Ideas for interpreting heritage sites

Bored of boards!

IRISH
WALLED
TOWNS
NETWORK

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

"Think like a wise man,
but communicate in the
language of the people"

W.B. Yeats

Introduction

Done well, interpretation can enhance the visitor experience. It may also strengthen the relationship between the site and those who live around it. Furthermore, by improving the attractiveness of a site, interpretation can lead to economic benefits for the wider area. Done badly, it can inaccurately communicate the meanings of the site and alienate those who visit. It can also physically damage the historic material if badly specified and installed.

Currently, the interpretation of Ireland's historic places is dominated by panels. Although very useful, there is more to interpretation than just the use of text heavy boards. The primary objective of this document is to show what other media can be used. Nonetheless, some guidance on interpretive panels is provided. Most of the methods shown are durable, low maintenance and relatively low tech.

Some definitions

A heritage site is a place that has been deemed to be of historical or cultural importance by a section or sections of society. Heritage interpretation is the communication of the meaning or meanings of a place through a variety of media. According to the international charter that guides interpretation this 'can include print and electronic publications, public lectures, on-site and directly related off-site installations, educational programmes, community activities, and ongoing research, training, and evaluation of the process itself' (*Ename Charter*, 2007, p. 3).

Limitations & author identification

The examples shown in this document deal with outdoor sites open to the public. They are a random sample of interpretation actions encountered in recent years both nationally and internationally. The use of events to animate sites has not been considered in this document. Similarly, interpretation within upstanding buildings is not explored.

Before a place can be interpreted it must be accessible and safe to navigate. Analysis of access issues is outside the scope of this document. A list of publications on access and site management can be found at the end of the document.

A brief note on planning your interpretation actions

How a site is interpreted depends largely on the nature of the place itself. Some locations may be able to take a high degree of on-site interpretation. Others - because of rarity, use, or fragility - may require an interpretation strategy that is largely off-site or dependant on mobile technology or publications. For instance, large panels in a medieval church may be visually intrusive and take away from its religious significance. However, no matter what is done, an interpretation plan should be carried out first. It is not sufficient to simply install a sign or piece or interpretive art without giving some consideration to the site's conservation values.

The complexity of the plan will depend on the ambition of the proposed interpretation programme and the site's significance. Relevant stakeholders, in particular the surrounding community should be at the core of the interpretation planning process. A genuine conversation should be conducted between the heritage professional and the stakeholders wherein the viewpoint and ideas of all participants are valued. The conversation may manifest itself though the creation of a steering committee and the running of a series of workshops. It is important to note that the level of heritage professional / community interaction will depend again upon the proposed interpretation programme and the site's significance.

Any plan should consider the following:

1   Significance: why is the site important? Is there a statement of significance? Is there a conservation management plan? If there is no statement of significance one should be created in accordance with the Burra Charter (2013). What is important to the community? Do different sections of the community have differing viewpoints on the monument?

2   Reasons: why are you interpreting the site? What are your motives?

3   Meanings: what are the meanings you wish to communicate?

4   Audience: is your audience going to be the local community, Irish tourists, foreign tourists, children, teenagers, adults, people of differing socio-economic background and ethnicity? Each audience may need differing interpretation actions.

5   Key messages and stories: people learn through stories they find interesting and relevant to their lives. What stories will you tell?

6   Goals: what will the visitors learn? Will they gain skills? Will their attitudes and future behaviour be changed?

7   Critical review: what information is already available about the site before they arrive, at the arrival points, and on location? Where are the information gaps? Do items need to be removed?

8   Legal protection: Is the site subject to the any legal protection under the planning, archaeology or wildlife acts? If so, you must design your interpretation to take them into account. What permissions do you need?

Once all the above items have been considered, the heritage professional and the stakeholders can then decide what to do. Remember, there are five senses. If possible, try to stimulate each one. There are a variety of ways through which the meanings of a site can be communicated. The media chosen should be the ones best suited to match the needs and nature of the various audiences. Above all, they should be compatible with the conservation values of the site. Finally, do not fall into the trap of designing it for yourself. Think of the audience at all times.

If you want to learn more about heritage interpretation a list of publications can be found at the end of this document.

Heritage interpretation examples

Archaeological excavation, Black Friary Community Archaeology Project, Trim, Co. Meath

A private archaeology company have been working in partnership with Meath County Council to excavate one of Trim's medieval friaries. Students pay to excavate. There are open days for locals.

Archaeological excavation, Vindolanda, Hadrian's Wall, UK

Run by a charitable trust, the Roman fort of Vindolanda has undergone excavations each summer for several decades. Volunteers pay to dig. Each day talks are given by professional archaeologists. The site is an exemplar in how an archaeological site can be used for both research and tourism purposes.

Athens underground metro station, Greece

In Athens commuters encounter archaeology as part of their daily routine.

Romanesque Church, Madrid, Spain

The archaeological remains of a Romanesque church are exposed and preserved through protective glass.
The statue of the man encourages people to come over. A small model provides interpretation.

Building footings, Warram Percy, UK

At the abandoned Medieval village of Warram Percy pebbles and kerbs have been used to illustrate the layout of an archaeologically excavated building. In the second image an interpretation panel with re-creation drawing aids interpretation. The site is still used for agriculture. Sheep were grazing on the day of visiting. The minimal use of kerbing in the second picture provides the visitor with an appreciation of the scale and layout of a medieval house while causing the least amount of disturbance to a working farm.

Line of city wall, Kilkenny

At several locations in Kilkenny the line of the largely now gone medieval city wall is marked by distinctive but uniform paving.

Ramparts, Vinolanda, Hadrian's Wall, UK

In order to give visitors an appreciation of the scale of the Roman fort, scholarly recreations of the ramparts have been built close to the archaeological remains. In an Irish context, scholarly restoration of sections of a monument or sample re-creations could be done to help visitors understand the site.

"Dry words and dry facts will not fire hearts"

John Muir

Entrance posts, Carlisle, UK

Wooden posts in Carlisle mark the site of a gate into the Roman town.

Self contained audio-visual display, Beaumaris Castle, UK

Located within Beaumaris Castle is a self contained audio visual unit that sits on the archaeology.

Tudor framework, London, UK

This structure is located in what was once part of medieval London. The area is now almost totally dominated by modern buildings. The piece is a striking reminder of the area's past. It is also an example of how local history can inspire interesting, place specific artwork.

Herb garden, Edinburgh, UK

This herb garden is located in the middle of the city. Such a garden with medieval plants could easily be planted in Irish towns, in areas usually given over to bedding flowers.

Rothe House, Kilkenny

All the plants and trees in the garden and orchard of the 17th century Rothe House were based on faunal remains discovered during archaeological exactions on site. The presence of geese in the orchard also helps to create a medieval atmosphere.

Volunteer led tours, York, UK

Tours are a great way to learn about a place. Many towns have heritage groups. In places where there are no professional guides, volunteers could run tours of historic sites or town centres during the tourist season.

Seating with maps, London, UK

This photo is from the men's section of a clothes shop. It shows the possibility of putting interesting historical images on seemingly mundane objects.

Parking ticket machines, Bayonne, France

QR codes on parking machines with links to information on events, shopping and local attractions.

Electrical box, Dublin

This scheme showing art placed on mundane objects could easily be replicated to give information on local heritage.

Mural, The Rocks, Sydney, Australia

This mural depicts the late 19th / early 20th century appearance of a now gone section of the street. The roadway it was destroyed to make way for now forms the canvas.

Murals, Buttevant, Co. Cork
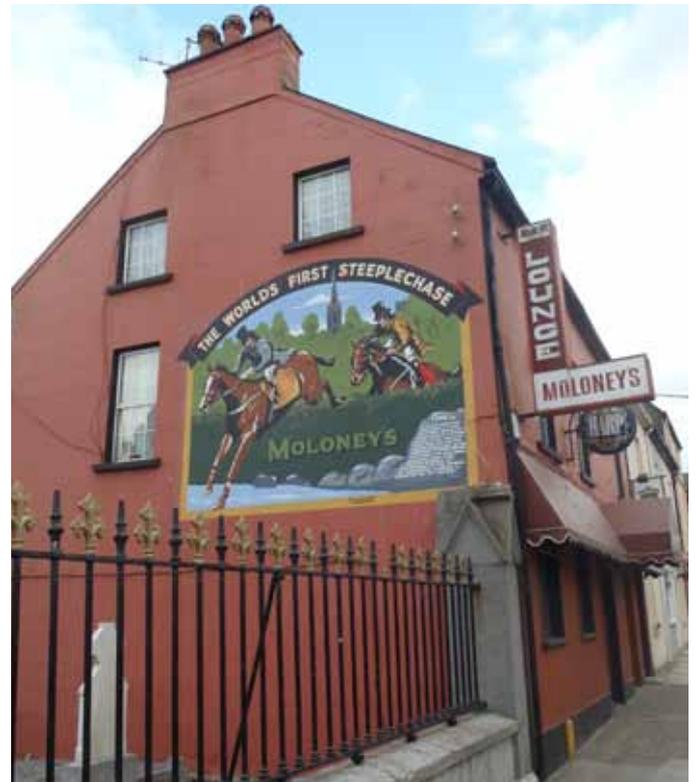
The local heritage group commissioned an artist to paint two gable murals depicting the medieval origins of the town and its role as the starting point for the world's first steeplechase. The murals are a constant reminder to all the residents of the town's heritage.

Alice Kytler Graffiti, Kilkenny

A derelict location has been transformed into an interesting piece of heritage interpretation by the use of street art. The 14th century witchcraft trial of Alice Kytler and the execution of one of her maids are depicted here in a contemporary fashion. In the second picture people peek through the plywood hoardings to get a closer view of the artwork. On either side of the viewing points are wanted posters.

Graffiti, Athens, Greece

Graffiti or street art can be used to interpret the past and make it relevant to audiences not usually interested in heritage.

Superimposed photo, Derry-Londonderry, UK

The image superimposes a 21st photo of a city wall gate onto a late 19th / early 20th image. The result is a very interesting piece that encourages the viewer to examine what has changed and what has stayed the same. By bringing together 21st century people with those from a previous century it humanises the past.

Berlin Wall, Germany

In these images high quality street art and seemingly mindless writing have made the past relevant. On the work to the left are written the words 'next wall to fall Wall Street'.

QR graffiti Athens, Greece

Stencilled QR code linking to a poem. This could easily be a link to a YouTube video about the folklore or history of a place.

Longship, Templebar, Dublin

This piece interprets the use of the stars by Vikings for navigation.

**Art pieces, Lough Boora, Co. Offaly**

The outdoor art pieces in Lough Boora react to the landscape and history of the site. As a collection they add significantly to the visitor experience.

Construction site hoarding, Newcastle, UK
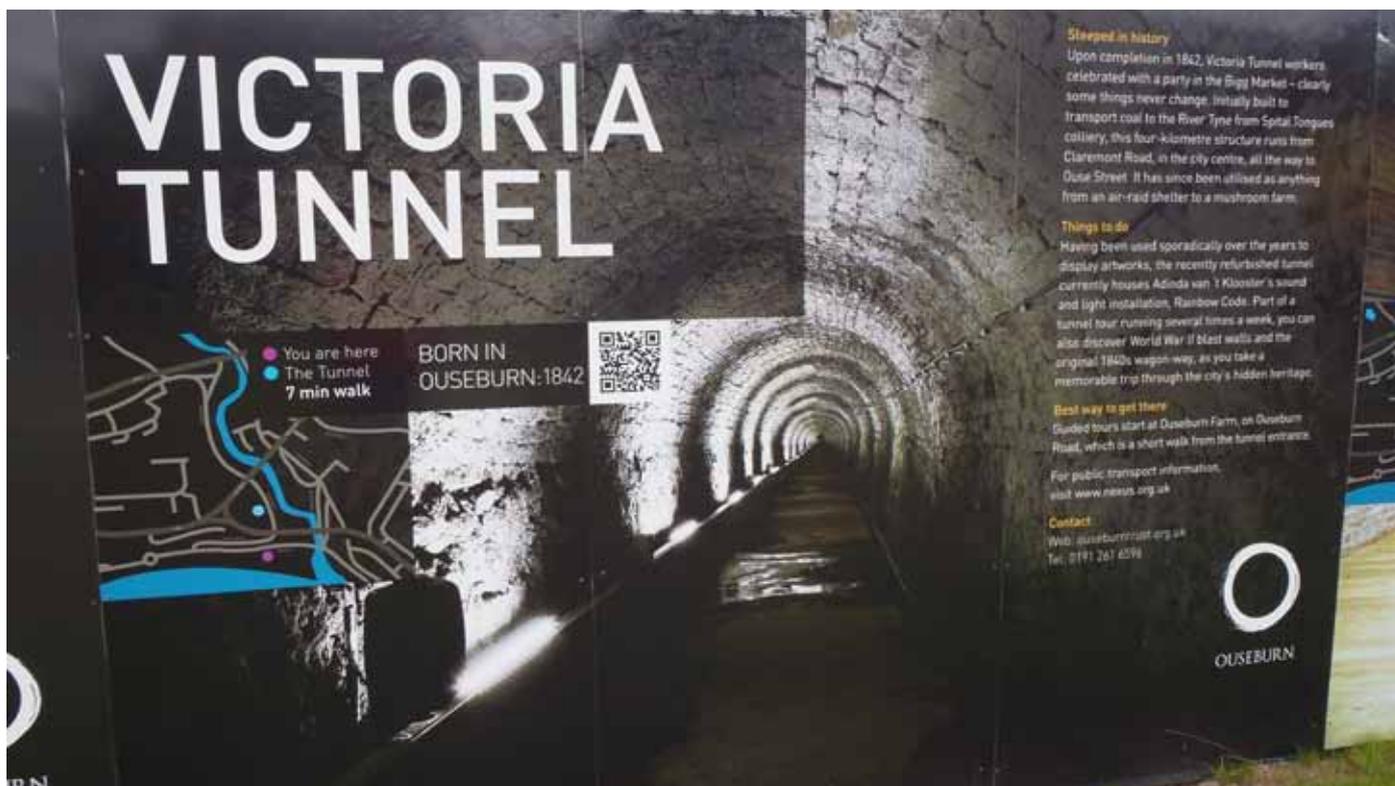
Along a derelict construction site 2m high hoarding has been erected telling passers-by about local heritage attractions. Note the QR code providing a link to further information.

YouTube videos of archaeological excavations, Heritage Council, Kilkenny
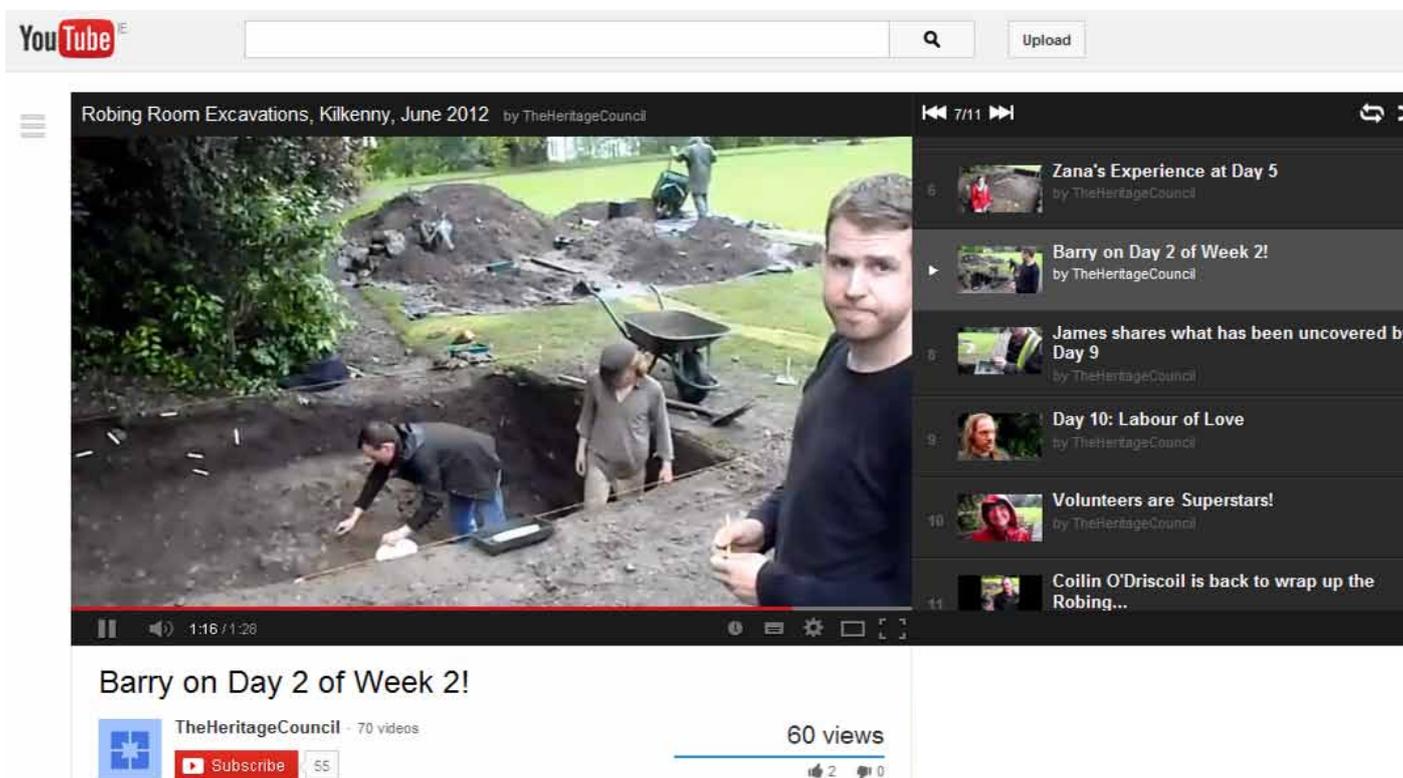
Short videos can be made by heritage groups about local historical sites and uploaded on to YouTube. QR codes on leaflets or interpretation panels can link smart phone users directly to the videos.

Longship, Waterford

During Christmas 2013 a Viking longship was located in the heart of the city. Spectacular objects such as this are a great way of sparking people's interest. They are also hard to forget!

1896 Olympic Stadium, Athens, Greece

The simple addition of a plywood podium allowed visitors a brief feeling of winning an Olympic medal. Simple but intelligent items such as this can really connect visitors to a place.

Medieval stocks, Waterford

Visitors to a place want an experience. They want to get a flavour of what was life was like in the past. In Waterford, the presence of stocks allow people the chance to gain a small but memorable insight into punishment during the Middle Ages.

City Walls lighting, York, UK
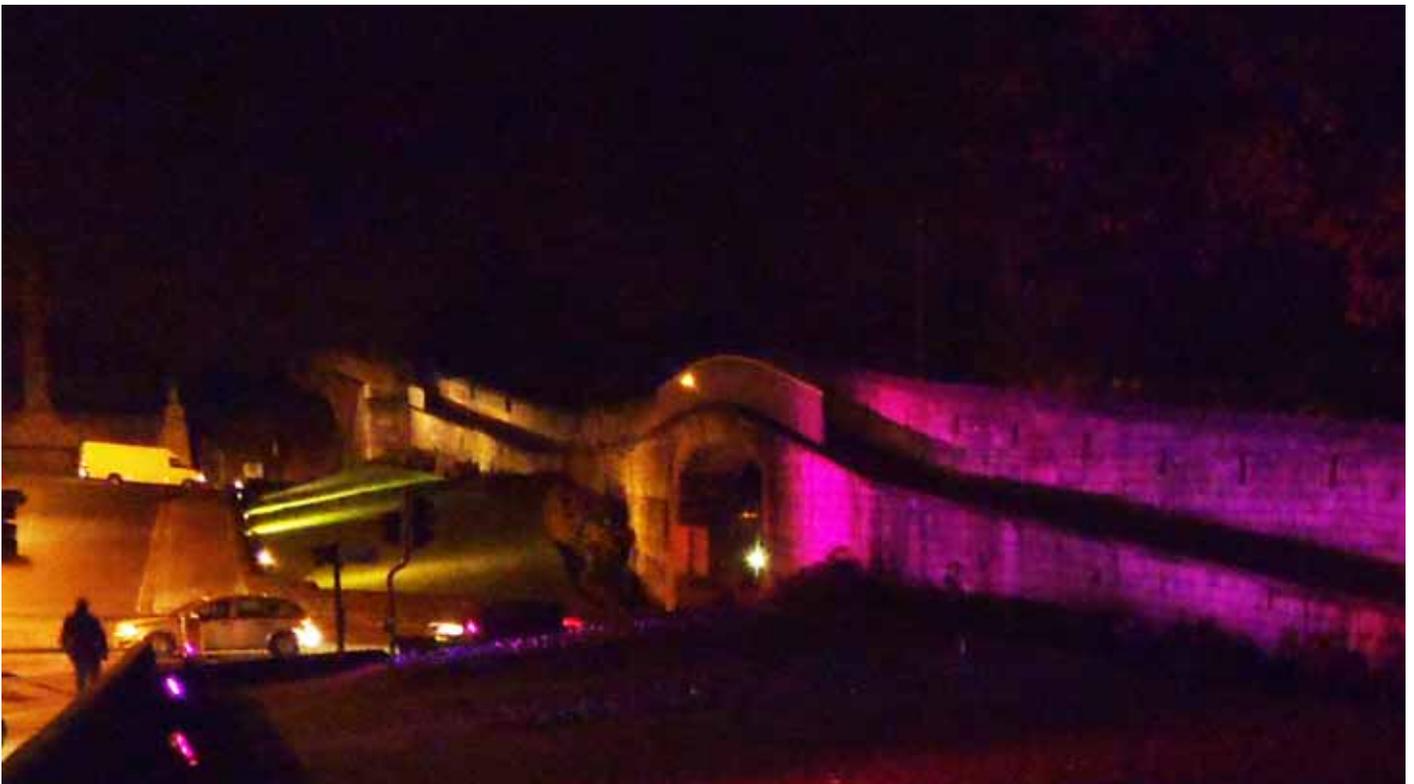
Lighting and the projection of short sentences or images onto heritage sites can be an innovative way of interpreting a site at night.

Interpretative panel, Vindobala, Hadrian's Wall, UK
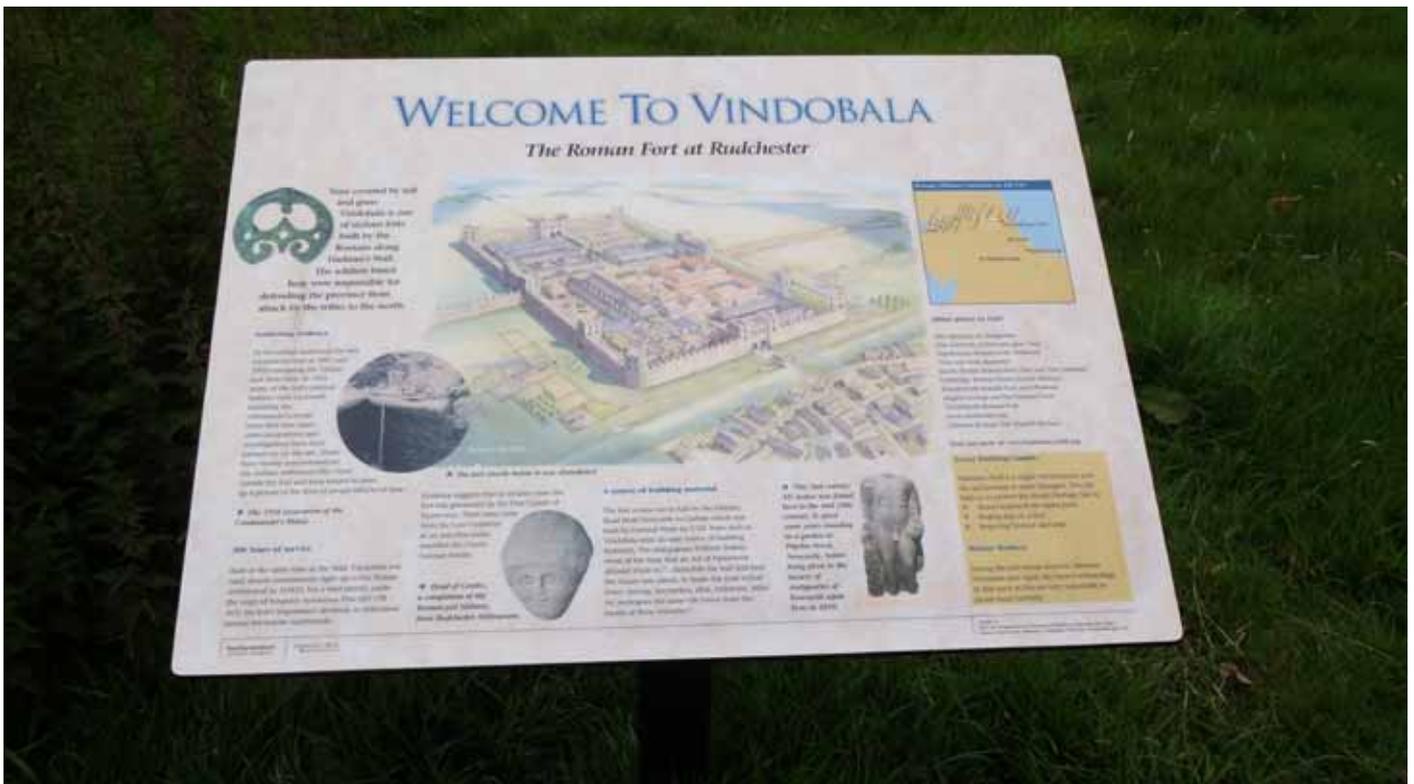
The Roman fort of Vindobala has only one interpretive panel. Unlike many badly designed and panels it does not simply list facts. Instead it provides context and insight. The re-creation drawing helps visitors visualise the site's appearance. There are three layers to the text. This allows visitors to read to a level they are comfortable with. Layer one tells the visitor what it is, i.e. the Roman Fort at Rudchester. Layer two comprises 50 words in bold that give basic information i.e. who built it and why. The final layer provides the reader with more detail on the fort and those who lived there. The text also explores the archaeological excavations that took place at the site. On the right side of the panel is a map showing where the fort was located in relation to the rest of Hadrian's Wall. There is also some information on other places of interest and information on how not to damage the archaeological remains. Although this panel looks wordy, it has been well planned to be accessible to all levels of interest in as few words as possible. The location of the sign has been carefully selected so as to not take away from a visitor's view of the monument.

"There are no facts,
only interpretations"

Fredrich Nietzsche

Interpretative panel, Vindolanda, Hadrian's Wall, UK

Like the signage at Vindobala, this panel at Vindolanda has three layers of text. It too is dominated by a re-creation drawing. However, unlike the example at Vindobala there are summaries in French, German and Latin. This allows a broader audience to understand the significance of the site. The design is simple, elegant and contemporary. Pastiche is avoided. The sign is fitted onto a concrete tray. This means that site insulation does not require excavation. Such an archaeologically non-invasive approach is only suitable in areas with no livestock. In places where sheep or cattle are present a more durable solution is necessary.

Erosion signage, Hadrian's Wall, UK

The use of a timber saw horse is an archaeologically sensitive way of displaying a sign. The saw horse sits on the ground. If well built, a saw horse should be able to tolerate livestock. In the example below, the sign holds a simple notice warning walkers about causing erosion to the monument. The horizontal timbers could just as easily host a well designed interpretive panel.

Further reading

International charters:

Burra Charter: the Australia ICOMOS charter for places of cultural significance, 2013, ICOMOS Australia, Burra
australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Burra-Charter-2013-Adopted-31.10.2013.pdf

Ename Charter: the charter for the interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage sites, 2007, ICOMOS, Abdijstraat
icip.icomos.org/downloads/ICOMOS_Interpretation_Charter_ENG_04_10_08.pdf

Guidance on heritage interpretation:

Colquhoun, F., 2005, *Interpretation handbook and standard: distilling the essence*, Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai, Wellington
www.doc.govt.nz/Documents/about-doc/role/policies-and-plans/interpretation-handbook-complete.pdf

Cross, S., 2012, *Sharing our stories – using interpretation to improve the visitors' experience at heritage sites*, Fáilte Ireland, Dublin
www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/2_Develop_Your_Business/1_StartGrow_Your_Business/NEW-Sharing-our-stories_1.pdf

Cross, S., 2010, *Telling people about our heritage – interpretation and signage guidance*, TellTale, Buxton
www.roscommoncoco.ie/en/Services/Heritage/Publications/Telling_People_About_Our_Heritage-Interpretation_and_Signage_Guidance.pdf

Lawson, E. & Walker, M., 2005, *Interpreting heritage places and items guidelines*, NSW Heritage Office, Parramatta
www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/heritagebranch/heritage/NSWHeritageOfficeGuidelinesinfointerpreting.pdf

Heritage interpretation plans:

Mannix, L., 2012, *Rindoon interpretation plan*, Heritage Council, Kilkenny
www.heritagecouncil.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Irish_Walled_Towns/Rindoon_Draft_Interpretation_Plan.pdf

Mulloway Studio & Paul Kloden, 2012, *Perth waterfront project heritage interpretation strategy*, Hocking Heritage Studio, Shenton Park
media.mra.wa.gov.au/Documents/Elizabeth-Quay/15243_47759_Elizabeth-Quay-Heritage-Interpretation-Strategy.pdf

Peacock, A., 2010, *Interpretation plan for the castles and town walls of Edward I for CADW*, PLB Consulting, Malton
cadw.wales.gov.uk/docs/cadw/publications/
InterpplanCastlesEdwardI_EN.pdf

Veale, S. & Kelly, M., 2008, *Castle Hill Heritage Park interpretation plan,* Godden Mackay Logan, Sydney
www.thehills.nsw.gov.au/IgnitionSuite/uploads/docs/
Castle%20Hill%20Heritage%20Park%20Interp%20
Plan%20July%202008_part%201.pdf
www.thehills.nsw.gov.au/IgnitionSuite/uploads/docs/
Castle%20Hill%20Heritage%20Park%20Interp%20
Plan%20July%202008_part%202.pdf

Guidance on access:

Access: improving the accessibility of historic buildings and places, 2011, The Stationary Office, Dublin
www.ahg.gov.ie/en/Publications/
HeritagePublications/
BuiltHeritagePolicyPublications/Access%20-%20
improving%20the%20accessibility%20of%20
historic%20buildings%20and%20places%20(2011).
pdf

Easy Access to historic buildings, 2012, English Heritage, London
www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/easy-
access-to-historic-buildings/easy-access-historic-
buildings2012.pdf

" I hear and I forget.
I see and I remember.
I do and I understand."

Confucius

"Education is not the filling of the pail, but the lighting of the fire"   W.B. Yeats

IRISH WALLED TOWNS NETWORK

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

www.irishwalledtownsnetwork.ie