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of the Association for Heritage Interpretation

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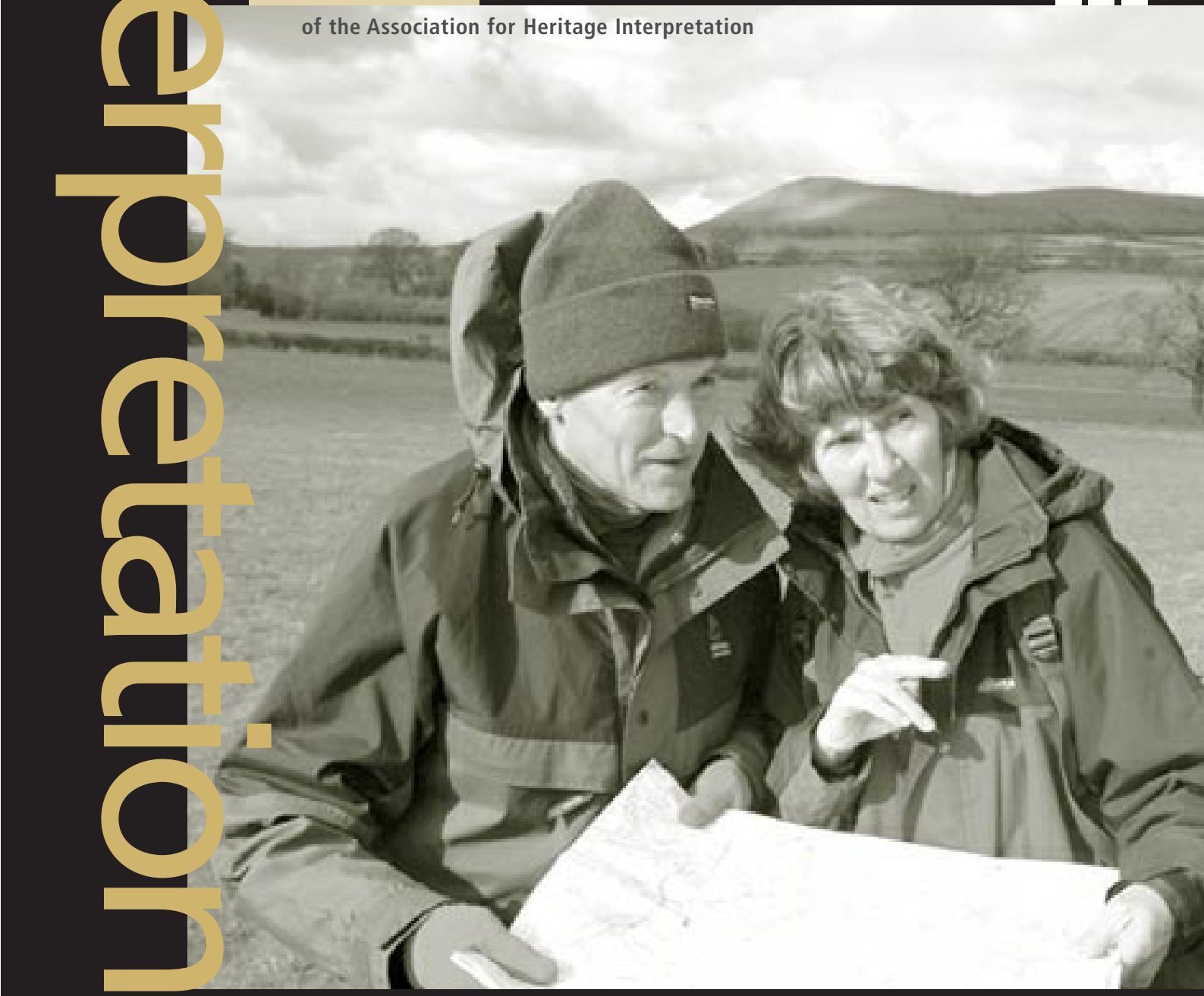

# Understanding our visitors

*The value of evaluation*

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Managing Editor:
**Ruth Taylor**
**Email:**
**ruth.taylor@nationaltrust.org.uk**

Production Editor:
**Elizabeth Newbery**
**Tel: 01865 793360**
**Fax: 01865 793375**
**Email:**
**emnewbery@connectfree.co.uk**

Design: **Nicole Griffin**
**Carrington Griffin Design**
**Email: cgd@pavilion.co.uk**

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The next issue will feature
**A round-up of interpretation world-wide**
Email suggestions for contributions to ruth.taylor@nationaltrust.org.uk

How effective is research and evaluation? That's the question our contributors aim to answer in this issue. Paul Harris, Linda Francis and Myra Crilly demonstrate the process of evaluation of signage for those with visual impairments; Anra Kennedy looks at how we measure on-line provision for children and Nigel McDonald gives some tips for evaluating self-guided walks; Julie Forrest reports on evaluating interpretation of natural history sites in Scotland, Jan Loveless and Sue Pellegrino describe how they evaluate access at National Trust properties and Patricia Turner shows how the learning impact at National Trust sites is assessed.



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All members receive *Interpretation Journal* and a bi-monthly Newsletter and other mailings. They can participate in AHI events and (if paid-up) can vote at the Annual General Meeting.

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

# Isaac Newton or William Blake?

**James Carter**, outgoing chair of AHI, considers the role of evaluation



It is accepted wisdom that evaluation is an essential part of interpretive planning and development. Accepted, but seldom acted on, because measuring whether interpretation is 'working' is a complex process. To know whether something is working we have to know what it is supposed to do, so any exercise in evaluation depends on agreeing what interpretation is all about. It also depends on having measuring tools that can give us meaningful results.

Considering the nature, role and practice of evaluation is timely. There is a growing need to demonstrate to funding agencies that interpretation is worth their investment; and an increasing recognition that it might be a good idea to ask the audience what they get out of an exhibit, or whether they can follow the directions in a guided trail.

Evaluation can certainly help give a clear focus to interpretation, but I believe we should also approach it with some healthy scepticism. Most importantly, we must recognise that measuring something is not the same as knowing or defining it. It is all too easy for assessment to dominate or distort the essential character of what is being assessed: ask any teacher who has had to grapple with Ofsted!

William Blake recognised this tension in the eighteenth century. He saw Isaac Newton, whose ideas had led to the scientific revolution, as misguided. Blake asserted that creative imagination would always be more important than rational analysis, and playing with this opposition has been a perennial theme in scientific and artistic debate ever since. Ironically, it was Newton's successor Einstein who gave new life to Blake's philosophy in his wonderful statement that 'imagination is more important than knowledge'.

This same tension lies at the heart of attempts to evaluate interpretation. Checking exhibition proposals with their intended audience is fine up to a point, but many audiences are innately conservative in their attitudes. To use an analogy with another art form, very few developments in theatrical performance came about because audiences said they wanted them: pioneers like Peter Brook or Jerzy Grotowski are driven by a creative vision that must sometimes challenge what is accepted, or even acceptable. The same must apply to interpretation if it is to provide new insights and keep our relationship with our heritage alive and relevant.

Measuring 'learning' is even trickier. In the informal setting of interpretation learning is an unpredictable affair, mediated through the mass of extraneous influences visitors bring with them or will encounter after they leave. The Generic Learning Outcomes developed for museums, archives and libraries through the Learning Impact Research Project are a step in the right direction here (see Pat Turner's article page 23).

The Learning Impact Research Project adopts constructivist ideas about what constitutes both knowledge and learning. It defines learning as 'a process of active engagement with experience', and if learning is a key aim of interpretation, this gives it an exciting role at the heart of how we link ourselves to each other, to our history, and to the world. Exciting, but problematic for any attempt to assess its impact, because in this ever-changing web everything is connected to everything else. As William Blake said, 'If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: infinite.' And therefore, of course, immeasurable.

*James Carter is a consultant on interpretation, communication and training projects.*
*A summary of the Generic Learning Outcomes is available at http://www.mla.gov.uk/documents/insplearn_lirp_rep.pdf*

# In black and white

**Paul Harris, Linda Francis** and **Myra Crilly** demonstrate the evaluation process between client, designer and a user who has visual impairment



## The client

*Paul Harris, OCC Strategic Countryside Access Officer*

Oxfordshire County Council's Countryside Service manages over 4,000km of public rights of way (footpaths, bridleways and byways). Just like every other highway authority we have a responsibility to ensure that these paths are well defined, properly maintained, easy to use and well promoted.

This is hard enough to achieve even for able-bodied users, but access for people with mobility and visual impairments is extremely poor, with little or no provision and awareness across the county. We made the decision that the routes we selected should offer reasonable access to pleasant areas of Oxfordshire – not just on tarmac'ed paths.

We decided that we needed to contract-in countryside accessibility specialists to undertake interviews and assessment of a long list of potential routes, comprehensive audits of the chosen routes, and the design and production of accessibility information web leaflets. We were looking for a contractor with a good understanding of accessibility in terms of countryside access, with particular knowledge of the needs of mobility impaired people on general public rights of way, who had proven experience too. This is still a limited field and out of two possibilities, we selected *Acre Associates* as they had the right combination of price and capability. They sub-contracted the specialist design work to Linda Francis.

As a client, we have been very impressed by the contractor's approach and commitment to the project. Each route, and the access to it, has been thoroughly audited and in addition, we have a list of works that could raise the standard of the route even more. We have been especially pleased with the level of detail that has been worked through on the access information leaflets. The brief here was for a simple black and white leaflet that could be downloaded quickly and cheaply from the internet, was suitable for the visually impaired, and that provided the essential access information. By building on work done by Kent County Council and the Chilterns AONB, and working directly with visually impaired people through the Cardiff Institute for the Blind, we are confident that our leaflets do exactly what it says on the tin.

Below: Myra Crilly

## The designer

*Linda Francis*

The design brief was to produce information that worked in black and white for the visually impaired. The need for black and white was considered essential because the information is chiefly for downloading from the web and many people only have black and white printers.

This was challenge number one since black and white can often be more restricting than colour when getting information across. Challenge number two was that it should be something the visually impaired themselves find workable rather than something we thought would work for the visually impaired. The RNIB has produced an excellent resource, the *See it Right* pack (details on their website www.rnib.org.uk ) which has been an invaluable, well-researched source of basic information. However, because this project was largely covering new ground there was also a need to develop aspects of it in consultation with potential users. My aunt, Myra Crilly, who is visually impaired, was an ideal source of advice! She also has regular close contact with staff, friends and other users of facilities at the Cardiff Institute for the Blind.

Between us we developed a good working format, although I feel there is still room for further development which unfortunately time and budget did not allow. Nevertheless it has been a hugely valuable experience for all concerned, giving us a sound basis to build on in the future as well as the knowledge to share our findings with others working on similar projects.

Most of the symbols below have been used previously and are from a range of different sources. Some have been adjusted to work better for the visually impaired. The slope symbol and the line styles for surface types have been designed from scratch for this project.

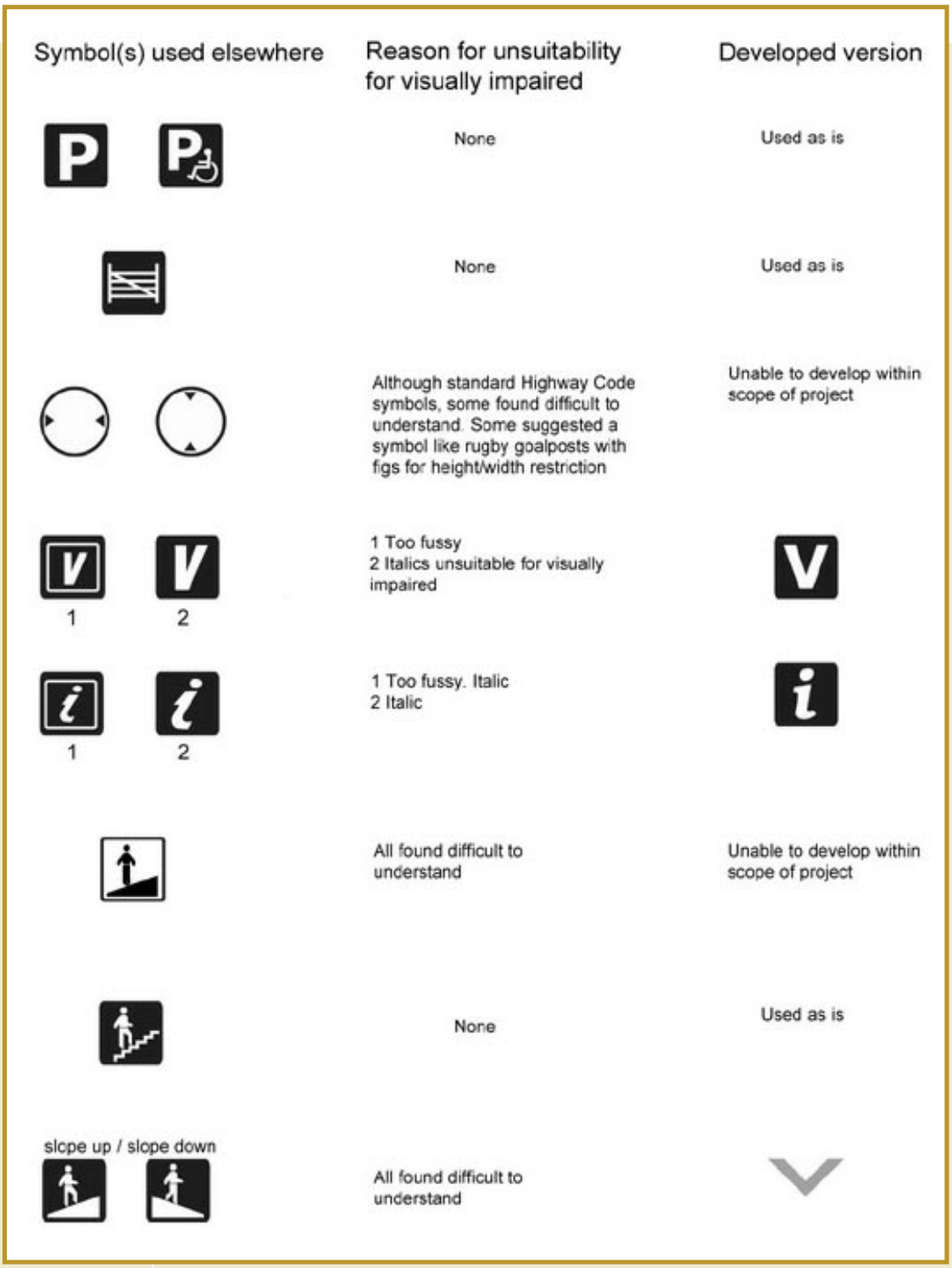
## The evaluator

*Myra Crilly*

I suffer from macular degeneration (the loss of central vision). I live just round the corner from the Cardiff Institute for the Blind so I was more than willing to look at Linda's symbols with a group of friends who have a variety of visual impairments.

**'access for people with mobility and visual impairments is extremely poor, with little or no provision and awareness across the county'**






With the Disability Discrimination Act coming into force in October, visual impairment is going to be a big issue. My friends and I were delighted to work on a project that was being prepared ahead of the Act. We found the most important things to remember when producing these maps or anything similar can be boiled down to just a few basic principles:

- Short, succinct sentences with headings and subheadings, **not** prolonged prose
- Minimise clutter, making sure the different elements stand out clearly as separate entities
- 16pt is the ideal size for text, but we found 14pt acceptable
- And contrast, contrast, contrast.

**‘it should be something the visually impaired themselves find workable rather than something we thought would work for the visually impaired’**



| Symbol(s) used elsewhere | Reason for unsuitability for visually impaired | Developed version |
|---|---|---|
|  | Some would prefer symbol of bench with a back and no figure | Unable to develop within scope of project |
|  | Too fussy |  |
|  | Although standard map symbol, some found difficult to understand. | Unable to develop within scope of project |
|  | None | Used as is |
|  | Too fussy |  |
|  1 2 | 1 Difficult to understand<br>2 Too fussy |  |
|  | None | Used as is |
|  | Too fussy. The least liked symbol of all! | Unable to develop within scope of project |
|  | Could be simplified more | Unable to develop within scope of project. Also, not needed on the first series of maps |

I am looking forward to visiting Linda next spring and trying out the maps ‘in the field’. On a personal note I have had tremendous benefit from the project: I now know how to handle PDF files and have much more confidence in using a computer generally. A great bonus!

*Paul Harris tel: 01865 810206*
*email: www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/countryside*
*Linda Francis tel: 01865 407626*
*email: linfran@oxfree.com*
*Acre Associates tel: 01844 358241*
*email: mike@mikefurness.co.uk*

# Testing times

**Anra Kennedy** asks whether children need, or even want to access 'culture' online. If so, how do we measure and ensure the quality of our online provision?



In the current cultural climate, the concepts of inclusion, access and creativity have become fundamental to the policies and projects of central government and the arts, heritage and education sectors. Children are an important element of these policies. An understanding of young children as a target audience and methods of evaluating their web use is vital.

## Children, chickens and eggs

Websites and digitised collections have given museums, galleries and heritage organisations access to a vast new pool of potential visitors; visitors unhindered by physical, social, financial or geographical limitations.

This freedom of access applies particularly to children of primary school age. As broadband provision is rolled out across Britain's primary schools and uptake of home connections increases, more and more young children are able to access the Internet.

The advantages to children of being able to access the cultural sector online are clear. In the 'real' world children are heavily reliant upon adults to facilitate any exposure to the arts or involvement with cultural experiences. Online, adults are less important. Online there's no physical journey to undertake, no need for chaperones, spending money or snacks. Children can dip in and out of resources for short periods, at times of the day that suit their family or school routines. Most importantly, children surfing the web can create their own pathways through content and are free to follow their individual interests. They don't have to tag along with Dad as he peruses the porcelain display if they'd rather be looking at the mummified cat down the corridor.

Over the last three years at 24 Hour Museum we have been working on a range of online projects for children aged between 4 and 11, centred upon our website for children, www.show.me.uk. This is where the chickens and eggs come into play.

*Show Me* was created specifically to give children an enticing, accessible doorway into their heritage and culture. When we began the project, back in early 2001, we began with the assumption (and the hope) that children would enjoy and want to use cultural content online.

The site showcases the best online provision from the UK cultural sector, supporting it with news stories, ideas for offline activities and visit information. We wanted to go beyond the provision of formal learning materials to give children an entertaining, fun website with its roots in heritage and the arts.

The problem was, we could find no conclusive evidence that children would visit such a site. We couldn't ask children if they liked or might like this kind of content, as they had no concept of what it might actually be – there was no pre-existing model for such a site.

The most popular websites for children were tied into toy ranges, television programmes or blockbuster films – they certainly weren't based upon works of art or museum artefacts. However, there were hundreds of Harry Potter fan sites being developed by children themselves, long before the launch of the first film. A worldwide community of young readers

**'Websites and digitised collections have given museums, galleries and heritage organisations access to a vast new pool of potential visitors'**



Right: A screenshot from www.show.me

**'Children surfing the web can create their own pathways through content and are free to follow their individual interests'**

was going online to exchange ideas about characters, plotlines, folklore and magic, without the added extras of 'whizz bang' sound and animations. This was the only real clue we had that children as web surfers could see beyond flashy commercial graphics to the content within a site and had an appetite for cultural content.

With hardly any cultural sites to use for testing and most published evaluation taking classroom use and the impact of advertising as its focus, rather than home or recreational use, we had to take a leap of faith.

Rowena Loverance, Head of E-learning at The British Museum, one of the trailblazers in the creation of online culture for children, had a similar experience when she began developing the British Museum's phenomenally successful Ancient Egypt learning resource (www.ancientegypt.co.uk) back in 1998. As she puts it 'You can't ask people what they want when they have no idea of what might be on offer, or of what is possible.'

We began building a prototype version of ***Show Me***, which we could then use for evaluation purposes, before deciding upon a launch version. This enabled us to begin gathering evidence to support our belief that children would visit and enjoy their own cultural online space.

### *Show Me* research

Researching, designing and developing the site – deciding upon tone, structure and content – has been a lengthy process. *Show Me* is still evolving and needs more work, but we have gained an understanding of children's use of the web, we've built an audience of children and we've discovered that the demand for cultural resources specifically designed for young children is very much there. The research process involved:

- User testing with children
- Gathering opinion from teachers, museum and gallery staff, web designers and cultural policy makers
- Reviewing and researching web content produced by over six hundred UK museums, galleries, archives and heritage institutions
- Reviewing and researching commercial provision of educational and cultural content.

### Why do children use the web?

In the course of our research we've identified three main reasons why children use the web. All are equally valid, but all impose different requirements on the content and interestingly, different requirements on user testing.

Children surf at school during lesson times because they've been told to, outside lesson times for purely recreational reasons and finally in a more purposeful way but still outside lesson times, for homework help or to pursue an interest in a particular subject. Access to the web for the latter two reasons might be taking place at home, at a friend or relative's house, at an after-school club or perhaps in a library.

### Evaluation in practice

At school, children's web use is often highly task-orientated and time-limited. It's also likely to be whole class, group or paired access, rather than individual time, or in an IT suite with a group all looking at the same site together. Crucially, this web use is very likely to be closely guided by the teacher, who has to ensure maximum educational benefit from all online time and will probably have pre-selected the resource, removing the element of choice from the child.

Web use in the context of a lesson is the most straightforward user scenario of the three to evaluate,


Above: Ancient Civilisations: a screenshot from www.show.me

in practical terms, and is thus also the most commonly evaluated of the three. It is relatively easy to find a school willing to co-operate with online testing and so to access a ready pool of eager young testers and teachers willing to give constructive feedback.

Schools work well then, for testing educational use of a resource designed for classroom use, but are an artificial environment in which to test informal and recreational use of websites, when children behave in entirely different ways.

A child using the web at home or for the purposes of play is free to roam away from whatever they're looking at, and will do so the moment they get bored, frustrated or simply attracted by a tempting link.

This is one of the most fundamental considerations when testing and creating sites designed for informal use. It's essential to user testing for this type of content that children have the freedom, in the testing session, to click wherever they want. If they do exit the site immediately, that's a telling result in itself.

Another element to consider when testing in these circumstances is the children's interactions with their friends. We've found that very often surfing the web is an activity children will undertake with siblings or friends, particularly when they're looking for games to play.

Mimicking this scenario by observing children online together is an extremely useful process. As well as being able to observe pathways they take through content and how they interact with what's on the screen, the advantage of testing in friendship pairs is the honesty factor.

Young children find it very difficult to be totally honest in a web testing setting. They tend to go to two extremes. Some children are very eager to please and spend much more time on a site than they might if surfing alone, in an effort to 'do well' in the tester's eyes. For instance, I asked one young boy what his favourite website was, two minutes into a chat with him, before we'd even looked at the website. He answered with a beaming smile "What's your website called? That's my favourite."

At the other end of the scale, some children don't want to admit they're interested by something, when they patently are. They can end up being drawn into the content despite themselves, exploring and playing on the website, but keeping very quiet in an attempt at nonchalance. This applies particularly at the upper end of the *Show Me* audience age range with children aged between about 9 and 11. Without wanting to stereotype here, we've found this tends to apply to boys more than girls.

When children are exploring a website with a friend they find it much easier to forget they're being observed and will chat freely between themselves. Even their body language can be very telling. They'll give each other an eye-rolling, bored glance or a quick grin, which wouldn't happen in a one-to-one setting with an evaluator.

## Moving on

As the quantity and quality of online cultural resources for children increases, evaluation will hopefully become easier, as we have more and more examples and types of content to build upon and compare. *Show Me* is developing and changing all the time. We're committed to carrying out as much meaningful and realistic evaluation as we can in order to inform that development and to sharing the results and impact of that evaluation to other practitioners and content creators within the cultural sector.

*Anra Kennedy is the Education Officer for the 24 Hour Museum. She edits and writes the website for children, www.show.me.uk.*

# ‘For ever, for everyone’

**Jan Loveless** and **Sue Pellegrino** describe how they evaluate the provision of access at National Trust properties



In recent years, the National Trust, along with its peer organisations, has been reinforcing its people-focused approach. Its centennial aim ‘For ever, for everyone’ resonates with the original commitment to social inclusion of founding partner Octavia Hill. October 2004 heralds the full implementation of Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA). The expressed intention of the Act is also one of social inclusion.

Access Matters UK have been carrying out DDA Access Audits of some National Trust properties over the last year. Our experience has been that, while there are properties which can be difficult to increase access to in the broadest sense, due to the nature of the listed status of the buildings or the terrain, for example, creative and informed solutions to enable improvements to access are being developed and adopted. Effective ways of interpreting the ‘story’ of the property have also been found so that people can engage with what the property has to offer.

The physical barriers can be difficult to overcome, especially where steps and stairs are concerned. However, there are many and diverse ways of delivering the ‘story’ of the house, its peoples and times, that can be developed and that National Trust properties are increasingly offering.The requirement for ‘reasonable adjustment’ as outlined within the DDA provides a really exciting opportunity to look at alternative means of interpretation which will undoubtedly achieve better Access for All.

## The context

The DDA requires service providers to respond to all the requirements of Part III of the Act from October 2004. Any elements that make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for a disabled person to use the service have to be addressed and a ‘reasonable adjustment’ made. The DDA is a ‘rights-led’ piece of legislation that focuses on people rather than buildings. It gives disabled people the right to access a wide range of services and not be discriminated against nor treated less favourably. In respect of historic buildings, many adjustments can be made to the physical environment that will not compromise the historic integrity of the building. In preparation for the implementation of the DDA, the National Trust has been undertaking various Access Audits on its sites over the last few years and properties have been building the recommendations into the property management plans for the future.

An Access Audit is an evaluation of an environment, a process or an event with regard to its ability to be inclusive of people with disabilities. It is not just about buildings. A competent access auditor will be trying to understand how the site works for a visitor from the first bit of publicity they see about it, through to arriving at the site, making a tour of it, using the facilities and leaving. This involves not just measuring and checking the built environment, but listening, observing and reading in an attempt to understand attitude and information - key elements to access. The most physically accessible building in the world can be rendered inaccessible to some by misguided attitude or lack of meaningful information and interpretation.

The Audit process, as implemented by Access Matters UK, is both comprehensive and reflective, comprising both quantitative and qualitative assessment. The Access Matters UK Audit tool entails scrutiny of twenty two key elements of an environment. These elements follow the journey of a visitor from arriving at the site, using all the facilities, touring any buildings and garden areas, and leaving. A fundamental prerequisite for an Access Matters UK Audit is that the Auditors visit properties when they are open and being fully used - preferably at a very busy time such as a weekend or Special Event Day. This gives a true picture of the challenges facing the properties when they are under pressure and the way in which

**‘The most physically accessible building in the world can be rendered inaccessible to some by misguided attitude or lack of meaningful information and interpretation’**



Above: Volunteer room steward talking to a disabled visitor in the garden at Chartwell
Above right: A partially sighted visitor handling watchmaker's tools at the Back to Backs, Birmingham

visitors themselves cope with this situation. It is at such busy periods that the likelihood of challenge under the DDA is at its greatest. The presence of stewards cannot be relied upon so heavily (as is the custom) to make the 'reasonable adjustments' on the spot, as they are often pre-occupied elsewhere. This leaves some disabled people with a 'less favourable' service as they, for example, wait to be taken up in a lift, or go off in the wrong direction to the WC, due to lack of verbal instruction.

The Access Matters UK Audit process involves spending considerable time watching, listening and observing, as visitors and staff make their way round the property and use its facilities. Survey of the built environment uses *Approved Document Part M:2004* of the Building Regulations and the British Standard on Access BS8300:2001 *Design of buildings and Their Approaches to Meet the Needs of Disabled People: Code of Practice* as baseline guidance. The philosophy underpinning the Audits (and the DDA), however, is one of social inclusion, often going beyond these standards to achieve an environment which will be accessible to all in the broadest sense. Auditors will engage with both visitors and staff where appropriate, to gain insight into the way they view a particular situation or take note of any ideas they may have to improve accessibility, based on their experience. The Auditors walk round the property, stopping to observe how spaces are used and noting situations where a disabled person could be receiving a 'less favourable service' as well as others where there are examples of good practice to be commended and passed on to other properties. A closed property will not be able to offer any of this key information. All the quantitative and qualitative material is then gathered together, reflected on in the light of DDA, interpretation and conservation issues, and put into a descriptive report with photographs, complemented by a spreadsheet presentation of all the recommendations. One of the key elements of the report is the relationship between access and interpretation. For example, the presentation of information about the history of a property needs to be accessible for people with visual impairment as well as those with other disabilities such as learning difficulties or dyslexia. Accessible information, in the broadest sense, will in turn lead to wider audience participation, thus reconnecting with Octavia Hill's original commitment to social inclusion.

## Access in the past

In 1895 Octavia Hill co-founded the National Trust and embarked on saving some spectacular and significant historic buildings and landscapes from dereliction, decay and changes of use. Since then, the National Trust has grown to care for thousands of acres of countryside and coastline, hundreds of great Houses, parks and gardens. The collections in the care of the Trust are such that 150 of the properties

**'Changes to improve access will contribute to a building's continued viability. Improving access makes good business sense'**

are registered as museums.

From the foundation of the National Trust, learning has been at the heart of the work of the organisation. The 1907 National Trust Act established that the properties the Trust purpose was 'promoting the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and tenements of beauty or historic interest.' The crystalisation of this purpose during the 1990s into the 'motto' created for the Trust's centenary, 'for ever for everyone', illustrates that the Trust still holds true to this same ideal.

Traditionally, as in many historic houses, the National Trust has supported these environments much as they were in the past by ensuring the placement of pictures, furniture and tapestries reflecting almost exactly the room settings as they were in a particular period. The National Trust has ensured that any intrusion into the historic integrity of the whole is kept to a minimum, hence the paucity of signs and labels and lack of handrails on lengthy staircases or steps where these did not originally exist. In the very early years, visitors were spectators filing past and viewing historic settings and objects of undoubted significance.

### Recent developments at the National Trust

The Learning Vision of the National Trust, launched earlier this year, includes a specific objective to provide a range of choices to suit the needs of all our visitors. Properties are now producing property learning plans to facilitate the inclusion of this variety of choices, including visual, oral and kinaesthetic experiences.

Coupled with the Learning Vision and the Trust's Interpretation Philosophy, the re-emphasis of the people-focused approach of the National Trust combined with the centennial aim of widening participation and developing new audiences is driving a cultural shift. This will increase the development of property interpretation from the use of traditional label presentation to an emphasis on a people approach, widening the role of room stewards, and creative interpretation techniques that can more readily enter into a dialogue with visitors using meaningful language that has resonance for all age groups and social backgrounds. The influence of the DDA is integral to this new approach and together they provide a real opportunity to open up environments for all to enjoy. As highlighted in the recent English Heritage publication *Easy Access to Historic Buildings*[1] 'the survival of most historic buildings depends upon their continued viable use. Changes to improve access will contribute to a building's continued viability.' Improving access makes good business sense.

The National Trust is also involved in partnership working, through the involvement of their Access for All Adviser, with similar organisations. English Heritage are soon to publish their sister document to the 'Easy Access to Historic Buildings' publication, focusing on historic landscapes. The National Trust has been involved at every stage of the development of these guidelines and continues to work with English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund and other related organisations on several discussion groups regarding the development of access to heritage as a whole.

Traditionally, historic sites have potentially been viewed as a rather hostile environment for visitors with disabilities, particularly for people with mobility difficulties but also for people with sensory or cognitive impairment. However, the requirement of the DDA to provide "reasonable adjustment" opens up enormous opportunities in terms of interpretation as a means of "telling the story" in a meaningful way. Where people cannot climb towers or access ancient hill forts, a reasonable adjustment has to be made and alternative means of interpretation found which will bring the site alive



Above: Live interpretation with Ralph Allen at Prior Park with WEA Heritage Education for All group

for them and offer other ways of involving them in the experience. For example, the main show rooms at Knowle in Kent are situated upstairs so an instructive virtual tour has been developed to tell the story of the property and to enable these rooms to be viewed by people who do not wish to go upstairs, or who cannot. Stourhead has developed a sensory trail and Montacute has developed interactive garden trails. Staff and volunteers have also had the opportunity to participate in WEA courses covering topics including live interpretation and storytelling.

In all cases it is crucial that the public can understand the background and the social context of the properties and be able to relate it in their own way to their lives. This dialogue must be conducted in a language that can be understood and in formats that can be easily comprehended. Sensitive interpretation of environments will resonate with new audiences and can play a major part in bringing houses and estates to life in a very real way and in a way that would involve people in their continuing development as places of employment, education and recreation.

### Interpretation and reasonable adjustment

The means used to achieve 'reasonable adjustment' are various. It is often assumed by properties that this will be a very costly exercise involving hi-tech equipment and resultant dependency on time to set it up. Technology does indeed offer many options for interpretation and can be wonderfully exciting and creative. However, our strong recommendation is to 'start with what you've got'. Not all disabled people want to sit in front of yet another screen or be isolated by yet another set of headphones.

The National Trust has an invaluable resource in its dedicated army of volunteers and staff. Visitors to National Trust properties are not just curious about the built environment; they also have a very natural curiosity about the life and times of the people who lived in it. Individual personalities and family dynamics are an endless source of fascination and these too can be interpreted by volunteers and staff in imaginative and creative ways to bring an environment to life. It is often this side of interpretation which we have found, by listening and talking to visitors, has enormous appeal for people from all walks of life. If the human element resonates for them in some way, the experience will be a meaningful one in a deeper sense. The impact of using real people to bring the built environment and its historical inhabitants to life should not be underestimated. Photo albums, web cams, audio-visual tours are some of the other many options. The more choices people have, the better, but they don't have to be expensive ones.

Where possible, various options are given in our recommendations to enable properties to choose a solution which is most appropriate to their future plans, conservation considerations and the availability of local resources. Many seemingly inaccessible sites are already making reasonable adjustments in imaginative ways, combining the skills of their volunteers with the professional expertise of their staff to come up with individual solutions. At Souter Lighthouse, for example,

alternative interpretation of the lantern is being achieved in a variety of ways. The volunteer stewards are an inexhaustible source of interesting Lighthouse tales, a CCTV camera films the view from the Lantern and can be manipulated and watched from the ground floor, a video further illustrates the interior and staff are currently looking at having an inexpensive web cam installed which can be viewed from the ground floor and live on the internet linking in with other lighthouses round the Baltic coast.

**'Not all disabled people want to sit in front of yet another screen or be isolated by yet another set of headphones'**



Above: Access in the countryside is also important. The launch of Hartland Way easy access trail

## Access and interpretation

The symbiotic relationship between Access and Interpretation has been formally realised within the National Trust, with the development of a new directorate, Community, Learning and Volunteering. Heather Smith, the Access for All Adviser, is part of this, enabling a closer approach to be taken between access and interpretation. There are also two Learning Advisers with specialisms in interpretation. In addition to this, a working group has been set up to discuss how the National Trust communicates with its use of signage. This group involves the Access for All Adviser and representatives from several sections of the Trust, including curatorial and conservation, to achieve a fulsome discussion and outcome considering all aspects of the use of signage.

In line with both the Trust's responsibilities regarding the DDA and in recognition of the value of its volunteers and staff and the need for them to be as effective as possible, Heather Smith has commissioned a programme of Disability Awareness Training.

The challenge of reconciling Conservation and Access continues to stimulate significant debate throughout the National Trust and provides the opportunity to re-visit and challenge some long-established working practices with the possibility of arriving at some innovative and more accessible solutions.

*Sue Pellegrino and Jan Loveless run an Access Consultancy Practice (www.access-mattersuk.co.uk) and are currently contracted as the Access for All auditors for the National Trust.*
*Heather Smith is the Access for All Adviser for the National Trust, (heather.smith@nationaltrust.org.uk).*

[1] *Easy Access to Historic Buildings* pub. English Heritage 2004

# The magic of Maguffin's Well

**Nigel McDonald** gives some top tips for evaluating self guided walks



Someone asked me recently 'what makes a good self guided walk?' I answered that it is easier to say what makes a bad one. And that's the truth. You know you've got it wrong when people get lost and come back tired, irritable and write and tell you all about it.

### The misery of the 'missing'

Apparently for every person who complains, there are another twenty-seven who would have! Ever thought of the poor souls who are still out there? What if some of those twenty-seven never got the chance to complain because they never made it back?

A psychologist called Maslow once came up with a hierarchy of human needs. In a nutshell he said that your audience needs to feel safe and confident before they can have their minds opened to the wonders of your guided trail. They want to know that they won't become one of the lost. They'll never get the magic of Maguffin's Well if they can't find it.

OK, so what do we do about that? Here are a few top tips that follow the rule that you evaluate from the start.

**'Apparently for every person who complains, there are another twenty-seven who would have!'**

Below: Test it once, test it again




### Tip 1: Do your homework

Plan a route that suits what your audience wants. Go and ask them. Don't assume you know who they are, what they are interested in or how far they'll walk. Four years ago I was asked to put together four walks for a soon-to-be-finished visitor centre. I thought I knew who audience was; I got it half right. Nice walks, well managed, lovely leaflet, but too long. As a result my walkers actually use the short cuts and only rarely walk the full routes.

So do a bit of homework. You'll meet some nice people and get out of the office for a couple of days.

### Tip 2: Print that fits

Brief your designer to come up with a piece of print that will work where you want it picked up. I know a wonderful walk that remains untrod because the leaflet was printed A4 folding out to A2! (they make good tents). Think about where you guide will be displayed. This will help you make decisions about format – will it fit in the rack? The last thing you want is to have your leaflet stacked – a stack of leaflets is a great place to leave a coffee cup.

### Tip 3: Print for demand

Do you need to print at all? What's the demand? Can you maintain a distribution? If you have no suitable distribution points or a small audience, you could try downloadable print. Most libraries now offer free Internet access and only charge a nominal fee for printing. Consider putting your print money into raising awareness of your walk. Take an ad in the local tourism paper or print a flier maybe. You could even start a website – it's a great place to include all the fascinating stuff you had to leave out of the leaflet (see Tip 5).

Remember some people like to walk on Sundays and on long summer evenings.

Can they get a copy of your guide?

### Tip 4: Maps ain't all that

How many people do you know who can read a map? I pass on this tip to you to relieve my guilt. I once spent time sorting out sixteen Ordnance Survey

**'I know a wonderful walk that remains untrod because the leaflet was printed A4 folding out to A2!'**



Above: Can they find the start?
Above right: That's the last time we saw that nice family from Reading

maps for sixteen separate leaflets covering the sections of a (not to be named here) National Trail. I had pasted the text artily around the nicely softened edges of the map.

There are probably still people wandering the hills today calling vengeance on my cringing soul. Maps are less important than your directions. The majority of your walkers will follow the written directions to the letter. They will only look to the map if what you have described is not exactly what they can see.

Write your directions and test them, then get someone else to test them. Finally, before you print, take copies of your final artwork, give them to a bunch of new people and test them again.

### Tip 5: Ooohs not aarghs

My penultimate tip is a personal bugbear. Keep your directive and descriptive text apart, and keep them both brief. Remember we live in a sound-bite society. Brief is best. Stand and watch people using your guide. If they move easily from point to point with an 'ooh' and an 'ahh', you've got it right.

### Tip 6: Live and learn

You've gone to print, they're walking in droves. Collect their comments. Put your contact details on your guide; an email address is good. Put a comments book in the TIC or visitor centre. Be brave, ask your walkers what they thought – are they grinning or groaning?

Remember Maguffin's final warning...
'Ignore these lessons at your leisure
...the souls of the lost will haunt you forever'

*(Authors note: Maguffin is a fictional character and bears only passing resemblance to persons living, dead or in a state in between!)*

*Nigel McDonald is Interpretation Manager for Shropshire County Council*
*email: Nigel.McDonald@shropshire-cc.gov.uk*

# Rating the results

**Julie Forrest** gives detailed practical guidance on evaluating the interpretation at six visitor centres in Scotland



## Evaluation

In 2002 Scottish Natural Heritage commissioned an evaluation of interpretation in six visitor centres where they had funded or part-funded the work. The aim of the evaluation was to see if the interpretation met the aims and objectives of the interpretation plans and to identify good practice. The six centres were:

- **Burn o'Vat Visitor Centre**, located near Aboyne in Deeside. It interprets the Muir of Dinnet National Nature Reserve (NNR) that includes the Vat (a massive pothole formed by glacial meltwater) and other glacial landforms. The centre has a small one-room display
- **Stevenson Forvie Centre** is situated on the Ythan Estuary north of Aberdeen. The NNR has a large sand dune system, diverse birdlife and the best examples of coastal heathland in Scotland. The Centre has an exhibition room and a foyer with fish tank and displays
- **Knockan Crag** is 13 miles north of Ullapool. The geological interpretation centre, aims to present Earth science in a popular way and encourage visitors to explore the geology of the wider area. It is the only attraction that is not primarily indoors. The interpretation is spread along three trails, and includes a roofed, but open-sided interpretive area
- **Noss Visitor Centre** is on an island off the east of Bressay in the Shetland Isles, which features seabirds, rich seas and geology. The small visitor centre is open for three months in the summer (May – July)
- **Trossachs Discovery Centre** is situated at the back of the Trossachs Tourist Information Centre on the main road in Aberfoyle
- **The Scottish Seabird Centre** is located in North Berwick overlooking the Bass Rock and is in the same building as a cafe and shop. It is the only visitor centre where there is a separate entrance fee to the exhibition area.

## The methodology

Three different methods of collecting data were used.

### *1 Before and after*

A common way to find out the effect of interpretation is to measure aspects of visitors' knowledge/attitude/behaviour before and after their visit, sometimes known as 'pre test' / 'post test' (Diamond, 1999[i]). One sample of visitors is asked a series of questions before entering the exhibition, and another sample is asked similar questions as they leave the exhibition. The 'after' sample must be a completely separate set of respondents, so no one is represented in both samples. Provided the samples are both representative of visitors as a whole, the results show how people's knowledge and attitudes changed as a result of the interpretation.

An advantage of this method is that it determines what people knew before coming to the visitor centre. Of the three methods chosen this one gives the most rigorous assessment of what people have gained from the interpretation.

### *2 Perceived learning*

In this method respondents are interviewed at the end of their visit. For chosen themes/objectives the respondent is asked:

- How much do you feel you knew about the following BEFORE you came to this Visitor Centre?
- Please rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is 'nothing' and 5 is 'a lot'.
- How much do you feel you NOW know about the following?
- Please rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is 'nothing' and 5 is 'a lot'.

**'Provided the samples are both representative of visitors as a whole, the results show how people's knowledge and attitudes changed as a result of the interpretation'**

The results of the 'before' and 'now' responses are compared to see if there is a shift along the scale after respondents have been round the visitor centre. This method relies on the assumption that respondents have an accurate perception of whether

**'Knowledge levels only really broke down when questions became more specific'**

their knowledge has increased or not. (There are varying opinions on the reliability of self-perception). The advantage of this method is that it does not involve the complexities of obtaining 'before' and 'after' interviews.

The disadvantage is that the results are relative rather than absolute. One person's perception of low knowledge could be a high level to another. Similarly, what one person would report to be a slight shift, say from 2 – 3 on the scale, might be reported as a big shift, say 2 – 5, by another person.

The main value in the method is ascertaining whether the sample overall felt their knowledge increased during the time they spent in the visitor centre. To be sure there was no confusion between the BEFORE and AFTER ratings, interviews were proposed for this method.

This method is appropriate for visitor centres with small numbers,

### *3 Check on exit*

In the third method respondents were asked questions 'on exit' from the visitor centre to check their knowledge and attitudes. The main types of question used were: correct /incorrect and open-ended questions.

The disadvantage of this method is that it does not take account of what people knew before visiting the centre. So the results reflect prior learning as well as what was learned during the visit.

## How the three methods worked in practice

### *Before and after*

The 'before' and 'after' interview approach used at the two high volume sites – Trossachs and the Seabird Centre – worked fairly well in practice. However, even at these high volume sites it was a challenge to obtain equal numbers of 'before' and 'after' respondents. We feel this is the most rigorous method to isolate what the interpretation achieved, eliminating prior learning as far as possible.

Charts give a visual picture of the differences between 'before' and 'after' responses, while the chi-squared test identifies which differences are significant (rather than attributable to chance).

Use of the chi-squared test allows the possibility of using smaller samples. John Veverka[2] has carried out multi-choice tests using sample sizes of 30 'before' tests and 30 'after' tests, and distributing questionnaires to all members of a group, with conclusive results. This is a good method if no check is required on whether the sample is representative and there is no requirement to analyse the results from particular subgroups.

### *Perceived learning*

At Burn o' Vat and Forvie, respondents rated their own knowledge of topics before and after their visit. This worked well in practice using interviews.

At Forvie, where some supervised self-completion questionnaires were used to augment the sample, possible confusion in interpreting the perceived learning questions did not materialise. We therefore conclude that it would be feasible to administer this method using the cheaper option of self-completion questionnaires in future. Indeed this might be essential for low-volume sites where interviewers ended up spending short periods on site for many days to achieve the targets. However, unless someone checks the completed questionnaires it is inevitable that some questions will not be answered by all respondents.

We feel that a minimum sample of 200 is needed to balance out any misinterpretation in the subjective question on perceived learning. Charts give a visual picture of differences in rating of knowledge BEFORE and AFTER. It is straightforward to calculate the percentages of respondents who reported that their knowledge increased by one point, two points, etc.

The advantage is that it is quick to work through the self-rating questions covering several topics. The downside of this method is that it relies on visitors' perceptions of their learning, which may be inaccurately reflected on the five-point scale.

Above and right: The Visitor Centre at Knockan Crag

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*Blending methods 1 & 2*

At the Seabird Centre (where we were primarily using the 'before' / 'after' method) we also asked respondents for their perceived knowledge level. With the mix of methods we were able to deduce that 41% of respondents felt their knowledge of seabirds increased, and this was attributable to the interpretation.

*Check on exit*

Questions were asked to check achievement of objectives on exit using interviews at Knockan Crag and self-completion questionnaires given out at the end of the visit at Noss.

At Noss, the Warden had to check that visitors did not look back over the exhibits while completing the questionnaires. This suggests that self-completion may only be suitable where there is a warden present, or questionnaires are handed out/picked up at a point that does not allow the visitor to return to the Exhibition. The latter would probably only apply at a commercial centre, such as the Scottish Seabird Centre, which has a turnstile at the pay point.

A disadvantage of self-completion questionnaires is that not all respondents complete all the questions. This may be overcome by using 'supervised' self-completion if there is a supervisor available. The supervisor's tasks would be to check that respondents do not return to the exhibition to fill in the questionnaire, and to encourage completion of all questions. Like the perceived learning method, there is no way to eliminate prior learning from the results.

**Other lessons learned**

This section draws out the main lessons learned about evaluating various aspects of interpretation.

*Overall aim*

We asked people for the main message they felt the visitor centre was trying to put over, and compared the results with the overall aim (purpose/theme or other wording). Where there was one overall aim this was fairly straightforward. However, in cases like the Seabird Centre, where there were several levels at the top of the interpretive hierarchy, this was difficult. It is essential that managers are clear what messages they want to get over to their visitors.

**'At Noss, the Warden had to check that visitors did not look back over the exhibits while completing the questionnaires'**

*Prior knowledge*

As already mentioned, to be rigorous and find out exactly what the interpretation has achieved means eliminating prior knowledge and attitudes using the 'before' / 'after' method. Results from the Seabird Centre and the Trossachs suggest that visitors have considerable prior knowledge and appropriate attitudes

## 'Be realistic about what you can maintain in terms of both funding and staff resources'

We attempted to address prior knowledge at Noss and Knockan Crag by asking respondents how they perceived their knowledge level before their visit, but the results did not show any difference.

We feel that a reasonably well-educated person (and most visitors were B/C1 occupational group) could correctly guess the answers to many of the questions we formulated to test various themes and objectives. Knowledge levels only really broke down when questions became more specific, eg naming the most important geological feature in the Trossachs, naming the two key figures in developing understanding of geology at Knockan Crag, or naming one bird that has adapted to deep-dive at the Seabird Centre. In other words, people believing their knowledge had increased does not translate into knowledge of specific facts.

### *Learning objectives*

The difficulties of evaluating general objectives were well illustrated at the Seabird Centre where different parts of objectives were checked with different questions. This led to complex conclusions like: 'part of one learning objective tested not met, further two parts of objective tested met, but knowledge not attributable to interpretation The challenge of formulating meaningful questions and believable responses'.

It would be much easier to summarise how many objectives were met if each objective were specific, as suggested above.

### *Attitudes and emotions*

The standard method of asking visitors how strongly they agree with statements worked well.

### *Behaviour*

Most of the behavioural objectives were evaluated by asking respondents how strongly they agreed with a statement eg 'Visitors to Forvie should not enter the ternery during the breeding season'. At Noss, the behavioural objectives were defined in specific terms and questionnaires were issued at the end of the visit, so we were able to ask direct questions. For example 'Did you go round any puffin burrows on the cliffs?' which (unusually in the surveys) showed the behavioural objective was not met. We feel these direct questions led to a more accurate feedback on behaviour.

### *Formulating effective questions*

We recommend that when evaluating interpretation sufficient elapsed time is allowed to draw up and pilot questions/statements that are meaningful and believable, but not necessarily with an obvious answer. This involves having an understanding of the misconceptions which may occur, and may sometimes mean drawing in specialists with subject expertise of the topics being evaluated, and expertise in formulating assessment questions (possibly from the fields of education or training).

## Improving the interpretation

### *Key messages*

Here we summarise the key messages emerging from more than one site.

- Revisit the main purpose/interpretive hierarchy to ensure there is a robust interpretive framework to guide any future upgrading of interpretation.
- Where there is a demand from visitors for more information, add a 'reference point' that gives further sources of information and where to find them.
- Ensure interactive exhibits are in good working order and maintenance is resourced and in place.
- Vary displays eg through the seasons, particularly where there is a high proportion of local / repeat visitors.
- Liven up the atmosphere and strengthen the sense of place within the exhibition with, for instance, audio, and wall murals.
- Most of the themes and objectives tested in this evaluation were represented by more than one element of the exhibition. It was therefore not possible to assess the effectiveness of the design and presentation of individual elements of


Right: Inside the Visitor Centre at Knockan Crag



exhibits in communicating aims and objectives, though this would be worthy of further research.

## Principles of good practice

In this final section we draw together our main findings from the survey and combined them with a broader look at interpretation to form six principles of good practice for interpretation.

### *1 Start with a robust interpretive framework*

- Consider testing the existing knowledge and expectations of visitors in developing the interpretive framework
- Develop a logical hierarchy of aim/themes and objectives
- Define SMART objectives
- Prioritise the main messages

### *2 Involve visitors*

When developing the interpretive framework it may be worth ensuring that visitors' views are represented alongside those of local experts, interpretation and subject experts and funders. This should increase the chances of providing what the visitor needs. Noss is a good example. Here our survey showed that 80% of the visitors were interested in bird watching: they wanted information about birds and where to see them. The theme of the exhibition: the importance of the seas, was, however not understood as the main message. This suggests that the main message and theme of the exhibition may not be appropriate at this site.

Surveys like this evaluation give some clues as to what visitors want. However there could be a more in depth role to uncover their needs before interpretation is developed. Fisher et al (2001) report on the role of audience advocacy in museums.

### *3 Use types of interpretation that work well*

- By studying the survey results, the following types of interpretation appeared to work well.

#### *Live interpretation – through technology*

- Use of hi-tech equipment, eg at Seabird Centre, was effective in attracting people to use it. This is reflected in the proposed use of live cameras by 79%-81% of 'before' respondents increased to 90%-96% of actual use by 'after' respondents.

#### *Live interpretation – with staff present*

- This is effective in providing factual information; eg live talks at Seabird Centre, wardens at Noss and Burn o' Vat.
- Live interpretation is also effective in influencing visitor behaviour, eg at Forvie, 33% of the visitors who had spoken to the tern warden, decided to alter their route through the Reserve.
- Interpretive techniques, which stimulate, will encourage visitors to explore the centre / site and find out more. For instance, at Knockan Crag this is demonstrated throughout the exhibition and along the trails using imaginative, but subtle techniques (eg art works and writing) to motivate visitors to keep going. This is reflected in the high

## 'Use of hi-tech equipment, eg at the Seabird Centre, was effective in attracting people to use it'

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Above: The Scottish Seabird Centre

level of achievement of attitudinal and behavioural objectives at this site.

### *Interactives*

- Interactives encourage visitors to get directly involved in the exhibit and its key messages. It is a highly effective and attractive means of interpretation. This is demonstrated at Burn o' Vat where over half of visitors quoted hands-on activities (including touch table, push button audio exhibit, animal masks) as the main thing remembered from the Visitor Centre. However, it is important that interactives work properly and are maintained.

### *Provide information*

- Providing information on a whole range of subjects, eg flora, fauna and local history, is as important as interpretation. At Noss, Forvie, and Trossachs visitors requested more factual information on practical and site specific issues/details.

### *4 Follow the ground rules*

Once you have developed a robust interpretive plan the following ground rules should help you to create and deliver effective interpretation.

Interpretation should:

- entertain
- be active, not passive
- provoke and stimulate
- create links
- have local roots
- use techniques matched to audiences
- be honest.

### *5 Pre- and post-test key interpretive exhibits*

- This will encourage definition of measurable objectives for each exhibit and should be done before the exhibit is finalised. Only exhibits that achieve their objectives should be used and a budget would be needed for this process.

### *6 Plans in place*

- Ensure plans are in place for maintenance of displays, particularly interactive ones, when funding interpretive facilities.
- Be realistic about what you can maintain in terms of funding and staff resources. Be clear who is responsible for monitoring the displays and taking necessary action.

### References

[1] Diamond, J. *Practical evaluation guide: tools for museums and other informal educational settings* pub, Altamira Press 1999

*This article was authored by Ruth Taylor from the report supplied from Strathspey Surveys in association with Mary Johnstone Training and Elspeth Grant.*

*Julie Forrest is Group Manager, Interpretation, Awareness and Involvement Unit Scottish Natural Heritagejulie.forrest@snh.gov.uk*

# Broadening horizons

**Pat Turner** explains measuring learning impact at National Trust sites using generic learning outcomes (GLO's)





Above: Children experimenting at the Corfe Castle exhibition

Internationally the expectations of museums and heritage sites are that they will provide an educational experience as well as enjoyment for their visitors (Cunnell and Prentice, 2000). In this 'age of learning' (DfET 1998), the heritage sector is under increasing pressure from the Government and local authorities to broaden audiences and make collections intellectually accessible to everyone in order to promote 'lifelong learning'. According to the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA,2003a) every experience offered to the visitor in the museum and heritage environment has the potential to be a learning experience provided that it engages, motivates or stimulates the visitor, or it changes the way they think, or it gives them something they did not have prior to the contact. The informal, cultural learning that occurs in a heritage environment is difficult to 'measure' when compared with formal education which has 'fixed' learning outcomes. As part of its vision 'Inspiring Learning for All' the MLA (2003b) together with The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (University of Leicester) has developed a method to measure the impact of informal learning in the sector. Considerable insight into the evaluation of informal learning has been provided by the Learning Impact Research Project (MLA May 2003), and the development of 'Generic Learning Outcomes' (GLOs).

## The Generic Learning Outcomes

Five GLOs were developed (MLA 2003b), and these are defined as:

- Increased knowledge and understanding
  Learning new facts, coming to a deeper understanding or grasping meanings more firmly.
- Increase in skills
  Knowing 'how to do something'. Skills include intellectual, practical, professional, social as well as the 'key skills' of numeracy, use of IT and communication.
- Change in attitude or values
  Changes in feelings or perceptions about self, other people or the wider world.
- Evidence of enjoyment, inspiration and creativity
  Evidence of having fun, or having innovative thoughts or evidence of exploration / experimentation.
- Evidence of activity, modification of behaviour or progression of learning.
  Change in behaviour, intention to act or progression of activity.

## Learning impact in the museum environment

Museums and heritage sites are informal learning environments where there is no set curriculum but instead learning is individual and constructed from ideas and experiences (Hein 1996). Informal learning empowers learners to develop their own skills of observation, enquiry and interpretation, and can lead to change, development and the desire to learn more (MLA 2003a). The learner in this environment is encouraged to identify gaps in their knowledge and to formulate individual learning objectives. The learning environment should provide learner support, where they feel safe & comfortable expressing themselves.

To facilitate and enhance the learning experience, the learner should be made aware of the potential learning outcomes within each environment. In the formal learning setting learning outcomes are prescribed, and the learner is assessed to determine the extent to which they have met these outcomes. However, fixed learning outcomes are not appropriate in the informal learning environment. Instead the learner identifies individualised outcomes based on their needs, interests or prior experience and on the information provided at the specific learning site.

## The Lifelong Learning Initiative at the National Trust

The National Trust produced its new Learning Vision and action plan in 2002. This was produced to support the National Trust Strategic Plan which makes a commitment to put learning at the heart of the Trust's activities, and to contribute to the learning agenda of wider society. The Director-General defined the need to make a leading contribution to lifelong learning as one of the three strands of her vision for the Trust. The Learning Vision has three main aims:– to meet the needs of our current core audiences, to reach out to new audiences and to develop a culture of learning for all staff and volunteers.

The first step in delivery of the new vision was to assess the nature and scope of existing learning provision across a range of National Trust sites.





Above: Family learning at Stourhead

A series of evaluation studies were commissioned of different types of learning and interpretation provision. This study, undertaken in the autumn of 2003, consisted of a survey that combined market research with a qualitative approach.

A modified form of the 'Critical Incidence Technique' (from Cunnell & Prentice, 2000) was used to measure certain dimensions of the learning experience and the learning environment at selected National Trust sites. The questions were designed to elicit incidents or events that either contributed to or detracted from the quality of the learning experience of visitors to the selected Trust sites. Four hundred and ninety three visitors from nineteen Trust sites in England and Wales participated in the three-day survey.

## The key questions asked

The key questions in the survey sought information concerning visitor's perceived learning and what contributed to this, factors that impeded learning and the preferred learning styles:

- *'When you arrived today were you aware what you could learn or discover at this site?'*
- *'What was the most interesting thing you learnt or discovered during your visit today?'*
- *'What helped you to learn about that?'*
- *'What if anything, stopped you from learning or discovering more during your visit today?'*
- *'What type of information did you prefer or find most useful?'*

## Outcomes of the survey

### *Awareness of what could be learned or discovered*

Being aware of what can potentially be learned enables learners to plan their experience. In this survey just over a quarter of the visitors were unaware of what was on offer on their arrival at the site and perhaps benefited less from their experience than the majority of the sample who did know what was on offer. The level of awareness varied across the individual sites, suggesting that in some instances more could be done to inform visitors prior to their arrival, or even on arrival, at the site.

For the majority, responses were divided into:

### *Awareness on arrival at a site*

'We picked up a leaflet when we came in'
'The staff told us about it when we arrived'
'We were given it at the gate by a lady volunteer for the children to follow'

### *Being aware prior to the visit*

'Read about it some time ago in the newspaper'
'From the National Trust person on the coach'

*What was the most interesting thing you learnt or discovered during your visit today?'*

The responses to this question ranged from the negative –

*'Nothing really'*; (only 7% of responses, though!)

to the mildly positive –

*'The furniture'* *'generally very interesting'*

to the enthusiastically positive –

*'Many interesting things, the whole history of the building, Stewart connection, Charle 1st, very interesting'*.

Site specific learning emerged, which was not surprising given that the sites surveyed ranged widely in type from Chartwell to The Workhouse, Southwell. Overall, less than 7% of responses were negative – indicating that the vast majority of visitors had a positive learning experience.

## The learning experiences translated into Generic Learning Outcomes

The visitor learning experiences were fairly easily categorised according to the five GLOs as the following examples illustrate:

### *Increased knowledge and understanding*

This particular outcome emerged at all sites, and indicated that the range of learning experiences was wide –

*'The tiles around the fireplace reflect heat – they're from Holland, which was interesting too considering the age of the house'*

*'I know what the ice tower is used for now'*

**'The "learning environment", which contributes considerably to the learning process, is complex and multifactorial'**

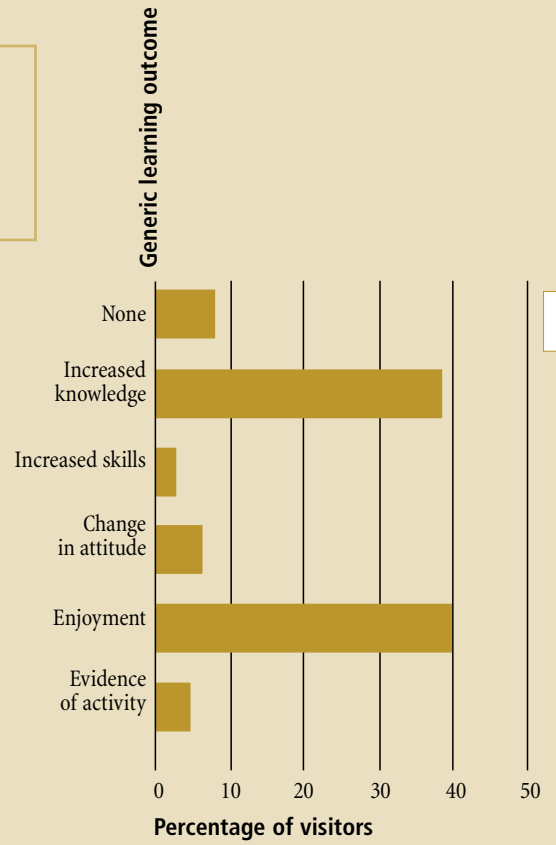


*Figure 1: Percentage of each GLO to emerge*

*Increase in skills (intellectual, practical, professional)*

This outcome was often related to information technology –

*'The computer thing – to show the changes. An understanding of which bit came in when'*

*Change in attitude or values*

An outcome that occurred mainly at two sites (Avebury and the Workhouse, Southwell) –

*'Opens your eyes to how people survived those austere conditions'*

*Evidence of enjoyment, inspiration and creativity*

Not surprisingly this was an outcome that emerged frequently, but not at all sites!

*'The beauty of the house and garden and the pictures and fine drawing room'*

*'The planting – inspirational!'*

*Evidence of activity, modification of behaviour or progression of learning*

Not a frequent outcome, but clear evidence of continued learning and intent to act emerged specific instances –

*'The history – we are reading a book about it, so came to find out more'*

*'It confirmed our idea to have ducks in our pond. Hydrangea we didn't know about'*

Overall, the most frequent learning outcomes identified in the analyses were 'Increased knowledge and understanding' and ' Evidence of enjoyment, inspiration or creativity'. The remaining three GLOs emerged in fewer than 10% of cases as illustrated in figure 1.

Below: The prehistoric stone circle at Avebury, Wiltshire



*Evidence of enjoyment of physical activity*

An additional, sixth outcome emerged from the analysis as evidenced by comments such as –

*'. . . Previous visits – knew there were many different walks in beautiful landscape'*

Whilst 'physical activity' may not be 'learning' in the context of the descriptions of the five GLOs – it nevertheless is important in the context of recent Government initiatives for health promotion and increasing participation in physical activity amongst all age groups.

**'What helped you to learn about that...?**

The 'learning environment', which contributes considerably to the learning process, is complex and multifactorial. In this survey the factors that enabled learning or discovery were – like the learning outcomes – site specific, indicating that learning environments were frequently unique to the site. Eighty-three percent of visitors could identify factors that enabled them to learn and a wide range of tangible and intangible factors emerged.

The tangible factors identified related to the physical environment i.e. The displays and layout; the interpretation panels and leaflets; the audio-guides and verbal information provided by stewards or volunteers.

As described by one enthusiastic visitor –

*'Well its all there isn't it? Oh its well done, you can read about it, ask about it'.*

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Above: Family learning at Chartwell

**'The vast majority of visitors who participated in this survey clearly enjoyed their experience'**

Other visitors found the audio-guide really useful –

*'The tape – everything I've learnt has been on the tape –fantastic!'*

And many other visitors learned by *'just wandering around and looking'*.

Intangible factors which related to the atmosphere and ambience of the environment, contributed to the learning experience also –

*'The study, the books, maps, desks, the general feeling of the history being made'*

*'We had a guide book, but just being here, the experience . . .'*

## Factors that inhibited learning

Although the most frequent response to this question was 'nothing', issues were identified by just over a third of respondents with criticism mostly levelled at accessibility to information, provision of information and environmental factors:

*What, if anything, prevented you from learning more?*

*'Rooms too crowded/ too noisy/people in the way'*

*'Not enough access/areas closed off eg railway museum closed'*

*'Information difficult to find, to read/see, or hear* (9%)

Very few visitors (less than 2%) found it 'difficult to get about' in the physical environment, but the 9% who found information difficult to read, see or hear may have included visitors with hidden disabilities such as dyslexia, hearing or vision problems. This particular aspect of accessibility is often overlooked, although it is really important in the context of developing effective learning environments.

## What type of information did you prefer, or find most useful?

Visitors clearly preferred information in the form of human interaction (stewards or tour guides, etc.) and in particular, material to read and use independently (guide books, leaflets etc) – as succinctly voiced by one visitor:

*'Information on entry to the rooms. Walk around with it in hand. Leave it on exit'*

The most popular preferences (types of information) that emerged in the survey are listed in figure 2, page 27. Some forms of interpretative information were available at certain sites only and this may have contributed to the variation in visitor choices that emerged (see figure 2).

## Preferred learning styles

Visitors were asked to identify their preferred means of acquiring information from a list which was provided. Interestingly the majority (85%) said that they preferred to learn by looking (self-discovery) and 61% by reading, whereas less than half (45%) chose 'listening'. Touching and hands-on / interactive methods were preferred by only 25% of all respondents, but there was considerable variation for this choice depending on the site. For example, at one site 68% of visitors selected 'hands on / interactive' as their preferred style, suggesting that their choice was probably influenced by their recent experience.

## In conclusion . . .

This survey demonstrated the potential for effectively evaluating the visitor learning experience in a museum and heritage environment using a modified market research approach, and this methodology could easily be adapted for smaller organisations or to evaluate single sites. It was possible to evaluate

| Information type | Description |
|---|---|
| Material to use independently / to read (83%) | Guide books, laminated room sheets, leaflets, interpretation panels |
| Human interaction (48%) | Room stewards, guided tours |
| Information to listen to / interact with Hands on (16%) | Audio guides, lectures & talks, IT interactive |
| Things to watch / observe (9%) | Videos, film shows, theatre, live interpretations & demonstrations |

*Figure 2: Information preferences*

Far right: Adult learners at Chartwell



the quality of the learning experience, across a wide range of Trust sites, to provide evidence to the National Trust on its provision of informal learning in the heritage domain. Areas for further development were identified that would enable the Trust to enhance and widen the learning experience at its sites through the writing of property learning plans.

The vast majority of visitors who participated in this survey clearly enjoyed their experience, and could reflect on their learning and identify what they had discovered, and also what contributed to their learning. The nature of the learning, the process involved and the contributing factors differed across the range of sites and given the diversity of the various sites that participated in the survey this was to be expected. Notably, a sixth possible outcome – 'engagement with physical activity'– emerged. This outcome is probably unique to this type of heritage environment compared with a museum setting, and meets current initiatives to increase physical activity levels throughout the population in the UK.

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*Dr Pat Turner is an Assistant Director with responsibilities for pedagogical issues and student support in the School of Social Sciences & Law at the University of Teesside, Tees Valley, TS1 3BA UK. Email P.Turner@tees.a.c.uk.*

# Does interpretation pay?

**David Masters** of Imagemakers appeals for the need to research the economic benefits of interpretation



I've heard talk about the need to research the economic benefits of interpretation on many occasions, but nothing so far has happened. When I was editor of *Interpret Scotland*, we circulated an evaluation questionnaire asking readers what future topics they would like the journal to address. The economic benefits of interpretation came out near the top of the list. The editorial board briefly considered this as an option but there was so little material that it was impossible to base an edition around this subject.

It is now time, surely, for action. We at Imagemakers propose that a partnership of interpretation consultancies and national agencies come together to raise funds and steer a research project into the direct and indirect economic benefits of interpretation. The research could cover a wide range of economic benefits including direct visitor expenditure at a site, indirect expenditure associated with a visit, and the financial benefits of more effective visitor management. There would be some significant challenges to such a study and it would not be an easy subject to address, especially taking into account issues to do with the 'quality' of the interpretation and how to distinguish between the impacts of the interpretation and other aspects of the visitor experience. But, with our collective experience, it should be achievable. Of course, any research must be independent and impartial, but we are quire convinced that there are important economic benefits to be quantified.

We are willing to commit some staff time and fundraising experience to realise such a project, which we would see very much as a partnership across the industry. We will be writing to AHI and a number of key consultancies and agencies to test the water, but if you would like to get involved, please let us know. We do not want to take a lead, but simply help get something going. AHI would be the best body to co-ordinate the research study, which we envisage would be undertaken by a university department.

Whether we like it or not, our field of work is driven by the economics of heritage conservation, education and tourism. In many parts of the public sector achievement targets and auditing systems have been put in place to ensure best value. Only when they have proven themselves are providers then given freedom from central control. We in the heritage industry are not immune from such trends. It is in our interests to become more pro-active in addressing and evaluating the public and economic benefit of what we do. If we don't, we run the risk that someone in government is going to ask difficult questions of us.

*If you are interested please contact David Masters or Jane Sillifant at Imagemakers on 01837 840717, enquiries@imagemakers.uk.com*

*If you have views on how AHI could contribute to a research study please email ruth.taylor@nationaltrust.org.uk*