

Feedback from Susan Tomkins, Archivist (excerpt from interview on 10th July 2013)

Debs Interesting. The talking walls for Beaulieu, it was different to the Dunster Castle one because there wasn't so much architectural history over so many centuries. Although the characters in the Dunster one became very important to the Beaulieu one because they really did help to tell the story I think and then there was the fact sheets and the lifestyles and there was a lot of content basically and my concern was wanting to give too much and there's always been this element of how much choice do you give a visitor and how much time you want them to engage with it and moving them on basically so that other people can take part in that bit as well? So have you got any thoughts on the content and choice?

Susan I think, from experience, looking at similar things that people have had in **different areas is that the majority of people will not stand there and go religiously through everything. They will pick something, sometimes at random, just to see what it does or they'll look at it and pick something that's of interest to them and then they will do that bit and then they will move on.**

Most places where I've looked I'm not aware of people standing there and religiously going through absolutely everything that's on there, but I think that some of the things which for some of our visitors, particularly with my education hat on, teachers and people like that, if there is a connection to something that they can then get to at home or at work with the school if it's relevant, they will then go onto it there and use it as a resource, but they will do that externally. They won't get their groups using it while they're necessarily here, but they will use that externally and visitors say with families or people that have their interest, as I said, I think they do a bit and then they move on.

Debs So kind of like the website, which is how I planned it, for all the information to be there for people to access in that way, i.e. they came on a visit and they got a code to enter the website to then access more information or whatever. That's what I was doing it for rather than a kiosk in the museum, if you see what I mean? So that it needs breaking apart a little doesn't it? It's very much like you've done it at Buckler's Hard so you get bits of information at different points that you can dip into.

Susan That's right, which we got from the naval museum at Portsmouth. We got the interactive game there for Illustrious where you have to load the thing. I can't remember exactly how long that is, but that's about the right length of time that people will stand.

Debs And engage with it.

Susan And engage with it and that is because they're following something on. So I think they'll stay there slightly longer than they might do if it's what I call an information idea, which is what they perceived it as as being there in the Abbey, "Oh yeah what does that do? Oh that's interesting. Have you seen that? Oh yeah" and then go on and look at something else or I did notice when it was in there a couple of times, because I was down there doing other things, people looked at it, did a bit and then they obviously went out and walked around and they came back again afterwards to look something, to find something on there.

Debs So they did actually look it up?

Susan Yeah and went back. That happened on a couple of occasions when I was down there. So they'd obviously seen something somewhere in the site and either wanted to know more or weren't sure and went to see if there was anything on the thing. So that happened a couple of times or I'm guessing that's what they did because they were there and then they moved away and then they came back again having been outside.

Debs Again, going back to the sheer physical size of the things, all the fact sheets and everything else was really there as a resource for the school children or people in their interest to delve deeper away from here, but the images of the building being built at different stages, of how it was built, the scaffolding and everything, trying to bring the size to life, but it's difficult isn't it in the domas in and out?

Susan Yeah that's right. That's what I was saying before about you need it to be there, but I did notice that even people didn't use it, because it had the big screen, people would stand and look at the screen without actually using it themselves. If they went in and someone was using it, they would look at it and stand and look at it and then move on. Whether some of them came back, I don't know because when I was down there I wasn't particularly monitoring that. So yeah I did notice the big screen worked.

Debs Moving. Something moving always attracts doesn't it? Yeah.

Susan Yeah that's right, it sort of attracted their attention.

Debs "Oh what's going on there?" Yeah. Okay, yeah. So when you're laying out your interpretation boards and your information bits, how do you choose what's going on there? Obviously it's relevant from all the stuff that we've been talking about, but how do you know how to limit the information, the amount of text, for instance, per image? Do you see what I mean?

Susan Yes I do. What we try to do is the information that we put on a panel, the opening paragraph is something which, if you take the subject of a panel, we usually try to have one subject per panel or one story per panel and if somebody doesn't have a lot of time, if they only went round the exhibition and read the first paragraph of each panel they would have an idea of the subject.

Debs So it's almost like an abstract?

Susan Yeah.

Debs It gives you an overview crunched.

Susan And then the rest of the panel is if you've got time and you're interested in that subject you want more information about it, but it doesn't repeat what you've said before because you don't ever have enough words and most people don't want to stand and read for a long time.

We've probably got more words than we might otherwise have on the panels at Buckler's Hard because a lot of our visitors at Buckler's Hard, they've gone to the maritime museum because they're interested in the subject. So that gives them a lot of information that's there and other visitors who have gone because they happen to be in the area, there's lots of visual images on there with captions and the first paragraph, again, they don't have to stand and read the rest of it, but they're not put off by it. Because we've got lots of illustrations on the panel, they're not quite as put off as they might be if it was lots of text and just one thing and then deciding what, in terms of the number of words, quite often it's not a specific word count. It's what story do I want to tell and what is the minimum number of words I need to be able to tell this story?

So sometimes it's a really interesting story, but it's just too wordy to get the story across then sometimes it's better not to use it because you can't tell it. You have to give people so much information so that they can understand the story that they won't ever get to the story because they'll have switched off. So although it's a good story maybe telling it on a panel, it's not the most appropriate way of doing it and sometimes you can tell the story by using a series of pictures with captions or a series of drawings with captions like building a ship because that could be so wordy to get every single thing, but if you've got a series of illustrations which show some of the things, you can do it in other ways.

Debs Picture, thousands of words and all that stuff.

Susan Definitely.

Debs There could be too much to choose from to go and see, to engage with, well what do I do?
But then it's still making enough information available that's going to be of interest to such
a wide number of people that visit.

Susan That's right, yeah because if you take Buckler's Hard, somebody that goes down there may
have a passing interest in ship building, but be really interested in the social side of things.
So they can flip through the ship building bit and then spend longer doing social side of it
or vice versa or people may go and they're not really sure what they're interested in, but
different panels will spark their interest for different reasons and they'll just pick and
choose and then you get people who go down and they read everything and they work
their way along.

Debs Yeah just soak it up.

Susan Yeah they just read everything and look at everything. So I think you try to appeal to as
many of your visitors as you can by using a variety of techniques, which is what you do
when you teach. People learn in different ways so you provide lots of different ways for
them to learn so that you provide something for everyone.