

Finding a balance

Business plans often forecast that increasing visitor numbers will generate income and revive local economies. But the relationship between interpretation and commercial activity may not be so simple. Genevieve Adkins describes how Historic Scotland finds a balance between sometimes conflicting demands.

At a first glance Historic Scotland seems well placed to make the connection between interpretation and commercial activity. It manages many large sites with apparent income-generating potential. But scratch beneath the surface and this potential is not easily fulfilled.

The agency certainly has to be businesslike. In 2004-05, Historic Scotland had an income target of £24.8 million. A number of properties contributed significantly to achieving this target: Edinburgh, Stirling and Urquhart Castles alone generated 69% of it. Altogether our 'Top Ten' properties contribute 75% of the total income generated.

Interpretation plays an important role in enhancing the visitor experience at these sites, and in attracting visitors. However, interpretation is only one factor which contributes to visitor numbers and income generation. The properties have huge potential for other commercial activity, including retail, catering, functions, and filming.

Weighed against such commercial activity is the staffing, management and operational expenditure it implies. The reality is that commercial activity does not automatically equal profit. Generally speaking, increased visitor numbers mean higher operational (and sometimes capital) costs as the agency seeks to manage visitor needs and pressures.

The agency also has a conservation role. The conservation of the historic environment is a guiding principle underpinning all our work, influencing nearly all interpretation and commercial activity. Good examples of this principle come from the four sites within the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Area (WHA): Skara Brae, Maeshowe, the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness.

In recent years the need to conserve these properties has led to the building of a new visitor centre at Skara Brae, and the introduction of guided tours and timed ticketing at Maeshowe. Both sites use interpretation as a tool to manage visitor access to the monuments; where physical access is limited, alternative experiences such as exhibitions and literature are provided.

In contrast, other sites in the WHA are freely accessible, their commercial potential having been balanced against a number of factors including the needs and interests of the island community, the landscape impact of the buildings needed for a staffed property, and the overall visitor experience of the WHA and wider Orkney.

Recently, this commitment to free access at the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness has been challenged by large increases in visitor numbers, mostly from cruise liners. To retain the principle of free access the Agency has worked with Orkney Islands Council and Scottish Natural Heritage to provide new parking facilities and a Ranger Service, two measures which will enable us to monitor and manage visitors in response to the shifting pattern of tourism.

The area where we need to work hardest at balancing interpretation and commercial activity is in the way we communicate the significance of the properties in care. In the past the agency has invested in interpretation and commercial development at sites which showed the greatest ability to provide the greatest return. Visitor numbers have frequently formed the basis for business planning.

This 'raw' commercial thinking is now being balanced by investment in presentation and interpretation at sites with great historical significance. The first such project was the re-display of a collection of Early Christian carved stones at Whithorn, Dumfries. Whithorn was once a focal point of the early Christian church in Scotland, but it is perceived as rather remote today. Our work here had its roots in a desire to communicate the significance of the collection and its location, but it has had a welcome commercial benefit: so far there has been a 12% increase in visitor numbers to the property.

For Historic Scotland the relationship between interpretation and commercial activity is complex. It means resolving factors that include conservation, site significance, sustainability, value for money and community interests. And our role as a public agency means there are always new policies with which we need to engage.

Over the coming years the challenge facing us is to better understand the relationship between interpretation, commercial activity, and our conservation remit. We need to undertake research on this, and improve the way we record our work so we can identify not only which activities generate income, but which make sense in the long term.

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Drive thy business or it will drive thee.
Benjamin Franklin