

real stories real lives

Successful attractions need good stories, good interpretation, and well planned marketing. Dr Lorna Ewan and Juliana Delaney of the Continuum Group describe how all these came together to create a five star attraction in Edinburgh

Buried beneath Edinburgh's City Chambers there is a complex maze of closes (narrow alleys) which make up the historical site known as Mary King's Close. Used by a local walking tour operator for some years, when a range of unfounded tales and legends became the stuff of urban myth, this valuable asset was both under-appreciated and under-used. There was, however, a wide awareness of its existence and of its reputation for being haunted.

The City Council's economic development team recognised that the Mary King's site was an asset with world-class tourist attraction potential. A Europe-wide tender was issued in 2001, and a contract awarded to the Continuum Group to develop and operate the underground site on a long lease.

Development had to be based on as full an understanding of the site and its history as possible. Full site surveys, including structural assessments, were done. An archaeological survey of the whole site was completed and detailed drawings produced of a unique 17th-century house within the site.

In parallel with the on-site works, primary documentary research was carried out in a range of archives including the National Archives of Scotland, National Library of Scotland, National Museums of Scotland and the Edinburgh City Archives. Specialist academics were also consulted.

The site presented the challenge of interpreting the difficult complex of spaces safely, together with their fascinating and emotional human stories, whilst respecting the sometimes fragile physical fabric. Good story-telling, combined with a subtle use of state-of-the-art technology was seen as the right combination to turn the dark passages into a memorable visitor experience.

Despite the Close's renown as a place of paranormal activity, Continuum's interpretive approach was largely historical – on the basis that the ghosts would take care of themselves! The historical stories revealed through research were fascinating, including a well documented murder case which made legal history, the experiences of the Craig family during the plague, the remarkable survival of 17th century rooms, and Mary King's own testament.

Once the interpretive 'headline stories' had been identified, the challenge was to integrate them into appropriate spaces in an understandable and largely chronological order, whilst ensuring that groups of visitors could move around the complex site safely without meeting each other. Limited tableaux and audio interpretation provide visitors with some visualisations of times past, from hand-carved solid oak panelling in 16th-century style to the sounds of cattle lowing in the cobbled cowshed. Lighting was used both to interpret and illuminate. The ethos was to ensure all the interpretation had academic integrity and that the media used did not detract from the site itself.

The difficult access to and through the closes demands that visitors are accompanied throughout, so well-trained guides were seen as the most important medium for interpretation. Scripts for four historical characters were developed as personas for the guides. This approach not only ensured good story-telling but meant the interpretation could include a range of Scots words that could be explained to visitors as necessary. Recognising the importance of the guides, professional script-writers, voice coaches and a theatre group were all involved in developing their presentations.

With a world class project in the making the attention turned to marketing and operations: this was a stand-alone commercial venture which had to make money. A limited marketing budget had to deliver a projected 60,000 visitors a year. The emphasis was placed on PR to build on existing awareness, and tell the 'real' story of Mary King's Close. The media responded with overwhelming enthusiasm; particularly to the well researched presentation which offered wider access to a greater number of visitors. Extensive coverage in the Scottish media was matched by English and international coverage. A TV advertising campaign ran to support the opening. The result was to deliver double the projected number of visitors in 2003, the first year of operation.

But the most important measure of success is visitor satisfaction, and exit research shows that over 95 per cent of visitors would recommend a visit to Mary King's Close to a friend. The Good Britain Guide awarded the Close 'Oddity of the Year 2004' on the basis of nominations by visitors, and the Edinburgh Tourist Board awarded the site its top accolade of a Five Star Quality Assurance Award in May 2004.

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