

# HOW TO: Heritage Interpretation (Introduction)

**London Historic Buildings Trust**

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funding from;



Historic England



# About LHBT

- Charity, founded 30 years ago
- Only London-wide building preservation trust
- Saving At-risk Heritage: *'sustainable projects, innovative social solutions and cultural benefits'*
- How we work:
  1. Delivering Projects
  2. Peer to Peer support
  3. High Street Heritage Action Zone
  4. Training
  5. Consultancy

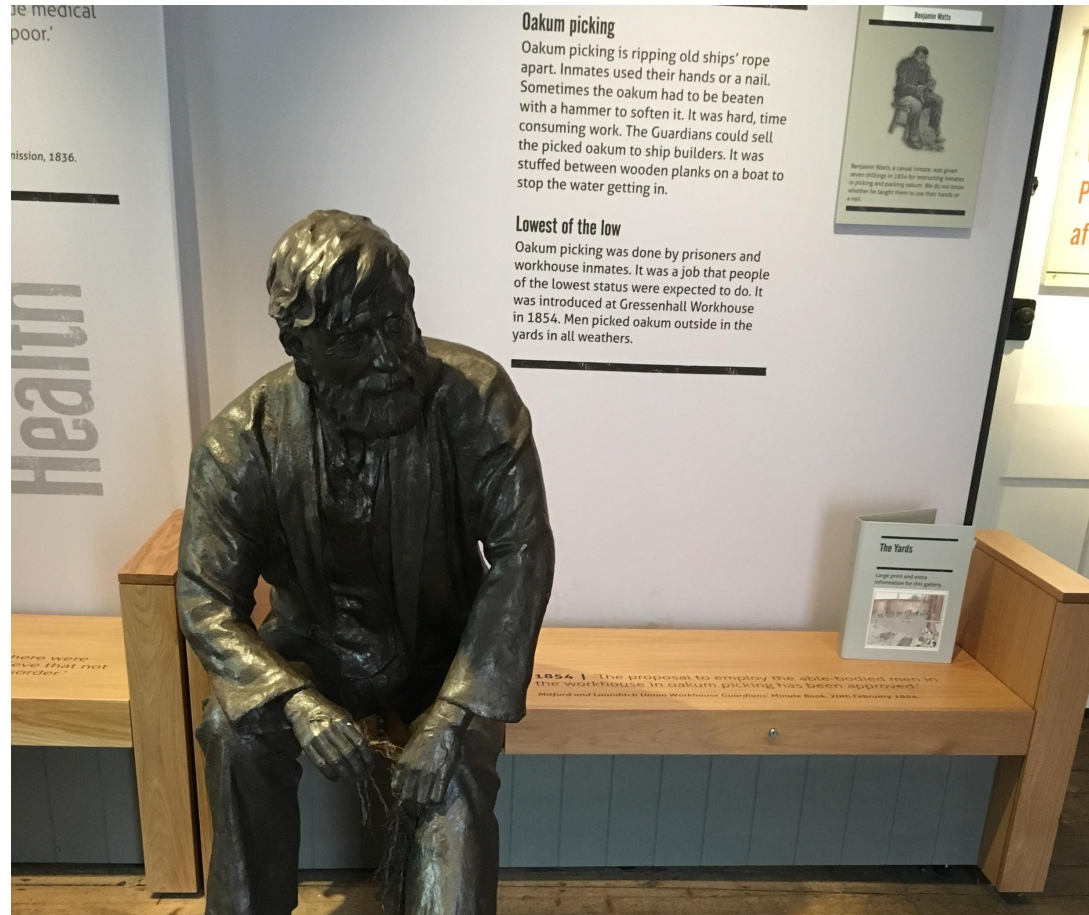


# What is interpretation?

- How we communicate stories of our buildings and heritage to audiences
- Communicate what's special about our heritage
- Tell the story of the people and events connected with our heritage
- Connect and engage with audiences



# What is interpretation?



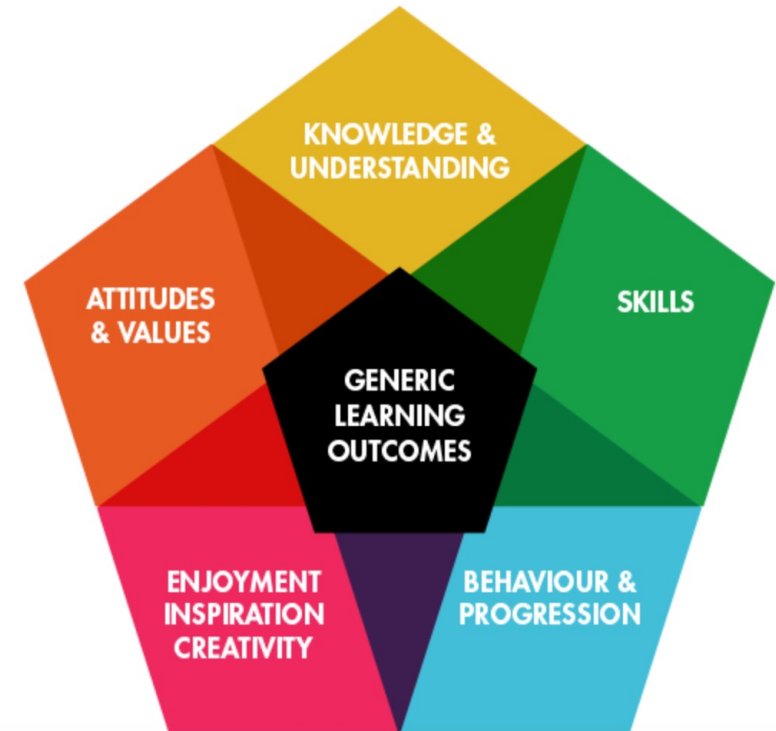
- “An educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information”  
Freeman Tilden
- Interpretation should be meaningful, revealing, provoking, relate to personal experiences, and develop understanding and appreciation
- Move away from instruction and information

# Aims and objectives

- Important starting point
- What do you want your interpretation to achieve?
- What are you interpreting? Site? Collection? Event? Person? Time period? Combination?
- Why are you interpreting your site? Why is it important to interpret this information?
- What's really significant about the thing you are interpreting?
- What do your audiences need?
- What do you want your audiences to go away with as a result of engaging with the interpretation?

# Generic Learning Outcomes

- The impact(s) on audiences as a result of engaging with your interpretation
- What's the change you want to see?
  - Knowledge & Understanding
  - Skills
  - Attitudes & Values
  - Enjoyment, Inspiration, Creativity
  - Activity, Behaviour & Progression



# Messaging

- We don't remember all the interpretation we engage with
- What do you want audiences to remember?
- What's relevant to your audiences?
- What do you have information about? What's possible?
- Which messages reveal something truly interesting about the subject?
- What change do you want to influence in visitors?
- What could visitors find out in their own time?



# Messaging

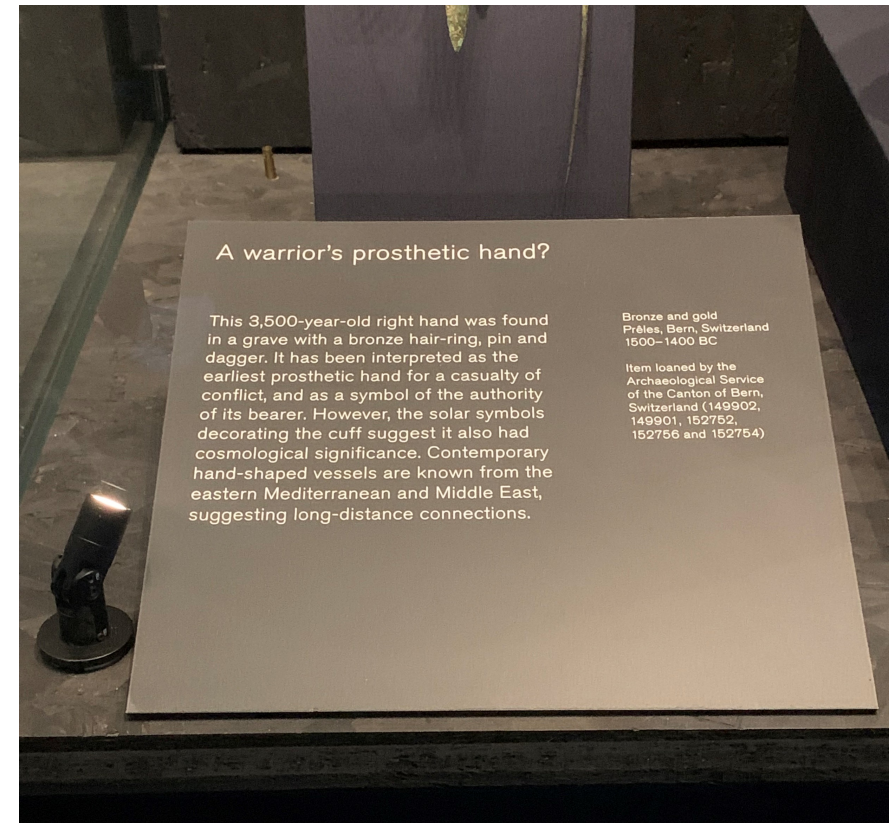


- Big idea: Broad, overarching message
- Other messages and themes
- Keep these in mind as you create interpretation
- Test with colleagues and audiences – are the messages clear throughout your interpretation?

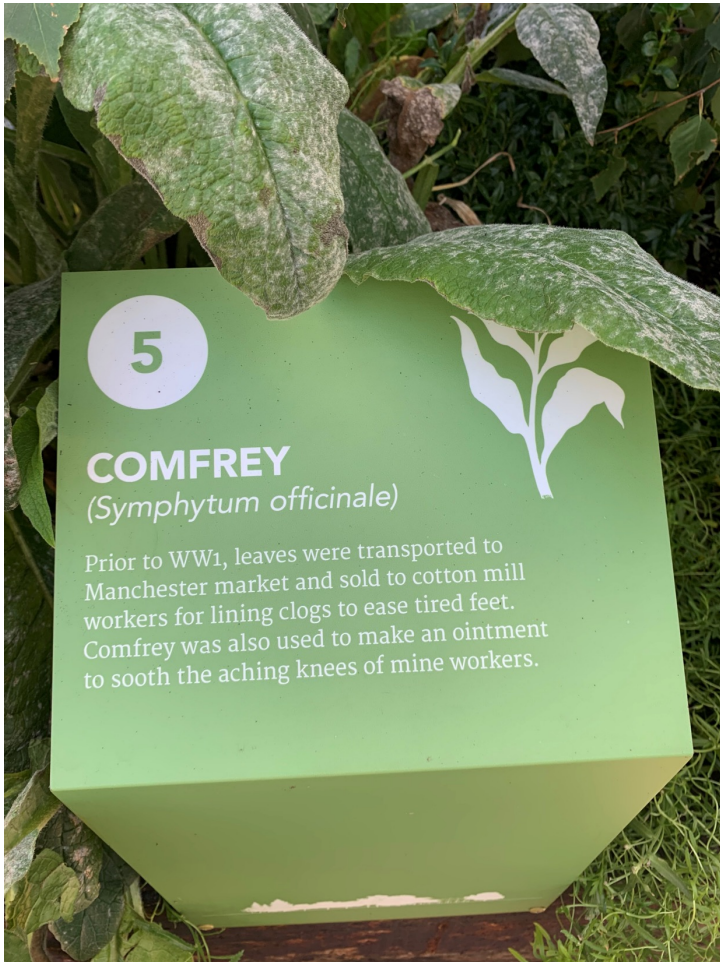


# Telling engaging stories

- What's the significance of the heritage?
- Stories of people, places and events: relevance, emotional connection
- What emotions do you want to evoke? How will you help visitors empathise and understand?
- How will you make interpretation relevant to visitors? E.g. connections with their daily lives
- First-person or overall narrative?



# Language



- Well-structured
- Key points
- Easy to digest
- Appropriate to audience and method of interpretation
- Consider attention spans
- Types of audience:
  - Streakers (single line, attention grabbing interpretation)
  - Strollers (50 word summary)
  - Studiers (250 words)

# Methods of interpretation

## Considerations

- Work within your resources: time, people, money
- Different learning styles and audience needs
- Space you are using: conservation, fragility of space, sensitive to space (e.g. landscape signage free), size, legal protections (planning, archaeology, wildlife), visitor dwell time?
- Permanent or temporary?
- Opportunities for interpretation e.g. dedicated exhibition space, spaces within a site, toilets, seating, café etc
- Co-creation: enable audiences to be part of researching, planning and/or creating interpretation



# Types of interpretation

## Live interpretation / people interpretation

- Interaction with people helps bring stories to life for visitors
- Tour guides
- Room stewards
- Expert talks
- Costumed interpreters - living history, demonstrations, tours, scripted, improvised
- Alternatives if in-person is not possible
  - podcast, blog, video



# Types of interpretation

## Written on-site interpretation

- Text panels: one idea per sentence; one topic per panel
- Labels and plaques: interpreting a specific object, part of a building, site



# Types of interpretation

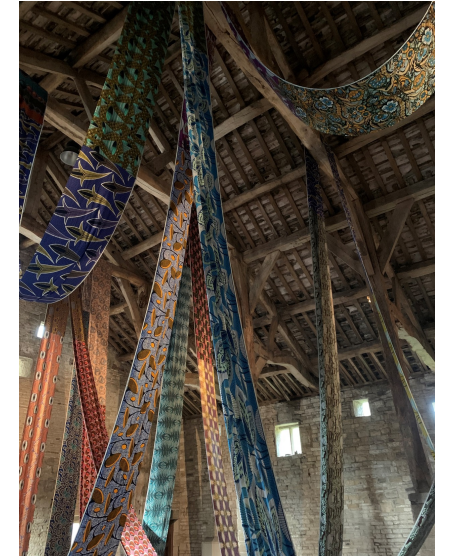
## **Self-guided tours**

- Visitors set the pace; no or little requirement for staff/volunteers
- Guide books
- Leaflets
- Site maps
- Floor plans
- Trails – digital; floor plaques; etc

# Types of interpretation

## Artistic interpretation

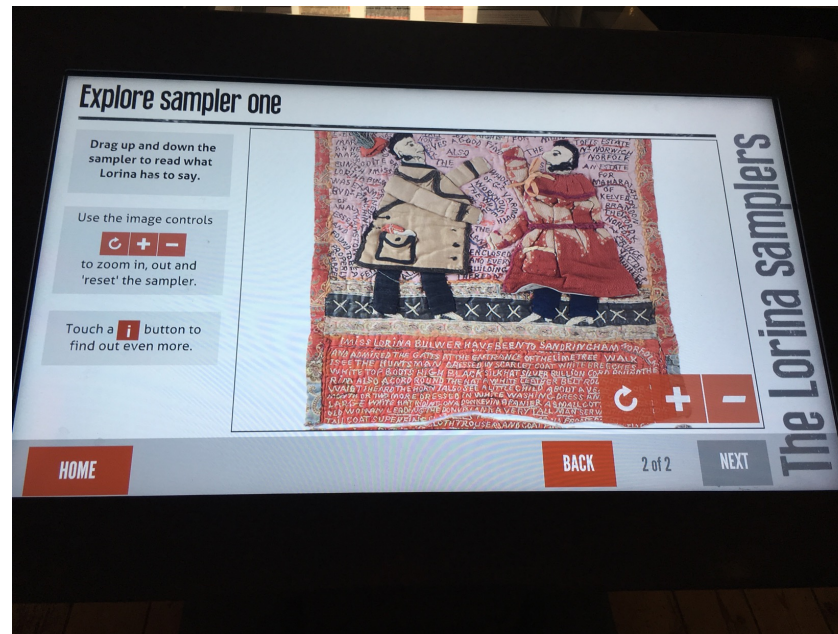
- Art installation
- Mural
- Mosaic
- Graphic timeline
- Marking signs e.g. gates of an old town, building site
- Street art
- Superimposed photos
- Hoardings
- Projection
- Digital 3D modelling



# Types of interpretation

## Audio visual interpretation

- Video
- Immersive experience
- Sound installation
- Oral histories

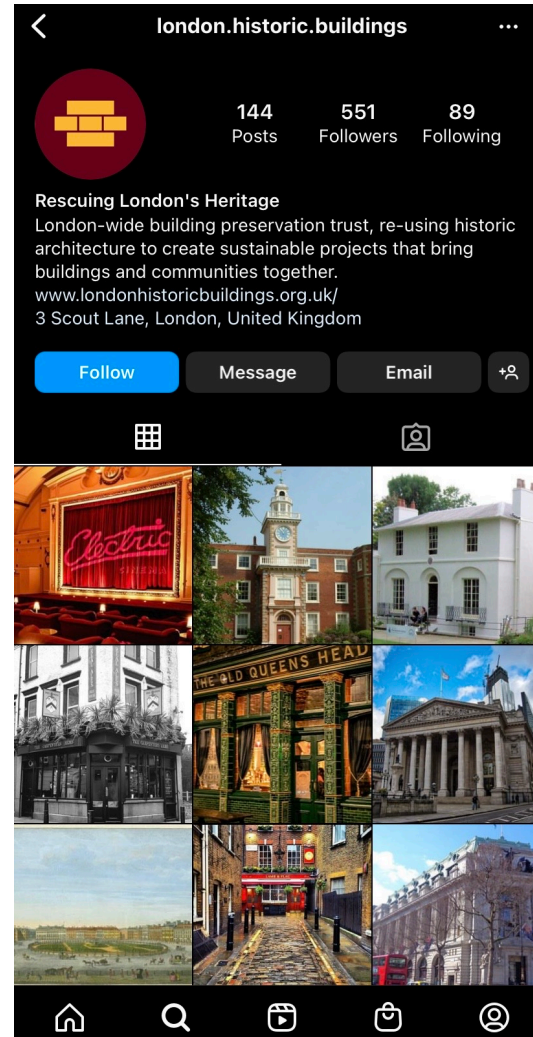




# Types of interpretation

## Digital interpretation

- Uses visitors' own technology
- Website
- Downloadable resources and tours
- Social media – e.g. video, images, hashtags
- QR codes



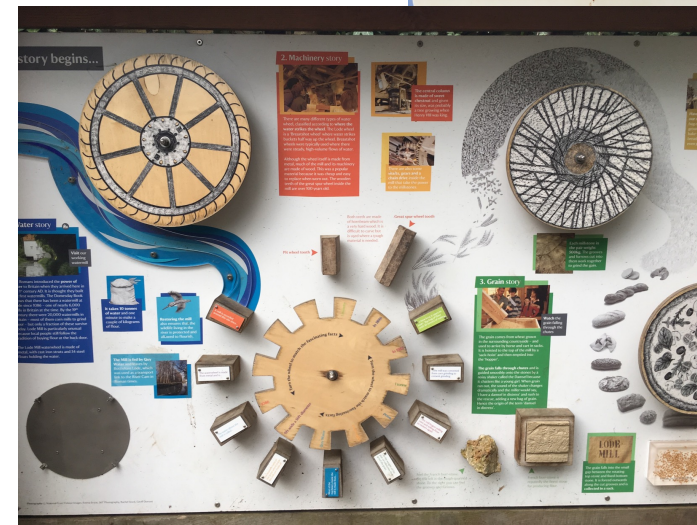
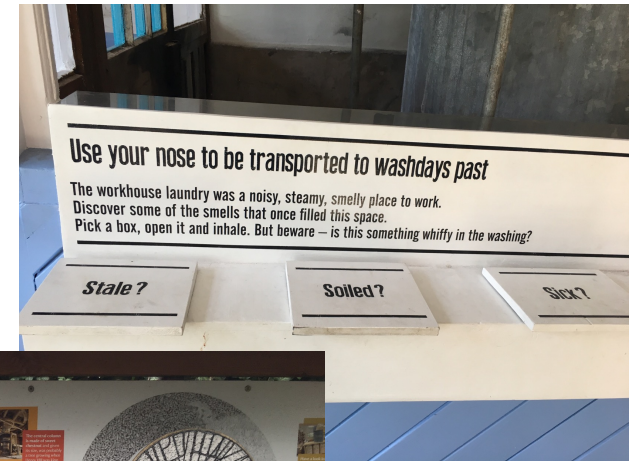
# Types of interpretation

## **Programming and activities**

- Open days
- Immersive experiences
- Events for specific audiences e.g. families
- Excavations

# Audiences

- Interpreting for people – audience-focused
- Good interpretation accessible to all but tailored to specific audience(s)
- Define your audience e.g. families, young people, older people, local people, UK tourists, international tourists, school groups....
- What impact(s) do you want to have on the audience(s)?



# Audiences

- What are the needs of the audience group(s)?:  
Physical, sensory, intellectual
  - Comfort
  - Interactive
  - Orientation
  - Family learning opportunities
  - Writing style
  - Time pressures
  - Etc...



# Audiences

- Defining audience needs:
- Nothing can replace audience research e.g. focus groups, interviews, surveys, vox pops, creative methods
- Think as audience:
  - Who are they?
  - What does a good day out look like for them?
  - What are their interests?
  - What are interesting ways/angles into your site/stories for them?
  - How much understanding do they already have?
  - What perceptions do they have?
  - How can the stories/site be made relevant to their experiences?

# Accessibility

- Important to consider and cater for access needs, e.g.
  - Sans serif fonts
  - Text size
  - Avoid capitals, italics and underlining
  - Left aligned text
  - Visual breaks in the text
  - Viewing height of interpretation and signage
  - Avoid glare and consider lighting
  - Braille guides
  - Audio guides / audio description
  - British Sign Language tours
  - Accessible language

## Subject matter

- Don't shy away from talking about difficult subjects
- Consider language
- Work with people with lived experiences
- Language you use and choices about which stories to tell is not neutral – you are deciding which histories to interpret and in what way
- Clear values and understanding of your key messages

## Subject matter

- Whose stories and histories have been told in the past?  
Whose stories have been left out?
- Important to tell stories of people, communities and events that reflect society
- Places give a sense of belonging
- Create welcoming, safe spaces for all



# Interpretation Plans

- Write a plan before you start: effective interpretation, meet audience needs, does what you want it to do
- Helpful for funding bids
- Objectives
- Audiences
- Big idea, messages, themes
- Interpretative methods
- Outcomes: learning, behavioural, emotional
- Evaluation

# Cité mémoire, Montréal



- Playful, digital interpretation revealing hidden stories through storytelling
- 20 scenes from Montréal's history. Images and music are projected onto buildings.
- Characters give first-hand accounts of how the city evolved over the course of history.
- Uses the built environment as a canvas.
- Unexpected, magical, inspiring and high-quality.
- Emotional connection.
- Inspired to learn more.
- Attracted visitors of all ages.
- App that gave more information: layering

# Ordsall Hall, Salford



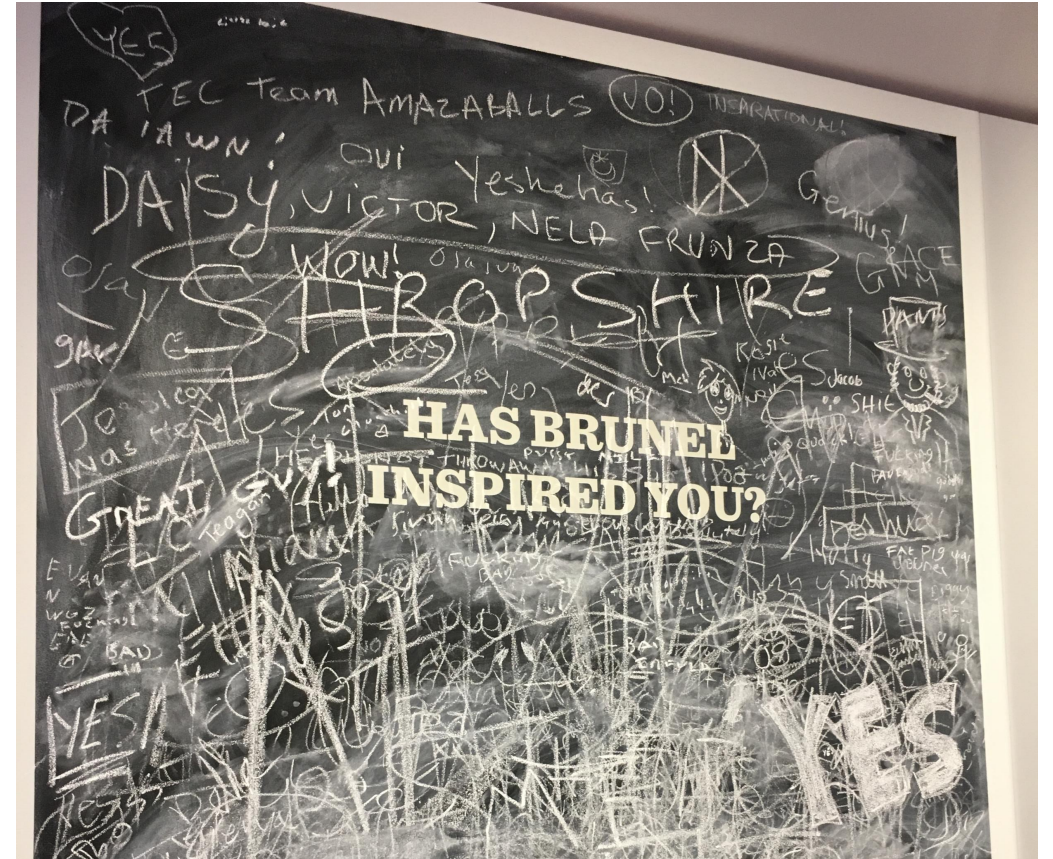
- Welcoming, playful and immersive
- Invites visitors to play and learn together
- Objects in light wood (replicas) can be used by visitors
- Sit and pretend to be at a Tudor feast
- Dress up

# Nightwatchers, Tower of London

- After dark immersive experience by Anagram, digital theatre company
- Messages and phone calls led participants through the buildings and courtyards.
- Revealed stories of spies and surveillance in the reign of Elizabeth I and provoked thought about surveillance in the present day.
- Felt like I was privy to the secrets and stories of the Tower. Like the buildings were speaking; stories were being revealed.
- Alternative audio tour.
- Reaching new audiences.

# Top Tips

- Audience focus: Who is this for? What are their needs?
- What are you interpreting, why are you interpreting it, and what do you want to say about it?
- What impact will the interpretation have on visitors?
- Consider resources: time, people, money
- Plan first – and have your plan top of mind throughout the process
- Choose an appropriate method of interpretation for your audience, space and resources
- Evaluate with audiences – what works, what doesn't, lessons learnt?



# Links and Resources

- [HumanKind | Research Centre for Museums and Galleries \(RCMG\) | University of Leicester](#)
- Steve Slack, *Interpreting Heritage: A Guide to Planning and Practice* (2020)
- [AHI - Association for Heritage Interpretation - a diverse network](#)
- [Understanding your heritage guidance | The National Lottery Heritage Fund](#)
- [Inclusive Heritage | Historic England](#)
- [Museums Galleries Scotland | Introduction to interpretation](#)