

What's up elsewhere - make it unique

Robyn Hartell, Heritage Interpretation and Education Officer with the South Australian Department for Environment and Heritage, reviews her impressions of interpretation in the USA, Canada and Great Britain

In August 2003 I was privileged to be awarded a Winston Churchill Memorial Fellowship – an honour which offers Australian citizens the opportunity to travel overseas to further their knowledge and understanding of a particular topic or field of expertise.

My Fellowship quest was for innovative programs, activities and experiences that encourage people to appreciate and celebrate built heritage places. I travelled to the United States, Canada and Great Britain and had more than 60 appointments and interviews with interpreters, educators and heritage practitioners. One of the major benefits of this amazing journey was that it gave me the opportunity to consider what visitors really want from interpretation, rather than what we, as interpreters, choose to give them.

'Taking Stock' of my impressions originally seemed simple enough, but it is hard to summarise in just a few words a trip where each day brought new experiences and perceptions! So I thought I would address just one concept – the overwhelming sense of 'sameness'.

As I travelled, I became tired of what I saw as the similarities in interpretation – the sameness of design and the sameness of writing styles, but mostly, the sameness of content. I think that we often forget the obvious – that tourists travel. They move from one interpreted place to another, and they need variety, especially in the type of story being told.

As interpreters, we tend to become engrossed with our own 'piece of turf' and want to share all our knowledge and enthusiasm with others. Or we take the 'easy' approach and relate the story suggested by available props and documents. We forget that there are many groups like ours with similar stories to tell. Too often, our interpretation presents a general story, rather than the 'new', specifically relevant story for each place. I believe it is the individual significance of each place, and of the people associated with it, which should be the basis of its interpretation.

A classic example in the UK is the cliché about castles – "if you've seen one you've seen them all!" From my experience, every castle is actually quite different, but their interpretation is so similar. Repetitious, general information about armour, castle life, etc (often chronologically irrelevant to that particular castle) was not what I wanted. Rather, I actively sought interpretation that explained why each new site was different

from the many castles I had already visited. I enjoyed the specific stories about each place, which contributed to my wider understanding of Scottish and English history.

As I travelled I had numerous discussions about this aspect of interpretation, but perhaps one of the more interesting examples is from Fort Langley Historic Site in Vancouver, Canada. Fort Langley was an outpost for trading furs, salmon and cranberries, and interpretation there highlighted the fur trade and pioneer settlement, providing a visitor experience similar to many sites across Canada. In the 1980s, in a drive to be more accountable for public funds, Parks Canada sites developed 'Statements of Commemorative Integrity'. These statements ensure that the reasons for a site's commemoration are communicated to the public. The sites now have the mandate to interpret not a general theme, or simply 'the olden days', but that aspect of the site uniquely significant to the nation. In the case of Fort Langley, this relates to its history as the most westerly outpost of the Hudson Bay Trading Company, and the place where British Columbia was proclaimed a Crown colony. Staff at the Fort are now developing strategies and programs that reflect these particular aspects of the national story. This does not mean that information about fur trading and trapping will not be part of the Fort Langley story, but rather that it will no longer be the main focus of interpretation.

Back home, one of the main legacies of my Churchill Fellowship is a commitment to interpreting heritage places according to their differences. I now approach new interpretation projects by establishing what is unique or special about the place and how it might contribute to the local or South Australian story. Sometimes, of course, the answer is still to provide a more general story, but now this is because it is a more appropriate approach for that particular project, rather than just 'the way it's always been'.

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O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
Robert Burns