



An Chomhairle Oidhreachtá  
The Heritage Council



# TELLING PEOPLE ABOUT OUR HERITAGE - *Interpretation & Signage Guidance*

Devised from *TELLING PEOPLE ABOUT OUR HERITAGE*, a workshop for community groups with Susan Cross in association with Roscommon County Council; held July 28th 2010, in Gleeson's Townhouse, Roscommon, Co. Roscommon. An action of the County Roscommon Heritage Plan.



## **PEOPLE: Who's IN and Who's OUT?**

### **A. The IN Crowd**

#### **1. INformed Visitors**

These people have sought out your site because of its culture & heritage. They have good background knowledge: they know what they are looking for, will know it when they see it and will understand its significance. Their expectations may be high in terms of how the story of the site is presented. Accuracy will be important to them. They may like to discuss their interest and/or have quite specialized questions. They are likely to ignore entry-level interpretation.

#### **2. INterested Visitors**

These people have a broad interest in culture and sightseeing but their historical knowledge can be quite superficial. They are looking for an overview and to develop a sense of the place they are visiting. They therefore need a good introduction that places the site within the framework of what they already know knowledge. Authenticity is particularly important to this group. This is almost always the largest visitor segment for a heritage site and is the main target for most interpretation.

#### **3. INcidental Visitors**

These people are not interested in culture and heritage and visit your site for other reasons (perhaps because someone else in their group is interested, or they are on a walk that goes through your site, or their dog needs a walk or a host of other reasons). These people can sometimes be engaged by an alternative approach. People are often the best method of assessing and responding to the interests of these visitors.

### **B. The OUT Crowd**

#### **4. OUTreach groups**

Some people, for a whole range of social, cultural, personal and other reasons will never think about visiting your site if you want to engage with them you need go out to them and engage in community and outreach projects.

## **PEOPLE: Visitor-focused interpretation**

### **Some things that will help your visitors**

- Give people something to do, not just something to read
- Involve people and encourage group interaction
- Have a clear, simple and interesting message
- Use real things, and specific examples - not abstract explanations
- Ask questions, encourage people to think for themselves. Don't just give them answers
- Make your content relevant and accessible
- Be personal - use characters and people in your interpretation
- Appeal to the broadest possible audience
- Be brief
- Use a wide range of communication methods - this will help you to cater for all learning styles and will keep all your visitors interested for longer.
- Reinforce your main message wherever possible
- Be interested in your visitors (and they will be more likely to be interested in you and what you have to say)
- Don't be too solemn or serious

## Making a PLACE come alive - some golden ingredients

Including the following in your interpretation will help bring places or objects to life.

**PEOPLE** - People like people. Your visitors will like to know about individual people who are associated with your site.

**SENSORY** We discover the world with our five senses. Encouraging visitors to use their senses gives them a fuller experience.

**Sight** - Encourage people to look for things they may not otherwise see or understand

**Sound** - People are using their eyes to read your words. Encourage them to use their ears too. What can they hear?

**Touch** - If your visitors can touch, encourage them to do so. Feel the weight of the loaded bucket, the fineness of ground flour. Otherwise, use words and pictures that describe how things feel.

**Smell** - For many people the most evocative of the senses, with the power to unlock memory. If there is nothing for visitors to smell, introduce scents into your writing.

**Taste** - If you can give people something to eat you are onto a winner!

**SPECIFIC** 'This tree was used by ...', 'this spot is where the runaways camped ...'. Tell stories about things you can see.

**MEMORY** Connect with important things in people's lives - for instance childhood, family, birth, death. These are experiences we share with people throughout the world.

**IMAGINATION** You want people to make an imaginative connection. Do not be afraid of saying 'Imagine ... a world without electricity' or 'how it would feel to move in these clothes.'

## **PLACE: Looking at your site as an interpreter**

### **General features**

- What are the special or unique features?
- What are the dominant or eye-catching features?
- What sensory experiences are offered?

### **Physical features**

- Look for views, vistas, doorways, water etc.
- Is the underlying or outcropping geology of interest/significance?
- Consider relief and terrain - are any areas dangerous or inaccessible to (some or all) visitors?

### **Built environment and human activity**

- Who created this site? Why, how and when?
- What did they do here? What was that like?
- Are there architectural or structural features that make this place unique or interesting
- Are there unanswered questions or conjectures about any of the structures?
- Do you know of individuals associated with this place?
- What happens here now? Can visitors see anyone at work?

### **Natural environment**

- Which plants/animals are most striking?
- Which are the ones that relate most to people's lives?
- Which ones do most people see?

### **Human involvement (current)**

- Look for desire lines and patterns of use
- What do visitors want to know?
- What do visitors want to see? touch? smell?

### **Archival material**

- Identify documentary resources, artefacts and other material
- Investigate oral history, vernacular and reminiscence sources
- Research folklore and legend

## PURPOSE - Knowing your message

Your interpretation needs a purpose. You need to know what that purpose is so that you can tell your visitors when (or before) they arrive, and reinforce it throughout the visit.

Your purpose will be about giving people experiences or information - or more likely a combination of the two. Your message is what you want you want people to leave your site thinking or talking about. A good message will make the information you want to convey more relevant, meaningful and memorable.

### Make your place memorable

People remember messages rather than facts. If the visitor is given the message early it can act as an 'advance organiser' helping her/him to make sense of, understand and remember more information.

People remember information if they think and talk about it. They are more likely to do this if the material is relevant to them. A good message must therefore make the subject relevant to the visitor.

Messages are not subjects. For instance your subject might be *Woodland Lepidoptera*.

Your message might be:

*'Butterflies love these sunny flowery glades so today we'll see a lot of them.'*

or

*'More butterflies live in these woods because we cut the hazel down regularly'*

### What makes a good message?

When deciding on a message, be realistic about what a visitor new to your subject can learn. Be even more realistic about what they will want to hear or look at.

Your message is the measuring stick for the content and structure of your interpretation. Try to make everything you do

relevant to your message. This should be done in different ways at different stops i.e. through activities, looking at different things etc.

### **Three steps to a heavenly message**

Your message should be a simple statement of what you want people to get from the interpretation. If you complete this phrase *'When people leave this interpretation I want people to be thinking or talking about ...'* in a simple and lively way you will probably have written a message.

It can be helpful to approach message writing in three stages.

**STEP ONE:** In general this interpretation is about ... *woodland Lepidoptera.*

This is your topic; the subject you have to convey. It may well be written in specialist language. It will almost certainly be a vast subject containing loads of possible stories. So, the next stage is to select one aspect.

**STEP TWO:** More particularly it is about ... *coppicing as a means of managing for butterflies.*

(Which means that it's not about taxonomy, colour or physiology. This cuts our topic down to size. But the language is still specialist. So, on to the next stage.)

**STEP THREE:** When people they will be talking or thinking about ... *cutting the hazel down regularly means that more butterflies live in these woods*

Now we have translated our subject into a message we can imagine people repeating.

**THINK ABOUT YOUR SITE:** A message for your next interpretation

What do you want people to be talking about when they leave?

Who is this likely to be relevant to and why?

What can they see at your site to make this memorable?

What can they do to make it come alive?

What new information do they need in order to understand the significance?



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# PROJECTS - Interpretive media and their advantages and disadvantages

## 1. Person-to-person interpretation

This covers all forms of interpretation that involves someone talking to the visitors. It could include guided tours, visiting people at work, watching demonstrations, presentations and science shows, story-telling, performances and re-enactment.

### Advantages

- People like people. Visitors will warm to a good guide and this gives a human dimension to the visit and can often feel like being given a privileged 'insider's view'.
- This is the most flexible and responsive interpretive medium. A good guide can adapt the style and content of the presentation to suit the visitors' needs and interests.
- A good interpreter can help visitors understand complicated processes and issues that would be hard to convey on a panel or in print.
- Allows for a wide range of events and can be very creative.
- Guided activities can be charged for; can generate income.
- They can provide employment.

### Disadvantages

- Requires a lot of organisation.
- Visitor numbers can be unpredictable. Need to be able to cope with very large and very small groups.
- Needs commitment from everyone involved to maintain quality and develop new events and programmes. Staff need support and training.

### Cost

- Low, mainly for training staff, development and training.

## 2. Outdoor panels

These are the basis of much information to visitors to outdoor sites, particularly unstaffed ones. Panels can welcome visitors and give orientation information as well as interpretation.

### Advantages

- Panels are always there - at places and times that people could not be.
- They can integrate pictures with text
- They are good for highlighting points of particular interest.
- They can be very durable.

### Disadvantages

- They are totally inflexible.
- They can obscure the object or detract from the atmosphere of the site.
- They can only be viewed by about three people at once.
- They cannot guide people through a site. People cannot remember a map from a panel - they will need something to carry with them.
- They cannot be updated so are not good if you have a lot of repeat visitors.
- They are limited in what they can convey.
- Some materials do not weather well and may fade or peel in sunlight. Condensation can be a problem in humid conditions. They can also attract vandals.

### Costs

Variable, from low to high, depending on materials and fixtures. A glass-reinforced plastic panel (the standard material in UK) can cost £2,000 - £4,000. Lamination is much cheaper but much less durable.

### 3. Publications

You may produce publications for a range of purposes including promotion, orientation and as souvenirs as well as for interpretation. In many cases interpretive print includes one or more of these other functions.

#### Advantages

- Publications can include a lot of information. (This can be a disadvantage if the publication is not well laid planned and designed).
- Publications are mobile and can be used all round the site.
- They can combine pictures with words
- The visitor can read as much as he or she wants, when they want (including after the visit).
- They can generate income
- Visitors can take them home

#### Disadvantages

- Publications only appeal to people who enjoy reading
- You need to consider distribution and availability, particularly if there is no shop or other outlet on site.

#### Costs

Low to moderate - dependant upon size, number of colours used, paper type, print run etc.

## PROJECTS: Producing better panels

Develop a healthy prejudice against panels. They are over-used and often poorly done. They are hard to do well. Our job is to entertain, delight and inform the visitor. Panels often only do the last of these.

**Panels are unpopular** at countryside sites because of:

- insensitive siting
- creating a sense of urbanisation
- proliferation
- maintenance (or, more accurately, lack of it)

**Panels are good** at:

- showing people images of things they cannot see (for instance what this ruin looked like 600 years ago, or what lives under the surface of this pond)
- giving information to first time visitors
- giving information at an unstaffed site

Make your panel as **visually appealing** as possible. Plan the images alongside (or, even better, before) the words. People will often 'read' your picture before your words.

**Do not put more than 250 words** on a panel. One hundred and fifty words per panel is better.

The **text hierarchy** is immensely important on a panel. The text must be clearly ordered and designed so that it can be scanned.

Panels don't have to be large, rectangular or made of GRP (glass reinforced plastic). They can be little, funny and/or temporary. They can have tactile elements, objects or sound associated with them.

**The stand** is as important as the panel.

When you are convinced you do want or need a panel, pull all the stops out to make it as **beautiful** as you can.

## PROJECTS: Creating better leaflets

Spend time thinking about why you want this leaflet. If you are clear about its **purpose**, your leaflet is more likely to succeed.

Work hard to create an attractive and eye-catching **cover**. Colour, text, and images can all be used to attract attention and deliver a simple message quickly.

The information should be **well organised** and easy to scan. Think about which parts of the leaflet people will see first, second and third and put your main messages there.

**Attractive images** are very important.

**Break up the text** into short blocks.

Put things where people will **expect** to find them. Maps and contact details, for example, should be on the back.

Make sure **maps** are easily understandable. This is much easier said than done. Maps need testing. If your leaflet needs a map allow twice as much time as you can possibly imagine needing to produce it.

Think about type of **paper** - in terms of cost, environmental impact, glossy or otherwise.

Think about **paper size and fold**. Is your paper big enough for what you want to say? Should it fit into a pocket? Non-standard folds can make for a distinctive leaflet but cost more.

If the leaflet is to be **displayed** in a leaflet rack it needs to be DL (one third A4) and the top third needs to attract attention.

Don't forget to include everybody's **logo**. (But try to tuck them away on the back cover!)

**Don't rush**. All stages will take longer than you expect.

**Check** everything thoroughly at all stages. If possible use an independent person to do the final proof-reading.

## PROJECTS: Words that work for interpretation

Interpretation is read by people at leisure, usually when they are standing up and distracted. These are not ideal reading conditions and people require simpler text than usual. The following principles help make reading easier.

### **Be brief.**

200 - 250 words is a good length for a panel. If you need more words than that, try to introduce pictures to support your message and put some of the words in captions.

### **Use simple sentence construction.**

Not all sentences should be this short. They will be boring to read. People will get fed up.

Conversely, extremely long sentences, that contain embedded and subordinate clauses, lots of commas, and possibly semi colons, should also be avoided; they are off-puttingly difficult for everyone and particularly so for people who have reading difficulties or whose first language is not English.

### **Break up the information.**

Many people find large blocks of text daunting. Break up the information into shorter paragraphs and consider using subheadings, and bullets.

### **Keep the tone informal and direct.**

Your text is a substitute for a personal guide. It is not an academic essay. Using 'we', and 'you' makes your writing more personal and, therefore, accessible.

The following can also help:

- quotations
- questions
- a lively enthusiastic style
- a sense of drama and excitement
- a conversational tone
- a light touch (maybe even the odd joke!)

**Use words from spoken rather than written English** Use 'buy' rather than 'purchase' or 'told' rather than 'informed'.

**Avoid specialist language and concepts**

Or, if you must use them, allow yourself enough space to explain them properly. It is often difficult for a specialist to recognise jargon and specialist language - a non-specialist editor can help here. Rewording a passage written in specialist or technical terms, may involve looking at the subject from a completely new angle. This can shed new light on the subject - for you and your reader!

**Use active verbs**

Interesting, vivid writing is about action. Although verbs are action words, some of them spend some time being passive. Don't let them! Learn to recognise (and activate) passive verbs.

Examples:

*This reserve was purchased by the Wildlife Trust in 1967.* -

PASSIVE

*The Wildlife Trust bought this reserve in 1967.* - ACTIVE

*The mace was stolen by a local pawnbroker* - PASSIVE

*A local pawnbroker stole the mace.* - ACTIVE

The second sentence in each case is much more simple and direct.

Passive verbs can also take people out of the action altogether.

For example:

*'This reserve was purchased in 1967.'*

This is classic bureaucratic writing. The verb 'purchased' is passive and, worse than that, it is 'agentless passive' which means it does not tell you who purchased the reserve.

Hiding the subject of the verb makes the action invisible - consider *'the fabric was woven locally'* compared with *'local cottagers, usually the men, wove the cloth'*. The second is more vivid and specific.



## Three Golden Rules for writing

### **DON'T FORGET TO:**

#### **Plan carefully.**

You will find it much easier to write if you are clear about what you want the panel to communicate and to whom.

#### **Give yourself plenty of time.**

Writing is not easy. It is hard to be clear, creative and concise if you are writing under pressure.

#### **Check, check and check again.**

Check your facts, your grammar, and your spelling. Then get someone else to do it for you. It is terribly distressing to see your precious work on the wall with an error in it. (It will also irritate the visitors!)

## First things First – text hierarchy

***Here's a sad, but true, fact - Most people will not read all your panel.***

Your visitors are probably

- busy having a good time,
- distracted by their kids/friends/parents,
- not desperately interested in flying buttresses

They may well not like reading very much, especially when they are standing up (let alone on the top of a windswept hill!). So, give them a break! Make the panel easy for them.

You need to put a lot of effort into persuading them that your panel (or leaflet, although this is most important for panels) is worth a second glance.

**First things first!** Put at least something of your most important content (that is your theme) where people will see it first. That means in the picture or the title.

**Lead them on.** Think carefully about where they will look next - probably the 'stand-first' or introductory text, or the picture caption. Your stand-first should summarise what the panel is about. Your picture caption should convey an important theme-relevant piece of information.

### **How much can you do in pictures?**

Pictures are not only worth a thousand words (assuming of course it's the right picture!) they are multi-lingual. They are seen as easy. Associate your words closely with appropriate images.

**Provide signposts for scanning.** Headings and subheadings show what information is where. They make text easy to scan and are therefore really important.

**Just a little at a time** Break up the text. Even the body text for the seriously interested should have a maximum of six lines in a paragraph.

## **SIGNAGE - SOME GUIDELINES**

### **Do I need planning permission to put up a sign?**

#### **PERMANENT SIGN**

On public land a licence is required from the Planning Department of Roscommon County Council.

On private land planning permission is required from the Planning Department of Roscommon County Council.

#### **TEMPORARY SIGN – (erected for less than one month)**

ON PUBLIC LAND - Generally prohibited except in certain circumstances e.g. promotion of charity, sporting or cultural events where a *Temporary sign permit* is required in advance from Environment Section of Roscommon County Council.

ON PRIVATE LAND – with landowners permission - Get advice on road safety from Environment Section, Roscommon County Council.

WITHOUT LANDOWNERS PERMISSION – Not allowed (Fine will be issued to business being advertised).

**It is important that you clarify with the Planning Authority if you need planning permission or a licence for your sign. See *Roscommon County Councils 'Policy on Advertising Signs' (2009)*.**

### **Are there any other types of consents that I need to consider?**

- Landowners consent in writing where applicable.
- The National Monuments Section of the DoEHLG should be notified in writing, two months in advance, where interpretation panels are proposed for archaeological sites. Where a monument is also deemed a National Monument any proposed signage may require Ministerial Consent. If placing signage within a historic graveyard the sign should be placed on the surface of the graveyard. Under no circumstances should any foundation holes be dug for the placement of signage inside a historic graveyard.
- Certain areas in the county are designated for nature protection and erecting signage may require the consent of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, DoEHLG.
- A number of heritage buildings in the county are protected structures and proposals for signage on or within the curtilage of protected structures may require planning permission. Check with the Planning Section of Roscommon County Council.

## **Is there any guidance on disability access at heritage sites?**

The National Disability Authority have recently published a Draft Code of Practice on Accessible Heritage Sites.

## **Is your sign insured?**

It is important that your sign is insured against public liability and also damage as the cost of replacement may be high.

## **Who will erect and maintain the sign?**

On public land the sign will be erected by Roscommon County Council at the expense of the sign promoter. On private lands the sign will be erected by the sign promoter. Placement of a sign should be given serious consideration as inappropriate placement will have a negative visual impact, may create a road hazard, or may minimise the level of interactivity between the visitor and the panel. Give some consideration to maintaining your signage and its renewal where applicable.

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