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Session 48: *Attractions and Experiences: the Uses of History in Tourist Development*

*Selling history in an age of industrial decline:  
heritage tourism in Robin Hood county.*

Peter Lyth

Christel DeHaan Tourism & Travel Research Institute,  
University of Nottingham Business School, Jubilee Campus,  
Wollaton Road, Nottingham, NG8 1BB, UK.

**Email: [PeterLyth@aol.com](mailto:PeterLyth@aol.com)**

“... the spinning jenny is in the museum, the oil is drying up. Other people make things cheaper. Sometimes we are ahead of the game, sometimes behind. But what we *do* have, what we shall always have, is what others don't: an accumulation of time. (England) is a nation of great age, great

peaks, and had weather which is notoriously bad, they could only be one thing - its own history, or 'heritage'. Britain would market a skilfully-crafted version of her past to a new generation of heritage tourists.

After considering the nature of heritage and tourism in a postmodern society, this paper focuses on the English county of Nottinghamshire, the traditional home of Robin Hood. It looks at the growth of heritage tourism in Britain, the emergence of 'heritage sites' and the way their commercial success reflects a new type of 'lifestyle experience' tourism which has emerged as an accompanying feature of de-industrialisation.

### *1. Heritage tourism and paradigm shift*

Tourism is now vital to many economies in the world and Britain is no exception to this trend. British tourist revenue has increased rapidly since the 1970s and is now worth around £75 billion (2002-03).<sup>5</sup> Of that total figure, around £60 billion is spending by domestic tourists, amongst whom 73 per cent make trips within Britain by car. Over 2 million jobs in Britain (about 8 per cent of total employment in the British economy) are directly or indirectly attributable to tourism.<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly therefore tourism produces massive economic benefits. Tourists themselves are inclined to be heavy spenders and attraction managers invest large sums in the local economies of tourist destinations. This investment reduces local unemployment as workers made redundant by de-industrialisation are hired by tourism-related enterprises. Certainly there is concern about the social and environmental impact of tourism on local communities, but policy-makers remain generally sanguine; tourists 'take nothing but pictures and leave nothing but footprints' is a common motto for those who believe that tourism is the salvation of regions in economic decline.<sup>7</sup>

Tourism's growth has coincided not only with the de-industrialisation of mature economies like Britain's, but also with the phenomenon known as postmodernism. As a movement postmodernism is perhaps most commonly known within the fields of architecture, literature and the visual arts, but it also has a number of salient attributes which should inform any discussion of tourism as it has developed since the 1970s. At its most fundamental level postmodernism can be taken to mean a way of comprehending or experiencing the world which challenges Enlightenment notions of reason and truth. This questioning of belief has taken the form of eclecticism, fragmentation, and cultural pluralism and pastiche. As a result of the acceleration in production, exchange, consumption and communication that characterises advanced capitalist society, time and space have been 'compressed' and the distinction between past, present and future has become blurred. History has become 'hollowed out' and its chronological framework eroded; what is 'old' has become almost anything that is past, whether it is the Beatles, Beethoven or Beowulf. With this compression of time and space has come a diminished sense of place and belonging, and a correspondingly increase in levels of insecurity. We have become anxious about our identity and search for historical roots and a sense of authenticity, what David Harvey has called 'eternal truths'.<sup>8</sup> And because of its challenge to the established nature of truth, postmodernism has caused the distinction between reality and representation to fade; the *idea* of reality has become more important than reality itself. The experience of an image or a simulation of reality hahin3 [(cen Tc 2.517(an )





Patrick Wright has noted with some cynicism that the NT is a showcase for buildings representing the past of an aristocratic oligarchy for the 'gaze' of a contemporary middle-class tourists; 'an ethereal kind of holding company for the dead (but not gone) spirit of the nation'.<sup>22</sup> Certainly the NT is middle class and it is not surprising to learn that heritage tourists generally



'vernacularization' offers 'ordinary people now' the chance to encounter and learn about 'ordinary people then'.<sup>37</sup>

would naturally take place, as far as possible, through a marriage of backward-looking heritage and forward-looking private *enterprise*.<sup>41</sup> By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were few towns or cities in Britain that were not working on their 'heritage image' and putting up the signs that





*Figure 1*

Brown signs, mounted together with green, white and yellow road signs, indicating the direction to 'The Tales of

demands a semiotic approach. Tourists are themselves semioticians; all over the world they are searching for and reading “signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behaviour, exemplary Oriental scenes, typical American thruways, traditional English pubs ...”<sup>47</sup> They look constantly for what Dean MacCannell calls ‘markers’ and heritage sites depend upon these markers, whether they are brown road signs or something less obvious such as souvenir shops or plaques on walls telling

take an ironic delight in its falseness; they don't care if events are 'staged' so long as they are

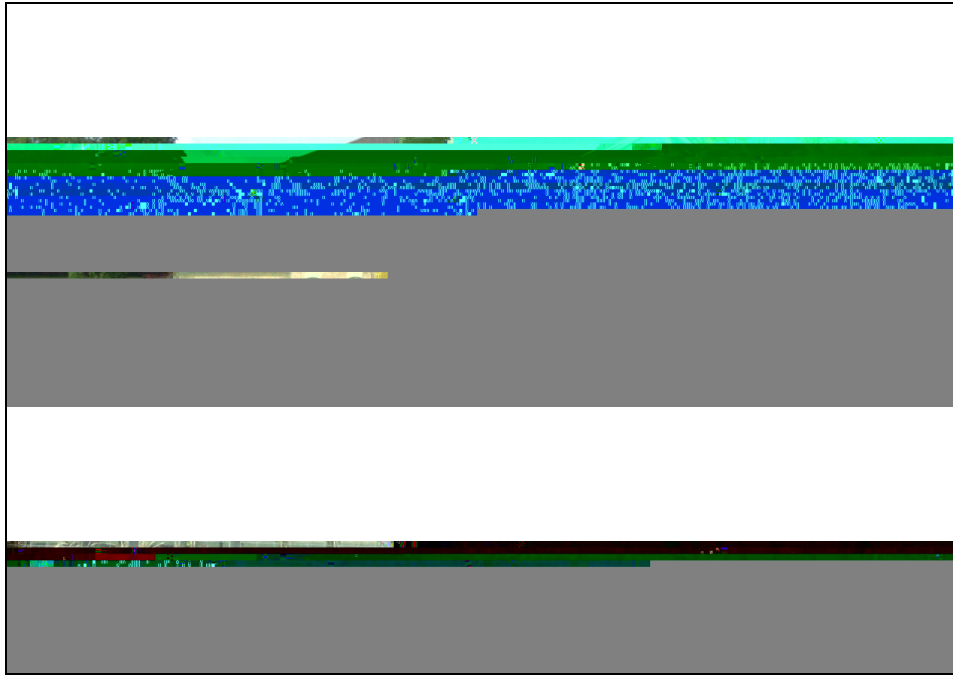
'greenwood' of Sherwood (escaping in the nick of time from the Sheriff's men!), the attraction asked:

“Are you brave enough to enter the UK's greatest medieval adventure? Step back in time to the days when England's best loved outlaw waged war against his arch enemy, the Sheriff of Nottingham. The days when good was good and evil was most foul.”

The publicity ends with the slogan, in a style wonderfully representative of the 'lifestyle experience' paradigm: “*Day and Night, Come and Be an Outlaw !*”<sup>57</sup>

class culture. Yet the way that Lawrence's heritage is celebrated in Eastwood draws on the new rather than the older model. Tourists are invited to follow a blue line painted on the pavement starting from the house where he was born, taking a route that passes various locations from Lawrence's novels (each well 'marked' with an appropriate plaque and Lawrence logo), 'experiencing', as they walk along, the classic Lawrentian landscape of squalid back-to-back miners' housing nestling in the shadow of a coal mine – or at least where the mine had been before its head frame and winding gear were dismantled in the 1990s.<sup>59</sup> Alternative conclusions might be drawn from this: either traditional middle-class literature lovers are now enjoying new 'lifestyle experience' heritage tourism, or the British working class has discovered D. H. Lawrence. Taking both conclusions together suggests however that the two trends are merging; the *methods* of 'lifestyle experience' heritage are being adopted by traditional sites while the *assets* of traditional heritage are being recognised by 'lifestyle experience' practitioners.

The idea that the trends are merging is supported by the third example from Nottinghamshire. Moving from working-class Eastwood to middle-class Southwell, an example can be seen of a local community rising to the challenge of 'lifestyle experience' tourism, and doing so under the auspices of the traditionalist heritage guardian, the National Trust. Southwell is a small market town in the centre of Nottinghamshire with a Norman cathedral (known as the Minster) which has always been a tourist attraction of modest proportions; since 2001 however the Minster has had a rival for tourist revenue in the shape of the refurbished Southwell Workhouse. The Workhouse was built at the height of the Industrial Revolution in 1824 to serve as a compulsory residence for paupers. It is a monument to the Poor Law system which was adopted throughout Britain after 1834 and it served as harsh quarters for the destitute members of the Southwell community for over a century. By the 1950s it had become an old people's home run by the local



*Figure 3*

The Workhouse: a National Trust property at Southwell, Nottinghamshire. View from the car park. [Photo: Peter Lyth]

piece of built heritage for the nation. But also because they recognised an opportunity to acquire a ‘museum’ dedicated to the past of ordinary people; it was a foray from the traditional into ‘vernacular’ heritage. In fact the Southwell Workhouse is a remarkable synthesis of traditional and ‘lifestyle experience’ heritage. The building itself is fairly undistinguished and certainly very different from the majority of NT properties; instead of portraying the lifestyle of rich aristocrats it presents the lives of Britain’s poorest and most unfortunate. But it does more than *represent* them because the Workhouse borrows ‘lifestyle experience’ techniques to allow visitors to actually ‘experience’ life as a destitute pauper in Victorian England. Tourists ‘journey through’ the Workhouse much as they move through the replica of mediaeval Nottingham at The Tales of Robin Hood or follow the blue line at Eastwood in the steps of D.H.Lawrence. While a factual commentary is provided by audio handsets, they are confronted with Workhouse ‘staff’ (usually NT volunteers acting the part), dressed in the working smocks of the period and speaking to them in the local accent of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Nottinghamshire. Museum staff who are ever present in traditional NT attractions have become actors, and their traditional didactic role has been taken over by machines.

### *Conclusion*

One further characteristic of the Southwell Workhouse confirms its status as a ‘lifestyle experience’ heritage site in postmodern Britain: the first thing the visitor to the Workhouse sees is a car park. As with many NT properties, for all but those people living in the immediate

usage has declined in Britain and even low income households have acquired a car; the 'collective gaze' of mass tourism has given way to 'solitary gaze' of the car-owning individualist.

By way of conclusion we can say that there is a fundamental change taking place in the nature of the heritage tourism which is growing at such a dramatic rate in Britain. The old paradigm characterised by middle-class visits to traditional sites (the homes of 'the good and the great') is giving way to a newer one which involves a much more *declass * appreciation and experience of heritage, often representing ordinary people who did ordinary jobs. This paradigm shift is contemporaneous with a structural shift in the British economy from manufacturing industry to service industry – of which tourism is of course fast becoming the largest sector. Whether the British obsession with heritage is a symptom of decline and the cause perhaps of a backward-looking sentimentality that has discouraged attempts to meet the economic challenges of the future, it is an undeniable fact that heritage is big business and provides jobs for many of the people who lost their livelihoods with de-industrialisation. And there is one more footnote to add: the trend towards the active 'experience' of heritage, particularly of industrial heritage, rather than the passive appreciation of historical artefacts, has allowed a new generation and class of tourists to see the ordinary lives of people who were inevitably less fortunate than themselves; even if you have just lost your job at the shipyard or the mine, it is reassuring to know your fate will never be as bad as that of an inmate of the Southwell Workhouse ...

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> The creed of the cynical PR guru Jerry Batson in Julian Barnes', *England, England*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1998; 39-40. This 'postmodern' novel is widely celebrated as a dystopian critique of contemporary tourism.
  - <sup>2</sup> *The Big N – Welcome to Nottingham and Nottinghamshire*, [www.visitnottingham.com](http://www.visitnottingham.com)
  - <sup>3</sup> The literature on the history of British holiday-making is now substantial; some significant examples would be Piers Brendon,





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46 See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Telo Press, St.Louis, 1981.  
47 Jonathan Culler, 'The Semiotics of Tourism' in Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its  
48 Institutions*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988; 155  
49 Culler, *Semiotics of Tourism*; 165-6.  
50 J. Craik, 'The culture of tourism', in C. Rojek & J. Urry, (eds.), *Touring Cultures, Transformations in Leisure  
and Theory*, London, Routledge, 121.  
51 Stephen F. Mills, 'Open-Air Museums and the Tourist Gaze', in David Crouch and Nina Lübbren (eds.),  
*Visual Culture and Tourism*, Berg, Oxford & New York, 2003; 86-7.  
52 G. Moscardo, 'Cultural and Heritage tourism: the Great Debates', in B. Faulkner, G. Moscardo & E. Laws,  
(eds.), *Tourism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Lessons from Experience*, Continuum, London, 2000; 8. See also P.  
53 Boniface & P. J. Fowler, *Heritage and Tourism in the 'Global Village'*, Routledge, London, 1993, also J. G.  
Robb, Tourism and legends: archaeology of heritage, *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol.25, 1998; 579-96.  
54 Rojek, *Ways of Escape*; 177.  
55 Around 34 million tourists visited Nottinghamshire in 2003, worth around £1.2 million in revenue and  
creating over 20,000 jobs. Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor,  
*ExperienceNottinghamshire*, [http://capture.bhm.lon.world.net/upload/ENL\\_GB\\_201\\_](http://capture.bhm.lon.world.net/upload/ENL_GB_201_STEAM_Nottinghamshire)  
Nottinghamshire.  
56 No real Robin Hood has ever been identified beyond dispute but if he did exist it was before the 14<sup>th</sup> century  
when his deeds are first recorded.  
57 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1972; 42. As Hobsbawm points out, "taking  
from the rich and giving to the poor is a familiar and established custom, or at least an ideal moral obligation,  
whether in the green wood of Sherwood Forest or in the American south-west of Billy the Kid ...",  
Hobsbawm, *Bandits*; 46.  
58 Originally a non-profit making organisation owned by the city council, The Tales of Robin Hood  
attraction passed into private ownership in 1996.  
59 <http://www.robinhood.uk.com>  
60 Alan Aldridge, *Consumption*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2003; 87.  
The idea for the blue line was apparently copied from the 'freedom trail' painted on the sidewalk of the  
American city of Boston in Massachusetts.  
<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/places/theworkhouse>