



HERITAGE INTERPRETATION

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WHY IS THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURE AND HERITAGE IMPORTANT?

Heritage tourism is traditionally associated with visits to archaeological and other historic sites as well as to buildings and monuments, whilst cultural tourism goes beyond heritage to explore the 'way of life' of an individual, community or civilisation including their activities, artefacts, language and literature, music and dance.

For those tourists seeking a personalised encounter with the past or simply wanting to feel part of a place, interpretation can play a pivotal role in bringing these artefacts, experiences and places 'to life' and after all, at its best, interpretation can engage, inform, educate and inspire the visitor.

Timothy & Boyd (2003) remind us of the value of cultural and heritage attractions both in pure economic terms (value of entrance fees, activities undertaken, souvenirs and refreshments purchased etc) but also in social terms (sense of place, personal attachment, connection to a former community or civilisation). But they also have a scientific role, associated with the study of these places, the exploration of former communities and civilisations as well as understanding their relationship with the landscape around them.

Image: Silvanus, the sculpture of a Roman soldier's head from the 'Rediscovering the Antonine Wall' project. © Historic Environment Scotland



The scale of sites and broader attractions visited by tourists ranges from:

■ World

Perhaps linked to 'World Heritage' status but also to 'sightseeing' more broadly, and to places tourists simply 'must visit' whilst travelling or, on holiday.

■ National

Places which symbolise a nation's shared identity and perhaps evoke a sense of national pride.

■ Local

Familiar places within the local community that over time remain consistent 'landmarks' and create a 'nostalgic' emotion for generations of local people.

■ Personal

Personal connections which draw someone to a specific location, site or landmark, often linked to a family event, experience or legacy.

(Adapted from the work of Timothy & Boyd, 2003:14-6)

WHY IS THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURE AND HERITAGE IMPORTANT?

Three core roles are typically identified for the interpretation of cultural and heritage sites including: education, recreation and conservation. These roles are expanded as follows:

Table 1. The interpretation of cultural and heritage sites

The use of specially designed interpretative media and their associated activities can:

1 Educational roles	<p>Provide a brief overview of the site in terms of information about its history, peoples, associations, processes etc.</p> <p>Tell the full story (told or untold) of a people or civilisation, bringing it to life and helping visitors to understand and appreciate it, as well as exploring the successes and any failings of the past.</p> <p>Further enhance visitor knowledge of the site and thereby increase their understanding of its importance and significance.</p> <p>Establish a 'sense of wonder and curiosity' associated with the presentation of the site, its people, artefacts and processes etc.</p> <p>Specifically promote a greater understanding of local, national as well as international issues and/or historical events associated with the site.</p>
2 Recreational and entertainment-based roles	<p>Orientate and guide visitors on arrival.</p> <p>Enhance visitor enjoyment of the site and thus potentially increase visitor numbers as well as encouraging their repeat visitation.</p> <p>Encourage greater visitor engagement across the site through entertaining and even humorous activities and experiences.</p> <p>Lead to a more rewarding overall visitor experience, through the use of immersive, interactive, experiential and emotionally stimulating activities.</p> <p>Establish and/or enhance a 'sense of place' for the site and its surroundings.</p>
3 Conservation-supporting roles	<p>Raise visitor awareness of their potential impacts upon cultural and heritage sites generally, thus encouraging them to adopt more sustainable, minimal impact and/or positive impact behaviours.</p> <p>Create a sense of 'personal ownership' with the visitors towards the site and the surrounding area.</p> <p>Raise a broader awareness of the fragility of many culture and heritage sites as well as their conservation priorities at a national and even international level.</p> <p>Raise an awareness of the importance of the site within the local community.</p> <p>Build visitor awareness of the aims, goals and mission of the managing organisation.</p>

(Table based on the work of: Knudson, Cable & Beck, 1995; Leask & Fyall, 2006; Leask & Yeoman, 1999 and Timothy & Boyd, 2003)

THE PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURE AND HERITAGE

Some of the core principles which have been widely discussed include:

1.

Interpretation should be inclusive

Your interpretation should address the diversity of your visitors and their varying needs, it should feel inclusive and welcoming for everyone without shying away from telling the full story of the place and the people or civilisation associated with it.

2.

Atmosphere and setting matters

Through your site you should endeavour to create an atmosphere which is welcoming for the visitor, is in keeping with the stories being told, the nature of the site itself and encourages self-discovery and exploration by your visitors. Remember your guides or volunteers at the entrance and/or visitor centre as well as those placed strategically around the site have a key role to play here.

3.

Let your visitors make choices

Your visitors should be encouraged to make choices not only on which direction to go in and what to see first but also in the way in which they engage with the stories being told and the artefacts they view – so, invite your visitors to engage in a personal journey of self-discovery whilst on your site. The layering of content can also help your visitors by allowing them some choice in terms of their depth of exploration.

4.

Link everything together

For visitors, connectedness is important, they should be able to make connections between the various parts of the site and the stories which are being told. Equally important are the personal connections they can also make between the stories and their own knowledge and past experiences. So, talk with your visitors and help them create those linkages.





Image: Dunfermline Museum Fife Cultural Trust.

5.

The visitors' experience should be fun

Most visitors are to a greater or lesser extent there to be entertained, they should be able to enjoy themselves whilst still learning something about the site. Think of ways of bringing in entertainment and humour to the stories you are telling and the experiences you are offering them.

6.

Your interpretation should be themed

Most sites are complicated by hundreds or even thousands of years of history together with the fascinating stories of peoples from multiple time periods. Most visitors are not as passionate or even as knowledgeable about your site as you are, so guide them to the key elements you want to share with them. Create themes which not only link together to establish the 'whole picture' but provide a focus for the visitors' attention.

7.

Your interpretation should create opportunities for participation

Active participation should be at the heart of your site, physical or mental activity helps to engage the mind and encourage a personal sense of discovery. Design for conversation – and encourage visitors to comment on their experience, perhaps even to post pictures or comments on-line either whilst on site or once they get home.

8.

Provide time for reflection but also, social interaction

Create opportunities for visitors to reflect on what they have seen and heard. Rest is really important and providing seating gives them 'mental space' (Black, 2005:202), where they can 'process' what they have seen. Encourage them to discuss their experiences and their thoughts on it, both within and even between, social groups. Create exhibits which challenge them individually but can also be explored as a social group. Your guides and volunteers should be well-trained and encouraged to actively interact with visitor groups too.

MEDIA AND TECHNIQUES USED IN THE DELIVERY OF INTERPRETATION IN CULTURAL AND HERITAGE SETTINGS

A wide range of approaches and techniques can be applied when delivering interpretation in cultural and heritage settings, they are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Media and techniques for the interpretation of cultural and heritage sites

Media and Technique	Application	Strengths	Limitations
1 External viewing points and external panels and exhibits	Provide information about the site as well as planned activities and events. Provide a location from where volunteers or guides may be based. Provide a location from where the whole site can be seen, perhaps from an elevation (via a viewing platform or tower). Provide information on the management of the site, relevant Codes of Conduct etc.	A recognisable location where the visitors can get information and advice about the site. An opportunity to create a 'first impression' of the site. A bird's eye view can be profoundly helpful, notably on large-scale or complex sites.	Make sure external signs and panels are durable in nature and check them regularly for signs of damage. Costs of some developments can be prohibitive for many sites.
2 Website and publications	Supply pre-arrival information. Support planning for the visit including site maps, range of media & activities offered, best routes, timing of any special events etc. Help to orientate visitors whilst on site. Provide information about the site, its history and peoples. Provide site-specific and/or broader conservation messages etc. Provide messages about the site's managing authority.	Convenient and cost effective. Potential for wide dissemination. Profile raising for the site. Can help manage visitor expectations of the site in advance of their arrival. Accessible 24/7 potentially.	Needs regular updating. Balance the offering with the 'feel' of the site. Paper-based materials can become on-site 'litter.' Visitor engagement can be somewhat limited. Material may need to be created in multiple languages.

<p>3 Electronic tools including apps and downloads</p>	<p>Supporting a range of on-site interpretative experiences through the use of mobile devices and tablets. Downloadable apps, podcasts, interactive maps, audio trails etc. which can support other interpretive media and/or activities on the site.</p>	<p>Portable and convenient. Visitors are able to access the material they are interested in. Updating can be simple and easy. Visitors can add their own comments and even post their photos.</p>	<p>Major updating of materials can be expensive. Some technologies may need regular maintenance. High technical skills may be required. Use of audio files may not appropriate on all sites and/or in some specific locations. The quality of Wi-Fi / mobile connectivity may be an issue on some sites. Material may need to be created in multiple languages.</p>
<p>4 Role of guides and volunteers: Guided tours and face to face interpretation</p>	<p>Can provide information and explanation as well as orientate visitors whilst on-site. Can 'walk the site', and meet and greet visitors as well as being on 'information duty' at entrances and other key places. Can offer drama, music, poetry as well as activities and special events. Walks and tours can cover a wide range of topics, tailored to visitors with different levels of interest and knowledge. Can lead groups of visitors who can engage at a more personal level with the site through their experience of practical tasks and activities.</p>	<p>Powerful and highly effective. Can respond quickly to visitor's questions. Information supplied can be constantly updated and tailored to the needs of the visitors. Can easily facilitate the active involvement and engagement of visitors.</p>	<p>Requires experienced and well trained guides and volunteers. May not suit all types of visitor groups. A good range of topics for walks and tours needs to be offered. The sound of a guided commentary may be inappropriate on some sites and/or in some specific locations. Roving guides are less practical on large and/or more remote sites.</p>
<p>5 Role of guides and volunteers: Living history and costumed interpretation</p>	<p>Can bring the past, present or future to life through the use of 'living' characters. A costumed interpreter can inhabit a first, second or third person identity. Commentary on 'daily life' as well as an opportunity to simply ask questions can be powerful in raising visitor understanding. Can lead tours as well as deliver demonstrations and skills-based activities. Can deliver re-enactment of site activities or entire historical events. These activities and events can also include drama, music, poetry etc.</p>	<p>Powerful and highly effective in engaging an audience. Can respond quickly to visitor's questions. Information offered and activities or events run can be updated easily and/or tailored to the needs of the visitors. A programme of special events can encourage repeat visitation. Facilitates the active involvement and engagement of visitors.</p>	<p>Requires experienced and well trained guides and volunteers. Sound research beforehand is critical. The costs and maintenance of clothing and other props can be expensive. May not suit all types of visitor groups. Some visitors can be wary of approaching a costumed interpreter – the interpreter needs to learn to 'read the signs'. Authenticity is critically important, but remember period dialects can be problematic. A good range of topics for tours and special events needs to be offered.</p>

<p>6 Visitor centres, internal exhibitions, models and exhibits</p>	<p>A focal point for the visitor and a base location for the guides / volunteers.</p> <p>Provides information about the site as well as planned activities and events.</p> <p>Provides integrated content about the site through static, interactive and/or audio-visual displays and exhibits.</p> <p>Where the resources allow a 'sound-and-light' show as well as hi-tech AR / VR simulations may be possible.</p> <p>Paper-based materials and other souvenirs can be made available too.</p> <p>Encourages personal connections with materials and artefacts where they can be safely handled.</p> <p>Provides information on the conservation and management of the site etc.</p>	<p>A recognisable location where the visitors can get information and advice about the site.</p> <p>Provides a setting for the offering of a wide range of interpretative media and experiences. Such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panels and display cases; • 2-D or 3-D models (static or moving) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - displaying equipment, architectural, topographical, civilizations etc.; • Dioramas, tableau, walk-through exhibits; • Touch tables, discovery rooms, handling objects; • Simulations, immersive films, interactives; • SpyCams, 'live feeds', animatronics; • Augmented and virtual reality simulations. 	<p>Can be expensive to set up if it does not already exist.</p> <p>Some media can be expensive and time-consuming to create.</p> <p>Needs regular updating or a 'rolling programme' if you wish to encourage repeat visitation.</p> <p>May not suit all visitors.</p> <p>Static materials and displays may not hold the visitor's attention for very long.</p> <p>Hi-tech media can sometimes over-shadow the artefacts / materials.</p> <p>Handling materials and artefacts may not be appropriate and/or possible.</p> <p>Material may need to be created in multiple languages.</p>
<p>7 Self-Guided Tours</p>	<p>Visitors can follow a designated tour using a leaflet, signs, panels and/or downloadable or fixed audio commentary.</p> <p>A family-friendly activity with great opportunities for self-discovery.</p> <p>Provides excellent opportunities for conservation and heritage awareness messages.</p>	<p>Always available.</p> <p>Visitors can explore the site at their own pace.</p> <p>Visitor movement around the site can be managed effectively (in sensitive areas).</p> <p>Tours can be tailored to different visitor groups.</p>	<p>A 'fixed message' is given to the visitor.</p> <p>Tours need to be regularly checked and maintained.</p> <p>Tour signage needs to be regularly checked, it can be attractive to vandals.</p> <p>The sound of audio downloads may be inappropriate on some sites and/or in some specific locations.</p>

(Table based on the work of: Black, 2005; Knudson, Cable & Beck, 1995; Leask & Fyall, 2006; Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Ward & Wilkinson, 2006.)

THE POTENTIAL CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH INTERPRETING CULTURE AND HERITAGE

A number of potential challenges exist and some of the most common of them are commented on below:

- **Present a true and accurate picture even if it is uncomfortable** – your visitors will rely on you to explain the story and history of the site to them, elements of this story may be uncomfortable to a modern audience but through the skilful use of interpretative media and even interactive activities this story and its associated events can be explained and explored within the ‘context of the time’.
- **Be authentic in the way in which your experiences are presented** – remember that presenting a picture of life at a particular point in time effectively ‘freezes it’ for the visitor and if you are not careful it can not only simplify the story, but can even imply that further development of that community or civilisation has not taken place – thus potentially risking making it appear somewhat inauthentic to your visitors today.
- **Be careful with your use of dramatic license** – whilst this is often skilfully used to create a mood and to set the scene and context for a good story, be careful to avoid creating either an overly bleak (‘doom and gloom’) feel or, commodifying the past by painting an excessively romantic and ‘quaint and idyllic’ picture.
- **Let your visitor’s think for themselves** – it is a really good technique through a character, through multiple voices from history or via ‘the voice of authority’ to pose questions to your visitors and even challenge their views but be careful not to suggest the ‘right’ answers, allow them to think for themselves and to make up their own mind about the story that is unfolding in front of them. Your key ‘take away’ messages should ideally deliver for them but, even if they end up taking away the wrong message, that can sometimes be ok too!
- **Use costumed interpreters wisely** – the creation of ‘living characters’ from the past can be an incredibly powerful way of telling a story and bringing a ‘civilisation to life’. However, some visitors can be wary or uncomfortable about approaching a costumed interpreter particularly if they are using an appropriate period dialect. It is worth considering how such interpreters are placed within the site, consider using signage to explain their use on site for visitors or, by having a modern-day guide standing beside them. Where a costumed interpreter is on their own, another successful approach is to give them something to demonstrate to your visitors, this can often be a great way of ‘breaking the ice’, so remember, help your visitors to engage with these wonderful interpreters.
- **Avoid over-interpreting the site** – give visitors time to think for themselves, to make up their own mind about the story or indeed the entire site which is unfolding before them. Equally self-discovery is a hugely powerful element and its importance should not be over-looked. Also remember that on many sites, its ‘sense of place’ speaks volumes and only subtle or indeed in some cases no interpretation at all is required.
- **Avoid over-simplification too** – some visitors will only have very little time on your site but that does not mean that you have to present an overly simplified version of the story for them. Instead, provide them with bite-sized elements or themes of the story or just focus on one aspect which they can take away. Hopefully, on a return visit, they can then build on these elements.
- **Use technology wisely** – visitors have to come to explore your site and learn about its history, people, artefacts, materials and processes. Technological media in all its forms have a very important part to play in their on-site experience but equally be careful not to make the technology itself the ‘star of the show’ – visitors may not come to be dazzled by your capital budget.

SOME KEY TIPS WITH INTERPRETING HERITAGE – THE ART OF ‘MINDFULNESS’

Visitors who are in a ‘mindful’ mental state pay more attention to the site around them, equally they are receptive to learning and engaging with new ideas and experiences. Timothy & Boyd (2003:175) suggest that *‘when visitors are mindful, they are more sensitive to context, they process historical information more actively resulting in a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, the past’*. Gianni Moscardo (1999) suggests that a ‘mindful atmosphere’ can be encouraged by:

1.

Telling a good story but also one which is clear and logical to follow, using themes wherever possible to organise and present information.

3.

Helping your visitors to find their way comfortably and easily around the site, and remember to spotlight areas where historical events and stories can come to life.

5.

Using interactive, immersive and experiential multi-media and multi-sensory experiences wherever possible.

7.

Knowing your visitor and understanding how they respond to the current interpretation on the site.

2.

In so doing, helping your visitors to make direct personal connections with people, the artefacts, materials, media, exhibits and special events they encounter whilst on site.

4.

Actively encourage your visitors to ask questions as well as share their opinions on their experience around the site.

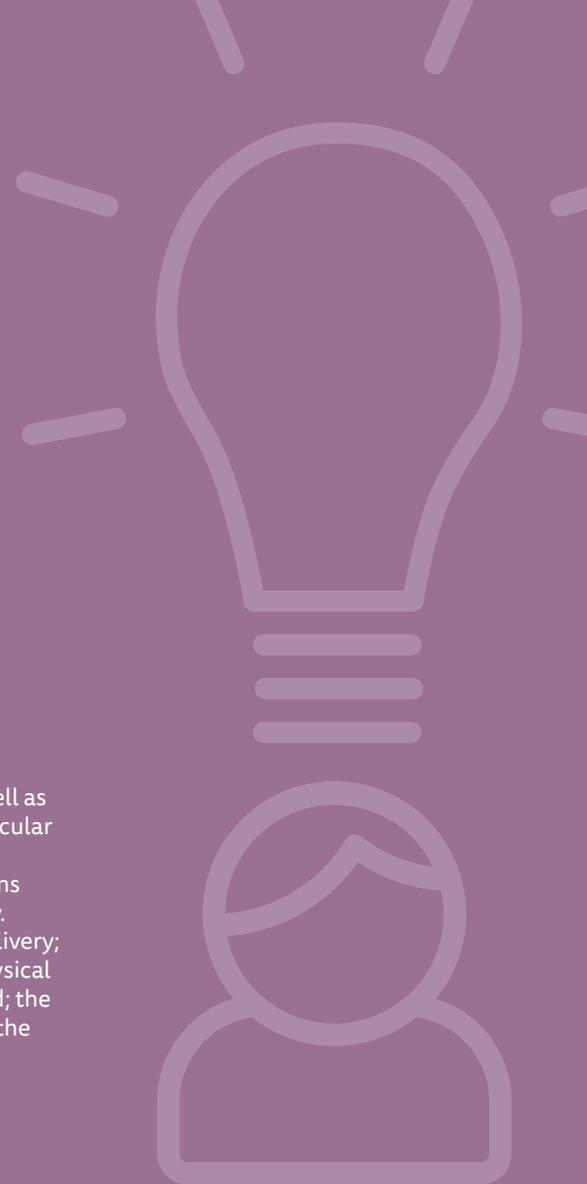
6.

Providing novelty, surprise and even shock (in a positive way) through the use of materials, media, exhibits and special events they encounter whilst on site.

8.

Ensuring your overall site as well as the visitors’ experience in particular settings or locations provide them with a rich variety, in terms of: the emphasis (educational v. entertainment); the pace of delivery; the level of interaction; the physical and/or mental activity required; the level of visitor control offered; the types of media used etc.

In supporting ‘mindfulness’, you should also aim to provide the basic needs for all visitors such as: food and drink; places to rest; toilets; comfortable conditions; and a general feeling of safety and security.



CASE STUDIES FROM THE AHI DISCOVER HERITAGE / ENGAGING PEOPLE AWARDS SCHEME

The AHI's scheme has just completed its fourth round of awards (2021) having originally commenced in 2015. Award winners and runners-up provide incredibly powerful examples of cultural and heritage 'excellence in practice' and some of these examples are therefore shared here.

Image: Visitors prepare for battle in this area by learning fighting techniques and handle replica objects to get a sense of their weight and awkwardness. © Katie Blake, Bright White Ltd.

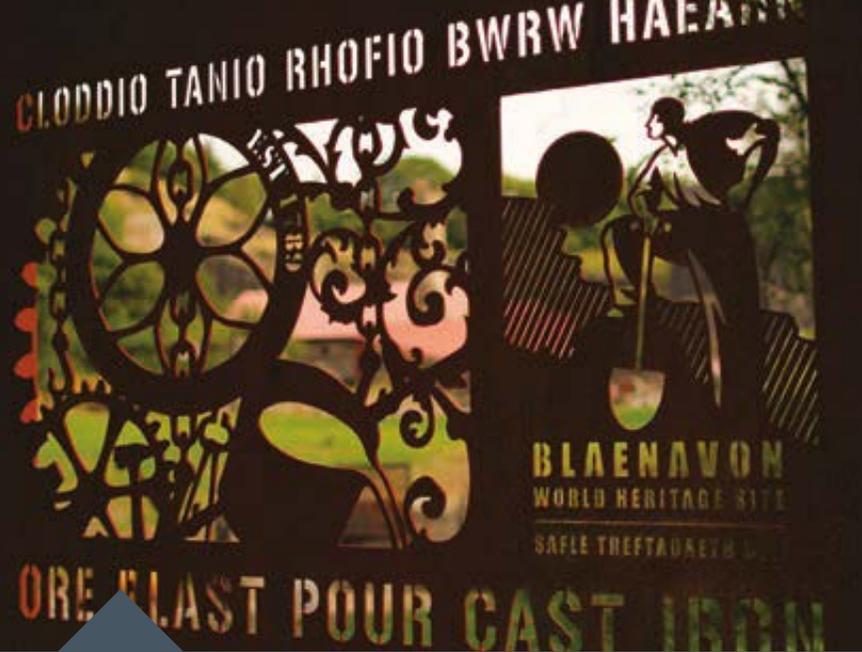


Case study 1. **Battle of Bannockburn Visitor Centre Experience (National Trust for Scotland)**

Winner, 2015

Explanation of a complicated medieval battle through a digital 3D up-close and immersive re-creation. Multi-media technology focusing on training of soldiers and the role of women as spies. Exploration of personal stories of some of the people involved in the battle. Digital media helping visitors learn about different fight techniques. Use of object handling to get a sense of the weight and awkwardness of armour and weapons.

nts.org.uk/visit/places/bannockburn



Case study 2. Blaenavon Ironworks (CADW)

Runner-Up, 2015

Bringing the site to life in its noisy, fiery, dirty and sweaty heyday through a sound and light display. Models being used to explain the various elements of the site. Sculptures as artworks adding a further dimension. Four buildings being dressed to depict period workers' cottages. Interpretative panels using key characters (including children) to develop the story of Blaenavon and Wales' role in the Industrial Revolution.

cadw.gov.wales/visit/places-to-visit/blaenavon-ironworks

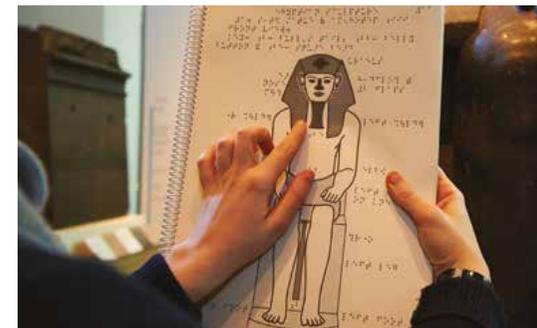
Image: The entrance to the steel model of Blaenavon Ironworks, which depicts key industrial processes in words and images.

Case study 3. Egyptian Sculpture Gallery, The British Museum

Winner, 2017

A touch tour designed for blind or partially-sighted visitors including nine objects within the gallery and covering 3000 years of ancient history. The tour being supported by a large print booklet, downloadable audio as well as a braille guide. Tour guides and volunteers being on-hand to provide additional guidance and support for visitors.

britishmuseum.org



Top: The touch tour comes in many formats including Brail. © British Museum

Bottom: Visually impaired visitors are allowed to touch exhibits. © British Museum

Case study 4. Eskdale Mill & Heritage Trust, Cumbria

Winner, 2021

A suite of media including graphic panels, AV presentation and hands-on interactives interpreting the people of the mill, the mill's architecture as well as its operation. A 'Flour Power' trail was developed for children. Whilst the visit is principally self-guided, volunteers are on-hand to answer questions and enhance the visitors' experience. An outdoor trail encourages the visitor to focus on the external landscape which supports the mill's operation.

eskdalemill.co.uk



Top left: Balancing the books. © Minerva Heritage Ltd.

Top right: A water-powered interactive in the mill's grounds. © Minerva Heritage Ltd.

Bottom: A panel interprets the drying bed of a Medieval water mill, Eskdale Mill, Cumbria. © Fuzzy Duck.



Case study 5. Gloucester Cathedral

Winner, 2019

A downloadable app and interactive table welcome visitors to the cathedral. Panels, projections and touch screens throughout the cathedral and its surroundings introduce features of interest. Messages have been sandblasted onto blocks of stone creating a dramatic effect. Animations, interactive activities and virtual tours are used to bring the history of the cathedral to life. Layering allows visitors to pick up a quick message or to delve into deeper content as they prefer. Questions are posed throughout to encourage the visitors to ponder and think.

gloucestercathedral.org.uk



Case study 6.

Neolithic Longhouse, La Hogue Bie Museum (Jersey Heritage)

Winner, 2019

A multi-sensory experience taking visitors back to Neolithic Jersey, based around an historically accurate Neolithic longhouse building. Dynamic interpretation (through the volunteers) was offered throughout the building phase. Self-led exploration is encouraged, with artefacts and tools left within the building. Written and graphic panels, a documentary film and volunteer-led tours (some of whom built the longhouse) add to the visitors' experience. Living history demonstrations also encourage visitor interaction and personal engagement with the site.

jerseyheritage.org/explore/find-a-place-to-visit/la-hougue-bie-museum



Case study 7. Seamus Heaney Homeplace, Bellaghy (Mid-Ulster District Council)

Winner, 2017.

A multi-media experience enabling visitors to explore the life and work of the poet, Seamus Heaney and the impact his family, his neighbours and the surrounding landscape had on him and his work. Visuals and graphics are used to great effect throughout the centre.

Creative activities are at the heart of the experience from visitors choosing their favourite poems to creating their own poem – a powerful way of making poetry more accessible for everyone.

seamusheaneyhome.com

Image: Heaney's own words are used effectively in the HomePlace. © Tandem Design

Case study 8. Plymouth trails, Plymouth

Finalist, 2021

A series of self-guided walking trails are delivered to visitors through a phone app, way-markers and booklets. The trails also link to other landmarks and attractions around the city. The app itself includes real-time maps, a navigation tool as well as pop-up text, images and video as the visitor approaches each point of interest. The three core trails (Mayflower, City Centre and the Hoe) also include an audio option. Three other trails (Rainbow Connections, Powerful Plymouth Women, Blue Mile) are available and a trail about Beryl Cook is in development. The app itself is being updated to enable users to find blue plaques, statues and other features across the city.

[visitplymouth.co.uk/things-to-do/activities/trails/plymouth-trails-app](https://www.visitplymouth.co.uk/things-to-do/activities/trails/plymouth-trails-app)

*Top left: Bronze floor markers around the Mayflower Trail.
Top right: Users of the Plymouth Trails app can experience 'then and now' images on the routes.
Bottom: Bronze totems highlight sites of interest.
Far right: One of the ten bronze totems guiding users around Plymouth's Barbican city.*



CONCLUDING REMARK

The value of interpretation on cultural and heritage sites lies in its ability to entertain but also educate visitors, but perhaps most importantly it should inspire them to question and even challenge what they thought they already knew about a place, its peoples, artefacts and materials.

Bannockburn's battle room where visitors fight the battle with fellow team members under the guidance of a Battle Master. The outcome is unpredictable. © Katie Blake, Bright White Ltd.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

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Guide designed by
TheWayDesign.co.uk



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for Heritage
Interpretation**

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