
Evaluating Heritage Interpretation

1. The aims for heritage interpretation in your church

Good interpretation brings your church and its history alive for visitors – it is more than just telling them facts, it helps them understand the church and appreciate it better.

Interpretation includes:

- Guide books and leaflets
- Text and image panels
- Exhibitions
- Objects
- Film
- Audio
- Talks and tours
- Trails
- Interactives (low-tech or digital)
- Food made to historic recipes
- Costumed interpretation – people in period clothing, in first person (“I am living in the 1500s and I do this”) or third person (“In the 1500s, people did this”)
- Websites

Which stories do you want to tell?

Discuss with the congregation and others, which stories you will tell about the church and the people associated with it. Be realistic about how much you can tell – it’s better to tell a smaller amount well, than overwhelm people with complex information. Be clear who your audience is, too.

Jo Scott, Inspired Futures’ Heritage Interpretation Consultant, gave a workshop on the interpretive planning process in October 2015, and the handouts from that session are here:

- Thinking about Heritage Activity Planning
- Thinking about a Heritage Activity Questionnaire
- Thinking about Interpretive Media
- Heritage Activity and Interpretation Reading List

Meanwhile, we recommend James Carter’s “Sense of Place, an Interpretive Planning Handbook” which covers planning, design and evaluation of heritage interpretation. It is a free download from <http://www.jamescarter.cc/good-stuff/>.

There is also lots of useful guidance from Scottish Natural Heritage, about planning and evaluating interpretation: <http://www.snh.gov.uk/policy-and-guidance/heritage-interpretation/> .

2. Making sure your interpretation works well

It is very important to try out your interpretation on your visitors at an early stage – this is called **front-end evaluation**, when you try out text, images, trails etc to make sure they work, and people understand and enjoy them, before you spend a lot of money on text panels, etc. Be clear about what you want to achieve with each project or element, and how it fits in with your original aims, then you can test to see if you have done this.

Try out your interpretation with people who are familiar with the church and its history, and those who aren't, to make sure that it is appropriate. Layered interpretation, on a graphic panel for example, provides a small amount of information for people who want to find out about the key points, and more detail for those who wish to find out more. Don't put too much text on a panel as it is hard to read and take in; keep longer text for a guide book. If you develop a trail, or interactives, make sure they work properly and that they tell your story effectively.

Once you have piloted your interpretation and made any changes, if necessary, you can produce your panels, trail, etc. Then evaluate again (**summative evaluation**) to make sure that visitors are enjoying and learning from it, and to see whether your original interpretive aims have been met. You might also find there have been some unexpected outcomes of the new interpretation, or people have been using it successfully in ways which you had not originally planned. It is important to capture unexpected outcomes as well.

3. Evaluation methods

Planning stage

- Questionnaires – to find out what people know already; what they are interested in
- Discussion sessions – as above
- Try out possible routes for trails; new locations for signs; content for panels etc

Front-end evaluation

- Questionnaires – what do people think about the new interpretation
- Observation – are people using the interpretation in the way it was intended? Are there any problems with it? (e.g. interactives not working properly or confusing)
- Visitor tracking – are people following e.g. the trail route in the way it was intended? Is the trail guide or map itself easy to use, or unwieldy?
- Discussions – with individuals or groups, so they can explain their reactions to the interpretation

Summative evaluation

- Questionnaires – what have people learned from the interpretation? Have they changed their opinions on anything? Have the interpretation aims been met?

- Observation – are people using the interpretation in the way it was intended?
- Visitor tracking – are people following e.g. the trail route in the way it was intended?
- Discussions – with individuals or groups, so they can explain their reactions to the interpretation. Have the interpretation aims been met?