

Interpretation

What is it?

Offering interpretation is more than providing information and signing, it is an opportunity to highlight the intrinsic local identity of a site. It is most successful when it is entertaining and encourages participation from visitors. It can also generate increased visitor numbers and hence economic benefits.

Interpretation is 'storytelling' which explains the significance of a site, revealing why and how a place is important. The techniques which can be used are varied, ranging from printed, graphic, three-dimensional, audio-visual, walking trails, people or event based methods. The 'story' you wish to tell may include an explanation of features which visitors can see, the historic or cultural significance and stories associated with your site, or simply the sequence of the site's excavation and construction.

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Benefits of Interpretation

Interpretation is firmly established as part of the processes need to manage any cultural significant environment. However the economic benefits of interpretation are also now recognised. Visitors to any destination expect not only to be cared for and entertained they now wish to engage with and have a deeper understanding of the place they are visiting.

Interpretive Planning

Planning interpretation means balancing many different issues but for any effective scheme it is essential. It's best to work through a planning process, here's a suggestion:

1. Why are you doing this?

Your aims may be to do with:

- increasing understanding and providing learning opportunities
- managing visitors, perhaps you want them to visit at quieter times
- managing a site, encouraging visitors to 1 place, keeping them away from another
- benefiting financially, increasing visitor numbers or charging for specific activities

2. What will you interpret?

You will need to think about:

- features which visitors can see
- researching the cultural significance of your place
- the unique stories your place can tell
- the themes or stories you will tell

3. Who is it for?

You will need to think about your visitors:

- characteristics, who comes to your place now, who would you like to come?
- numbers, how many visitors do you want?
- what are your visitor's interests and expectations?
- how long do you want them to stay?

4. How will you do it?

- what media will you use which best suits your aims, your visitors and the story you are telling?
- when and where will you provide interpretation?
- will you need staff resources, have you the right skills available?
- how will you maintain it and refresh your interpretation?

- how will monitor and evaluate your interpretation?

Help and advice

Many interpreters are members of the Association of Heritage Association and their website provides an up to date contractor's list. Their website is www.heritage-interpretation.org.uk

For historical information about waterways a first point of call is the local canal society or history society. Local libraries will have their contact details. Whilst archive materials are held by The Waterways Trust (www.thewaterwaystrust.co.uk) or the local county archive.

For ecological information the local Wildlife Trust or BW ecologist can provide information.