

INTERPRETATION

A Journal of Heritage and Environmental Interpretation



Outdoor Interpretive Panels

February 1998

INTERPRETATION

PRODUCED FOR THE SOCIETY FOR THE
INTERPRETATION OF BRITAIN'S HERITAGE

ISSN 1357 9401

Published by
The Society for the Interpretation
of Britain's Heritage

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Advertising Rates

Full Page	£250
Half Page	£150
Quarter Page	£ 90
One Eighth Page	£ 49

For details of non-member and full colour rates
please contact

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Design/Layout and Printing by
Allsorts Colour Print

The next issue of Interpretation will look at
The Interpret Britain Awards and is due out
in February 1998



THE SOCIETY
for the
INTERPRETATION
of
BRITAIN'S HERITAGE

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Things can get pretty ugly if you don't plan for ongoing maintenance and repair

Cover picture. Cast aluminium panel by Rosemary Allen for English Heritage at Battle Abbey, Hastings, East Sussex. As visitors walk round the site with a hand set, the numbers and images on the right hand side of the panel allow them to select accounts of the battle from the viewpoint of different characters, at different times during its progress.

Not Another Boring Panel!

Neil Diment

This is a plea, a battle cry from the heart - a crusade for the new millennium even! Why is it that our countryside and heritage sites are littered with so many examples of poor outdoor interpretive panels?

I'm sure we could all describe examples and - to our chagrin - may even have had a hand in producing one or two in the past. There are examples of good practice however to be found at sites around the country, and this issue of the SIBH journal highlights some of those which have been produced by members and their organisations. Learning from these, and mistakes made in the past, this issue tries to point the way forward to reduce the incidence of boring panels in the future.

What Are We Talking About Here?

An outdoor interpretive panel is a reasonably permanent combination of text, illustration(s), photograph(s) or map(s) imaginatively presented to tell a story about an object or place, and fixed on site. By 'reasonably permanent' I mean five years. With so many factors involved - from changing 'phone numbers to fashions in design, organisations that form and reform, and colours that fade - you'd have to make a very strong case indeed for any panel remaining on site for more than five years. We are not dealing with purely directional, information or welcome/orientation signs and panels, although good practice should determine that your interpretive panel will be planned as part of an overall site signage programme to ensure uniformity of design and clarity of messages - and consequently less confusion amongst visitors!

Although you will find lots of hints, tips and ideas within these pages, this issue does not set out to be the definitive guide on how to produce a panel. That still remains to be written in the UK, but note that a US version is available - see Michael Gross' article - which provides a rich source of ideas and examples of good practice. Similarly you will not find a detailed account of the range of materials

options open to you. Andrew Jenkinson has some tips to point you through the materials maze. Scottish Natural Heritage produce a very concise one page description (see below). Our advice is, talk to the national manufacturers, our advertisers, about the services they can offer at the earliest possible stage in your planning and design. But note that more than one of our contributors urges caution here - don't believe every word they say! Explore local alternatives. Keith Rennells came up with a successful sticky solution in the Weald; Cadw have worked very successfully with a local manufacturer for years. The Bodachs of Arrochar have more to say on this subject.

Panels with Attitude

Stop for a moment and consider why are there still so many boring panels around. Why are we doing this? No, I don't mean what are our aims and objectives - yet. We'll come to that in a moment. Why are we cluttering up our countryside and heritage sites with boring panels that nobody wants to read, written by experts for experts, detracting from the very place we may be seeking to raise an appreciation of in the minds of our visitors? Are we merely marking time in our organisations, or territory out on our sites?

Let me ask you another question. What first drove you to work for an organisation which, at the end of the day, is perhaps seeking to help conserve a part of our heritage? Can we change visitor behaviour and attitudes? Can we make a difference? Not with a boring panel.

There has to be a reason ... If nothing else, I hope you will read Peter Blood's article in this issue. OK, a panel may not change the world, but let's be clear about why we personally are involved in producing it. Digging deep, we might even be able to put some of ourselves, some of that original motivation and conservation ethic, into our panels. James Carter writes of National Power's panels at Drax which encourage reduced energy consumption. If Europe's largest coal fired power station can be persuaded to address an issue like that, there's hope for us all!

Right from the Start

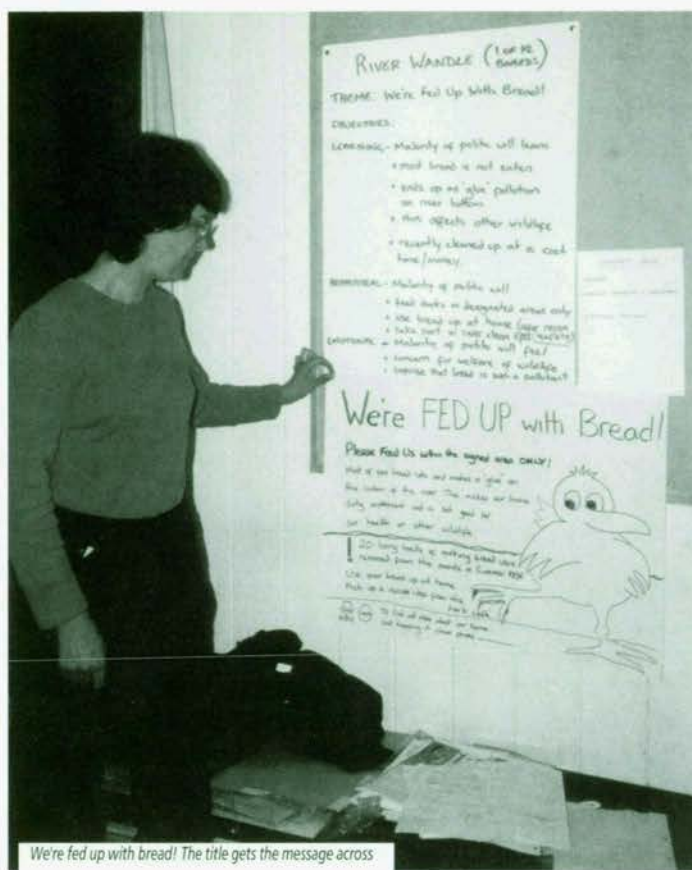
Unless we know what we are trying to accomplish with our panel how will we ever know if we have been successful? You may want a panel that tells your visitors about A, B or C. But what do you want people to do with this information? What is the 'produce of the product'?

As part of your planning, be clear about your objectives and what you want your panel to achieve. Write down, and get agreed by all parties, the theme of the panel - and I use the word here in the Sam Ham sense. Ask yourself, 'What is the one thing you want visitors to remember/understand/think as a result of reading this panel?' Use Tilden's principles to communicate that message effectively.

Panels should be planned as part of a range of interpretive programmes and services, not as a 'one-off'. This issue contains examples of good practice for a number of organisations such as Cadw, where panels are rightly seen to complement other media and techniques. The Forestry Commission see panels as just one part of their organisation's integral site signage programme. The Sussex Downs Conservation Board work with local people - a panel will emerge from a local interpretive plan, which sits within the framework of the strategy for the Downs as whole.

Use your Title to Convey your Theme

The title may be the only bit of your panel that most people will read. Hard to take after all that effort you've put into producing it, I know,



We're fed up with bread! The title gets the message across

but it's true. I know I am at X castle, Y wood or Z reserve when I get there. Your off site signage will have told me that and directed me there. Why waste valuable space telling me that on your panel? Use your title instead to convey the main message, or theme, about X, Y or Z that you want to get across.

Two examples. On a recent course a participant from the London Borough of Sutton was struggling with ideas for a panel for along a river where local people love to go and feed the ducks. Her colleagues were concerned that the ducks were unhealthy from an unrelenting, soggy diet of mother's pride, and the pond was getting clogged up and polluted from all the bread the ducks didn't eat. The title we came up with, alongside a large cartoon-like illustration of a pretty unhappy looking duck, conveys the message in a slightly provocative manner.

Up on the north east coast, the Northumberland Wildlife Trust have installed a panel at the village of Craster, which explain something of the history of the place. You can still buy smoked herrings there, but the fishing industry has otherwise all but disappeared. The harbour was also once used to ship stone from the local quarry down to London and elsewhere to build roads. With a humorous (and highly appropriate) reference to a catchy slogan of a few years ago advertising a certain brand of malt vinegar, the panel is entitled 'Don't say Craster, say fish and chips'. It's why it's here, as the subtitle then tells us. The main title neatly relates to visitors' associations with the seaside, while revealing what's special about this particular place.

Be Creative

Be creative with the use of words, mounts and materials as well as your theme. Go one step beyond the 2D oblong. View the panel as a whole - after all, that's what your visitor does - not just the two dimensional part with the text and diagrams on it. Michael Gross talks about 'synergy' here. 90% or more of our effort probably goes into researching and writing the text - which most people don't read. Plan the panel as a piece of furniture.

Consider 'local distinctiveness' and use local materials to reflect the vernacular in the design of your panel frames and supports. The good people of Ilkley, when they were given the opportunity, demonstrated a clear preference

for a plinth made of local stone - they didn't want steel frames.

Maybe a panel may not even be the answer. When you've read Peter Blood's article, read Jim Hardcastle's. Do you really need another panel?

Evaluate

If you do not build evaluation into your panel planning, how will you know if your objectives have been achieved? Is your panel answering questions that nobody's asking? Did it make a difference? These days it's fairly cheap to produce good colour photocopies of your proposed designs. Increasingly 'mock ups' are being used to pre-test the panel with the target audience before going to all the expense of getting the thing produced and installed - and then find it's too late.

Wales seems to be leading the way in this field at the moment. In Pembrokeshire, panels on the national trail are being properly evaluated as part of the interpretative planning cycle before revised versions are designed. The Countryside Council for Wales commissioned a research study last summer which will help point the way forward for the next stage of their programme of interpreting the NNRs.

A Word on Maps

I love maps. I have several adorning my walls at home. But strangely I can't remember much of the information on them, when I am no longer looking at them. Your visitors will be much the same. Most people do not understand the language and symbols of conventional maps. Use pictorial sketch maps, giving an oblique bird's eye view of the site or landscape, rather than the traditional two dimensional Ordnance Survey approach. Not only do they look more attractive, visitors can relate more easily to these - and you have an added potential bonus of alternative uses for the artwork.

Link maps on panels with signing and waymark systems. Portray marker discs on your panel to give people the confidence to follow the route depicted on your map, but which they can't carry with them in their head.

Accessible for All?

On access considerations alone, good practice in panel design is tending towards a preference for angled or 'lectern' mounted panels. They are also much less obtrusive than upright ones!

For detailed guidance on appropriate considerations including recommended panel height, angles, avoidance of glare from the sun, minimum typesizes, preferred typeface, colour contrasts and background colours to avoid etc., the following contacts should prove useful:

- i) The RNIB's 'See it Right' campaign produces copyright free factsheets covering access to information for visually impaired people. Telephone: 0171 388 1266
- ii) The English Tourist Board's 'Providing Accessible Visitor Attractions' contains some very useful guidance for only £5. Telephone: 0181 846 9000
- iii) The 'BT Countryside for All' good practice guide is available from the Fieldfare Trust at £25 plus P&P. Telephone: 0114 270 1668

No More Stuff on a Stick

Before you turn the page or read on, please write the title of this editorial on a postcard. Stick it above your desk at work. Better still, send it to your boss and challenge your organisation's accepted thinking about panels. Become part of the crusade and determine that you will never have a hand in producing a boring panel again!

If just one person, as a result of reading this decides to think more:

Objectively
Thematically
Creatively
Laterally

then this issue of Interpretation will have made a difference. There will be one less ugly, boring panel in the world.

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Not Another Bo

PLANNING TRULY 'INTERPRETIVE' PANELS

John Veverka

Are Your Boards Boring?

If your interpretive boards or panels are boring, then you can be sure of one thing - they are NOT interpretive. Truly 'interpretive' panels are planned and designed to be exciting, provocative, revealing and memorable. There is a big difference between interpretive and informational panels. This short article will reveal the difference and give you some ideas as to how to make sure that your interpretive panels effectively communicate with your visitors - and accomplish their purpose.

What Does it Mean to be 'Interpretive'?

Today almost everything we toss out in front of visitors is called 'interpretive', yet most of the communications we give them are informational not interpretive! The definition of interpretation I prefer to use - and have taught for many years - is that developed by Interpretation Canada:

Interpretation is a communication process designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our cultural and natural heritage, to the public, through first hand involvement with objects, artifacts, landscapes, or sites.

The communication process in the definition is the use of Tilden's Interpretive Principles which state that to be 'interpretive' the communication process must:

- Provoke the attention, curiosity or interest of the audience
- Relate to the everyday life of the viewer or reader
- Reveal the theme or key point of the message through a unique or creative viewpoint, design or perspective
- Address the Whole - the interpretation should illustrate a higher theme or message
- Strive for message unity - use the correct graphics, colours, textures, design elements to support the theme of the interpretive message

This process is also the basics of a good advertisement. When you look at or read a provocative ad in a magazine or on TV, you are seeing interpretive principles at work. Interpretation has come from, and utilises communication strategies and techniques

from: advertising, marketing, consumer behaviour, psychology of the audience, recreational learning theory, journalism as well as other support areas.

Plan for your Total Site Interpretation and your Media Mix

Before you begin planning for one or more interpretive panels you should first consider the main story or theme of your total site and other interpretive media and services that will make

up your message media mix. What is a media mix? To illustrate and interpret the total site story to your visitors you may use a variety of media including printed leaflets, visitor centre exhibits, outdoor demonstrations, living history, guided tours, self-guiding audio devices and interpretive panels. The variety of media you use for interpreting your total site is your media mix.

In the interpretive plan for your total site you should have determined that for a given site, resource or location, interpretive panels were the best or most cost effective media for interpretation at that location. But the panel(s) is only one of many different media you may be using to illustrate/interpret your total site theme. So, you should consider, as good planning practice, where and how the panel will fit into your total media mix presentation



of your site story. Is a panel the best media? Do you need an interpretive panel? Remember, you are interpreting the 'whole site', and a panel(s) for an individual location should be planned and designed to fit into the total site story presentation and design look (media graphic standards). The bottom line - the interpretive panel should fit in and help illustrate your total site interpretive message.

Interpretive Panel Planning Considerations

Once you have decided that an interpretive panel(s) is the BEST media for interpretation at a particular site or resource, here are the key steps I recommend in planning and designing interpretive panels.

1. Story and Theme Analysis

Identify the key concept that this particular panel will be designed to interpret. The best way to determine the theme is to ask yourself 'if a visitor only remembers one thing or message from this panel, I want that one thing to be -----'. The answer is the theme. Note that there is a big difference between a theme and a topic. A theme is a complete sentence and a topic isn't. For example:

Topic: Birds of the park

Theme: We manage this habitat to attract three species of migratory birds

The THEME is what the panel graphics and text will 'illustrate'.

2. Audience Analysis

Once you have the theme you want the panel to interpret, you also need to consider just who will be reading the panel. Will the audience be: experts or people with little knowledge; local residents or tourists; children or retired folks, etc. The market group that the panel is designed for will translate into the kind of text, graphics, and 'relate' approaches you use in the final design.

3. What are the Objectives of the Panel?

This is the area where most planning falls short. I would guess that most panels in the countryside today are 'objectiveless' panels. That means that no one can explain why they are there other than that 'we got funding for 5 boards and had to do something!' The ONLY way you can be sure that your panels are working are to have objectives for them. I like to use three different objective levels in panel planning:

I) Learning Objectives

These are what you want your visitors to learn or remember. Upon completion of reading/looking at the panel, the majority of

the visitors will be able to list the three ways that wildlife preserves benefits wildlife and people.

ii) Behavioural Objectives

These are the most important of the objectives as they determine the real results or purpose of the panel.

Upon completion of reading the panel, the majority of the visitors will use this resource in a safe and stewardship-like manner.

Upon completion of reading the panel, the majority of visitors will stay on designated trails only.

iii) Emotional Objectives

These are the objectives where you describe how you want the audience to FEEL upon completion of their interaction with the panel. It is the emotional objectives that drive the behavioural objectives quite often.

Upon completion of reading the panel, the majority of the visitors will feel that protecting natural areas is important for them and their children.

Upon completion of reading the panel, the majority of the visitors will feel the desire to help support the (agency etc) that manages this preserve.

The true success of the interpretive panel is dependent upon you having clear and accomplishable objectives. How can you 'plan' a panel if you don't know what it is you want the panel to accomplish?

4. The Two Questions!

After you have developed your objectives, or as you consider what you want the objectives of the panel to be, ask yourself these two questions:

I) Why would the visitor want to know this?

This is my 'who cares? or so what?' question. If you cannot answer these questions you will have a problem in the panel being successful. Be careful not to have your panel giving answers to questions that no one is asking! If you can think of a good reason that the visitors will want to know this information - use that statement as part of the panel header (Provoke). For example: 'This plant can save your life!' Would you want to know more?

II) How do you want the visitor to USE the information you are giving them?

If you don't want the visitors to use the information on the panel in some way, then why are you giving it to them? The answer to this question can become your behavioural

objective(s), such as to 'have a safer experience', or to 'consider becoming a volunteer at the Centre'. Again, there is not a right answer. But you need to consider the question carefully. You have spent a lot of time and money on developing this panel - WHY? What do you want as a result of your panel investment?

5. Determine How/When/Where to Use Interpretive Boards or Panels

This planning consideration concerns itself with such issues as selecting the panel materials that would be best for your site/use. Kinds of materials can range from fibreglass and porcelain signs to photo metal and other materials. Each sign material has its benefits and limitations. It is good to ask for material specifications and samples from different sign manufacturers to see what your options and costs are. Remember, the visitors do not care what kind of panel material you use - they only care about the quality of the message presentation! How/When/Where questions you also need to consider are:

Panel Locations: What kind of mounting system will you need, what will the impact on the panel mount have on the environment or on the 'view'?

Panel Maintenance: Can the panel and mounting system be easily maintained should any vandalism occur or the panel need to be changed in the future?

What is the 'life' of the Panel - how long do you intend to have it in place as is? The answer to this question might reflect on your choice of panel manufacture materials.

Will the panel topic be for a seasonal presentation or a year round presentation?

Will any of the information presented on the panel be likely to change in the near future?

6. Evaluation

This is an important step in the interpretive planning process that is almost always left out. Before you spend £2,000.00 on a panel or board, wouldn't you like to be sure that it works (that its objectives are being accomplished)? I recommend that you make a simple photocopy of the proposed draft panel and pre-test it with a sample of your visitors to see if they understand the message etc. When you have the panel text and graphics working at a 70% of greater level of objective accomplishment - then send it out for final production.

7. Implementations and Operations

This part of the planning process focuses on

the real costs, time and logistics involved in getting from the 'let's have a panel' stage to the final installed product. Some of the questions you need to consider include:

- What is the budget, and what are our media fabrication options for that budget?
- When do we need it by, and how long does it take from plan to fabrication?
- Who will do the contract, manage the contract etc?
- Who will do the research, write the label copy, select graphics, do final design, and do the actual fabrication?
- Who is responsible for approvals (drafts, text, design etc)?
- Who (will you) do any pre-testing evaluation studies?
- Who will install the panel(s) and maintain them?

Remember the Visitor

In planning and designing interpretive panels it is important to remember some basics about how visitors learn and remember information.

- People learn better when they are actively involved in the learning process
- People learn better when they are using as many senses as possible
- People retain about:
 - 10% of what they hear
 - 30% of what they read
 - 50% of what they see
 - 90% of what they do

Make sure that the visitors use the panel to help them look at and understand the resource the panel is interpreting. Use behavioural considerations in the panel design and text such as: 'look for the ...', or 'can you find the ... in the site in front of you', 'go ahead and touch the ...', 'listen for the ...'. These action steps will help design some 'minds on and hands on' activities for the '90% of what they do' communication information retention process.

Dare to be Creative

If you have had some time to go out and look at interpretive panels you might have noticed some things that many have in common. They might be un-inviting, un-exciting, un-memorable - and probably unsuccessful! How many of the panels you have seen in the past can you remember anything about? Do you want your panels to be the same? Do you really want to spend £1,000 or more for your panels message to be a blur in your visitors' site experience? Then dare to be creative!

Depending on the particular panel topic: consider using cartoons; use 'hidden picture graphics' (how many birds can you find in the illustration?); challenge the visitor to look for, find, smell, touch, THINK; use riddles or puzzles and have the visitor check with staff, at a visitor centre etc. to see if they had the correct answer. Consider using a 3-D panel - using sand-blasted wood to create an elegant presentation of shape, colour and text. Design a vertical panel with a 'peep hole' so the visitor can look through the panel to see a resource. Use clear vertical panels with sand blasted historic illustrations on it so that a visitor can look at/through the panel at the historic site and see superimposed on the site, through the clear-etched panel, what the resource might have looked like 100 years ago, 500 years ago! Dare to be Creative!

Use the panel mounting or frame as an exhibit element too! You can use solar powered digital sound boxes in the frames to include bird calls, sound effects or other messages; or use 3-D fibreglass impressions built into the frames for visitors to touch.

Do not be so comfortable with the way that 'it has always been done'. There is not a wealth of evidence showing that the way 'we have always done it' has actually worked! Try new ways, new strategies, and new perspectives. And pre-test before you build. The visitors should be the ones to tell you if it is a good idea or not.

What if it fails?

- 'A ship in port is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.' Grace Hopper, Inventor

- 'There's as much risk in doing it 'the way it's always been done' as there is in trying something new' - John Veverka, Interpretive Planner

- 'Behold the turtle who makes progress only when he sticks his neck out.' - Old Chinese Proverb
- The point to all this is that there are lots of new, exciting and creative ways to tell a story with a panel. You should

not feel restricted in your individual creativity - it may be just the thing needed to help make a potentially boring story really come to life for the visitor. Remember, the chief aim of interpretation is provocation - NOT instruction.

Summary

This short article focused on the key components to planning and designing a successful interpretive panel. The planning process should consider:

1. The main theme of the panel
2. The intended audience
3. The objectives of the panel
4. How/When and Where you intend to use the panel
5. How you will evaluate the panel to make sure that its objectives are being accomplished
6. Implementation and operations considerations

Interpretive panels must use interpretive principles: Provoke, Relate and Reveal the essence of the message. And finally, consider the visitor, they are not out on a holiday to read a book on a stick. Make sure that the panel content relates to them and considers the two questions:

1. Why would the visitor want to know this?
2. How do I want the visitor to use the information I am interpreting to them?

Interpretive panels do not just happen, they are carefully planned. For the time and investment involved in producing them, interpretive panels are more effective than panels not using interpretive techniques or principles. Their product is your success - if done correctly.

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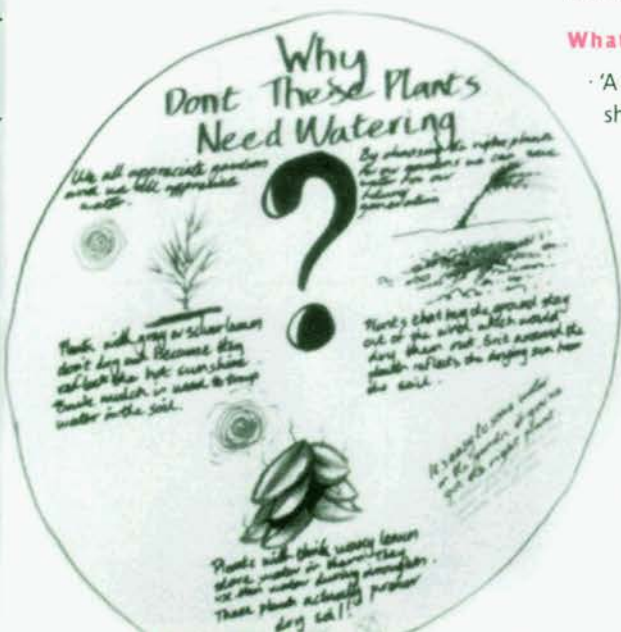
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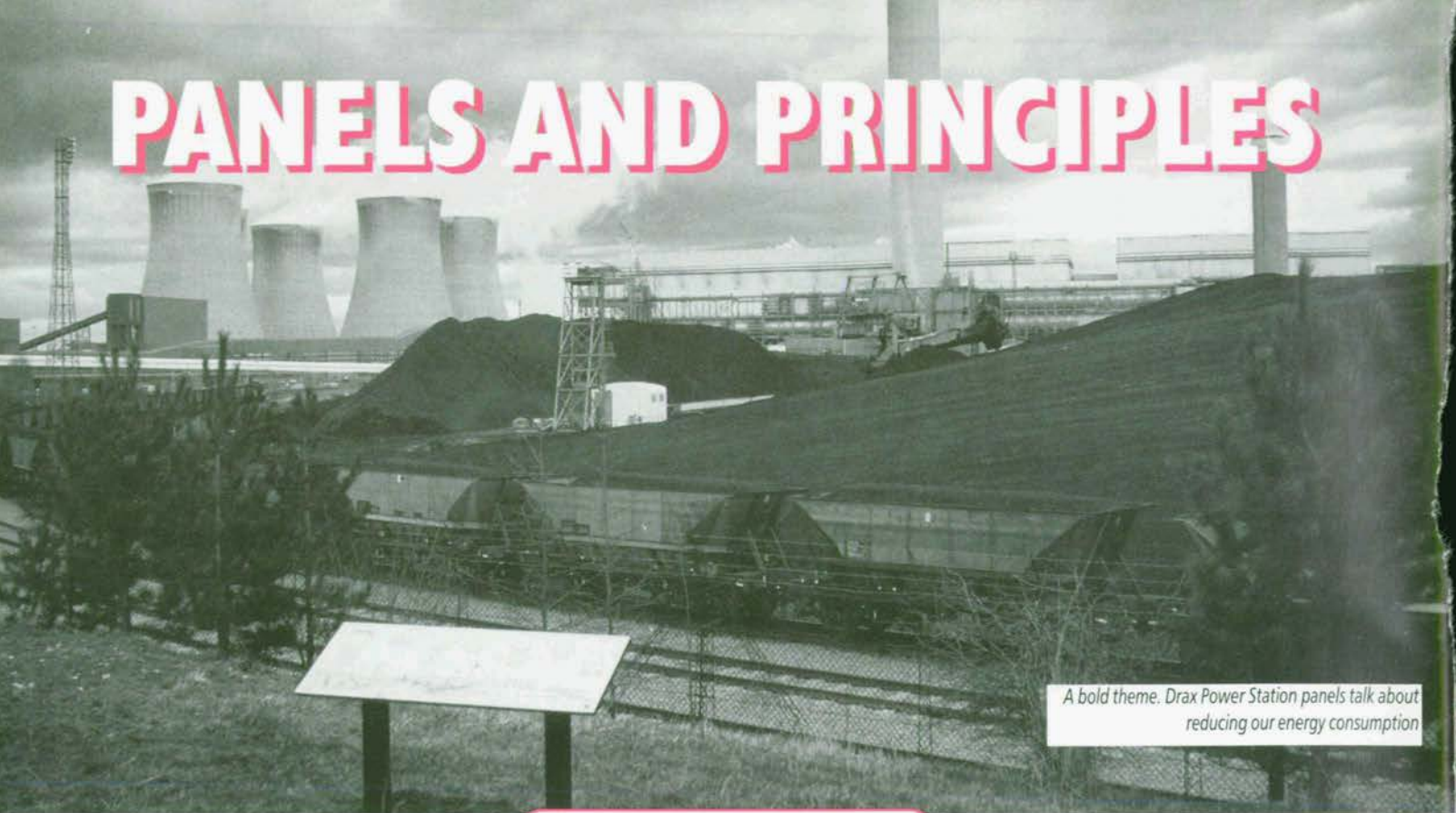
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PANELS AND PRINCIPLES



A bold theme. Drax Power Station panels talk about reducing our energy consumption

Getting a stand-alone interpretation panel to work is quite a challenge. It needs a combination of skills: good interpretive planning, copywriting, design, illustration, and site planning; and they must all work together in a very concentrated space.

Ideas Not Facts

Let's look first at the idea that interpretation should reveal something to your readers. This is always the most difficult thing to define in planning interpretation, but it's crucial. It's what makes the difference between something that interprets a place or an object, and something that just gives information about it. This doesn't mean that you can always find something completely new and original to say: the important thing is to send people away with some ideas to think about, rather than just a few facts.

This means doing some careful, and creative, thinking at the start of the project. As an example I'll look at a panel I worked on for the Edinburgh City Council Ranger Service, who manage large areas of countryside and local nature reserves in the city. They wanted a panel for Blackford pond: a classic place for families with young children to feed the ducks. The pond is in a small area of formal park, which is in turn a gateway to a wilder river valley and hill on the edge of the city.

The original idea was that the panel should act as an identification guide for the large number of birds that use the pond. The rangers were also keen to reinforce some points about things like putting litter in a bin. Plastic bread

James Carter

bags don't do much for a duck's digestion, let alone the work they create for the rangers if they clog up the pond's outflow! Now identification guides are fine, but I wanted to find something more interesting. For one thing, books are far better at that sort of thing than any panel can be; and for another, does knowing a bird's name really tell you anything about it?

Revealing Themes

So together with Zoe Hall, who worked as the designer on the project, I developed two themes for the panel that would both tell people something interesting about the birds they were feeding, and give a positive context for the rangers' messages. The themes were:

1. Because they look for food in different places, many birds can live together on a small patch of water like Blackford Pond.
2. Humans can help to make this a good place for birds to live.

The important thing about themes is that they are ideas, not facts or subject classifications. Writing them down, and keeping them in front of you while you work, keeps you focused on what you really want to say, rather than all the things you could say. This is another important discipline with panels, as I'll discuss later. Once the themes are clear, you can select the facts you will use to illustrate or demonstrate them, and develop any ideas about the reactions that you would like your audience to have to them.

Together with some clear statements about what the rangers wanted to achieve, these become your objectives.

Objectives for the Blackford Pond Panel

Learning Objectives

1. Different birds feed at different levels in the pond. This enables more birds to live in one place.
2. Birds use two main types of feeding: surface and diving. The birds here represent examples of both methods.
3. How to tell the difference between a moorhen and a coot.
4. The island in the pond provides a important refuge, and was re-built by Edinburgh District Council Rangers.

Behavioural Objectives

1. The majority of visitors who read the panel will take litter home or put it in the bin.
2. The majority of visitors who read the panel will understand the need to keep dogs outside the pond area.

Emotional Objectives

1. Visitors reading the panel will realise that human actions affect the birds here.
2. Visitors reading the panel will value Blackford Pond as a place to come.

Make Your Illustrations Work

This may seem like a fairly simple list of communication objectives, but it's a lot for one panel to achieve. Together with deciding on an interesting theme, keeping control of the amount that you try to do with a panel is a key discipline. Just watch people next time you're standing by a panel outdoors, and time how long they spend looking at it. Unless it's at a viewpoint, or somewhere very special that they've made an effort to get to, it's likely to be less than one minute. One way to get round this is to make sure that your illustrations, as well as your text, work towards the objectives. The rangers had already suggested that the panel illustration should show dogs outside the perimeter wall - we developed this so that the illustrator had a clear brief that specified exactly what we wanted:

1. The main picture should include the following:

i Recognisable images of tufted ducks, mallards, moorhens, coots, swans, black-headed gulls. These can show a range of behaviours, such as preening, diving, coots fighting, mallard taking off from water.

ii The island with trees on it.

iii The wall across the pond, with a party of people accompanied by a dog on the far side. Dog looking over the wall.

iv People at the edge of an around the pond walking, feeding birds, talking with children, putting litter in bin.

v NO dogs must be shown within the enclosed pond area.

2. Small pictures to accompany text. These need to be sufficiently accurate to enable identification from them, but do not need to be completely true to life in colour.

- i Tufted Duck
- ii Mallard
- iii Moorhen
- iv Coot

Good Relations

Relating to your audience isn't always easy with a panel, because you never know who might look at it. Knowing your site helps, and in the case of Blackford Pond the main audience was clear: family groups from a middle class area, mostly with children of ten or under. I felt that the illustration was a key element both in

relating to this audience, and in getting their attention. I wanted the picture to have the same function as the pictures in children's books with plenty of detail that parents could point to and talk about with their children. We chose Jacqui Stevenson as illustrator because her style is bright and cartoon like, but also very clear.

I believe it's also important to be aware of why your audience is on the site, and to link the style of the panel to this. When I worked on an interpretive plan for Nairn seafront, I reckoned that most visitors to this largely caravan resort near Inverness would come simply for a stroll

Illustrations should illustrate not decorate. A clear brief to the illustrator ensured that the Blackford Pond panel graphically conveys the themes and objectives.



by the sea, not particularly expecting to learn anything. so the plan recommended that panels along the promenade should carry very little information, and have a 'seaside holiday' feel to them, with quotations from local people carried on a postcard-shaped part of the design.

The style of your text, and the way in which you explain any new or unusual concepts, is another key element in relating to your readers. Susan Cross' article has more on this.

Provocative Titles

And what about the injunction to provoke your audience? I believe there are two aspects to this: getting, and keeping, their attention; and sending them away with something to think about. The design and illustration of a panel should help in getting attention, though there's a fine balance to be struck between doing so and making sure it doesn't dominate the landscape. Text can play a part too, especially in the title or headline. I've always felt that a title that just says where you are is wasted. At Blackford Pond, the title is 'Diving and Dabbling' - hopefully intriguing enough to be worth a second look.

As for ideas for them to think about, we're back to the importance of a clear theme, and to the reason for providing a panel in the first place. Why not be a little bold with this? On panels around Drax power station in Yorkshire (the largest coal fired station in Europe), I agreed with National Power that the panels could review the various methods of generating electricity, together with their environmental effects, and even suggest that in future we may need to reduce our energy consumption.

Textbook Panels

There are three other principles which I think should be in any panel textbook. The first

relates to getting agreement to adventurous themes, and making sure that both client and interpreter understand each other. In the three projects described here I've been fortunate to work with people who were interested in the project, but understood interpretation well enough to take some risks with it, and allow the panels to have some 'personality'. Interpretation designed, or even worse written, by a committee often tries to please everyone. Instead it usually ends up dull, too full of facts, and with no sense of the individuality of the place it's talking about. You may well need to work with a steering group, but make sure you allow some

individual authorship in the panel's design and text.

Secondly, if you possibly can, be there when the panel is installed. You will probably have carefully planned it so that it relates to the view in a particular way: I know from experience that it's all too easy for a firm of contractors to install it the wrong way round!

Lastly, be aware that there are some fascinating places where a panel just isn't suitable. This might be because a romantic atmosphere is best left alone (there's a particular ruined castle on the west coast of Scotland, which I would far prefer without its standard issue panel), or because the panel is going to suffer from vandals. Panel materials can be very tough, but there is no such thing as a vandal proof panel. If a large part of the audience at your site includes Saturday night revellers, remember that however hard you try to relate to your readers, you may not get quite the response you would like!

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'RULES OF ENGAGEMENT': THE FOREST EXPERIENCE

Bob Jones

The Forestry Commission has long been involved in the production of outdoor 'orientation' or 'interpretative' panels. My own involvement goes back some 25 years - a perspective that becomes increasingly sobering as the years go by! I truly wish that I could look back over all those years and all those panels and feel that I had got it right every time - but it will be a brave (or foolish!) designer who would claim such a feat. I take comfort from some successes on the path which has led the Commission to where it is today. A particular satisfaction was in turning the Commission away from using imported hardwoods in its signing structures - for here is Rule No. 1 - you cannot consider panels without giving equal thought to the structure upon which they are mounted e.g., materials, form, environmental impact.

Strategic Thinking and Policy

Today, we are at something of a cross-roads in our thinking on signs throughout the forest estate. Our management guidelines on their use are in the last throes of a major revision. The following are some of the better bits ...

'Signs are probably the single most visible manifestation of our corporate face, and as such can have a powerful impact on how we are perceived by others. Consistency throughout is all-important.'

'Signs can be expensive to purchase, erect and maintain and to avoid becoming intrusive should be used sparingly and sensitively, yet ensure they achieve their function. The messages carried must be brief, positive and welcoming. They should also reflect good practice in respect of efficient information design principles ... of particular concern with dual-language or multiple-layer signing'.

Panel Guidelines

Turning to panels in particular, the guidelines advise:

'... these are signs which provide site and facility information, orientation, and interpretation. They will aim to enhance the visit by providing brief and accessible information about the area, its history, the wildlife, landscape and management through

the use of text and illustrative material. Text will be kept to the minimum and be written in clear and succinct Plain English'.

Our preferred formats include:

• **Lectern:** *Particularly suited to car parks, viewpoints and locations requiring large amounts of orientation or interpretative material.*

• **'MilePost':** *Plank sized posts, containing c. A4 size interpretative panels.*

• **'FencePost':** *Trailhead sized post, suitable for small amounts of interpretative material.*

• **'SignalPost':** *Fencing grade posts with pivoting arm in the body of the post, containing small interpretative panels.*

• **'SackSign':** *Ballast filled waterproof sack, pre-printed with interpretative message. For use where discrete or non-invasive way-side signing is required (e.g., on ancient monuments).*

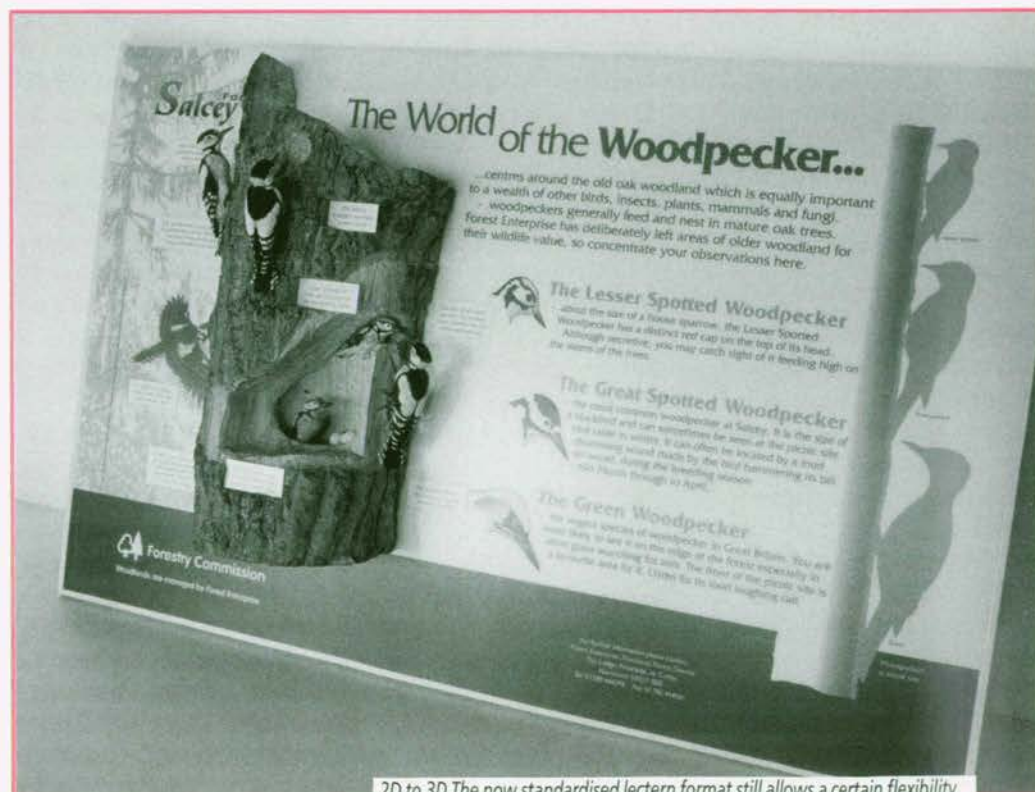
Exceptions will occur, in response to a particular site's sensitivities. In such cases ... talk to Design and Interpretative Services'. This is Rule No. 2.

Foresters tend to take our specifications and seek further economies - a laudable goal and often a rich vein of practical experience. Hence Rule No. 3. - listen to field staff.

Reflect the Spirit

'When identifying a forest area, local names ... will be perpetuated. In Wales and Scotland a presumption will exist in favour of the Welsh or Gaelic name, without the need for an anglicised version in addition. However, steps should be taken ... to aid the non-speaker of that language ... through phonetic translation'. Rule No. 4 - see your panel as others see it! Put yourself in the mind of the user, leave your own baggage to one side and don't hesitate to start again. Better still, do some pre-testing with cheap laser-prints.

'Where dual language signs are a requirement ... priority will be given to Welsh and Gaelic as the lead languages. The second language ...



2D to 3D The now standardised lectern format still allows a certain flexibility

will be displayed in a separate colour. This can place a particular burden on panels ... we take the view that ... indigenous language is an expression of cultural heritage that should be acknowledged and accommodated fully. Word for word translations are often inappropriate, so copy written in English should be so crafted as to reflect the spirit of the primary language. Visual accessibility demands great care be exercised in determining the content of such signs'.

Additionally, where we feel compelled to speak to the overseas visitor in their language, remember - the more copy, the more inaccessible the sign, and the more you are wasting money. At the risk of appearing xenophobic, Rule No. 5 - always ask why do you need another language? - if you do, to what extent is a full translation necessary?

The Learning Curve

Over the years we have produced panels through just about every process and on virtually every kind of material. All of which have their own pros and cons - be it cost, durability, colour limitation etc. The deciding factors favouring any one approach must be determined by the objectives of the panel - and budget. Rule No. 6 - incorporate purposeful and measurable objectives in your panel, otherwise don't produce it.

Whilst we have explored most processes and 'dwelt-in-the-lodge' of one or other camp at some time, we currently favour electrostatic digital images as a panel standard. These images are output as full colour paper prints, laminated in thin plastic sheet, face and reserve bonded to rigid clear Lexan polycarbonate and Foamex backing sheets. In total the resultant 'sandwich' will be 18mm thick and able to absorb most of the punishment thrown (literally!) at it. Rule No. 7 - believe about half of the manufacturers claims about material and process performance. It is vital that the whole process I describe above is done as a flowing operation. If the paper absorbs moisture before lamination through changes in humidity levels, said moisture will then strive to make its presence known once on site and subject to wide-ranging ambient temperatures. Also, unless the seals are good, Rule No. 8 is never under-estimate the abilities of various life forms to find a comfy home or a good meal in some part of your panel - usually a highly visible bit!

Rule No. 9. Before fabrication, take your artwork and read it, then read it again, then have someone else read it, run the electronic spell check over it, read it again. The chances are there is still an error on it somewhere, and Mr Hawkeye will delight in drawing your attention to it again, and again, and aga ...!

Non-Invasive Signing

Much of our recent endeavours on signing have been concerned with the introduction of what we call 'non-invasive signing'. In these cases we are trying to encourage a philosophy which pays greater heed to the integrity of a site, minimises the visual intrusion of signs and invites the visitor to take part in the process. Examples are:

i) 'SignalPost' This is a cross between a fencing stringer post and an old-fashioned drop-arm railway signal. To view the panel, the visitor raises it by pulling down on a counter balance arm. Once read, the arm is released and the panel drops back on a pivot into its rest position.

An enterprise, non-invasive 'signalpost' sign. The 'panel' - the signal arm-rests inside the body of the post, protected from nasty UV rays and weather!



ii) 'SackSign' Imagine a clearance village site in the highlands of Scotland. The ruins have emerged following felling operations and there

is an important heritage story to be told - but it is a remote location, visitor numbers are never likely to be very high. The site is to be listed - means you can't dig a sign into the ground because of the risk of disturbing archaeological remains. Also there is an atmosphere to protect - panels on poles or artificial cairns would intrude upon the site and destroy the 'sense of place'. Because of the remote location, because of the visitor numbers involved, on-site signing is the only viable interpretative media - the site is seen as an important factor in the local tourism economy, so to do nothing is not an option. Enter 'SackSign'! This is essentially a waterproofed jute or hessian sack, screen-printed with a simple interpretative message, filled with sand, and set amongst the ruins at trailsides. Its existence being inconspicuous, the visitor must actively look for it. The material used is in keeping with the possible detritus of such a village, e.g., a pack-horse meal-bag or a drovers grain sack. The dead weight of the sand filled bag means only the determined will move it, and it sits on top of the ground without disturbing any of the fabric of the site - above or below ground. Best of all the cost per

'sign' has not exceeded £50 - and you have plenty of spare sacks ready to fill if the on-site ones walk or deteriorate.

Adding Value to Panels

I suspect many of us have a love-hate relationship with outdoor panels, but it can be difficult to get away from the fact that they are often the most practicable option for a given interpretative programme. However, they need not be dull or predictable. Current work involves the inclusion of three-dimensional casts eg., of a woodpeckers nest, within the body of the panel. Not only do these give the viewer a real insight into a hidden world, but they bring a certain tactile quality to the experience. Interactive panels encompassing touch-sensitive 'screens', using trickle-charged batteries fed by discrete solar panels, are also under development. However - and finally - Rule No. 10: Always ask yourself, or the client, why do you need a panel at all?

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Forestry Commission. A founder member of SIBH, based in Edinburgh, he can be contacted on 0131 334 0303.

THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG



Susan Cross

Panels are limited in what they can communicate. If a panel works well for the visitor it will probably be because of what it does NOT say. Most of the subject, and almost all its subtlety, will remain hidden from view. Here is an example: a 'panel on writing panels' accompanied by the explanatory detail that is hopelessly inappropriate for a panel but ideal (I hope) for something that people will read at leisure.

1. Make sure they do. Every word needs to work hard to justify its place on your panel. There is no place here for make-weights or space fillers. Make your words work, so your visitor doesn't have to. This means that you will have to work on the words.

2. Titles are vital. By the time she's read this far your visitor will have decided whether or not she is going to read this panel. Put your main message into the title. This, of course, presupposes you know what that message is. I do; the rest of this panel, and this article, is about how to write briefly but with impact.

3. Alliteration almost always acts as an alchemy (but, as with alcohol, alternatives and almond essence, you can overdo it). There are other tricks you might try. I nearly added 'punning' to the list of p's because I like it, but not everyone

does. I am really arguing here for a lightness of touch along with the punch.

4. Sub-titles are important. Your visitor will be scanning, not reading, your carefully crafted prose. Sub-headings help him to spot what he is interested in. Sub-titles are one way of dividing up the text. (And don't forget what Tilden said about the importance of provocation. Revelation comes later ... don't hold your breath).

5. Involve your visitor. Ask questions. Give them something to think about. I think you are writing this panel because you can't lean on the wall all day talking to your visitors. Your panel has to do the leaning and talking for you. So let it talk like you - courteous, welcoming, friendly and human.

6. It is always a good idea for panel text to suggest things that visitors can do. Hopefully your panel will be about a more gripping subject than writing panels so you can find a more engaging activity for your happy punter. Examples might be 'count how many different sorts of butterfly you can see between here and there, or 'imagine what this place looked like in the dim and distant past before crisp packets'. Encourage the visitors to use all their senses.

7. We can debate whether I should have written 200, the more readable form, here. I didn't because it is at the beginning of the sentence and I went to school a long time ago. However, when I am writing for panels I break many of the rules I learnt back then. One sentence paragraphs can work a dream. Pithy phrases, that are not sentences, can have a place. I certainly write 'aren't', 'can't' and 'isn't'. And begin sentences with a conjunction. I just don't tell my English teacher.

8. Your assumption should be that people will not read everything you have written so highlight your main points to add impact. This is my main point. Two hundred words is a recommended maximum. I think 150 words is often better. (This, by the way is the revelation promised earlier - sorry if it's less than you'd hoped for, but that's life!).

9. Whatever you're writing about try to get people into it. You can do this by referring to individuals, using illustrations or photographs that include people, describing what people have done on the site or just evoking people as I have done here.

10. Try to highlight specific local examples to draw attention to the specialness of this place and what you can see, smell or feel here.

11. Another question. What a stimulating and



provocative panel! For the panel writer a picture can be worth a whole lot of words and for the visitor even more. Pictures are easier than words so, if you can, show it rather than say it.

12. Panels need designers who like working with words and their meaning as well as with colours, shapes and all that stuff. Here's an idea for breaking up a heading which offers a designer something to play with.

13. More sub-headings. Once again, they break up the text and highlight the main points. You can see what this panel is about if you read only the bold text.

14. Here's an example of my breaking one of my rules (which just goes to show what I feel about rules). If you find yourself using brackets in a panel text it is worth asking whether the brackets contain secondary information. If so try deleting them, the panel can probably stand without them.

15. Like this sentence for example.

16. This means it will contain verbs. And verbs that act, not the sort that lie about passively. So do not write 'this site is being managed for three-toed sloths' but 'The Wildlife Trust manages this site for ...'. Many of us have been trained in scientific or bureaucratic writing

which relies heavily on the passive. I remember spending ages in my first ever Chemistry lesson trying to describe how I lit a Bunsen burner without using the word 'I'. It took me some time to get to, 'The Bunsen burner was ignited ...' (I was obviously a good student I was using unfamiliar latinised words like 'ignited' rather than good old Anglo Saxon ones like 'lit'. See point 18 below). One of the reasons why passive verbs are so popular is that people can hide in them. But, as I pointed out earlier, interpretation needs people as well as action. It therefore needs active verbs.

17. Direct your text to the person reading it. Use the word 'you' ...

18. ... and write in a relaxed, conversational tone, ...

19. ... using words that are often used in speech. These may not be the ones that you are used to writing in formal reports. For instance, lots of panels begin with something along the lines of 'This reserve was purchased by Wetshire Naturalists in 1997', but when did you last go out to 'purchase' some fish and chips? There's an interesting little bit of history here. A lot of the more formal, bureaucratic words (like 'purchase'), have French or Latin roots and come from the language of the Roman and Norman ruling classes. These words tend to be longer than their short and brutish Anglo Saxon equivalents (like 'buy'). Consider (or 'think about') 'transport' and 'carry', 'observe' and 'see' and, of course, 'ignited' and 'lit'.

20. Another good reason for not using the wider reaches of your vocabulary on panels is that simple, familiar words are much easier for visitors whose first language is not English, or who have some difficulty with reading. Simple sentences also help. Compare and contrast the last two sentences to see what I mean.

Sentences can be simple without being short. It helps if you vary your sentence

length to avoid the staccato style, reminiscent of early schoolbooks, which can feel patronising. The occasional very short sentence can have a lot of impact. Believe me.

21. I had added humour to the list but there just wasn't room for it. Editing text for panels can involve some painful cuts.

Susan Cross would be a struggling poet if she wasn't a successful interpreter and scriptwriter. She is a partner in TellTale a Buxton-based interpretive consultancy and can be contacted on 01298 70376



Notwithstanding my diatribe against the principle of outdoor panels in Interpretation Journal no. 55 (Spring 1994), Scenesters continue - as predicted then - to produce panels or to commission their manufacture on behalf of our clients! Used correctly they remain one of the most immediate ways of communicating with visitors.

Andrew Jenkinson

MATERIALS

THE

But deciding on that correct way confronts providers with an embarrassment of choice. Rarely is the 'horses for courses' metaphor so apt, with the number of runners greater than ever. The changes in recent years are less in the finished manufacturing processes than in the preparation of artwork and its printing onto the chosen medium, with computerisation taking over in both fields. It is the significance of these changes, and their effect on the choice of panel materials, that I will review briefly here. You can still execute a sign in half inch high letters on cast aluminium, or rout and paint text and simple diagrams in solid wood. But generally such media are best used only for instructional or informational signs (but see Eileen Willshaw's article! - ed).

The \$64,000 Question

The question we are asked most frequently is 'How much will a panel cost?' Unfortunately the number of variables is now so great, and the amount of origination that might be undertaken in-house so different for different organisations, that I have found it virtually impossible to get hold of ball-park figures from panel manufacturers. Costs, where quoted below, are based on our own most recent experience.

Our message is therefore that if you want accurate estimates, you must decide at the earliest stage on the most important variables. You may start by deciding on a particular medium of production. But the manufacturer will wish to know size, number of colours, quantity and type of mounting. The artwork origination costs will also vary with different processes, as well as with the amount of text and illustration. Many of these factors are inter-related and it is this maze that I will try to steer you through below.

Under Starters Orders

It is relatively easy to draw a distinction between origination and production costs. Research, drafting text and commissioning illustrations will be a significant item whatever production method you choose. As a rule of thumb I try to keep the production costs of interpretive panels to less than the origination costs, for I feel that the greater proportion of an interpretive budget should go into interpretation! But obviously, once you have agreed on a panel as the interpretive medium then it should last and look presentable throughout its life.

The more substantial the material, the greater the vandal resistance and longer the life. But if someone asks us for a vandal resistant sign that will last for ten years, then alarm bells start ringing. Does this client really want an interpretive panel or a maintenance free name plaque?

Low Cost Option

Thanks to computerised origination and printing you can now get some very effective panels with highly professional artwork that will last for two or three seasons. Then you can either get further copies or take the opportunity of making changes to the panel before reprinting.

If you can supply your finished computer file on disk to a printer, then a paper copy of an A1 panel as a full colour electronically produced (electrostatic) print will be in the order of £45, with a small but worthwhile reduction for two copies at the same time. Film encapsulation will be about £14 each. For under £100 you then have two copies of a panel as elaborate and colourful as your skill and imagination allows, ready to mount on-site.

But there lies the rub! You need to supply a suitable frame, with or without 'glazing'

(toughened glass, polycarbonate or high-impact acrylic) depending on your assessment of vandalism risk. This may well cost up to £150 depending on design and in-house construction skills.

That is where the tougher and more permanent production media score. But again the field is large and the permutations of the variables mentioned earlier are as numerous as ever. To illustrate the diversity, I will focus on three different principles which may be distinguished.

Reverse Printing

The message may be applied directly to the reverse of a transparent sheet - acrylic or polycarbonate are most often used - either by screen printing or (if you can find a designer familiar with the process) by transfer of an electrostatic image. The printed sheet then needs further mounting in some form of frame. It is however much tougher than film laminate, and there is no additional glazing surface to trap condensation or increase reflection.

Encapsulated GRP

Secondly, the printed image can be encapsulated within a glass reinforced plastic (GRP) sandwich. The detail of production method varies from company to company. Some will, after consultation to ensure compatibility of materials, embed your own original screen print or electronic print. Others require to undertake the printing on their own materials. Again, the visual effect can be one of simple use of a few individual colours (spot colour), or can be in full colour (so-called four-colour process because the full colour range is generated from combination - cyan, magenta, yellow and black).

These panels all share the advantage that if you wish, the fibre-glass backing can be moulded over integral fixings or rounded on the edges and extended backwards (a return edge) so that a frame and separate glazing (with all the attendant problems of condensation etc) become unnecessary. They are supplied according to your specification and are very easy to attach onto a wall, a lectern or upright posts.*

Clear GRP protects the front face so graffiti and scratches (within reason) can be wiped off or polished out. A UV filter is incorporated to give greater fade resistance to colours.

Production details vary and therefore so do costs, but these signs will all be more expensive



to produce. You will be looking typically to a bill in excess of £350 for manufacture alone of an A1 panel. So, that will last 10 years without significant maintenance or fading - good value for money? Maybe; but will (and should) your interpretive message last ten years without change? And if the sign is vandalised (and we have yet to find one that is totally immune from all forms of attack) then you have the same expenditure again on a replacement.

'Inset Printed' GRP

Thirdly there are signs which combine screen-printing technology with the GRP medium to produce panels which enjoy most of the advantages of the resin encapsulated types described above. In essence the image is screen-printed face down, using polymer inks, onto a silicone coated plate. Any number of colours can be printed in sequence. Then a background colour and the GRP matting are applied, the panel cured and released. The result is an 'inset' sign where each colour printing and the background colour are all flush on the face of the panel. At one time this technique was

synonymous with Shelley Signs of Eaton on Tern, but Stonewood Signs of Trowbridge and possibly others are now in the market.

As with the GRP signs outlined above, the fixings can be moulded into the back and return edges moulded around so that the sign can be mounted directly without framing. You will be looking at the same order of manufacturing cost as with GRP encapsulated signs.

The main limitations are at the printing stage. The polymer inks are viscous and therefore require a coarse screen. This precludes the printing of fine detail i.e., small serif letters, very thin lines or, except on rather a coarse scale, continuous-tone photographic images and colour shading. A degree of full-colour imagery can be achieved, at a cost, by hand-painting but that is a task that requires the utmost skill.

However, there are few limitations on size and shape and the overall effect is undoubtedly appealing to those needing a tough, all-weather panel with very good fade resistance. Again, and inevitably, vandal resistance is not 100%. The inset nature of the image, as opposed to surface printing, means the image does not easily scratch off, and judicious polishing will remove surface scratch marks.

Finding the Treasure

After this brief review one must conclude that the materials maze really has no treasure at the centre! 'You pays your money and takes your choice' - sometimes rather a lot of money. The trick is to combine origination, printing technology and panel manufacture in such a combination that you don't get permanently lost. Don't be seduced by long-lasting heavy-duty panels if you know you want to be able to change your message in twelve months time. But equally you must not expect your film-laminated Cibachrome photograph or full-colour inkjet print to look as good in its third year as the day you put it up.

None of the production considerations should detract from the fact that the first requirement is to assess the interpretive need and function of any panel. Too many organisations still seem to use the outdoor panel simply as a means of marking their territory. A pretty panel is no substitute for value of the interpretive message, and if a panel is not the best way of conveying that message it is likely to be more of an intrusion than an asset.

Andrew Jenkinson, in partnership with his wife Gill, has been running the Scenesters Countryside Interpretation Consultancy since 1980. They have just moved base from Little Stretton to Bucknell, still in Shropshire and can be contacted on 01547 530660

St Mary's Churchyard - A Haven for Wildlife

Historic Refuge

This churchyard of Westbury is a special place, made in the heart of the village. It is a place of peace and quiet, a place where the dead are at rest. It is a place where the living can find peace and quiet. It is a place where the living can find peace and quiet.

Grassland Management

The churchyard is a place of peace and quiet. It is a place where the living can find peace and quiet. It is a place where the living can find peace and quiet.

Birds

Many birds live on the seeds and insects to be found amongst the churchyard vegetation. The long grass is an ideal habitat for them. The long grass is an ideal habitat for them.

Bats

Bats are traditionally associated with bellies and Westbury is no exception. Come at dusk and you will see the small pipistrelle bats emerging from the eaves of the bell tower. The less common long-eared bats have also been identified by their droppings. To help these much maligned animals (all now fully protected under the Wildlife & Countryside Act) but roosting boxes are being erected.

Insects

Wild flowers and mixed grasses provide food for many insects; most conspicuously the butterflies. Lady's smock is a favourite of the caterpillars of orange tip butterflies, only the males of which have the distinctive colour on their wings. Stinging nettles might look untidy to us, but they are kept in some parts of the churchyard because they attract the small tortoiseshell and peacock butterflies.

Grassland Plants

GOOSEFOOT is the most distinctive plant of Westbury Churchyard. Typical of the chalky soils of old lawns, it has a long, thin stem with small, white flowers. It is a plant that is very common in the churchyard. It is a plant that is very common in the churchyard.

Ferns and Lichens

The sandstone of many Westbury gravestones supports a good growth of lichens, the slow-growing dual plants composed of both fungal and algal parts. Many fine examples can be seen, and of course we know their maximum age! Ferns grow on the churchyard walls. Look on the roadside wall for clumps of wall rue.



The photograph shows a painted metal lectern placed in front of a pollarded willow. When closed there is nothing to see, but if the visitor chooses to open the shutters the wealth of species which live in the hollow trunk is revealed. Other points along the route seek to explain ideas as diverse as: Why does the grebe dive under water? Who dug the ponds? Who lives under the lilies? and How does the Archimedes screw work? In selecting the themes a conscious decision was taken not to include the migratory birds who arrive as the visitors leave - the reserve is closed to the public in winter.

Discovering French Ways

Yves Delmaire

Here in France every village has a tourist information panel describing the region's food, the church and the chateau, but examples of the art of interpretation as a means of communication are less easily found. Our tradition is one of guides and 'animateurs' who welcome visitors and give tours of natural and historic sites. However, this is changing quickly and new ways of explaining things are being explored.

In the Venice of the north, as the marshes which surround the town of St Omer are sometimes known, the landscape has a unique and mysterious quality which creates the impression of floating on islands of land with water on all sides. A small nature reserve (80 hectares) was created at Romelaere in 1988 to shelter among others, 50 species of moths, 8 species of marsh warblers, nesting bitterns and many migratory birds which over winter here. However, it soon became clear that the site needed to be prepared for another kind of invasion - by thousands of visitors attracted by the new status of 'voluntary nature reserve'. By 1992 a strategic management plan had been developed which divided the reserve into 3 areas. At the centre lies the core wildlife zone which is surrounded by a buffer zone; visitors are (unknowingly) restricted to the recreational zone on the outside of the reserve by a series of well designed paths and walkways.

Something of 'The Golden Scarab' by Edgar Allan Poe was in the air when we were planning the interpretation of the nature reserve at Romelaere. This short story describes an explorer who discovers a path which is a sort of game where he must follow the route to its conclusion, only one element is missing and it is only at the end he discovers the vital clue which leads him to the treasure.

One of the great attractions of Romelaere is its hidden quality and the aim of the interpretation of the site was to gradually reveal the concealed facets which are spirit of the place. The trail is presented as a round trip and along the route there are 8 stopping points which provide an opportunity to find out more. Each has an area aside from the path where visitors can stop and look and use the 'device' which is provided to help find the missing clue. There are no words; only images and objects and nature ...

So far the interpretation has survived well, in spite of the 100,000 visitors who arrive each year between April and October, and far from frightening away the nesting birds, the number of marsh harriers which nest close to the path has increased. The visitor management and interpretation of Romelaere is now recognised to be one of the best examples of 'mise en scène de la nature' in France.

Panels can be used to provoke an action or a reaction



An empty frame draws attention to the subject being described

In general the technique of interpretation through information panels is much less evident in France than in Britain. However, a new wave of sophisticated visual statements is now spreading across the country. A wide range of materials including metal, glass, ceramics, plastics and even lava are all used with great panache. Slices of basalt lava quarried in the Massif Central are used as the base for fire enamelled panels - a favourite, if expensive, choice for orientation tables as the finish is very hard. Good examples can be found, but frequently the interpretive content does not match the style and many opportunities to communicate are being lost.

An outdoor museum where samples of marble and tools from the quarry are on display. It should be noted that only certain objects will stand the test of time and visitors - the diamond toothed wire used for cutting the marble quickly disappeared!



These projects demonstrate that creative solutions can be found, but all too often in France, those elected to make decisions and

other professionals involved in making choices lack the experience and courage to choose a new and special way of expressing the spirit of a place.

Yves Delmaire is in charge of environmental education for Espace naturel regional in the Nord Pas de Calais (France). His work includes planning for visitors and interpreting the environment for the Regional parks and protected sites in the area.

He can be contacted on 00 33 320 128 668

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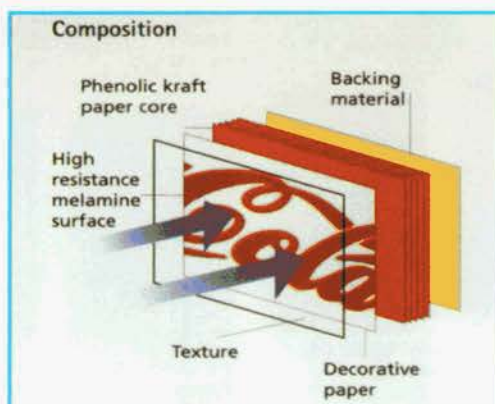
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Customised Laminate Signs

GETTING BETTER ALL THE TIME -

Cadw's AWARD WINNING PANELS PROGRAMME

Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments was formed in October 1984 to protect, conserve and present the ancient monuments of Wales; it is now an executive agency within the Welsh Office, based in Cardiff. In 1985 I reported in the pages of this journal on Cadw's then new programme to provide interpretive panels at the monuments in its charge. Now, twelve years on, here is an update on progress, lessons learned and modifications put into effect.

When the programme was devised the intention was to provide an information panel, or panels for virtually every monument in Cadw's care (some 130 sites in all). Broadly speaking, that is still the case, except for roofed buildings with furnished interiors and certain small field monuments. Most of the larger ruined castles and abbeys in our care have now been provided with numerous panels to provide interpretation for our visitors - Caerphilly Castle, for example has eleven dealing with the site itself, another five to explain four working replica medieval siege engines placed there a few years ago, and a further three to explain a reconstructed timber fighting gallery on the wall top. Most medium-sized sites have four or five panels, but there is still some way to go before coverage of our estate is complete.

An Integrated Programme

The original purpose and content of these panels have remained unchanged: to provide a basic introduction and historical context to the site and also, since most of our monuments are ruined, to explain the significance, use and original appearance of the different areas. Where plans are included, these are always oriented to the way a visitor will stand when viewing the panel, together with a dot labelled 'you are here'. Wherever possible, explanatory illustrations are included too - diagrammatic, or reconstruction drawings which attempt to show how the area originally appeared and functioned. Often these are cut away to show, for example, the sequence of defences in a castle gatehouse, or the internal layout of a Cistercian abbey church. These drawings are all specially commissioned by Cadw and are part of a rolling programme of interpretation intended for use not only on panels, but in the Cadw guidebook series, explanatory site exhibitions, and in retail souvenir items.

Peter Humphries

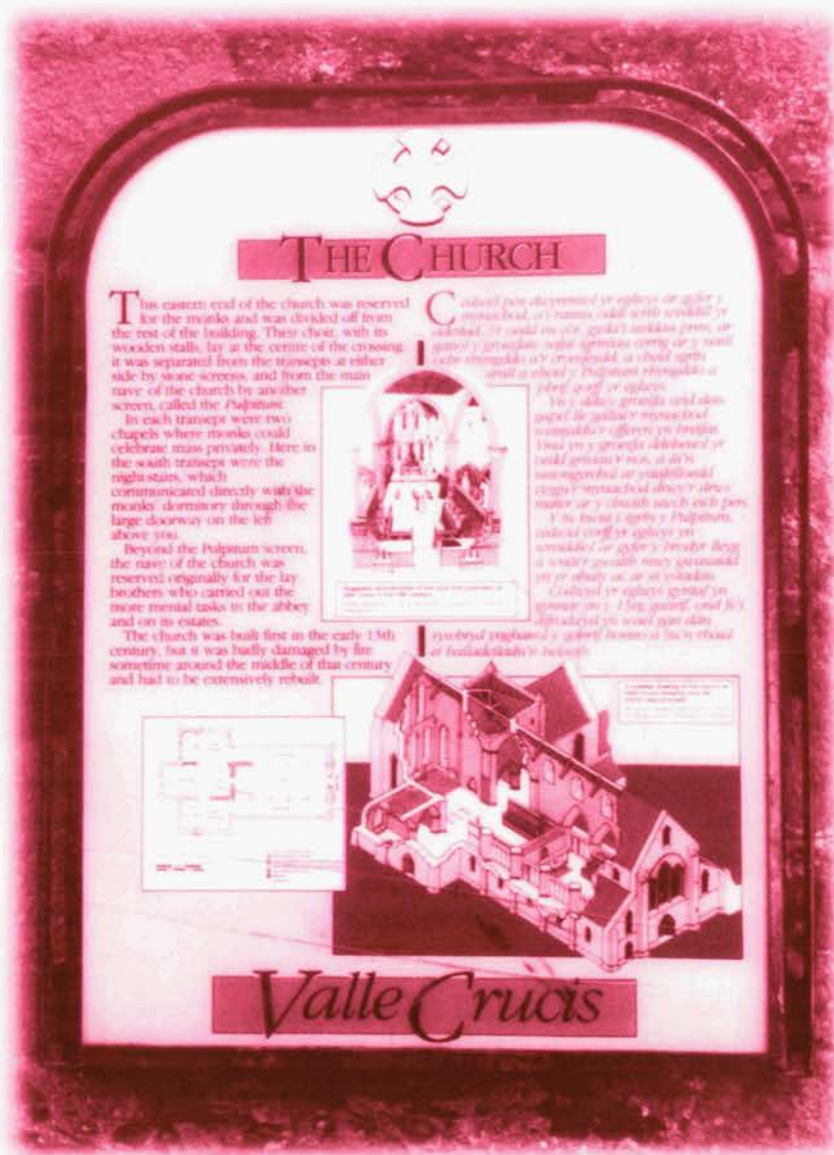
Bilingual

From the outset, all main text on the panels has been bilingual, in English and Welsh. Initially, this was regarded as a necessary provision for an organization charged with the preservation and maintenance of Wales' architectural heritage; but, since the introduction of the Welsh Language Act in 1993, it is now also a legal requirement for public sector organizations. The automatic doubling in the length of text, which this entails, is partially alleviated by the use of differing typefaces and colours for each language, though, in the interests of clarity, panel titles and legend on maps and plans are in English only. It is pleasing to note that Cadw's panels have been selected as examples of good bilingual practice by the Welsh Language Board and are

illustrated in their publication on the subject. It is even more pleasing to report that our panels have twice been recipients of Interpret Britain awards.

House Style

The general 'house-style' of the panels has been retained, though we have made a number of modifications and refinements. There are still three basic sizes - unchanged over the period - with rounded top corners and approximate word counts of 85, 150 and 230 in each language. Much of the design style has been maintained, too, with coloured boxes delineating headers and footers and a central black line separating the two languages. The Cadw logo, which appears centrally at the top, has, itself, been revised and is now incorporated in its new style. However, the dark green background employed originally was



An eight-year-old panel at Valle Crucis Abbey, Denbighshire. The deep scratches across the bottom have not affected legibility.

changed about ten years ago to light grey to improve readability and appearance.

New Frame System

The frame system for the panels has steadily been modified and improved also. Two types of frame - free-standing and wall-mounted - are produced in three sizes, custom designed to suit our particular requirements. Initially the frames were made of mild steel dipped in a dark brown PVC and the panels were bolted directly to them. But these frames were prone to rusting if the PVC coating was punctured and, occasionally, vandalism to the panels caused the polycarbonate to tear from the drill holes for the securing bolts.

A new design was eventually produced which incorporated an aluminium tray, into which the panel is slid, and a locking strut at the bottom to secure it; fastenings are of stainless steel. These frames are finished in a brown powder coat, with all ferrous components first galvanized. Their design allows easy levelling up on uneven walls; they do not rust and replacement panels can readily be fitted into existing frames when required. The fabrication of the frames is put out to competitive tender and they are made up in batches to supply our needs for several years. Costs vary according to type and size: on the last occasion they ranged from £117 up to £270 each.

Locally Produced

Production methods have gradually changed, as well, over the last twelve years, but the choice of materials has remained the same. At the start of the project we decided to produce the panels by the relatively simple method of screen printing to the under surface of clear polycarbonate sheet and protecting the printed surface with a thin layer of self-adhesive vinyl. This method was chosen, as opposed to using glass-reinforced polyester (GRP), or laminate systems, for two main reasons: [a] it was considerably cheaper and could be produced locally; [b] it was felt to be slightly more resistant to casual vandalism.

Polycarbonate is what the police use for riot shields; it is extremely tough and can even resist gun shot. Its main advantage, when used for panels, is that deep scratches to the outer surface do not affect its life, nor do they generally render the graphics illegible - with GRP panels, for example, a deep score on the surface can pierce the protective coating, allow water to penetrate to the graphics and obliterate them in a relatively short time. The disadvantage is that polycarbonate is rather

more vulnerable to attack by solvents, and to the flame of a blowtorch - we have recently had a spate of determined assaults on panels in north-east Wales where they have been comprehensively battered and the jet from a paint aerosol has been ignited, then held against the panel causing the surface to melt. I suspect that little would resist such behaviour!

Full Colour Too

As a production method, screen printing provides clarity and durability, but it cannot print full-colour graphics; instead, colour must be screened into linework. Nonetheless, panels produced in this way, well before the creation

worst cases they may last little more than a year, but their life can be considerably extended by siting the panel to face northwards - we have some north-facing panels with colour photographs which have been in place more than six years and are still in perfectly good condition.

New Technology Reduces Costs!

Although the panel 'house style' has been maintained throughout the period, printing methods have recently changed - and with a dramatic effect on price. Layout and production have always been carried out under two-year term contracts, within which we have constantly sought to refine the process. Over the last six months we have finally abandoned our old tried-and-tested screen-printing methods and have been experimenting with full computer origination, including high-resolution scanning of artwork and digital printing, with the graphics still bonded to the underside of polycarbonate. This method allows unlimited use of colour artwork with a good guarantee of life. The term contract for production has just been relet on this basis and it has reduced the average cost of £500 per panel to just £140. Comparing this with the £250 cost for much cruder panels when we first began the project in 1984, these new prices represent a huge cost saving and are the direct result of adopting new technology.

Keeping Up-to-Date

As to the future, we have yet to achieve total coverage of our estate and are still working towards that goal. Even after we have done so, there is a strong affinity here with painting the Forth bridge - however durable, no panel lasts for ever, and we have already replaced them on several sites. But ideas change too: over the period we have revised our own interpretation of some sites and we have commissioned new and better drawings. With regular panel replacement, all of these revisions can be incorporated and our site interpretation stays up to date. Technology, also, will not stand still and we shall undoubtedly benefit from future advances in this field - as we have already. So, it really seems to be a case of 'more of the same' - but even better.

Peter Humphries is responsible for all site interpretation at monuments in the care of Cadw.

Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments, Crown Building, Cathays Park, CARDIFF CF1 3NQ. (01222 826396)



Erecting a new panel: levelling the frame on the wall. The panel is then slid up into the frame

of Cadw, have lasted for twenty years in the open with full legibility. We continued with full screen printing for a number of years, but over that period we had begun to commission more and more full-colour reconstruction drawings and other artwork for use in the expanding guidebook series and for site exhibitions.

Some way of incorporating this on the panels was needed and we eventually devised a method of doing so by including unprinted frames within the screened artwork. A Cibachrome photographic print was then mounted within the frame onto the underside of the panel; once sealed with vinyl, it was fully protected from weather penetration. However, although this method allows relatively easy replacement of the photographs, they do gradually fade with exposure to the sun. In the

Outdoor interpretive panels give immediate meaning to visitor's experiences in an economical way. Advances in materials and digital technologies have expanded the capabilities and effectiveness of this medium.

Interpretive panels communicate visually. The synergy of supports, panels, faces and placement on the landscape, conveys the overall message. Holistic consideration of these design elements is necessary for successful communication. Too often we craft beautiful text and consider the job complete when we inscribe it on a panel. But, the most eloquent words cannot overcome a poor visual presentation.

Supports

Supports do more than hold up the panel. They link the panel harmoniously with the

environment and can be a sculptural element that metaphorically conveys the site theme.

Panels

Signs and outdoor interpretive panels can be created from many materials made attractive and vibrant by variations of colour, illumination, texture, and shape. Durability and aesthetics are the two main criteria for panel selection.

Faces

A sign face greets the visitor and expresses personality. It is the surface to which are applied the cosmetics of colour, type, graphics, and symbols. Interpretive messages should be primarily visual (photographs and drawings) complemented with concise inscriptions. These elements should be arranged in a functional and aesthetic progression from a focal point.

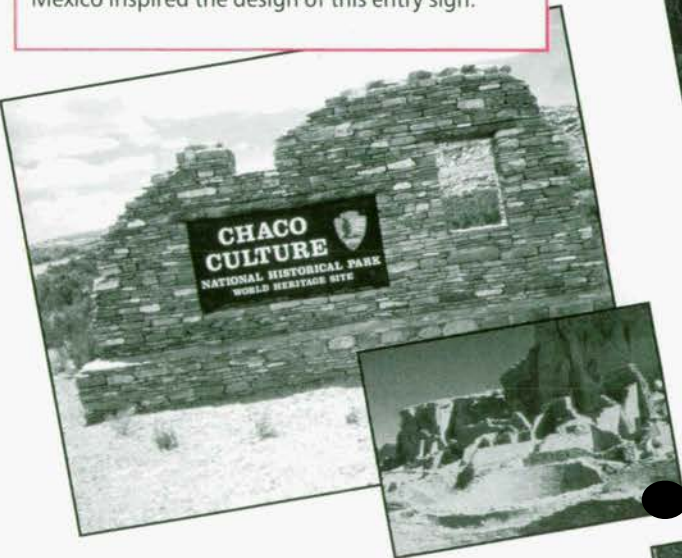
Placement

Signs and outdoor interpretive panels should be available but unobtrusive. Heights and angles must ensure accessibility for a diverse audience and should keep the sign panel subservient to the landscape. As much care should be given to the placement of a sign as to its design.



TOWARD SYNERGY IN OUTDOOR

Slides 1 and 2 The ruins of Chaco Culture in New Mexico inspired the design of this entry sign.

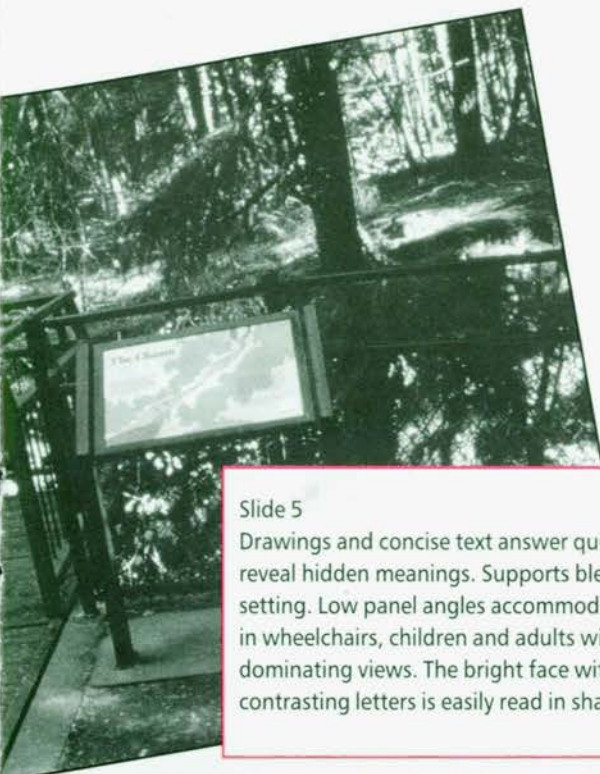


Slide 3 Tall trees and volcanic rock are incorporated into the design of the Rogue Gorge Trail in Oregon



Slide 4 An interpretive kiosk which spans the trail draws visitors. This timber beam structure harmoniously expresses the importance of this trail. Interpretive panels use colourful graphics to introduce the trail theme



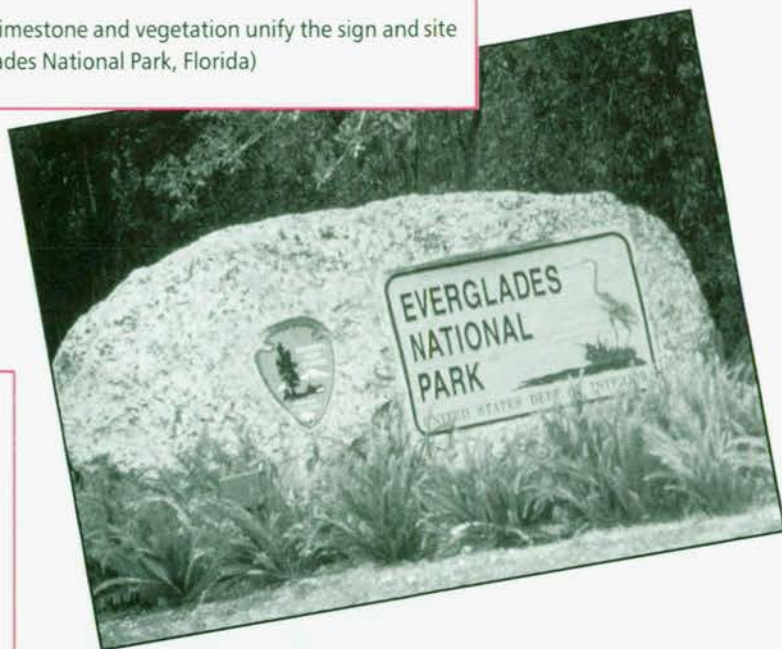


Slide 5

Drawings and concise text answer questions and reveal hidden meanings. Supports blend with the setting. Low panel angles accommodate people in wheelchairs, children and adults without dominating views. The bright face with contrasting letters is easily read in shade

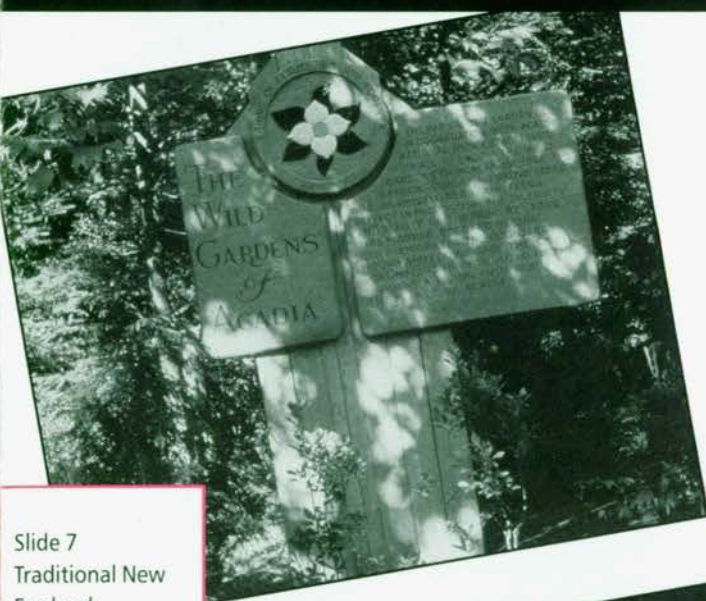
Slide 6

Native limestone and vegetation unify the sign and site (Everglades National Park, Florida)



DOOR INTERPRETIVE PANELS

Michael Gross and Ron Zimmerman

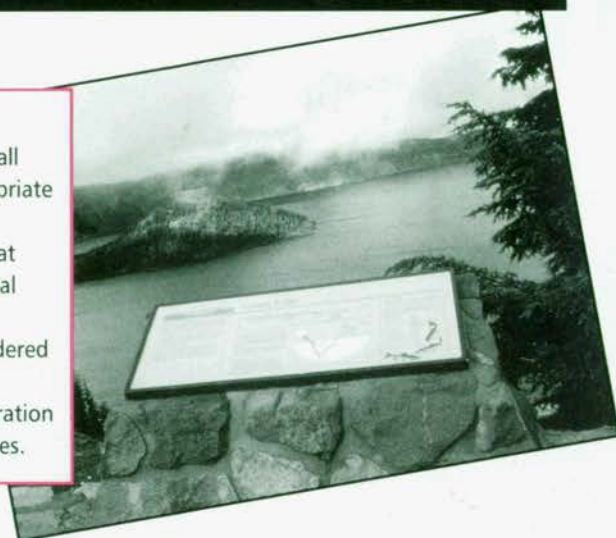


Slide 7

Traditional New England craftsmanship integrates this sign with its region (Acadia National Park, Maine)

Slide 8

An existing rock wall provides an appropriate support for an interpretive panel at Crater Lake National Park in Oregon. A lengthy text is rendered more readable by graphics and separation with rules and boxes.



Slide 9

Deliberate placement of this outdoor interpretive panel near boulders and vegetation relates to the theme. The graphic organizes the text and develops a visual sequence. Brown steel beam supports with low profile angle is standard practice in North America (Boulder, Colorado)

Mike and Ron teach interpretation in the College of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, WI 54481 - USA. They are authors of four books in the Interpreter's Handbook Series including Signs, Trails and Wayside Exhibits; Interpretive Publications; Techniques for Programs and Presentations; A Guide for Nature Writers. The Interpretive Center Book will be published in 1998. Inquiries and orders can be placed e-mail (mgross@uwsp.edu), telephone (715-346-2076) or facsimile (715-346-3624).



Think of your panel as a whole, as a piece of countryside furniture, with the two dimensional panel surface, frame/mount and area of installation all considered together. This is how your visitor will see it in the landscape.

Do not waste all that time and effort spent carefully planning and designing the panel itself, and have that spoilt by a poorly designed frame, or paying no attention to the actual installation.

1. Panels must be unobtrusive but not invisible
- don't add to the countryside clutter

2. Go for lectern mounted, angled panels
- to provide greater access for all your visitors
- which are less obtrusive in the landscape
- will not intrude on the view of the very feature you are striving to interpret

3. But provide drainage for angle mounted panels
- unless you are trying to encourage the growth of green algal sludge at your site!

Anyone stopping to read these panels on the Jedburgh town trail will not force others off the pavement

4. Make sure it is easy to relate the panel to the object or place it describes
- a map or illustrations of a view should have the same orientation as the panel itself

5. Match panels materials and mounts to surroundings
- reflect the use of local materials and architectural details if possible

6. Incorporate them with existing structures where possible
- blend them in with the built environment

7. Avoid full sunlight
- would a roof to your structure provide shade and shelter?

8. Allow for visitor circulation
- site panels in little lay-bys to the side of a path so as not to impede flow

9. Provide hard standing or suitable ground surface around
- that grassy patch will become a sea of mud under many visitors' feet

10. Be there for the erection!
- to ensure correct orientation on site

THERE HAS TO BE A REASON WHY ...

Looking to Produce Outdoor Interpretation which makes a Difference

Peter Blood

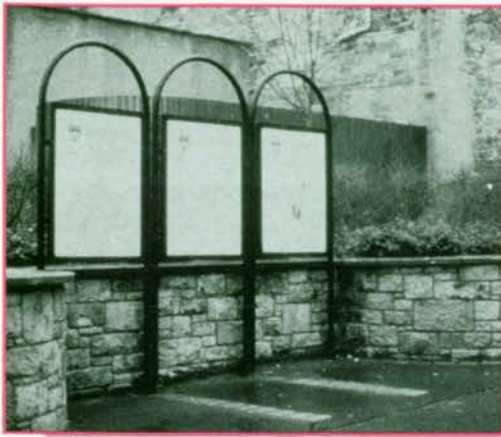
I know of a lady who, in her spare time, works with the children of parents who are addicted to crack cocaine. She is helping them to create a garden out of a vacant lot in a run-down and crime-ridden neighbourhood in Berkeley, California. Her hope is that some of these kids might be inspired to realise that there is something more for them than the cruel, degrading and hopeless existence they witness daily, all around them, before they are sucked into the downward spiral of drugs, crime and street gangs which dominates their neighbourhood. She encourages the children to care for the plants they are growing by giving names to the trees, by painting pictures

of the flowers and writing poems about the garden as the seasons change. She laminates these on plastic and pins them up around the plot. She helps the kids to feel good about themselves, their neighbourhood and their ethnic roots. This can be dangerous work because crack dealers don't like people whose activities threaten their market.

Though most of us choose to cushion ourselves from such extremes of modern life, we should nevertheless recognise that this lady is working at the sharp end of the business in which we make our living and, if there is still a place for heroes in this world, then she should be one of

them. For, in trying to broaden these children's horizons by encouraging them to interact positively with their environment, she is driven by that same force that should be driving all of us who are involved with heritage and environmental interpretation; namely the wish to enrich the quality of people's lives. It is just that what she does is more 'up front' - her work is a matter of life and ... not much of a life at all.

I think it is sometimes a little too easy for us to lose sight of the fact that our endeavours can and should make a difference in the World. The problem is that when we do, the interpretation we produce becomes uninspired, uninvolved and lacking in insight. In many cases it is not really interpretation at all but rather just a rehash of bland facts with a few illustrations thrown in to make it superficially more attractive. In my view, we have to start



Where and Where Not to Use Them



Wear and tear around a panel at Avebury not only detracts from the site - it's not much fun on your feet when it rains

Only consider using panels where there's ...

- ⊗ Something to see
- ⊗ A reasonably large throughput of people
- ⊗ Not a lot of vandalism (there is no such thing as a vandal-proof panel).

Panels should not be used, or used only after very careful consideration ...

- ✗ Where your story is complicated
- ✗ Where visible evidence is not clear to an untrained eye
- ✗ Where your audience is mainly local repeat visitors (e.g., regular dog walkers)
- ✗ In sensitive landscapes
- ✗ Where they would cause obstruction
- ✗ When there's no money for maintenance and repair

With acknowledgements to the work of James Carter - and the CEI training files!

Photograph Credits:

Phil Dagnall

producing more outdoor interpretation of a type which does make a difference; something with a bit more edge to it, which is more proactive and inspirational; interpretation with, in modern parlance, 'attitude'.

Visitors to heritage or natural sites go there because they are looking for something. A tiny minority of them go there because they are looking for something to smash up. Perhaps those of us who design and manufacture outdoor interpretation could define our role as 'trying to help the former find what they are looking for whilst ensuring that the latter don't'. However, a more positive approach would be to turn the tables on those destructive elements who are targeting our signs and make our signs target them, by ensuring that there is something in their content to which they can relate. This may not be easy but it is something we should try to

address because it represents the most challenging and therefore potentially, the most rewarding aspect of the work we do.

By profession, the American lady I mentioned above works as an investigator helping, amongst others, the inmates on Death Row in San Quentin Jail. When asked why she devotes herself to such apparently hopeless and, some might say, undeserving causes, she says it is because she believes that 'there has to be a reason why every person is alive'.

This is a simple philosophy but a profound one. It provides an excellent starting point for developing a good 'attitude' to outdoor interpretation. First of all it inspires a very constructive approach. It reminds us that our work should exclude no one and indeed, should positively strive to involve everyone. It infers that, 'no matter where you look, if you

look hard enough, you will find something of value'. This should direct us, when we design interpretation for a site, to purposefully seek out and highlight those unique or special elements of it which contain a significant message of benefit to our lives today; whether that be a feature in the landscape, a lesson from history or the way in which a creature has adapted itself to suit a particular habitat.

I believe that, if we follow these principles, then the interpretation we produce cannot help but make a difference. Instead of being an underused, vandalism-prone intrusion into the landscape, it can become something which really makes a positive contribution to enriching our lives.

Peter Blood is a partner in the Osprey Company, designers and manufacturers of outdoor interpretation. He can be contacted on 01890 883127

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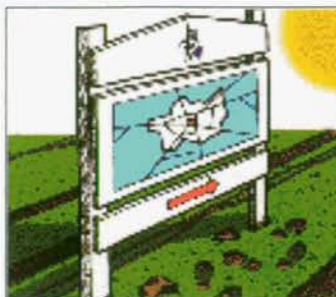
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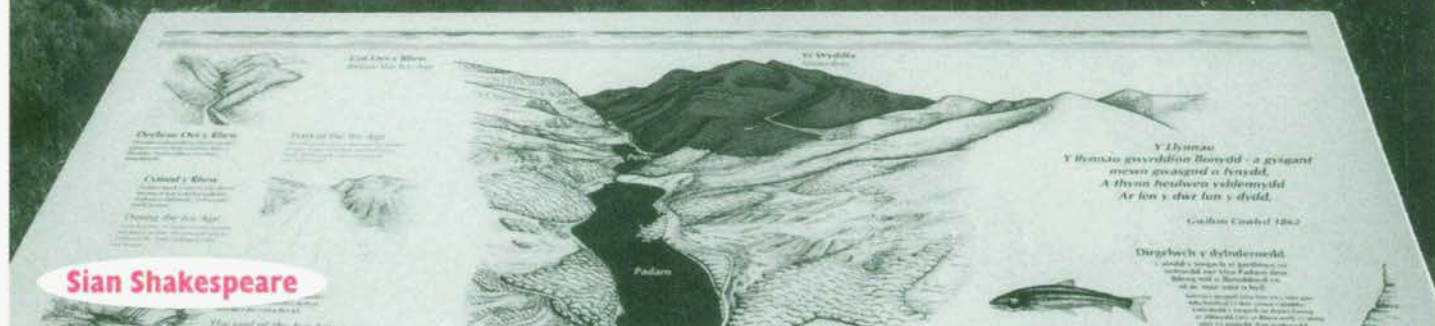
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THE PLACE OF PANELS IN THE WELSH COUNTRYSIDE



Panel interpreting the glaciated Padarn Valley at the foot of Snowdon

The Task

It was April 1991 and, as Interpretation Officer for the newly formed Countryside Council for Wales, I faced the task of up-dating the interpretation provision on our 62 National Nature Reserves we manage. We aimed to build on the valuable work and enthusiasm of the Nature Conservancy Council who previously managed these 'jewels in the crown'. Naturally we recognised that the wardens who manage the sites, form the best medium for conveying messages and inspiring visitors. However, we faced the likelihood of the dwindling number of staff being able to devote less and less time to this important aspect of our work. We therefore had to find as effective a means as possible of interpreting our sites without depending so much on staff. Six years down the line we have completed an interpretation programme, in which interpretation panels have been installed on several of our popular sites.

To Build or Not?

Regular visitors to our sites will have noticed that 'centres' are very few and far between. The only visitor centre, in the traditional sense, is the one opened in 1995 at Ynyslas Dunes, north of Aberystwyth. The justification for this exception is the fact that a base for staff was already planned on site. However, early indications from a recent evaluation survey seem to show that the old favoured Mr Sand and Mr Marram cartoon traiside panels to the beach are popular in conveying messages about dune damage. It was fate and not careful planning which was responsible for the demise of the similar well established centre at Oxwich coastal reserve on the Gower. Doubtless panels will play their part in interpreting the Reserve in a different manner in future.

Panels In and Outdoors

A summer warden at Aber Falls, near Llanfairfechan on the North Wales coast, has usually facilitated the interpretation of this fascinating site. However, we hope that visitors will learn and gain inspiration from the carefully designed and located panels along the way to the Falls and visiting the permanently open summer exhibition in the old cow byre. The comprehensive display in the old Pilot's Cottage at the further end of Ynys Llanddwyn tidal island, Anglesey, is similarly open for most of the summer. Hopefully, this is the icing on the cake for visitors who have experienced the light hearted cartoon depiction of Newborough Warren (undertaken jointly with Forest Enterprise) at the main car park and the interesting taster panel at the entrance to the island itself. For those more interested in lakes and birds, a display in the birdhide, which is suitable for wheelchair users, is a good opportunity to brush up on local features of interest.

A Culture Change

The transition from producing a shower of leaflets interpreting various aspects of our Reserves to installing well planned and prepared panels can be seen as something of a culture change within CCW. We aimed to demonstrate their value by taking the line of least resistance i.e., working on sites which are least sensitive and managed by more obliging staff. On these sites we have chosen only to interpret features which people can clearly see and give an insight into the 'sense of place'. We have found that the use of good suitable images is essential in conveying messages where one has to be even more economical than usual with words due to using both English and Welsh. Using appropriate pieces of literature can help to merely create an ambience in certain places.

Where to Start?

According to good practice, we have prepared interpretation plans for the popular sites and panels have been identified as a medium at several of them. However, the final product influences the whole process of design (the whole thing is very different from leaflets!!). As with any novice I was bombarded with information from various companies on panel material. They all assured me that their product was unique and the only one to satisfy my requirements. However, I have found that the principle of 'horses for courses' applies. A thorough investigation of all options was called for and it was essential to share in others experience. In the end of an understanding of what was required and feasible for the chosen production technique saved a lot of wasted effort and money in terms of artwork production. Whatever the outcome, the truth of the matter is that there are too few companies specialising in interpretation panel design and production. Those that do all seem to provide a friendly but unreliable service. Their products are invariably of a good standard in terms of finish and reproduction although I cannot comment on their longevity, since I have not yet been around for long enough!

The Proof is in the Pudding

To what end are all these panels being planned and produced? CCW is constantly learning and refining its way of creating panels, in the light of experience. However, the time has come for us to try to objectively assess the success of our various projects. After all, do visitors read them and what impressions are they left with? It is too early yet to reveal any findings from the research that the Welsh Institute of Rural Studies or Aberystwyth University has been carrying out on our behalf during last summer.



This panel on the old railway line at Cors Caron, near Tregaron in Mid-Wales, is complemented by a colourful booklet which can be picked up at any of the local tourist outlets.

The study has comprised of an interview survey and systematic observation on three high profile sites. Hopefully, the most interesting findings will come from assessing visitors' prior knowledge of certain aspects of the site and comparing that with what they have gained following their visit. One clear message which has already come to light from the study is the need for well defined objectives for each item of interpretation. It is difficult to evaluate if you don't know what you set out to achieve! Unfortunately the findings of this evaluation study will only be accurate to a certain point since no clear objectives were stated at the inception of the projects. Hopefully we should be in a position to share our experience of the evaluation study with you during 1998.

Where do we go from here?

Some of the improvements I would like to see being taken on board for future panel projects include:

- definite objectives being devised for all interpretation projects
- extensive trialling of panel mock ups
- more use of temporary panels which interpret features which change e.g., with the seasons
- devising panels which are more tactile than flat boards

Panels have certainly become embedded into our way of doing things. The findings of the evaluation study should identify issues concerning the use of panels and inform the way we plan and implement them.

Sian Shakespeare has been the Interpretation Officer with the CCW since the beginning of its life co-ordinating the programme of interpretation of our NNRs throughout Wales and providing advice to partners. She is more than happy to discuss any aspects of CCW's interpretation work and experience further. Telephone: 01248 385575

TRIAL ON THE TRAIL: Monitoring and Evaluation of Interpretation Panels on the Pembrokeshire Coast Path

Margi Bryant

How can you climb higher than Everest while taking a walk in south-west Wales?

If - as Tilden says - the chief aim of interpretation is provocation, then something along these lines might be a good opening for an outdoor panel about the Pembrokeshire Coast Path National Trail.

But when different organisations are collaborating on a major co-funded project, provocation may be the last thing on anyone's mind. Pressure to reconcile a variety of purposes, messages and target audiences can result in a product which tries to be all things to all people, but may overlook the real needs of the end user. Monitoring and evaluation - undertaken routinely in environmental interpretation in the United States but only recently catching on in this country - can provide a much-needed chance to tap into the user's perceptions and develop the product accordingly.

This article looks at an initial series of seven panels erected on the Pembrokeshire Coast Path in summer 1997, and how a small-scale, do-it-yourself monitoring and evaluation exercise helped us rethink our ideas before proceeding with a planned second series.

The Project

The Pembrokeshire Coast Path is one of Britain's most spectacular National Trails (long distance footpaths). It runs for 299 kilometres along the clifftops, beaches, estuaries and farmland around the rim of south-west Wales. Officially opened in 1970, it is managed by the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) through the agency of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park.

Installing interpretive panels at selected points along the route was a joint initiative by CCW's National Trail Office and the National Park, with finance from CCW and the European Regional Development Fund. Local community councils, though not financially involved, were consulted about siting and content.

The panels were intended for all actual and potential Coast Path users, and sited where there was existing development (cafes, public toilets, car parks etc) and a high throughput of people. The main aims were to raise the profile of the National Trail, to provide local trail information, to promote safety and conservation awareness, to explain about the management and funding of the path, and to interpret the landscape, wildlife and history of the area.



Coast path walkers look for specific information. The new series of panels should more closely match their needs, following the monitoring and evaluation exercise.

To fulfil all these aims, each panel displayed two maps and eight separate categories of information, totalling some 800 words in English and at least as much again in Welsh. The panels measured 750 x 1,000 mm and were printed in four colours on steel-backed vitreous enamel.

The M & E Exercise

We monitored panel-readers at three sites during August 1997, using timed observation followed by a simple standardised interview.

The observation showed that reading the panels took a long time. As they contained so much information, this was hardly surprising, but it was salutary to see that 35% of readers took more than 5 minutes and only 20% less than 1 minute. Research findings from the United States put optimum panel-reading time at 15 seconds.

We interviewed people immediately after they had read the panels. We asked what had attracted them to the panel, how much of it they had read, what they remembered, what they were planning to do next and whether the panel had influenced these plans. We also sought their opinion on the quantity, content and presentation of the information.

Many respondents (35%) said they always looked at panels as a matter of course. However, a sizeable second group (30%) were looking for specific information, and in every case the information sought was about the route, access points, distances and difficulty of the Coast Path. Given this selectivity, it came as no surprise that 60% skim-read the panel or read only part of it. Even so, an attentive 40% assured us they had read every word.

Retention was quite another matter. The majority (55%) remembered nothing specific from the panel, though there were plenty of favourable comments ('nice bright colours', 'lots of information'). There was a striking correlation between those who remembered nothing and those who claimed to have read the whole panel, though some of the skimmers were equally amnesiac. By contrast, people who focused on specific information about the Coast Path remembered what they had read.

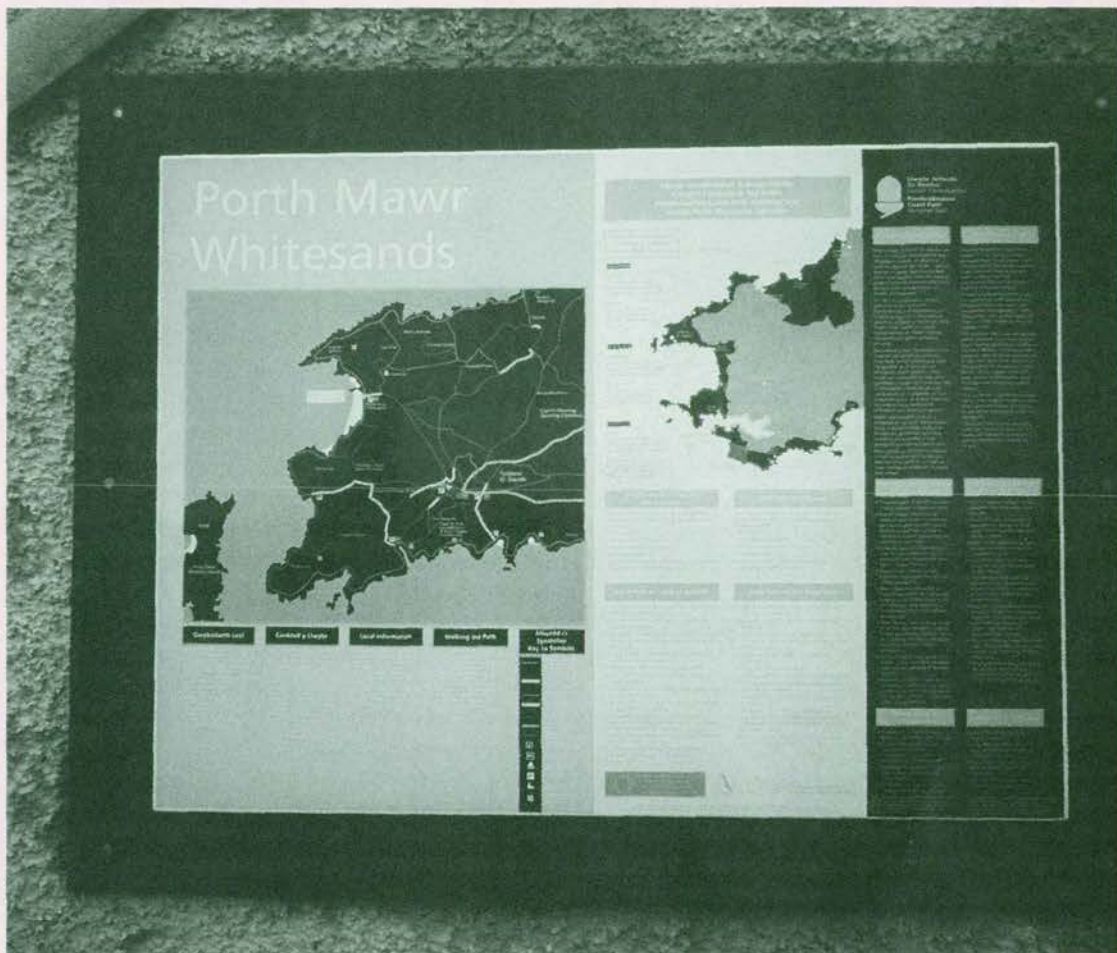
Most respondents (70%) said the panel had not directly influenced their plans. This group included keen walkers and those who had no intention of walking anywhere. Others,

however, amended their plans in positive ways, such as returning to their car for stronger footwear or deciding not to try a clifftop stretch by bicycle.

The opinion questions revealed a very positive response to the panels. Around 85% found the content 'useful and interesting', 65% said the amount of information was 'just right' and 55% thought the presentation good. However,

quantity and variety of information, however interesting and well-presented it was. Each panel had too many objectives and too wide a potential audience.

Instead of replicating the existing format at other sites, we are now working on a new series of panels with a narrower range of objectives, focusing on National Trail identity, path information and safety essentials. The panels



Nice bright colours and lots of information. But most people could remember nothing from the panel.

we may need to treat these answers with a degree of scepticism. Around half of those who praised the content failed to remember any of it, while half of those who thought the amount of information 'just right' had read only part of the panel.

The Lessons

The inescapable conclusion was that people were homing in on specific information about the Coast Path, especially route, access, distances and level of difficulty. The panels were therefore fulfilling an important and valuable function, which certainly justified their presence.

However, our attempts to communicate other matters of interest - even the path's status as a National Trail - could not be deemed a total success. The interview responses showed that people were unable to absorb the sheer

will be smaller (mostly 450 x 600 mm), and sited near access points to reach a path-oriented audience. They will be temporary, with thorough monitoring and evaluation in summer 1998 before we consider making them permanent.

We may yet invoke Everest to attract path-users' attention, but our main aim is a closer match between their needs and ours. (And if the reference is still mystifying, the Pembrokeshire Coast Path has ascents and descents totalling 9,000 metres - 52 metres more than the height of the world's highest mountain!)

Margi Bryant is Interpretation Office with the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. She can be contacted on 01437 764636

PANEL VISION

Gill Callander

The Sussex Downs were designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1966. In 1992 the Sussex Downs Conservation Board was set up as a national experiment in AONB management. The Board's Information and Interpretation team is responsible for delivering information and interpretation services across the AONB.

The team is regularly approached by organisations, Parish councils and community groups asking for help in producing interpretive panels. It is interesting to note their approach is usually media led. This tends to occur because they have seen an example of a panel elsewhere and have decided that they would like one for their site.

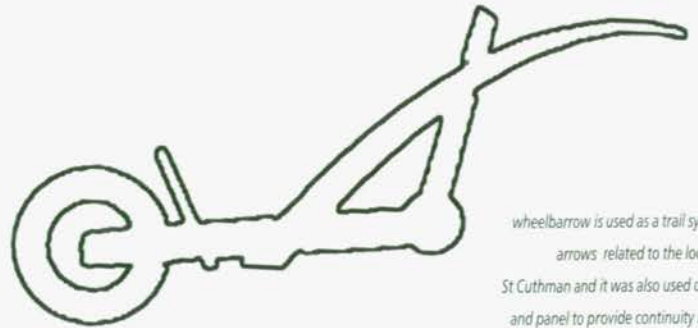
Although very enthusiastic in their approach, many groups tend to emphasise the final product rather than the message that they wish to convey to people. There is also a lack of knowledge about other methods that could be used to provide interesting and memorable countryside experiences, often in a more effective way than a panel.

If every Parish Council or Community group were to take this approach it would not be long before there would be a proliferation of individual panels across

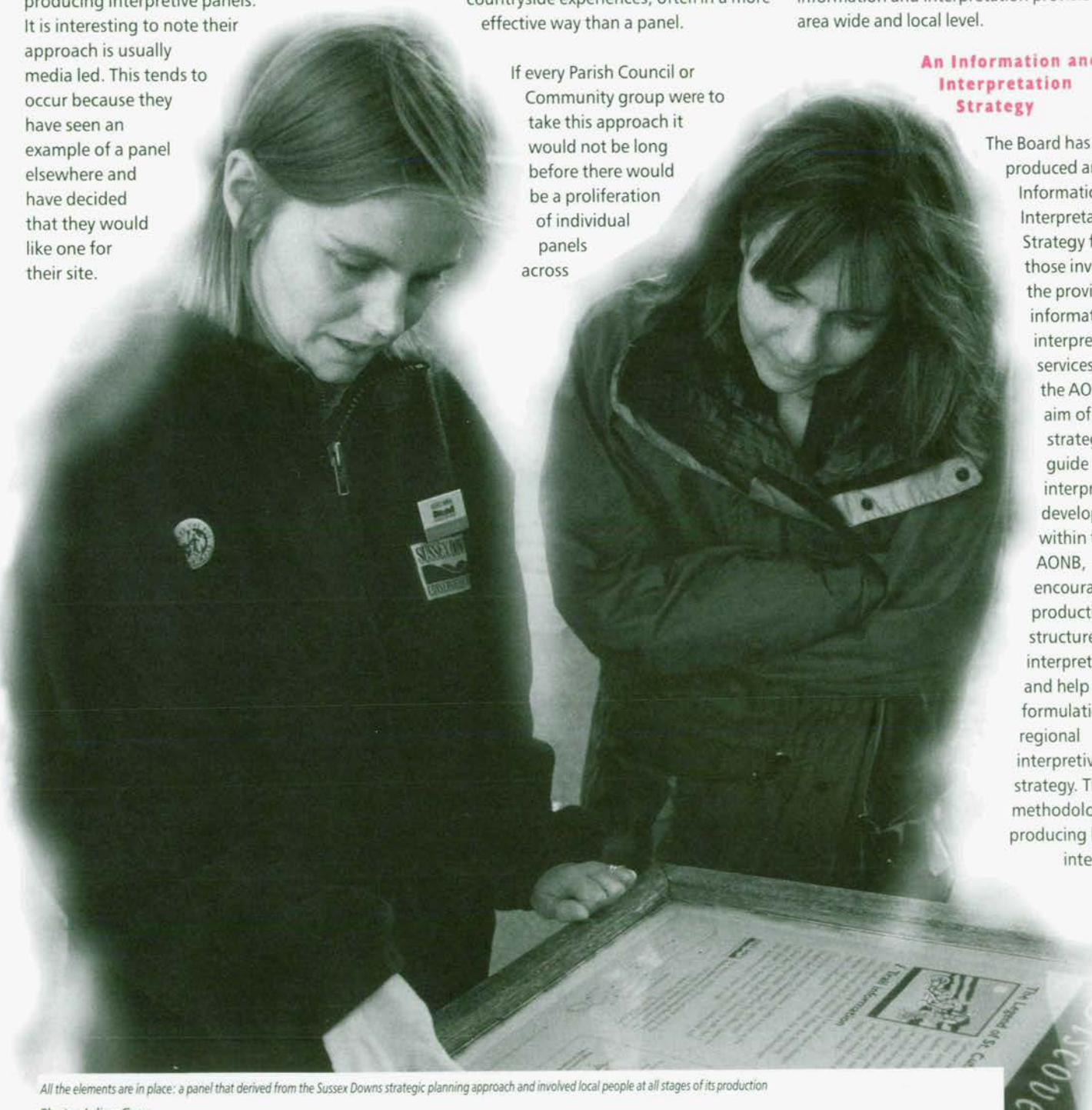
the AONB. For this reason alone we feel it is important to plan information and interpretation provision at an area wide and local level.

An Information and Interpretation Strategy

The Board has produced an Information and Interpretation Strategy for all those involved in the provision of information and interpretation services within the AONB. The aim of the strategy is to guide interpretive development within the AONB, encourage the production of structured local interpretive plans and help with the formulation of a regional interpretive strategy. The methodology for producing local interpretive



wheelbarrow is used as a trail symbol on the arrows related to the local legend of St Cuthman and it was also used on the leaflet and panel to provide continuity between the different elements of the project



All the elements are in place: a panel that derived from the Sussex Downs strategic planning approach and involved local people at all stages of its production
Photo: Julian Gray

plans can be applied to individual projects, helping to ensure that they have clear objectives, are properly targeted and that the most appropriate media is used. It is this methodology that was to develop the Steyning Nature Trail.

Steyning Nature Trail - Not Just a Panel

The Parish of Steyning is situated at the foot of the Downs in West Sussex. The downland that surrounds the village is rich in wildlife and provides opportunities for local people to enjoy themselves. The Conservation Board was approached by Steyning Chamber of Trade for assistance in producing a nature trail through the countryside around Steyning.

The local interpretive planning methodology was used to identify themes, target audiences and the most appropriate media for the project. We established that the aim of the trail was to provide local people with information about the changing nature of the landscape around Steyning, and to encourage them to explore their local countryside using the rights of way network.

We felt that a combination of different interpretive media, consisting of a panel, trail leaflet and waymarking, would best suit this project. The trail begins from a central site in the town, next to a car park, community centre and local public transport links. A panel and plinth could be absorbed into this environment and would be a focal point for the start of the trail. The information on the panel was limited to a general introduction to the trail, a map showing the trail routes and, most importantly, information about where to get a trail leaflet from. Design expertise was provided by the Conservation Board and the panel produced in two colours by screen printing onto the reverse of clear Glass Reinforced Plastic (GRP). The panel was mounted in an oak frame and securely attached onto a brick and flint plinth.

While the panel provides a good introduction to the trail, a supporting leaflet is necessary to provide details about the route to follow, further information about the local area and features to look for along the way. People find it reassuring to have a copy of the route with them as they walk around. The waymarking of the route on the ground helps to reinforce this point. A series of GRP arrows were produced and inserted into the rights of way posts and countryside furniture. The background colour of the arrows relates to the status of the paths i.e., yellow for footpath and blue for bridleway.

The waymarking of the trail fits in with an AONB wide signing strategy that has been developed to ensure that there is clear information and signage across the

countryside sites and rights of way network. Sign designs have been developed through working with the Guild of Sussex Craftsmen. Constructed from local oak, the signs reflect a traditional style of Sussex countryside furniture. The rights of way signs use the national colour coding system and allow information on distances, times and specific routes to be added without detracting from the design. Site entrance signs promote the fact that the site is within the AONB. In addition to the sites managed by the Board a number of other organisations managing sites across the Downs have adopted this approach, helping to raise the identity of the AONB landscape as a whole.

The Key to Success

Members of the local community were involved in developing the trail leaflet and panel. Local people also worked with the Board Ranger on a number of practical conservation works along the trail route, including footpath clearance, the creation of glades and the erection of new rights of way posts. As a result of this work a local conservation group, affiliated to the British Trust for Volunteers, was set up and continues to work in the area.

The project attracted funding from Steyning Parish Council, Horsham District Council and a local business. The Conservation Board provided funds plus advice and design work for the leaflet, panel and waymark arrows. A number of shops and businesses in the town

were keen to stock copies of the leaflet and staff at the Community Centre, near to the start of the trail, check and clean the panel on a regular basis.

The key to the success of this project has been the involvement of the community in all aspects from the initial idea to the practical work and the maintenance of the panel. Many different people have ownership of the project through their involvement and this could be one of the reasons why the panel and arrows have not been vandalised to date. The initial print run of 5,000 leaflets have nearly all been distributed and the Parish are interested in producing further copies.

The Steyning Nature Trail project illustrates how in isolation a panel would not have been sufficient in guiding people around a route. It is only through using a combination of techniques, which support the information on the panel, that the public are provided with the information that they need to get around the trail in a safe and informative way. This identifies the importance of planning an interpretive project and the need to be sure that the chosen media is most appropriate for the job in hand.

Gill Callander is the Interpretive Ranger with the Sussex Downs Conservation Board. She can be contacted at Chanctonbury House, Church Street, Storrington, West Sussex RH20 4LT, or telephone 01903 741234



On the trail. Don't expect your visitors to retain all the information about the route on a panel map - an accompanying trail leaflet is essential along with the reassurance of good waymarking photo: Julian Gray

THE BODACHS of ARROCHAR

Bill
Middlemiss

As part of the large environmental improvements at the Head of Loch Long, near Arrochar, the Argyll and Bute Countryside Trust were commissioned to design and install interpretive panels 'with stopping power'.

The Problem

A major environmental problem had existed for many years at this location which bordered the A83 trunk road, the main gateway to Argyll. There were, in fact, two problems. Firstly, the beach at the head of this sea loch collected vast accumulations of seaborne waste, such as plastic bags and general flotsam. Once dry, plastic debris was blown over the area, giving a very untidy image. The problem, in common with many other similar sites throughout Argyll, was particularly bad during the winter/spring and resulted in the need for a considerable input of time from Council employees and teams of volunteers in collecting and clearing this rubbish before the influx of summer visitors.

The second problem occurred mainly at weekends and holidays when large numbers of hill climbers arrived in the area to climb the very popular adjacent hills, referred to as the Arrochar Alps. This resulted in cars being parked along the verge of the busy trunk road, as the only parking available was in a standard lay-by adjacent to a large interpretive panel mounted on a shelter board.

The Answer

These problems were overcome through the implementation of a major civil engineering project which constructed a concave seawall around the head of the Loch. This was designed to collect as much as possible of the debris, which could then be lifted by machine diggers. Above and behind this wall the area was levelled and extensive car parking areas constructed, interspersed with tree and shrub plantings. A linear footpath was constructed through this area to provide easy access for walkers from Arrochar to link with an existing footpath to Ardgarten and the Argyll Forest Park.

Interpretive Provision

We recognised that large numbers of visitors pass through the area, but apart from the large interpretive panel which acted as a Gateway to Cowal, no provision existed for interpreting the Arrochar area. We also knew that relatively few

visitors appeared to read the existing panel. We agreed that there was an opportunity for a new approach. Interpretation should be more user friendly and delivered in smaller 'bites'. On a bare and exposed site it would however need 'stopping power'.

Our solution was to provide six interpretive points along the route of the path and close to or in the car parks. These take the form of exciting dramatic wooden sculptures on which the panels are attached. John Donaldson of Livingston was commissioned to create the sculptures and the Trust's Sean Trevarthen-Darby designed the panels.

Close co-operation between the two was essential. John's sculptures were of 'bodachs' (gaelic = old men). They each hold or support wooden disks on which are imbedded multi-shaped acrylic panels, each interpreting themes which introduce parts of the local story and also provide orientation for visitors. Sean researched the themes, consulted with local bodies, prepared text and illustrations. The text was supplemented by either two/three colour illustrations or full colour photographic images. He then oversaw the production of the panels by a local manufacturer in Lochgilphead.

The Lochgilphead Range of acrylic panels developed by the Trust is, we believe, unique. Experience has shown that the panels are robust, can be repaired in most cases of vandalism and are available in any regular or irregular shape. For special effect, panels can even be produced in three dimensional format and incorporate imbedded samples.

The only vandalism caused to date

resulted from someone striking the corner of a panel with a hammer-like object and breaking an edge. This was easily repaired on site by buffing down the raw edge and re-polishing. The design was imbedded 10mm under the surface and suffered no damage.

Arresting Results

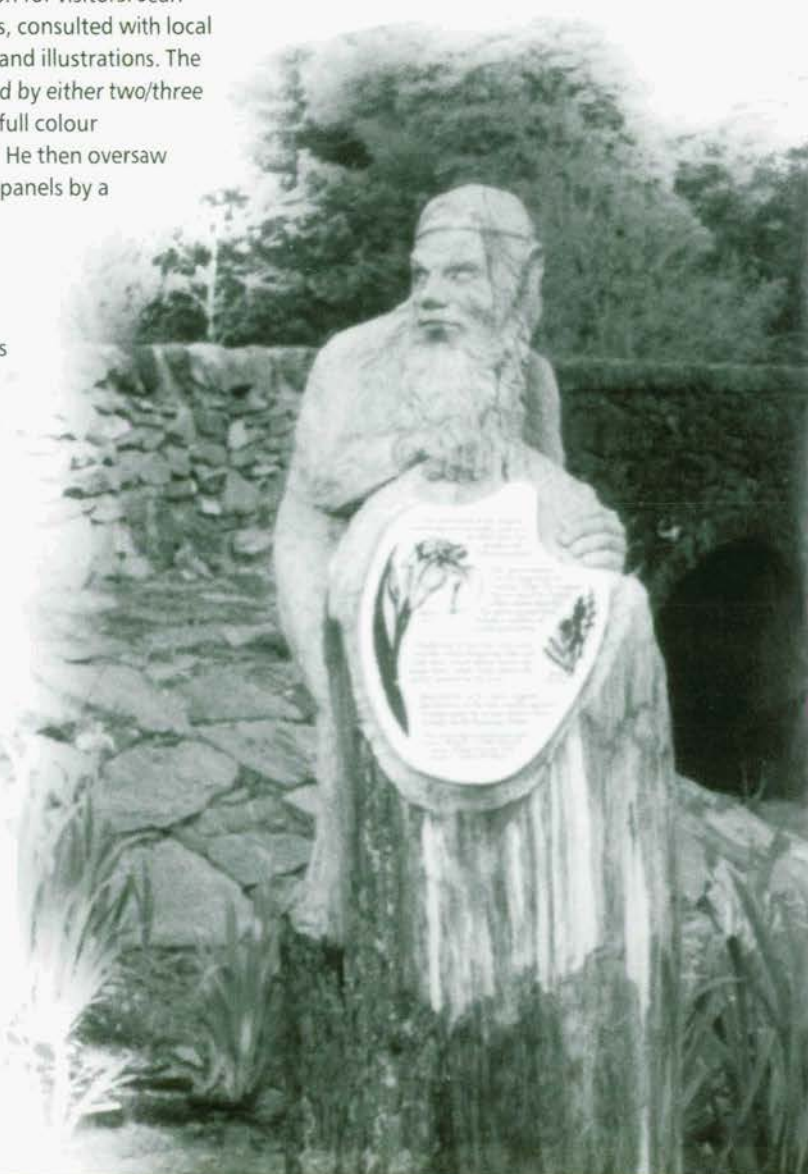
The panels were erected on site in November 1996.

Full monitoring is still underway, but casual observation notes the striking improvement in the degree of interest created by the interpretive subjects. The site is very well used, both by car drivers and walkers and it is noticeable that a high percentage of users stop to read the panels, usually moving on from one to the next.

There seems little doubt that the bodachs have the power to arrest visitors, who are even detained long enough to read the panels.

Bill Middlemiss can be contacted at the Argyll and Bute Countryside Trust on 01546 603798.

A bodach and panel at the Head of Loch Long. The full colour acrylic panels are specially shaped to complement John Donaldson's sculptures.



Panels as Public Art: The Chester Approach

Eileen Willshaw

On Chester Walls. An imaginative solution that reflects the character of the site - and the more traditional MoW approach!

Interpretive panels are now familiar features in our urban and rural landscapes. The importance of producing effective panels, which enhance public understanding and contribute to good visitor management is widely recognised. But what of the panels themselves? visit almost any heritage site, country park or historic town, and you will find signs which are remarkably similar in their construction, choice of materials and graphic techniques. So often, irrespective of situation or subject, interpretive panels look very much the same.

Yet if good interpretation should reinforce the significance of our built and environmental heritage, should we not be producing panels which reflect and contribute to the individuality of each site? By their very nature, panels are intrusions into some of our most sensitive monuments and landscapes. Surely their design and construction should be a positive enhancement to the site and setting, adding to that unique 'sense of place' which interpreters try to convey?

Imaginative Approach

In Chester we have tried to take a new and more imaginative approach to 'the boring old panel'. Over the last few years, the City Council has been working with environmental artists, to produce panels which are conceived as individual works of public art, whilst still conveying the essential messages which underlie effective interpretation. This collaboration between interpreter and artist has resulted in schemes for two of Chester's most outstanding historic monuments.

Chester is well known as a major tourist destination, attracting some 6 million visitors every year. Most visitors congregate in the heart of the old city, producing the classic problems of congestion and overcrowding, so common in Britain's historic towns. In 1994, as part of the city's visitor management strategy we started to look at new ways of directing visitors to less well known sites around the city and so relieve pressure on the vulnerable historic core.

The Wall Provides the Key

The key to the strategy was the City Wall, which runs for almost two miles around the city. Originally built by the Romans and extended in medieval times, it is the most complete circuit of defensive town wall in the country. As well as being an important visitor attraction, the Wall provides a remarkable pedestrian route around the busy city centre.

However, our research showed that only parts of the Wall were heavily used; even at the height of the tourist season significant stretches were relatively quiet. Yet these under-used sections gave convenient pedestrian access to key features and areas of historic interest - the very places we wanted to encourage visitors to explore.

Visitors also found orientation to be a problem. the scale of the monument and the fact that there are twenty-six different access points caused great confusion. We found that the majority of visitors walking the Wall did not know where they were, where they were going or what they were looking at!

A comprehensive programme of interpretive and directional signage was adopted as a way of resolving these problems and developing the Wall as a primary pedestrian route. The key objective of the programme was 'to provide exciting and unusual graphic panels which explain the significance, history and development of the City Wall and which promote a sense of exploration and discovery'.

Looking Good

Immediately we were confronted by important design constraints. The City Wall is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, so no panels could be fixed into the masonry itself, only into the irregular mortar joints. Yet the narrowness of the pedestrian walkway meant that free-standing signs were not an option. The idea of on-site interpretation was also controversial, opposed by many local people. As one resident wrote to me 'we don't want Chester's Walls cluttered with plastic signs'. It became obvious that conventional signage would not be appropriate.

With some trepidation, we approached Partnership Art, experienced environmental artists with a record of innovative public art projects around the country. They had never worked on an interpretive project before, but were enthusiastic about the prospect of producing signage which was unusual, distinctive and unique to Chester. We had never worked with artists before; would the public art approach compromise the interpretation? We wanted our panels to look good, but we also wanted them to work! In fact the project became a true partnership, with the City

Council's team of archaeologists, interpreters and conservation officers, working alongside artists, designers, manufacturers and fabricators.

The Whole Works

We started by exploring the use of different materials, which would be sympathetic to the masonry of the wall and also have a tactile quality for children and the visually impaired. Eventually we decided upon etched zinc, with three dimensional elements cast in gun-metal. The design itself was inspired by the old Ministry of Works signs for ancient monuments; a modern re-interpretation of traditional signage. Most importantly the panels were designed to encourage interaction; we wanted them to be touched as well as read! Rubbings can be made from all the illustrations, something we actively encourage people to do.

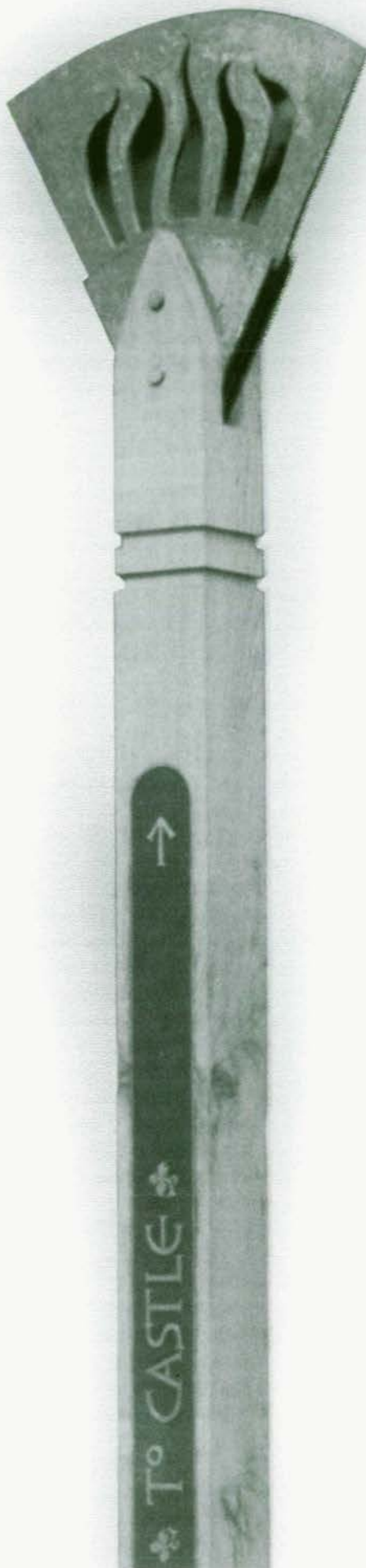
Local people and disability groups were closely involved in all the design stages. The most lively debates centred upon a series of oak and brass waymarker posts, designed to reflect the burning beacons which once lit the Wall - affectionately known as the 'flaming waymarkers'. Prototypes of both the panels and the waymarkers were displayed on site, allowing residents and visitors to contribute their ideas to the final design.

The result of the City Council's Archaeological Interpretation Initiative is a series of twenty-eight panels and seventeen waymarkers around the complete walled circuit. Like more conventional signage, each panel includes directional information, access information, site interpretation and activities for children. Yet the original use of materials, distinctive typography and bold design, enhance as well as interpret the City Wall.

Inspiring Design

This theme of linking interpretation with public art has continued in a new trail around medieval ruins, which once formed the eastern end of St John's, Chester's oldest church. Picturesque and romantic, the ruins were enclosed behind tall railings and had not been open to the public for over a century. Here, panels were not only one element in the final scheme; architectural lighting and imaginative landscape design were central to the interpretive concept.

The panels themselves were inspired by large fragments of medieval masonry found on the site. These became an integral part of the interpretation. Each panel was designed to the shape of individual fragments, so that the interpretation appears to have evolved naturally from the surrounding ruins.



Flaming waymarkers. Bold design of directional signs as well as the panels enhances rather than clutters

Outstanding Success

The Chester panels have been judged a success by both visitors and local people. Far from being controversial, local people seem to love them - even the 'flaming waymarkers'. School and family groups circle the walls making rubbings to take home. A recent evaluation exercise undertaken by University College Chester, showed that 85% of visitors thought them to be 'excellent' or 'outstanding'. The materials have proved extremely durable and resistant to vandalism and we have experienced no major maintenance problems. The only real drawback has been that due to Ancient Monument Constraints, some panels have had to be positioned too low to the ground for comfortable adult reading.

Working with artists is not an easy option. When Partnership Art were appointed as consultants, we had no design concept and no idea what the end result might be; a high risk strategy given Local Authority committee procedures and contract regulations! Inevitably, the artist's desire to maintain the integrity of a piece of work is not always compatible with good interpretive practice. As interpreters we have had to reject some time honoured and well-tested solutions and find new ways of conveying essential information. The experience is challenging, creative and brings completely new perspectives to the interpretive process.

Never Boring!

The underlying philosophy of the Chester approach has been to maintain local distinctiveness; to create interpretive panels which reflect the character of each site and which are unique to that site. By treating signage as a public art form, we believe we have gone some way to achieving this and we will continue to work with artists on future interpretive projects.

Chester's panels are visually attractive, highly original, sometimes idiosyncratic - but never boring!

Eileen Willshaw is Heritage Development Manager for Chester City Council. She can be contacted on 01244 402478

Panels: Produced by Partnership Art Limited

*Typographic design - Axis Design
Panel manufacture - Nicholl Graphics*

*'We would like you to be careful
where you tread and please do not
pick the wildflowers'*

*'All around, some seen, some only
heard are the many different birds
who live on the hill'*

Quotes from Pepperbox Hill's new interpretation panel

The National Trust's new interpretation panel at Pepperbox Hill is different from the many other countryside panels in the Wessex Region. Why? Because it is written and illustrated by local school children - capturing their imagination, creativity and passion for the site.

What is Pepperbox Hill?

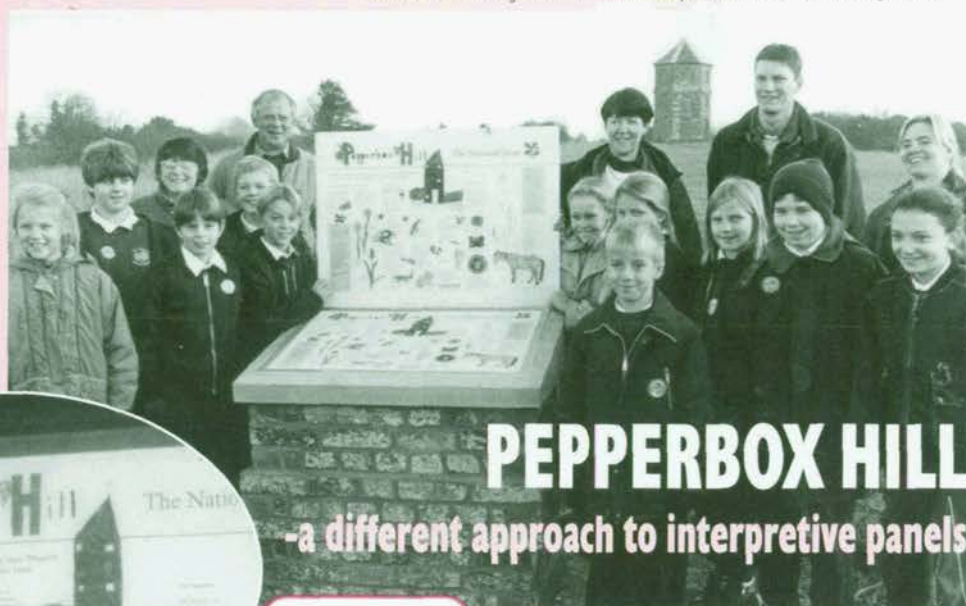
Named after the hexagonal building known as the Peberbox, Pepperbox Hill lies 7 miles south east of Salisbury. The 34 hectare (85 acre) property lies on a chalk escarpment nearly 500 ft above sea level. There are fine views over the Avon Valley towards Salisbury and South East towards Southampton. The downland contains one of the ten best populations of Juniper in Wiltshire with other chalk loving shrubs such as Yew, Whitebeam, Blackthorn, Dogwood and Wayfaring Tree. The property has not been grazed since the 1930's but now has New Forest ponies on site.

A Child's-Eye View of Conservation

Pupils from All Saints Primary School in Whiteparish, have been making regular visits to Pepperbox Hill for some 4 years as part of the National Trust's Countryside Guardianship Scheme, led by Head Warden, Simon Evans. Through activities such as monitoring species, cutting scrub and learning about the history of the area, the pupils have built up an in-depth knowledge and commitment to the site.

It was this knowledge and commitment which inspired Simon to suggest that the children should be involved in the production of a new panel for the hill, when the existing panel was due for replacement. Delighted to be involved in letting other people know about their special place, the children set about writing messages for other visitors, illustrating their points with drawings of plants, animals, birds and insects which they had come to know.

The children's original artwork was scanned into an AppleMac computer by the designer who output the design on disc to the printing company. It was printed in full colour using



PEPPERBOX HILL

-a different approach to interpretive panels

Ruth Taylor

light fast inks onto vinyl and fixed to polycarbonate backing at a cost of £550. Design costs were £480. The panel was then mounted into a purpose built cairn in the same brick design as the Pepperbox itself using a stainless steel frame. Funding for the panel came from the Countryside Commission and the Salisbury and South West Wiltshire National Trust Centre.

But Why a Panel?

The reason for using an interpretive panel at Pepperbox Hill rather than some other form of interpretation is due partly to the isolation of the site. It is not a site from where it would be easy to distribute leaflets. A free leaflet distributed on site would need replenishing or checking each day. There is not a warden on site every day and money would need to be found each time a reprint was needed. Free leaflets can also cause litter. Although no formal visitor survey was carried out at Pepperbox Hill, surveys of similar sites indicated that they are largely used by local people and dog walkers, with some keen naturalists and holiday makers. The Trust owns many small countryside sites like Pepperbox where the solution to providing information is a discrete sign sited not to cause intrusion to the sense of place.

A Success All Round

As well as providing an attractive and informative panel, the project has also engendered a huge amount of enthusiasm and support from the school involved and the local community. The children's depth of understanding of conservation issues at Pepperbox Hill was evident when the youngsters were interviewed at the press launch for the project. Not only did they have a great knowledge of the site, but they also showed that they were totally committed to

preserving it for the future. In the hands of 9-11 year olds like these, the future for conservation looks bright!

The Pepperbox Hill panel didn't just happen. Its roots can be traced back to January 1994, when the Wessex Region of the National Trust set up a Countryside Interpretation Strategy, aided by funding from the Countryside Commission.

We wanted to approach the interpretation of the countryside in a more co-ordinated manner. The strategy aims therefore, to encourage public access, promote understanding and increase enjoyment of the Trust's coast and countryside in Wessex. It does this through:

- A consistency of approach in interpretation
- A set of criteria by which to allocate resources where they are most needed
- The use of interpretation as an effective management tool
- Maintaining a high quality in design and production materials
- A regular review of interpretation
- Interpretation provided relevant to the area

As the first region to have a dedicated Countryside Interpretation Officer, the Wessex Region is at the forefront of developing countryside interpretation within the Trust. We can justifiably claim to be leading the way. Visitors to Pepperbox Hill can only agree!

Ruth Taylor is Countryside Visitor and Information Officer for the National Trust, Wessex Region. She can be contacted on 01985 84360

INTERPRETING ELEPHANTS AT CHESTER ZOO

Sara Ruks



include the cost of graphics and our time in generating ideas and writing the text.

This process of printing onto vinyl which is then bonded to aluminium has proved very successful over the past 5 years. Similar signs have withstood weathering, both from precipitation and the sun. They are easily cleaned and resistant to being defaced by felt tipped pen, scuffing and corrosion by bird droppings. They are too well-mounted to be wrenched off or stolen! However, they are vulnerable to a determined knife attack.

Chester was the first zoo in the UK to successfully rear an Asian elephant, in 1977. At Chester we have a herd of eight Asian Elephants. Cow elephants come to Chester from other zoos to be mated by our bulls. Chester is the only zoo to do this. Everybody who visits the zoo wants to see our elephants. Even elephants want to see our elephants! We decided to capitalise on all this interest to 'educate' our visitors about elephants, their biology, the problems they face in the wild and Chester Zoo's involvement in elephant conservation.

As we have a relatively large budget for interpretation, we were able to produce seven panels, each one focusing on a different subject. We have tried to present the information in a different way on each panel and to encourage observation. All the signs are produced in the zoo's house style of dark green lettering on a paler green background.

Name that Elephant!

The central panel, and the first to be developed, is an identification panel containing photographs of all the elephants with their names, date of birth, where they were born, arrival at Chester and distinguishing features to aid identification. For each of our eight elephants a separate A3 has been printed by Positive Print Services (PPS) in Manchester from the photographs and information we provided. After encapsulation we mounted each one in specially manufactured aluminium frames screwed to a wooden 'table'. Four spare frames are filled with A3 sheets of 'fascinating facts'. We are able to update this panel easily. This is important as elephants move between zoos as part of the internationally co-ordinated breeding programme or births occur. This type of signage has been in use for chimpanzee

identification for several years. The total cost of production and installation was £600. The expected life of each A3 picture is one year before it fades and needs replacing. The replacement cost for each A3 is £14.

Promoting Understanding

Promoting better understanding of elephants, international co-operation between zoos, will hopefully save them from extinction. The other six panels contain information which does not need to be updated regularly and will remain relevant for at least five years. The titles of these panels are:

Asian or African?

Trunk - more than just a nose

What a mouthful, Keeping their cool and Family life

Facing Extinction

Being helped by Chester Zoo

Extinct and living relatives

For these more permanent panels we have used a different approach. Each board is 48" x 18" in size and has been produced for us by PPS. As with the identification panel, we provide the graphics (art work, photographs or transparencies) and the text. These panels are printed on vinyl which is then bonded to 3mm (11 gauge) aluminium. Bolts are welded on the back of each panel at the factory. The exact cost of each panel depends on many factors, but the average cost to us is £375.00 per panel. The panels are then bolted onto wooden 'tables' which are fixed by metal brackets to the fence by the elephants. The total cost of each panel was £525. However, this figure does not

Asian or African?

The 'Asian or African' board is interactive with flaps that can be lifted. The hinges must be strong enough for a million lifts a year, resist the activities of vandals, not allow the flaps to be opened more than 90 degrees and automatically close slowly! Our sign manufacturer developed an hydraulic hinge which seemed to satisfy these criteria. However, mechanism has not been an unqualified success. The flaps tend to stick open and or crash down.

We have not undertaken any formal evaluation of our elephant signage. However, we do spend time watching and listening to our visitors. The identification panels are proving to be the most popular, with the majority of visitors correctly recognising all of the elephants. The 'Asian or African' board is also very attractive to the public. Most visitors that pass pause to read the sign and lift the flaps. The 'Trunk - more than just a nose' panel is being used as we hoped with visitors watching out for the various uses of the trunk, from signalling to showing. The other panels are also being read with interest.

I feel that this signage is worth our investment of both time and money. It enhances the visitor experience, increases time spent watching the elephants and promotes Chester Zoo's involvement in conservation.

Sara Ruks works for the Education Division at Chester Zoo. As an educational charity, the Zoo's mission is to promote conservation by the breeding of rare and endangered animals and by educational, recreational and scientific activities.

A STICKY SOLUTION TO INTERPRETING THE WEALD!

Keith Rennells

The Kent High Weald Project (KHWP) is a countryside management initiative, funded by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, Kent County Council and the Countryside Commission. Since 1991, the KHWP has been focusing its activities on the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and recently designated Low Weald Special Landscape Area within the Borough. The Project also targets the urban-rural fringes of the larger towns in the area.

The High Weald is characterised by its abundant woodland cover, and its 'patchwork' landscape of small fields divided by thick hedges and shaws, thin strips of remnant ancient woodland, set upon gently rolling ridges and valleys. However, there are increasing pressures on the Weald countryside from development, transport, recreation and changes in farming practices. The Project sets out to facilitate the conservation and enhancement of this precious landscape and its rich wildlife habitats. At the same time it seeks to promote the enjoyment of the countryside for quiet, informal recreational activities.

A range of opportunities, from long distance walking and cycling trails to shorter circular routes at small sites have been established to encourage locals and visitors alike to discover the area. However, the sticky clay soils of the Weald are a challenge for even the most experienced walkers!

Successful partnerships with local communities are at the heart of the work of the Project, with dozens of groups and thousands of individuals involved. However, many local people are concerned about recreational pressures on the countryside. It is therefore vital that any schemes to encourage enjoyment of the High Weald countryside embrace the principles of green tourism, and a balance between access and conservation achieved.

Grabbing those Opportunities!

During the first five years of operation, the Project did not have an interpretation strategy as such, tending instead to devise interpretation initiatives in an ad-hoc and piecemeal way. This was largely determined by the ability to raise funds for specific projects and grabbing pots of money if and when they became available. Typically for countryside management projects, this sense of

opportunism still underlies much of what is done. However, the experience gained as the Project has become established allows for a more considered interpretation strategy to be developed.

For this reason, my own attendance on a 'Panels' training course earlier this year was very timely for gaining a greater understanding of the underlying principles and concepts relating to interpretation panel planning and design.

To date, our interpretive work has covered four areas: natural/cultural sites of interest; self-guided trails; guided walks and other events; and countryside exhibitions. The use of interpretation panels has mainly focused on a number of small sites in public ownership, typically between 2ha and 20ha in size.

The Partnership Approach

Countryside management initiatives are often carried out on land owned by parish or town councils, or by the borough council. At this level, resources can be limited, and for an interpretive panel to come about, grant aid is usually needed. In partnership with local communities, the Project has been able to make good use of Kent Rural Action grants, administered by Kent Rural Community Council, which encourages (and requires) participation by local people.

In response to local requests for support, we have co-ordinated conservation management at dozens of small sites of mainly woodland, but also including heathland, wildflower grassland and wetland habitats. In addition to the practical conservation work, it has been important to interpret natural and cultural features to people, in so doing adding to the enjoyment of a visit. Another important objective has been to raise awareness of the value of a site, and the importance of the conservation management work carried out.

With funds and staff resources limited (none of the site have any official wardening), a low cost but long-lasting design of interpretation panel was required.

A Sticky Solution

The Project quickly adopted a system used by other countryside management organisations in Kent and Sussex whereby interpretive material is screenprinted onto self-adhesive

vinyl. The vinyl is attached to an aluminium backing sheet, which is then slotted into a timber frame and bolted into place. No additional surface protection is required for the vinyls, which are able to endure whatever the elements decide to throw at them!

This system is low cost, and good, attractive designs are possible. It is also extremely valuable in areas like the Weald where vandalism is occasional and niggling rather than a persistent problem. A stock of 20 vinyl sheets held in reserve adds little to the overall cost of production. Should a problem occur (typically graffiti, cigarette burns or knife slashes) the frame can be simply unbolted, the aluminium sheet taken out, and the damaged vinyl peeled off and replaced from the reserve stock.

The idea is to keep up with, then outlast, petty vandals. As many countryside managers will confirm, when a piece of new countryside furniture is put in place, the attention it gets from vandals will fall away as time passes. Fortunately, we have rarely had to put this to the test. Panels which have been in place five years have only had the vinyls replaced once or twice. However, it is a reassuring back-up, and illustrates the longevity and durability of the system.

The Kent High Weald Project's lectern panel stand with self-adhesive vinyl in position at Bokes Farm Trail, Hawkhurst



Marshleyharbour Wood: Case Study

Marshleyharbour and Forest Woods are owned by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and South East Water. They are working in partnership with the Project to enhance the quality of the area for local people and wildlife. The area demonstrates the successful integration of different woodland interests. Part of the site is the focus of a heathland re-creation scheme, and the land forms and important water catchment, linked to a supply reservoir. In

addition, the area is worked as a sweet chestnut coppice, with a softwood timber crop. The site is well used for recreation, with an excellent network of paths, a short educational nature trail, and a longer circular walk through the heathland areas. There are also routes for horseriders.

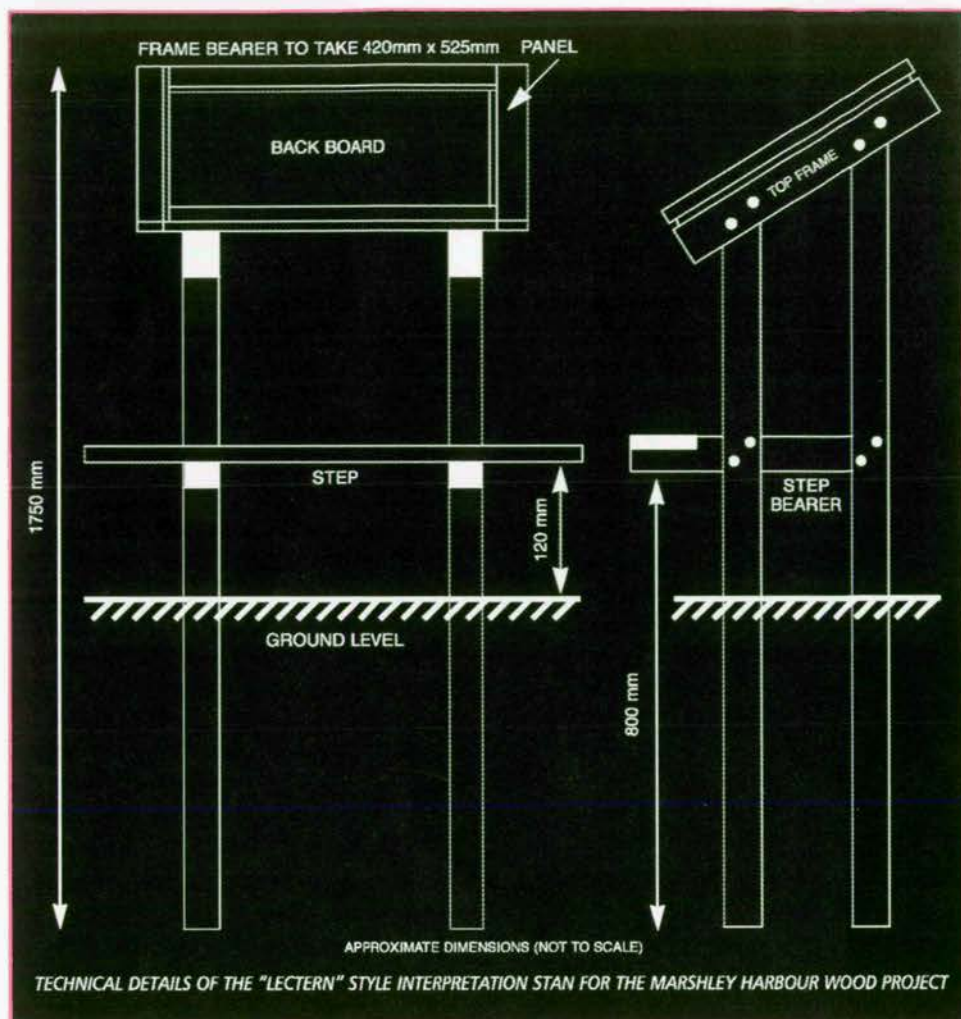
To supplement the integration of these varied uses of the woodland, the KHWP and landowning bodies set about devising an interpretation project at the wood. An educational resource pack is being compiled to facilitate use of the nature trail, and leaflets will guide walkers and horseriders around their particular routes. Panels are being designed to interpret the natural and cultural history of the woodland. Five such panels will cover the areas of 'water and conservation', 'heathland recreation', 'taming the wildwood' and 'people and the environment', with an overall introductory panel.

The self-adhesive vinyl system of panel design was considered the most appropriate option for the site. Budgets are once more limited, and this relatively low-cost method will allow for five such panels to be produced. A local interpretive artist is researching and designing the panels, with the printing carried out by a small company based in the village. High Weald Design, an initiative which specialises in the design and supply of timber products from home grown hardwoods, will be commissioned to make the frames for the boards.

The role of the Project is to co-ordinate all aspects of the project, starting with liaison with the landowners and local community. Plans are formulated, and funds raised to implement work on the ground. The KHWP then contracts out the work and briefs the interpreter. Progress is carefully monitored thereafter.

Looking back, it would be true to say that some of our early interpretation panel designs were pretty uninspiring. The information presented was adequate but, as Tilden said, information is not interpretation! The degree of revelation was minimal, and there was little attempt to provoke a reaction and grab visitors' attention. But now, hopefully, things are changing. The Marshleyharbour Wood interpretation project adheres to 'Tilden's Tips'. These should ensure that the communication is 'interpretive' rather than just informational. So we have set out to 'provoke - relate - reveal - address the whole - strive for message unity' with our designs.

The Marshleyharbour Wood project will come to fruition in early 1998. The interpretation panels, educational resource pack and trail



leaflets will be launched together to maximise their impact and raise awareness locally.

The cost of the panels is as follows:

Costs

Research and design of 5 panels (420mm x 585mm)	= £2,900
Screen process Printing; IMPRINT, Pembury, Kent:	
Self-adhesive vinyl ('jac' - manufacturers of the adhesive vinyl)	
- A2 printed 3 colours. 25 x 5 designs	= £1,600
Aluminium sheets: 5 x 420mm x 585mm	= £100
Lectern type interpretation stands x 5	= £750

The panels will be erected by KHWP staff and local volunteers

Total cost of interpretation panels = £5,350 (i.e., approximately £1,070 per panel)

Looking to the Future

As the Project develops its interpretation strategy, improved forward planning and budgeting should lead to a more co-ordinated approach for future projects. The flexible

system of using self-adhesive vinyls has served us well, and the panels have proved durable. However, the process used to date has limited the number of colours in the panel design. Experience has shown that a simple three colour design works better than say five colours. This in itself limits the scope of the artwork. For this reason, and by maximising the ability to raise funds, we are now seeking to examine other options and systems of interpretive panel design, which will not stifle the interpretive artists creativity.

The production of high quality panels to interpret the natural and cultural heritage of the Weald countryside will continue to be an important objective for the Kent High Weald Project. We have been able to utilise a type of design which has proved effective within budgetary limitations. However, a greater experience and understanding of interpretive processes means that we can now move forward, armed with a greater range of options, in its quest to develop truly interpretive panels!

Keith Rennells is the Manager of the Kent High Weald Project, a local authority countryside management partnership based in the borough of Tunbridge Wells. He can be contacted at the Council Offices, High Street, Cranbrook, Kent TN17 3EN on 01580 715918. Fax: 01580 712064.

Teacher: 'I'm sorry, could you repeat that please?'

Park Ranger: 'Well, it's a pond, and it's fully mobile, so we can bring it to your school.'

Teacher: 'Really? That sounds amazing!'

fish tank would be a selection of the fish from the lake, something people very rarely get to see, and text mounted on the inside of the tank. This idea was quickly rejected on the grounds of cruelty to fish.

Jim Hardcastle

Dare to be Creative!

The fully mobile and interactive pond has been made by the Southwark Parks Ranger Service in London. For a year now we have been mystifying then amazing teachers that we can actually bring a pond to their school. Schools in inner-city London often face the problem of having only a tarmac play area, which doesn't really lend itself to environmental education. Through creative and lateral thinking, and jumping on the back of another project, we designed and built a mobile pond.

NOT ANOTHER BORING PANEL



Logistically it was a nightmare at the start. The process of filling it up with water every morning was too time consuming. If you tried moving it full of water the casters broke off. If you tried moving it empty the casters broke off. We left the casters off in the end. Even in three sections it could only be moved from one part to another on the back of a small truck with at least three people lifting it. But we persevered. The more we used it the easier it got.

or HOW A PANEL BECAME A POND Adaptable Solution

There was absolutely no intention to build a dirty great pond at the start. The original project brief was to design and build an interpretive panel explaining why there were Rangers up to their armpits in a lake planting out reeds. The Rangers clearing and replanting the lake wanted a panel to explain what plants were being used, why the fish had been taken away and what types of wildlife we were hoping to attract. The Rangers also wanted the panel designed so that they could put it up when they were working, move it around the lake as they did and store it away at night. This last point really got us thinking.

Natural Selection

Myself, the Interpretation Officer, and the Premises Officer, a genius at D.I.Y. along with the Ranger organising the lake project sat down to discuss ideas. We felt a panel couldn't be updated quickly and cheaply as the project progressed. We also thought it would be boring. The interpretation had to be dramatic and exciting like the project. The next idea was to mount a large fish tank on wheels. Inside the

Bizarre ideas were thrown around, laughed at and discussed for a couple of weeks. The concept of having something that could be used at the lake and then taken around to schools, used by other Rangers in their improvement projects, updated easily and show all forms of pondlife formed our working brief. The natural solution was a mobile pond.

Ponds on Wheels?

The construction appeared relatively simple. Just sink a pre-formed plastic pond into a wooden frame then put it on casters. The whole object splits into three sections; the middle containing the pond and two outer areas locking around the middle. Plant pots are sunk into the outer areas containing plants found around ponds, aquatic plants in pots are placed in the pond and all the wildlife painted around the edge. Fake lily pads with slits for renewable information are also attached to it. The wood, pre-formed pond and paint cost just under £200 and took two of us one week to make. It measures 3m x 2m and 60 cm tall. And then we tried to move it.

constraints. By designing the pond to be adaptable we can accommodate topics such as mini-beast hunts (we collect them from a local pond first), life-cycles, fish, food webs, plants and their adaptations and so on. To see the kid's faces as they come out into their bleak playground and find a massive green pond with reeds and hedges towering above them makes it all worthwhile.

From a simple panel the idea evolved into a long term environmental education tool. And rightly so. The local tax-payer invested a lot of time and money through us in this project. Any interpretation we do takes into account other opportunities. It still mystifies us why we didn't think of a mobile pond in an urban environment before. And the pond never fails to amaze and excite the children it visits.

Jim Hardcastle works for the London Borough of Southwark's Parks Ranger Service based at Chumleigh Gardens. He can be contacted on 0171 525 1054.

The results of changing the brief and much perseverance - the obvious benefits of a mobile pond in an urban environment.

The benefits really do outweigh the

AFTER THE SHOW

Neil Diment

Great! So you've got the funding secured, partners agreed, panel designed and text produced. The day comes, your months of hard work are finally there for all to see as the panel is placed in situ. Your visitors are even stopping to read it.

But spare a thought for what happens after the show. The panel may attract unwelcome attention from some of your visitors. The elements will certainly start to affect the surface of the panel and its frame and supports. Some of these factors can be planned for. You will need to include time and money as part of your initial panel planning for ongoing maintenance, repair and possible replacement.

Who Cares?

Don't leave the countryside or your heritage site with another eyesore or piece of unwanted furniture. Who is going to regularly check and clean the surface of the panel and remove any

graffiti? Timber frames rot, and may need restaining, repainting or repairing to keep them looking good. Perhaps you could ask your sponsors to include an allocation in their grant towards this ongoing work, not just the capital cost. View your panel project as a five year investment - it won't reflect well on them, or you, if the finished product starts to present a poor image after just a couple of years.

You may move on. Who will take responsibility for the necessary ongoing care? Better no panel at all than one that looks tatty, and reflects an uncaring attitude to the very feature or site you are trying to engender a concern for through your interpretation. The panel will present a very poor image of the very organisation which put so much time and effort into erecting it in the first place. Take it down, don't expect it to carry on performing its function, conveying its message once the combined attention of people and the elements have begun to hold sway.

Last Words

Whether you are planning a panel for just one site or hundreds, the likelihood of graffiti and vandalism occurring needs to be taken into account, as does the need to remove or replace panels which have exceeded their life expectancy. The show doesn't stop once you move onto something new! With some 400 sites to care for and a priority in recent years to provide some on-site interpretation at over 200 unmanned sites. English Heritage recognise there is a problem at sites like Wharram Percy and need to take a more strategic, holistic approach to the interpretation of sites in their care. Interpretation at the site is currently subject to review, and there are plans both to rationalise and improve the information offered to visitors - and to remove the concrete plinth!

Let me leave the last words to Alison Hems, Senior Interpretation Manager with English Heritage, 'We don't tend to have a problem with the remains, but 20th century intrusions are vulnerable because of what they signify rather than what they say. We need to consider not only the historic, but also the contemporary significance of our sites, and acknowledge that those sites will have more than one 'meaning' for visitors and for the communities in which they happen to be'.



Alongside Wilburn Street Basin Slide: Graffiti

What kind of image is this panel presenting to visitors? A series of such panels, along with a reconstruction of a gate and part of the old Roman wall, were erected in Castlefield in the historic centre of Manchester. The irony here is that this was supposed to be part of a regeneration project - the panel gives exactly the opposite impression. Were panels the right medium in this inner city area with all its attendant problems?

Alongside Water of Leith Slide Vandalism

Wrong material, wrong medium or wrong method? Colinton station panel after vandalism - one of a series of panels along the Water of Leith in Edinburgh, situated close to a favoured spot for Saturday night revellers. Someone has taken a pickaxe to this one, smashing through the polycarbonate to reveal the plywood backing. Interestingly other panels on the walkway along a former railway line have survived, but these have been fixed to an existing wall rather than being free standing - Japanese visitors have even been seen taking notes from one of them! Although at an interesting spot, this would appear to be an example of a panel being in a place where a panel has no business being.



Alongside Wharram Percy Photo Outstaying its Welcome

A modern intrusion in an evocative landscape. This ugly concrete plinth at Wharram Percy in North Yorkshire - perhaps the best known of all the deserted medieval villages - lies amongst fields containing lumps and bumps of former buildings discernible even to the layperson's eye. The remains of former interpretive provision have been left in situ, despite the recent installation of a new 'guardianship' panels at the site's entrances.

Interpret Britain (which is the short title of the Society for the Interpretation of Britain's Heritage) was formed in 1975 to:

Provide a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas on the Interpretation of Britain's Heritage, both urban and rural;

Disseminate knowledge of interpretive philosophy, principles and techniques;

Promote the role of interpretation and its value among those involved with recreation management, conservation, education, tourism and public relations in national and local government, charitable bodies and private organisations.

INTERPRETATION is the process of communicating to people the significance of a place or object so that they enjoy it more, understand their heritage and environment better, and develop a positive attitude to conservation.

The opinions expressed by authors in INTERPRETATION are not necessarily those of the committee of SIBH.

Membership of the Society

Personal members can join the Society in the Full or Associate categories, by election depending on qualifications and/or experience, or in the Affiliate (non-voting) category, which is open. There is also a category of student membership.

Organisations can join in the Affiliate category, choosing the number of Journal copies/representatives they require. All members receive the Society's journal and other mailings, and have the opportunity to participate in a range of society events.

Current Subscription Rates:

Full	£43
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