

# an investigation of art in the Peak District National Park, UK.



Original Peak District guidepost - near Chatsworth



Guidestop at Longshaw Gate and its 'companion' stone

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Over 50% of the survey participants aged 50+ many walking as part of a pair/small group, some young families but a lack of young adults out visiting the park. Attitudes were consistent across different demographics, suggesting age is not a key factor when predicting how an artwork will be perceived.

14/25 regular visitors to the National park (at least once a month). This suggests a large % of people are familiar with the landscape and that they would perceive or notice change – like an artwork – more than a first time visitor.

16/25 had noticed the stone artworks some prompting needed to clarify 'artworks' - suggesting this is perhaps not the right title for the sculptures?

25% had heard of Companion Stones and recognised the sculptures referred to as being part of it

Nearly 50% would expect to see public sculpture in the Peak District National Park suggestive of a positive attitude and acceptance of art in the park

Over two thirds engaged with the stone artworks pausing for either a brief look or a longer contemplation

Over 50% of people had seen similar pieces elsewhere suggesting cultural artefacts (including heritage items and contemporary artworks) are recognised as part of the landscape

## survey data + analysis

### Participants offered a range of interpretations about the artwork's message

this included "don't know", "to think about the outdoors", "to get people to contemplate", "to inspire you", "encouraging a contemplation of the rural environment" and "to provoke an appreciation for the area's cultural heritage"

Interestingly, although these responses did not necessarily address the detailed messages within the artwork, most offered interpretations that were consistent with the artists' general intentions.

### 90% liked the artwork (10% held 'no strong opinion')

praised for its design and use of natural material, comments made included the added interest it provided for families and children ("it's something interesting for the kids to find and look at, something to plan a walk round"), and it was described as "surprising and unusual".

### 100% were positive about cultural projects in the National Park

This question had a consistently positive response, with comments ranging in approval from "fine" and "Nothing wrong with it" through to "Great idea", "fantastic" and "Lovely, really like to see it, don't know anything about them but enjoy them. Good setting for it." Importantly, several were also cautious, qualifying their approval by commenting "not too outlandish", "depends what it is" and "Should be limited and only if it's in keeping".

## key issue 1 - people + production

### Artworks produce more than a physical object.

It was important right from the start that this project should be all about forming new creative relationships: "the great thing with Companion Stones was we brought people together, and it's that fusion of poets and artists which was really exciting" (Monkhouse, 2012). This allows the working process to be fuelled by new stimulus, and makes the design process so much more enriching for the artists involved: "From Arts in the Peak's point of view I'm very interested in how artists work, how you make opportunities for artists not only just to make projects but to actually develop as well" (Monkhouse, 2012).

In the design of the sculptures and the writing of the poetry, many of the artists took references from the environment and culture of the location they were designing in. The stoops themselves were of great inspiration to the artists involved; helping to define scale and conceptual form: "The original guide stoops have huge auras, old stones from another time that tell of ways across the moor. They are perfect, functional. They are honest in their making and to the place" (Genever, 2010).

## key issue 3 - materiality

### What is appropriate in a National Park setting?

The nature of materiality was an interesting topic when the results of the survey are considered. Question 7 asked visitors what they liked about the artworks. The results were conclusive in their general praise of the use of natural materials, with all visitors liking and approving of the piece except one (who was indifferent). One person commented "it fits doesn't it. It's got space. Not like modern art".

Question 8 (which asked for general comments on cultural projects in National Parks) prompted the cautious responses of: "Nature gives so much; there's no need for...anything (to be added)", "Should be appropriate – natural materials" and "Should be limited and only if it's in keeping; its other places (cities) that need brightening up (so not really necessary in the Peak Park?)". Despite this the survey prompted a largely positive reaction to the idea of cultural projects and artworks, with visitors suggesting it was "to be encouraged" and many saying they approved if it was done in "suitable materials".

Despite this positive feedback from many members of the general public, who collectively saw the stones as a success, the stones elicited a few complaints sent via email to curator Charles Monkhouse. Much of this seemed based on material choice in particular "the smoothly dressed, light coloured sandstone is quite alien to the area of rough dark gritstone and the precisely chiseled inscriptions bear no resemblance to the crudely marked guide stoops" (anon).

### "Stones mark and define our landscapes"

(Sites of Meaning, 1999)

"I think art is essentially about here and now, here it's about locality and it has to be relatively specific" (Monkhouse, 2012)

## key issue 2 - location + place

### Landscape settings - can artworks enhance or detract?

The sites for the Companion Stones were chosen as a result of a guide stoop being on the same location. For some of the sites this has meant a fairly remote/wilderness location.

The survey suggested that while many visitors liked the artworks in general and particularly in the popular tourist/visitor destinations of Longshaw, this was perhaps more contentious in the more remote settings, with one stating the artworks didn't belong on "remote moorland" (anon).

Email complaints received by Charles Monkhouse seem to support this feeling and include comments on how distracting some of the stones are, suggesting that many "seemed incongruous" (anon) and "that they were an unfortunate distraction and quite out of sympathy with the environment and the stones they were intended to be companions of" (anon).

However, positive comments were also made on the placing of the artworks, with visitors saying that they thought the stones helped to "enhance rather than detract" from the environment, and that they "always make you stop and have a look". There were several suggestions that the main messages of the stones were strongly related to a sense of place and that they made "you think about the landscape" (anon).

## key issue 4 - time + change

### How can an artwork provide for the future?

The legacy of the Companion Stones is manifested in the way they position themselves in their own time and place.

Time and change play a major part in their conception and design, with the poetry on the stones seeking to mark the Companion Stones as a signpost or guide – not, as their guide stoop predecessors "to the local market towns – but towards the future" (Companion Stones publication, 2010)

Part of this reference to our time is evident in the self-sufficiency of the artworks in their promotion, the Companion Stones web address is carved into each stone; providing a way for interested visitors to find out a bit more about the project without having to erect some sort of plaque or sign next to them.

However, there has been some criticism on the use of this strikingly modern inscription in the middle of some fairly remote settings: "I would prefer not to have other people's poems, carved in rock, thrust in my face while I am out walking, not to mention the www domain names carved underneath them" (anon).

Charles Monkhouse has stated however, that the Companion Stones must be "of their time". The stones are intended to be a statement of present culture, something which may become the 'cultural heritage' of the future and "the website address labels it as the twenty-first century" (Monkhouse, 2012). One survey respondent praised the project for this reason, as it "Brings something about the future to the Peak".

## research findings

To what extent is the case study Companion Stones a success? It has proven itself through the visitor survey responses to be generally well liked. It has caused debate among some and has had several very negative reactions. And it is this provocation of interest and debate which actually suggests its success as a piece of art: "effectively art in many ways is exploitative, it exploits the landscape, it exploits people, its provocative, it generates reactions, its meant to generate reactions, sometimes those reactions are going to be uncomfortable and sometimes that's intentional. But because everyone brings their own perspectives and their own perceptions to it, a dozen people will see the same piece of art in a dozen different ways" (Smith, 2012)

What place does art have in a National Park? The case study shows that it can play its part in the incredibly diverse topic of interpretation and understanding that Park Authorities have to deal with. It can also help to develop a cultural presence that is of the time, with local artists and creative people utilising their potential to influence future cultural heritage: "the original business of heritage... is that they also see landscape as evolving and changing. Working with the national trust people, their agenda is also about change, and what they want to use art for is to help manage the change, how to talk to the public about what change is going on" (Monkhouse, 2012). Importantly, this research also highlights the need for artworks to respond very carefully to the local context, for example through the selection of materials and location, especially in remote locations.

The National Park policy review suggests that there is not currently much in the way of formal arts strategy for the National Parks in Britain. However, evidence of the success of arts projects that have been put in place, including this case study example, suggest that Parks Authorities should continue to be innovative in their interpretation strategies by including arts projects. These can benefit public perception by highlighting cultural as well as natural heritage issues, and by simply adding to the park user experience.