

The cradle of inspiration

How can the story of a birth relate to the story of a life?
Mary Hudson considers how, as Wordsworth put it, the child is
father of the man – or woman.

Since Burns's death in 1796, his birthplace in Alloway – 'Burns Cottage' – has welcomed millions of visitors from all over the world. One may safely assume that the majority of these visitors are drawn here by their interest in the life and works of the iconic 'ploughman poet', but Burns did not write any of his poems or songs in this cottage, nor did he do any ploughing there. Burns left Alloway when he was just seven years old. Here lies the dilemma for birthplace interpretation – should the guiding principle be the real significance of the place; or a broader perspective that will satisfy more popular interests?

Many visitor attractions in Britain look at the lives of famous figures from the past. Interpretation has in many cases played a role in humanising these sites, bringing them to life with stories of how these people lived and worked. Birthplaces fall into this category, but few limit their interpretation to the birth and childhood of their celebrities. In Stratford-upon-Avon, the houses owned by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust welcomed 688,000 visitors in 2007. One of them is believed to be the birthplace of the bard, and is also where he lived as a newly-wed adult. Interpretation here can therefore focus on both the child and the man who is probably of more interest to most visitors. Sir Winston Churchill was born in Blenheim Palace, but that is unlikely to be the motivation behind the 374,021 visits made in 2008. Instead, the temporary exhibitions at Blenheim on the subject of Churchill choose to interpret his life.

Two other birthplaces that were not homes for the famous adults who started their

lives there are the **Charles Dickens' Birthplace Museum** in Portsmouth and **J. M. Barrie's Birthplace** in Kirriemuir, Angus. In both, interpretation explores the aspects of the writers' childhood that inspired them, revealing direct links between early life and later work. We learn that J. M. Barrie lost his elder brother when he was six years old: this is believed to have inspired the concept of Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up. Dickens, we are told, only spent the first three years of his life in Portsmouth, but returned there to research his novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*. Similarly, at **Wordsworth House** in Cockermouth, Cumbria, we learn that the poet was inspired by the landscape of his birthplace, although he left when he was 13 years old.

This is the most honest approach birthplace interpretation can take – he/she wasn't the person you know here but he/she became the person you know because of here – and this will be our approach in the re-interpretation of Burns's birthplace in Alloway. Visitors will be encouraged to learn about the seeds of inspiration that shaped both the man and the poet.

Honesty may be the best policy in birthplace interpretation. But none of the birthplaces that focus solely on the birth and childhood of their subject attract as many visitors as those that have the life story to tell: J. M. Barrie's Birthplace and the Charles Dickens' Birthplace Museum saw fewer than 4,600 visitors each in 2008-9; Wordsworth House around 27,000. Compare those figures with about 70,000 visitors to **Dove Cottage**, where



Burns Cottage

Wordsworth lived and wrote with Coleridge and his sister Dorothy; and 85,000 at the **Brontë Parsonage** in Haworth. Factors such as property size, location or different levels of fame may play a part, but is it also something to do with the fact that the famous people we know never lived or wrote in the places where they were born? Alloway attracts around 270,000 visitors a year, but only 10 per cent visit the cottage where Burns was born. The other 90 per cent visit the wider site, which relates to Burns's famous poem *Tam o' Shanter* and includes the **Tam o' Shanter Experience** with its popular café and shop. If Burns hadn't returned to the landscape of his childhood as a setting for one of his most popular poems, would all those people visit Alloway today?

Perhaps the guiding principle for birthplace interpretation has to be the overall mission for the attraction. A site that interprets only a famous person's birth and early life can stick closely to the integrity of the place. In doing so, it may well be a hidden gem. But if the aim is for a busy, profit-making visitor attraction, it needs to offer something more than the 'cradle of inspiration' in its most literal sense.

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