

Improving accuracy in the costumes of live interpreters in living history museums

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Introduction

Costumed interpretation is employed in museums primarily to entice, and engage with visitors. It is not aimed at the expert visitor or researcher, so often concessions are made in accuracy for the sake of budget. Not only may inaccurate costumes promote myths and confuse visitors, but efforts to improve accuracy could further the knowledge of makers and interpreters, and perhaps even encourage new research. Money is the most constant and re-occurring reason for compromising on accuracy but there are many other contributing factors such as the availability of skills or materials, a lack of knowledge about what is accurate, and adaptations made for practicality.

Method

This research took three living museums to use as case studies, to explore the impact their varying degrees of accuracy have had on both visitors and staff. These museums were Cosmeston Medieval Village in Penarth, South Wales; Beamish Living Museum in Newcastle, North-East England; and The Black Country Living Museum in Dudley, West Midlands. Oral interviews were conducted with both the staff responsible for providing costumes within these museums, and costumed interpreters themselves. At Cosmeston a school group was also observed on a tour of the village with a costumed guide, and pupils completed a questionnaire about their experience.



A costumed interpreter taking primary school children on a guided tour of Cosmeston Medieval Village. Costume accuracy is quite high at Cosmeston where each of the knowledgeable interpreters research and help source, or even make, their own costumes.



A costumed interpreter acts as shopkeeper in the men's wear shop at the Black Country Living Museum. A few authentic items are on display, but predominant are the ready-made items bought in, both to sell to visitors and to dress the museum's own staff.

Case studies

Cosmeston Medieval Village is a very small reconstructed site with only a few costumed members of staff on site each day. They have a small budget but most staff started as volunteers and are happy to put time into their costumes. The other two museums are both much larger, with dozens of costumed interpreters to dress every day. Beamish has a dedicated costume department which both buys and makes costumes for the museums' staff whilst the Black Country Living Museum relies predominantly on its volunteer interpreters providing their own costumes with help from a single part-time costume maker.

What prevents living museums achieving accuracy?

- Lack of funds, and choosing not to allocate more of the funds that are available to costume departments.
- Lack of time and/or skilled staff to do effective research into authentic costume of the period being reconstructed and to apply this in practice.
- Sometimes accuracy is simply not deemed to be of great importance when it is primarily used to engage with children and nonexpert visitors.
- In the case of Cosmeston Medieval Village, it can be hard to know what an accurate costume is when so few records survive, let alone garments from 1350, when the village is set.
- Costumes worn in living museums, sometimes by more than one interpreter, need to be machine washed regularly so delicate fabrics like silk, or wooden buttons, may be avoided.
- However well constructed costumes are when they leave the costume department, they are still at the mercy of the interpreters and volunteers who wear them on a daily basis; often important elements such as shawls and hats will be worn in an inaccurate way.

What effects do the accuracy of costumes have?

- Within the living museum context visitors do not seem particularly concerned with the accuracy of costumes.
- However, inaccurate costumes do provide a confusing, generalised and inaccurate view of the time period being presented. This is especially the case in the larger museums where several different dates are being represented in different areas of the site.
- Costumes provide a tool for interpreters. They help them 'get into character', engage with visitors and can form part of what is being demonstrated. More accurate costumes encourage better interpretation.
- Wearing accurate costumes help further the interpreters' knowledge, especially for those not already specialist in their area.
- Striving to make accurate costumes can increase the knowledge of the makers and, in the case of Cosmeston Medieval Village even create new ideas about how medieval costume was worn.



Rails showing just some of the costumes, for interpreters and school parties, made in the costume department at Beamish Museum. Basics like shirts and shoes are often bought in but more unusual items like tailored women's suits or these dresses are made on site.

Conclusion

Costumed interpretation in museums can have significant value even with poor levels of accuracy. It raises visitor numbers and gets visitors engaged with the museum in a captivating and flexible way which allows them to ask their own questions. Small inaccuracies such as machine stitching, good quality synthetic fabrics or plastic imitation buttons, will often go unnoticed by the majority of visitors and will not necessarily create misinformation. The areas of more fundamental importance to costume are the accuracy of cut, construction, colour and feel of the clothes. These are the areas which create vivid memories for visitors, which help interpreters feel in character, and which can lead to new discovery about the way garments may have been worn.

Key reading

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