

**Communication or Communion:  
what's really happening  
in effective interpretation?**

Opening keynote paper,  
Association for Heritage Interpretation conference  
Bournemouth, England  
13 October 2010

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## **Communication or Communion: what's really happening in effective interpretation?**

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*This paper was the opening keynote session for the Association for Heritage Interpretation conference in Bournemouth, England, on 13 October 2010. I also ran the 'closing remarks' for the conference on 15 October: there's a record of that session at the end of the paper.*

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There are many ways of thinking about effectiveness in communication. Sometimes our definition of effectiveness may be linked with specific goals, such as affecting visitors' behaviour or meeting a particular management objective. But for me the core of interpretation has always been how our work helps people connect with and experience heritage as part of their leisure time. It's this aspect of interpretation, the effect it can have for our visitors, that I want to look at in this paper.

We all want our interpretation to be effective, but that means we need to know what effect we're after; the end result we're hoping for. The immediate, obvious response to the question 'what is effective interpretation?' is to think about communicating ideas, messages, understanding: the whole area commonly understood as 'learning'.

This is tempting, largely I suspect because it seems possible to measure learning outcomes, or to demonstrate a change in knowledge in our visitors; to demonstrate just how effective we are. And there is increasing pressure to do just that, to justify the existence of staff teams and of expenditure.

This role for interpretation is certainly important. Some visitors do come because they want to find out about a place or a collection; to learn about and understand it. To cater for them, we need clear thinking and planning about what facts and information we're going to present if we're to develop concise, clear presentations that really will increase their knowledge and understanding.

But I'm wary of this as the only way to measure effectiveness. There are two major problems with it. First, visitors are not, nor ever were, blank slates, ready for new knowledge to be written onto them. In fact I think they are increasingly less so, as information from TV programmes, the web, books, schools and conversations with friends creates an increasing but very diverse baseline knowledge. That means interpretation can easily be telling them what they already know. With such a wide variety of pre-existing knowledge, how can we reliably or usefully measure effectiveness?

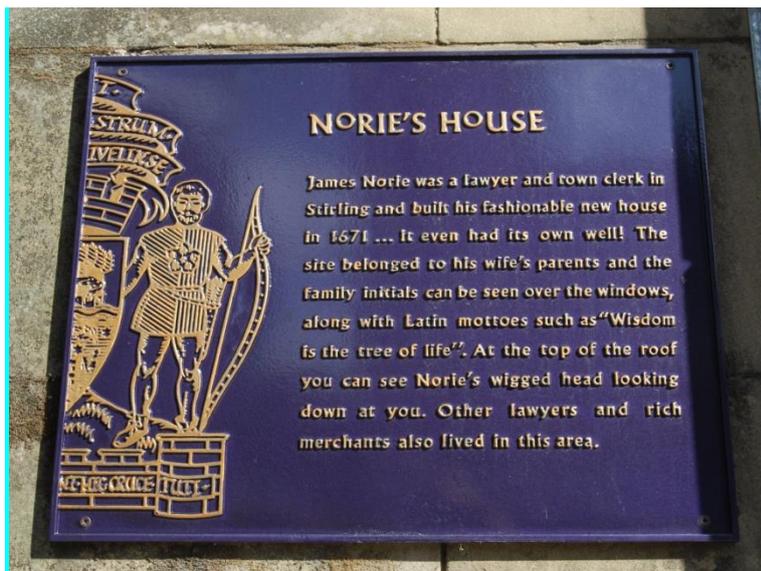
More importantly, I do not believe that 'learning' is the key motivator for most visitors. For many adults, not to mention children, the very word strikes a chill to the heart, especially as something they might do in their leisure time. I've even seen the idea of learning used as a metaphorical stick to whip children into line. On a visit to a Scottish museum, I was following a family group with a gaggle of children, all of whom were in boisterous high spirits as their day out began. 'Now see you learn something here!' the

mother admonished them, and their mood sank as quickly and forlornly as a party balloon.

It's true that work on Generic Learning Outcomes<sup>1</sup> (GLOs) has taken us a long way from this puritanical, joyless concept of learning. GLOs include areas that deal with Knowledge and Understanding; Skills; Attitudes and Values; Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity; and Activity, Behaviour and Progression. But if you dig down into the detail of this wonderful array, only the 'Knowledge and Understanding' area includes a reference to museums and their work. I know many museums do wonderful things that contribute to other GLO areas, but I find the 'official version' of their scope telling.

If we're to think about effectiveness in the work we do, I believe we need to think about other ways to experience heritage and about how interpretation might fit with them.

Instead of being eager, or even reluctant, students, I think many heritage visitors can be described by a wonderful French word: *flâneurs*. It doesn't really have an exact English equivalent. It means a stroller or a saunterer; someone who explores their surroundings with no particular goal while being open to new experiences and perspectives that might enrich their day. The French poet Charles Baudelaire celebrated this noble profession, describing a flâneur as 'a person who walks the city in order to experience it'.



*One of a series of plaques in the old town of Stirling, Scotland. Installed on a few carefully chosen buildings, they're ideally suited to the discerning flâneur.*

There's a series of plaques in Stirling that I think are models of interpretation for this way of experiencing heritage. There's a tight discipline in the way they're written, as well as in what people might learn from reading them. But their design and presentation is subtle: more like someone whispering in your ear than lecturing, an idea I've explored elsewhere<sup>2</sup>. I believe this interpretation is undoubtedly effective and worthwhile, but it would be hard to measure its effectiveness in ways that might justify the expense of producing the plaques.

<sup>1</sup> See the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council website for more detail about GLOs <http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/toolstemplates/genericlearning/>

<sup>2</sup> James Carter: 'Whispered Sorcery' in *Interpretation Journal* 15 (1), Spring 2010; pp.12-13

A third experience of heritage lies in the reason the flâneur may be wandering the old town of Stirling at all – the desire simply to be there; to be in touch with a place or an object that the visitor thinks is interesting, valuable or worthwhile. I had a powerful demonstration of this when I visited the pyramids at Giza, Egypt with my mother. I remember her sitting inside the tomb chamber of the Great Pyramid of Cheops softly repeating to herself, 'I'm inside a pyramid; I'm inside a pyramid', as if she needed both to convince herself that it was true and fix the experience in her memory.

This aspiration just to 'be somewhere' applies to countryside visitors just as much, and in some cases perhaps more, as to those visiting cultural and historic touchstones. Countryside visitors want a chance to sit amongst the flowers, to admire the view or to play with their companions.



*My mother on her visit to the Giza pyramids.*

In this way of experiencing heritage, visitors want direct contact with something they already know about, or at least know enough about for that contact to be meaningful without any intervention from us. In fact what we do could very well get in the way of the experience they're looking for. The meaning of that contact is extremely personal: it might be deep and long lasting, or superficial and ephemeral. This connection with heritage is close to what pilgrims are seeking; indeed the parallels between heritage visits and pilgrimage are explored in several studies of tourism and its meaning.

What happens if we extend this analogy of heritage visits as pilgrimage? I suggest it means that we have to see the process of finding personal meaning from contact with heritage as closer to communion than to learning.

The word communion may, for some, have negative overtones. It might be seen as a ceremony that transmits a defined ideology and belief system, or reinforces a power structure. This is not the sense I mean. I am thinking of communion as something that offers personal reassurance, growth, achievement; a means of connection with the world around us; a means of connection with our fellow human beings, past and present.

If we think of connection with heritage in this way, we can see the role of the interpreter as close to that of a priest: someone who facilitates or allows space for visitors to find a personal and unpredictable meaning. A meaning that is impossible to measure.

If all this seems a little too rarefied, let me bring it down to earth. What practical touchstones can we look to in interpretive practice that can help us be effective in supporting the three ways of experiencing heritage I've discussed:

- learning, for those who want it
- an enriching diversion for receptive passers-by (the flâneurs)
- the right conditions for communion.

First, I suggest we need our own thorough personal engagement with the subject of our interpretation, or the place or object it concerns. In particular, we need empathy with its physical qualities, the things that define the experience of being there. A sense of place, if you will. Physical experience is key to communion in all religions – just like the chance to sit among the bluebells or inside a pyramid.

This means interpretation must be intimately bound up with the physical management of a place or the presentation of objects. That physical management and presentation must also respect and perhaps enhance the essential qualities of a place or a collection, and offer as high quality an experience of it as possible.

This may seem obvious, but it is tempting in these cash-strapped times to do things 'on the cheap'. To stick up a panel and not worry too much about the landscaping around it, or to write text without visiting the site. We must resist this!

Apart from a respect for and a desire to conserve the physical qualities of the place, our own involvement and engagement should lead us to a sense of what the place or object means to us, and what, by extension, it could mean to others.

This leads to the second thing we need to produce effective interpretation: a creative vision. A vision for the experience we want to offer, the nature of the communion to which we will invite people. In this respect, an interpreter is like a director preparing to mount a new production of a play. The heritage resource is the text we work with; the way we interpret it like a particular production, with new visions always possible. Theatre directors must consider what they want the play to mean to this time, in this presentation: an analogy which seems as rich to me as that between interpreter and priest.

The Director of the British Museum, Neil McGregor, made a comment recently that epitomises this view. In an episode of the museum's series *A history of the word in 100 objects*, produced in partnership with BBC Radio 4, he said,

'Thinking about a distant world through things is not only about knowledge but about imagination, and it necessarily involves an element of poetic reconstruction.'<sup>3</sup>

Third, just like a theatre director, we need to build creative partnerships with people who have the skills we need to deliver our vision. For interpretation projects, these often include landscape designers, artists, graphic designers and writers. Effective

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<sup>3</sup> Neil McGregor, *A history of the world in 100 objects*, 'Jade Bi' episode. BBC Radio 4, 8 October 2010.

communication needs a creative synergy and a shared vision between all those contributing to a project.

I want to close this paper by looking at a couple of real-life projects that, for me, exemplify the ideas I've discussed.

First, a site from the Turistvegen – National Tourist Routes project in Norway. This ambitious scheme, intriguingly originated and managed by the Norwegian State Roads department, has developed innovative viewpoints, car parks, accommodation and other facilities at selected sites along a number of routes through the country's best-known landscapes<sup>4</sup>. Interestingly, the project places strong emphasis on encouraging and supporting the creative vision of landscape architects and architects in shaping visitor facilities; it also places a high value on the best quality materials and construction techniques.

My first introduction to the project was a site called Stigastein, where a viewing platform juts out vertiginously over Aurlandfjord.



*The viewing platform at Stigastein*

There is no conventional interpretation here, but to my mind this project is undoubtedly interpretive. It achieves its aims simply by offering a powerful visitor experience, giving a visceral understanding of the depth of the fjord.

In contrast, my second example is a small display at the British Museum. It was one of a series mounted in 'Room 3', a small gallery the museum has been using to experiment with display techniques and layouts. From 11 February to 11 April 2010, the gallery featured a prehistoric carving of swimming reindeer, one of the objects from the *History of the World in 100 Objects* series.

A display like this must cater for a wide range of audience backgrounds. Some will have heard the radio programme about the object, and will already know much about it. Some are flâneurs – the British Museum is probably on the 'must see' list of most tourists in London, and Room 3 is just inside the main entrance, where they may stumble across it

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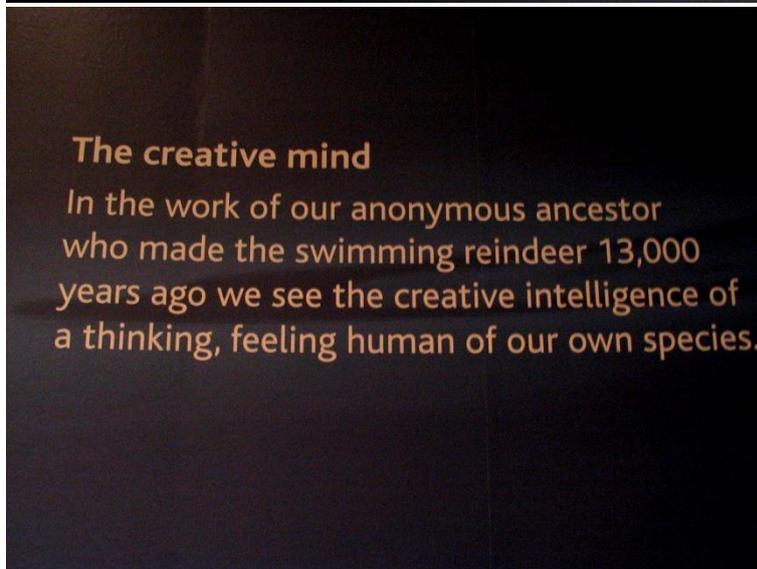
<sup>4</sup> For more information, visit <http://www.turistveg.no/main.asp?lang=eng>

by accident. And all visitors are potentially pilgrims looking for a sense of connection with the distant past.

The carving itself was displayed in the centre of the room; indeed it was the only object in the display. Underneath was a simple label, giving minimal information: just enough to help readers understand what the object is, where it came from in both time and space, and offering a single question to suggest a way of looking at it. If that's all you want, the exhibition leaves it at that: an almost unmediated experience of the thing itself.



Around the walls of the oval space created for this exhibition, four other ways of looking at and thinking about the object were introduced with bold titles and a short paragraph that summarise them; more detailed text and images below expanded on these themes.



*Examples of the expanded interpretation around the walls of the exhibition.*

I like these very different projects because they both have a clear sense of purpose – of the effects they might have – but they leave space for visitors to find their own experience, to discover those effects for themselves. And with that in mind, I'd like to leave you with a final thought about a quality that effective interpreters, and for that matter effective priests and theatre directors, need. That quality is humility.

Humility is perhaps more associated with priests than with theatre directors or even interpreters, but we all need it. We all hope that we will communicate effectively, and as we've seen there are things we can do to give our work the best possible chance of being effective. But ultimately, as the congregation leaves the service, as the audience leaves the theatre and walks out into the night, and as the visitors leave our museum or nature reserve, I don't think we can ever really know what effect our work will have.

## Postscript – conference closing thoughts

In the 'Closing thoughts' at the end of the conference, I looked further at the notion that interpreters' work can be compared to that of other professions. I had been toying with this idea as I developed the introductory keynote paper, and had been intrigued by the possibility of developing an alternative to the well-known rhyme used by children to count cherry stones, or plums in a pie: 'Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, Rich man, Poor man, Beggar man, Thief.'

Even as a child, I was fascinated by the implicit social normalisation in this sequence. It's used to count how many of something desirable you've taken, and it starts with the pejorative (at least in middle class society) 'Tinker'. Now you don't want to end up as one of those, do you? So, taking just one isn't a good idea. Next, you progress through a series of relatively respectable professions until you reach 'Rich man'. Who wouldn't want to stop there, especially since the consequences of going further are so dire? In a very tongue-in-cheek way (pardon the pun), the rhyme trains us to take a moderate and seemly amount, but not to be greedy.

But being greedy is fun. In playing with the idea that interpretation could be compared to other professions, I wondered what sequence could represent a similar progression from undesirability, through dull respectability, to adventurous and renegade potential.

My own rhyme, though I was never quite sure I'd got it nailed down, was:

PR representative  
Psychologist  
Showman  
Shepherd  
Teacher  
Guardian  
Theatre director  
Priest

As a light-hearted way to round off what had been a stimulating and varied conference, I introduced this idea to delegates and asked them to develop their own sequence of eight professions. Each table of ten or so people was asked to come up with a sequence as a shared endeavour, and I asked them to try to represent the various roles for interpretation that we'd seen during the conference: you can check out the other papers from the event to see if you can work out which case studies and site visits they referred to in their rhymes! I gave each table three ideas as starting points – 'Teacher', 'Priest' and 'P.R. representative' – but told people to use or ignore them as they wished. Here are the results. If nothing else, I think they prove what an inventive bunch AHI members are!

**Set 1**

- Politician
- Psychologist
- Artist
- Therapist
- Publican (a bar-keeper, for any non-British English readers!)
- Scientist
- Salesman
- Life Coach

**Set 3**

- Missionary
- Entertainer
- Market trader
- Jester
- Broker
- Storyteller
- Theatre director
- Teacher

**Set 5**

- Teacher
- Preacher
- Costermonger
- Guide
- Actor
- Pilot
- Conductor
- Police

**Set 2**

- Ringmaster
- Diplomat
- Inventor
- Cook
- Magician
- Conductor
- Wool gatherer
- Friend

**Set 4**

- Thinker
- Teller
- Shaper
- Maker
- Talkman
- Walkman
- Mega-fan
- Geek

**Set 6**

- Talker
- Stalker
- Teacher
- Preacher
- Lawman
- Doorman
- Comic
- Temporary Heritage Project Learning, Interpretation, Communication and Participation Officer