Thinking about interpretive media

Open up the Pandora's Box of interpretive media and explore which of these tools – from leaflets and panels to guided tours, audio and art – could work best to deliver your interpretive messages to your target audiences. Use the guidance here as an opportunity to think creatively about interpretive options. If you're stuck for ideas, cast your mind back to the last museum or heritage attraction you went to. What tools did they use there?

Here's some ideas to get you started:

- **Face-to-face interpretation** (guided tours, talks, costumed interpretation, room guides). People are undoubtedly the best interpreters (especially when well trained for the job): they can deliver a very personal insight, respond to the needs and interests of their audiences and are very unlikely to deliver exactly the same experience every time. Brilliant for repeat visits and events. Widely regarded as the most effective and memorable but can also be expensive to deliver, especially on a regular basis...

- **Leaflets**. Can be used to entice visitors to your site and to help welcome and orientate and provide insights once people are on site (usually better to have two separate ones to fulfil these different jobs effectively). You can also offer activity sheets, puzzles and other print – gorgeous and glossy or simple and reprinted yourself – to encourage fun and discovery

- **Guidebooks**. A great way to deliver extra interpretation and additional insights. But remember, most people use them as a souvenir after a visit, so don't rely on them as a tool to e.g. guide people around your site. Effective in encouraging repeat visits, when people realise what they missed!

- **Graphic panels**. A well-used tool and not to be scoffed at. When well written and using plenty of images and illustrations and a minimum of text, they can be very successful. Be careful to think about the impact on their location if you're fixing them permanently

- **Exhibitions**. Can bring together a whole range of media, from words and images to sounds and smells. Can be very effective in engaging lots of visitors but can be difficult to keep new and fresh for repeat visitors

- **Interactives**. Can be high or low tech. Low tech are often very popular and can be kept quite simple – jigsaws, feely boxes, simple puzzles – and are low maintenance. High tech can make good use of new technology (computer interactives, phone downloads), but be sure you can keep them working as it is very frustrating when they don't! Interactives work best when they have a real purpose – find out how something works, discover how heavy something is, affect different outcomes – rather than just lifting up a flap or opening a box. Even better if you can get groups or families to work together to achieve something, so that they really engage with the heritage and each other, making a memorable experience

- **Audio tours**. Can be expensive to do properly, as you'll need a great script that is well recorded. These are getting simpler to deliver now as people are increasingly used to downloading to their own phone (so you don't have to provide and maintain expensive audio equipment). The other major benefit is that they don't have a physical impact on a building interior or environs, but sound can be intrusive (as can the effect of people milling about glued to their phones). Audio also gives you the option of offering other languages. Sound posts, by contrast, are a fixed installation that are accessible to everyone, whether they have a fancy phone or not. But again these can intrude on other people's experience. Whichever you choose, always keep audio <u>very</u> short and <u>very</u> snappy or people will soon get bored

- **Audio visual presentations**. Can be a good alternative to personal interpretation, especially if you use real people and genuine recollections for example. However, can be expensive to do well, you need to be able to maintain the equipment and the film needs to be short, snappy and engaging or visitors will quickly get bored (3 or 4 mins max!). Also have the benefit that they can be easily switched off and/or removed, minimising impact on the historic fabric

- **Reconstructions and recreations**. Again, can be very expensive but really help people to appreciate how a place looked or was used in the past. If you can't afford a full size recreation, consider replicas of one or two key items or artefacts for handling, a model (even better if it's a tactile one) or a high quality reconstruction illustration. Pictures really are worth a thousand words – and don't need translating into other languages

- **Interpretive installations on site**. This could be seating, sculpture, specially designed waymarking, often interpretive or incorporating interpretive messages, poetry, symbols and puzzles. Can be expensive to get something bespoke and highly creative but often these become a real draw in their own right

- **Websites and on line interpretation**. On line material can be accessed before and after a visit, and increasingly while you are exploring too. This can be a mix of information and interpretation and can incorporate words, images, sound, film, interactivity and so on. Can be a challenge if you have no signal in your special place and requires careful planning so that material is suited to use on the internet at home and via your phone. A good way to deliver additional layers of interpretation without filling up your historic church or lovely graveyard

- **Events**. A great way to attract new and repeat audiences, and can be delivered on a variety of scales from low key guided walks and school activities to major performances. Can be useful to attract new audiences that would not traditionally visit your site but they won't always engage with your church itself or its stories and collection (dinosaur exhibitions at Woodhorn Mining Museum used to attract thousands of people, but few actually went into the Mining Museum itself at the time or came back to visit it later...)

- **Digital technology**. Digital technology gives us some exciting and increasingly accessible ways to communicate with our audiences, like phone apps, augmented reality, QR (Quick Recognition) codes and social media. QR Codes are easily generated patterns that can be attached to your interpretation; all the visitor has to do is photograph them with their smartphone to be directed to relevant web pages to find out more. BUT visitors will need a phone signal and an app to translate the code. Talking of apps, these are also a good way of engaging your visitors via their phones or tablets and are increasingly being used in the heritage environment for e.g. guided tours, augmented reality, games. Although they can be very expensive to develop, one option is to customise an existing platform. My advice is always to talk to specialists who can help you achieve your digital interpretation effectively – and make sure it will actually work in the way you want!

Deciding which media 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 – or event or activity – for the job.

Budget will of course always be a factor (for implementation AND maintenance). You also need to consider the nature of your place – some media might just not be right for the location or the ambience you are creating / complementing. Remember: don't have your head turned by all the fancy interpretive media out there unless you are sure these will appeal to your audiences. And bear in mind that, however good your media might be, it won't be effective without strong and engaging messages: you always need a clear theme and some good stories, whichever medium you choose to deliver it. After all, people are just as likely to give up on a dull download as they are to walk away from a boring panel!

So, take a step-by-step approach to interpretive planning to help you identify the most effective ways to deliver your messages to the people you want to engage at your church.
Make **AIM, AUDIENCE, MESSAGE, MEDIA** your mantra and you'll be fine!