Battlefield tourism: meanings and interpretations


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Abstract

Battlefield sites are some of the most iconic locations in any nation's store of heritage attractions and continue to capture the imagination of visitors. They have strong historic, cultural, nationalist and moral resonances and speak to people on a national as well as a local scale. They have the power to provoke contention but at the same time foster understanding and respect through the consideration of deep moral questions. Battlefields are suffused with powerful stories of courage, sacrifice, betrayal even cowardice. They have a strong sense of place and can provoke a range of cognitive and emotional reactions. But as sites they are inherently unremarkable and rely on the incarnative powers of interpretation to inform and enliven otherwise empty landscapes.

This thesis is a wide ranging analysis of what battlefields mean to tourists and the effect interpretation has on battlefield sites. In order to further understand these aspects the development of the sites is also investigated including the historical and cultural forces which have been at play in creating such 'attractions'. This makes use of the semiotic interpretation of tourist sites and the 'site sacralisation' model of Dean MacCannell in addressing the important question of what factors are present in the construction of an attraction. The study uses the four main 'managed' battlefield sites in the UK – Hastings (1066), Bannockburn (1314), Bosworth (1485) and Culloden (1746) – to illustrate these objectives and comparisons are also made with a more recent conflict, that of the First World War (1914-18) at the Western Front in France and Belgium. Using an array of qualitative and quantitative methods the study addresses a hitherto relatively understudied area of tourism in exploring the meanings attached to the more historic sites and how they compare and contrast with visitor experiences at sites of more modern conflict. Interviews with experts/stakeholders involved with battlefield sites as well as both visitors at conventional times and at a re-enactment event were made and a large corpus of material was gathered from which conclusions were drawn.

Although not statistically generalisable because of methodological constraints the results from the study add an important dimension to our understanding of battlefield tourism and what conflict sites mean to people.

The study demonstrates how there is a very dynamic relationship between site and visitor and this is manifested in deep and wide ranging discourses which are reflected in the visitor comments. This is complemented by the views of experts/stakeholders. The study addresses some of the salient points surrounding the nature of visitor experience using the theory of the tourist 'gaze' propounded by John Urry. It asserts that a broader appreciation of the visitor interaction needs to be adopted utilizing a multi-sensory approach and not restricted to the dominance of the visual in interpreting the battlefield site. Interpretation is seen as critical in endowing relatively unremarkable sites with meaning and the existing approaches taken by the agencies managing the case study sites are found to be particularly effective in education terms. The study examined the deeper meanings thought to be attached to places of suffering and death (the numen) but found a very weak response suggesting that the commercialisation of such sites results in a diminution of any visceral type of experience. For the Western Front the deeper meanings were eclipsed by grief and the study thus concluded that the numen can be subsumed into more complex reactions to places of death and suffering. With regard to the development of the historical sites study challenges the stages of sacralisation in that more contemporary forces involved in attraction creation are neglected. A further commercialisation stage is added to update the model.

Battlefield sites have much to inform us about how heritage is received and understood by the public. This is even more instructive in the case of a conflict site where the nature of the attraction might sit uncomfortably with public perception. This study aims to shed light on the meanings of such 'dark' sites within society and in doing so provide vivid reflections on our own culture milieu.