

## Step this way

Elaine Reid looked at guided tours in historic houses as part of her postgraduate studies at Napier University.

In 2004, I carried out research at three historic house properties managed by the National Trust for Scotland: Threave House in Dumfries & Galloway, Craigievar Castle in Aberdeenshire, and Newhailes House in East Lothian. At all of these, visitors can only see the property on a guided tour, and nearly all the tour guides were volunteers.

The research aimed to appraise tours as a way to interpret historic houses and as a means to manage the physical resources and visitor experience at a site. Research methods included reviews of documents about guided tours, observation studies of the tours themselves, and a mix of pre-tour and post-tour surveys.

The research showed significant levels of learning, but tours seemed to have little influence on the topics in which visitors were interested. This was particularly the case in relation to information about the host organisation, its mission, and how visitors could help it achieve its goals.

The literature on guided tours (see references at the end) suggests presentation techniques such as *staging* (getting to know the members of the tour group) and interpretive devices like *foreshadowing* (whetting visitors' appetite by giving them a taster of what is coming later in the tour). Use of these techniques was often limited, and there were often discrepancies in the content delivered by different tour guides.

All this suggests that tours can be an effective interpretation medium, but that they need a sustained management input to create clear themes, and monitoring to review tour structure and delivery techniques. Most importantly perhaps, guides also need good support and training.

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Mark McLean, Education and Interpretation Officer at Newhailes, describes his approach to managing a team of volunteer guides.

My predecessor as Education and Interpretation Officer, Helen Foster, had recruited the help of Ros Newlands (from the Scottish Tour Guides Association) in putting together our guide-training programme. It was really useful for us to read from Elaine's thesis how the standards laid out there were actually being delivered.

I have been particularly keen to ensure that all our guides are 'singing from the same hymnsheet' in what they tell our visitors, and that they keep to a maximum of 75 minutes per tour. Within the necessary framework of things they 'must tell', each

guide adds their own unique flavour to the tours, according to their own interests and the composition of the visitor group. I have (discreetly) shadowed tours by all our guides with these issues in mind and made gentle suggestions afterwards when required - although I can myself be the worst offender on my own tours!

We have regular guide meetings to keep things on an even keel and to give the guides themselves a forum for raising any issues. I am currently training several new guides, and both the existing training programme and Elaine's research have been of huge assistance. We were all delighted when in June this year VisitScotland's 'mystery visitor' confirmed that we were to keep our 5-star visitor attraction status for further two years - a continued first for a historic house. In a very large part this result is thanks to all who comment on, monitor and (of course) conduct our tours.

Some good books about guided tours are:

*Enriching the experience: an interpretive approach to tour guiding* by John Pastorelli (ISBN 1862505225)

*Great Tours!: Thematic Tours & Guide Training for Historic Sites* by Barbara A. Levy, Sandra Mackenzie Lloyd and Susan Schreiber (AltaMira Press, California 2002)

## Upstairs or downstairs?

The research at Newhailes House produced some interesting results about the sort of things that interest visitors. In the survey, people said they were generally happy with the information given on the house and its contents, and on the lives of the family, but would like to have more information about the personal lives of the servants. These comments were supported by 'live' observations on the tours: when the commentary touched on areas like this, visitors became more animated, asked more questions, and would relate their own experiences by sharing personal stories with others in the group.

Tours often spend some time describing the rather complex family trees of the owners of Newhailes, whose portraits are on display in the house.

The visitor survey showed that people had difficulty identifying who the significant characters were, though they did like to hear fine personal details about individuals!

If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?

*Albert Einstein*