

Touching the past

Alexander Bennett, Project Coordinator for the re-development of the National Trust for Scotland's Culloden centre, describes how a new approach to interpretation underpins the project.

Anyone who has visited the Culloden Visitor Centre in recent years could be forgiven for believing that time stands still. Not because they have just experienced an awe-inspiring recreation of the battle of Culloden, but because the presentation of this turning point in Scottish history is set in a time warp from the early 80s. Time and thinking have moved on since the current display was created and visitors these days expect a more sophisticated, engaging and 'interactive' experience. In creating a new, more sympathetic, and intellectually engaging visitor centre for Culloden, The National Trust for Scotland (NTS) has an awesome responsibility to tell a story that is authentic and based in the best research and evidence available.

The project is being driven by interpretation in conjunction with world-class design. This marks a step change for the Trust, since in previous projects interpretation has had to fit into a given space, often dictated by the architect. The Trust has recognised that this is not an ideal way of working. Often the architecture would dictate visitor flow and exhibition space, limiting the interpretive possibilities even before the interpretive plan was written. Thus at some of our older visitor centres there are now problems with visitor congestion, as the space required to interpret the story was vastly underestimated. Another problem with this approach was that if building work was running over budget, the interpretive budget was often cut to make up the shortfall!

At Culloden the NTS is moving into a new era of planning all aspects of the visitor journey at the start of the project. This is done in conjunction with the architects, interpretive designers and the Trust staff, all on an equal footing. Working together from the start has already proved invaluable for Culloden and its visitors. There is a synthesis between architectural and interpretive design – one complementing the other. For example, significant views of the battlesite which help to tell the story of the battle have been incorporated into the architectural design.

Within the interpretive story, we aim to engage the visitor's intellect and emotions on an equal level. Essential to that will be the ability to bring the visitor into the story by making it real, based on fact not fiction. Myths will be de-bunked. One approach is to use what evidence we have of real people who fought or were otherwise involved in the battle – from Prince to pauper. The visitor needs to believe that what they are experiencing still has an influence on them today and is not just a distant point in

history. Again this is a different approach for the Trust, and will hopefully prove successful. The 'book on the wall' method of interpreting complex stories has definitely had it's time!

Another new departure has been to engage two tiers of academic researchers, in order to achieve complete objectivity and academic authority. Firstly we have employed a team of academic research consultants to work with our own specialist staff. They are studying the latest research on the events of the Jacobite rebellion, and identifying characters involved for whom we have enough evidence to tell their story. Secondly, all concepts, text, visuals and audiovisual scripts will be ratified for accuracy by an independent academic advisory panel.

In addition to using real people from history to tell their own story, the Trust will build on the current success of its Living History programme at the site. This will develop the humanitarian side of the conflict as well as interpreting some of the true horrors of this conflict to our visitors.

Throughout the centre the emphasis will be on getting people to engage with this immensely complex story in a meaningful way, and to encourage them out onto the battlefield itself –a place so resonant with atmosphere that any external interpretation must be as unobtrusive and sensitive as possible – another challenge that will need courage, and a lot of vision and determination!

The National Trust for Scotland is working with Gareth Hoskins Architects of Glasgow and Ralph Appelbaum Designers of New York on the re-development of the Culloden Visitor Centre.

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Nowadays most people die of a sort of creeping common sense,
and discover when it is too late that the only things one never
regrets are one's mistakes.

Oscar Wilde