

Outdoor Heritage Interpretation

A 10-step guide to designing a great panel

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Introduction

Interpretation is not what you say to visitors, it's the way you say it.

In a nutshell, interpretation panels help people discover the stories of a place. Interpretation is a communication process that shares key messages and stories with an identified audience in a way that speaks directly to and connects with them.

It's important to remember that you are creating interpretation for somebody else, not for yourself.

As you research and develop the content, it is easy to become immersed in the history, stories and details of a place. However, your visitors are coming to the panel with varying levels of knowledge, interest and experience. Perhaps knowing little or nothing about the significance of your site!

The majority of people may only spend a few seconds deciding whether to engage with a panel at all, whilst others may only read around 20% of the text before moving on. This means that information must be clear, concise and engaging from the very first glance.

If the tone delivery and content align with the audiences' interests and engagement styles, then you create successful content that educates and inspires without your audience even realising it.

The communication process of interpretation begins with clear objectives:

1. **What do you want to communicate?**
2. **What do you want your audiences to know and feel?**
3. **How do you want them to act as a result of their experience?**

A successful panel doesn't just provide information; it sparks curiosity, creates connections and encourages people to explore further.

Part 1 of this guide takes you through the 10 key ingredients of an effective heritage panel, from choosing a story to creating a design that will make people pause and take a moment to read.

Part 2 includes a practical guide on selecting appropriate locations and materials to ensure your panel sits comfortably within its setting and stands the test of time.

Part 1: The 10 key ingredients of a great heritage panel

1 | Start with your audience

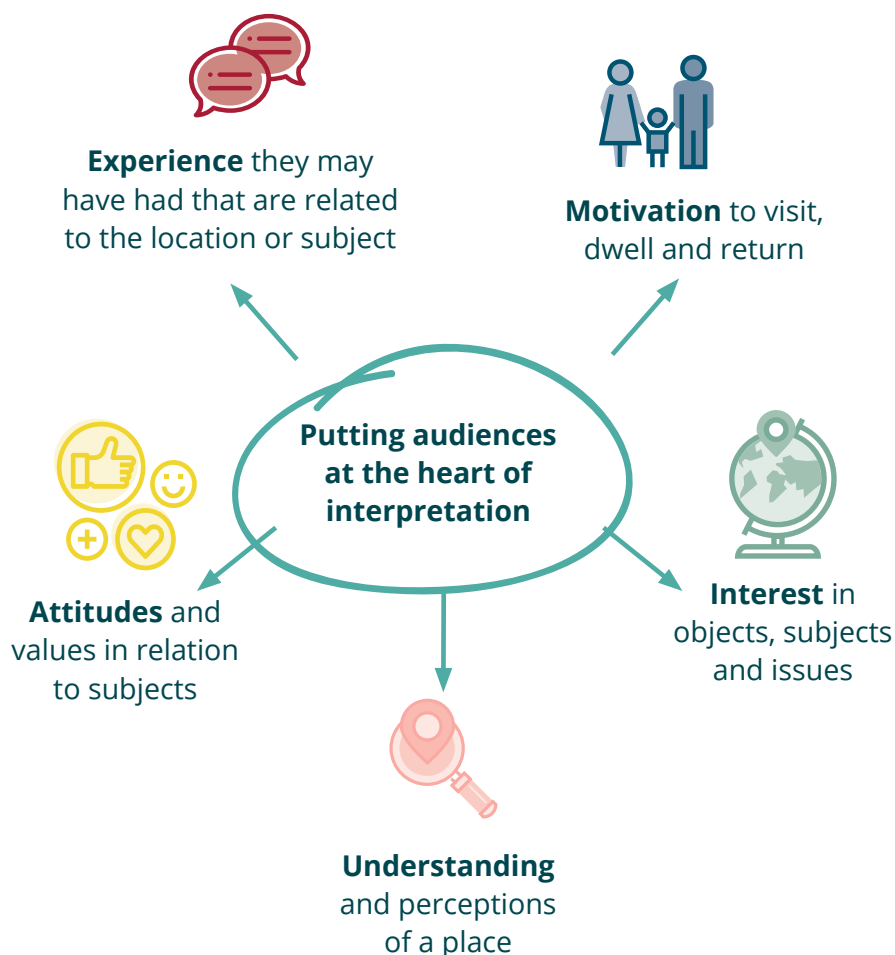
Before you write a single word, think about who the panel is for.

Placing the audiences at the core of interpretation in this way not only focuses the interpretation process, but helps to identify the specific outcomes you are looking for.

Throughout the development of your themes and copywriting, ask yourself:

- **Who visits this location?**
- **What might they already know?**
- **What might they be curious about?**
- **Are they locals, visitors, families or school groups?**
- **What would make them stop and engage?**

Good interpretation starts with the visitor. Understanding your audience helps you decide what stories to tell and how to tell them.



Top Tip

Don't try to tell people everything.

Focus on what they will find most interesting or memorable.

2 | Find your main story

Most people spend 30-60 seconds reading.

There is no doubt that you'll have lots of fascinating information to share.

The challenge is deciding what matters most.

A good panel should answer:

“What’s the one thing we want visitors to remember?”

For example, your panel may start with:

- XXX was once the centre of a thriving wool trade.
- These woods have been managed for over 500 years.
- Did you know that this building played an important role during the Second World War?

Everything on the panel should support this main message, whether that be images or supporting stories.

Your panel needs to be quick, clear and interesting.

Ways to keep it readable are:

- Use short sentences
- Keep paragraphs short
- Use everyday, accessible language



Remember

A panel is not a history book.

Less information often has more impact.

3 | Plan the structure



Visitors usually scan first and read second.

As noted on the previous page, people spend less than a minute reading a panel, so information needs to be easy to digest.

A simple structure works best:

Title:

A short, engaging headline.

Introduction:

One or two sentences explaining the main story.

Images, maps or illustrations:

Visuals that support the text.

Five-Second Rule

Visitors should understand the main message within **5 seconds** of looking at the panel.

ROMAN CASTLEFORD

You're standing on the site of a Roman bath house!

There was once a Roman military fort, bath house and busy spa town right here in Castleford. It was a place of industry, trade and cultural exchange.

Roman Castleford began as a timber fort like this captured in an artist's impression of Legentium (left).
Legentium became a strong stone fort in AD 88-96. An artist's picture shows people busy at work in front of the Commanding Officer's house inside the fort (below).

Tap to explore Roman Castleford
wmandc.co/cas-uncovered

Why is Castleford here?

Nearly 2000 years ago, in AD 71 the Roman Ninth Legion led an invasion to the north of Britain. Temporary forts were built including one here at Castleford called **Legentium**. It was later replaced by a stronger, permanent fort with buildings and stables.

A nearby settlement, called a **vicus**, grew to support the soldiers with food, goods and services. When the soldiers left around AD 100, the vicus continued to thrive as a Roman settlement, which was unusual.

Made in Castleford

Roads to York and London, and trade along the River Aire, linked the vicus to the wider Roman world. It was a busy place full of people, goods and new ideas.

Finds of pottery, olive oil, wine and fish sauce show how far goods travelled from Europe. Local crafts mixed Roman and British styles, and Castleford was the only known place in the western Roman Empire where spoons were made.



Further information:
Optional website, QR code or trail information.

Main content:
A few short sections with key facts and stories.

Captions:
Short explanations accompanying images.

4 | Write for the visitor

People read interpretation panels differently from books.

Aim for:

- ✓ Short sentences
- ✓ Short paragraphs
- ✓ Plain English
- ✓ Active, engaging language

Avoid:

- ✗ Long academic explanations
- ✗ Technical jargon
- ✗ Large blocks of text

Language shouldn't be oversimple and patronising but should allow for fast comprehension and be accessible to a wide range of visitors. Extra care should be taken to ensure that your tone is respectful and appropriate, and that your language is inclusive.

Writing your text

Carefully select each word you use so that either a narrative is developed, the reader has learned something, or their interest is stimulated. This will also help you to keep the text succinct. Follow the 25% rule of copywriting. (Write your text, then cut out 50%. Review, then cut out another 50%. The remaining 25% should be clear and concise.)

What do you think?

Good interpretation gets the reader thinking, so start with a question or humour ...

'What (is) a Shambles?!'

This ... is boring!

Try to avoid beginning sentences with the word **'This'** as it sets the tone for being informative and strictly factual rather than engaging and interesting.

'This arrowhead was found amongst the remains of a salt panning house' is a fact.

'Arrowheads like this one were used to XXX. Our arrowhead dates from XXX and was found during an excavation dig of XXXX.' tells a story.



Top Tip

Make it human.

Stories about people, everyday life and personal experiences are often more engaging than dates and statistics alone.

5 | Choose strong visuals

People notice images before they read the text.

When selecting images for your panel, ask yourself:

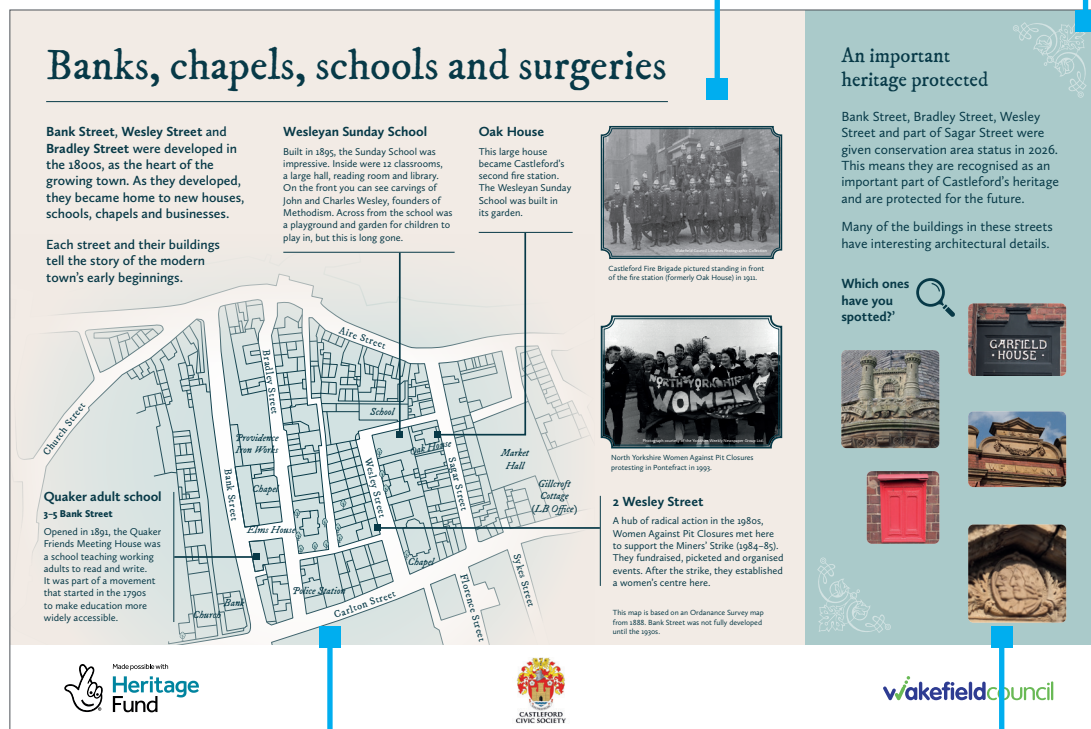
- Is it **relevant**? - “Does this picture visually explain the story we are telling?”
- Is it **clear**? - “Is it easy to understand at a glance?”
- Does it add **interest**? - “Does it make the story feel lively, human or meaningful?”
- Does it have **quality**? - A single strong image often works better than multiple poor-quality ones.

Useful visual content includes:

Archive documents

Historic photographs

Illustrations



“Then and now”
comparisons

Maps

Artefacts or
points of interest

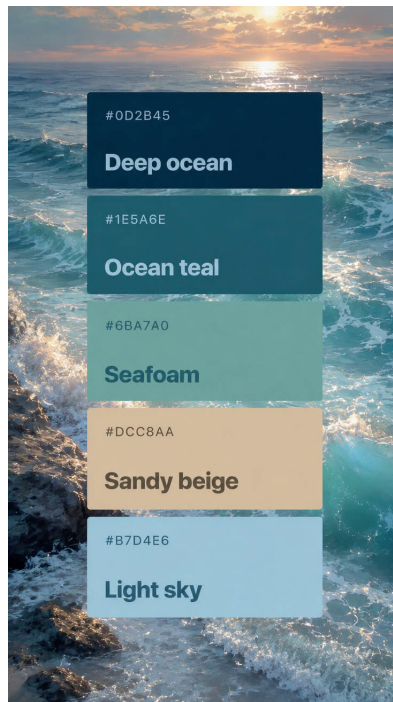
6 | Use colour carefully

Colour sets the tone before people read any text.

For example:



Warm colours can feel welcoming and historic.



Cool colours can feel calm and informative.



Natural colours often help connect the panel to its surroundings.

Colour & Contrast

Colour choices play a critical role in ensuring text and graphics remain legible for all visitors, including those with low vision and colour-vision additional needs.

Most importantly, prioritise contrast. Aim for a minimum contrast ratio of 4.5:1, in line with RNIB Clear Print guidance and internationally recognised WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) recommendations for standard text. Use online contrast-checking tools such as Adobe Color Accessibility Tools or WCAG contrast checkers to verify colour combinations.

A quick test: print in grayscale - if the text remains clear, the colour contrast is generally sufficient.



Top Tip

Find a colour that has relevance to your topic or area and develop a palette from that. Utilise a colour wheel or Pinterest to develop your palette.

7 | Make text easy to read

What makes a font good for heritage panels?

There are three qualities to consider:

- **Clear**
Letters should be easy to read even from a distance and consider visual impairments. Avoid overly decorative fonts for body text.
- **Calm**
You want a font that feels steady and trustworthy. Avoid swirly scripts or themed novelty fonts.
- **Characterful but not distracting**
A subtle heritage feel is fine for headings, but keep body text plain. Think of fonts like voices; your headings can have personality, but the main text should speak clearly and quietly.

Here are some simple font rules to keep in mind:

- Use one font for headings and one for body text.
...or just one family with different weights (e.g. bold for headings, regular for text).
- Avoid ALL CAPS for long text. This is harder to read.
- Look for fonts with open shapes.
Where letters like a, e, o don't close up at small sizes.

What sizes work best?

Here are suggested widely used standards for outdoor heritage panels, but sizes will be dictated by how big the panel is and how much text you have:

Headline / Header:	60-100 pt
Subheadings:	36-48 pt
Body / main text:	24-36 pt
Captions:	16-18 pt
Credits/logos:	10-14 pt

Most people underestimate how big text needs to be. Outdoor text should be bigger than you expect - people are standing, the light changes, and not everyone has perfect eyesight.



Remember

If you can't tell a lowercase 'a' from an 'o' at arm's length, the font is too tight.

8 | Make it accessible

Good accessibility is simply good design.

People are disabled by barriers in society – both physical and attitudinal – not by their health conditions or impairments. We all have different learning styles and interact with the world in our own way, and so it is important that your interpretation panel is layered in order to present audiences with options to learn. Key ways of reaching a wider audience include engaging with the different senses, through:



Anchoring visitors in their location and providing spatial understanding. Including engaging imagery and illustration to deliver your story.



Adding audio excerpts, poetry, music and audio soundbites to enhance storytelling and scene setting. This can be done through solar-powered speakers or links to a website.



Presenting accessible, engaging and educational written content and storytelling through spoken words via an audio device.



Adding tangible elements to draw connections through the inclusion of hands-on, sensory and tactile elements.

Consider these guiding principles:

- Simple language
- Large, clear text
- High colour contrast
- Content that works for a range of ages and abilities
- Provides different options for accessing information
- Ensure the panel is at a comfortable viewing height and accessible in terms of physical access
- Where possible, include different voices and perspectives from from the community



Top Tip

Ask someone unfamiliar with the topic to review your draft.

If they understand it quickly, you're on the right track!

9 | Consider enhancements

Additional features can enrich a panel when used thoughtfully.

Interactivity should help people connect, not confuse them. A little goes a long way, but they can improve accessibility and create memorable experiences. Options include:

Tactile elements

- Touch-friendly features (raised outlines, textures, replicas).
- Great for children and visually impaired visitors.

QR codes / NFC chips, audio and digital extras

- Think of QR codes as optional extras for those who want more by linking to educational resources.
- Adds deeper stories without overcrowding the panel.
- Lets visitors hear voices, sounds, or oral histories.

Cautions:

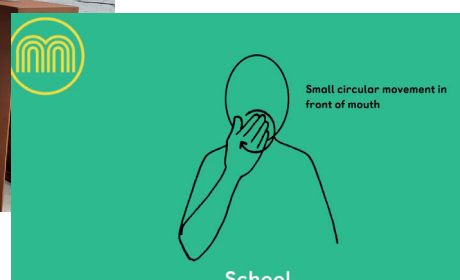
- Remember tactile elements must survive weather, curious fingers and time.
- Needs someone to manage/update the webpage/audio.
- Requires mobile signal.



Remember

Less is more.

Only include interactive elements if they genuinely improve understanding.



10 | Logos and acknowledgements

Logos are important but should not dominate the panel.

CASTLEFORD, A ROMAN SPA TOWN

Under your feet is a Roman bath house, one of the grandest and most popular buildings in Roman Castleford.

The impressive bath house stood just outside the military fort walls. Built from brick and stone, it was likely decorated with carved statues.

Places like this were important for Roman soldiers. Here, they could relax, meet others and stay healthy, ready for battle.

Even after the fort was demolished, the bath house remained in use for over 200 years. It became a well-loved part of the vicus and may have given Castleford a reputation as a place to visit as a Roman 'spa town'.

The Bath House

There were three rooms, each one hotter than the last:

- Frigidarium - cold room
- Tepidarium - warm room
- Caldarium - hot room with hot bath

Apodyterium - changing room

Cold water plunge pool used on the way out

Praefurnium contained the wood fired furnaces

The building was 25m long

Digging up the past

Local archaeologist Ron Jeffries found the Roman bath house in 1978. Volunteers from Castleford helped him dig it up, with support from expert archaeologists.

Because the site was close to the river, the ground stayed wet and protected objects underground. They uncovered most of the bath house, along with objects that show what life was like in Roman times.

Finds included shoes, shield covers and pieces of tent fabric from the first fort. Some of the best-preserved Roman sandals were found here, too. These can be seen at Castleford Museum.

Archaeological finds at the baths include gaming tokens, a manicure set and carved intaglio gemstones, like the one below.

See this at the museum

The 1978 dig revealed the footprint of the Roman bath house.

Find out more about Castleford's Roman bathhouse wmandc.co/bath-house

Made possible with **Heritage Fund**

CASTLEFORD CIVIC SOCIETY

wakefieldcouncil

Rule of thumb:

- Keep them small - as long as they adhere to brand sizing requirements.
- Place them in a corner and at the bottom of the panel.
- Follow brand guidelines for size and spacing.
- Let the story remain the focus - logos are the signature, not the headline.

Simple takeaway:

Images pull people in, colour sets the mood, and the logo quietly tells us who created it. If it feels clear, calm and inviting, you've probably got it right.

Design checklist

Before you begin designing, use this checklist:

Content

- ☐ Clear main message
- ☐ Audience identified
- ☐ Text concise and engaging
- ☐ Facts checked

Images

- ☐ High-quality images
- ☐ Appropriate permissions and/or image licences secured
- ☐ Captions written

Design

- ☐ Clear hierarchy of headings, intro and main copy
- ☐ Readable fonts
- ☐ Good colour contrast
- ☐ Accessible layout

Final Review

- ☐ Someone unfamiliar with the story has tested it
- ☐ Proofread for spelling and grammar
- ☐ Logos and credits included
- ☐ Printing specifications confirmed



Remember

The best interpretation panels don't try to tell visitors everything.

They tell one good story clearly, visually and memorably, leaving people wanting to learn more.

Part 2: Delivering your panel

Choosing the Right Location

Where you place an interpretation panel is just as important as what it says and how it looks.

A well-positioned panel feels connected to its surroundings and provides visitors with context to the stories. Here are a few things to consider.

Connect the story to the place

Your panel will be most effective when visitors can immediately relate to what they are reading to what they can see around them.

Where possible:

- Position panels close to the subject being interpreted.
- Orientate maps, illustrations and viewpoints to match the surrounding landscape.
- Allow visitors to look up from the panel and easily identify features being described.

Work with the landscape

Interpretation should complement the setting rather than compete with it.

When choosing a location:

- Aim for the panel to sit naturally within its surroundings
- Avoid blocking important views or overshadowing key heritage features.
- Take the opportunity to rationalise other signage in the area to avoid clutter
- Think about how the panel will look throughout the year as vegetation changes



Remember

The best interpretation helps visitors to see their surroundings differently, as well as learn about it.



Make it easy to reach and view

A good interpretation panel should be accessible to as many people as possible so they can comfortably read it.

Make sure the panel:

- ☐ **Has a clear approach** route and connects to an existing path where possible.
- ☐ **Does not obstruct** paths, entrances or circulation routes.
- ☐ **Provides enough space** for people to stop, read and gather safely.
- ☐ Is **situated on a surface that is level**, well-maintained and suitable for people who use wheelchairs or mobility aids.
- ☐ Is at a **suitable height and reach** range.
- ☐ Is at an **appropriate viewing angle** for standing and seated visitors.



Top Tip

Lectern-style panels often work well because they can be read comfortably by a wide range of visitors.

Choosing Materials

Outdoor interpretation needs to withstand changeable weather, wear and continual use.

Choosing appropriate materials will help ensure panels remain attractive, legible and effective for many years.

Materials should also feel appropriate to the location. Review materials used in nearby existing signage and infrastructure as well as being sensitive to the heritage or natural setting.

Frame and lectern material options

Timber

Sustainably sourced hardwood timber is a popular choice as its warm natural appearance blends well into landscapes and has a lower visual impact in sensitive environments. It also provides opportunities for carved or etched decorative details or wayfinding features. It is worth noting that timber does weather and requires periodic maintenance over time.

Metal

Steel or aluminium structures are robust and a good choice for high-traffic locations where durability is a priority. Powder-coated spray finishes provide weather protection and are available in a wide range of colours.



Remember

A rural nature reserve may require a different approach from a town-centre heritage trail.

Recommended panel materials

The graphic panel itself must be able to withstand a range of environmental challenges, including rain, sunlight, abrasion and vandalism.



Aluminium Composite Material (ACM)

Typically supplied as a 3-5mm panel mounted to a backing board or within a tray system. It is lightweight, durable, has good resistance to weathering and provides a cost-effective solution.



High Pressure Laminate (HPL)

One of the most robust options available for outdoor interpretation. It has excellent resistance to moisture, mould growth, UV exposure and other demanding environmental conditions which makes it a good choice for coastal or high traffic installations. The printed surface is fused beneath a protective layer which allows most graffiti to be removed using cleaning agents like white spirits.

Think about long-term maintenance

When selecting materials, consider the whole-life cost rather than simply the initial purchase price. Specialist suppliers will be able to recommend appropriate materials and specifications for your panel. Questions to consider are:

- Which materials will suit the location and landscape?
- Will the structure be durable and appropriate for visitor numbers?
- Is it weather and UV resistant?
- How easy is it to clean and how often will maintenance be required?
- Can damaged parts be replaced?



Remember

The most successful interpretation combines a strong story, thoughtful placement and durable materials that continue to serve visitors for years to come.

make things happen 

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