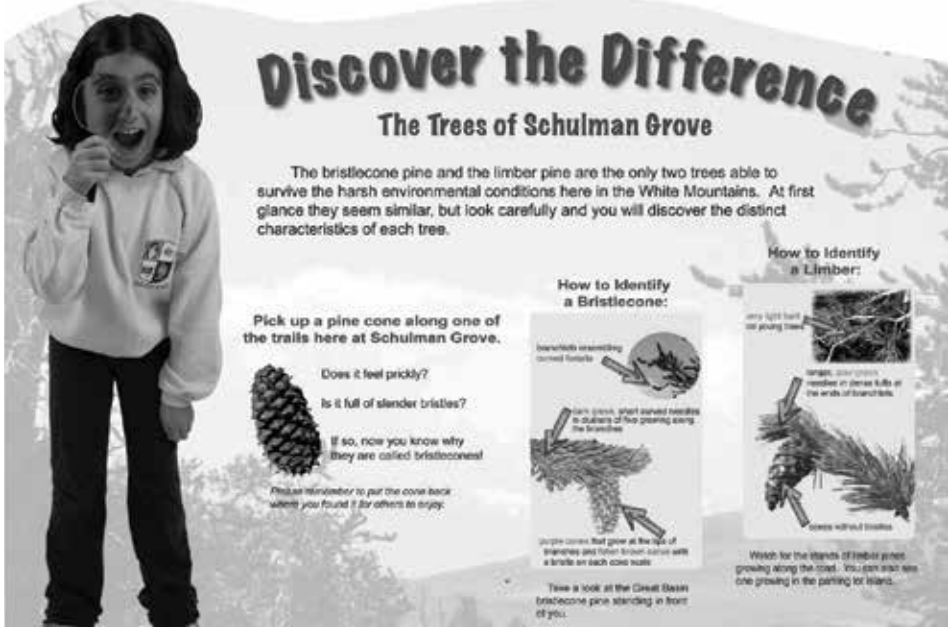
The best practices version was designed using research-supported techniques as defined by work done in a wide array of related fields including cognitive psychology, museum visitor studies and graphic design.

Research-based findings used in the design of the best practices version:

- Sans serif type was used for the presentation of the text, in order to allow for quick reading, and was presented in black letters on a white background in order to maximise legibility
- Headings were made distinct by using a different font and colour
- Vivid photos were included in the design to facilitate greater visitor learning
- Two flip panels were added to increase novelty and distinctiveness while simultaneously minimising the perceived amount of effort that would be required to read the sign

ABOVE:
Original version: US Forest Service-designed panel.

1. Read panel for label.



ABOVE:
Best practices version: design components of the sign that were changed for this version included layout, typography, colour, graphics, contour and the inclusion of flip panels.

- An irregular contour cut was made along the top border of the manipulated version with the intention of increasing novelty

Main findings of this study:

1. Attracting Power

The artistic component significantly affected how many visitors chose to attend to the label. Out of the 74 individuals who were observed while the original design was being displayed, 57% of the 74 visitors who walked by the original sign attended to it for at least one second, while 83% of the 72 subjects who walked by the best practices design attended to it.

Comments from visitors participating in the survey and interview confirmed the importance of the artistic elements in getting their attention. When asked to describe the first thing they noticed when approaching the sign, many of the subjects exposed to the original design of the sign reported first noticing graphic elements with answers like, 'the pictures,' or 'the pine cone drawings'. The majority of people who viewed the best practices design instead described the interactive flip panels as the first thing they noticed, with graphic elements also commonly mentioned.

2. Holding Time

The artistic component also affected how long visitors engaged with the label. The average holding time for the 42 subjects exposed to the original design was 38 seconds, compared to 50 seconds for the 60 subjects viewing the best practices design.

3. Memory Recall – Main Messages

The artistic component significantly affected visitors' ability to recall the main messages of the label. About half (51%) of the 65 subjects exposed to the original sign design were able to correctly recall the main message, while nearly three-quarters (71%) of the 57 subjects exposed to the best practices design were able to do so.

4. Memory Recall – Secondary Messages

Although a greater percentage of visitors were able to recall more detailed, secondary messages after viewing the best practices design, the effect was not dramatic enough to be statistically significant. Out of the 65 subjects exposed to the original sign design, 62% of them were able to correctly identify both the bristlecone pine and the limber pine. For the 57 people exposed to the best practices design, 70% were able to correctly identify both trees.

Table 1. Summary of findings

	Original Version	Best Practice Version
1. Attracting Power	57% (n=74)	83% (n=72)
2. Average Holding Time	38 sec. (n=42)	50 sec. (n=60)
3. Memory Recall Main Message	50% correct (n=65)	71% correct (n=57)
4. Memory Recall Secondary Messages	62% correct (n=65)	70% correct (n=57)

Sam Ham, author of *Environmental Interpretation*, in his chapter on self-guided interpretive media wrote, 'Communication is more a matter of conceptual design than it is artistic design.' However, this research supports other studies in the field in finding that the artistic design elements also play a vital role in attracting and holding visitor attention as well as facilitating learning.

Several implications arise from this study. Adequate time and consideration devoted to the artistic component of interpretive exhibit design can facilitate greater visitor learning. While the wording on a label may be important to the understanding of content, artistic aspects should be considered as highly integral in attracting visitors, holding their attention and communicating the theme or main message of a label.

Of course, as with any project of this nature, there will always be trade-offs to consider. For example, the best practices version of the sign in this study did facilitate learning behaviours, but an argument could be made that the original design fit into the environmental context better and may have affected visitors' view of the surrounding scenery. Another trade-off may be in the maintenance of the label – the original version of the sign has already persisted in the harsh alpine environment for years and does not appear to have faded from UV exposure. It's up to interpretive planners and designers to weigh these trade-offs and make the best decision for each scenario.

Kari Jensen, Exhibition Developer,
Oregon Museum of Science and Industry.

TOMORROW'S WORLD – TODAY?

Each issue James Cokeham will be reporting from the front line of the ever-advancing world of new media and technology.

Don't know your augmented from your virtual reality? Twitter leaving you all a flutter? Thrown into a cold sweat when 'mashups', 'widgets' and 'gesture sensing' are mentioned? Then this article is for you. I'll be exploring how 'new media' is being used to provide our audiences with innovative new interpretive opportunities and trying to wade through acronyms and technical specifications to give it to you straight (and in plain English!).

Virtual reality never really took off, did it? But the tech industry is awash with excited chatter regarding the potential of 'augmented reality' – 2010 is meant to be 'its year' – a technology that offers interpreters the opportunity to, literally, recreate the past.

Whereas virtual reality concerned itself with creating a totally new virtual world for users to explore, augmented reality is the art of augmenting, or changing, reality (reality being what we see around us). Imagine looking out of your window and seeing a small oak sapling. Looking at the same sapling through a device that can augment reality provides 'live' information directly connected to it – think of it like a 'sixth sense'. This could be a simple text tag, showing when the tree was planted, an Internet link to an audio or video clip revealing the sapling's significance, or a detailed computer-generated representation of how the tree might look in 100 years when fully grown (in place of the humble sapling).

Excited yet? Imagine being able to reveal visually how the archaeological remains of a Roman town would have appeared in its pomp. Or show how a landscape might have looked before the physical ravages of an ice age glacier. Interpretation at its purest?

Devices require high-resolution screens, GPS capabilities, an internal compass and a camera in order to perform this function – features standard to the latest generation of smartphones.

Check out the following links for some amazing examples of 'AR':
http://bit.ly/7X3KNp
http://bit.ly/75zdTY

ABOVE:
Apple's 'apptastic' iphone.
© Josh Bancroft http://bit.ly/5Pxh0J

If you've managed to avoid the app revolution thus far, the word is merely a shortened version of 'application' (specifically, small applications for mobile devices such as mobile phones or MP3 players). They're normally developed by third parties for 'smartphone' platforms, such as Apple's iPhone, and use the devices' powerful

in-built features (touchscreen, accelerometer, GPS, camera etc.) to provide a new avenue of added functionality. Apps come in all different shapes and sizes – interpretive ones too?

Imagine the potential of a handheld, GPS-enabled multimedia touchscreen device that can host high-resolution imagery, video and audio content within an integrated, layered experience that requires no mobile phone or Internet signal (apps are installed pre-visit) and that visitors bring to a site themselves. Smartphone sales have bucked the recent effects of recession in the mobile market to grow exponentially over the last year (we'll all have one in five years?) and Apple recently announced that an astonishing 3 billion apps have been downloaded from its App Store since its launch in June 2008.

A wealth of opportunity...

James Cokeham is a Heritage Interpretation Consultant specialising in new media and technology. james@imagemakers.uk.com

ABOVE:
Augmenting the Acropolis.
© Eric Rice http://bit.ly/7b3Pyb, http://bit.ly/8PlzHA

THE SANDFORD PRINCIPLE

The Rev, the Rt Hon, the Lord Sandford DSC, 1920-2009.

For many years, Lord Sandford was President of AHI – and SIBH before it. He gave status to our association that stemmed from his varied career as naval officer, clergyman and politician. In 1974, his National Parks Review committee set down that, in conflicts between conservation and recreation, the former must always prevail. This 'Sandford Principle' was later established in law. Lord Sandford strongly supported the role of interpretation and was pleased to lend his name to the AHI. He will be a hard act to follow.

Commander, the Reverend: 2nd Lord Sandford's titles suggest he was a 'lad o' pairts', his *Times* obituary describing him as naval officer, clergyman, politician and conservationist. To many, that eclectic CV characterised a man with passion and social purpose – with legacies ranging from co-founding Water Aid to the Sandford Awards for Heritage Education, AHI president and the eponymous Principle.

A post-war Labour government, intent on social betterment and 'democratising' the countryside, passed the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act; covering only England and Wales. Landowner lobbying, forestry, hydroelectric developments and political intransigence meant Scottish Parks waited a further 51 years.

The 1949 Act provided National Parks with two aims of equal weight:

- preservation and enhancement of natural beauty
- encouraging the provision or improvement of facilities for the enjoyment thereof and for the enjoyment of the opportunities for open-air recreation and the study of nature

The 1960s and 70s saw people flocking to coast and countryside along new motorways. Parks with governance dominated by elected members stood accused of promoting economic gain over environmental protection. For some, preservation of the Parks' natural beauty was being overlooked. The Act demanded a review.

Ironically perhaps, given Conservative enthusiasm for economic growth, Sandford's committee, in their review of the 1949 Act, proposed significant changes including the Principle and the establishment of independent Park authorities. Sandford's Principle finally appeared in the 1995 Environment Act, requiring authorities, in cases of irreconcilable conflict, to give greater weight to the first aim – 'in order that the beauty and ecological qualities of the National Parks may be maintained'.

Interpretation gained a boost from Sandford's 1974 proposals. Parks trying to reconcile conservation with enjoyment turned to interpretive planning and visitor centres. Lessons came from the US National Parks Service where conservation attitudes hardened in the 1960s and investment was reallocated to awareness programmes.

Although mere youngsters, Scottish Parks have listened and learned; four aims, not two, which must be achieved collectively in a coordinated way but the Principle remains in section 9.6 of the 2000 Act. Now though, government ministers are explicit – it is not a trump card. Park authorities must recognise residents, businesses and visitors as part of the solution, not the problem. To date ,the Principle is rarely invoked and if Park management (including interpretation) is effective, surely as Sandford intended, it should not be feared.

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A WAY WITH WORDS

WHISPERED SORCERY

James Carter introduces the main theme of this issue – the importance of writing in interpretation.

Writing is sorcery. Make a few squiggly marks on a piece of paper – like the ones you're reading now – and you conjure images and ideas in your reader's mind. The magic trick works because the squiggly marks represent sounds, and the sounds are words, and the words are linked to things, actions, thoughts and feelings. It's amazing the system works at all; that our brains are capable of skimming the marks so quickly while making the abstract connections between them, the sounds they represent, and the shapes and dreams for which the sounds are just symbols.

RIGHT:
Written interpretation can spark a conversation between visitors. © James Carter.

THE RIGHT WORDS

In trying to conjure clear images, or powerful ideas and emotions, it's tempting to write with a breathless enthusiasm that we hope will transmit itself to our reader. But, there's a fine line between being enthusiastic and telling the reader how to feel. The right words often give the reader space: words are symbols, and symbols are powerful largely because of the personal meanings we attach to them. Powerful writing can often look deceptively simple.

WITCHCRAFT AND ALCHEMY

If the chain of abstract symbols and associations that makes writing work is witchcraft, interpretation adds another layer of alchemy. The impressions we create through the text on panels, in exhibitions or on screens colour the reader's experience of a place. It's as if we're conjuring a pair of spectacles through which we invite the reader to look for a while, and that will let them see the place in ways they might not have thought of.

WHISPERED WORDS

But all this conjuring has to be quick and subtle. Our writing isn't going to be studied in depth while the reader digests complex arguments: they'll skim across our words in a few moments and move on. We need to offer ways of seeing that will add to our reader's experience, but do so almost unnoticed. After all, visitors come to see the place, not to read our text. If our words get in the way of their experience, we've failed. At its best, interpretation is a whisper in the visitor's ear. It suggests ways of looking, plants seeds that may take root in the field of a visitor's own thoughts, while leaving them free to explore for themselves.

'THERE'S A FINE LINE BETWEEN BEING ENTHUSIASTIC, AND TELLING THE READER HOW TO FEEL'

That means that interpreters really do have to be alchemists. We must weave common vocabulary and everyday language, words that can be scanned quickly and easily by a wide cross-section of readers, into a singing filigree of gold – writing that evokes ideas and impressions and makes this place, this moment, interesting.

GOLD OR BASE METAL?

All alchemists dream of making gold, but interpretation too often has the dull thud of base metal. In an attempt to make sure their interpretation works, many organisations try to codify it. They write instructions for their alchemists, rule books designed to ensure the end result is precious. Text must have a reading age of x; it must follow the criteria developed by the Plain English Campaign; it must contain tangibles, intangibles and universal truths (a recommendation by the National Association of Interpretation in the USA).

These strictures have some value, but they are no guarantee that the spell will work. Reading-age tests are blunt instruments, useful for getting an impression of how complex text is but no way to gauge its likely effect on the reader. Plain English criteria remind us that writing must be easy to follow, but they were developed to make official publications more accessible: they have no room for the unusual, for rhythm, for the flash of inspiration that can really make a place come alive. Working with tangibles, intangibles and universal truths sounds great, but it can also be a recipe for text that sounds pious and twee. And it's an awful lot to ask of 200 words.

GO WITH THE FLOW

If we want tests for what makes interpretive writing work, I think we need to look at qualities that are both less regimented and more demanding than any of the rules commonly applied to it. We also need to remember writing's roots as a way of representing speech. In the few moments that interpretation has to work its magic, text that could live as speech has more chance of making the connections we want. So, try reading your text out loud. Better still, give it to someone else to read out loud and listen carefully to what happens. Where do they stumble over the sense, or have to go back to check how a paragraph is unfolding? Writing that doesn't flow, that has no sense of rhythm or light and shade, is unlikely to live in your reader's mind.

Second, concentrate on how your words colour the way your reader will see the place. What sort of experience does the text invite them to have? Listen especially for words or phrases that are hollow, or trying too hard to make the visitor feel the way you do. Too many adjectives are a common problem here: use them carefully! Writing interpretation is like whispering a spell into your reader's ear – and every word in a spell needs a purpose.

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WRITING STEPS

Susan Cross explains that there's more to good interpretive writing projects than good writing.

I've spent a lot of time helping people through interpretive writing projects. Interestingly, it's often not the writing that trips people up. If you've not done this sort of thing before, you may be surprised by the time, the debates, and, especially, the emotional highs and lows involved. Interpretative writing isn't quick and it's often not easy. Here is a step-by-step guide to what you might expect.

STEP 1 PLANNING

It all starts when you are invited to write the text. You may feel excited at the opportunity, nauseous with terror, or both. Ignore your stomach, and concentrate. Don't think about writing yet: start by paving the way for a successful writing project.

Listen to what is wanted, why it's needed, who will read it and where. Write that down as clearly as possible. Be courageous and creative in deciding how to present the text so that your visitors will want to read it. Write your proposal down. Identify the aspects of the subject most likely to get people talking and write down the theme for your interpretation.

Now clarify who will sign off your work – you need one person and you need to get them on your wavelength. Begin that tuning-in process by showing them your short and compelling argument about how the text should be written. Include the number of words you will use, what your theme is and the style and language(s) it will be written in. Discuss, amend if necessary, and agree it.

Now everyone knows what you are aiming for. You have a target for your writing and your project manager knows what to expect. You may have saved yourself a heap of trouble later on.

STEP 2 STARTING

You may slide rapidly from the euphoria of having your creative idea accepted to panic at having to deliver it. That's normal. Don't let fear of the blank page transfix you. Call on inspiration in every way you know. Be playful. Go to your site and watch and listen. Hear what people say as they leave. Notice exactly what you want people to look at, imagine, think, do, touch, and hear there. Talk to your mates about it. Write. Write anything: poems, stories, riddles, conversations, mind maps.

Suddenly your page is not blank any more – you've started. And you are getting mastery over your material.

STEP 3 DETAILING

Think about what your finished piece will look like. Plan a rough layout of the panel or screen, mock up the leaflet. Work out where the words, pictures and white space will be. Think hard about how much of your theme (see Step 1) you can put in a picture and how your words will complement it. Then find the images or brief the illustrator.

Identify what you want people to read in 2–3 seconds (probably just the title, so that had better be good – see Step 6), in the next 10 seconds (sub-headings, introduction and picture caption) and later (the body text). If possible, talk to the designer about the text hierarchy and agree how many words can go where. Show this to your project manager and get agreement.

ABOVE:
There is more to successful interpretative writing than meets the eye.

STEP 5 WRITING

Now, at last, you are ready to start writing. Pick the time of day when you work best. Clear a space, sharpen a pencil. Look at your brief and think about the task you set yourself. Do not get cold feet at the thought of writing couplets, the cryptic crossword or whatever else you thought would be brilliant for your audience. Just do it. Write to your format from the start. Don't write an essay and try to cut it down.

Next day, return to you wrote. Dislike most of it, so bin it. Write what you should have written.

Wait a few days. Improve text. Go through it sentence by sentence, word by word. Read it out loud. Check your text follows the rules for good interpretive writing. Check spelling and grammar. Be fierce. Make changes as necessary. Spend a long time thinking of titles and hating them all. Take a break, relax – and discover brilliant title.

STEP 6 LISTENING

Show your text to trusted friends and colleagues. Listen to what they say. Do not sulk. You and your writing may not be as brilliant as you secretly like to think. If they couldn't understand it, change it. This is particularly important if you have tried to be funny. Show your text to other people – make more changes. Find a really picky person to proofread it.

Think about showing your text to your project manager. Feel weak. Consider how you can present it as your readers will see it – you could write it large and stick in on the wall, or fold the paper, or send it to their mobile. Maybe your designer can help you with this.

Listen to project manager's comments. Decide she is an idiot. Accept you are now a temperamental artist at risk of losing your job/client.

Show your text and panel/leaflet/screen design to visitors and ask them what they remember. Force yourself to remember visitors are not idiots, just busy people enjoying their visit.

Change your text in line with their comments. Take text back to your project manager. Get approval.

STEP 7 FINISHING

Brief the designer. Few days later, receive design. Hate it. Wait 48 hours, then look at it again. Discover it's mostly fine, just not what you expected. Identify the important issues and discuss them with designer. Spend a week or two working on details of design with designer. Then, let go: it's time to stop, get the project signed off and into production. Apart from checking proofs, your job is done.

Eventually the panel/leaflet/screens are out there with your visitors. Wait several weeks, until your sensitivity about your writing has diminished, then visit the site. Observe people looking at your words. Realise, on reflection, that your writing is not as bad, or as good, as it might have been. Gather lessons and ideas for your next, even better, project.

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A WORD IN YOUR EAR

Bernadette Ross discusses the way in which she approaches writing scripts for audio and audio visuals.

'IT'S THE WAY I TELL'EM'

At the outset of any tour we ask ourselves two key questions: What is the story? What is the message? This is the starting point. We then communicate with the client in creative meetings, we research, we do a fair amount of standing on the shoulders of giants and hope to arrive at a final draft for a robust tour which fulfils the BBC Reithian dictum of 'informing whilst entertaining'.

There are many styles and formats in vogue today, and it's important to consider this whilst writing the script. Format falls into two main types: the linear tour and the random access tour. Both have their merits and you need to choose the format which is most apt for your interpretative message, site and demographic.

LINEAR TOURS

The linear tour is the most immersive experience for the visitor. It guides the visitor on an established route through the site. Visitors can pause the tour if they wish but cannot alter the order in which they receive the information.

The linear tour allows the scriptwriter to build a narrative arc and is the ideal way to build an argument or get a message across. It also aids flow of visitors through the site.

RANDOM ACCESS TOURS

The *arriviste* of these formats is the random access tour. Random access tours developed as audio cassettes were replaced with digital audio technologies. They allowed the visitor

BELOW:
A multimedia layer in use.
© Dominic Thurgood.

'CHOOSE THE FORMAT WHICH IS MOST APT FOR YOUR INTERPRETATIVE MESSAGE, SITE AND DEMOGRAPHIC'

to chart their own tour through the site or gallery. The visitors simply chose a 'stop' and listened to a two-minute commentary. The hermetically sealed relationship that the linear tour offers for developing content over a tour is here traded for the freedom of the random access tour. For purists, this is a 'pick and mix' option which precludes narrative engagement. However, the random access tour is a reflection of how people use broadcast media and the Internet and how they consume content today. The random access tour gives the visitor the choice of what he/she wants to listen to. This means we need to have a more sophisticated approach to storytelling and to how we get the interpretative message across.

The job of the scriptwriter and the editorial team is to 'package' the interpretation and its key messages within this random access format. Within each stop the writer has to create a narrative engagement to complement and enhance the interpretation. This process has become more sophisticated as more digital platforms are on offer. In addition, digital technology interface and hierarchical menus are now our means of directing the visitor to content through a shorthand or a visual grammar. The layering of information in linear and traditional random access tours has become more 'episodic' or 'themed' within hierarchical menus.

With both linear and random access tours adding layers of extra information gives the scriptwriter the opportunity to add greater depth to the subject. Layers allow the script to address the casual first-time visitor as well as inform those who want to go a little deeper into a subject.

WHICH TECHNOLOGY?

It is important not to become bogged down by the diverse range of technologies on offer but rather to ensure that you use the most apt platform and repackage your interpretation or narrative accordingly. There is no downgrading of content: it is simply restructured.

Once the format has been decided, there are several creative styles which enhance the script further. The traditional narrative, used on linear tours, is a scripted voice-over and works well with conveying a strong narrative. The other style is more varied – it still has scripted voice-over but also includes interviews with experts, witnesses, artists. Contemporary colour can also be added to either format using readings from letters for example or a well-researched reconstruction of a historic moment. A nicely turned anecdote would be lost with voice-over delivery, but when it comes from the witness themselves it adds weight and veracity to the tour. It's very important that the scriptwriter asks themselves what is the best way of conveying this piece of information – voice-over, expert interview, 'colour' interview, dramatic evocation or video vignette. All of the latter have been borrowed from radio and television as tour producers and interpretative teams became more aware of how their visitors consume content.

THE GOLDEN 20 SECONDS

When people listen to a tour they listen in a linear fashion – audio is linear. So it is important within a 'stop' or a commentary to build the information in that way. You don't give the point away in the first paragraph but you need to win your audience, to engage them and take them with you – you need to capture their attention and arouse their curiosity. You need to tie the commentary to what they can see. Our data collection shows that people will listen to a commentary for 15 – 20 seconds in order to decide whether to continue listening. This is the golden 20 seconds.

Writing in the active voice rather than the passive makes the text more immediate and the construction simpler, which again helps the linear nature in which the audio is heard. Adjectives should be sacrificed, but not description. The text should be more conversational and less didactic, although this does not mean 'dumbing down'. Long sentences should be broken up while colour and anecdotes are added to propel the narrative forward.

The length of the commentary is also key. Again our data collection shows that people display a similar attention span to that when watching TV. As television became more reductionist and edited, the viewer became conditioned to this more packaged type of content. This fact is not lost on audiotour producers and our data collection attests that the visitor's cut-off-point for a commentary is about 1.5 to two minutes.

AND FINALLY

For the most part, audio visual is scripted in advance – a 'shooting script'. The narrative is worked out, the sequences which work best visually are planned, and interviews are researched prior to recording on camera to be sure that there are no surprises on the day. The script is then finessed in conjunction with visuals in studio so that the voice-over works in harmony and propels the visuals forward.

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WORDS THAT SING AND DANCE

Michael Hamish Glen argues that writers should be as highly valued as designers in the provision of interpretation.

One of the joys of real interpretation is its ability to inspire. This is no more acutely honed than in writing. Words can conjure up a thousand pictures if they are apposite, accurate, alluring, polished and provocative. I have been trying to write such words for many years and have drawn inspiration and encouragement from others. I want to highlight some examples from fellow wordsmiths, and from my own work, to encourage you to value writers as highly as designers in the provision of interpretation.

In a recent article for the *Boletín de Interpretación*, I argued that interpretive wordsmiths are akin to drystone dykers. Their skill is to make humble words sing and dance, brightly or sadly, to the tune of the client; what they write must meet a brief, not simply enhance a place, however appealingly or appropriately. That is the role of poetry (or prose) written for another purpose but which is applied, often to great effect, to a different situation. I want to concentrate on words composed for a specific site to tell a predetermined story.

'He was both minimal and lyrical'

With these words, Alec Finlay (himself a distinguished 'interpretive' poet) described his father's one word poem (which you can see at Little Sparta):

CURLEW
curfew

His image of the moorland bird's flight at dusk denoting the time to go indoors is so precise! In the 40 years since my little enterprise, *The Salamander Press*, hand-printed some of Ian Hamilton Finlay's concrete poetry, I've strived to emulate his economy and lyricism. So far, my shortest lines (to meet the stipulated letter-count) were five-word evocations of five cascades in the Brecon Beacons *Waterfall Country*. Brynach Parri provided the Welsh variants. Here are examples from the caves at Cwm Porth and Pont Melin-fach, the Bridge of the Little Mill:

Searching waters carve dark secrets
Dyfroedd chwilgar yn cerfio tywyllwch cêl

Captured currents grind daily bread
Ffrydiau caeth yn malu bara beunyddiol

In contrast, when asked to devise a way of linking the communities along the Ystwyth Valley, I mimicked that much-loved parody of Welsh place names – the Anglesey railway station known in brief as Llanfair PG – to create a strapline for interpretive media:

Cwmafonystwythsy'nsyrthiotros graig
heibiogoedwigpentrefdiwydiantcollrhyd
pontceunanto'rhafodgerybwa

Gwyneth Davies' Welsh version is very popular with local children. The original English reads:

Thevalleyoftheagileriverthattumblesoverrock
pastwoodlandvillagelostindustryford
bridgeravinefromtheuplandfarmnearthearch

Brecon Beacons NPA

ABOVE:
One of five 'Waterfall' panels in the Brecon Beacons National Park.

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

When dealing with two languages, it's important to work with someone who can 'interpret', rather than simply translate, your words; not all phraseology and grammar works in a second language. I try to write my English in a manner that reflects that of the partner language. It would be good to have total fluency in two languages like today's Welsh, Scots and Gaelic poets!

Gavin Parsons interpreted my 1950s mode of writing when he provided the Gaelic for some 20 'signal posts' at Leitir Fura in Kinloch Forest on Skye; the panels allowed for one language on each side. The approach was triggered by seeing sunlight through the trees playing on swaying bracken and I was given the freedom to write in blank verse. One example of English text is:

Birch
not silvered as its lowland cousin,
but brightly flamed on black-house
hearths; and for weaker kin,
a short-lived forest nurse
in lasting armour,
that enrobes its corpse.

My first project that involved Gaelic integrated it within English text, to try and highlight its continuing use and importance. The approach was pioneered with Bob Jones of Forestry Commission Scotland but current opinion favours bilingual text. I created personal accounts for 12 panels at the Clearance township of Rosal in Sutherland, using former tenant's names and loosely based on an eye-witness account written many years later. One paragraph 'spoken' by Janet MacKay, gives a flavour:

But I fear the men with their harsh voices and rude ways. They are not of us. They care nothing for the Gàidhealtachd, our Highland ways, our people, our language and ar beathannan, our lives. Mo mallachd aig na caoraich mhòr – my curse on the big sheep.

In a quite different style, one of my earliest attempts at 'minimalist' interpretation was at Bennachie Forest near Aberdeen where I worked with three sculptors – my dozen statements, evoking different aspects of the forest, were their brief and my favourite example, which is self-explanatory, is illustrated below. Three other lines were:

The face of the city is the heart of the mountain
The calling of the cuckoo is the other side of Spring
The loss of a great heart is the gain of a small invasion

The first refers to the quarrying of granite to build much of Aberdeen, the second speaks for itself and the third alludes to insects colonising dead trees. Verity Walker and Eleanor Bird mention the Bennachie project in their piece.

Forestry Commission Scotland

RIGHT:
One of the sculptures placed in Bennachie Forest, Aberdeenshire.

'WORDS CAN CONJURE UP A THOUSAND PICTURES IF THEY ARE APPOSITE, ACCURATE, ALLURING, POLISHED AND PROVOCATIVE'

SOULMATES IN COMPOSITION

James Carter, who helped me with this article, put me in touch with Elspeth Wills, some of whose writing is similar to mine – so I like it! At Crarae Garden in Argyll, noted for its Himalayan plants, she adopted the colours of Tibetan prayer flags for the walks, and wrote a line of poetry for each. She draws together a number of cultural tethers with:

The spirit of fire is the red of the rhododendron and the flame of the maple.

In contrast, in the doughty, gritty surroundings of Coatbridge, once wreathed in the smoke of heavy industry, she worked with sculptor Gordon Muir who created iconic objects linked to the town. A huge stick of dynamite, in steel, has the delightfully short caption:

Crackle... Fizz... Bang!

James himself is no mean poet and I particularly like a stanza of his from Achray Forest:

In richer soil
oaks may grow mighty
but not these bent west coast old men:
gloved grey with lichen,
feet cooled in moss.
Sunlight glitters on the loch;
soft rain wraps the world in silence.
Their roots hide secrets among the stones.

James Carter

ABOVE:
Part of Valerie Gillies' Ballad of Leaderfoot in the Scottish Borders.

James also guided the interpretation along the Tweed Valley where he worked with Valerie Gillies. Some of her *Ballad of Leaderfoot* is carved on blocks of sandstone beside the magnificent railway viaduct. The words on one block refer to three bridges:

Before these, the Fly-boat Brae
led down to its ferry
near the ghost-line of the Roman way
on the outward journey.

Another writer I admire, another collaborator with Ian Hamilton Finlay, and one whose writing style can also be similar to my own is Tom Clark. He wrote simple lines for the benches in Falkland Park. They are delightfully cryptic, leaving walkers with something to contemplate, for example, amid the great trees:

a dancer to forgotten tunes *oak*

KIDS' PLAY WITH WORDS

Children have an innate ability to go for the intellectual jugular (and sometime the physical one too!). One piece of writing, by an eight-year-old girl, which I'll never forget, adorns the *Table of Innocence* in Caerphilly. In Welsh and English, under the title of Diniwed/*Innocence*, are her words, as site-specific as they are universal:

Three things are difficult for me: to hold the air in my hand, to weigh the world and to stop time.

Maureen Raper worked with children in Spittal, Berwick upon Tweed, getting them to write their responses to the park they hung out in. Two I like best, now inscribed on seats, are:

If I come to the park at night
Ghosts are disguised as trees.

When the tide goes out the sea sulks in the rock pools.

Alec Finlay and Ira Lightman have worked with primary schoolchildren to create 'mesostic' poetry using tree names as the vertical core for a series of layered poems composed by the youngsters. Their exciting and stimulating project, called *Wormwood*, is best seen on his website, alecfinlay.com/animations.

RHYME HAS A REASON

My own efforts aimed at family audiences include nearly 40 four-line stanzas for British Waterways' interpretive map of Kingswood Junction near Solihull. Half were about the wildlife and half about the people of the canal. Their purpose was interpretive rather than literary, although they all scan and rhyme properly! Here are a couple:

'THE SKILL OF INTERPRETIVE WORDSMITHS IS TO MAKE HUMBLE WORDS SING AND DANCE, BRIGHTLY'

I'm Betty Bat, *I'm hunting a gnat.*
Under a bridge – I might find a midge.
Dusk is the time when I'm at my prime.
But daytime is best for having a rest.

I'm Tilly Taff, *I'm Jack's better half*
I don't like to gloat but a Cadbury boat
Pays the wife too, as part of the crew.
So sugar is sweet as well as a treat!

I'd like to end with the most comprehensive job I have undertaken – a series of benches and seats around Loch Leven, working with Aaron Lawton. One example is illustrated. I wrote in Scots and English and every stanza had to meet an exacting brief. It was fun, though, and seems to have caught the imagination of passers-by.

M H Glen

ABOVE:
One of many benches along the Loch Leven Heritage Trail near Kinross.

That's what we all aim to do. But none of our words would have been written without that same imagination – and support – of our many clients whom we all acknowledge collectively and gratefully. May there be many more!

Michael Hamish Glen is the Jobbing Wordsmith at QuiteWrite, part of Touchstone Heritage Management Consultants of which he is Principal. www.quitewrite.co.uk

PIMP MY WORDS

Tobias Capwell, a rookie curator at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum remembers having to get to grips with interpretation – and fast! Sue Latimer had the responsibility of guiding him along the right lines.

I had been a Curator of European Arms and Armour for only about two days when I was given the task of writing text for a series of major exhibits of objects in my care. These new galleries formed part of one of the largest museum refurbishments in recent memory, of the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow.

BELOW:
The Cold Steel Story.
© Culture and Sport Glasgow (Museums)

BREAKING THE MOULD

This was not to be a typical or orthodox museum. Quite the reverse. Glasgow Museums was committed to breaking many of the moulds that have been used to create museum displays for a very long time. I was asked to approach my subject from new perspectives, and to think very seriously about what needed to be said and why. What would visitors read? What would they remember? What would attract their attention, and reward them for having given it?

I think the complete re-thinking of the approach to museum display may have been hard for me had I been a veteran of previous, more traditional displays. We were being asked to discard previous methodologies and preconceptions about how 'things are done'. I guess this was an easy thing to me, since I was straight out of graduate school; I had no methodology, no preconceptions. I only had the small amount of knowledge, of my subject and my objects, that I had been able to gather in ten or so years of study. Thus I was slightly perplexed when, after making a number of critical points about the treatment and placement of key objects in a somewhat heated design meeting, one of my colleagues pointed out that my position was typical of 'Curators'. I had only just been given this title, whatever it meant. I had very few preconceptions or prejudices, but it seems that they are often official awarded along with the job.

It is perhaps unusual for major displays to be originated by someone with, basically, no experience. But that did put me in a position to use my wide-open imagination in tackling the assignment that had been handed to me, to come up with something genuinely new. In this way the priorities of the project worked quite well with where I was in my career.

BELOW:
Armour for use in tournaments, made in Germany c.1560. © Culture and Sport Glasgow (Museums)

A STORY APPROACH

The 'story'-based approach to the new displays at Kelvingrove had a powerful focusing effect. It not only allowed me to make object selections very quickly, with the selection making it immediately obvious why a particular object was being included, it also made text-writing much easier, since each display was much more specific and directed from the start. For example I was not writing a general historical display of princely armour, I was developing very particular sets of visual and written statements about the essential role played by fashionable dress in warrior cultures around the world. The first, rather obvious thing I learnt about writing a museum display is that it helps to have a point, the more specific the better. Maybe this seems like a facile observation. However, my feeling is that the instant a person starts wondering what the point of a display is, you as the author have lost them, and you won't get them back. So the statements behind the display need to be strong, obvious and immediate. I tried to achieve this by making instant visual impressions, as spectacular and lively as possible, combined with surprisingly small amounts of text.

THE 30-WORD LABEL

I can't take credit for the small amounts of text actually. I was told how long my labels, captions and graphic panels could be, and there was no flexibility. But I will admit that I was quickly won over by the 30-word label. Sue Latimer simply asked me one day: 'Do you want people to read your text?' Yes, was the predictable answer. 'Do you want people to remember anything of what you've written?'. Again, yes, I guess so. 'Then it has to be short.'

This was when I realised that short text was not at all about 'dumbing down' or thinking too little of the mental capacity of your audience. It's just about how people interact with written words in a mobile situation, wandering around a museum. I quickly connected this up with my own feeling that I hate reading huge ten-foot high pages of text stencilled onto gallery walls. That's a book. I want to read a book at home on the couch with a hot-water bottle and a pot of tea. But I'm in a museum. I realised that I hardly ever read museum gallery text, even on my own specialist subject. This was because I was making instant, split-section decisions about whether my time was better spent looking at objects or staring at a wall with profusions of letters painted on it. It's not a difficult choice.

If I wanted my gallery work to be read, I had to write in a totally different way. If I had not been given these ruthless word-count limits, I probably would have made the mistake of attempting to write a piece of gallery text in the same way I would write something for publication. A terrible mistake; it's probably been made before.

WEIGHING UP WORDS

From a selfish point of view I loved the challenge of the 30-word label. Every single word had to count. Like the objects themselves, each word and phrase had to be there for a reason and be full of meaning. I found myself giving a lot more thought to which word or other was more evocative of the mood or impression I was trying to convey. As a ridiculous and sweeping generalisation, I don't think Curators often spend much time thinking about words that way.

I don't know whether what I did was really successful or not. It always seems that way, when the new sparkling display is open and everyone is saying everything is fabulous, swept up in the excitement of it all. I don't have much interest in reading surveys or studies, and I didn't stick around long enough to find out for myself. But part of me hopes some tiny bit of something I wrote about might have made it out of the gallery, out of the museum, and into someone's dinner conversation.

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WRITING TOGETHER

Sue Latimer

I represented Learning and Access on the Kelvingrove project team, and had responsibility for developing the interpretation. When I joined the project, three and a half years before reopening, the interpretative aims for the new displays were already clearly set out. They were to focus on stories revealed by and through the objects, and each was targeted at a particular audience.

The development of interpretation plans for each story had already established a shared way of working, which continued into the creation of the content. The story curator, research manager and a learning and access curator worked on the text together, combining our knowledge of the collections, visitors, learning and communication to create thought-provoking, object-focused experiences. The first meeting reviewed the interpretation plan, and discussed how the key theme and messages would be conveyed across the available graphics and other interpretation, and how many words and images were available. The story curator wrote the first draft, we discussed it at the next meeting and they revised it, often more than once as we brought out the best approach for the particular story and audience. The final stage was editing, which was the final check on clarity, sense and typos.

Toby's article expresses much of why it was a pleasure to work with him – he understood the importance of using interpretation plans to frame the content and of writing specifically for visitors, and he really engaged with the process. His three main stories were in the first phase of development and were used to develop the graphic concepts. This gave us the luxury of time to refine our approach and ensure images, text and design worked together in the best possible way. Planning in as much time as possible to work together on text is essential. If deadlines slip, there is less time for the editing to be a conversation that constructively develops the text. And more chance of missing the audience and incorporating errors.

ABOVE:
Animal Armour
© Culture and Sports Glasgow (Museums)

BELOW:
A rapier displayed in The Cold Steel Story.
© Culture and Sport Glasgow (Museums)

BELOW:
The Earl of Pembroke's armour with matching horse armour.
© Culture and Sport Glasgow (Museums)

To have that constructive conversation, you need to be able to explain why a piece of text doesn't work. Toby was great at challenging me to explain why I wanted to change his text. By applying his knowledge to the problem, he often came up with the perfect solution. People put their heart and soul into text-writing and you must always be aware that you are challenging their creativity. But interpretative text isn't literary fiction – it's a mechanism to engage the reader swiftly and effectively with the theme. The reader shouldn't really be aware of the writing. It is still a hugely creative process, but the creativity is in how you combine expertise, ideas and audience knowledge to provoke a light-bulb moment in the reader.

The best way of working is – not surprisingly – when mutual respect is combined with mutual challenge to find the best solutions. The worst is when someone refuses – overtly or not – to engage in the process, guaranteeing frustration on all sides. Some people find it hard to limit their words without limiting their ideas. One of our mantras was 'Simple words, not simple ideas'. You want people to come along with challenging concepts and tussle together to bring them alive for your audience.

BELOW:
A detail of the Earl of Pembroke's armour.
© Culture and Sport Glasgow (Museums)

In first drafts, the information was usually good, the problem was how it was delivered. When people talked about their stories, all the enthusiasm and fascinating information came out, and that's what we had to capture in the written text. The interpretation plans help to focus feedback on the text – if it's easy to read, communicates the necessary messages engagingly and is right for the audience, then it works. It isn't about personal preferences and the writer's own voice should come through. For me and, I think, everyone involved in Kelvingrove, developing the interpretation was a learning experience. I had to refine and communicate my understanding of stories, audiences, interpretation and effective writing. I learned a lot about people and negotiation. And I realised that perfection is unattainable, but decision-making and meeting deadlines are essential.

In response to Toby's final hope, just one of the great comments about Kelvingrove was from Liz Forgan, then head of the Heritage Lottery Fund: 'I've never stayed in an armour gallery for more than 30 seconds because I'm not interested. How do you make armour interesting to middle-aged women like me? I don't know, but they've done it.' And I bet she's talked about it over dinner.

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BEYOND THE BASICS

Olivia Buck looks at the way visitors influence the way she and her team write text at the British Museum.

Much has been written about accessible text, regarding word counts, active rather than passive tense, straightening out sub-clauses and so on. This is now becoming embedded in good museum writing practice. At the British Museum, our aim is to maximise visitors' engagement with our collections. Beyond the basic guidelines outlined above and in the light of the results of recent visitor research and evaluation we have begun to look again at the way in which we write interpretive text.

This article focuses on writing text for permanent galleries, rather than temporary exhibitions, and uses the recent Japan Gallery as a case study. The article also aims to provide some practical tips for writing and the interpretation process.

ROLE OF THE INTERPRETATION OFFICER

The interpretation officer is a key member of the core project team for all exhibition and gallery projects. He/she works with the curator in the initial stages to scope the key messages and narrative of the gallery or exhibition. Formative evaluation will then be carried out to gauge visitors' interests and levels of understanding of the subject. The results of this evaluation inform our decisions about what texts should be written and enable the interpretation officer to brief the curator before they begin text writing. He/she then edits the texts to ensure they support the agreed key messages and themes and are intellectually accessible to visitors. The interpretation officer also works closely with the graphic and 3D designers to ensure that the location of objects and panel texts and design encourages visitor engagement with the objects.

BELOW:
A general view of the Japan Gallery.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

PERMANENT GALLERIES AND PAYING EXHIBITIONS

The results of our visitor evaluations have shown that visitor behaviour is significantly different in permanent galleries to paid exhibitions, above all in terms of the amount of time spent. In paid exhibitions visitors will follow the exhibition narrative, read the subject panels and labels and engage with other interpretive media. Visitors tend to spend between 30 to 90 minutes in paid exhibitions. By contrast, visitor dwell time in the permanent galleries is considerably lower, usually under four minutes for a whole gallery. Fewer visitors are prepared to follow the narrative of the gallery. Instead 70% of visitors 'browse' the gallery stopping at two or three objects, at which point they may engage and look closely at the object and read its associated label. Less than 10% of visitors read the panels, which provide vital contextual information about the objects.

In response to these findings we have made some changes in our new galleries that we believe will help visitors engage more deeply with the objects and at the same time deliver more key messages.

ABOVE:
The retired townsman statue.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

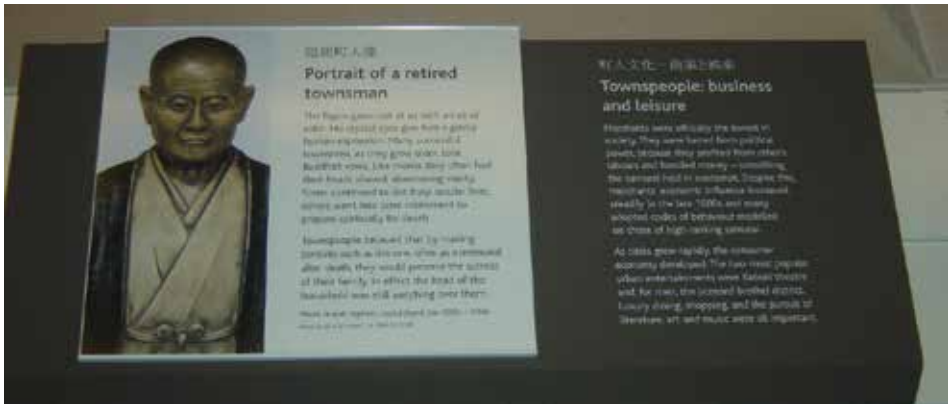
BELOW:
The portrait of a retired townsman's object label on the left, with contextual information on the right.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

PANELS

Evaluation showed that while few visitors read gallery or subject panels in galleries, they do nevertheless expect them in a display. Visitors are drawn to objects rather than panels. The strength of panels seems to be the sense of visual and intellectual structure that they give. For this reason we retained panels but used them more as signage with limited word counts.

'GATEWAY' OBJECTS

These are carefully selected objects throughout recently redisplayed galleries that act as 'gateways' to a particular section or theme. The Japan Gallery is a good example of this new technique. The aim is that visitors will engage with these gateway objects and the texts immediately next to them and then be drawn to other nearby objects. Through careful positioning, display, lighting, images and text we have tried to make the gateway objects attractive to visitors, enticing them to engage. This is a direct response to our research showing that visitors read more labels than panels in permanent galleries. We have placed some essential contextual information with the objects to encourage visitors to read more. The results are heartening, the dwell time in the Japan Gallery is around 11 minutes, and visitors on average stop at 12 gateway objects (27% of the objects in the gallery), which is significantly higher than most other galleries.



EVALUATION

We undertake different forms of evaluation in order to have a better understanding of visitors' interests and needs.

Terminology testing
We use terminology testing and personal meaning maps to get a good sense of what visitors understand by certain key terms. This means that when drafting interpretive text we know what preconceptions visitors have about certain words. We have also carried out formative evaluation on potential gateway objects. This gives us a valuable insight into what type of questions visitors ask about an object and we can endeavour to answer them in the label texts.

ABOVE:
The Great Court, British Museum.
© British Museum

Testing length and tone
We have researched visitor responses to different styles and lengths of text. Visitors tend to prefer text that includes dates and facts, but that is presented in an easily readable style. We want interpretive texts to have a distinctive voice, often the curator's voice, so that each gallery or exhibition has a different feel. This variety in style of the text, combined with the use of contemporary quotes and other media gives visitors variety and can enable them to engage more with objects.

We may, for instance, include language that helps visitors gain an emotional response to the objects. We have found that when visitors have had an emotional response to a display it often makes it more memorable. This example of a label from the Japan Gallery shows the use of emotive language to create a connection between the visitor and the object:

> *Portrait of a retired townsman*
> The figure gazes out at us with an air of calm. His crystal eyes give him a gently human expression. Many successful townsmen, as they grew older, took Buddhist vows. Like monks they often had their heads shaved, abandoning vanity. Some continued to live busy secular lives, others went into semi-retirement to prepare spiritually for death.
>
> Townspeople believed that by making portraits such as this one, often as a memorial after death, they would preserve the success of their family. In effect the head of the household was still watching over them.

INTERPRETIVE MEDIA

Diversity of information and media can help visitors to engage with objects. In any project there are a range of interpretive devices offering different modes of engagement and catering for varied learning styles. For the Japan Gallery, high level texts, panels, labels, images, a gallery guide, the museum multimedia guide, the museum map, gallery talks and other events all provide visitors with variety of entry points. There must be a clear hierarchy between these distinct media. Furthermore, various writing styles and voices will be appropriate for each of the different media. This article focuses on the more traditional forms of interpretive writing such as panels and labels, but these should be considered alongside other interpretive devices and not in isolation.

INTERPRETIVE WRITING PROCESS

Our evaluation research has enabled us to develop some guidelines for writing interpretive text at the British Museum. We have a constantly evolving house style, as well as guidance on word lengths for panels and labels. We always consider our audience, visitors to the museum itself, but also specific target audiences identified for different exhibitions. All our object-specific texts start with what the visitor can see to help him/her look at the objects more closely. This enables visitors to engage more deeply with our collections.

We have developed a text sign-off process: once the interpretation officer and the curator have agreed the text, it is circulated to all other stakeholders for their comments. We also ensure that for major projects at proof stage a second interpretation officer, who has not been involved in the project, reads all the texts as a final check for proofing, consistency and sense.

CONCLUSION

Visitors are motivated to visit the Museum for many different reasons and seek a variety of ways to engage with objects, at an intellectual, emotional, social or spiritual level. Visitors' needs change according to the motivation for their visit. Our next challenge will be to develop further interpretation techniques so that we can provide more for every visitor, including those who do not yet come to the British Museum. Our biggest challenge is to enable visitors to engage more deeply with our permanent galleries and display collections. Providing interesting, informative and accessible text is just the first step.

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DUMBING DOWN OR LIGHTENING UP?

Judy Rand argues that one thing is clear – the shorter the text panel, the more likely that visitors will read it. The experience from the USA confirms the essential message of this edition: Keep it short!

For the past 30 years, text writers in the States have been working hard to reach more readers. Encouraged by visitor research that shows what works, we use active voice; we edit for clarity; we make texts readable and relevant. But when it comes to brevity, we still fall short.

THE 50-WORD LIMIT

Most history museums abound with texts, most longer than the 50-word limit that research tells us will catch and hold a reader's attention. (This paragraph is 50 words long.) Most children's museums have few texts; those they have are short. Yet both kinds of museums want to attract families.

Can history and heritage museums learn from children's museums?

Consider the USS Constitution Museum in Charlestown, Massachusetts. After tracking and timing of family visitors in two exhibitions (*Old Ironsides in War and Peace* and *A Sailor's Life for Me?*) the team discovered that families spent 'an average of seven minutes in *War and Peace*' a traditional history exhibition with 'many long text panels totalling nearly 4,500 words, sensational objects, and a few interactives'.

On the other hand, 'families spent nearly 22 minutes' in the smaller family exhibition, *A Sailor's Life*, which has just 1,500 words of text. 'Just as important, [families] talked to each other significantly more' than in the text-heavy *War and Peace*, says Exhibits Director Robert Kiihne.

'We [decided] to limit our text panels to 50 words,' says USS Constitution Museum writer Sarah Watkins. 'Brutally short, but it forced us to focus.'

Considering each panel in turn, they asked 'What is the main point we want to convey?' This helped them distil 'a 50-page draft document with research notes and quotes' into 15 pages. 'We weren't dumbing down,' says Watkins, 'we were lightening up.'

FOUR RULES

How can we learn from this success, and engage more family visitors through interpretive texts?

I follow four rules:

- UNDERSTAND readers' needs
- Speak directly to visitors
- Focus on function
- Design for the family

UNDERSTAND READERS' NEEDS

Although single adults may linger at exhibits, families behave differently. Researcher Paulette McManus, studying visitors at London's Natural History Museum, notes that families work 'as a co-ordinated hunter-gatherer team, actively foraging in the museum to satisfy their curiosity about topics and objects that interest them'.

Children set the pace. As a result, parents rarely get the chance to read more than a headline or short paragraph before they're pulled on.

READERS ON THE MOVE

At the Monterey Bay Aquarium, writers have been working on this problem for years. Their text panels feature a full-sentence headline, so parents moving past get the idea at a glance. Short paragraphs catch attention; short words and sentences encourage parents to read out loud.

The designers also focus on visitors' needs. How large should type be? (36 points and up.) How many characters per line? (40 to 55.) How many lines per paragraph? (No more than six.)

Many zoos have followed suit, meeting their free-ranging visitors' needs by placing short texts where parents can easily scan them.

SPEAK DIRECTLY TO VISITORS

All writing has a 'voice' – a personality a reader can feel. The many choices a writer makes – diction, distance, angle of vision, sentence length and structure – add up to a style and tone of voice that can range from 'distant, cool, authoritarian' to 'close, warm, conversational'. In a museum, your 'pitch' sets the 'tone' of the relationship with your visitors.

THE INVISIBLE GUIDE

Imagine you're walking through the museum with a family of visitors. They look to you for answers, not a lecture. They'd love to have you point out a few – just a few – interesting things they'd otherwise miss. You'd speak simply and clearly. You wouldn't use technical terms or complex sentences. And you wouldn't natter on; if you did, you'd see their eyes glaze over. This strategy will help you find a natural voice, and keep your texts brief.

In short: write as you speak. That's the kind of writing that encourages parents to read aloud to children.

When museum writers use a conversational voice rather than a formal tone, designers find creative ways to weave those words right into the experience. In *A Sailors' Life*, questions screened on tin plates start conversations:

Do you get more than 4 hours of sleep at a time?

Not if you are a sailor in 1812!

Salt beef again?

While at sea, we eat the same foods day after day, whether we like it or not. How'd you like to eat the same food every day?

Lie down in a hammock and you'll see text on the wall on the spot where your eyes fall.

Paulette McManus's research tells us that parents will read text out loud to children. Write text that sounds conversational when a parent reads out loud, and you'll hear visitors quoting texts to each other.

FOCUS ON FUNCTION

Text panels exist to support the visitors' experience, not become the experience. Different kinds of texts support the visitors' experience in different ways.

A text panel can:

- INVITE visitors in with a quick sketch of the story.
- PERSONALISE the experience, connecting the familiar to the unfamiliar.
- FOCUS visitors' attention.
- ANTICIPATE and ANSWER visitors' questions, and start conversations.

'When you sit down to write, the function is the most important thing,' says writer Eileen Campbell. 'Ask, "What do I need this panel to do for the visitors"'?

Being clear about the panel's function helps you keep it brief – and useful.

DESIGN FOR THE FAMILY

To make texts accessible, children's museum designers use a clean, uncluttered layout. Text and images are highly visible and highly legible. Images show the key idea. The few words readers see – short, to-the-point, simple and clear – telegraph the key idea.

The stakes are high. Designers make countless decisions, any one of which can make a carefully written label hard to find, hard to see, hard to read, hard to understand.

It's hard to believe all the effort that goes into creating such short labels. But when designers and writers work to keep text panels short, personable, accessible, and to the point, they will, indeed, reach more readers.

The secret is that shorter, more readable texts attract all kinds of people – not just parents. When you increase access, everyone benefits.

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LITERARY JOURNEYS

James Loxley ponders on the links between literature and interpretation.

Mine is one of those families that are members of more than one heritage organisation and conservation charity. We happily display their stickers in the rear window of our car. The roots of our interest lie in the weekend preferences of my own parents: the less manicured pleasures of innumerable village churches, overgrown branch lines and the memorable oddity of Temple Bar plonked down in a Hertfordshire wood.

IGNITING A SPARK

What's more, I find the imaginative engagement provoked by such sites intertwines with long-pondered responses to literature. What is it about these books, this *writing*, that the pleasures we take in them can set off such yearnings, and even provoke us into travel? Literary tourists might well be expected to acknowledge that the vivid story or imagined world that impelled their journey is the effect of words set out in this specific arrangement, on these pages.

THE HISTORY OF WORDS

The custodians of sites will not be unaware of the centrality of words and works to its interpretation. I have more than once seen and felt the pleasure to be had from hearing the origins of such everyday phrases as 'a flash in the pan' or 'to come up to scratch' explained in the course of interpretative work – interpreters, as much as visitors, clearly recognise the affective power of a language recharged with its history. It can provide a repository of attitudes, facts or information, and a record of the kind of everyday detail about human life in the past that isn't so easily visible in the grand epochal perspective.

LITERARY JOURNEYS

Literary journeys, like those of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Johnson or Robert Louis Stevenson, relate us not just with eyewitness accounts of a place's past but also with insights into how such authors witnessed it in the fullest sense of that word. The words they chose, and the tone and style and vocabulary that register their impressions, are what bear the significance. When we hear or read those words, we may feel ourselves get closer to that experience; at the same time, we may also sense – through the same means – more aspects of the difference between their world and ours than we can otherwise appreciate.

LITERARY QUOTATIONS

But if literary travel narratives are one particular resource, it's also worth emphasising that literature of all kinds can provoke a more full-bodied engagement with the histories around us. An extract or quotation from a literary source somehow worked into a site can furnish the visitor with a perfectly judged moment of insight into the place's historical freight. This is a way of working with literary sources that acknowledges their historical or etymological power as literature, just as we recognise that other words inscribed in the landscape – epitaph, inscription or artwork – have, as well as a literal meaning, a form, shape, texture and colour that give them their weight of significance and are integral to the force they can exert upon us. Writers and artists, of course, know this: Ian Hamilton Finlay, for example, insisted not only on the importance of the formal characteristics and capacities of literary language, but also on the vital relation between these features and a word's visual and tactile presentation. As the Northumbrian poet Basil Bunting put it:

Words!
Pens are too light.
Take a chisel to write.

James Loxley is Senior Lecturer and Head of English at Edinburgh University.

BELOW:
Samuel Johnson.

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