



Forest Fun



A damn good telling



Ships and stones



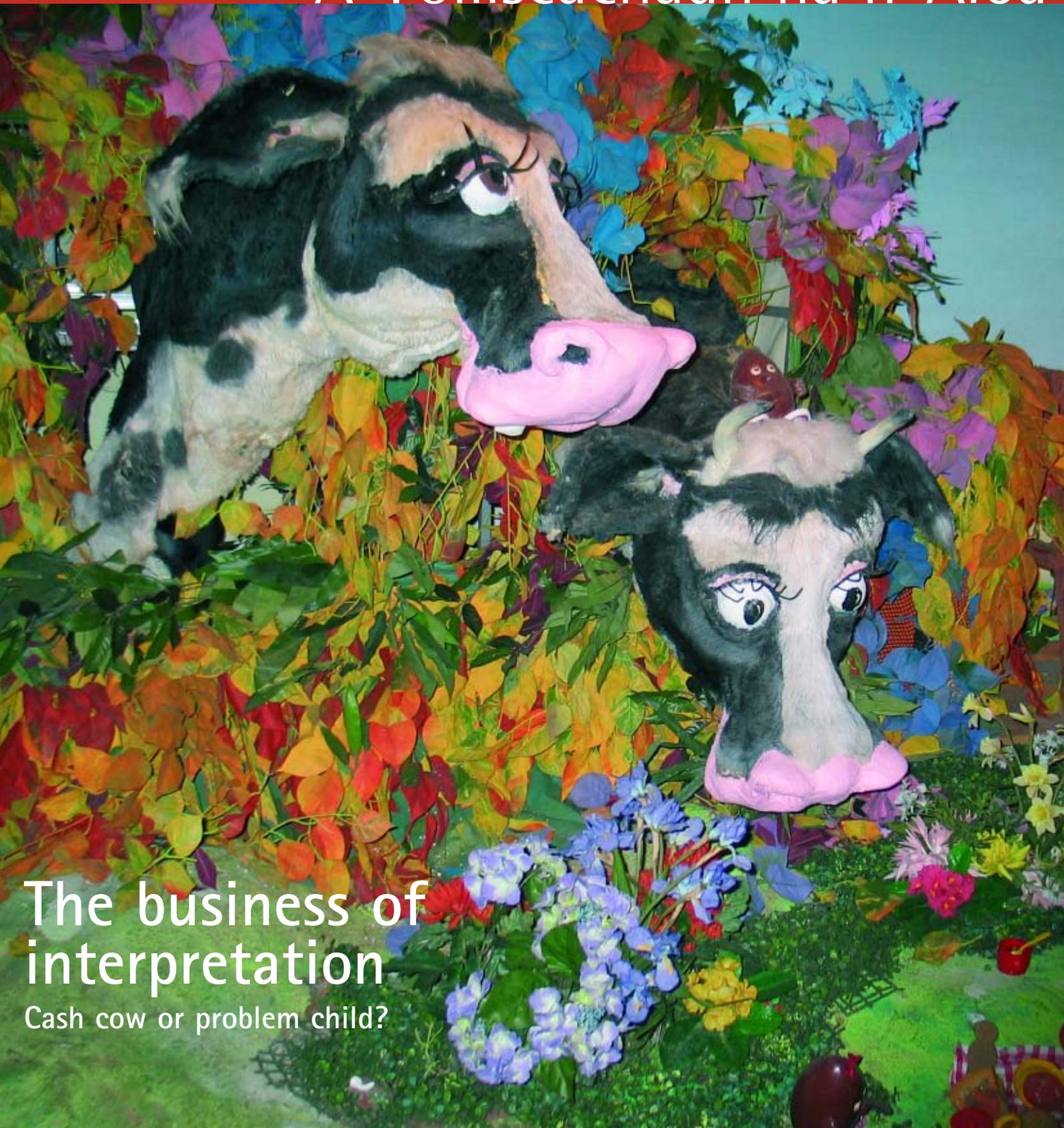
Retail messages

the journal for Scotland's Interpreters

# Interpret Scotland

issue 12 | autumn 2005

## 'A' Foillseachadh na h-Alba



### The business of interpretation

Cash cow or problem child?

# Interpret Scotland

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Interpret Scotland is an inter-agency initiative that seeks to:

- ◆ Improve the quality and quantity of interpretation in Scotland
- ◆ Promote the co-ordination of interpretation at local and strategic level
- ◆ Share resources, expertise and experience to avoid duplicating effort



I ran the wrong kind of business, but I did it with integrity  
Sydney Biddle Barrows,  
US 'Madam'

Cadbury World © James Carter

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## A bull market

If the relationship between commerce and interpretation is a spectrum of opportunities, the cows on the cover gaze from one extreme end of it. They are part of the scenery in *Cadabra!*, a particularly surreal part of Cadbury World, the visitor attraction at Cadbury's chocolate factory in Birmingham. Here small carts trundle visitors through a bizarre landscape inhabited by characters more or less related to chocolate or to Cadbury's products. Parents exchange glances of queasy disbelief, while their children are probably too full of the chocolate bars they've been given at regular intervals during the tour to mind what happens next.

Cadbury World is undoubtedly commercially successful: if you turn up in high season without an advance booking you're unlikely to get in. As an exercise in interpretation it does a reasonable job of telling the history of the company and the rather scary industrial scale of its operations. But most of its visitors would be hard pressed to say what a cocoa plant looked like after the experience, and cocoa's sometimes shady history and economics is left behind after a brief mention of the Aztecs in an old-fashioned section at the start of the tour. By the time you step into the fevered acid-trip of *Cadabra!* those themes have been relegated to an Aztec-style head-dress on a cute cocoa bean with a smiling face, who waves cheerily as you lurch round the next bend.

That tension between what a commercial attraction could do, and what it needs to do or can get away with to satisfy its customers, is at the heart of many of the articles in this issue. It may even reveal a rather uncomfortable truth: that interpretation is a negotiated settlement in which the audience's expectations and wants have the strongest bargaining position.

### James Carter, editor

Interpret Scotland is published twice a year and is distributed free on request. If you would like to join the mailing list, or if you are receiving duplicate copies, please contact Sandra Phipps at Scottish Natural Heritage on 01738 444177 or [sandra.phipps@snh.gov.uk](mailto:sandra.phipps@snh.gov.uk) You could also visit the Interpret Scotland web site: [www.interpretscotland.org.uk](http://www.interpretscotland.org.uk)

### Next edition

Issue 13 of Interpret Scotland will look at research initiatives linked to interpretation, and what they tell us about its practice. Please send any suggestions for articles, or letters for publication, to the editor.

In the modern world of business, it is useless to be a creative original thinker unless you can also sell what you create.

David M. Ogilvy

# Less zeal; more appeal



**David Hayes describes how his company learned the hard way that interpretation with a commercial edge needs to do more than satisfy its creators' enthusiasms.**

The first of many over ambitious interpretive projects, the Landmark Centre at Carrbridge was set up in 1970 with the grandiose 'mission' to interpret the history and natural history of the Highlands. Facilities then included a multi-vision show and exhibition on 'Man in the Highlands', shop and restaurant. Outside the first nature trail in Britain wound its way through the Caledonian pinewood.

Some years later, without surveying our existing customers, we created Scotland's first Forest Heritage Park. We thought that the park, by interpreting the human story of Scotland's forests, would complement the nature trail and attract more visitors.

The initial exhibits included a working steam powered sawmill and a 70 foot high fire tower. We intended to follow these up with major exhibition stations on timber felling, timber extraction, milling, propagation, management and products: everything anyone might ever want to know about timber. Full of enthusiasm we completed the felling exhibition, describing the benefits of the straight-backed Great American toothed saw over the salmon-bellied peg-toothed saw.

Few of our customers shared our enthusiasm. Many by-passed the felling exhibition; those that did venture in paused but briefly to glance at our superb collection of early chain saws. We were providing information that no one needed and creating a facility with minimal appeal and marketability.

Since then we have focussed on attractions that are highly repeatable, have maximum appeal to our main market – families with children aged from 3 to 15 – and as far as possible are



appropriate to a woodland setting at the edge of a National Park.

As a result of this more customer orientated approach we have trebled admission income and now provide the equivalent of 70 full time jobs. Landmark is a sustainable visitor attraction, not dependent on public sector funding, that creates substantial local, social and economic benefits.

At the Camera Obscura in Edinburgh we very nearly went down the same false route. The property, with its views out over the city, seemed the natural place to tell the story of Edinburgh. Imbued with interpretive zeal and a desire to emulate Patrick Geddes we drew up detailed plans for an urban interpretive centre.

Luckily we also put in a temporary 'Magic Gallery' exhibition on optical illusions. When we saw how much people were enjoying themselves there we realised that by following a conventional heritage interpretation route we would be creating yet another unnecessary facility, providing visitors with information that was not directly relevant to their enjoyment and appreciation of the city.

Since then we have concentrated on the optically related themes of seeing and illusions. This more commercial, visitor related, strategy is paying dividends. Admissions are well up as is admission price. The tower echoes to peals of laughter as visitors of all ages and nationalities enjoy themselves.

At Inveraray Jail, by contrast, heritage interpretation has a pivotal role. The early 19th century courthouse and prisons are the real thing. This is the place where men and women were sentenced and briefly imprisoned before being transported to Australia. Prisoners picked oakum and made herring nets here. Some female prisoners gave birth while in jail. Interpretation here is highly relevant to the visit and greatly enhances the visitor experience.

The mistakes we have made over the last 35 years are still, however, being repeated. Substantial buildings have been put up to interpret themes that have no site significance and insufficient popular appeal. Facilitated by government grants and lottery funds, grandiose ill thought out projects have got off the ground too readily. Quite apart from the Millennium Dome, we have science centres, clan centres, archaeological centres, and music centres. Few are sustainable or attract the visitor numbers they originally project. Many have already closed. Others require regular injections of public money to keep them afloat. A far more rigorous approach to the assessment of potential projects is required if we are not to continue to create massive white elephants.

**David Hayes is Managing Director of Landmark, Carrbridge**  
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*Landmark (left and above) is now a popular family attraction inspired by its woodland setting*

Business, you know, may bring money, but friendship hardly ever does.

Jane Austen

# Giving history a future



Mercat Tours Ltd has evolved from a small hobby to a major business, offering tours of Edinburgh and Glasgow that play to the vogue for 'ghosts and ghouls', but are based on solid historical research. Win Brogan explains how good interpretation, professional training, and sound management are at the heart of their success.

*History is a damn good story.  
What it needs is damn good telling.*

Mercat Tours Ltd was born in the summer of 1985, the child of four young history teachers keen to find outlets beyond the classroom for their beloved subject. They were also persuaded of the need for some high-quality history tours from overhearing inaccurate accounts delivered from Edinburgh's open-topped buses.

The company began as a hobby, with a season of two tours, run three times a day, lasting the six weeks of the school summer holidays. All tours were researched, devised and delivered by the four founders.

Twenty years later, one founder remains, and Mercat Tours Ltd is his full-time occupation. The business has evolved to a limited company, with five different tours offered all year round, twelve times a day. The company employs 10 permanent staff and a further 65 self-employed guides, and since 2000 there has been a Mercat Glasgow franchise.

We believe our commercial success is built on four major factors:

- ◆ the quality of our products
- ◆ the vision and leadership of the company's management
- ◆ being active in addressing our learning needs; and above all
- ◆ the calibre of our staff.

The importance of our staff, and of how they present the tours, is reflected in the training they get. Every guide experiences a three month induction followed by a further three months' probation. Thereafter we have a team of 'mystery shoppers' who provide regular assessments on guides' performance.

Before the formal training begins the trainee is expected to go on each of our tours, to experience them as a customer. The training programme itself is a heady mix of whole-group workshops, master classes, 'shadowing' other guides, and on-the-job training. A supportive framework is essential for guides to be free to learn and develop. The trainees give one another peer support, and each trainee is attached to a specific trainer who acts as their mentor throughout.

We are very clear that we do not expect all guides to be the same. Rather we respect their individuality, and enable guides to explore the skills involved – use of voice, gesture, facial expression, movement, construction of an account – and then to deploy these in their own unique way to communicate the personality of a story.

At Mercat Tours we are clear that we give our guides transferable skills for life. The guide learns to convey information in a telling manner, within a restricted time frame, to a varied audience and to handle difficult situations.

Does it work? Is it worth it? Well, we have neither a recruitment nor retention problem. Guides are immensely loyal and proud of the company. And Mercat Tours has won many accolades, including a Scottish Thistle Award for Culture.



All pictures on this page © Mercat Tours Ltd.

We have also been asked to provide training for other organisations, sometimes for guides whose volunteer status can present difficulties. Here there can be an inference that non-paid is synonymous with non-professional. Perhaps the organisation may feel less willing to insist on training and quality assurance when guides are giving of their own time. Or the guide may feel they are beyond accountability because they are not being paid. Nothing is further from the truth.

Our focus, from start to finish, is on the customer experience. Whether the customer is paying or not, or the guide is paid or not, is irrelevant. Any organisation relying on guides has to come clean on its expectations of its guides and then has to equip them for their tasks. There must be no apologies for doing so – the customer deserves nothing less, and besides, volunteers want to be associated with quality. Paid or unpaid, good guiding is professional.

**Win Brogan is Head of Development with Mercat Tours Ltd.  
Win@MercatTours.com**

I understand small business growth. I was one.  
George W Bush



# Images to stay with you

Pete Cairns describes the connection between commerce and understanding on wildlife photography trips

Although there is increasing interest in, and awareness of, the natural world, our real connection with wildlife and wild places is becoming ever more distant. Wildlife tourists (or in my case photographers) know more but understand less. The growing appetite for a pre-packaged wildlife experience is symbolic of our alienation from nature. Nevertheless, it provides opportunities for wildlife operators and guides not only to entertain their guests, but to educate them.

I make part of my living from putting photographers in front of wildlife subjects. This is fine for business, but not sustainable from a self-satisfaction point of view. If the client takes pictures knowing nothing of the biology of the subject, the habitat upon which it depends, and the fieldcraft necessary to get responsibly within its 'fear circle', then the experience is diminished and the subject becomes merely that: a subject.

I hope that a significant part of our business' success over recent years has been in the passion for, and knowledge of, Scotland's wildlife that our small team of guides imparts to our

guests. During a seven day trip, we will spend around 80 hours with them. To my mind, if this opportunity to provoke thought and discussion – not only about the wildlife subjects we photograph but on wider land management issues – is not taken, we are detracting from our guests' fulfillment. Perhaps more importantly, we are failing in our duty to broaden their ecological understanding. After their seven days, I want my guests to know a lot more about red squirrels, forest restoration and deer management than when they arrived.

The wildlife tourism business is a people business where effective communication is the key. In my case, I need to employ good photographers as guides, but I would always sacrifice technical skills behind the camera for a locally-based, knowledgeable communicator whose approach will dictate the guests' level of fulfillment long after their pictures are forgotten.

**Pete Cairns is co-director of Wildshots, a wildlife photography holiday company in the Cairngorms. [info@northshots.com](mailto:info@northshots.com)**

© Peter Cairns/www.northshots.com

## Many shades of blue blue blue blue

Independent tourist guides all run businesses based on interpretation. Barbara Millar explains some of the skills involved.

Each of the 281 'Blue Badge' members of the Scottish Tourist Guides Association (STGA) develops their small, one-person business in a different way, according to their individual strengths and interests. Some may specialise in working with large groups on extended coach tours, others in leading small walking groups; some choose to offer in-depth tours of Glasgow or Edinburgh, others are happy to work anywhere in the country.

A skill shared by all 'Blue Badge' guides, however, is the ability to adapt their interpretation of Scotland for the diverse groups of tourists who visit our country. There would be no point in offering the same interpretation of Edinburgh to, say, a group of young German students on a weekend break and to a group of more mature American travellers who have just stepped off a cruise ship. Each group will have different needs and interests: understanding and empathising with these is an art which each guide quickly develops.

Even the briefest of conversations at the outset of the tour – whether it is a one-hour whirl around Edinburgh's Old Town or a packed eight-day trip from Moffat to Orkney – will give essential clues which will subsequently steer the guide's interpretation. For instance, it should be possible quickly to ascertain that the German students may be more interested in shopping and nightlife than in galleries and museums, or that the Americans have seen the Edinburgh Military Tattoo on television back home, and want to understand more about its historical location.

The STGA runs a central booking service, and holds a database recording each guide's special areas of interest and knowledge, languages spoken and other abilities. This helps clients to get the guide who can best interpret their needs and interests.

**Barbara Millar is a Blue Badge guide based in Fife. [Barbara.millar@btopenworld.com](mailto:Barbara.millar@btopenworld.com)**

# Vision, or hard-nosed reality?

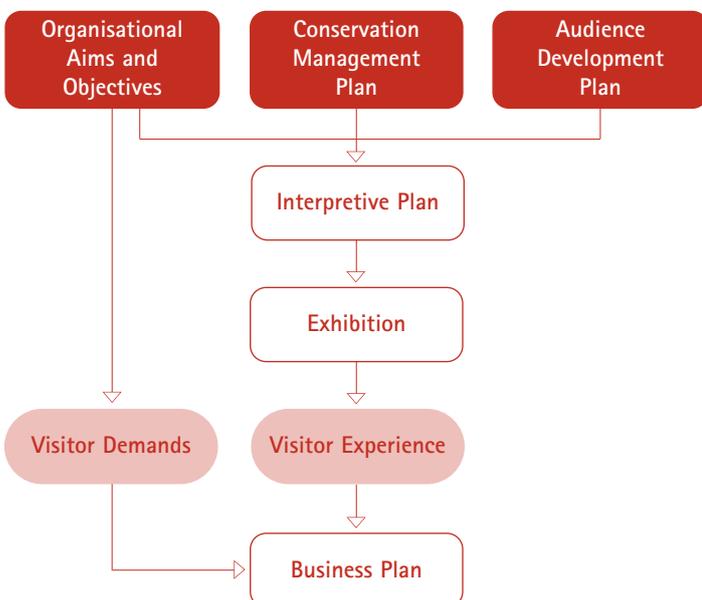
**Corrie Cheyne shows how an interpretive plan can be a vital part of the process of producing an accurate business plan and, hopefully, a successful funding application.**

A thoroughly researched business plan is fundamental to any funding application. It demonstrates that the organisation has considered all the financial implications of a project in terms of capital costs, funding, revenue expenditure and income generation. Without a strong business plan, any funding application will fall at the first hurdle. But for heritage developments, a good business plan is likely to pull together several other plans.

One of its key starting points is the conservation management plan, a tool designed to support and inform the management of heritage assets. This must demonstrate a clear understanding of those assets, a key part of which is their significance in social and cultural terms, or 'heritage merit'.

Another starting point for the business plan is the audience development plan. This allows organisations to understand the market environment in which they operate. It provides a framework in which to consider wider objectives and what role audiences are to play in those, examines current and future audiences, and considers how to reach new ones.

For the conservation management and audience development plans to feed meaningfully into the business plan, there must also be some analysis of both visitor demand and the anticipated visitor experience. This is where the interpretive plan fits in. Essentially, it provides the specification for the visitor experience, responding to the needs of the project and to the existing visitor market opportunity.



The nature of the visitor experience is a major influence in determining the level of achievable visitor numbers and the associated income. Without a clear interpretive plan and design brief, any business plan merely speculates rather than forecasts what the visitor numbers and income will be. The interpretive plan therefore provides the substance to the assessment of the visitor experience – the meat on the bones, as it were.

The ongoing financial performance of the project is critically important. The business plan therefore needs to consider the impact of the visitor experience over the long term. It must balance the initial capital investment required to produce a high-quality exhibition with the ongoing costs required to maintain it. Exhibition lifecycles vary, but it is widely accepted that if changes are not implemented within five to seven years, then visitor numbers will decline. The interpretive plan has a significant role to play here in identifying how the visitor experience can be refreshed, and at what cost.

'Heritage merit' is central to any funding bid, and this directly includes how you will seek to engage audiences, broaden your audience base, enhance learning opportunities – in other words, how you will handle the interpretation. In many ways, the interpretive plan provides the vision and substance behind a project, and the ability to voice clearly and with conviction what it is you are seeking to do and the benefits this will bring.

When preparing a funding bid, here are some points to bear in mind:

- ◆ Clearly state the heritage merit of the project
- ◆ Use the findings of the audience development plan to drive the development of the interpretation
- ◆ Keep the visitor experience in mind when developing interpretation
- ◆ Set clear, measurable interpretive objectives
- ◆ Ensure that the design brief follows on from the objectives of the interpretive plan
- ◆ Ensure that the interpretation meets relevant national standards and best practice
- ◆ Only take interpretive approaches that are practical to maintain
- ◆ Provide plans for ongoing development and refreshment

**Corrie Cheyne is an Interpretive Planner with Campbell & Co. [corrie@campbelland.co.uk](mailto:corrie@campbelland.co.uk)**

Thank you to Paul Jardine, Principal Consultant, Jura Consultants, and Graham Black, Senior Lecturer in Museum and Heritage Management at Nottingham Trent University, who made valuable contributions to this article.

# Finding a Balance

**Business plans often forecast that increasing visitor numbers will generate income and revive local economies. But the relationship between interpretation and commercial activity may not be so simple. Genevieve Adkins describes how Historic Scotland finds a balance between sometimes conflicting demands.**

At a first glance Historic Scotland seems well placed to make the connection between interpretation and commercial activity. It manages many large sites with apparent income-generating potential. But scratch beneath the surface and this potential is not easily fulfilled.

The agency certainly has to be businesslike. In 2004-05, Historic Scotland had an income target of £24.8 million. A number of properties contributed significantly to achieving this target: Edinburgh, Stirling and Urquhart Castles alone generated 69% of it. Altogether our 'Top Ten' properties contribute 75% of the total income generated.

Interpretation plays an important role in enhancing the visitor experience at these sites, and in attracting visitors. However, interpretation is only one factor which contributes to visitor numbers and income generation. The properties have huge potential for other commercial activity, including retail, catering, functions, and filming.

Weighed against such commercial activity is the staffing, management and operational expenditure it implies. The reality is that commercial activity does not automatically equal profit. Generally speaking, increased visitor numbers mean higher operational (and sometimes capital) costs as the agency seeks to manage visitor needs and pressures.

The agency also has a conservation role. The conservation of the historic environment is a guiding principle underpinning all our work, influencing nearly all interpretation and commercial activity. Good examples of this principle come from the four sites within the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Area (WHA): Skara Brae, Maeshowe, the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness.

In recent years the need to conserve these properties has led to the building of a new visitor centre at Skara Brae, and the introduction of guided tours and timed ticketing at Maeshowe. Both sites use interpretation as a tool to manage visitor access to the monuments; where physical access is limited, alternative experiences such as exhibitions and literature are provided.

In contrast, other sites in the WHA are freely accessible, their commercial potential having been balanced against a number of factors including the needs and interests of the island community, the landscape impact of the buildings needed for a staffed property, and the overall visitor experience of the WHA and wider Orkney.

Recently, this commitment to free access at the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness has been challenged by large increases in visitor numbers, mostly from cruise liners. To retain the principle of free access the Agency has worked with Orkney Islands Council and Scottish Natural Heritage to provide new parking facilities and a Ranger Service, two measures which will enable us to monitor and manage visitors in response to the shifting pattern of tourism.



*Interpretation in Orkney must meet the challenge of handling large numbers of visitors delivered by cruise ships*

The area where we need to work hardest at balancing interpretation and commercial activity is in the way we communicate the significance of the properties in care. In the past the agency has invested in interpretation and commercial development at sites which showed the greatest ability to provide the greatest return. Visitor numbers have frequently formed the basis for business planning.

This 'raw' commercial thinking is now being balanced by investment in presentation and interpretation at sites with great historical significance. The first such project was the re-display of a collection of Early Christian carved stones at Whithorn, Dumfries. Whithorn was once a focal point of the early Christian church in Scotland, but it is perceived as rather remote today. Our work here had its roots in a desire to communicate the significance of the collection and its location, but it has had a welcome commercial benefit: so far there has been a 12% increase in visitor numbers to the property.

For Historic Scotland the relationship between interpretation and commercial activity is complex. It means resolving factors that include conservation, site significance, sustainability, value for money and community interests. And our role as a public agency means there are always new policies with which we need to engage.

Over the coming years the challenge facing us is to better understand the relationship between interpretation, commercial activity, and our conservation remit. We need to undertake research on this, and improve the way we record our work so we can identify not only which activities generate income, but which make sense in the long term.

**Genevieve Adkins is Head of Interpretation at Historic Scotland.**  
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I find it rather easy to portray a businessman. Being bland, rather cruel and incompetent comes naturally to me.

John Cleese



© Colonial Williamsburg

# what's <sup>up</sup> elsewhere

## Interpretation on a plate

### Mary Hudson takes in some history with her supper.

I have always believed meal times to be sacred. For me, they're the one occasion when you can shut your mind off to everything except what's on the plate in front of you. On the whole I'd say that most visitor experiences cater for my needs here. Interpretation is usually kept separate from the restaurant or tea room so you can enjoy your cream tea without any interference. Not so at Colonial Williamsburg, the 'world's largest living history museum' in Virginia, USA.

Colonial Williamsburg was the capital of Britain's empire in the New World. It describes its mission as to 'interpret the origins of the idea of America'. Among the authentic and reconstructed 18th-century buildings are a series of taverns in keeping with the period. The waiting staff wear period costume and all play a role in the interpretive experience.

In the tavern where we ate our evening meal, our waiter introduced us to the menu

and to the foods available at the time, as well as the background to various sayings, such as 'to make ends meet' (If you could afford a napkin that was large enough to tie around your neck you were generally quite wealthy!). We were entertained with anecdotes and song as we ate but, rather than being intrusive, this approach created an immersive experience that really worked. I left the tavern with a full stomach, a complimentary copy of authentic recipes, and a much broader understanding of life in eighteenth-century colonial America.

My understanding was further increased after hearing tales and joining in with bawdy ballads while swigging local ale from a ceramic tankard in another of the recreated taverns. This was followed by my first interpretive breakfast the following morning!

Obviously the success of such a scheme largely depends upon the ability of the individual interpreters and the resources available for staffing and training. However,

on a simpler level, the design of the menus and the provision of authentic recipes both added to the interpretive experience by broadening visitors' understanding of life at the time in a subtle but effective way.

A similar tack is used at Mount Vernon, George Washington's home in Virginia. The menus include relevant facts about Washington's hospitality and the foods eaten in his day. Even the disposable paper place mats provide a brief introduction to George Washington and his life at Mount Vernon, which I found myself reading while waiting for my food to arrive.

I left the States wondering why we hadn't been doing this for years in our own tea rooms. Maybe it's time to cross the boundaries between the exhibition space and the tea room or restaurant and give our visitors something more to digest than the specials of the day?

**Mary Hudson is an interpretive planner with the National Trust for Scotland.**  
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## News

### International interpretation conference

2007 has been designated the 'Highland Year of Culture', and a major international interpretation conference is being planned as part of the programme of events.

Running in Aviemore, at the foot of the Cairngorm mountains, from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2007, the conference will provide an opportunity to share experience and best practice from around the world. Its themes will include:

- ◆ re-interpreting traditional icons in the 21st century.
- ◆ the role of creativity and innovation in interpretation for remote and fragile areas
- ◆ developing links between community regeneration and interpretation
- ◆ using a minority language in interpretation

There will be an exciting programme of international speakers, workshops and site visits, as well as lively evening entertainment celebrating the best of Highland culture. Pre and post conference tours will give opportunities to visit further afield.

A sub-group of Interpret Scotland is currently shaping ideas for the programme: watch this space, and book the dates in your diary!

### Training for blue badge guides

The Scottish Tourist Guides Association (STGA), the organisation for Blue Badge Guides in Scotland, is inviting applications for the 2006 intake for guide training. The two-year course involves weekend classes and summer schools, with support through web-based materials.

Preference will be given to candidates who are fluent in a foreign language and are willing to travel throughout Scotland. There are particular opportunities for people who speak Mandarin, Cantonese and Central and Eastern European languages.

**Applications are due by 6 January 2006. For more information contact the STGA Training Manager at Old Town Jail, Stirling, FK8 1EA; tel: 0131 477 2204; email [info@stga.co.uk](mailto:info@stga.co.uk); website: [www.stga.co.uk](http://www.stga.co.uk).**

Capital isn't that important in business. Experience isn't that important. You can get both of these things. What is important is ideas.

Harvey S. Firestone

# Shopping with a conscience



**With shopping now regarded as the number one leisure activity in UK, Ian Edwards wonders whether retail could be the next interpretation medium.**

Few visitor attractions have resisted the apparent necessity to provide a 'shopping experience' in addition to whatever they serve as their main offer. Larger environmental organisations, and some museums, have gone even further and started distributing mail order catalogues.

This article is not about how to make your shop commercially viable, but about the opportunities that retailing offers to spread ecologically sound messages and demonstrate in a practical way an organisation's commitment to principles of social and environmental justice. I want to illustrate this mixture of message delivery with selling through two examples from England and Wales, though there are examples in Scotland.

I have to confess I hate shopping. The car parking, crowds and queues are guaranteed to put me in a bad mood. So even though I live in the city, close to hundreds of stores, I tend to make most of my purchases through mail order. Currently my catalogue of choice is Howie's of Cardigan Bay. Their range of clothes might be considered a bit trendy for a male pushing 50, but I like the fact that they use natural fibres like organic cotton and merino wool, and that they make things locally rather than in the sweatshops of the Far East. I also like the way they fill their catalogue with wacky stories, unrelated to their products but reflecting their underlying green credentials. They also stick messages inside clothes where only the wearer will see them ('Buy land - they don't make it any more' is a favourite.)

In their summer catalogue 56 pages are devoted to displaying or describing their products; 16 are what might be described as 'lifestyle' images – active young people canoeing, cycling or playing by the sea; and more than 20 are devoted to stories on social and environmental issues, including bison in Yellowstone, watching plants grow, and gentle attacks on pills, deodorants and obesity.

Cynics may see this as just a clever marketing ploy. Certainly Howie's appear to be running a successful business. However, from my dealings with them I feel their concern is genuine, and even though they are growing they still treat their customers as individuals. It is simply refreshing to find a company more concerned with quality and environmental impact than choice.

My 'green shop award', however, has to go to the Eden Project in Cornwall. Again there are cynics who mistrust the phenomenal scale and popularity of this theme park dedicated to plant life, but there is much about Eden that really impresses me. I would encourage Scottish interpreters looking for inspiration to put their scepticism

to one side and take the long train ride down to St Austell to see what is happening at the other end of the Celtic fringe.

In Eden's large, modern retail area their uncompromising values come shining through in the goods on display. Their buying principles are spelled out in large letters as you enter the area, and include:

## **Produced locally, Fair trade, Organic, Recycled, Sustainable**

Of course not all their products tick all the boxes, but these are the criteria (along with saleability!) that are being considered when the retail manager is considering what to stock.



*The Eden project reinforces its environmental messages in the shop (above) and at the waste bins in the café (top)*

Within the retail area I estimate that about 20% of the space is devoted to information about the plants rather than the products. This includes stories about the raw materials, harvesting and production, and about the communities that supplied the products. There are also images, objects (cotton bolls, rubber tyres, etc) and examples of the living plants (coffee, bananas, herbs) growing within the display area. Like Howie's they have succeeded in making much of this interpretation accessible and relevant, and at times amusing ('your most expensive designer suit is your skin').

Again, I have no doubt that the Eden shop is a commercial success. But what seems most impressive is that they have succeeded in getting their messages across with the merchandise. Eden is a very popular destination, and the social spectrum of their audience is broad. Many of their shoppers probably don't buy organic cotton, local honey, fair trade coffee or recycled glasses as a rule: at Eden they aren't presented with less-ethical, cheaper alternatives, and they seem happy to literally buy into Eden's ideals.

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Some writers thrive on the contact with the commerce of success; others are corrupted by it. Perhaps, like losing one's virginity, it is not as bad (or as good) as one feared it was going to be.

V. S. Pritchett

## Other professions

# Planners, Public & Profits

Ronan Toolis and Steve Carter make a plea for interpretation to be built into the conditions that drive commercial archaeology.

Sometimes, when caught at the bottom of a waterlogged trench in torrential rain, commercial archaeologists might ponder what the point of archaeology is. Will society at large be any better for what we do? Well it should be, because the fundamental justification for most commercially funded archaeological work in Scotland is public benefit. Society benefits from a greater understanding of its past, offering a sense of place and a perspective on the present and future. So, archaeological discoveries are wasted if we don't report them to the wider public as well as our peers. This is particularly true of archaeological excavations because excavation is a form of destruction; the only way of 'preserving' an excavated site is through disseminating the findings as widely as possible.



*Sometimes commercial archaeology is not very accessible*

Archaeology has a long tradition of interpreting its findings to a wider audience, be it through specialist academic publications and lectures or more popular forms of public outreach, often devised by voluntary or not-for-profit organisations. This tradition still exists, but most archaeological work in Scotland today is undertaken by commercially-funded companies. Commercial archaeology is largely driven by planning conditions, not research or educational objectives. These planning conditions are imposed during the development control process because local authority planning policy recognises that the archaeological resource is a finite, non-renewable public asset. The underlying justification for commercial archaeology is the mitigation of development impacts for the public good.

A practical example of this policy is provided by the Braehead Iron Age Dig in Glasgow, undertaken by AOC Archaeology Group. The full excavation of the site was subject to planning permission, which required an element of public participation. An interpretation

package was designed around the idea of changing interpretations of the site as the dig progressed. Visitors were guided by professional archaeologists from an introductory exhibition to vantage points around what was admittedly not the most visually appealing of sites. As new finds and information affecting the interpretation of the site were revealed, the exhibition and the dig website were updated, enabling visitors to trace the progress of the excavation from initial assumptions to new interpretations. Volunteers were also encouraged to participate in the excavation so members of the public could actually contribute towards the changing interpretation of the site.

However, Braehead is a rare example of interpreting archaeology to the public as a condition of planning consent. Planning conditions routinely require the production of academic publications, but these serve a tiny elite readership, and there is rarely a requirement for more public forms of dissemination. In general, local authorities have proved to be remarkably reluctant to follow through the logic of 'public benefits' and ensure they materialise. An honourable exception to this picture in recent years has been the requirement from Highland Council for public presentation of the results of all significant archaeological projects.

Commercial archaeological organisations are, of necessity, focused on chargeable work. If interpretation for the wider public is not required of their clients, it is highly unlikely that such work will be funded. Examples of un-funded public interpretation work are widespread in the commercial sector, as CSA's Scottish Archaeology Month testifies, but these often rely on individual members of staff giving up their own time. The simple truth is that most archaeologists are still genuinely interested in their work; and like to tell other people about what they discover.

This ad hoc approach to providing interpretation of commercial archaeology, based on the circumstances of a particular development or the good will of individuals, is simply not an adequate approach to a significant public asset. The present planning system offers, in theory, a mechanism for funding significant levels of interpretation in archaeology but it is largely failing to deliver. Can we hope that the Scottish Executive's proposed modernisation of the planning system will change things for the better?

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A mere literary man is a dull man; a man who is solely a man of business is a selfish man; but when literature and commerce are united, they make a respectable man.

*Samuel Johnson*



# Go tell it on the Mountain

**CairnGorm Mountain opened their visitor centre, and a funicular railway up one of Scotland's most famous mountain ranges, in difficult times. The railway itself was controversial, and so were the management arrangements, which do not allow passengers outside a small area at the Ptarmigan, the top station. Five years on, Jim Cornfoot explores how interpretation has become a core part of the company's work, and how it is shaping its future.**

CairnGorm Mountain is owned entirely by a charitable trust with a simple goal: to support the local community by offering an exceptional mountain experience in a sustainable way.

The company is one of Scotland's largest Social Enterprises, and is continuing to diversify its product away from mono-cultural and climate-dependant recreational activities (such as skiing and snowboarding), to a wider and more secure base that capitalises on the organisation's inherent asset: the mountain itself. This shift has placed interpretation at the very heart of the organisation's strategic intent.

The current interpretive proposition is based on the simple premise that Cairn Gorm is a special place that has the potential to instil respect for Nature's scale, beauty and power. Above all it has the potential to make us question our human place as a part of the environment, in both a local and global context. To this end products and services contain physical, sensory, aesthetic, psychological, cultural and spiritual aspects that aim to inspire a passion for Nature, and a desire to live environmentally sustainable lives.

The process of creating the first interpretive plan involved a partnership with key stakeholders and external consultant support, and took place prior to opening the new facilities in 2000. This work guided the development of the main exhibition in the Ptarmigan building. At the time, although other interpretive opportunities existed, the exhibition was perceived as the single most tangible product – an 'added value element' – that could be marketed to potential visitors to the funicular.

Further interpretive projects were identified to both offset disappointment about the restricted egress from the Ptarmigan building, and to educate visitors about the mountain's many conservation designations – and therefore the reasons for access restrictions. These projects included an all-abilities footpath, interpretive panels depicting the incredible views from the Ptarmigan, and a new Mountain Garden. The garden lets visitors experience some of the most important habitats and indigenous plants of the Cairngorm Mountains in a highly inclusive way – without the need to venture far into the often harsh mountain environment.

CairnGorm Mountain rapidly became the third most popular paid non-city visitor attraction in Scotland, and the most popular paid visitor attraction in the Cairngorms National Park. The change from



All photographs on this page: ©Bob Kimmaid

*Interpretation at the Cairngorm summit station gives a safe insight into an environment for which many visitors are not equipped*

ski area to year-round attraction, in an environmentally fragile site, became the catalyst for a shift in staff culture. The team became much more customer focused, and more environmentally aware. These changes were rewarded with Hospitality Assured accreditation and a gold Green Tourism Award. The company now uses the 'Triple Bottom Line' principle, where economic, social and environmental criteria are all included when measuring success.

These shifts in business emphasis have resulted in the engagement of a full-time Ecologist, a Sustainability Consultant, and a full-time Interpretive Coordinator. This has led to a more cohesive approach to interpretation, with a cross-company interpretation group meeting monthly to examine all projects and ensure they meet the organisation's goals at a strategic level.

We see these changes continuing in future: our long-term strategy is to become ecologically sustainable and to make education for sustainability the prime operational objective. Staff have already visited the Eden Project, and in the late autumn will be going to the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales. Both these visits are helping the CairnGorm Mountain team learn from established providers about making education for sustainability a core product for our customers.

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Honor sinks where  
commerce long  
prevails.

Walter Bagehot

# Scholarship, commerce or both?

**The Scottish Mining Museum has embraced both God and Mammon, and feels better for it. Fergus Waters explains ...**

An optimist might have hoped that, by now, the Scottish museums community would have moved beyond the habit of seeing success as a museum and success as a visitor attraction as competing objectives. Yet this rather sterile debate continues to absorb us.

For the record, the Trustees and the curatorial team at the Scottish Mining Museum have long taken the view that the aims of maintaining and interpreting our collections on the one hand, and engaging the interest of the general public on the other, are complementary – indeed, indivisible – rather than contradictory. We see no conflict in marrying our responsibilities as collectors to our ambitions for commercial success: and no reason to apologise to our learned peers for being a five-star visitor attraction.

Interpretation is as necessary to good collecting as it is to good business. There is no dilemma, but there is a duty to address a broad audience, of whom scholars are just one part. If that sounds impossible, then let us start by remembering that one need not address all sections of the audience simultaneously.

Is there any reason, for example, why a museum should not set out to engage the interest of the very young? We can see none, and we are proud of having created the Balloon Mine, a mobile and marvellously economic resource where children pay 50p to tunnel for as long as they like through a series of interconnected tents, in search of balloons. When they emerge from the 'mine' and burst the balloon, they find it contains a slip of paper entitling them to a small prize, usually a pencil or rubber. The idea of

exploring an enclosed space in search of reward – the essence of mining – is thus simply, but effectively, conveyed.



*The balloon mine: a cheap and mobile insight into the realities of mining.*

Two points are worth making about this kind of initiative. First, imagination matters more than budget (our modest investment in this case has repaid itself many times over). Second, if the initiative is not swiftly successful, walk away from it. Nothing is more wasteful of time and resources than trying to make a go of an idea which the public like much less than you do. There are equally valuable lessons to learn from failures as from successes.

It is also important to tune one's expectations, and therefore strategies, to a realistic appraisal of one's marketplace. Our visitor market at Newtongrange is smaller than we might wish, and wishing won't make it bigger. But there is incremental growth to be had from targeting groups like schoolchildren who, if they enjoy themselves, will pester parents to bring them back. Equally, if people enjoy their visit to the museum, they are more inclined to spend time and money in the shop and the cafeteria, and to recommend the experience to others.

It would be wrong to see the prodigious effort we put into education merely as a cynical ploy for footfall: though we are not

too proud to take those benefits from it. It also satisfies a more elevated agenda. Our decision to enmesh our educational products with the school curriculum has led us into close working relationships with a range of partners who add value through their knowledge, the synergy of their aims with ours, and resources additional to our own.

We see our schools programme as an excellent fit with the core purpose of a museum dedicated to telling the story of a vanished industry and the communities it created. At the same time, it has given us access to new sources of funding to manage and deliver these activities. We are doing just what we're here to do, and making a modest profit from it.

Good business development supports, rather than distracts, the museum. It impels us constantly to review how we can make best use of our assets – the buildings, the collections, and the staff – in advancing our core agenda. That means, for example, ensuring staff have the training, the backup and the systems they need to maximise their contribution.

In short, being a better visitor attraction helps us be a better museum. Excellence in one facet encourages, rather than displaces, excellence in the other. We aspire to both.

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