

## The Adopt-a-monument scheme

Helen Bradley, Adopt-a-Monument Officer with the Council for Scottish Archaeology, explains how the scheme benefits both the monuments and the local communities who care about them.

In the 1990s a number of local archaeological societies were itching to get more involved in looking after their local heritage. As a result the Council for Scottish Archaeology (CSA) set up the Adopt-a-Monument Scheme. The Scheme proved very popular, but had to be shelved in the late 90s when it was no longer possible to fund a dedicated officer. However, interest in the scheme never really died down, and in response to a spate of new enquiries a few years ago CSA successfully applied to Historic Scotland for funds to support a new Adopt-a-Monument Officer post.

The scheme offers support and advice to community groups who want to take on heritage projects that deal with the key themes of conservation, access improvement, and interpretation. There are currently ten projects underway all over Scotland. They range from restoring an 18th century folly in the Western Isles to creating a heritage trail connecting five stone circles in Perthshire. There are innovative experiments such as reconstructing a prehistoric 'burnt mound' site on Shetland, through to the creation of a monastic garden in the grounds of a Borders Priory, a project which embraces both natural and cultural heritage.

The scheme provides training in a range of skills tailored to the needs of each group. This includes survey and recording; documentary research; project management; fundraising; hosting educational events, and interpretive planning - you name it, we provide it, or else find someone who can!

The real benefit of the scheme is the symbiosis between monument and community. The monument itself is conserved, celebrated and interpreted for the future, and the act of participating in the project brings the group together with new skills and confidence, and a real sense of ownership of the heritage on its doorstep.

The interpretive side of Adopt-a-Monument poses real challenges for communities. They need to achieve two things which at first seem mutually exclusive - enabling the individual experience or 'feel' of a monument to be enjoyed freely without too much prescription; but also making it as physically and intellectually accessible as possible. Monuments convey their own palpable atmosphere to interested visitors, and this is one of the reasons why people value them so highly. Take prehistoric sites for example; these often engender a sense of remoteness in time and a partly-alien quality which we must be careful not to stifle with over-interpretation. Conversely, at sites nestling at the heart of residential developments there is often a sense that the incongruous is in fact the reassuringly familiar, invisible even. In these situations something show-stoppingly creative is needed in order to bring a monument to life. Those groups trying

to get to grips with the interpretive process have to understand these diverse ways that people will experience a monument before embarking on any interpretation work.

There is also a crucial balance to be struck between 'what does our monument, mean to us?' and 'how can we effectively communicate the overall importance of this monument to others?' Community groups adopt sites in the first place because they have a deep, usually very personal, connection to a monument. But the interpreters must avoid a blinkered approach where a local and specific passion for a site becomes its only story. Value is not just local (though this is of vital importance), it is often also national (and increasingly global). This must be integrated into the interpretation to prevent it alienating visitors from outside the local area. This is why we encourage groups to take into account all their potential audiences through research, consultation and the production of an interpretive plan.

The often hugely contrasting local perceptions of what is meaningful and communicable about a monument pose an unrelenting challenge to interpreters, both community members and external advisors. As with all community-led work the glue which holds these projects together is active and constant discussion, without which an end result may be achieved, but one which really tells only half the story. The usefulness of the CSA's involvement here lies in facilitating this interpretive process (which can seem so daunting at first) and helping groups to accommodate broad perceptions of what is important about a monument through their interpretive approach.

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**Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has.**

*Margaret Mead*