

## 4. Telling the Story – Interpretation



*This sheet explains the importance of good interpretation, giving advice on creating it, and of having events and celebrations.*

### INTERPRETATION

#### The benefits of good interpretation

- Enhances people's visits.
- Generates support and positive advertising by word of mouth.
- Can influence and change attitudes.

Interpretation is not the 'teaching' of facts.

Interpretation is a way of communicating which is enjoyable, entertaining and meaningful, with clear themes so that the audience will take notice and become engaged with the place they are visiting.

Remember who your best teachers were. These teachers communicated in a way that captured attention and imagination and helped you to remember and understand.

Visitors to churchyards and burial grounds are a non-captive audience; they don't have to take notice. Make your interpretation both engaging and inspiring.

#### Step by step guide to creating interpretation

Before embarking on interpretation please take time to plan carefully.

Think about why you want interpretation and how much money you have for it.

- What is its purpose?
- Who is it aimed at?
- Where will it be located?

It may be appropriate to have minimal interpretation and let the place speak for itself.

#### Once these questions have been answered then decide which media to use:

- Interpretive panels
- Leaflets
- Audio guides
- Art
- Special events
- Guided walks or talks
- Waymarked trails
- Website

Any interpretation needs to be tested to see if it works:

**Stage 1** – Test it before the final production; ask your audience whether it works for them!

**Stage 2** – Once installed, see if it is working; do people stop and look or is it time for a change?

The sight of uncared for and out of date interpretation gives a negative message about a place and its community.

#### Doing it yourself

Home-made interpretation will be more individual than professionally produced but you do need to get it right. Take careful note of the following advice and recommended reading. If this is not for you, have a look at grants to pay a professional (see sheet D5, Applying for Grants).

#### Telling the story of your churchyard or burial ground with words

##### Title

Think of a title which will get noticed and communicate a theme. For example, the title 'The Churchyard of St. Mary's Church', could become 'Haven on Earth - The Story of St Mary's Churchyard'.

##### Topics

The next step is to choose the topics or subjects for interpretation. Topics might include: grassland, trees, animals, people, stonework. More than 5 topics is overload! Remember, less is often more with interpretation – you don't have to tell people everything of interest.

Once topics are selected then the next step is to decide the theme of each topic.

##### Themes

*Themes are what you want your visitors to understand, remember or feel when they leave.*

As well as being memorable, themes focus the mind, making the job of writing interpretation easier. Any number of themes can be developed for each topic but a theme should communicate only one main idea.

##### For example

**Title:** Haven on Earth – the Story of St Mary's Churchyard

**Topics:** grassland, trees, gravestones, animals, people

## INVOLVING PEOPLE

### 4. Telling the Story – Interpretation

#### Themes for the topic 'grassland'

- The churchyard grasses and flowers have grown here for about 1000 years.
- This churchyard is a haven for over 50 species of wildflower – sadly most have disappeared from the surrounding countryside.
- In summer, take a walk through the grassland and discover the many visiting insects and butterflies.
- 'Like a Bride Bedecked with Jewels' – the description given to our flower-rich countryside by a medieval traveller and diarist. Imagine what it must have looked like!
- Our short mown grassland helps ground-feeding birds like thrushes and blackbirds.



*Buttercup*

#### Themes for the topic 'gravestones'

- Take a look at the different types of rock in this churchyard; there are more types here than anywhere else in the parish.
- Like old buildings, gravestones reflect the fashions in architecture and verse. Look out for florid Victorian gothic style in memorial carving.
- Look for old gravestones carved with symbols indicating the profession of the person buried.

It is easy to write boring themes but STRONG themes take time. A picture tells a thousand words; use plenty of good quality illustrations.

#### Writing for interpretation – hints and tips

- Use powerful active verbs and be positive – this sounds more natural and lively.  
'we manage...' is far better than 'this site is managed by...'

- Use metaphors, comparisons and analogies – these help people relate what you're telling them to something else they know about.

Pipistrelle bats are so tiny they will fit into a small matchbox.

The veteran yew tree is a living green monument.

Long-eared bats are 'whispering' bats. They make quiet echolocation calls to avoid being heard by moths.

- Use visual metaphors to describe things.

The grassy, mounded anthills, made by the harmless yellow meadow ant, are like icebergs – there is more below ground



*Pipistrelle bat*

than above it.

- Be personal and address the reader in the first person; refer to them as 'you':

You can see the variety of different summer flowers in the churchyard grassland.

- Ask questions and engage your audience's imagination, maybe with size or timescale.

Why do you think snowdrops are also known as Candlemas bells?

Step back 500 years and you would see the local men practising archery in this churchyard.

If you were small enough to get inside a lichen then you would see that it's two things in one – a fungus and an alga working together.

- Write in short sentences and paragraphs. Short ones pack more punch! And avoid jargon and elitist vocabulary.
- Make text large enough and plain enough for people to read easily.

Visitors remember about:

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10% of what they hear

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30% of what they read

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50% of what they see

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90% of what they do

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So the more you actively involve the visitor; look for the... smell the... touch the... the more they will remember.

#### EVENTS AND CELEBRATIONS

Burial grounds offer a valuable space for community events and activities. Try to link these to traditions, folklore and history.

In the past churchyards were used for archery practice and wrestling, for fairs and markets and 'church ales'. The natural history and built history of churchyards or burial grounds may well provide inspiration for events or activities, helping to interpret them for all visitors.

- Run special activities at your site to enhance town and village events such as a summer fete or carnival. The activities can be based on the natural and historical interest (see sheet D3, Things to Do).
- Put on events when there is something special to see, such as Snowdrop Sunday or Wildflower Wander. Serve refreshments.
- Link events or activities with nationally promoted weeks or days – National Tree Week or Volunteers' Week.
- Get in touch with the leaders of groups for young people. Explain the potential of the site for activities and give them a copy of sheet D3, Things to Do.
- Invite local groups such as Women's Institute and

## INVOLVING PEOPLE

### 4. Telling the Story – Interpretation

local history and wildlife groups for a guided tour, particularly when there is something of special interest to see or hear about.

- Work with others in your community and link with other local events or other interpretation for your area. Is there a town or village guide being produced that you could contribute to? Are there other interpretation boards or leaflets concerning the local area, in which case do you want to use the same style?

- Consider working with other burial grounds nearby, unified interpretation of all cemeteries in a city perhaps, or a booklet about all the churchyards in one parish.

When organising events and activities, always follow Health and Safety guidelines (see sheet D2, Health and Safety).



#### Useful contacts

Association for Heritage Interpretation, [www.ahi.org.uk](http://www.ahi.org.uk)

Churches Tourism Network Wales, [www.ctnw.co.uk](http://www.ctnw.co.uk)

The Churches Tourism Association, [www.churchestourismassociation.net](http://www.churchestourismassociation.net)

Advice and help on writing Church Guides, [www.churchguides.co.uk](http://www.churchguides.co.uk)

#### Useful reading

Environmental Interpretation – Sam H. Ham, North American Press