



Manx National Heritage: A model for Europe

Filmic interpretation of Viking Crosses at the 'House of Manannan'

Stephen Harrison explains how his organisation's recent achievements are attracting the attention of cultural destination managers throughout Europe.

Manx National Heritage, the Isle of Man's cultural heritage organisation, has become the first organisation to win the prestigious 'British Museum of the Year Award' twice, this time for its 'House of Manannan' project at Peel, on the west coast of the island. It follows a similar award for developments at the Manx Museum, MNH's headquarters, in Douglas six years ago. Having already received the Interpret Britain Award in 1998, the 'House of Manannan' was presented with this new accolade, the highest which can be given to a museum organisation within the British Isles, at a special ceremony in London in early October 1999, by Lord Rothschild, former Chairman of the National Heritage Fund. John Letts OBE, chairman of the panel of judges from the Museum Action Movement, organisers of the award scheme since 1973, had this to say about the 'House of Manannan':

'For a start, the Manx National Heritage is itself an unusual hybrid, combining some of the characteristics of our own National Trust with those of a major national museum. In addition to the main museum in Douglas, they present in museum terms one of the finest castles in Britain, and on another site, a living, agricultural, eco-museum in a beautifully managed live context and a handful of other sites.'

'They have taken a commercially dying fishing village, several miles away in Peel, which has another splendid living castle across the harbour, and created out of what seems at first to be a collection of redundant warehouses and railway buildings (actually they are new) a new heritage centre devoted to 'The Story of Mann.'

'This is designed to give the whole flavour and spirit of this rather extraordinary island in a single distillation. It is an impressive canvas which is presented. Do not suppose that all is model and diorama. Over 200 properly assessed items are worked into the displays. Much of the story is to do with the

sea (how can it not be, when the sea governs so much of life on the island?) and is very intelligent, but not over-assertive – in fact, rather tactful.'

'Little wonder that something like six per cent of the total population are 'Friends of Manx National Heritage.'

'This new addition has not only helped to revitalise Peel, it should help draw even more visitors, not only to have a holiday on the Isle of Man, but to understand it.'

Awards from the European Museum of the Year, the Gulbenkian Foundation, the Isle of Man Tourist Authority and the Civic Trust have also made their way to Manx National Heritage in recent years, consolidating the organisation's reputation as a leading European exponent of multi-disciplinary museum interpretation.

Integrated strategy

The 'House of Manannan' is positioned on the harbour frontage of the historic fishing village of Peel on the west coast of the island. It has been constructed to blend in with the existing vernacular architecture and comprises 32,000 square feet of display space on three floors. The building, designed by local architects, Ellis Brown, won an award in this year's Civic Trust Competition. The 'House of Manannan' brings together a wide range of formal museums, monuments, natural sites, and initiatives within the local community, which were not previously considered as connected or important, and creates an interpreted historic landscape extending over 227 square miles through a centralised series of presentations, through which an enhanced 'sense of place' is produced.

This model for coordinated cultural interpretation is perhaps particularly significant at a time when the Government's heritage, museum and archive provision in the UK is shifting to strongly

emphasise regionally inspired strategic partnerships, providing synergy and economy within the museum sector. It is an approach which will not admit the curse of departmentalism and would seem to be one which, certainly for the Isle of Man, is a very efficient and significant way to harness the increasingly scarce resources for heritage management. The 'House of Manannan' development in Peel is a very specific part of this 'all-island' strategy. The emphasis within the displays is on exploring the buildings and countryside outside the formal museum presentation. A sort of 'come in and go forth!' philosophy.

One of the main attractions for the judges of the Interpret Britain Award was the way film, dialogue and narrative are seamlessly linked with the 3-D museum displays and object presentation. The traditional god of the Irish Sea, Manannan, acts as the narrator throughout the display. Manannan is able to span time, place and form so that he can comment to visitors on the significance not just of the displays but also the landscape which they represent and the significance of human achievement within the island at various critical times in its maritime history, from the early Celtic inhabitants, through the Viking legacy, up to modern times.

Visitors are drawn into the displays in different ways and are guided by Manannan himself, who explains how the various influences of the Celts, Vikings and Christians have combined to create what is affectionately referred to as 'Manxness'.

The presentation techniques employed in the Centre are designed to captivate and stimulate virtually all the senses. Visitors experience mists swirling around monolithic crosses; the sounds and smells of a full-size, wattle-walled roundhouse with a Celtic Chieftain and his family settled in for the long winter months; the peace and solitude of an ancient keeill (church); rich aromas of oak-smoked kippers; Vikings unloading their longboat after returning from a raiding tour. All these experiences are graphically illustrated and explained through 'hands-on' displays, supported by interactive video galleries, with the aim of encouraging visitors to go out and visit other heritage attractions throughout the island.

Local and international recognition

The creation of the 'House of Manannan' broadened the concept of interpretation within the island to encompass a number of physical and intellectual areas which had not been recognised as collectively significant. By focusing its heritage strategy on the notions of 'Manxness' and its history, Manx National Heritage has evoked a terrific response from the local population, bringing the community together to consider the importance of its own identity at a time of significant social change. It has also boosted the efforts of the island's cultural tourism industry as a whole. The process began controversially but has concluded with a new enthusiasm about the potential of museums to reflect and respond to the changing needs of the community while providing protection for the aspects of the heritage which are valued.

The international reputation of Manx National Heritage has also continued to grow in recent years through its involvement in detailed promotional work with more than a dozen countries

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Aerial view of the Calf of Man and other areas to be designated a Manx National Heritage Area

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in Europe, communicating its achievements and, in turn, helping to create a very prestigious image of the island. In the last two years, representatives of over 14 different European countries have visited the Isle of Man to see the results of Manx National Heritage's 'threshold interpretation' strategy. This has built on the earlier success of the organisation in winning the European Museum of the Year Award for 1993. The award's judges declared that

'Now and again one comes across an achievement which is truly revolutionary and which is capable of having a great influence on developments elsewhere in Europe. The Isle of Man decided to put the whole of its national heritage – museums, historic monuments, environmental resources – under the same management. The Isle of Man has become an essential place to visit for anyone who wishes to see how to do the job better.'

The addition of the 'House of Manannan' to the island's portfolio has convinced many that there is something pioneering happening in this small island in the middle of the Irish Sea, which could have significance as a model for other countries in Europe.

Stephen Harrison is Director of Manx National Heritage