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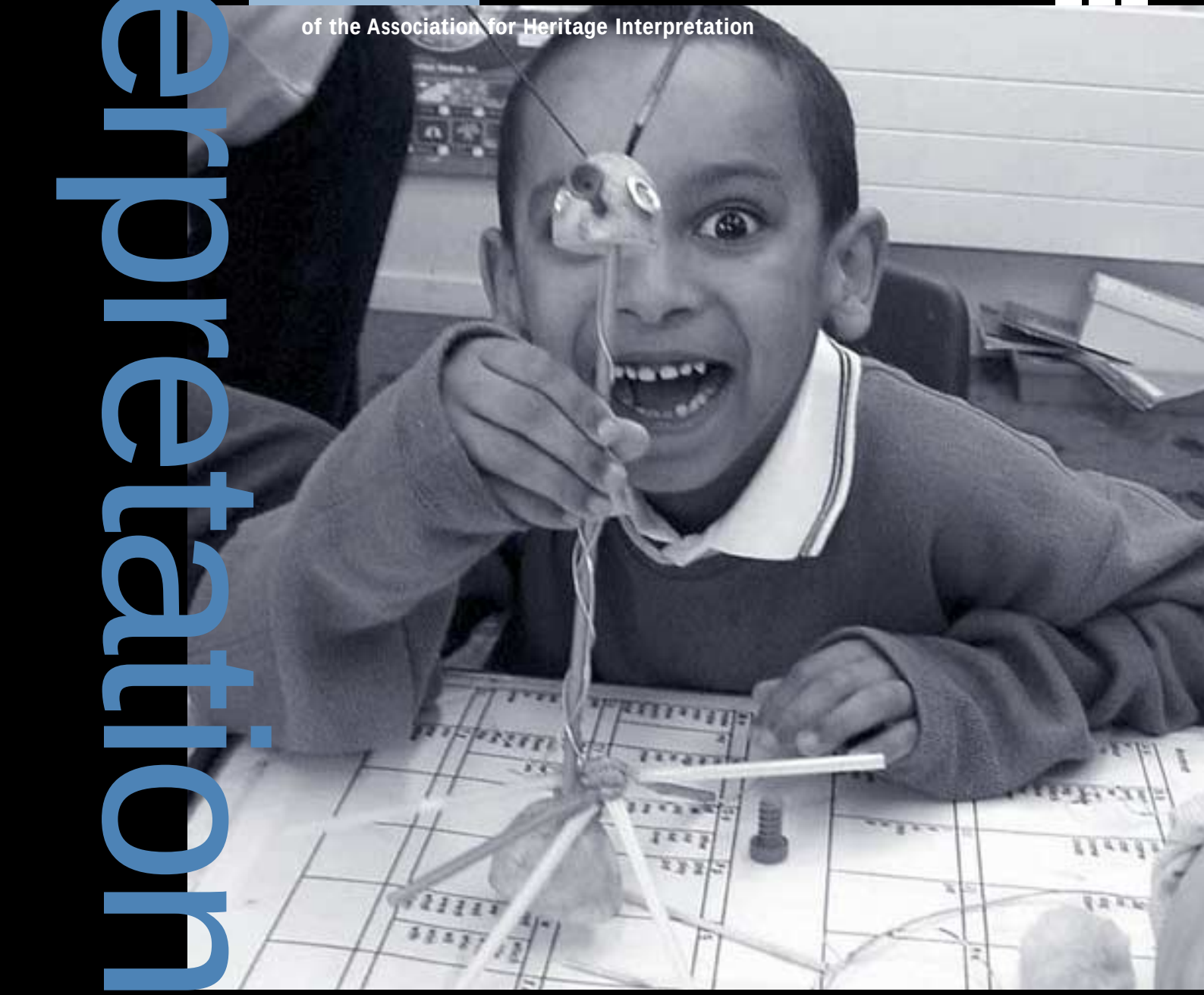
AHI



Freedom to delight

Interpretation for children and families

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www.heritage-interpretation.org.uk

Contents

The next issue will feature
Evaluation of interpretation
Email suggestions for contributions to WPARET@smtp.ntrust.org.uk

Correction: in the last issue the name of Scott Burnham, Creative Director of Urbis, was misspelt.

In recognition of exhibitions, publications and events specifically conceived for young people, the Interpret Britain Awards 2003 Special Category was interpretation for children. This issue supports the awards: Mick Orr makes a cry for humour, Rachel Hamdi and Elizabeth Newbery explain what children want in publications, Esther Dugdale describes the Clore Interactive Gallery at Manchester Art Gallery, Louise Allen explains how drama brings botanical gardens to life for children, Jo Graham draws on research into family learning and Alison Coles describes the work of Curiosity and Imagination.

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

Freedom to delight

Dea Birkett makes a plea for a warm welcome for families from heritage attractions

Bad beginnings don't necessarily mean unhappy endings. When my family was thrown out of the Royal Academy's Aztecs exhibition when my youngest child, just two, shouted 'Monster!' at a statue of Eagle Man (surely an interpretative act), I wrote about it in the Guardian. Within a day, I'd had hundreds of emails from disgruntled families fed up with feeling unwelcome in Britain's museums and galleries.

Their response led to the launch of the Guardian Kids in Museums Campaign and the first Kids in Museums Award for the Best Family Friendly Museum. What began as an bad experience became a celebration of good practice.

But it also became a call for action. The heart of the Campaign is the 20-point Kids in Museums Manifesto, drawn up from reader-visitor comments. Top of the list is the demand for a welcome. And I believe the crucial factor in ensuring this welcome is the information assistants. Almost every establishment already employs them, but few are aware of the fact. They may be called room wardens or even guards. But with a little imagination and some effort, these same staff could be used not as fierce uniformed figures (looking a little like police) waiting to pounce upon a rowdy child, but as enablers and interpreters who make families feel they belong.

Of course, interactive and hands on is another Manifesto demand, but not necessarily through an over reliance on technology. As the Interpret Britain Award winners show, people can interact as well as computers and hands on can mean a box of dressing up clothes or an art cart. In fact, information assistants would be rather good at being interactive, too.

It's not that we want only our children to feel comfortable. Almost without exception, visitors asked for family-friendliness rather than child-friendliness. They were looking for a memorable experience for the whole family. They wanted, for example, guides that could be used by adults and children together, rather than age-specific publications. One reader said, 'It's important that parents aren't forced into a decade of purdah and that family outing shouldn't be a euphemism for kids' activity.' The director of a small local museum wrote, 'Adult visitors can more easily recall that sense of childhood curiousity when participating with children. We've made the conscious decision to run activities for children as much as possible in the public galleries rather than hidden away in a separate room. Most visitors seem to enjoy the busy, excited atmosphere.'

But not all. Another director of a major museum received a complaint from a regular visitor. It read: 'I used to really like coming to the museum, but I don't anymore. Now it's all buttons to push and noisy children enjoying themselves. I much preferred it when there was no one there.'

Without inclusion and interpretation, this complainant's wish will come true. There will be no one there. Heritage will be preserved and displayed for the few. But, because of the work of the Interpret Britain Award winners and many others, I have a hunch that won't happen.

Dea Birkett is a writer and founder of the Guardian Kids in Museums Campaign

For information about the **Campaign** and **Award**, and to download copies of the **Kids in Museums Manifesto**, go to www.guardian.co.uk/travel/kidsinmuseums. For free **Quentin Blake Kids in Museums** posters, stickers and Manifestos, send an sae to Kids in Museums, The Guardian, 119 Farringdon Road, London EC1R 3ER

Magic moments

Mick Orr reflects on fighting for humour and designs that deliver 'magic moments'

'I have seen too many casualties where vibrant ideas, challenges, word play and humour have been evaluated out by using formal processes'

A magic moment observed

At the end of a test session at Discover (see below), a teacher, in tears, reported that she had just heard one of her charges, a boy of five, speaking for the first time ever. His enthusiasm for the Hootah character, a spiky baby space monster that appears throughout the exhibition to link the story-making, had overcome all the child's inner difficulties and inhibitions. Standing beneath a sumptuous leather audio-cone, he shouted "Hello, Hootah!" into the audio device. Touching a button he stood enthralled as he heard his own voice played back to him. This was a landmark for the teacher but, more importantly, for the boy, a magic moment – a term to which I will return.

Working with children

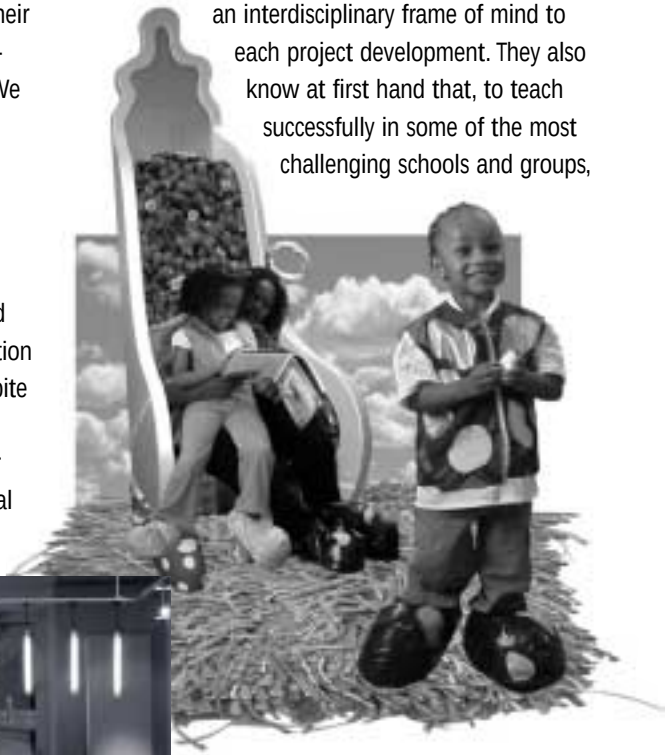
For over twenty years it has been Bremmer & Orr's pleasure and inspiration to work with countless children, whilst designing museums, galleries and educational campaigns. Throughout this time we have used workshop sessions to tease out of children their ideas, passions, expectations, characters and story-lines, whilst appearing to be doing other things. We use unobtrusive observational techniques and are keen to identify children's (and their 'minders') stumbling blocks, resistance and switch-off points.

Widening the access

Over the years we have had cause to question and test some of the assumptions and also the evaluation and briefing materials that are put before us. Despite having been involved (in my previous education career) in developing psychometric tests and other evaluation tools, I have since found that less formal techniques are often more instructive. I have seen too many casualties where vibrant ideas, challenges, word play and humour have been evaluated out by using formal processes. By trying to please all opinions at the same time the result is 'flattening' of the interest and reduction of the challenge . For us, as interpretive and exhibition designers, the challenge is always to walk a tightrope between accessibility and interest, clarity and illusion, scholarship and imagination, creativity and learning, activity and quietness... all in the firm belief that one size does not fit all! We take the view that if you haven't sparked interest, you haven't achieved access.

A multidisciplinary approach

As a design practice, we have some advantages. Our staffing has purposely included educationists who are also artists, designers, and writers. We build many of the exhibit devices in our own studios and workshops, where children have been invited to try them out. Our designers therefore bring an interdisciplinary frame of mind to each project development. They also know at first hand that, to teach successfully in some of the most challenging schools and groups,



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Above: The Story Throne, Discover
Left: Giant's Feet, Big Foot Chloe in the Do You Dare? Gallery, Discover

‘…to teach successfully in some of the most challenging schools and groups, you must be entertainer, organiser and facilitator before you are educator’

you must be entertainer, organiser and facilitator before you are educator.

Firsthand experience

Nowhere is trialling more important than in reading and literacy skills. We benefit from the weekly input of Pamela Harbutt, a member of our practice who balances her writing and consultancy role in Bremner & Orr with regular contacts with dyslexic children. The landmarks she sees in the development of particular children are what she terms ‘magic moments’.

The power of ‘magic moments’

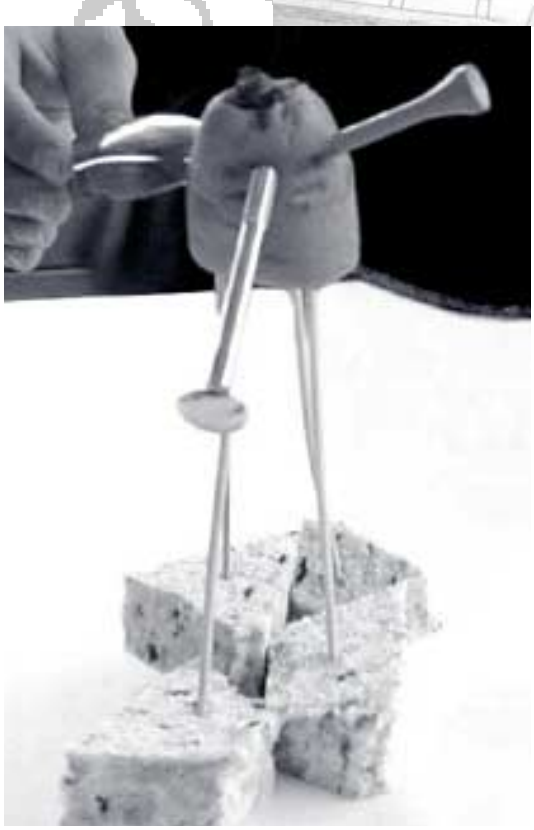
Such is the power of ‘magic moments’ in reading and understanding that they can have life-changing results in what seem to be unrelated areas. An appreciative and incredulous note from a parent one day said that her six-year-old daughter had managed to read a few pages on her own. Her parents had noticed that, apparently incidentally, she had begun eating as never before and also sleeping through the night! It always surprises me how anxieties in one sphere manifest themselves in what seem to be completely other areas, and can be relieved in an apparently unconnected way.

Discover

The story-building environments designed into Discover (at Stratford, East London) are purposely surreal and invite open-ended interpretations of structures and props. They enable children of two to eight years, together with their ‘minders’, teachers and enablers, to conjure up stories, plots and characters. Immersion in saturated-colour sets, a table with real feet, a giant’s legs as tall as the building, puppet theatres, a parcel big enough to climb into, a blue-screen journey that flies you down the drain – all are intended to suspend reality and free the imagination so that children can be prompted to find their own ideas and voice. The concepts and exhibits were developed over two years; designers worked with Discover staff and had the benefit of artworks and stories from workshops conducted by the Discover story-builders, operating in nearby schools and nurseries. Triggered by the children’s enthusiasm and excitement, story ideas come bursting and tumbling out. The five-year-old boy referred to above was a case in point.

Developing Hootah

The realisation of the character called Hootah, the spiky baby space monster that links so much of the story-making in Discover, was created in practical workshop sessions consisting of Bremmer & Orr designers, Dr Vicky Cave, formerly Creative Director of Discover, teachers and lots of children and was conducted in East London schools. Using a variety of media that included found objects, vegetable slices and electronic bits, the logo character of Hootah was literally ‘grown’ from the children’s imaginative 3D experiments and speculation. The painter Dubuffet is reputed to have said,‘Your children can draw better than you think, but I can draw better than your children’. Looking at Hootah, it is purposely difficult to see where the



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Right: Total engagement building Hootahs

Above: Blue Screen video story interactions, Discover

children left off and the designers took over. Our intention was to derive, with the children, an un-slick but quality character that owed more to their ideas and questioning than to the stereotypical TV cartoons they are so often presented with. At the same time, we were able to evaluate what the character could deliver and initiate.

Roald Dahl as a springboard

Many readers will be familiar with our work at the County Museum Galleries at Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire, where the Roald Dahl Children's Gallery has become a benchmark. In the displays there, a selection of museum objects in imaginative contexts, seen in a Dahlesque way, become springboards for ideas and curiosity. When Felicity Dahl (widow of Roald Dahl and his Literary Executor) opened the Galleries to a fanfare of music and excitement, she made a point of saying that Roald generally hated museums – but, she added, he would have loved this one!

Having the courage to agree

Colin Dawes, the then-director, was a co-conspirator (and brave client) to go along with the somewhat anarchic museum concept as it was developing. Eight years later, and to the credit of the current team, (their leader, David Erskine played a vital role in the initial development), the galleries continue to draw and inspire hordes of children. They see and write about the quirky and imaginative side of life, finding magic, as Roald Dahl recommended, 'in the most unlikely places' (including zany museum artefacts!).

The Roald Dahl Museum & Story Centre

We are now engaged in a new Roald Dahl Museum, this time as a Story Centre, that will house invited writers-in-residence and the Roald Dahl Collections and Archive. It is located in Great Missenden, the village where all his children's books were written, where his famous writing hut is found and where the full archive of his writings will be made available to research readers. It is due to open in February 2005.

Choosing the right criteria

Looking back more years than I choose to number, to a time when I myself was involved in curriculum development and evaluation programmes, I recall that children could hardly wait for the publication of the next Dahl book. At that time, the teaching profession was very divided on Dahl. It seemed that what the children read and loved as imagination

'…all are intended to suspend reality and free the imagination so that children can be prompted to find their own ideas and voice'

unbounded, their teachers saw as subversive, dangerous, challenging and embarrassing. At one conference, I distinctly remember a hard-bitten teacher saying he would, under no circumstances, go in front of a class of youngsters to read from a book where the hero was called Wonka! No doubt he would have thought it equally subversive to read from books that amused children with the idea of mixing medicines, gluing pensioners' furniture to the ceiling, driving your father's car, or suggesting that 'whizzpopping' was OK – even for the Queen. Dahl's work, at that time, broke all the rules of writing for children and would have been torn apart if judged by many of today's evaluation processes. So, I am certain, would Lewis Carol's 'Alice Through the Looking Glass' and many more. Thankfully 'kids' lit' has come a long way since then and now offers the full spectrum of options, to encourage enjoyment, questioning and learning through reading. The Dahl Museum intends to showcase other writers who push the boundaries, including Philip Pullman, Jacqueline Wilson, Terry Pratchett.

Making humour work for you

In order to win the interest and enthusiasm of children for reading, Dahl always fought his corner for humour as a powerful device and was not afraid to write that a granny had 'a mouth like a dog's bottom'! We often find ourselves fighting for humour to be used in interpretation. When designing an important child safety campaign, we had to stick to our ground and fight the evaluators to keep in the best joke, where the main child-character admonishes a parent causing traffic hazards outside the school gates: 'What's wrong with you grown-ups! I think dieting must be affecting your brains.' The evaluators worried that it might offend the sensibilities of parents. The children, of course, loved it and the joke helped to commit that page of safety messages to memory. To be fair, the client put aside their concerns and let us run with it – another brave client!

Consensus does not always deliver the best!

As designers and interpreters, it is sometimes inordinately difficult to hold a whole committee with you and still retain a vision that you know will hit the target audience in a way that will be memorable; it is very easy to get rounded down. I am old enough to know that advertising slogans are usually economical with the truth; however I was most amused to see that the only car in recent years that appeared to look different from all the other clones, the Chrysler Cruiser, blatantly advertised itself as 'never having seen a focus group'. If in doubt, our designers repeat the mantra: you have to climb to the end of the branch, because that's where the fruit is. Discuss!

Mick Orr is Director Designer of Bremner & Orr Design Consultants Ltd, founded with co-Director Designer, Morag Bremner, in 1982

Below: False Teeth and Big Ears, the Roald Dahl Gallery, Buckingham County Museum

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Discover
1 Bridge Terrace, Stratford, London E15 4BG
Roald Dahl Children's Gallery
Buckinghamshire County Museums, Church Street, Aylesbury, Bucks HP20 2QP
The Roald Dahl Museum & Story Centre
92 High Street, Great Missenden, Bucks HP16 0AN
(Opening Feb 2005)

'In order to win the interest and enthusiasm of children for reading, Dahl always fought his corner for humour as a powerful device'

Bottoms, bodies and blood

Rachel Hamdi and **Elizabeth Newbery** discuss what makes successful publications for children

Many museums, galleries, heritage and environmental organisations are focussed firmly on family learning and it follows that children's publications, mostly in the form of guide books and trails, have become a growing element in plans for interpretation initiatives.

Challenges

We are usually commissioned by museums, galleries, historic sites and environmental attractions to develop creative ideas for interpreting sites or events such as special exhibitions, for children. Within that we have to juggle the needs of curators, educationalists, parents, marketing departments – and children.

Curators want nothing less than 100% accuracy. Educationalists want to squeeze in as many links to the curriculum as possible. Parents want something to occupy their children on site. Marketing departments need something that sells. And of course children want none of that: they want funny illustrations, minimal text and as many disgusting details about lavatories, bodies and blood as possible.

So how do we meet these needs, without watering it all down to some common denominator that satisfies everyone but no one in particular?

Striking the balance

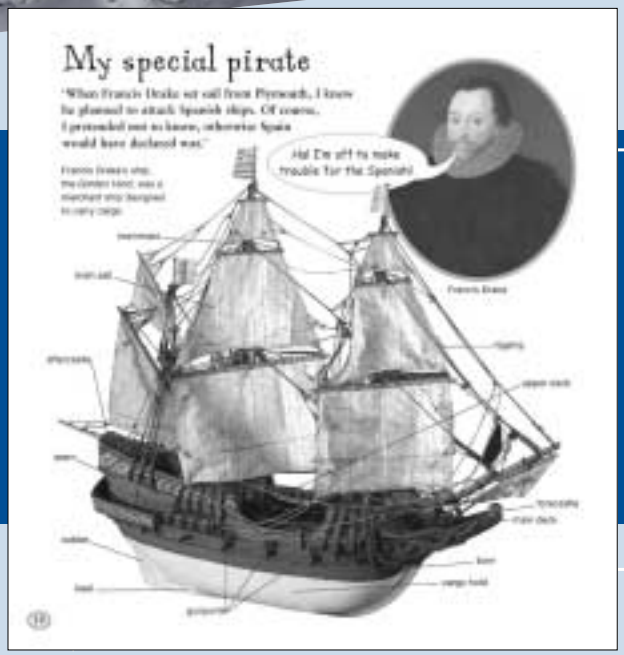
First there is the content. Working with heritage and environmental organisations enables us to have access to expertise, the latest research and first class images. It means we can include the most up-to-date information, have a chance to put right misconceptions that are often slow to filter down to children's books and have access to images that may not be available to commercial publishers. This enables us to put a different slant on familiar curriculum subjects, such as the Tudors. The downside is the standard of accuracy required sometimes makes upbeat text for children difficult. For instance, 'probably the largest, fine-cut diamond in the world' just doesn't cut it like 'THE BIGGEST DIAMOND IN THE WORLD'.

Then there is the design. The design of the book has to take account of all these interests and needs. One reason why images and text are so integrated is that readers can then select pieces of information and form images in their own minds about the subject.

Recent evaluation of a series of trails in preparation by Historic Scotland[1] confirmed that parents see trails as opportunities to learn with, and

Below: *The First Elizabeth*, commissioned by the National Maritime Museum to tie in with the exhibition about Queen Elizabeth I, drew on the latest research and images of objects lent to the Museum

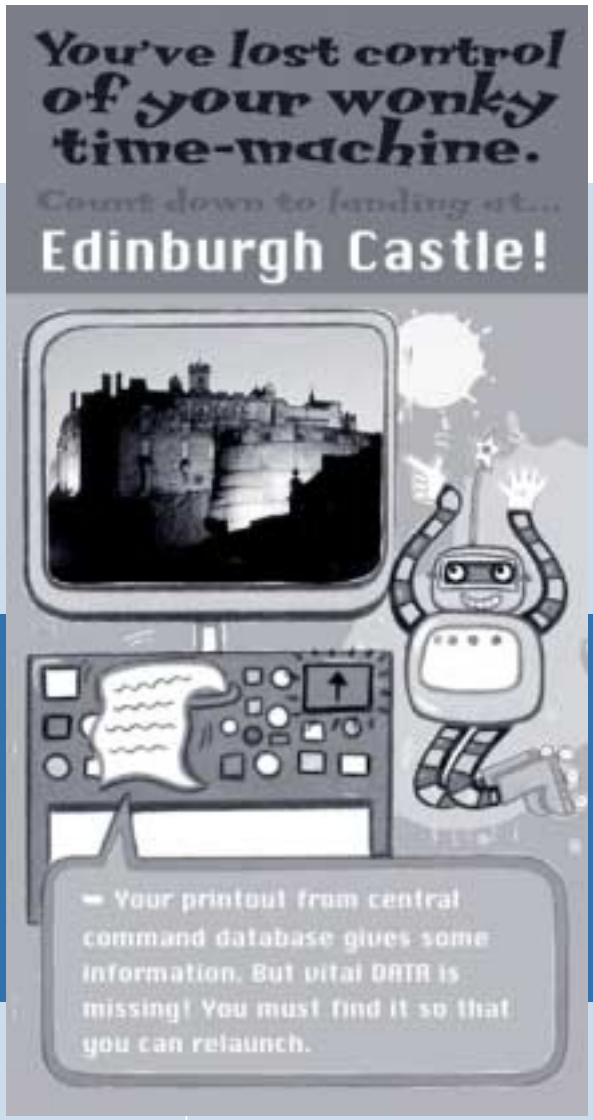
NMM PUBLISHING



Right: *The First Elizabeth*, used the queen as a commemtator on events in her lifetime

'...children want none of that: they want funny illustrations, minimal text and as many disgusting details about lavatories, bodies and blood as possible'

1 Evaluation of family trails: Historic Scotland 2004



Above: Trails for Historic Scotland use an alien to encourage children to collect 'vital data'

support the learning of, their children. Indeed, some adults even choose children's guides and trails for their own needs as a quick introduction to unfamiliar sites or subject matter, in preference to lengthy and often dry official guides.

All non-schools based publications should stand alone, but budget restrictions usually require them to be aimed at 7-10 year-olds, the largest single group of children making visits to sites. Any parent knows that the differences between the abilities of a 7 year-old are vastly different to the average 10 year-old, so we try to incorporate different areas of spreads in books or activities in trails that cater for different abilities. Of course educationalists want something that has as many links to the curriculum as possible, but they also look for reading levels, a variety of skills-based activities, word count and visual appeal, accurately geared to the abilities of that target group.

One of the outcomes of the evaluation on trails for Historic Scotland was that most parents were delighted to be guided round the site by children via the trails, so books and trails that promote interaction between family groups are very welcome. Some parents however, want trails to occupy their charges while they pursue their own interests on site.

The need to generate income has also given rise to more publications for children. A decent profit margin means a high print run to achieve a low unit cost, so many sites now look to sell through commercial bookshops as well other related attractions.

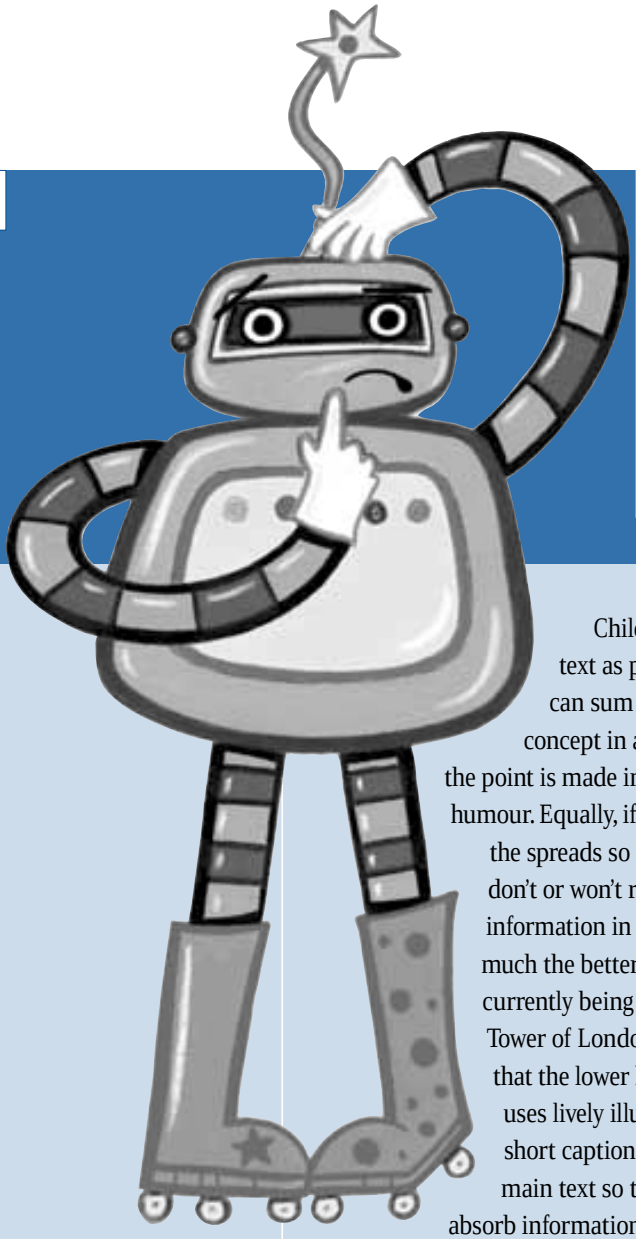
'One reason why images and text are so integrated is that readers can then select pieces of information and form images in their own minds about the subject'

And finally the kids…

Our first priority is to make the place, subject or event come alive. One way to do this is to link it to good stories – not a problem when writing for the Tower of London for instance, but more difficult when writing about industrial or environmental sites perhaps.

Another is to use characters, real or imagined, to guide children round a site. A series of trails currently being devised for Historic Scotland uses an alien to collect facts. But the device has to have a purpose: the alien has to have a reason for landing (a wonky time-machine), a reason for collecting facts (vital data needs collecting so that it can relaunch), and a way of consolidating of new information and terminology (new words have to be 'punched' into 'central command database' via a word search).

Yet another way of engaging children is interactive text. You can get children to speculate on emotions, possible outcomes and accuracy by posing questions such as: Do you think the artist felt sorry for him/her/it? What do you think happened next? Do you think the story is true?



Above: Alien illustrated by Rosey Hill

'if you can organise the spreads so that children who don't or won't read can absorb information in some way, so much the better'

Children like as little text as possible so if you can sum up an event or concept in a funny drawing, the point is made instantly and with humour. Equally, if you can organise the spreads so that children who don't or won't read can absorb information in some way, so much the better. The guide currently being developed for the Tower of London is organised so that the lower half of each spread uses lively illustrations and short captions to support the main text so that children can absorb information even through they may not be inclined to read the main text.

Writer and designer

So how do writer and designer work together?

Ideally, the writer and designer should be joined at the hip: the writer delivers the text to the designer who then roughs out the first layouts to work out how the text, images and illustrations all fit together. Back it goes to the writer who adds or cuts bits to fit (while not compromising on historical accuracy, storylines or educational outcomes). Back it goes to the designer who then makes the necessary adjustments and commissions the illustrator.

One of the most important considerations is the feel of a book. It should invite the reader to open it like a present. It should feel comfortable to hold, so the size, the number of pages and the weight of paper are critical. The cover has to be eye-catching and has to grab children's attention with a visually exciting image that also informs about the content.

Strong colour throughout is important and unsurprisingly, the evaluation for Historic Scotland showed that 100% of children consulted wanted full colour publications – boring old black and white or two-colour simply won't do.

The illustration brief also has to strike a balance. The illustrator must be sensitive to the specifics of the topic, and historically accurate, yet we have to give the illustrator opportunity for interpretation and creativity. We choose illustrators for different reasons. Sometimes we need realistic illustrations to show something we cannot get a picture of, more often we're looking for an illustrator who can depict a scene with accurate detail and humour.

The illustrator sends in ideas in pencil – and if we laugh out loud we know we're on the right lines. Then it all goes off to the client for approval with fingers crossed that they get the jokes too.

Rachel Hamdi and Elizabeth Newbery write, design and produce guide books and trails for children. They can be contacted on 01865 556942 or 01865 793360 website: newberyandengland.co.uk

The First Elizabeth published by National Maritime Museum 2003

Family trails for Melrose Abbey, Stirling Castle, Edinburgh Castle and St Andrews Castle to be published by Historic Scotland, July 2004

Tower Power to be published by Historic Royal Palaces, July 2004

From Bhangra to pease pudding

Alison Coles describes a UK-wide initiative that is exploring new ways of engaging children with heritage

There are two values
which you can give a child
as a present for life.
First of all roots,
and then wings.
(Native American proverb)

Bringing heritage to life

Over the last couple of years Curiosity & Imagination (the national network for children's hands-on learning) has been running an initiative called Bringing Heritage to Life. Funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, it aims to do more than just encourage lively heritage interpretation for children - the title hides another meaning. Crucially, Bringing Heritage to Life seeks to encourage heritage learning that has a real impact on children's lives, bringing heritage and life together. It looks at how heritage can change the ways in which children think about themselves, their communities and the wider world.

All Curiosity & Imagination's work is inspired by an approach to learning which has emerged from the worldwide 'children's museum' movement. Firstly, we believe in the power of playful, hands-on experience as a tool for learning. Play is what children do when they are given the freedom to follow their own ideas and interests, in their own ways and for their own reasons. Through play, children explore the world around them and make meaning out of it for their own lives. The Curiosity & Imagination approach to children's learning combines play with hands-on experience of inspiring objects and environments – including heritage ones. Artefacts, buildings, natural objects, historic sites and so on can inspire children to make discoveries and connections, engaging them with new aspects of the world. In this way of working, children's curiosity and imagination are the driving force behind their learning, leading them to develop an understanding of the world that has real resonance for their lives.

Secondly, we recognise that parents and carers can play a crucial role in encouraging and supporting their children's learning. Parents can be empowered to explore alongside their children as an integral part of the provision, or helped to consolidate and extend the learning experiences back at home. This involvement can also bring educational benefits to the parents themselves and encourage them to pursue their own learning.

Thirdly, we promote learning provision that develops from, and responds to, the characteristics and changing needs of the local community. In particular, the Curiosity & Imagination approach stresses the importance of involving children in shaping the learning opportunities, so that the provision is in tune with their concerns, interests and needs. This participation by children and other local people will help to foster a strong sense of community ownership, encouraging members of the community to invest time and energy in sustaining and developing the provision.

Finally, we emphasise the value of working with a range of partners at a local level, sharing expertise and resources. This 'joined-up' working can be a key factor in creating high quality provision for children, and also contributes towards long-term sustainability. In addition, a collaborative approach across different sectors can catalyse the development of innovative ways of working.

Below: Creating a Mackintosh chair

'It does not take extensive research to realise just how many barriers disabled people face to the enjoyment of online heritage resources'

ERIC WEATHERHILL

'In this way of working, children's curiosity and imagination are the driving force behind their learning, leading them to develop an understanding of the world which has real resonance for their lives'

Making a difference

Bringing Heritage to Life is applying this approach to heritage learning and so far has involved two action research schemes and an awards scheme. The first action research scheme, 'Making a difference', aimed to find out just how we can make a real difference to children's lives through heritage learning provision, and involved evaluating the impact of five local projects. This evaluation has been a partnership between the project leaders and professional evaluators Alison James and Nicky Boyd and has spanned the entire duration of each project.

Each 'Making a difference' project aimed to bring about a particular change in children's attitudes and views, through engaging children with heritage of various kinds. For example, Natasha Wolffe and Lisa Rigg of Time and Place Projects wanted to help children in Hackney, East London, to appreciate the value of community history and the importance of archives in preserving that history. They conceived a project that used role play to bring archives to life - with staggering success. Children from four Hackney primary schools formed their own learned societies – including the Beastly Society (animal enthusiasts) and the Wardrobe Society (fans of costumes) – and their own pen names. They then created an archive for their society, including rolls of honour tied up with ribbon, beautifully bound journals, portraits of members, letters and certificates. These were all carefully conserved and catalogued and made accessible to fellow societies, parents and friends. There was a big emphasis on authenticity, and the children got a huge kick out of using genuine archive equipment. When they visited a real archive towards the end of the project the archivists were stunned by the pupils' enthusiasm and understanding.

Elsewhere, children in Dundee gained new connections with their natural heritage through learning historical crafts and skills practised by people living and working close to the River Tay Estuary. On the Isle of Wight families created games to help them to engage with the built environment they encounter on the walk to and from school. Up in the Scottish Highlands, primary school children found new confidence through creating life-sized tea rooms inspired by the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, including tables, chairs, lamps, crockery and menus. The Tea Rooms were then opened up for family and friends to view over a cup of tea and a cake. One previously excluded child was unable to sleep for excitement about the project and unusually eager to get to school. Finally, a partnership between Sure Start: Carlisle South and Tullie House Museum used museum objects and costumes to bring nursery rhymes alive for children aged from 6 months to 4 years. Children tasted pease pudding, tried washing clothes with dolly tubs ('This is the way we wash our clothes on a cold and frosty morning') and discovered why people had to take their cakes to the 'baker man' for baking – all aimed at encouraging a lifelong interest in heritage. The evaluation of these projects will be completed later in 2004, and we hope that it will demonstrate the huge value of heritage learning to children's lives.

By children, for children

Meanwhile, we are working on another action research scheme funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, called 'By children, for children'. This is focussing on how children themselves can create heritage learning provision, building on the principle that they are the best people to decide about what will interest and engage other children. We are evaluating the involvement of children in the creation of multi-sensory role-play environments using 'pop up' technology at the British Empire

‘One previously excluded child was unable to sleep for excitement about the project and unusually eager to get to school’

Right : ‘Oranges and lemons say the bells of St Clements’

and Commonwealth Museum, a project in which children design and build a story trail of dwellings for the real and mythical inhabitants of a local community woodland in the Scottish Borders, and two other projects. Ambitiously, three of the projects involve pre-school children, and we hope to learn a good deal about techniques for harnessing the ideas and creativity of very young children.

Roots and Wings

Alongside this action research, we are bringing people’s attention to inspiring heritage learning provision for children through a new awards scheme called ‘Roots and Wings’ (supported by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust). There are six 2004 award-winners, all of which demonstrate excellence in engaging children with heritage. One is the volunteer-run Tom Leonard Mining Museum in Cleveland, which produced a unique silent movie called with children from a local primary school: ‘Skinningrove Ironstone Mine, the early 1900s. An ordinary working day is suddenly interrupted by an explosion in the dark tunnels of the mine. Will Jim be brought out alive? And who has the courage to try to save him?’ The children did background research, acted, directed and produced, and arrived in stretch limos to a glitzy premiere at the local town hall. According to Mick Benson, steelworker and voluntary project leader, “In this project the children truly dug deep as they engaged with their heritage and still managed to reach for the stars that surely some are destined to become.”

A dance project with teenagers at the National Trust’s Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire, also received a ‘Roots and Wings’ award. Working with the Rambert Dance Company, the young people created an original performance inspired by the house – its architecture, the people who lived in it, and its connection with India. Embracing elements of the Bharata Natyam Indian dance style, yoga and Bhangra, the performance was so wonderful that parents were moved to tears.

‘Ambitiously, three of the projects involve pre-school children, and we hope to learn a good deal about techniques for harnessing the ideas and creativity of very young children’

Enriching children’s lives

As the proverb quoted at the beginning of this article suggests, it is only through developing the strong ‘roots’ which an understanding of heritage gives that children can gain the confidence to ‘grow wings’ and take an active and imaginative role in shaping the future. Curiosity & Imagination is sharing what we are learning through the Bringing Heritage to Life initiative with practitioners right across the heritage sector, aiming to inspire innovative and creative practice which truly enriches children’s lives.

Alison Coles is Manager of Curiosity & Imagination, the national network for children’s hands-on learning that is led by the charities 4Children, Demos and the Campaign for Learning (www.curiosityandimagination.org.uk).

For the child in us all

Esther Dugale describes the pleasure in being allowed to produce displays free of the usual restrictions

Above: The Clore Interactive Gallery

The Clore Interactive Gallery is one of the destination galleries at the newly refurbished Manchester Art Gallery (MAG). Sited in the Hopkins extension, the gallery features original and reproduction artworks, each with an associated interactive. MAG wanted a destination for children and families but adults were not to be excluded.

Designing the Clore Interactive Gallery became an exercise in interpretation for the child within us all, aimed at animating some of the Gallery's outstanding collections in ways that would inspire the imagination and encourage wider access.

Freedom to delight

The process began with a refreshing brief – to delight, inspire and inform – and a good budget. What more can a designer ask!

Freedom from the need to have defined learning objectives for every exhibit in this project was hugely liberating. We were not required to slavishly address the national curriculum. As a designer who specialises in interpretation for children, learning objectives are hugely important. But it is also important to understand when and where these should be relaxed. MAG understood this and the end product I hope captures a sense of that liberation. It allowed us to engage visitors with the artworks in a really immediate way – with what would appeal, with real energy. The underlying messages and encouragement are there, the variety of learning styles, but the immediate activities are designed to make the visitor smile, to allow visitors to play with what inspired the art. We wanted to get away from the need to tell visitors what they ought to know and rather indulge them in the joy of being able to animate or manipulate the pieces.

It became obvious very early in the design process that this approach was equally enjoyable for adults and children alike - whether it was members of the design team, the various guinea pigs on which the ideas were tried, or the children and contractors who were involved in making the exhibits.

How did the design evolve?

The evolution of the design was a pure delight from start to finish: from searching through endless racks of paintings and objects with the MAG team to discover artworks that had that magical element of appeal, via animated brainstorming sessions exploring opportunities for fun interaction with both the team and the audience, to highly entertaining experiences with drama sessions, scripting and shoots.

The inspiration for the Gallery as a whole was developed from a wonderful object from the decorative arts collection – a solid silver ship. This

beautiful object conjures up images of flights of fantasy. The ship forms the hub of the Gallery's displays in a world of blue sky and clouds, taking visitors on a voyage into the world of art.

The twenty pieces were chosen to encourage different types of play, to represent the breadth of the collection and to provoke a variety of responses. Humour was absolutely fundamental. If it was making us laugh, that was a good sign.

We always kept simplicity in mind. Each interactive had a single idea that could be enjoyed. Visitors could choreograph a Japanese Samurai, make a de Heem still life rot before their eyes, dance with mirrors based on a Kenny Macleod video; race chariots around an arena based on a grand painting by von Wagner, pose as Ford Madox Brown's *Manfred on the Jungfrau*, create an abstract landscape based on a Peter Lanyon painting, make their eyes blur by passing a contrasting pattern over a Bridget Riley or transpose their faces into a weird mask based on Dhruva Mistry's *Guardian*.

Below: A teenager enjoys the interactive based on Jock Macfadyen's *Waiting for Cortina Boys*

The budget for the gallery allowed us to use technology creatively to inspire visitors. Four of the exhibits are particularly memorable for their use of technology, involvement of children and their humour. Event worked closely with MAG, the software contractor Centre Screen and the Hardware contractor DJW to create the end results.

'Waiting for the Cortina Boys'

When painter Jock MacFadyen saw two young girls sitting looking bored on a street corner, he wondered what they might be talking about and was inspired to paint *Waiting for the Cortina Boys*. The teenager in all of us identifies with these girls and their adolescent world – but how to bring the painting to life? Was it possible to put visitors in the girls' shoes and reconstruct their conversation? Drama sessions at a local girls' secondary school explored what the characters might have been saying. Despite having to remove X-rated material we were left with highly evocative remarks, from which a series of ten phrases were selected for each character. Two of the girls were chosen to record the phrases, providing the archetypal teenage tone of boredom. The painting was then recreated as a three dimensional cardboard model with articulated dolls by Nancy Gould who animated them for each individual phrase, memorably capturing teenage body language to match the soundtrack. Visitors can reconstruct their conversations, putting phrases together in a sequence of their choice. The interactive triggers identification with the artist and gives a narrative to the painting. The outcome is laughter, connection and recognition.

'Freedom from the need to have defined learning objectives for every exhibit in this project was hugely liberating'

Right: *Girl Reading* by Charles Edward Perugini and recreation of *Girl Reading*

Girl Reading

Charles Edward Perugini's portrait of a young girl reading is the ultimate romantic Victorian image of the beautiful and demure young women in a classical setting. The team agreed that humour was absolutely vital and we all wanted to destroy the peacefulness. Irreverence was definitely top of the agenda. Children are themselves hopeless fidgets. Many interactives are designed to encourage activity. We wanted to create an interactive that got users to sit still! Visitors could seat themselves in front of a projected recreation of the scene. The seat was rigged with sensors and the alcove with movement detectors. What was the reward for keeping still to be? The longer the visitor sits still, the more the girl moves. First she glances at you, then she stares at you. 10 seconds later she gets the giggles. If you can sit still for a whole minute and a half (which is longer than you think) she either burps or farts – outrageous for such a demure young lady – and then you've won!

The recreation was shot in high definition to do justice to the beauty of the original image. The model we came across by chance. The shoot was hilarious. We all had to leave the room as giggles overtook the crew.

'The inspiration for the Gallery as a whole was developed from a wonderful object from the decorative arts collection – a solid silver ship'

Winter Night's Tale

Daniel Maclise's painting captures a family sitting together in an atmospheric, fire-lit cottage on a winter night, listening to the grandmother telling a scary story. Story paintings are a well-tried topic for interpretation of art for children. We wanted to have one exhibit where the painting came alive. The painting is displayed in an enclosed booth with a pepper's ghost of the grandmother telling stories, projected over the painting itself. Background audio and flickering lighting effects add to the atmosphere. The stories were developed with the professional storyteller, Jacqueline Harris. Working over eight sessions with schools, she and the children developed or adapted some classic, short ghost story types, including some local tales. These were then edited and given to a local actress with a resemblance to the figure in the painting. There are ten stories in total of no more than three minutes, which are set on a loop, interspersed with periods when the painting is lit for viewing.

L'Agression

Raymond Mason's *L'Agression au 48 de la rue Monsieur le Prince* captured all our imaginations. On

returning to his studio in Paris with an American journalist friend, the artist briefly witnessed a furore in the road on which his studio was located. The local optician had been stabbed in his shop. Mason dropped off his friend and had to go off to find somewhere to park. The friend recounted more details to him. Mason's sculpture of the scene captures the different reactions of the group of locals that lived in the street. Recreating the full scene with all the characters would have been enormously expensive. Given the grotesque caricatured nature of the figures, we came up with the idea of using a single actor to play all the parts in outrageous makeup. Emil Wolk, the Manchester-based actor who played all the parts, was an example of inspired casting. We held script sessions, again filled with laughter, to develop the identities for all the characters, mapping their relationships and responses to one another. Over three days, Emil was filmed in thirteen different incarnations or interpretations of the sculpted figures, doing over 150 individual segments – each character's reaction to the event and each character's reaction to each of the other characters. The transformations were extraordinary, the outputs hilarious. The resulting interactive encourages visitors to look closely at each character and imagine the unspoken relationships and responses. The scenario is not explained, rather visitors, like Mason, can become engrossed in the characters immediate reactions.

'Visitors could choreograph a Japanese Samurai, make a de Heem still life rot before their eyes …'

Interesting issues

Several interesting issues were raised during the development of the project. First, the importance of the inclusion of real objects in children's exhibitions. Second, the proximity of interactives to real artworks and whether they encourage visitors to look at the pieces or distract visitors' attention. Third, whether interactives are best grouped together in one space or spread throughout a gallery. And finally, the challenge of incorporating interactives in galleries in what is traditionally a contemplative environment.

The result is The Clore Gallery which generates enthusiasm and involvement for what is often regarded as specialist or elitist subject matter. It unites children and adults in pleasure and it is a truly interactive art gallery.

Esther Dugdale, Senior Designer at Event Communications for 10 years, has a particular passion for interpretation for children

Below: A still frame from the Cortina Boys computer interactive

Making sense together

Jo Graham demonstrates how families like to learn in museums

The importance of family visitors to museums, galleries and heritage sites is well established, but what kind of experiences work best for them when they come and are there ways in which the sector could do more to encourage and support family visits?

Know your families

To provide high quality experiences for families, we have to understand how families work and what their likely interests and needs are. Whilst the following family facts are sometimes obvious, they are worth re-stating because they are frequently overlooked in the planning of exhibitions or other learning experiences.

Families come in different shapes and sizes

Modern families do not conform to the nuclear family notion. Families may have a single parent, include weekend visits between parents, be re-constituted or involve close relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. With many parents working, children frequently have close relationships with other family adults or with carers, such as child minders or nursery workers. Any of these relationships may form the basis of a family group visiting a museum.

Below: A family reading together at the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood

‘Whilst some tensions may be obvious, families are used to balancing the agendas of all the family members’

Families come from different cultures

Although living in cross-generational groups gives families much common ground, people’s cultural background still plays a determining factor in how they relate to each other, their interests and potentially their needs. Being part of a family does not override being part of a wider cultural group.

Families are multi-age

By their nature, families are cross-generational. In addition, siblings are rarely the same age. They may be relatively close together in age or may be many years apart. There are no set rules. What is true however, is that families with young children, for example children under seven, have less ability to cope with a non ‘family-friendly’ environment than those with older children. But it is families with younger children that are more willing and able to make family visits. Younger children need to ‘get out of the house’, have fewer social commitments and are not embarrassed to be seen with their family adults.

Families are social groups

Although crèches are very popular in IKEA where children don’t need to be part of decision-making, most families that visit museums and galleries do so to spend time together. Families are social groups that know each other well. They go out together to spend time together. Whilst most families don’t think about it as family learning, essentially they are learning together: building meanings together, having the experiences that will be the family memories of the future. Whilst some tensions may be obvious, families are used to balancing the agendas of all the family members. They will follow children’s interests, understand the need to keep the youngest member happy, build their day round the physical needs of children or older members and make room for moments when the family adults can follow their agenda, however briefly.

Families out together

Families like to do as well as see

Whilst there may be differences between individual families, there is common ground in the ways families like to experience museums and galleries. A recent study on family interpretation carried out on behalf of the South West Hub[1], highlighted the importance of

‘The study found that most families were keen to be engaged in activities together; with handling historical objects, live interpretation and games to play together being the most popular’

Above: Falmouth Art Gallery workshops cater for families with children of all ages

active, social learning. The study found that most families were keen to be engaged in activities together; with handling historical objects, live interpretation and games to play together being the most popular. Families with younger children were especially keen on active experiences. Trails and facilitated workshops were very popular in traditional art spaces, where families also welcomed the idea of activities but found it more difficult to envisage what these might be. This is borne out by evidence from the Tate Gallery [2]. This study found that activities for families created: ‘a relaxed and supportive environment for families to enjoy the gallery. Many adults felt that, without special activities, galleries were hostile and difficult places to visit with children.’

Family adults frequently stress the importance of feeling there is plenty for their children to do. However, the most enjoyable and powerful family experiences occur when the activities engage the whole family. The Tate evaluation [2] found plentiful evidence of activities ‘permitting both adults and children to play. Many adults commented on how much they learned from participating in the activities with their children.’ As one parent from the study put it: ‘I like the idea that children have the answers, it’s not just us.’

A recent evaluation of the Childhood Galleries at the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood [3], carried out by Kate Pontin, showed the value families put on activities, concluding that the Family Fun Pack (additional interpretation, trails etc) was no longer felt to be needed by families ‘as there was so much already to do in the museum’. Her report concluded that: ‘Most parents join in at least some of the time with their children; talking to them or doing the activity. Family interaction was high and the museum provided an important opportunity for members to ‘do’ and learn together.’

Her observation of families illustrates the way families organise their own visit pattern, breaking away and re-forming to suit different interests. The family is seen to interact with both objects and activities, combining doing and seeing with adult input, typically nostalgic and personal.

Families like to play

Although families will differ in how comfortable they feel playing in public spaces, in the ways they like to play and in how much time they want to spend playing, most families like to play together. The Tate report concluded that, amongst other reasons, adults enjoy doing activities with their children as a means of letting go, which is difficult when they are alone.

Discover, a children’s discovery centre in the east end of London, has plentiful evidence of families playing together, fully immersed in imaginative play. One observation showed a family who ‘played together in the cave for some ten minutes, re-enacting the Billy Goat’s Gruff tale and then making up their own game. They spent a lot of time physically bonding, experimenting … and imagining. The play was child led but with parents active in it.’

The Bethnal Green example also shows parents fully engaged in their children’s games, presenting a strong case for museums to provide props and costumes to enable adults to join in children’s play, not simply dressing up clothes for children.

Whilst role play is probably the most socially exposed form of play and therefore not all adults will take part, other kinds of play can be effective. ‘Bags of Fun’ developed as part of the Access to Oxfordshire [4] project, used simple game formats such as dice games to engage families in games with rules that linked to objects in displays.

Families like to read

Contrary to some popular opinion, families are not averse to reading. The SW Hub report [1] found that families were keen for older children to have text they could read independently, whilst families with younger children wanted text that adults could quickly take in to inform family discussions. As this example from Discover illustrates, family adults need to be able to quickly assimilate information as they help children to shape their visit. ‘Mum obviously felt she was responsible for organising the family and read every graphic available, even turning one over in the search for more information. She looked at the map and read a Discover leaflet.’

The Hub report showed that families with children under seven tended to like the idea of sharing stories together, whilst those with older children liked the idea of FAQs or interesting facts.

'To support families learning, we need to provide playful, enjoyable activities that families can share at their own level, their own pace and in their own way'

Above: Families playing in the sparkly river at Discover, Stratford.

Families were keen to have contextual information, both in text and in other forms. In a Natural History Gallery families were extremely keen to have animal and bird sounds. The same report found that families responded positively to photographs providing context for both the natural history objects and the paintings. Families also asked for photographs in the Childhood Galleries (social history) at the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood.

So what can we do to support family learning?

First and foremost to support families, we need to understand them. This may involve some reading, but as importantly, observing families and talking to them about their museum time is vital. This can help build understanding of where individual differences lie as well as spotlighting common ground.

Research has shown that families like to learn together. They like to be active in their learning, to be playful and enjoy themselves. They like a sense of gaining new knowledge but also like to just feel as if they've had a good time together. To support families learning, we need to provide playful, enjoyable activities that families can share at their own level, their own pace and in their own way.

Research has also shown that families are not text averse as long as the text addresses the questions they have in an accessible way. Text can therefore be part of how museums and galleries communicate with families, but it shouldn't be the only way. Families in the South West Hub consultation were asked to grade a wide range of interpretation techniques on how useful they would be. As one parent said: 'Can't we have a little bit of all of these?'

Below: Families enjoying the farm animal puzzles, books and toys relating to the work of 19th century animal painter Thomas Sidney Cooper

A' typical' visit

- A family arrives with both parents and with two children of about 3 and 5 years old.
- The eldest child leads them up the stairs and rushes to the home space.
- The parents sit down and join in the role-play drinking pretend drinks etc.
- Dad goes off with one child to play with the Lego while Mum stays playing washing. She watches and talks to the child. The play continues for quite a long time.
- They then move on and look at some objects in cases – have a conversation about the soldiers. She points out a toy she had when she was little.
- Eventually the family moves on together and plays on the ambulance. The parents become the patients. Everyone joins in with mum helping the younger child.

Jo Graham is an independent consultant, with expertise in family learning in museums and galleries

[1] *Why have badgers got wet noses?* SW Hub August 2003. Available from the SWMLAC website. www.swmlac.org.uk

[2] *A Shared Experience: an evaluation of family activities in three Tate sites* (Cox et al, 2000)

[3] *The Childhood Galleries at Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood: an evaluation* Kate Pontin

[4] *Bags of Fun: Oxfordshire County Country Museum and Heritage Dept*

Drama in the garden

Louise Allen explains how drama, music and story-telling are used to interpret plants for children at the oldest botanical gardens in Britain

Live interpretation has been a key part of the University of Oxford Botanic Garden Interpretation and Education Programme since the programme was established just over ten years ago. During this time period the programme has developed and evolved and this evolution has led us to adopt a story-based approach throughout our educational and interpretive work. Regardless of whether visitor is 4 or 94 we have found our approach to be very effective. There are however four key ingredients to the Oxford approach to storytelling:

- The stories must be relevant to people's lives
- The audience must be able to relate to the stories
- The stories must have a clear message
- A living plant must be used to illustrate the story

These stories are used within the guided tours given by our educational and horticultural staff to great effect with over 6,500 children and 3,000 adults taking part in the programme each year. Themes covered within our tours for children include the Rainforest Experience, Christmas Pudding and the Whole World Cake. Themes for adult tours include the Healing Power of Plants, Plants for People and the Plant Hunters.

Our most recent development within the Interpretation Programme has seen the introduction of communicators from outside the Garden to take forward our storytelling programmes. This has enabled us to devise promenade theatre performances, story trails and musical performances.

'Green Fingers and Healing Hands'

Jacob Bobart, the Garden's first curator in the 17th century , recently 'returned' to the Garden for an interactive promenade theatre performance, *Green Fingers and Healing Hands* designed to actively engage and involve school children and family groups visiting the Garden. On arrival people were met by Dr Hilary Pritchard, who explained a little about the history of the Garden, the importance of plants in medicine today and why we need to look after plants for our future. As the tour continued, the group encountered Jacob Bobart, looking very confused at the state of the Garden. For Bobart it is 1642 and he has very different views on the world, on botany and the names and uses of plants. As the performance progressed, the children realised that the two characters in fact had much more in common than they first thought...

This performance is now part of our regular programme of events for schools and families using actors from Andrew Ashmore and Associates to play the roles of Jacob Bobart and Dr Hilary Pritchard.

'A Story for Spring'

This story trail has been developed for our satellite collection, the Harcourt Arboretum with local storyteller, Peter Hearn. The story trail leads children through the woodland, by way of a series of 'story points' where stories, poems, and songs are

Right: Jacob Bobart, the first curator

'For Bobart, it is 1642 and he has very different views on the world, on botany and the names and uses of plants'

‘Regardless of whether visitor is 4 or 94 we have found our approach to be very effective’

Right: The Rainforest House

presented on the theme of a story for spring – incorporating concepts of renewal and conservation. Stories draw on myth, legend and folklore not only from Britain but also from a range of cultures.

‘The Rainforest House’

The Rainforest House is our most recent interpretive initiative and aims to completely submerge children in rainforest life. It runs during the winter months and is located within one of our glasshouses. Built using materials from the rainforest such as bamboo and rattan, the house is decorated and equipped using rainforest artefacts. A number of programmes run within the house introducing family groups and visiting school parties to how plants from the rainforest are used in people’s lives. These programmes include *Knock on Wood* with inspirational music maker, Andy Wilson and his fascinating collection of musical instruments made from plants. *The Day the World Came to My Place* is another programme using storyteller Peter Hearn who takes groups round the world in story, music, and song to show how plants from all parts of the Earth affect our daily lives.

Below: A story trail

Looking ahead to ‘Food Art’

Our most recent programme entitled Food Art, is a celebration of food and art inspired by plants from around the world. The five month project includes five residencies, each lasting two weeks with artists working with local schools and local community groups to celebrate food plants from British, Andean, Oriental, West Indian and Mediterranean cultures. These residencies are combined with cultural extravaganzas to be held at weekends throughout the summer bringing in musicians, performers and, of course, storytellers from each culture.

Lousie Allen is Education Officer at the University of Oxford Botanical Garden

Book review

Enriching the Experience - An Interpretive Approach to Tour Guiding

John Pastorelli

Pearson Education Australia 2003
ISBN 1-86250-522-5
Paperback

This is a practical and useful book related to guiding in Australia that translates to any environment. One thought will remain with me forever: Pastorelli describes the Aboriginal approach to the meaning of country. Country is for them an integral part of a living culture – they describe visiting, talking to and singing to country as you would to a person. Such sensitivity to place is inspiring.

The excellent introduction uses Freeman Tilden's classic work on interpretation as the framework that Pastorelli then expands. He has a reader-friendly and approachable style best suited to those new to interpretation and finding themselves in the role without any specific training. It could also act as a 'wake-up call' to those who may have been tour guides for years and feel they have got into a rut.

It is full of common sense and imaginative ideas, a working book relating theory to practice. I would like to use and trial some of the activities suggested with a group of students on Study Week in Interpretation and Communication and welcome their feedback.

A particularly good point is that Pastorelli makes you think about the experience not only from the guides' point of view but from the expectations of the audience. He describes the guides as a part of the language of our museums that help visitors make meanings and develop understanding from the experience. If the book achieves this aim then it is most worthwhile.

Review by Rose Horspool, Head of Creative Studies Dept, Bishop Burton College

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