



Association of
Independent
Museums

Museum Displays and Interpretation

Ruth McKew, Director, Headland Design Associates

Photo: Bowes Museum

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“Museums should be places
where you raise questions,
not just show stuff.”

William Thorsell
Director and CEO of
the Royal Ontario Museum

Introduction

Interpretation is the way that we connect visitors or audiences to our historic places and collections, it is how we communicate stories and ideas about our heritage. Museums use collections, built heritage and intangible heritage to tell stories and to help people discover the meaning behind the objects or heritage. We engage our visitors by providing information and provoking questions and conversations; good interpretation will make people go 'Ooo I didn't know that' or 'listen to this'. Interpretation is both an activity and a tangible product.

But how do we do it and how can we make it better? Interpretation needs to be accessible, strategic, engaging and informative, and our visitors need to leave inspired. Sometimes museums provide interpretation unintentionally, without considering the perspective or view conveyed. The objects or stories that we choose to show or tell, and how they are displayed don't just provide interpretation, but also convey our museum's purpose and vision. By reviewing and considering our interpretation we can promote equality and inclusivity. The AIM Hallmarks say we need to 'develop and understand our collection, identify missing perspectives and histories and use them to encourage debate and discussion'.

There are lots of ways to provide interpretation, and what works for one museum may not work for another; your interpretation should reflect your organisation and its values. It's important to take a strategic approach to interpretation even if you are only planning one display or exhibition, you need to consider how it fits into the rest of the museum, how it will communicate with your audiences and what story you want to tell.

This guide will help you to:

- Understand what interpretation is
- How to plan interpretation
- How to produce content and text for interpretation
- Understand how to use professional support
- And think about costs for interpretation.



Photo: Llyn Maritime Museum

Context and some definitions

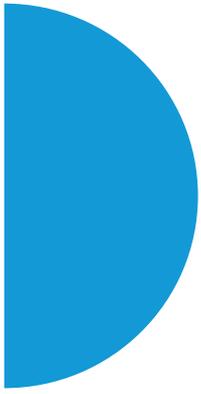
Museum audiences have high expectations, and it can be hard to know where to start. What about things like: how high should text be mounted? How much information is too much? In order to create successful interpretation, we need to understand our audiences and the heritage that we wish to interpret. Interpretation is the mechanism that connects our visitors to the heritage. Interpretation in museums has often evolved on an ad hoc basis, as funding or resources have become available. This often creates a mix of styles and approaches, and sometimes such interpretation can lack a clear narrative or story. A strategic approach can start to create a coherent visitor experience.

At the core of the Museum Association definition of a museum is that 'museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment'. Creating engaging and interesting exhibitions and displays is fundamental to the success of any museum. Interpretation should be continually evolving and telling new stories alongside changing displays.

The last few years (2019-22) have provoked rapid change which has had an impact on how museums deliver interpretation:

- Black Lives Matter emphasised the importance of honest evaluation about the stories we tell and how we tell them, as well as the need to review the collections that are owned by museums and an honest appraisal of why we have them and their meaning and significance.
- During the early time of the Covid pandemic many museums removed tactile exhibits, although mostly these have returned.
- Visitors were more comfortable accessing information via their own personal devices rather than shared touchscreens and expected to be able to undertake contactless transactions.
- Online engagement increased during periods of lockdown, and many museums are still struggling with a reduced number of volunteers and adapting to new ways of working.





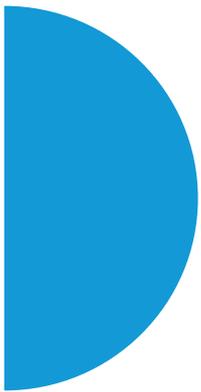
Interpretation

Interpretation is 'the action of explaining the meaning of something'. Museums & Galleries Scotland define interpretation as 'how we communicate our collections to our users. As museums or galleries, we should use our collections to tell stories and to convey identifiable meaning. Interpretation enables museums to communicate the wonder of their collections, connect with their users, and engage with diverse audiences.'

The National Lottery Heritage Fund (Heritage Fund) defines interpretation as 'the way we communicate

stories and ideas about heritage to different audiences. It involves turning information into something accessible, relevant and engaging'.

When done well, interpretation can bring history and ideas to life, and enable visitors to engage with objects, people and places from the past, but like history it is not neutral and communicates a perspective or view which we need to consider carefully. Interpretation should stimulate all the senses, it shouldn't just be visual but include opportunities to touch, smell and listen.



Interpretive Media

Interpretive media is the tangible means we use to engage with our visitors and can include:

- Object displays with labels
- Digital labels or QR codes
- Apps or digital information accessed via visitor's own devices
- AV presentations
- Digital interactive exhibits
- Hands on interactive exhibits
- Graphic panels
- Guides or guided tours

We talk about engaging with our **visitors and audiences**. It's really important to know who currently visits and to consider who we would like to visit so that we can develop interpretation which will meet the needs of new audiences. Some funding grants (for example, those offered by Heritage Fund and AIM's New Stories, New Audiences) offer grants for new interpretation that will appeal to people who might not already visit your museum, so it's important to think about the needs and interests of these groups.

Planning Interpretation

It is important to take a strategic approach to interpretation, to ensure that the interpretation works together to tell a coherent story, uses a range of interpretive media and has a coherent style. Before starting it's helpful to have a clear idea of the museum's vision, aims and outcomes. It can be useful to establish the outcomes, outputs and impact for the new interpretation – what do you want to achieve, what resources do you need and what will the long-term outcomes (or impact) be?

[The Heritage Fund guide to Evaluation](#) has some helpful notes and tips on putting together a Logic Model before starting a project.

[London Museum Development](#) has some helpful notes and tips on putting together a Logic Model before starting a project.

Review

A review of the current visitor experience will enable you to identify the challenges and opportunities. Follow the visitor route, starting outside the building, and consider how people find their way around, as well as the exhibits. Identify the gaps in terms of the story told. Is it told from different perspectives? What are the hidden or untold stories? In order to appeal to a wide range of people, the story needs to enable people to connect, to find a voice which resonates for them.

Interpretive Framework

An interpretive framework is a big table that sets out the key stories, gathered together into interpretive themes, alongside ideas for interpretation, and assets, such as key objects for display. The best place to start is with brainstorming the key stories that could be told for a particular topic, object or place. These can be refined and grouped together. Once you have a few key stories for each topic you are ready to create interpretive themes from the topics.

Photo: Tudor House



Case Study:

Wirksworth Heritage Centre

The Big Idea

“Wirksworth’s geology shaped its landscape, shaped its industry, shaped its people, shaped its spirit.”

Wirksworth Heritage Centre recently opened in a new building with new exhibitions which introduce visitors to the museum’s collection and the quirky town. The Big idea encapsulates what the museum is about, a series of Interpretive Themes bring together the key stories.

Interpretive Themes:

- Wirksworth’s history as a mining and quarrying town has left a unique social, architectural and landscape legacy – both above and below ground.
- Wirksworth is and was a working place where people have used their skills and labour to improve their lives and their community.
- The Wirksworth Carnival, the Wirksworth Festival and traditions like Well Dressing and Clipping the Church are part of the town’s distinct character.
- The people and families of Wirksworth have helped to shape the history and character of the town.
- Wirksworth was and is an independent-minded, nonconformist and creative place that has been an inspiration for art and literature.

And within each theme there is a series of key stories. The stories for the first theme are shown below.

Theme: history as a mining and quarrying town has left a unique social, architectural and landscape legacy – both above and below ground.

Key Stories:

- Roman lead mining
- Uses of lead
- T’Owd Man carving shows a medieval lead miner
- Tools for mining
- Rights to dig for ore & Royal Charter
- Families worked in the mines together
- Flooding of mines
- Limestone quarrying replaced lead mining industry



Photo: Wirksworth

Interpretive Themes

‘People remember themes. They forget facts.’

Dr Sam Ham

An interpretive theme is different to a topic.
A theme should:

- Connect people to the subject
- Help them to learn something
- Have a greater impact

Themes summarise the most important points.
They are complete ideas that express a message or point of view and connect tangible objects with intangible ideas.

A topic might be: The development of Llandudno.
The theme could be: Llandudno developed from quarrying villages into the Queen of the Welsh Resorts, based on land owned by the Mostyn family.

Lots of information can be found online about developing interpretive themes, often linked to the research by Dr Sam Ham or Freeman Tilden whose work at the National Parks of America developed a thematic approach to interpretation which has been adapted for museums and heritage.

The story we want to tell

The story we want to tell, sometimes called the exhibition narrative, is the longhand version of the story or history. It’s not exhibition text but sets out clearly the information about each key story within the interpretive themes. For example, for each graphic panel of text you probably need about 350-400 words of information which you can draw on for writing about 100-150 words of interpretive text.

The Big Idea

The Big Idea is a defining statement, which encompasses the primary message we want to communicate to those engaging with the interpretation. It will provide people with an understanding of the history and what to expect while engaging with interpretation.

Interpretive media

Consider using a range of interpretive media to tell the story. People learn in different ways and like different types of media. Consider which stories appeal to which types of audience and present the story in a way that appeals to them. Use the Interpretive Framework to match interpretive media to the different stories. You might not be able to tell all the stories, keep some for when the displays change or present further information as leaflets or flipbooks, for those interested in finding out more.





Bywyd morwr
A sailor's life

Roedd rhaid i griw llong lechi gydweithio
The crew of a loaded slate ship had to work together

Roedd y spwmer a'r llongau eraill oedd yn claddu'r lechi yn amrywio o rannau maint y llong a maint y criw. Roedd llawer o'r morwyr yn byw yng Nghaerffon a'r cych. Efallai y byddai spwmer a gariol 150 o durnelli oddi yma i Hamburg yn yr Almaen yn gwneud 13 swit y durnell, gan ennill £97 a 10 swit. Byddai hynny'n ddigon i dalu cyflogau'r criw, costau bwyd ac atgyweithio, ac i roi swm i'r cyfranddalwyr.

Meistr y llong oedd y bôc ac ef oedd yn gofalu am y busnes, y startu a'r cyflogau. Ef oedd yn cynllunio'r ffordd ac yn mapio'r llwybr gan gysylltu ar gyfer fywyd drwg. Byddai oddu i't ym gonachwyllo gwialth llwytho'r lechi ac yn cadw golwg ar y cargo ac ar walth ymestol a chadw'r llong. Byddai'r bos yn gwneud gwaith angenrheidiol pen oedd y llong yn hysgu. Byddai'r fellok yn dod ar y llosg i helpu i'w llywio yn yr harbwr ac yn Afon Mersey, yn enwedig ym Mhwll Gwst (the Swallows). With Mrs. Sorkel, byddai'r gadeiriol a byddai'r criw'n llywio i fyny thwy fôr i'r Iwerddon i Sianel y Gogledd a'r Iwerddon.



Morwr yn llywio fôr
Sailor steering ship

Schooners and other ships that transported the slate varied in size and had different sized crews, many of whom lived in or near Caerffon. A schooner that carried 150 tons from here to Hamburg in Germany might have made 13 shillings per ton, earning £97 and 10 shillings for the shareholders.

The master of the ship was the boss and took care of the business, allowing for bad weather. The two mates would supervise the loading of the slate and oversee the cargo and maintenance of the ship. The bosun would carry out work needed while under sail. A local Pilot would help on board to help navigate the harbour and the Mersey Strait, especially the Swallows. At Puffin Island he would leave the crew to continue up through the Irish Sea to the North Channel and beyond.

Types of Interpretation and Museum Displays

Interpretation should be continually evolving and respond to audiences' needs, opportunities and new stories. The principles of good interpretation are the same regardless of the media used, but there are some considerations for each type of media.

Photo: Cei Llechi

Labels and QR Codes

Object displays with labels

Object displays need to be appealing and eye catching, with consideration of the height of the objects, making sure that they are visible for children as well as wheelchair users and people of different heights. Information alongside the objects should be clear and easy to read, it should be obvious which object or group it refers to and should be concise (30-50 words).

It is not necessary to include the accession number (it could be added to the reverse for reference) and, unless there is an explanation about what it is, accession numbers mystify many visitors. Principles about text writing apply to object labels (see section 8). If space is tight in the showcase, placing small numbers alongside objects means information could be made available outside the showcase.

Digital labels and QR codes

Digital labels or information panels provide information via touchscreens or e-readers, which can be updated, and can provide a further depth of information without using more space. Some are linked to an IT system and can be changed regularly, others work on standalone devices, but all need to be properly maintained. These are useful when you want to offer visitors the option to delve deeper into a subject by providing more details via an online platform, or if you also want to include other interpretive elements.

QR codes have been around for a long time but have become better used recently due to increased use of personal devices to access information during the pandemic, and because modern phones have a QR reader within the camera. A QR code image can be added to graphic panels or showcases, which directs the user to a website with the relevant information.



Photo: Cardiff Museum

Digital and Hands on

Apps or digital information accessed via visitor's own devices

Apps usually require the user to download the app onto their phone, which isn't always practical, but once downloaded onto their phone it can provide access to information related to a whole site and can include games and activities, as well as historic information. They work well across an area or connected sites and can help visitors with orientation.

There are other technologies that can provide information via visitors' devices without requiring them to download an app. This includes iBeacon technology, which provides internet access to a discrete website and information. This works well in locations where the Wi-Fi and phone signal is poor and can be designed to alert visitors to particular locations or objects. It is easier for visitors to use and does not require the commitment of downloading an app, but once the visitors leave the site, they can't access the information. This can be useful for encouraging people to visit the site to engage with the interpretation in-person rather than them being able to access stories remotely. Apps and iBeacons are an excellent way to provide visitors with more in-depth information as well as activities and games.

AV presentations

Audio content, such as oral histories or vox pop comments, can be provided via audio boxes, or through headsets or single cup headphones. Audio content needs to be short and easy to understand, less than 2 minutes is ideal. Seating alongside audio and AV presentations allows visitors to rest while they listen. Audio content can be bilingual with options for language choice or if there is a screen, subtitles can provide other language content and content for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Audio Visual presentations can require interaction, such as choice of content or language, or can be played at set times on a large screen. This can make a great introduction to a gallery or museum or can tell a story using film, images and animation. Subtitles are helpful for many visitors (and can be multi-lingual). The length of the AV presentation should be considered carefully depending on whether visitors will be seated or stood along with questions like, 'will entry be timed or free flow'? With any audio content, you need to consider background noise and provide access to a hearing loop system.



Photo: Llyn Maritime Museum Pulleys

Digital interactive exhibits

Screens provide digital interactive exhibits. These offer visitors a choice of content, can include games and activities, as well as film, audio and photographic content, or the chance to take a closer look at museum objects.

Hands on interactive exhibits

Museums have long recognised the importance of encouraging visitors to touch and have a go. Interactive exhibits range from tactile replica or real objects, smelly boxes, games with lift up flaps to access information and mechanical exhibits that help to explain principles. Interactive site models can help visitors understand the context of a site or the complexity of a factory or mill. Room sets can become more interactive if people are allowed to touch and sit in the space. Hands on exhibits can be used to tell part of the story as visitors push buttons or turn handles more of the story is revealed. Historic games help to explore what life was like in the past, and imaginative snakes and ladders games can describe the ups and downs of an industry or story.

Types of Interpretation

Graphic panels

Information can be presented on carefully designed panels. It is important to limit the amount of written information - most of us can only hold about seven ideas at once so consider carefully what is to be included. Text should be concise (more on this shortly) and the position of the text and font type and size should be checked for accessibility.

In person interpretation

First person interpretation can connect visitors to a subject, it can be tailored to meet specific needs and the presenters are able to answer questions. The tour is only as good as the guide, and it requires enough people (staff or volunteers) to deliver it. Costumed interpretation will be based around a script and characters will tell a story, giving a particular perspective. Demonstrations can provide an engaging way of connecting to visitors.

External panels or viewpoints

Information outside the building is a good place to provide opening times and contact details, but is also an opportunity for interpretation, especially when the building is closed, presenting the opportunity to

offer information about a historic building or location. External panels need to be weatherproof and are usually made from duralite mounted onto a wall or within a robust stand. These will be more expensive than internal panels.

Website and leaflets

Interpretation begins before visitors arrive. Your website probably has some information about the collections, heritage and story that is told. This needs to be part of the strategic approach and should be carefully considered. It is also a good place to direct people after their visit for more information.

Branding and marketing

Marketing is another form of communication with your audience, so it is worth considering what you say through marketing. Does the message reflect your values and the interpretive principles of the museum? It can be nice to give visitors a taste of the story we are telling through the marketing. Branding can crossover with interpretation, and often requires a Big Idea and this can link into, or be similar to, the interpretive Big Idea.



Image: Yorkshire Dales Country Park

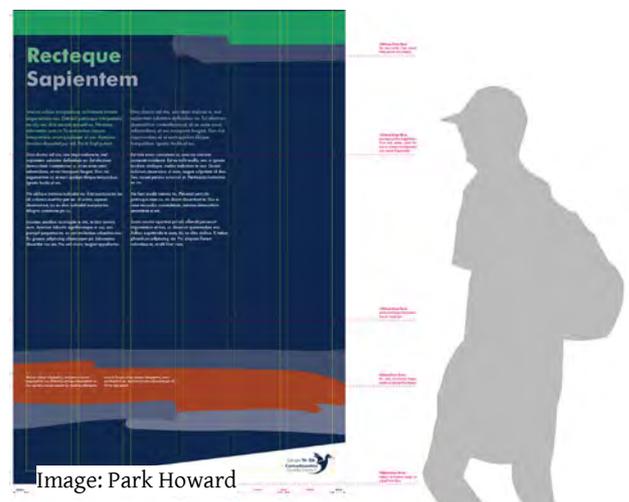


Image: Park Howard



Research

Interpretation is the way that we connect people to our heritage, so we need to understand both people and heritage.

Understanding Audiences and Heritage

People

People comprise our current visitors, but also new audiences – the people we would like to connect with, who might not already visit the museum. We might be able to connect with them through a new subject or by using a different interpretive method. In order to understand what people are interested in or need to connect, we need to undertake audience research. The best place to start is the AIM Success Guide: Understanding Your Audiences.

We need to know what current visitors like or don't like. This information can be obtained through surveys or by chatting to visitors in the museum. A focus group can help to gain more nuanced responses and answers to specific questions. To learn about new audiences, we need to ask and listen to a wide range of views. Ideally, this should be done early on in the planning process, and at regular points through the design stages. This can also include people with particular needs or interests.

Co-curation takes audience engagement further and invites people to come on in and help us design and interpret our collection. True co-curation is about giving equal control and decision making - it's a bit

like inviting someone into your living room and letting them rearrange your furniture! Obviously, you need to work with the participants beforehand to agree how much autonomy you can or want to give. A great way to start is to invite people to take part in writing new labels for objects, giving their unique perspective or story, to create the text for graphic panels or work with exhibition designers to design new display spaces. Derby Museums use a toolkit called Human Centred Design which provides ideas and new ways to involve people in the design process.

Heritage

The heritage we are interpreting includes museum collections, history, built heritage and intangible heritage. Before we start interpretation we need a good understanding of the heritage and summary of the history. Research for this can involve volunteers and potential audiences, specialists and people with contemporary knowledge. Understanding museum collections will involve review of documentation and information about the collections and could include producing a statement of significance for specific objects or groups of collections.



Designing Interpretation

Photo: The Atkinson



Plans and Graphics

Design of exhibitions is a specialist skill and can be provided by exhibition design or interpretive design companies, who will have 3D designers to plan the space and layout, and graphic (or 2D designers) to design graphic panels and digital content. They will understand visitor needs and guidelines for accessibility. However, there is some design work that can be done in-house. Simple graphic panels can be produced using software packages such as PowerPoint or Photoshop. You will need to consider the height of text, font size and colours to ensure that the panel is legible and accessible. You also need to use images that are high enough quality to be blown up on the panels (and don't forget to check and obtain copyright). Showcase layouts, showing which objects will go where, can also be done in house and will help work out what objects will fit. Simple floor plans showing the layout of showcases and interactive exhibits, and elevations showing the location of graphic panels are also straightforward.

The visitor route is an important part of exhibition design. Gone are the days of 'Ikea' style routes that force visitors in a particular direction, but some people like a route and it's important that the visitor experience has a logical sequence, with high points and reflective areas throughout.

If you need professional support, ask around to see who other museums have worked with and take a look at the AIM suppliers list. Exhibition design companies can be appointed on a fee basis or design and build. A design and build cost basis includes design and management fees and provides value for money as the design company will use tried and tested sub-contractors. If your project is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and is over £250,000 you will be awarded development stage funding, which should include costs for an Interpretive Plan. This is a good time to appoint your exhibition designers as they can help to develop the plan and deliver the project at delivery stage.

Lighting is an important consideration. Adequate lighting is important to ensure that text and graphics are easy to read and to help people with visual impairments. Well used lighting can also highlight objects or displays and create a sense of atmosphere.



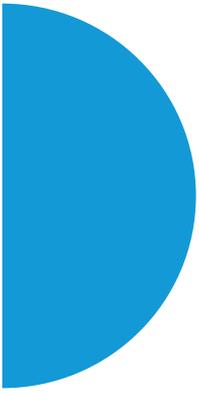
Photo: The Atkinson

Text Writing

Photo: The Atkinson



Ancient Egyptians believed that a complete person was made up of non-physical parts, like their names and their shadows, and physical parts, known as the ka and the ba. The ka was the life force of a person and after death it resided in the world but needed food and drink. The ba was free to leave the tomb in the daytime but must return at night. Descendants left offerings and used powers of magic and spells to reunite the ka.



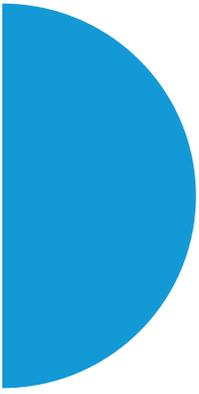
Text Writing

Before you start, decide on the hierarchy and format for the text that you are writing. This might include objects labels, graphic panels and digital content. It is also important to agree a tone of voice; describe it so that you can picture it each time you write text. If more than one person is contributing text for one gallery it can be helpful to have one editor who can adjust the text, so it has one clear voice. It can also be helpful to agree some rules, such as terminology or a glossary so the text is consistent, for example, how will you present dates: the 1800s or the 19th century?

Object labels are often printed and put alongside the object or can be referenced using a number by the object with information placed near the showcase. One object label can also be used to give information about a group of objects together. The title should be bigger than the rest of the text and doesn't need to be the name of the object, it could be a question or a fact about the object. The remaining text might tell visitors about the manufacture of the item, who owned it, how it was used, how it relates to other objects or why it's important, unusual or significant. Ideally an object label should be 30-50 words, printed in a non-serif font and at least point size 16. Below is an example object label from the National Football Museum.

The earliest shirt from the women's game in the museum collection is from 1984. This Wolves men's shirt is from 1908, and it's not the oldest one.

Why does the museum not have any women's shirts from before 1984?



Graphic Panels

Graphic panels should be carefully designed to make sure that the information is at the correct height. The font should be a non-serif font and point size 40 (or 30 if the panels are smaller and close to visitors). The title should be attention grabbing and fit with the titles of the other panels, so they feel like a set. The first paragraph should be less than two sentences and should grab the attention of the reader, whilst giving enough information to make sense if they don't read any further. The main body of the text follows on and should provide further detail. Each graphic panel should have less than 150 words (less if it is bilingual).

Digital content can be slightly longer, especially if users are likely to read it at home, sat down. It can provide more in-depth information but needs to be in short chunks with a clear hierarchy and a clear route to find the information.

For museums in Wales, all information will need to be bilingual and could use terms and phrases relevant to the local area. Make sure that both languages are given equal weight and consider using a professional translator who will write (rather than translate) the text in Welsh. There may be other places where information will be provided in more than one language. The Scottish Government have guidance on using Gaelic and Scots languages, but it is not compulsory. It is important to ensure that it is easy for visitors to work out how to find their language of choice. Bilingual graphic panels work well if the information is placed carefully alongside each other.

Principles for text writing:

- Use simple language to express complex ideas
- One idea per sentence
- Use the active form of the verb and ask questions, admit when you don't know something
- Read texts aloud and note natural pauses (use a full stop at this point)
- Remember that visitors will probably be reading this while in the gallery, not sat in an armchair
- Grab the reader's attention at the start (it's not an essay with an exciting climax)
- Find a unique perspective and tell us something we don't already know
- Remove superfluous words and keep it concise.

To find out more about text writing in museums [take part in a course.](#)

See example Graphic Panel on the next page.

Example Graphic Panel

BRIDGES AND BORDERS

The parliamentary Act of Union united Scotland and England in 1707. However, the border already had its own independent character, neither English nor Scottish. This is still somewhat apparent today.

The Union Chain Bridge expresses this strong identity, straddling the River Tweed but also the border, in the centre of the river at this point. Its Latin motto, *Vis Unita Fortior* ("United strength is stronger") is also a nod to the two parishes it joins – Horncliffe in Northumbria and Hutton in the Scottish Borders.

Locals have traditionally made use of the ambiguities of a border identity. The border had little relevance for local families, who intermarried and depended on one another for work and social life. For centuries, the Border Reivers, or raiders, rustled animals across the border as if it didn't exist. Many people living nearby still have traditional reiver surnames such as Charlton, Nixon or Armstrong.



*Detail of River Tweed from
John Blackadder's map of
Berwickshire, 1797*

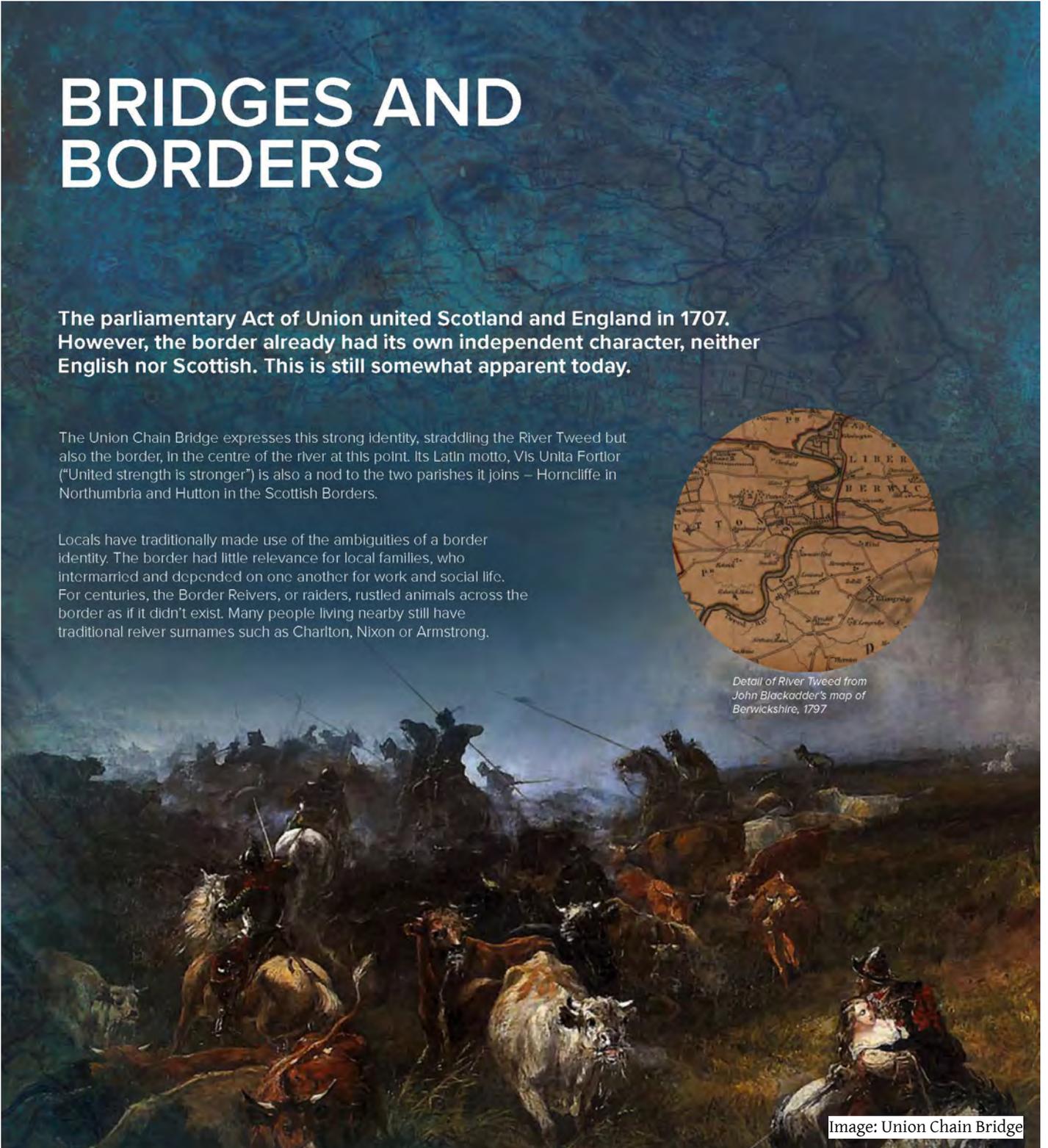


Image: Union Chain Bridge

Related Issues

In planning interpretation, you need to be aware of professional ethics, government policy and guidelines.

Photo: St Asaph Cathedral





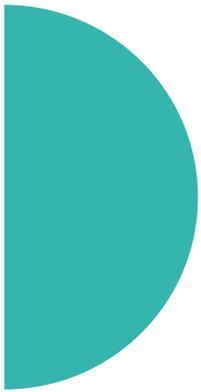
Planning

For some new interpretation you will need to consider planning / advertisement consent, conservation area planning, historic or listed building consent, or Scheduled Ancient Monument consent. These tend to apply to things like:

- Outdoor signage
- Interpretation which is fixed into the fabric of a historic building
- Plans which involve modification to a historic building

Churches and places of worship have to obtain permission for any new interpretation from the organisation's decision making body, e.g., in the Church of England / Wales this would be the Diocesan Advisory Committee (or Cathedral Advisory Committee).

Early discussions and planning application advice is really helpful and can help to inform designs and locations of new interpretation.



Accessibility

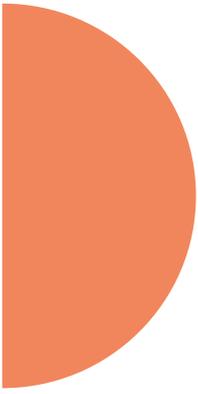
Museums and public places are required to provide equal access for everyone. The Equality Act 2010 makes it unlawful to treat disabled people less favourably than others. Museums must make reasonable adjustments to how people access the building and services. Any new interpretation should consider the needs of disabled people.

[The Heritage Fund have a great list of resources around access.](#)

Access is not just about access for people with disabilities, other things to consider are people of different ages, language and varying resources, such as financial and time constraints.



Costs and Putting Together a Brief



Costs

A lot of new interpretation can be done on a small or limited budget. Displays of objects can be changed easily, and object labels can give a change of tone or perspective, refreshing the story being told. New graphic panels will provide a new narrative or story and can be produced with a small design and print budget.

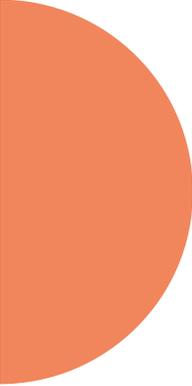
It is possible to buy elements of interpretation as one-off items, but if you work with an exhibition designer, designing and installing a whole gallery or museum will provide better value for money than designing one off exhibits, where the design fees can seem out of proportion.

The highest cost items are likely to be museum standard showcases, digital AV and hands on interactive exhibits.

Estimating costs for interpretation is difficult and is better done with some input from an experienced interpretive designer. A good place to start is by commissioning an Interpretive Strategy or Interpretive Plan, which will outline designs and cost estimates as well as set out an Interpretive Framework.

The Heritage Fund suggest estimating costs based on cost per m². This provides a rough estimate to give a ballpark figure to help with costs before specific briefs are developed. They are based on the size of space and ambition for the interpretation, but do not take into account the number of showcases or variety of collections to be displayed. The figures may be a bit low and not account for recent price increases.

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Low specification display Without showcases (or reusing existing cases), mainly graphic panels, adjustments to existing lighting, no AV, non-bespoke furniture.</p> | <p>Allow £1,000 per m².</p> |
| <p>Medium specification display Including some museum-grade showcases alternating with Perspex covers, simple AV, graphics, some furniture and some mounts and accessories.</p> | <p>Allow £2,000 per m².</p> |
| <p>High specification display Including museum-grade showcases, AV, lighting, graphics, furniture, framing, mounts, labels and accessories.</p> | <p>Allow £3,000 per m².</p> |



Sample Costs

The sample costs shown below provide an indication of costs for individual elements within an exhibition. VAT must be added to all costs shown and if you are working with a design company design and management fees will be proportional to the cost of the exhibition. The costs are a guide only and reflect prices in 2022.

| Element | Outline Cost |
|--|--|
| Exhibition design consultant fees charged as % of project budget | 15% |
| Content research and development | £60 per hour |
| Script/text writing and editing | £60 per hour |
| Illustration/picture research, copyright | £50 per hour |
| Graphic Panels: Graphic design Graphic art working 12mm digital wrap MDF graphic panel 900mm x 1400mm or: Direct print to substrate - 5mm foamex graphic 900mm x 1400mm | £300 per panel £300 per panel £250 £125 |
| Low tech hands-on mechanical interactive Interactive design | £5000 - £8000 £60 per hour |
| Low tech jigsaw type interactive Interactive design / art working | £500 - £1200 £60 per hour |
| Audio point with headset excl. content | £450 |
| 32" digital screen with inbuilt player | £500 |
| 32" touchscreen with inbuilt pc | £1800 |
| Exhibition high spec grade showcase 2000mm w x 2000mmh h x 600mm d with internal lighting - no shelving. | £15,000 - £18,000 |

Putting Together a Brief

A good brief starts the conversation with prospective consultants or design teams. It should include:

- Introduction and context
- Purpose and aim of the new interpretation
- Outputs (you might need to specify the number of showcases or graphic panels)
- The project team and support or information available
- Opportunities for questions and site visit
- Evaluation of quotes / bids
- Timescales
- Contact information.



Photo: Bowes Museum

Resources

[Museums Galleries Scotland
Introduction to Interpretation](#)

[National Lottery Heritage Fund Guidance
Interpretation
Evaluation](#)

[AIM Hallmarks of Successful museums](#)

[AIM Success Guide:
Understanding your Audiences](#)

[AIM Success Guide:
Marketing](#)

[Text Writing](#)

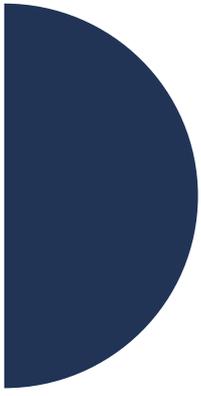
[Access – Good practice](#)

[Welsh Language](#)

[Derby Museums Human Centred Design](#)



Photo: Crab Museum



About the Author

Ruth McKew, Director of Headland Design, is part of a multidisciplinary team that design and deliver a huge range of interpretation for museums and historic sites across the UK.

Ruth began her museum career at the Cheshire Military Museum in Chester getting to grips with regimental collections and eclectic volunteers. She worked as curator at Cheshire Museums and supported museums across the region as a freelance curator. A stint in Malawi included developing and installing an exhibition about traditional and scientific medicine and working with the National Museum to change displays with absolutely no budget!

Ruth joined the team at Headland Design over ten years ago and specialises in interpretive planning to support the delivery of engaging and successful interpretation and exhibitions. The team at Headland undertake interpretive planning and design work, and deliver new exhibitions and interpretation for museums and historic sites. The team also have expertise in activity planning and understanding audiences with an excellent reputation of working with museums of all shapes and sizes.

[headlandesign.co.uk](https://www.headlandesign.co.uk)