

Ideas for  
interpreting  
heritage sites

Bored of boards!



# Introduction

Done well, heritage 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 poorly 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.

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# 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 of 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 through 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 upon the proposed interpretation programme and the site's significance.

A 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 socioeconomic 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. Regardless though of whatever way you present the place's story it is essential that the source material be arrived at through an academically rigorous process. If there is a lack of consensus do not be afraid to give other view points. In places that have experienced violent episodes, commemorate, do not celebrate. Finally, do not fall into the trap of designing it for yourself. Reflect upon your own prejudices and think of the audience(s) 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. This dig has a high tourism potential. Rarely do people get the chance to see an excavation in progress or to talk to archaeologists.

## 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. Roughly 90,000 people visit the site annually. 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.

### **Underground metro station, Athens, 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 under 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. The presence of a short inscription communicating what the line marks is vital. As a designer it is important to recognise that the general public may not know what your piece of interpretation infrastructure denotes unless they are told.



### **Insert paving, Christchurch, Dublin**



Different coloured stones mark the location of a Viking house. The plaque on the foreground provides additional interpretation including an image of what the house once looked like.

### **Entrance posts, Carlisle, UK**



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

## Exposed archaeology, Athenry, Co. Galway



In 2007 the remains of one of Athenry's five medieval town wall gates were uncovered during road improvement works. Instead of just covering the stonework back over the Council decided to conserve the archaeology and present it as an attractive feature. The combination of exposed archaeology and steel wall create a dramatic sense of arrival into the medieval town. The inscribed interpretation is kept to a minimum. This ensures it is read.

“Knowledge becomes understanding when it is coupled with feeling”

Alexander Lowen

## 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.

## Walkway, Elizabeth Fort, Cork



The reinstalled timber walkway allows visitors the opportunity to at least partially experience what it was like to be stationed at the fort.

### **Bronze wayfinder model, Waterford**



Several striking bronze models in the Viking triangle of Waterford City help tourists orientate themselves. Similar models could show how a place looked like in the past.

### **Self contained audio-visual display, Beaumaris Castle, UK**



Located within Beaumaris Castle is a self-contained audio visual unit that sits on the archaeology. In rural sites the audio-visual display could be powered by wind or solar energy produced on the unit. Another option is for visitors to pedal a bike generator.



## Catalina flying boat pavilion, Bowen, Australia



There is pressure in many towns to build interpretative centres. Once constructed, there is often little current budget to animate the space. As a result, stagnation sets in. They can also become white elephants absorbing time and resources. For places with likely low visitation numbers (i.e. below 10,000 people per annum) a well thought out pavilion could be considered. These can provide excellent interpretation while minimising adverse legacy issues. They can also function as a focal point for heritage activities now made possible by a freed-up current budget. One excellent example of this approach is in Bowen, Australia. Located just off one of the two main roads in to the town, this architect designed pavilion tells the story of the World War Two flying boats that flew from the site. The structure is simultaneously eye catching and sympathetic to its surroundings. The roof's shape mirrors that of an airplane's wing. Inside, text is kept to an absolute minimum. This encourages people to read all the material. The use of images on the glass of the Catalinas flying over the ocean gives visitors an effective sense what they must have looked like when coming in to land.

## **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 plants present during the Medieval Period could easily be planted in Irish towns, especially 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 floral remains discovered during archaeological excavations on site. The presence of ducks 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.

### **Vinyl map, Derry-Londonderry, UK**



The vinyl map on the café wall shows the line of the city walls. By locating the map in such an everyday place, even people who may have little interest in the past are being educated about the city's historic layers.

### **Vinyl display, Redfern, Sydney, Australia**



Heritage interpretation should be thought provoking. Just like today, the politics and lives of those living in the past were complex and multifaceted. The image depicts an Aboriginal Australian soldier from World War One. This is from a time when Aboriginals were not eligible to be citizens of Australia. Subsequently, their role in the war was largely forgotten about. Redfern is a stronghold of the Aboriginal community in Sydney. However, they are being pushed out by a process of gentrification. The use of the image directly opposite the main entrance to the busy train station is an overt political statement.

## 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



This image on a gable wall superimposes a 21st century photo of a city gate onto a late 19th / early 20th century 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.

## Hoarding, Meath Street, Dublin



The attractive hoarding fills a gap in the streetscape with a comic style history of the area and profiles of local traders.

## Mural, Mutton Lane, Cork



The mural runs the length of the lane and depicts folk stories and local characters from contemporary Cork. The best thing about this mural is that it encourages discussion about Cork amongst those enjoying a drink outside the laneway pub.

## Outdoor exhibitions, Paris, France



Both exterior exhibitions were located in places of high footfall. They brought a niche interest (graphic design) to as broad an audience as possible. The exhibitions are great examples of engaging people who may not otherwise be interested in a subject matter.



## Street art, Berlin, Germany



These pieces of high quality street art have made the past relevant. On the work to the left are written the words 'next wall to fall Wall Street'. The parallels being made between today and the fall of the Berlin Wall are obvious.

## 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



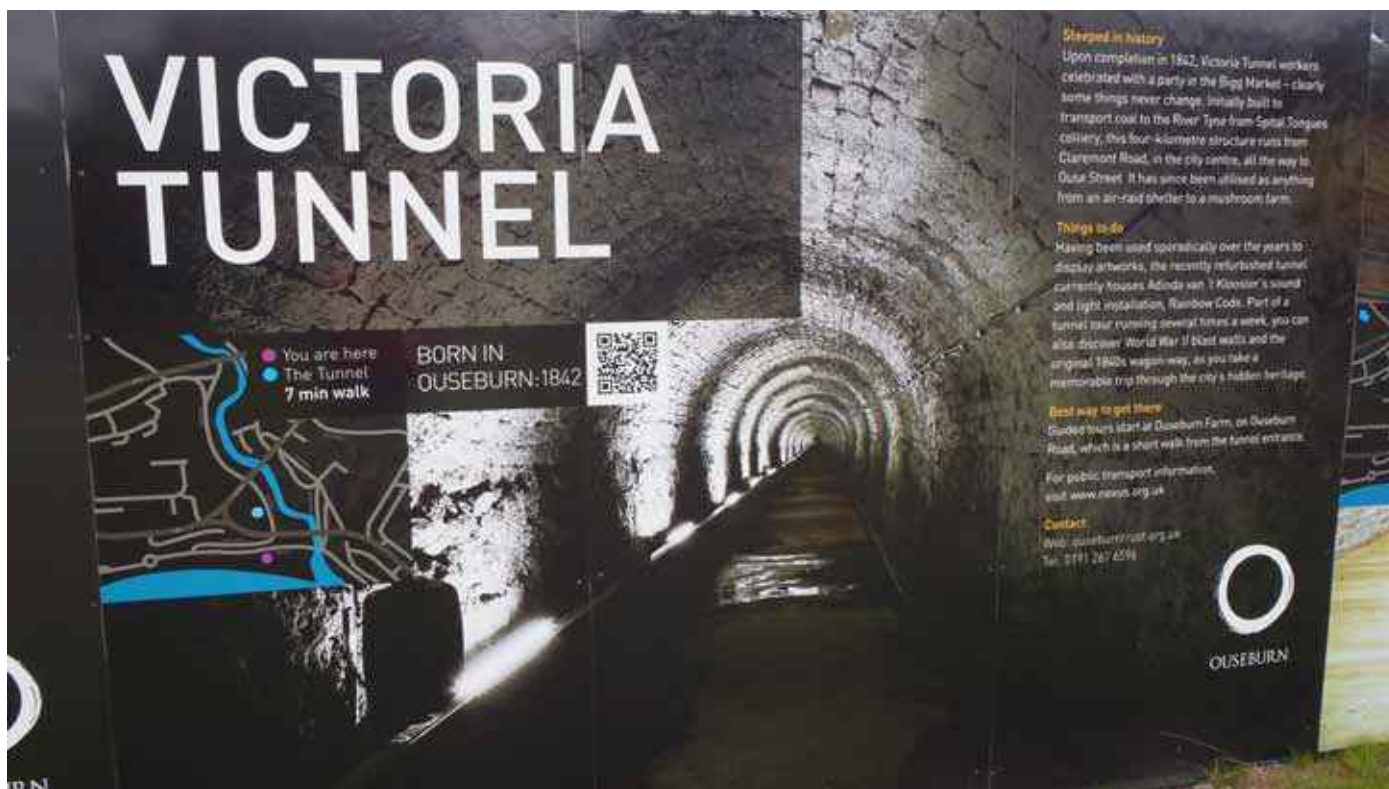
This piece interprets the use of the stars by Vikings for navigation.

## Art pieces, Lough Boora, Co. Offaly



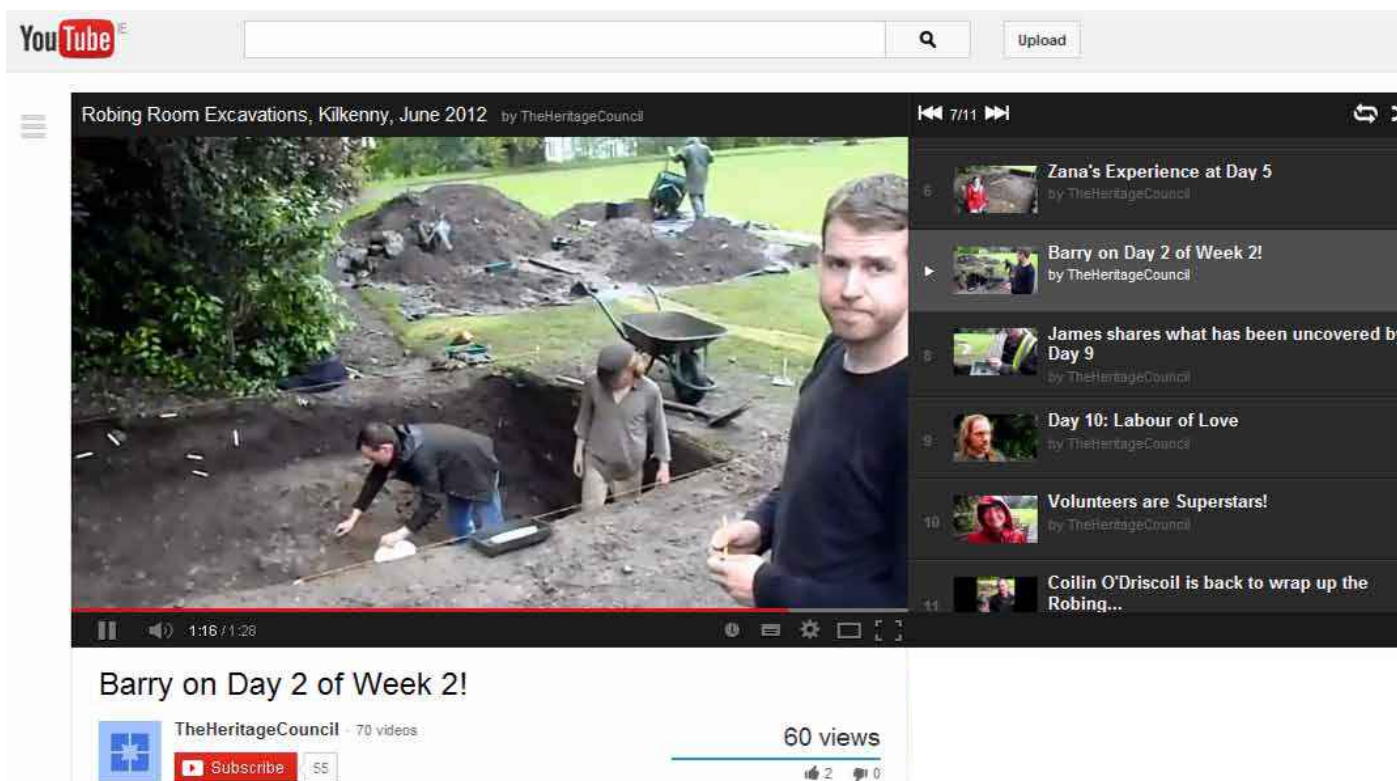
The outdoor art pieces in Lough Boora react to the landscape and history of the site. As a collection they add significantly to the visitor experience.

## 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



In Waterford, a Viking longship is 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



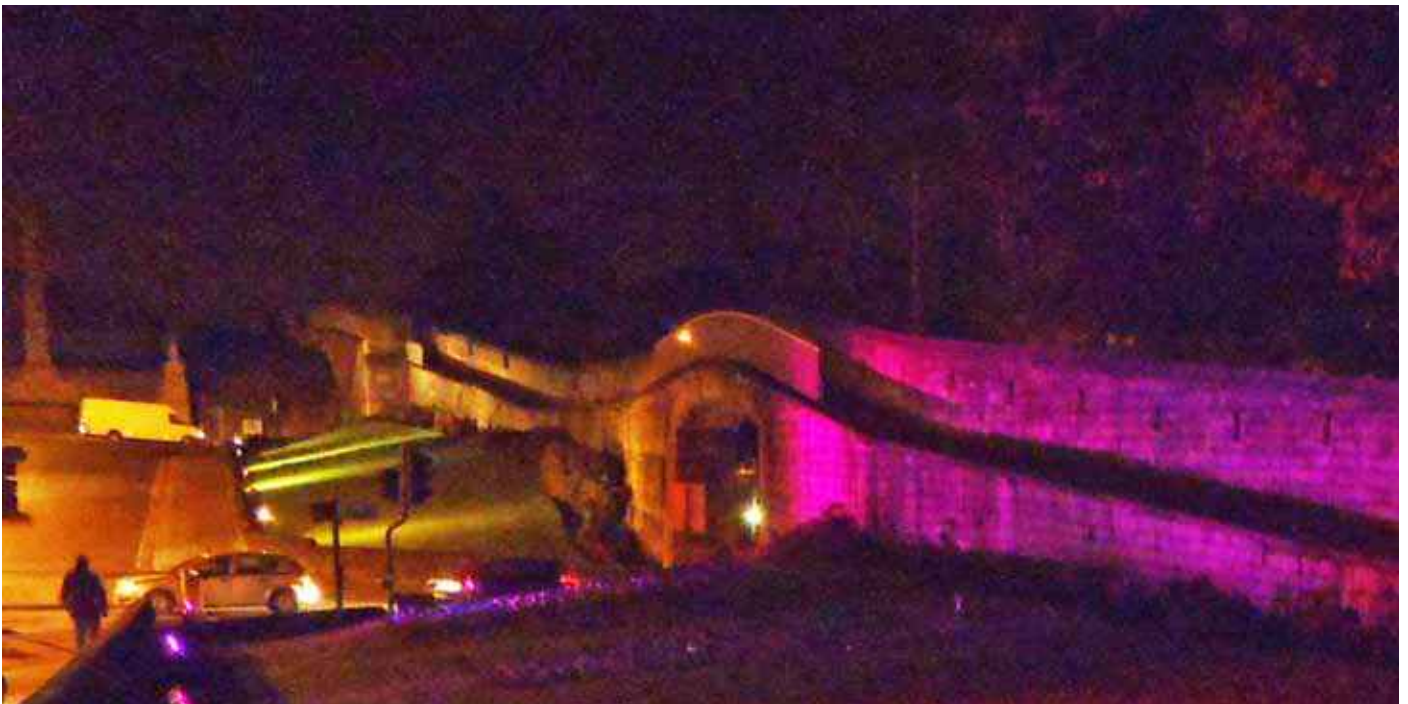
The simple addition of a plywood podium allowed visitors a brief feeling of winning an Olympic medal. Simple but intelligent items such as this can really connect visitors to a place.

## Medieval stocks, Waterford



Visitors to a place want an experience. They want to get a flavour of what 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. The stocks are also a great photo opportunity for tourists. The use of the 'Waterford, Ireland' branding gives the city free advertising once the images have been uploaded to social media websites.

## 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 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 recreation 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 noninvasive 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 above, 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.



It can be hard for visitors to understand what life was like on archaeological sites, even those from the recent past. The text of this sign is not laden down with facts. Instead, it communicates a sense of what it was like to be stationed on the island during World War Two. This is complemented by simple re-creation drawings. A number of everyday objects discovered during archaeological investigations have been pushed into the concrete pillar. This allows people the chance to touch artefacts and have a physical connection with the past. In Ireland, legislation protecting archaeological material is stricter. Accordingly, copies of artefacts should be used.

“Dry word and dry facts  
will not fire hearts”

John Muir

## Signage, Bayonne, France



On each business along this historic shopping street a little plaque was erected displaying the various historic uses of the building.

## Safety and visitor responsibility signage, Wharram Percy, UK



For sites located on private land, farmland, and the countryside in general, it is essential that visitors are made aware of any safety issues and responsibilities. Safety issues may include slippery and uneven surfaces, deep water, steep steps, cattle (especially around young calves). Visitor responsibilities may include respecting the landowner, not interfering with livestock, supervising children, keeping dogs on leash, not climbing monuments, sticking to the path, being mindful of creating erosion, not lighting fires, taking home all rubbish, closing gates, no metal detecting, and removing all valuables from cars.

# 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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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  
[http://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0CC4QFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.thehills.nsw.gov.au%2Fdownloaddocument.aspx%3FDocumentID%3D2204&ei=W699VMeiLK0u7gakooDACQ&usg=AFQjCNF8-P00yGtRwUqTy04x\\_713GXqW5g&bvm=bv.80642063,d.ZGU](http://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0CC4QFjAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.thehills.nsw.gov.au%2Fdownloaddocument.aspx%3FDocumentID%3D2204&ei=W699VMeiLK0u7gakooDACQ&usg=AFQjCNF8-P00yGtRwUqTy04x_713GXqW5g&bvm=bv.80642063,d.ZGU)

<http://www.google.ie/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&ved=0CDMQFjAD&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.thehills.nsw.gov.au%2Fdownloaddocument.aspx%3FDocumentID%3D2205&ei=W699VMeiLK0u7gakooDACQ&usg=AFQjCNGs-i7Qne1m5poubYuLjlsDobgyca&bvm=bv.80642063,d.ZGU>

### **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-%20improving%20the%20accessibility%20of%20historic%20buildings%20and%20places%20\(2011\).pdf](http://www.ahg.gov.ie/en/Publications/HeritagePublications/BuiltHeritagePolicyPublications/Access%20-%20improving%20the%20accessibility%20of%20historic%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](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/easy-access-to-historic-buildings/easy-access-historic-buildings2012.pdf)



of the fire” W.B. Yeats

“Education is not the filling of the pail, but the lighting



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