

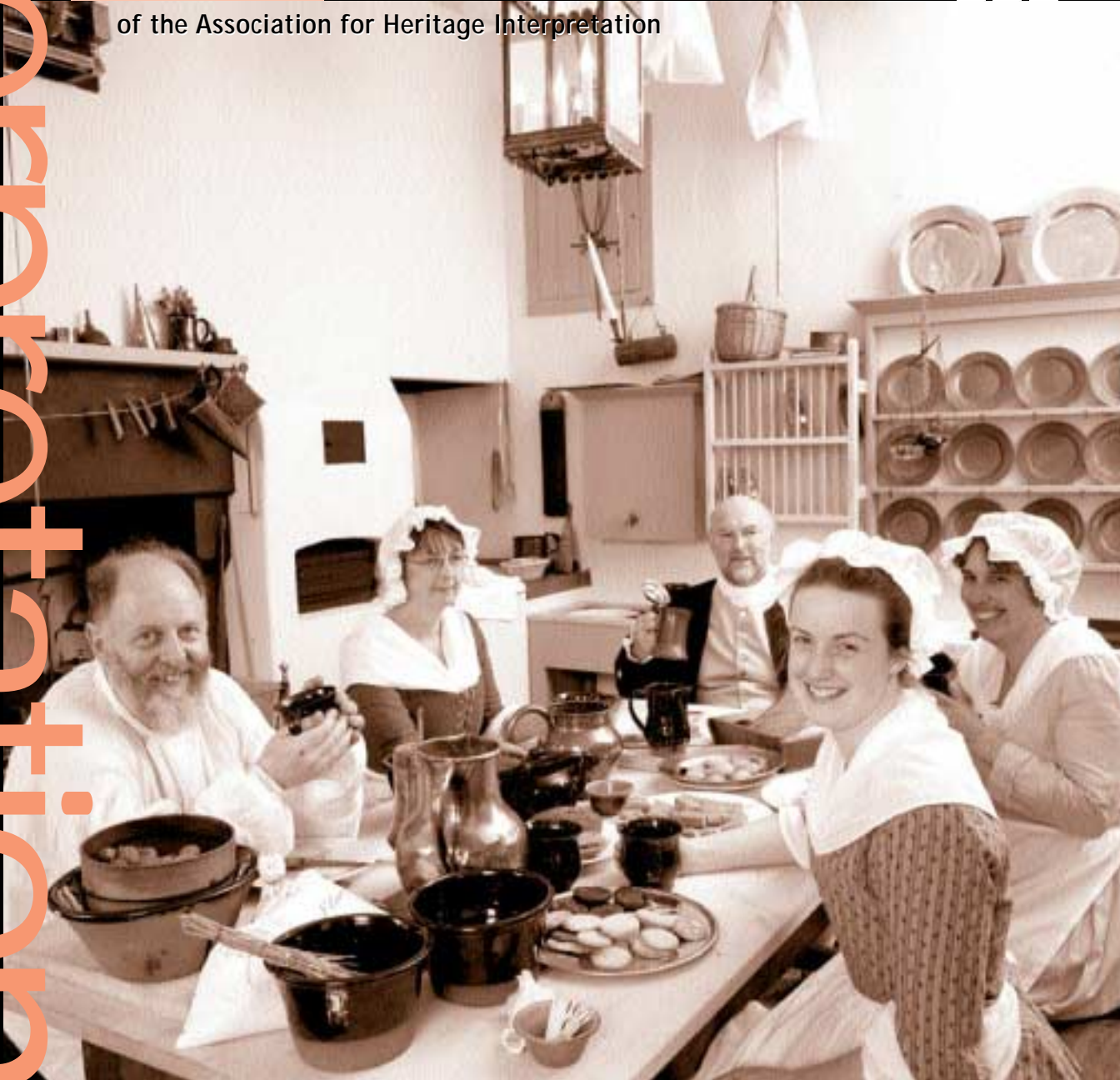
Spring 2006 / Volume 11 / Number

1

journal

A H I

of the Association for Heritage Interpretation



## The Best of Interpretation 2005

*Nine award winning schemes from Interpret Britain*

Published by the Association for  
Heritage Interpretation

ISSN 1357 9401

Commissioning Editor:  
**David Masters**  
0121 441 1198  
dd.masters@virgin.net

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

Assistant Editor:  
**Rachel Minay**

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

Printed by Dataprint, Oxford

Cover photograph: Costumed  
interpreters at Wordsworth House  
© National Trust

**Interpretation Journal** is published  
three times a year in Spring, Summer  
and Autumn

The opinions expressed by authors in  
**Interpretation** are not necessarily  
those of the committee of AHI

You can visit AHI's website at:  
[www.heritage-interpretation.org.uk](http://www.heritage-interpretation.org.uk)

# Contents

- 3 **Foreword:**  
David Masters and Rose Horspool
- 4 **The Churchill Museum**  
Phil Reed
- 7 **A day in the life of Charleston**  
Wendy Hitchmough
- 9 **Back to Backs point the way forward**  
Keith Robinson
- 12 **The Curiosity Shop**  
Colin Reid and Mark Simmons
- 14 **'I really liked the tunnels'**  
Carolyn Dalton
- 16 **Empowering your guides with super-Powerpoint**  
Pat Cooke
- 18 **New life for an old house**  
Kate Hilton
- 21 **A Company of Pleasures**  
Anne Jennings
- 27 **The Samantha Seagull project**  
Brian Stewart

The next issue will feature:  
**Invoking emotions in  
interpretation**

At the awards ceremony in December at the new Churchill Museum in London, Loyd Grossman congratulated the winners on their achievements and said their schemes represented the very best of interpretation and were second to none. In this issue, nine winners outline their projects and explain why their schemes are judged to be the best in their class.

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<b>Half page</b>	<b>£150.00</b>	<b>£210.00</b>
<b>Quarter page</b>	<b>£90.00</b>	<b>£130.00</b>
<b>One eighth page</b>	<b>£55.00</b>	<b>£80.00</b>
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Interpretation enriches our lives through engaging emotions, enhancing experiences and deepening understanding of people, places, events and objects from past and present.

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# Raising the bar

David Masters and Rose Horspool look at what makes an award winner

'Winners of this year's Interpret Britain & Ireland Awards have emerged triumphant from the toughest judging since the competition began 21 years ago.' Thus began the press release sent out by the AHl Press Officer last December. In this edition of the Journal we celebrate these winners and highlight what can be learnt from their experience.

For the 2005 awards a new approach was taken in the judging process, with two assessors from the 20 strong judging panel visiting each site and scoring the interpretation against a more rigorous set of good practice criteria than ever before.

This professionalism reflects the importance we attach to recognising the very best in interpretation. As Lloyd Grossman, our patron, said in presenting the Awards 'The tougher judging process ultimately benefits everyone, most of all the public, because first rate interpretation makes heritage more accessible and enjoyable.'

## What makes an award winner?

The Association's new definition describes interpretation as '*enriching our lives through engaging emotions, enhancing experiences and deepening understanding of people, places, events and objects from the past and present.*' All the award winners – from Birmingham's Back to Backs to Hartlepool's Curiosity Shop – are achieving this, demonstrating a common set of essential qualities:

- The excellence, commitment and skills of staff, both paid and voluntary;
- Clearly and imaginatively conveying the main themes of the interpretation;
- Creative and collaborative relationships between all those involved with a project including staff, volunteers, consultants and designers;
- Effective liaison with the local community and other stakeholders to develop new audiences;
- Doing the basic things well and looking for innovation where this would add impact;
- Having outstanding guides providing marvellous and often moving stories and communicating in a two-way process with the audience;
- Providing lively and humorous insights into the site, with opportunities for visitors to discover more should they wish.

These qualities were not dependent on large budgets or related to large sites; indeed the winners ranged from to small intimate sites and projects such as the Museum of Garden History to more nationally known sites such as The Churchill Rooms in Whitehall. At the award ceremony it was heartening to hear each winner talk about their project with such passion and care. This was what made them come alive – the human commitment and involvement.

Shortly before the awards, last year's annual conference took a reflective look at interpretation and the future role of the Association, resulting in a renewed commitment to promote and work for high quality interpretation in the British Isles. A new energy is showing itself in the Association, which the committee hope to carry forward with the support and involvement of all Members and Associates.

So do please be encouraged to enter for a 2006 award. Even entries which don't make the grade will benefit from the appraisal and feedback provided by the judges – and you never know until you try!

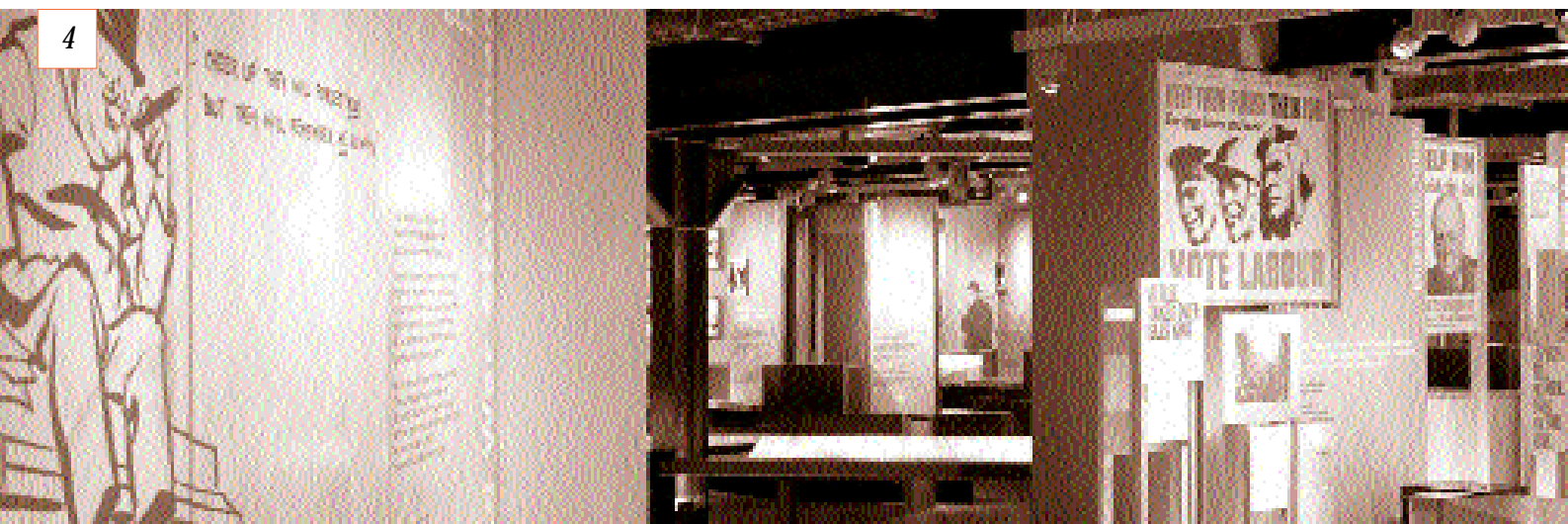
On a personal note, I am delighted to have been asked to become the new Commissioning Editor of the journal, and look forward to helping it develop further as the flagship publication of the Association.

**David Masters is Commissioning Editor and Rose Horspool is Awards Organiser**

# The Churchill Museum

**Phil Reed** looks back at the problems overcome to produce a new award winning museum

4



JOHN MACLEAN

Above: The new Churchill Museum, featuring the section on 1945 and the postwar years

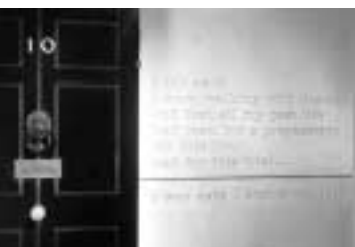
When the Cabinet War Rooms (CWR) opened to the public in April 1984, what was on offer was no more than one-third of the full area that the Rooms occupied by 1941. In that year the Rooms had expanded by 200% to accommodate the additional personnel – mainly Defence intelligence staff – required to both support the effort being put in and to concentrate the highest echelon of that effort in the Cabinet War Rooms.

designed to extend the services, historical insights and facilities that the CWR was able to offer the visiting public. This resulted in the opening in 2003 of the historic suite of rooms given over to Churchill's private office staff, but which also provided a bedroom for his wife, a kitchen and dining room for them both and a room for his closest friend and Cabinet colleague, Brendan Bracken. These were carefully restored to look just as they did when abandoned at the end of the war and before being stripped out for use once again as storage.

'We saw in other personality museums around the world examples of how not to approach the subject; not simply to view him through rose-tinted spectacles and not to oversteer towards iconoclasm, in an effort to be even-handed'

JOHN MACLEAN

Below: The new Churchill Museum, featuring the original door to Number 10 Downing Street



## Permission and agreement

In 1995 the CWR made approaches to HM Treasury to ask if, as part of their proposed refurbishment of their building, (the Treasury currently occupies the building above the CWR's basement lair) we might take back those parts of the extended War Rooms that were not opened to the public in 1984. Years of negotiations followed and, eventually, agreement was reached for the vast majority of those long hidden areas to be leased back to the CWR.

## The Churchill Rooms

From the outset the plan was always to use the additional spaces in a number of ways that would be

In addition we opened a conference centre and a new state-of-the-art learning suite, complete with the latest in high-tech equipment to facilitate working with young people both locally and remotely, but, as a spin-off, providing weekend activities for adult visitors.

## The greatest Briton

The last part of the equation, however, was for the creation of a museum dedicated to the life, achievements and legacy of Sir Winston Churchill, filling what we perceived to be a major gap in this country's heritage. There is no major museum in Churchill's name in this country and, arguably, in the world. The only one of any stature is that in Fulton, Missouri, in the USA, the scene of his famous 1946 'Iron Curtain' speech. It seemed



wrong that the man voted the 'greatest Briton ever' by the 2002 BBC poll, the man globally famous for his unyielding resistance in the face of tyranny, should not merit a major permanent display on his life and achievements in the country of his birth, the country he so deeply inspired in the Second World War.

The acquisition of a 900 square metre space, once occupied by the Joint Planning Staff and the Joint Intelligence Committee (and less gloriously by Treasury Archives thereafter!), offered a great opportunity for the creation of such a museum at the site of Churchill's own 'Finest Hour', the CWR, where, sporadically throughout the Second World War, he had met with his War Cabinet and sheltered, albeit reluctantly, from the enemy bombing raids.

### Presenting an individual life

After an exhaustive competitive tendering process we appointed Casson Mann to be the designers of the museum and we set to work as a team to organise the narrative logic, the subject content and exhibits of the museum. The difficulties of presenting the story of one person's life are myriad, as we rapidly realised. We were conscious from the beginning of

and, equally, not to oversteer towards iconoclasm, in an effort to be even-handed.

We also knew that this museum had to be both comprehensive and engaging, if an individual life – even one as full as that of Winston Churchill – were to attract an audience beyond just the faithful and sustain their interest. We also faced the additional difficulty of a relative paucity of exhibitable material and, not wanting to stretch a point in trying to find relevance in distantly related objects, we instructed the designers to find alternative ways to approach the subjects that were more sparsely covered.

Adversity, as many will know from experience, often produces inventive solutions that are far better than anything that might have been arrived at without that challenge. With their depth of experience and record of success in creating mixed media exhibitions, Casson Mann proposed a design that met all our demands for a display that would be informative, engaging and comprehensive, a trio of purposes that do not make easy bedfellows!

In a design that is both innovative and sustainable, Casson Mann produced a layout that would allow visitors freedom to wander, and

Below: The new Churchill Museum, featuring the 'Working Day' display case in the section on '1940 – 1945: War Leader'

Below right: The new Churchill Museum, featuring the display on Churchill's early military career in the section on '1874 – 1900: Young Churchill'

JOHN MACLEAN



the problems which confront the creator of a museum in the memory of a single individual, whose name and reputation are sacred to so many but whose record has, perhaps inevitably in the modern world, been the subject of 'revisionist' attention. We saw in other personality museums around the world examples of how not to approach the subject; not simply to view him through rose-tinted spectacles

encourage them to discover and to learn. The story of the life would begin in 1940, as that was the context from which the visitor would emerge into the museum from the historic site. It was also the era from which the most popular and memorable images and facets of Winston Churchill hale and which we therefore wanted to take as our starting point for the visitor's journey of exploration behind the received knowledge of Churchill.

'We faced the difficulty of a paucity of exhibitable material so we instructed the designers to find alternative ways to approach the subjects that were more sparsely covered'



Top: The new Churchill Museum, featuring the section on '1940 – 1945: War Leader'

Above: The new Churchill Museum, featuring the 'Lifeline'

### Creating a benchmark

Throughout its genesis, a member of the learning staff and consultants on physical, intellectual and linguistic access were attached to the project to ensure that the end product reflected clearly defined learning outcomes and would be easily accessible to all, regardless of level of ability. At the same time, we wanted the displays to be at least moderately challenging, inviting and involving and for both the techno-skilled child and the technophobic adult to be drawn in to the exhibition. We deliberately did not include copious instructions and directions, intending for the route and the understanding of the methodology to be, as far as possible, intuitive rather than didactic and ideally to encourage interaction among visitors and generations in curiosity, enquiry and understanding. Finally, we wanted the museum to be ground-breaking and a benchmark, at least for personality museums, but possibly for all manner of other museums.

The use of multimedia enables us to cover in detail and in an exciting way those elements of the story for which we have no relevant objects. However, it also allows us to mix the format of the presentation

to the visitor, in an effort to give access to a wealth of information without boring, stagnating or drowning users in luxuriant curatorial wisdom! The format enables the visitor to become closely involved in the exhibition, to be enticed into a subject or a section or simply have their interest sustained or boosted by an entertaining feature, mixing the light and the heavy, the trivial and the tragic.

### The 'Lifeline'

Nowhere is this more evident than in the 'Lifeline', the central spine of the exhibition. This computer-generated projection of a timeline of Churchill's life acts as a magnet to the visitor and, by its intriguing, surprising and exciting format, provides one of the best, cleverest and fun forms of learning experience in a museum context. Designed to encourage visitors to dig deeper into certain subjects touched on within the body of the exhibition, in fact the majority will simply check out a relative's birthday! Whatever rationale is applied, it has proved a major attraction for visitors, contributing to the astonishingly high level of approval ratings that the professional surveys of visitors to the exhibition show consistently.

This technology, as with all the other aspects of technology within the museum, are deceptive in that they are not ground-breaking in themselves, but in the combination of the different elements and in the extent to which a simple idea has been broadened to encompass complex presentational concepts. Equally importantly, the technology is easily sustainable and adaptable to change, producing what every curator wants: a museum to excite and engage all ages and abilities, but one that should not tarnish with the years.

*Phil Reed is Curator of the Cabinet War Rooms and the Churchill Museum.*

# A day in the life of Charleston

**Wendy Hitchmough** describes how Charleston, the home of the Bloomsbury Group in Sussex, won an Interpret Britain Award for its very personal interpretation



Above: Charleston

Below: The Garden Room

How many people would choose to go on a guided tour? You're at the mercy of a guide who might turn into the Ancient Mariner or whisk you straight past the one thing you really wanted to see. When we were looking at new ways to interpret Charleston, however, we decided to develop the experience we already had in guiding rather than turning to new technology. Charleston was the home of Bloomsbury artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant and, as a relatively small domestic house shown without labels or velvet ropes, it lends itself to personal interpretation. Our general tour scores highly in visitor surveys and Charleston has a team of highly trained and experienced guides. 'A day in the life of Charleston' was designed to build on these strengths and to demonstrate that there are many stories that can be spun around our collection.

## Taking a personal approach

'A day in the life of Charleston' explores the nitty-gritty of a working day in the house, taking visitors behind the scenes. They enter through the side rather than the front door and the tour begins in the kitchen very early in the morning with the work of Charleston's former housekeeper, Grace Higgs. Visitors can sit around the kitchen table and enjoy the warmth from the Aga (now incorporated into our environmental management system). As the tour progresses to the dining room for breakfast, through the work rooms in the house – the study, library and studios – and then to the bedrooms, the work of Bloomsbury artists and writers is set in the context of their everyday lives and contrasted with the lives of their servants. Dressing up clothes (from the collection in store) are exhibited in the spare bedroom, archive recordings of the voices of Vanessa Bell and Grace Higgs can be heard in the top studio, and the garden room is presented in evening light with its shutters closed and table lamps illuminated.

## A new option

The new tour doesn't replace Charleston's general tour. It is only offered on Fridays so that visitors have a wider range of options to choose from. Taking in

additional rooms, it is longer than the general tour and at 90 minutes it attracts Bloomsbury enthusiasts but focus groups showed that length was not an obstacle. Many first-time visitors took an 'in for a penny' approach. Visitor figures for Fridays used to be relatively low but the popularity of 'A day in the life of Charleston' with many visitors coming specifically for the new tour made it consistently the busiest weekday for 2005.

## Researching the tour

The tour is packed with original research to encourage repeat visits. There are stories in 'A day in the life of Charleston' that have never been heard before. A team of guides and full-time staff worked together on the research and writing process in collaboration with the British Library National Sound Archive. Charleston's history is relatively recent. Duncan Grant lived in the house until 1978 and there are still people whose memories can build up a complex picture of everyday details that bring the house to life. Those details – drinking coffee at breakfast instead of tea, the seating arrangements around a table – are seldom written down and there was very little documentation about Grace Higgs' working day as Housekeeper. Research for the tour drew on Charleston's recent oral history interviews and added new recordings specifically for the tour.

**'We decided to develop the experience we already had in guiding rather than turning to new technology'**





**'Details – drinking coffee at breakfast instead of tea, the seating arrangements around a table – are seldom written down'**

8

Right: The Studio fireplace

including a series of life story interviews with Grace Higgs' son, John (born at Charleston in 1935), which now form part of the British Library National Sound Archive's collection. One guide was trained to conduct those interviews and other guides in the team visited archives at Tate and the University of Sussex to search through unpublished Bloomsbury letters.

### Creating 'A day in the life'

The planning and writing process was challenging and stimulating. The team of guides and full-time staff met every week, beginning each session with an oral history extract as a reminder of the vivid appeal of actual voices and ordinary facts. The first outline was drafted in each of Charleston's rooms in turn and the guides' experience in managing and entertaining visitors was invaluable. They warned against the 'ping-pong' effect of describing objects and paintings out of order and they knew which pictures would arouse questions from visitors whether we wanted to talk about them or not. When the first draft was complete it was checked and approved by leading Bloomsbury scholars, by expert advisors who remember the house (including John Higgs) and by all Charleston's guides. This gave the written tour an archive value but it also generated a great sense of achievement and enthusiasm among the guides, which they naturally conveyed to visitors. Guides assimilated the information in the written script and then put it into their own words with a smattering of 'quotation cards' to bring out the voices of Bloomsbury (and some of their more personal revelations) unedited. A written quotation from Lytton Strachey, for example, helps guides to be frank about homosexuality in the house no matter how formidable their visitors may appear. He wrote: *'The world is rather tiresome, I must say – everything at sixes and sevens – ladies in love with buggers, and buggers in love with womanisers and the price of coal going up too. Where will it all end?'*<sup>1</sup>

### A winner

Charleston tested the success of the tour with visitor surveys and focus groups but we thought we had a winner from day one. The very first tour in April 2005 ended with a round of spontaneous applause.



In summary, the objectives of 'A day in the life of Charleston' were:

- to bring new audiences to Charleston;
- to encourage repeat visits;
- to integrate the museum's research and oral history work with its interpretation;
- to inspire and provide professional development for its staff and volunteers;
- to emphasise that there are many valid readings for the collection.

It achieved the following:

- the tour successfully brought new and familiar audiences to Charleston. Feedback from visitors has been positive;
- it encouraged original research, with staff and volunteers working together in collaboration with the British Library National Sound Archive;
- the planning and writing process was challenging and stimulating. As a collaborative involving trustees, full-time staff, guides and volunteers it improved professional development and communication within the Trust;
- textiles and works on paper from the museum's collection in store were incorporated into the tour;
- it included an oral history content in an imaginative and dramatic way.

*Dr Wendy Hitchmough is Curator at Charleston*

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Michael Holroyd, Lytton Strachey, p.461



# Back to Backs point the way forward

**Keith Robinson** describes how the recent Interpret Britain Award given to the National Trust's Birmingham Backs to Backs project acknowledges the groundbreaking work which has made this site a 'must see' attraction

9



Above: Hurst St. 1953, with the old Birmingham Hippodrome in the background

## What are the Birmingham Back to Backs?

*'...an insightful look back to other generations...'*

Visitor to the site

July 2004 saw the opening of the Back to Backs and the site's transformation from near dereliction to a vibrant, busy attraction in the centre of Birmingham. Court 15 is one the last surviving sets of back to back houses around a courtyard in the country.

Visitors are taken on a guided tour through 4 houses set at different periods from 1840 to 1977. An exhibition area sets Court 15 in its wider context and looks at industrial growth, migration and housing in Birmingham using video, sound points and inter-actives as well as striking photographs from the period.

be the most practical from one perspective. The challenge was to provide not only the manpower to deliver tours every 15 minutes, 6 days a week for 52 weeks of the year but, more importantly, to ensure that every visitor was engaged and enthralled.

The answer was a fantastic partnership with South Birmingham College who organised and delivered, with the Trust, a 10 week course in Tour Guiding through the Open College Network. The level of commitment did not put people off – hundreds of people responded, from 16 to 80 year olds from all walks of life and backgrounds. So successful has the approach been that 4 more courses have been put on for the site.

**'The challenge was . . . to ensure that every visitor was engaged and enthralled'**



Above: The Oldfield family bedroom, 1870s

Right: Houses in Court 15

## Ground-breaking guided tours

*'The highest form of interpretation is personal interpretation...when it's done well'*

Freeman Tilden

One of the key successes of the project has been the use of volunteer tour guides. The nature of the site, with its 33 small rooms and 11 staircases, indicated that this approach was certainly going to





**'The profile of visitors to the site is interesting with a very high percentage of either non National Trust members or people who do not normally frequent heritage sites'**

Top: Inge St frontage in 2001

Above: The Bingham's sweetshop, 1930s

Above right: Court 15

#### Visitor response

*'I have since been encouraging everyone I meet to visit this wonderful piece of history'*

Visitor to the site

How we do know that the project is a success? The obvious answer is to look at the response of the visitors both in their volume and in their comments. In terms of numbers, a new site is always likely to attract a high total in its first year. We budgeted on the high side at 20,000. The actual figure was 40,000.

Not only that, the profile of visitors to the site is interesting with a very high percentage of either non National Trust members or people who do not normally frequent heritage sites. Already, there has also been a good deal of 'repeat visiting'.

The percentage of visitors who take the trouble to fill in 'comment cards' (overwhelmingly positive) is another indication.

#### In the heart of Birmingham but in Birmingham people's hearts

The key question is 'Why have the visitors been so positive?' The answer is that this site centres on people in a variety of ways:

- The 4 houses tell the stories of real individuals who lived in Court 15;
- These stories are about ordinary people who the visitors can identify with. After all, this site looks at the conditions in which many of our forefathers lived in the 19th and 20th centuries;
- The guides are all local people, some of whom actually lived in back to backs and can relate their own experiences;
- The training of the guides allows them to elicit and respond to visitors' memories;
- Local people including ex-residents of Court 15, local ethnically diverse groups and a host of local museums and organisations were consulted in the planning process;
- The interpretation in its hands on approach, where people can sit on the furniture, is sensitive to what people want to do on their visit.





Above: The 60th anniversary of VE Day

Above right: The Levy's house, 1930s



### Lessons learnt

Obviously, many of the above points are relevant here too, but some general observations might also be useful as reminders for future projects.

- Identifying the key themes for the site at an early stage and pulling all the interpretation through them is crucial;
- Using a designer who will attend all your project team meetings is a must. The house interiors and exhibition were produced by Mike Oakenfull of Querceus design. Mike was adaptable, flexible and extremely patient as the project team discussed approaches, changed ideas and changed them again!
- Working as a team and in a real partnership is both satisfying and rewarding. Court 15 would not be here without the work of Birmingham Conservation Trust who led the fight to secure both its preservation and the necessary funding to enable the project to happen. Elizabeth Perkins of the Birmingham Conservation Trust was a key

figure in our group with her background knowledge of the site and the range of contacts and support networks which she had built up over the years;

- Structured training instils confidence in volunteers which in turn translates to enthusiasm and support of a project;
- Very often we find ourselves tinkering with sites. What an impact can be made when we can start on a site from scratch and embody all our key principles of interpretation!

### Building on the success

While everyone involved with the Back to Backs is thrilled by its impact we are already working on replicating this. Since the opening the National Trust has extended the tour guiding course with South Birmingham College to all its Warwickshire sites with corresponding responses and success stories.

On a wider level, as an organisation in the West Midlands, we now have a tried and trusted team of curators, conservators and 'learning' personnel whose skills and acquired wisdom are in great demand!

*Keith Robinson is Regional Learning & Interpretation Officer, The National Trust*

**'Court 15 would not be here without the work of Birmingham Conservation Trust who led the fight to secure both its preservation and the necessary funding to enable the project to happen'**



# The Curiosity Shop

Colin Reid and Mark Simmons explain the concept behind a ground breaking travelling museum

12

## Museums and shopping

Although museums are attended by a large section of the public, for many people they still hold little interest, perhaps because of stereotypical perceptions or a lack of awareness of what museums have to offer. These people are rarely reached – or impressed – by conventional museum publicity.

With this in mind, museums across the Tees Valley developed a radically new approach. The Curiosity Shop is a ground-breaking initiative that challenges the difficulties of attracting non-visitors to museums by physically taking the museum out to them. It is designed to be set up in vacant shop units in high streets and shopping centres. The logic is that everyone goes shopping, so what better window on the world of museums than an actual shop window?

The Curiosity Shop is the creation of Hartlepool Arts and Museums Service and ten partner museums across the Tees Valley. It has been developed with funding from Renaissance in the Regions, matched with local Single Programme regeneration money.

pickled in formaldehyde.

We deliberately designed the Curiosity Shop to be a real museum experience, with objects and displays of the highest quality that, although easily dismantled for touring, look permanent once installed. Interactivity is also a key concept. There are buttons to press, touch screen audio-visuals, and drawers labelled enticingly 'Open me' and 'Now try me'! These concepts are integral to each of the Curiosity Shop's display modules, which together capture the essence of museums and their collections. A 'Window on the World' features an eclectic mix of multicultural artefacts and animals from around the globe, while 'All About Us' explores the human experience: birth, death, marriage, entertainment, and social history. 'Making and Doing' celebrates human creativity, from matchstick models to fantasy comics. Finally, 'Visit Your Local Museum' promotes finding out more and includes an information point and interactive DVD featuring 12 museums and galleries.

Below: The Curiosity Shop frontage



'The idea behind the Curiosity Shop harks back to the 'Cabinet of Curiosities' once owned by wealthy travellers that, in turn, inspired the first museums'

## The cabinet of curiosities

The idea behind the Curiosity Shop harks back to the 'Cabinet of Curiosities' once owned by wealthy travellers that, in turn, inspired the first museums. Passers-by are stopped in their tracks by the sight of a polar bear in the window and a talking portrait that beckons them inside to experience 'the amazing world of museums'. Inside they encounter a colourful collection of 'wonders', including a real cabinet of curiosities containing engrossing artefacts such as a furry fish, a merman and the world's smallest cat and dog. There are displays of fossils and crystals, mummified cats, and strange bugs

## The word on the street

The Curiosity Shop displays are designed to be colourful and quirky, in keeping with the name of our design company, Querceus Design of York. This concept extended from the objects and displays to the labels, written to be accessible and based around fun, quirky facts rather than dry explanation. The signage also features evocative adjectives, such as 'Cool', 'Mint', 'Awesome' and 'Wicked' inside speech bubbles. These were chosen for their use in contemporary youth culture while retaining an original meaning that is relevant to the objects on display. So, for example, 'Wicked' describes a fearsome club that if used in anger would kill with a single blow, while 'Awesome' relates to a display about religious belief. This not only engages with



Above: 'Peter the polar bear' – one of the attractions



Above: Visitors are encouraged to explore the displays

Right: Thematic display cases



## 'The Curiosity Shop is a ground-breaking initiative that challenges the difficulties of attracting non-visitors to museums'

young people but is thought-provoking for all ages.

During 2005 the Curiosity Shop toured five local town centres promoting local museums, their programmes and collections. Staffed by our own dedicated team, each hosting museum service provided additional staffing and volunteers during each six to ten week stay in town. Without doubt the most challenging element of the project was the logistics of touring a complete museum with only a three-week turnaround between venues. The modular design of the displays allow them to be easily dismantled, moved and reassembled at each venue by our core team, with additional technical help and transport backup from exhibition company The Workhaus. Finding appropriate commercial premises, however, was less straightforward and often proved difficult due to the uncertain nature of short-term shop rental. Legal help in this process was essential. Premises were also of varying quality, and we soon learned that we needed considerable technical support from our own Neighbourhood Services team to bring venues up to scratch. In Redcar, for example, the vacant unit required a completely new electrical system, roof repairs and redecoration throughout.

### The measure of success

The success of the Curiosity Shop can be measured by the fact that during its nine-month tour it attracted over 140,000 visitors. More significantly, it has dramatically raised both awareness and visitation for all the museums involved. Central to the success of the Curiosity Shop is the visitor reaction. All ages invariably express surprise, amazement, and of course, curiosity, with a desire to interact with the displays and to find out more from our staff. The Curiosity Shop attracts targeted and repeat visits, with people

bringing others back to see a favourite display or specifically to see objects featured in the media. The response from young adults is also particularly encouraging. Most take time to fill in the Curiosity Shop's comments book, which is full of adolescent superlatives like 'Total Mint' and 'Lush' - not words teenagers usually tend to use in describing museums.

These positive audience responses are especially pleasing because we are reaching a non-traditional audience that on the whole rarely visits museums or galleries. Research consistently shows that half of our visitors haven't visited a museum within the last year, with one in ten claiming to have never visited a museum. Despite this, representative samples show that 80% of our visitors state that they are inspired by their visit to go on and visit a museum across the Tees Valley, and museum visitor numbers have visibly risen whenever the Curiosity Shop is in town. This research confirms that taking museum collections 'downtown' definitely reaches the audiences other outreach projects cannot reach!

### Comeback tour

What's next for the Curiosity Shop? Discussions are already underway for a 'comeback tour' taking in more locations throughout the North East, with the displays also available for hire elsewhere in the country. Another possibility is retooling the displays to create a temporary community museum on the high street, with new collections sourced from the local area and structured community involvement. The real challenge in the long run, however, is to continue to outreach our permanent museums to traditional non-visitors. The legacy of the Curiosity Shop is that all the partners involved now have a better understanding of what visitors generally desire in a museum; information that will be shared with the whole museum sector when the project is published as a full case study in 2006. This can only be good for all our audiences in the future.

*Colin Reid is Arts and Museums Officer, Hartlepool Borough Council; Mark Simmons is Audience Development Manager, Hartlepool Arts and Museums Service*

# 'I really liked the tunnels'

**Carolyn Dalton** describes the different ways tried out to interest people in *By River and Road* gallery at Doncaster Museum

We like to think of the new local history galleries at Doncaster as 'an innovative inter-disciplinary approach that makes good use of Doncaster's wide-ranging collections'. Our visitors prefer 'Wicked', 'Excellent', 'Brilliant', 'Fascinating' and, in the case of little Tishanna (aged 10), 'I wish I cude come to the Museum every day but I can not because I have to do my bedroom'.

These comments, and many more like them, are the main reason why we are so happy with our new *By River and Road* gallery, which has taken shape over several years and phases. For the first time in almost a century Doncaster Museum tells the story of Doncaster, not only its people, but its wildlife and geology, and the influence that they have had on each other.

## Why should I look at that?

We used several different ways to try and interest people in the story. Text panels were anything but uniform and one-off panels were encouraged, such as one for the sale of an Iron Age roundhouse of 'open-plan design with integrated dining and living area' by Druid, Bard & Mistletoe, Estate Agents. Teachers have been seen reading the panel word by word to visiting classes.

Many of the cases come almost to the floor, so even the smallest visitor can see in. Three of the most popular have been scenic cases; the five-metre long 'Ice Age to Temperate' case, the 'Fish in the Don' case

now warned as they go in, as there have been a few tears. The two Stone Age women defending their salmon from the bears are also popular with children, who are fascinated by the realism of the blood.

Children also love the two tunnels leading from the woodland section to the wetlands. They like the fact that most adults can't get down there, so this is a little world of their own.

The tunnels are not our only interactives and we have generally gone for the low-tech, cheap-to-maintain option, which has worked well. There are two board games, the most popular being a race between three Humber Keels to bring cutlery from Sheffield to Doncaster. The game is liberally sprinkled with cartoons relating to the mishaps of the three boatmen en route. Other interactives invite you to live as a hunter-gatherer, to 'Search for the Perch' (a variation on 'Hook a Duck') or to 'Write your name in copperplate' at the Victorian desk. A computer interactive gives access to around a thousand local history photos from the museum collections and a DVD plays local history films. In addition, the museum's Education Officer is always creating different trails around the displays. The interactives are appreciated by our visitors who say things such as, 'The museum has improved tenfold since last time I came, the children like the games and activities – well done.'

'They like it that most adults can't get down them, so it's a little world of their own'

where anglers come to point out fish to their children, and the Duck Decoy reconstruction which is so realistic that we have had to put in a Fire Exit sign to stop people walking into the glass – and incidentally following the ducks to their rather sticky end!

## Interactives – fun for all?

The growling bears in the Old Stone Age area have had a mixed reaction from children. Most find them irresistible, but parents of the very young are

## Case design

From a professional point of view we have been very pleased with the success of our three types of case, made to in-house designs. The conservation cases have Artsorb(r) cassettes built in to them, whilst the security cases are steel boxes with bullet-proof glass. Regular cases were made using ZMDF and lined with barrier foil to prevent off-gassing. All the fabrics used inside the cases were Oddy tested, again for off-gassing.





Above: Duck Decoy:  
Follow the ducks at your  
peril through the Duck  
Decoy!

Above right: Bears and  
arctic-temperate case:  
The last Ice Age comes to  
an end along the Don  
Gorge



- That fibre-optic lighting is not really adequate to light text panels and larger areas;
- That a good floor covering, which ties the whole thing together, is worth its weight in gold;
- That it is very difficult to complete a major piece of work like this and keep the museum open;
- That the overall plan of the displays is excellent for hide-and-seek and creating some good views through the displays, but is too complicated to be easily understood. We are attempting to solve this with gallery plans and case headings.

### Who are our visitors?

We have always been mindful that this was a local history display, largely for the local community. We therefore designed displays with a lot in them to encourage repeat visits and the comments in the visitor book show that this has been achieved. We have yet to determine how much our steady rise in visitor figures as phases were completed (more than doubling in three years), is down to repeat visits and how much to new. Certainly this comment is not unusual: 'My first visit for 25 years. The changes are superb! A wonderful new look to a very well presented collection.'

### The next step

Although we are very pleased with the success of the displays we have no intention of resting on our laurels. Some of the earlier panels are too wordy and not clear enough for those with sight impairments and these need redoing, as do some of the earlier cases. We also plan to introduce an interactive based upon drawing, following a couple of comments in the visitor book.

### And finally...

I will finish with the comment made by Ruby, aged 10 (and her accompanying adult I suspect):

**'The museum has improved tenfold since last time I came, the children like the games and activities – well done'**

### Lessons learned

One advantage of doing the work in phases is that some mistakes were corrected before the final opening, whilst popular items could be built upon. Here are some of the more important lessons that we have learnt.

- That you cannot underestimate the importance of iconic objects. It is objects like these that bring back children and adults alike time and again;

*'I come here quite often. You'd think seeing the same thing everytime would get a bit boring but, everytime I come it gets even more exciting and better and I love the way it has something for everyone.'*  
Can we ask more?

*Carolyn Dalton is Curatorial Manager  
(Doncaster Museum Service)*

# Empowering your guides with 'super-Powerpoint'

**Pat Cooke** describes Kilmainham Gaol that won an award for devising a 'super-Powerpoint' presentation, whereby the guides, using a touch screen, can call upon a menu of still images and historic film footage to illustrate their introductory talk on the site

16



## The prisoners

Once a group had viewed the presentation, a guide would then escort them on a tour of the site, pointing out the cells where many remarkable Irish men and women had been detained and, in the case of the leaders of the 1916 Rising, the yard where they had been executed. We have a staff of six permanent guides, augmented by up to eight seasonal guides to deal with the busy summer months.

## The visitors

Over recent years, we have found ourselves wrestling with the happy but nonetheless challenging effects of

**'Giving guides a spectacular audio-visual aid set them a new performance challenge, and added a new dimension of skilled presentation to their already honed performances'**

Above: A guide and super-Powerpoint

## Kilmainham Gaol

Kilmainham Gaol is one of Dublin's top attractions, with over 165,000 visitors a year. Some of the leading figures in Ireland's struggle for political independence from the 18th to the early 20th century were imprisoned or executed here, making it the premier site for an insight into Ireland's turbulent history and its struggle for political independence.

Over the past five years we have carried out visitor exit surveys to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the total visitor experience. Visitors were asked to rate the AV presentation, the guided tour, the exhibition, and services such as bookshop and tearoom. In all surveys the guided tour scored significantly higher than the other elements of the visitor experience, whereas the AV show consistently rated third in order of preference after the guided tour and exhibition.

Since 1988, visitors have been introduced to the site by showing them a 20-minute presentation in the chapel, which doubled as the site's auditorium. The presentation, a slide-tape show with voiceover and soundtrack, offered a synoptic version of the gaol's dramatic history.

inexorably rising visitor numbers. (Numbers have increased year on year from 112,000 in 1999 to over 165,000 in the present year.) Increased numbers leads to increased pressure on the guide staff to handle the volume with optimum efficiency, especially during the peak June-August months. They began to complain that the non-negotiable 20-minute block of time allocated to the AV was frustrating their efforts to deal with the throughput of visitors. At one of our staff meetings, they asked if I could look into shortening the AV presentation.

The motivation for change, therefore, came partly from what our visitors were telling us and partly from our guide staff's increasing sense of frustration with the existing AV show. But if winning this award highlights something worthwhile from a heritage management perspective, it is the importance of using visitor exit surveys to gain an insight into the relative appeal of the elements comprising the visitor experience. If, for example, the AV show had rated more highly than the exhibition or the guided tour, there would have been very little incentive to radically review it in the way we did.

Above: An interactive display

Right: Engaging visitors

### The brief

The next step seems now to have been a rather obvious one: why not marry our AV presentation to the strongest aspect of our service in our visitors' eyes? Why not integrate it with the guided tour by means of – a phrase that instantly suggested itself – a 'super-Powerpoint' presentation?

This resulted in the brief for a new touch-screen presentation, wholly at the command of the guide, and projected on a spectacular scale on large screen in the auditorium. Martello Media took the brief and implemented it with functional clarity and simplicity. I want to commend Martello particularly for sustaining their commitment and enthusiasm for the project during the piloting of the system with our guides. For this was no 'plug-and-play' process. We needed to ensure that the guides were completely comfortable with the whole set-up, from how the podium was designed, to levels of sound amplification, to screen layouts and menu options.

In fact, we do not consider this AV show 'finished': it is an open system, amenable to additional features being added on the recommendation of guides. (For instance, they have recently suggested that a map of Ireland with key historical locations marked on it would be very useful in locating specific events; we intend to add this.)

### The importance of training

Because the success of this formula is so hugely dependent on human performance, training has been a vital aspect of its success. Clearly what impressed the judges for this competition on the day they visited was the effectiveness of the live performance. We have set up a dedicated training module – basically a PC and touch screen identical to the one used in the auditorium - where all guides can practice their performance until they are confident with it. Furthermore, we got in one of Ireland's top communications companies to give our permanent guides a refresher course in the elements of effective public presentation, with particular reference to the use of AV aids to complement public presentations. Our seasonal guides are now trained in by our permanent staff.

Since the system went live last January, we have found that the guides have taken to it with



17

enthusiasm. I have to admit that at first I was apprehensive; I thought some of them might have been overcome by the techno-gizmo aspect, but thanks to the simplicity of the design this has not been a problem. In fact, I now see why we should have had no fears: guides come with egos pre-installed, and the good ones are all natural performers. Giving guides a spectacular audio-visual aid set them a new performance challenge, and added a new dimension of skilled presentation to their already honed performances. They had to work at earning the admiration of their listeners by mastering the timing and delivery of their spoken words in conjunction with the cinema-scale imagery (both still and moving) they conjured up on the screen behind them – hence the 'super' Powerpoint!

### The power of illustration

A final general reflection. It has often struck me as peculiar how little use is made of visual aids in giving guided tours. Of course, the vast majority of tours around historic sites work perfectly well without them, and one can easily see how in many circumstances they could be superfluous or intrusive. But sometimes pointing to a still image of a key character can give a face to a name, or a diagram or drawing can get across a point about architecture, engineering or landscape more economically than can be said in a thousand words. You don't, in other words, have to go the full way to 'super-Powerpoint' to see how AV aids can enhance guided tours, giving guides a set of props that will embellish their performances.

*Pat Cooke is Director of Kilmainham Gaol*



# New life for an old house

**Katie Hilton** looks at the concept behind this award-winning project

18

## A bright future

Five years ago, The National Trust's property Wordsworth House – birthplace and childhood home of William Wordsworth – was a house with an uncertain future. Lacklustre displays, dated interpretation and flaking paint meant declining visitor numbers and, ultimately, the threat of closure. Today Wordsworth House is thriving, following a successful project to recreate the context of William Wordsworth's childhood in Cockermouth, and to interpret it in a lively and thought-provoking way.

The work to restore Wordsworth House, funded jointly by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Cumbria Rural Regeneration, the European Regional Development Fund and the National Trust, has touched every part of this 18th-century town house. Nearly £1 million has been spent on a programme of building work, redecoration, improvement of visitor facilities, changes to the garden and a complete reinterpretation of the house itself.

The transformation of Wordsworth House is the result of nearly five years hard work. The project has its roots in a bed of research, undertaken over two years from early 2001, which has guided every change made. Detailed historical research has gradually pieced together the way the house might have looked in the 1770s and how the Wordsworth family might have lived in it. Extensive market research helped us to understand the way visitors felt about Wordsworth House and gave us a clear direction in which to take the reinterpretation.



learn about the house. At its heart lies our belief that Wordsworth's development as a poet was profoundly influenced by his childhood in Cockermouth – the central interpretive message.

On arrival at the house, visitors purchase tickets in a newly created reception, which hints at the nature of the visit to come by means of evocative photographic banners and a background soundtrack. Each visitor (or group) is given a personal introduction to the house and a welcome leaflet, which they then use to guide themselves around the house.

Wordsworth House is now furnished with furniture and household clutter that is not only appropriate to the 1770s, but also largely robust and fit to be touched. Indeed, around one-third of the contents have been newly made by specialist craftspeople, specifically to be handled by visitors. Half of the rooms on display are classed as 'hands-on' (identified on the welcome leaflet by a green hand symbol) and here visitors are encouraged to pick things up and investigate.

As they move around the house, visitors encounter a handful of costumed interpreters, dressed as the Wordsworth family's servants. These are paid members of staff, trained in live interpretation techniques and well versed in relevant historical research. Chatting to visitors in the third person, they provide bustling movement and liveliness. Indeed, together with the volunteer room stewards on hand to answer



**'At the heart of the Interpretation Plan lies our belief that Wordsworth's development as a poet was profoundly influenced by his childhood in Cockermouth – the central interpretive message'**

Above and right: Costumed interpreters dressed as the Wordsworth family servants

## Fresh ways to engage with visitors

Work at Wordsworth House has been based on an Interpretation Plan, which shapes the way the house operates today. This plan recognises the importance of engaging the visitor through participation and hands-on activity, and focuses on the need to provide visitors with a choice of ways in which to



**'Together with the volunteer Room Stewards on hand to answer questions, the Costumed Interpreters create the single most successful aspect of the 'new' Wordsworth House – its relaxed warmth and lively atmosphere'**

questions, they create the single most successful aspect of the 'new' Wordsworth House – its relaxed warmth and lively atmosphere.

#### Noisiness speaks for itself

Since the house reopened in June 2004, the response of visitors has been consistently enthusiastic. The house is noisy, busy, and alive with chattering and laughter. A repeat of the qualitative visitor research conducted in 2001 has confirmed this response. Whereas in 2001 over half of visitors were dissatisfied by some aspect of their visit, this year 97% of visitors interviewed rated their visit either 'excellent' or 'very good'. Every visitor questioned said that they approved of the new approach taken by the National Trust at Wordsworth House.

Appreciative visitors have filled in hundreds of comment cards and these show the particular popularity of the live interpretation and the hands-on rooms. Parents are especially relieved, it seems, to see their children making bread, playing with toys,

putting on costumes and enjoying themselves!

Although improving the quality of visit has always been one of our main objectives, it has also been important – in order to be sustainable in the long term - to increase visitor numbers. In 2003 we had 17,000 visitors; in 2005 the figure rose to 26,750 (an increase of over 50%).

#### Making it personal

Throughout this project there has been a strong emphasis on broadening our audience – to reach out to more local people, more families and more school groups. In all of these areas we have seen success.

Attracting visitors with disabilities has been a particular priority, and the interpretation and visitor facilities have been designed with this in mind. In the Discovery Room, for example, height-adjustable touch screens offer a range of audio-visual activities – for ease of access by visitors in wheelchairs. Our live interpretation, too, has the advantage of being flexible and personal, so that it can be tailored





Above: Children are encouraged to dress up and play with toys

precisely to the needs of any visitor with disabilities.

In the past, Wordsworth House was not considered to be child-friendly, with the result that family and school group visits were very low. Today, we run a lively and popular programme for schools, aimed primarily at Key Stage 1 pupils and characterised by hands-on participation with the costumed staff.

#### What have we learnt?

A project of this scale brings many challenges and problems, as well as opportunities.

We learnt many lessons, of which the following are the most significant.

- It is vital to take the time to develop a good, thorough Interpretation Plan. We found it important to refer constantly to our plan, to remind ourselves of our original aims (especially in times of stress)!
- Our success is due in part to having found a good design consultancy (Infinite Design, Newcastle) with whom we developed an excellent working relationship. From the outset they responded

sympathetically both to the nature of the building and to what we were trying to achieve.

- The key to the reinterpretation of the house has been choice. Visitors shape their own visit and choose what and how they learn - whether through the costumed interpreters, guidebook, interactive computers, room stewards or just by wandering through and digesting the atmosphere.
- The one-to-one introduction, given to all visitors on arrival, is crucial. At this point visitors are introduced to the idea of live interpretation and encouraged to make use of the hands-on rooms. Many people are conditioned not to touch in historic houses, and this is our way of getting over any initial reticence!
- Live interpretation has many advantages. However, it is essential to find the right people to carry it out, otherwise it can be off-putting and intrusive. Although we expected to take on trained or student 'actors', we have found that local people, with the right mix of personal qualities (warmth, wit and a willingness to research) and training, can make extremely skilled interpreters.

#### Keeping the vitality

Although the original funding has long since been spent, we do not regard Wordsworth House as a 'finished product'. In order to maintain the current freshness and vitality, we need to continue to evaluate, review and develop our interpretation. Our future plans will involve encouraging personal development in staff, furthering historical research about the Wordsworth family, looking for new interpretation techniques and adding to our collection of household clutter!

*Kate Hilton is Custodian of Wordsworth House*

**'Visitors shape their own visit and chose what and how they learn – whether through the Costumed Interpreters, guidebook, interactive computers, Room Stewards, or just by wandering through and digesting the atmosphere'**



# A Company of Pleasures

Anne Jennings describes the success of *A Company of Pleasures; garden renaissance* at Hatfield House

21



develops one of the museum's main aims – to explore garden history in a way that makes the subject relevant to today's gardeners who make up one of our core audiences.

## Telling the story

The main storytelling is developed through a series of image- and text-based panels, which are colour coded and geographically zoned within the building. The coding relates to the four main 'P' themes that dictate the interpretive structure of the exhibition: Place, People, Plans and Plants. This technique provides a rich and varied exploration of the subject, including understanding the value of the 'spirit of the place', appreciating how many different personalities contribute to the character of a historic garden, demonstrating how and why garden design has changed over the last 300 years and celebrating the range of plants that were growing in Britain in the 17th century. The unusual interior and setting of the museum (a historic, redundant church building) means that there is little in the way of a clearly defined route and for this reason, the themed panels were written to stand alone as 'mini-stories' within the main exhibition. This approach means that visitors do not become disoriented or confused by moving the 'wrong way' through the exhibition.



## Challenge of the brief

There is something of a cultural gap to bridge when a subject usually interpreted from an academic perspective has to appeal to an audience with rather more practical interests. Add to this a ridiculously short timescale, an unrealistically small budget and a non-traditional museum environment, and it becomes clear that accepting a design brief for a temporary exhibition at the Museum of Garden History could at best be thought of as 'demanding'!

Nevertheless, design and interpretation experts

**'The team explored the subject through the work of the now Dowager Marchioness of Salisbury, who has created Jacobean-inspired gardens at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire over the last 30 years'**

Top: A Company of Pleasures

Above: An interpretation panel

David Patrick and Jo Scott rose to the challenge and developed, with museum staff, the exhibition *A Company of Pleasures; garden renaissance* at Hatfield House, which explores the influence of the Renaissance on British gardening. Rather than tackle it from a purely historical perspective, however, the team explored the subject through the work of the now Dowager Marchioness of Salisbury, who has created Jacobean-inspired gardens at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire over the last 30 years. This approach

## Interactive and sensory exhibits

The museum brief also demanded that interactive and sensory exhibits should be included in the exhibition and, despite budgetary restraints, David and Jo came up with some innovative ideas that were relatively cheap to produce, undemanding to maintain and appealing to a range of different audiences. A 'contemplation tree' encourages visitors to record thoughts on 'leaf' labels that can be tied to the branches; a rope can be woven into a knot pattern that

'A 'contemplation tree' encourages visitors to record thoughts on 'leaf' labels that can be tied to the branches'

22



Above: Display cases and panels

follows a historic design used in 17th-century knot gardens. Sensory exhibits include a beautifully presented tactile display from which dried seed heads, pebbles, gourds and other items can be handled. Nearby dried herbs are hidden in 'sniff boxes' and a selection of flower bulbs show the variety and beauty of the underground food storage systems used by plants. Aroma units scent the air and gurgling water and birdsong provide background sound, whilst headphones are available for those who wish to hear Lady Salisbury speak about the inspiration for her work.

One of the simplest devices is the 'flip book', used in various locations around the museum. Each book is themed to the subject focus of the particular area and consists of perhaps half a dozen pages with supplementary information supporting the main interpretive panels. It is the interaction between audience and exhibition that makes these devices such a success, and visitors clearly enjoy turning the sturdy pages and reading more about the subject. This idea is further developed by a large facsimile copy of *Gerard's Herbal*, which is permanently fixed to a display table used to demonstrate how early gardening books were illustrated by woodcuts.

Nearby can be found one of the most unusual three-dimensional exhibits – a small tank containing live silkworms. These were brought into the museum at pupae stage and the larvae were fed with mulberry leaves from the museum garden. Visitors can see the different stages of development of the creatures and appreciate the intricacy and labour intensity of the silk industry from this one small exhibit. The story of silkworms and the introduction of the mulberry tree to Britain are relevant to the 17th century, as is the development of a rich and varied culinary culture. The museum is fortunate to have a passionate food historian running the café and he presented 17th-century themed food each Wednesday throughout the main visitor season, with menus and additional information chalked onto a blackboard. This was a very exciting inclusion and greatly appreciated by visitors and staff alike!

#### Leap of faith

The decision to invest in this temporary exhibition was something of a leap of faith for this small museum, which in common with others of this size and

specialist appeal, faces enormous financial difficulties. Visitor numbers have fallen over recent years, mainly because of external factors beyond the museum's control, but without increasing the number of paying visitors the museum cannot hope to be financially viable in the long term. National and international events from the Foot and Mouth epidemic and 9/11 in 2001, the war in Iraq in 2003, followed by perceived threats on terrorist attack on the underground all took their toll of British, European and American visitors. Not only did the museum need to attract new visitors, but perhaps more crucially, provide existing visitors with a reason to return. Only by presenting significant temporary exhibitions can this be achieved. The early season saw our hopes raised in going some way to meeting this aim but sadly the bomb in London in July once again impacted on visitor numbers that declined immediately after the event.

#### For the future

A Company of Pleasures; garden renaissance at Hatfield House will remain in the museum until April 2006 and we are actively trying to locate a future venue for it. One of the most exciting potentials of the exhibition is that it provides us with a template for future presentations that could adopt a similar structure and reuse some of the interactive devices such as the sniff box and flip book ideas. However, the Museum of Garden History is currently awaiting recommendations following a major Strategic Review that took place through summer 2005. The report will address all museum activities, including temporary exhibitions, so we must wait and see what the future holds.

This has been an extremely positive experience for the museum and the improvement to the content and appearance of the place was immediate and dramatic. Although the strategy for our future exhibitions is still awaiting definition, it seems that the presentation of professionally curated and designed temporary exhibitions can only contribute to the interpretive role of any museum, large or small.

*Anne Jennings is Head of Horticulture & Events at the Museum of Garden History and a freelance garden writer, designer and consultant*

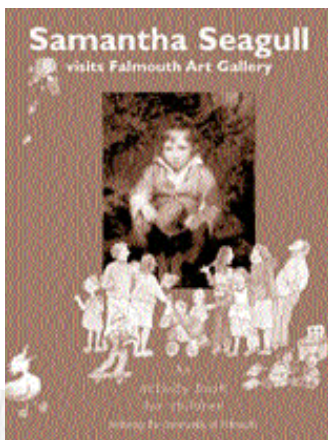


# The Samantha Seagull project

**Brian Stewart** describes how the saving of John Opie's masterpiece *A Cornish Beggar Boy* acted as a catalyst for an innovative education and community programme

23

Below: *Samantha Seagull* visits Falmouth Art Gallery and illustration by Claire Fuller



## The project

The Samantha Seagull project set out to use Opie's painting as a focus for increasing understanding of Cornwall's rich artistic heritage amongst families with children under ten years old. It included an exhibition and a book celebrating volunteers, local children and families' involvement in Falmouth Art Gallery.

The book was entitled *Samantha Seagull visits Falmouth Art Gallery – an activity story book for children starring the community of Falmouth*. It included caricatures of staff, volunteers and visitors from the Falmouth community. Interspersed were children's activities, favourite works from the permanent collection, children's comments and photographs from gallery workshops including groups such as Mencap, Age Concern, Falmouth Stroke Club, Babypaint and Falmouth Youth Club.

## Great masters

An accompanying *Samantha Seagull* exhibition was mounted in which children's work was professionally framed and shown alongside the work of the great masters, which were selected by children from a wide range of exhibitions. The children are regularly given a post-it note during gallery visits to place on the wall

beside their favourite work.

Predictable choices included a view of animals leaving Noah's Ark by the Italian master Filippo Palizzi (1818-1899) and a stunning underwater photograph, *Tom pot Blenny*, by Mark Webster, but there were also many surprises too, including a sophisticated snow scene by Kenneth Newton and a Pre-Raphaelite style painting by John William Waterhouse.

Staff and volunteers helped to deliver a series of free events and workshops, which included gallery talks, felt-making, printing, face-painting, dance, drama, mime, papier mâché, mask-making, collage, foil leaves, finger painting, badge-making, wax resist, pirate eye patches and a treasure hunt.

## Project highlights

Highlights included *Beano and Dandy* artist Nick Brennan showing visitors how he would draw Opie's beggar boy in cartoon form. He also created today's version with skateboard, iPod and attitude – much to the delight of the children.

The idea for the *Samantha Seagull* project came when one of Falmouth's many herring gulls cheekily entered the gallery's rear entrance in search of food for her offspring. She pompously looked around and then waddled out. She nests on top of Tesco's opposite the gallery and was affectionately named



Right: A carnival workshop

**'The children are regularly given a post-it note during gallery visits to place on the wall beside their favourite work'**







**‘The idea for the *Samantha Seagull* project came when one of Falmouth’s many herring gulls cheekily entered the gallery’s rear entrance in search of food for her offspring’**

Above and right: Young visitors get stuck in

Samantha by staff. This simple event provided the inspiration for the storybook and the exhibition, which was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Education Officer Claire Fuller provided the illustrations, featuring regular visitors to the gallery. Throughout the year Claire made sketches of people from the local community during their gallery visits.

Children’s interpretative comments about paintings in the collection were saved from a number of temporary exhibitions. Photographs of activities were also taken regularly. Staff and volunteers were invited to contribute their skills to enhance the project, from copyright clearance to proof-reading. Informal team meetings were held to brainstorm ideas.

### **Capturing joy**

With the *Samantha Seagull* book we wanted to capture some of the joy that a gallery can bring to its local community – and the local community can bring to a gallery. So in addition to being a story and activity book the publication is also intended to bring back happy memories for the Falmouth community for many years to come.

It is very exciting for children and families to feature in a book! It also raises self-esteem, particularly important for the children from the Penwerris and Beacon Council Estates with whom we work closely on a number of projects through a partnership with Falmouth Youth Club.

The *Samantha Seagull* books are sold through the shop, but are also given to children participating in



workshops or as prizes. Carnival workshops were held with the help of professional artists John Dyer and Jo Short. Falmouth Youth Club linked with the gallery to design a float, but when the carnival was cancelled due to bad weather a fancy dress parade was promptly held in the gallery, with entertainment being generously provided by Brett Jackson’s Swamp Circus. Children paraded in costumes inspired by paintings in the gallery (although permission was given for a Harry Potter and a Jedi Knight to attend!). The fancy dress competition was jointly won by all the children, who were each given a free copy of the *Samantha Seagull* booklet.

*Brain Stewart is Curator of Falmouth Art Gallery. A full evaluation will be available on [www.falmouthartgallery.com](http://www.falmouthartgallery.com).*