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Widgets, gadgets and gizmos

Hand-held technology in interpretation





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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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FOREWORD: THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

This edition of the journal explores a contemporary but contentious subject – the place of hand-held technology in interpretation.

The uptake and application of these new media is causing quite a stir, with some believing they offer a useful interpretive tool, whilst others take a far more sceptical approach. In this heat we hope to shed some light.

Underlying the debate is an unprecedented boom in digital technology. Mobile phones are universal, iPods are eponymous, TV is HiDef, and digital hubs are the future for recreation in the home. Analogue is so last century.

In response, heritage bodies, commercial organisations and interpreters have been exploring how to take advantage of this brave new world. At Culloden, the National Trust for Scotland has put its faith in a PDA tour designed to bring to life an evocative but highly sensitive landscape (page 4), whilst the National Portrait Gallery has recently tested the potential for mobile phone audio tours, with mixed results (page 14).

Elsewhere, Sally Murliss investigates how mobile phone audio tours are bringing a Roman settlement and a country park to life in Norfolk. Julie Dean explains the potential for MP3 technology to bring cost-effective audio tours to the heritage sector, and Dan Boys describes an attempt to engage young people through the use of on-line audio guides in Kent. In a fascinating marriage of art and technology, Ross Lowrie describes how sculpture and Bluetooth connectivity lie at the heart of the Tyne Salmon Trail.

But amongst these pro-technology articles there is another view. On page 10, Bob Jones makes a passionate and heartfelt plea for caution. To Bob, an elitist techno-monster is on heat, sucking 'the very soul' out of experience. At risk is nothing less than the 'there that is there'.

Finally, in a spirit of celebration we mark Liverpool's status as European Capital of Culture 2008 with a report on the renaissance of St George's Hall, one of Europe's finest neo-classical buildings. But even here, in the hallowed architecture of a building conceived to evoke the Roman Forum, a PDA tour has found its way into the interpretation. Is this really the way of the future?

David Masters, Commissioning Editor.

BATTLING TO VICTORY

How does the National Trust for Scotland overcome the difficulties in interpreting Culloden Battlefield, a place of pilgrimage, a war grave, a highly emotive subject – and a field. Caroline Tempest has the answers.

How does a stretch of empty, windswept moor near Inverness become a moving and meaningful historic battlefield? As you all know, the answer is when quality interpretation brings it to life. Put bluntly, without it, it's just a field.

CULLODEN

To some of our hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, the atmospheric setting of Culloden was marred by poor interpretation prior to the completion of the multi-million pound Culloden Battlefield Memorial Project (CBMP) earlier this year. Visitor complaints included lack of orientation ('Is this where the battle took place?') and lack of understanding ('I don't understand what happened, where and at what point'). Indeed, the last pitched battle fought on British soil is a difficult story to tell – the conflict involved thousands of soldiers on both the Jacobite and the Government side, events moved rapidly (it was all over in about an hour) and the battle was extraordinarily bloody, even by contemporary European standards. The ground was poorly chosen by the Jacobite command, leading directly to the failure of the Highland charge – a feared tactic which had ensured victory for the Jacobites in every battle of the campaign so far.

A SPECIAL PLACE

The crushing defeat of the Jacobites at Culloden is well documented. Almost overnight, the battlefield became a place where people came to pay their respects – a site of pilgrimage – and to this day endures as a physical symbol of the suffering of the Highlands, post Culloden. It is a subject that arouses great passion and a place where sensitivities run high.

The challenge faced by the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) was to bring the story of the battle successfully to life and to orientate visitors around the site intelligently without any impact on the landscape and this special

BELOW:
Imagine putting an interpretive panel on this!



© Ewen Weatherspoon



© Ewen Weatherspoon

ABOVE:
Flags showing the position of the two front lines, the only visible intrusion on the landscape.

(some would say sacred) sense of place. A key objective of the CBMP was to remove the old visitor centre away from the immediate area of battle (recent archaeological research proved that the centre was built on the Government lines). The exhibition in the new centre covers the political, religious and socio-economic context of the battle in a lively and detailed way. But outside, the NTS were keen to avoid littering the landscape with a crowd of interpretive panels trying to cater for all learning needs. This would have broken the spell of Culloden, one of the few battlefields yet to witness the close encroachment of modern development. With a bit of imagination, it really is possible for visitors to feel something of the atmosphere of that cold and miserable day in April 1746.

'THE CHALLENGE FACED BY THE NTS WAS TO BRING THE STORY OF THE BATTLE TO LIFE... WITHOUT ANY IMPACT ON THE LANDSCAPE'

'VISITORS DO NOT WANDER
AROUND THE BATTLEFIELD PEERING
AT A SCREEN'

The NTS team, working closely with our project content managers, CMC Associates, looked for a different solution. Although some of us suffered from a healthy dose of scepticism of traditional audio tours, they appeared to be the probable solution. But an audio tour could not meet all our aspirations for the site. In line with the spirit of the project we wanted to create something innovative and ground-breaking – something that could offer the visitor a new experience. An 'ideal world' brief was drafted for an interpretive device that could:

- bring the people and events of the conflict to life without detracting from visitor awareness and appreciation of the environment;
- complement the learning objectives within the visitor centre, wherever possible making links with the indoor interpretive experience (for example by relating archaeological artefacts on display inside to the location on the field where they were discovered);
- be location aware and trigger information at relevant points through the battlefield walk, helping visitors to orientate themselves on the battlefield;
- deliver a quality, layered content in a variety of relevant media;
- not inhibit discussion within visitor groups;
- be easily updated both in terms of content and hardware;
- facilitate access for all.



© NTS

ABOVE:
One of the trigger points for the Battlefield Guide is on the roof where visitors are asked to imagine the thousands of men lining up for battle in front of them.

WHAT DID WE END UP WITH?

Knowing exactly what our requirements were, but not the best way to fulfill them, and with no perfect solution for our needs existing on the market, the NTS commissioned an independent report into all the technological solutions for such an interactive user experience. The report gave us a detailed explanation of the various technological solutions available to us, with analysis and recommendations on how to proceed.

Following a tendering process we appointed a young Inverness-based company, Zolk-C, who specialise in technology solutions that enable interpreters to deliver better, more effective user experiences at heritage sites. Working closely with CMC Associates to ensure that

quality of content was always the driver, we developed a guide to the battlefield comprising a discreet portable computer (PDA) that complements the site's minimal physical interpretive installations. Overall, the Battlefield Guide (BFG) offers engaging, user-driven, multi-layered interpretation to the battlefield without physical intrusion on this sensitive site. As it is carried around the site it helps with visitor navigation, provides interpretation of areas within the visitor's panoramic vision and builds on the sense of discovery as it reveals places of specific relevance to the principal combatants and the events of the battle. As visitors explore Culloden at their own pace, specially created content (comprising audio, video, maps and illustrations), is triggered automatically using satellite technology – relevant to the visitor's position on the site.

'WE WERE DELIGHTED TO WIN A MUSEUMS AND HERITAGE "AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE" IN MAY 2008'

For the NTS, the successful aspects of the BFG are easy to summarise:

- On first being given the BFG, the audio instruction suggests visitors put it in a pocket and forget about it – a warning 'bleep' will sound shortly before the audio content triggers. If the audio is supported by visual material, a prompt is given for the user to look at the screen. In this way, visitor's need only interact with the device as and when they choose. Visitors do not wander around the battlefield peering at a screen – the device is secondary to the experience of being in the field.
- Audio accounts from contemporary participants are vividly brought to life. Combined with careful use of sound effects, these create an immersive and emotive tour of the site. The experience of hearing their accounts as you stand where they once stood is truly memorable, and often poignant. The ability to then see images of personal artefacts or fragments of ballistics found in that specific spot deepen the experience. We have found that visitors will frequently return to the exhibition displays to look with fresh eyes at the real items, which have taken on a new significance through the BFG interpretation.
- Visitors comment that they are hardly aware of the lightweight single earpiece. Sound quality is excellent, but visitors are actively encouraged to listen to the environment around them and to talk to their friends about the site.
- The default screen displays a map of the battlefield with a flashing icon to represent the visitor's location – which moves as the visitor explores the site (think of the Marauder's Map in the *Harry Potter* films, but without the special effects!). Because it shows the user's real-time location, it gives them the confidence of knowing exactly where they are at all times.
- The information menu changes depending on the visitor's position on the battlefield – if they wish, visitors can use the screen options, such as a 'Find out more' and 'Fact File', to access further interpretation.

BELOW:
Visitors can see plans for a much more elaborate memorial cairn by touching the screen.

© NTS





ABOVE:
Interpretation of Leanach Cottage is automatically triggered as visitors walk past.

© Ewen Weatherspoon

HOW DID WE GET THERE?

To get to the stage where we as the client were happy to launch the guide, it went through three significant evaluation periods. The scariest moment was when the earliest prototype was tested on over 50 interpretation professionals as part of the international interpretation conference The Vital Spark in October 2007. Who could afford to buy that kind of evaluation?! Participants completed detailed questionnaires which, as anticipated, led to an iterative process of evaluation, both of content and soft/hardware. The comprehensive phases of pre-evaluation were essential, ultimately leading to an informed re-scripting and re-recording of the content, making a much better tour – and one we're very proud of. We were delighted to win the Use of Technology category at the Museums and Heritage Awards for Excellence in May 2008.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Needless to say, not everything initially ran as smoothly as we would have liked. Whilst the evaluation process ironed out many content issues, annoying glitches in the software came to light – battery life wasn't ideal, and there were a few things we hadn't been able to predict, not least the new centre being in the wrong place! Before opening we had tested the device almost to destruction – but always starting the tour from the old visitor centre, as the new one was a building site. From the old centre we never experienced any problems with the guides 'finding' the satellites without which the devices won't work. But once we went live with the new building it was a different story – the building completely blocked the 'sight-line' between the battlefield and the satellites, thus preventing connection! A booster aerial has now been put in place, which fortunately solved the problem.

WHAT NEXT?

The commitment to develop, improve and evaluate the BFG continues now that we're open – it was never planned to 'standstill'. The non-proprietary hardware means we can update the devices cheaply and easily in the coming years. Additional languages and specialist tours are already in the pipeline. Overall, we feel that it was well worth taking the plunge with this new equipment, and although it is by no means appropriate at every site, it serves our needs very effectively.

Project Team: The National Trust for Scotland
www.nts.org.uk; CMC Associates
www.cmcassociates.co.uk;
Zolk-C www.zolkc.com

Caroline Tempest is the Senior Interpretive Planner for the National Trust for Scotland.

BELOW:
A friendly bleep sounds before the audio begins, but sometimes visitors still get a surprise.



© NTS

DIRECT DIAL

Sally Murliss looks at the successful introduction of dial-up mobile audio phone tours of two sites in Norfolk.

How many people do you know who don't possess a mobile phone? If you can think of any, they're in a shrinking minority: around 75% of the UK's population own one, and the figure is even higher for 15–24 year olds (no surprises there) at 96%. On a global scale, 1.3 billion people have mobile phones. Our familiarity with mobile phones as tools to communicate and access information has driven the development of phone-based tours for cities, museums and heritage sites. Cultural institutions in the US and some parts of Europe are at the forefront of these initiatives, and the UK is catching on.

HOW IT WORKS

Mobitour is one example of the new generation of mobile phone audio tours. The premise is simple: visitors use their own phone to ring a dedicated number for the whole tour, and can explore areas of particular interest in more depth. They can hang up and return to the same place in the tour, skip elements or listen again for up to 48 hours – useful if they want to know about a place before visiting or to re-live a visit. In addition to call charges (which can be free if they have an inclusive package), there may be a charge levied by the site owner. All this information is given when users dial up and listen to a free preview. Another advantage is that, through the service package, visitor evaluation data is automatically generated, with information about uptake, what subjects visitors listen to (and therefore where they go), what subjects are repeated and what subjects they follow in more detail.

Two sites in Norfolk – Caistor St Edmund and Whitlingham Country Park – introduced Mobitours earlier in 2008. Both opted for three tour options tailored to families, adult learners and those with a specialised interest, although the system has the capacity to deliver unlimited content. Visitors pay £1.50 to listen to the tours, with a proportion of that income coming back to the sites. The interpretive

design company that developed Mobitour did the scripting and recording of the audio, in consultation with the site managers. The interpretive designers also produced entry signage about the service and discreet posts for each stop on the route, reminding people of the number to ring – of crucial importance to optimise take-up.

RINGING THE ROMANS

It's difficult to imagine Caistor was once Venta Icenorum, the most important Roman centre of northern East Anglia. The earth-covered walls still stand, the street layout can be seen during dry weather, and the site of the amphitheatre is visible as a crop mark. But to conjure up a thriving Roman town out of these is beyond most of us, even though there are some interpretation panels already in place. As Mike Bentley, Rural Services Manager for South Norfolk Council says, 'You could just be visiting a field'.

The site is unmanned and remote, so for Mike a mobile phone tour was an ideal way of helping visitors experience life at Venta Icenorum. The tour takes in ten stops, each highlighting features like the bathhouse, temples, forum and basilica. The family tour is guided by local magistrate Guyus Neepos, who is only too delighted to show off the town's superior amenities, evoked through his narrative and appropriate sound effects (the screams of those who've just been treated by the nose hair plucker at the baths; the shouts of people peddling their wares; the general hustle and bustle at the forum). Reconstruction drawings of the site are incorporated into instruction posts at each stop.

This layered approach is one of many advantages of the mobile phone tour. According to Mike: 'It can deliver more in-depth information than the interpretation boards we've had here for a while and it's interactive. We've found that people start listening to the

BELOW:
A stopping point on the Caistor tour.



RIGHT:
Triggering the imagination – a thriving
Roman Town is brought to life through sound.

first level and are so interested and entertained, they carry on listening to the second and third levels as well.' The quality of the content is crucial in generating this response.

A FLEXIBLE FRIEND

The Roman town is the subject of ongoing archaeological investigations by the University of Nottingham, and another key feature of the phone tour for Mike is its flexibility: 'We didn't want to invest in expensive static interpretation which would soon be out of date because of the research going on here. With the mobile phone tour we can add another layer or re-record the script quickly to keep people up to date with the latest findings.' Mike's also planning to make use of the element that invites users to opt for text messages listing forthcoming events. He'd also like to develop the tour to include pictures and give pointers to other attractions and facilities nearby.

Take-up has varied but is still a minority of visitors. However, the tour has generated some income through the call charge and Mike hopes it'll break even in time – although this was not a prerequisite, it's an important point for cash-strapped budget holders. Although no formal visitor survey has been carried out on site or through the survey package, feedback has been upbeat, not least amongst partner organisations.

WHERRIES AND WARBLERS

The Broads Authority introduced a Mobitour at Whitlingham after trying out Caistor's tour. The country park is a very different place, with on-site staff and a visitor centre. It's on the outskirts of Norwich and is one of Norfolk's most popular attractions. Formed by gravel workings, it has two broads, woodlands and meadows. The audio tour here highlights the wildlife and social history through narrative, birdsong and other sound effects, and six characters from the past, such as a wherryman (a bargeman) and General John Money, a



former owner of Whitlingham estate. Finding suitable voices for these characters provided something of a challenge in the initial stages of recording the tour.

Each of the nine stops along the three-mile walk is marked with a story post incorporating zinc plaques etched with relevant features and the Mobitour number. The plaques also act as rubbing posts linked to a larger interpretive scheme across the park and in the visitor centre. Together with the audio tour, these play a significant role in improving the accessibility of the park. Invited by Country Park Manager Russell Wilson to audit the interpretation, the Royal National Institute for the Blind rated the plaques and audio as 'excellent'.

The staff at Whitlingham have also used the Mobitour to support the education programme and have had good feedback from teachers and pupils (back to that 96% again). Like Mike, Russell is enthusiastic about the audio tour: 'It adds a new dimension to what we offer at Whitlingham. It's an additional attraction for our visitors, which also interprets the country park. And from a practical point of view, it frees up staff time from giving lots of guided walks.'

According to Russell, the only downside of the tour so far has been a caller who incorrectly dialled the last three digits of the phone number – 999 instead of 905.

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

Although Caistor and Whitlingham aren't using all the features available on Mobitour yet, both Mike and Russell believe it's a good solution for interpreting their particular sites. Of particular importance is good content – professionally scripted, recorded and edited by a design company familiar with interpretation and the pitfalls of an overlong and unengaging script.

The limited visitor feedback collected so far has been positive, and the exit survey Russell is designing for Whitlingham should reveal some interesting data, as will the survey package and online reports from Mobitour. Is using a mobile phone for information, as well as for chatting and texting, an age-related thing? What would be the take-up if the £1.50 charge was waived? What parts of the tour are most popular? And so on. One thing is certain: the mobile phone tour is a viable and valuable addition to the interpretation toolkit.

If you want to listen for yourself, the Mobitour numbers for Caistor are 0207 112 1928 and Whitlingham 01603 510599.

Sally Murliss is a freelance communication consultant.

THE COACH TOUR



© Bob Jones

Bob Jones looks at hi-tech wizardry available to interpreters and wonders whether we are actually failing our visitors.

ABOVE:
Eyes down, keep moving...

BELOW:
Typically, three come along at once.

THE WILD GLEN

Some years ago I had a vision – as you do! A tour coach swept down one of Scotland's wilder glens – a place where history was writ in bloody battle; a place where monarchs wander free, guarding harems from antlered interlopers; a place where invisible power has been harnessed from deep and dark lochs; a place where the elements are raw and exposed; where snows linger into June; and where woolly marauders once laid waste the land, after first driving its people to the edge.

ZOMBIE TOURISTS

The coach swept by, full of wraith-like tourists, all voraciously consuming information from a PDA clutched before their eyes or a mobile phone wired into their ears. The coach did not pause but pressed on through that awesome place with hardly a blink of dulled eyes, hurrying to the next en-route tacky tartan 'gifting' shop. And 20 minutes after that, as the sun dipped in salute to the day, clipping high coories amidst the snow-clad guardians of a now-forgotten glen, the tourists emerge from the metal cocoon into that night's 'heritage' *mhotel* (sic) – itself a part of the tour company's money-spinning stable – and otherwise lifeless until their meticulously scheduled arrival. Here they will recharge their gizmos and download the next day's experiences. A hardcore may even replay the highlights of today's run, seeing it almost for the first time and oblivious to the reality of the 'there' that was there – and oh! so briefly within their grasp.

What is it about this vision that disturbs?

Indeed, through the little plastic earpiece they had all had a factual account of the natural and cultural history of the glen; they had listened to supposedly first-hand accounts of the highland clearances; they had heard that Boswell and Johnson had also passed this way; they had watched the digital death of natural tree-cover as anything remotely green that struggled to present its succulent head above the thin soil was turned to cud.

MISSING OUT

But what they had not had, was the feeling of '*place*' – the caress of the wind on their faces; the sound of a silver burn in spate; the musky scent of the mighty stag in trampled heather, the cacophonic silence of the mountains.

Their senses in short had been anaesthetised, 'schmoozed' by the technology that they so diligently upgraded (and just as quickly cast aside as they are seduced by the next slimmer, faster, mega-gigabyte, lifestyle gadget). Their eyes saw only pixels – if they looked up at all from palmtop-screen it was to stare sightless as the colours and shapes of the world outside their air-conditioned air-cushioned mini-barred bus blurred into 'landscape skink'. They smelt only the air freshener of the coach. They touched nothing save the comfort blanket of the moulded grip of their very own personal piece of technological hardware – already yesterday's model as the ever-accelerating techno-babbling industry hurtles towards its inevitable zenith – a microchip containing all possible knowledge (and perhaps not a little



© Bob Jones



© Bob Jones

ABOVE:
The Glen... the 'there that is there'.

propaganda?) implanted in our unemployed brains. Their ears heard only the monotonous drone of the sound-balanced, authentically 'Braveheart' voice, half of which monologue they missed because they were not tuned in to the accent, or the key words were unfamiliar – and of course they could not ask a spontaneous question of the non-existent virtual tour-guide. In short, they had failed to connect with 'understanding'.

WHO IS TO BLAME?

Correction, we – the interpreters – had failed them. We had ourselves rushed to embrace the latest emerging media – because it seems so exciting, so enticing... because we can. And because the techno-evangelists say we must. We had prostrated ourselves before the graven god of 'new technology' in the belief that this must surely enhance experience. We had lost touch with reality. We had lost our touch with our senses. No ...we had lost our senses!

'WRAITH-LIKE TOURISTS, ALL VORACIOUSLY CONSUMING INFORMATION FROM A PDA CLUTCHED BEFORE THEIR EYES OR A MOBILE PHONE WIRED INTO THEIR EARS'

I am no Luddite – in the '70s I installed one of the first Sound Post systems in Britain (a weather-proofed eight-track tape recorder with stethoscope-like listening tubes, developed by the late Philip Eden of the then Countryside Commission and early SIBH member). In the early '80s I introduced one of the first computer games to an interpretative centre on an old Commodore computer. Indeed, I dearly hope someone somewhere is collecting all these media antiques of yesteryear for the forthcoming (surely it must be?!) Museum of Interpretation! Today, I am Bluetoothed and Blackberried, palm-topped and laptopped with the best (even though they do sound rather more like ailments than sophisticated communications hardware). But in truth they are merely tools – and 'digital' is merely media. Fitness-for-purpose must inform our media choices – not fashion, not upmanship, not the perverse notion that to be good it has to be expensive.

ELITIST STUFF

Do not be fooled, most technology is in fact elitist – affordable only by the privileged (just watch your budget disappear into the maw of the dual-income few, like chicks in the nest devouring all that is thrust down the ever-open throat); it is anti-social – as humans we are essentially social beings (a trait not conducive

to wandering around a heritage site in dumb silence with a handset or wand pressed to our ears); it is exclusive – particularly to those whose faculties and digits are challenged by the aging process (try wearing rigger's gloves, closing your eyes and attempt to work a key pad apparently designed for a 12-year-old games-machine player or 13-year-old prom queen, and you'll get an inkling of understanding!). And that, dear reader, is why I believe the shotgun marriage of technology and interpretation is in fact abhorrent. Technology, like Harry Potter's *dementors*, sucks the very soul out of experience. It wraps a shroud around us and will eventually, and with surgical precision, amputate our underused brains from reality.

Today, I live at the foot of that glen and for four months of the year I watch the coaches sweep by in convoys. The 'hielan' giftie shop along the road is a reality; the heritage *m*hotel is a reality; the timetabled 'experience' is a reality.

And the techno-monster is in heat. Discuss.

Bob Jones FAHII is Head of Design & Interpretation, The Forestry Commission, Scotland.

TEENAGE KICKS

If men are from Mars and women from Venus, then some may suggest teenagers are from outside the Solar System – when it comes to audio interpretation. Dan Boys asks whether young people really seek something different.

6/10 YOUNG PEOPLE ARE DOING IT

In 2001, a study in Canada of 9–17 year olds revealed that file-sharing is a popular activity for young people. 57% said that playing and downloading music is what they like to do most on the Internet. More recent data is harder to find, but we can assume that seven years on these statistics have increased and illustrate that young people have the skills and desire to access web-based audio content.

Whilst downloading audio for consumption on computers, MP3 players and mobile phones is popular, few organisations have exploited the high ownership of this equipment and its potential for interpretation to this audience in tourist attractions and heritage sites. An extensive search for online audio guides illustrates that this audience is poorly catered for; only five audio trails have been designed specifically for the 'iPod generation' with each falling into one of two categories – those written and produced by teenagers (either partly or wholly), and those written and produced for teenagers (by adults).

BELOW:
Some of the young people participating in the audio trail consultation session – with the obligatory lollies!



DARWIN'S LEGACY

Using the technological angle to engage young people with environmental/nature-based audio guides as a driver, the London Borough of Bromley commissioned five 'Circular Walks for Young People' comprising audio and activities. The aim is to encourage 11–16 year olds 'to explore protected landscapes in the Green Belt countryside and discover local history and biodiversity'. But this is no ordinary landscape: this is where Charles Darwin made his home and an area that provided evidence for his controversial publication *The Origin of Species*. Today it is a nominated World Heritage Site.

Due to funding constraints, it was necessary to complete half of the project, including an evaluation process, before the end of the financial year. This time limitation ruled out the opportunity to develop the trails with young people and so it was decided to develop three very different audio trails to enable the target audience consultation group to make an informed choice about which styles and elements they liked and disliked.

To summarise, the three approaches were:

- Oral reminiscence comprising the memories of eight people who have lived and worked on the High Elms estate.
- A fantasy story with attitude, based in Beckenham, that follows two teenagers on a quest to save nature. Due to its arguably less rich heritage, the approach here focuses more on the narrative.
- A 'gentle' story set in 1859; the listener explores Cudham with Darwin's children.

'A DRIVING FORCE IN DECIDING TO DO AN AUDIO TRAIL WAS THAT THEY "WOULD EXPECT TO FIND OUT INFORMATION ABOUT THE PLACE IN A CLEAR WAY"



© Dan Boys

ABOVE:
Listening intently to the Beck Corridor Audio Trail, which is situated in an urban green space in Beckenham, South East London.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Between eight and twelve 'stops' were produced for each route (no longer than two miles in length) and a PDF file containing directional information and an activity for each 'stop' was also created. The activities can be used stand-alone, but work most effectively when used in conjunction with the audio content by inviting users to develop their understanding in an informal manner.

The client requested we use local amateur actors for the fantasy-based trail, whilst professional voiceovers were used for both narrating the directional information and linking the oral reminiscence in the High Elms audio trail.

WORD-OF-MOUTH

A group of 11–16 year olds spent one spring day undertaking two audio trails and analysing a third. To elicit the user group's thoughts, feedback was received through three approaches: a simple questionnaire; flip chart 'cocktail session'; and discussions. Each was designed to extract information on usability, learning and emotional experiences.

A surprising outcome of this event was the participants' strong preference for the interview-based audio trail. Preconceptions amongst those running the workshop deemed this approach more appropriate for adults. However, its clear and structured approach was welcomed by the young people, despite some audio stops exceeding the three-minute limit. The survey supported this view, all respondents found this audio trail 'interesting', with over 70% citing 'educational'. One person echoed many participants' views by stating that a driving force in deciding to do an audio trail was that they 'would expect to find out information about the place in a clear way'.

FEEDBACK

Young people are very comfortable with mobile devices to make phone calls and listen to music. However, when utilising one for an 'alien' purpose, such as an audio guide, it is evident that confidence is an issue. Even though the participants were provided with directional information in the activity sheets, they tended to rely on the audio instructions. This could be in part due to the fact that they were asked to download the files prior to the event from a temporary webpage that did not provide any background or user guidance. It became clear during the session that amendments to the directional information provided at the end of each track were required, as users' confidence in the audio trail was directly linked to their ability to understand the directions and navigate their way to the next stop.

'CONFIDENCE IN THE AUDIO TRAIL WAS DIRECTLY LINKED TO THE ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND THE DIRECTIONS AND NAVIGATE THEIR WAY TO THE NEXT STOP'

FINE TUNING

One of the pitfalls of undertaking evaluation in a group is that the participants rely on each other to navigate their way to the next stop. In addition, it was clear this group sought the information in bite-sized pieces. Whilst the objective was to keep the directional information short, the nature of some of the routes meant that this information could not always be restricted to one or two sentences. The solution has been to separate the map and directional information from the well-received activities and provide them directly with the audio. In addition, users are prompted to pause the audio at key points during the directions so they don't have to remember too much in one go.

In conclusion, developing a successful audio trail for young people follows similar planning to audio trails for adults, ensuring the directions are infallible, the language is relevant and the content clear. So perhaps, in the end, teenagers are only from Neptune.

Dan Boys established Audio Trails in 2006, bringing together his passions of conservation, social history and gadgets.

AN AUDIO TOUR IS AVAILABLE...

Andrea Easey gets down to the nitty-gritty and looks at factors which influenced the take-up of audio tours at the recent exhibition Pop Art Portraits at the National Portrait Gallery.

In autumn 2007, the National Portrait Gallery held the exhibition Pop Art Portraits for which we created an audio guide. The decision was based on the success of the previous year's exhibition, David Hockney Portraits, where the audio guide take-up was unusually high (7% of its visitors). It was felt that the target audience for both shows was similar and the main attractions of the Hockney audio guide (interviews with sitters and sound clips of the artist) were also viable for the Pop Art project. Acoustiguide Limited were commissioned to develop and deliver the content following a brief from the Gallery and the exhibition curator, Paul Moorhouse.

FREE TASTERS

Acoustiguide carried out interviews in the UK and US with the artists included in the exhibition. A 'taster' version of the tour was requested as part of the initial contract that could be downloaded free of charge from the Gallery website and through iTunes for use on personal MP3 players in order to drive traffic to the main audio tour and to the exhibition.

MOBILE PHONE TOURS

In the original brief it was anticipated that the audio guide would be hired by visitors on-site using standard hand-held audio guide players such as those used to provide the audio guide to the gallery's collection. However, if the gallery's standard pick-up rate for a paid-for tour of about 3% of visitors was achieved, then the gallery's normal quantity of players would be adequate to meet demand. If the take-up rate was significantly higher, then the gallery would not have enough players. One of the most attractive solutions to this problem was to make the content available as a mobile phone tour in partnership with X-On.

PRICING STRATEGY

As a pricing structure was already budgeted for exhibition visitors to hire the tour using traditional players (£3), it would have been

difficult to then offer the phone tour free of charge, with the only cost to users being the connection time, as this could be understood as penalising traditional audio users. It was not possible at the time to work out a 'pay-as-you-go' structure to allow users to pay for individual segments so that if all were accessed the combined price would be the same as for the traditional tour. The eventual pricing structure for the mobile tour included a £3 payment made with text message confirmation directly from X-On. This could be charged to a credit card or arranged to appear on the phone bill of the user. Once registered as having paid for access, users paid the price of a local call to access each track. Access lasted for 24 hours after the £3 payment was made. The exhibition's label booklet included the audio track numbers so phone users had the information they needed to hear the audio after they had left the exhibition. Information about how to use the tour was printed on a bookmark handed to visitors with their exhibition ticket, and a poster in the Main Hall advertised the availability of the tour in both formats.

TAKE-UP... OR NOT

The audio guide players hired in the gallery achieved the expected take-up figure of 3% of exhibition visitors, however the gallery found that acceptance of the mobile phone offer was negligible. Despite the phone tour being a strong offer with very rich interpretation, this alternative method of delivery did not appeal to the exhibition audience.

When considering the audience segmentation for the exhibition, there might be some explanation of why the mobile phone tour did not have a higher pick-up rate. Overseas visitors accounted for up to 40 % of all National Portrait Gallery visitors during the time the exhibition could be seen at the gallery (11 October 2007 – 20 January 2009). In particular, almost a quarter of the visitors to Pop Art Portraits came from overseas.

BETWEEN:
In the Car by Roy Lichtenstein, 1963.



© EMPICS

RIGHT:
Renowned Pop artists gather in front of
Marilyn by Andy Warhol to launch the
Pop Art Portraits exhibition.

ENGLISH ONLY

The guide was only available in English, which may have dissuaded visitors for whom English was not a first language from 'taking a gamble' as to whether they would enjoy the mobile tour. A free sample was advertised as being available, but the caller still needed to pay the cost of a local call. As roaming rates for mobile calls for foreign visitors are high, even offering a local call option made the tour expensive – especially on top of the flat fee to access the tour. It was hoped that UK visitors at weekends and evenings might use the 'free minutes' on their tariff to hear the tour, but this might have needed reinforcement as a message. Promotion of the tour also seemed to have less impact than anticipated. Despite a large poster positioned behind the exhibition ticket desk and a colourful bookmark, dedicated to promoting the mobile audio tour alone, given out with each ticket sold, 84% of visitors questioned did not know there was an audio guide.

CAPPING THE COST

There may also have been reticence on the part of the exhibition goers to embrace new technology and use a new way to access information at a museum or gallery. When looking at the visitor profile, only 30% of visitors were aged 34 and under. The majority of visitors (53%) were aged 35–55. This technologically 'rising' audience is comfortable with technologies with which they are familiar and of which they have experience. Therefore the traditional audio guide unit does not pose a threat and is likely to be used, but accessing a mobile phone tour with an upfront fee is less comfortable and a risk that is unlikely to be taken for the first time under these circumstances. This group of users may have opted to use the mobile tour if it was the only method by which they could access the content or if they could have had the safety net of only paying for the content they heard and could terminate the call and therefore cap the cost to suit them.



© EMPICS

RECEPTION PROBLEMS

Other factors that may have made the mobile tour less attractive were possible concerns about the quality of the mobile phone connection. Inside traditional museum and gallery buildings with thick walls, it is often the case that mobile reception is reduced in some areas, although a quick test ensured that adequate reception was available throughout the exhibition before the agreement was made to go ahead with a mobile tour. The depth of content for the tour could also have worked against its popularity, as to hear the full version, 36 separate stops needed to be accessed.

Mobile phone tours may also have a higher pick-up rate at sites offering environmental interpretation or outdoor features such as a walking trail. Using a mobile phone while outdoors seems intuitive whereas use inside a building, where security staff ask visitors not to use phones, is a problem. The signage for Pop Art Portraits clearly stated that phones could be used to access the tour but the expectation is to be told not to use mobiles.

WEBSITES, ITUNES AND PODCAST

One unexpected statistic was that, when questioned, 10% of exhibition visitors said they had listened to audio content about the exhibition. We knew 3% had hired the tour, so where were the missing 7%? When looking at the National Portrait Gallery's website to book tickets or find out information about the exhibition, the Pop Art Portraits mini-site had a clearly visible 'Audio' section offering the taster

ten-minute version of the audio tour. This was also available, free of charge, from the gallery's website and through iTunes on both the National Portrait Gallery and Acoustiguide's podcast pages. This podcast also reached no.3 on the iTunes Visual Arts Chart. These free downloads seem to have been a welcome addition to the audio offer for the exhibition and they are probably the audio to which the extra 7% of visitors referred. That these visitors didn't then pick up the main audio guide may have been the result of the taster being all the audio they felt they needed.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions we have drawn are that the mobile tour seemed an unattractive option to visitors because of its pricing strategy and because it was offered as an alternative to the traditional method of accessing the tour. If the gallery's supply of traditional audio players had run out or if mobile phones had been the only way of using the tour, then the pick-up rate for this would doubtless have been higher. In retrospect, it might have been better to have offered a selection of tracks via the phone tour as a 'light' version of the main tour at only the cost of the phone calls. This might then have shared the apparent success of the MP3 taster audio tour.

**Andrea Easey is Interpretation Editor
at the National Portrait Gallery.**

BIG BANGS FOR SMALL BUCKS

Julie Dean illustrates the pros and cons of MP3 technology with four case studies.

THE LOW-DOWN ON DOWNLOADS

One very hot day in Seville we were inspired to become MP3 trailblazers. We had waited in an endless queue to enter the magnificent Alcazar. Essential to my dyslexic husband's visit was the advertised audio guide. Eventually we moved out of the blazing sun into reception where we were obliged to wait 40 minutes for the return of an English audio guide. Finally we were granted our prize and hurried to the first spot to listen. You've guessed... it didn't work. There had to be another way and it was at this point my husband announced our new career.

WIDENING HORIZONS

An MP3 guide is different to traditional audio guides because the visitor follows the audio tour on their own equipment, downloading the digital files from a website before they visit. In this way trails can be accessed at any time.

Downloadable audio guides have many advantages for managers because they:

- are cost effective with no further need of outlay on equipment;
- have no implications for staffing, storage or maintenance;
- offer interpretation at outdoor or unmanned sites;
- are unobtrusive;
- attract different age groups, youngsters and silver surfers alike;
- are flexible, offering layered interpretation;
- can reasonably be part of a package of interpretation.

'THE BBC REPORTED ON THEIR WEBSITE THAT AN MP3 TOUR PRODUCED IN 2007 FOR LIVERPOOL 08 CAPITAL OF CULTURE "TOOK 10,000 DOWNLOADS IN ITS FIRST WEEK"

They also appeal to visitors because:

- there are no queues or faulty handsets;
- there is no need to refer to written information and visitors can concentrate on the object, or view;
- visitors explore at their own pace and can pause or repeat sections;
- they can evoke pictures in the mind;
- they are suitable for those with reading difficulties;
- not everyone engages with room guides or likes group tours.

Downloadable tours are a cost-effective means of interpretation at traditional indoor sites and also offer flexible interpretation outdoors.

'WE DEVELOPED THE RESULTING GHOST TRAIL ON A STRICT BUDGET INCORPORATING SOUND EFFECTS AND INTERVIEWS WITH STAFF WHO HAD EXPERIENCED GHOSTLY ENCOUNTERS IN THE COURSE OF THEIR DUTY'

GHOSTLY GUIDANCE AT A TRADITIONAL SITE

Case study 1: Bodelwyddan Castle

Chana Bedford, former Marketing and Development Officer, was anxious to develop easily accessible audio tours to attract visitors who were interested in ghostly goings on, as both a taster for, and a companion to, overnight ghost vigils. MP3 downloads allowed her to add another layer of interest to existing interpretation.

We developed the resulting ghost trail on a strict budget, based on Chana's script and incorporating sound effects and interviews with staff who had experienced ghostly encounters in the course of their duties. The trails were then uploaded to a free portal, giving access to audio trails and tours throughout the country, and also to iTunes.

Notably, the downloadable ghost trail has attracted interest from visitors through the web portal and iTunes who may not have visited Bodelwyddan Castle as a matter of

course. As Viccie Beech, the current Development Officer at the castle, stresses:

'Access for all is central to Bodelwyddan Castle's ethos. Employing MP3 downloads as a means of communicating interpretation to younger visitors is a great way of shattering the misconception of museums as stuffy, dusty buildings that should only be visited under duress in the company of your parents. It captures an audience that may ordinarily miss out on the hidden delights of attractions such as Bodelwyddan Castle. The research of heritage experts such as Tilden¹ has proven that establishing an interest at a young age will ensure future generations value and care for their heritage, protect the long-term future of heritage tourism attractions.'

¹ Tilden, F *Interpreting our Heritage* pub University of North Carolina Press 1957 ISBN 0807831808



IPODDING THE LANDSCAPE

Case study 2: Natural England Walberswick National Nature Reserve



Staff were looking at a way to develop paperless and unobtrusive nature trails across this important site. Working with managers Adam Burroughs and Victoria Francis, we produced three trails covering wildlife, plant life and local history, heritage and folklore. It was also an opportunity to convey how the seemingly natural landscape is in fact actively managed by Natural England staff and volunteers.

Information conveyed by the audio trails could not have been achieved by traditional methods at this unmanned site as there was no visitor centre, and staff were hoping to convey more information than can be comfortably fitted on an interpretation board. There were no implications for staff and equipment; the information delivered avoided the introduction of large interpretation boards, and the visitor could hear and learn about wildlife and plant life that they may not always see on a particular visit because of the time of year. Interviews, which included staff commentary, reminiscences from an elderly resident, information from an amber expert and a local boatman who knew the river and estuary intimately, all worked to give the visitor a new insight into the very special and fragile landscape.

GUIDING THE COMMUNITY

Case study 3: Shropshire Wildlife Trust

This project aimed to train volunteers and staff already involved in podcasting in order to produce their own audio trail interpreting land at Earls Hill. MP3 was ideal at this unmanned reserve because it did not involve the management of equipment and had to be produced on a tight budget.

Volunteers were able to make oral history recordings and incorporate them into the trail along with interviews with the Trust's own experts and examples of bird calls. John Harding, a volunteer, felt that the use of MP3 technology was a great way of engaging children and teenagers because when he visited schools the familiar technology was regarded as 'cool' and encouraged many of them to want to walk using their iPod.



DOWNLOADING OUR HERITAGE

Case study 4: Heathers and Hillforts Project Partnership



We are currently producing downloadable trails for Denbighshire Countryside Services with the aim of celebrating the special moorland habitat and landscape of the area, the cultural association with the Iron Age and the traditional moorland management, using modern technology.

Erin Robinson, Interpretation Officer for the Project, realises that not everyone is attracted to the idea of an MP3 tour:

'Some people may comment that they visit a countryside site or a historical attraction to get away from technology and the hubbub of modern life – why would they want a mobile phone or downloadable audio tour? Well, that's the beauty of this type of interpretation – you have the choice whether to use it or not and it has no impact on the landscape. The stops on the tour we are creating with Audio Guide Productions will be located on existing waymarkers, so nothing will detract visitors from the captivating beauty of the site.'

CATCHING ON

Managers may feel there are drawbacks in the presumption that a visitor will download guides before they visit sites. They want to include visitors who just turn up. There are options here. Prices of players have reduced to the point where a few preloaded MP3 players can be provided at suitable sites within a reasonable budget. They can even be sold as a revenue stream. Some venues are also able to supply computer access for on-the-spot downloads. MP3 files can also be used as a basis for both downloadable and mobile phone tours.

An ever-growing number of people do however plan their visits by using information from the Internet. Visitors will come to expect it as an option.

A FINAL WORD IN YOUR EAR

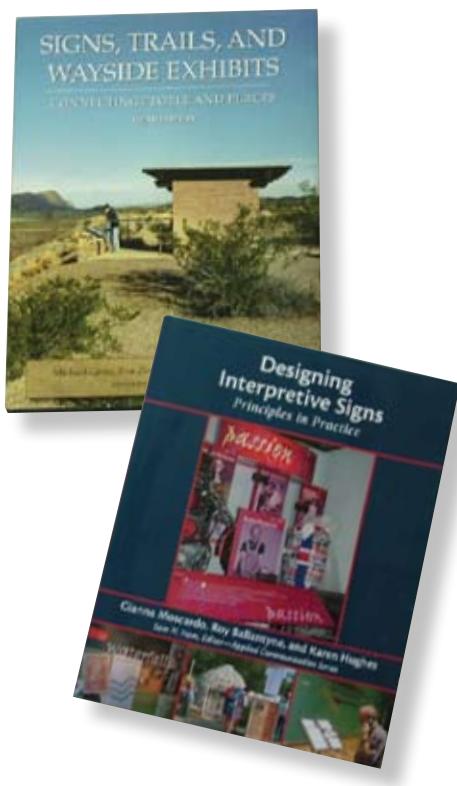
MP3 interpretation is still in its infancy but the signs are encouraging. The BBC reported on their website that an MP3 tour produced in 2007 for Liverpool 08 Capital of Culture 'took 10,000 downloads in its first week' (BBC website, 3 July 07.) That's an awful lot of potential visitors who will be looking at their heritage with new ears!

Julie Dean is co-director of Audioguide Productions.

BOOK REVIEWS

Moscardo G., Ballantyne R. & Hughes K. *Designing Interpretive Signs: Principles in Practice*, Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, Colorado, (2007). 139pp, \$50 ppb

Gross M., Zimmerman R. & Bucholz J. (3rd ed) *Signs, Trails, & Wayside Exhibits: Connecting People & Places*, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Foundation Press (2006). 161pp, \$25 ppb



I recently encountered these two books separately but given the obvious overlap and close publication dates I decided to review them together. The first is part of an *Applied Communications Series* edited by Sam Ham, while the second is part of the University of Wisconsin *Interpreters' Handbook Series* and was first published in 1992. Although both books have been published in the US, the authors of the first book have an Australian perspective.

Moscardo et al. is the 'meatier' tome, setting out to argue the case from the visitor studies literature of why the principles of good practice it proposes, actually work. Although it sets out to deal with signage, its emphasis on evidence-based communication and understanding visitor reactions covers many kinds of media, and I would argue that this book has created a place for itself as an authoritative up-to-date text on interpretive theory and practice in general.

It lays out a set of interpretive principles, emphasises the need to plan provision with an emphasis on themes, and then moves into catching and keeping people's attention through good design, writing and organising text, dealing with disabilities, and with a useful chapter on families and children, all researched and referenced. If I had any gripes with this book, it is that there were a couple of examples of poor copy-editing: an illustration that didn't really illustrate the point it was supposed to, and typos in a book that emphasises the need for checking text. However these slight imperfections pale into insignificance beside the achievement of producing an attractive, accessible book that will serve as required reading for any course on interpretation with academic aspirations.

While both books are appropriately illustrated, it would be fair to say that Gross et al. is profusely and beautifully illustrated, a veritable tropical rainforest of different types of signs and panels, the new edition now also including examples from Scotland. It has lots of good practice recommendations and case studies, emphasises a model of interpretation based on meaning making, and focuses on all aspects of signage/panel production including planning, design, text, disability, fabrication, materials, plus creating trails, surfacing, furniture etc.

Same subject, two different books: is there a choice? I would say no – both books have complementary strengths despite their overlaps. For a no nonsense 'how to do it' guide for dipping into in search of sensible advice and good ideas, Gross et al. is a treasure chest and any interpretive designer should have this book on their shelves. For any serious student, teacher or practitioner of interpretation as a discipline, who wants to understand the evidence for good practice and principles, then Moscardo et al. fills the gap which had opened up between assertion and visitor research.

Carl Atkinson is Head of Communication Section, Countryside Council for Wales.

BLUETOOTH ON THE TYNE

Ross Lowrie looks back at the last six months to give an honest account of The Tyne Salmon Trail, which uses sculptures and mobile phone technology to inform visitors about the life of the Tyne Salmon.



ABOVE:
Ten cubes are inspired by the colour of the salmon and their scales.

TRAVELLING SCULPTURE TRAIL

We could have printed some leaflets about the amazing journey of the Tyne Salmon or perhaps we could have made a video about the return to life of the River Tyne, once so polluted that it was deemed biologically dead. But we decided instead to try something a little different, something new. We embarked on an ambitious year-long travelling sculpture trail that followed the journey of the Tyne Salmon from source to sea. We would communicate with trail users by using Bluetooth messages, leaving them with a lasting reminder of the trail, and telling the story of the Tyne Salmon.

BLUETOOTH MARKETING

The Environment Agency has more than a passing interest in rivers. We regulate discharges, investigate pollution incidents and police fisheries. Furthermore, we want more people from more different backgrounds to enjoy river-related recreation. So the idea of celebrating the journey of the Tyne Salmon was born. We worked with a north-east based team of architects, xsite, and they came up with the idea of a travelling sculpture trail. To attract a hard-to-reach audience we would use Bluetooth technology, more commonly used for commercial marketing, to convey our messages.

ISN'T BLUETOOTH JUST FOR KIDS?

I was dimly aware my phone was Bluetooth-enabled, but I hadn't used it before. A quick straw poll in the office revealed I wasn't the only one. If we didn't use it, how could we expect others to? This is where the Tyne Salmon Trail comes into its own. I realised I hadn't used Bluetooth before because there didn't seem to be much point, but now I was being offered something interesting.

CREATING A SLIDESHOW

We developed downloads that work just like a slideshow, scrolling from one image to the next. These used few words and crisp images to offer trail users attractive and stylish keepsakes. They hold information about the Tyne Salmon including its migratory journey, lifecycle and myths and legends, in addition to promoting local recreational opportunities and services. These downloads are easy to create – deciding on the content is the difficult part.

CHEAP AND LIMITLESS

Two limitations of most mobile-phone based technology are that it is expensive and depends on mobile signal coverage. Bluetooth is different: it is free to send a message and doesn't rely on a good signal. It works everywhere. This was essential to us as we were installing sculptures in remote Northumberland countryside, miles from the nearest decent signal.

Providing power was the greatest challenge, as the Bluetooth transmitters need a continuous source of power to transmit messages. In a visitor centre you just plug them in; in the great outdoors we needed more new technology. We rely on solar panels and battery packs hidden within the sculptures, a system we originally developed for remote flood risk webcams. Bluetooth computers need more power than webcams so the solution isn't perfect – in the winter a lot of time was spent changing batteries.

'TO ATTRACT A HARD-TO-REACH AUDIENCE WE WOULD USE BLUETOOTH TECHNOLOGY, MORE COMMONLY USED FOR COMMERCIAL MARKETING, TO CONVEY OUR MESSAGES'

FEEDBACK

So how have visitors reacted to this innovative communication technique? The results have been surprisingly good. Despite power failure in the winter and some vandalism to the sculptures, the project has been a hit with the general public so far. The sculptures have attracted some criticism, as does much contemporary public art, but most people are genuinely excited by the innovative use of Bluetooth and see the benefits of this new approach. Many people who have received our keepsakes have never used their phones in this way before and are thrilled to receive a free memento. What's more, the Bluetooth computers take the guesswork out of evaluation; they give exact data on how many messages have been sent and to how many new phones.

There is still work to do to improve the technology: a large proportion of trail users do not have their Bluetooth turned on, and the frequency at which people fail to successfully download a message is disappointing. So this technology comes with a warning, you can reach hard-to-reach audiences, but this should be seen as an addition to your existing interpretation techniques, not a replacement. Our project has been successful so far because we have used Bluetooth in conjunction with the sculptures and other activities including fishing taster-days. We have learned there is no substitute for getting your feet wet and your hands dirty!

BLUETOOTH SAVES LIVES!

Like any journey into the unknown, it has been a rocky road with many surprises along the way. The Tyne Salmon Trail has been a departure from the norm for the Environment Agency, and has not been without its challenges. But the use of Bluetooth has been groundbreaking for us and has provided an excellent testing bed for the potential use of this technology for flood warnings in areas with



ABOVE:
Striking art draws the public in.

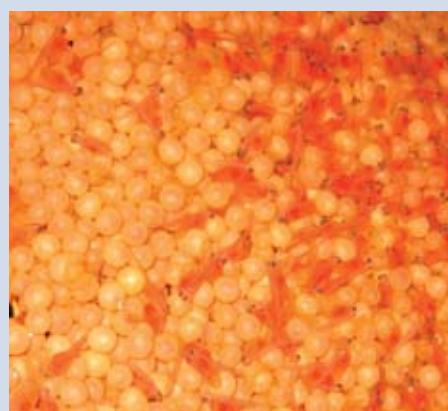
poor network coverage, such as campsites. We may also use it to encourage the public to sign up for flood warnings. Bluetooth educates us on the incredible journey of the Tyne Salmon and may yet save lives!

CONCLUSIONS

Lessons for using mobile phone technology:

1 Make it work – this is the tricky part. You must make sure it works for most phone types, as every phone is different.

- 2 Don't believe the hype!** – Bluetooth companies will tell you it always works. Ask for previous experience and evidence of previous campaigns.
- 3 Educate** – most users won't know how to Bluetooth so use signs to tell them or, better still, be there to help them.
- 4 Less is more** – mobile phone screens are small, so it is best to use a few well-chosen words – there just isn't room for an essay, no matter how passionate you are about the subject!
- 5 Be realistic** – Bluetooth isn't for everyone. Many people will choose not to use it, some will want to but will be let down by incompatible technology. 25% of 'successful hits' is a good return.



ABOVE:
This image of salmon eggs and alevin (baby fish) is sent as a keepsake.

Ross Lowrie is Tyne Salmon Trail Project Manager for the Environment Agency.

THE RENAISSANCE OF ST GEORGE'S HALL, LIVERPOOL

Lorraine Knowles explains how the challenge of problematical entrances and difficult circulation spaces has been overcome to create a new visitor centre in this great building.

From the day it opened in 1854, St George's Hall has been hailed as one of Europe's finest neo-classical buildings. Certainly it is a neo-classical building of extraordinary proportions and sumptuous interior decoration, combining law courts, concert hall and great assembly hall in one structure. By rolling what were originally two briefs – one for law courts and the other for musical events – into one, the young architect, Harvey Lonsdale Elmes, made the scheme affordable for the corporation of Liverpool. But the resulting design compromises, in its entrances and circulation space, have presented challenges ever since.

The biggest challenge, once the law courts function moved to new premises in 1984, was what to do with the building. Nearly a quarter of a century later, the building's future has been resolved; once again its great hall and small

concert room are being used for public events and its remarkable story can be enjoyed by visitors to a brand new heritage centre created at the south end of the hall.

St George's Hall is the first building anyone encounters arriving in Liverpool by train. Conceived as part of a scheme to echo the forum of Ancient Rome, it is unmissable, taking up half Lime Street. Together with the museum, library and art gallery, buildings which followed on adjacent William Brown Street, and which its northern entrance faces, its setting is reminiscent of Berlin's Museuminsel of which Schinkel's Altes Museum is said to have influenced Elmes.

Finding the way in to St George's Hall is the first challenge for the visitor. The imposing east entrance opposite Lime Street station cannot fail to draw one up its grand flight of steps but, as this entrance leads straight into the great hall via a narrow corridor, disabled access aside, there was no scope for a visitor reception. Whilst access issues at the north entrance facing the galleries have been resolved, this never proved a satisfactory way into the building when the museum trialed its use as a visitor attraction back in the late 1980s. So these two entrances have reverted to their original purpose of giving access to the great hall for functions and the small concert room for performances, and the south entrance has been opened up as the main way into the building instead.

This entrance, below another towering portico, faces towards the city centre and allows level access into a previously unseen brick-vaulted space which now happily accommodates an introductory interpretative exhibition, visitor welcome and shop. Entering such a grand building through what was an unfinished part of the undercroft is in some ways disappointing, but as one explores the building, one understands why it was the best option.

BELOW:
The south portico of St. George's Hall below which is the heritage centre entrance.



© Liverpool City Council

'THE IMPOSING EAST ENTRANCE OPPOSITE LIME STREET STATION CANNOT FAIL TO DRAW ONE UP ITS GRAND FLIGHT OF STEPS BUT, AS THIS ENTRANCE LEADS STRAIGHT INTO THE GREAT HALL VIA A NARROW CORRIDOR, DISABLED ACCESS ASIDE, THERE WAS NO SCOPE FOR A VISITOR RECEPTION'

(Opening up this part of the building in a way never intended has revealed a half-finished staircase, abandoned because space was required for the innovative heating and ventilation system.)

It also brings into sharp focus the struggle which the 19th-century architect(s) – Elmes and then Cockerell – faced in bringing this project to fruition: from start to finish there were problems with budget, design variations, rising costs and client/contractor relationships and, not least, the death of Elmes only a few years into the build. It was no straightforward job for the 21st-century architects Purcell Miller Triton either, bringing such a monumental building up to current-day safety standards.

The storyline, which has been presented by Janvs Design Group, concentrates on two main themes: the legal use of the building and the wealth and ambition of Victorian Liverpool, which led to its commissioning what one might best describe as a civic palace – a stark contrast with everyday life in a port city.

By use of a PDA-style audio tour, graphics and projected images, the designers enable the visitor to choose different styles of tour and give a taste of the great spatial contrasts to come: the cold, cavern-like prisoners' cells along the west side of the Hall leading to the sober,



ABOVE:
Looking back to the heritage centre entrance from the interactive gallery.

wood-clad and marble-columned civic and criminal courts at the south and north ends; and above these the polychrome richness of the great hall and the classical, but shimmering, elegance of the small concert room.

From the heritage centre, the visitor is able to progress along the prisoner route past reconstructed cells via the holding cell and arrive in the dock of the criminal court – a memorable experience – or take the upper route via the grand southern staircase, stopping off to admire the south entrance hall housing a

BELOW:
Interior of the heritage centre.



© Liverpool City Council

bizarre artwork based on St George and the Dragon; and look down on the great hall from the balcony above before entering the magnificent small concert room. Routes vary according to what events are taking place in the building but it is possible to follow a circular route which takes in a tea room overlooking St John's Gardens and a much-needed community exhibitions gallery in the former grand jury room. This has been cleverly designed to provide a permanent display panel structure with the capacity for easy changeovers so that each exhibition has a professional finish.

On the day that I visited, the great hall's Minton-tiled floor was covered – not with its protective wooden floor but with a mock-ice skating rink – and the statues of Victorian worthies looked down on skaters dancing not to the sound of the hall's 'Father' Willis organ but to disco music!

As the heritage centre exhibition and guidebook points out, the hall has, in its 150 years, been host to all manner of events from banquets to fairs to political rallies but the skating rink must be a first. Some might consider this people's palace approach inappropriate to such a fine architectural gem but it has succeeded in breathing life back into an unheeded jewel in Liverpool's crown. The resurgence of St George's Hall, aided by a £23m HLF grant, is part of the renaissance of the city itself in

which the strong cultural offer, in good times and bad, has earned it the European Capital of Culture title for 2008. The regeneration journey has taken two decades, but it is heartening to see this Grade 1 listed building accessible to all for the first time ever and a true centrepiece of the city's heritage. The heritage centre is a way into the building; the building is the exhibit. May it long continue to amaze.

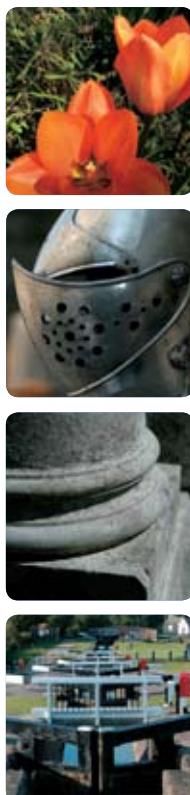
Lorraine Knowles is Visitor Operations Director for English Heritage's West Territory and is a Trustee of St George's Hall. She was formerly Keeper of Liverpool Museum.



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LEFT:
Community exhibitions gallery
in the former Grand Jury room.

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