

Taking Stock

The tenth edition of Interpret Scotland seemed an appropriate time to review the state of interpretation in Scotland. We asked Kev Theaker, lecturer in Interpretation and Countryside Management at the Scottish Agricultural College in Auchincruive, to build a picture of how Interpret Scotland members see interpretation, and how their organisation's attitude towards it has changed. We sent out a short questionnaire that asked them to reflect on where interpretation had got to, how it had changed in the last five years, and how it might progress in the next five. The response gives a glimpse of how organisations in Scotland are thinking.

All respondents felt that interpretation had a greater profile within their organisation than previously. In particular, the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) and National Museums of Scotland (NMS) both identified interpretation as leading projects rather than being an extra, add-on benefit.

In terms of identifying the drivers for these changes, no one pointed to anything specific. NTS have built on their successes and used the strength of their team to raise interpretation's profile, while NMS appear to have benefited from internal restructuring and budget improvements. Visit Scotland cite better branding of Scotland and Scottish Enterprise recognise the need for quality, value for money, and the improvement of visitor experience as drivers for improvement.

There was a consensus that interpretation now had a higher profile across Scotland. Evidence for this was seen in the expansion of interpretive teams, the increased awareness of audiences in the political arena, and also in the developing needs of funding bodies and performance targets.

The practice of interpretation was considered to be much more professional, with a greater palette of media and approaches used routinely. Interestingly, one comment about media was: 'Seems to me to have moved back to a focus on people and what they can deliver rather than an emphasis on technological solutions.'

So what about the future? Among the challenges identified were:

- The need for visitors' experience to be 'authentic'
- Keeping a careful watch on why we are doing what we are doing'
- Refreshing existing products rather than developing new ones
- Demonstrating the effects of good interpretation.

Money is perceived as a major obstacle, as ever, especially with the decrease in lottery funding. Another was 'people stuck in the old way of doing things!' Whether this refers to interpreters or other staff was not clear - let's assume it means both. But there are opportunities too. For NTS these include interest from the Scottish Executive, and more

rigorous monitoring of projects. NMS see scope for joint projects that cross-fertilise ideas and audiences. Though changes in tourist markets are a challenge, several organisations also see them as an opportunity, with people looking for learning and high-quality experiences.

So, where does this leave us? In 1998 Nuala Lonie's review of interpretation's practice and profile identified the need to improve communication; promote good practice; improve training and sharing of good practice; and increase the profile of interpretation. Can we sit back, pleased that we have achieved a higher profile for interpretation? Have senior managers and policy makers finally recognised that interpretation underpins every museum, gallery, and heritage attraction? Are interpreters served by an outstanding national group focused on pushing forward professionally?

Without doubt, we have progressed. Major projects are being driven by interpretation, with visitor consultation and evaluation built into the budgets. Perhaps, as indicated by the questionnaire, we are moving away from an infatuation with technology and design to ensuring that they are used to meet interpretive purposes. Interpretive planning is (I hope) central to our major agencies in Scotland, and central to planning are visitors' needs for authentic, high quality, meaningful experiences.

But where is the vision to carry us forward? Interpret Scotland as a group has no equivalent in England, the Association for Heritage Interpretation has a limited membership and we are still importing consultants and trainers from America. SIN's 'Scotching the Myth' conference showed the demand, from across the UK, for interpreters to meet on common ground. It also showed some of the gaps – there were few participants from the private sector.

Perhaps we should celebrate what we've managed, praise the innovators and ground-breaking projects, but remember to lift our eyes to the horizon occasionally and think 'Where do we want to get to, and how can I help?'

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"They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself."

Andy Warhol