

# 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'



Every fashionable dinner table should have one – the table set for dessert, Georgian style

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



Jean Armour reminisces about her late husband, Robert Burns  
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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.

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## 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.

# News

## 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.

## 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**.

## 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...

## 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](http://www.perth.uhi.ac.uk/interpretation)