



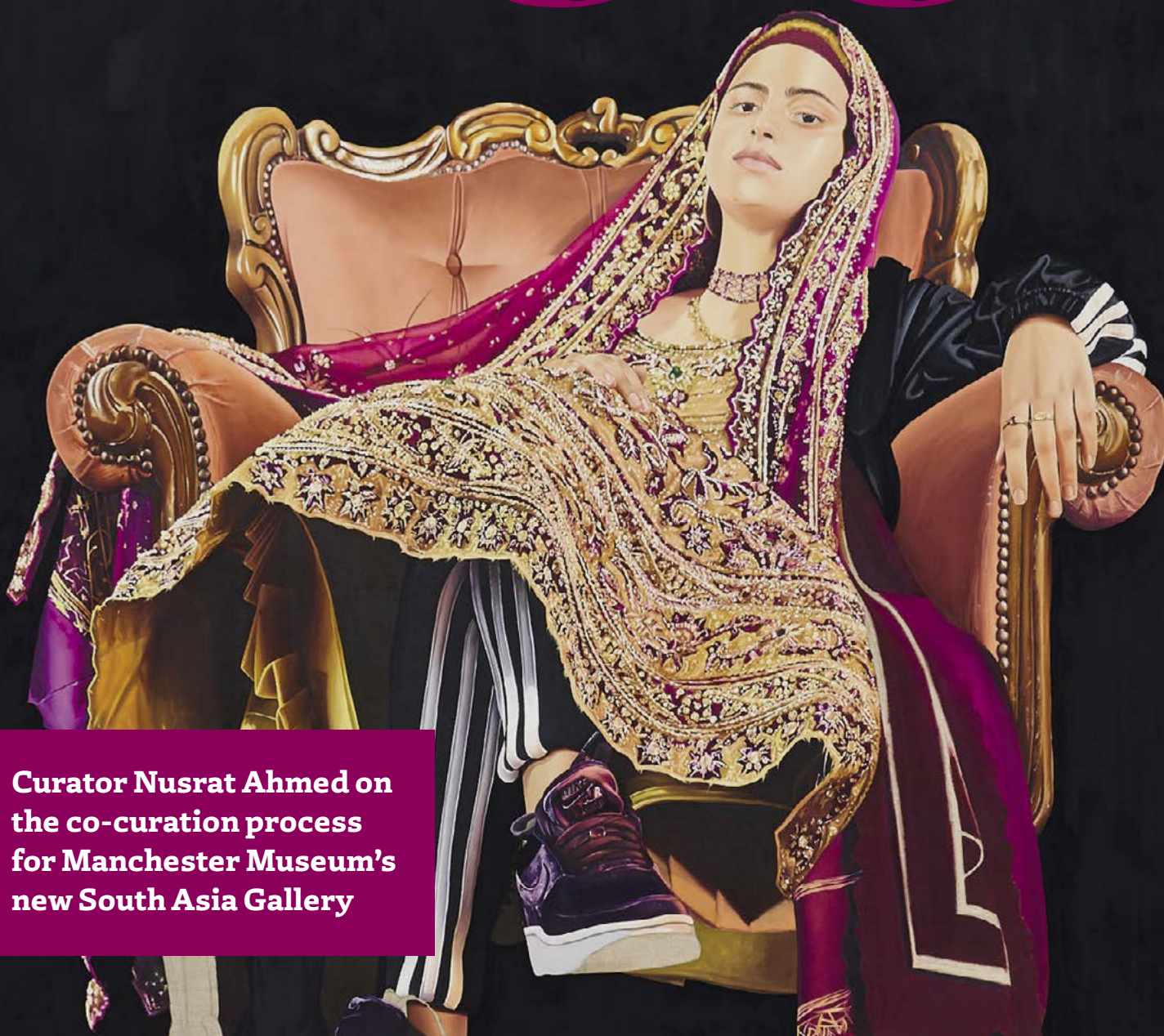
**Hear from our conference
bursary recipients**

**Sharpen your practice with our
Interpretation Hacks**

How to understand your audiences

The Journal of the Association for Heritage Interpretation 28-1 / Summer 2023

Engage



**Curator Nusrat Ahmed on
the co-curation process
for Manchester Museum's
new South Asia Gallery**

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Cover image:

I beg you to define me by Azraa Motala, a newly commissioned interpretive artwork for Manchester Museum's South Asia Gallery.

Photo by Manchester Museum.



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Editorial

Welcome to the Summer 2023 issue of the Interpretation Journal, under its new name 'Engage'. The name is one of a number of changes you will notice, along with the cover design, content and a return to a theme.

I am delighted and honoured to have been appointed journal editor by AHI and hope to build on the excellent work of previous editors. I'd like to start by thanking my immediate predecessors, Nicky Temple and Nicolette Evans, and the team who work to bring the journal to you – designer Neil Morgan and copyeditor Greer Glover.

I started in interpretation as a tour guide in William Wordsworth's Dove Cottage, Grasmere, in 1986. Then, as an archaeologist for 17 years, I was always happy to talk to people, write articles and lead site tours. I returned to interpretation in 2005 when I founded *inHeritage* and, a year later, became the Peak District National Park's Interpretation Project Manager. That was then I first became a member of AHI. I still remember my first conference and the delight of meeting other people who did this sort of thing. I was a Trustee from 2010 to 2022, Chair from 2015 to 2018 and Chair of the Awards from 2013 to 2021. Journal editor is a new challenge and one I'm looking forward to.

I want to ensure that the journal provides guidance, information and inspiration for all of our members. From practical advice and signposting AHI resources to case studies, research results and providing thought-provoking opinions, I hope there is something for everyone.

In This Issue

News, Views & Reviews brings together news from AHI, across the industry and our partners in the Global Association for Heritage Interpretation, as well as reviews.

Interpretation Hacks is a series of short, practical ideas that covers a range of aspects of interpretation – digital, writing, live interpretation and sustainable materials. It also focuses on one of AHI's brilliant best-practice guidelines.

We then have a special **Conference Bursaries** section written by students and those early in their careers who received bursaries to attend our 2022 conference. They tell us about their experiences of the conference and the impact it has had on their work.

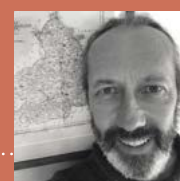
Our theme is **Audiences**. Nusrat Ahmed explains the co-curation process behind Manchester Museum's new South Asia Gallery; Emma Parsons guides us on how to understand audiences; Katy Firth describes her work with vulnerable young people on Orkney. We introduce the on-theme **Interpretation Research Lab**, which covers visitors to science centres and nature sites. Audiences is rounded off by Bob Jones as he excavates some relevant articles from **Past Issues** of the journal about visitors.

I hope you enjoy the issue. We always welcome feedback, ideas and discussion about the contents. Look out for posts about the journal on AHI's social media channels and feel free to email me at: journal@ahi.org.uk.

Bill Bevan, MAHI



Shamshad Noor (pseudonym) is a south London-based occasional artist and heritage consultant with over a decade's experience at leading organisations, including the British Museum and Science Museum. She specialises in content development, interpretation and events. She is also the creator of the woefully rarely updated webcomic My Museum Life.

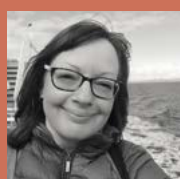


Bill Bevan, MAHI
Engage Editor

This issue we feature the following contributors:



Nusrat Ahmed
Curator



Emma Parsons
Arts & Heritage Consultant



Katy Firth
Heritage Engagement Practitioner

View from the Chair

Welcome to the new format journal, with its bold new design and content. It comes courtesy of our new journal editor Bill Bevan, who has reshaped the format, working alongside the design and editorial teams. In addition, the timing of the journal release has been shifted slightly to make it more timely and topical. We hope you enjoy the range of articles and new styling. Please do let us know what you think.

AHI Board of Trustees held our first in-person meeting in three and a half years at the Birmingham and Midlands Institute, in early March. It was a delight to welcome new Trustees Amelia Evans and Gavin Glencorse alongside reconnecting with our valued longstanding Trustees. A board meeting was combined with a Forward Plan meeting and we were able to look ahead and start drawing up plans for the next three years. Stellar plans include celebrating our 50th anniversary at the 2025 conference, which conveniently also falls in awards year.

In October, I will be stepping down from my role as Chair, having dedicated the two years I had promised to the role. AHI is inviting nominations for a new Chair of the Board of Trustees. Details of the role and its expectations will be circulated to all our members for nominations.

Mark your diaries and secure your tickets for the AHI conference in Lincoln, 11th-13th October. It will be a wonderful opportunity to network, share ideas and partake in inspiring site visits. Look out for our series of webinars throughout the year. We have one series that focuses on AHI Best-Practice Guidelines and another with our partners in the Global Alliance for Heritage Interpretation.

I extend my thanks to the membership for your sustained engagement with AHI. For the Journal, I thank our new editor Bill Bevan, designer Neil Morgan, copyeditor Greer Glover, Trustees Damon Mahoney, Phillip Ryland and Chris Walker, and all our valuable contributors. I'd also like to highlight the excellent work of AHI administrator Lyn Redknapp, our Vice Chair, Trustees, volunteers, and of course the Fellows for their valuable work and support.



Lincoln Cathedral.

Geraldine Mathieson



Visit Mor

Beth Môrafon, MAHI

Chair

Association for Heritage Interpretation

Heritage 2033

The Heritage Fund has announced a new ten-year strategy for funding in the UK, with the vision for heritage to be valued, cared for and sustained for everyone's future. There are four new Investment Principles. Essential reading!

<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/about/heritage-2033-our-10-year-strategy>

Interpreting World Heritage

James Carter, FAHI, writes in the inaugural periodical of the International Centre for the Interpretation and Presentation of World Heritage Sites under the auspices of UNESCO. James highlights research by John Falk of Oregon State University to describe five profiles that explain what people are looking for during their visit - *Explorer* - *Facilitator* - *Experience seeker* - *Recharger* - *Hobbyist/Professional*.

<https://unesco-whipic.org/periodicals>

Festivals

Two regular family-friendly festivals that blend engagement, interpretation and music are happening in July.

Timber is a weekend of celebration, debate and reflection about trees and woodlands in the National Forest, Leicestershire, 7th-9th July.

<https://timberfestival.org.uk>

Bluedot focuses on space science, with talks, experiments and art installations at Jodrell Bank Observatory, Cheshire, 20th-23rd July.

www.discoverthebluedot.com

Highland Futures

Six Highland museums will showcase their collections to global audiences in a collaboration between Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Smartify, the popular cultural travel app.

<https://futurecot.com/six-highland-museums-embrace-digital-to-showcase-collections-worldwide>

Autism in Museums

This website features a blog that showcases autism-friendly events and has links to useful resources.

www.autisminmuseums.com

National Association for Environmental Education

NEAA is the UK's oldest educational charity supporting schools and teachers to help young people understand the inter-relationship between humans and the rest of nature, and the responsibilities that we have towards the Earth.

<https://naee.org.uk>

Diamond Dogs

The V&A Museum has acquired the David Bowie archive and is preparing to open The David Bowie Centre for the Study of Performing Arts at the V&A East Storehouse, Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, Stratford in 2025.

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/press>

Science Museum Group (SMG)

There are two new developments at SMG. The Engineers gallery opens at the Science Museum, London, on 23rd June. It celebrates engineers and their stories and showcases innovations through the global lens of the Queen Elizabeth Prize for Engineering. At Locomotion, Shildon, a new collections building should open by the end of this year.

www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/see-and-do/engineers

www.locomotion.org.uk/about-us/our-future-vision-2025

Welsh Football Scores State Backing

The Welsh Government is making a further grant of £5.46m available to Wrexham County Borough Council to continue the development of the new Football Museum for Wales. Deputy Minister for Arts and Sport, Dawn Bowden said the funding comes as 'interest in Welsh football is at an all-time high.'

<https://media.service.gov.wales/news/more-than-gbp-5-4m-for-new-football-museum-for-wales-in-wrexham>

Public Engagement in History

The Institute of Historical Research & Dig Yourself webinar, Public Engagement in History: Pitfalls, Tips and Tricks, is available to watch online.

www.history.ac.uk/whats/ihr-events-archive/public-engagement-history-pitfalls-tips-and-tricks

Castlemartin Video

'Castlemartin - A Story of Wildlife, Weapons and Welsh Mountain Sheep' is on the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park's YouTube channel. It is a follow-up video to the one featured in 'Reflections of Castlemartin - A lifeline to a community's past,' Interpretation Journal 25-2, Winter 2020.

English:

<https://youtu.be/jOezM4-vHf4>

Cymraeg:

<https://youtu.be/LAEF9LIAMg>

People's Plan for Nature

This a crowd-created vision for the future of nature, and the actions we must all take to protect and renew it. What is the role for interpreters in this?

<https://peoplesplanfornature.org>

If you have anything you would like to submit to Digest, please email journal@ahi.org.uk. Deadline is 15th September for publication in December.

Globetrotting

Canada

Interpretation Canada's Annual Awards of Excellence

For four decades, Interpretation Canada's Awards of Excellence have recognized the exceptional dedication and creativity of interpretive programs and products in Canada.

Interpreters from coast to coast submit entries each year in the hopes of receiving one of the highly coveted Awards of Excellence. The entries are as diverse as Canada showcasing the unique stories and heritage of our country. Winners are awarded either a Gold, Silver or Bronze.

Over the years, the Awards program has evolved into the unique offer that it is today. One thing that sets our Awards apart from other organizations is that it is not a competition. Entries are judged based on individual merit and are not compared against each other. All entries that meet the criteria receive an award. This allows us to highlight all the award-winning work being done across the country rather than a select few.



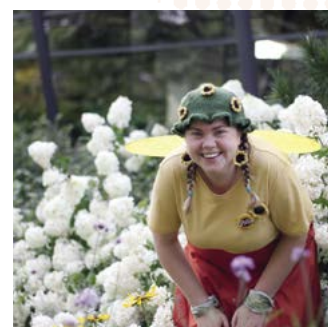
Eyes on the Skies.



Photos courtesy of Interpretation Canada



Photos courtesy of Interpretation Canada



Photos courtesy of Interpretation Canada

2021 awards winners, from left to right, Simpson River Spinner, Enchanted Garden – Stella the Sunflower Pixie.

The Awards program focuses on thematic interpretation and has two categories: personal and non-personal interpretation. Entries are evaluated by a panel of judges from across Canada. A key aspect of the awards is the feedback provided by judges. We focus on providing thoughtful, meaningful feedback to all entries – whether it receives an award or not – in order to facilitate and encourage excellence in the field.

The Awards are one way that Interpretation Canada strives to advocate for our profession. By showcasing high quality interpretation and developing standards, we demonstrate what best practices in our field should look like. By entering our Awards, interpreters across Canada help to raise the profile of, and standards for, our profession.

We invite you to check out the 17 winners of the 2021 Awards of Excellence. We hope you enjoy!



Sarah Rauh

Vice Chair & Awards Committee Chair

interpretationcanada.ca

<https://interpretationcanada.ca/2021-award-winners>

Mexico

Interpretation of Cultural Heritage as the Art of Introducing People to Other People

There is a trait of human beings that can help make our interpretive programs highly relevant and meaningful. I am talking about curiosity, but... a very particular one.

This is the curiosity about other people's lives. When humans, like us, satisfy it, we can reap lots of benefits. For example, we can learn how to solve both ordinary or exceptional problems; we can recognize danger (and experience it with the advantage of being just an observer). Sometimes it also gives us the opportunity to judge others! All these encounters with other people's lives helps us to strengthen our identity and increase our tools to live our own lives.

Curiosity about others is something your audience try to satisfy every day: sometimes by eavesdropping; from time to time, by having conversations with people about their perspectives on life. They satisfy it also by traveling or by going to places where there are expressly ways of knowing how other people's lives are alike, whether it's contemporary or ancient people; or people who live close or far as well. That's one of the greatest motivations to go to history, archaeology, or anthropology museums. Also, your audience satisfies it with the imagination: by reading novels or watching movies or series.

Curiosity about other people's lives is a powerful ingredient in interpretation. It allows us to connect our audiences with people from everywhere and every time. To use it, we must have a very particular approach: every time we are relating our narratives to cultural heritage objects, we will have to think about the people who gave meaning and relevance to these objects in their lives.



(Palacio de Gobierno de Chihuahua, photo: A. Jiménez)



Miguel Hidalgo is a Mexican patriotic hero. After a living history interpretive program where people get to know him, the story climaxes with this video showing the context and the moment when he was killed in Chihuahua, Mexico.

By changing our way to see and present objects, we can get rid of dates, sizes, and all the data that we, as interpreters, know our audiences find not relevant and boring. From this perspective, we can see how cultural heritage can help interpreters to introduce not objects, but people, to our audiences. Interpretation, being seen this way, can be understood as 'the art of introducing people to other people'.



Antonieta Jiménez

InterpatMx: Asociación Mexicana de Intérpretes del Patrimonio and El Colegio de Michoacán, AC (México)
<https://interpat.mx>

AHI Full Membership MAHI

Why apply for full membership?

Gaining full membership status is an important step in your career pathway.

Benefits include:

- You can use the AHI logo and letters MAHI after your name.
- Show colleagues and clients that your professional skills are officially recognised.
- Access additional opportunities to present your work at the AHI conferences, webinars or in our journal.

supporting evidence where you can demonstrate your understanding of three core competencies in interpretation – planning, delivery and evaluation.

Find out how to apply on the AHI website. If you would like to talk to someone about applying you can email Philip Ryland or contact the AHI office, using the email admin@ahi.org.uk <https://ahi.org.uk/join>
Philip Ryland pryland@bournemouth.ac.uk
Office admin@ahi.org.uk 01795 436560

So why not submit an application?

The process is straightforward and involves the completion of an application form along with

So, why not take the first step and make contact with us about applying for full membership of the AHI.



A Practical Guide to Costumed Interpretation

Jackie Lee

An essential guide if you want to take on the guise of a historical figure to create an immersive visitor experience. Your portrayal may suggest the illusion of time travel, just don't forget your crystal ball.

Costumed interpretation, I discovered, is not an umbrella term for all interpretation delivered in historical dress. It's not living history or re-enactment. It is interacting with the public while adapting the persona of a figure from the past, delivering the messages of the organisation you're representing in the first person.

Aimed at freelance costumed interpreters, Jackie provides a thorough and methodical approach to preparing for your role, so you can portray your chosen figure confidently. She provides useful check lists – including the research needed to build a picture of the life of the person you're portraying.

Areas for research are mapped out into realms: personal, local and wider world. Combined with key messages, it creates a sort of case file on the individual you will become. Jackie provides examples, along with suggestions on how to pepper messages into conversations with visitors.



There are pointers on challenging situations, such as useful openers with reluctant visitors; and dealing with anachronisms, like trying to portray a character midway through their life when the public know something about the individual being represented that the individual does not yet know. This is where Jackie uses the 'crystal ball', allowing the character to muse about what might come to pass.

One challenge readers may have wished to hear Jackie's thoughts on, is how to price up such a time-consuming and expensive (when you factor in props and costume) piece of work.

At the National Trust's Little Moreton Hall, we shied away from first person interpretation, overwhelmed by the challenge of creating an authentic characterisation. We also worried our visitors would feel uncomfortable suspending disbelief to interact with historical characters. Had this book been available, I feel we would have had the confidence to try the costumed interpretation route.

AHI Members have a special 20% discount. Use this code **ESA31** by 30th June 2023.
<https://bit.ly/LeeE31>



Rachel Costigan

is a freelance consultant based in Derbyshire, who has worked in natural and cultural heritage engagement since 1999.

Had this book been available, I feel we would have had the confidence to try the costumed interpretation route.



LIVE INTERPRETATION

*Costumed Interpretation –
what it is and what it is not!*

*Costumed guided walk around Charlotte Square
in the company of Jackie Lee as Mrs Grant.*

It is NOT dressing up. The interpreter does wear a costume to portray a particular character from history which enables them to deliver key messages that can be best delivered by a person rather than any other form of interpretation.

Equally, it is not the same as re-enactment which aims to recreate a specific event in history. Costumed interpreters interpret! They do not attempt to act out an event from the past, they aim to provide an explanation to visitors which fosters understanding, engagement and enquiry.

For those who practice living history, which aims to provide highly specialised demonstrations of everyday crafts and skills by interpreters in costume, a crossover with costumed interpretation can be seen. For example, some costumed interpreters do use simple tasks in their interpretation such as how to drink from a glass in the 18th century or napkin folding as Victorian servants.

However, for the costumed interpreter the demonstration is not the central part of the delivery. Engaging visitors through conversation is the mainstay of their delivery.

Informal conversational encounters work well for audience engagement. Many visitors are wary that getting involved with an interpreter is going to draw them into some kind of participation that will embarrass them. However, by greeting the visitors with a simple 'Good day, have you come far?', the skilled interpreter can quickly draw them into a short conversation about who they are, why they are there and what they are doing in this particular space.

Costumed interpretation is a great way of helping your audiences connect with stories being told on-site, whether it is about a document, an object, a building (even a ruined one) or a person. Through interaction, the interpreters generate empathy thus enabling visitors to feel that these people of the past really did live.



Jackie Lee
Artemis Scotland
www.artemisscotland.com

Sustainable Interpretation

Eco or No-Go?

We need to make sustainable choices in producing interpretation. It's no secret and it becomes more of a priority every day. When it comes to panels and structures, making sense of the sustainable, environmentally friendly and 'eco' choices out there isn't always easy.

Considering the whole picture is a good place to start, by asking ourselves and our suppliers the right questions. There are the obvious ones: what it is made from and if it is recyclable. But we can go further than that:

- Do I need something new here or can I use an existing structure and update the graphics?
- Are the materials sustainably sourced? Are they using recycled waste?
- What waste is produced during production and what happens to it? Can it be reduced?
- Where is this being produced and where are the materials coming from? What is the associated carbon footprint?

Displays at Westonbirt, The National Arboretum, created for COP26. Printed onto ply and mounted on trees which had been felled recently.

- How is it packaged? Is it wrapped in single-use plastic or can you use sustainable wrap?
- Does this need to be delivered pre-assembled or can it be flat-packed?
- Is this recyclable, and almost more importantly, how? Does it need to go to a specialist facility? Don't forget to keep this information so the right people can find it when it's needed – possibly in 20 years!
- Do you need to get installers and where are they coming from?

Even small swaps can make a big difference. To avoid the use of plastic for temporary interpretation, we recently swapped Forex, which requires specialist recycling facilities, for a board made from paper waste from The Sustainable Signage Co. This lasts outside for months and can be recycled with general cardboard. We have recently been specifying 100% recyclable aluminium



© The Way Design

New Forest Show, everything is printed with Sustainable Signage Co, and the wooden stands were repurposed from an older project.

panels which can be processed as metal waste, are guaranteed lightfast for 10 years and are graffiti-resistant.

I certainly don't have all the answers. For every option, there are pros and cons to weigh up, but let's start the conversation...

Have you found any sustainable interpretation processes you'd like to share?

@AHI_Social
@TheWayDesignUK
#AHIJJournal



Mary James
The Way Design
<https://thewaydesign.co.uk>



© The Way Design

Digital Horizons

Demystifying QR Codes

QR (Quick Reference) codes are all around us – in retail, travel and (of course) interpretation. They were introduced to solve a problem – how do you point people from the real world to a location online without asking them to tediously type a web address into their phone?

Not only is it tedious, but copying such text is prone to error, which is unsatisfactory for both the user and the provider of the online content or service. QR codes solve that problem by letting machinery (a camera plus some clever pattern recognition algorithms inside your phone) do the conversion from real world to online. One of the big steps forward in recent years is that nearly all phones and tablets have a

QR code reader built into the camera app – removing the need to download a specialist app.

Although they look complex, the QR code is simply a machine-readable version of the web address. For example, this is the QR code that links to www.ahi.org.uk:

Making QR codes really could not be easier. Here's a step-by-step guide:

1. Figure out which page you want to link to. Get the page up in your browser.
2. Copy the URL (the web address) from the bar at the top of the browser. It will look something like www.ahi.org.uk
3. Go to a search engine and search for 'QR code generator' – there are many free ones.
4. Paste the URL into the text box that appears and hit the button 'Generate QR code'.
5. Download the resulting image file and paste it into your graphic artwork.
6. Test it.

Now, that works perfectly as long as your content is always present at that web address but what if it might change? It might not be totally under your control. Well, there is a slightly more sophisticated way of doing it – look up 'dynamic QR code generators' with your search engine. This is an intermediate service, which does not link directly to the content, but to content that you specify in a control panel and can change – if the link no longer works or changes, you simply change the target in the control panel. This means your lovely panel artwork never has to change.



© Bright White Ltd

XR Technologies

You are very likely to have come across virtual reality or augmented reality, but what is XR technology? XR stands for extended reality, and XR technology is the term used to describe a family of different output technologies, mainly virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and mixed reality.

Why is this relevant to heritage interpretation? Well, the answer lies in the fact that the underlying 'engine' of everything in the XR range is the same. 2023 might well be the year that augmented reality headsets become big news as companies like Apple ready their products for launch. We're likely to



2023 might well be the year that augmented reality headsets become big news as companies like Apple ready their products for launch.

A visitor feeds a sauropod called Alan in virtual reality. Stand in the same space as Alan and understand the sheer scale of these creatures. If you are gentle, Alan will feed from your hand. A vertebra from such a sauropod was recently discovered in Yorkshire and is now in the Yorkshire Museum collection.

see another renaissance in XR like we did when VR and AR became affordable. The important thing to realise is that underneath, they can all use the same engines and therefore investment in content creation can be made into a single asset that can then be deployed in VR, AR and mixed reality. Furthermore, some of your existing VR and AR projects can be relatively easily ported across to AR headsets, getting more value from your previous investments.

The main 'engines' are Unity and Unreal. It's important to see that, really, your investment goes into those engines, and not the headset itself. This provides an element of future-proofing. If you are commissioning VR or AR, always remember to make sure that you negotiate the purchase of the Unity or Unreal scene from the software developer, as that is where the investment lies and the scenes are the assets you will need to breathe new life into your XR experiences as technology changes.



Chris Walker

Bright White

www.brightwhiteltd.co.uk

Write Track

Welcome Words

Rethinking what you say when you welcome visitors may have more meaningful impact than the traditional welcome panel.

Welcome and orientation panels and signs for outdoor properties, recreational trails, exhibition galleries or rooms in an historic property are an important part of interpretation. They are often the first opportunity we have to introduce visitors to what they will experience, and provide navigation. Common content includes a title or property name, 100 or more words, an image and a map. A lot of thought goes into what is included on a welcome panel and, sometimes, they can become information heavy.

I have been experimenting with creating a welcome that focuses on the core idea – or interpretive theme – we want people to engage with during a visit. I feel that this serves two aims. It sets up visitors to imagine, feel and be receptive to the objects, places or stories they will encounter as they explore. It also aims to plant the memorable seed that visitors take away with them so that, if asked, they can say that the place or exhibition they visited was about x, y or z.

The welcome to Coppermines Valley, Lake District National Park, is placed where the industrial landscape is revealed after a walk from Conistown village. It evokes the mining past in 21 carefully chosen key words that link landscape, human activity, sensory triggers and industry.

An example is the welcome sign at Coppermines Valley in the Lake District, a popular hiking location. Most walkers bring their own maps; the trailhead at the bottom of the fell has wayfinding and visitor information; an interpretive hub further along the footpath introduces the mining story with more signposting to specific places to explore.

This approach is not suitable for everywhere, especially larger properties that are more complex for visitors to navigate around or have numerous points of interest. However, I encourage you to experiment with this approach where you feel it will work and differentiate this sort of welcome from the more usual orientation, if you can.



Bill Bevan
Engage Editor

Best-Practice Guidelines

In this issue, we put the spotlight on our guide to best practice called *Demystifying Evaluation*, written by Philip Ryland, MAHI and Sunita Welch, FAHI.

An essential part of tailoring your interpretation, activities and programmes to your audiences is to conduct evaluation. AHI has a fantastic best-practice guide about evaluation and it is free to members via the AHI website. The guide will help by guiding you how to conduct evaluation. It breaks evaluation down into four questions to ask:

Why? Explains the roles evaluation can play to improve visitors' experiences and your interpretation, and in gaining external funding.

When? Outlines when to do evaluation during a project as part of an on-going process and which is integral to regular reviews of your on-site interpretation.

What? Four areas for you to evaluate:

- **Visitors** (existing and potential visitors) to examine their interest in, and reaction to, the interpretation on offer.
- **Whole programme** to identify which media have consistently achieved their objectives and to modify others where greater effectiveness might be achieved.
- **Performance of interpreters** and helping them to identify ways in which they could improve their delivery.
- **Overall productivity** of the programme and its associated facilities to determine whether money and effort are being managed effectively on the site.

How? Ways for you to carry out evaluation:

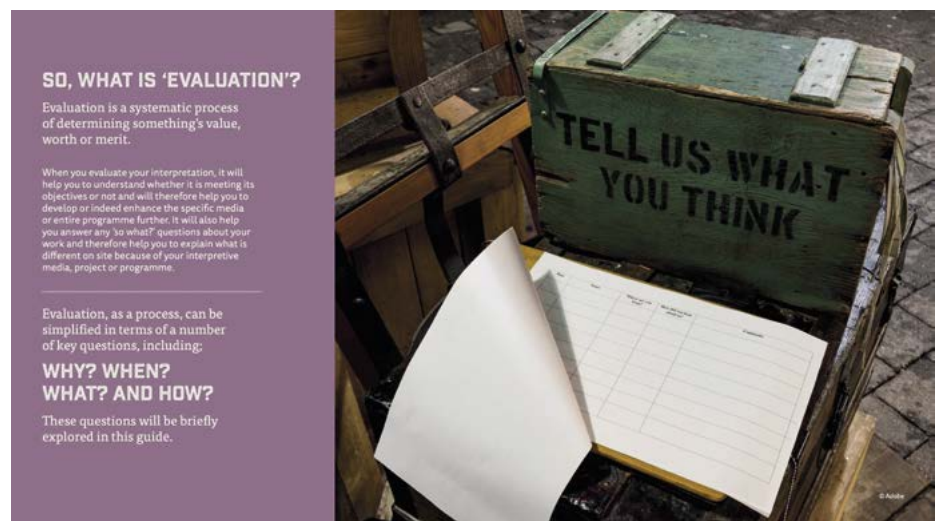
- Informal appraisal.
- Observation of visitor behaviour.
- Informal direct contact with visitors.
- Formal contact with visitors.

The guide goes into some depth on the **how** to evaluate and gives examples of data collection methods. There are also reading suggestions to take your understanding and practice of evaluation further.

Demystifying Evaluation,
Dr Philip Ryland, MAHI
and Dr Sunita Welch, FAHI
AHI Best-Practice Guideline 12,
December 2020

Read on...

You can read and download the full version of the *Demystifying Evaluation* and all our best-practice guidelines
<https://bit.ly/Sum23-Evaluation>



SD, WHAT IS 'EVALUATION'?

Evaluation is a systematic process of determining something's value, worth or merit.

When you evaluate your interpretation, it will help you to understand whether it is meeting its objectives or not and will therefore help you to develop or indeed enhance the specific media or entire programme further. It will also help you answer any 'so what?' questions about your work and therefore help you to explain what is different on site because of your interpretive media, project or programme.

Evaluation, as a process, can be simplified in terms of a number of key questions, including:

WHY? WHEN? WHAT? AND HOW?

These questions will be briefly explored in this guide.

An essential part of tailoring your interpretation, activities and programmes to your audiences is to conduct evaluation.

Connecting

with young interpreters



‘Y Cysylltiad, The Connection’ was our first in-person conference for two years. Hosted in Dolgarrog, North Wales, in October 2022, it was the perfect occasion for interpreters across the UK to regroup, share experiences and reconnect.

It also saw the launch of our first conference bursaries, an invitation for young interpreters studying or working in Wales to apply for support towards joining us. The bursaries were made possible thanks to the generous funding by the legacy Interpret Wales, ATS Heritage, Barker Langham, Haley Sharpe Design Limited and Heritage Insider.

To apply for a bursary applicants had to express in 200 words how attending the conference would support their career aspirations and then, if successful, share in this journal a response to the conference and how it relates to their own interpretative practice and journey.

Attending a professional conference can be cost-prohibitive to many, and especially those at the early stages of their career or study, so the successful applicants were awarded up to £475 each towards their conference costs, travel and accommodation.

Not only do the bursaries help remove financial barriers, they also open doors to a welcoming new AHI network with opportunities to meet mentors, prospective employers and in the case of students, contacts for their research. The AHI also benefits, gaining new fresh views into the sector, academic research papers, and perhaps even future Trustees!



Suzanna Jones

*Visitor Experience and Interpretation Area
Consultant
RSPB*

Augmenting

CATRIN'S RESEARCH

I am undertaking a PhD investigating the potential impact of augmented reality (AR) on the interpretation of Wales' intangible cultural heritage such as myths and folklore with linkages to landscape and place. My research incorporates insights from storytellers, heritage interpreters, technology specialists, academics and community-based projects. An outcome will be a concept study for a Mabinogi-based project using geo-located AR in outdoor rural settings.

AHI's conference in Snowdonia was timely, as I had spent the summer interviewing a range of experts and researching various case studies of projects across the world that have used AR as a place-based interpretation tool. The conference was a welcome opportunity for me to engage in my first in-person conference since before the pandemic and it was a joy to interact with delegates, something I hadn't realised I'd missed quite as much as I did!!

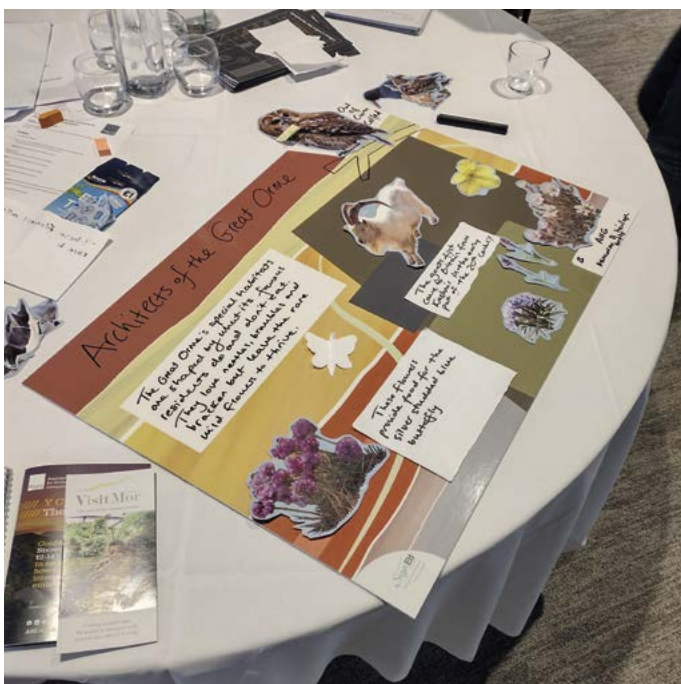
I was drawn to the range of speakers and variety of activities, which provided opportunities to make new connections, enrich awareness, and deepen my knowledge of the issues and impacts of heritage interpretation in various settings.

The packed schedule of knowledge-exchange activities during the day was balanced with entertaining and relaxing social evenings. Whilst I admit I am biased, the talks by Dr Dafydd Gwyn 'Dolgarrog: a sense of place' and Huw Roberts' introduction to the traditional Welsh Triple Harp showcased our fantastic Welsh cultural heritage.

The Coast and Colonialism trip, on a glorious autumnal sunny day, featured insightful site visits to the stunning Great Orme headland by Tramway, the uncomfortably splendid Penrhyn Castle, and a quick stop at Bethesda where community initiatives matter and make a difference.

So, what next? My career aspirations are to work collaboratively with communities and the heritage sector to develop interpretation projects which are appropriate to tell the story, connect with the place and engage, enlighten, and entertain the audience.

I am grateful to AHI for the bursary which enabled my conference attendance. It will have contributed to my research, and personal and professional development. All that is left to say is 'Diolch'.



© AHI



Catrin Bradley

Ymchwilydd PhD Researcher

University of Wales Trinity St David

Email Catrin if you would like to find out more about her research.

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Josh has Reserved Experiences

The 2022 AHI conference, in beautiful North Wales, was a fantastic personal experience. With everything that has happened in the last few years I cannot express what a joy it was to be able to be a part of it.

The warm welcome I received from everyone reminded me what a special opportunity this is to be surrounded by people who are willing to share their experience and knowledge with eager learners like myself.

I work in Visitor Experience at RSPB Newport Wetlands. We have many and diverse stories to tell at the reserve. A seven-thousand-year-old parent picking up their tired child is told through footprints on the mudflats. Vikings battled with locals; medieval monks sculpted the landscape we see today. How the loudest bird in Britain, the booming bittern, has returned to South Wales, after a 200-year absence. I was very keen to use this conference to see if we could improve how we tell these stories to our visitors.



Connecting the landscape workshop.

There were many engaging workshops but one that I was most inspired by was Dr Dafydd Gwyn's talk, 'Dolgarrog: a sense of place'. His passion for the area was infectious. Being passionate is important as it creates positivity. If you have a passion for your subject, then you have a foundation with which to start communicating to others.

I was very keen to use this conference to see if we could improve how we tell these stories to our visitors.

I also attended Siân Shakespear's workshop, 'Lifting the lid on community and bilingual interpretation'. We had some excellent conversations revolving around making no assumptions when it comes to your visitor. A large proportion of my contact with our visitors is face-to-face so making an instant connection with them is vital. We talked about the importance of flexibility and adapting so that the connection is a memorable one.

I certainly had a memorable time and will take forward some of what I learnt into my work. I'm also looking forward to next year's conference.



Joshua Sankey

Tim Profiad Ymwelwyr/Visitor Experience Team
RSPB, Newport Wetlands
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/newport-wetlands>



Millie Rathbone



Millie Rathbone

Black Chair (left) and Hedd Wyn's house (above).

Millie's On Track to Interpret

At the time of the conference I had been in my new post as an Interpretation Trainee for the Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways for just three short weeks. A relatively short drive north saw me arrive in Dolgarrog armed with enthusiasm, if very little industry experience. I didn't quite know what to expect, but I was safe in the knowledge that I would get to meet and listen to industry experts in the next few days.

'Y Cysylltiad – The Connection' became my theme for the next few days, and connect I did. Whether it was connecting with uncomfortable truths of the past by 'Reframing Picton', connecting with the hyper-local audiences targeted at Beckfords Tower, or simply connecting with other attendees, connections were made everywhere.

The site visit on Thursday gave me an invaluable opportunity to connect with heritage that was now on my own new doorstep. We started at Yr Ysgwrn, Hedd Wyn's house, set in the stunning Snowdonia National Park. A story of the tragedy and grief of war unfolded, culminating in the harrowing display of the singular Black Chair. A bardic chair, awarded to Hedd Wyn for his poem Yr Arwr but never seen by him as he died during the First World War before it was announced.

The afternoon saw us adventure to Blaenau Ffestiniog where our tour guide, Catrin Roberts, gave us a history of slate, the town, and its people.

Above all else, these visits showcased that people, in all their various forms and walks of life, are truly the most valuable interpretive tool that can be used.

With delegates from all over the country, from myriad organisations and institutions, the conference showed me just how vast Interpretation as an industry is. With my eyes now opened, I look forward to progressing in my career, with a greater understanding of what it means to create interpretation that ultimately connects people.

**Millie Rathbone**

Hyfforddwr Dehongli/Interpretation Trainee
Rheilffyrdd Ffestiniog ac Eryri/Ffestiniog & Welsh
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STEPPING STONE FOR MORGAN

As a Countryside Project Officer working on the Green Communities project for the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), the aim of my role is to bring people and nature together. To do so, effective interpretation is key for a number of projects.

The Green Communities Fund is a project which supports improvements to where people live, work and play across North East Wales. The overall aim of the project is to improve and enhance local environment quality; active sustainable management of natural resources; develop and improve access to sustainable green infrastructure; and improve ecosystem resilience.

It was key for me to gain a better insight into interpretation in order to help the communities I am working with to develop local projects. To help improve my understanding of interpretation, I attended the Association for Heritage Interpretation conference.

Disaster and Faith

Walking along the Sacred Trail up to Llangelynnin Old Church is a familiar route. Growing up only a stone's throw down the valley, this landscape is engrained into every part of my life. Hearing the rest of the group's thoughts provoked a renewed appreciation for the church and the grounds, something I have taken for granted over the years.

Llangelynnin Old Church.

How has this helped in relation to my work?

Through attending the conference, I have gained an insight into the importance of interpretation to raise awareness of local history and key features within the local landscape. After attending the conference and by working with communities across the AONB, we have developed interpretative material on a number of projects. My hope is that the communities I am working alongside also have a new found appreciation for the heritage which surrounds them and to use this as a stepping stone to continue raising awareness of local history.



Morgan Jones

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Morgan Vaughan

Validating Rachel's Ambitions

From being new in post in the role of Museum Development Officer for Conwy County Borough Council, two weeks later I found myself attending my first ever conference. Barely knowing what my job would entail, I was thrust into a room with many amazing individuals who have been doing their jobs for years and years – seasoned professionals!

It was an immense honour and inspiration to be around so many brilliant people and to hear the speakers. The conference gave me the opportunity to meet local Welsh heritage professionals. Speaking with them helped me feel like I was not alone, that interpreting heritage in Wales is a joint venture with lots of strings to the bow.

The opening presentation was by Andrew White, Director of The National Lottery Heritage Fund in Wales. As part of his presentation, he mentioned some of his favourite Lottery Heritage-funded projects, and I was pleasantly surprised to see one of the projects I'd worked on be featured! The Llandudno Museum LGBTQ+ Heritage Walk. I am passionate about LGBTQ+ History and hearing my first ever queer project be praised really encouraged me. So much so, the first events I organised in my new role at Conwy after the conference were for LGBTQ+ History Month in February. There were two events: a clay love spoon craft activity where participants were invited to utilise symbols that meant a lot to them run by local artist Katie Ellidge, and a celebration event which featured talks about personal experiences by Rev Sarah Hildreth-Osborn, and about the Welsh LGBTQ+ Counties project by Norena Shopland, and a performance on the life of Conwy-born Victorian sculptor John Gibson by Jane Hoy and Helen Sandler of theatre company Queer Tales From Wales – as well as rainbow cake!



Rachel Evans

Andrew White, Director National Heritage Lottery Fund, Wales showcases Llandudno Museum's LGBTQ+ Heritage Walk.

The events created welcoming spaces in which people could be together and celebrate their different stories. From the feedback, I felt I achieved my aim of letting people know that archives and museums are safe spaces.

Attending the AHI conference gave me the validation to pursue an ambitious project and go after what I believe is needed for the museum service and what will help the local community.

I gained so much from my first ever conference, brilliant tips and techniques for use in my own role, as well as the confidence and drive to aim for underrepresented areas of history and to be brave in my delivery. Thank you, AHI Conference, for this opportunity.



Rachel Evans
Museum Development Officer
Conwy County Borough Council

Co-curating Manchester Museum's South Asia Gallery

Manchester Museum, part of the University of Manchester, reopened to visitors on 18th February 2023 following an ambitious £15 million transformation. With the mission to build a better understanding between cultures and a more sustainable world, the new museum includes the South Asia Gallery. A British Museum Partnership, it presents a compelling, contemporary take on South Asian and British Asian culture.

The initial idea for the gallery was conceived around six years ago and was originally intended to be designed chronologically. It was in 2018 when Esme Ward became Director of Manchester Museum that the idea for it to be shaped through co-curation arose.

Greater Manchester is home to a large community of people of South Asian heritage, and it is important that the museum reflects and works for the communities it serves. Esme Ward asked, Is the gallery as imaginative, inclusive and caring as it could possibly be?

With this in mind, the museum reached out to the local South Asia diaspora inviting them to an event to present a new vision for the gallery. It was here that the South Asia Gallery Collective was formed. The Collective is an inspiring group of 30 community members which include leaders, educators, artists, historians, journalists, scientists, musicians, students and others from South Asian diaspora. All of them have co-curated this gallery.

In the first two years of this project, pre-pandemic, co-curation was really about opening doors to our communities. There were facilitated workshops and research visits so that the museum team could learn more about the Collective members'



interests and personal lived experience. This is how the content for the gallery initially began to emerge and this unique personalised approach humanises the gallery, telling stories about real people. Although objects are of course important, this gallery is about storytelling.

The six overarching themes

The gallery presents a compelling, contemporary take on South Asian and British Asian culture and

is divided into anthologies: Past and Present, Lived Environments, Movement and Empire, Sound Music and Dance, Science and Innovation, and British Asian. Each chosen through the co-curation process to bring together stories and narratives to shape the anthologies.

The learning

We have been continuously learning throughout the lifespan of the project. The key ingredient to

The South Asia Gallery Collective.



© Maryam Wahid



Singh Twins section.

co-curation is a willingness to move away from traditional museum practice and to invest both time and space to allow co-curation to happen organically. Create the right environment for co-curators to embark on their own journey... invest in the resources, remunerate for members' time, shift away from the 9am to 5pm work pattern, and create an inclusive and fair environment for equal access to engage. Breaking down hierarchy is another important ingredient. These structures can fuel a power imbalance, which fosters a divide that leads to either no real co-curation or diluted co-curated projects.

There is also a need to break down language barriers. Many Collective members were trying to navigate an alien museum language difficult for anyone not familiar with the sector. By introducing a 'terms and terminology' document, we were able to break down and communicate complex language and processes. Exchanging these for everyday language created an even playing field for all involved.

A programme of skills-sharing sessions with museum professionals to share their expertise allowed co-curators to build their understanding to make informed choices and decisions about their gallery.

The combination of these ingredients led to a genuine exchange of ideas, listening and learning. Each Collective member being valued for their input meant that relationships were based on mutual respect and trust.

Co-curation is unscripted so doesn't always align alongside the Royal Institute of Architects (RIBA) Plan of Work stages and deadlines, and allowing it to form naturally may result in stopping and adjusting the timeline and approach. Often a challenge but making sure all voices are equally represented in the gallery is critical to the process – people and their stories come first.

Co-curating the South Asia Gallery has taken over five years and is a transformational project on many levels. From partnership working, community engagement, museum practice and much more, it has been a continuous journey of sharing and learning. The process has given a voice to the non-traditional curatorial/museum professional. It has been about transferring ownership of spaces and allowing different voices to be at the forefront of museum narratives.

Co-curation also includes evaluating the method, sometimes scheduled and other times fluid. Throughout the project, multiple opportunities

Co-curating the South Asia Gallery has taken over five years and is a transformational project on many levels.

Manchester Museum was thrilled to welcome over 80,000 people in the first two weeks of its reopening, which is fantastic

have been provided for member feedback and platforms were created allowing for the submission of anonymous feedback. At the start of the journey, members also completed individual content plans and toolkits; these have acted as a record for members' ambitions, hopes and fears, and have been an invaluable source of data for shaping gallery content. We are continuously collecting visitor feedback and in our first month this has been extremely positive. My own insights into visitors' responses are, overwhelmingly, that the gallery, the way it has been co-curated, was very much needed and welcomed.

With co-curation now complete, Manchester Museum has commissioned an independent evaluator to examine its processes and we are looking forward these findings over this coming year.

What's next for the gallery?

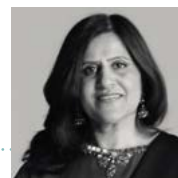
Manchester Museum was thrilled to welcome over 80,000 people in the first two weeks of its reopening, which is fantastic. Across the anthologies are diverse objects from a rickshaw imported from Bangladesh and decorated in Manchester, to a seven-foot self-portrait by local artist Azraa Motala exploring what it means to be British Asian today.

Manchester Museum Co-curation Workshop 2019.



South Asia Gallery Preview event 15th February 2023.

We are delighted that people are excited to visit us and the co-curation journey does not end here. We have worked with 30 co-curators to bring their lived experience and stories to the gallery and we've created real change around who 'holds' the narrative and who decides which stories are told. It is impossible to capture everything about South Asia in one gallery, which is why this space will continue to evolve and we'll continue to co-curate and collaborate with new people moving forwards so that we can represent different cultures, countries and showcase South Asia in all of its richness and diversity.



Maryam Wahid

Nusrat Ahmed

Lead Curator

Manchester Museum South Asia Gallery

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Twitter: @McrMuseum

THE SURFACE UNDER

Using sensitive and flexible strategies to engage vulnerable young people in heritage and arts in Orkney.

The project was supported by Historic Environment Scotland, as part of their national Heritage Remixed youth engagement programme, who contracted me to deliver an Orkney-focused strand. The aim of the programme is to engage new young people with heritage (particularly those who face barriers to accessing heritage) through creative partnerships that support the wider aims of local youth programmes.



Young person using 360 camera to take photos of her site to share with others.

Katy Birch

The first Under the Surface project began in 2019. Two groups took part: Orkney Young Carers and the Connect Project. 'Connect' work with young people who have left the conventional education system and require additional support to take the next steps into employment or further study. The name 'Under the Surface' references hidden archaeology but also elements of our personalities which are hidden beneath the surface.

One of the key elements of 'Heritage Remixed' is co-design with young people to ensure they are supported and engaged throughout the process to express and realise their own ideas. The young people led on choosing sites to visit, but also chose the creative practitioners they worked with. I invited practitioners from the creative and performing arts to submit short video pitches, which the young people watched and chose their favourites as a group. This involved some compromise on their part. One challenge I had to overcome during this exercise was working with some young people who chose not to speak. I used emoji stickers to help them choose the person they wanted to work with. The young people co-curated exhibitions at the culmination of each project, planning case-layouts and writing object labels.

The heritage sites the young people chose varied widely, from an Iron Age broch site, to a Viking settlement; a Neolithic stone circle and even the well known site of Skara Brae.

The heritage sites the young people chose varied widely, from an Iron Age broch site, to a Viking settlement; a Neolithic stone circle and even the well known site of Skara Brae. All of them brought opportunities to experience the bracing Orkney elements in the surroundings of our beautiful landscape. Fresh air and exercise came part and parcel with each visit.

Two Young Carers contemplating the world during their joint workshop with the Connect project.



Katy Firth

Young people from Connect exploring the Unstan neolithic tomb in Stenness, Orkney.



Katy Firth

During the first project the young carers chose to work with metalworking artist, Fiona Sanderson and the Connect group chose ceramic artist Kerriane Flett. I'd say the most rewarding part was one of the young carers, who hadn't before uttered a word, telling Fiona which word he would like to stamp into a metal spoon. An unexpected bonus was the new partnership forged between the two artists, who, despite being contracted to work with different groups, ended up hosting a joint workshop with both groups together.

The projects have been a great success, developing young peoples' confidence, teaching new creative skills and contributing to wellbeing.

The second Under the Surface Project had an additional challenge to contend with: Covid-19. This meant we had to take a different approach and meet each individual young person within a five-mile radius of their home. The great advantage of this approach was that the young people had the opportunity to share their own favourite places with their support workers and myself. Through using a 360-degree camera, they also shared their favourite places with the rest of the group and the artist. For me, one of the highlights of the second project was one young



Visiting the Ring of Brodgar with young person and their carer.



Experimental pottery firing on the beach.

person who had been extremely isolated on their small island and took the decision to come to the mainland to take part in their artists workshops. This was the impetus they needed to move out of their pandemic isolation.

The projects have been a great success, developing young peoples' confidence, teaching new creative skills and contributing to wellbeing. This was measured through qualitative feedback after the project by interviewing participants and their youth workers. Awarding the Heritage Hero Award to participants, handed out at Orkney Youth Awards, was one way to recognise their achievements. An unexpected benefit has been that the projects have established new local partnerships between heritage, youth-work and creative practitioners with everyone learning from each other. Due to the success of these projects, I am now working on a third project with the youth project 'Right There', and am continuing to use a gentle, considerate approach to building young peoples' confidence around visiting heritage sites in their landscape.



Katy Firth
Freelance Heritage Engagement Practitioner

How Understanding your Audience will Improve your Decisions

How do you make a good decision at work? Do you think about what worked last time? Is it mainly gut instinct or based on evidence? Without realising it we may be weighing up risk and reward – how important it is to get this right and what the consequences are of getting it wrong.

If we get interpretation right, the reward is that we engage our audience with content that resonates and makes meaning. We will have a visitor who is more likely to return, to recommend, to donate, to spend more time (and maybe money) on-site, and potentially make positive connections in their lives beyond their visit. We become a more resilient organisation, we build loyalty and support, we have a happy staff team. So it feels worth investing time in getting this right.

So to lower the risk and increase the reward, let's improve our understanding of that audience. This can help us to:

- Build evidence of demand for our plans and get the green light to proceed.
- Work out the questions the audience want us to answer.
- Test out options.
- Understand existing knowledge levels and pitch our information.
- Reassure, reward and motivate visitors to find out more, spend more time, engage more deeply with us.
- Reach a wider breadth of people, diversify our audiences, make new connections.

Essentially, understanding our audience will lead to better decisions and a more resilient organisation.



© Emma Parsons

Make a plan

Spend a little time thinking about what would be useful to know about your audience. What is their starting point; have they visited a museum or heritage site before or have they never crossed the threshold and are feeling uncertain or nervous? What is their motivation for visiting? People actively seeking out information have different attention spans from those visiting for a fun day out. Who are they visiting with – are they solo visitors or in a group; is there a mix of generations in a family group or a mixed ability primary school group? How much do they already know about

Consulting audiences about interpretation themes and content for a new history centre.

the subject, what is their preferred learning style, do they have any special needs?

You may be able to answer some of these questions already. You may have data about the types of visitor the museum or site usually attracts. But how about if this project is looking to develop new audiences? You may not have much existing knowledge to base your thinking around.



Consulting visitors on potential interpretation themes using a suitcase of objects.



Organising feedback into insights.

So let's put these ideas into a process to follow:



We start with a plan. Identify the issue you want to solve and then the information that will be useful to you in solving it. You can make this a set of research questions. If you keep this at the heart of the process it should steer your work and avoid you losing your focus as you work this through. By gathering both qualitative and quantitative data you strengthen your evidence base and your understanding.

Next consider how best to collect this information. Some of this may already be available in the organisation or from other secondary sources. Other information may be missing and you will need to gather this from scratch. You could run a focus group, set up a stall at a community event to test out interpretation themes or methods, or run a survey. There are so many different ways of doing this to suit your own scale, resource, experience, budget, and loads of advice and support available from others in the sector and online sources (see list opposite in Read on).

You've gathered in your data, now it's time to make some sense and analyse it. Think back to your research questions and focus on these. Be curious, explore your statistics, question them, consider the wider picture they are starting to give you in their headlines. You are looking for insights rather than bare statistics.

Gather these insights together and consider how best to act upon them. This might be in a formal written report to a working group or board. It might be a PowerPoint sent to a colleague. Or it could be a set of sticky notes and a flip chart in your office that is for your eyes only. The important thing is to do the work – to analyse what the information is telling you and how you can respond to it – and then to use this in the work you then deliver.

We often don't put time aside to reflect on what we've done. But it's well worth doing this, or how else do we avoid making the same mistakes or improving for next time? Imagine you have been asked to pass on your knowledge to a colleague. What top tips would you share?

People actively seeking out information have different attention spans from those visiting for a fun day out.

Here are mine.

Top tips

- The effort should be with you. Go out and speak to people in the places they frequent already, don't expect them all to come to you. Maybe get an invite to a teacher network meeting, set up a stall at a community centre or library, go to a residential housing scheme or a youth group.
- Don't just talk to people who will echo your ideas back to you, listen to new voices, broaden your connections and diversify the people you engage with.
- It's easier for people to respond to a list of ideas rather than be given a blank sheet of paper and asked to produce ideas themselves.
- Use stimulus material – images, stories, models, mock-ups, site drawings.
- Don't use jargon or technical language (words such as 'interpretation' or 'collection' or 'archive' may mean nothing to your audience) – check your question and answer options with someone not in the sector to see if they make sense to them.
- Give people a reward for their time in speaking to you and make it one they value – food, goody bags, a chance to see behind the scenes, an invite to an event, a high street shopping voucher – all have value to different people.
- Make sure you let the people you've consulted with know how you've used their responses – build the relationship and they will be more willing to take part again.
- Allow enough time for this process, including time to make meaningful changes to the plans you started with.
- Enjoy learning from this experience. It's always rewarding.



© Emma Parsons

Trialling how to engage potential audiences with dialect.

It's easier for people to respond to a list of ideas rather than be given a blank sheet of paper and asked to produce ideas themselves.

Read on...

Understanding Audiences – a Success Guide published by AIM 2020, written by Emma Parsons. <https://www.aim-museums.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Understanding-Your-Audiences-2020-1.pdf>

Visitor Studies Group – membership organisation that brings together those interested in visitor studies from a breadth of sectors with advice, support and training events <http://visitors.org.uk>

A useful guide to running focus groups from Citizens Advice – <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Equalities/How-to-run-focus-groups-guide.pdf>

Best-practice note on research with vulnerable groups – <https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/MRS-Researching-Vulnerable-Participants-best-practice-note.pdf>



Emma Parsons

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 Emma is a freelance consultant working in the Arts, Heritage and Environmental sector. She specialises in project development, consultation and audience development and is a mentor for the National Lottery Heritage Fund.



Facilitating Breakthrough in Science Centres

A research report that recently caught my eye was a study into how facilitators significantly improve visitors' depth of engagement at Science North, Canada (Machado Corral, Monteiro, Pisani and Barriault, 2021). The results seem relevant to any venue that engages people using hands-on exhibits and showcase a potentially useful audience evaluation technique.

This is a summary of the report, with some academic jargon still in place. There is a link below if you wish to read the report in full, for free, online.

The study

The researchers used video recordings made at the science centre between 2008 and 2020 to evaluate how visitors interacted with exhibits. The videos categorised visitor behaviour according to the Visitor-Based Learning Framework and whether a facilitator interacted with visitors or not. The study divided the data into two groups. 439 visitors who were recorded at an exhibit interacted with a facilitator and 4,396 visitors did not. The difference in numbers struck me as possibly important and is explained as a reluctance by facilitators to interact with visitors when they know a video is recording.

The Visitor-Based Learning Framework
The Visitor-Based Learning Framework is a tool that curators, interpreters and evaluators can use to analyse engagement through observing visitors (Barriault and Pearson, 2010). It groups seven learning-associated visitor behaviours into three levels: Initiation, Transition, and Breakthrough. As an assessment of visitor learning taking place in science centres, the framework looks at the conditions and

processes of engagement that are conducive to learning.

The three levels reflect increasing depth of engagement and learning experience, but they do not necessarily occur in a linear fashion.

- **Initiation** describes visitors who take the first steps in engaging with an exhibit but are not completely involved.

The difference in numbers struck me as possibly important and is explained as a reluctance by facilitators to interact with visitors when they know a video is recording.

1. Doing the activity without further exploration.
 2. Observing the exhibit or other visitors engaging in the activity.
- **Transition** indicates that the visitor comfortably engages more thoroughly with an exhibit as evidenced by positive body language and expressing emotion.
3. Repeating the activity to obtain a desired outcome and/or changing how the activity is done to look for a different outcome.
 4. Expressing physical or verbal emotional responses through engaging in the activity.
- **Breakthrough** is when the visitor fully engages with the learning opportunities provided by an exhibit. Visitors relate the exhibit to their personal lives and make meaning by building on their own experiences to engage in further exploration and inquiry.

5. Referring to past experiences while engaging in activity, including making comparisons and deductions based on observations of similarities and differences.
6. Seeking and sharing information, including having conversations with staff or family members, and reading signage.
7. Being engaged and involved, including trying various ways of doing the activity, doing the activity for several minutes, making comparisons, using information gained from the activity.

As interpreters, 'Breakthrough' is what we are often striving for.

Results

For visitors who did not interact with a facilitator, the percentage who stopped engaging at Initiation level was over two-fifths of this group at 42.5%, while less than

a third, or 29.1%, reached Breakthrough. Where a facilitator interacted with visitors, over half, 51.0%, reached Breakthrough levels of engagement.

Implications for Interpreters

The study's key conclusions are:

- The Visitor-Based Learning Framework has potential as a tool for visitor evaluation.
- Interactions between visitors and facilitators improve visitor engagement with exhibits as measured by the Visitor-Based Learning Framework.
- Engaged learning is recognised as being active, highly contextual and social.
- Facilitators bring tremendous value to achieving a visitor centre or museum's interpretive and educational aims.

A Science North facilitator assists a young visitor with a hands-on exhibit.

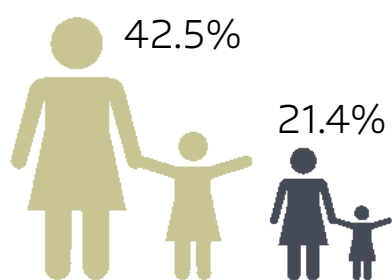




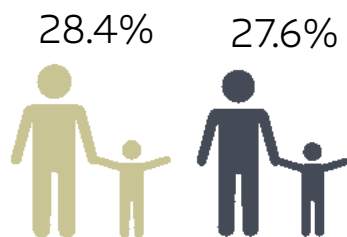
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Helping with an interactive at MathsCity, Leeds.

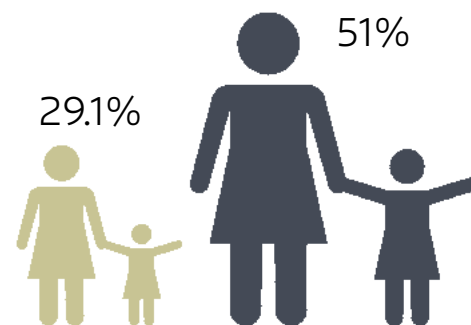
Engagement level (percentage of visitors)



Initiation



Transition



Breakthrough

■ Without facilitator (4,396 people)

■ With facilitator (439 people)

Read on...

Machado Corral, S., Monteiro, P.H.N., Pisani, K. & Barriault, C.L. 2021. Facilitators Improve the Learning Experience of Visitors to a Science Centre. *Front. Educ.* 6:675124. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2021.675124

Barriault, C. & Pearson, D. 2010. Assessing exhibits for learning in science centers: A practical tool. *Visitor Studies*, 13(1), 90-106.

Read the full report for more detailed examples, graphs and results of visitor behaviours, engagement levels and facilitator techniques observed during the study.

<https://bit.ly/Sum23-Facilitators>

<https://www.sciencenorth.ca>



Bill Bevan, MAHI
Engage Editor

Visitor Experiences on a Self-Guided Trail

One respondent described a recent experience on a self-guided trail as:

“I loved feeling completely lost in glorious countryside.”

Whilst this feeling may not be what most visitors wish, self-guided trails do provide a brilliant opportunity for visitors to explore a location in a safe, yet managed way, via a trail leading them through a sequence of stops or ‘stations’. Trails are widely offered across natural and heritage sites. Traditionally, they were associated with a leaflet or booklet and waymarked signs, panels and posts; today many are linked to mobile phone and app technology. Following a self-guided trail can inform and inspire, but also challenge the visitor, allowing them to make direct connections with the site and what they can see around them. Beyond that, trails can create new experiences, stimulate special moments and create meaningful memories.

This piece of research undertaken by Philip Ryland asked visitors at a range of natural sites the question: ‘What do you want from a self-guided trail?’

Fifty groups of visitors were approached, of these: none were visiting on their own; 21 were with a partner and 29 were with family and/or friends. They were asked if this was their first visit to the site and for 38 groups it was. A breakdown of this information as it links to their social grouping is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of visitors

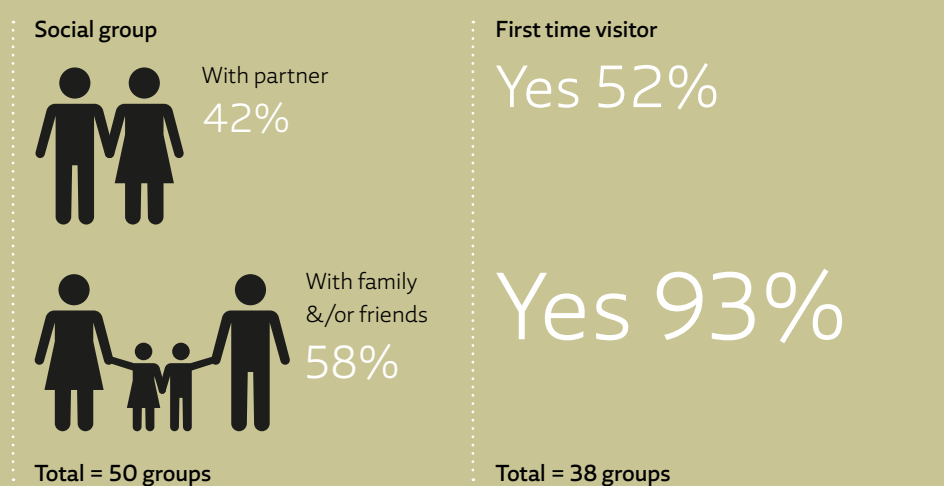
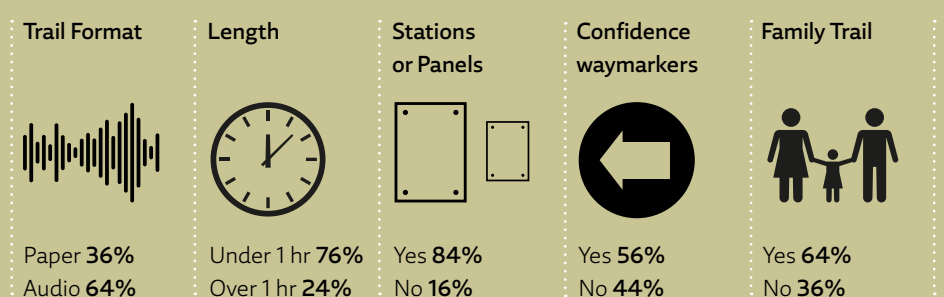


Table 2. Visitors' recent experiences of trails

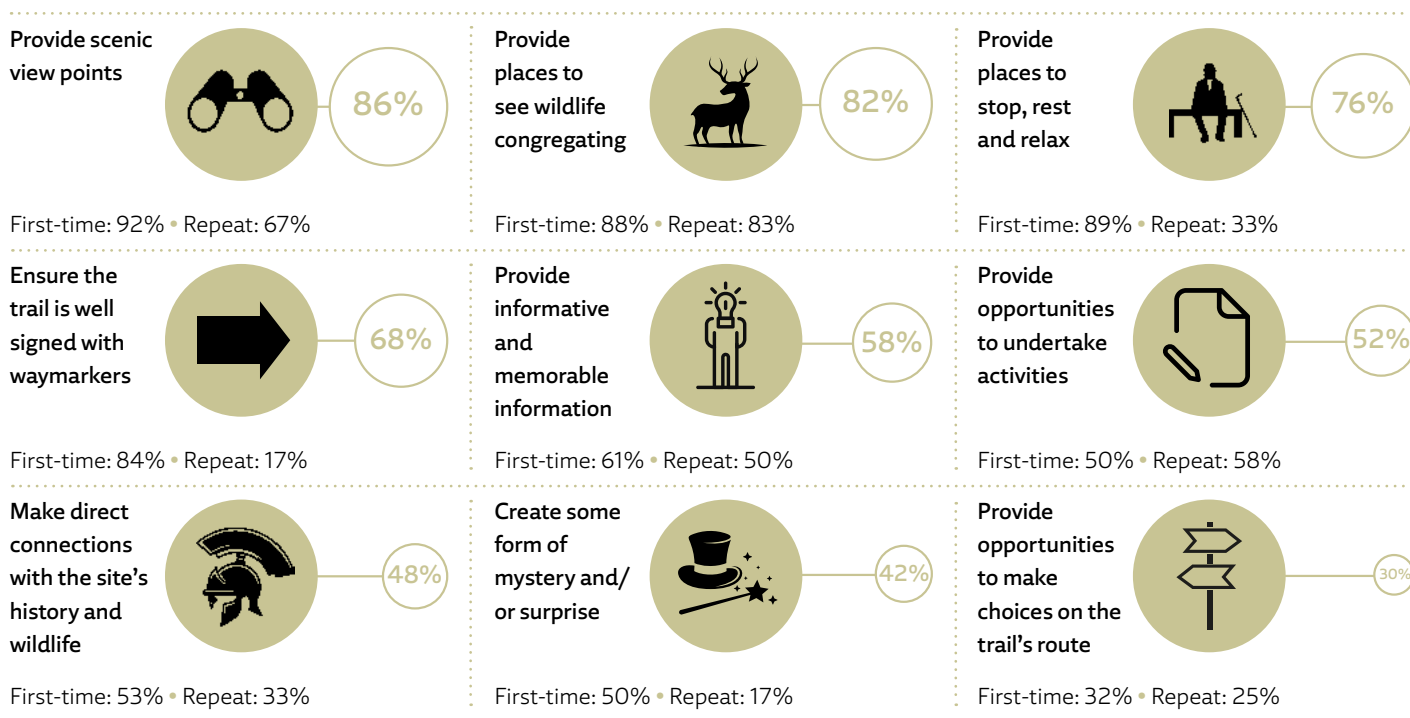


In exploring the style of self-guided trail which they had most recently undertaken, the following information emerged, in Table 2.

Trapp, Gross & Zimmerman (1994) suggest there are three principal elements in the design of a self-guided trail, namely: creating mystery, variety and beauty. Mystery

provokes visitor curiosity, whilst variety provides contrast and diversity. Beauty, they suggest focuses on the spectacle of the landscape; its colours, textures but also timeliness quality. But what did the visitors say about their experience? In terms of their views of the purpose and features of a self-guided trail, nine main themes emerged, which are summarised in Table 3:

Table 3. What do you want from a self-guided trail: main themes identified



So, what do these results suggest about the design of a self-guided trail?

1. 'Making direct connections', 'Seeing wildlife' and 'Providing memorable information' proved to be important features. The information provided on a trail should of course be relevant to your audience but most importantly it should capture their attention, provoke questions and encourage active engagement with the site, its landscape and wildlife. Memorable information about the site can be enhanced through effectively layered messages delivered in a logical sequence and tightly focused around an overall theme. The making of connections is nicely illustrated by a respondent who described part of their experience as: 'We stopped at the lake and were encouraged to look around for any birds, it was such a special moment when Ben spotted a heron' (Respondent 21, 2022).
2. 'Provide opportunities to undertake activities' also proved to be a popular response. Asking questions and provoking discussion within and even between visitor groups can be highly effective. Many trails also incorporate various forms of scavenger-type hunt to encourage interaction and a more dynamic experience. Sniff or touch boxes are also popular. Ham (1992) suggests that the design of each station should focus upon 'look – listen – compare' as a way of encouraging visitors to engage

directly with the site, and ask themselves the question: 'What do you feel about it?' A good example of interaction came from Respondent 12 (2022) who said: 'We had never hugged a tree before – and its smell was amazing!'

3. 'Use mystery or surprise to enhance the experience'. A simple technique is to ensure stations cannot be viewed from one another and where possible natural features are used to obscure the view along the trail. Try and create a situation where visitor curiosity over 'what comes next' is maintained throughout the trail. Curves in the route can also be used to achieve the same effect, although this approach can sometimes fail, as Respondent 5 (2022) said: 'The trail was quite curvy so we just cut across it, in some places.'
4. The value of carefully designed messages at each station is also critical. It is important that the messages focus on observable features, avoid unfamiliar or complex language and encourage active visitor involvement. The development of a thematic map for the whole trail can help to ensure that each station's messages link directly to the overall theme and where layering of information is used, this is sequenced correctly. Respondent 41 (2022) said: 'The geology was quite complicated, but I think we sort of got it, by the end of the trail.'

In conclusion, I defer to Ham (1992) who, in discussing the development of a successful thematic map for a trail, suggested that the designer should follow the mantra: 'focus – explain – connect', which I think is nicely encapsulated by the comment from Respondent 28 (2002), who said: 'We knew little about the site when we arrived, but the trail was amazing, we shall certainly now be coming back again.'

Coming in Summer 2024: Emotions

Read on...

Trapp, S., Gross, M. and Zimmerman, R. 1994. *Signs, Trails, and Wayside Exhibits: Connecting People and Places*. Stevens Point, WI; University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Foundation Press Inc.

Ham, S.H. 1992. *Environmental interpretation: a practical guide for people with big ideas and small budgets*. Golden, CO: North American Press.

Sharpe, G.W. 1976. *Interpreting the environment*. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc.



Dr Philip Ryland, MAHI

teaches tourism and is also Associate Dean (Student Experience) in the Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University.

Past Issues

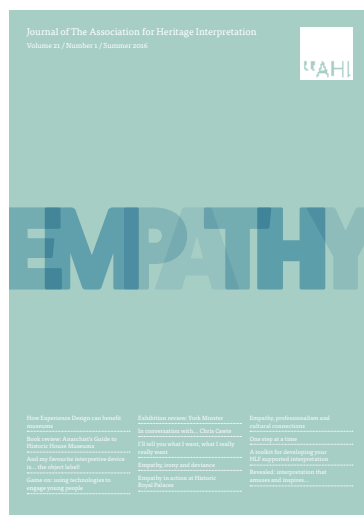
In this trawl of the AHI's Journal archives, we stay on theme and look at those articles that have focused on 'Audience' issues and aspirations, and on understanding their needs. We have picked out some audience-related topics from across a mere three years, to demonstrate the wealth of knowledge in past issues of Interpretation Journal that can help you with your own projects.



Targeting – The Discover Heritage Awards 2015 edition, Autumn 2015 issue (vol. 20-2 editor Bill Bevan) provided further practical insights into 'A' for Audience and niche sectors. That year's awards saw a new category – 'Interpretation for a Target Audience' – with success going to:

- 'Roman Medicine Roadshow' (Wellcome Trust) – explores medicine and health in the Roman world by 'taking the museum to the people'. Specifically designed to engage with an audience of young people from socio-economically deprived areas through workshops in schools, live shows in shopping centres, train stations and high streets.
- 'Iona II Dive Trail' (Historic England & Wessex Archaeology) – doesn't get much more niche than this! Dive groups and chartered dive boats make up a highly specialised target audience.
- 'Light Fever' (Royal Armouries) – 'going beyond traditional military history' by partnering with teenagers from Autism Support Network to reach out to their own peer group audience.

Visit <https://ahi.org.uk/journal-archive> to read the full articles. You will need your membership details to login for access.



Empathy – Summer 2016 issue (vol.21-1, editor Eric Langham) focused on Empathy, and contains several insightful articles, notably: 'One Step at a Time' where Clare Patey (artist, curator) introduces us to the work of The Empathy Museum (www.empathymuseum.com). She describes 'A Mile in My Shoes'. Her audience is invited to walk a mile in a pair of actual shoes belonging to a stranger while listening to their story and walking into someone else's life experiences. Audience participation first hand (foot!) enables access into another person's perspective, enhanced through an empathetic connection.



Enjoyment – Summer 2017 issue (vol.22-1, editor Eric Langham) took 'Entertainment' as its theme. In 'What do ghosts eat for supper?' Ali Marshall (Torre Abbey Gardens) reminds us that *'old jokes are somehow comforting, common ground whatever our background.'* In short, humour and a sense of fun can work across boundaries to reach audiences from all backgrounds.



Bob Jones, MBE, HFAHI
BlueSkyBlueWater Interpretative Planning Consultancy

The AHI logo consists of a white square with a stylized 'A' and 'H' inside, followed by the letters 'AHI' in a bold, sans-serif font.

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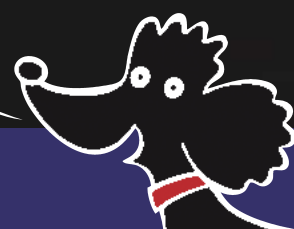


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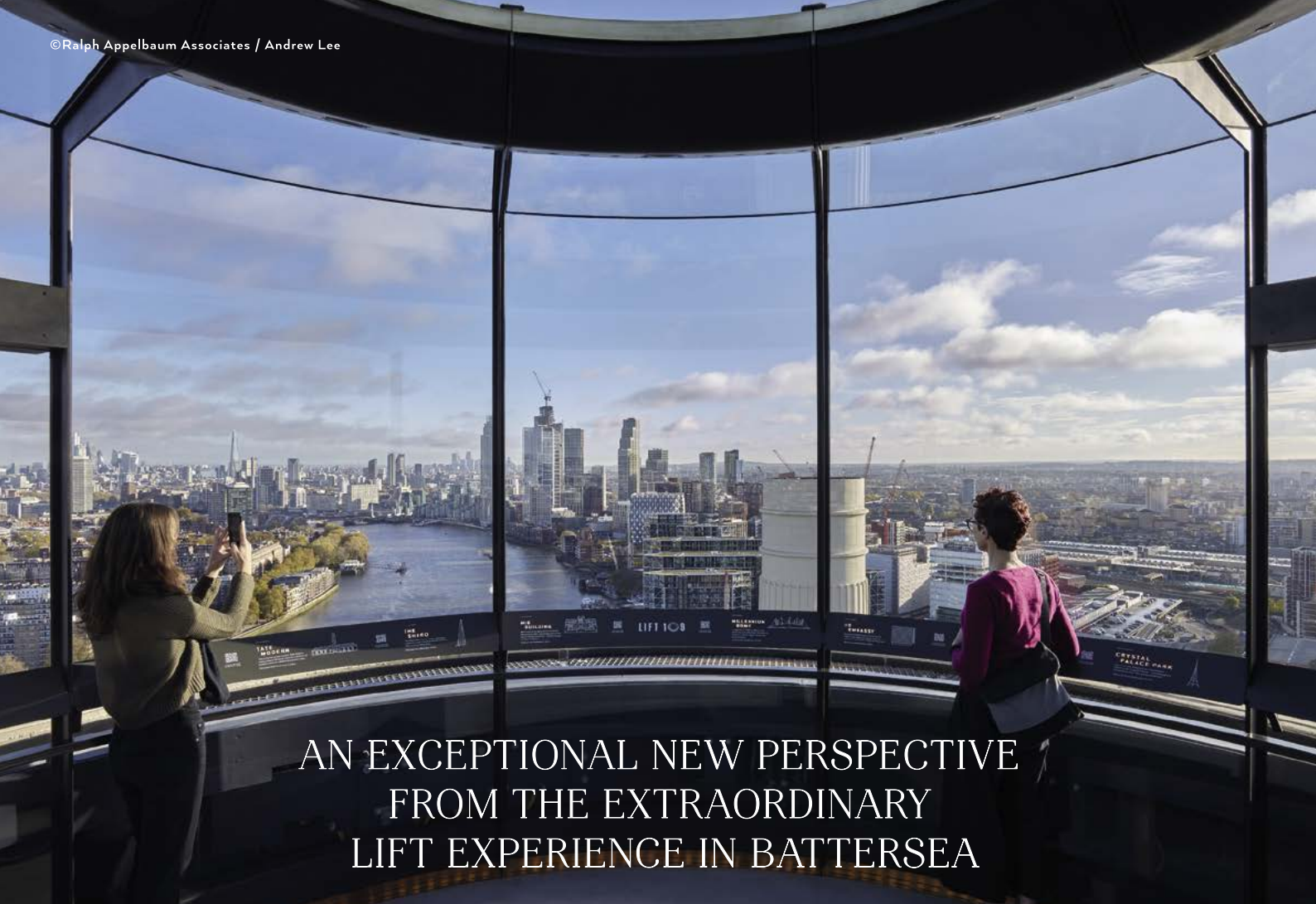
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