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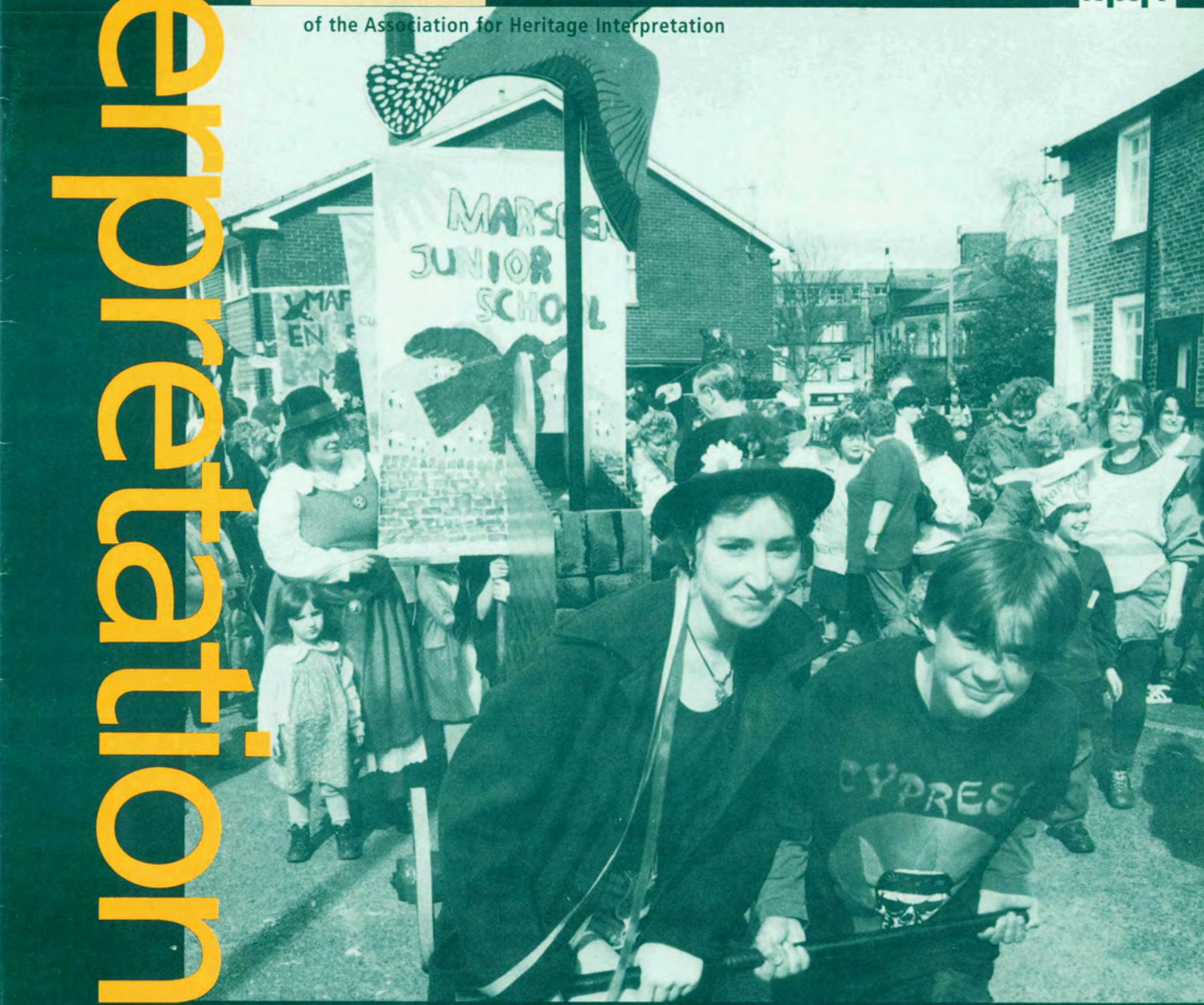


# Communities and heritage

*How local people explore, celebrate and present their own heritage*

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The next issue will look at:
**Interpreting landscape**
Due out: *June 2000*

## Foreword

Projects that link community, heritage and interpretation can face hard questions. Just which 'community' should be involved? And how can professionals help to give expression to local ideas while still retaining the distinctive voice of the community?

Most of the projects featured in this issue of the journal are award winners in the Communities and Heritage category of this year's Interpret Britain Awards, recognising work that unites communities and their heritage. All of them show how vibrant work in this field can be, and remind us that good interpretation is born from a passionate involvement in our heritage.

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*The Interpret Britain Awards scheme is partly funded by a grant from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. For further details contact John Iddon, Director of Heritage Interpretation at St Mary's University College, 0181 240 4018*

# A word from Old Annie

Brenda Kelso



**Village tours around St. Peter's in Thanet started as a leisure interest for a retired bank manager. Over five years they have attracted more than 6,000 visitors.**

*Above: Taking tea at the Ranelagh Pleasure Gardens with Monsieur Necromancer and his assistant*

Brian Sleightholm started the tours as an outlet for his interest in his home village and his expanded leisure time. He realised that there was potential for a living history tour if only he could find enough people to join the project. Friends and acquaintances received the idea with enthusiasm and began to work on a series of cameo characters who could bring alive special points of interest around the village.

Research on costumes was quite easy, as there were books in the county libraries at Broadstairs and Margate which provided information on different occupations at different periods in history. Research into local history was also not too difficult as there are six benefaction boards in the church listing Overseers of the Poor and other benevolent people. In the churchyard memorial inscriptions record notable people whilst time spent in the local studies sections of Broadstairs and Margate libraries helped to uncover interesting and useful facts.

The parish church, built in 1070, is the central point of the village and the starting place for the tour. The White Ensign flies from the top of the church on tour days, a privilege dating from the time of the Napoleonic wars when the church tower was used as a signalling station. A Redcoat soldier stops each group of visitors to ask 'Are you friends, with none of you spies for Napoleon?' On the village green, John Wesley is found to be preaching. Passing the nearby picturesque farmhouse other notable people are mentioned including the painter Walter Sickert, who lived in St. Peter's from 1934 to 1938, and the intricacies of the award winning village sign are explained.

In the first part of the 19th Century the village boasted Assembly Rooms and a Pleasure Garden, similar to the Vauxhall Gardens in London, which attracted thousands of people. Here, one might encounter entertainers such as Madame Rossini, the tight-rope walker, Miss Holdaway, the famous singer, or Monsieur Necromancer, the international juggler. After traversing a long alleyway, possibly meeting either Brother Thomas or the Lady Abbess, Mother Benedicta Spiegel de Peckelsheim from Bavaria, visitors pass through a gateway into the stabling and staff cottages area of Blagdon House to meet the groom, the housekeeper and the cook. Often the smuggler Joss Snelling can be found here trying to sell off some of his ill-gotten gains!

The tour takes two hours, including a fifteen-minute break, and this is felt to be enough walking and talking for most people. For the characters too there are limitations. Although the main tour day is Thursday morning, many requests for tours at others times are received. The characters cannot be available for every occasion and the situation now demands understudies so that the cameos do not suffer from a shortage of characters. After five years and more than 6,000 visitors from all round the world, the St Peter's tour has become a victim of its own success!

No one expected the project to last beyond the first summer, but it has brought to everyone taking part, especially to the older people, the opportunity for friendship, enjoyment and activity. There is a committee, but it does not dictate to the volunteers. The team of characters and willing helpers stands at one hundred and seven people to date. Everyone has a say in what takes place and ideas are readily accepted and explored and, if workable, adopted.

Like any other village, St Peter's in Thanet has had its ups and downs. But the members of the tour like to think it is as important now as it was in 1414, when it was shown on a map made by a monk called Thomas of Elham. He is, of course, one of the characters.

*Brenda Kelso, aka 'Old Annie', can usually be found on tour days smoking her pipe outside the workhouse. For details of St Peter's and the tour contact Brian Sleightholm, Chairman, on 01843 864746 or visit* www.broadstairs.gov.uk

The St. Peter's village tour is an award winner in the Interpret Britain Awards Communities and Heritage category.

# This place belongs to all of us

Richard Dunn



**In 1998 the Ragged School Museum, working in conjunction with a young local photographer, began a project called Common Ground: Portraits of Tower Hamlets. The project shows how even a limited budget can be used effectively to give many different people access to a project of interest to them.**

Tower Hamlets has London's second highest unemployment level and over twice the national average of children in low-income families. Staff at the Ragged School Museum, a small independent museum in the borough, try to develop projects which are relevant and accessible to all members of the culturally diverse local community. The underlying ethos of these projects has been one of general inclusion rather than of specific targeting of individual groups, while in addition trying to empower the local community so that its members can make meaningful contributions to each project. In recent years, the museum has also become increasingly aware of the number of barriers preventing people from the local community coming through its doors and has begun to think about ways of breaking these down.

The idea behind Common Ground was simple. In the words of Rehan Jamil, the photographer with whom the museum worked, 'the main idea was to show what a young Asian man and an old white woman have in common. They could be standing at a bus stop and not talking to each other, but they share the same things – we all do.' One of the things that binds a community together is the physical landscape its members share. Everyone uses, goes into, or passes by the buildings, parks and other spaces that make up their local area, although as individuals their feelings about each place vary greatly. In Common Ground, the aim was to capture both the shared experience of the borough's landscape and the uniqueness of each individual's feelings about its elements.

The main work took place during the summer of 1998. Travelling around Tower Hamlets, the photographer and the museum curator asked people to talk about places which were special to them. Their thoughts and feelings were recorded and the photographer took portraits of each at their chosen location. Nearly thirty people were interviewed at different locations. Of these, twenty were chosen for an exhibition of photographs and accompanying quotes.

## Personal contacts

The people interviewed for the project came from a wide variety of backgrounds. There was a deliberate attempt to represent the borough's population fairly, in order to emphasise that the theme was relevant to everyone, whatever their age or background. Personal contacts both of the museum staff and of the photographer proved the most successful way of finding a representative sample of people. Indeed, this is one important lesson of working within a specific community - links between groups and different parts of the community mostly rely on specific individuals and are only as strong or as weak as their interactions. A second important lesson is that building and maintaining links within a community is extremely time-consuming and can easily take up all the time you have to give it. The results are worth the effort, but for a small organisation this can put pressure on other functions.

In developing the project, the museum staff and the photographer not only wanted to represent the local community fairly, but also wished the final exhibition to be experienced by as many people from that community as possible. One issue was that





*Previous page, left: Shuhel Miah on the passenger footbridge at Poplar Station: 'It's very future-facing.' Right: Achiya Hassan and Christ Church, Spitalfields. 'Being in the heart of Brick Lane, there are very few Bangladeshi Sylheti Christians. It's nice to be able to come to a place that I can relate to spiritually where I live.'*

*Above from left: Paul Clarke outside the gun proving warehouse, Commercial Road: 'It's a crazy building stuck with all the modern crap all around it.' Middle: Bimbi Harris at Free Trade Wharf, Wapping: 'I must admit they're rather ugly from the outside. But, once you're inside, they're beautiful, because you look out at the river and it's a joy.' Right: Shabina Ghoni in St. Paul's Way School Swimming Pool: 'I like swimming 'cos it's my best sport.'*

of language. Many Tower Hamlets residents speak English as an additional language and the main mother tongue, other than English, is Bengali. As a result, the exhibition text was translated into Bengali, with equal text weighting for both versions.

## On the buses

More significantly, however, museum staff were aware that simply showing an exhibition at the museum would not be sufficient. Feedback from a survey carried out in 1998 had clearly shown that people were not sure of what exactly the museum was and faced many barriers excluding them from coming in. In order to combat this social exclusion, therefore, the team looked to develop ways in which local people could have access to the exhibition by seeing it in a range of alternative contexts.

The first idea came from the photographer, who suggested approaching Stagecoach East London to ask if they would show parts of the exhibition on local buses. They were more than happy to help in this way and 80 panels (including translated text) were produced in-house to go on different bus routes. This coincided with the showing of the exhibition at the museum and so not only gave local people direct access to the exhibition but served as a way of attracting to the museum those who might want to see more.

The second approach was to produce a robust low-cost touring version of the exhibition. From March 1999 this was shown at different venues in Tower Hamlets in an attempt to give as wide a variety of people access to the project in as many different types of social space as possible. The tour began at the Asda Superstore on the Isle of Dogs, moving on to the Royal London Hospital, community centres, health centres, libraries and the town hall. Because the museum was able to transport and show this version without charge, it was easy to attract venues other than traditional exhibition spaces. Again, however, contacting the venues and transporting the exhibition was time-consuming, although there can be no doubt that it was worth the effort in order to be able to put the museum's work into so many different places – places in which the museum had previously had no presence.

Most of the funding for the project came from a Peabody Trust 'Leaders for London' Millennium Award of £3,500 to the photographer. These awards aim to encourage young people in inner-London boroughs to carry out projects of benefit to themselves and to their local community and this was seen as a commendable use of that money. With an additional contribution from the private sector, the total budget was about £4,200. This covered production of the main exhibition, the touring version, 80 bus panels and a book of the project and as such showed excellent value.

## Learning lessons

Common Ground was an undoubted success for the museum. Through working on the project and making deliberate efforts to talk to different groups and individuals in the local community, staff have begun to make links which should have long-term benefits. In addition the working relationship with the photographer was incredibly positive for museum staff. As a 20-year old from the British Asian community he came with quite different views of the borough from those of the staff - something which has taught them many new lessons. There were also benefits for the photographer. His career has progressed since the project, with work coming as a result of word-of-mouth recommendations from people who had seen or heard about it.

If there are lessons to be learnt from this project, they are simple ones. Firstly, a successful community project does not require great leaps of the imagination or stunning originality. Simple ideas (and they can be other people's) that are relevant to everyone in the community are all that is needed. Secondly, anyone can do a project like this. It does not require great skill or large amounts of money, just the willingness to spend the necessary time working in positive partnerships with the people of a local community.

*Richard Dunn has been curator of the Ragged School Museum since 1997. Contact 020 8980 6405.*

*All photographs by Rehan Jamil*

'Common Ground' won an award in the Interpret Britain Awards Communities and Heritage category

# Evolving a new identity

Dr Alan Wilson

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**The redevelopment of a former heritage centre site gave Tameside Museums Service a chance to encourage a shared community identity.**

Portland Basin Museum is a new social and industrial history museum in Tameside, an urban and industrial area to the east of Manchester. The borough consists of nine small towns and one of the aims in creating a community museum was to help promote a sense of common identity for the whole of the borough.

The museum is based in Ashton-under-Lyne, the largest of the towns. It forms part of a shared occupancy building which includes residential accommodation, office and conference space, a restaurant, and catering facilities.

Soon after being established in 1995, the curatorial team embarked on a process of consulting with the local community to find out what was wanted from its new museum. We held a series of focus group sessions involving local schools, historical societies and community groups. From those discussions and from assessments of the museum collections we concluded that what was needed was a lively museum, celebrating the heritage, people, and industries of Tameside, but at the same time acknowledging the area's diversity. The local schools wanted standard educational facilities but also work-stations where pupils could use primary source materials; in addition, they wanted opportunities for role-play and hands-on activities. Local community groups wanted displays devoted to particular sites, trades and personalities, along with local dialect, playground games, anecdotes and songs.

Faced with a quite dauntingly long and diverse list of suggestions, the curatorial team produced an initial design brief which, although it included most of the suggestions, was inevitably influenced to some degree by budget considerations and the practicalities of interpreting some subject areas in a museum setting. Other constraints were imposed by the need to ensure maximum physical and intellectual access to the museum.

Haley Sharpe of Leicester were appointed as designers since they appeared the most sympathetic to the approach we were adopting and had produced similar exhibitions in the past. However, we were very well aware that the initial design brief would evolve naturally as we continued our research and worked more closely with our designers.

That evolutionary nature of the project was undoubtedly the case, and the final design bears remarkably little resemblance to the original scheme. This was due to some exhibition areas costing far more than originally anticipated, leading to some displays being pruned or abandoned. In addition, there were changes resulting from new ideas being presented which we felt would improve the visitor's experience or aid interpretation.

### Problems with the steelwork

A major problem we did encounter was with a long disabled access ramp connecting two floors of the social history gallery. We wanted to make a design feature of this by creating a reconstructed 1920s street along one side of this. In order to allow visitors (particularly those in wheelchairs) to enter the various room sets leading off the ramp, level platforms had to be created next to each doorway. At quite an advanced stage, it was discovered that the steelwork of the ramp did not marry up with the street design, and the whole street layout had be reworked.

Other problems encountered were, in comparison, fairly minor. They tended to involve assumptions on our part that certain display objects would be relatively easy to acquire, only to find that this was not always the case, resulting in occasional bouts of wild panic and feverish collecting activity.

The 1920s street is undoubtedly the star attraction of the museum, and the one we devoted most of our resources to. It consists of a variety of room-sets including a worker's cottage, a schoolroom and playground, a fish and chip shop, a pawnbroker's, a corner shop, a Methodist chapel, a pub, and a doctor's surgery. The choice of sets was quite deliberate. We wanted to explore the major life experiences of Tameside's residents, identified as housing, education, shopping, religion, recreation and health care. We excluded work from the list because it is dealt with in the industrial gallery.

The choice of the 1920s as a period was taken because the social history collection is particularly strong for that era, and because it was an important time in Tameside's social history. Many traditional industries were in rapid decline at that time, yet few new industries were emerging to replace them; there were more recreational activities; more free time to enjoy those activities; and better schooling and welfare provision.



*Above from left: Mannequins help to people the 1920s street when live interpreters are not available; Middle: The new building retains as much as possible of the character of the canal warehouse that it replaced; Right: The agricultural display allows visitors to get to grips with life-like models of farm animals*

## Bringing the street alive

The street allows us to have live interpreters interacting with the visitors, although cost considerations mean this can only take place on special occasions. On a permanent basis we have audio loops in most of the sets and mannequins to help bring them to live. Our Friends organisation is also very active, regularly changing the displays according to the season, and giving many of the sets that special 'lived in' look.

One of the principal attractions of the street to our family visitors is that parents and grandparents can often recall something of the 1920s, and of the objects in the various sets. This enables them to discuss and reminisce about their own lives with younger members of the family.

Also within the social history gallery are the work-stations asked for by schools. These are a combination of desk and display case, with folders of primary source material which enable school children (and others) to undertake project work. The folders are supported by illustrations and objects relating to specific subject areas.

The industrial gallery presented problems all of its own. In some subject areas our collection is quite limited. Coal-mining, agriculture and textiles were all major industries in Tameside, but unfortunately we have remarkably few objects in our collection to interpret their history since the Tameside Museum Service was only established in 1975. Many objects which would have been suitable for display had by then been destroyed, lost or acquired by other museums. To overcome this problem we embarked on a programme of active collecting; borrowing from other museums; and some creative, lateral thinking. For example, due to the paucity of objects relating to agriculture, we created an audio-tactile display targeted both at visually impaired visitors and at urban children who are often unaware of the relative size of certain farm animals.

A central feature of the industrial gallery is an exhibition space entitled 'Made in Tameside'. This display is devoted to the smaller manufacturing industries in Tameside – from fruit machines to Bakelite coffins. Because this display includes many industries still active in Tameside it also encourages us to undertake active contemporary collecting, and involves us with the local business community. Furthermore, because we are describing the products made locally, we are demonstrating our relevance to the local working and residential population.

## Proving the pudding

We do feel that we have met most of the criteria we set ourselves. However, the proof of the pudding is clearly in the eating. Since opening Portland Basin we have continued to consult our local schools and community groups to ensure that future developments are in line with their requirements. We have also undertaken an informal summative evaluation. The response to those consultations has so far been very positive. Written comments have been effusive and in the first eight months of operation we received over 80,000 visitors.

We are not, however, complacent. We are aware that improvements can still be made. In some cases, display details we expected to have completed prior to opening are still incomplete, and we already have plans for improvements and enhancements! Inevitably some visitors would have preferred us to focus on topics not at present covered and, as we anticipated, inter-township rivalry has come to the fore with some visitors suggesting that greater emphasis should have been placed on their own particular town or district. We do have the potential to make changes and additions to the displays in the future and we genuinely welcome the feedback we are receiving.

No museum is ever truly finished, and Portland Basin is no exception. However, we feel it does fulfil its original remit – it is first and foremost a community museum; it is also accessible, and a valuable educational resource for the inhabitants of Tameside.

*Dr Alan Wilson is the Director of Tameside Museums Service and is also an Associate Lecturer with the Open University, teaching Family and Community History.*

Portland Basin museum has recently won an ADAPT Trust award for accessibility in addition to the AHI Community Heritage Award.

# Devoting moor to Marsden

David Finnis



**Events that celebrate local traditions can help to build local support for the work of large organisations – and inspire the creation of new types of beer.**

At Marsden, midway between Huddersfield and Oldham, the National Trust cares for 5,685 acres of unenclosed, urban common moorland which almost surrounds the village. At first glance this windswept landscape appears bleak and inhospitable, but it is important for wildlife. As well as providing grazing for sheep, the estate also supports classic moorland birds such as golden plover, red grouse, snipe, curlew and the diminutive twite. These birds and others breed here in such numbers that the estate is already designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest and is part of an international Special Protection Area.

A moorland landscape like Marsden needs to be looked after. Large areas of bare peat are signs of vast erosion problems, but steps are now being taken to arrest this wear by revegetating areas with heather and native grasses to provide better wildlife habitats and grazing.

## A challenge for interpretation

Seeking support for this work, and interpreting the area for residents and visitors alike, has not been easy. Marsden itself is a large village, some would say a small town, which has seen the decline of its textile industry over many decades. The village stands at the head of the Colne Valley and is within short travelling distances of the major West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester conurbations: hence it suffers from all the usual 'urban fringe' problems. The locals are very parochial and often feel neglected by those in authority. Many do not welcome change and view visitors with suspicion. Bearing all this in mind, how would you involve the community in interpreting the area?

It was back in 1987 when I joined the National Trust at Marsden and I set myself two main objectives. The first was to raise the profile of the trust in Marsden and the second, perhaps some would say more importantly, was to raise the profile of Marsden within the trust. From this I was hoping to develop more support and respect for the vast amount of work that had to be done.

The initial years were mainly involved with practical conservation works but we also organised a limited guided walks programme which took people out on to the moors to learn about the moorland heritage and what the trust was doing to protect it.

However, a couple of years ago we decided to introduce more family orientated events and themed walks which involved all parts of the community. The 'commoners' (farmers) were involved with sheep shearing activity walks, a number of the pubs became involved in walks which finished with meals, such as a Yorkshire pudding walk, and the local home brew pub, which takes names for its beers from the local reservoirs, is now involved with a walk that concludes with a trip around the brewery. These types of walk certainly generate much needed income for the local economy!

As these walks became more popular we began organising other events with local specialists who could provide the expertise we did not have in house, for example photography workshops/walks with the Huddersfield Photographic Society, horse rides with the Kirklees Bridleways Group, cycle rides with the Huddersfield Cyclists Touring Club. This not only enabled us to spread our resources much further, but also to pass on our conservation messages to these particular user groups as well.

## Reviving the cuckoo

Our largest community activity by far is the annual 'Cuckoo Day' which we organise in conjunction with the Marsden Community Association and Marsden Enhancement & Residents Society. All the villages in the upper Colne Valley have nicknames, with Marsdeners known as Cuckoos. Tradition has it that the villagers believed the cuckoo to be responsible for bringing the Spring and good weather. One year they decided that if they could capture the cuckoo they would be able to keep the Spring and good weather all year long. So they started to build a tower around the cuckoo, but just as they were putting the last stone in position, the bird flew away, taking the Spring and good weather with it. It was said that the tower 'were nobbut a course too low'!

With this in mind we started a celebration of the story some seven or eight years ago and have added to the event each year. Now it involves workshops in local schools before the day to create banners and street decorations, and the night before the big day there is an evening guided walk to the place where the walling-in was supposed to have taken place. This is followed by a folk evening at the home brew pub which brews a special beer for the event.

The day itself sees artistic workshops and


PHOTOS: HUDDERSFIELD DAILY EXAMINER

*Above from left: Food is as much a part of local heritage as the moorland. The author is holding the beer! Middle: Our programme of events helps to generate support for conservation work such as this clean-up day. Right: Ron Crabtree brews 'Cuckoo Spit' beer each year*



refreshments in the Mechanics Hall, children's games, a play from the youth drama group depicting the cuckoo story, Morris and maypole dancing, a street procession headed by the village brass band, a quiz printed in the local paper which involves visiting all the shops, cream teas, and the 'Cuckoo Ball' – an evening ceilidh.

Cuckoo Day was highly commended this year by the Yorkshire Rural Community Council in their South & West Yorkshire Village Ventures competition in 'recognition of collective action for the benefit of rural community life'.

The event grows and grows each year and now attracts many residents and visitors from great distances. Some of the shop-keepers have actually said that this is their best day in the year financially! We are fortunate in that we can normally attract grant aid and sponsorship to cover the costs of all the activities as Cuckoo Day cannot yet stand on its own feet financially. However, our other major event which involves most of the gardeners in the village produces much needed finance to further the revegetation works we undertake on the moor itself. This is our annual plant fair where local gardeners grow and donate plants which we then sell. In 1999, of the sixty or so National Trust properties taking part nationally in the plant fair (including many large and famous houses & gardens) we came top in funds raised, bringing in over £5,000.

Cuckoo Day also helped in unlocking access to the local schools where we now have a 'Guardianship' with the local junior school. This involves our warden working with the children up to seven days a year on different environmental projects, both in the school and out on the moor.

## Volunteers are vital

Obviously, with a very small full-time staff (of just two!) much of what is achieved at Marsden is done through the involvement of volunteers and we have a very dedicated, enthusiastic team of around fifty local people who assist with every aspect of what we do. On average they devote in excess of 10,000 hours a year, a tremendous input from and into the local community.

## Better for the trust and better for the moor

What of the future? Well, we will continue with and expand our range of activities and events. This year will see a twelfth moorland festival organised in conjunction with Kirklees Countryside Unit. We will be publishing a six-monthly newsletter, with contributions from local organisations. We are currently embarking on an integrated management plan for the Upper Colne Valley, which involves a number of land owners, government agencies and local organisations. In addition, we will be embarking on a public consultation exercise to help us prepare our 'statement of significance' for the estate, but that's another story...

What has been achieved? I am sure that support for the trust locally is growing. More locals are involved as volunteers and are helping to turn the tide of erosion on the moor. Numbers are up on all the events and activities and a greater understanding of our role in managing the moor is apparent. It has not been easy, but it has been very satisfying!

*David Finnis is the National Trust's Property Manager at the Marsden Moor Estate. Contact 01484 847016.*

The trust's range of community activities in Marsden won an award in the Interpret Britain Awards Community Heritage category

# Let the bridges speak

Sue Clifford



**Much has been achieved in noticing and celebrating Local Distinctiveness. But there are always new ideas to explore; new bridges to cross.**

*These bridges had speaking countenances. Every projection in each was worn down to obtuseness partly by the weather, more by friction from generations of loungers, whose toes and heels had from year to year made restless movements against these parapets, as they stood there meditating on the aspects of affairs.*
(The Mayor of Casterbridge, Thomas Hardy)

Listening and looking can reveal much. Lounging can be an important way of re-engaging with the things we take for granted, of savouring our own knowledge and the interest someone else takes in the stories we have to tell. Our understanding of a place is deepened by detail, such as a bridge or a song, a field name or a shop front, for the smallest of things can act as a lightning conductor to both rouse curiosity and impart fragments of knowledge.

Common Ground has encouraged people to both celebrate and take care of their places through an understanding of Local Distinctiveness, defined from the inside – by those who are there. Creating the circumstances for socially exploring and communicating the small complexities of significance of a place is the foundation for this.

Arguments for everyday nature and commonplace history were regarded with scepticism in the early 1980s. Often horror greeted the idea that local people could and should be supported in achieving their own descriptive and demonstrative involvement in their own place – that they could know anything and be trusted to do things was novel to all but the inner city housing avant garde. In many places it still is.

But there have been huge shifts. Just from our own work we know that thousands of people have started exchanging knowledge and feelings about their place through the making of Parish Maps, which in many places have created agenda for action and change, better links with professionals as well as new means for understanding the quotidian. Celebrating and reinforcing Local Distinctiveness is now widespread, in terms of new design, conservation of ordinary heritage, food particularity, for promoting gentle tourism, for helping people see what they already knew:

*Just to look is healing,*
*to stand in the porch of summer*
*and stare through turbulence*
*into the dark.*
from St Winefride's Well by Gillian Clark

Part of our *grand projet* involves the building of bridges, the lowering of barriers, the erasure of compartments. This includes helping people to liberate their capacity to move between objective and subjective ways of expressing what they value. Often we have journeyed with the arts to work through new ideas for exploring emotional attachments and expressing the intangible. How, but in poetry, can appreciation of our powers of and real need for close observation and questioning be crammed so poignantly into a few lines?

*Diving off a road-bridge a young gnat*
*three seconds in mid air.*
*Sunny brick, river so old and green*
*there might be no upstream,*
*and is there any pure source to swim in?*
from Rivers (The Thames, August-November 1973) by Peter Levi.

Common Ground is currently preoccupied with rivers – an anthology of poetry was published in the new year, a pamphlet on rivers and local distinctiveness is forthcoming and in the South West of England we are working on Confluence, a model project encouraging people to create music for a river.

Confluence has already brought into existence: river carols sung by a new community choir, who wrote them; watery ballads written and performed in village hall, library and pub; homage in the Fish Cabaret from a teenage a capella group; and singing fishmongers. A storyteller has researched and started telling the tales particular to this river; a scratch band has played music for a bridge; our composer in residence on the River Stour, Karen Wimhurst, has collected on tape, with Helen Weinstein, spoken histories to literally interweave with a new composition for wind instruments. She has also developed an experimental piece mingling the sounds of a working mill with percussion and voice. We look forward to a concert based on water bird song with a dawn chorus walk on May 1st; with wind players and percussionist we are working with a family of plumbers, who have 100 years of artefacts of their trade, to create new musical instruments for a challenging concert of new music; we are encouraging the keeping of River Diaries and want to create an intranet around water across the valley.

We have launched a national project to name brooks




on bridges with the idea of getting local groups to search out elusive names and to take on the naming using an alphabet particularly created for the valley. Each name within the catchment then uses this letterform as subtle signification of where you are, helping to build identity around the geography of a catchment, bounded by the ecology of our most basic need.

Fontmell Magna in Dorset has achieved the first as an example with us. Richard Grasby has made the letterform and carved the words 'Collyer's Brook - Mill Bridge' onto a small stone capped brick bridge at the heart of the village. Already two neighbouring parishes are keen to do the same.

Small bridges often go unnoticed, brooks often go without names. The very act of asking one's neighbours, delving into parish records, discovering stories, uncovering controversy, facing the future with a small change and seeing it through - philosophically and actually - offer a steep learning curve and can build confidence, as anyone who has tried it knows. Once people start talking about and looking at the small brooks they begin to 'own' them again.

If people are taken seriously in their involvement in their own locality then perhaps we can turn the institutional exhortations around conservation into reality. Without a popular culture of wanting to care, strategies for sustainability will have no foundation.

### Readings

The River's Voice, an anthology of poetry about rivers; edited by Angela King and Sue Clifford. Green Books, 2000. The poems are from this.

The Naming of Rivers, Brooks and Bridges; guidance note. Common Ground, 2000.

Local Distinctiveness: Place, Particularity and Identity; edited by Sue Clifford and Angela King. Common Ground, 1993.

Celebrating Local Distinctiveness; Common Ground for Rural Action, 1994.

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**The Ouseburn Heritage Project is working to arrest structural decline and rekindle a sense of identity through an imaginative regeneration programme.**

# Regeneration through community history

Mike Greatbatch

From the early 1700s Ouseburn, just east of the centre of Newcastle upon Tyne, was attractive to heavy industry. Barges could navigate the 'burn to service the lead, iron, glass, and pottery works: as the industries grew so did the local community. But in the 1930s and 1950s virtually all the old terraces and cottages were demolished, the community being re-housed in nearby Byker, Walker, Shieldfield and Heaton. Many Ouseburn families therefore still live locally, and even those that don't still retain a strong sense of association with the area and its people.

The Ouseburn Heritage Project brings together former residents and those who once worked in the area to celebrate their community history and to encourage others to visit the Ouseburn and discover this history for themselves.

### A community-led project

The heritage project was initiated by The Ouseburn Trust, a voluntary sector development trust established in 1995. Two years later the trust became the lead partner of the Ouseburn Partnership, which unites the city council, the trust, and sixteen other local organisations and businesses (including art and craft workshops, a city farm, a boat club, and a riding stables).

In January 1998, a full-time heritage manager was appointed to develop the project under the

NANCY AND RITA GREARSON



*Previous page and above: the project's magazine gives lasting value to people whose experiences and photographs were previously deemed unimportant.*
*Above right: John Grearson, who ran one of a number of carting firms in the valley, delivering pottery from the Maling factory*

supervision of a heritage project team of nine people. This team represents the original community ownership of the project, having been the small group of activists who first raised awareness of the area's heritage potential. They give their time voluntarily, and in two years this team has created a wider membership of over 200 people and over 30 community groups. This has been achieved through a programme of guided walks, illustrated talks, an education service and publications that encourage the active participation of large numbers of individuals who share an interest in the Ouseburn.

The guided walks tend to last most of the summer evenings on which they are held, as different generations of Ouseburn 'locals' share anecdotes and reminiscences at every pause on the walk! Last summer we combined walks with visits to local historic buildings or surviving factory sites, thereby giving local businesses and voluntary groups an opportunity to explain their contribution to the economic sustainability of the Ouseburn.

These events can also connect cash-strapped local community groups with new sources of income. For example, Stepney Bank stables secured over £20,000 of revenue funding following an event in June, after which a participant recommended the stables for a grant from a regional charity.

## The essence of the project

The principal means of promoting the heritage value of the Ouseburn has been an illustrated magazine that provides local people with an opportunity to share their old photographs and personal experiences of living and working in the area. It is published three times a year and a minimum of 3,000 copies have been printed for each of the four current issues. The magazine is distributed free of charge throughout Newcastle but specifically the inner city wards neighbouring the Ouseburn. It has proved so popular that issues 1 and 2 have both been reprinted to keep-up with demand.

This magazine is edited by the heritage manager, but compiled by local people whose continual support has produced a steady stream of fascinating accounts and photographs. A majority of the contributors left school at the age of fourteen and have had little or no formal education thereafter. Many are in their eighties and are delighted to find that their individual histories have such a large and growing readership.

## Supporting local groups

The heritage manager and members of the heritage project team regularly give illustrated talks to community groups and interested organisations. These talks provide another source of contact with former residents and help to unearth rare photographs and memories. At one of these presentations, somebody actually left the meeting to go home and fetch a superb sepia photograph of her grandfather so that it could be included in the next Ouseburn Heritage magazine!

Some of these community groups have benefited from small grants given by the Ouseburn Partnership. Less mobile residents at a sheltered housing scheme in Byker have enjoyed the opportunity to visit the valley, their mini-bus costs being funded by the heritage project as part of a long-term scheme designed to use visits to the valley to stimulate memories and help initiate an oral history programme. They in turn have supported local voluntary groups with small donations, 'as a way of putting something back into the community for the younger folk to enjoy'.

The Ouseburn Heritage Project was created to use the best from the past to inform and encourage new investment for the future. In its first two years it has brought a lot of pleasure to a great many people and has helped to establish the lower Ouseburn valley as a place to visit and learn about Newcastle's social and industrial past.

*Mike Greatbatch is Heritage Manager with the Ouseburn Partnership. Contact 0191 276 6104.*

The Ouseburn Partnership is an award winner in the Interpret Britain Awards Community Heritage category.

# Back for the future

Colin Roxburgh



**Colin Roxburgh looks at what motivates community heritage initiatives – and at what communities get out of them.**

The process of community regeneration often starts with the question – what future would you envisage for your community? The answers communities give usually include the desire for increased economic prosperity, jobs, access to services, affordable housing, and increased control over local resources. But they also often include a desire to protect and improve the environment, and to preserve and celebrate local heritage.

Increasingly communities are recognising that their future lies in analysing what they have and building on their strengths as much as trying to remedy their perceived weaknesses. The things that give a community a sense of place – its history, environment, culture – are all seen as potential contributors to that strength.

Some examples from regeneration strategies I have been involved with in rural Scotland over the last five years illustrate this:

- *The Islay Development Company is working with other partners to establish a Gaelic College - building on the island's heritage in the hope that providing further education will help to reduce the decline in population by offering increased opportunities for young people.*
- *In Crianlarich there are proposals to establish a Trailway Centre that recognises the community's past connections to the railway but also connects with the area's desire to create walks and trails for locals and visitors.*
- *In Brig o'Turk in the Trossachs the community are considering a number of ways of keeping their heritage alive as part of their plans for the future. This includes producing a Community Map which will highlight local heritage as a means of defining the area.*

## A role for tourism

The most common role for heritage in community plans for the future is to promote tourism through providing visitor attractions. There are also other motivations at play, some of which seem more fundamental. The Islay example suggests that heritage can be at the heart of new educational and economic initiatives that will have major impact on the future of communities.

Heritage can also restore or bind the social fabric as change in communities increases. Brig o'Turk is one of four communities we are working with in rural Stirling as part of an initiative called Community Futures. The four participating communities have all changed dramatically in the last twenty or thirty years. Where in the past there was still a large number of people locally employed in agriculture or forestry there is now a predominance of 'out commuters'. The turnover of people coming and going has also increased, with many staying for only three or four years before moving on. All this adds up to an identified decline in social cohesion – people know little about the community they live in and sometimes less about their neighbours.

Ways of bringing heritage alive and making it accessible and meaningful are seen as being central to restoring a sense of place and as a way of recreating community pride and social connection. The Brig o'Turk Community Map and a Welcome Pack for new residents, which will include details of the local history, are two good ideas which have emerged from this kind of concern.

Overall our work in these and other communities suggests that there is a real need – and opportunity – to do more to keep local heritage alive and to assist communities in accessing their local heritage and cultural resources. Too often it seems that heritage is something that is latent rather than alive in many communities, or contained within a Centre, apart from the living working community. Occasional bursts of activity - through exhibitions or primary school projects – bring it into sight before it disappears again.

Considering heritage in the context of the future of the community rather than simply as an issue in its own right brings it into main stream plans for regeneration. It then becomes something that is championed by the community as a whole – argued for in terms of a wide range of social and economic benefits – and hopefully brought alive throughout the community in many creative ways.

*Colin Roxburgh is a founder member of the Small Town and Rural Development Group, a consultancy specialising in participatory planning, community regeneration, and rural development. The group can be contacted on 01764 670499.*

# Community Heritage for Herefordshire

Ian Standing



**A new Heritage Service was set up in the recreated County of Herefordshire just two years ago, in April 1998. Delivering the service's commitment to community heritage means re-thinking the whole basis of museum management.**

From the outset we wanted to create a truly community based service. But we knew of no models to copy, nor any general definition of the words community heritage. Eventually, our own ideas took shape:

*'Our concept of Community Heritage recognises that local history and heritage belong to the communities that generated it ...'*

We believe that community heritage is something more than bolting on a few community based projects to the inward preoccupations of running existing museums. For the heritage professional, community heritage is (or should be) a mindset; a completely fresh approach, and one that fundamentally alters perceptions of their work.

## Going out to them

The most basic step in working with communities is the one of going out to them, rather than expecting them to come to you. The ancient market town of Ross-on-Wye had no publicly owned museum or heritage facility prior to mid 1997 when one of its most important buildings, the 1650 Market House, was renovated and equipped as a Heritage Centre by the former South Herefordshire District Council. Because the Market House was always a central point in the life of the town, it was important that the community was offered opportunities for ownership and involvement. Consequently there was plenty of public consultation in planning the scheme. The ongoing challenge lay in making it relevant and responsive to local people once it was opened. We began by staging community exhibitions.

The first of these was 'Ross-on-Wye Childhoods Remembered'. We teamed up with the Oral History Group of the Ross University of the Third Age, whose members recorded the childhood memories of local people from 1908 to 1960. We gained access to their family photograph albums and made display copies of the best items. We also borrowed contemporary childhood objects. The exhibition attracted 1,400 local people at a time when we were saddled with admission charges. More importantly, it triggered local interest and it showed people that the place really was for them and their history. Market House gained many supporters. Local collections, especially of old photos, began in earnest.

Since then we have run community exhibitions on the local railways, sports, shops, archaeology, local art, woodcrafts and buildings. Pivotal to their success is the input of the three part-time Heritage Centre Assistants. They operate the centre and they are the first line of contact with the community from which they come. They increasingly research and mount the exhibition programme.

The visitor figures suggest that the approach is succeeding. The 1998/99 figures of 21,000 were 120% up on 1997/98. They have increased further in the current year. Significantly, around 8,000 were local people; a good result from a town of 10,000 souls.

## A museum on wheels

Nigel Nixon of neighbouring Shropshire County Museums Service started a project, in which we share, to take museums to people in rural communities. We created a community heritage access officer post specifically to develop and deliver this service within the county.

Completed in May 1999, the Museum on the Move has run a first season of trial visits to rural schools and villages in Herefordshire and the project is being warmly received. The overall project officer says 'The team is unable to meet the demand for the vehicle's presence at public events, and bookings from schools are good. Another bonus we have noted in Herefordshire is the how the Museum on the Move has raised the profile of our service among elected members'.

The mobile museum includes handling objects and interactives. It also possesses recording and playing equipment for sound and images, a video microscope, ICT and an able staff. It can operate as a mini-museum, or as a research tool, for example as a mobile oral history unit in a village, or at a residential home for the elderly.

## From suspicion to creativity

Before 1998, each of Herefordshire's council and voluntary museums, heritage and local history centres tended its own patch, with little contact between them. A possible way to establish an effective and community based county heritage service was through collaboration and partnership amongst this network.

*Above: When Ross-on-Wye's Market House opened as a heritage centre in 1997, there was a danger that in a busy tourist town it would be seen as 'just for the visitors'*
*Above right: Participants in the Childhood Remembered exhibition*

We recognised that the voluntary sector had achieved a great deal in gathering local collections and displaying them, and that their knowledge of their localities and specialities was better than ours. But the voluntary sector had no professionally trained staff and very slender resources. They faced all the usual problems with collection management, development and marketing. The scope for a symbiotic partnership existed.

We called a meeting of all the museums in June 1998. It was noticeable how few people knew anyone else, and that the general atmosphere was a bit wary. But a wide ranging discussion took place and a decision was made to create a Herefordshire Museums Forum that would meet quarterly and produce a regular mailing.

Forum meetings are now highly cordial and constructive. The second Herefordshire museums leaflet is in press. A training programme is in place which attracts more offers of external funding than we can use. There is a spirit of creativity and development among the membership, one of whom was 'Highly Commended' in the 1999 Gulbenkian Awards. Heritage Services staff act as curatorial advisors for registration and they are currently assisting two members with further development.

The strength of the forum lies in heritage professionals and the voluntary sector collaborating as equals and it is this that makes it different to many other county groups. For the future, it will be for the forum members to decide where they want the forum to take them and what it should be achieving for the good of the county's heritage.

**Back to community heritage**

Our other work includes taking relevant objects out of the stores to display at village history days and exhibitions. One highly successful project was a 'Carry on Collecting' exhibition where around 30 local people displayed their own collections in the main exhibition gallery at Hereford and in some of the voluntary museums. It caused an irate letter to the Guardian newspaper complaining about a child's collection of Gonks being in a museum. The author seemed unable to comprehend that museums might be for active public use once in a while! And this brings us, full circle, to the starting question: just what is community heritage?

Community heritage is a collective term that covers many things. At one end it is local people investigating and appreciating the worth of their owns roots and environments, and interpreting them to a wider audience by way of exhibitions, publications and trails. It includes many locally induced buildings and landscape preservations, and all the museums founded by similar forces to preserve and display things that mattered to their founders. But it seems to me that far too many museums then go on to develop a life of their own. Increasingly dominated by professionals and specialists, they become institutionalised and lose touch with their community roots. Thus communities and their heritage are separated. In Herefordshire we are keen not to let this happen.

*Ian Standing is Community Heritage Officer with the new Herefordshire Council. Contact 01432 260673*

Herefordshire Council's Community Heritage Service is an award winner in the Interpret Britain Awards Community Heritage category.

# Westray Heritage Centre

Nancy Scott



**On the island of Westray, Orkney, a local trust found themselves working on a much larger project than they ever imagined when they started.**

Eighteen enthusiastic islanders formed the Westray Buildings Preservation Trust in 1994 with two main purposes:

- the maintenance of buildings on the island considered to be of importance to the history and heritage of the island, and
- the advancement of the education of the public in the history, geography, wild-life and other features of life on the island.

We were delighted with our first purchase – an old hall in the middle of Pierowall village, ideal for an interpretation display and perhaps for crafts. With a budget of around £5000 in mind we set about planning the best use of what we saw as a sizeable hall – room for office, store, toilet, utility and 60 square metres of display and sales area. We were *so green.*

None of us had been involved in anything like this before. Most of us were in full time work and already involved in various voluntary organisations. We really didn't know where to start and we all had our own ideas! But we were encouraged by a clerk of works who offered to draw plans for us and by the generous donations of the great majority of the 600 islanders towards what they saw as a worthwhile project.

## Steep learning curves

With plans in hand we approached Orkney Enterprise, Orkney Islands Council and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) for funding. They could not promise anything until detailed costings were available, then only if we fitted their criteria, and the amount each would give would depend on what the others gave! *Steep learning curve!* Life became days of phone calls and evenings of form filling. Gradually as more costings were gathered the forecasted total rose to nearer £50,000. How would we raise this?

From many discussions with SNH we found we could qualify for a 50% grant on a natural history display and so we determined to make this our permanent feature, with an annually changing historical display.

We were so fortunate to gain the expertise and vision of two talented local artists, sisters Lizza and Jenna Hume. Other skilled people on the island provided photographs and gathered information. A local commercial artist with expertise in desktop publishing began to draft the pages for an interpretive book. But SNH strongly advised us to find an expert on presentation. This meant finding names of such people and then holding a tendering process (more steep learning).

Before we could do this we needed to make fairly detailed plans of our planned three wall maps and a model of a geo (the rocky Orcadian cliffs that shelter large bird populations). We then gathered together all our costings and shook in our shoes on finding the total to be just over £80,000! However, heartened by a statement made to me in a Skye centre that 'the money is out there. You just have to find it', and encouraged by many people in small interpretation centres all over Scotland we delved into a book about grant-giving trusts and applied to the before-mentioned bodies to endeavour to find the balance. We did.

With grants approved we looked at our interpretation plans with our expert. Under his guidance we saw a much better way of presenting the information on panels of tapestry and collage work rather than repeated maps. Each panel is produced by the Hume sisters and reflects the character of Westray's hills and cliffs, bays and beaches, and cultivated lands and settlements. Around each panel is a frame of small boxes containing items which can be found in the area and which depict its character.

We started off very green. We learned much. We had to overcome many difficulties - not least the time involved for people who were already busy and who were all working on this project voluntarily. We did it for our island, not for any personal gain - even our artists who were paid for the special wall panels reckoned they worked for 30p an hour!

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Westray Heritage Centre gained a 'Commended' certificate in the Nature's Prize Scottish Environmental Awards 1997 and is listed as a three star attraction by the Scottish Tourist Board.

*Top: A ten foot high model of a geo takes up one end of the centre Above & below: Simple interactives are popular with children, who arrive as reluctant visitors but are often reluctant to leave*