



Adapting Stories to Places

by Allison Galbraith

Quite often I find that even after I have worked through various methods of research, I am still clutching at straws where finding a good tale to tell about a specific place is concerned. So be ready to throw those straws into the air and work with the ones that sparkle and float before you.

There may be part, or fully formed stories already there within your research. You will have to think about your audience and how they would receive these stories. Are there children in the audience, and are these stories suitable for children? Or, is it an adult audience, would you be able to tell the stories as fact or folk legend?

Let me give you an example from a storytelling commission I undertook at Low Parks Museum in Hamilton earlier this year. My remit was to tell stories to an adult audience about the environment and trees surrounding the museum. After meeting the curator, taking a guided tour, taking notes from museum reference books and researching online, I found a very interesting article on the web, about the ancient oak trees at Cadzow, in the grounds of Chatelherault. It included historical figures from the battle of Bannockburn, Robert the Bruce himself, and some clever trickery which explained why the oak wood was planted. A good story for sure, and even if the dates didn't match the historical truth about the real age of the oak trees, I told the story anyway.

Everyone enjoyed a cracking tall tale, which even sparked an audience debate about all manner of tree-related facts and fictions. I always allow space for the audience to take part in the event, often their contributions make for a truly

unforgettable experience.

However, if there are few or no ready-made stories about your chosen place, here's what you can do:

- Write down a list of all the things about your place that you have found interesting. Now write next to these any stories that spring to mind.
- Look for stories to suit your list of topics. You can flick through collections of stories and folktales. Go to the library to further your search, or arrange a visit to the Storytelling Centre's library in Edinburgh. (contact 0131 556 9579)
- Search on-line for suitable stories.
- Ask a friendly storyteller if they can recommend a story to match your theme.
- Do you know a personal or family story which might be appropriate? Even short personal recollections can make suitable additions to your event. You can include them as punctuation between the fuller stories.
- Would some snippets of folklore, a song, ballad, or music be a worthwhile contribution? I regularly mention the folklore of the flora and fauna which I have noticed growing around the place. I use my own collection of folklore books, and on-line sites like the Woodland Trust. (See Resource List)
- Don't be frightened to make links - no matter how tentative - between the place and stories you just love to tell, or good stories you consider worth telling.
- Adapt existing stories to suit your place and audience.

Here's another example of the creative use of story adaption from my recent event at Low Parks Museum: The curator mentioned that there was a motte hill and an old heronry, virtually unknown, but still existing near the museum. I felt that this would be a worthy fact to bring to light during the evening, and in the back of my mind I knew there were stories about herons, possibly Celtic Christian tales. However, as I searched through some storytelling collections I stumbled across, *The King's Dinner*, in *Tales on the Tongue - Storytelling Voices in Scotland* (See Resource List). This story contributed by Russell McLarty caught my attention when I noticed that it was set in a Scottish medieval castle, was about a crane and was fantastically humorous for an adult audience. Bingo! A perfect tale for my event – I always like to include at least one funny story. I set Russell's story at the heronry in Hamilton, while swapping the herons for cranes. And it worked beautifully, the audience laughed and clapped, and didn't question me on the validity or provenance of the story; they merely accepted the story for its charm and humour!

You can also have a go at making your own original story to suit your place and event. Remember keep it short and sweet – don't ramble!

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