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A H I

Big issues

Conflict, contemplation and interpretation

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The next issue features
The AHI Awards 2003 (special category): interpretation for children
Email suggestions for contributions to WPARET@smtp.ntrust.org.uk

The articles in this issue are adapted from talks given at the AHI Annual Conference *Conflict and Contemplation* held in Manchester, September 2003. Embracing the broadest definitions of the theme, Hugh Smith and Bob Jones consider the balancing acts required for interpreting sensitive sites; Jim Forrester and Debbie Walker look at interpretation as an aid to contemplating conflict; Shelagh Hourahane discusses problems and possibilities with artwork for important sites; Scott Burham argues the case for contemplating the future of the metropolis; Andrew Jenkinson considers the meaning of interpretation and interpreters, while James Carter speaks for need to recognise that the essential quality of interpretation is its reflection of cultural concerns.

Apology: Vol 8 No 3 the strap line to Breaking down barriers p11 should have read: Marcus Weisen and Clare Stewart discuss innovation in online access and audio guides for people with disabilities.

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If you would like to respond to articles in this issue please email emnewbery@connectfree.co.uk

Conflict and contemplation – a very personal view

Michael H Glen

Humans are animals, with the attributes of animals. We are preordained, as animals, to accept and indeed promote, the survival of the fittest however much, as animals with developed brains, we dress that up with sophistry and medical and social techniques that strive to eliminate weakness. Our moral and ethical codes depend on whose morals and ethics are followed.

We still go to war, still drive out the unwanted, still torture and bully, still amass our weapons of defence. Our battles for survival are based on fear even when it appears as aggrandisement. And how proud we are of our military and community achievements that prove our fitness survives.

But the un-interpreters are fearful of discussing the truth behind conflict – between countries, creeds, colours, cultures, classes, and even clans. They strive for the bland, the insipid and the innocuous. They use obfuscation and selectivity to avoid breaking the first commandment of un-interpretation – *thou shall not offend*. We watch as more and more un-interpreters set 'objectives' for audiences that measure facts learned, not depth of understanding achieved.

How many 'war' museums, industrial and social heritage centres and other facilities, that purport to interpret past or present conflicts, take basic instinct – the survival of the fittest – as a starting point. What drove the military leaders, the industrialists, the empire-builders? Why are their stories told in the coy framework of 'heritage' and not in the context of human ambition? Children would understand – they know about survival. We needn't be fearful of wishing to survive; why should un-interpreters be fearful of discussing it? Are we afraid of revealing ourselves when we *reveal* the actions of others? Would such revelation not *relate* better to audiences, especially if it *provokes* them?

Understanding conflict in all its manifestations is hard work and not for the faint-hearted. If the fourth aim of interpretation is to *entertain*, then interpretation of conflict entertains in the sense of exercising the mind and providing satisfaction from gaining understanding. And it may lead to contemplating the human condition.

Contemplation and interpretation are yang and yin, or yin and yang (a topic for a conference paper!). While interpretation is usually seen as an action, not a reaction, contemplation can be done only by ourselves. Sure, writers and artists contemplate on our behalf, providing their interpretation of whatever, but we must contemplate their results. We can also contemplate the wider world and the greater truths, 'letting the wonderment', as Emma Stewart advised, 'do the interpretation'.

Although more trust is given to people to do their own interpretation through contemplation, the un-interpreters resist relinquishing their territory to the 'uninformed'. Fear again creeps in, this time that people might get it wrong, might not understand, might not have the powers to appreciate something for themselves. But people can be helped by encouragement, not hindered by ill-considered un-interpretation, by sanitised information masquerading as explanation.

Interpretation and contemplation are bedfellows, working best in conjunction not in conflict. Let's have more opportunity to consider for ourselves, with guidance, whether contemplating the ills of humanity or the treasures of the world we live in.

Michael H Glen divides his time between administering AHI and working as an interpretation consultant and writer

Forgotten souls

Hugh Smith looks at the problems involved with interpretation at a former 'gypsy' concentration camp at Lety, in the Czech Republic

Visiting the site of a former concentration camp is certainly not everyone's idea of a holiday excursion. However, it has been estimated that around six million people visit six of the major sites related to the Holocaust each year[1], thereby taking part in a form of 'dark' tourism[2] or 'thanatourism'[3]. Indeed Marc Terrance's book, *Concentration Camps: A Traveler's Guide to World War II Sites* provides practical advice on visiting many of the sites[4]. It is however apparent that there are varying levels of interpretation at the many sites, influenced by factors such as the number of buildings that remain standing and the level of notoriety of the original site. One site that isn't included is the site of a former concentration camp located at the small town of Lety in the Czech Republic.

Conflicting issues at the Lety site

It was while conducting additional research into the field of dark tourism, building upon the earlier work undertaken by Professors John Lennon and Malcolm Foley of Glasgow Caledonian University, that information began to emerge of a small former concentration camp situated to the south of Prague.

Above: The view towards the pig farm from the main road out of Lety

'Estimates of deaths are in excess of 500,000 , with the Romany word '*Porrajmos*' (the devouring) used to describe this period'

The camp operated as an internment camp for the Roma people and there were several contentious issues surrounding the camp including the circumstances surrounding deaths that occurred at the camp during 1942-1943; that the camp was controlled by Czech Guards as opposed to Nazis[5]; that any recognition of the past events was considered woefully inadequate and; that the original camp buildings are no longer in existence and have been replaced by a large pig farm/factory. The representation of such tragic past events by a pig farm is not positive, to say the least.

Lety provided a clear case study of suggestions why interpretation at some sites is lacking. In the case of the Lety site, factors such as the ongoing persecution of the Roma people, the politics of closing a private business (the pig farm) and the absence of the original camp buildings have an impact. To help understand the reasons in more detail, the circumstances merited further detailed research.

A meeting was arranged with Paul Polansky, a historian who had discovered many documents relating to the operations of the concentration camp during 1942-43 and had conducted interviews with many of the survivors. The Roma Peoples during World War II suffered horrendously as an already outcast people. Estimates of deaths are in excess of 500,000[6], with the Romany word '*Porrajmos*' (the devouring) used to describe this period.

It became evident that a visit to the site was required. This was not a simple process as the interpretation was minimal and hard to locate. With the assistance of a local contact provided by Paul Polansky, the former concentration camp site was eventually located during a visit to the Czech Republic in October 2002. Lety is a small town situated off the main route south of Prague to the north of Písek. It is also very near to Orlik Castle a sizeable tourist attraction in the area. However Lety is not on the tourist itinerary: the main road from Lety to Orlik Castle passes the pig farm.

‘The representation of such tragic past events by a pig farm is not positive, to say the least’

Current interpretation at the Lety site

No road signs exist on the main route to reveal the existence of the former camp or any interpretation or memorials. To access the interpretation necessitates travelling on a minor road from Lety. Just outside the town at the start of a small woodland area, a small sign (in Czech) points to the right into a field where an area of ground has been cleared as a car park. It is overgrown. Further downhill the view opens out onto the pig farm and an interpretation board is visible. The board is situated alone in a large field.

The interpretation board was erected following lobbying by and on behalf of the Roma People. Taking a positive viewpoint, the board acknowledges the existence of the former camp, provides a plan of the camp and shows the area that it covered in relation to the view provided today. It also provides a key to the camp buildings that would have stood there and also mentions that over 1300 Roma were held there where 327 died and 511 were sent to Auschwitz ‘to face a certain death’. However issues remain surrounding the information contained on the board including the lack of reference to the guards in the camp being Czech and how the deaths occurred.

Without guidance, the memorial situated in the nearby woodland would not have been located. It is placed within a cleared area of ground boarded by trees and bushes and an opening that provides a view towards a small lake and the pig farm. The scene is peaceful but the smell from the farm can be overpowering.

The memorial area comprises a number of large stones that are scattered in a circle with a central stone monument carved as a fragmented sphere with wording in Czech. An interpretation board is located at the entrance to the cleared area and while it looks as though some information was held on this board in the past, none remains as shown in the photograph below.

Could further interpretation take place at the Lety site?

The interpretation board and memorial have been erected and positioned here as a form of remembrance of the atrocities that took place and therefore should be important for the Roma, as the people who were persecuted at the site. It is difficult to consider that the interpretation that exists at this site could ever be termed a tourist ‘attraction’. However there are factors that need to be considered on the potential for enhanced interpretation at the site to provide a fitting memorial to commemorate those who suffered. For example, are the Roma interested in further development? Since their arrival

Above: The interpretation board at Lety
Right: The memorial monument at Lety

in Europe from Northern India in the 14th century the Roma have been continually persecuted as they did not assimilate easily with the indigenous population. This persecution continues throughout Europe today. Does their current situation suggest that they may be more concerned with improving their day to day lives rather than considering the past or are both linked? If the Roma's past is not respected how can they improve the present especially as in this case it can be argued that their past suffering is represented by a pig farm?

Are the Czech people interested in further development? Certainly there is evidence of ongoing prejudice against the Roma. The closure of an operating business would have political complications not least relating to the loss of employment and potential compensation that would have to be paid to the owners.

Is there interpretation of the Lety site elsewhere?

Within the Czech Republic, the Museum of Romany Culture in Brno has been actively involved in achieving the erection of the interpretation/ monument in Lety and at an additional camp for Roma based at Hodonín near Kunštát, Moravia. This museum was founded in 1991 and has been located in its own building since December 2000. The new building, situated in the centre of Brno, was donated by the City and the reconstruction work was sponsored by the Czech Government. The museum operates as a research and educational institution. As yet the museum has been unable to provide a permanent exhibition area which could help towards understanding the different history and culture of the Roma. The museum does however represent a positive image of progress for the Roma and as stated in the museums aims, it can

'*…help the Roma in understanding the roots of their identity and create a real place in modern society*'
(Museum of Romany Culture, undated)

A small corner of the Prácheňské Museum, Písek has been dedicated specifically to the Lety camp. This museum was founded in 1884 and provides extensive evidence of the history and nature of the region of Písek and the former Prácheň region. The interpretation relating to Lety consists of a model of the camp, as it existed during operation with additional narrative.

Additional interpretation includes authentic photographs of the camp, guards and prisoners together with text explaining that the camp was built and '*. . . was in order by Nazis and Czech authorities during the occupation 1940-1943*'.

Other sites commemorating the tragic history of the *Porrajmos* include Mirovice cemetery, which comprises a memorial plate to commemorate the prisoners from the Lety camp that were buried within the cemetery. An additional memorial plate is located at the cemetery at Černovice that is dedicated to the prisoners at the Hodonín camp. Other monuments and memorials dedicated to the memory of Roma who were transported to Auschwitz, have been placed at Bohusudov, Uherčice and Masná Street in Brno.

Above: Interpretation board at the memorial site at Lety
Above right: A model of the Lety Camp at the Prácheňské Museum, Písek

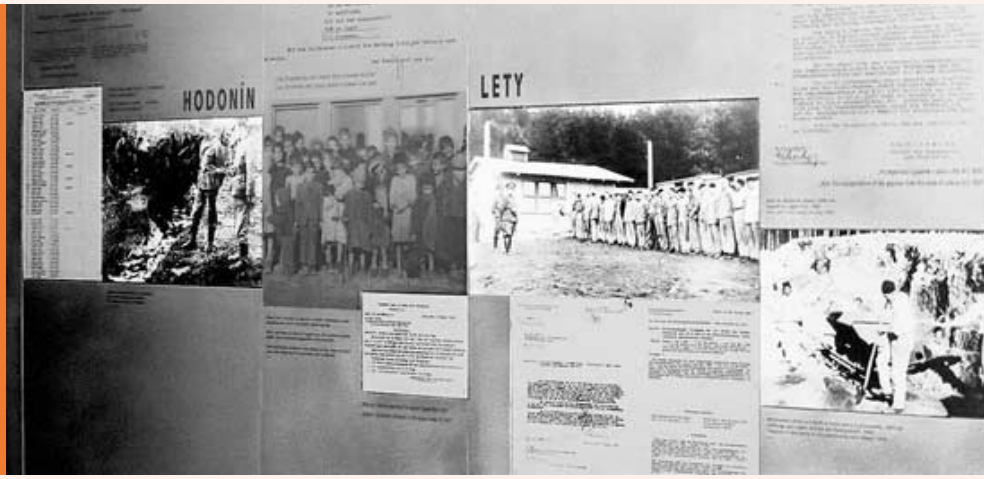
‘It remains to be seen whether the level of interpretation at the site will increase as a result of enhanced political lobbying by the Roma and their representatives’

Interpretation at Auschwitz

An enhanced level of interpretation of the Roma does however now exist at the former death camp at Auschwitz in Poland. This is now a key site synonymous with the annihilation of the Jewish people. It is a site of mass killing where up to some 1.5 million people perished including an estimated 21,000 Roma and Sinti peoples[7]. The victims included Roma from the camp at Lety and Auschwitz can therefore represent the final destination and tragic end for many Roma during World War II. The interpretation of the Roma at this site is now significant with ‘Hut 13’ being devoted entirely to their commemoration. Detailed sophisticated interpretation panels situated over two totally refurbished floors show various official documents, photographs and information on the Roma people held at the camp.

Despite such additional interpretation and commemoration the history and suffering of the Roma people is overall represented in a low key manner. The Lety site is particularly troublesome in this regard. The interpretation board and memorial are not considered fitting or adequate to represent the suffering that took place at the site. This can only be achieved by the closure of the pig farm that operates on the original site of the concentration camp and the erection of a more fitting memorial, despite the issues this may raise as mentioned earlier. It could however be argued that the enhanced interpretation elsewhere, particularly at Auschwitz, counter-acts the minimal interpretation at the site itself. All that would be required at the site is improved signage and evidence of care and respect. It remains to be seen whether the level of interpretation at the site will increase as a result of enhanced political lobbying by the Roma and their representatives. This may occur as a result of the Roma’s potential for enhanced visibility and acceptance as many former eastern European nations, where a substantial number of Roma reside, become part of the European Union. A greater awareness of their current situation and history may lead to potential funding opportunities and therefore development of sites such as that at Lety.

‘It is difficult to consider that the interpretation that exists at this site could ever be termed a tourist attraction’



Above right: The interpretation panels at Hut 13, Auschwitz. Note the specific reference is made to the camp at Lety and that at Hodonín

1 Cole, T. (1999) ‘*Selling The Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History is Bought, Packaged and Sold*’, Routledge, New York
2 Lennon, J. and Foley, M. (2000) ‘*Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*’, Continuum, London and New York
3 Seaton, A.V. (1996) ‘*Guided by the Dark: from Thanatopsis to Thanatourism*’, International Journal of Heritage Studies, Volume 2, Number 4
4 Terrance, M. (2000) ‘*Concentration Camps: A Traveler’s Guide to World War II Sites*’, Universal Publishers
5 Polansky, P. (1998) ‘*Black Silence*’, Cross-Cultural Communications, New York
6 Guy, W. (2001) ‘The Czech Lands and Slovakia: Another false dawn?’ in Guy, W. (ed) ‘Between Past and Future’, University of Hertfordshire Press, Hatfield
7 Piper, F. (1996) ‘Auschwitz: How many perished Jews, Poles, Gypsies…’ Frap-Books, Poland

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Sensitive sites, sensitive solutions

Shelagh Hourahane explains some of the problems and possibilities involved in the use of artwork for the interpretation of important sites

Over the last couple of decades artists have taken a prominent role in making objects to be set in a 'natural' environment. In many instances this work is intended to represent the individual's particular response to a site and may act as a means of stimulating visitors to appreciate a similar way of seeing and expressing. Alternatively art works may act as an entertaining, attractive and often functional addition to the site furniture. In some situations, artists who have an interest in the natural environment are given the opportunity to take part in events that are described as 'interventions' in the landscape. The nature of these projects produces work that is entirely self-motivated and it may not always relate to the particular place in which it is exhibited. Sometimes, as the word 'intervention' suggests, there may be a temporary rearrangement in the landscape as a result of this activity. The idea of interpretation is more specific and requires attention to issues such as that of whose response to a site is being explained and of the awareness that understanding a complex and highly sensitive nature reserve or heritage site may demand.

'...there are conflicts for some people in the use of art as interpretation perhaps because creative media can cause strong emotional reactions'

Left: Wardens and artists working together

Touching the Linden Tree

A short story that I heard as a radio drama may help to explain the conflict that can arise between the way that an artist works and the underlying importance of a natural site. It is called *Touching the Linden Tree* and if there is a moral for us in this story it is that the making of sculpture out of natural materials and the artist's personal desire to express him/herself is not always sympathetic to an understanding of the natural environment or to the interpretation of it.

Dissatisfied with the pressures of work, an Englishman in a mid-life crisis, leaves behind his urban life, his family and his job to find a remote cottage in Wales. This is a place surrounded by a grove of trees. He begins to make sculpture, figures which help him to express his feelings about people, using wood cut from the trees around. As the man works and thinks about his past life, we begin to hear the voices of the trees, especially of one tree. It wonders why the man cuts their branches, mutilating them and yet never looks at them or touches them with care.

We also learn from the tree voices that, from time immemorial, girls have come from the nearby village to touch the trees and to leave red ribbons tied to them as tokens for a happy marriage and to have children. The man knows nothing of this and continues to see the wood as the base material for his own self-expression. Presently, his children come to stay and they begin to play in the trees and even leave toys in their branches. This helps him to begin to look properly at the trees and to begin to re-evaluate his relationship with them. He starts to touch them with sympathy and to realise that his sculpture has been destroying the trees and eventually he also understands what these particular trees mean to the local community.

Airing the problems

Creu-ad is an artist led company that works with rural communities and countryside managers using the arts to express and explain the significance of particular places. We believe that art works are a valuable tool for site interpretation because they stimulate and challenge in ways that more conventional

Right: Detail of Wal Lechi (The Slate Wall) at Pen Lon car park, Newborough Warren National Nature Reserve, Anglesey

interpretation may not. However, there are conflicts for some people in the use of art as interpretation perhaps because creative media can cause strong emotional reactions. While the usual site infrastructure of information boards, signs, fences and boardwalks are accepted on a nature reserve as necessary and can somehow be ignored, interpretive art works that are installed in sites often fall foul of possessive 'wilderness' ideologists. So, we will hear the plea that it is inappropriate to introduce 'man-made objects' onto a natural site. It may be that some such complaints are fuelled by the idea that the beauty or appeal of creative work may be a challenge to the notion of the absolute beauty associated with a valued natural site or landscape.

One of the most difficult hurdles to surmount in proposing the use of art works is the belief that such things are merely decorative or that they are put on sites as an end in themselves and have as their main purpose to attract more visitors to what may be an already well-used environment. It is indeed true that some projects do have this purpose and many sculpture trails around country parks and forests will have something of the theme park concept in their origin. This need not be the case if the work is properly developed with an interpretive programme in mind and with consideration of the priorities of those people who have a close relationship to the site and an understanding of its significance. However, so long as such work is described as 'art' or 'sculpture' rather than 'interpretation' there will continue to be uncertainty about its role causing a tension between the belief that nature conservation is entirely about science and the possibility that it can also be about feeling.

Some of the possibilities

For some people it may seem to be a contradiction to suggest that we should have artwork that isn't primarily about the artist. Such ideas touch a raw vein of romantic and individualist belief about the nature of art. There is an older tradition that allows the artist or maker to transcribe and give form to ideas that originate within communities and which have a particular meaning for a community. This is the tradition of art that is rooted in local experience and draws on communal knowledge and aspiration. To be good interpretation, rather than a form of entertainment, artwork in all disciplines must work with this latter tradition. At the same time its purpose will be to stimulate subjective responses for those who experience it. It may be helpful to think of interpretive art as a gateway through which people can pass in order to begin to question and rearrange their perceptions and knowledge of a place.

'It may be helpful to think of interpretive art as a gateway through which people can pass in order to begin to question and rearrange their perceptions and knowledge of a place'

Understanding each other

From the start of a project that aims to use the arts in interpretation it is important to break down barriers between people with a different interest or stake in the site. The first step should be to facilitate the exchange of everyone's knowledge and understanding of a site. Wardens or managers will have an extensive and layered knowledge about it. Local individuals are more likely to focus on particular aspects that are interesting and valuable to them personally and that may stem from their own childhood experience or from received history. The artist, who may be an

outsider, brings a lateral way of observing the world and a kitbag of skills to express ideas and feelings. So, it is important to get everyone concerned to talk, to share, to feel that they have something to contribute and to focus down on what is the central purpose of the project.

When *Creu-ad* started work on the developmental part of the *Sense of Arrival* project with the Countryside Council for Wales, we decided to hold an artist-warden workshop. This project has been innovatory in many ways, not the least being the Countryside Council's decision to work with artists to produce new interpretive material for a number of national nature reserves. The significance of such reserves as nature conservation sites meant that any interpretive work done would have to be sensitive to this. The process has been one of learning about ways to involve local people and how to deal with the various sensitivities of people who see themselves as stakeholders in the sites. The artist-warden workshop was useful in that it allowed the wardens to talk about their personal feelings for the site they manage and issues, such as 'whose site it is' could be raised. The artists could store up new information and begin to think about ways of transcribing the warden's powerful attachment to these places into a form that could communicate to many people. During the day several hours were spent in a hands on exercise that gave both groups of professionals the chance to express ideas about what and how a specific spot could be interpreted and then to jointly make some ephemeral art objects that reflected these ideas.

Whose message?

Although the ultimate purpose of *A Sense of Arrival* has been to make durable objects that will remain on site, it is useful to always start a project by producing creative work that is not going to impact on the site in any way. It is a helpful way of getting people involved and helping them to express their own interests and ideas without any further commitment. There are many ways of making interpretive art works that are not going to be permanent, do not impact on the site and leave the way open for other interpretations in the future. Even three-dimensional objects can be made in such a way that they decay or

'...it is important to break down barriers between people with a different interest or stake in the site'

Above: The Visitor Centre at Ynsylas Dunes National Nature Reserve, Ceredigion
Left: Detail of *Marram Shadows* sculptural treatment with text from *The Big Book*

are dismantled after a short period of time and they can be treated as trial models for more permanent work. However, many people in a community will want to talk or write about their responses and initial work with storytellers, poets, video artists and musicians can produce some of the best interpretive material. While working at Ynylsas Dunes National Nature Reserve on the Ceredigion coast, the project was initiated with poetry workshops in English and Welsh. As a result, *The Big Book* was created containing the poems and illustrations of local children. So, the words that sweep in inspiring curves across the sides of the Visitor Centre are the words of young people who now have a stake in the reserve.

Above: Artist Jenny Fell and pupils of Ysgol Craig-yr-Wylfa, Borth with *The Big Book* containing poetry and illustrations by the children

‘Interpretive artwork must not become the main focus of a visit to a nature conservation site…’

Don’t spoil the view!

Interpretive artwork must not become the main focus of a visit to a nature conservation site or to a place that is valued because of its historical or cultural significance. A similar plea should be made about visitor centres that may have become so intriguing and interactive that they overshadow and deaden responses to the environment itself. The best of on site interpretive artwork should be discreet and should have a subtle relationship with the place through materials, form, position and meaning. Alternatively it may in some cases be bold, on the periphery of a site, making a challenging statement that will set thoughts chasing and help the visitor to sharpen their perception of what is around them. Whatever it is, it must never spoil the view, it should instead be a gateway to understanding and fuller appreciation.

Shelagh Hourahane is a Director of Creu-ad (www.creu-ad.co.uk), a company that specialises in creative interpretive work with countryside agencies and with rural communities

Contemplating the metropolis

Scott Burham argues that as urban populations and environments explode, creative interpretations of the city are essential to forge new relationships between people and the urban environment

A sobering reality

- In 1800, 5% of the world lived in a city
- In 2003, half the world's population was urban dwellers
- By 2025, 75% of the world will live in an urban environment

These statistics, so often quoted by urban planners and specialists indicate a sobering reality facing the future conditions of cities worldwide. Considering that the historical imperative of workers living in the city to be near the plants and areas of production no longer exists, and the speculated explosion of the virtual office hasn't altered urban populations as it was once believed it would, we are left with the certainty that as time progresses, urban populations will continue to grow exponentially, and urban environments will continue their sprawl.

> 'the last decade has seen an unparalleled growth in artistic and creative interpretation of the urban dynamic'

Much work is being done in academic and specialist fields to study the physical and social issues that the growing urban populations bring about, with much of the study contributing to tangible innovations, projects and new approaches to the built environment, architecture, resource allocation and energy use – all aggressively attempting to meet the changing realities of the city. Even those who have no direct link with urban issues or projects will be familiar with 'urban planning', sustainable design', 'green spaces' – phrases once relegated to specialist interests that now weave through most conversations when the future of cities is discussed.

Creative intervention

It is just as important, however, that great attention be paid to the cultural and creative exploration of the urban environment and people's narrative, and emotive relationship to the city and its aesthetics. The argument could even be made that the cultural interpretation, contemplation and creative study of the urban dynamic should be treated with the same level of importance as the academic and scientific approaches taken to the built environment and population concerns. For, while it can take millions of pounds and years of time to transform an area of the city, people's perspective of and relationship to that same environment or indeed the city itself can change in an afternoon of cultural intervention and exploration. Creative intervention into people's experience and perception of the city can at times bring about a personal change beyond any aspect that a change in the built environment could deliver.

While not a new development in cultural exploration, the last decade has seen an unparalleled growth in artistic and creative interpretation of the urban dynamic. Independent artists and arts organisations are responding with great creativity to the increasing importance of urban issues within their work in both subject matter and direct interventions in cities around the world. Certainly one of the clearest signs of the growth of this cultural area, and an obvious point of personal pride, is the introduction of the world's first institution dedicated to the exploration of urban culture, Urbis.

Urbis: The Centre for Urban Culture

Urbis has the rare distinction of being the world's only organisation devoted exclusively to the creative exploration and interpretation of urban culture and the dynamics of the urban environment. The Urbis building, one of Manchester's most dramatic pieces of architecture, and Urbis itself was born with great symbolism, being built on the site of the devastating IRA bomb in 1996 – from the site of great urban destruction comes an organisation devoted to exploring the many elements that make up the modern city.

Below: Urbis, The Centre for Urban Culture, Manchester

Above: Members of Eindhoven graffiti collective SOL Crew at work in Urbis as part of *Ill Communication*

Urbis explores the most unique aspects of contemporary urban culture and the cities of today and tomorrow. It is a challenging task to capture, display, exhibit and maintain a coherent understanding of a constantly changing subject field. Unlike almost any other area of heritage culture and interpretation, the area that Urbis explores is the 'heritage of now', of capturing and communicating the living, breathing modern city.

Faced with such challenges, the urban dynamic must be broken down into broad strokes of experience – the sensations that most broadly define the urban experience and the aspects that create a city's vibe and differentiates one city from the next. The upper three floors address this by focusing on three broad areas of experience: the People, Place, and Pulse of the city.

- *People*: the people of cities around the world and the stories they have to tell
- *Place*: how cities structure themselves and how the environment of the city changes around the world.
- *Pulse*:'*Imagining the City*' installation and other multimedia installations which look at the vibe and pulse of the city.

With the top three floors covering the broad experiential aspects of urban culture, Level One hosts Urbis's large gallery space with constantly changing exhibitions focusing on specific urban cultural elements, inspirations and developments.

While Urbis is the first institution to be launched with such an exclusive area of focus, indications are that the need for similar institutions are being felt elsewhere in the world, as individuals and organisations from New York to New Zealand have contacted Urbis recently to explore establishing related programmes elsewhere.

This can be seen not only as a reaction to the growing urban populations and environments, but an acknowledgement that the way people are interacting with the city and responding to urban culture itself is changing in the most significant way since the establishment of the modern metropolis.

The city as playground

Cities are in many ways almost organic in the way they structure themselves at the collective will of the people, and the way people take individual control over areas of the city or ways they use the city, completely outside of established rule or permissions. What is developing now is a seismic shift in the way people are relating to the city. Instead of being overwhelmed by the urban environment and consumed by it, people are taking control and becoming the masters of the physical city. Engineering it to their own use and manipulating it for their own creative enjoyment and expression.

In September 2003 Urbis launched the first of a series of exhibitions exploring graffiti art and culture, *Ill Communication*. Nine of the leading graffiti artists from Europe were invited to work

Above right: *Imagining The City* exhibition designed by Land Design Studio. Gold Medal Winner for Installation, ID Magazine, 2003
Above: SOL Crew's finished piece for *III Communication* at Urbis

'the city has never been more alive, and in more a state of adventurous flux and redefinition'

directly on the gallery walls. The show received unprecedented media coverage for a graffiti art exhibition, which in itself was evidence of a growing public interest in the art form. But of particular interest within the show was hearing the artists talk about why they chose to work in such a public, marginal, and in many cities, illegal area of practice. As 'Bomb Kid' from the Eindhoven graffiti collective SOL Crew explained, street-based art (the preferred term used by the artists) is a chance to communicate directly with the public, without an intermediary of advertising, print, or other media influence. He explains: '*advertising in the city can be just as intrusive – people have no control over what huge images may appear on the side of a building. We are making the choice ourselves when we do a piece outside. We are taking control of what images are shown to the city.*' He views his work not as vandalism or destruction, but a creative addition and contribution to the urban landscape. In fact, the collective's name, SOL Crew, is an acronym for Signs Of Life – their statement that when their work appears in the city, it is a Sign Of Life of the city itself.

In North America, the organization *Adbusters* is spearheading campaigns for citizens to take control over the influx of visual messages and advertisements spreading throughout cities. Their campaigns encourage people to reclaim the urban environment from advertisers and urban planners by doing everything from 'unbranding' areas of the city by placing black stickers over logos which appear throughout adverts and on the street to placing sofas in parking spaces on the street and using the space as a reading area instead of giving it over to a car.

In the extreme are truly adventurous activities such as 'free running' which involves treating the city as an obstacle course, getting from point a to point b in the city by scaling buildings and jumping from roof to roof. As one of the practitioners said '*the object of free running is to always move forward, never backward. And to not just get somewhere, but get there beautifully.*'

The city has never been more alive, and in more a state of adventurous flux and redefinition. The task of contemplating the metropolis and providing creative explorations through Urbis programming and activities is a momentous task, but also a labour of paramount need as the size and prominence of urban environments grow at such exponential rates.

Scott Burnham has created and directed numerous urban cultural projects for cities including Prague, Barcelona, London, Boston and Amsterdam. He is currently Creative Director for Urbis in Manchester

Considering contest and combat

Jim Forrester and **Debbie Walker** reveal the thinking behind the new IWM North exhibitions and learning programmes

The starting point

IWM North is an expression of an existing remit in a new museum. It takes as its starting point the social and community history collections of the Imperial War Museum (IWM) and seeks to present them in a new location in a new building to a new audience. It is ambitious and different but it is still manifestation of the brief set by government in 1917: that there should be a national museum of war and conflict to record the courage and sacrifice of all British and Commonwealth participants, along with the social upheaval and change that usually ensues from war. In those days, it was envisaged as a record of historical events; today, with almost 100 years of collecting and recording behind it, the IWM is in a position to discuss a century of conflict, to offer it up for debate and to build learning programmes around it.

Above: Part of the displays: Experience of War

'The IWM is in a position to discuss a century of conflict, to offer it up for debate and to build learning programmes around it'

When the Trustees of IWM sought some 17 years ago to open a branch in the north, it was with a view to taking their community history museum further out of London since it collects and interprets people's stories from across the whole country. Unsure of where to locate such a museum, it took until 1997 for Trafford in Manchester to be chosen as the site. This was after a promising start in Hartlepool had fallen through and a trawl of some 70 possibilities had led to the old Port of Manchester on the edge of Trafford Park. Acres of disused land allied to good road communications and the availability of grants suggested this site as possible but it was the catchment of 15.5 million people within a two hour drive that cemented the decision.

With the site chosen, it was then a question of finding an architect who could address the brief of creating a stunning 'must-see' building to pull people across the Ship Canal and invite them visit this new branch of IWM. In the early stages, the name Imperial War Museum was discussed with a view to minimising the sometimes negative impact of its name, and the architect has often referred to it as then three most difficult words in the English language. It was, however, recognised that it has strong positive brand values too - excellent knowledge, research and interpretation- and such a powerful brand is not to be dismissed lightly. It would be necessary to use the design, interpretation and marketing to correctly position the museum in its community history niche.

After a wide trawl, the architect Daniel Libeskind won the competition with his breath-taking concept of a world shattered by conflict that is recreated as a sculpture of the broken pieces or shards. By selecting his design, the Trustees ensured the museum's message was there for all to see and respond to. The next challenge was both to fundraise and to devise an interpretation strategy that would stand alongside the

Libeskind design. In the course of the design process, it proved too difficult to achieve £40m within the timeframe and the project was cut back to £30m. Construction started in January 2002 and the museum opened two and a half years later in July 2002.

Interpretation strategy

Amongst its rich and diverse collections, IWM has remarkable collections of photography and sound recordings and, since these are relatively inaccessible to anyone other than researchers, it was felt that a dramatic means of presenting this material could be the answer. After much testing and research, Event Communications designed and produced a massive-scale AV show called *The Big Picture*. It allows a series of 15-minute shows (three at present) to be shown in rotation using 60 slide projectors firing onto 20 screens. Each show is an essay on a theme relating to war and conflict and the current themes are *Why War? Weapons of War and Children* and *War*. The shows occur in the main gallery space and require the lights to be fully dimmed, creating an all-enveloping experience. Few people are unmoved by the intensity of the shows which seek to make the past experience of war relevant to today.

To complement *The Big Picture*, a 220 metre Timeline made up of fairly conventional wall cases was set out around the perimeter of the main gallery with a deliberately cryptic graphic style in a contemporary typeface. To ensure *The Big Picture* could function in the main space, this was necessarily kept fairly clear but a selection of large objects including a Harrier Jumpjet, a T34 tank and a Trabant car were dispersed throughout. Behind the screen walls, which are mostly on independent steel, plywood and canvas structures, there is space for six themed exhibitions that can be changed in the future. Designed by Real Studios who also did the Timeline, these currently cover subjects from the *Experience of War* through to *Science and Technology* or the *Legacy of War* and link strongly into the learning programmes.

The last piece of the main display 'jigsaw' seeks to provide visitor choice along with regular opportunities for handling sessions through two innovative vertical, computerised storage units. Known as TimeStacks, these allow the team to create quick displays in 2m x 1m trays which can then be selected by visitors using buttons. The trays currently cover the conflict in Iraq, trench art, dogs in war, sport in war and many other subjects. It is the speed and ease of change that makes them so useful along with the ability for the interactors (explainers and performers) to open up the TimeStacks and to lead discussions based around objects.

With a further gallery devoted to special exhibitions that rotate three times a year, and with a full public programme to complement both the long-term and

'Daniel Libeskind won the competition with his breath-taking concept of a world shattered by conflict that is recreated as a sculpture of the broken pieces or shards'

Far left: IWM North
Below: View of the Water Shard from the canal

Left: A Timestack handling session

special exhibitions, the museum is well positioned to achieve three of its main aims: to work with a wide range of visitors of all ages and pre-knowledge; to respond to contemporary world events speedily; to maintain an innovative and cutting-edge approach to displays and programming. The first 18 months has brought in 600,000 visitors and this is now settling back to around 300,000 per year. Free entry helped with this start as did the focus on Manchester during the Commonwealth games, but this addition to the new destination of The Quays in Trafford and Salford has greatly added to the regeneration of the area and has endorsed the Trustees original vision that they should move north.

'Few people are unmoved by the intensity of the shows which seek to make the past experience of war relevant to today'

Learning programmes

Learning and access have always been at the heart of the IWM North project. From the beginning we aimed to offer a variety of different learning outcomes - open ended, challenging, appealing to all the senses - and fun! We set out to provide a public environment combined with a fully integrated learning, events and exhibition programme to provide accessible interpretation and encourage active participation and 'ownership'.

The Head of Learning & Access and the Learning & Access Officer were appointed a full year before we opened to develop and promote our community role, actively promoting the effective use of the museum as a life-long learning resource. This also included working with a variety of focus groups (incorporating formal education) to make sure what we produced was relevant and wanted/needed. Such work led to the creation of a free CD Rom guide to the Museum for formal educators (over 10,000 have bee mailed out). This guide includes a raft of resources for pre-, during and post- visit for all ages and levels, including new and challenging interpretation such as *The Big Picture* shows. The CD is soon to be transferred to our web site so it can more easily updated and new resources added.

The Learning Programme is designed to be as accessible as possible and flexible enough to suit different learning styles. The exhibition displays, interpretation styles/techniques used and the *Learning Studio* and staff development all take account of this, aiming to provide a unique kind of learning based on first-hand, concrete experience of real objects and primary and secondary resources. With this in mind we set about building a Learning and Access team that included Visitor Programmes Officer, a team of interactors and volunteer co-ordinator and administrator.

The interactor team

The interactor team is at the core of the interpretation and learning offer the museum provides. The basic aim is for interactors is to develop a two-way dialogue with the visitor. They were appointed as a team and have a variety of skills and experience including actor, artist, script-writer, play worker and formal educator. The two crucial 'key skills' they all share are they are born communicators and an affinity with the museum and its collections. One of the most successful aspects of the team is their sharing of their particular skills and knowledge, with a number of the interactors now taking part in performances and leading formal and informal education group sessions. They have quickly established themselves as one of the most popular attractions of the museum.

The development of the interactor team, the volunteer programme and the policy to work across

departments takes in to account that we realize that interpretation is not about teaching visitors. It's about the gap that can arise between the museum's knowledge base and the visitor's understanding and prior learning. It's about empowering visitors to negotiate the gap in a way that's significant to them and respectful of others. We aim to enable the visitor to see and interpret in new and different ways, and hopefully the museum can play a role in promoting tolerance, respect and even appreciation of other views.

Above: A handling session with an interactor
Right: *The Big Picture Children and War*

Visitor research

The visitor research we are undertaking is also making us aware of what areas we are succeeding and those we are not. For example most people find the museum a surprisingly emotive experience. However for many it is also frustrating, as they feel we don't provide enough background/in-depth information on the stories we are telling and supply enough ways to actively interact and engage with what they see. We are at present undertaking more qualitative evaluation and bringing together a number of cross departmental working groups to develop such area as interactivity and orientation – the building is meant to disorientate but not alienate.

Volunteer scheme

The volunteer coordinator and administrator were again brought on board before the museum opened to set up the innovative volunteer programme the initial project team researched and fund raised for. This programme allowed the museum to develop local audiences who were unlikely to visit the museum. At the same time we were providing needy people (lone parents, young people at risk of exclusion, returners to work, people with disabilities and from ethnic minority backgrounds) with transferable vocational skills and recognised qualifications. These people have become ambassadors for the museum in the local communities as well as being a very useful and informative focus group for testing out the museum and its interpretation/learning services.

'It's about empowering visitors to negotiate the gap in a way that's significant to them and respectful of others'

Jim Forrester is Director, and Debbie Walker is Head of Learning and Access, at IWM North

Another line on the palimpsest

James Carter argues that as interpretation matures, we need to recognise its essential quality as a reflection of cultural concerns, not a mechanism to achieve mechanistic objectives

Above: Interpretation, like this sculpture near the River Tweed by Gary Fay with a poem by Valerie Gillies, adds both physical and conceptual layers to the landscape

'Palimpsest' is one of those words you can roll around inside your mouth just to enjoy the sound and feel of it. It is also a symbol for an intriguing concept. The word started out as a way of describing documents that have been written on more than once: a common practice in medieval times. Parchment was expensive, so you might write your shopping list on it one week, and the next week write another list at right angles to the first. Then somebody else might use the same parchment to write the court records, building up layers of different texts on one document. The concept has been adopted to describe landscape: any landscape is made up of layers that create what we see today, from the geological underlay through layers of vegetation and human intervention to layers of cultural meaning and reference points.

'Palimpsest started out as a way of describing documents that have been written on more than once: a common practice in medieval times'

A bold experiment

At Creag Meagaidh, a wild and woolly National Nature Reserve to the south west of the Cairngorms, I realised that we can think about interpretation in the same way. Back in the 1980s Dick Balharry, a pioneer of Scottish countryside management, tried a bold and controversial experiment here. As reserve manager, Dick was concerned about the loss of the natural scrub woodland that once covered the mountains. A key factor preventing the trees coming back is that there are too many deer. Conventional wisdom was that if the deer were culled, more would simply come in to the area. Dick reckoned that if the herd was culled heavily and in the right way, then the population would remain at a lower level and not get colonised from outside, allowing more tree growth and a richer environment, as well as a healthier deer herd. Against considerable opposition,

‘But there is still a need to maintain some UK-wide representation and recognition for what we do’

Above: Trees are returning to Creag Meagaidh: interpretation can offer ways of thinking about them as a ecologist or as a poet

Dick managed to try this idea as an experiment.

Today you will find a sequence of interpretation panels at Creag Meagaidh as you come up from the car park towards the hill. They are at least 15 years old, and still look pretty good – a striking contrast with the fast fading digital prints we seem cursed with nowadays! The panels tell the story about how deer stop trees growing and about how deer on the reserve are culled. Just at the point where the path enters hill country, a final panel offers a view of the landscape in front of you as it was when the panel was done, and describes hopes for how the trees should regenerate over the coming years. Those hopes have been realised, for there are many more trees in the landscape than in the illustration on the panel.

This final panel was always seen as the upper limit of interpretation on the reserve: a sort of high tide mark beyond which there would be no more fixed interpretation. In the last few years, however, four large stones have been installed in between the penultimate board and the upper limit. The stones have a poem sandblasted into them, one line of poem per stone, so that as you walk uphill you read Sorley MacLean’s words:

I saw
The tree rising
In its branches
The jewelled music

Dick regards this as a bit of cheating. Someone has managed to get away with a bit of extra interpretation because the upper tidal limit hasn’t been passed!

But both pieces of interpretation are valid, and I find them fascinating because the two interventions reveal the concerns of their time. The panels describing the management of the reserve needed to prove a case, to establish the experiment and convince people that it was necessary, even to explain the whole relationship between the deer and the trees. The poem stones express a need for a poetic or aesthetic response to the role trees play in the landscape. They reflect a time when the experiment is an accepted fact, although still an interesting and valid subject for interpretation.

Cultural expression

For me, the point of all this is to emphasise that interpretation is primarily a form of cultural expression. I think this aspect of the discipline has, ironically, been lost in the way interpretation planning has developed. Planning models emphasise a desire to have audiences remember themes, and to meet objectives about what people are going to learn and do and feel. I have played a part in promoting these models myself, and I would not want to lose the clearer sense of focus that interpretation planning has brought. But the way people are often encouraged to apply this turns interpretation into a mechanistic process where ‘site significance’ is something that can be rigidly recorded, and where if audience A are subjected to message B then C will be the result. Interpretation becomes a way of ticking boxes, a device like a successful piece of marketing that can provide measurable and cost effective results. I don’t believe interpretation can be defined so narrowly. Of course it must have a clear sense of what it is trying to achieve, but it must also be a creative response to its subject, reflecting the concerns of the time in which it is done and, in really lively interpretation, the individual character and viewpoint of the person who creates it.

Evaluation

Evaluation studies can throw this into sharp relief. The Manchester Art Gallery has recently completed a major re-development that tries to make the collections more accessible. In preparing picture

Above: Two of the poem stones by the path at Creag Meagaidh

labels for the new displays, staff used principles developed by a Scandinavian museum educator, Margereta Ekarv, that are intended to make museum text easier to read. The idea (harder to do than it sounds) is to write text so that each line expresses a single concept, or ends at the point where you might pause if speaking. The end result can look a little like a poem in blank verse, and is often more direct and personal than conventional labels. Visitors seem to like this: the gallery has received several letters praising its labels, and I do not know of any museum with conventional text that receives such comments! Yet during the gallery's development staff tried some audience focussed research in which they showed two pieces of text – one conventional, the other written according to Ekarv's principles – to a sample group of the public. The result? The public preferred the conventional one. It is to the credit of the gallery team that they had the courage to press ahead with the idea, to try something that would challenge the innate conservatism of British gallery visitors and offer a more personal view of the pictures.

If interpretation is a form of cultural expression, would it be possible to have new interpretation projects reviewed in the same way as theatre performances or films? Because it seems to me that they provide closer analogies for what we are doing than a marketing department's record sheet of sales per customer contact.

Networking

Another area where the idea of a palimpsest seems relevant is in the growth of associations, networks and bodies that aim to promote and develop the whole field of interpretation. The last three or four years have seen several: the Scottish Interpretation Network, Interpret Scotland (a grouping of representatives from the major agencies involved in interpretation), Dehongli Cymru in Wales (similar to Interpret Scotland), and the Interpretation Alliance in England, which has been working on a proposed advisory service for people developing interpretation projects.

These new groups reflect a need for people involved in interpretation to get together and talk, as well as a growing sense of interpretation as a discipline. Their basis in the newly devolved parts of the UK reflects the development of that great palimpsest called Britain, and a growing desire for local relevance. That desire for a local exchange of ideas and contacts is perhaps greatest for people whose work involves interpretation as only a part of what they do: countryside rangers, attraction managers or tourism officers, for example. Small scale events are a good way to meet this need, and AHI would welcome any offers from people who might like to organise an event based on their site or work.

Certification?

But there is still a need to maintain some UK-wide representation and recognition for what we do. Should we be looking at a range of certification for interpreters, interpretation planners and trainers, like that operated by the NAI in the States? Should we focus on persuading senior managers that interpretation is an established discipline in its own right? Should we make links with other bodies who have shared interests in areas of expertise and concern, such as the Group for Education in Museums?

All of these are potential future avenues for AHI to explore. We would welcome any thoughts on what the priorities should be, and how we could work towards them. The groundswell of interest in interpretation is encouraging and exciting, but it's also a challenge. How do we write a few more lines on the palimpsest, yet make sure the whole thing stays legible?

James Carter is a consultant on communication and interpretation projects, and Chair of AHI

Who *are* the interpreters?

Andrew Jenkinson reflects on the contradictions involved in the use of the words interpreter and interpretation

My short presentation at Manchester grew out of contemplation of the fact there is an element of conflict in the way we use the word interpretation. Notably, that the actual process of interpretation, in the strict and traditional sense of the word, was only partly the preserve of those (myself included) who consider themselves to be 'interpreters'. For a large – possibly larger – part, it is the visitor / user who interprets, in the light of their accumulated knowledge, experience and interest. And secondly that it is unnecessary to have a separate and special definition of interpretation to cover the use of the word in an environmental or heritage context.

'…for much of the time we have taken for granted the meaning of interpretation, using as a starting point… the American National Park Service, and its great advocate Freeman Tilden'

These notions have of course been touched upon previously in several ways in the 28-year history of our organisation. The first recognition that I could find was by David Eagar in issue No. 3 of the Newsletter. He felt that much greater cognisance should be afforded to the audience for interpretation, and coined (unsuccessfully so far as I can see) the word 'interpretee' for the recipient of interpretation.

In the early 1980s much midnight oil was burnt at conferences at which Professor Terry Lee and Dr David Uzzel of the Psychology Department of the University of Surrey tried to rationalise the individual's responses to interpretation in terms of schemata or each individual's psychological baggage. Again this was an approach that struck many chords with me. It shifted consideration from the medium to the message.

Medium v. message

Yet still the medium seemed to dominate the professional's view of interpretation. I have contributed myself to that debate in terms of interpretive panels. We have been instructed in design criteria for legibility of lettering. We have listened eagerly to the latest audio gadgetry; discussed living history interpretation and a host of other techniques of undoubted professional interest and concern.

And much of the time we have taken for granted the meaning of interpretation, using as a starting point that imported from what we saw as the home of interpretation, the American National Park Service, and its great advocate Freeman Tilden. Namely that 'interpretation is an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information'.

I came to interpretation from a slightly different background from many of my fellow Society members in the late 1970s. I was not a graphic designer. I had no institutional responsibility to provide interpretation as part of a visitor service division. I was not employed by an organisation whose prime function was concern for any particular aspect of heritage or environmental protection. I was an adult education tutor for environmental sciences within the further education service of Shropshire County Council. My three immediate colleagues were responsible, as adult education tutors, for history, archaeology and literature. So, with the possible exception of the last, we all took naturally to a world in which the boundaries of conventional adult education lecture classes expanded outwards to interpretation of the environment within the environment. The clearest manifestation of this was the extensive Exploring Shropshire programme of guided walks that took place around the county between 1975 and 1981.

Traditional definitions

Why the autobiography? Because this essentially 'educational' introduction to interpretation was based less on the new trans-Atlantic definition of interpretation within a formalised environmental protection agency, but rather on conventional dictionary definitions of the word to 'interpret':

- To explain or perceive the significance of
- To clarify the meaning of
- To translate – from specialist language or jargon into everyday language
- To represent the meaning or character of (e.g. music, art)

I saw elements of all of these, to different degrees, in what I was doing in adult education. And crucially I was doing it for the benefit of an audience, but not directly, other than to satisfy my own convictions,

Right: On an 'open field' historic site such as Branodunum Roman harbour on the north Norfolk Coast there can be no meaningful interpretation by the visitor unless an archaeological interpreter provides the context

Above: Castell Henllys illustrates how archaeologists have interpreted evidence and presented it in a meaningful way to give visitors opportunities to interpret prehistoric life through their own experience

for the benefit of a cause (i.e. environmental or heritage conservation).

Most frequently I was explaining the significance of the natural landscape to a voluntary audience of interested adults. I was very conscious that I was often perceiving the significance of what I was explaining only as I responded to their questions. It was often a mutual learning experience.

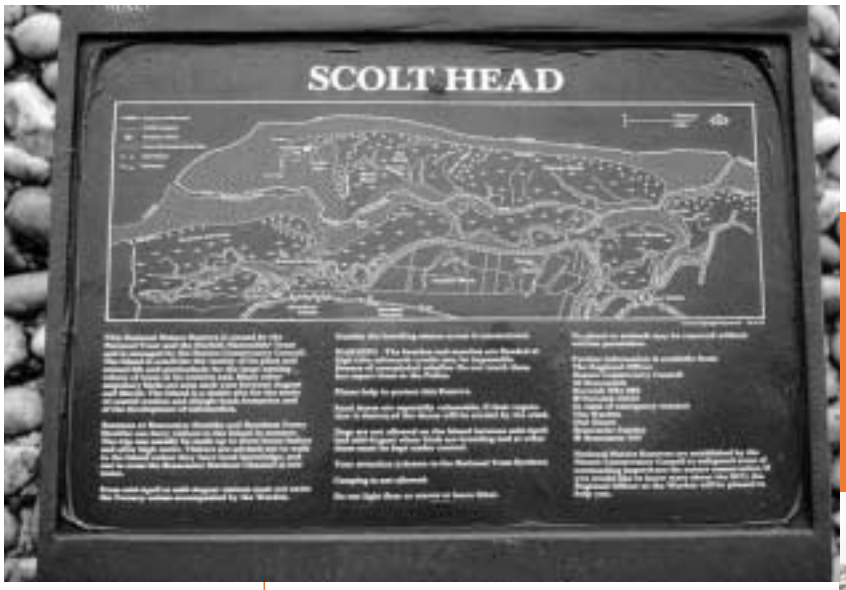
I often had to clarify the meaning of something I had said in terms that individual members of the audience could relate to in their own experience. In a subject as bogged down in nomenclature and jargon as geology I spent much time 'translating' from what is to all intents and purposes a foreign language into everyday English. And perhaps less obviously, I was both helping others and myself in representing the meaning of the landscape. Geology is perhaps the most 'artistic' of the natural sciences. One can derive pleasure and interest from it at many different levels and through different senses. One person's desolate scenery is another's awesome splendour

I was comfortable with the idea that all of this was interpretation within those standard dictionary definitions. I did not need to invoke anything special to explain my aims or actions. But what I did need, for the communicative aspects of this interpretation, was an audience. And until my message had been received by an audience, explained to them, and understood by them I had not interpreted.

By the same token I am very cautious about describing media per se as interpretive or as providing interpretation. Whatever the provider's intent, panels or leaflets only become interpretive – or interpretation only takes place – when the message within the medium is received and understood by an audience in such a way that it enhances their enjoyment or understanding.

Some may think this pedantic hair-splitting, or philosophising of the 'sound of the one-handed clap' school. But my reason for going down this road is to emphasise that ultimately I believe it is the audience that does the interpreting. Those who view your exhibition, read your book, watch your video or simply take advantage of the emotional experience of the landscape to which you have given them access or immerse themselves in the dramatic atmosphere that your living history performance has created are the ones who are interpreting. They too are the interpreters.

Fear not – I have no intention of changing my description of my own business from that of 'countryside interpreter'. Still less will I expect AHI to agonise yet again over a change of name or even a new formal definition of interpretation. And useful though I think it might be in some contexts I can see the linguistic problems of referring to audiences as 'interpretees'. Some people have lost more than enough sleep over the etymological correctness of 'interpretative' as opposed to 'interpretive'!



Above: Complex maps or information can leave the visitor having to interpret the interpretation before they can interpret the site
Right: A toposcope provides the information that visitors need to interpret a good view for themselves

Interpretation requires an audience

My aim is to 'say it for the message' and to understand that the message has a target audience of diverse individuals, each with their own set of knowledge, experience and expectations, within the context of which they will interpret your message. I like to think that this makes for both better interpretive planning and better interpretive media.

I do not believe that, within the constraints of most media, one can satisfy all of the people all of the time. But by striving to understand audiences and the way in which they approach your interpretive situation or resource it is realistic to satisfy most of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time.

The key is in recognising, and responding to, that element of personal self-interpretation within the audience. Whilst I realise the danger of generalising, there is arguably a basic difference in the requirements of cultural or historical interpretation and those of natural or environmental interpretation.

'...I was very conscious that I was often perceiving the significance of what I was explaining only as I responded to their questions'

Cultural heritage sites require 'interpretation' to explain missing features and provide a context for those who are not of that culture – and in the case of history that is all of us! An Iron Age hill fort at best conveys nothing more than a sense of awe if one is presented only with a bleak hill-top and much eroded ditches and ramparts. It requires the knowledge of the archaeological interpreter to demonstrate how the defences originally looked; what sort of dwellings filled the enclosed space and what may have been the social and economic structure of the society that lived in this way. Generally there will be a level of interest among the audience in wanting answers to these questions – whether one has visited a reconstructed site as an 'interpretive experience', for example Butser or Castell Henllys' or alighted upon it in the course of a walk over the hills.

Still less obviously significant is a site such as Roman Branodunum – modern Brancaster – on the north Norfolk Coast. A field with a few minor humps and bumps was not going to stir the imagination or conjure up any sort of image in the mind of the passing walker without some interpretive guiding hand, and an artist's representation of the 2000 year-old scene. But even then many questions must remain unanswered. As always the visitors will have vastly different starting points. And the main point is that the archaeologist may have been the interpreter of the site, but the visitor has to interpret the interpretation.

This of course is where person-to-person interpretation such as guided walks scores over inanimate interpretation such as on-site panels. The latter, if well thought out, might appear to convey an adequate interpretive message – but what does the map say to the vast majority of the public, who were shown by Countryside Commission research in the 1980s to be unable to interpret maps in a meaningful way? And what does the interpretive panel add to

Right: Most visitors to woodland do not seek any interpretation beyond that of their own experience. Provision of access to the site permits this interpretation

'In an increasingly multi-cultural society it will become harder to rely on a common core of experience amongst one's audience for interpretation'

the enjoyment of a visitor who is already conversant with the generality of information so often expressed upon them?

'...ultimately I believe it is the audience that does the interpreting'

A visitor to an ancient oak-wood in late spring is much less likely to have any desire to seek answers to those questions which 'interpreters' appear so keen to assume. The experience of dappled sunlight through the fresh green leaves, the shimmer of the bluebell carpet, or the bird song are images that will be taken home. That it is a local nature reserve of 23.5 hectares of ancient woodland or that it is the home of a rare nocturnal moth living in the treetops are not factors that are going to weigh heavily in the interpretive experience. Support for conservation will be generated more by ensuring that the experience is available to and shared by all, than by telling people how vital it is to protect a rarity.

Adapting to a multi-cultural audience

It is to me a sad reflection on our present educational system that the range of common cultural experience is becoming evermore restricted despite the prescribed National Curriculum. The lack of certain common cultural references in a multi-cultural society makes it more difficult for us to predict the response of our audience, or to use historical reference as a convenient short hand. Does the up-coming generation understand an expression such Canute-like? I was amazed when discussing the reproduction artefact business with our recently arrived neighbours from Hastings that they had frequently been asked what 'a Thousand and Sixty-six Creations' was about!

In an increasingly multi-cultural society it will become harder to rely on a common core of experience amongst one's audience for interpretation. The Bible, Shakespeare, classics or the Victorian novel all become decreasingly useful as sources of literary reference or allusion. Yet there remain those like myself for whom the idea of 5 acres (or, with a bit of mental arithmetic, 2.5 hectares) is easier to interpret (or visualise) than x football pitches!

As 'interpreters' within the accepted definition of the interpretation profession, we should be making more effort to ensure that our provision relates to carefully targeted audiences who will understand and appreciate what we are saying in the context of their own experience; rather than to hope that a 'catch-all' message will be equally well communicated to all recipients.

Andrew Jenkinson has been managing partner of Scenesetters, countryside interpreters and publishers for 23 years, following an earlier career in adult education

Troubles and trees

Bob Jones discusses the balancing act required to interpret sites of conflict in a contemplative manner

A tragic story

'November the eighth, the day of the execution, was heralded by gale force winds and torrential rain, causing the assembled crowds to fear the heavens themselves were affronted by the awful sight of the gallows set high against the sky upon the rocky knoll of Cnap a'Chaolais.

James had prepared a final speech in which he said his own innocence had made it possible for him to bear his sufferings and that he died, as he had lived, an honest man. He revealed that, on the day following his sentence at Inverary, one of the wretched MacColl brothers had come to him in prison begging forgiveness for the terrible acts of perjury he and his family had committed. James then named others who had likewise perjured him, praying God most sincerely to forgive all who had ever done or wished him evil.

James knelt upon the scaffold, took leave of his friends and mounted the ladder. It is said even the hardened soldiers of the military guard were seen weeping openly. The execution took place at mid-day and at five in the afternoon the body was hung in chains a gruesome reminder to all malcontents of Hanoverian law and order.'

The romanticisation of history

So died James of the Glen, a Jacobite – generally accepted as being innocent of the murder of Colin Campbell of Glenure, the local Hanoverian factor in 1752. Some readers may recognise the story as the *Appin Murder*, fictionalised and romanticised by Robert Louis Stevenson. And herein lies my concern in contemplating the conflicts of the past: the romanticisation of history. The real event in this case is shrouded in mystery and intrigue, and has the power to set family against family even to this day. It forms a milestone in Scottish history – the callous shooting in the back of a man who was not the rapacious monster of Jacobite mythology nor the cunning and much-hated 'Red Fox' of Stevenson's fiction – but who was in fact a typical country gentleman and family man who did much to soften the impact of Hanoverian reprisals on the local Jacobite population, many of whom were survivors of Culloden, the last great battle to be fought on mainland Britain.

Commanding contemplation

The story I have outlined commands contemplation, if only because of all those who played a part in the tale - whether victim, perjurer, agent or a revengeful and vindictive establishment. The challenge is that, as interpreters, we owe it to the memories of those we speak for to articulate their lives with honesty and without 'sexing-up the report' for interpretative effect.

The issue of 'ownership' is a further challenge. As interpreters we also owe it to the memory of those who constitute our histories to care for such 'memorial' sites and not allow them to fall below the 'radar'. But people move on, organisations come and go, agencies re-invent themselves, and the interpretative inventory slips from our grasp. The panel or cairn slips into dilapidation and demeans the very event that gave it life. I contend that we are not good at playing the long game; at seeing beyond the looming deadline and the current funding shortfall! We need to get better at the interpretative inheritance we would leave to those who will follow us.

Sites of conflict

The events I have described above in what has become '*The Last Clansman Trail*' are merely samples of a vast inventory of conflict and contemplation related heritage and cultural landmark sites that the Forestry Commission manages, often located in amongst trees, in woods or forest, or open ground. They include military aircraft crash sites, war memorials, former prison camps and battlefields. Sometimes they are found in obviously special places, whether prominent geographic features chosen deliberately for the impact they would have on subjugating the 'rebellious' population, such as the gallows site at Cnap a'Chaolais above the then important thoroughfare of the Ballachullish narrows and ferry, or on an actual battlefield, land witness to horrendous conflict. Sometimes they are deep amidst native woodlands stuffed full of contemplative ambience; others are hidden within forests only to be revealed in the harvesting cycle of forestry.

John Muir, father of the national parks movement, wrote in his essay *A Wind-Storm in the Forests* written as he contemplated the power and the conflict of the elements, perched high through the night in a violently swaying tree in Yosemite valley:

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Above: Aoineadh Mor SackSign
Above right: A close-up of the SackSign

'... herein lies my concern in contemplating the conflicts of the past: the romanticisation of history'

'...we all travel the milky way together, trees and men; but it never occurred to me until this storm-day, while swinging in the wind, that trees are travellers in the ordinary sense. They make many journeys, not extensive ones it is true; but our own little journeys – away and back again – are only little more than tree wavings; many of them not so much.'

With some temerity I would add to Muir's deliberations that it is mankind who brings conflict to the trees – and possibly it is the trees who contemplate us and our doings with disbelief – and perhaps, we might hope, a little pity?

'...little can ever better the 'first-hand' account'

The value of first hand accounts

Returning to my first challenge – that of honesty over spin - little can ever better the 'first-hand' account. The following extract relates to the misery of the Highland Clearances – a social conflict – and the experiences of a former inhabitant of the 'cleared' west coast township of Aoineadh Mor, as she contemplated the events from afar and in another time. Mary Cameron told this story, years later, to her former minister's eldest son in Glasgow. She is describing the events in 1824 when she and her family were forced to leave 'Unimore' (sic). The route they took was the steep path through the Bealach na Sgairm (which translates as 'steep, rocky pass'), an extraordinary feat in view of the burdens they carried.

'When we got the 'summons to quit', we thought it was only for getting an increase of rent, and this we were willing to give; but permission to stay we got not. The small cattle (sheep) were sold, and at length it became necessary to part with the one cow.

When shall I forget the plaintive wailing of the children deprived of the milk which was no more for them? When shall I forget the last sight I got of my pretty cluster of goats bleating on the lip of the rock, as if inviting me to milk them? But it was not allowed me to put a cuach (pail) under them.

The day of the 'flitting' came. The officers of the law came along with it, and the shelter of a house, even for one night more, was not to be got. It was necessary to depart. The hissing of the fire on the flag of the hearth as they were drowning it, reached my heart. We could not get even a bothy in the country; therefore we had nothing for it but to face the land of strangers (lowlands).

The aged woman, the mother of my husband, was then alive, weak, and lame. James carried her on his back in a creel. I followed him with little John, an infant at my breast, and thou who art no more, Donald beloved, walking with my sister by my side. Our neighbours carried the little furniture then remained to us, and showed every kindness which tender friendship could show.

On the day of leaving Unimore I though my heart would rend. I would feel right if my tears would flow; but no relief thus did I find. We sat for a time on Knock-nan-Càrn (Hill of Cairns) to take the last look at the place where we had been brought up. The houses were being already stripped. The bleat of the 'big sheep' was on the mountain. The whistle of the lowland shepherd and the bark of his dogs were on the brae.'

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Above: Cnap a'Chaolais 'targe' interpretative panel. (A targe is a Scottish clansman shield)

'...to walk amongst the pines is to feel the past

Aoineadh Mor recently re-emerged from beneath the forest plantings of the 20th century as the trees were harvested. Trees will return to stand vigil over the township's remains – although only to its boundaries this time – through a new and sensitive forest design plan for the site, which recognises interpretation and responsible custodianship as key management issues.

If you are in any doubt about the power of trees and about the things that bind us to them – beyond their longstanding service in warming, sheltering, defending, medicating and clothing us – do not be! John Muir also wrote that '*...between every two pine trees there is a door leading to a new way of life...*' Take time out whenever you next can and go walk amongst some trees, but treat what you find with care and respect. Interpret for others what you find by all means – but do so with an eye and a thought to those who will follow you, and who will be charged in their turn with passing the 'account' on to those who will follow them...

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