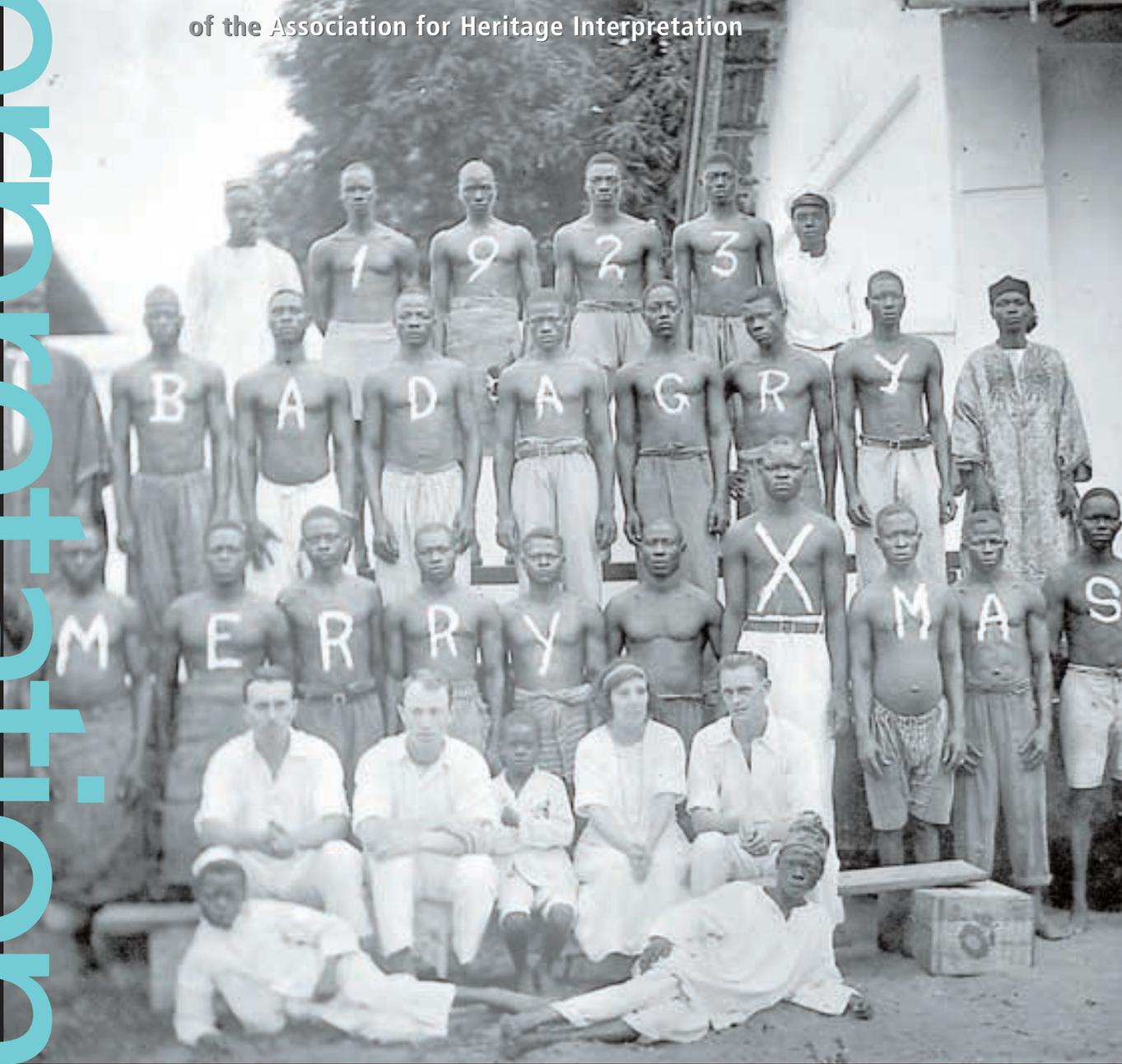


# Interpretation

journal



of the Association for Heritage Interpretation



## Hot topics

*Interpreting controversial and emotional issues*

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Production editor:

**Elizabeth Newbery**

Tel: 01865 793360

Fax: 01865 793375

Email:

elizabeth@newberyandengland.com

Assistant editor:

**Rachel Minay**

Associate editor:

**Margie Bryant**

Design: **Nicole Griffin**

**Carrington Griffin Design**

Email: [cgd@pavilion.co.uk](mailto:cgd@pavilion.co.uk)

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**AHI Awards 2005**

Special category: Using the  
creative arts in interpretation

Email suggestions for  
contributions to: [elizabeth@newberyandengland.com](mailto:elizabeth@newberyandengland.com)

Certain issues are notoriously difficult to interpret. In this issue we show how interpreters have dealt with such emotional issues such as slavery, colonialism and imperialism; the sensitivities of the Umeewarra Mission of South Australia; exhibiting human remains, genocide and the miners strike of 1984–5. Others such as the Eden Project have deliberately introduced the shock factor to encourage audiences to look at plants in another way.

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# 'And passions just like mine'

David Uzzell introduced the term 'hot interpretation' in 1988; here he reflects on how the concept is now being used some 17 years later

*So we go inside and we gravely read the stones  
All those people, all those lives  
Where are they now?  
With loves, and hates  
And passions just like mine  
They were born  
And then they lived  
And then they died  
It seems so unfair  
I want to cry*

(Cemetery Gates, Morrissey, 1986)

Hindsight is a wonderful faculty. When the term 'hot interpretation' first passed into interpreters' talk it came across as a quite radical idea. Just under two decades later it seems somewhat obvious. What is hot interpretation? In short, the concept arose in response to what I saw at the time as a shortcoming by many interpretive designers and providers to acknowledge that visitors to heritage sites do not experience heritage simply as a cognitive experience. Of course, this is an exaggeration because interpreters have always recognised that heritage interpretation should be enjoyable, and enjoyment is at least in part an emotional response. But enjoyment was simply left as a fuzzy concept. Enjoyment one sometimes felt was assumed to be typically the absence of negative qualities rather than the presence of positive ones. For example, if an exhibition wasn't boring, if visitors did not lose interest in an historical re-enactment, and provided the interpretation held the attention then it could be seen to be enjoyable. Interpreters clearly design exhibits to be enjoyable (fun?), but it is doubtful whether many interpreters design material for specific emotional responses. Enjoyment is also intimately tied up with learning. We know that people get enjoyment from the rewards associated with learning, such as the sense of achievement. Likewise, when people enjoy an experience they are more likely to be receptive to the learning experiences offered. But 'enjoy' has rarely been properly described other than in terms of warm-glow feelings.

Originally, the case for hot interpretation was premised by the argument that interpretation should not simply be a cognitive experience. One theory of attitudes in psychology is that attitudes comprise three elements – the cognitive, the affective and the behavioural. Consequently, if one wishes to change attitudes then one must give as much attention to the affective and the behavioural as the cognitive – it is not just about looking to enhance people's understanding of the heritage, but also addressing what they *feel* and what they can *do* as a consequence. Interpretation has always paid a great deal of attention to raising awareness and enhancing understanding, but less to these other aspects. If interpretation is about raising awareness and changing attitudes and behaviours, then it requires a more holistic approach to be effective. And so, it was good to see Ceri Thompson's comment that the design of the new displays at Big Pit 'were planned to be as 'human' as possible'. The papers in this issue of *Interpretation Journal* illustrate the different ways in which interpreters are recognising this.

When I originally wrote about Checkpoint Charlie and the Berlin Wall, Oradour-sur-Glane, the First World War displays at the Imperial War Museum, and other sites of war and conflict the emotions centred on horror, sadness, humility in the face of such bravery and anger at the senseless loss of life ... Inevitably, emotions are circumscribed by the type of heritage or history that is being told. But hot interpretation is not just about getting hot under the collar – feeling the extremes of emotions when confronted with the extremes of human experience.

Emotions, like manners, to ring true must not simply be exhibited but felt and mean something. One always has to be wary of accusations of sensationalism, as Katherine Haan found in the design of displays at the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum in Bristol. Hot interpretation can provide a cathartic experience as one comes to terms with the past, but what is striking about the papers in this issue of *Interpretation Journal* is that the authors see hot interpretation as an extremely effective device for addressing the future. In the mid

1990s I wrote a paper with Roy Ballantyne (*Journal of Environmental Education*, 24, 3, 4–7) advocating the establishment of a museum in District Six in Cape Town in which hot interpretation could be used to bring the peoples of South Africa – Afrikaners, Cape Coloureds, Europeans, Xhosas, Zulus and others – and together to tell their stories of what apartheid meant to them. Its purpose: to be a catalyst to promote a healing of the anger and facilitate reconciliation in the community. It is striking that the papers by Suzanne Bardgett in respect of the genocide exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, Jane James on Umeewarra and Haan on the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum all see this positive role for hot interpretation; 'This is not black history, or white history, but our shared story and one that we all need to come to terms with.' Haan poses the question 'Can the cultural sector go even part way to contributing to that process of repair?' It is perhaps worth noting that the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, 2000 and the new Disability Discrimination Act, 2005 place on public bodies a general duty to promote good race relations and positive attitudes towards disabled persons. Here is an opportunity for interpreters to contribute to social change and reformist public policy and set the value of heritage interpretation in a broader social context

than simply leisure and tourism.

War and conflict are emotional subjects that excite strong affective responses, but the emotional palette which heritage and heritage interpretation can inspire and to which we can respond is infinite. It has equal application to the many different stories which interpreters tell – environmental destruction and pollution, species depletion, religious, sexual and racial intolerance and discrimination, class and caste issues, social reforms and the history of access to health, welfare and education. There is a danger of equating hot interpretation with shock and controversy. While the Eden Project (Sue Minter) has sought to shock visitors by using urban graffiti artists to 'respond to Eden', there are many other interpretive examples in the gardens of Eden that produce a no less startling but rather more affectively gentle response.

*David Uzzell is Professor of Environmental Psychology at the University of Surrey, Guildford. He edited Heritage Interpretation, Volumes I and II, (Wiley, 1989) and Contemporary Issues in Heritage and Environmental Interpretation: Problems and Prospects (with R. Ballantyne, The Stationery Office, 1998)*

# Interpreting Umeewarra – ‘road of the stars’

**Jane James** describes the sensitivity needed in interpreting the Umeewarra Mission of the Flinders Ranges, South Australia

## The Aboriginal peoples

Aboriginal people have lived in Australia, acting as custodians of the land, for at least the last 60,000 years<sup>1</sup>. Following the initial ‘discovery’ of Australia by the Dutch in the 1600s, and ultimately by the English in the 1700s, settlement by Europeans, predominantly the English, followed in 1788.

children were removed from their parents, families and land and placed in missions or homes.

This programme was carried out with the support of the government of the day. These Aboriginal children are known as ‘the Stolen Generation’<sup>6</sup>.

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‘A process of persecution, rejection and destruction of many of the Aboriginal people of Australia and their culture’

Below: Sign to Umeewarra



Above: Umeewarra Mission house

## The first Europeans

Matthew Flinders was the first European known to have explored Spencer Gulf on the south coast of Australia, in 1802, including the site of Port Augusta<sup>2</sup>, and he was followed later by other seaborne parties, mainly in the 1830s when South Australia was established as a free state and British colony in 1836, and by the explorer Edward John Eyre in 1839<sup>3</sup>. By 1842, the Port Augusta area was one that was frequented by trading ships and drovers servicing the grazing lands of the Flinders Ranges. Settlement in the area followed soon after so that supplies could be brought by sea for the pastoral properties developing in the Flinders Ranges and for the export of wool. At this time South Australia was the home of as many as 50 distinct Aboriginal groups<sup>4</sup> and the area around Port Augusta had long been used as a meeting place for local Aboriginal people.

Early European settlement in Australia was accompanied by a lack of understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal culture. Land was confiscated and diseases introduced, resulting in a negative impact on many Aboriginal groups. What followed was a process of persecution, rejection and destruction of many of the Aboriginal people of Australia and their culture. Over the past 200 years of white settlement, Aboriginal people have experienced rejection, a process of assimilation and, more recently, moves towards reconciliation<sup>5</sup>.

Christian missions, established in the early 1900s, often felt that the children of Aborigines would have a better, more Christian, upbringing if they were taken into the care of European settlers. Aboriginal

## The Umeewarra Mission

One such mission was Umeewarra in South Australia. Umeewarra Mission was located on the outskirts of Port Augusta, at the head of the Spencer Gulf, in the southern foothills of the Flinders Ranges, 500 km north of Adelaide, the state capital.

Umeewarra Mission was established in the 1930s by missionaries from the Open Brethren Assemblies Church and ran, in the same location, for about 70 years. The site was deliberately selected as one that was close to a traditional Aboriginal camping and meeting area, in the hinterland of the tidal flats of Port Augusta. The Flinders Ranges run to the east and north. Port Augusta – the ‘gateway’ to the Flinders Ranges – has traditionally, in both Aboriginal and European times, been at the crossroads for travellers moving from both east to west and north to south through South Australia.

The name ‘Umeewarra’, from *amewara*, which means ‘road of the stars’, was derived from the position of the mission, located in the outback of South Australia, beneath the Milky Way. The name was suggested by Jimmy Captain, an ex-police tracker from Oodnadatta, who suggested to the missionaries that ‘Umeewarra’ meant that the mission was ‘the road to the stars’ and ‘that God has his people [the missionaries] here now to tell us right across our country’ that the mission is ‘the way to heaven’ (Anderson, 1988).

When the Umeewarra Mission was established it catered generally for three groups of children. Firstly, children removed from their families and land, from areas throughout central Australia, including South

Australia and southern Queensland. Children taken from these areas belong to a number of different Aboriginal groups, each with its own culture, beliefs and identity, and each with its own language. Secondly, Aboriginal children who were wards of the state from the surrounding area were also accommodated at Umeewarra Mission. Thirdly, children were sometimes left at the mission by Aboriginal families, who were unable to look after them, for a number of reasons, including temporary respite care, or for schooling from the missionaries (Mattingly and Hampton, 1988). These children came from Arabana, Gugada, Pitjantjatjara and Adnyamathanha lands and other areas.

#### Life in the mission

Up to 45 Aboriginal children were accommodated at the mission at any one time and ranged in age from babies to teenagers. It was built to accommodate them in dormitories, with a communal dining area serviced by a large kitchen. The children’s play activities were supervised in a semi-enclosed quadrangle, and the chapel was used for regular prayer meetings and church services. Much of the structure of the original mission site still remains.

The Umeewarra Mission, unlike many others established throughout Australia, encouraged children, including the ‘Stolen Generation’ children, to keep in contact with their families. Elsewhere most

The Umeewarra Mission closed in 1996, with some of the mission children staying at the site, which now houses the Davenport Aboriginal Community. For some of these people, Umeewarra is the only home that they have known, and many see it as a caring and supportive environment.

#### The Umeewarra Nguraritja

The Aboriginal community in the area has set up a committee, the Umeewarra Nguraritja, composed largely of former mission children, to oversee the site, culture and people from the Umeewarra Mission. This committee wants to establish a museum or interpretive centre to tell the story of the Umeewarra Mission times.

The story, in part, is one of sorrow and hardship. The sorrow of children removed from their homes, of a destruction of Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal culture and beliefs. The hardship is linked to the loss of family, loss of identity and loss of culture linked to a sense of place. There is some celebration, however, in efforts that were made to keep children at the mission in touch with their families. There is also an acknowledgment of the support that was forthcoming from the Brethren Church at the time, towards children who were in the care of the missionaries. Many of those children maintain their contacts with the last missionaries who were based at Umeewarra.



Above: Umeewarra Mission chapel

### ‘The concept of developing an interpretive centre for Umeewarra has come from former mission children’

‘Stolen Generation’ children were actively discouraged from any contact with their families or homeland<sup>7</sup>. Umeewarra also permitted some restricted retention of Aboriginal culture and beliefs, but did not permit any indigenous ceremonies to take place. Children in the care of the Brethren missionaries were given a Christian upbringing, with school work, sport and religious instruction. Their lives were ordered and relatively restricted, and Christian teachings were part of their daily routine.

The stories from the mission form part of the Aboriginal community’s cultural and intellectual heritage, as does the documentation relating to the running of the mission. Such materials include archives, film, photographs, videos, oral histories, letters, diaries, etc. Some of this material is stored by the missionaries of the Brethren Church, some is held by the Umeewarra Nguraritja and some is at the mission site.



Above: Arid Lands museum

### Strict guidelines

The Umeewarra Nguraritja has imposed strict guidelines and aims to protect both the authenticity and integrity of the site and the people involved, both Aboriginal and missionary. The material culture and heritage from the mission times needs to be preserved.

The children who were raised at Umeewarra have their own personal stories to tell, and it is especially important to the Umeewarra Mission people that the stories of the older people are recorded before they pass away. They have concerns about the way that such stories are recorded and by whom, and feel that such oral histories are most appropriately recorded by Aboriginal people. These stories, recollections and memories will remain the intellectual property of Umeewarra Nguraritja.

Authenticity and cultural integrity are also issues that will need to be addressed. Much of the material – missionaries' diaries, official documentation and records – will be material over which Aboriginal people have no control.

### The Brethren missionaries

The Brethren missionaries are also supportive of the desire to tell the Umeewarra story. They are happy to make available materials that date from the mission days that were part of the record keeping whilst the mission was in operation. The missionaries also have a role to play in the telling of the Umeewarra story. Their oral histories will be unique and their explanations and interpretation of the documents, diaries and photos that have been kept are invaluable. They have encouraged the Umeewarra Mission people to reclaim this heritage and will actively assist in the collation and analysis of the many and varied materials.

The issue for the Umeewarra Mission people is to uncover a way to preserve, conserve and interpret the mission culture that is part of their history, in a museum or interpretive centre that maintains the integrity of that history, and in a manner that contributes to the peace and reconciliation process into the next millennium. The people will need to decide how to preserve the material culture from this time, how to record the oral histories and stories from former inhabitants at the mission and from the surviving missionaries, and, importantly, will need to

decide what to display and interpret for the visitor. They acknowledge that it is crucial that the original collection of materials – written, photographic and verbal – be kept safe and intact at all costs.

### An interpretive centre for Umeewarra

The concept of developing an interpretive centre for Umeewarra has come from former mission children. Their approach has been strongly supported by the missionaries of the Brethren Church who have been custodians of much of the material culture dating from the days of the mission. Both groups see the value in not only preserving the mission heritage, but also in interpreting that heritage to the broader community, and to visitors, as a reflection of part of the history of South Australia.

The issue of interpretation and reconciliation that any prospective museum or interpretive centre has to face is how to contribute to this process, without stealing the culture of the 'Stolen Generation'. The ATSIC Cultural Policy Framework (1995) suggests that the 'Keeping Place' or 'Cultural Centre' has the potential to become a primary focus or resource for activities concerning culture and identity.

One of the issues to be addressed by the proposal to develop an interpretive centre, is the location of such a centre and whether it should be housed, at least in part, in some of the old mission buildings, but in terms of offering an insight into life at the mission, there is an argument that supports development at the original site which will create an authentic 'sense of place' (Carter, 1997). There is also the view that 'good buildings are rare and often potent symbols' (Davidson, 1991) and there could well be a convincing argument that supports the idea of a custom-built centre.

In 2003 a 'Tracks to Umeewarra' reunion day attracted many former mission children, providing them with the opportunity to share their different perspectives and experiences about Umeewarra when it operated as a mission. The event was commemorated with a plaque and the planting of two trees, one by an early resident and the other by one of the last residents. These events contributed towards the reconciliation process and provided a focus for the development of the intended visitor interpretive centre.

The role of interpretation in telling the story of the Umeewarra Mission will be crucial in establishing the centre as an authentic Aboriginal cultural enterprise and in maintaining both the integrity of the site and its people.

*Associate Professor Jane James is Head of Cultural Tourism at Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia. This article was written with the permission of the Umeewarra Nguraritja*

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**‘The issue of interpretation and reconciliation that any prospective museum or interpretive centre has to face is how to contribute to this process, without stealing the culture of the ‘Stolen Generation’**

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# Too hot to handle?

**Katherine Haan** looks at interpreting sensitive issues in relation to the history of empire and its legacies today

500 years of history cannot be swept away. At its height the British Empire controlled over a quarter of the world's surface and its people. This history and the ongoing legacies we deal with every day need to be shared, debated and discussed to make sense of modern society and to move confidently into the future. The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum in Bristol provides a public forum where just such discussion can take place.

building an empire (1480–1800), control, the Victorian empire at its height (1800–1900), and the struggle for freedom and independence, from colonialism to Commonwealth (1900 to today).

The museum avoids duplicating existing exhibitions, such as retelling the history of the Second World War when the Imperial War Museum and the National Army Museum already do this very well. Instead it shows how the war affected

**‘Through its exhibitions and educational activity it covers issues ranging from slavery and indentured labour, to racism, economic exploitation and cultural imperialism’**



Above: A pamphlet against the slave trade

Right above: The Kianboa African Boys Band, marching past a building in uniform, one carrying the Union Flag. Kenya, 1959

Right below: Tea being served to an African gentleman by a waiter in a white uniform, c. 1910

## Too hot for who?

The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum opened in Bristol in 2002. The vision for the museum was conceived in the 1980s, but funding was not forthcoming. Empire was almost considered a dirty word, best swept away, ignored even if it could not be forgotten. The subject's unpopularity, particularly in government arts and museum circles, risked jeopardising the only permanent public presentation of an important part of Britain's history. Some private supporters of the museum only served to reinforce the assumption that such men would only support a jingoistic glorification of empire. There was a fear of what such a museum might present.

However, once The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum opened it defied many critics with a history that neither condones nor condemns the empire but rather presents 'a balanced view of the impulses behind empire and the legacy of empire' (BBC 4).

## Can you take the heat out?

It is not the museum that is controversial, but the issues it necessarily covers. Through its exhibitions and educational activity it covers issues ranging from slavery and indentured labour, to racism, economic exploitation and cultural imperialism.

The displays begin with maritime Bristol in the late 15th century and runs all the way through to the present day, presenting a national overview of 500 years of history. There is an emphasis on trade, Britain



perceptions of the empire and speeded up its demise. Similarly, it could not represent the glories of the Benin empire in the way that the British Museum or the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford do, but it can explain the controversial way in which Benin's treasures came to Britain.

Denial does not make these issues go away. But how do you interpret such inevitably sensitive subject matter? And how do you do so for a whole range of audiences?

**'The key, I believe, is in presenting history as a story told from many perspectives, including the ruled as well as the rulers'**

10



Above and right below: Coin and slave restraints on display at the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum

### Presenting different perspectives

The key, I believe, is in presenting history as a story told from many perspectives, including the ruled as well as the rulers. The museum represents different perspectives and opinions and does not speak for white Britons only: 'At last a museum that allows "hidden voices" to speak,' (Tracey, museum visitor).

In the process of exhibition development the stories and the sensitivities that lie therein need to be unpicked by a process of consultation. Museum staff worked with a range of academics, advisers and researchers, and a Bristol-based focus group to establish the permanent exhibition in under a year. The consultation, albeit with a small number of mainly Black Afro-Caribbean Bristolians, was vital. The issues the group discussed included the vexed question of displaying slavery sensitively. One of the strongest outcomes was the need to portray the cultures of indigenous populations as existed pre-colonisation, and then continue to represent their views of colonisation throughout. Consequently, the displays on enslavement start with the richness and wealth of African cultures prior to the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Through this process, difficult and highly emotive issues, most notably enslavement of African people, but also the Opium wars, the Mau Mau emergency and numerous other examples of conflict and oppression, are tackled sensitively. African cowrie shell headdresses, Asante gold ornaments and carved ivory are displayed alongside handcuffs, leg irons and slave whips.

### A handle on interpretation

Sensitive subjects do not limit the range of opportunities for interaction. The museum uses a wide range of interpretative devices to make the subject come alive and feel personal. Visitors are not overloaded with dates and names. There is plenty of text (probably too much) but it is broken up with highly illustrated panels and different approaches including quotation panels that allow for first person perspectives that can contradict each other, and indeed, challenge the main exhibition narrative.



*It is the duty of Government to civilise and to maintain peace and good order, and this can only be done by the introduction of British concepts of wrongdoing.*

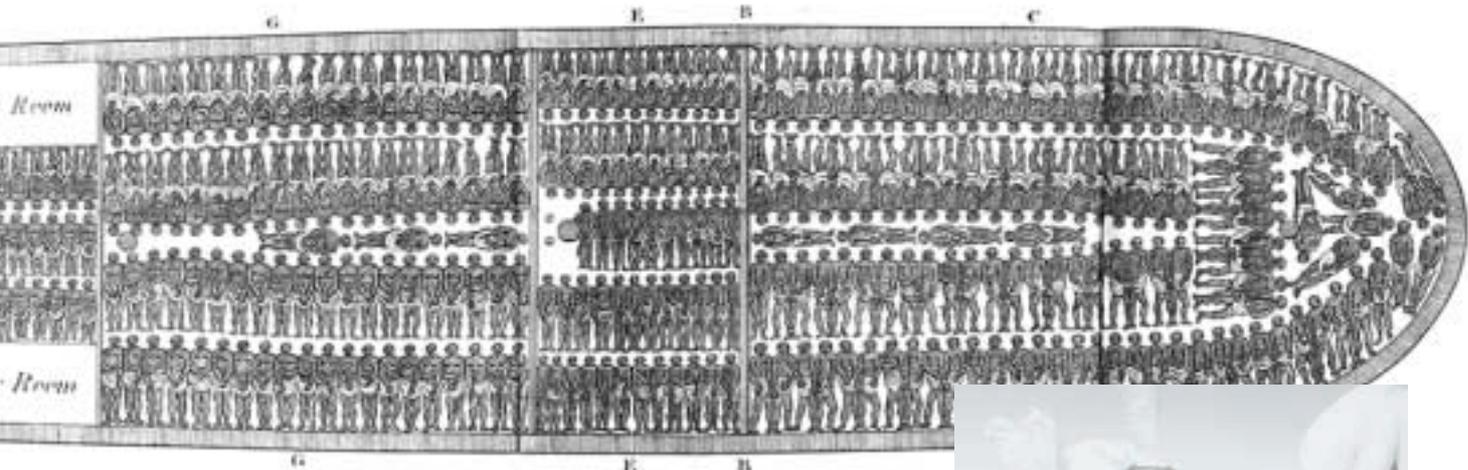
Royal Commission into Criminal Justice in East Africa, 1934

*It was the introduction of direct taxation that spoilt everything... I could think of no argument which would persuade our people that white men who minted money were so poor that they wanted the people to give them part of their meagre earnings.*

Obiukwu Nze of Umulolo, former Warrant Chief, Nigeria, c. 1965

There is a series of more humorous and colourfully illustrated questions and answers on three-sided spinning panels specifically for younger children, as well as hands-on interactives, computer games and dressing up areas.

At the very start of the exhibition, an unusual audio-visual introduction presents multiple perspectives on empire in just a few minutes. Different voices continue to be represented throughout with powerful first person oral history testimonies including moving first person accounts on video of both living in, and emigrating from, former colonies. There are displays of archive film footage, oral history stations, original and facsimile documents. And of course there are the objects themselves, rich in illustrative content, such as Chinese porcelain, Indian fabrics, and ethnographic items from the Americas and Pacific, many of which



Left: Five elephants with riders and five people standing in front. Tezai jungles, February 1913

Above: The slave ship. Courtesy of the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum

Right above: Taken from an album recording the visit of Princess Elizabeth and Duke of Edinburgh to Kenya in 1952. The photograph depicts the Governor of Kenya, Sir Phillip Mitchell

were secured as loan objects from national and regional institutions. In a computer exhibit at the end of the exhibition 70% of respondents say the museum presents a view of empire that is balanced. The remainder are equally split, with 15% saying it is overly politically correct and ignores the good and 15% saying it is overly celebratory and ignores the bad. This suggests the museum has succeeded in presenting different perspectives.

### Linking the past and the present

Importantly, in its work the museum seeks relevant links between the past and the present.

The past is not a series of disconnected events that somehow stop to make way for the present. There is failure among both the general public and the politicians (fuelled, I believe, by ignorance) to understand the legacy of the British Empire reflected in the multicultural Britain in which we live today. The issues our colonial history raises – of equality, power, control, political boundaries – are very much in evidence on a global stage today. The history of



**‘Importantly, in its work the museum seeks relevant links between the past and the present’**

empire contextualises so much else, and looking back to see what happened in the past can hopefully help prevent us from repeating the same mistakes again.

‘A wonderful museum. Our future is molded by our past and it is so important for us all to understand where we came from. It is up to us all to move on and create a better world.’ (Kim, Midlands).

One of the most rewarding things as Head of Education and Interpretation is to see people – from all sorts of diverse backgrounds – finding something

in the story that speaks to them. For many young people, particularly black and other minority groups, the school syllabus does not help them understand their own sense of self and their heritage.

‘Thanks for showing me a part of history my school has completely ignored.’ (Nick L. 12 years).

The museum clearly engenders in its visitors both an emotional response and a degree of empathy no matter what your personal perspective.

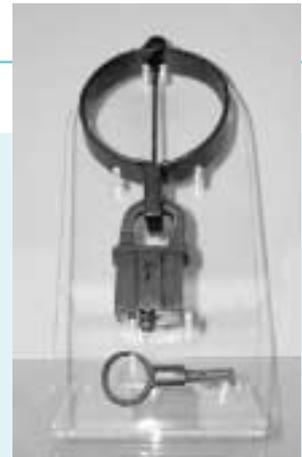
‘It is the first time I’ve been in a museum dealing

**'This is not black history, or white history, but our shared story and one that we all need to come to terms with'**



Above: Welcoming ceremony for a District Officer, the Kikuyu Independent School in procession, c.1925

Right: Slave restraints on display at the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum



with the subject of equity/inequity/ethnicity and seen black people presented with dignity (their own true voice) – particularly older black men and women. That more than any other aspect of the museum was very emotional for me.' (Maria, museum visitor).

#### Can you handle the sensitivities and have fun?

In its temporary exhibition programme the museum does not shy away from difficult issues. The current exhibition, Pow Wow, looks at the impact of the first English colonisers on the indigenous people on the east coast of America. A story of struggle and survival, the displays achieve a balance between handling the sensitivities of the conflict between two cultures with engaging younger visitors in hands-on activities and role play. As well as text panels explaining the history, the exhibition features a storybook designed to be read aloud. Children can sail a Tudor ship, take part in a treasure trail and find out about tepees and longhouses as two types of Native American houses. There is also a living garden where Native American plants and English herbs sit side by side. The exhibition is crammed with gruesome details and fascinating facts, such as the story of the settler who was so hungry he killed his wife and preserved her in a barrel of salt to see him through the winter.

#### The next hot topic

The next major temporary exhibition perhaps presents the biggest challenge of all. 2007 marks the bicentenary of the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Britain, and the museum plans to commemorate this with an exhibition aimed at engaging people at an emotional level in understanding a range of perspectives involved in the trade. This will raise issues of human rights,

legacy and racism, and indeed, the continuation of slavery today.

The emphasis will be on using personal accounts and dramatisations. The museum has already been successfully working in the subject of enslavement, producing powerful dramatisations from multiple perspectives: 'Voices of the Transatlantic Slave Trade', is available as a DVD.

When the museum first opened I saw a young black man crying in front of the displays of shackles, whips and other instruments of restraint. How much emotion can an exhibition provoke before it is accused of over sensationalising? Hearing the passion of the black community in calling for reparations and healing for the crimes carried out against their people, can the cultural sector go even part way to contributing to that process of repair?

'It's relevant today because it's our people. It is kind of sad. I didn't really want to touch them shackles out there. Show the younger generation what really happened and what they went through.' (Charles, Community Youth Worker).

There will be national public and political attention focused on the subject of enslavement in 2007. It is an ideal time for museums to develop their resources and maximise the contribution they can make to the understanding of this challenging yet crucially important subject. The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum will be championing a way forward in the south-west. The ongoing legacies of slavery illustrate how our past shapes our lives today. This is not black history, or white history, but our shared story and one that we all need to come to terms with.

*Dr Katherine Hann works part-time at the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum, and as an interpretation and audience development consultant across the heritage sector*

# Explaining genocide

**Suzanne Bardgett** looks at the issues addressed in setting up a ground-breaking display on genocide and ethnic violence opened at the Imperial War Museum in 2002

## Aims and purpose

*Crimes against Humanity: an exploration of genocide and ethnic violence* is housed in the space above the Holocaust Exhibition, where the museum's white steel-ribbed roof provides an austere rectangular exhibition space, several storeys removed from the busy atrium below.

Visitors who arrive in this space find an exhibition made of just two elements: a floor to ceiling screen across the end of the space on which a 30-minute film is continuously screened, and a table of interactive videos. An introductory text explains the exhibition's purpose – to allow visitors to explore why it is that ethnic violence and genocide have happened so frequently in the past 100 years. Most visitors stay to watch the film – although it has a beginning and an end it can be joined at any point – and then spend some time seated at the bank of interactives, where detailed histories can be read of instances of genocide and ethnic violence over the last century.

*Many visitors comment that they find the exhibition a surprising but valuable addition to the Museum's displays:*

A surprisingly unbiased film, well presented and with very sensible commentaries from some well-informed individuals. Hard-hitting and honest.

Informative in a chilling sort of way. The film definitely caused me to consider certain aspects of humanity that I hadn't given much time to in the past. It makes me reconsider many of my views, such as fairness, politics, good/bad, deception and fault. Thank you. It has given me greater depth.

## A film to stimulate thought

We decided to make a film the centre-piece of the exhibition partly because the unusually shaped space suggested it, and partly because it seemed that a film which treated the subject thematically was the best way to engage visitors in this intensely moving subject matter. Allowing our visitors to sit for half an hour in front of a carefully crafted presentation of these themes would, we hoped, give them the space and time to contemplate – something which would be more difficult to achieve with a conventional walk-through panels and showcase-led display.

Our brief was for a film which would dissect the common features shared by genocides, looking at, for example, the fact that such events often occur in states where there is rapid transition or where the government promotes an extreme ideology; how a 'Utopian vision' of a society cleansed of troublesome or despised elements will often play a part in inciting ethnic persecution; how if the international community has the will to try and convict those who incite and commit mass murder, it can act as a deterrent to others.

We advertised our search for a suitable production company in *Broadcast* magazine. This exercise drew some surprises. Two companies came up with proposals involving a degree of 'play-acting' within the gallery. One wanted visitors to create a scenario where an extremist regime has come to power in the UK, with the opportunity for visitors to examine their likely responses. Another involved a 'laboratory of human behaviour' mixing experiments which reveal how easily human beings commit 'crimes of obedience', intercut with the testimony of real people who have lived through or witnessed the aftermath of genocide.

Whether through innate conservatism/caution or

**'A thought-provoking climax to a great museum – brings all under this roof into focus, and lends everything resonance'**

good taste we felt that a more straightforward, non-participative approach was more 'IWM'! We decided in the event to employ the same company as had



ANDREAS SCHMIDT

## 'An incredible documentary. Should be required viewing for every high school history class'

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ANDREAS SCHMIDT

### Crimes against humanity

An exploration of genocide and ethnic violence

Genocide and ethnic conflict have occurred many times in the last hundred years – often under the cover of war. This presentation looks at these events, and at the challenges the world faces in trying to prevent them.



made the Holocaust Exhibition's audio-visual programmes, October Films. As well as having a strong reputation for historical documentaries, the two full years which this team had spent working with us had given them sound and recent experience of presenting a very similar topic at the Lambeth Road headquarters. The Holocaust Exhibition and 'Crimes' needed to complement each other and sit comfortably on their adjacent floors: using the same film company gave us a better chance of achieving this.

### Expert opinions draw visitors in

Director James Barker and Producer Annie Dodds's approach was to interview eight experts in this field and to combine their recorded thoughts with existing film footage illustrative of the theme.

Some of the commentators are household names with recognisable voices – like Fergal Keane and Martin Bell, both distinguished BBC reporters, or Michael Ignatieff, remembered by people of a certain age as the presenter of BBC's *The Late Show* in the 1980s, and today an eminent authority on human rights at Harvard. Some – like international lawyer Justice Richard Goldstone and Human Rights Watch Rwanda expert Alison Des Forges – speak from the perspective of actively working for victims' justice.

The first-hand experiences of this handful of dedicated people give the film a sense of urgency and the stamp of authority. Veteran reporter of the Bosnian War Martin Bell, expresses his personal vision for the future: 'I hope that we are at the beginning of an age when we are willing to consider pre-emptive action – where war is stopped from breaking out by active intervention of some kind of multinational force.'

Fergal Keane speaks of the importance of abandoning old prejudices and understanding how history has caused legacies of hatred among people: 'The critical business is creating an institutional body of memory – of what actually happened – not what people's granny told them happened. Not a kind of biased mythology – but the facts. Just give them the facts.'

### The interactives

The interactive scripts are rather like encyclopedia entries – succinct but carefully researched summaries, with common headings – Brief summary, Background, Course of events, Recent developments. Researcher Victoria Cook spent a full year researching and writing the bulk of these, finding illustrations and devising the maps. It required considerable effort to reduce subjects about which whole books had been written to just 1,000 words. Finding suitable illustrations took many hours of Internet searching and negotiation.

Although the film has not been updated since 2002, the interactives have. We this year expanded the case studies to include the current conflict in Darfur, as well as looking at the slow but steady progress of justice for victims of past conflict in Cambodia, East Timor, the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. Presenting events while they are still unfolding is not easy, but by tapping into both mainstream sources such as the BBC and *Economist* websites, and more specialist ones run by human rights NGOs, we have kept the display up to date.

### Achieving historical balance

The *Crimes against Humanity* exhibition could have involved consultation with numerous different interest groups, but our need was simple and straightforward. Getting embroiled in too much debate would have been time-consuming and risked derailing the project.

We found the ideal specialist adviser in Dr Mark Levene, then the only UK-based academic teaching a course in comparative genocide. We also sought the input of Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman of Kings College War Studies Department. As well as being a highly regarded historian he is also one of the museum's trustees.

Levene warned that the exhibition was bound to cause controversy. 'What you have to realise,' he warned us, 'is that the Holocaust is a *safe* genocide. The Germans have apologised for it. With this exhibition you risk offending large numbers of people.'

As we had expected, there were complaints from Turkey about our inclusion of the Armenian genocide in the exhibition and the museum eventually received over 2000 emails on this topic. (Turkey's unwillingness to acknowledge the scale of the tragedy has been



an issue for many years.) Ironically some in the Armenian community were also vexed because they felt that by mentioning the Turkish government's stance the museum was giving quarter to the voices of denial (although the museum's view is that it was simply stating a historical fact).

Another area of contention was the inclusion of the persecution of indigenous peoples in the exhibition. Some felt that this was taking the definition of genocide beyond its strict limits, and challenged the description of the San Bushmen of Botswana as being under threat through diamond mining. What are regarded by some as measures to facilitate the modernisation of the Botswanan economy, humanitarian groups regard as destructive marginalisation.

Our policy throughout was to check and double-check our facts and then prepare to defend each statement. Or where there was genuine doubt or disagreement we said so.

#### Too shocking for a Sunday afternoon out?

When it was ready, the film was screened to staff at the museum to test their reactions. Some were worried by the inclusion of two horrifying scenes – one of a murdered woman dying on a roadside in Rwanda, another of a burned Bosnian victim being moved for burial. The team had also qualms.

to consider the impact on young, unprepared audiences (who might not be expecting to confront something so disturbing on an afternoon out in a museum). Although the British Board of Film Classification gave our film a classification of 12, therefore, we decided to recommend that no child under 16 should be admitted.

#### Lessons learned

We learned the following from working on both *Crimes against Humanity* (2001–2002) and the Holocaust Exhibition (1996–2000):

- If dealing with a distressing subject area, be prepared for it to affect the team in subliminal ways. Build a strong team who will support each other.
- Appoint expert but manageable historical advisers and nurture the relationship between them and the in-house team.
- Ensure that both the above fully understand the ethos of the museum, and where the 'invisible boundaries' are.

**'A harrowing reminder of the failure of human beings to live together. It made me look within myself and question views I held'**

Another issue was the appropriateness of dealing with rape as a 'crime against humanity'. In 2001 the Hague had delivered a ruling which made mass systematic rape and sexual enslavement in time of war a genocidal crime. We decided to include this as one of the film's sub-themes, and so audiences get to hear Bosnian Muslim Jadranka Cicelj's searing account of her ordeal at the hands of her Serb captors, and hear of the thousands of Rwandan women who contracted HIV through rape.

While it seemed right to us not to underplay – through self-censorship – the ferocity or perverse nature of ethnic cleansing, it was clearly important

- Be 100% sure of your historical facts.
- Anticipate areas of controversy and prepare your arguments in advance.

*Suzanne Bardgett is Project Director of the Holocaust Exhibition and the Crimes against Humanity exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, London*

NB All images are from the *Crimes Against Humanity* exhibition

# True grit

Ex miner turned curator **Ceri Thompson** describes the development of new gritty displays about the working lives of miners and the miners' strike of 1984–5

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## From collier to curator

There was little call for coal miners when Cwm Colliery closed in 1986 and, after 16 years underground, I decided to try a different career. Being without any formal qualifications, apart from a G1 (Mining) Certificate, I spent five years in further education. After becoming educated, I worked on various paid and unpaid museum and archive projects, mostly mining based, along with less obvious employment which included baking bread and moulding computer casings. By the turn of the new century I had become the curator of Big Pit.

museum exhibition area. We could not control the environment in the network of rooms within the baths, so we had to control the inside of the cases environmentally. The cases had to mimic bays of lockers so they were very large – a daunting thought when choosing the contents.

Part of the brief to the designers, Haley Sharpe, was to design the exhibition layout so that it did not hide the original building features; the exhibition had to look as if it could be easily removed and the baths resume their original function. We retained an 'industrial' appearance in the construction of the

**'A home could be a place of drudgery, where a woman was in more danger of being injured than was her husband on the coalface and where a child could be scalded by the boiling water being prepared for a miners bath'**

## A national mining museum for Wales

Big Pit closed as a working mine in 1980 and opened as a museum in 1983. At that time the main focus of the museum was an underground tour led by former miners, and other interpretation was rather limited. In 2001, Big Pit came under the umbrella of the National Museums and Galleries of Wales and was awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund grant to redevelop the site. The aim of redevelopment was to create a national mining museum for Wales.

There were to be two major display areas in the redevelopment. One of these was the 'Mining Gallery' which was basically a display of large mining machinery in simulated underground settings with an introductory film, accompanying 'virtual miner/guide' and lots of bangs and flashing lights. However, for the purpose of this article, I will concentrate on the more traditional displays in the former pithead baths, which was originally built in 1939 in the Continental or modernist style.

## Filling the baths

The interpretation here was dictated by the building itself. Although of historical importance it did not immediately lend itself to becoming a

panel supports and cases. Each of the display areas were colour themed but some variation was allowed according to the subject matter. For example, the 'mining disaster' case interiors were painted black rather than the green of the other cases in this area. I lost the argument for blood red in the 'trade union' case but made up for it later by laying scarlet cloth under the objects.

## Humanising heavy industry

Many industrial museums concentrate on the capabilities of large machines without considering the human aspects of heavy industry. Although we have plenty of impressive machinery on site, the display areas were planned to be as 'human' as possible; we used images of people everywhere and oral history quotes as 'headlines' above the graphic panels. Although the exhibition was largely written by former mineworkers we tried to be even-handed and give as many alternative views of the topics covered as possible. As a Welsh museum we naturally did everything bilingually; however we did not slavishly translate from English, instead often writing the Welsh first or even having two slightly differing texts in each language. The Welsh used was based on the dialect of the Rhymney Valley rather than



Above: A.J. Cook's 'locker' in the pithead baths

## 'The Welsh miner – a hot-headed militant or heroic rescue worker?'



Above: Ceri Thompson maintaining one of the Pithead Baths museum displays

'Cymraeg Byw' (the Welsh equivalent of the 'Queen's English').

The exhibitions were also planned to be highly visual. Large images were used, and the word count was kept to around 70 words in each language (not so much a 'book on the wall' as 'Hello magazine on the wall'), object labels were to be as unobtrusive and short as possible. More detailed information was to be provided by laminated 'flip books' positioned around the exhibitions, which would cover topics in more detail. In addition, miner/guides were employed to interact with visitors and offer a deeper level of interpretation.

### A tale of three display areas

There were to be three main display areas each with its own main theme. The theme of display one was the working life of the mineworker. At the start of the exhibition some of the original clothes lockers were opened to show 1980s style work wear with a panel on the door featuring one of a number of randomly chosen mineworkers. Included are a canteen girl, a Hungarian immigrant and A J Cook who led the miners during the General Strike and Miners' Lockout. The three display cases in this section show the changing appearance of the mineworker since about 1850 and the type of tools that were such an important part of his working life. We designed a computer interactive to show that not all mineworkers cut coal. This covers a number of important jobs in the industry. However, to provide some humour, we also gave the views of a 'typical collier' on each of these jobs (not usually complimentary!).

Display two covers Victorian children in mines (with the obligatory mining museum 'crawl through' and 'pull a coal dram' interactive); health in work and at home, with particular reference to the dust-related

diseases that have killed more mineworkers than any fall of roof or explosion. The centre of this area is a 'miner's kitchen', again an obligatory part of all mining museums. But this time we wanted to be different; we didn't want an idyllic terraced home where Mrs Collier baked bread and did little else. We wanted to show that the home could be a place of drudgery, where a woman was in more danger of being injured than her husband on the coalface, and where a child could be scalded by the boiling water being prepared for a miner's bath.

Topics in display three cover the Welsh mining industry from the geology of the coalfields through to the pit closure programme of the late 20th century. Despite the views of a *Guardian* arts correspondent, we did not just provide 'a case of fossils'. We actually looked in depth at how coal was laid down and how the peculiar geology of Wales affected both the industry and Welsh mineworkers.

### Heroes and villains

I have always been struck by the odd attitude of the UK media towards the Welsh miner (and Welsh mining museums, come to that). During disputes the miner is portrayed as a hot-headed militant. On the other hand, during disasters, he is seen as a heroic rescue worker braving burning galleries to save his comrades. To illustrate this point a short film shows scenes from television coverage of the 1984–85 strike interspersed with images from the tip slide at Aberfan and the Senghenydd and Cambrian Colliery explosions. Among the objects on display in this section are three Albert Medals awarded to rescuers at Tynewydd Colliery in 1877, and a watch that was the only means of identification of one of the 349 men and boys killed in the Senghenydd disaster.

The final section of display three covers the death throes of this once mighty industry and includes a wall of the names of over 1,500 closed Welsh collieries. On the opposite wall we have a montage of faces and quotes from mineworkers. These reflect their feelings towards pit closures and range from 'I miss the comradeship' to 'About bloody time – I've done my bit'.

*Ceri Thomas is curator at Big Pit, National Mining Museum of Wales, in South Wales*

# Empowering plants

**Sue Minter** describes the Eden Project's cutting-edge approach to plant exhibits for maximum public engagement

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Eden is a wacky and highly successful project. It is also one which would not have existed without the National Lottery launched in 1994 and with a big pot of money to celebrate the Millennium. It is based in Cornwall in the far south-west of the UK, which has a strong (though seasonal) tourist industry based on its beautiful coastal scenery, but is otherwise (based on all the usual indicators) a 'deprived area' due to the decline of its traditional industries of quarrying, mining and fishing.

Eden is structured as a social enterprise company based on the Eden Trust, a registered charity. Its mission is to use horticulture, art, performance and creative interpretation to deliver change for positive futures.

The type of visitor is anyone on holiday and not just the higher income social groups who normally visit museums and botanic gardens. Eden does not 'dumb down' its interpretation, broadened to include art and performing arts, both of which are traditionally strong in Cornwall and focused on the relationship between people and plants, hence the term 'Living Theatre of Plants and People'.

## Multi disciplinary team working

The early plans for the plant-based 'exhibits' were worked out by an interdisciplinary team of horticulturists, educators and people with creative backgrounds in the arts, performing arts and in advertising. The exhibit mix goes beyond the replication of habitats (though there is an element of this in each biome) to include human habitats, for example the introductory 'Street' in the Warm Temperate Biome or the Malaysian house and garden in the Humid Tropics, to a concentration on crop plants. This is a big departure from traditional botanic gardens where 'economic plants' are often grown as individual specimens. The concept at Eden is to recreate a sense of the crop, as if the visitor had dropped in on a corner of a field. There is also an emphasis on 'crop to product', so, for example, in our 'Crops For Tomorrow's Industry' exhibit we display little artificial crops 'bearing' their products in small greenhouses behind which grows the crop from which the product is derived. Each exhibit also carries a different message or issue (such as genetic diversity or Fair Trade and driven by the Education Director)

and then the exhibit development is thrown open for discussion at an Exhibit Forum which brainstorms the interpretive ideas. Far from being a recipe for indecision, this method works because people recognise the winning idea and then buy into it. The Creative or the Artistic Directors may have a big role in then 'casting' an artist or a performing artist, or horticulturalists might lead, or the internal team of designers might design and construct something to complement the plants – all something quite beyond what many botanic gardens do.

Artists often bring a fresh approach to a topic. If they are involved at the heart of the interpretive process (rather than as an afterthought), they can bring an additional layer of meaning, humour, provocation... and there is clear evidence that the visitors are engaged by this. For example, in the chocolate exhibit, the terraced walls are covered with pictograms of the history of chocolate ('The Mayeaux Tapestry') including its raunchier nature as an aphrodisiac ...



Above: The Malaysian house and garden. Crops for tomorrow's industry  
Right: Pictograms in the chocolate exhibit



## Set dressing and extending the season

The first display to develop maturity at the Eden Project was the Humid Tropics Biome. The Warm Temperate Biome, which contains the Mediterranean floras, was planted only just before the Project opened in 2000 and takes longer to mature. Paradoxically, I think it has been a region that the public has found it harder to relate to, despite the number of holidays the British take in the



Above: Exhibit assessment by Andy Jasper (left)  
 Right: A display of winter products in the warm temperate biodome

Mediterranean. We took the decision that the Warm Temperate Biome needed additional ‘set dressing’ with an enhanced Mediterranean ‘Street’ complete with terracotta paving, a stage set church tower, a fine set of wrought iron gates to a floriferous courtyard and false villa entrances embellished with their names in tiles. In the Californian zone, adding a white picket-fence with a US mailbox, a saddle rack with a turn of the century saddle and horse blankets to aid understanding’ that this is California. The horticulturists follow up with a superb display of Californian wildflowers which turns art into reality.

This biome, with these climates is obviously, seasonal compared to the Humid Tropics. Many botanic gardens just accept that they are at their best in the spring and leave it at that. But a lengthened, year-round display can be achieved by using crops and crop products. For example, we regularly grow seasonal vegetables throughout the summer but start in early spring to show the importation of the early crops that the UK obtains from Spain, messaged with trade and production stories. This means it is essential for us to have an agronomy researcher who gleans the current trade issues and also sources the seed, which may be commercial or from international genebanks. In winter, we are faced with the challenge of displaying crop products using market stalls (a great favourite with the public).



Bulb Mania celebrates the daffodil industry in Cornwall, which is the largest in the world. We can paint the landscape with colour, which attracts early season visitors. Flower Power enabled us to celebrate the summer in Cornwall – where most other gardens are at their best in spring.

Canopy Season allows us to celebrate ‘Life on a Different Level’ i.e. high up in forest canopies. Trialled for the first time last year, we hope to capitalise on the fact that the Humid Tropics Biome will contain the tallest ‘Canopy in Captivity’ by acting as a public interface for scientists working on the biodiversity in these areas. Of special interest to children are abseiling performances by circus acrobats dressed as various animals, reptiles and invertebrates. ‘Time of Gifts’ has the major purpose of

**‘Artists can bring an additional layer of meaning, humour, provocation...and there is clear evidence that the visitors are engaged by this’**

**Seasonal themes**

Last year the underlying 80 or so exhibits at Eden were overlain with four seasonal themes: Bulb Mania (March–May), Flower Power (July–August), Canopy Season (September–October) and Time of Gifts, launched on November 6 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the National Lottery. Many botanic gardens run seasonal themes, but our themes have been designed with additional purposes in mind.

attracting crowds in the winter to counteract the seasonality of Cornwall’s economy and create sustainable year-round employment. A giant ice rink is made available and school children are invited to enjoy it, while their parents reflect on the season and the nature of giving and enjoy time with their families. Retailing at this time will be especially geared to the issues behind trade. Last year over 100,000 visits were made during this season.



Above: A musical instrument made to look like an old yew stump

### Being child-centred

There is now a new push in the UK to engage children in the outdoor environment from which they are often excluded for fear of safety. For these children the natural world becomes alien and threatening (25% per cent of children have been told off for playing outdoors!). Added to the expanding use of sedentary indoor activities and the pressure for junk food, there is the threat of creating an obese generation who will die before their parents. Some botanic gardens are providing science-education exhibits for children, but we are concentrating on activity-led provision placed either in parallel to the

children are to encourage them to feel at ease in a safe outdoor environment, to learn to take some physical risk (hence the skating rink) and have exercise, to learn about the sources of what they rely on everyday, to learn more about agriculture and cultures and to have fun.

We are continually evaluating the impact of our exhibits using our own staff, students and in collaboration with the Department of Education at Exeter University. We change exhibits when, for example, trade stories change. We decommission and add new exhibits or revamp them – Eden is always changing.

New for 2005 will be an education resource centre called ‘The Core,’ which will demonstrate the way plants and photosynthesis drive the planet and will house the public and schools education programmes, visiting exhibitions and IT access. It will be open from August 2005. Designed on the mathematical Fibonacci plant spiral, its roof will be covered in copper embedded with photovoltaic cells which will ‘photosynthesise’ as a tree canopy does. Inside, ‘clockwork’ exhibits will demonstrate the products and ecosystem services plants provide for us.

We control the food offered on site by employing all catering staff directly. This (and the direct employment of retail staff and buyers) means that we can be consistent in the messaging of Eden, through from plant exhibits, to plant-based products

**‘Eden also has its eyes firmly on tomorrow. In this we are helped by the futuristic design of the biomes, which encourage people to “think future”’**

exhibits for adults or near eating areas. In other words, provision that is integrated throughout the site. Quite simple amendments to exhibits can be made to accommodate the ‘kids’ perspective’ e.g. peepholes at the right height, cut-throughs to join up with the parents’ route graded for kids’ sizes and so on. Special installations have included musical instruments made to look like plants and labelled with an amusing pseudo-botanical name – after Edward Lear’s ‘Nonsense Botany’. Our aims with

consumed in the restaurants, to plant-based products sold in the shop – with all their attendant issues of sourcing (very strongly local and fair or community trade). Eden is only able to offer this consistency because of the integration of directly employed teams on site Eden also has its eyes firmly on tomorrow. In this we are helped by the futuristic design of the biomes, which encourage people to ‘think future’ and this is a good tip for the design of new gardens.

Right: Labelling with humour

### Recipe for success

If I reflect on what has led to the effectiveness of exhibits at the Eden Project, I would cite four things:

- The interdisciplinary group of creative people who choose exhibit themes.
- The combination of excellent horticulture with the added value of artistic and design involvement in interpretation.
- The authenticity and topicality of exhibit information, which is sourced from speaking to experts in the field or in commercial production and paired by visits to countries abroad.
- The input from scientific partners who often exchange ‘content’ for our exhibits for our ability to provide a window on their work for the public.

But there are also at least three qualities to the ‘tone of voice’ of the exhibits:

### Humour

Serious subjects do not have to be covered in serious ways for the point to be made. For example, in our Plants for Fuel display, a giant industrial carbon-fuelled boiler created by artist David Kemp connects to an ordinary domestic glasshouse wherein potted world globes await nurture: an interpretation of global warming that brings a smile to most visiting gardeners as they pass the biofuel plants that provide a potential solution to the problem.

Below: The graffiti bus



### Sensory effect (particularly smell)

One of the most popular exhibits in the Warm Temperate Biome is the Perfume display. Here, disposable aromatic plants act as ambassadors for their species as they are touched and enjoyed. Similarly, we hope to engage in quantification of the effect of colour on mood in Bulb Mania.

### Controversy/shock

While not actively seeking sensation, we have not been averse to controversy and are aware that there are many shocking things relating humans to plants and plant products or services, ranging from inequities in healthcare availability to genocide in resource wars. An example of a recent controversy was our decision to invite a group of urban graffiti artists to ‘respond to Eden’ by decorating specially purchased car, bus and caravan wrecks in our car parks. The controversy from this still hasn’t totally died down ....

‘Serious subjects do not have to be covered in serious ways for the point to be made’



Sue Minter is Director of Horticulture at the Eden Project with an interest in the ‘cutting edge’

# Voices from the grave

**Angela Boyle** discusses the implications of using human remains in interpretative displays

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## Public interest

As an archaeologist and osteologist I have been closely involved with the excavation and analysis of human remains for the past 18 years. Much of the material is hundreds if not thousands of years old. I have also examined human remains of only one or two hundred years old and this has led me to consider my work from both a scientific and a personal point of view.

Barely a week goes by without the appearance of an archaeology programme on television (*Meet the Ancestors*, *Secrets of the Dead*, *Time Team*). The public has an apparently unending appetite for archaeology and in particular the people of the past. We regularly see images of skeletons being excavated or examined by specialists.

It is not entirely clear how these conditions are reconciled with public viewing of skeletons under excavation, during for example, archaeological open days or indeed when filming for television is taking place.

## Oxford Castle and Prison

A number of projects that I have worked on recently have become the focus of much public interest. An assemblage of approximately 80 skeletons was recovered during excavation in advance of major redevelopment at Oxford Castle and Prison. The majority of the skeletons were recovered from the castle moat and are believed to be those of executed prisoners who were hung on the castle mound and then thrown unceremoniously into the ditch. Perhaps

**'We regularly see images of skeletons being excavated or examined by specialists'**

## Archaeological data

Traditionally, human remains have been seen as empirical archaeological data like any other category of evidence within the field. Much emphasis was placed on the analysis of the bones themselves to determine aspects such as age and sex, manner of death, evidence for disease and general health. More recently a subjective approach has been fostered and many archaeologists have written emotively of their experiences of dealing with human remains (eg. Downes and Pollard 1999').

Archaeologists have long been expected to treat human remains with appropriate respect, indeed it is a legal requirement. The archaeological excavation of human remains requires a Section 25 licence which is obtained from the Coroners Division of the Home Office. Paragraph two has a number of conditions attached which are of particular importance:

- The removal shall be effected with due care and attention.
- The ground in which the remains are interred shall be screened from the public gaze while the work of removal is in progress.

most significantly a number of the skeletons showed clear evidence of dissection.

The skeletons have already been the subject of an hour long programme (*The Secret of Oxford Gaol*) which was produced by *Meet the Ancestors* for the BBC. A visitor centre is now planned and will be located in the 18th-century D wing of the prison, St George's Tower, the Debtors' Tower, the crypt and castle yard. The tour will commence in the crypt and progress chronologically from the early medieval period through to the 21st century. It is not yet clear whether the human remains themselves will be on display, but there will almost certainly be footage of the excavation and the use of appropriate images.

## Giles Covington

The programme also featured the story of Giles Covington who was hanged at Oxford Castle along with two other men for the murder of a pedlar in Nuneham Woods in 1789. He protested that he was innocent of the crime of murder right to the end in the hope of avoiding dissection, which true to the beliefs of the time, he believed that eternal rest would be denied him. Covington was cut down from



Left: *Time Team* filming at Lankhills Roman cemetery in Winchester

Below: Skeleton and chariot revealed at Ferry Fryston, West Yorkshire

**‘Traditionally, human remains have been seen as empirical archaeological data like any other category of evidence within the field’**

the gallows, dissected at Christ Church anatomy school and subsequently became an anatomical specimen (see *The Story of Oxford* at [www.oxford.gov.uk](http://www.oxford.gov.uk)). He is still on display at the Museum of Oxford and there is no doubt that he would have been appalled had he known what his fate would be.

### Jeremy Bentham

In huge contrast is the story of the philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham, who died on the 6th June 1832 at the age of 84 and left his body in his will to his friend, Dr Southwood Smith for dissection. He was also instructed to deliver a public lecture over the body to medical students and the public generally. He can still be seen at University College, London seated in a large case with a plate-glass front, wearing his own clothes and holding his walking stick. His head which was replaced by a wax likeness, is preserved in a mummified state in a nearby box (see *The Auto-Icon of Jeremy Bentham* at [www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/info/jb.htm](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/info/jb.htm)).

### Lindow Man

A very well known individual on display at the British Museum is Lindow Man (Lindow II) the sight of whom never fails to arouse considerable emotion in the writer. He is fleshed and suffered an apparently brutal end. Yet he is an extremely popular attraction within the museum.



### A man and his chariot

When an Iron Age chariot burial was found at Ferry Fryston, West Yorkshire, news of the discovery provoked media interest from all around the world.

One of the most commonly asked questions from professionals and public alike was perhaps predictable: who was the individual in the chariot? He was an adult male, measuring height 5 foot 9 inches in apparent good health. Clearly he was an individual of some status if the conspicuous consumption of the vehicle in the burial ritual is anything to go by. Analysis is now complete and both skeleton and chariot are to become the central exhibit of a new museum.

### Should we display human remains?

Archaeology is the study of the past and the past is concerned with people. People today, be they archaeologists, heritage professionals or members of the general public are interested in the people of the past. This is a reality that we cannot escape.

It could be argued that it is the worst form of elitism for us as archaeologists and heritage

**'I would not advocate the unregulated use of human remains in any context, however, as professionals we have a duty to disseminate the information we have recovered about the past'**



Above: Filming *Meet the Ancestors* with Julian Richards

professionals to decide whether or not the general public should be allowed to view human remains on an archaeological excavation, in a museum display or indeed on television when we routinely analyse them.

I would not advocate the unregulated use of human remains in any context, however, as professionals we have a duty to disseminate the information we have recovered about the past and it is surely possible to do so in a sensitive manner. One possibility is the use of casts of skeletons.

There are clearly ethical issues relating to the use of human remains, however, we should perhaps consider these from a cultural standpoint. There are cultures and religions who place no importance on the remains of the dead, for example Buddhism. There is ample evidence from prehistory for the (apparent) casual treatment of the dead. Medieval man thought nothing of disturbing earlier remains to

bury others. In the 21st century we have become very isolated from the process of mortality so perhaps one could argue that confronting the remains of past individuals in order to understand what their lives and deaths might have been like can only be a good thing.

*Angela Boyle is Head of Heritage Burial Services, Oxford Archaeology*

### References

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