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Interpreting the Wales Coast Path

A guide for people working with visitors and places along and near the route

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A guide for people working with visitors and places
along and near the route

Prepared for the Countryside Council for Wales by
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The completion of an 870 mile long all Wales Coast Path by 2012 is a key Welsh Government commitment. The development programme is managed by the Countryside Council for Wales and funded by the Welsh Government, the European Regional Development Fund (through the Environment for Growth theme of the Convergence Programme) and the sixteen local authorities and two national parks through which the path passes.

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Introduction

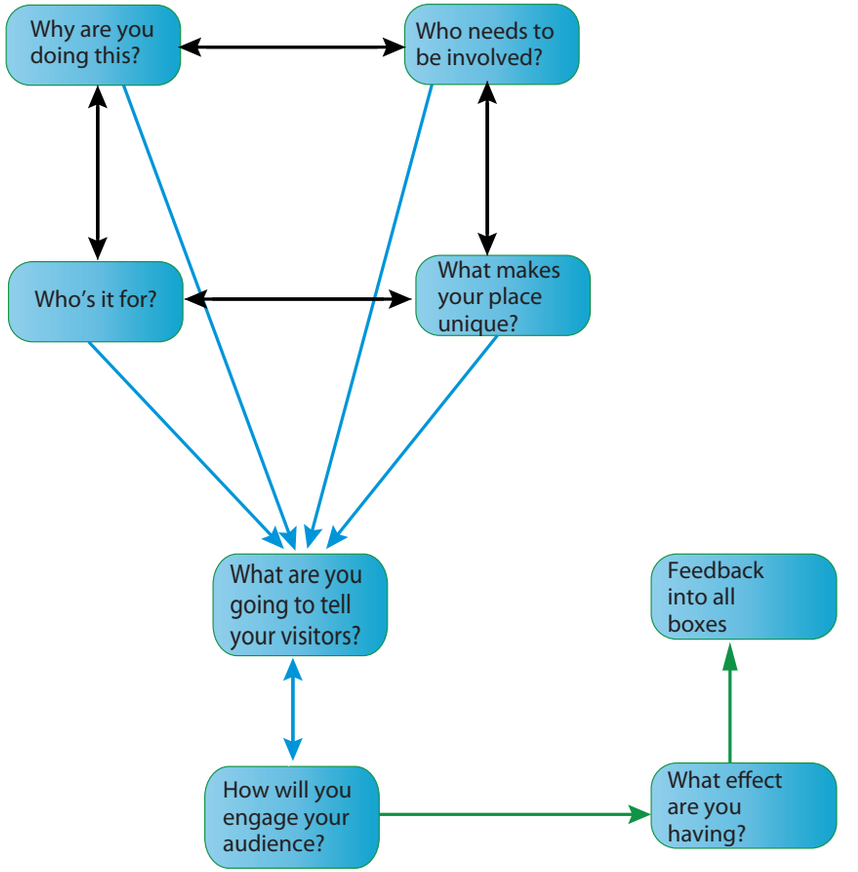
The Wales Coast Path will be part of Britain's family of long distance paths. They are major drivers for tourism, attracting hikers keen to tick off the latest challenge, tourists looking for a taste of the landscape and families with toddlers. All those visitors will be expecting high quality paths, but the way they feel about the place will be shaped as much by the stories it has to tell as by the ground under their feet.

Long distance paths are big business: not just for tourism, but as an easily identifiable and trusted way to explore the countryside. A whole community has grown up around the concept of long distance routes in Britain: the website of the Long Distance Walkers Association boasts a database of 'over 1,200 routes covering more than 69,000 miles'.

The Wales Coast Path will be particularly attractive, with its unique invitation to 'discover the shape of a nation'. That slogan makes a promise to visitors, whether they are long distance hikers or family holidaymakers: that by walking the path, they will get to know something of what makes Wales unique. Well-maintained paths and stiles, signposts and car parks are all important parts of making the Wales Coast Path work, but what will really define its success is the way people feel about the places it takes them. Interpretation – the art of helping people explore, understand and perhaps begin to love the places they visit – is the tool that will shape their feelings.

A plan for action

Good interpretation can look simple, but that simplicity is usually the result of careful thought and planning. To develop effective interpretation you need a clear understanding of the situation you're working with, combined with a healthy dose of creativity. This document will help you with both. It's structured around a series of questions you need to consider in planning interpretation: if you give some thought to all of them, you'll end up with a project that should really do the job for you and, most importantly, your visitors.



It helps to think of planning interpretation as a flow chart, in which answers to the four questions at the top influence each other as well as decisions about what you're going to do. You don't always need to start at the top and work your way to the end, but you do need to think about each question at some point in the process.

Each chapter of this guide deals with one of the questions in the flow chart on [page 4]. You'll find a 'what to do' section at the end of each chapter that you can use as a starting point for developing your own plan. Much of the document assumes that you'll be developing a plan for an area or stretch of the coast. If you're working on a single discrete project, such as a panel, the same questions will still be relevant, but probably at a smaller scale. Throughout the document, we refer to 'place' or 'site' as the focus for interpretation. This might be a place with a clear boundary, such as a nature reserve, or a stretch of coast. You can also use the planning process if you're working with a collection of objects, such as at a museum: just substitute 'collection' for 'place'.

You'll almost certainly need professional help with the writing, illustration, design and production of the finished product. Professional input may also help you with planning: interpretation is now a well-developed discipline, and there are experienced consultants who can work with you on any aspect of the planning process.

Why are you doing this?

Why do you want to communicate with visitors? More importantly, what are they going to get out of it? The word 'interpretation' can cover a wide range of different communication goals and you need to know what you want your interpretation to do. Being clear about what your goals are, and where they're relevant, is a vital part of planning.

All interpretation is concerned with communicating with visitors in some way. This chapter looks at some of the commonest aims for that communication: see which ones are relevant to you.

Guide people around

Interpretation is often compared to telling stories about a place. But the best storytelling in the world is no good if people aren't sure where they can go or can't find their way around. Why do you think the classic introduction to a story is, 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin...'? Many of your visitors will never have been to your site before. If they're not confident about what's on offer and how to find their way, they won't be receptive to the ideas you'd like to offer them. Orientation – anything that helps people plan a visit and follow a route – is a vital part of your communication package.

Visit planning

The first thing visitors need is help with choosing where to go and what to do. Many will use the web to research and plan their trip, so make sure there's enough information online to help people choose a route. Provide pdf files with route guides and maps, so they can print them out to use on their visit. There's more about different media in chapter 9.

You'll also need to provide information on site, partly for visitors who haven't done any pre-visit research and partly to re-assure those who have. You'll need to think about where best to provide this: for long stretches of path, look for key access points where you can introduce an entire length of coastline, give an overview of what it offers, and offer more detailed information about selected local routes.

The information people need to help them plan their visit includes:

- How long a route is. It's best to give distances in both miles and kilometres. Giving people an idea of the time they need is more difficult, because different people walk at very different speeds. If you do give this information, you might try giving ranges of time, like '60 to 90 minutes' rather than an absolute figure.
- An idea of the physical nature of the route, such as the types of path surface and whether there are a lot of steep uphill climbs. This information is particularly important for anyone with a child's buggy or wheelchair users.

- Information about facilities along the way, like toilets, cafés, and pubs.
- Options for public transport. Because timetables change so often, it's usually best just to give contact details for bus and train companies so visitors can plan the details for themselves.
- What sort of experience the route offers. Will it take you past some interesting historic sites? Does it lead to a breathtaking view? Are there lots of wildflowers at particular times of year?

You may also need to let people know about any safety considerations along the way, such as stretches of the path that run along cliff tops or where the tide might cut people off.

Finding the way

Helping visitors find their way starts before they actually get to your site. Check that road signs are clear, and that the site name they show is consistent with what's on websites and in leaflets. Once people arrive, make sure the starting points of trail routes are clearly marked.

It's also a good idea to reassure visitors they're on the right track, especially on routes that will be used by visitors who may not have a map. Try to walk the route and see it through the eyes of someone who's never been there before. Where do you need waymarkers to make sure people take the right turn?

If you're planning to improve signposting along your length of the path, think about what else might be useful. How about signs to places just off the route itself, like bus stops, cafés or villages? If there are facilities like these a mile or two off the path, signposts could well prompt people to take a break: good for visitors, and good for local businesses.

Frequent waymarkers are particularly important along circular routes and in places that will be used by holidaymakers, who may well not have a map with them, rather than long distance walkers. Along more remote stretches of path, you might want to reduce the number of signs and installations so the place feels more untouched and visitors can have a sense of exploring for themselves. But remember that many people who are doing the long distance route may not be very good at reading a map. Everyone will appreciate reminders, especially at major path junctions, of the destinations that lie ahead and the distances to them. Make sure those distances are accurate! It takes a bit of time and a painstaking attention to detail to make sure distances in leaflets, on websites and on signposts are all consistent, but it makes a big difference to how confident your visitors will feel.

Refreshments: 1 mile

The Peddars Way National Trail follows the route of a Roman Road across 46 miles (74 km) of the Suffolk and Norfolk countryside, eventually meeting up with the Norfolk Coast Path National Trail. It's an attractive route, but it misses many of the villages along the way by a mile or two. That meant a long slog for walkers, and it also meant that local businesses were missing out on valuable custom.

Now there's a scheme to erect finger posts pointing the way to pubs and shops, if the business concerned pays for the sign and its installation. Each sign gives the name of the business, the distance to it and a phone number, so path users can check opening times or make a booking. Tim Lidstone-Scott, the National Trail Officer, says the scheme has been a real success: 'We've had brilliant feedback from the pubs. Many of them have seen a significant increase in trade, and some have even developed new strands to their business by offering services like camping.'

'But you need to be careful about places where there are several businesses. We got caught out with one sign that ended up looking a bit like a totem pole! Now we have a policy of just putting the word 'Services' for any destination with more than two or three businesses'.

Along the Norfolk Coast Path, there are signs that point the way to bus stops that may be a mile or two away. From the bus stops, other signs point towards the trail. Both schemes help make the paths easier – and more enjoyable – to use.

Enrich visitors' experience

This should be at the heart of everything you do. Interpretation offers visitors ways of seeing, understanding and thinking about a place. It can help make their visit inspiring, memorable or even surprising.

For tourism, interpretation plays a key role in creating satisfied customers. Visitors often come with expectations and ideas they've picked up from marketing, from talking to other people, or from books and TV programmes: the experiences they have during their visit help give them a sense that they've 'got what they came for'. Other visitors come simply because they're looking for somewhere enjoyable to go. For them, interpretation offers ways of looking at the places they come across. For both groups, your job is to make sure what they find is interesting, well-presented, and really adds something to their visit.

The potential to tell visitors something they never knew before, or to bring ideas alive by linking them with visitors' direct experience of a place, is the core of interpretation. It needs a sensitive balance between offering people ideas or knowledge, and just letting them experience the place for themselves. It also needs some creative skill in the way you engage your audience. You'll find more about the ideas you might introduce to your visitors in chapter 6, and some starting points about how to do it in chapter 7.

Good interpretation can send people away buzzing with new insights, moved by stories from the past, or feeling calm and contemplative. But you need to think about interpretation as more than just 'telling people stuff' if you're really going to enrich visitors' experience. The impressions they take away and the meaning a place has for them will be influenced just as much – perhaps more – by their physical experience as by the things they learn. There's more about how the place itself can shape visitors' experience in chapter 5.

The essence of interpretation is to help visitors appreciate a place through the things they can see and do there.

Encourage respect

Interpretation was first defined as a discipline by the United States National Park Service in the 1950s. Back then, it was seen as an important tool in developing a positive attitude towards conservation. The hope was that if people understood how the environment worked, they would appreciate how important it was and value it more. Those attitudes would in turn lead to more responsible behaviour, and to support for environmental protection in general. That philosophy applied to cultural as well as natural sites: finding out what happened at a Civil War battlefield, or how Native American people live, would mean that visitors had a deeper understanding of history and respect for culture.

The link between understanding a place and feeling that it's worth looking after is still valid. But encouraging a positive attitude towards conservation is a complex business. Just telling people how important a place is and that they should care about it can be counter-productive: most of us don't like being told what to feel. People don't begin to care about a place just because they understand it. They need to feel their own emotional connection with it, and to develop a sense of its importance through the experiences they have there. Knowledge alone is not enough.

Early interpretation placed a lot of emphasis on explaining things: the behaviour of cliff-nesting birds, or the role of slate in the Welsh economy. Fascinating subjects, but only interesting for visitors if they are presented in a way that adds something to their day out. It's possible for visitors to learn a lot from interpretation, and sometimes it might even change the way they think about a place or an issue. But that isn't what most of them have come for. What they want is an enjoyable or interesting experience: focus on that, rather than on what you want them to learn, and you'll have the best chance of sending them away fired up with enthusiasm.

*You'll find more about the psychology of influencing attitudes to conservation in **Branding biodiversity**, published by the Futerra communications agency (look in the 'thought leadership' section http://www.futerra.co.uk .*

Influence visitors' behaviour

So far, we've been looking at what interpretation can do for your visitors. But you're bound to have times when you want to tell them something about your work and perhaps influence what visitors do. You might need to explain that a section of path has been diverted, or ask them to avoid a particular area because birds are nesting on the ground.

The principle of thinking about this from your visitors' perspective still holds true. If there's something you'd like them to do, make it easy for them. If possible, explain what you want in a way that makes them feel good about doing it: perhaps by saying that by using an alternative path, they'll be helping to protect the rare wild flowers that make your stretch of coast special.

Influencing behaviour

Trying to influence visitors' behaviour is a complex business, and there are limits to what you can achieve with messages delivered on-site. If you have real problem issues, you've got more chance of success if you understand who's involved and what influences their behaviour. You can find details of how to plan and carry out this sort of work in ***Promoting persuasion in protected areas***, published by Sustainable Tourism Online and available at http://bit.ly/promoting-persuasion.

Make things consistent

Well-planned interpretation offers visitors a consistent and coordinated set of information and stories. When they arrive at a car park, they'll get the best experience if there's just one introductory panel and map, not several produced by different organisations at different times. Ideally, the information and stories they find at one place should be complemented by what's on offer a few miles along the coast.

In an imperfect world, it may never be possible to reach this ideal. But by working with others, you can certainly improve things. Local communities, businesses, heritage organisations and local authorities all have an interest in the way visitors experience their area: interpretation projects can bring them together to share their aspirations, with a practical result that makes things better for all concerned.

For communities, interpretation can also be a way for local people to explore their own backyard and perhaps to see it in a new light. This might be an important goal for some projects, with the process of community engagement being as important as any end product that's offered to visitors.

Because several different organisations and groups often have an interest in how visitors are catered for, thinking about who needs to be involved is an important first step in planning a project. If your partners are to be really engaged and supportive, they need to be involved in thinking about all stages in the process, including this one: deciding what you hope to achieve! The next chapter has more about the important – and sometimes tricky – business of working with others.

What to do

- Look at the various communication aims discussed in this chapter and decide whether they're relevant to your situation. You may find that you only need to work with two or three.
- If you want to help people plan their visit and find their way, identify where you need to do this and note down the information that's needed at each point.
- If you'd like to enrich visitors' experience, write down what you hope to achieve by doing this.
- If there are aspects of your visitors' attitudes or behaviour you'd like to influence, define these as precisely as you can. Who's involved, and what would you like them to think or do as the result of your interpretation? Are the behaviours you want to influence relevant all year round, or only at certain times? Everywhere on the site, or only in particular places?
- Think about the information and interpretation that's on offer at the moment. Does it present coherent messages? Is it of consistent quality?
- After you've considered the various possible goals for interpretation, draw up a list of objectives that you want to adopt for your particular site or project. Objectives should define what you want to achieve, and you should refer to them as you develop your project to check that you're working on proposals that will meet each of them. Make them as specific as possible, and don't give yourself too many!

Example objectives

As an example of the sort of objectives you might set, here are some from an interpretation plan for a National Nature Reserve. The plan specified that interpretation on the reserve would:

- Complement and enhance the experience that visitors have come for. In the majority of cases, this is to have an enjoyable outing with family and friends, rather than to visit somewhere they expect to 'learn' anything
- Extend the range of recreation opportunities on the reserve by providing a number of different styles of interpretation and by creating routes that follow consistent topics.
- Support the goal of increasing visitor use of the reserve by encouraging visitors to explore areas other than the well established trail to the viewpoint.
- Encourage an awareness that the reserve is managed to conserve its unique natural heritage interest.
- Promote responsible access and explain the need for dogs to be kept under close control during the nesting season.
- Promote the existence of other National Nature Reserves in the region.

Who needs to be involved?

Interpretation often involves telling stories about a place. Sometimes it can involve changing the place around so visitors can explore it more easily, or enjoy it better. Both these activities tend to go more smoothly if people who have an interest in the place are involved in what's happening.

You may need to work with quite a range of people to get support for your interpretation and make it successful. They could include:

- representatives of agencies with a statutory interest in your work, and perhaps with the ability to fund it. The organisations most likely to be involved are the Countryside Council for Wales, Cadw and local authorities;
- representatives of voluntary groups and societies with an interest in your area or expertise in the subjects you want to interpret;
- representatives of the communities in the area. This includes groups that have a formal or statutory role, such as Community Councils, as well as groups of people with a common interest (such as local chambers of trade);
- individuals, including experts on particular subjects, landowners, and business people. There are often a few individuals who have a lot of influence on the general mood of a community: try to identify them and get them on board.

Working with others to develop an interpretive plan or deliver an interpretation project is not always easy, and it can be a slow and frustrating business. But your project is far more likely to be successful if you involve people who might have an interest in it, and who might help you make it work.

Involving local communities and voluntary groups is particularly important. People who live in a place are understandably sensitive about how it's portrayed: if they feel they've been involved in a developing a project they're more likely to support it. They'll also have valuable local knowledge about the stories you might tell, and skills that can make the scheme a real product of its place. Sometimes it can be enough just to keep people informed through representatives on community or town councils, but if your project might involve major changes you'll need more elaborate community involvement.

Working with agencies means you can build on the knowledge of experts to make sure the interpretation is accurate and up to date. It should also help you be aware of what's happening on a regional or even national scale, so you can avoid duplicating what's being done elsewhere. And on a practical level, you'll probably need funding or planning approval for what you want to do. Building a positive relationship with agencies should make both a lot easier, and will open up opportunities for contributions in kind as well as cash.

Get the balance right

In a perfect world, communities might be so involved with their heritage that all interpretation schemes would be driven by local people. But most projects take a 'top down' approach. They're started by organisations, often because those organisations have the funding to support them, and involve other organisations in the process. They may also be concerned with the organisation's legal responsibilities, like Cadw's management of historic sites, and involve land or buildings owned by the organisation.

The timetable and funding arrangements can make it difficult to establish any substantial involvement by the local community, but it's still important to do as much as you can to consult them. Do whatever you can to let the community know what is happening, and get comment from them even if you cannot set up a full consultation process.

Seven tips for working with community groups

1. Get a feel for the community – and be prepared for the unexpected. All communities have issues and tensions that may have long histories. There will be agendas that you will not be aware of and some elements within the community may use the project to achieve their particular aims, which may be different from yours. Be open, and aim to build confidence and trust between groups and agencies.
2. If you're working on a major community-based project, be clear about what it can achieve. Interpretation will not solve deep-rooted problems like unemployment and poor housing, but through working on a scheme the community can develop a sense of collective ownership of local cultural, historical and natural resources. Another outcome may be a greater degree of self-belief in a community's ability to influence events in the future.
3. Make sure that everyone involved is clear about what they want to achieve from the project. Develop, and write down, a short list of common objectives that everyone can endorse. Difficulties can arise if people feel there's a tension between economic development and protecting heritage resources. Aim to maintain an open dialogue about these issues, and to build confidence and understanding.
4. Encourage people to be involved. Use their skills to work on specific tasks: this will help them feel part of the process and build their commitment to its outcome.
5. Keep people informed at all stages of the project. Set up a Facebook page for the project and make sure it's updated regularly, or get articles in parish newsletters. If people don't know what's going on, they will quickly lose interest.
6. Make it easy for people to be involved. For example, think about providing transport or paying travel expenses for people to attend meetings, especially in remote areas.
7. Allow plenty of time! Developing an interpretation plan through community involvement will take at least three months. Before this you will need perhaps one month to prepare the ground with key agencies and groups. And as the plan is finalised, people will need time to consider the proposals - at least another two months.

(adapted from Carter, J: A sense of place)

Keep the vision

Good interpretation usually has a sense of creative vision behind it. Think about any guided walks you've been on: the best were probably those where you felt the guide was giving you their own enthusiastic insight into the place. This sense of personality can be hard to achieve in a project that involves several partners, all of which have to approve the end result, but it's vital if your visitor is going to find it interesting.

You'll have the best chance of producing lively, engaging interpretation if everyone involved is clear what you're trying to achieve, and understands that the visitor's needs come first. Some common problems to watch out for are:

Too many cooks. Set up clear responsibilities for commenting on draft texts and layout, and make sure this doesn't involve too many people. If you're working with professional interpreters, such as copywriters and designers, they need one person to be their main contact with the project: that person should coordinate comments and give a single set of instructions back to the consultants.

Too much text. It's very tempting to give too much information on panels and in exhibitions. This can be a real difficulty when enthusiastic experts or local history societies are involved: they'll often want to include a lot of detail, and may find it hard to accept that exhibition text works better when there's less of it. The next chapter gives some guidelines about making interpretation lively and accessible, which should help.

Too many logos. It's easy for installations like panels to be dominated by the logos of all the different organisations with an interest in the place. Keep the number of logos to a minimum. If you have to use several, keep them as small and as unobtrusive as possible. Visitors are interested in the story the panel tells, not who paid for it!

New ways in Newport

Newport is quite a hub of activity on the Pembrokeshire section of the Wales Coast Path. It's a popular spot for walks along the river estuary as well as the coast, and there are craft shops, a castle and a prehistoric burial chamber to explore.

But over the years, projects by various different organisations had left a rather rag-bag mixture of interpretation . It wasn't easy for visitors to get clear information about where they could go, and the many different styles of panel, some of them in poor condition, made a shabby impression.

Working with local groups from the town council to the local footpath group, the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority reviewed the situation and came up with a master plan that would present the town in a more coherent way. It wasn't always easy: people can be very attached to projects they did years ago, even if they are now out of date. Elaine Jones, the National Park Authority's interpretation officer, says that looking at things through a visitor's eyes was the key: 'Holding initial meetings on site was a real help. We could look at what was there and discuss how it might appear to someone who didn't know the place'.

As a result, interpretation that was previously spread across several different panels, or presented in places where it wasn't useful, has been rationalised and presented on a smaller number of new panels. They use panoramic maps by a local artist, which has helped in getting community support for the scheme. At the same time, a new display was developed for the visitor centre: local schools contributed to a film about tourism in the town, and oral history work was integrated into the displays. Those involved learned a lot about the discipline involved in interpretation, and how a display that works for visitors needs to choose just a few interesting stories.

What to do

- Make a list of the agencies, businesses, community groups and individuals who might have an interest in how your site is presented to visitors. Where you're dealing with organisations, identify who the individuals are that you need to approach about your scheme.
- If you're working with local communities, think about whether statutory bodies like Community Councils are truly representative of local interests, or whether there are individuals who act as opinion formers and who should also be involved.
- Decide whether each of your potential partners needs to be involved in shaping the project, or whether they simply need to be kept informed. If you're not sure, ask them!
- Call an initial meeting to explain what you're hoping to do. You may need to introduce the whole concept of interpretation, and explain that it can involve far more than putting up a few panels.
- If the project involves encouraging people to rationalise or change things that are already in place, it may be best to avoid being too blunt about this at the start. Try beginning by getting everyone to consider things from a visitor's perspective, and to look at how changes might benefit everyone.
- Identify a steering group who will stay closely involved with the project. Keep this as small as possible, ideally no more than eight people, and try to ensure that the group includes positive and constructive individuals.
- Make sure that everyone on the steering group agrees and supports the objectives for the project, and understands the context within which you're working.

Who's it for?

All communication works better if you have some idea of who you're talking to. That's especially true of interpretation. Your audience – the people who'll read your panel or come to your event – are there because they want to enjoy visiting the Welsh coast, not because they want to learn about your organisation's work or how important it is to conserve rare seaside plants. If you want them to take an interest in those things, you need to tell present the plants (or your organisation) in a way that gives them a more enjoyable outing. So your starting point must be what's likely to interest visitors and what they need, not what you want to tell them.

Being aware of your audience will help you decide on the information you need to provide, the way you invite people to think about the place and the media you use. It may also help to shape the sort of facilities you provide along and around the coastal path.

It's a good idea to do at least some survey work to give you a sound, realistic understanding of your visitors. If you do this regularly, say every three years, it will help you pick up any changes in patterns of activity. You will usually need to have surveyors working face to face with visitors: simply leaving questionnaires to be picked up and completed by anyone who feels like it won't give you a representative sample.

Surveys don't need to be elaborate. Only collect as much data as you can process, and design questions that will really help you understand your visitors. Common things to find out are:

- What sort of groups do visitors come in? Singles, couples, families?
- What are they doing during their stay?
- What sort of information are they looking for? Do they find it easy to find out what they can do?
- What kind of media do they like to use for particular types of visit, for example an informal walk, or a trip to an historic castle?
- What does a visit to the are mean to them, and what would help most to give them a better experience on your stretch of coast?

You may need to treat some of the responses with caution. Survey results often show people saying they think a place would be improved by having 'more information', but that doesn't mean they'd actually read a 50-page guide book if you offered them one. Try to get a sense of exactly what they think 'more information' would do for their experience of a place, and what they are really likely to use.

Many projects may not have the time or resources for survey-based audience research. If that's the case, the next best thing is to talk to people who actually deal with your visitors. Guest house owners, shopkeepers and pub landlords all know their customers – or should do! Rangers have valuable first-hand knowledge about the people who use your stretch of coast. Talk to them all about the people they meet, but be aware that anecdotal evidence like this needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. It can give you a feel for what visitors might need or like, but it will be coloured by the attitudes and ideas of the person you're talking to.

You can't, of course, provide different interpretation for every individual. To plan effective interpretation, you need to identify groups of visitors who share similar needs and interests, and develop services to suit them. You may well need to cater for several different groups, each of which needs a different approach.

Trampers or strollers?

For a long distance route like the Wales Coast Path, a key distinction is between people who are focussed on completing the entire route – let's call them trampers – and people who will only walk a short stretch, often as part of a circular walk that uses other paths as well as the Wales Coast Path – the strollers.

Trampers may be on a mission to walk the route in one go, or they may just do a section on one visit and come back next year for a bit more. Either way, they are committed to a goal, and may well have walked other long distance routes before coming to the Wales Coast Path. They will probably be well prepared: many will have a guidebook to the route and will have planned their trip some time in advance.

Experience from other long distance paths suggests trampers aren't too bothered about what might be called true interpretation – getting to know and appreciate a place while they're actually there. They will often get the background they want from websites or guidebooks;

once on the path they may be more interested in making progress than in stopping to explore places of interest. But they may still like some reassurance about finding their way. A surprising number of walkers on other national trails are not confident map readers, and many like to find signposts that give the name of the next point along the route and the distance to it.

Take it easy

Strollers have different interests, though they will almost certainly appreciate the same signposts that help trampers on their way. The majority of coast path users will be in this category – people who walk just a stretch of the path, perhaps using public transport to reach the start of their walk or return from the end, or using the path as part of a circular route. For them, the Wales Coast Path is a focus for an enjoyable day or half day out. Many will be on holiday in the area; others will be local residents. All of them will be looking for ways in which they can use the Wales Coast Path so it fits their abilities and the time they have available. Their focus is more on exploring and enjoying the places they pass through; less on the need to cover the miles, so they are more open to interpretation that introduces ideas and ways of understanding. They may also enjoy landmarks or features that mark places to stop and rest, or that make recognisable destination points.

As you think about how to interest this important group, look for ways in which the Wales Coast Path can be 'packaged' so it becomes part of a distinct, achievable experience. How could you plan routes that will appeal to a range of abilities, from people with children in buggies, looking for a half-hour stroll, to folk who want an all-day walk that gives them a sense of wildness and escape? Are there circular routes that link places whose stories fit neatly together (perhaps including a pub on the way)? You'll find more about planning interpretation around ideas and stories in chapter 6.

Make sure you plan interpretation that fits the people who are actually coming to your site, rather than the people you'd like to come or who you think ought to come. It's easy to think that all interpretation should appeal to a 'family audience', perhaps with children between seven and twelve. That might be just right for a walk near Barry Island, but it could be wasted on the tops of the Brecon Beacons, where visitors tend to have tramper characteristics.

For complex sites with a lot of stories to tell, you may need to plan different interpretation media to suit different audience groups. It may seem complex, but it's the only way to make sure as many people as possible appreciate the place.

Case study: Know your audience

Beinn Eighe, in the north-west Highlands of Scotland, was Britain's first National Nature Reserve. It includes ancient Caledonian pine forest and large areas of high altitude scree with Alpine plant communities.

A major project in 2002 developed a range of visitor facilities on the reserve, including a waymarked trail through the pine forest and the UK's first waymarked mountain trail, both interpreted through leaflet guides. A dedicated visitor centre offers an indoor exhibition about the reserve, a bird watching window, a children's game in the picnic area and two short trails from the centre, interpreted through panels. One of the trails uses sound stores to play Gaelic poetry that relates to the environment.

The short trails are aimed in their style and approach at family groups, and the style of the indoor displays is also family-oriented, with interactives and quiz games. This was intended to make the reserve more attractive and accessible to a wider audience. But recent visitor surveys have shown that the area actually receives a relatively low number of family visitors. The main audience is adults in small groups, with a higher proportion of visitors from outside the UK than at other reserves in Scotland. When groups do include children, they tend to be older teenagers.

The concept of offering a range of ways to explore and learn about the reserve is good, and it's appropriate to have some provision for young children near the centre. But a new interpretation plan for the reserve specifies re-fitting the indoor display to suit the actual audience profile more closely, and revising the short trails so their interpretation appeals to young adults.

What to do

- Think about how you can categorise your visitors, based on shared characteristics that influence the sort of interpretation they might use. Common criteria are the people they come with, their age, nationality and what their reasons for visiting are. Remember that local residents may be an important group.
- Choose the three or four most important groups that you want to reach with your interpretation.
- For each group, identify what knowledge and attitudes they have about your site before they come; what they need to make their visit successful and enjoyable; how far existing interpretation is meeting their needs; and what facilities you need to provide to make their visit rewarding.

What makes your place unique?

Most interpretation schemes will hope to give people an enjoyable experience, and perhaps to send them away thinking a place is special. But offering them interesting ideas through things like exhibitions, tours and leaflets is only part of the picture. The way a site looks, from the materials used for furniture to the layout of the paths, has a major influence on the way people feel about it.

The core of interpretation is to offer visitors ideas and experiences that are linked to the time they spend at a particular place – or visiting a collection, if you work with a museum or gallery. The physical features of a place define its character and may well be the main reason people choose to visit it at all. If your interpretation is to enhance visitors' experience, you need to conserve those features that are unique or special. You must also make sure any interpretation you provide complements them.

The ideas or stories you'd like to offer visitors will have more impact if they're linked to and supported by things people can see (or hear, touch, smell or taste). Again, you need to have a clear sense of what defines your place physically as you think about what makes it significant, and why visitors might find it interesting. Some places may have important ideas and stories associated with them, but little or no physical evidence to help bring those stories alive. A battlefield would be an example: an important event once took place there, but there is usually no trace of it or its consequences at the site. In cases like these you may need to help visitors visualise what happened, or even introduce new features that are inspired by or reflect the site's significance. You'll find more in chapter 6 about choosing the ideas you want to present in your interpretation; chapter 9 looks at media that can help give life to a hidden or forgotten story.

The drama of a visit

Think about the last time you went to see a play or a film. The design of the scenery or the opening shots set the tone for what was coming next, usually before you heard any actors speak. Then the play or film took you through a carefully planned sequence of emotions and ideas, with moments of high drama and other times that were calm or thoughtful.

If you want to give visitors the best possible experience, try thinking about their journey around your site in the same way. What impression do people get as they arrive? Car parks are often forgotten and rather sorry places: shouldn't their design and quality set visitors up for what's to come?

Once they've parked the car, where would you like them to go first? Where would you like them to stop and take in the atmosphere? Are there stretches of path that are a little dull, where you might enliven the experience with something interesting? You don't need to tell

people something at every turn of the path: in fact it would be a big mistake if you did. But thinking about where the path turns and what it feels like to walk along it are just as important in shaping visitors' response to the place as putting up panels or printing leaflets.

Respect for the place

You must be sensitive about where you provide interpretation, choosing only those places where it will really enhance people's experience; and about how you do it, choosing designs and materials that complement the landscape, or providing interpretation in ways that don't rely on physical structures. This applies just as much to urban stretches of the path as to the countryside. Installations near Port Talbot might reflect its industrial character; along the seafront at Colwyn Bay you might complement the town's seaside resort architecture.

The site furniture you provide should also fit with the character of the site. There's often strong demand for places to sit along a path. But think about what that seating looks like. A Victorian-style seaside bench might be just the thing at Colwyn Bay, but at Tor Bay on the Gower it could look seriously wrong. The design of seats and picnic tables might not seem to have anything to do with interpretation, but it can have a strong influence on visitors' experience: and that's what it's all about.

What to do

- Look at your place with fresh eyes. Take notice of what mundane things like the car park, toilets and litter bins say about the place.
- Note down the physical features and characteristics that define your place or make it unique. Highlight the key things visitors need to see if they are to understand the site's significance.
- Write down ideas for how those key features need to be conserved, or how they might be enhanced.
- Think about the sequence of an ideal visit, including places to stop and rest as well as places to learn about the site. What would you like visitors to be thinking and feeling at each spot?

What are you going to tell your visitors?

Everywhere along the Wales Coast Path, you could offer visitors a mass of information. It might be about the rocks, plants and animals, or about people and what they do. But if you tell people disconnected facts, or give them too much information, they'll just get bored. Perhaps the most important step in planning interpretation is to choose how to structure what you tell visitors and what details you'll give them.

Our minds absorb new information best if there's some structure to it. We tend to forget disconnected facts, but if those facts are used to illustrate or support an idea, we'll often remember the idea as well as having a better chance of remembering some of the facts. So interpretation will be more effective if you define some ideas you'd like your audience to engage with, and choose a few facts or stories that will illustrate those ideas.

> *'Interpretation's job is to offer a few ideas that will help people enjoy their visit, not to provide an encyclopaedia of knowledge.'*

Ideas and themes

In interpretation planning, the ideas around which you structure your information are called themes. A theme in interpretation is not the same as a subject. It's a statement that describes a point of view; a way of understanding a place, an object or a subject. For example, you might be planning a panel to be installed on the site of an Iron Age hillfort. *A Welsh Iron Age hillfort* would be your subject, but that does nothing to define what you'd like visitors to think about, or how you'd like them to look at the place.

There would also be a vast number of facts about hillforts, the Iron Age, and Wales in the Iron Age that you could tell your visitors: far too many for them to absorb during their visit, and overwhelming for anyone who didn't have a specialist interest in the subject. But after doing some research, you might decide that your audience would be interested in this way of looking at and thinking about the place:
The people who lived here in the Iron Age were part of a complex society that had sophisticated trading links with the rest of Britain and with the continent.

Or you might prefer this idea:
This hill top gave the people who lived here a commanding view for miles around. But we don't really know whether they built enclosed settlements like this for defence, or as status symbols.

Or perhaps this one:
The ramparts around this hill fort are impressive. When it was occupied, there would have been an equally impressive collection of buildings inside, including houses, food stores, watchtowers and shrines.

Each of these statements could be a theme for interpretation. They express clearly defined concepts, and you'd choose a different set of facts, stories and images to illustrate each one. You might also point out different aspects of the site itself, depending on which theme you chose.

None of the themes gives a complete understanding of Welsh Iron Age hillforts. Instead they offer interesting ways to think about and experience the place, and that's far more likely to be what visitors want. The themes are also intriguing ideas that will probably stick in visitors' minds long after they've forgotten specific facts. If they get really interested, people can find out more information from books or the web, or by visiting a local museum or other Iron Age sites.

For a single panel, you should choose just one or two themes like the ones above; for an exhibition in a visitor centre, you might work with four or five. Too many themes will just make things confusing. Interpretation has to be tightly focussed if it's to appeal to visitors in the short amount of time they have, and if it's to act as a complement to their experience rather than being something they have to study in depth. A half-hour talk or demonstration can get across more complex ideas, but it's still best to structure it around one or two themes: it will be far more effective at sending people away thinking, 'Wasn't that interesting!'.

Pack a theme in your suitcase
Try this exercise as a way of developing a theme.

Go to the site you're working with. Your interpretation is all about helping visitors appreciate the place: it will be more powerful if you base it on your own experience of the site, rather than what you can remember of it while sitting in an office!

Imagine you're going to visit somewhere far away that's completely different from Wales, where people know nothing about your site or Welsh culture. Mongolia, perhaps, or the Sahara desert. You're going to talk to people there about your place and you'd like them to get an idea of what it's like and why it's special.

Choose one thing to put in your suitcase that for you captures the essence of the place. It's a magic suitcase, so this thing doesn't have to be an object, although it must be something you perceive with your senses: you could take a sound, a smell, or the feel of wind on your skin.

Write down what people in Mongolia or the Sahara will appreciate about your place from you showing them the thing you've brought with you. Make sure this is a statement that makes sense as a sentence (but not more than two or three sentences!) in its own right.

As an example, someone planning interpretation for a woodland might take the sound of birdsong in spring in their suitcase. From listening to it, the people they talk to might understand that 'birdsong is a key to understanding the life of the woodland' (a statement that could become the theme for their interpretation). They might illustrate this idea by telling visitors how birdsong reveals how birds mate, establish territory and warn each other of danger.

Choosing themes
You'll almost certainly find more potential themes than you can use in any one interpretation project. You can use different themes for different media, presenting one main idea on a panel, for example, with a programme of guided walks based on other themes. There's more about choosing the right media for your interpretation in chapter 9.

But you'll probably still find that you have more possible themes than you need. If that's the case, you need some criteria to help you choose which to work with. Good themes usually share one or more of the following qualities:

They inspire you
A theme must guide the work of writers, illustrators, graphic designers, artists and anyone else working on the project. Above all, your theme should make you think, 'I know a great way to get that idea across…'.

You can bring them alive through features or objects on your site
Think about the features people will notice, or ask questions about. Remember that what seems commonplace to you may be mysterious to your visitors. What ideas can be brought alive through those features? Striking landscapes or geology are natural starting points for interpretation; so are unusual or dramatic buildings and objects.

They'll appeal to your audience
If you've defined your key audiences, you may well find there are some themes that are more likely to interest them than others. With the hillfort example, if the site receives a lot of European tourists, the idea that Iron Age people traded with Europe would be a good one to explore.

They're specific to your place
Try to find ideas that express the uniqueness or special qualities of your subject. If you're planning interpretation for a whole stretch of the Wales Coast Path, think about what makes your bit of coastline different from anywhere else – or at least different from the sections on either side!

They involve people and what they do or have done in the past
If your theme connects your subject to interesting human stories, it's got a good chance of engaging your audience.

They have a sense of drama
Dramas are always interesting. Drama needn't be about some spectacular event: something can be dramatic because it's the biggest, oldest, fastest…

They're linked to wider ideas
Are there features at your site that reflect the character or history of Wales as a whole? Or that show some universal truth about nature or humanity? Be careful here: themes that connect to bigger stories can be really powerful, but they need sensitive handling if they're not to seem corny, twee, or unbelievable.

Interpretation and stories

Interpretation is often compared to storytelling, and the content of interpretation – the ideas it presents – is sometimes referred to as the stories it tells. If you think of a story as a particular way of thinking about something, that comparison is valid. But remember that 'story' also has a specific meaning: it's a narrative that tells a sequence of events, with a beginning, a middle and an end.

You might use stories in this sense to illustrate or support your theme. For example, interpretation of a blanket bog might have the theme *'Bogs are fragile places that have developed over millions of years, and that are home to plants with amazingly complex life cycles'.* To get this idea across, you might tell people a story of how bogs form very slowly, starting as a patch of waterlogged ground. Plants grow, but when they die they don't rot because the ground is so wet. Gradually the layers of dead plants build up to form peat, with pools of water scattered on the surface. You might add to that narrative with a few facts that also support your theme, such as that the deepest layer of peat could be 8,000 years old, and that mosses rely on rain drops to splash their sperm onto neighbouring plants to fertilise them. In other situations, there may not be a narrative – a story in the true sense of the word – that's relevant to your theme. Stories can be useful tools in interpretation, but the most important thing is the idea that you'd like people to engage with.

If you do plan to use narratives to support your theme, be aware of what you can and can't achieve with different media. Exhibitions in

visitor centres are not good at telling stories, because people don't follow a set sequence as they look at the various objects, images and displays. Face to face interpretation can be good for telling involved or complex stories; panels can only tell short, simple ones.

What to do

- Try the exercise described in this chapter to develop a theme for your site. To give you a range of themes to choose from, try it several times with different objects, or ask other people what their theme would be.
- Write each theme in the middle of a large piece of paper. Use this as an 'ideas board', and add notes, pictures, and objects around the theme statement that describe how you might get the theme across. You might try having the pieces of paper on the wall for a week, adding to them whenever a new idea comes to you.
- Review your themes using the criteria described in the chapter. Think about how you might deliver different themes through different media, or for particular audiences.
- If you're working on a single item of interpretation, like a panel or a leaflet, choose just one or two themes. If you're developing a larger project, like an exhibition, or planning interpretation for a site, see if you can find an overall theme that defines a 'big idea' for the whole thing, with sub themes that you can explore in sections of the exhibition or at particular places on the site.

How will you engage your audience?

Good interpretation needs interesting content. Working out what your themes are (see chapter 6) will help you with this. Interesting content then needs engaging presentation: if you're going to send people away with new ideas and feelings, you need to connect with them in some way, to make a bridge to their way of thinking. There are plenty of ideas that can help you do this, all based on research into how our minds work.

You'll find practical examples of many of these ideas in journalism and advertising. They have a lot in common with interpretation: all of them are disciplines for communicating quickly and clearly, and they work best when there's a clear, interesting idea behind it all.

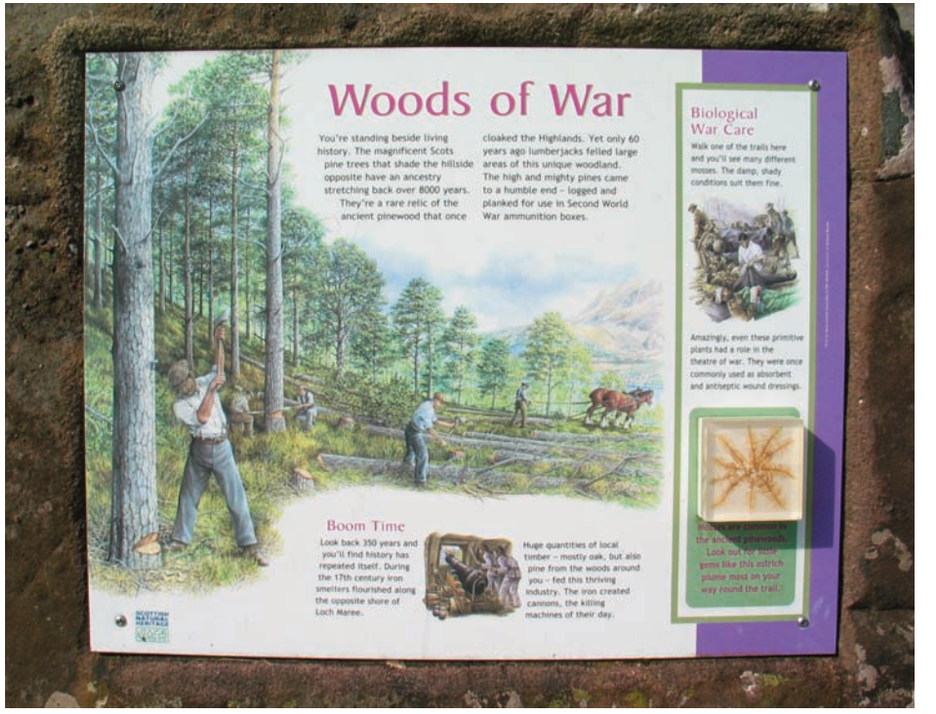
It's possible to produce good results by doing things yourself or with volunteer input. But remember that writing, design and illustration are professional disciplines that take years of training. If your project is really going to be effective, you may need some outside help.

Catch their attention

The first thing is to get people to notice your interpretation, and to think that it's going to be worth their while to spend time with it.

Make it visually attractive

Displays and publications need to look good. This doesn't necessarily mean they need to be slick – a display about local history might make creative use of old furniture and hand-written labels – but the way things are designed should complement your site or subject, and look as if someone has taken care over them. Remember that audiences are used to seeing high standards of design everywhere, from cereal packets to mobile phones. Sloppy design or poor quality illustration sends a message that the content might be sloppy or of poor quality too.



Offer them something novel or amusing

Our minds are particularly good at noticing anything new or unusual. If there's a chance it will make us laugh that's even better. You can use these 'hooks' in interpretation, perhaps by choosing large, dramatic images as prominent features in a display, or using an amusing headline. Do remember, though, that not everyone has the same sense of humour. Bad puns are just as likely to turn people off as to engage them!

Make it provocative

Freeman Tilden, who wrote the first book about interpretation, said that 'the chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation'. He was talking about interpretation's role in stimulating ideas rather than communicating facts, but it's worth thinking about how you can provoke people's attention, too.

Sometimes, it's appropriate to use words or images that are unsettling or even shocking, though you need to use this technique with care. The Eden Project in Cornwall developed a bed of beautiful flowers, with a panel bearing the headline 'Stop! Look! Ask!' in bold letters, which encouraged visitors to think about where the flowers they bought at florists came from, and how they were grown. You can provoke attention in more subtle ways too. A panel at a raised bog in West Lothian uses the headline 'A wet place of tiny marvels', which conveys the main theme as well as drawing attention with its unusual juxtaposition of words.

Relate to them

People will pay more attention to your interpretation if they feel it's got something to do with them and what matters to them. If you've ever been at a crowded party and suddenly realised that someone's talking about you on the other side of the room, you've felt the power of this idea: you notice the sound of your own name above the hubbub, and it's then very difficult to concentrate on anything else!

You can't address all your visitors by name. But you may be able to find ways to present your theme so it connects with universal human concerns, such as family, food, shelter and warmth. If your interpretation involves complex ideas, find some analogies that are connected to things they know: at Knockan Crag National Nature Reserve in Scotland, the geological principle that rocks are laid down in a sequence is compared to dumping today's newspaper on top of yesterday's.

This principle is particularly important if you're talking to people face to face, for example on a guided walk or at a demonstration event. Spend a bit of time chatting to your audience beforehand. Find out where they're from, what they've been doing in the area and what they thought of it. You'll build a relationship with them that will make them trust what you say far more – and you'll also be able to adapt what you tell them to suit their particular interests.

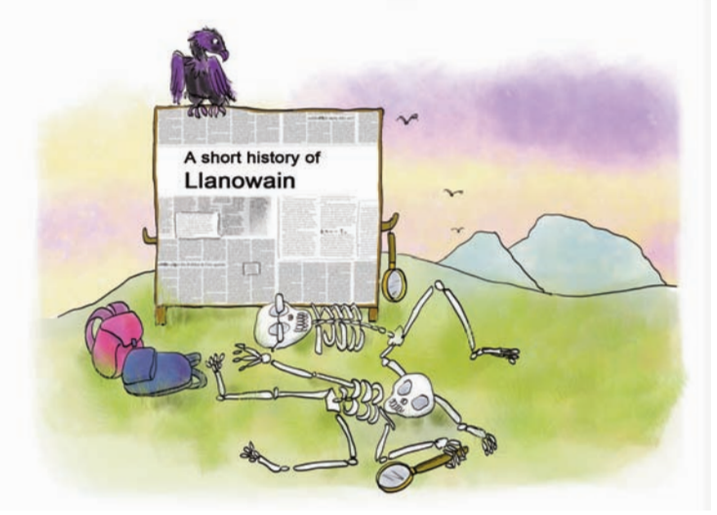
Keep their attention

You've got a great idea to offer, you've got your audience's attention and they feel you're a trusted friend. But you'll still lose them if you don't make your interpretation easy and enjoyable. These three principles will help you keep their attention, and apply to almost any communication medium you use.

Make it short

Remember that the vast majority of your audience haven't come to your site to study. If you use too many words on a panel or in an exhibition, or talk for too long on a guided tour, you'll lose their attention. Good interpretation is concise and gets to the point quickly. The small minority who do come to study will have many other sources of detailed information, or you can provide special events and publications for them.

Research in museums shows that in galleries with fewer, shorter texts on open display, visitors read a higher proportion of what's on offer. This means being really disciplined about your writing, especially when text has to be presented in both Welsh and English.



Make it accessible

The style of your writing, or the way you speak to people, can make or break your project. Visitors will probably be standing up while they read, so make it easy for them. Use clear, everyday language, with shorter sentences than you'll find in books. Make sure you don't use scientific or specialised words unless you really need them: if you do, explain what they mean.

> *'(an author should) say all he has to say in the fewest possible words, or his reader is sure to skip them; and in the plainest possible words, or his reader will certainly misunderstand them.'*
>
> John Ruskin, A joy for ever

Make it varied

It's good to use different ways to present ideas, especially if you're working with a guided event or an exhibition, where people will spend some time. Some people understand concepts better if they're presented visually, others prefer to get involved physically. Everyone will appreciate some 'light and shade' as they go through a display of any size; on a guided event, plan some places where you'll stop only briefly and others where you can linger.

What to do

- Write each of your themes on a large piece of paper, surrounded by the facts or stories that you'll use to support it. The 'idea boards' you made when working on your themes would be a good starting point.
- Work through the principles in this chapter, and see how you might use some of them to capture people's attention, make your interpretation relevant to them, and keep their attention in ways that connect with your themes. You won't need to use all the principles described here: if you do, your audience might feel rather overwhelmed!

What effect are you having?

True communication is a feedback loop. When you're talking to someone, you adjust the way you speak and what you say to the signals they give you about how interested they are, whether they've understood you and whether they like the way you're speaking. If you can build in some of this feedback to your interpretation project, you'll have a much better chance of success.

Chapter 4 looked at the need to base your knowledge about your audience on surveys, if at all possible. That research is really part of the feedback process: you can ask people what they think about the topics you'd like to interpret, and that can give you some starting points for how you might present them.

You also need to build in some feedback – interpreters talk about 'evaluation' – once you've got something to show your audience. The best time to do this is while text and designs are at a draft stage, so you can adjust them if your research shows that people don't understand something. You should try to get a sense of whether they are 'getting' the themes you've developed, but don't expect them to be able to repeat them word for word. If your theme was 'Iron Age people lived in a complex society with trade links to the continent', you'll need to decide whether someone who say this has got the idea or not: 'I thought folk back then were savages, but families seem to have been just as important as they are now – just a bit bigger! And some of them must have travelled a lot.'

If your objectives include influencing people to behave in a particular way, you can monitor what they're doing. Make sure you can compare your data with similar information from before you introduced the interpretation.

It's possible to survey your visitors after your interpretation is installed, to see what they think about your place. You'll only be able to draw conclusions about the effect your interpretation has had if you've also got data from surveying people who haven't used the interpretation. The 'before' and 'after' sample groups mustn't be the same, because by asking people questions before they use the interpretation you sensitise them to the sort of thing you're going to ask afterwards, and the 'after' results won't be valid. This sort of evaluation is fine for things like guided events, which you might repeat with adjustments in the light of your evaluation. For a fixed installation like an exhibition, it will be too late to make any changes. It might be interesting to see what effect you've had, but it's not as useful as checking things while they're still in development.

A new booklet guide to the Isle of May, designed to be read on the way to the island, was shown in a draft state to ferry passengers. Informal conversations asked people what impressions of the island they'd got from the booklet, and asked for their opinions about the style of writing and illustrations.

What to do

- Decide what level of evaluation is appropriate for your project.
- Allow a budget to cover the costs of survey work, and make sure the work schedule allows time for it as well as for any adjustments you may have to make.
- Be prepared for some nasty surprises if your audience don't understand what you show them!

Tools for interpretation

Many interpretation projects start with someone saying, 'Let's put up a panel...' or, 'Let's put on a guided walk...' That's fine, as long as you really think about who it's for and what you want it to do, and are prepared to change your plans if the original idea doesn't seem right. This chapter reviews some of the commonest media: you may well have to use more than one of them if you're going to reach all your audiences and achieve all your goals.

There isn't a formal 'what to do' section in this chapter, because there's no sure fire way to choose the right medium. Instead, you need to be aware of all the communication possibilities open to you, and select those that are going to work for your objectives, your audiences, your partners, your site and your themes. Have fun!

Personal interpretation

The best form of interpretation is to have a friendly, enthusiastic person talking to you. They can:

- tailor the ideas and stories they offer to what interests individual visitors
- help people see things that would be difficult or impossible to point out on a panel or in a leaflet
- answer questions
- get visitors to try out activities
- present more complex stories than is possible in an exhibition.

You can't, of course, provide a guide for every group that comes to walk the Wales Coast Path, and some visitors prefer to explore by themselves. But face to face interpretation, whether it's done through a guided walk or at special events and demonstrations, can be the most powerful way to get your stories across. It can also be part of a unique tourism product: tourists are increasingly looking for authentic experiences, and chatting with a welcoming, knowledgeable guide can give them a feeling that they've really got to know a place.

Think about how you can make personal interpretation part of what you do. You'll need to plan a programme that fits with the season when most visitors are around, and that suits the profile of visitors at particular places: games for families in Llandudno, for example, with cliff-top bird watching walks for adults in Pembrokeshire.

Things in the landscape

You'll almost certainly get involved with projects that involve putting something in the landscape, often a panel that welcomes visitors to a place, or explains a feature along the path. Panels can seem like an easy option, but there's a lot more to making them work than you might imagine. Good panels aren't cheap either. For something that uses professional illustration, copy writing and design, with a properly landscaped surround, you should allow a budget of at least £5,000 at 2011 prices.

Siting

Finding the right place for a panel is crucial. It needs to be somewhere that visitors will see it clearly, and they need to be able to get to it and stand in front of it without getting in other people's way. Think about what direction they should face while reading the panel, and remember that it will attract a lot more traffic on the ground around it: you may need to reinforce the surface.

Design and materials

If you're putting something into the landscape, its design and materials need to be appropriate. The best panels use custom-

designed supports that reflect the character of the place, and perhaps even the story being told. This is particularly important in places people visit because of their scenic beauty – like much of the Wales Coast Path.

Content

It's a real challenge to get the content right on an outdoor panel. Perhaps more than any other medium, they need a highly disciplined approach to the number of ideas they will address and how much text they carry. This is particularly important given the need, in most projects, for all text to appear in both Welsh and English. Although most visitors will only read one of the languages, the visual impact of a lot of text is a major disincentive to read anything at all. For a single panel, a target of 150 words in one language is a good guideline. You'll need to stick to just one or two clearly defined themes to make this work.

Good writing on a panel looks simple, but getting it right is a real skill: consider working with a professional copywriter to get a good result.

Maintenance

All panels need some maintenance to keep them looking good. A neglected or damaged panel creates a really bad impression: it's better to have nothing at all than something that looks worn out and forgotten. Most materials will need cleaning once a year or so to stop algal growth, and someone needs to check the panel every few months for dirt or damage.

You also need to think about, and budget for, replacing panels at the end of their life. Cast bronze and sand-blasted stone can last for decades, but most other materials will start to look tired after six or seven years in the rain and sun. The panel design will probably be looking dated by then too.

Working with two languages

Many organisations providing interpretation on the Wales Coast Path will have bilingual policies. The work you produce will need to be consistent with them. Graphic design that must present all content in two languages in a single layout, such as on a panel or in an exhibition, is quite a challenge.

Most visitors will only read one of the two sets of text. Good design should make it easy for them to identify which text is in which language, and to keep following that language as they read through the material. It's not good enough just to assume they can do this by reading the first few words: that creates a momentary 'hiccup' in the fluency with which they access the information. With informal communication like interpretation, that hiccup might make all the difference between whether they bother to read your carefully crafted words, or move on to something that isn't making them jump a subconscious hurdle every time they start a paragraph.

There's also the problem that bilingual text in a single layout makes it look as if there's twice as much text. Research in museums has shown that lots of text is a real disincentive to reading. It doesn't matter that half of it isn't relevant to an individual reader: the visual impression is that there's a lot of reading to do, and most people's reaction is to lower the amount of attention they're prepared to give it.

You can make life easier by being really strict about how much you write. For a single panel, 150 words in either language is a good upper limit. You also need to pay attention to the appearance of the text. Work with your designer to find ways that will help your readers, perhaps by setting languages in different colours, or by the way blocks of text are positioned.

The other issue to consider is translation. Interpretation uses everyday language and expressions; really good writing will use the sound and rhythm of the words to carry some of its meaning and emotional impact. It's difficult to translate these qualities accurately and most translation services simply take the text and translate it word for word, with little sensitivity to its tone or to catch phrases and word play.

A far better solution is to ask two writers, each working in their native language, to develop separate texts, giving them the same word limits and the same brief for the themes, stories and information they have to convey. If this isn't possible, find translators who can capture the atmosphere and feel of a text as well as its sense. Above all, test the translation on native speakers of each language and ask them if it 'works'.

Publications

Although our age seems dominated by electronic media, paper is going to play an important role for a few years to come. The humble leaflet actually has a lot of advantages: you don't need a fragile electronic gadget to read it, it can be part of a library in a holiday house so it's used by several visitors, you can display it in places where people are most likely to need it, and it gives you a larger canvas on which to present maps and images.

As with any other interpretation medium, you need to be clear what your leaflet or booklet is going to do. Is it going to promote your site, giving people an idea of what's on offer and how to get there? Or is it something that will actually help them find their way round and tell them a bit about what they might find? It's usually a good idea to separate these two functions: trying to combine promotion with interpretation means you don't do either job well.

The web

The way visitors experience and think about your place is shaped by what they discover before they come as well as by what they find on site. Many visitors will do at least some research on the web before they arrive, and with more and more people using smartphones they may well look for resources online during their visit.

Websites are particularly important for pre-visit information: the stuff that will help people decide where to go and what they can do there. Make sure information about your site is easy to find, accurate and clear. Give them an idea of the site's character and stories: websites are a major influence on the expectations visitors bring with them. Don't promise more than you can deliver! If you have waymarked walks, offer guides to download as pdfs: they need to be designed so they fit onto A4 pages, and look good if they're printed with a cheap domestic printer.

The web is also a good place to provide further information about your themes and stories. Visitors who want to read lots of detail can do so far more comfortably sitting at a desk than they can on site.

Share it

The web is more than a modern way to publish your material. Perhaps the biggest change it has brought about is the way visitors can share their impressions of a place, both with each other and with the organisation that manages it.

Visitors will use services like Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and TripAdvisor to tell their friends about your place and the experiences they have there. Online games like geocaching offer people ways to share places they particularly like and the stories they find interesting, although they will always appeal to a fairly small niche market. The things people say and the photographs they share in all these channels will become part of your site's online presence, and therefore part of its interpretation. And all of this will be out of your control: scary, but an inevitable fact of modern life!

The best approach is to embrace the potential that social networks offer, as long as you have the staff time to make engagement with your online public a genuine, sustained activity. Monitor the web for mentions of your site using Google alerts; set up a Facebook page and a Twitter account for your site and use them to talk to your visitors. If people make comments about things they don't like, respond to them and treat it as valuable feedback. Check what Wikipedia says about your site: if it's wrong, change it.

Shiny toys

Smartphones offer a range of possibilities, and the proportion of visitors using them is rising all the time. At the very least, you should check what your website looks like if people browse it on a phone to check directions or what facilities there are. Most websites need to have a mobile-friendly option that is displayed automatically if someone visits the site using a mobile device.

Other options include using QR codes to offer links to content like walks guides. More elaborate schemes involve having an electronic guide developed specially for your site as an app, or offering a downloadable audio tour. There are situations in which these can be viable projects, but don't get so seduced by the technology that you see this as the only interpretation solution you need. Do all your visitors feel confident using a smartphone? Do you want them to have their experience of the place mediated through looking at a tiny screen – something they probably spend a lot of time doing anyway – or is exploring the coast path about giving them something more? On a practical level, is there a reliable mobile signal across all networks throughout your site?

Most apps are developed for iPhones, because it's easier to make programs work consistently for Apple's tightly controlled operating system. But iPhones represent only about 19% of the smartphone market. Can you justify developing what will probably be an expensive product for such a small proportion of your visitors?

Smartphones and the mobile web offer exciting possibilities, but as communication media they're so new that any projects using them have to be seen as experimental. It's also important to recognise how fast this technology is moving. QR codes seemed new and exciting in 2009; in 2011 some commentators were saying they were 'dead' and about to be superseded by Near Field Communication (NFC), which triggers a response simply by waving the phone over a chip embedded in a poster or object.

Try these technologies out if they fit your audience and what you want to achieve, and if they look like genuinely good uses of your budget. But be aware of their limitations – and remember that what looks cool and impressive now will probably be out of date in a year's time.

Visitor centres

A visitor centre is a major investment. It needs a building in the right place and of the right size and character, displays that are imaginative and well-produced, and most importantly a commitment to staff time, at a minimum to clean it, maintain it, and open and close it at reliable times.

Only major sites with a reasonable number of visitors can usually justify having a dedicated centre. But there may well be opportunities for you to work in partnership with existing centres in your area, including tourist information centres, if you think that an indoor display is what you need. This might involve something as simple as a single panel display with a leaflet dispenser, or something more elaborate like a seasonal display taking up an entire room.

Arts projects

Interpretation doesn't always need to tell visitors stories in words. Sculpture, painting, music and even dance can all be ways to express the essence of a place, or create an evocative memorial of an event. Sculpture can be combined with creative writing to create landmarks or furniture that reflect ideas and stories, and create unique features that become part of a place.

All interpretation needs some creative input, but there is an increasing interest in projects that give artists more of a leading role. The end product can be ephemeral, such as a theatre production that plays on beaches for a summer season, or more lasting, such as a series of sculpted benches that become part of the landscape. If you want really interesting results you need to allow artists some free rein in how they respond to the stories of a place, and the meanings your visitors take away from the finished work will be very varied. In general, that means arts-based projects are not as suitable for specific,

concrete ideas and messages as more conventional interpretation. But working with sculptors and poets can produce striking, memorable installations that may live in visitors' minds long after they've forgotten a panel.

Arts projects are particularly good when you want to shape visitors' experience, or draw their attention to the qualities of a place. Perhaps one reason they've become popular is that visitors are bombarded with information, and often come with quite a bit of knowledge that they've gleaned from books or the web. Interpretation's role in future may be less concerned with telling people stuff, and more concerned with how the physical character of a place reflects its stories: the creative, personal vision that artists bring to a project can be an ideal way to do this.

Arts projects come with their own unique set of challenges. Because they often involve installing unusual or even controversial structures, they can provoke strong reactions from residents as well as visitors. Arts work also seems to attract more than its fair share of accusations that it's a 'waste of money'. And just as with panels, you need to be sure that someone will look after the finished piece and restore it if necessary

WANDER - Art on the Wolds Way

Artists' works commissioned for sites along the Yorkshire Wolds Way create intriguing landmarks for people walking the route. They were also intended to help in marketing the area, so Visit Hull and East Yorkshire (the destination marketing organisation) wanted to commission artists whose work would attract new groups of visitors.

Andrew Knight of public art consultants RKL, which worked on the scheme, felt that getting good community engagement was essential. 'If people feel involved with a project they'll become ambassadors for it', he says. 'It makes all the difference between a piece of work local people are proud of and something they don't care about or even resent.'

Each work commissioned through the project had a local steering group, brought together after consultations with local parish councils and an open public meeting. At these early stages, it was important to emphasise how the project was an opportunity to create something unique in the area – but that if people didn't like the idea they were free to say no.

RKL Consultants then worked with the steering group to explore what the brief for their artist might include, and to develop a brief the steering group could approve. Three or four artists, chosen on the basis of their past work, were invited to meet the group and see the site. The artists' expenses for these visits were covered by the project. The steering group, advised by RKL Consultants, then chose who to commission.

This process means the commission is awarded without knowing what the end result will look like. That might seem a risky leap of faith, but it's often a better mechanism than asking for definite proposals, which have to be developed before the artist has had time to really get to know the place and its stories. The artists developed proposals in dialogue with the Steering Group, who then agreed the final proposal before seeking necessary statutory consents. The key is a good, trusting relationship between the artist, the community and the commissioner. Some projects also arrange for the chosen artist to work up a proposal for a proportion of the available fee – with a get-out clause in case everyone hates it!

It's important to recognise just how long the process can take. Andrew says, 'The Yorkshire Wolds project took much longer than we'd anticipated. It's not just the community engagement: we had to deal with the complexities of working on Common Land and Sites of Special Scientific Interest. But the quality of the end result makes it all worth it.'

You can find more about recommended mechanisms for commissioning artists at http://www.publicartonline.org.uk

Acknowledgements, branding and logos

You'll probably need to acknowledge any financial support you get. Usually this will mean including the logos of funding organisations in publications, panels, and websites.

Remember that if your interpretation is supported by any European Union Structural Fund, the Welsh Government or the Countryside Council for Wales then you need written approval from the Coast Path Team before your item is produced. Contact the team for print quality versions of the various logos you'll need and advice on their usage. We would also like to see your porduct at the proof stage. Please contact walescoastpath.gov.uk for further information.

Even if your interpretation has not been directly funded by us, we would be pleased if you would use and support the Wales Coast Path branding.

If you'd like to find out more

Here is a selection of organisations, websites and books and that will give you more detail about interpretation and interpretive planning.

Websites

The Association for Heritage Interpretation
www.ahi.org.uk
AHI is the UK's professional body for anyone working with interpretation. It runs an annual conference, which is a good place to see new projects and discuss ideas, and publishes a journal twice a year with detailed case studies and articles reviewing current practice. Associate Membership is open to anyone. Full membership (MAHI) and Fellowship (FAHI) require applicants to demonstrate a track record of experience and training. The Association's website has a register of consultants and suppliers.

Scottish Natural Heritage
SNH played an active role in developing the practice of interpretation. Their website includes some advice on interpretation planning
http://www.snh.gov.uk/policy-and-guidance/heritage-interpretation/interpretive-planning/

Wales European Funding Office
www.wefo.wales.gov.uk for further guidance on Information and publicity guidelines 2007-2013

Books

Beck, L and Cable T — *Interpretation for the 21st Century: Fifteen Guiding Principles for Interpreting Nature and Culture* (Sports publishing, 2nd edition 2002)

Carter, J (ed.) — *A sense of place: an interpretive planning handbook* (Tourism and the Environment Initiative, Inverness, 2001). Available as a 3.7 Mb .pdf file from http://www.jamescarter.cc/content/writing.htm

Cross, S — *Sharing our stories: using interpretation to improve the visitors' experience at heritage sites* (Fáilte Ireland, 2010). Available as a 1.4 Mb pdf from http://www.failteireland.ie/builtheritage

Ham, S H — *Environmental interpretation: a practical guide for people with big ideas and small budgets* (North American Press, Golden, Colorado, 1992)

Hems, A and Blockley. M (eds) — *Heritage Interpretation* (Routledge/English Heritage, 2006)

Pierssenné, A — *Explaining our World* (E & F Spon, 1998)

Tilden, F — *Interpreting our heritage* (University of North Carolina Press, 1957, several subsequent editions)

Veverka, J — *Interpretive master planning* (Falcon Press Publishing, 1994)