

Firing the imagination

Elizabeth Newbery and Karen Chancellor look at how simple paper based trails can be made exciting for children.

Children today are bombarded with sophisticated imagery through adverts, film and television. They can indulge their fantasies of zapping aliens and overcoming all sorts of unlikely obstacles through computer games, and in many cultural attractions they have access to imaginative inter-actives. So do paper resources have much value and relevance for children in the 21st century?

Why the need?

First, paper resources are portable and are relatively economical to produce. Secondly, they encourage a dialogue between accompanying adults and children. Thirdly, they promote skills such as reading, listening, observation and recording. All good stuff, but the real challenge is to make them as exciting as ridding the world of aliens.

No more wimpy servants

Various regions of the National Trust, notably the West Midlands and East of England, have recently commissioned a series of paper-based trails that we hope give aliens a run for their money. The trails are short, pacy and focus on a single theme relevant to the property. Children respond to resources that are bright, contemporary and illustrated with lively drawings, so we use specialist children's book designers and illustrators to devise the layouts and draw the characters. Text is kept to a minimum and activities embrace a wide a range of abilities. The trails use fictitious characters to help children understand who lived there, when, and how they influenced the property. Nothing new there perhaps, but these characters are more empowering than usual. Who wants to be guided round by a wimpy servant or an apple-cheeked monk when you can be a spy in the pay of the Spanish king, a ruthless priest hunter, a sneaky business rival, a madly jealous neighbour, a pompous head butler or a ghost buster?

Solving other problems

Strong story lines with a real purpose help to overcome certain problems in some National Trust properties. For instance, the delicate fabric at Kingston Lacy in Dorset means that children are not allowed to use pencils or any other medium for recording. At Croome Park in Warwickshire, the Capability Brown landscape has only just been restored and replanted, making it difficult for children to appreciate key elements in Brown's work. At Upton House, also in Warwickshire, a high proportion of objects, furniture and paintings are on open display without roped off areas. But negative 'don't touch' labels become positive with a warning from your boss not to leave fingerprints as evidence. And at Ickworth in Suffolk, ghost busters help to make this extraordinary property, built as a showcase for treasures, become less remote in every sense.

Testing, testing, testing

When testing the first trail at Baddesley Clinton we discovered that children got so excited that they wanted to rush on to the next room leaving parents stranded and unable to look round at their own pace. So we inserted a card of special notes for

adults that give further information, encourage dialogue between parents and children, – and slowed down the pace.

Case study: Melford Hall

Melford Hall is a beautiful red brick 16th century house in Suffolk with Elizabethan, Regency and Victorian interiors (but not arranged in chronological order on the house tour). Hopping backwards and forwards in time is difficult for children so we chose to focus on the collection of Chinese porcelain. You might think that an unlikely subject to enthuse children except that this porcelain had been captured from a Spanish galleon laden with treasure in the 18th century. Today it is displayed throughout the house and we use a fictional spy in the pay of the Spanish king to report back on its whereabouts and condition.

Feedback from staff and volunteers at Melford suggests that they have had many favourable comments from children and parents about the trail. In particular that children like being engaged in a more purposeful and practical way when looking round the property: it helps focus their attention thereby gaining more from the experience.

From a regional perspective we know that families come out and want to 'do' something together. The children's trail provides a colourful and attractive vehicle to do this. It also provides a clear theme for the visit: we know that visitors remember themes rather than information and 'treasure hunting' is one that fires the imagination. The insert providing additional detail for accompanying adults also gives an additional layer of interpretation. In the future, we would like to provide a reward for successfully completed trails as an additional incentive.

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Footnote

1 Research published by Roehampton University, Surrey 2007

Sound bites

‘An overwhelming finding amongst children from 22 primary and 24 secondary schools is that reading is still one of the activities they most enjoy despite the advent of new technology’¹

‘My six year old daughter has bombarded me with Queen Elizabeth and Catholic priests ever since we shared the guide’

‘The whining stopped and my child who is normally is not too interested in learning (sad but true) while on holiday, suddenly became much more interested in the stories behind the places’