



Scottish
Tourism



Visitor
Studies

Research
for all



Mellow
guiding



the journal for Scotland's Interpreters

Interpret Scotland

issue 13 | summer 2006

A' Foillseachadh na h-Alba

Research

just a round of golf –
or a finger on the pulse?



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- ◆ Improve the quality and quantity of interpretation in Scotland
- ◆ Promote the co-ordination of interpretation at local and strategic level
- ◆ Share resources, expertise and experience to avoid duplicating effort



Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.
Abraham Lincoln

A sculpture by Matt Baker at St Mary's Loch - see article on page 9

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Look before you leap

This issue has 'Research' as its theme. We've taken a fairly broad view of this: the articles look at how we can use information about what's happening to guide and plan future development, or make it more effective. Research is a way of putting your finger on the pulse: checking how visitors respond to different interpretation techniques (page 5), or finding out what tourists might be looking for when they come searching for traces of their Scottish ancestors (page 6).

Research is also a way to prepare for what you know you want to do, and perhaps for things you haven't even thought of yet. Ian Yeoman's article (page 3) explores this wonderful world, in which predictive research tries to dream of the future in a way that is genuinely useful for the present. If you're looking for how the astronaut cover fits in, this is the place to start!

If you want to try some research yourself, the first of Interpret Scotland's guidelines on interpretive planning is on page 11, with some starting points for thinking about your audience.

It's worth remembering, however, that the end result of all this should be to do something. After all the preparation has been done, interpretation requires a leap of faith and of imagination. Matt Baker (page 9) reminds us that having an idea, and putting it into action, is also a profound form of research.

James Carter, editor

Cover: Astronaut James Irwin collects a sample during the Apollo 15 mission - or is he playing golf, like his colleague Alan Shepard on Apollo 14? © NASA

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Next edition

Issue 14 of Interpret Scotland will concentrate on the link between communities and interpretation. Please send any suggestions for articles, or letters for publication, to the editor.

What is research but a blind date with knowledge?

Will Harvey, Silicon Valley entrepreneur

Scottish Tourism is out of this world



Dr Ian Yeoman gazes into the future of tourism – with his feet firmly grounded in research.

In 2015 the Gleneagles Lunar Space Station could be the world's most exclusive resort. Catching the Virgin Galactic from Auchterarder, space tourists will fasten their seat belt, hear the rockets roar and feel a sudden power acceleration of 4G. As the spaceship reaches the stratosphere tourists will gaze down on Planet Earth for the most exclusive view in the world. During their stay at the Gleneagles Space Station tourists will take in a round of golf, take the lunar buggy out for a spin and float around the leisure complex. They'll enjoy the best of Scottish cuisine – vacuum packed.

Sound a bit far fetched? Well it isn't. The Virgin Galactic is a real proposition, starting a regular passenger service in 2007. It's an exclusive travel experience, with celebrities and the mega-rich paying \$50,000 for the privilege. But in real terms this is far cheaper than the first scheduled flight to cross the Atlantic in 1939. Then, passengers paid \$75,000 in today's money. Today the average fare across the Atlantic is around \$450. So by 2050 space tourism should be affordable for us all.

If we are to fulfil our ambition to increase the value of Scottish tourism by 50% by 2015, we need to know who the future tourist will be, and what they will do. It is very important for Scottish tourism to be innovative, whilst drawing upon its spectacular scenery and cultural assets.

According to the UN World Tourism Organisation the traditional sun-and-sea 'summer holiday' is changing. Today, destinations must offer a range of diverse experience and activities to the more sophisticated traveller. Some of the key trends that will shape the future include:

As consumer prosperity and confidence rises, the **experience economy** will mature, as consumers seek new meanings through 'self actualisation'. This is a search for a deeper meaning and a sense of worth beyond material possessions. This is what we call authenticity, in which purchasing decisions are based upon real perceived value. Something that is real, honest, simple, rooted, human, beautiful and ethical.

The creation of new dynamic **traveller groups** as a result of the changing make-up of the nuclear family. The nuclear family, which once comprised parents, children, grandparents and 'horizontal' relatives such as cousins, aunts and uncles, is being replaced by the 'vertical family', characterised by up to five co-existing generations,

stretching from great-grandparents to children. Other emerging markets are the 3rd Age traveller, based upon men and women who retire at 65 and can expect to live for 12 years after retirement, being healthy and active for at least 7 years, or the number of people looking to travel solo, particularly due to an increasing proportion of society that never marry, fuelling a demand for 'single' travel products.

As the world becomes more educated, this will fuel our hunger for **cultural short breaks**. But culture will no longer be divided into high or low brow – it will be no brow culture. Visitors will take in a Rolling Stones Heritage Rock Concert (Mick Jagger will still be pulling in the crowds at 86) and go on to listen to Gordon Brown's memoirs at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.

As society gets richer, **luxury is about time** rather than money. People will want to spend more time with partners, children or pursuing a passion.

Technology will play a greater part in 2015. Future tourists using the latest satellite navigation systems will never get lost. James Bond-style interpretation glasses mean stories and adventures can be created in front of us without the need for guides. Golfers will be able to practise the Old Course on their 6th generation PlayStation before they play the real thing.

However, the future consumer will be **more anxious**, perhaps concerned for personal safety, or conscious about their mode of travel and its impact on the environment.

Whatever the future, one thing is guaranteed; Scottish tourism is one of those industries that will always be here. It has outlasted shipbuilding and will be here when the oil runs out. The only thing that is uncertain is the exact future for Scotland's tourism industry: only time will tell.

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For more information about the research on which this article is based, try exploring www.scotexchange.net/scenarios

The Future Foundation has worked with VisitScotland on the possible shape of leisure and tourism www.futurefoundation.net/

Doing research on the Web is like using a library assembled piecemeal by pack rats and vandalized nightly.

Roger Ebert, *American film critic*

e Kirstie Anderson



Uig schoolchildren test the Sgeulachdan (Storytelling) project on the Isle of Lewis. Images and stories, changing with the user's location, will be beamed to an iPaq portable computer.

Gadget fever

A recent research project, funded by Scottish Natural Heritage together with Forestry Commission Scotland, has been looking at the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in interpretation. There's an increasing interest in the potential of new technology, but little accessible advice or guidance for site managers or funders in this fast-changing field.

The research was a response to this situation. Carried out by Imagemakers, James Carter, and Heritage Multimedia, it included a wide-ranging literature summary, concentrating on any reports that had assessed ICT-based interpretation, and a detailed evaluation of four UK projects. In an era when your washing machine probably contains a more sophisticated computer than your bank was using ten years ago, it can be difficult to keep a study like this within reasonable bounds. The project defined ICT as 'the combination of computers, networks and software to create interfaces to digital information' – a definition that emphasised media that enable greater interaction between visitors and the content of interpretation. This meant it could include emerging techniques such as mobile phones and hand held computers, but not get diverted by technologies like high-definition television, or the programs that control audio-visual presentations.

One of the most interesting areas for ICT applications is in the increasing ability of mobile phones to handle high-speed data transfer, so they can receive 'rich' media, such as video or interactive web pages. More sophisticated devices, such as hand-held computers, combine this with 'location awareness': signals from a satellite network pinpoint the user's location to within a few metres, so the content on offer can be directly relevant to individual places. Since many visitors already own these devices, there is less need for sites to provide expensive (and rapidly obsolete) hardware.

But there are several catches to this apparently exciting potential. Perhaps the most important finding of the research was that successful ICT-based interpretation projects need high quality content that presents an interpretive insight into its subject. This may seem obvious, but a surprising number of schemes use cutting-edge technology to present rather poor content. ICT media are simply communication channels. It is easy for the 'gadgets' to be so appealing in themselves that they become the focus of the project.

There is also the issue of how fluent people are at using technology, or how widespread the latest gadget will be. Everyone knows the stories about how people never use their videotape machine to record programmes because they don't know how to program it –

there is every sign that the same is true of the latest wave of technology. Several museums and galleries now offer tours based on podcasts (audio commentaries available from a website that can be played on an mp3 player), but they may only reach a very narrow subset of the potential audience.

Another salutary technological tale comes from the history of text messaging. The technology that keeps a mobile phone in touch with its network allowed messages of up to 130 characters to be sent at no cost to the network provider. The mobile phone companies offered this to consumers as an after-thought, never thinking that it would catch on. Now you can't go anywhere without seeing people sending messages to their mobile phones.

It seems clear that developments in ICT will change the ways in which visitors will be prepared to access interpretation, just as they have changed the way we communicate with each other. Exactly what those changes will be, and which communication methods will become as accepted as reading text or listening to another human being speak, remains to be seen. And that means that for the foreseeable future, most ICT-based interpretation will be an experiment.

Hardware and software guidelines

An important guideline is that the cost of developing high quality content should be a major element in your budget. Consider these guidelines on the 'gadgets' you might use:

- Widely available hardware and software is more appropriate and cost effective than tailor-made or 'latest version' systems.
- Check that you have appropriate back-up equipment, warranties, and maintenance and support agreements.
- Have a rescue plan for what happens if your software developer goes out of business. Some suppliers will agree to place the program source code (to which they have intellectual property rights) in a bank deposit box so you can get at it if their company is no longer around when you need help.

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The report on ICT media and interpretation will be published shortly by Scottish Natural Heritage and will be available on the SNH website.

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.
Zora Neale Hurston, American author.



visitor studies in action

Strangers lurking with clipboards



© National Museums of Scotland

Visitor Studies at the Museum of Flight showed that people would like more hands-on activities

Jenni Fuchs' new post as Visitor Studies Officer at the National Museums of Scotland reflects a commitment to putting visitors first.

We probably all know the feeling of seeing a stranger with a clipboard lurking ahead on the street corner, eyeing us up as their next target. We hurry past, head down, or even cross the street to escape. But what about the panic of the person on the other side of the clipboard? Ten more surveys to do before the next tea break, and nothing but rejection.

At the National Museums of Scotland (NMS) there has been more activity by strangers with clipboards in the past twelve months. Like many museums, NMS has moved towards a visitor-centred focus and improving the visitor experience is one of our priorities. In order to focus on the needs and expectations of our visitors we need to understand the visitor experience, and this is the role of Visitor Studies.

Of course, accosting visitors with clipboards is only a small part of Visitor Studies. Over the past year we have used a variety of methodologies, including self-completion questionnaires, interview-led surveys, focus groups, audience forums, observing and tracking visitors and mind maps. NMS has carried out Visitor Studies projects in the past, but the new post has enabled more coherence and consistency between projects and departments, in contrast with the previous ad hoc approach.

Evaluation of learning outcomes and interpretation is the flip side of good planning, and should be the responsibility of everyone on

an exhibition team, from curator to designer. As part of raising awareness I have been running introductory workshops in Visitor Studies and evaluation across different NMS departments, to show the potential across the board. Visitor Studies can support Exhibition or Learning and Programmes teams through evaluating interpretation against set learning objectives, showing whether the interpretation does what we want it to do and providing evidence of the impact of their programmes. Or it can allow Marketing to go deeper into understanding our audiences, and help front of house staff to improve their customer service by helping them learn more about our visitors.

Already, visitor research outcomes have led to changes in the way NMS does things. Last summer, we carried out major research at our Museum of Flight, including summative evaluation of the new Concorde Experience and formative evaluation of future development options for the rest of the site. What we discovered will help to shape what happens here. For example, audience feedback highlighted the lack of hands-on interpretation and activities. As a result, an interactive gallery has been prioritised in the Development Plan for the museum.

A more short term outcome was the research we did for our summer exhibition last year, *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina*. Through a visitor survey we evaluated the pre-set learning outcomes and interpretation styles of the exhibition, which included a large interactive map, text panels, photo albums, film footage and music. Since our temporary exhibitions only run for a couple of months evaluation often takes the form of tail-end feedback to learn from for next time. This survey was carried out in the opening weeks of the exhibition. Feedback from visitor comments books backed up our results, and we were able to make some changes to improve the visitor experience for the rest of the exhibition run, for example by adding family trees of the Romanovs to aid interpretation.

Sometimes results from visitor research can show that what our visitors want differs from what we were hoping or expecting. This has not been an issue with any of our projects so far, but we are fully aware of the risk. We don't avoid asking questions because we might not like the answers. We don't let evaluation reports disappear in drawers. At NMS, evaluation is decision oriented and aimed at action. The ultimate goal is to improve the interpretation of our displays and exhibitions for the benefit of our visitors.

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Advertising people who ignore research are as dangerous as generals who ignore decades of enemy signals.

David Ogilvy, advertising executive

Where can I find my roots?

An estimated 50 million people worldwide can claim Scottish ancestry. If they visit the country as ancestral tourists, what might they be looking for? Gillian Harrower describes some of the work involved in finding out.

Interest in researching family roots has grown dramatically over recent months, largely due to the high profile media coverage given to the subject. The recent BBC series *Who do you think you are?*, for example, generated a fourfold increase in enquiries to www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk, the website of the General Register Office of Scotland.

In Autumn 2005, VisitScotland conducted an online survey with the database of www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk, the official online source of parish register, civil registration and census records for Scotland. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the characteristics and attitudes of consumers who have an interest in investigating their Scottish ancestors when on a holiday or short break in Scotland. There seem to be four main motivators:

- Accessing more information – getting the facts about their ancestors
- Seeing what their ancestors saw – a typical comment was 'I wanted to find the sea they fished in and experience the weather. I wanted to hear the language they used and the songs they sang'
- Wanting to connect with other people – both relatives and local people
- Making a strong emotional connection to Scotland for themselves.

However, researching ancestors is only part of the reason for a trip to Scotland – two thirds of previous visitors spent less than 25% of their time on this, with other activities including visiting castles and museums and exploring Scottish scenery. Since 81% of previous visitors intend to take another ancestral holiday or short break in Scotland, we need to give compelling reasons for visitors to return. A good basis for this is to provide authentic experiences based on the 'seeing what they saw' and 'connecting with people' motivators .

Public sector bodies including VisitScotland, Scottish Enterprise and Highlands & Islands Enterprise have recognised the potential of this market, and are working together with the industry, through an industry-led Steering Group, to help businesses capitalise on this market potential. My work with businesses through the Ancestral Tourism Initiative (ATI) covers a range of product development issues. In particular I advise and support businesses to provide new



Many tourists say they want to feel a stronger connection with their Scottish ancestors

consumer focused products, and to improve the level of visitor experience on the ground by enhancing the quality of existing ancestral tourism products.

A one-day training course, suitable for all frontline tourism businesses where staff come into contact with ancestral tourists, helps businesses appreciate visitors' needs. Developed by training provider Tourist Board Training Ltd, the course is linked to VisitScotland's new 'Ancestral Welcome' scheme, a code of practice that recognises businesses committed to ensuring their services and facilities meet the needs of ancestral tourists. To date over 100 businesses have been through the course, and 16 have been accredited to the Ancestral Welcome scheme.

Based on a review of the first phase of the ATI, the initiative has re-focused its efforts in the last year to work with local and sectoral groups, so we can encourage more buy-in from businesses, and explore ways in which businesses with a common interest can work together.

The Initiative also recently held two workshops for businesses actively involved in the ancestral sector, aimed at sharing best practice and encouraging networking amongst the ancestral tourism community. We believe that one of the most important roles we have is to share what works, and more importantly what doesn't, with businesses in the ancestral tourism community, so that they are equipped with the information they need to develop their own businesses and effectively meet the needs of ancestral tourists.

The greatest impact that the ATI has undoubtedly had has been in raising awareness of the opportunities, based on research, and encouraging individual businesses to make small changes in the way they operate – for example establishing links to local genealogists, museums, or relevant attractions – and making sure they have useful information for their visitors which they can provide before, during and after the visit.

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For more information on the Ancestral Tourism Initiative go to: www.scotexchange.net/ancestraltourism

Only the best knowledge is good enough for the least informed

Te Papa, the Museum of New Zealand

Research for all

Martin Bellamy considers what's needed to make museum collections meaningful.

Museum objects in themselves are relatively dull and sterile. What brings them alive and makes them relevant to our visitors are the stories they have to tell. Sadly, all too often, these stories were not collected when objects were acquired and their relevance has long been forgotten. In order to unlock their secrets we now need to invest some time and energy on research. After all, sound, authoritative knowledge is the bedrock of any museum and ought to underpin all aspects of our work. How can we increase access and interpret our collections to as wide a public as possible if we don't know what we have or why it is important? Without research museum collections will become forgotten and meaningless.

However, if we are to avoid the old perception of research as curatorial self-indulgence or skiving we need to embrace new ways of thinking about this activity. In the beginning museum research was essentially antiquarian in nature. The object was researched in terms of its own intrinsic worth, highly detailed and increasingly arcane, taking little account of any historical context. By the 1970s this approach was scorned and the context became all. Objects started to become props in bigger social or economic debates. The object type was what mattered, not necessarily the particular object, with the exception of a few notable firsts and lasts.

What we are now doing in Glasgow Museums is taking a third way in which we look at objects in terms of the stories that they can tell. The very particular and specific stories that an individual object has can then be used as a means to address more general broader themes. It is far more interesting to learn that 'Mrs Smith used this mangle to do her washing every Wednesday until 1954', to convey advances in domestic technology, rather than stating blandly that 'mangles were used until the introduction of twin tubs in the 1950s'.

Essentially we are trying to unlock the hidden stories within objects. To do this we need to take a more multidisciplinary approach to our collections. We can then expand the number of objects available for research from the narrow bounds of individual collections into the whole museum collection. Objects which have been neglected in terms of their artistic merit can suddenly find that they are incredibly valuable in terms of geology or technological history.

We also need to relax our institutional control over knowledge by involving our stakeholders more meaningfully. If we integrate them more into the research process who knows what fascinating stories may be revealed? As the Museum Association code of ethics says,



Research, and the stories associated with objects' context, has underpinned the displays at the newly refurbished Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum

we are obliged to 'cultivate a variety of perspectives on the collections to reflect the diversity of the communities served by the museum'. The trick is how to manage and capture the research that enables us to do this.

Glasgow Museums Service is famed for its Open Museum, and we are very good at getting objects out into different communities where they can take on a new resonance. What we are perhaps not so good at is capturing the object-specific evidence of the Open Museum activities. I hope that in the future we will be able to ensure that information gleaned about objects in this way is treated with the same respect as information from other forms of research, and that it is recorded with the same reverence. To do this we need to work in a much more integrated way to develop common goals to preserve this community knowledge for posterity.

Quite how we do this in practice is still up for grabs, but inevitably new technologies will be part of the solution. A free-for-all Wikipedia* style collections catalogue may (or may not!) be a step too far. But surely this more inclusive approach to research and knowledge management has to offer a way forward for museums?

Editor's note: *Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com) is an internet-based encyclopaedia in which entries can be created and modified by anyone, with their content moderated by volunteers. The system is an interesting model for collaborative meaning-making. However, recent commentators have suggested that in the long term it leads to bland, 'lowest common denominator' perspectives (Andrew Orłowski in *The Guardian*, Thursday April 13 2006 and <http://tinyurl.com/8mr5x>).

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If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called **research**, would it?

Albert Einstein

Step this way...

Elaine Reid looked at guided tours in historic houses as part of her postgraduate studies at Napier University.

In 2004, I carried out research at three historic house properties managed by the National Trust for Scotland: Threave House in Dumfries & Galloway, Craigievar Castle in Aberdeenshire, and Newhailes House in East Lothian. At all of these, visitors can only see the property on a guided tour, and nearly all the tour guides were volunteers.

The research aimed to appraise tours as a way to interpret historic houses and as a means to manage the physical resources and visitor experience at a site. Research methods included reviews of documents about guided tours, observation studies of the tours themselves, and a mix of pre-tour and post-tour surveys.

The research showed significant levels of learning, but tours seemed to have little influence on the topics in which visitors were interested. This was particularly the case in relation to information about the host organisation, its mission, and how visitors could help it achieve its goals.

The literature on guided tours (see references at the end) suggests presentation techniques such as *staging* (getting to know the members of the tour group) and interpretive devices like *foreshadowing* (whetting visitors' appetite by giving them a taster of what is coming later in the tour). Use of these techniques was often limited, and there were often discrepancies in the content delivered by different tour guides.

All this suggests that tours can be an effective interpretation medium, but that they need a sustained management input to create clear themes, and monitoring to review tour structure and delivery techniques. Most importantly perhaps, guides also need good support and training.

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Mark McLean, Education and Interpretation Officer at Newhailes, says that even his own tours sometimes don't follow the rules.

Mark McLean, Education and Interpretation Officer at Newhailes, describes his approach to managing a team of volunteer guides.

My predecessor as Education and Interpretation Officer, Helen Foster, had recruited the help of Ros Newlands (from the Scottish Tour Guides Association) in putting together our guide-training programme. It was really useful for us to read from Elaine's thesis how the standards laid out there were actually being delivered.

I have been particularly keen to ensure that all our guides are 'singing from the same hymnsheet' in what they tell our visitors, and that they keep to a maximum of 75 minutes per tour. Within the necessary framework of things they 'must tell', each guide adds their own unique flavour to the tours, according to their own interests and the composition of the visitor group. I have (discreetly) shadowed tours by all our guides with these issues in mind and made gentle suggestions afterwards when required – although I can myself be the worst offender on my own tours!

We have regular guide meetings to keep things on an even keel and to give the guides themselves a forum for raising any issues. I am currently training several new guides, and both the existing training programme and Elaine's research have been of huge assistance. We were all delighted when in June this year VisitScotland's 'mystery visitor' confirmed that we were to keep our 5-star visitor attraction status for further two years – a continued first for a historic house. In a very large part this result is thanks to all who comment on, monitor and (of course) conduct our tours.

Some good books about guided tours are:

Enriching the experience: an interpretive approach to tour guiding by John Pastorelli (ISBN 1862505225)

Great Tours!: Thematic Tours & Guide Training for Historic Sites by Barbara A. Levy, Sandra Mackenzie Lloyd and Susan Schreiber (AltaMira Press, California 2002)

Upstairs or downstairs?

The research at Newhailes House produced some interesting results about the sort of things that interest visitors. In the survey, people said they were generally happy with the information given on the house and its contents, and on the lives of the family, but would like to have more information about the personal lives of the servants. These comments were supported by 'live' observations on the tours: when the commentary touched on areas like this, visitors became more animated, asked more questions, and would relate their own experiences by sharing personal stories with others in the group.

Tours often spend some time describing the rather complex family trees of the owners of Newhailes, whose portraits are on display in the house. The visitor survey showed that people had difficulty identifying who the significant characters were, though they did like to hear fine personal details about individuals!

The end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started
/ And know the place for the first time.

T S Eliot, *Little Gidding*

Creative Corner

Researching the second coming

Matt Baker has worked on site specific arts projects in Galloway Forest and the Forest of Dean. He was lead artist for the Gorbals Project in Glasgow. How does he see the relationship between artwork and research?

I should start by introducing myself as a 'process-led' artist. This little piece of artworld jargon means that I have no loyalty to any particular medium: instead I work by immersing myself within a situation or place through a process of multilayered research. Out of this I create an artwork entirely specific to the place.

'The context is half the work' is the mantra of much site-specific art practice, meaning that the artwork cannot exist separately from its surroundings. It derives its power from the web of relationship between the place and the artist's intervention in or with that place.

When considering artworks as a part of interpretation practice, this relationship is particularly pertinent. An artwork is by definition subjective and will therefore contain many layers of potential interpretation; in order to achieve this within a contextual work it is necessary for the artist to understand a place as a multileveled entity.

Experience

My research begins with direct experience, spending time alone in a place, sensing an intuitive response. Often this will take the form of an idea of scale, a characterisation in terms of texture (hard/soft, stable/mobile, loud/quiet etc) and a relationship to surrounding features (buildings, landforms etc). The intuitive response is then a foundation of the work and crucially the sounding board against which all further research is tested.

Information

The second research phase is a gathering of factual, anecdotal and experiential information about the place. Much time is spent walking in and about the place and speaking to people connected with it (a place exists as the sum of the thoughts of those who live there, those who used to live there, those who have visited and those who have never been there). These conversations form another key foundation to the work; a mixture of personal anecdote, history, opinion and conjecture. More often than not each conversation will throw up more suggestions of people to talk to: following this seemingly random sequence can uncover a chance remark or story that becomes an essential generator for the work. Alongside this

work is a similarly chance-informed trail through maps, text and images related to the place.

Experiment

At this point in the process the work has begun to suggest a material form, and the third stage of research usually starts in the studio with experiments with materials and imagery. Materiality, and the technology inherent in shaping and joining materials, are fundamental to the reading of the work and often an idea demands research into unfamiliar processes or design precedents: for example a recent project led me into working with the artificial sea used by the wave energy research group at Edinburgh University to test the buoyancy and movement characteristics of a floating section of an artwork.

Observation

The final aspect of research in my work is to consider each work as an experiment in its own right. As I see the purpose of my work being to contribute to the changing identity of a place, I assess the evolving relationship of a work to its context. Often this is impossible to assess through my own observation; instead I rely on a process of hearsay and observation from a distance (there is often nothing less helpful than the comment of someone made in the knowledge that they are talking to 'the artist').

Often the way a work enters into the mythology of a place can take unexpected and frankly bizarre forms. A suspended bronze figure that I made in Glasgow's Gorbals began to seep a ruddy liquid from the centre of her outstretched palm: in a predominantly Catholic area this was rapidly passed round as a miracle (with a bit of a Glaswegian twinkle). The result was that I fulfilled a long cherished personal ambition of being featured in *The News of the World*, while the sculpture figured on several esoteric websites as a harbinger of the second coming of Jesus Christ! Probably more significantly, the episode has contributed to widespread local adoption of the artwork as a good luck charm for the neighbourhood. It is this kind of experience that informs my approach to practice, a practice that in its entirety can be seen as a process of research into the role of identity and memory in public space.

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Each piece needs research into the way materials behave. Matt Baker (on left) checks floating bronze casts at Edinburgh University's wave energy tank

News

Consultants' database for the Cairngorms

The Cairngorms National Park Authority have set up a database of consultants, including those interested in working on interpretation, for projects in the National Park.

The Authority does not own or manage any land, visitor centres or visitor attractions in the Park, but works closely with land managers and communities to raise visitors' appreciation of the Cairngorms' special qualities. For projects funded by the Authority they often encourage people to use interpretation professionals, and the database will be a source of possible contractors.

Registration is free, and copywriters, designers, manufacturers, illustrators and interpretive planners are all invited to register. Details can be found at www.cairngorms.co.uk/parkauthority/consultants/

For more information contact Andy Ford, Visitor Services Officer with the Authority on 01479 870558 e-mail andyford@cairngorms.co.uk

More about Art

Matt Baker's article (page 9) gives some insight into how artists approach interpretation projects. A recent study in *Museums Practice* (published by the Museums Association) looks in detail at arts projects. The information is geared towards museums, but should be of interest to anyone considering such a scheme. It includes case studies, how to establish a mutually beneficial relationship between the artist and host organisation, what to think about in evaluating arts projects, and some simple 'do's and don'ts'. See *Museums Practice* Issue 31, Autumn 2005.

Letter – Presenting archaeology

Ronan Toolis and Stephen Carter are concerned about an apparent lack of commitment to interpreting archaeological remains that are discovered as a consequence of the planning system (*Planners, Public and Profits*, issue 12, autumn 2005). At East Lothian Council's Archaeology Service (ELCAS) we share those sentiments. We have always been of the mind that the future of the past lies in engaging the very people who are (in many cases) excluded from the process. We include this statement in planning recommendations and project briefs:

"If significant archaeological remains are uncovered, the applicant is encouraged to make provision for public accessibility, either through local media involvement, school visits/talks, open days (dependant on site conditions), exhibitions or evening talks. Community involvement should be seen as a positive step in creating both a local sense of history and an important aspect for the development of community well-being."

Unfunded public dissemination and interpretation is not just confined to the private contracting companies, nor to Highland Council, as I am sure other council archaeology services would agree. Many local authority archaeology services spend evenings and weekends engaging the public because we too see community involvement as essential to the sustainability of the archaeological profession.

Developers and their archaeological contractors often say that public site visits are out of the question because of site safety issues, but there are a range of options available for making sure that the public are aware of the archaeological remains that have been discovered.

In East Lothian and Midlothian, significant archaeological remains discovered as a result of the planning process are brought to the attention of the public through site open days and interpretation, press releases, local popular publications, local evening talks or the East Lothian Archaeology Week. The City of Edinburgh Council and East Lothian Council run an annual one-day archaeological conference, which invites archaeologists to give informal lectures to the general public about recent discoveries in both counties. This event usually attracts 150 attendees: this year the conference will include recent discoveries in Midlothian.

As the authors have pointed out, involving and engaging the public with archaeological remains (be they very recent discoveries or long known monuments), is of paramount importance. It is important not just because public support is fundamental to the sustainability of the profession, but because Scotland's heritage belongs to us all. As archaeologists and heritage managers we therefore have a duty to enable anyone, no matter what their level of interest or intellectual background, to know more about the archaeological heritage around them and to understand its context and significance.

Biddy Simpson, Heritage Officer, East Lothian Council Archaeology Service

Plan it out

Do you need to put together an interpretation plan, but you're not sure where to start? The Interpret Scotland group is planning a series of quick-reference guides to the key stages of interpretation planning. The guides will be published on the IS website. When complete they'll give 'bullet point' introductions to the questions:

- What do you want to say?
- To whom do you want to say it?
- How do you want to say it?
- Is it working?

Of course, not all interpretation can follow a 'logical' sequence like this: the important thing with any project is to make sure that all aspects have been considered, and that the decisions made at any point are consistent with each other.

Gillian Findlay from the Scottish Museums Council and Mary Hudson from the National Trust for Scotland have been working on the guide to the second question, thinking about your audience. Here it is.

Understanding Your Audience

Do you know who your visitors are? For interpretation to be most effective the messages you provide must be of interest to them, be presented in a style that attracts them and be accessible through media they are comfortable using. There are simple ways to find out the information you need and these will help you use your resources most effectively.

Here are some questions to ask which will help you establish or review the profile of your visitors:

- **Who are your visitors?**
School parties or family groups? Mums and toddlers? Retired people? Office workers at lunchtime? Specialist groups? Coach parties? Walkers? What they want to know and how they want to find out will vary enormously.
- **Where do they come from?**
Are your visitors local, from elsewhere in the UK, or from overseas? If many speak another language, you could consider translating some of your materials.
- **How often do they visit?**
Do you have lots of repeat visitors who'd appreciate a regular change in your interpretation?
- **Why do they visit?**
What are their motivations? Does what you provide meet their expectations and can you cater to their interests? You need to be sure that the answers you offer match the questions they bring with them.
- **How long do visitors stay and what holds their interest the longest?**
Are there particular areas or tools that people seem most drawn to? Can you repeat this success to your advantage elsewhere?
- **What level of knowledge do they bring with them?**
Are your visitors already experts in the subject you are interpreting, or is it likely to be something new to them? Understanding this will help you provide the appropriate content.
- **What are their physical and learning needs?**
Every one has different access requirements and preferences for the way we gather information. It's useful to bear in mind that the kind of interpretation you might enjoy will not be shared by everyone.
- **Who isn't visiting and why?**
This is perhaps the most challenging question to answer, but one which is crucial if you are to encourage new visitors and broaden the appeal of your interpretation.

Remember, establishing your visitor profile is just a start. To ensure you are communicating as well as you can, you need to act on your findings and regularly carry out a review.

For more on understanding your visitors, try these resources:

SNH guidelines on Interpretive Planning
www.snh.org.uk/www/Interpretation/default.html

The Scottish Museums Council
www.scottishmuseums.org.uk

The Visitor Studies Group, a UK based group working to develop and promote best practice in the area www.visitors.org.uk

Jenni Fuchs, Visitor Studies Officer at the National Museums of Scotland, also recommends these resources on visitor studies and evaluation techniques:

The Australian Museum Audience Research Centre www.amonline.net.au/amarc/

The Evaluation and Visitor Research Special Interest Group, also in Australia
<http://amol.org.au/evrsig/>

Museums Libraries and Archives recommendations on measuring learning
www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/measuring_learning/default.aspx

The US based Visitor Studies organisation
www.visitorstudies.org

A site run by Roger Greenaway, who specialises in evaluation techniques
www.reviewing.co.uk/evaluation/index.htm

The Global Social Change Research Project's listing of sociology research methods
<http://gsociology.icaap.org/methods/>

Research Councils UK guide to evaluation
www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/evaluationguide_print.pdf

An interesting review of Visitor Research issues
www.visitors.org.uk/events/andrew.pdf



The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing.

John Powell

From Creepy Crawlies to cafés

Janet Sylvester's work with market research group Scotinform shows some interesting results.

Interpretive techniques have changed enormously since our first involvement with interpretation related research in the early 1990s, when we conducted focus groups for the National Museums of Scotland to test different interpretation methods for the new Museum of Scotland. As techniques have developed, so has the demand to show how effective they are, and to learn how they can be used to appeal to different audiences.

The methods we have used to explore the effectiveness of different interpretation techniques range from quantitative face to face and self-completion surveys to qualitative focus groups and mini groups. Many studies involve a mix of quantitative and qualitative survey work. This can provide both data on interpretation techniques, and in depth analysis showing what people really feel about their visit, but it's worth considering the differences between some of the techniques.

- Face to face interviews are useful in providing data on visitors' views of different interpretation techniques. They enable visitors to be shown material where relevant, and interviewers can explain questions. Using semi-coded questionnaires means it is possible to gather some qualitative feedback during the interview, although this is limited by the length of the questionnaire (a maximum of 15-20 minutes).
- Self-completion questionnaires are useful to measure key data and are very cost effective (in other words, cheap!), but response rates can be very variable.

They also tend only to be completed by certain visitor segments, notably women and older people. I would suggest that their usefulness for exploring views on interpretation methods is limited and they should only be used if their limitations are fully recognised.

- Focus groups/mini groups are usually the key methods for exploring visitors' views of interpretation techniques. Both methods involve recruiting a group of visitors (8-10 for a focus group and 4-5 in a mini group) and holding a discussion about their visitor experience. The discussion can last anything between 30 to 90 minutes. Incentives are essential: these can be a voucher for the shop or café rather than cash. Groups should be held on site, preferably around the time of the visit. This means the feedback is immediate and provides an opportunity to talk to types of visitors who may not be available later (for example day visitors and overseas tourists).

So what do visitors like?

The results of recent research by Scotinform highlight that, for many visitors, the opportunity to see or interact with 'real' exhibits outweighs computer-based interpretation. The article on the Scottish Mining Museum in the last issue of *Interpret Scotland* (Autumn 2005) illustrates this: the Balloon Mine has proved a cost effective and simple way of conveying an important message to children. Adult visitors to *Scotland's Secret War* at the National Library of Scotland thought that the most interesting areas in the exhibition were the artefacts (such as the Enigma machine) and documents written at the time, whereas the computer-based exhibits had the lowest

appeal. Similarly, the highlight of *Monster Creepy Crawlies* at the National Museum of Scotland was the live insects, rather than the computer interactives. Of course, there are some groups of visitors who prefer the 'high tech' approach, notably teenagers and people in their early twenties, but research can identify what techniques appeal to the different target markets and their effect on the visitor experience.

The role of external influences on the effectiveness of interpretation is another area that visitors comment on consistently. The Real Life Science sessions at the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh were held in the Real Life Science Café, where their impact was reduced by the level of background noise. *Monster Creepy Crawlies* was a victim of its own success, with visitors during the Easter holidays discussing the over-crowding and heat rather than the impact of the exhibits. It is clear from the research we've conducted that ensuring a comfortable environment is as important as selecting the interpretation methods.

Exploring visitor reaction to interpretation techniques is a fascinating area of research. Most visitors are keen to provide feedback and have lots of views on what works and what doesn't. With today's sophisticated consumer it is important to listen to these views, and understand the needs of different market segments, to maximise the effectiveness of investment in interpretation.

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