

The poet Byron was a bit naughty!
Exploring and evaluating the visitor experience

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LitHouses Conference: addressing the issues



‘Literary houses ... face unique challenges with regard to the interpretation of their sites and collections’

‘How writers’ museums can more effectively communicate and interpret the lives and works of their authors’

What is the answer?



Newstead Abbey - A case study

Audience Development Plan, and Access Plan, produced in early 2006

Key tools:

- questionnaires using Generic Learning Outcomes (ILFA)*
- staff consultation
- focus groups using participatory appraisal techniques

*www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk



Newstead Abbey - Who visits?

Surveys suggested existing visitors are:

- Female
- White British/Irish/other
- Adult (over 20)
- Couples
- Full time employment or retired
- Within Nottinghamshire and surrounding counties (or holidaying)
- Car owners
- Formal education, particularly KS2
- Differing house and garden profile





Newstead Abbey - Who doesn't visit?

Surveys suggested under-represented visitors are:

- Male
- Black and Ethnic Minority
- Children and young people (under 20) including as part of a family or formal education
- Unemployed
- Those with disabilities
- Coach tours
- Repeat visitors to the house particularly



A picture of the visitor - their motivations

- Walking in the gardens
- The building/architecture - the 'Restoration' factor!
- General interest
- To see house and gardens
- The Byron association
- On recommendation
- For an event





A picture of the visitor - their experience

Generic Learning Outcomes in questionnaires revealed:

A raised awareness of the Byron connection

'Did not know it was Lord Byron's home'

'Byron lived here'

Increased knowledge of Byron's life

'Learnt that Byron the poet was a bit naughty'

'Byron's grandfather dismantled the Abbey'





A picture of the visitor - their experience

Generic Learning Outcomes in questionnaires revealed:

The benefits of interactivity and freedom in exploration

'Changing room costumes - trying on was fun'

'Ability to wander freely, unguided'

A depth of engagement and influence of behaviour

'Try to read some of Byron's poems'

'Sense of mortality - Byron thought about death a lot, so will I from now on'





A picture of the visitor - their experience

Tours and focus groups with:

- junior school children within an Education Action Zone
- young people of black, white and mixed race backgrounds

Using Participatory Appraisal with 3Ps consultancy (www.3Ps.org.uk)



A picture of the visitor - their needs

Common themes identified:

- Not all visitors have prior knowledge of the site/the writer
- A strong desire to engage with the lives of all who lived there
- The need for social/historical context to understand the detail
- Appreciation of a mixed experience
- A willingness to engage when they know what's there
- A good experience encourages future engagement



Our response - the Action Plan

Audience development vision

Exercising mind, body and soul

Newstead Abbey will look to its past - to the people and events reflected in its buildings, grounds and collections - to challenge, inspire and excite people today and in the future.





Our response - some proposed actions

Make people stories the route into the interpretation of the building, grounds and collections

Make the visitor the curator to ensure engagement with the collections and the people stories

Review and assess the collections to find new themes that reflect the diversity of the local population

Build on the sporting interests of Byron and others, to create events, activities and interpretation of appeal to new audiences, e.g. young people, men



Our response - some proposed actions

Provide access to Byron's poetry, throughout house, grounds and facilities

Create 'Newstead on Tour' mini exhibitions and information points - raising awareness among local people and providing alternative access

Develop a range of themed souvenir guidebooks/leaflets, which balance contextual interpretation, people stories, and collections information according to the theme and target audience



Addressing the conference issues

How to interpret LitHouses and their collections?

- Ask your audience/potential audience
- Good interpretive practice - *provoke, **relate** and reveal*
- Never assume prior knowledge, of person, history or place
- Interpret more than the mainstream story
- Continue to evaluate and question your approaches

Not necessarily unique challenges, but unique individuals, collections and places that everyone deserves the opportunity to discover

Intelligent solutions for cultural and natural heritage

