

Profiles

Caroline Tempest: Senior Interpretive Planner, The National Trust for Scotland (Central Office), Edinburgh

How did you get into working in interpretation?

From an early age I knew I wanted to work in the heritage sector. I worked at the Brontë Parsonage in Haworth whilst still at school, had a work placement with the National Trust for Scotland during my History of Art degree, and then a residential placement with the curatorial team at Chatsworth, Derbyshire. All this was very interesting but I knew I wanted to be more connected with the visiting public. So I studied for an MA in Heritage Interpretation, supporting myself with a great job as an Education Guide at the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh. Just as I was writing my thesis a post as Assistant Interpretive Planner came up at the NTS. That was seven years ago when the NTS was a very different place – and interpretation was only partly recognised as an integral part of heritage management.

What has been a formative or inspiring experience in your career?

Writing and implementing the first Interpretive Plan for Newhailes (then a new acquisition for the NTS) and on the back of it securing the first ever property based NTS Interpretive Officer. When Newhailes opened to the public it was awarded five stars from Visit Scotland – the first NTS property to achieve this. It's nice to get recognition for what can often be a tough job, but the best part is getting feedback from visitors and knowing you have made a difference to their visit.

What frustrates you about the field?

Interpretation as a profession has developed significantly and is now much more recognised – but too few design agencies are picking up this trend. Often I visit sites that look great aesthetically, but don't deliver on the interpretive messages.

What advice would you give to someone interested in interpretation as a career?

Try to get experience of working on a small interpretive project – most agencies are understaffed and would be more than willing to let a promising volunteer alleviate some of the workload. Practical experience really counts when applying for jobs as you need to be able to hit the ground running.

ctempest@nts.org.uk

Gordon MacLellan: Creeping Toad

As Creeping Toad, I work with groups to find ways of celebrating the places where people live, work and play. I work all over the UK and abroad, with projects from Devon to Forres and over to South Africa.

How did you get into working in interpretation?

My background is in science: I trained as a zoologist, specialising in Terrestrial Ecology at Glasgow University. After a few years teaching science at secondary level I escaped into full time environmental education and interpretation. I went freelance 12 years ago, moving from an environment/heritage education post into art and celebration-based interpretation. That's where I communicate best with people: in a space that combines environmental exploration and discovery with personal reflection and creativity and communal events.

Can you think of a formative or inspiring experience in your career?

My underlying inspirations lie in the world around me: just being in a place will fire my passion and commitment and suggest activities to use and paths to follow.

What frustrates you about the field?

People get so hooked on 'knowing' and 'instructing' that inspiration and emotion get lost. We can win the arguments about why we should save/protect/conservate but I don't think major change will come until we engage hearts and emotional commitment among the public. The most powerful interpretation takes risks. We can offer people information and the skills to find more for themselves, and then the courage to think, feel and decide for themselves. Those decisions might not be the ones we hope for, but for me that's the path we should pursue.

What advice would you give someone starting on a career in interpretation?

Gather experience; get mud, paint, glue and slug-slime on your hands. Follow your passion: communicate from both heart and head.

creepingtoad@btinternet.com

www.creepingtoad.org.uk

'We live in the age of the overworked, and the under-educated; the age in which people are so industrious that they become absolutely stupid.'
Oscar Wilde

Michael Hamish Glen: Freelance consultant

I've been involved in communication since, aged 3, I tried out a typewriter. After skirmishing with a range of jobs, I became Edinburgh's assistant publicity officer 40 years ago at the unseemly age of 25. After four years as the Scottish Tourist Board's (STB) Information Manager, I took on the 50-strong information department of the British Tourist Authority (BTA) in London. Five sybaritic years with an industrial training board were followed by three surreal ones with the Countryside Commission in Cheltenham before I set up Western Approaches to do PR, graphics and, I hoped, interpretation. What took me so long?

How did you get into working in interpretation?

While at STB I'd been sent on a week's course in interpretation, whatever that was, under the demanding but exciting tutelage of Don Aldridge, forever my mentor. I was on the road to Damascus but without a map. While at BTA, I was dragooned into helping form the Society for the Interpretation of Britain's Heritage (AHI's predecessor). In 1986, Michael Quinion and I teamed up as Touchstone and eager clients insisted that I find my map. Now I have a business called QuiteWrite as well, producing 'prose and poetry for people at places'.

Can you think of a formative or inspiring experience in your career?

The Association for Heritage Interpretation was always important to me as a forum of like-minded people. I took on the part-time administration job in 2000 and this has kept me firmly in touch with other interpreters.

What frustrates you about the field?

Clients who insist on telling visitors what they want them to know and not what these visitors might want to find out, and clients who believe designers should have the last say – and often the first.

What advice would you give someone starting on a career in interpretation?

Be as interested and involved in as many different things as you can, keep finding out and keep explaining. Your path along the Damascus road may be slow, full of diversions, but stick to it and you'll get there!

GlenTigstane@aol.com

Character, like a photograph, develops in darkness.

Yousuf Karsh, portrait photographer