

Dial 'T' for Tour

When Interpret Scotland was first published, audio tours often involved lugging around heavy pieces of expensive equipment. Now they can be delivered via your mobile phone. Pete Gray is on the line ...

How do you interpret a large open site with a complicated history? The traditional answer has been built around a combination of interpretive panels, live guided tours and dedicated audio guides. But widespread mobile phone ownership makes it possible to extend the availability of audio tours beyond the opening hours of a visitor centre to create a truly 24 hour service, while at the same time greatly reducing the equipment and operating costs usually associated with an audio tour.

The Prestongrange site in East Lothian covers 9 hectares. It includes the remains of a 16th century harbour, a glassworks and a pottery as well as the 19th/20th century colliery and brick works. The site is open all year round, but budgetary constraints mean the museum is staffed only between April and October, by two Museum Assistants for just five hours a day. Guided tours by staff are limited to at most five per day.

A cunning plan

At the end of 2002 we drew up a plan in collaboration with Andy Wood of AudioExhibitions to introduce an audio tour that would make self-guided tours available. We planned initially to use off-the-shelf MP3 players.

At the same time we realised that audio in a digital format could just as easily be delivered to a variety of devices, including directly to visitors' mobile phones. This has a number of advantages:

- No need to buy equipment – visitors bring their own
- No need to supervise the loan and return of equipment
- Visitors pay only for the amount of the tour that they actually use
- After the initial set-up there are no running costs – the revenue from the calls pays for the provision of the service
- The tour is available any time visitors want it

The phone line was set up through a third-party service provider, who receives the bulk of the revenue from calls - hence the absence of running costs. A small amount of revenue does come back to East Lothian Council.

How does it work?

The tour works like an information line, something we can expect visitors to be familiar with. They dial a single number (0870 005 3161), and when connected can either listen to the introduction and menu or press the appropriate key to take them directly to the section they want to hear. These sections are identified on the leaflet they have picked up or downloaded from our website, and on directional signs on the site. Call charges are dependant on individual phone tariffs. Generally it should cost around £3.00 for the whole tour.

The way ahead

Since there is no need for equipment or staff, this is an ideal solution for smaller organisations. A local history society or amenity group already has access to the necessary historic information, minimising research and writing costs. Recording and editing will need to be paid for: with our project this took up about half a day of studio time and the same again for the editing. We were fortunate that John Bellany, one of Scotland's foremost contemporary artists and who was born in nearby Port Seton, gave his services freely as narrator.

We spent just over £2,000 on the first print run and distribution of the leaflet, and a further £1,000 on directional signage. Astonishingly, the set-up of the phone line cost under £200. This is something well within the reach of even small local history societies or amenity groups through an 'Awards for All' lottery grant. We already have our next three tours planned!

The Prestongrange Audio Tour project was supported by a grant from the Scottish Museums Council. You can get more information from <http://tour.prestongrange.org/> and <http://www.audioexhibitions.com/>

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