



Toolkit 2:

Interpreting your Building for Visitors

Visitors to your church building will encounter you in a variety of ways and for many different reasons. They might be a regular church 'crawler' with prior knowledge of what to expect, or someone for whom church buildings are a complete mystery - they may never even have made a visit to a church building before. You can't make assumptions about why they come - but you **can** be ready for them.

Having a plan to welcome those who visit you must be seen as a complementary part of your churches ministry. Welcoming them, unconditionally and 'in absentia' is a challenge but getting this right can make a huge difference to the way that visitors understand you and may encourage them to learn more.

Some visitors will just want to enjoy the peace and tranquillity of your church – we know that church buildings can offer a tremendous 'power of place' - but others will be thirsty for facts and may be looking for more information. Telling the story of your church will encourage visitors to linger a while longer and will help you to build a relationship with that visitor on a new level.

Before you start

Assemble a team of people who understand and enjoy your church's heritage and who appreciate the importance of welcoming visitors to your church. You might include a member of your local history group who will be able to put the story of your church into a wider, community context. Think about the kinds of people who generally come to your church and how you currently welcome them. You might like to look at the first part of our Toolkit '**Ten Top Tips for Welcoming Visitors to your Church**' to get you started. The next step is to look at how you interpret your history and heritage. How do you currently do this and how might it be improved? Does it look tired or out of date? Could it do with revamping or updating?

None of this should cost excessive amounts of money. It is not necessary to produce glossy, heavyweight books in order to share your story. It is very simple to produce impressive looking material on a personal computer as long as you follow some simple rules.

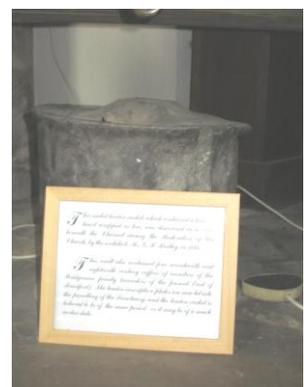
Do some research

You may already be using a booklet or guide. If so, this may have been written some time ago. You could try this out on an unsuspecting visitor to your church. Ask them what they think of it – tell them they can be as honest as they like! You might like to look at the Diocese of London's helpful advice on writing a church history <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/building-on-history-project/resource-guide/church-and-parish-history.htm>

Don't be too long-winded

Don't attempt to overwhelm the visitor with too much information. Depending on the size of your building and its significance you may only need a side of A4 to help visitors to navigate themselves around your church. Start by identifying ten noteworthy aspects of your church that deserve attention and concentrate on those. Mix up the historical facts with information about the Christian faith. By drawing attention to the altar you can also explain what an altar is for and what Eucharist is and how it is celebrated, for example.

You can include quirky, intriguing things as well – don't be tempted to assume that just because something is old it's automatically fascinating! The picture on the right here is of a leaden casket that contained an unidentified head found in a vault in the 1870s when the church was restored. This is the kind of thing that appeals particularly to small boys!



Don't overdo the dates

Dates can be dull so don't use them too much. Using general terms like 'Norman' or 'Medieval' or 'post Reformation' is better but make sure you quantify this. Using a simple time-line along the bottom of a page can help to put history into a context for those who aren't that great at history.

Do use simple terms

Don't assume that visitors will understand complex ecclesiastical or architectural language. Most haven't got a clue what a 'misericord' was for or where to find a flying buttress. If you have to refer to things like this you need to explain the term you have used. Remember also that some visitors may not know what the font is used for or why the altar is such an important part of Christian celebration - these are things that you may be taking for granted but they need explanation for those who aren't as churched as we are!

If your building is particularly significant in terms of its architecture or fabric, and it is the kind of place that people do visit to see something special then you will need to provide more detailed information. Having a file as a reference document can help and those who are interested can refer to that if they need more facts and figures.

Don't be too high-brow

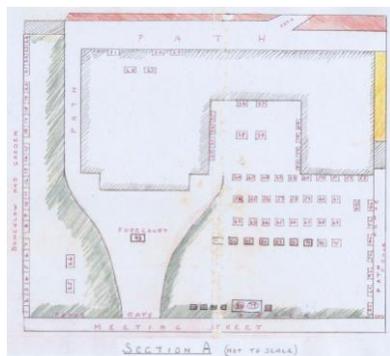
In terms of writing style try to imagine that you are telling a lively story rather than giving a lecture to your visitors. If your written material is boring they'll switch off. Try to explain the church history by making connections with the social history that was taking place in your community at the time. People of all ages and abilities enjoy and relate to pictures so use good quality images to help them to interpret your building and to highlight significant features.

Showing your visitors a collection of photographs of the church in days gone by will help to demonstrate that the building has been a witness to many important, life-changing events affecting the community.



Do anticipate questions

By taking some time to be objective about your church you can anticipate some queries that visitors might have. If you have an unusual symbol carved in the stonework or stained glass with puzzling imagery be sure to explain it in simple terms. Use images if necessary where interesting objects or features like carvings are difficult to see. Having a pair of good binoculars available can help where important details deserve to be studied, high up in the roof or in a stained glass window for example.

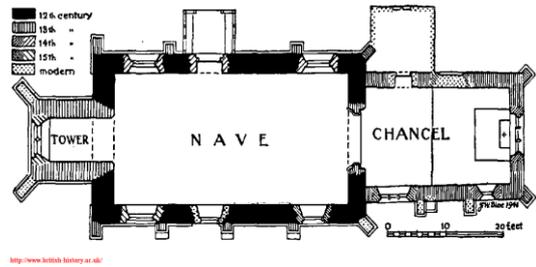


Remember also that many people visiting churches are looking for information about Births, Marriages and Deaths and may be researching their family history. Pew plans and graveyard plans, like the one on the left, can be useful for visitors too. You may not have a transcription of your parish registers but you can identify where they are kept and advertise the address, contact details and opening times of the local records office. The Diocesan Records will also be kept here and will be a useful place to start your church history research.

Some parish records have been digitally transcribed by volunteers so make sure you know if this is the case where you are and see if you can have a hard copy inside church for visitors to refer to. If your parish is small you might think about a community project to transcribe the registers yourselves – having them available on your website is a very useful way of serving those who visit you and meeting their immediate need.

Do use a floor-plan

By using a footprint map you can help those who may not have been into a church building before to understand the lay-out and the terms we use to describe areas in our church, like the Nave or the Chancel, but keep it very simple. Don't complicate it unnecessarily with too much text. You can use a numbering system on a floor-plan and this will encourage visitors to move around in your space and navigate rather than lurking just inside the door before leaving. Some church plans, like the one pictured here, are available in Victoria County Histories and accessible on-line, depending on the county.



It's much easier for visitors to follow a plan like this, as they would a map, than it is to follow written directions especially in a building that uses strange and uncommon words to describe its key areas and features.

Do be inclusive

Remember that the average reading age in this country is 12 years so be aware that people who visit will have different levels of understanding in terms of literacy and could be intimidated by difficult language. This doesn't mean you have to dumb down your written material – just try to anticipate average needs and abilities and regularly review your written material with that in mind.

Do be consistent

Make sure that all material you produce uses the same font, the same colours and the same in-house style. This can also be carried through to any notice-board based material or signage you use in the building. This consistency helps you to look professional and shows that you have thought about the way you present yourselves.



Do think about the children

Children in the main don't want to do anything that seems too much like school if they aren't at school – so activities that include a large volume of reading or writing tend not to be as appealing as more creative offers.



However, to have some material or an activity specifically for children is a very good idea and it doesn't need to be complicated. A simple I-Spy sheet with stickers or a Treasure Hunt is good. This could also be used when children come to your church for weddings or baptisms. Remember that children really respond to imaginative stories so you could use a character from history from your church to relate an event through their eyes. If your church has an unusual dedication or an interesting saint associated with it they could tell the story of their life and works, for example.

Try putting tiny Lego figures in church in unusual places – up on window sills or in pews - to encourage children to really explore and use their eyes in the building. This is especially good for children who do not read so well.

Identify and talk to people in your church who have experience of working with children, either in the classroom or in other ways. See what they say about the potential that your building might bring to the way in which you welcome and entertain younger visitors.

In summary

- Give some thought to the kinds and types of people who will be visiting you and what they might be looking for.
- Review what you currently offer in terms of interpretation and story-telling and try to be objective about how effective it currently is. If it needs work, make a plan for this.
- Decide what your ten main points of interest will be – you may have less than ten but don't try to highlight anymore than that unless your building merits it.
- Identify people who can help you to create the interpretation – the content, the style and the way in which you present your material will have a huge impact on its effectiveness.
- Remember to take advantage of opportunities to tell the story of your faith through the building and its contents. Visitors will be interested to hear how the beliefs of the worshipping community have shaped the way in which the building has evolved over the centuries.

Reading List/Helpful Resources

'The Gate of Heaven – How Church Buildings Speak of God' Nigel Walter
Grove Books Limited
ISBN 978-1-85174-802-0

'How to Read a Church – Images, symbols and meanings in Churches and Cathedrals' Richard Taylor
Rider Books
ISBN 184413053-3

'Exploring Churches'
Churches Conservation Trust
ISBN 1-903649-14-5

'Churches, Cathedrals and Chapels - A teachers Guide' Morris/Corbishley
English Heritage
ISBN 1-85074-447-5

'Rural Visitors – A Parish Workbook for Welcoming Visitors to the Country Church' Francis/Martineau
Acora
ISBN 0-9540766-0-5

'The Church Explorer's Handbook' Clive Fewis –
Canterbury Press
1-85311-622-X

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helen.mcgowan@btconnect.com