

# Everything speaks

National  
Trust

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Seven working  
principles for  
interpretation

Colour schemes, smells, what's on the menu. The style of signage, leaflets, activities, passing conversations. The position of things, parking, paths, benches, even bins. Every detail adds up to tell a property's story.

So we all play a part in interpretation.

## Questions to guide our interpretation

The focus of this guide is on how we can challenge ourselves to raise our standards of interpretation. We've boiled it down to seven working principles, compiling and simplifying the ideas we've been talking about for years.

Why does this matter now? We are already doing an incredible job with aspects of our interpretation. But our visitors are telling us very clearly that we're not doing it consistently everywhere. It's time we focused.

If everyone who has a role in presenting a property uses these simple questions to look at interpretation with fresh eyes, we can explore how to spark a passion for special places in millions more people.

**Tony Berry**  
Visitor Experience Director

**Andy Beer**  
Head of Visitor Experience and Learning

# 1

## Are we creating the right first impression?

**Simon Jenkins**

**Within the first few moments, on site or online, can our visitors answer the question: 'What have I come here to see?'**

While most places have made great efforts at creating a 'spirit of place' and bringing themselves 'to life', we remain largely conservative in our approach to presentation. The most noticeable area of innovation has been in interpretation for children, which is often excellent. Engaging with adults is more patchy, as if grown-ups somehow terrify us.

We are most successful when we consider the National Trust as hosts, welcoming our visitors as guests and concentrating not on what a property 'offers', but what the visitor 'receives'.

We set the tone as people arrive.

Once visitors are on our land, the 'first 50 yards' should be meticulously planned. It's the sequence of

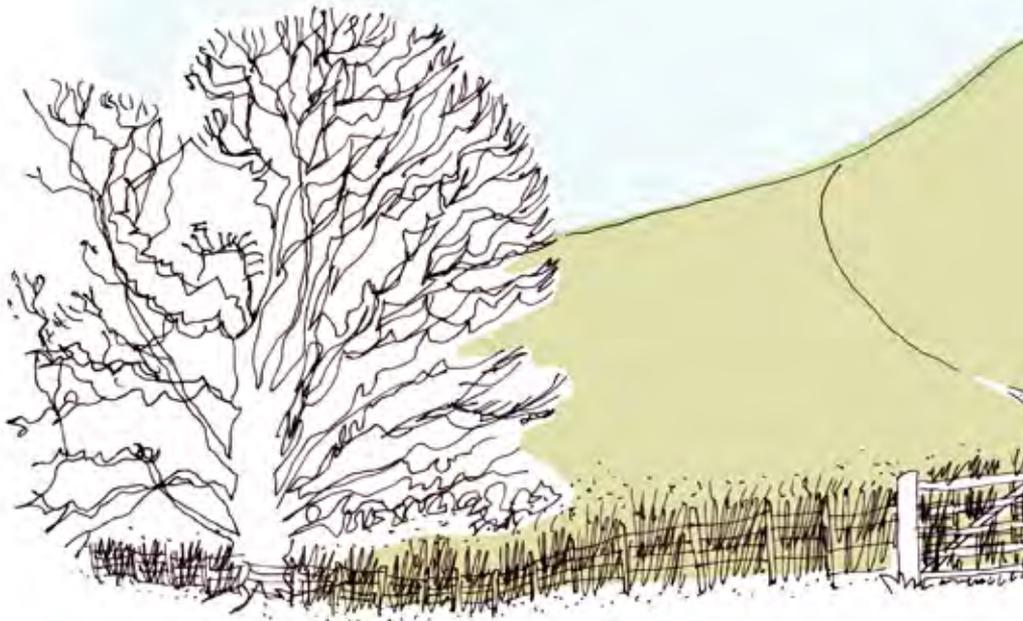
experiences that matter as well as the messages people receive. The layout of the property and the way people are guided to make choices and flow through different spaces makes a huge difference to a place's impact on visitors. We should be prepared to think radically and take risks.

Each property should do its own presentation audit, tracing the path from the nearest town to its car park and then to its front door, in a crescendo of interest. It is not enough to bring houses to life. We need to do more to tell people what this means before they have committed to a visit. If it is Shakespeare's Stratford, what is wrong with Kipling's Bateman's? This must extend beyond houses to gardens and the countryside. It would be wrong to overplay ownership, but I believe people would like to know why we own a stretch of land and what's of interest.

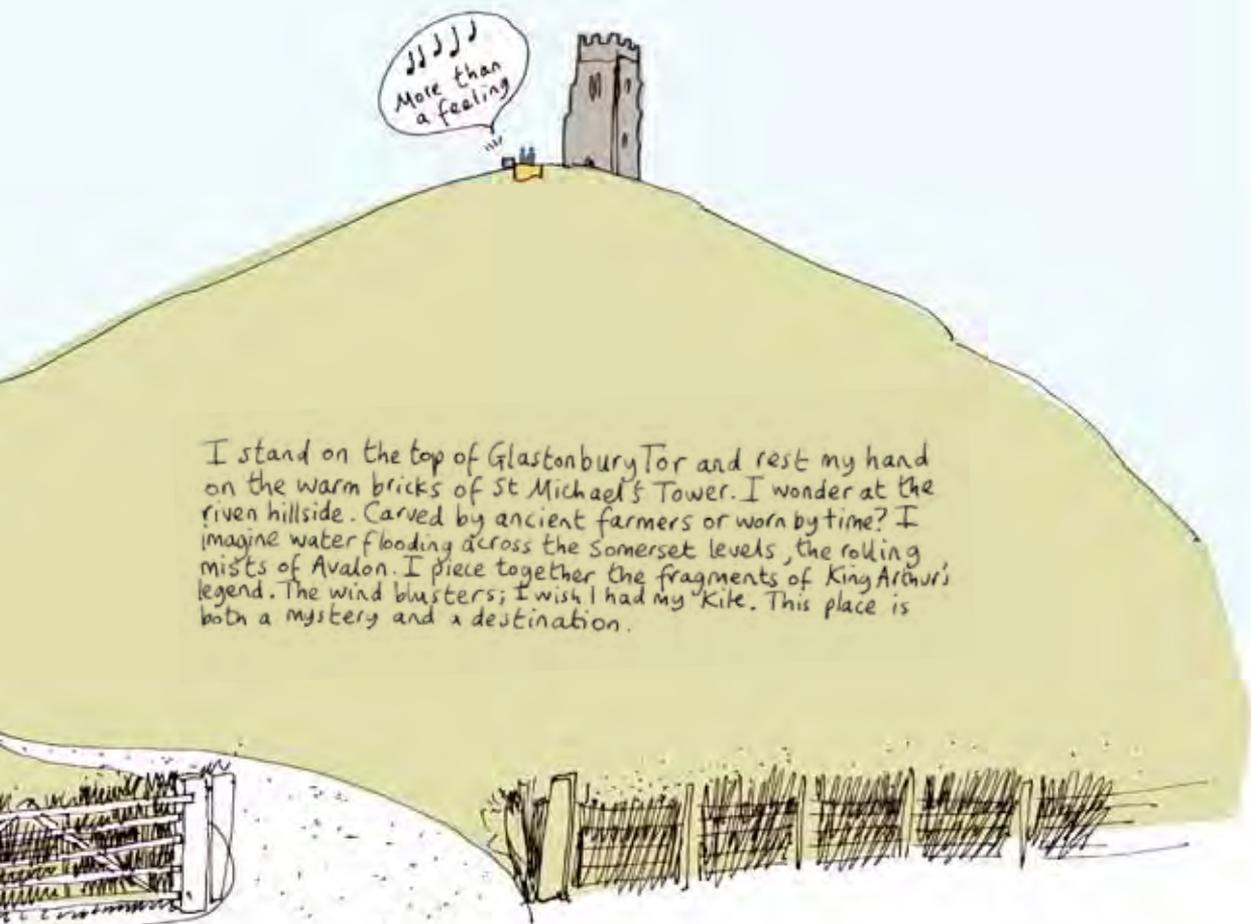


# 2

## Does the spirit shine through?



**If you had to describe yourself to a complete stranger, which adjectives would you pick, what sentence would you write and what picture would you draw. Not easy is it?**



The Spirit of Place defines the very essence of a property, and it's the one thing we want every visitor to understand and take away with them. There are, of course, many stories to tell and many reasons people visit, including personal interests ('My grandfather was posted here in the war'), hobbies (I'm interested in the

silver collection') or setting ('The parkland is a great escape for our kids'). The way we interpret our properties should explore this richness, and not confine its presentation to one simple narrative. But without a strong governing idea, individual layers of interpretation will be no more than a collection of

facts and won't add up to anything whole. Don't worry if you haven't gone through the process of articulating your property's Spirit of Place formally. If you understand your property's core character, ensure your team shares the same basic understanding and use the resources around you to express it.

# 3

## Does the visit appeal on different levels?



### INVITE ACTION

Hunt butterflies, spot trees, try on clothes, take a selfie, water the plants, play the piano, squidge the dough, taste the bread. Our properties are the scenes of life. Design activities that appeal to visitors of all ages. A simple step is to encourage visitors to use houses as if they were guests, using the pianos, snooker tables, libraries, kitchens or croquet lawns to potter or play. Lift the flap to find out more... →

### CATCH THE EYE

Some people just don't have the patience for long blocks of text. They might be preoccupied with chat, children or just interested in browsing. Think creatively about how you can hook their attention at strategic points around the property. It might be an object, a picture, a pithy one-liner or a simple timeline that's all they need to get the gist of the story before being distracted again.



**As a simple rule of thumb, you can cater for every visitor's learning style if you present key messages in four ways.**

We now understand a lot about our visitors and their preferences. Provide images that spark conversation or interest, or short, simple statements (ideal for the Out and About segment). For those



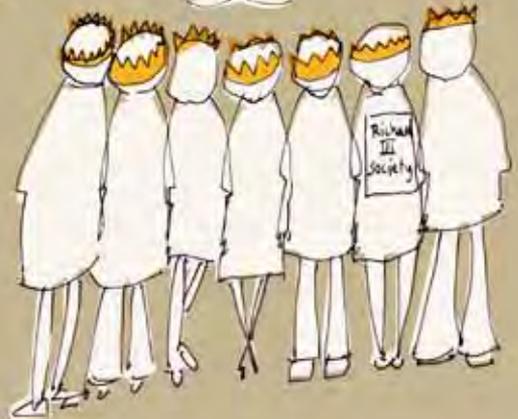
## MAKE A CONNECTION

Help people relate to what they are seeing. Relationships, faith, families, friends, love, beauty, arguments, food, grief, gossip, dreams, cleaning, fear, pets, going to the loo – facets of the human experience are shared across the ages. They can trigger instant and emotional responses. Take for instance a visitor who has discovered an ancestor was in service. The kitchens and servants' hallways will be fascinating.



## EXPLAIN THE DETAIL

There are lots of ways we can invite people to peel back the layers. Visitors who like detail will expect comprehensively researched and accurate answers to their questions. But just because we want to present something in depth, it doesn't mean it can't appeal to people with different learning styles. Specialist tours, mobile applications and information in reading rooms will add detail that the curious can explore.



who want the detail (typically the Live Life to the Full segment), there should always be an opportunity to explore in more depth. For the curious, make sure there are human interest stories or and seek to

make a personal connection. And for others – especially our Explorer Families – there should always be a way to become actively involved in the story.

# 4

## Does every detail count?





## FOUR LAYERS

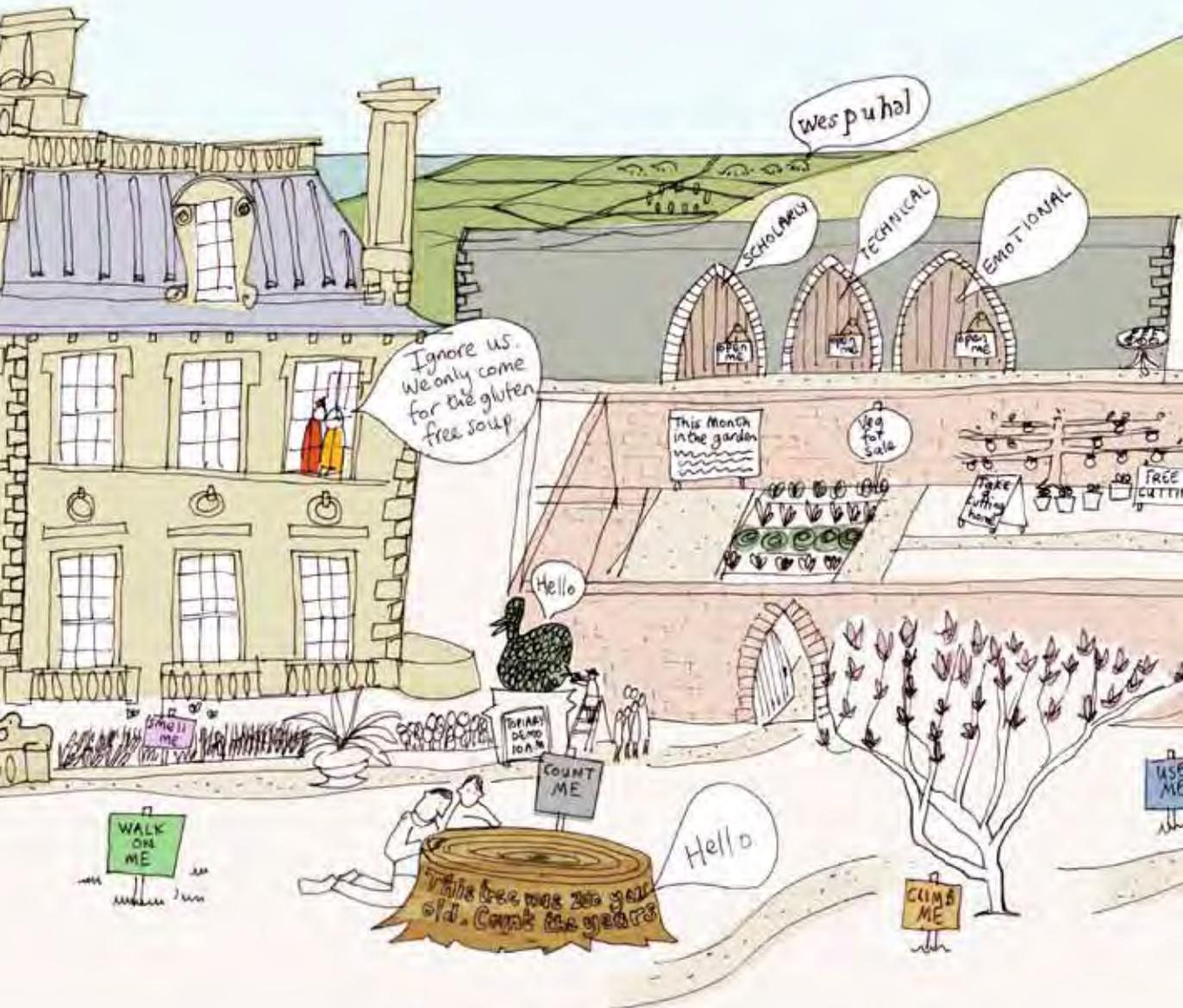
Provide interpretation on four levels – detailed information, pictures and snappy summaries, sparks for the imagination, and things to do – to cater for all learning styles.

## EVERYTHING SPEAKS

With a clear vision and co-ordinated planning you can create a consistent picture. Where necessary, remove or minimise details that detract from your main theme.

## LESS IS MORE

If you want people to focus on a scene, a detail, a concept or an event, clear the clutter. Give the focal point the space to be the centre of attention and the visitor the room to respond.



## MAKE YOUR STORY LIVE    AIM HIGH

Don't be in a rush to reveal everything in one visit. Plan to present different features over time, using the daily, weekly and seasonal rhythms of the property as inspiration.

Use the experiences people bring with them to their visit to create an experience that resonates. Don't be afraid to get emotional. Be fastidious about the detail.



# 5

## Can the place speak for itself?

**Like good waiters, it's our role to introduce visitors to our properties with artful discretion.**

People don't come to visit our places to appreciate our interpretation. They come to experience, to admire, or simply enjoy being in the place itself.

Our interventions should therefore do just enough, but no more. If an object, a view or a room can speak for itself, let it. This may mean exercising strong editorial control, leaving details that may distract on the cutting room floor.

**Less is more.**



# 6

## Are there reasons to return?



**We don't have to explain everything there is to say about a property in one packed visit. Design a programme that unfolds its story in episodes.**

Build a lasting relationship with our visitors by giving them plenty of reasons to return. Use the Spirit of Place as your source, but keep the storyline changing by regularly updating and refreshing what you present.

Places have their own pulse, created by what they are, who lived there and what they represent. At Hughenden, primrose season has special significance because primroses were Disraeli's favourite flower. Wimpole is animated by the farming schedule, Brockhampton by the apple harvest, wartime anniversaries beat loudly at Chartwell.

Reveal different layers of a property's history at different

times. In 2013, the Baddesley Clinton team offered visitors a glimpse into the lives of its Victorian residents in a special exhibition. In other years, the team will focus on more turbulent times, using the Catholic priest holes to evoke the atmosphere of danger and persecution during the Tudor years.

Also think about how you can tune into local, national or international events and celebrations.

Regular refreshment should be cost effective. One-off events attracting small numbers of people are unlikely to pay their way, so focus on fewer, high quality events that run for longer periods.

# 7

## Are we stretching and surprising people?

**Simon Murray**

**We shouldn't be afraid of getting scholarly, or technical, or emotional or profound. Unlocking the stories of a place can change lives.**

My best days are when I turn up to a property and find myself taken somewhere totally unexpected. One bite into my plate of pilchards at Cloud's Hill and I'm a guest of T.E. Lawrence. Sipping tea at South Foreland Lighthouse, it is the subtle combination of china cups, music, photographs and chatter of the local volunteers that enchants me into the world of the keepers. What scenes of routine, danger, beauty and desolation they must have witnessed.

Some places we manage speak for themselves and need no intervention. But for others, it's our interpretation that transforms a place from the dusty shell of a building into something wonderful. Disney would call it the fairy dust. Mary Berry would call it the yeast. Whatever we want to call it, we should be unashamedly ambitious in our efforts to make an experience more than an arrangement of physical ingredients. We can lift people into new worlds.

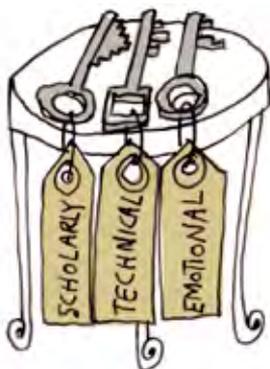
Let's look at other operators we admire and aspire to be just as amazing. Be ready to experiment and understand how to take risks without compromising our authenticity

and expertise. In aiming high, let's take care to pitch information at the right level and get the details right. It's a tricky balance to strike, making sure we're not assuming knowledge (it's alienating), but not underestimating intelligence (it's patronising).

My final observation, after years of feeling proud, surprised and sometimes frustrated by the properties I visit, is to hold two voices in your mind.

The first is the voice of the visitor. Begin with their passions and perceptions and have the humility to appreciate that it's not our story, but the story others will take away with them that unlocks the key to a deeper experience.

The second voice is the Spirit of Place. When there is a genuine intellectual and emotional understanding of what it is that moves people, the interpretation rings true. I want to feel Virginia Woolf's silent nod of approval as we recreate her austere bedroom, Charles Wade's applause as we rebuild a model village around a Snowhill pond. It's just what they would have wanted their guests to admire.



‘Consult the genius of  
the place in all;  
That tells the waters or  
to rise, or fall;  
Or helps th’ ambitious  
hill the heav’ns to scale,  
Or scoops in circling  
theatres the vale;  
Calls in the country,  
catches opening glades,  
Joins willing woods, and  
varies shades from shades,  
Now breaks, or now  
directs, th’ intending lines;  
Paints as you plant, and,  
as you work, designs.’

**Alexander Pope** wrote about ‘Spirit of Place’ in  
his Epistles to Several Persons: Epistle IV to  
Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington (1731)

# As we walk around our properties, let's ask ourselves:

- 1 — Are we creating the right first impression?
- 2 — Does the spirit shine through?
- 3 — Does the visit appeal on different levels?
- 4 — Does every detail count?
- 5 — Can the place speak for itself?
- 6 — Are there reasons to return?
- 7 — Are we stretching and surprising people?



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Editorial and design by First Person Communications Ltd

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