Approaches: past, present, future

The ways we present historic places are changing fast – but with a single aim: to allow people to make better connections with their shared past.

Interpretation, entertainment, involvement: historic site presentation c 1983–2008

Charles Kightly
Historical and interiors consultant

Sites

In the early 1980s, the typical historic site was either a ruin surrounded by manicured lawns, with interpretation confined to the odd metal wall-label ('The Great Hall'): or a country house viewable only by guided tour, with the visitors reverently shuffling round the state-rooms. Ruin exteriors have perhaps changed least since then, though the lawns have usually lost their 'Keep off the Grass' signs. Very few are in themselves presented differently: for instance English Heritage's Wigmore Castle, Herefordshire, now refreshingly displayed as a tree-covered romantic ruin, a condition exceptional in England but almost the norm elsewhere in Europe.

Historic site interiors have seen far greater changes, particularly during the last ten years. Bare rooms with scraped walls are increasingly unacceptable, as (though still common, especially in privately owned sites) is furnishing with a few random time-blackened antiques. One of the most important realisations, indeed, is that historic furniture did not look old when its original owners knew it: so that to include battered antiques in allegedly recreated interiors is (at the least) misleading. Hence the widespread trend towards furnishing with as-new replicas.

In a few places, too, efforts have been made to dispel the 'dripping walls and flaming torches' view of historic interiors, by at least suggesting their original colourfulness and (comparative) comfort. A pioneer is Plas Mawr, Conwy (opened 1997), where Cadw made the brave and successful decision to recolour the extravagant plasterwork – over a protective shelter coat – and replicate some of the furnishing textiles. Where original wall-surfaces have been destroyed, complete interior decorative schemes have been recreated as new, including the '13th-century ashlaring' in Pembroke Castle gatehouse, the rooms of the 'Medieval Palace' at the Tower of London and the colour washing and wall hangings at multi-period Nantclwyd House, Ruthin.

Going further still, the re-creation (or at least evocation) of entire communities has also been a notable development of recent decades. Unlike pre-existing open-air museums featuring trans-planted original buildings (such as St Fagans,

A recreated room of c 1690 at Nantclwyd House, Ruthin, with replicated 'Kidderminster-stuff' wall-hangings, portraits and a re-coloured ceiling.
© Gareth Parry

Avoncroft and the Weald and Downland) these Iron Age, Saxon, Viking and medieval 'settlements' have been new-built with varying degrees of accuracy. Among the more ambitious is the late-medieval Flemish fishing village of Walraversijde, near Ostend, largely constructed using original bricks from the site. This was a British-designed and partly British-built enterprise, like several other major historical site presentations in western Europe during the last quarter century.

Interpretation

Britain has also played a leading role in site interpretation. Wordy book-on-a-wall graphic panels, beloved by academics but often ignored by visitors, have progressively lost favour, particularly in countries – among them Wales and Belgium – where the text must be produced in more than one language. The detailed information they contain is now recognised as better presented in the high-quality illustrated guidebooks produced, for example, by Cadw and English Heritage. Instead, increasing use is being made of colour-coding, iconic images and (especially in Belgium, home of Tintin) cartoons.

The production of such panels has been made infinitely easier (and cheaper) by the same computer technology that also gave birth to that most striking recent development in site interpretation, the computer interactive. Varying in quality from the ingeniously excellent to the merely cosmetic, these interactives were until very recently regarded as indispensable to any modern presentation. Now their ubiquity is waning, due partly to maintenance problems and partly (with computer games in every child's pocket) to their loss of novelty value. Simpler and cheaper mechanical interactives ('lift the lid to see the rat'), however, remain popular.

Another new arrival, the audio tour, has developed from a simple cassette commentary to far more in-depth CD or down-loadable presentations, often spoken by characters from the past. Not always popular with older visitors, audio headsets and wands have now been joined by ambient sound, and the less intrusive push-button audioposts, pioneered for example by Cadw at Caerwent Roman Town and Blaenavon Ironworks.

The site as entertainment

Britain's leadership in site interpretation sprang in great measure from one phenomenally successful site: the Jorvik Viking Centre, which opened in 1984. It has since attracted 15 million visitors, and effectively founded the British heritage interpretation industry. Employing time-car rides and other fairground techniques to evoke the sights, sounds and (famously if questionably) smells of the past, Jorvik has been very widely imitated, sometimes by its original designers. Its descendants include overtly commercial British attractions (like 'The Canterbury Tales') and more serious interpretations like Ename Abbey in Belgium and English Heritage's Whitby Abbey.

Alongside many other all-singing, all-dancing technological features, most of these Jorvik-based sites people their presentations with dummies. But however expertly produced, a dummy is a dummy, and attempts to enliven figures by animatronic techniques have largely proved ineffectual, both because of their cost and their tendency to decline into farce.

Live interpreters

Many presenters have therefore chosen to bring their sites to life, at least periodically, by using real people. This was initially facilitated by the 're-enactment boom' that followed the foundation of the Sealed Knot in 1969–70, and has since diversified into re-enactments of almost every period from the Iron Age to the current flavour of the month, the Second World War. The use of re-enactors for 'living histories' – which may mean anything from a few ladies demonstrating weaving and crafts to a full-scale occupation of the site, with bangs and crashes – is currently very widespread, but may be declining. For though re-enactors are cheap, because they are volunteers doing it for fun, they tend for the same reason – rightly or wrongly – to have their own views about how things should be done.

Re-enactors (of the expert and meticulously clothed variety) at Oakwell Hall, West Yorkshire
© Gareth Parry

Sites which can afford them may therefore prefer to employ paid costumed interpreters who, like re-enactors, range from the expert and meticulously dressed – as for instance at Hampton Court – to the embarrassingly amateurish, attired in tinsel and mum's polyester curtains. Like the volunteer re-enactors, however, they still fulfil the vital role of person-to-person engagement with visitors.

Involvement

The principal aim of most recent developments in interpretation is not only to entertain but also to involve visitors, and make historic sites relevant to ordinary people ('hard-to-reach groups', to use current jargon, being an especially sought-after target). Increasingly, therefore, it is the servants rather than the masters, the kitchens rather than the state rooms, which are now being highlighted. Provided that historical integrity is never, ever, compromised by marketing, enhanced and broadened public interest in historic sites is surely an end worth pursuing.

Radical approaches of recent years, have they worked?

Anna Keay

Director of Properties Presentation, English Heritage

We at English Heritage, along with many others, have over the last decade or so striven to try new things, to be more imaginative and inventive in how we show historic sites. Two places where new approaches were tried in the 1990s were Wigmore Castle in Shropshire, where a medieval castle was deliberately consolidated in all its overgrown tumble-down glory, and Brodsworth Hall in South Yorkshire, where a stately Victorian house was not 'restored' to its hey-day splendour, but left in a faded and fallen state. Both inspire as concepts, but do they work as realities?

New visitor research at Brodsworth has posed the question directly of those who come. The results have shown that visitors are intrigued and fascinated by the presentational approach at the house, when they understand it, but that many of them wander through much of the house unaware of it, perhaps feeling that the housekeeping regime might be a little lax. Many visitors to Wigmore Castle are similarly perplexed, enjoying the natural beauty of the site but concerned that it seems to be neglected by its custodians. On my own first visit to Wigmore a new member of staff responsible for grounds maintenance intercepted me on the approach to explain that a catastrophe in maintenance had obviously occurred as the site was covered in brambles. Dismay turned to disbelief when I explained 'it's meant to look like that'.

These two examples are reminders of the pitfalls of 'high concept' approaches. They can work very well in abstract terms and be realised successfully, only to founder in the final analysis on the simple issue of their communication to visitors. For English Heritage the lessons from both Wigmore and Brodsworth are that a compelling presentational concept needs strong accompanying explanation to become more than just a bright idea.

English Heritage's decision to consolidate Wigmore Castle in all its overgrown tumble-down glory needs careful explanation if visitors are not to interpret it as careless neglect.
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Costumed and live interpretation at Historic Royal Palaces

Chris Gidlow

Live Interpretation Manager, Historic Royal Palaces

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In the properties in the care of Historic Royal Palaces, particularly Hampton Court Palace and the Tower of London, costumed live interpretation is integral to what we offer visitors – and now, what they expect. Palaces have always been places of spectacle, beauty, majesty and pageantry, and we are proud to continue that tradition. *Showmanship* is one of our underlying principles, alongside *guardianship*, *discovery* and *independence* of spirit.

Historic Royal Palaces has developed a range of standard interpretative activities including a daily programme of costumed interpretation with larger-scale special events for holidays and

The young Princess Elizabeth makes her way through the crowd of onlookers at the Tower of London. She has been imprisoned by her sister Queen Mary for being implicated in Protestant plots against the Catholic Queen. Visitor feedback confirms the effectiveness of this style of storytelling using costumed interpreters at the main sites of Historic Royal Palaces. © Historic Royal Palaces

anniversaries. This has become a major undertaking since its introduction in 1992 and is intended to attract visitors, give them an enjoyable experience and to present curators' research in engaging ways. It was also in its original conception to be a primary interpretative tool since historic spaces were presented with minimal use of text panels and other media. The sites would be 'brought to life' with real people, showing how the palaces were used and inhabited.

Our style of costumed interpretation has evolved to incorporate a mixture of methodologies, and includes living history and experimental archaeology through the costumed kitchen presenters at Hampton Court. We still want to present research in engaging ways, attract new visitors, encourage return visits, and give visitors enjoyable and entertaining experiences. Our ambitions now extend further. Costumed interpretation has the added advantage of providing visitors with a friendly and approachable point of contact, helping orientate visitors and control crowds, while offering a sociable and active complement to other interpretative media. This also addresses different learning styles. Visitors can explore the human stories within the palaces as we present multiple interpretations, meanings and motivations. Many costumed presenters also provide formal education sessions to school-age visitors and increase the value and attractiveness of a day out for children.

We are now in a position to build on our extensive experience of costumed interpretation whether in the first person – being in character – or the third person – guiding – and move into new territories. Instead of being in an essentially passive experience, visitors will now themselves take centre stage by constructing their own experience, making their own adventure, facilitated by live interpreters. This allows us to make best use of the interactive, flexible and inter-personal strengths of live interpretation.

The question is, does it all work? This is a costly exercise, in terms of people contracted, costumes, research and development. In-depth qualitative audience surveys undertaken in 2007 revealed that our visitors both enjoyed and learnt from live interpretation. Very many participated actively in it, valuing their learning experiences; others appreciated it as an engaging background to their visit. We have concluded that costumed interpretation and live events, when approached in systematic and rigorous ways, are integral to what we provide and offer benefits to all – as well as providing lessons from which others in the heritage world can learn.

Beyond the 'Ministry of Works' approach to site presentation

Jeremy Ashbee
Head Property Curator, English Heritage

Since the spring of 2007, English Heritage's Properties Presentation Department has contained a team of five Properties Curators. Central among their responsibilities is to advise on the philosophy of conservation of the properties. In this, they complement other existing teams, notably the Collections Curators, but since their remit includes ruins and field monuments (the overwhelming majority of English Heritage properties), their role has many more points in common with that of the 'guardianship inspectors', which was finally phased out in 2006. This places their work in a long and illustrious tradition and its literature is extensive, particularly from the early 20th century, and many of its tenets remain unchallenged today. It is now recognised that the long-established approach of 'conserve as found' actually encompassed some radical interventions which the inspectors deemed essential or invisible, but the principle of limiting physical intervention remains with us. However, other debates remain open, and the Properties Curators play an important role in taking them forward.

One of these concerns certain recurrent motifs in the presentation of ruined monuments. The 'traditional' approach, seen on a site such as Minster Lovell Hall in Oxfordshire or Castle Acre Priory in Norfolk, is characterised by mown grass, gravel paths, a discreet and small amount of signage (principally to identify buildings and give essential instructions), and a complete absence of vegetative cover on the masonry. This approach famously brings both advantages and disadvantages, and the arguments about them have run for years. Its principal benefits lie in the legibility of the historic fabric, with architectural details and masonry breaks visible (if not intelligible) to all; the relative ease of conservation (since vegetation would need to be removed before a wall might be inspected and conserved), and a more general perception that good order prevailed. The critics of this approach have made play mainly with aesthetic arguments – that the bare masonry of a ruin can appear ugly. Thus in 1921, H Avray Tipping could describe recent works to Farleigh Hungerford Castle as embodying 'the icy touch of the mechanistic age' (*Country Life*, 25 November 1921) or two decades later, James Lees-Milne called the Ministry of Works' conservation of Hailes Abbey 'the worst example I have yet seen of wanton sacrifice of aesthetic considerations to mere archaeological pedantry…' (National Trust, file 9907618). These writers were both criticising the technical details of the re-pointing, but were chiefly concerned at the loss of a softening cover of plants. But the argument against the clearance of cover might also appeal to historical precedent:

Minster Lovell Hall, Oxfordshire: the traditional way of presenting ruined sites to the public – neatly mown grass, minimal signage and a complete absence of vegetative cover on the masonry.
© English Heritage

that the pre-conservation phase of a monument's life might have a cultural value of its own, representing the monument as it was when visited by Jane Austen, illustrated by Turner or Girtin, commemorated by Wordsworth, or even actually contrived by Capability Brown.

The debate is often finely balanced. The conservation of Wigmore Castle (see p 27), with full attention to ecology, minimal intervention to the fabric, and to the picturesque qualities of vegetation sounds appealing on paper, but the experience of visiting the site can be troubling – with little interpretation of the works which created the present site, it can look unkempt, and to a student of castles, its 'evidential value' is minimal.

Guiding principles

Bronwen Riley

Managing Editor: Guidebooks, English Heritage

Mobile phones, iPods, PDAs, computer interactives … how can the traditional guidebook compete with such an array of visually and aurally sophisticated gadgets? Where do guidebooks fit in and how have they adapted to keep up with the times in the past few years?

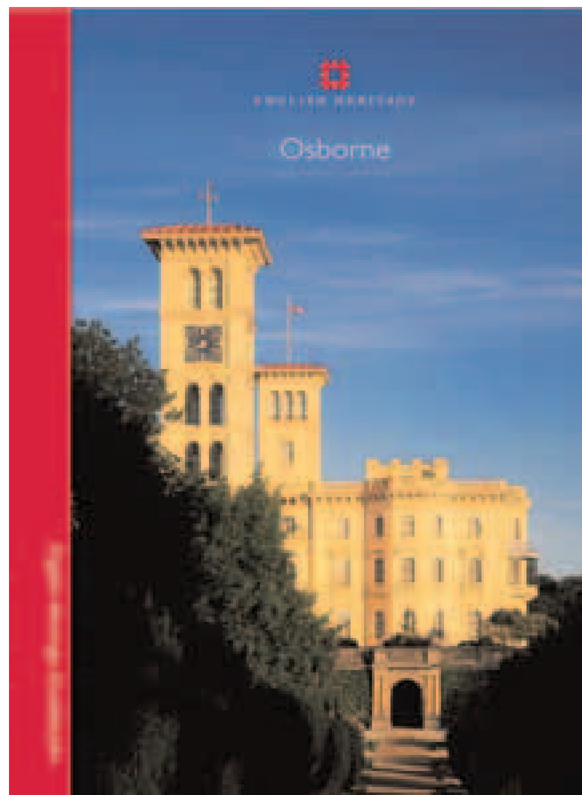
Opinions differ as to whether other means of interpretation will usurp the guidebook's role as an onsite guide. At Historic Scotland, Andrew Burnet, Publications and Information Manager, thinks that such a function at key sites may dwindle, thanks to all the other interpretative material on offer. At smaller sites, however, where there is not so much else available, the guidebook remains the key tool for onsite interpretation. At Cadw, National Trust and English Heritage, on the other hand, the latest formats all play up the guidebook's role as a key element in the tour of a site. Cadw makes its fold-out covers work as mini-guides, while the National Trust has introduced improved orientation drawings and mini-plans on spreads, similar to those used in the English Heritage Red Guides.

Where a range of interpretation is on offer, then the guidebook is perhaps under less pressure to be a 'one size fits all' and can be aimed at a particular market. Provided that it is still attractive as a souvenir of a visit, with excellent photography and illustrations and an appealing cover, then the content can be reasonably in-depth: it can be both guide and souvenir.

How has content changed and adapted? With a relatively generous budget and small number of sites, Cadw has been able to stick to its founding principle that the academic rigour and authority of the old Department of Work's blue guides should be maintained. But now there is pressure to have bi-lingual guidebooks, and to make the content more focused on people and more sensitive to the Welsh point of view. Historic Scotland is similarly compelled to produce guides in Gaelic, especially as the language has been accorded the same status as English. The Scottish National Trust already produces a separate Gaelic guide to Culloden. Guidebooks are caught in a web of political sensitivity – which strain of Gaelic should be used; is it discriminatory to produce a separate version in Gaelic or Welsh, which only a minority can read?

In contrast to Cadw, English Heritage at first went down a more populist route and stood accused of a morbid fixation on naughty monks and latrines. Re-launched in 2004 as the Red Guides, the guidebooks have an ambitious aim to be more academically rigorous yet still appeal to the average visitor and be attractive souvenirs.

Historic Royal Palaces had a makeover at roughly the same time (2005) but with a different outcome. Its new guides are more strongly influenced by magazines, with pull-quotes, a range of heads and sub-heads and busy layouts. The National Trust standard square-format guides have also recently undergone a radical re-think and design, with more pull-quotes and fluid layouts, more gobbets of information. While the focus has



Osborne – one of English Heritage's new Red Guides that attract modern audiences yet retain the academic rigour of the old 'blue guides'.

© English Heritage

been on boiling down the information to fit key interpretative themes on self-contained spreads, there is also new emphasis on orientation.

Engagement is the buzz word at the Trust with the largest amount of investment in time and resources directed towards the website. While big scholarly books on aspects of the Trust's properties will continue to appear, the feeling is that some of the more scholarly content and catalogues, which previously appeared in large guidebook format, will increasingly migrate to the web.

Design is certainly seen as key and can play tricks on people's perceptions. The old blue guides certainly looked official and with few if any illustrations and sober layouts, they were, and sometimes still are considered, to be more worthy and academic than the attractively produced full-colour guides of today. Yet, if read dispassionately, not only are they visually dull but they are also often, quite frankly, badly written, and much less informative than many present-day guides.

What is refreshing is that guidebooks are still seen as a real bedrock of interpretation, despite the multiplicity of resources that are now available for introducing people to the sites in our care. New gadgets may come and go, technology becomes outdated quickly, but reassuringly the guidebook, although it may change in shape and form, remains a true constant in site interpretation across the board – at once the most informative and the most profitable interpretative tool on offer.

About the house: changing approaches to the Queen's House

Pieter van der Merwe
National Maritime Museum, Greenwich

In the Queen's House at Greenwich, the National Maritime recently bucked the national trend by abandoning historically re-presented interiors in favour of a more flexible approach.

After more than a century in school use, Inigo Jones's Queen's House was restored to its 1660s form and opened to the public as part of the National Maritime Museum in 1937. In 1990, after further renovations, the Museum re-presented the House with the upper floor partly refurnished, largely 'in reproduction'. The change unsurprisingly reaped specialist criticism of principle and practice, tinged with some distaste for popularisation of an architectural icon.

Widening the House's attraction was certainly the Museum's aim: Mrs Thatcher's budgetary axe had recently forced it to charge entrance fees, focus on 'customers' and thus in market practice (overtaken in 1997 by an equally *dirigiste* 'inclusivity' principle) expand its user constituency. The 'furnished-House' phase lasted for nearly ten years, proved popular and certainly increased visitor numbers, albeit modestly: even today, some return and complain at not finding it still in that state. Overall it became more generally comprehensible, its school-level educational appeal greatly increased, and it launched into continuing success as a venue for corporate and private hire. There were disadvantages, however, which became increasingly apparent a few years on.

'A frontispiece in the midst' (Inigo Jones): The Queen's House and flanking wings of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, seen from the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park, with the Old Royal Naval College, the Thames and the Canary Wharf towers beyond. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

The first was inflexibility, becoming stasis. Vibrant reproduction wall fabrics began to fade and, while they remained suitable background to 17th- and early 18th-century oil paintings, the Museum's supply of these – though large – did not allow much evident change. Works after about 1750 and showcases holding other objects (a feature until the 1980s) did not fit the furnished *c* 1670s look at all. Effective but 'authentic' artificial lighting, especially of pictures and in the winter months, also proved near impossible. By about 1996 the Museum realised that, though worthwhile, the experiment had become a presentational cul-de-sac. Resources had also shifted to the massive Heritage Lottery-funded redevelopment of the main Museum galleries (completed in 1999), with a new site needed to mount a 'Time' exhibition for the Millennium. This was the spur to end the House's furnished phase and think again. From December 1999 it held the year-long 'Story of Time' show, though not before infrastructure improvements had been carried out, including the ingenious insertion of a lift to meet disability access requirements.

Thereafter, it became clear that the House's best new role within the overall Museum strategy was to be the principal showcase for its fine art of all periods – primarily its 4,000 paintings – and for temporary art exhibitions. This required no physical changes: fixed 1990s reproduction elements like fire surrounds remain in place, for example, but lighting has been improved, with better interpretation of the House itself within the context of the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site (inscribed by UNESCO in 1997). Wall colours are sympathetic but not 'authentic' and there is no period furnishing, original or in reproduction.

This has so far proved a sound and flexible arrangement, fitting well with both the Museum's ongoing Tudor and Stuart schools programme in the House – and its use for corporate and private hire. Since its re-launch in 2002 with a 16th-to-20th-century portrait exhibition ('A Sea of Faces'), the House has hosted both traditional shows and smaller events in the Museum's 'New Visions' commissioned contemporary art programme. The 2008 offering – particularly appropriate given that marine painting in England started when Charles II gave the van de Veldes a studio there – is the first major exhibition in twenty years of the Museum's Netherlandish paintings, entitled 'Turmoil and Tranquillity: the sea through the eyes of Flemish and Dutch masters, 1550–1700' (from 20 June).

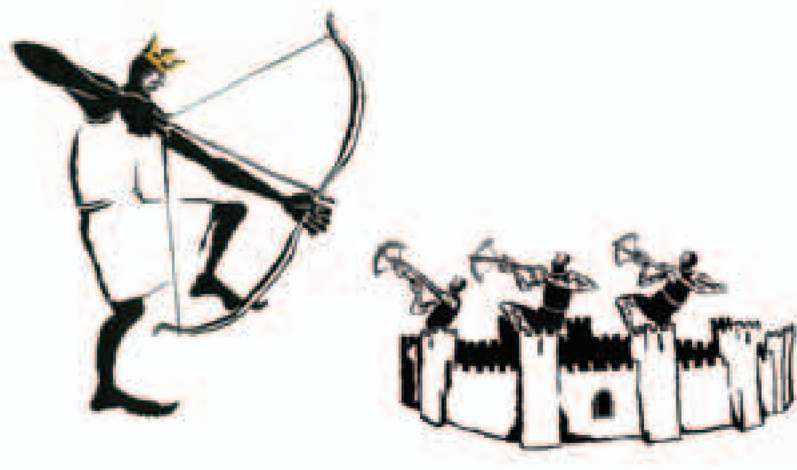
The House and its role will undoubtedly continue to be a focus of debate and some change. During the London Olympics, it will (according to plans at time of writing) be centre-stage between the equestrian show-jumping arena on the Museum lawns and the cross-country course in Greenwich Park, to the south – a situation that clearly raises both issues and opportunities. By then, however, a proposed re-working of the Museum's relationship with the Park may also support re-presenting the House in a more south-facing way, as recent work by Gordon Higgott suggests was Jones's original intention. No-one, however, should doubt the Museum's understanding of the significance of his early masterpiece, or its commitment to the House's appropriate care and use.

AV in the interpretation of historic places

Dirk Bennett
Interpretation Manager, English Heritage

The use of audio-visual (AV)displays in interpreting historic buildings is on the rise. English Heritage's use of them in a series of recent re-presentations highlights where such technology can work best.

In the world of historic buildings presentation 'AV' tends to be used as a short-hand term for any high-tech communication media directed at the senses of sight and hearing. It ranges from simple stills with voiceover to highly sophisticated animations and computer-generated imagery – and it grows ever more elaborate as the capabilities of the technology increase and its cost diminishes.



Computer-generated animations of King John's siege of Framlingham Castle in 1216 tell the story to an audience brought up in a multi-media age.
© English Heritage

Life in a 19th-century country house: the cook and the first kitchen-maid preparing food in the kitchens – part of the new AV installations at Audley End House in Essex.
© English Heritage

Creative approaches

English Heritage has implemented a variety of AVs over the past few years, among them the following:

Audley End – A series of short films installed in the rooms of the service wing, showing servants at work here during the 1880s. Projected directly onto the walls, the figures inhabit the spaces, and describe their duties and cares in service (5 minutes per segment, no seating, on site, transcripts available).

Battle Abbey – The events of the year 1066, culminating in the Battle of Hastings, dramatically retold through the voices of a 21st-century narrator and a contemporary witness of the events. The film includes animated sections of the Bayeux Tapestry, computer generated re-creations of the Battle of Hastings itself and footage of re-enactments (10 minutes, seating available in purpose-built theatre, includes subtitles).

Carisbrooke Castle – Jupiter, an animated donkey, guides the visitor through key episodes of the castle's history. Aimed at families on holiday, the film draws visitors into the wider history of the site through a friendly and familiar character. It includes animation, material shot on site, re-enactment footage, stills and material from image and videobanks (10 minutes, seating available in old guardhouse, includes subtitles).

Eltham Palace – Put together from family home videos this short cinema presentation shows the Courtald family enjoying themselves in the gardens at Eltham Palace, so giving a sense of the house when occupied (11 minutes, seating available in the house, music, captions and inter-titles, no narration).

Framlingham Castle – The history of the castle from its foundation to its later life as a poorhouse is retold in an animated film, specifically commissioned for the project. Aimed at the affluent family audience who frequent the castle, the animation is designed to appeal to children and to artistically aware adults. (3 minutes, no seating, video terminal, 'captions' on screen).

Royal Observer Corps Bunker, York – A history of the Cold War, told through a collage of documentaries and government instruction films from the 1950s (11 minutes, seating available, within bunker, subtitles available on request).

When does an AV presentation work best?

Our experience shows that interpretation through an AV presentation works best in the following circumstances:

- when a dramatic, dynamic event, such as a battle, is being explained
- when it can bring to life processes of work, common to social and industrial history
- when relatively recent history is being covered, so contemporary film footage that it can use, from newsreel to home-shot ciné film
- when children are a key part of the audience, as it can use strongly graphic or animated material to stimulate them.

Important considerations when planning a successful AV are:

- being clear about the target audience; trying to cater for all will risk watering down the initial concept and make the final result less coherent and unsatisfactory for everyone.
- being clear about the objective of the AV – is its purpose to be an introduction to the site, to add atmosphere, or to describe one particular aspect, event or personality?
- realistic consideration of the physical environment, including the limitations in terms of providing cabling, fittings, housing and electricity.

Above all, as the presented examples show, any treatment has to be right for its specific purpose – a 'one size fits all' approach seldom works.

Responding to the spirit of each individual place and its surroundings, AV can be so much more than the history of the site and has a crucial part to play in its interpretation and presentation. ■

The shock of the new: contemporary art and historic places

Martin Allfrey
Head Curator (Collections) English Heritage

Historic places are often inspirational and thought-provoking; they touch our emotions and fire our imagination. While traditional forms of interpretation are of course essential to gaining an understanding of a site, contemporary art can add enormously to the quality of the experience and enjoyment of a visit. Carefully chosen works add another dimension to a site; they attract new audiences and encourage visitors to see historic properties in a fresh light.

English Heritage has been working in partnership with Arts Council England in the North East since 1993. The first joint initiative was the creation of the Gymnasium Art Gallery and Fellowship programme at Berwick-upon-Tweed. The old gymnasium in the barracks had long-since ceased to be used for the physical training of soldiers. With funding from the partners, it was repaired and transformed into an artists' studio and flexible exhibition space.

The fellowships, offered annually to three professional artists, are open to visual practitioners from the UK and abroad and they are intended to give artists a period of time when they can focus on developing their work while living in and responding to this extraordinary border town, with its turbulent history and dramatic coastal setting.

Spurred on by the success of the Berwick Gymnasium Gallery, English Heritage was keen to embrace the art world again in 1996, the Year of Visual Arts. Major installations were commissioned for the ramparts around the town at Berwick and Belsay Hall was transformed into a contemporary living space by artists and designers. 'Living at Belsay' was to become the first of five thrilling contemporary art exhibitions.

It was the late fashion designer, Jean Muir, who first spotted Belsay's affinity for contemporary art. The hall, completed in 1817, is a building of strict geometry and awe-inspiring solemnity. Since coming into state care in 1980, it has remained unfurnished, due to the wishes of its last owner. This presents an opportunity to treat Belsay in a different way; commissioning artists to breathe life into its vast, empty interiors, which are the perfect setting for showing art and design.

From the first exhibition in 1996 the roll call of artists, architects and designers has been impressive. Alongside luminaries such as Thomas Heatherwick, Tom Dixon, Lord Foster and Stella McCartney have been young and emerging artists who have launched their careers through the associated Belsay fellowship programme.

Belsay's success is widely acknowledged but what really singles it out from other historic venues where contemporary art is displayed, such as Compton Verney, is that the property itself is inextricably linked to the installations. Belsay, with its uncomfortable memories and decayed interiors, is not the backdrop – it is the subject. By encouraging artists to draw on Belsay's rich historic seam, the installations form a new type of interpretation, a lens through which to experience the complex history of the site as well as an expression of contemporary concerns, ideologies and viewpoints.

The introduction of contemporary art to historic places can provide a new chapter in their history. Places like Belsay served a culturally dynamic role in the past; they were the physical embodiment of the taste and ambition of their owners and often at the cutting edge of design. By working with contemporary artists today, something of the innovation and vision that pushed the boundaries to develop sites in the past is maintained and nurtured.

The Pillar Hall at Belsay was the dramatic backdrop for this figure of a bride dipped in silver. It was created by fashion designers Viktor and Rolf, to represent a moment frozen in time and was one of the highlights of the 2007 exhibition 'Picture House'.
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Free sites unlocked: facing the challenges at free and unstaffed properties

Sue Barnard
Interpretation Officer, English Heritage
Susan Westlake
Properties Historian, English Heritage

What do Baconsthorpe Castle, Bratton Camp and Binham Priory have in common? These are three of the free and unstaffed English Heritage properties that have received new on-site interpretation as part of the Free Sites Project. Established in 2005 and supported by the organisation's Development Fund, this dedicated programme has been charged with devising interpretation at some of the 225 unstaffed sites in English Heritage's care.

Interpretation at free sites used to be limited. Competing with paying sites for budgets, they were not always given the attention they deserved. This deficiency was initially addressed through a 'minimum standards' programme, which aimed to provide a single basic information panel at each site, usually with one illustration. However, this proved woefully inadequate, especially at larger and more complex properties, and so a more ambitious programme was initiated, involving an annual budget of £80,000–90,000 and two full-time members of interpretation and research staff. Since 2005 41 properties have received new schemes, including Halliggye Fogou in Cornwall, Croxden Abbey in Staffordshire, Skipsea Castle in Yorkshire, Houghton House in Bedfordshire and Cantlop Bridge in Shropshire.

The priorities for new work are properties that have poor levels of existing provision and at which visitor numbers are thought to be high. In addition, sites are selected where we are able to communicate the findings of recent research, such as at Wayland's Smithy, Oxfordshire. Here, the results of a radiocarbon dating programme, which has led to new ideas about the sequence of activity at the long barrow, underpinned interpretation installed in 2007.

Unstaffed sites present particular challenges for interpretation. Guidebooks and hand-held audio tours cannot easily be distributed, and there are usually no indoor spaces for displays or exhibitions. To address these issues, a combination of on-site display panels, downloadable audio tours and improved on-line interpretation has been developed.

A design identity was commissioned early in the project to provide a house style using a palette of subtle colours that are sympathetic with the historic nature of the properties. Recognising the importance of images, we often use reconstruction paintings to communicate effectively the missing parts of the buildings or site. Because we cannot display objects we have, where possible, commissioned new photography of related collections. With a variety of plans, maps and other illustrations, these combine with new text to create lively, visually appealing and informative interpretation for our visitors.

We are working closely with Antenna Audio to develop new downloadable audio tours, which provide an alternative medium for information. Accessed through the website, these reach new audiences and can be downloaded onto an iPod or similar device to enhance a visit to a property. As well as narrated tours, we use the voices of experts, as at St Paul's Monastery, Jarrow, where Professor Rosemary Cramp, the archaeologist who led excavations there, brings the Anglo-Saxon site to life. Tours for Baconsthorpe Castle, Houghton House, Maiden Castle, Netley Abbey and Titchfield Abbey are already available through the 'Free Sites Unlocked' page of the English Heritage website (**www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.10612**), which also provides historical background, images and sources of further information for other unstaffed properties.

Plans are now under way for a further three years for the Free Sites Project. As well as continuing to address individual properties, the team is starting to look at groups of sites on Dartmoor and the Isles of Scilly. Although English Heritage's unstaffed properties present new challenges, they also offer exciting chances to develop new and innovative ways to tell the stories of these often remote and remarkable historic sites.

Visitors at Wolvesey Castle, Winchester, where new interpretation panels have recently been installed.
© English Heritage

Real coal mine, real miners

Peter Walker
Keeper and Mine Manager, Big Pit National Coal Museum, Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales

What makes the underground tours at Big Pit so successful and what happens when the supply of real miners runs out?

The new exhibition galleries at Big Pit – the former working colliery at Blaenafon in South Wales – largely funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, have won universal acclaim, and a £100,000 cheque from the Judges for the Gulbenkian Prize 2005, for their intelligent and thought-provoking use of people-based interpretation. But as good as our new exhibitions may be, it is still the underground tour of the genuine mine workings that provides the most lasting and endearing of memories. And of the 160,000 visitors that come to Big Pit every year 95 per cent of them experience the underground tour.

> 'Big Pit offers an exceptional emotional and intellectual experience. It tells the individual stories of its community better than any museum I have visited.'
> Sir Richard Sykes, Chairman of the Judges for the Gulbenkian Prize 2005

As you stand at the top of the mineshaft kitted out in helmet and cap lamp the realisation that this is no Disney-like simulation starts to strike home. And it's not just the hole in the ground that is authentic either – these 'costumed interpreters' are the real thing and they have the blue scars and personal experiences to prove it.

To the advantages of first-person interpretation in an authentic setting we add the telling of an emotive story that is within living memory. This in particular means that the visitors will bring their own personal perspectives and prejudices to the story and regardless of what these may be, they inevitably and naturally lead to a more profound engagement with the subject.

What adds to that engagement and encourages empathy with the miner's story is, of course, the miner himself. I'm sure that Baroness Thatcher never realised it but it turns out that the South-Wales miner was ready-made for an alternative career in tourism. Friendly and garrulous, with a ready and very natural line in witty repartee, the miner-turned-guide imparts the content of the tour with a frank honesty that is very refreshing in these PC-conscious days. The truth, of course, is infinitely subjective, but what you will hear from a Big Pit miner is what he truly believes, rather than the scripted and rehearsed inventions of the period interpreter.

Imperfect they may be, but tours such as these are perhaps the best example of the ongoing shift in many museums to people-based interpretation, following the recognition that visitors are often more interested in people than they are in objects. That's certainly been our experience at Big Pit, where praise for the dedication and enthusiasm of our staff has dominated visitor surveys for the last 25 years. Currently we employ nearly 40 former miners but given the current state of the British coal industry, how much longer can we carry on like this? Well, we can record our existing guides as much as we like but we have to accept that when the supply of ex-miners runs out in about 15 years' time a visit to Big Pit will be subtly different. I'm sure the guides will still be as friendly and garrulous but instead of 'I' or 'we' did this or that, it will by then have become a case of 'they'.

That said, as you travel through the mineshaft with your helmet and cap-lamp you will still be entering a real coal mine and your guide won't be an employee of Cymru Disney. He (or she) will still be a real person who will give you a glimpse into the hidden world of the miner, and hopefully put a smile on your face!

At the Big Pit Museum at Blaenafon, if you aren't smiling going down you'll be smiling coming back up!
© National Museum of Wales

Historic Scotland's Stirling Castle Palace project

Chris S Watkins
Head of Major Projects, Historic Scotland

Following three years of extensive research, archaeological investigation and survey work Historic Scotland are about to commence the next phase of their £20m project to conserve and reinstate some of Stirling Castle's magnificence lost during the military adaptation of the castle in the late 18th century.

Having completed the conservation and restoration of James IV's Great Hall in 2001, including the re-creation of its oak hammer-beam roof, site works will soon commence on James V's mid-16th-century Renaissance Palace.

Built high on the Castle rock and to the south of the Castle's inner close, the Palace incorporates the vaults of earlier structures and completes the composition of a court of honour as conceived by James IV. Commissioned by James V for himself and his French wife, Mary of Guise, the Palace comprises two sets of Royal Lodgings, each containing three main apartments linked by a gallery and built around a central courtyard known as the Lion's Den. The three main external elevations are richly decorated with an enigmatic collection of full-length statues set on balusters within shallow cusped niches. The statues, carved by French masons, depict the Planetary Deities, Virtues and the Liberal Arts. Designed to impress and to proclaim James's authority, the elevational treatment and choice of subjects for the statues draws strongly on the architecture and design of Northern Italy and France.

Internally the King's and Queen's Lodgings were intended to be richly decorated and hung with tapestries from James's large collection. The ceilings in some of the apartments were originally adorned with large carved-oak antique medallions, 32 of which still survive and are known collectively as the Stirling Heads.

The main apartments forming the Lodgings still exist in their original configuration, complete with window openings, carved fire surrounds and stone mouldings. The original timber floor-beams, recently dated to the 1530s, and some early doors remain in their original locations, but the oak ceilings, shutter-board windows, plasterwork and decorative schemes have now all gone after 250 years of military occupation.

Historic Scotland's proposal, following extensive research undertaken by their own staff and a team from Glasgow University, is to re-create the sumptuous interiors, including the coffered ceilings, with newly carved and painted oak medallions, the plasterwork and painted decoration, the wall hangings and furnishings including a new set of seven tapestries known as the 'Hunt of the Unicorn'.

As part of the presentation of James V's 16th-century palace at Stirling Castle, Historic Scotland has commissioned a sumptuous new set of tapestries known as the 'Hunt of the Unicorn' (detail). © Historic Scotland

The original Stirling Heads will be exhibited in a new gallery on the upper floor of the Palace alongside interpretation of the statues and the findings of the recent research into their iconography.

The new tapestries, based on a set in the Metropolitan Museum, have been funded largely by donations from the Quinque Foundation. The West Dean Tapestry Studio in Sussex started weaving them in 2001 both in their own studio in Sussex and in a temporary studio at the Castle. Four of the seven have been completed and are on display at the Castle. The final three will not be ready until 2013, two years after the main project opens to the public.

Kenilworth garden

Anna Keay
Director of Properties Presentation, English Heritage

The ruined might of Kenilworth Castle in Warwickshire has been an inspiration to its visitors for well over three hundred years. Harder to imagine now is the splendour and magnificence of the castle in its roofed and decorated heyday. All this is set to change with work now under way to bring back to life one of the wonders of the castle's glory days – the Elizabethan garden.

In July 1575 Elizabeth I arrived at Kenilworth for a glittering two-week visit, the guest of her long-time suitor, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. The occasion and the castle were described in detail by one of Dudley's entourage, who noted in particular that the garden the Earl had created there was 'fit to be called paradise'. Following extensive archaeological investigation and archival research, English Heritage's £2 million project to re-create this extraordinary garden will be completed in 2009.

Lying to the north of the 12th-century keep, the garden covers about an acre. Divided into four even quarters of planting, edged with a raised terrace, it was adorned with 'porphyry' obelisks and painted heraldic beasts. The largest single structure was the extravagant and avant-garde Renaissance aviary, adorned with faux jewels and filled with exotic birds. In the middle of the garden a great white marble fountain flowed with water, and this – along with all the other features – is now being carefully re-created from the contemporary descriptions and comparative material.

Re-creating Kenilworth's Elizabethan garden is not just an essay in garden archaeology. It is an attempt to reinvigorate a castle and remind us that it was once more than a ruin – a place of style and splendour, politics and personality. ■

Hans Vredeman de Vries's design for a formal garden, *c* 1583. The new garden at Kenilworth will bear many similarities to this unrealised scheme, including the central fountain, enclosed arbours, geometric plant beds and sand-covered paths.

Bringing a medieval palace back to life. English Heritage is planning to re-present rooms in the keep of Dover Castle to evoke their appearance at the end of the 12th century.
© English Heritage

Dover Castle

Anna Keay
Director of Properties Presentation, English Heritage

The keep, or Great Tower, at Dover Castle is one of the most impressive royal buildings anywhere in Britain. It was the most lavish creation of King Henry II, our own 'Alexander of the West', and the greatest castle-builder of his age.

In an ambitious new project, part of a site-wide interpretation strategy, English Heritage will re-present this building to evoke its appearance at the end of the 12th century. In so doing we are attempting a re-presentation feat never tried before. The age and status of the rooms makes it a particular challenge. The extraordinary survival of the original 12th-century fabric and room volumes presents a genuinely unique opportunity.

A research programme delving into the material culture of northern Europe in the 12th century has been amazingly fruitful and through it we are bringing together the best of scholarly thinking. Exciting new work on the purpose of the building, and its relationship to the shrine of St Thomas a Beckett at nearby Canterbury, is enabling us to interpret the purpose of the whole structure in a new and unexpected light.

The intention is to use this research to inform the complete re-dressing of a series of interiors within the Great Tower, including the rooms inhabited by the king himself, and to open these together with a new interpretative introduction to Dover as a medieval palace. In bringing to life one of England's most dramatic and fascinating historical periods, we hope to give visitors a surprising and delightful glimpse of the Middle Ages. ■

Rediscovering Attingham: uncovering details of an 1807 *trompe l'oeil* wallpaper scheme on the first floor of the house.
© National Trust

Attingham Re-Discovered

Sarah Kay
Project Curator, National Trust

Like those of most historic houses, Attingham's fortunes have risen and fallen. The house has had extravagant expenditure lavished upon it, has survived periods of decline, neglect and even bankruptcy, and has been revived and resuscitated. 'Attingham Re-Discovered' is the latest chapter in its revival.

Built by George Steuart in 1785 and altered by Nash in 1805–7, Attingham Park, in Shropshire, is a vast, austere, late-Georgian mansion. Yet, since it was first handed to the National Trust in 1947, visitors have only been able to see a comparatively small proportion of its rooms, making its development and historic use difficult to grasp and giving a sense that much seemed to be hidden behind closed doors.

In addition, many of the rooms that *were* shown had become rather soulless and had lost a convincing feel of ever having been lived-in. Over recent years, greater visitor expectations and increasing transparency in the way the Trust shows and explains its properties to visitors made it clear that improvements were needed. In 2006, *Attingham Re-Discovered* set out to meet this challenge. The project has essentially a three-fold aim:

- to improve the way that existing rooms are presented (both in terms of historical accuracy and atmosphere) and interpreted to visitors
- to extend the visitor route into 'new' areas
- to encourage our supporters to enter into the curatorial and conservation debates.

The proposals for the house's re-presentation and re-decoration are based on seven years of archival and physical research by internal and external advisers.

The scope of the project is vast and has been set out in a phased programme which currently spans six years but will probably take ten to complete. Attingham is in the fortunate and rare position of not having to apply for external funding in order to realise the plans. This is not necessarily, however, a straightforward advantage. It is important to move slowly and carefully and not rush decisions, as change can be a risky business. Too many changes can so easily destroy the intangible spirit of the place. There are difficult curatorial and conservation decisions to be made and a major challenge is maintaining an overview of the presentation of the house and ensuring that any proposed changes in a given room will sit comfortably and convincingly with the rooms on either side.

A key part of the project brief is to provide as much interpretational and educational benefit as possible by carrying out 'conservation in action'. Visitors can see the conservation work being carried out, are encouraged to *engage* with it and then return to view progress. Temporary interpretation panels are being used to set out the *aim* in each room, to reveal a '*hidden' secret*, such as a decorative detail, to explain a technical or historical term under *Did you know?* and to put the visitor in the curator's shoes by asking *What would you do?* Thus the project is not just a one-way street – visitors are invited to feed back their reactions and comments to the restoration proposals (and the costs), which are then taken into account in the conservation debates, and will eventually show whether we have done an effective job of interpreting the work. This transparency is quite new and challenging for the Trust and means that the project really is, in more than one sense, a journey of discovery.

Conservation Principles and the presentation of English Heritage sites

Jeremy Ashbee
Head Property Curator, English Heritage

The publication of English Heritage's *Conservation Principles* in April of this year, after an extensive consultation, now presents us – and the wider sector – with the parameters within which the debates about conservation are likely to run in the future. It draws on many developments over the

last decades, such as the emergence of the Conservation Plan process, and though much of the document has a clear precedent in existing practice, the way it is articulated contains important departures from the most recent previous legislation and Planning Policy Guidance. Though by no means limited to the English Heritage estate, the document has potentially radical implications for the ways that our sites will be presented in the future.

Those aware of the existing philosophy of 'conserve as found', inherited from the Office of Works, Ministry of Works and successor organisations, have been struck by the tenor of some of the later sections of *Conservation Principles*. Here it is acknowledged that those responsible for the historic environment are not charged merely with managing the effect and consequences of inevitable change, but in some circumstances may take active measures to bring physical change about. It is even permissible to use terms like 'restoration', once felt to be completely alien to the conservation philosophies of Britain. The document clearly sets out that the test for whether such an intervention should be considered lies in the depth of understanding which underlies the proposal, a clear articulation of the relevant 'heritage values' of a site and of its wider context (under the headings 'Evidential', 'Historic', 'Aesthetic' and 'Communal') and how these values will be affected by a change, and finally by a commitment to maintain what will be created after those changes have been carried out.

Not surprisingly the application of these tests to schemes carried out in the past, and to more recent proposals, can be a sobering process. For example, the removal of the first floor of the poorhouse at Framlingham Castle, to re-create the volume of a medieval Great Hall, or of the two 1788 side wings to Chiswick House, both in the mid-20th century, would fail the important test that the heritage values of the removed elements should be minimal. They have also arguably diminished the long-term sustainability of the site (though in the case of Chiswick, they did address a pressing immediate problem of dry rot in the wings), and have undoubtedly created historically anachronistic ensembles, with juxtaposed elements that never co-existed before.

A 2003 proposal to introduce a roof on Clifford's Tower, York, would have been problematic because of poor information about the historic roof form (extensive documentary and pictorial research produced very little evidence for the form of the medieval roof or a replacement of the 17th century). It might, however, have been more acceptable in terms of the heritage value of affected areas: much of the physical impact would have been limited to fabric reconstructed over the course of the 20th century. For many arguments about heritage value, there needs to be a strong element of professional judgement, and wide consultation within local communities and beyond. A new roof at Clifford's Tower would inevitably have removed the current view from the wall-walk into the internal courtyard: this view is frankly not dramatic or aesthetically pleasing, but is undeniably informative about the proportions of the historic building, and has been a feature of the site since the late 17th century.

Conservation Principles poses challenging questions for curators. For example, could we consider putting a new roof on Clifford's Tower in York when we know so little about the form of the original one?
© English Heritage

Much of the challenge of the near future is (in my opinion) to advance further out of an era of a 'house style' of conservation and presentation (inherited from the Ministry of Works), into a new paradigm in which the peculiarities of each individual site, past and present, lie at the heart of what we decide to do with it. The existence of *Conservation Principles* ensures that this approach is not purely pragmatic, or entirely at the whim of the individual curator or inspector. But it requires all those involved to make the most detailed interrogation of the site, and to articulate this clearly in debate with other interested parties. The marshalling and articulation of this evidence, for English Heritage sites, is now the responsibility of a new team of Properties Curators.

Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment is available at **www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/ConWebDoc.13556**