

## Multicultural Access

The recent opening of the Commonwealth Games in Manchester vividly shows how ethnically diverse the Commonwealth is, including the different countries which form the United Kingdom. Diversity has always been our historical reality. This diversity can be seen in our amalgamation of different cultures over many centuries, and the dramatic effects of this on our built and natural heritage.

There has been a long presence of Black people in the British countryside. An African garrison was stationed at Hadrian's wall during the Roman period, and it is estimated there were 10,000 Black people in rural Britain in the eighteenth century. Today there are large numbers of ethnic minority people living in Britain, and London is the most multicultural city in the world. But many minority groups still feel excluded from our countryside and heritage sites.

Failure to understand and interpret our multicultural world can lead to people feeling misrepresented or unrepresented. It also denies everyone access to a full understanding of where we come from and how things have come to be the way they are! Multicultural interpretation benefits everyone.

Minority groups are becoming increasingly vocal in demanding more accurate and representative interpretation. "Opium deal settles exhibition row" in the May 25th edition of the Glasgow Herald explains the outrage from 17 Chinese communities in the UK, when an exhibition of one of Britain's infamous traders, the East India company, failed to reflect the company's part in what led to the Opium Wars between Britain and China.

Interpretation does not happen in a vacuum. It is set in the context of personal, cultural and organisational world views. The acceptance of a multi-cultural British history changes how all of us see ourselves in Britain and within the world, repositioning minority cultural communities in the social history of contemporary society.

The inclusion of the multi-cultural facets of sites and collections makes them more meaningful and accessible to ethnic minorities. It is part of the process of the healing of a society that can contribute to the repositioning of inter-cultural relationships in the world.

### Towards inclusive interpretation

Our interpretation institutions need to raise their own awareness in order to:

- Move away from the dominant and mythical mono-culture that is no longer relevant to the contemporary world
- Fill the interpretive gap in Britain's multi-cultural history and heritage

- Re-define how participation in interpretation by ethnic Communities should happen, and embody these transformed concepts in new access policies and strategies.

To do this, they should undertake initiatives to:

- Uncover the currently invisible multi-cultural aspects of local and national history
- Encourage, support and assist ethnic communities in making connections with relevant aspects of their local and national history and heritage
- Encourage, support and assist ethnic communities in the creation of new artefacts which embody and celebrate cultural memory, multi-cultural history and heritage
- Enable the wider population to see themselves positively in the context of Britain's multi-cultural history and heritage.

### The future

The role of multicultural interpretation cannot be underestimated in advancing the cause of equal access and social inclusion. Its power lies in the shaping of the big picture of interpretation which all of us see ourselves - the playing out of the shifting of balance between who we are, how we are seen and who we can be. Multicultural interpretation must be recognised and resourced as a force to understand our past and to help build a better society for all in future.

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### References:

1. Interpretation Journal published by the Association for Heritage Interpretation, spring 2001 issue on Interpreting Cultural Identity.
2. Museum Practice published by the Museums Association, edition 17 on Diversity.
3. Multicultural Interpretation and Access to Heritage. BEN Paper. Downloadable free from BEN website [www.ben-network.org.uk](http://www.ben-network.org.uk)
4. Archive of Black History Tel 0207 326 4154

### Editor's note:

The cultural dimensions of how we understand and relate to the world are important issues for interpreters. Many of the issues touched on in Interpret Scotland are culturally determined, and we may explore this in a future edition of the journal. As ever, your views and ideas are much appreciated.

**“Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.” Albert Einstein (1875-1955) physicist and philosopher**