



BRITISH ARCHAEOLOGICAL JOBS RESOURCE

BAJR

:: Short Guide to Interpretation Panels and Leaflets in  
Archaeology ::

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# : Rough Guide to Interpretation Panels and Leaflets in Archaeology :

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### Disclaimer

*This document is produced as a personal guide to understanding interpretation in books, pamphlets and boards.. it is not definitive and should be seen as a starting point to both create your own interpretation and understand the complex process of creating interpretation*

*More information is available on the BAJR website ([www.bajr.co.uk](http://www.bajr.co.uk) in the Resources section)*

David Connolly, Director, BAJR

## Short Guide to Interpretation Panels and Leaflets

- **Introduction.**

Increasingly the popularisation of our heritage requires the archaeologist to be in a position where some form of public interpretation is called for. There are several publications and guidelines that deal with this. But this simple, short guide will be a good starting point. I have had to produce a number of documents, guides and interpretation panels over the years and with help and guidance for many people have overcome many of the problems and pitfalls that crop up. Although this guide is not comprehensive in all aspects of communicating with the public, it will make sure that you do not have to go through the mistakes I have already made. Remember though that you 'either have it or not' so do not be afraid to pass responsibility to someone who feels easy at public interpretation and writing.

- **Clear Aims.**

Before anything else, be clear to yourself, just what it is you are trying to convey... and stick to it. It can be too easy to get sidetracked, if you are dealing with perhaps an Open Day guide to your excavation of an Iron Age site... do not go off on a tangent about the nearby Motte or the fact that in 1894 the person who owned the field was the first person to cross the M'boke River in what is now called Zambekaiyaka, which only received independence from Belgium in 1978, which made it ...etc etc.....fascinating as it may be... non of the above has anything to do with your Iron Age Farm. By understanding what it is you want to say, it becomes easier to collect the resources you need rather than an unwieldy catchall of information overload.

- **Choose a style:**



**a: The voice of authority**, which will inform the reader and try to teach them about the chosen subject - you will use language that is suited to the classroom... but be careful as this style could lead you into being over scholarly. Many archaeologists think that using complex language is showing a respect for the reader and also providing a level of information that is of educational value. However, remember that a leaflet or panel is NOT a book, and therefore the

language of scholarship may not be best suited. Talking about *'BE/MB transitional phasing with relation to the substructure of the structure, evidenced in features 101, 105 and cut309'* will only result in alienating 90% of your audience. It is a difficult style to carry off successfully, but may be the most familiar to archaeologists themselves. Remember that an interpretation panel or leaflet does not have an extensive bibliography or glossary and is there to inform, not be regarded as a major research document.

**b: The Storyteller**, will use the age old techniques of guiding the reader through an interpretation by means of a narrative. Use the style of the oral traditions, with elements of rhythm in the language and the tools of humour, suspense or questions that engage and lead the audience into your story. In this way you can be informative and introduce elements of knowledge while remaining entertaining. The story does not even have to be true, but can still contain the information you wish to present. So it would be possible to tell a story about a boy who sees a Roman



legion pass on a Road even if the actual event is not recorded it could well have happened and would allow you to introduce subtle details like Roman Legionary armour, the construction of roads, the relationship between the ordinary farmer and the Romans ... etc. But like all types of interpretation keep it brief as you are writing a short passage not a book the size of Clan of the Cave Bear!

**c: Firstperson or Thirdperson**, is somewhat a subgenre of the Storytelling style. The thirdperson can feel very comfortable for most people as it mirrors the way most documentaries are presented, you can be detached from the actual events, and in effect stand with the reader, telling them the information. First person though can be much more exciting, engaging the reader in the actual events, a character from the past actually talking to the public 'face to face'. Imagine the impact of a character from the past explaining their feelings, " I would never have thought I'd ever have to pay taxes to these soft Romans and just look at this road, straight across my best fields!!"



**d: Conversational** is another style that sounds easy but is as difficult to get right as the Scholarly approach. It is often seen as enthusiastic and based on the premise of people out to have a good time. It can be a way of not only engaging the public, but also of actively encouraging involvement. It can ask them to participate, like asking them to climb a hill, try and cross a rampart, go to a standing stone, shout, enjoy etc. ...

It is also a good style for using metaphors to aid understanding, like

"the ramparts were as high as a double-decker bus"

A word of caution for this style is that trying to create an unforced matey style can actually lead to an empty superficial cliché-ridden style instead. If you can get over your enthusiasm and the message, without becoming patronising and forced then it can be a good style.

**e: The creative style** is for those who want to be a bit different. Let your creative juices flow and experiment. As long as it works then the sky is the limit. Perhaps a poem or a song that relates to your site.

*"Often tread the feet that came shod in iron and leather,  
up ribbons of stone from beyond the hills  
where fruits of my fields are taken  
to pay for pax romani."*

You must remember though that your reader will be a harsh critic, so keep in mind that people have to understand the message. A cleverly constructed Haiku which, when read backwards, gives the name of the site in the original Q-Celtic language is not going to win you any friends!

- **Target Audience**

Now this section may sound a bit patronising, but the reading age of the general public should be pitched at 9-12 years old. This is in fact the reading level that has been deemed the most accessible for the majority of adults and older children – in other words it is inclusive. This means that there are few technical terms, no complex bits of science or convoluted histories. You will of course have one or two people who read your leaflet or panel, and will accuse you of dumbing down or not providing the more in depth information required to fully appreciate the subtle complexities of the site. Fair enough, but if they want to know more, then they will have the ability to study further or ask you directly. The other 95% will only want the simple digest that you present in the interpretation.



A recent client caused me much concern by the continual rewriting and complaints about the factual content of the text, demanding that I include complicated political details from 16th century Scotland to create a backdrop to the internal local squabbles and alliances which led to a single act in the early 17th century. This would have been fine if I had been writing a book, but when you have only 50 words, you must make concessions. Keep it simple and to the point. Why use 20 words when one well-chosen word will do.

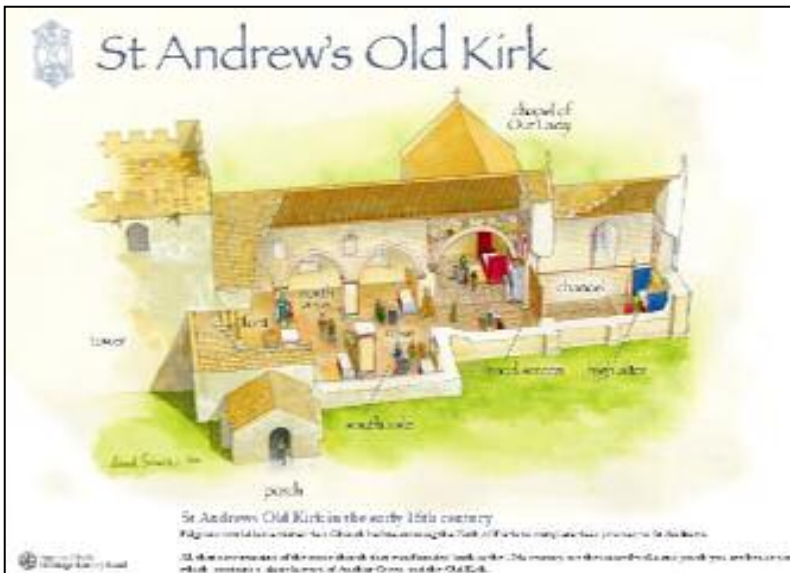


Once you know who will read your interpretations, you can pitch it at the right level. Newspapers must do it every day, and you must decide whether your reader will be generally a SUN reader, a GUARDIAN reader or a NEWSWEEK.



- **Illustrations**

Imagine a leaflet or an interpretation panel without pictures and maps. – Unthinkable! In some ways the illustration will take the place of all the words you would like to use but do not have the space for. Graphics should be thought of as carefully as the text, and the style should reflect a consistent approach. As a personal plea, can I ask that you get someone who can actually create illustrations that do not look amateur; the public have sophisticated needs when it comes to graphics. Now this does not mean that they must be expensive 3 D digital reconstruction's using texture-mapped terrain models to accurately recreate the site in the autumn of 79AD, as even a simple line drawing can effectively draw the viewer into the past with a minimum of fuss.



*Dave Simon reconstruction of medieval church (for Scottish Seabird Centre, North Berwick)*

Illustration falls into 4 main categories:

**a: Reconstructions**, which are the staple of almost all forms of interpretation. These can range from lavish colour panoramas using watercolours and inks (like the one above) through digital models (though be careful as they can look very very forced, unreal and frankly naff!) to simple drawings in black and white. Make sure you talk to the artist or illustrator to discuss the nature of what you are trying to get over and have a tie in with the text - Often it is easier to write the text after the drawings have been done. Also make sure that the reconstruction bears a passing resemblance to what you are interpreting, and has a tie-in within the text. So there is no point in the reconstruction of a Roman Fort, no matter how nice, when the site actually has a Roman Road and Iron Age enclosed farmstead. An important point, which is often forgotten until the end, is where an interpretation panel will be located. If the reconstruction is of a particular view, it does help if it is similar to the one that the public are actually seeing. Too often the viewer is left confused or misled by what they see 'on the ground' and what they see on the panel.

**b: Maps / Plans** form another important part of interpretation, allowing descriptions of location and routes to be easily understood. Imagine trying to describe even the simple process of trying to describe the layout of your house in words? Forget it, draw a plan. A good plan however is one that conveys, at a glance, all the information that the viewer requires, such as "*I am here, the round houses are there the nearest Roman fort is there which is near the present town of XXX.*"... end of information. If you have a good illustrator, please try to remember that this is for the public, not a journal, so the map or plan can be as creative as you wish, and does not have to be a traditional informative standard that appears in most journals. If your site is for example on the coast and medieval then looking like a mappa mundi with sea monsters etc can add both humour and context. Also think about making the map look more hand drawn, with key elements in 3D to emphasize them, many people find this easier to interpret than the OS map style.

**c: Photographs** are often undervalued and underused in interpretation, but from the 1890s onwards you will have a wealth of available resources, whether it is the view of the village on market day or a fine photograph of the man who first 'excavated' the druid barrow group in the 1920s posing with his workers. Photographs do not always have to be dull rectangles either, they can be shaped, cut to mould around text or given borders that replicate torn photos or even a series of negatives. Like the idea of creative text, you can also be creative here ... in fact, as you are dealing with graphics, it can be easier to be more visually imaginative.



**d: Insets and drawings** can be useful to enhance the text with images that show artifacts or elements within the words. Often you may want to describe an artifact within the text, but space makes this impossible. Just try to describe in words how an ard plough looks and works!! Instead of losing precious words.. use an illustration, but only if it is relevant and enhances the interpretation. So in the case of the ard plough ... only illustrate it if you have actual plough



marks visible or it is essential to the interpretation of the site. It can also be useful to create a 'logo' that can be easily identifiable and links separate interpretation panels or chapters in a booklet.

*Georgian Enamel, Nokalakevi.*

- **Layout and design**

It is very difficult to provide a definitive guide to the final product, as it all depends upon the style used, the material, the size of the interpretation panel or booklet / leaflet. However there are certain points which range across all the different styles.

What you must try and achieve is a coherent text, a consistent style and a harmony between the use of text and the use of visuals. Sounds simple?

Think very early on about how you want the final product to look and how it will be produced as this may influence how you approach the rest of it. Will the board be on wood, will it be on long vertical panels, will it form a pathway around the site, will people be on the site with your booklet or can it be read elsewhere and still make sense ... etc. Also think about the use of colour, no point producing fabulous colour illustrations or colour-coded routes on a map if the final product is a photocopied sheet or a duotone panel. If you are intending to produce exterior panels, think about maintenance issues and length of time that they are expected to last.

Choose a maximum of 2 fonts (serif fonts are best for people to read – I personally use Elegant Garamond for text) make sure the headline text is 'significant' and will grab peoples attention both visually and by the content. Also think about font size, font colour and the layout on the page.

Text sizes regarded to be best for interpretation panels are as a minimum:

Headlines 12mm (60-72pts)

Sub Headings 20mm (48 - 60pts)

Text 8mm (24-30pt)

Captions 8mm (24-30pt)

If you have a designer then make sure they are consulted early on, instead of just dumping a load of pictures and text on their laps .... It is important to realise that the illustrations will affect the text layout and the text will affect the graphics. You will spend time removing words, graphics, moving them about and then moving them again. Think about it early on.

My rule of thumb for the first draft is to print it out to size and see if it actually works ... the screen of a computer is not the best place to view drafts.

Act as if you are one of 4 stereotypes ...

- a) Just looks at the title and the picture ... then walks on
- b) Just looks at the title and first paragraph as well as the pictures before moving on.
- c) Looks at everything and then walks on ... (usually saying ... hmm I never knew that)
- d) looks at everything, is interested and goes to a library or bookshop to find out more.

Your interpretation should work on ALL 4 levels of interest, and there is nothing wrong with the viewer only getting the information they want from only the title and picture, there is something wrong if they can't though.

Be prepared to try to create text that is no more than 200 words per board / item, however less is best. Be prepared to edit ruthlessly and keep editing until you have the words pared down to the minimum without losing the meaning. Try not to repeat yourself, or say the same thing again, as by repeating yourself over and over, you are using up words which if you had not repeated yourself you could have used elsewhere... but I repeat myself!

Go through each word and check spelling and grammar and also check the text layout, as sometimes it is better to keep certain words together.

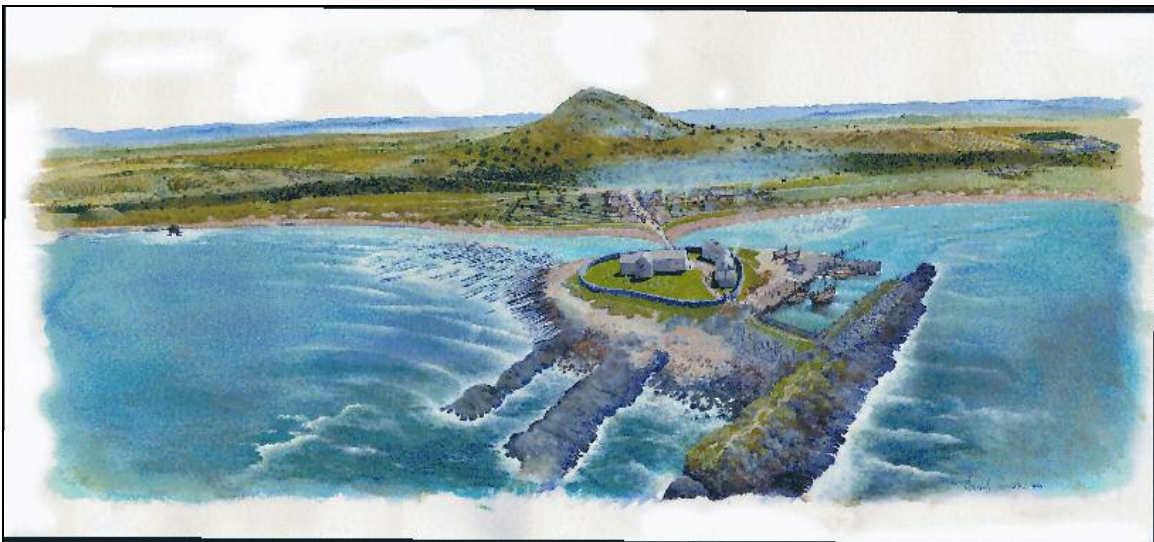
For example;

*the early 13th century church of St Cuthbert was founded to meet the needs of the pilgrim route.*

*the early 13th century church of St Cuthbert was founded to meet the needs of the pilgrim route.*

by bringing the **St** and **Cuthbert** onto the same line you have help the human eye associate words together.

Show it to someone who knows nothing about the subject (quite often you can be too close and know too much about it yourself) to ascertain if the message is coming across loud and clear.



**North Berwick in the 13th century – David Simon**

Be prepared to rewrite, redesign and redo at least twice.

At the end of the day you want to have a sign or booklet that suits the needs of the end user. It should appeal to the broadest number of people, but does not have to be dumbed down to be accessible, just carefully thought out first.

This guide is merely a short and simple first step, if you wish to learn more then I recommend these books, magazines and websites for further reading.

## **Books**

Evans, H  
*Newsmans English*  
Heinemann, 1972

Gross, M. Zehr, J. and Zimmerman R.  
*Signs, Trails and Wayside Exhibits, Interpreter's Handbook Series.*  
UW-SP Foundation Press, Inc, 1994

Gross, M. Zehr, J. and Zimmerman R.  
*Creating Enviromental Publications, Interpreter's Handbook Series.*  
UW-SP Foundation Press, Inc, 1994

McManus, P M.  
*Oh Yes They DO: how Museum Visitors Read Labels and Interact with Exhibits Text*  
Curator 1989

Scottish Tourist Board  
Site Interpretation: A Practical Guide  
STB 1993

## **Magazines**

Interpret Scotland

## **Websites**

### **Panel Manufacturers**

Arien Products - Somerset - 01278 785268 - [www.arien.com](http://www.arien.com)

BEP signs - Greenock - 01475 784423 - [www.bepsigns.co.uk](http://www.bepsigns.co.uk)

Charles Henshaw - Edinburgh 0131 337 4204 - [www.charles-henshaw.com](http://www.charles-henshaw.com)

Osprey - Coldstream - 01890 883127 - [www.signsbynature.co.uk](http://www.signsbynature.co.uk)

Perstorp-Wareite - Co Durham - 0191 259 3397 - [www.formica-europe.com](http://www.formica-europe.com)

Sandblast Sign Co - Lanarkshire - 01357 440441 - [www.ssc.gb.com](http://www.ssc.gb.com)

Shelly Signs - Shropshire - 01952 541483 - - [www.shelleysigns.co.uk](http://www.shelleysigns.co.uk)

VPB Industries - Manchester - 0161 351 7400 - - [paul@armourseal.u-net.com](mailto:paul@armourseal.u-net.com)

### **Illustrators**

Association of Archaeological Illustrators and Surveyors [www.aais.co.uk](http://www.aais.co.uk)

If anyone wants to be on this list.. please get in contact with BAJR - [info@bajr.org](mailto:info@bajr.org)