

Interpret Scotland | A'Foillseachadh na h-Alba

the journal for Scotland's Interpreters

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People focused interpretation

Interpret Scotland

Issue 19: People focused interpretation

You could argue that all interpretation is 'people focused' - it depends on lively, engaging communication between human beings, whether that involves a museum display, a guided tour, or a mobile phone download.

But for this issue, we've concentrated on the really personal aspects of interpretation: the challenges of how to interpret people and their lives; bridging the gulf between a famous person and their not-so-famous childhood; what makes for powerful connections on a guided tour. And in this 'Year of Homecoming', there's more than a nod towards one of Scotland's most famous people - that mercurial, mythological bard who started life as a ploughman in Ayrshire.

We'd also like to get some feedback about the directions Interpret Scotland might take with this publication. This is the second online edition, and we're looking at what happens next. Do you like getting the magazine as pdf files with links from an e-mail, like this? Or would a website with a blog and a discussion forum be more useful? We've set up a short survey to find out, and would be very pleased if you could take a minute or two to complete it.

James Carter, editor

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'Bha duil agam gum briseadh mo cridhe an latha a bha again ris an Aoineadh Mhor'
'On the day of leaving Aoineadh Mòr I thought my heart would rend'
The words of Mary Cameron, from an account of her eviction in 1824

In 1779 there were 45 people living in Aoineadh Mòr, a township on the Morvern peninsula. By the time of the 1851 census there were just two left, presumably the lowland shepherds. Across the whole of Morvern, the population has fallen from around 2,000 inhabitants in the early 19th century to less than 500 today. A way of life was changed forever, and people left the Highlands never to return.

Clearly we are dealing with an emotive and sensitive subject if and when we seek to interpret the history of these places, and of the Highland clearances that made them what they are today. Bob Jones MBE pioneered the interpretation of these townships for Forestry Commission Scotland, a responsibility he took very seriously:

'I take the view that these locations are almost memorials - people lived, laughed, cried and died in these communities... We are duty bound to treat the sites with sensitivity and not just see them as tourist opportunities; above all we have a duty of care.' ¹

Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) manages some 660,000 hectares of national forest estate throughout the country. Memories of past lives are scattered throughout our woodlands and hillsides. But the stories of these sites are not all the same. Some sites undoubtedly had a turbulent history; at other townships the residents left of their own free will. Which sites should we interpret, and how best to do it? The sites that were originally chosen for interpretation - Aoineadh Mòr, Leitir Fura on Skye and Rosal in Strathnaver - were those where there was original evidence available and a strong story to tell.

For the township of Aoineadh Mòr, literally brought to light again after a felling operation in the 1990s, we had Mary Cameron's original and moving account of the eviction, told to the son of her minister years later in Glasgow. Although in a remote part of the country, the story was powerful enough to justify our investment here. The spin off was that some site development could add positively to the limited local recreation and tourism infrastructure.

Leitir Fura on Skye sits within the Kyleakin and Kinloch Hills, an area which has been subject to a substantial native woodland restoration project. The area benefits from stunning coastal views, which add considerably to the visitor experience. New interpretation for Rosal township, in Strathnaver, was developed around the same time. Strathnaver witnessed some of the most brutal scenes of the Highland clearances: the notorious Patrick Sellar worked for the estate here, and was ultimately charged with homicide because of the way he handled evictions.

Again pioneered by Bob Jones, new ways of sensitively interpreting archaeology sites were used at Aoineadh Mor and Leitir Fura in particular – the Sack Sign and the Signal Sign.

Sack Signs were just that – messages printed onto sand-filled sacks. Cheap to produce, easy to install and low impact, they seemed to be the perfect medium. Unfortunately rain and rodents took their toll on Bob's sacks, and they needed changing more often than site staff were willing or able to do. New sacks twice a year doesn't sound too onerous – but look at how many site panels struggle to get changed once every five years. We have not forgotten the Sack Sign, however, and it may well reappear on a site near you one day!

Signal Signs have proved hardier – they remove much of the visual intrusion of onsite panels but still offer a robust solution. They also encourage some interaction in pulling the text panel out of the wooden post if you want to read it.

On all three sites Michael Glen's skilful wordsmithing sought to capture the essence of the sites and the story they had to tell. Reconstruction drawings have been used on each site: expensive to produce but invaluable in bringing the story to life. They have been based on site evidence and aim to paint an accurate picture as is possible.

Do you have the Gaelic?

Of course English was not the language spoken at these sites – you would have heard Gaelic here. The appropriate use of Gaelic language and culture in interpretation is a hot topic for us, as we are currently charged with developing the FCS Gaelic language plan. Some research on attitudes to current FCS use of Gaelic within interpretation suggested that our favoured method of word pairing was not well received by either Gaelic speakers or non speakers.

This was unfortunate as it was a neat design solution and had gained approval with interpretation colleagues. But when interpreter and audience disagree, we must listen to the audience! New interpretation for Leitir Fura will include original Gaelic text and audio, with English translations rather than vice versa. Will this capture

the blàs (flavour) of the place in a better or different way? Will it work for every audience? We shall have to wait and see, and keep asking the questions.

Discover your roots in Scotland's forests

The major FCS interpretation initiative for Homecoming Scotland 2009 continues the work of interpreting the lives that used to be lived in our forests. **Forest Heritage Scotland** is a joint project with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), and aims to tell the 'stories in the stones' on the national forest estate.

Around 60 sites are featured on the website, about 30 of them being old townships or dwellings. The project is a work in progress, and throughout this Year of Homecoming, the stories are being gathered and presented. One of the aims is to collect stories from the descendants of those who lived on the sites, though this part of the project has had a slow start.

However, what the webpages do allow is for the fascinating stories of these sites to be presented in an accurate and detailed way, together with photos, maps and reconstruction drawings. We have started to use **audio files** and also film clips (hosted on u-tube). In theory the website will be both easy and cheap to maintain and keep up to date. Time will tell, but we feel we are developing a more sustainable and engaging way of interpreting our remote historical sites. Continued advances in technology may well mean that onsite and offsite interpretation become the same thing.

We have faced a general issue of maintenance on these remote sites.

We constantly need to remind ourselves that any installation and its associated infrastructure needs care and attention – and ultimately replacement or removal. This is encouraging us to look more at the use of web based interpretation, and at the possibility of running guided walks: we hope that a recent staff training event with the well-known interpreter Susan Cross will encourage more use of this medium.

We also continue to look for appropriate, engaging and sustainable ways to present onsite messages, though my recent efforts at burning words into sheep bones didn't seem to work (the text weathered away too quickly). Sometimes the solution can be very simple, as at Beglan Township (Glenmore Forest Park) where we have sandblasting a set of stones to name the ruins – a simple and low maintenance version of the Sack Signs.

Lastly, we need to 'reality check' the quality of the visitor experience that we can offer on these sites. They are remote and there is often little to see other than the low remains of stone walls. Whilst this shouldn't stop us interpreting the sites, we need to make sure our promotion doesn't oversell the experience in our enthusiasm to share the story.

Overall, the lesson is to present the stories as well and as accurately as you can - and keep asking the questions. The places and their past people deserve no less.

¹ Personal communication, 2009

²'Forrest, F 2008 Is Our Gaelic Any Good? Forestry Commission Scotland'

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History is the present. That's why every generation writes it anew. But what most people think of as history is its end product, myth.

E.L.Doctorow, author

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The interpreter's pineapple

Jackie Lee explores the rich world of costumed interpretation

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
Robert Burns – To a louse

It seems appropriate in the year of Homecoming to use a few lines from our national bard to start us thinking about costumed interpretation. For after all, costumed interpretation is all about seeing an historical character, whether real or 'generic', and the period they inhabit through the eyes of both the interpreter and the visiting public. For many, it might look like an opportunity to get dressed up and have some fun playing at being in the past. But this form of interpretation is a powerful tool when trying to convey interpretive messages associated with social history, particularly in the realm of manners and etiquette. It highlights in an immediate way how much life has changed for us today while engaging and involving the visitor in the learning process.

To illustrate this let us look at the life of Mr and Mrs Grant, the first residents of 5 Charlotte Square, Edinburgh – now the headquarters of the [Edinburgh World Heritage Trust](#). For the last four years, on [Doors Open Day](#), it has been possible to step back to 1810 and meet these fine New Town characters in their home. Mrs Grant is famed as a society hostess par excellence; her husband, Mr Grant, is an advocate who works to keep his wife in the style to which she has now become accustomed.

People who come to visit the Grants at home are given lessons on how to become part of the social scene of the time. Most importantly, out of earshot of Mrs Grant, Mr Grant explains that no one must eat the pineapple on the table set for dessert as he has hired it for the occasion and it must be returned.

He goes on to explain that pineapples are so expensive that to have one on the table is a real social must-have; but expense prohibits him from outright purchase. So a bit of fun is had around the 'hired pineapple', and this tiny historic detail is used to highlight the manners of the period as well as the story of the Grants' life and, equally, of others in their social class at the time. Although costumed interpretation is often seen as a more populist approach to interpretation it is no less scholarly, as shown by the pineapple story. It is an excellent means of reaching a wide audience; particularly those for whom access through the written word may be difficult for a variety of reasons.

For costumed interpretation to work, the visitor must be well prepared for what is about to happen. It is after all a ruse, but if you don't know it's happening or what the rules are you can't play. And a ruse it most certainly is, for everyone knows they are not really meeting a person from the past. Given this fact it is important for costumed interpreters to be skilled in 'drifting' between first and third person interpretation – there can be nothing more infuriating to lost visitors who want to find their way back to the bus than to encounter a 'character' who has not developed a means of providing that information and who steadfastly remains in character cross-examining them on 'what a bus is!' With all the visual stimuli available to people today they are sophisticated enough to come in and out of the game as and when required.

Going deeper

While costumed interpretation can be seen as a 'game' that encourages people to suspend disbelief and engage in their heritage, for some it can provide a more profound experience. At the [NTS Hill of Tarvit Mansionhouse](#), Artemis Cultural & Educational Services provides costumed interpreters as the cook/housekeeper and visiting valet/butler. These sessions have been particularly important to visitors who have been in service themselves, and who reminisce with the costumed interpreters about their working life. It has also provided a connection with the past for families whose relatives worked in service.

On one occasion an elderly lady brought by her son spent a long time talking to the 'butler' about her time in service in London – as they moved on through the house, her son returned to thank the butler. He said he had never heard his mother talking about her working life in such an animated fashion and felt that he now understood some things she had done in her own household as a result. The same man visited the house the following year, this time on his own, and spent a long time watching the butler working with a group of children. At the end of the session he came forward and explained that mother had now, sadly, died. He felt that watching the butler with the children had reminded him of the happy time he had spent with his mother at the house and the things he had found out about her on that day. It is very moving to have played such an important role in someone's life, and shows how important such interpretation can be in helping people make connections with their past.

At [The Burns House](#), Dumfries, our interpretation of Robert Burns' wife, Jean Armour, has centred on her widowhood and how she has coped since the death of Robert. This has produced an enthusiastic response from visitors: our interpreter has been presented with red roses, asked to provide her autograph – as Jean Armour – and received marriage proposals! It would seem that for some visitors the historical character can transcend fantasy and become real.

Perhaps this is where Burns' words literally come full circle. They make it clear that, unlike other forms of interpretation, costumed interpretation enables the visitor to see historical characters in another dimension.

Tips for setting up a costumed interpretation programme

- Make it appropriate. Costumed interpretation should be aimed at fulfilling the overall interpretation and education goals of the heritage site.
- Get staff on board. It is of paramount importance that the costumed interpreters have a good working relationship with all staff so they are seen as an important part of the overall interpretation.
- Get your visitors in the right frame of mind. Visitors need to be prepared for who they are about to meet and what might be asked of them.
- Be sensitive. While there are key messages you want to convey, you must accept that some visitors just want to have their photo taken with the costumed character and move on. Interpreters should not feel that they must give every visitor a set of facts.
- Check your results. It is important for the continuing development of the live/costumed interpretation programme that it is evaluated regularly.

Jackie Lee is Director of [Artemis Cultural & Educational Services Ltd.](#)

On the whole human beings want to be good, but not too good, and not quite all the time.

George Orwell, writer

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News

AHI Conference, Cardiff

AHI's annual conference is in South Wales this year, and runs from 9-11 September 2009. Based in Cardiff, the conference will look at interpretation's role in regenerating both places and communities. There is a full programme of visits to inspiring sites in the South Wales Valleys, as well as local and international speakers who will look at how interpretation can restore pride, attract investment and help shape the future. Bookings are now open for this essential annual interpreters' get together, and the full programme and booking form are available on the [ahi website](#).

MSc Interpretation: Management and Practice

Applications are now being accepted for the MSc Interpretation: Management and Practice at the University of the Highlands and Islands. This flexible programme allows you to study for PgCert, PgDip or MSc qualifications as well as individual modules as CPD. This year there are 15 part-time SAAS funded places and 2 full-time SAAS funded places available. Scottish residents can use the ILA500 to pay their fees. Further details on www.perth.uhi.ac.uk/interpretation

An Interpretation MBE!

Bob Jones, for many years Head of Design and Interpretative Services at the Forestry Commission and Forestry Commission Scotland, was awarded an MBE in the 2009 Honours List. The award was for his 'services to forestry' - but those services included a passionate commitment to the cause of interpretation and to Interpret Scotland. Perhaps Bob took the opportunity to discuss the meaning of Tilden's principles with Her Majesty...

Going Doune Well

In April 2009, Historic Scotland launched a new audio tour at Doune Castle. Primarily to increase the social history content in the castle, the opportunity to capitalize on the now famous connection with Monty Python was too good to miss. Visitors can enjoy a random access guide, with optional access to Monty Python excerpts for the fans. The tour is narrated by Terry Jones, who offers significant insight into the medieval history of the castle as well as unique stories about the filming of Monty Python and the Holy Grail at the site. The project provided an interesting exercise in layering interpretation for different audiences and balancing 'real' history with the more recent stories of the film-shoot

Vital Spark papers online

Papers from the highly successful Vital Spark conference, run jointly by Interpret Scotland and AHI in 2007, are now available from the [AHI website](#). All papers are in PDF format, and are free to download.

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Step this way...

Viola Lier gives her top tips for debutant guided tour leaders.

Wonderful! You have done your preparations, you know your facts and you have thought about the practicalities. Your tour is of the right duration, you are comfortable with the route, have allowed plenty of places to sit down and to take shelter. You know the maximum size of your group and have adjusted your stopping places. You are sure your visitors will be able to hear you, see what you are talking about and will be safe and comfortable throughout your tour. Great! That's it, isn't it?

Let's slow down and make this a truly memorable experience for your visitors. Here are some more thoughts:

- Put yourself in your visitors' shoes. Can you remember the first time you came here? What did you expect? What surprised you? What fascinated you? What disappointed you? Re-discover – be inspired by your visitors.
- A little chat can go a long way. Try to find out as much as you can from your visitors before you start. Apart from establishing rapport and putting your visitors at ease, it just might provide you with the information you need to tailor your tour content to the expectations, knowledge and background of your crowd. And remember: you never get a second chance to make a first impression.
- Start at the beginning and take your visitors with you on a journey of discovery. Mention the practicalities (duration, safety, photographs, mobiles...) and whet your visitors' appetite for what's to come. Never overestimate previous knowledge and never underestimate your visitors' intelligence.
- I'm not nervous! Nerves are good, but letting them show is not. Perhaps memorise the beginning of your tour. Breathe and smile. Pauses in your commentary are good: remember that they will seem longer to you than to your audience. Your visitors need pauses to digest information and impressions.
- You know enough. In truth, you probably know more than enough. Don't be tempted to tell them everything you know, but select and present information in a clear, structured, meaningful way that will create a basis for your visitors to want more and come back. Less can be more.

- If you don't strike oil, stop boring. Variety is the spice of life. Have a good mix of contents and be prepared to chop and change. Give short-hand descriptions and definitions for complex ideas. Don't blind with science. Don't drown in dates. It's not only what, but how you deliver it. Remember the good old provoke – relate – reveal. Always be aware of what your visitors are looking at: that's what has caught their interest.
- Involve, engage, enthrall, enthuse your audience. Your visitors chose to come with you. They want interaction with their guide. How about riddles and activities? Are you using suspense? Are you making links? Listen as well as talk. Perhaps some of your visitors have first hand experience of living or working in an environment you are describing.
- Do you have the touch? What about handling objects and illustrations? You will be surrounded by them in a museum or on a nature walk – make good use of them. And just in case, why not carry some appropriate objects with you.
- May I ask a question? Are you happy for questions to come at any time throughout your tour? Will you invite questions at certain points or at the end? Remember to thank visitors for their questions and to repeat the question for the whole group to hear and feel involved. Perhaps throw the question back to the group or to the one who asked. And if you don't know the answer, that's ok. Don't make it up: admit you don't know, and say you will try to find out and/or suggest where visitors can learn more.
- Finish on a high! Have you delivered what you promised? Briefly summarise the highlights, invite final questions and give visitors pointers to what they might like to do next.

This article is inspired by *The Art of Guiding* by Katrine Prince and *Guiding is Fun*, part of the STGA (Scottish Tourist Guides Association) Training Programme, by Ros Newlands.

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The Guide is definitive. Reality is frequently inaccurate.
Douglas Adams, writer

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Interpreters' soapbox

Who are you looking at?

An anonymous interpreter lets off steam...

If I hear 'we get everyone here' one more time when I ask who the audience is for an interpretation project, I'm likely to say something rude. I think there are two things about this kind of answer that wind me up: the idea that there are places that attract 'just about everyone'; and that audience profile is the same thing as target audience.

Firstly, I don't believe that the majority of experiences on offer attract 'everyone'. Even the most eclectic of attractions can't lay claim to that. If I'm challenged at this point I have to try and think of a group of people who wouldn't visit, for example, a museum or nature reserve. Homeless heroin addicts from an inner city? Base jumping snowboarders looking for the next adrenaline fix? Russian oligarchs wooing a new business associate? It is entirely possible that a Premiership footballer was spotted once, but that doesn't make them part of your audience profile. And yes, I'm sure all those groups could conceivably go and enjoy what's on offer; but that's not the point. Everyone can watch Coronation Street. But they don't. The Corrie audience has a very wide range of professions, ages and social groupings, so that's probably not the way to break the audience down; but I bet the scriptwriters and editors can. And I'd love to see the face of a commissioning editor at the BBC if a new programme was pitched as being 'for everyone'...

Alright, I'll grudgingly concede that there is a wide range of people at most attractions, but they can't all be the target audience. So what if there are primary school children and university professors, farmers and city dwellers? What's important is which of these groups the interpretation is targeted at and why. Rattling off dozens of different visitor types doesn't prove anything except that even more thought is needed to pin down what the interpretation is trying to achieve.

What matters when we look at our audience and then at our target audience? Does it matter how old they are or where they've come from? Well sometimes it does, but sometimes it doesn't. How useful is it to categorise visitors to one of Scotland's mountains as hillwalkers? Isn't that a bit like saying the people who visit swimming baths are swimmers? Of course there's a need to know how people interact and engage, and their reasons for visiting, but what's important here? How old a hillwalker is and where they've come from, or what their opinion on land management is and their knowledge of the Outdoor Access Code?

Of course, we know all this. We know the importance of visitors' expectations, lifestyles, learning styles, behavioural and social norms. I'm not saying anything new here. So why is it that I keep hearing and seeing audience profiling that doesn't

really help in pinning down what's being done and why? Is it just laziness? Is it that the planning process is boring and folk just want to crack on with the exciting bit – dreaming up gizmos and contraptions? Or is it all too complicated and there aren't the tools to do the job properly?

When compared with marketing men and advertisers (who seem to know what colour underpants I like to wear and just how to get me to buy more) interpretation doesn't take understanding the audience very seriously at all.

Well, I'd love to carry on this rant over a pint sometime. If anyone feels like it, I could meet you in my local – you'd like it, you get everyone there...

It is absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious.

Oscar Wilde, writer

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Peeling back the layers

David Hopes describes how stripping off layers of paint may reveal more than just the fine detail of a statue.

Standing alone in a corner of a museum storeroom in Alloway is a small statue of Robert Burns: highly dramatised, unquestionably romantic, instantly recognisable, the sculpture is one of a large number cloned in the 19th century from the Nasmyth portrait of Burns to represent one of Scotland's most revered writers. Over the past century the statue has been painted and repainted to freshen-up its plaster curves, resulting in a heavy accumulation of paint on the surface. A once smartly dressed thirty-something poet, book and pencil in hand, has become embalmed in layers of lovingly-applied gloss, each coat burying more of the difficult detail. This statue of Burns has become an amorphous Everyman whose form survives but whose finer points have become smoothed-over and simplified. An icon has become anonymous.

Stripping back Burns and reinterpreting the poet's birthplace is the latest challenge faced by the National Trust for Scotland, which took ownership of Burns Cottage and Museum, Burns Monument, and the Tam o' Shanter Experience visitor centre in November of last year. The opportunity to build a new museum and reinterpret nine Burns-related sites dispersed across the village was afforded by 2009 being the 250th anniversary of the poet's birth, even if the project to deliver change will not be complete until next year.

However, the real driver for the redevelopment of Burns heritage in Alloway, the place of the poet's birth just south of Ayr, was the condition of 5,500 artefacts which have been painstakingly assembled in Alloway since the early 19th century. Described as 'Scotland's literary crown jewels', the world's most significant collection of manuscripts, books, art, and memorabilia relating to the life, work and legacy of Burns was in danger of physical disintegration until the recent involvement of the Trust. Moreover, the true colour of the poet's life and the richness of his work was buried beneath decades of tired interpretation. The potential of this amazing collection to reflect the brilliance of Burns in and around the poet's birthplace is formidable, but it is not without its challenges.

One of those challenges is the nature of the collection. It should come as no surprise to discover that the museum collection is largely paper-based – over 3,500 books and 311 manuscripts in the poet's hand represent the fruits of Burns's literary outpourings. They reaffirm that it is because of his way with words that we have rated Burns and collected so much in his name. Although these manuscripts and books are hugely important, filling a museum with them and asking the visitor to appreciate their individual value would be interpretive suicide. Aesthetically, there is a sameness to

many of the manuscripts and unlocking their meaning requires effort on the part of the visitor. Some manuscripts are hard to read, and the use of Scots in many of the poems and songs can be off-putting.

Another challenge is that Burns himself, the subject matter for the new museum, is so complex yet seemingly so well known. Reinterpreting such a complicated, iconic figure whilst negotiating a course through a minefield of myths and decades of cultish attachment is a tricky business. Catering for those who know nothing about Burns as well as satisfying the avid Burnsian is also a tough balancing act.

In an attempt to overcome these barriers, the new museum – Robert Burns Birthplace Museum (RBBM) – will be selective in its use of manuscripts and books, creating displays from items across the collection to make the museum more visually interesting. We have looked to the collection to develop interpretive themes and key messages; at RBBM interpretation will be thematic rather than chronological, a deliberate departure from the way Burns is interpreted elsewhere. Hands-on interactives will work alongside interpretive panels and object labels to provide a multi-layered approach to communicating the story of the poet's life and work. Audio points and performance will be used wherever possible to convey the vibrancy of Burns's language and to aid an understanding of, and appreciation for, Lowland Scots. Alloway was a place of beginnings for Robert Burns: it is where his life began and where we hope the visitor will be inspired to begin a journey of discovering more about the poet.

And what about the unfortunate statue of Burns? Over the next six to twelve months the layers of old paint will be removed, allowing a fresh new look under the surface. What will be revealed from the chrysalis of paint will be a figure which will hopefully intrigue, inspire and inform. Burns may yet be reborn in Alloway.

Robert Burns Birthplace Museum is scheduled to open to the public in the summer of 2010. For more information, visit the [NTS website](#).

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Life is like an onion: You peel it off one layer at a time, and sometimes you weep.

Carl Sandburg, writer

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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 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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There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets in the future.

Graham Greene, writer

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A dram o'banter

Robert Burns is the national mascot for this 'Year of Homecoming'. But what would the great man have thought of being the centre of so much attention? Michael Glen tuned in to his spirit...

When taverns stert tae stowe wi folk,
An warkers thraw aff labour's yoke,
As simmer days are waxin lang,
An couthie chiels brak intae sang;
Amang them aw are sonsie faces,
Brent-new income frae furrin places,
Ilk ane, sae blithely, takin turns
Tae heist a toast tae Robert Burns.

This truth fand honest Rab dumfounert,
An aiblins juist a bittock scunnert,
At sic a stushie noo he'd perished,
E'en though his warks were unco cherished.
He thocht o Jean, his loosome wife,
Left lane tae thole the waefu strife
O takin tent o hoose an hame,
An greetin bairns wi empie wame.

Bit then he gauped, though nane could see,
Fur his was immortalitie.
The nation's bard was happ't in awe,
An on his mou the wirds: It's braw
Tae be a leegen here on Earth,
Wi folk frae aw aroon its girth
Hame-comin fur a salutation
Tae Scotia's makar's reputation.

Bit pleasures are lik petals, brittle,
Wi man an aft-times scattert skittle,
Ane instant 'mang his billies prood,
The next a slap whaur he has stood.
Oor Rab kent weel that tae be vauntie,
Tae strunt about, be ower jauntie,
Wad dwang guid men tae ding him doon,
An breenge him frae Edina toon.

Bit tae oor tale. Rab's here as guest,
Tae handsel this by-ornar fest –
Twa hunnert years an fifty's passed
Syne he blew in on Janwar's blast.
Nae parlyment sat doon that day
Tae legislate that, come whit may,
Oor rantin, rovin Robin's date
Wad gar the warld tae celebrate.

The verra thing diverts him maist
Is gangin oot in furm o ghaist.
Tae tell the thrang amidst the nappy,
It's Rab the bogle keps them happy.
Frae howf tae howf, an ilk ale hoose,
His speerit rins, a swippert moose,
Jinkin and joukin shauchlin feet,
Doon the wynds, along the street.

Frae moose tae houlet he chynges guise,
An flees aboot the gloamin skies.
He gies a skraich, unhaily, dauntin,
That minds admirers he's still hauntin.
Bit this is jest, tae be contrair –
He finds the adulation sair.
He whuspers in a lug: It's Rab.
Drink on, and he'll pick up the tab!

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This poem is based on Burns' well-known humorous work Tam o'Shanter

aiblins – perhaps

chiels – lads

nappy – strong drink

breenge – drive out

houlet – owl

swippert – nimble

by-ornar – extraordinary

loosome – lovable

wame – stomach

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How long ago is the past?

Bob Powell ponders how living history can be kept up to date.

What image does the word 'museum' conjure up in your mind? Glass cases, serried rows of objects, books on walls, dull colours, formality, quiet in the library sense...? Those negative associations are, thankfully, increasingly mythical. In contrast, I would suggest that 'museum' should conjure up people both past and present: reflections of past lives, and enthusiastic engagement with people of all ages and origins from the present. Further, it should mean lively but realistic interpretation; a place of inspiration to explore, to engage with and to learn. To that end a museum has a living interpretive function, perhaps not the one commonly perceived, where the collections or objects are only one of the many tools that a museum has in its work of interpretation, engagement, understanding and inspiration.

Particularly in the social sense, most museum objects echo work, creativity, manufacture, living, struggle, pleasure, recreation and other strands of the daily grind. They all share the common factor of human experience and therefore an obvious link with the user or audience. An object in a glass case in iconic isolation may have limited interest for some, but put that object in a lifelike context that aids interpretation and stimulates the imagination and it goes the extra mile, particularly when it is researched and presented in an accurate, realistic and stimulating way. Interpreting people does not necessarily have to involve the portrayal of an actual person, but when linked to living interpretation it can provide a window into a time, a way of life or lifestyle.

At the Highland Folk Museum, some of our most successful and engaging interpretation is through the medium of real people. Acknowledging the museum founder Dr. Isabel F. Grant's recognition of the importance of nostalgia in interpretation, there is much to be achieved from having interpreters with real life knowledge, experiences and stories. Not only is there the benefit of mutual reminiscence and exchange of experiences among people of the same generation, a key part of the interpreter's learning process, there is also the major benefit of first-hand exchange between generations. The former undoubtedly enlivens the visitor experience. The latter provides opportunities not just to engage but hopefully to inspire new generations to take an interest in the past and in real lives, skills and traditions, and especially to become involved. We are facing a potential crisis in some fields of interpretation as the last exponents of some crafts and aspects of what were once deemed traditional ways of life are dying out. What of the future if our young are not engaged with their past and inspired to become involved in its understanding?

Of course, you then approach the question of relevance. Our older staff, the current tradition bearers, happily interpret and engage with people about our late 1930s farm, school and other features. There is a commonality of nostalgia that reaches back into a lifestyle that extended into the 1950s: it is why, to increase its relevance to our visitors, our latest building is presented as it was in the 1950s. But if our major success involves real people, and living history and folk museums are about real people, when do we progress further with structures, features and people who have experienced the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and beyond? If nostalgia, tradition bearing and exchange is as important as our work implies, we must remember that the parents of many of our young visitors were born after 1990. An Orwellian 1984 is 25 years ago, an increasingly distant past to our many and varied visitors. Life did not stop with the Victorians, Edwardians or the pre-war era – and neither should museums or living history.

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We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future.

George Bernard Shaw, author

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