

Saying It Without Words

We respond differently to different forms of communication. Text based media can instruct us, but arts media and activities can help us to feel by connecting with us in a more affective (emotional) way. Here we present an Interpret Britain Award winning interpretive project in the Peak District.

What are the three most important concepts in interpretation? No not Provoke, Relate, Reveal. Even more important than those are Communication, Communication and Communication. But communication is a two way process; it means listening as well as speaking.

The National Trust High Peak Estate in the Derbyshire Peak District is an area of outstanding ecological, archaeological, and geological significance. It is also a fabulous place for a day out.

When we first set about devising an interpretation strategy for the property, we wanted to integrate interpretation into a wider learning plan involving staff, volunteers and the public where two-way communication plays a crucial role in the day to day management of the property.

Arts activities are central to the provision of learning on the property. The combination of hands-on arts activities in a spectacular natural setting produces a double whammy of powerful personal involvement and emotional engagement which can lead to the sort of "life-changing experiences" that the new *National Trust Learning Vision* advocates.

When we had the opportunity to renovate an archaeologically significant vernacular farm building to be used as an interpretation shelter, we wanted to use arts media and involvement with a local school to shape both the process and the end result of the interpretation.

Grindle Barn in the Upper Derwent Valley lies on an old packhorse trail and is now part of a farm which retains traditional hay meadows - so many of which have disappeared in the last 50 years. The importance of the farm's history and wildlife make a visit doubly rewarding, but how could we go about communicating this hidden significance?

We started by commissioning artist Nicola Henshaw to carve a wooden bench which would symbolise some of the natural life of the area. The arms of the bench are in the shape of a curlew's head with its long downward bending bill. The bench fulfils the practical needs of the visitor while also suggesting deeper layers of interest. We also commissioned Nicola to carve a wooden panel which would go above the doorway, showing a timeline of life in the valley from the monks of Welbeck Abbey who first introduced sheep onto the hills, to the packhorse trains of the 18th century, and the present day walkers and wildlife of the moors and fields.

The next stage was to work with the local school and two artists to collect natural and historical images of the area and rework them in clay to create ceramic tile pieces to be inlaid into the barn walls. Children from Bamford School visited the barn and by means of a role-play we recreated the life of the packhorse trains, investigating how and why the landscape has changed over the centuries. Artists Lesley Fallais and Les Biggs worked with the children collecting words and images that reflected their understanding and response to this place.

Back in school these images were added to and refined, with each child creating their own tile. The art work became part of the interpretive process allowing the individual to communicate their own response to and develop their own understanding of the place. They therefore created their own significance rather than have someone else's significance forced on them.

The only words on the barn walls are the words of one girl's poem intended to evoke an emotional response. For the rest visitors can see dotted around the walls small images on the ceramic tiles that refer to the life, past and present, of this place. If they are sufficiently intrigued to find out more there is a leaflet, illustrated by the children, available in a dispenser in the barn. This provides more information in the form of an imaginative journey of a packhorse train through a changing landscape, identification of some of the hay meadow flowers, information about the environmental significance of this site, and useful visitor information.

Grindle Barn demonstrates an arts based approach to interpretation and learning across the property that gives people the opportunity to discover, create and communicate their own sense of the significance of a place through imaginative and emotional responses.

In making the Interpret Britain award, the judge noted they were "particularly impressed by the integration of arts activities as a medium for interpretation...the interpretation appealed not just on an intellectual level but also on an emotional level, encouraging a response and direct involvement from the user."

Adrian Tissier, The National Trust adrian.tissier@nationaltrust.org.uk

Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it."

Hannah Arendt, political theorist and philosopher, (1889–1951)