

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

“... 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 history, great accumulated wisdom. Social and cultural history – stacks of it, reams of it – eminently marketable, never more so than in the current climate ... This isn't self-pity, this is the strength of our position, our glory, our product placement. We are the new pioneers. We must sell our past to other nations as their future!” Julian Barnes, *England, England*.¹

“... a county of outstanding beauty that includes Sherwood Forest, lively market towns and wonderful historic buildings. It's also home to the world's best loved outlaw, Robin Hood ... discover Nottinghamshire today.” *The Big 'N' – Welcome to Nottinghamshire*.²

Over the course of the second half of the 20th century Britain changed from an economy based on industrial manufacturing to one based on services. This transformation caused an enormous upheaval as Victorian heavy industries such as coal mining, steel production and ship-building were abandoned, and the communities where these industries once existed suffered economic and social disruption. Most modern manufacturing industries also declined to the point where their contribution to the national economy was marginal. Car production in the West Midlands of England, for example, which was once a major employer, shrunk to almost nothing.

Contemporaneous with this move to a service economy was a dramatic growth in tourism. Tourism was what Britons had once done for a couple of weeks a year when they were not working in industry. They journeyed by train to the seaside or took one of Thomas Cook's splendid tours to the Continent.³ After the introduction of the jet engine to commercial air transport in the 1960s they began to travel en masse to the beaches of the Mediterranean, the essential nature of tourism, however, remained the same: it was something on which Britons *spent* rather than *earned* their money.⁴ In the 1970s this picture began to change. Tourism, which governments had hitherto disdained as hardly worthy of the British worker, grew in economic importance. Britain's tourism 'assets' were re-evaluated and repackaged to meet demand from a new market. But what were those 'assets'? Since Britain possessed no golden beaches or Alpine

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).⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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'.⁸ 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 has become as real, indeed more real, than reality itself; it has become what the French theorist Jean Baudrillard calls 'hyperreal'.⁹ Within the context of postmodernism, tourism, and in particular heritage tourism, is more easily analysed. Where image is swapped for reality, historical roots are consumed to assuage a sense of insecurity, and the *idea* of experience is more compelling (and a whole lot safer!) than real experience, heritage tourist sites will surely follow.

In what follows a shift in the working paradigm of tourism is posited as an explanatory model for the dramatic growth in heritage sites in de-industrialised and postmodern Britain. If one accepts with the sociologists that demand for tourism results from a need to ‘escape’ from *the ordinary* (work, domestic arrangements, etc.) into *the extraordinary* (what we seek when we go on holiday), and that this act of escape by tourists is driven and structured by culturally-determined notions of what is extraordinary and therefore worth viewing - what John Urry has termed the ‘tourist gaze’ - then it is clear that in postmodern Britain the ‘gaze’ has changed.¹⁰ The mass tourism of cheap package tours which characterised escape from the modern economy of Fordist industrial production has given way to a tourism based on the consumption of a broad palette of sights, attractions and, above all, *experiences*.¹¹ The paradigm has shifted from mass tourism (modern) to ‘lifestyle experience’ tourism (postmodern). And part of the effect of this shift has been to ‘universalize’ tourism, changing it from an experience and economic activity limited in time and space to an everyday mode of perception and experience. “As ‘tourism’ *per se* declines in specificity”, notes Urry, “the universalising the tourist gaze (means that) people are much of the time ‘tourists’ whether they like it or not.”¹² The key features of these paradigms can be described as follows:

The traditional *mass tourism* paradigm

- Tourism is an escape from the drudgery of work
- The ‘tourist gaze’ is collective (Urry)
- The tourist product (holiday) is standardised (eg. a ‘*Thomson Holiday*’)
- The holiday experience is superficial and trivial
- The impact on the destination is generally negative

The postmodern *lifestyle experience* paradigm

- The boundary between work and tourism is blurred, leisure becomes more ‘serious’.
- The ‘tourist gaze’ is solitary or ‘romantic’ (Urry).
- The tourist product (holiday) is multiform; tourists seek novel sights and experiences, and meet local people with the object of acquiring ‘cultural capital’.
- Tourists search for deeper meanings from their holidays
- The impact on the destination is less negative

The ascendancy of the ‘lifestyle experience’ paradigm in tourism is both the cause and a consequence of heritage. Because heritage is not history, but rather *the contemporary use* of history, and because it is not necessarily concerned with what is authentic or historically correct, but presents the past to the public in a manner tailored to contemporary needs and purposes, heritage fulfils the postmodern passion for collecting and consuming individual ‘experiences’ exceptionally well. It is the new economy. Indeed it is hardly an exaggeration to say that in Britain heritage has reached the status of a new religion; Britain worships its past.¹³ Heritage offers a novel (if spurious) sense of place and identity to a country which has lost its old ‘eternal truths’ of industry and empire, reassuring us that our lives are better in the new service economy than those of our parents in ‘the bad old days’ of the industrial past.¹⁴ For the many critics of heritage we are dupes, settling for inauthentic, ‘improved upon’ history, made more entertaining for consumption by tourists.

“Instead of manufacturing goods,” writes Robert Hewison, “we are manufacturing heritage, a commodity which nobody seems able to define, but which everyone is eager to sell.”¹⁵

Not all voices are critical and Raphael Samuel, for example, praises heritage as ‘democratisation of culture’ and notes that visiting museums and heritage sites can be an inspiration to learn about history, especially for children. Whereas tradition and heritage used to ‘belong’ to the upper class now they have been appropriated by the masses and the only people who regret this are élitist intellectuals who think history should remain within the walls of academia.¹⁶ What is common to most commentators, however, is the belief that heritage as a tourist product took off in the 1980s as Margaret Thatcher’s government sought to mobilize images of traditional British culture as a substitute for Britain’s disappearing industries. Accordingly, heritage had a *political* agenda: while we are busy shaking our heads in bemusement at the lives of people in the past, we have our backs turned to the chaos and contradictions of people’s lives in the present.¹⁷ Whatever one’s views on the ‘meaning’ of heritage, it is undoubtedly a highly prized tourism resource. And it is important to remember that heritage is consumed at different levels by different types of tourist and therein lies its strength. As the relics and events of the past are ‘commodified’ for tourist consumption, this may indeed trivialise the past but this process of commodification increases the commercial prospects of the tourist product and therefore of the tourist industry.

The paradigm shift referred to above is reflected in two trends in British heritage tourism. The first, corresponding to the mass tourism paradigm, is a traditional evocation and exhibition of British history. Its character is overwhelmingly middle-class, it is dominated by scholarly interpretations and guarded by august national institutions. The second trend, corresponding to the lifestyle experience paradigm, is more proletarian in character, less concerned with historical accuracy, focused on the everyday experiences of common people and presented through some kind of interpersonal or direct ‘experience’ of the past – for example, a ‘journey’ through a tableaux representing some historical event or period in which tourists come to face-to-face with heritage centre staff (suitably costumed) ‘acting’ the role of historical characters. A further feature of two trends is their representation of *place*: the traditional model, based on the palaces and predilections of the aristocracy, reflects national virtues and tastes, the ‘lifestyle experience’ model, by contrast, is overwhelming *local* in its emphasis: it is about English, Welsh or Scottish regions, towns, villages – above all communities.

The two trends are equally vibrant in commercial terms and the rapid growth of one certainly does not mean the decline of the other. Traditional heritage draws on at least two centuries of cultural evolution in Britain, beginning with the tastes and values of an influential elite for whom the conservation of artefacts and buildings became something of an obsession.¹⁸ This is the origin of heritage tourism’s ‘assets’ in the 21st century, although it must be admitted that most of the very old buildings in Britain, for example Roman remains and mediaeval castles, have survived through chance rather than any deliberate act of preservation. In any case Britain was amongst the first countries in the world to enact legislation to protect its buildings. The 1882 Ancient Monuments Protection Act led to the ‘listing’ of buildings and their official protection by the state and after the Second World War the system of protecting historic buildings was formalised in the Town & Country Planning Acts.¹⁹ Traditional heritage in Britain grew out of the fears and passions of an educated middle-class, and ‘traditional’ museums still have an association with power and authority, and appear to serve a privileged customer base.²⁰ And the institutions of British heritage have been traditionally middle-class, with the initiative for their formation often coming from influential private organisations and individuals rather than the government. Chief amongst these ‘heritage guardians’ has been the National Trust (NT). Founded in 1895, the NT has been an extraordinary success story, particularly since the 1970s. It is the biggest conservation body in Europe, with an annual income in 2005 of over £300 million and a membership growth which has been little short of phenomenal: rising from 278,000 in 1971 to 3.4 million in 2005, or around ten times the size of the largest political party in Britain.²¹

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’.²² Certainly the NT is middle class and it is not surprising to learn that heritage tourists generally tend to belong to higher income groups.²³ But the organisation remains dynamic in the sense that it has adapted successfully to the commercial dictates of the tourist industry, adopting in postmodern Britain the techniques of the second, ‘lifestyle experience’ trend in British heritage growth.

The lifestyle experience model is less middle-class in character than the traditional, NT variety and more rooted in ‘consumption through experience’. It is tempting to view the two trends as representatives of high and low culture, but this would be oversimplification. It is more useful to see the lifestyle experience model in terms of Samuel’s ‘democratisation’ of culture - heritage’s embrace of the common man.²⁴ This degeneration of high-brow authority over cultural taste and its replacement by pop culture may be condemned by some observers as a sign of mindless capitalist consumerism,²⁵ but in broadening access to history it has not only transformed the British tourist industry, but may also be turning Britain into an ‘expanding historical culture’ in which the ‘work of inquiry and retrieval is being progressively extended into all kinds of *spheres that would have been thought unworthy of notice in the past*’.²⁶ (italics PL)

Regardless of whether one looks at the traditional or lifestyle experience model, nowhere is the dispute over heritage and tourism more bitter than over the importance of *authenticity*. Is it vital? Or should heritage allow a more flexible approach towards historical accuracy, allowing of the multiple interpretations that are more in keeping with postmodern conceptions of truth and reality? As Barbara Korte explains:

“The loss of the real has been marked as one of the great epistemological problems of postmodernity, whose discussion involves now-familiar conceptualisations such as a preoccupation with images, representations and depthless surfaces, signification without referentials in the real world, the simulacrum, hypereality, cyberworlds and a general shallowing of experience that is easily satisfied with spectacle”.²⁷

Critics of heritage tourism’s lack of authenticity and fondness for spectacle abound. “Heritage is not history, even when it mimics history”, notes Lowenthal. “It uses historical traces and tells historical tales, but these tales and traces are stitched fables that are open neither to critical analysis nor contemporary scrutiny ...”²⁸ For Frederic Jameson heritage tourism is quintessential postmodernity in which we are condemned to seek history through superficial pop images and simulations of that history.²⁹ Heritage tourist sites may look authentic but they are actually repositories of ‘staged authenticity’, a ‘mimesis’ where a ‘facsimile of the past (is) brought to life’, for visitors ‘to enter and experience’.³⁰ This lack of authenticity is heritage tourism’s defining feature, for not only are heritage tourists indifferent to authenticity, they actually acknowledge and welcome inauthenticity; simulation being an attribute of postmodernity. For postmodern tourists simulated authenticity is quite sufficient and, says Chris Rojek, even better than the real thing.³¹

“Postmodernism reverses the tendency in modernist thought to oppose authentic experience with unauthentic experience and to privilege the former. By throwing the symbolic, processed character of social experience into sharp relief, post-modernism problematizes the realm of the authentic.”³²

The achievement of heritage sites in Britain is, as Rojek has pointed out, to blend genuine and authentic British heritage resources with a simulated ‘experience’ of history; “authentic historical buildings and artefacts are preserved and actors in period costume present themselves as real living people from the past. The authentic and unauthentic are displayed as equivalent items”.³³ This is the defining quality as well as the commercial force of the ‘lifestyle experience’ paradigm.

2. *The nature of heritage sites in postmodern Britain*

All over 21st century Britain, heritage sites bearing the hallmarks of postmodernism have sprung up in place of factories, mills, mines and shipyards. Indeed in fiction, if not yet in fact, the nation itself has become a single heritage site. For the chief protagonist in Julian Barnes’s novel, the success of *England, England* (a theme park celebration of all things English, packed onto the limited space of the Isle of Wight) proves that people don’t want authenticity, they want convenience; it “is everything you imagined England to be, but more convenient, cleaner, friendlier and more efficient”.³⁴

There are signs of this all over Britain and of the time-space compression that makes history more easily digested by the heritage tourist. At Wigan Pier in the industrial landscape of Lancashire, the Victorian cotton mill is presented in the same manner as Robin Hood and mediaeval banditry in the county of Nottinghamshire, although they are separated by 150 kms and 500 years. The ‘Way We Were’ exhibit at Wigan Pier is centred on a converted cotton warehouse called ‘The Orwell’, in celebration of the novelist George Orwell, amongst whose early works was the biting piece of social commentary *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Orwell’s book recorded poverty and destitution in the 1930s; however ‘The Orwell’ now serves as a pub and function centre for the more prosperous - a “perfect venue for wedding or private party”. The publicity for the Wigan Pier *Experience* is both evocative of the hard lives of industrial Britain that we have thankfully left behind, and optimistic about Wigan’s postmodern future:

“Welcome to Wigan Pier, a proud past and a very exciting future. Situated on the banks of the Leeds-Liverpool canal. Heart of Wigan Pier Experience is *The Way We Were* – an authentic recreation of life in the 1900s for the people of Wigan and surrounding Lancashire. Witness the Victorian way of life – from schooldays through to work and play. You can experience life below ground at the coalface; see how the famous Lancashire pit brow lasses lived and feel the horrors of the Maypole Colliery disaster. In the ever-popular Victorian schoolroom you can also experience the rigours of a strict Victorian education”. Also there’s the Trencherfield Mill Engine – “the world’s largest original working mill steam engine, located in its original setting, which has recently been restored to its former glory”. Accompanied by a ‘fun, educational and exciting audio-visual show’ telling the story of Trencherfield Mill from 1907 to the present day.³⁵

The examples of Wigan Pier and Robin Hood (which is discussed more fully below) show that there are a number of common elements discernible in the new heritage sites of postmodern Britain, regardless of whether their historical context is Victorian, mediaeval or ancient. These elements exemplify tourism’s ‘lifestyle experience’ paradigm.

Firstly, there is an elevation of *the ordinary* to the rank of what is ‘gaze-worthy’ - for the tourist, extraordinary. The new heritage site celebrates the commonplace, the modest and the mundane, and thereby make it possible for ordinary people to experience heritage in a way which is impossible with the legacies of royalty or the aristocracy.³⁶ In the words of one authority, this

‘vernacularization’ offers ‘ordinary people now’ the chance to encounter and learn about ‘ordinary people then’.³⁷ Vernacularization has also meant a movement from the rural and quaint to the industrial and urban, from palaces where the aristocracy played to factories where working men and women worked. This ‘industrial heritage’ has brought back to life machinery, buildings and landscapes ‘that originated with industrial processes from earlier periods’.³⁸ It is a branch of heritage tourism which Britain has virtually pioneered and this should come as no surprise since the ‘first industrial nation’ possesses a large collection of 19th century heritage ‘resources’ in the form of redundant artefacts and buildings left over from the country’s rapid de-industrialisation. Thus, for example, exhausted collieries are now exploited as heritage sites where once Victorian capitalists exploited the coal seams beneath them.³⁹ Looking at a list of ten major heritage sites opened in England since the 1970s, it is clear they all focus on past industry and on the lives of ordinary people:

1. Beamish Open Air Museum (Durham)
2. Wigan Pier Heritage Centre (Lancashire)
3. Ironbridge Gorge Museum (Shropshire)
4. Quarry Bank Mill (Cheshire)
5. Black Country World (West Midlands)
6. Birmingham Canal (West Midlands)
7. Living Dockyard (Chatham, Kent)
8. Pencil Museum (Cumbria)
9. Albert Dock (Liverpool)
10. Big Pit (South Wales)

A second element in new heritage sites is an emphasis on the *local*. Sites usually represent a partnership of local private and public interests. Just as the seaside resorts that grew up in 19th century Britain were the result of private and public initiatives - local authorities invested in promenades, piers and public toilets, while the private sector built hotels and ran pleasure steamers – so today the development of tourist attractions is a combination of private capital and support from local and national government. It might be said that tourism is always a local affair: it is local communities that benefit from the revenue it earns and it is local communities that have to suffer the consequences of hordes of tourists roaming their neighbourhoods. But as the list above illustrates, there is a strong connection between ‘the ordinary’ and ‘the local’. People searching for their roots and the ‘eternal truths’ they feel they have lost in postmodernity, will tend to do so near to home – heritage is *local* heritage. Place is often as important as time and many new heritage sites in Britain are ‘stories of a place’. To use Harvey’s formulation again, the idealisation of place and community reflects the general retreat from time-space compression and the dislocations of globalised culture - part of ‘the search for secure moorings in a shifting world’.⁴⁰

The local emphasis in British heritage also has a more prosaic explanation. New heritage sites developed within a network of local relationships: between the site and local businesses, local councils, local history societies and local enthusiasts. And this process was encouraged as a matter of public policy in the 1980s and 1990s by governments (at both the local and national level) anxious to relieve hardship in areas of chronic industrial decline and unemployment. With public funding often available from central government or national bodies like the Heritage Lottery Fund, tourism was to transform derelict manufacturing areas and unproductive agricultural land into new spaces for cultural consumption. Heritage would be part of regional economic recovery and local authorities were encouraged to invest in their cultural ‘assets’ in order to foster a leisure-led regeneration of failing industrial areas. And because the heritage boom coincided with the Thatcherite *Zeitgeist* of entrepreneurship and privatisation, this process

would naturally take place, as far as possible, through a marriage of backward-looking heritage and forward-looking private *enterprise*.⁴¹ By the end of the 20th century there were few towns or cities in Britain that were not working on their 'heritage image' and putting up the signs that pointed the way to their heritage assets. Local communities tried to maximise these assets in the market place and adopt strategies which were calculated to encourage the employment of local people. Like new tourist economies in the developing world, they sought to minimise 'leakage' to the global economy and multinational companies, but nonetheless heritage sites in Britain, even as they were addressing local history, were guided by commercial criteria and created tourist packages of standardised amenities and interpretative approaches, eg. audio-visual shows, gondola rides and walk-through *tableaux* leading to the inevitable gift shop at the end of the 'experience' selling postcards and pottery.

The third element in Britain's new heritage sites, and one which is very much connected to the first two, is *commercialisation and branding*. Private interests have taken a lead in an area of social and economic life previously dominated by public agencies like the National Trust, and unlike those bodies, their aim is to make a profit. Heritage 'theme parks' like Wigan Pier, for example, are created and managed with clear commercial objectives in mind, and stress popular entertainment over the more educational approach of 'traditional' heritage sites. They are part of a leisure industry whose purpose is to provide enjoyable experiences in response to a growing demand for *the past as entertainment*. With the commercialisation of heritage has come *branding* and the marketing efforts of new heritage sites in Britain are now showing a level of sophistication to match that of more tangible manufactured products. Perhaps the most telling example of this is the most obvious – road signs. Because heritage is increasingly dependant on the car and road transport, the marketing of heritage has become an exercise largely directed at car owners and road users. The white-on-brown road signs which have sprouted along Britain's roads since the early 1990s are in every sense a form of government-sponsored roadside advertisement for tourist products. Road signs in Britain follow a standard colour pattern similar to other European countries with brown indicating the direction to a tourist destination or attraction.⁴² But brown signs do more than indicate the direction, they also inform the motorist of the attraction's *existence*; they cross the line between road sign and advertisement and serve as 'markers' of the tourist gaze'.⁴³ As the number of heritage sites, and their importance for local economies, has increased, so have the number of brown signs. In the competition to attract heritage tourists, the award by the responsible government agency, the Department for Transport (DfT), of a brown sign on the approach roads to a local heritage site confers the respectability of official sanction and serves as a highly effective tool by which a local community can brand and market its cultural buildings and artefacts to tourists. The brown sign 'says', in effect: "it's official: we're an important tourist destination".



Figure 1

Brown signs, mounted together with green, white and yellow road signs, indicating the direction to ‘The Tales of Robin Hood’ in Nottingham, England. (Photo: Peter Lyth)

In fact evidence from the DfT suggests that brown signs may be a little too effective as advertising

“While it is recognised that white on brown signs are perceived by tourist businesses as useful marketing tools, this is not the purpose for which they are provided. They should not be used as a means of circumventing planning control of advertisements ...”

The DfT felt that the use of standardised and easily recognisable symbols would, by consolidating the recognition value of established tourist attractions like the heritage sites of the National Trust (which has its own distinctive oak leaf logo) also serve to deter new tourist sites seeking free advertising.⁴⁴ In fact brown sign logos and symbols are, in effect, heritage brand names just as the brown signs themselves are advertising. By creating a sense of familiarity with the heritage product, brown signs ‘brand’ heritage sites in the eyes of the motorised tourist in the same way that a red sign announcing Coca Cola alerts the thirsty driver to the presence and availability of a cool drink. We know from marketing theory that branding facilitates sales of consumer goods by providing product identification and by streamlining shopping. The consumer develops a loyalty to a branded product and is attracted to the symbol, logo or ‘sign’ that indicates that brand’s whereabouts.⁴⁵ To motorists brown signs indicate culture and heritage. They pass road signs, often at high speed (like the supermarket shopper in a hurry) and their reaction to these signs, and their colour, is unconscious, in the way that a Coca Cola customer lifts a red can from the shelf. The motorist looks for blue if they want to go faster on a motorway, and for brown if there is time for culture, history and heritage.⁴⁶

The importance of signs and semiotics in the analysis of heritage tourism is confirmed by the interest of semioticians. Indeed for Jonathan Culler, the cultural analysis and criticism of tourism

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 ...”⁴⁷ 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 the tourist why that particular place is significant. These markers frame the site for tourists and for Culler they serve a semiotic purpose: an ‘empty’ site becomes a sight worthy of the tourist gaze through the attachment of a marker. An unremarkable place or piece of ground becomes a heritage attraction only when a sign or plaque is added reading, for example:

‘King Charles I spent his last night of freedom in this pub’,

Or

‘On this spot Paul Morel met Miriam Leivers in D.H.Lawrence’s famous novel, *Sons and Lovers*’.

As more markers are added the markers themselves begin to become the attraction; we look for brown signs, plaques and souvenir shops with almost the same anticipation as we look for the heritage site itself.⁴⁸

The fourth, final and perhaps most important element to be observed in Britain’s new heritage sites is the emphasis on *experience*. The importance of experiencing the site, rather than merely gazing upon it, is a function of the other elements of ordinariness and commercialisation. The visitor to a new industrial heritage site has a more active role than the visitor to a traditional museum or National Trust property. Instead of the passive gaze at authentic pieces of the past, we are invited to ‘experience’ our heritage by putting ourselves in the shoes of our ordinary (and usually unfortunate) ancestors: experience the life of a South Wales miner on his knees with a pickaxe at the *Rhondda Heritage Park*, or try your hand as a Liverpool docker in the Maritime Museum at *Albert Dock*. New heritage offers ‘customised excursions into other cultures and places’, at the end of which the tourist leaves with evidence of the cultural identities he or she has ‘visited’, markers in the form of postcards, t-shirts, souvenirs, etc.⁴⁹ Thus the postmodern tourist’s quest for experience at heritage sites is a quest for an experience of signs – “I’ve been there, and done that, and here’s the sign to prove it” (a t-shirt or postcard) – indeed the postmodern tourist’s experience is incomplete unless it is accompanied by the appropriate sign or semiotic marker.

New heritage is about engaging the past – experiencing traditional and now defunct industries, or living the lives, if only for a few minutes, of legendary heroes. Where heritage cannot be easily assimilated by the uneducated or uninitiated visitor, the ‘experience’ is strengthened by restoration of the site or even by the building of an entire replica. Experiencing the idea or ‘feel’ of the past is more important than historical authenticity; above all history has to be made accessible for heritage tourism to work. For example, if an open museum such as the York heritage site in York had been left entirely as an archaeological dig and the Viking remains it uncovered were left in situ, the number of visitors to the museum would be far fewer and its commercial objectives not realised.⁵⁰ Replication and simulation of history may upset academics and traditionalists but for ‘lifestyle experience’ tourists it is *de rigueur*. Rather than worrying about authenticity, they enjoy in the ‘simulational’ nature of heritage tourism and seek a ‘hyperreal’ experience of what they believe the past should have been like, in which animation may be more important than authenticity and the commercial representation of heritage just as satisfactory as historical accuracy.⁵¹ The best example of this principle is Disneyland – the ultimate simulated heritage site. Visitors know that the ‘Magic Kingdom’ is not real and they

take an ironic delight in its falseness; they don't care if events are 'staged' so long as they are staged well, like the Walt Disney films upon which they are based. As the prototype for the 'simulational' experience, Disneyland is frequently taken as a model for the representation of heritage and there is no doubt that the Disney 'effect' has been imitated by industrial heritage sites and even traditional museums in Britain.⁵²

3. *Heritage in Nottinghamshire - Robin Hood County*

Three examples from the county of Nottinghamshire illustrate the response of a local community to industrial decline and the growth of interest in heritage tourism. 'The Tales of Robin Hood', D.H. Lawrence in Eastwood and the Southwell Workhouse all exhibit in varying degrees the key elements of new heritage discussed above. Nottinghamshire is chosen because it is typical of 'average England', indeed it is in almost every sense, 'middle England'. It is a small, flat landlocked county with little to show for itself in terms of appealing landscape. It certainly has no obvious tourist attractions like London, Stratford or Edinburgh, or the Lake District, Cornwall and Devon, and the Scottish Highlands. The city of Nottingham had a dynamic local economy based on textiles, pharmaceuticals, bicycle manufacturing and one of the most famous tobacco firms in the world, but nearly all of this was in decline by the 1970s. The string of collieries across the coalfield in the west of the county, which had been the major source of employment there for over a century, had likewise all but vanished by 1990. Nottinghamshire's response to de-industrialisation was to turn itself into a service and entertainment centre, with tourism as an important part of this strategy.⁵³ It looked around for suitable sites, artefacts, or narratives of its historical past, with commercial potential. The county had one internationally-recognised icon and he was pressed into service: Robin Hood. Nottinghamshire became the 'Robin Hood County' with appropriate signs on the county boundaries.

Robin Hood was, by chance, an almost ideal symbol of postmodern heritage. Although his legend is at least 600 years old he is actually a very contemporary figure.⁵⁴ As a medieval knight, he is romantic, quick-witted, with a mischievous sense of humour and, of course, good with a bow and arrow. Dispossessed by greedy Norman landlords, he is forced to live beyond the law, in the depths of Sherwood Forest, from which he strikes at corrupt officials and tyrannical overlords, giving the proceeds of his thieving to the long-suffering poor who are all around him. He is what Eric Hobsbawm has aptly called a 'noble robber' and it is not hard to imagine him as 21st century celebrity.⁵⁵ The Robin Hood story is attractive to a society where inherited wealth is viewed with disfavour and everyone is encouraged to think that they too can be rich and successful. Whatever the truth of the legend and the nobility of his motives (and we have already established that postmodern tourists care little for authenticity), Robin Hood still strikes a chord and his connection to Nottinghamshire has been assiduously propagated in the service of heritage tourism. The few remaining fragments of Sherwood Forest in the northwest of the county became a heritage country park in the 1970s and tourist facilities developed with car parking, park ranger service and a Robin Hood Visitor Centre. The massive 'Major Oak' tree, Robin's legendary hiding place, was displayed, much preserved and protected, as a genuine heritage artefact and the centrepiece of the park. Today the Sherwood Country Park in Nottinghamshire has annual visitor figures of around 500,000.

Within the city of Nottingham, home of Robin Hood's arch foe, the Sheriff of Nottingham, a highly successful heritage site called 'The Tales of Robin Hood' was opened in 1989, on a street appropriately named Maid Marion Way.⁵⁶ Complete with actors, and a Disney-style mechanised gondola ride carrying tourists through a mediaeval replica of Nottingham and out into the

‘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 !*”⁵⁷ Visitors to the attraction average about 150,000 per month during the summer season’

The second example of Nottinghamshire’s heritage ‘assets’ which was used to revive a local economy in the throes of de-industrialisation comes from the former coal mining community of Eastwood. By no stretch of the imagination can Eastwood be said to be an attractive town, but it is the home town of D. H. Lawrence who was remembered there until the 1970s, with typical English working-class puritanism and shame, as the man who wrote *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, an obscene book that deserved to be banned. Only when the local collieries began to close and at the same time tourist scholars started coming from as far away as California to visit the humble terraced house where Lawrence was born, did the local community in Eastwood see the potential for heritage tourism and begin to exploit the fact that one of the greatest novelists of the 20th century had grown up in their midst.⁵⁸ Thus a D.H.Lawrence museum and heritage centre was set up, ironically in the building that had once housed the offices of the local mining company and an extensive exhibition of Lawrence’s life and times put together.



Figure 2

The blue line marking the D.H.Lawrence heritage trail through Eastwood, Nottinghamshire. (Photo: Peter Lyth)

D.H.Lawrence is an interesting ‘asset’ to consider in the context of the traditional and ‘lifestyle experience’ paradigms in heritage tourism. Although he came from a strictly working-class background (his father was a miner), as a towering literary figure he is clearly part of a middle-

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.⁵⁹ 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 authority and later it served as public housing for low-income families. In the 1980s however it fell empty and remained derelict, protected by its status as a listed building but lacking any purpose that the local council could recognise. In 1997, just as it looked as if the decaying old Georgian structure would be turned into expensive private apartments, the National Trust rescued it from that fate and announced that it would be opened as a museum. During the next few years the NT completely restored and refurbished the old Georgian building, using £2.25 million in funds from the Heritage Lottery Fund, finally opening it to the paying visitors in 2001.⁶⁰

The Workhouse is the only fully renovated example of such a building in Britain and it is clearly an important resource for historians of Victorian social history. But it also marks a major new departure for the National Trust. Why did the NT buy it? Partly, obviously, because they wanted to secure a unique



The Workhouse at Southwell, a National Trust property opened in 2001

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-19th 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 neighbourhood, it can only be reached by car. One of the most striking aspects of the growth of heritage tourism is the way it reflects the shift from the collective to the solitary gaze (see above). Heritage tourism could not have enjoyed such a boom in a society lacking in individual mobility and it is not a coincidence that its tremendous growth since the 1970s taken place against the background of an equally tremendous growth in car ownership. Public transport

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 *declassé* 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

- ¹ 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.
- ² *The Big N – Welcome to Nottingham and Nottinghamshire*, www.visitnottingham.com
- ³ The literature on the history of British holiday-making is now substantial; some significant examples would be Piers Brendon, *Thomas Cook: 150 Years of Popular Tourism*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1991, Fred Inglis, *The Delicious History of the Holiday*, Routledge, London, 2000, J. A. R. Pimlott, *The Englishman's Holiday*, Harvester Press, London, 1976 and John K. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort: A Social History 1750-1914*, Leicester University Press, 1983, and *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century*, Manchester University Press, 2000.
- ⁴ See Peter Lyth & Marc Dierikx, 'From Privilege to Popularity: the Growth of Leisure Air Travel since 1945', *Journal of Transport History*, Vol.15, No.2, September 1994; 97-116, and Peter Lyth, 'Gimme a ticket on an aeroplane': the jet engine and the revolution in leisure air travel, 1960-90, in Laurent Tissot (ed.), *Development of a Tourist Industry in the 19th and 20th centuries: International Perspectives*, Editions Alphil, Neuchâtel, 2003; 111-22,
- ⁵ DCMS – www.culture.gov.uk/tourism
- ⁶ Dallen Timothy & Stephen Boyd, *Heritage Tourism*, Prentice-Hall, Pearson, Harlow, 2003; 1.
- ⁷ Travel & Tourism Research Association, 1991 Annual Conference, quoted in Stanley Plog, 'Leisure travel: an extraordinary industry faces super-ordinary problems', in William Theobald (ed.), *Global Tourism: the next decade*, Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford, 1994; 41.
- ⁸ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1989; 292.
- ⁹ I draw here on Baudrillard's essay, 'Simulacra and Simulations' reprinted in abridged form in Peter Brooker (ed.), *Modernism/Postmodernism*, Longman, London, 1992.
- ¹⁰ See John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, Sage, London, 1990.
- ¹¹ John Urry, *Consuming Places*, Routledge, London, 1995; 151.
- ¹² Urry, *Tourist Gaze*; 82
- ¹³ For an introduction to the literature on heritage in Britain, see Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain*, Verso, London, 1985, Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, Methuen, London, 1987, David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge 1985 and *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, Cambridge University Press, 1998,

Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory. Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, Verso, London, 1994 and Nick Merriman, *Beyond the Glass Case. The Past, Heritage and the Public*, London, 2000.

14 Lowenthal, *Heritage Crusade*; 128. .

15 Hewison, *Heritage Industry*; 9. See also Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist. A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 199, and Katherine Burnett, 'Heritage, authenticity and history', in S. Drummond & I. Yeoman (eds), *Quality Issues in Heritage Visitor Attractions*, Butterworth, Heinemann, Oxford, 2001, 39-53

16 Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*; 25.

17 Hewison, *Heritage Industry*; 135-8; also Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*.

18 See G. J. Ashworth, "The conserved European city as cultural symbol: the meaning of the text", in Brian Graham (ed.), *Modern Europe: Place, Culture and Identity*, Arnold, London, 1998; 261-86.

19 P. J. Larkham, 'Heritage as planned and conserved' , D. T. Herbert (ed.), *Heritage, Tourism and Society*, Mansell, London, 1995; 95

20 Merriman, *Beyond the Glass Case*, 5, 17.

21 www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/print/w-trust/w-thecharity

22 Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*; 56.

23 See for example, D. Light & R. C. Prentice, 'Who consumes the heritage product? Implications for European heritage tourism', in G. J. Ashworth & P. Larkham (eds.), *Building and New Heritage: culture and identity in the new Europe*, Routledge, London, 1994; 90-116, or N. Merriman, 'The social basis of museum and heritage visiting' in S. M. Pearce (ed.) *Museum Studies in Material Culture*, Leicester University Press, 1989; 153-71.

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25 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*; 60.

26 Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*; 25

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28 David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, New York, Free Press, 1996; 121.

29 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991; 25.

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32 Chris Rojek, *Decentring Leisure: Rethinking Leisure Theory*, Sage, London, 1995; 171.

33 Rojek, *Ways of Escape*; 151

34 Barnes, *England, England*; 184

35 Wigan Pier website, *Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust*, www.wlct.org/tourism/wiganpier.

36 Urry, *Tourist Gaze*; 130.

37 Bella Dicks, *Heritage, Place and Community*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2000; 37.

38 J.A.Edwards & J.C.Llurdés, 'Mines and quarries: industrial heritage tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 23, 1996; 342

39 See J.Alfrey & T.Putnam, *The industrial heritage: managing resources and uses*, Routledge, London, 1992, P.Fowler, *The Past in Contemporary Society: Then, now*, Routledge, London, 1992, or M.Robinson, 'Tourism development in de-industrializing centres in the UK: change, culture and conflict', in M. Robinson & P. Boniface (eds.), *Tourism and Cultural Conflicts*, CAB International, Wallingford, 1999; 129-59

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42 Blue is for motorways, green for trunk roads and white for minor routes to towns and villages. Yellow is for temporary diversions and red indicates a military destination.

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44 1981 regulations provided for blue and white signs for tourist sites, this was changed to white on brown in 1994. Department for Transport, *Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions (TSRGD)*, 1994, directive, 13 August 2001, 1.4, 11.4

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48 Institutions*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988; 155
49 Culler, *Semiotics of Tourism*; 165-6.
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55 Boniface & P. J. Fowler, *Heritage and Tourism in the 'Global Village'*, Routledge, London, 1993, also J. G.
56 Robb, *Tourism and legends: archaeology of heritage*, *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol.25, 1998; 579-96.
57 Rojek, *Ways of Escape*; 177.
58 Around 34 million tourists visited Nottinghamshire in 2003, worth around £1.2 million in revenue and
59 creating over 20,000 jobs. Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor,
60 *ExperienceNottinghamshire*, http://capture.bhm.lon.world.net/upload/ENL_GB_201_STEAM_Nottinghamshire.
No real Robin Hood has ever been identified beyond dispute but if he did exist it was before the 14th century
when his deeds are first recorded.
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.
Originally a non-profit making organisation owned by the city council, The Tales of Robin Hood
attraction passed into private ownership in 1996.
<http://www.robinhood.uk.com>
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
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<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/places/theworkhouse>