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Borrowed Robes: The Educational Value of Costumed Interpretation at Historic Sites

Jane Malcolm-Davies

This paper won the European Pre-Doctoral Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality Research Paper Competition in Barcelona, Spain. The competition was sponsored by The Center for Hospitality Research (U.S.A.), ESADE (Spain), and IMHI (France).

Working Paper Series

No. 05-06-03



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THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF COSTUMED
INTERPRETATION AT HISTORIC SITES**

Jane Malcolm-Davies

School of Management, University of Surrey, UK
j.malcolm-davies@surrey.ac.uk

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Jane Malcolm-Davies

*School of Management, University of Surrey, UK
j.malcolm-davies@surrey.ac.uk*

ABSTRACT

Pressure to develop vulnerable historic sites into competitive commercial operations has led to controversial interpretive techniques being introduced by aggressive marketing managers. Scarce resources have been invested in largely unproven technological and other innovative methods of presentation. This paper looks at the employment of costumed interpreters at historic sites, what it is claimed they offer visitors, and whether their services match visitors' needs. It reports the findings of an investigation into what visitors want from historic sites and the extent to which costumed interpreters contribute to their experiences. The study reported here compared the performance of 12 historic sites in four countries: two European (Sweden and the United Kingdom) and two American (Canada and the United States); with the participation of 589 visitors. The study provides clear recommendations for site managers as to the value of costumed interpretation and offers guidelines on the levels of investment (in reproduction costume and staff training) which guarantee visitors educational experiences during their visits to historic sites.

INTRODUCTION

Historic sites in the United Kingdom are fighting for their survival in a highly competitive leisure market. The withdrawal of state funding from the arts and cultural resources in general has forced them to face up to the challenge of making money and, if possible, become self-sufficient. Government-created quangos in the United Kingdom have been charged with making ruins (English Heritage) and redundant official residences (Historic Royal Palaces) accessible to wider audiences both physically and intellectually (HRPA, 1995). They must justify themselves in quantitative terms, such as the number of visitors coming through the gate or the income generated. These performance indicators are equally important for institutions which operate in a wholly commercial environment as for publicly funded organisations which have to demonstrate the effectiveness of subsidy (Richards, 1996, 13).

There has been relatively little research published about historic properties (such as houses, palaces, castles, forts, monuments, ships and archaeological sites) in contrast to museums, galleries and science centres, and how they have responded to the new commercial environment of the late 20th century (Berezziat, 2002, 2). Most heritage attractions see their purpose as primarily educational, and there is much debate about the need for and appropriateness of entertainment. Attitudes have tended to be polarised, although at least one critic of the heritage industry has commented that the perceived opposition between education and entertainment ought not to go unchallenged (Samuel, 1994, 271). Even those pleading for this more rational approach refer to education and entertainment as separate rather than seeing them as part of the same process: "There has always been a fundamental problem in

knowing when the entertainment stops, and the education starts” (Walsh, 1991, 105). Much criticism of innovative presentations at heritage resources has assumed that education and entertainment are incompatible and that the latter will always strangle the former, although these assertions are rarely supported by empirical evidence (Light, 1995, 130). Similarly, few of those claiming that the educational impact of a presentation can be enhanced if it is entertaining quote visitor studies to prove their point (Fleming, 1986; Screven, 1986; Ames, 1989).

A survey of research into the characteristics of visitors to historic sites shows that they are frequently profiled in terms of their demographic characteristics but rarely in terms of their motivation. There are some revealing exceptions. Education was what most visitors to Burgos Cathedral (Spain), Nottingham Castle (United Kingdom) and Paleis Het Loo (Netherlands) identified as their motivation for visiting (Richards, 1996, 25). Visits to New Lanark in Scotland were perceived to have increased visitors’ knowledge through a beneficial learning experience (Beeho and Prentice, 1997, 84). At an Australian ecomuseum, 48 per cent of visitors said their principal reason for visiting was an interest in history or a desire to learn (Moscardo and Pearce, 1986, 473). Surveys of visitors to historic sites in Wales showed 62 per cent of respondents wanting to be informed or educated (Light, 1995, 125). A study of visitors to the ship *Discovery* in Dundee (United Kingdom) showed that 82 per cent included learning in their reasons for visiting, compared with 63 per cent who mentioned entertainment as a motivator (Prentice et al, 1998, 9).

While market pressure has prompted historic site managers to consider ways of improving the entertainment value of the visitor experiences they offer, it is educational benefit which is implicit in the management of most heritage resources. Under the government legislation of 1983 which created English Heritage in the United Kingdom, it has a statutory duty to provide educational facilities, advice and information to the public (Prentice and Prentice, 1989, 155). Other United Kingdom heritage attractions such as the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, the York Archaeological Trust and Wigan Pier Heritage Centre are to a greater or lesser extent established as charitable educational organisations. The Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa is committed to educating its visitors (MacDonald and Alford, 1989, 157) and historic sites in the United States may register with the American Association of Museums provided they are “essentially educational or aesthetic in purpose” (Angotti, 1982, 183). Assumptions about the need for entertainment rather than education have led to historic sites being faced with “a ‘double mandate’ to act as both an entertaining tourist attraction and an educational resource and often end up caught between the two, satisfying neither objective” (Hughes, 1989, 53).

There has been a discernible shift from historical monument to heritage product since 1850. Three successive management approaches are identifiable - preservation, conservation and heritage (Ashworth, 1994, 15). The “heritage” phase is the one in which the resource is transformed into a product for consumption in the marketplace. Successful commercial products are designed with constant reference to market research. It is the museums and galleries sector which has led the way in investigating what visitors want (Davies, 1994, 24; Light, 1995a, 118): “Where in the past collections were researched, now audiences are also being researched” (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, 1). A marked preference among visitors for dynamic, animated and changing stimuli and events has been noted (Herbert, 1989, 216-7). A survey of visitors and non-visitors to museums in Lincolnshire (United Kingdom) prompted 46 per cent to request the opportunity of seeing people making and doing things. Furthermore, 62 per cent said there should be things for visitors to do themselves. In a similar survey in Leicestershire (United Kingdom), 73 per cent wanted workshops where they could watch people making and doing things and 69 per cent requested events where they could do things. This survey also discovered that 55 per cent of respondents thought museums would be better if they provided participatory experiences. In two other studies requesting local comment on the future of museum

development in the United Kingdom (Poole and Croydon), interactivity and liveliness were identified as key requirements. A great deal of research has shown that visitors and non-visitors to museums want workshops, activities and personal contact with history rather than to be kept at arm's length by the professionals (Davies, 1994, 77-79). There are few similar studies which focus on historic attractions rather than museums. Research in Wales in the 1980s offered early predictions of a growing trend. Visitors were asked for their reactions to possible future developments. As many as 91 per cent of visitors were in favour of "special exhibitions of crafts, costumes and armour", 75 per cent were similarly disposed towards "outdoor events which recreate historical happenings", and 55 per cent towards "people in historical costume" (Herbert, 1989, 219).

ORIGINS OF COSTUMED INTERPRETATION

One initiative in the drive for novelty and an enhanced visitor experience is the introduction of costumed interpreters (Richards, 1992, 39; Holloway, 1994, 144). In 1996, the Jorvik Viking Centre in York (United Kingdom) updated its static displays by giving visitors an opportunity to strike coins and converse with visitor hosts dressed as Vikings (Yale, 1998, 131). More recently, Castle Howard has revamped its front-of-house appeal with guides dressed as characters from the building's past (Cork, 2003). Costumed interpretation was not much known in the United Kingdom before the 1980s, although the genre has a long pedigree in Scandinavia and North America. International exhibitions such as the Paris Exposition of 1878, which featured reconstructions of exotic villages, complete with imported native peoples (Greenhalgh, 1989, 91), inspired Artur Hazelius in his efforts to preserve the traditions of rural Sweden (Aldridge, 1989). He collected buildings from all over the country and reconstructed them at Skansen in Stockholm, where there were occasional costumed activities from its opening on 11 October 1891 (Anderson, 1984, 19; Rehneberg, 1957, 7; Perrin, 1975, 11) - not 1881 as some sources suggest (Leon and Piatt, 1989, 65). The permanent costumed demonstrators arrived in 1898. They performed traditional music and dance, herded reindeer and demonstrated customs appropriate to the different cultural groups represented (Alexander, 1968, 271; Anderson, 1984, 19; Robertshaw, 1990, 30). Hazelius' open-air museum was copied all over the world but the idea of costumed crafts demonstration did not take root everywhere. It was deliberately shunned in the United Kingdom, where demonstrators at Acton Scott in Shropshire were dressed in white laboratory coats lest visitors be misled into thinking they were anything more fanciful than modern technicians (Burcaw, 1980).

The origins of professional costumed interpretation also lie in the battle re-enactment movement. Military re-enactment as a leisure pursuit led to the appearance of costumed people at historic sites as long ago as 1865 in North America (Anderson, 1984, 135-172; Anderson, 1985, 130-175), although the phenomenon of "historicist hooliganism" is more recent in the United Kingdom (Hewison, 1987, 83). Organisations such as The Sealed Knot Society appeared from 1959 (Anon, 1989, 81). By the late 1980s and through the 1990s, they proved a "cost-effective resource" for special event managers at Cadw (Welsh Historic Monuments) and English Heritage under commercial pressure to draw crowds and boost revenue (Carr, 1989, 303; Griffin and Giles, 1994, 331).

Ad hoc costumed interpretation was provided in the United Kingdom by volunteers at Blists Hill at Ironbridge in Shropshire from 1973 (Tait, 1989b, 88), the Ulster-American Folk Park in Co Tyrone from 1976 (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, 98), and the new Black Country Museum in Staffordshire from 1978 (Harada, 1979, 99). But it was the late 1980s before historic sites employed paid, permanent, costumed staff as an integral part of their daily interpretation (Hicks, 1994, 9). The pioneers were at one firmly-established open-air museum, Beamish in County Durham, which introduced daily costumed interpretation in 1985 (Tait, 1989b, 74), a new heritage centre at Wigan Pier in Lancashire, which did so in 1986 (Yale, 1998, 32), and a restored textiles mill at Quarry Bank in Cheshire where

costumed staff arrived in 1988 (Yale, 1998, 183). Two of these three sites employed resident theatre companies, as did the Museum of the Moving Image and the Science Museum in London. But the theatrical management model was short-lived at historic attractions. Beamish had replaced its theatre company with local people by 1994 (Lewis, 1994, 333) and in so doing was coming into line with most North American historic sites, where managers and interpreters are at pains to explain “interpreters are not actors” (CWF, 1990a, 8).

This resistance to a theatrical definition is threefold: in reality, few costumed interpreters are actors (Malcolm-Davies, 2002a, 5); it protects against the fierce criticism of costumed interpretation within the heritage community which tends to assume anything theatrical is fake (Grinell, 1979, 20; Hitz, 1989, 74; Snow, 1993, 133; Tramosch, 1994, 37; Sansom, 1996, 134; Hughes, 1998, 41); and challenges the suggestion that activities involving historic costume are frivolous and foolish (Frye, 1977, 39; Hollander, 1978, 361; Wilson, 1985, 48; Levitt, 1988, 9; Wilson, 1992; Foster, 1999).

Costumes are frequently used in tourism marketing to convey a sense of place through spectacle, excitement and exoticism. Not surprisingly, it is marketing managers who claim much for costumed interpretation at historic sites (Barnes, 1974, 202; Seaman, 1993, 26; Sansom, 1996, 134; Shafernich, 1993, 46) and often provide the money and impetus for its introduction (Lewis, 1994, 333; HRP, 1993, 12). It is assumed that the promise of colour and liveliness will broaden the appeal of the site beyond its traditional visitors (Light, 1996, 184) and differentiate it from its competitors (Evans, 1991, 149). Publicity leaflets often make claims which site curators find difficult to endorse: an invitation to “time travel to 1848” at Hale Farm and Village in Ohio (United States) is a typical example (McMahon, 1999, 14). A contradiction is apparent at Blists Hill in Ironbridge (United Kingdom), where the museum says the village is “a possibility rather than absolute fact” while the souvenir guide book claims “Blists Hill is the next best thing to time travel” (Shafernich, 1993, 54). Costumed interpreters are said to play an important role in contributing to the atmosphere of the visitor experience at historic sites (Shafernich, 1993, 46). In its most common forms, the costume is merely “decorative” (Crang, 1996, 422); it contributes to the visual impact of the site (Dewar, 1991, 72). It enhances the scene (Smith, 1980, 33) and adds to its visual interest and enjoyment (Riddle, 1994, 262); the costume and props add extra “realism” (Binks, Dyke and Dagnell, 1988, 41). A telephone survey of managers at 23 costumed interpretation sites in Ontario (Canada) reported that “overwhelmingly, it was argued that reproduction costume ... adds to the period atmosphere of the recreated setting” (Tait, 1989a, 58).

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Despite its 100-year history, the majority of commentaries on the genre offer anecdotal evidence of what costumed interpretation adds to the visitor experience. Costumed interpretation “is praised for the extensive historical research it often requires but damned as frivolous show-business entertainment” (Leon and Piatt, 1989, 64). Given historic sites’ avowed educational objectives, few studies focus on whether learning is an identifiable benefit of costumed interpretation for visitors. A study of costumed interpreters at the Minnesota History Center showed that visitors expressed their enhanced enjoyment of the site in terms of learning (Litwak and Cutting, 1996). At Colonial Williamsburg, visitors to Wetherburn Tavern had an impressive level of recall and understanding with regard to specific interpretive objectives (Sansom, 1996, 122; Graft, 1989, 137). During a study at the Medieval Palace at the Tower of London (United Kingdom), 76 per cent of visitors who spoke to the costumed interpreters felt they had learnt something (Hambro, 1993, 15). At Quarry Bank Mill in Cheshire (United Kingdom), costumed interpreters were introduced with two objectives: conveying messages about life as an apprentice in the mill in the 1830s and providing an entertaining and atmospheric experience. Visitors reported a significant change in understanding for some of the intended learning

outcomes (Badman, 1990). At Hampton Court Palace in Surrey (United Kingdom) a study comparing live interpretation with other forms of interpretation suggested that models and panels are more effective than costumed interpreters. However, visitors do not use models and panels as much and believe costumed interpreters to be more informative (Cummings, 1992, 6).

The majority of published surveys reporting a relationship between visitors' learning and costumed interpreters are from museums, galleries and science centres. A survey at London's Museum of the Moving Image (United Kingdom) showed that 71 per cent of visitors felt the costumed interpretation enlivened their visit and 57 per cent thought they imparted information about the sociological significance of film (Malcolm-Davies, 1990, 27-28). In a 1992 survey at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, 63 per cent of respondents said they had learned something new from the costumed interpreters (Rubenstein, 1993, 121). At the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore (United States) visitors met four costumed renaissance characters, who argued the merits of 16th century art. A reported 88 per cent of visitors felt they learned a lot or quite a bit about the renaissance (Stillman, 1993b, 54). A survey at the Science Museum in London asked visitors whether they found the costumed interpreters informative - 88 per cent agreed this was so (Bicknell and Mazda, 1993, f63).

Few historic sites guide their costumed interpretation initiatives with visitor studies (although there are notable exceptions in the North America, such as Colonial Williamsburg, Connor Prairie and sites in the care of Parks Canada). It has been suggested that staff's perceptions of what they provide are frequently at odds with what visitors think (Pearce, 1988, 204; Beeho and Prentice, 1996, 484; Markwell et al, 1996, 97). The results of a study of costumed interpreters at work at Northwest Trek Park in Washington (United States) are instructive in this regard. The criteria the costumed interpreters used to evaluate their own work was substantially different from those used by visitors: only eight of the 36 favourable comment categories and eight of the 36 unfavourable comment categories coincided for interpreters and visitors (Ham and Shew, 1979, 41). The data suggest that only 22 per cent of what interpreters do well or badly coincides with what visitors care about; and that interpreters tend to view the visitors and the setting as the critical factors rather than their own performances. This is particularly true when assessing what was poor - the visitors and the setting were identified as problems more often (64 per cent) than the interpreters' skills and content (36 per cent). A tour group, for example, may be referred to as "unresponsive", "interested" or "personable" rather than the interpreter's own performance being judged "unprovocative" or "lacking in enthusiasm" (Ham and Shew, 1979, 42).

Most commentaries on costumed interpretation are self-congratulatory or *carte blanche* criticism rather than thoughtful comment on specific models. Examples of the former are Anderson's writings, which are "idiosyncratic" at best (Leon and Piatt, 1989, 92) and "evangelistic" at worst (Handler, 1987). Critics, such as Peterson (1988), often lambast examples of poor practice rather than using them to construct a framework for evaluation. There is good and accurate costumed interpretation and there is poor and inaccurate costumed interpretation. It is necessary to distinguish between "the practise of surgery and the botched operation" (Yellis, 1990, 5). A comprehensive review of studies of costumed interpretation showed that most were confined to one site. Few examine management issues such as the amount of time, effort or money invested and how this might affect the quality of the visitor experience. The need for a study which offered some useful insights into the difficult choices managers face in allocating scarce resources to costumed interpretation was overwhelming. The lack of objective assessment of the genre's potential in enhancing the visitor experiences at historic sites called for a study which took a broad overview and attempted to quantify aspects of its performance with reference to current management objectives such as visitor satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

There were two stages to this study. The first addressed the dearth of precise information about costumed interpretation by mapping sites at which costumed interpreters are a permanent daily feature of the visitor experience and where they are employed as staff rather than working as volunteers. This produced an inventory of 340 sites worldwide. Each received a detailed questionnaire which investigated why costumed interpreters were introduced, their terms of employment, the training they receive and the sites' investment in reproduction costumes. A total of 159 sites returned useable questionnaires (representing a 47 per cent rate of return). These data permitted the construction of investment categories focusing on training, pay and reproduction costume (table 1). Both pay and costume budgets were expressed as multiples of admission price to permit meaningful comparisons between countries with notable differences in the cost of living. An average admission price of US\$7/€6.46 was used for those sites which do not charge an admission fee. The largest group comprised the 65 sites categorised as low investors in costumed interpretation (41 per cent). The next largest group was the 47 sites making a medium investment (30 per cent). There were 25 sites categorised as high investors in costumed interpretation (16 per cent), while 22 sites (14 per cent) provided insufficient information for them to be categorised accurately.

Table 1: Definitions of high, medium and low investment profiles for historic sites employing costumed interpreters as a permanent daily feature of the visitor experience

	High	Medium	Low
Training			
Induction	one to three months	one week to one month	up to a week
Further	daily/weekly	monthly/quarterly	annually/never
Evaluation	daily/weekly	monthly/quarterly	annually/never
One day's pay	15+ x admission	7 to 14 x admission	up to 7 x admission
[Average	US\$65/€60	US\$64/€59	US\$44/€40.65]
Costume	81+ x admission	40 to 80 x admission	up to 40 x admission
[Average	US\$983/€908	US\$323/€298	US\$123/€114]

These categorisations helped to identify typical sites with high, medium and low investment profiles. A sample of 12 sites in four countries was constructed, deliberately avoiding well-documented sites with unusually high investment funds such as Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia (United States), Plimoth Plantation in Massachusetts (United States), Upper Canada Village in Ontario (Canada) and Hampton Court Palace in Surrey (United Kingdom). The intention was to investigate investment in costumed interpretation at sites typical of the population as a whole.

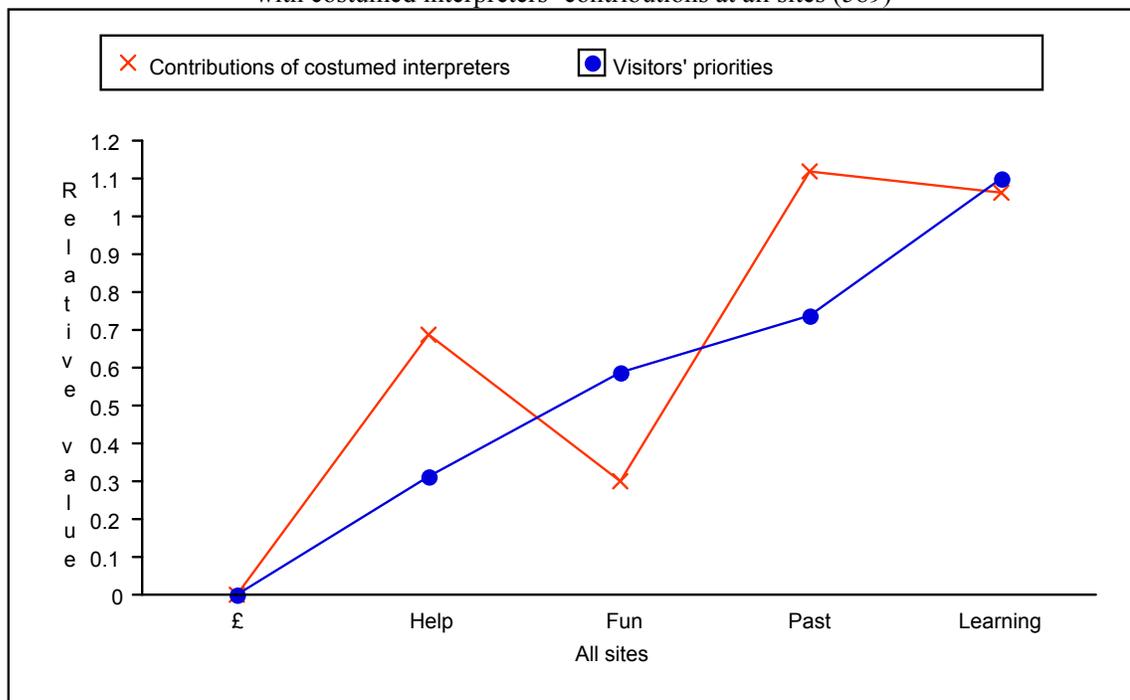
A questionnaire was devised with reference to the literature review, the mapping study and qualitative work at two United Kingdom sites. The mapping study revealed that costumed interpretation was introduced primarily to add educational benefit to the visitor experience (82 per cent), to enhance the entertainment value of visits (60 per cent) and/or to attract more visitors to the site (59 per cent). Just under half of the sites in the mapping study introduced costumed interpreters to improve value for money for visitors (42 per cent). The qualitative study showed that visitors identified "a sense of the past" and "helpfulness" as the key benefits of contact with costumed interpreters. The questionnaire was designed to measure five dimensions of the visitor experience drawn from these sources: value for

money, helpfulness, fun, learning and a sense of the past. The first aim was to discover visitors' priorities for their visits by ranking these five dimensions. The second aim was to investigate how costumed interpreters contributed to these dimensions of their visits, if at all. Visitors were asked to respond to a series of paired comparisons which produce a rank order of the ways in which costumed interpreters contribute to their visits. The method of paired comparisons forces visitors to make choices and produces a hierarchy of answers which can be compared with the rank order of priorities for their visit overall (Guilford, 1954; Edwards, 1956 and 1957; Elliot and Christopher, 1973). This was something pilot questionnaires had failed to do because visitors tended to state wholesale approval of costumed interpreters rather than identifying their specific contributions, a phenomena observed elsewhere in studies of live performances (Pearce, 1988, 117; Dewar, 1991, 201; Eyl, 1991). A total of 589 useable questionnaires were completed by visitors to the 12 sites during 2000/01.

FINDINGS

The visitor study showed that visitors' top three priorities for a visit are to learn, to feel a sense of the past, and to have fun. Visitors also indicated that helpfulness and value for money were important but less so than the other three dimensions. This second study also showed that, in general, costumed interpreters do not provide services which match visitors' needs precisely (figure 1).

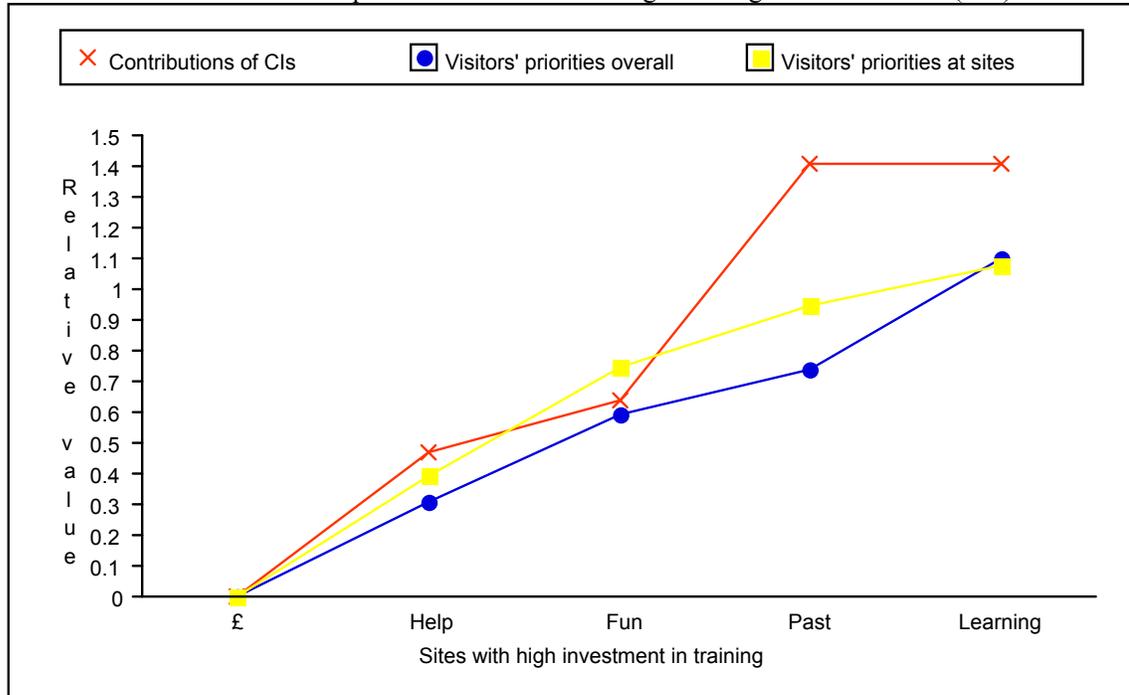
Figure 1: Comparison of visitors' priorities at all sites (589) with costumed interpreters' contributions at all sites (589)



Taken together, the data from all 12 sites mask some considerable successes. A few sites achieved a better match between visitors' needs and the contributions of costumed interpreters than the average shown above. It is instructive to examine their results in detail. The best fit was that achieved at sites where a high investment was made in training the costumed interpreters (figure 2). Visitors to these sites reported educational benefits and fun which outstripped their needs. The sites in this category provided induction training of one to three months, further training on a daily or weekly basis, and evaluated their costumed interpreters daily or weekly. At these sites, significantly more visitors

reported that the costumed interpreters contributed educational benefit as opposed to offering a sense of the past, fun, helpfulness and value for money (with a 99 per cent confidence level).

Figure 2: Comparison of visitors' priorities at all sites (589) with costumed interpreters' contributions at high training investment sites (100)



All the positively significant findings in the visitor survey were those concerned with the educational benefit provided by costumed interpreters. For example, at those sites which make a high investment in reproduction costume, there were significantly more visitors reporting that they had learnt something from the costumed staff compared with the other contributions being measured (with a 95 per cent confidence level)(figure 3).

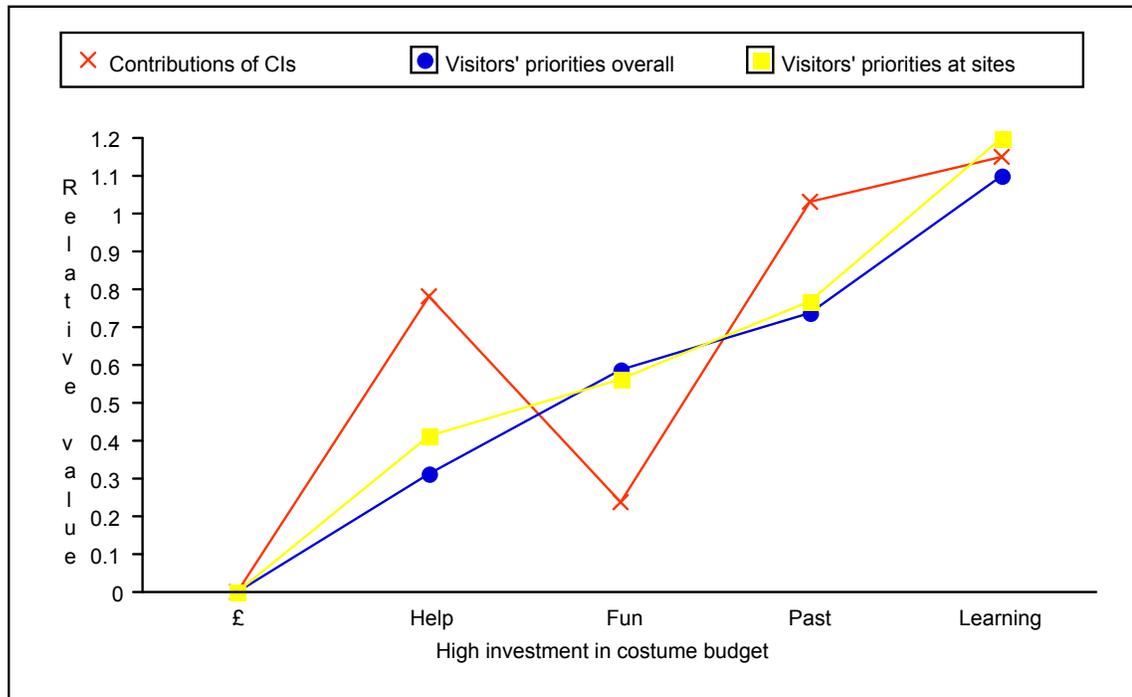
Investment in costume resources was measured by one relatively crude indicator: the budget for a single outfit. The range for the 159 sites in the mapping study was US\$8 or €7.42 to US\$5,000 or €4,640 and the average US\$462 or €429. The budget for each site was converted into a multiple of the site's admission price for ease of comparison across countries, revealing an average investment of 92 times the admission price to the site. Sites making a high investment in reproduction costume spent an average of US\$983 or €908, representing an investment of more than 81 times the admission price to the site on a suit of clothes for each interpreter.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results from the 12 survey sites taken together suggest that costumed interpreters are providing a sense of the past but not enough learning. It could be argued that sites have succeeded in providing an historical atmosphere (an aim identified in the literature review) but that visitors want more than this from costumed interpreters. This is consistent with the research discussed above which demonstrated visitors' demand for interactive experiences. Similarly, costumed interpreters are helpful but not much fun. This lack of fun for the visitor may result from the emphasis on scholarship and the seriousness

with which costumed interpretation has evolved - particularly in Canada and the United States – in order to resist the criticisms of heritage professionals (also discussed above). Constant attempts to demonstrate scholarship and avoid theatricality are two examples of how practitioners strive to establish credibility for the genre (Freas, 2001, 173-174; Snow, 1993, 43). This study suggests that costumed interpreters’ training should include techniques for entertaining visitors without undermining the learning they prioritise: “Fun is not incompatible with learning in the exhibit environment, but it must be used as a means to an end, not an end in itself” (Screven, 1986, 114).

Figure 3: Comparison of visitors’ priorities at all sites (589) with costumed interpreters’ contributions at high costume budget investment sites (250)



One of the important findings of this research is that education and entertainment cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive; both are required for a visitor to feel their visits are worthwhile. Visitors have a clear hierarchy of requirements from historic sites: learning, a sense of the past and fun. Costumed interpreters do provide atmosphere. There can be no doubt that costumed interpreters provide a sense of the past, since every investment profile in this survey produced a contributions profile which matched or exceeded visitors’ requirements for it. However, learning is clearly dependent on variables such as investment in training and reproduction costume, while fun is dependent on modes of interaction such as first and third-person interpretation, an aspect of this research reported in detail elsewhere (Malcolm-Davies, 2002b).

The conclusions of this study are that managers who identify the mission of their historic sites with clarity can make strategic decisions about investing scarce resources in costumed interpretation in line with the visitor experiences they wish to offer. The recommendations offered by the evidence of this study are that an historic site with an educational mission should make an overall investment in costumed interpretation which is high (see table 1 for definitions), especially in terms of the budget for a complete costume and frequency of staff training.

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