

Interpretation a public benefit?

Colin McLean, Manager for Scotland with the Heritage Lottery Fund, reviews the priorities for interpretation projects.

Those of you with pre-Lottery memories may recall that the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) is actually run by a body called the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF). You might also recall that the original NHMF objective was to save and preserve. It was a well known fact that saving and preserving were aims best served by locking things up safely in the dark, well away from the harmful rays emitted from visitors' eyes.

Personally, I always had a slight problem with this. Perhaps I was influenced by my experiences of collecting at the Scottish Mining Museum, where a fair proportion of the collections – underground mining equipment – had been designed to survive in one of the most challenging environments on the planet. A robust kick from a visitor's steel-toecapped boot was unlikely to damage such items; never mind a little exposure to UV light.

Now things have moved on. Recent and current investments by the HLF require commitments to a wide range of benefits other than simply "preserving", and it is in this context that we have taken an interest in interpretation. It is not my intention here to give pre-application advice to all of you seeking support for interpretation schemes. However, it is certainly worth mentioning that the very (and I mean very) competitive situation we currently find ourselves in, where demand exceeds available funds by an unprecedented margin, means that applications are being subject to a tougher assessment regime – same criteria as before, just higher standards against those criteria.

Interpretation is best viewed in the context of HLF's wider objectives. We are primarily a conservation organisation, so the starting point is that there has to be something – a tangible or intangible heritage asset – to conserve. However, we are every bit as interested in and committed to opening up the heritage to as many people as possible, and to getting people involved in their heritage – conserving it, understanding it, taking decisions about it. You might say we are trying to promote a virtuous circle, whereby the more people can get involved in taking decisions about their heritage, the more likely they are to want to conserve it (or see it conserved).

This all means that preserving and conserving the heritage asset is simply not enough for us – there has to be a real commitment to "opening up". Conversely, interpretation – one of the tools for opening up – is by itself not enough.

As an example, take our recent award to a project on Bennachie, that much-loved hill west of Aberdeen. We have invested in upgrading the visitor centre and its displays but, critically, the greater part of the expenditure is in conserving, repairing and improving the path network on the hill. We would not have invested in just the paths; nor would we have simply upgraded the visitor centre.

Our relatively new guidance on Access and Audience Development is there to assist applicants in promoting this multiple approach to projects. Without that combination of benefits, we are unlikely to become involved.

We try hard not to get bogged down in defining heritage, and we are determined that it is wide and inclusive. If you as a community can argue that a heritage asset, tangible or intangible, is important to you and your understanding of where you come from, then it meets our definition – it is your heritage.

The range of heritage assets that we are investing in continues to get wider. We are indeed still assisting the National Galleries to acquire, conserve and promote access to great Renaissance masterpieces. But elsewhere we have been supporting a project looking at the role of sectarianism in the history of Scottish football. Young Roots, a recent addition to our programme, is aimed specifically at getting a teenage audience interested in and involved with their heritage. One lesson we learned from the pilot scheme is that not all projects have tangible benefits in the form of a building, an exhibition or a book. Participation is itself a vital and potent benefit, particularly for new heritage audiences. Can there be any better way to be investing Lottery players' money?

Colin McLean, 0131 225 9450 ColinM@hlf.org.uk

All progress is based upon a universal innate desire on the part of every organism to live beyond its income.

Samuel Butler