

These notes have been produced to support the workshop on Heritage Activity Planning, delivered in October 2015, as part of the Inspired Futures project. The workshop covered:

1. **Planning** for action
2. **Quick wins** with impact
3. Understanding our **audiences**
4. **Measuring** success

## Thinking about our heritage

The heritage of our historic churches takes many forms, from the historic fabric of the building itself to the collections it contains; from the stories of people associated with the place and the cultural connections it represents to the community in which it sits; and to the traditional skills it embodies and requires to maintain it. There are equally many ways in which we can engage with this heritage, from worship and governance to volunteering, visiting, learning new skills and sharing what we know.

While growing a congregation and caring for an historic church can seem daunting at times, it can help to see the heritage as an opportunity instead of a burden. The heritage of your church can offer exciting ways to engage new people as potential members of your congregation. It can also open new avenues for funding. The key to making the most of these opportunities is to find ways to develop heritage activities that sit comfortably alongside your mission. They can often complement each other very well.

## Why do heritage activities?

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) will consider helping your church if your heritage activities can meet their specific outcomes:

- **Heritage** will be better managed, in better condition, better interpreted and explained, and identified/recorded
- **People** will have developed skills, learnt about heritage, changed their attitudes and/or behaviour, had an enjoyable experience and volunteered time
- **Communities** will benefit where environmental impacts will be reduced, more people and a wider range of people will have engaged with heritage, your local area/community will be a better place to live, work or visit, your local economy will be boosted and your organisation will be more resilient

Greater engagement with your church should lead to benefits for the historic fabric and collections, your congregation, the community in which it sits and for your current and future volunteers.

## What HLF require for activity plans

Preparing a full activity plan to meet HLF requirements can look pretty daunting too. They want to know:

Where are you now?

- your organisation, commitment, capacity
- who is engaging now and could do in future
- what you do now and might do in future

Where do you want to get to?

- a clear vision for your church
- who you intend to engage
- what difference all this effort will make

A Heritage Action Plan

- who does what, where, when; how much

## A Step by Step approach to planning your activities

I find it much easier to begin by breaking down my project into a few simple steps to reach my goal. Ask yourselves:

1. What do I want to achieve? (**AIM**)
2. Who is the project for? (**AUDIENCE**)
3. What do I want to tell them? (**MESSAGE**)
4. How am I going to say it? (**MEDIA**)

Keep in mind that you want to engage people with your place in ways that are appropriate for the building and its core use for worship. Think about how you can inspire emotions, encourage curiosity and make memories. This is what will keep people coming back.

## Thinking about your AIM

The first step of the planning process is to establish a clear AIM for your church or individual project. Ask yourselves these key questions:

- **What do we want to do?**
- **Why do we want to do it?**
- What have we got?
- Where is it?
- Who is it for?
- Who should be involved?
- What do we want to say?
- What else is going on?

Use the answers to establish your aim(s). Make them **clear, specific and measurable** – this will ensure you can demonstrate success. Don't forget that a clear aim, supported by a robust, achievable plan, is very important to funders. Your aim might include some or all of these:

- Creating a welcoming place that's easy to access and has good facilities
- Attracting a specific new audience: more families, local students
- Displaying our collection and tell our stories more effectively
- Growing the congregation through community activities
- Developing community skills and confidence

With robust aims in place, you will be able to demonstrate whether or not you have achieved them when your project is complete. If not, you can see which aspects you still need to work on and direct your time and resources to them.

To help you determine what it is you want to achieve and for whom, involve lots of people in the decision-making. Ask questions, invite opinions, give people the chance to share their views. This will engender interest in your project and a sense of ownership – it will also help convince funders that you are serious (and that people are already interested in what you propose to do).

## Thinking about AUDIENCES

Your passions are not necessarily the same as other people's. Don't assume that, because you are enthusiastic about an aspect of your heritage, everyone else will be. If you want to share your stories, you'll need to excite those other people too. Start thinking about their interests, needs and expectations. Good interpretation can help you to make your heritage interesting, engaging and hopefully unmissable. If The Pencil Museum in Keswick can do it, there's hope for us all!

## New audiences or more of the same?

Think about who is likely to come to enjoy your heritage. Are they members of the local community (might come regularly) or families on holiday (might come once)? Are they older couples looking for a fun day out or school groups looking for educational activities? Are they old or young, active or passive, specialists or general interest, coming singly or in big groups? A key question to ask yourselves is whether you want greater numbers of your usual audiences or to attract new and different types of visitors as well (or instead)?

### Choosing your target audiences

Make some decisions about the audience groups you want to target. Much as we'd like to engage all potential visitors, the reality is that we have limited time, money and other resources to spare. It is therefore important to focus primarily on your key audiences (which might be a mix of existing and new audience groups). Fortunately, if you improve your offer for a particular audience, you're almost certainly making the experience better for everyone! Be aware, however, that targeting some key audiences may make your site less appealing for some of your existing visitors – and they may not be happy about that.

The key is to be confident about who your audiences actually are and who you want to target in future. There are some guidelines on gathering audience data towards the end of these notes.

### Thinking about MESSAGES

We all know a lot of stuff about our special place or collection (see my comment earlier about your particular passions). You will fail if you try to tell everyone everything that you know about your subject; it's a real turn-off for even the most dedicated and loyal visitor.

The key to good interpretation is to **filter and focus**. Remember – your visitors are probably on a day off or on holiday; they want an enjoyable experience that is interesting and engaging not a heavyweight history lesson. And, however good your interpretation, they certainly won't remember everything. So think about the things you *would* like them to remember...

Focus on (two or three) ideas about your special place that you want people to:

- Discover
- Be amazed by
- Be moved by
- Remember

### Provoke, relate, reveal

Good interpretive messages Provoke, Relate and Reveal. Interpretive messages are not simply information, but succinct ideas that encapsulate what your special place is all about and are relevant, provocative and revealing for your audiences.

When I was writing the Interpretation Masterplan for Kielder Water & Forest Park, we wanted people to be amazed by the scale of the reservoir and forest. We didn't want to just *tell* people it was big or to explain how many miles or cubic metres of water or wood – no-one would remember that. So we worked out that 'Kielder Reservoir contains enough water for every person on the planet to have a shower, and there's enough energy in the trees here to make it a hot one'. Now that's an image that sticks in the mind. Good interpretation is about transforming what the experts want to tell into what the visitors want to know.

### Ask your visitors what they'd like to know

So remember, when you are preparing your messages, not to just focus on what you want to say. Try to imagine what your visitors would ask when they explore your church and look at your collection. If you're not sure, ask them what they want to know about.

At Bovington Tank Museum in Dorset, it was clear that, unlike the passionate volunteers, most of the museum's visitors – young families on holiday – were not all that interested in the slight variations between different tanks or the number of rivets that held them together! Not surprisingly, most family (i.e. non-specialist) visitors were far more interested in what life was like inside the tank – including gritty questions about where the soldiers slept, what they ate and how they went to the loo... The museum now focuses on engaging its visitors with these very human aspects of their military story and, once they've got them interested, can go on to tell the more complex stories of the development of weaponry and warfare.

## How to choose your messages

- Gather all your good stories and building highlights into one place
- Think about what makes your church special and different
- Think about what will interest your audiences
- Start to make choices

For more guidance on developing interpretive messages, read James Carter's **Sense of Place, an Interpretive Planning Handbook** (find it for free at [www.jamescarter.cc/good-stuff/](http://www.jamescarter.cc/good-stuff/)). It is an excellent guide and will stand you in good stead.

## Thinking about MEDIA

I use the term *media* here, but this refers to the whole Pandora's Box of heritage-related activities and events as well as the host of different interpretive media you might use to engage people with your place and its stories.

I have produced a separate document that looks at some of the interpretive media you might consider using, from leaflets and panels to guided tours, audio and art. In terms of heritage activity, you are also spoilt for choice. You could consider guided tours, activity trails, musical evenings, creative writing, craft events, performances, skills training, schools projects, on line archives and many more. It is your task to explore which of these tools would work best in your church to meet your **aim** and deliver your **messages** to your target **audiences**.

## Deciding which media / activities to choose

Obviously you need to take into account your place and your budget, but you should always start by thinking about your core aims and your target audiences (current and potential). What do you want to do and why? And who are your audiences and what are their particular needs and expectations? Once you know what you want to achieve, who your audiences are and what you want to say to them, THEN you can think about the right media for the job.

You also need to consider the nature of your church – some media or activities might just not be right for the ambience and setting. Budget, time and resources will of course always be key factors (for implementation AND maintenance). The good news is that there are almost certainly a number of different options for achieving your aim, audience, message, so keep an open mind and be as creative as you can be!

## Always remember the mantra

Take a step-by-step approach to your heritage activity and interpretive planning to help you identify the most effective ways to deliver your messages to the people you want to engage at your heritage site.

Make **AIM, AUDIENCE, MESSAGE, MEDIA** your refrain.

## Planning and implementing quick wins with impact

I always recommend undertaking some modest, quick win activities at the start of the heritage activity planning process. Use these to test the impact and efficacy of different actions on your target audiences and to assess likely demand for other projects and activities. Use these for:

1. **Quick** and **cost effective** actions
2. Making measurable **impacts**
3. Demonstrating **change** is happening
4. Engaging **more people**
5. Attracting **different audiences**
6. Opportunities to **test and evaluate** and inform your next steps

The following is a range of ideas to inform and inspire you. Which, if any, you choose to take up will depend very much on whether you are already undertaking any interpretation or heritage activities at your church or not. However, it is always worth looking for cost-effective opportunities to make an impact and to test new ideas so that you can target your time, effort and resources effectively.

- **A clean sweep:** churches are notoriously short of storage space but see if you can find ways to clear out your clutter. Be ruthless and get rid of any furniture, notices, interpretation and other material so that you can start afresh. You might be pleasantly surprised how much new space you create.
- **Be open and welcoming:** make sure your signage is effective (can a first time visitor actually find the way in?) and invest in signs and banners that proclaim loudly and clearly that you are open and welcome visitors. Take the signs in when you are closed. Be creative with how you draw attention to your open church – a boat in the churchyard, a banner on the wall – and ensure you are as enticing and irresistible as you can be. Provide some comfy seats and refreshments. First impressions always count.
- **Be memorable:** again, find opportunities not barriers. If your lighting is poor, provide visitors with head torches and binoculars to create a surprising and memorable experience. Put reclining garden chairs in the crossing so that visitors can sit back and admire your ornate ceiling in comfort. Make people smile and they'll be back (or at the very least recommend your church to others).
- **Beg, borrow and trial:** if you're not sure about exhibitions in your church, borrow one and see what congregation and community think. Talk to your local museum, library or TIC as they may have a travelling display you can borrow. Alternatively, think about what you can borrow from local people to create a display which will have real meaning for your community e.g. wedding dresses, old photographs of the area, wartime memorabilia, favourite toys. Why not link it to some relevant activities, so you can hold workshops and craft evenings and share some new skills, such as hat making, flower arranging, toy making, photography...?
- **Draw in different skills:** you may find you have a host of willing volunteers on the doorstep who simply don't know the range of skills you require. Think laterally about how to engage new people – create herb garden planters with the local gardening club and invite the community to pick them; invite local photographers to take photos of your gravestones so they can be put on line for genealogists.
- **Share your heritage secrets:** specialist tours can be very appealing, such as 'behind the scenes in the bell tower' or one-off roof tours. Take advantage of repair and restoration work at your church by offering special scaffolding tours or workshops with craftspeople. People like the idea of an unusual or unique experience (and can be persuaded to pay for

the privilege too!). And don't forget your natural heritage either. Think about ways to invite wildlife into your churchyard – bird feeders, owl boxes, hedgehog houses, bee hives – and encourage local wildlife groups, schools, the RSPB and others to do wildlife hunts, talks and creative craft events for making bird feeders and bee hotels. Children and families love this!

- **Trial some activities:** if you've considered a Mums & Toddlers Group or a Knitting Circle, now's the time to give it a go. Try it out once or twice – making sure you publicise it REALLY well – and gauge the interest. With any luck, your idea will be a great success and someone who comes along might be willing to run more sessions in future. If, despite excellent marketing and promotion, it's not a success, put it down to experience and try something else. Again, be creative in types of activities and events you test: stargazing from the churchyard; candlelit tours with mulled wine; storytelling after dark. All these might attract new and different audiences and spark lots of other ideas too. Be sure to test everything you try on the audiences they are designed for. If you're considering a new children's leaflet, let some children have a go before you send it to print; if you've made any mistakes or it doesn't work, find out before it's too late!
- **Play host to partners:** you and your small, hard-pressed church team don't need to do everything. Explore partnerships so that you can host events and activities but don't have to run them too. Offer your church as a venue to local arts and crafts groups, for example, for regular meetings or occasional workshops; your church could be exactly the kind of inspiration they need and you get the benefit of a whole new audience enjoying your special place. If you work with creative writers, for example, see if they would like to write some temporary interpretation for the building during a workshop; this could help everyone – from the writers to your congregation and visitors – to see your church in new ways.
- **Develop your on line presence:** even if you don't have the resources to develop your own website, make sure you take advantage of opportunities to showcase your church on other sites. A Church Near You is a great website and many churches could put a lot more information onto their pages. Explore opportunities in the community for creating a group to run your social media presence (you could arrange skills training for this too, as a benefit for all). Think about putting a Geocache in your church or churchyard and explore opportunities for digitising your archives and making them available on line. Again, you might find people in your community who would be delighted to help you with this, if they only knew you needed their skills!

### Finding out more about your audiences

One of the key aims of these kind of quick wins is to assess their impact – are they really drawing in new audiences and encouraging a greater appreciation of your heritage? There's only one way to be sure and that's to have a good understanding of your current audiences...

You need the hard evidence in order to have benchmarks and targets to measure against; don't just trust your instincts. And remember, you need qualitative as well as quantitative information – numbers alone won't tell you what you need to know.

There are lots of ways to gather audience information, some easy and cost-effective and others more time-consuming and expensive. Here are some hints and tips on how to find out who is – and who isn't – coming to your church.

### Who is coming now?

- **Count** your users and visitors; do some random daily counts to get a snapshot if your church is unattended; see if you can borrow an electronic counter

- **Visitors' book** – ask more questions; find out where people come from, what they are interested in, how they found out about your church
- **Community questionnaire** about who and how people engage with your church
- **Interview** people coming to activities & events – who, how old, where from, why?
- **Ask** how people found out about the church, activity or event
- **Check** your website user stats
- See who is part of your **Facebook group**

It's also very important to consider how these people are using your church. For a robust overview, use a mix of indirect evaluation (observe visitors and staff, listen to their comments, map their movements and note their dwell time) and direct evaluation (questionnaires, discussion groups, interviews, video and photographic feedback, encourage users to write diaries and draw pictures).

### Who isn't coming and why?

It's also very important to have an understanding of who isn't coming to your church and why. See if you can find out more about the potential barriers that face some of your potential audiences:

- Ask non-users about **levels of awareness**; do they simply not know you're open?
- Look at your **marketing and publicity** and see if you need to widen your network
- Talk to **groups with specific needs** and see you can do for them (e.g. families, visitors with disabilities, non-English speakers)
- **Invite non-users** to say what might inspire a visit in future (questionnaires, feedback on line, interviews, informal chats)

### Find out what people would like to see in future

There are several ways in which you can consult your current and potential audiences about future facilities and initiatives. A good way is to put up a **simple display** at your church and other local venues, showing the things you are considering and inviting people's thoughts. You can also:

- Use a **questionnaire** to ask what people would like to see and do
- **Ask** for feedback on your **website** and **Facebook** page
- **Survey** local resources to see what the gaps are that your church could fill
- **Invite** input from potential partners; ask them how you might work together

### Keep asking, keep sharing

You need to invite feedback from your current and potential users and visitors at every step. Ask them at the beginning, so can determine what you need to do and find out what people want. Ask them in the middle to test out your ideas and see if they will work for your audiences. Ask them at the end to find out if you have met your aims. Fingers crossed you have!

### What will all this tell us?

All this evaluation may also seem daunting but it's an invaluable part of your heritage activity planning. It will tell you:

- Have we achieved what we set out to do?
- Have we met the needs of our audiences?
- How should we plan our heritage activities in the future?
- What's the best way to allocate our limited funds and resources?

Good luck with your heritage planning. Just remember: AIM, AUDIENCE, MESSAGE, MEDIA. And now you can add: **EVALUATE, EVALUATE, EVALUATE!**