

Interpret Scotland: a look back in awe!

Bob Jones looks back over ten years of Interpret Scotland

Interpret Scotland is a grouping of organisations, not individuals. This is an important and fundamental distinction that sets it aside from other interpretative bodies.

Established in 1997, the genesis for Interpret Scotland (IS) was the coming together of a small number of people from different agencies who seemed to be constantly tripping over one another at various meetings – the common factor in each instance being... interpretation. There were just four of us at first – representing the Scottish Museums Council, Historic Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and Forestry Commission Scotland, but three years later, in Spring 2000, IS was formally launched by a group of seven agencies with its first journal (and in the Scottish Parliament visitor centre no less!).

Why 'a look back in awe'? Well, I suppose in the true Scots idiom that tagline might have been better put as 'Wha's like us?!' All of the things we've done have been achieved by a group of people with demanding day-jobs – yet there has been steady and regular attendance at steering group meetings. There has been no formal 'executive' and until I took it on board (for six months only – that was in 2004!) we rotated the 'Chair'. There has been no funding – we have relied on the good will of those who could bring cash to the table through their agencies, and those who couldn't contributed in kind and graft.

Out of this has come:

- 16 journals (including an Interpret Britain Award).
- a growth factor over 10 years that has taken us from a 'gang of 4' to a powerhouse of 17 national institutions and organisations from across the face of Scotland. The list (on the inside front cover of this journal) is impressive, with representation from the public, voluntary and private sectors alike, all of whom recognise the importance of interpretation in contributing to the economic and social fabric of a great country. And others are still knocking on the door.
- Contributions to a fantastic range of 'Sharing Good Practice' training events – from the basics of interpretative planning, to the use of new technology, to environmental campaigning, and much, much more. The shared expertise from the group has contributed significantly to the raising of standards throughout the industry.
- Representatives of IS have contributed to many partner agency or organisations' own training or conference events, on local, national and world platforms.
- The highly successful, and some say seminal, national conference – 'Scotching The Myth' – organised with partners Scottish Interpretation Network in 2002.
- Acting as consultee to the Scottish Biodiversity Forum, and as commissioning body for an Interpretative Strategy for this important Scottish Executive-driven initiative.

- And now, coinciding with the publication of this Journal, and with partners AHI, 'The Vital Spark 2007' – an international conference showcasing Scotland as one of the leading exponents of the art of interpretation.

Most importantly however, through networking we have supported one another (and therefore our respective agencies and organisations) with one of the earliest examples of the now politically correct (ie. as encouraged by Government) 'on-the-ground'-type joined-upness projects. Crucially that has been at grass-roots level, as the people involved with Interpret Scotland tend to be 'doers' and facilitators. On a practical level however, there has been much reliance on individuals giving freely of their time and expertise – IS needs to look to its embryo web-site if networking and sharing good practice is to become the bedrock of the organisation that it should be.

The Journal, in many ways a 'Millennium child' - but in one important way quite unlike the many (often mega-budget) failed Millennium projects - goes from strength to strength. This is in no small way down to the quality of its contributors and of its editors. But it has to be said, it would not be possible without SNH and FCS shouldering all the production and distribution costs. Independent funding remains one of the biggest challenges facing IS as it moves into its second decade.

On a personal note, as I will step down from chairing the organisation at the end of this year, the 'awe' in the title tag-line is mine. It is the individuals from the member organisations whose enthusiasm for interpretation – and for Scotland – has been the driving force that has taken Interpret Scotland forward. It has been a privilege and an honour to work with them all and to have been a part of this adventure. decline. That sensitivity may inhibit our creativity as we worry about 'doing it right'. But if we can move forward with hope we can achieve a lot. There is a real need for evaluation and research into what visitors' and residents' perceptions of and responses to Gaelic interpretation are. We should try out different approaches with an open mind, and a willingness to experiment without the worry of failing. The time is right to 'catch the moment' and work in partnership to deliver exciting, innovative interpretation using Gaelic.

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Uncertainty and mystery are energies of life. Don't let them scare you unduly, for they keep boredom at bay and spark creativity.

R. I. Fitzhenry, publisher