

# 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.



First hand exchanges between generations are a powerful interpretive tool

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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