Association for Heritage Interpretation
Conference Programme 2026

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Illustration Danni Gilbert

Headline sponsor

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Welcome to Newcastle/
Northumberland

Image: Hadrian's Wall near Greenhead, Northumberland

Welcome to the 2026 Conference

Welcome to the north east of England, the evocative setting for this year's conference. From built heritage running through the landscape in the form of Hadrian's Wall, to the natural heritage of its beautiful coastline, there are stories here to inspire, engage and connect you.

We believe that interpretation matters, not just for preserving the past, but for shaping the future. It can inspire curiosity, engage communities and connect people with the places and stories that shape their lives. This conference will give you opportunities to explore all of this, while discovering and enjoying what the region has to offer.

Jackie Lee, AHI Chair, Trustees and Conference Team

AHI Awards 2027

Wednesday 7 October, 1-1.20pm

Find out more about the award categories and how you can enter your project.

Kilmartin Museum Redevelopment
Project Permanent Exhibition
Kilmartin Museum Company LTD &
Studioarc Design Consultants Ltd

Winner, Indoor Category 2025

Be social!

Share your photos and thoughts

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Interpreting our heritage, from Elephant to flat iron

Rhiannon Hiles CBE

Chief Executive of Beamish, The Living Museum of the North

Wednesday 7 October
1.20pm

Awarded Art Fund Museum of the Year 2025, Beamish holds over 2.5 million items, showcasing collections of regional, national and international significance. Through largely donated objects, Beamish tells the stories of north east life, engaging communities, interpreting their history, using innovative, immersive techniques, reaching over 800,000 visitors a year.

Hadrian's Wall - interpreting through partnership

Bill Griffiths

Head of Programmes and Collections, North East Museums and Deputy Chair, Hadrian's Wall Partnership Board

Friday 9 October
9.10am

Hadrian's Wall has 11 different museums, managed by 5 different organisations. All come together to explore ways of interpreting the World Heritage Site to reach as broad an audience as possible.

Keynote speakers

Conference programme

Wednesday 7 October

12:00-13:00	Registration and lunch in the Cheviot Rooms Foyer. (Luggage can be left in Cheviot 3 until check-in)	
13:00-13:20	Chair's welcome / AHI Awards 2027 introduction	
13:20-14:10	**Keynote 1: Rhiannon Hiles CBE** Chief Executive of Beamish, The Living Museum of the North **Interpreting our heritage, from Elephant to flat iron**	
14:10-14:25	Break	
	Cheviot Room 1	Cheviot Room 2
14:25-14:50 Parallel sessions	**Dr Annetta Berry** Director, Relevant Interpretation, Formerly Interpretation Manager and Editor, The National Gallery **A Momentous Retelling of the Story of Art: Interpretation for the National Gallery's Bicentenary Re-hang** An exploration of how the National Gallery's Bicentenary rehang, across 63 galleries, required both a new approach to interpretation and practical solutions to managing a project on this epic scale.	**Ruth McKew** Director, Headland Design Associates **Sarah Oswald** Director, The Authentic Spark **Big stories, small packages Using flash fiction tools for interpretation inspiration** Can we use flash fiction to inspire our text writing? Sarah and Ruth invite you to find out in this participatory workshop exploring similarities between interpretive writing and flash fiction.
14:55-15:20	**Natalie Buy** Senior Interpretation Planner, The British Museum **Displaying the Bayeux Tapestry at the British Museum** Follow the whirlwind 12-month journey taken by the British Museum to display the iconic Bayeux Tapestry. The presentation will chart the highs and lows of this once in a lifetime interpretive opportunity.	

- Parallel sessions
- Workshop
- Site visit
- Panel discussion

15:20-15:50	Break & hotel check-in	
15:50-16:15 Parallel sessions	**Gwendolen Powell** Senior Interpretive Consultant, PLB Projects (formerly Senior Consultant TDR Heritage) **Kate Brooks** Heritage and Volunteering Worker, 1625 Independent People **Kingsley Hall Heritage Project – Putting young people at the heart of interpretive projects** Exploring how co-produced interpretation can be developed with young people and key steps to sustain engagement. Participants from the 'Making Young Lives Better' project will share their learning, experiences and expertise.	**Jackie Lee** Creative Director, Artemis Scotland **Connor Emerson** Curator of Social History, Beamish Museum **Tristan Langlois** Head of Learning and Participation, The Royal Armouries **Why you should use a costumed interpretation programme at your museum or heritage site** This workshop will provide an opportunity for delegates to discover, experience and discuss how emotional, multisensory engagement through costumed interpretation creates memorable, meaningful connections with people, objects and stories.
16:20-16:45	**Dirk Bennett** Exhibition Manager, Tower Bridge & The Monument **Collaboration across disciplines: Tower Bridge and Worcester Polytechnic Institute** For many years, Tower Bridge has collaborated with science and engineering students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts. This spring we evaluated Smartify's mobile tour using user data and on-site surveys.	
16:45-16:50	Break/speaker changeover	

Wednesday continued →

16:50-17:15 Parallel sessions	**David Rees** Interpretation Manager, Cadw, Welsh Government **Reinterpreting Tretower Castle and Court and Caerphilly Castle bilingually – blending story, language and experience.** A case study in a re-interpretation of two Welsh historic sites in south-east Wales and explores how interpretation and particularly the use of languages can move beyond traditional approaches to create even more meaningful visitor experiences	**Aileen Peirce** Head of Interpretation & Design, Historic Royal Palaces **Connecting With New Audiences: Last Princesses of Punjab** Exploring lessons from an exhibition designed to engage British South Asian audiences through an organisation-wide approach, from community interpretation to marketing, PR, digital content and even retail merchandise.
17:15-17:20	Break/speaker changeover	
17:20-17:45 Parallel sessions	**Daniel Watkins** Education, Learning and Engagement Manager, Alnwick Castle **Catherine Neil** Head of Alnwick Castle Ventures, Alnwick Castle **Alnwick Castle: Interpreting the Great Kitchen** Exploring the methods and styles utilised in interpreting the Great Kitchen, a fascinating historic space at Alnwick Castle in Northumberland which, until 2025, had never been open to the public.	**Liz Drury** Freelance Voiceover Artist, Liz Drury Voiceovers **Recording the Past: Young Voices Old Stories** How can heritage organisations use authentic voices to bring stories to life? Through case studies from Sheffield and Macclesfield, discover the power of mobile recording for interpretation.
17:45-18:30	Networking/Check-in/Free time **Optional session:** Future of the Interpretation for Nature and Landscape group - with Jenny Dockett	
18:30-20:00	Dinner in the Cheviot Rooms	
20:00-20:30	**Entertainment:** Sallyport Sword Dancers are a sword dance team, founded in 1969, who perform the traditional rapper and longsword dances of the North-East of England.	

Thursday 8 October

8:15-9:00	AHI Annual General Meeting In the Open Workspace opposite the Coffee Shop
8:00-9:00	Collect packed lunch from the Lobby
9:00-17:00	**Full day site visits** St. Mary's Lighthouse (North Tyneside Council) Presentation by Adam Kelsey, Manager Seaton Delaval Hall (National Trust) Intro from Emma Thomas, General Manager Belsay Hall, Castle and Gardens (English Heritage) Intro from Melanie Hills, Projects Engagement Manager Delegates will be split across two coaches. We will all visit St. Mary's Lighthouse as one group due to tide times. The group will then rotate visits to the other sites. Due to our numbers and limited time at each site, lunch will be provided as a packed lunch by the hotel, which you can eat where and when you choose. You will be able to buy refreshments from the cafes at Seaton Delaval Hall and Belsay Hall. **The coaches return to the hotel at 5pm.**
17:30-18:30	**Join north east based Jo Scott in the Lobby coffee shop for a conversation about the day's visits**
18:00	Bar opens in the Cheviot Foyer
18:30	Drinks in the Cheviot Foyer. Glass of Prosecco on arrival
19:00-21:00	Gala Dinner

Friday 9 October

8:00-9:00	Check out. Luggage can be left in the Cheviot Rooms.		
09:00-09:10	Chair's welcome - Cheviot Rooms		
09:10-10:00	**Keynote 2: Bill Griffiths** Head of Programmes and Collections, North East Museums and Deputy Chair, Hadrian's Wall Partnership Board **Hadrian's Wall - interpreting through partnership**		
10:00-10:10	Break		
	Cheviot Room 1	Cheviot Room 2	Outdoor session
10:10-10:35 Parallel sessions	**Sycamore Gap - a conversation** Chaired by Connor Emerson Curator of Social History, Beamish Museum Joined by Bill Griffiths and Kevin Robson, Director, Ancient Britain.		**Jim Mitchell FAHI** Access and Learning Manager, New Forest National Park Authority **Tricks, tips and hacks - an outdoor interpretation skill share session** An interactive outdoor workshop to share and discover practical interpretation techniques, storytelling, games and sensory activities. Exchange ideas, workshop improvements for future audiences, and leave with inspiring, ready-to-use approaches for engaging people with nature.
10:35-10:45	10 mins break and speaker changeover		
10:45-11:10 Parallel sessions	**Anna Maria Barry** Content Producer: Historic Research and Interpretation **Natalie Edwards** Interpretation Manager, The Royal Parks **Experimenting with Tours and Trails at The Royal Parks** From apps to sculpture trails, we discuss approaches to self-guided tours across the Royal Parks. We'll explore what worked, what didn't, and what's next.	**Ollie Taylor** Head of Public Programming and Experience, Bristol Dockyards, and AHI Trustee **AHI Best Practice Guides: What's Next?** What do members and non-members think about AHI's Best Practice Guides and what's next for them?	
11:10-11:40	Break & check out (30 mins)		

11:40-12:05 Parallel sessions	**Ollie Taylor** Head of Public Programming and Experience, Bristol Dockyards **How the Whales Became and Other Stories** How do you use ocean pollution to transform a cathedral-sized space into an exhibition to engage new audiences about ocean conservation? Insights into the multi-award-winning Whales exhibition and programme.	**Jenny Williams BEM** Founder Director, Take the Space **Three Streams Framework: Inclusive, Anti-Racist and Decolonial Practice in Heritage Interpretation** Heritage teams routinely work across all three streams at once - distinct approaches requiring different questions, interventions and relationships. This framework brings practical clarity to each as a standalone area and how they interconnect.
12:05-12:35	**Personal Ethics and Interpretation** Chaired by Iain Wheeldon Senior Lecturer in Museums, Galleries and Heritage, Newcastle University Joined by: Rachael Lennon, Head of Story, Beamish Museum; Keith Merrin, Director, North East Museums; and Nick Malyan, CEO, Sunderland Culture	
12:40-12:50	Break	
12:50-13:00	Closing thoughts	
13:00	Packed lunch available in the Cheviot Foyer to take away or eat in the Cheviot Rooms before departure	

Thursday 8 October
Site visits

St Mary's Lighthouse, island and nature reserve

The Lighthouse is a major landmark situated north of Whitley Bay, and is accessible via a short causeway, is a popular part-time island with a rich history. You can climb the 137 steps to the top of the lighthouse for spectacular views of the North East coast. There is also an exhibition which explains the Lighthouse's history and the wildlife of the nature reserve.

The Lighthouse, built in 1898, served until 1984 when modern navigational techniques made it obsolete. Now, it and the former keepers' cottages operate as a visitor centre by North Tyneside Council. The Nature Reserve includes rock pools, clifftop grassland, a beach, and new wetland habitats.

Belsay Hall, Castle and Gardens

With a unique Greek Revival mansion, a medieval castle and 30 acres of gardens to explore, Belsay Hall, Castle and Gardens has a great deal to discover.

See how the multi-million pound 'Belsay Awakes' project has enhanced this vast place, originally created by the Middleton family over seven centuries.

Interpretation panels guide you round the empty Belsay Hall, revealing how it was used by the Middleton family. The Castle is a complete contrast. Inside, a video recounts Belsay's story as told by 'the Wild Man', a mythical figure inspired by the Middletons' crest.

Seaton Delaval Hall

Seaton Delaval was home to the larger than life Delaval family. Behind the formality of the classical facade is a story of theatricality and mischief. Known as the 'Gay Delavals' due to their flamboyant lifestyle. In an age of extremes of behaviour, they stood apart as the most notorious of all Georgian partygoers and pranksters.

The hall has recently undergone a renovation project, including a reimagining of the 1781 estate plan in the landscape, incorporating the reintroduction of historic path networks and improvements to visitor facilities including a new cafe, play area, accessible entrances and toilets. In addition, the hall's collection has been re-interpreted to introduce the Delavals and tell their stories.

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07870 214050
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The Creative Core is the visitor experience design company. They create interpretation for museums, heritage and culture, building connection, meaning and pride through co-creation and audience-led design

Conference bursaries generously sponsored by **Barker Langham** and **Haley Sharpe**.

Not yet a member?

Whether you're just starting out or into your career, work freelance or in policy, design museums or community gardens, your perspective and voice matters.

Joining AHI connects you to a supportive network of interpreters, plus access to exclusive resources, events, and opportunities.

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