

## The Heritage Script

Have you ever noticed that there's a certain sameness to heritage sites? As if, whatever the place or its past, there's a common 'heritage script'. Whether you're in the ruins of a mediaeval castle, tip-toeing on a tumulus or mooching around a palace, these places can all start to feel like backdrops to a familiar drama that we're all supposed to play our parts in. It's as if these places come with their own accessory values, ways of behaving, and even appropriate off-the-peg feelings.

Well, there's nothing accidental about any of this. While some heritage sites celebrate eccentricity, and a handful genuinely stand out by virtue of the odd enthusiasms of those who work in them, most march to the beat of national policies, responding as best they can to directives from head office. So, in their obligatory gifte shoppes, the marginal, local and site-specific contents are overwhelmed by a deluge of damsel hats, plastic knights, jams in gingham headwear and chocolate ammonites.

Then there are those shared themes that are so strong they trample down initiatives designed to engage alternative voices and local communities. These themes fold together personal and national identity (with the ominous throb of race just in earshot). They talk of "our island race", "our nation's proud history" and commune with "people like us". They boast the superiority of the past over the present and celebrate its dominance. These are the big beats. To these beats dance the pomp and pageantry, beefeaters, thatched pencil cases, pirate trails and innovative visitor experiences. All of them helping to lull and enthrall us.

In the more 'traditional' sites, there will usually be found some spine-tinglin' tales. A ghost is *de rigueur*. The dungeon will have been the site for something unpleasant and a secret is also good: a mystery tunnel, passage, stairway or room. Sometimes it feels as though 'heritage' has been pre-packed for tour parties of pre-teen goths accompanied by nervous parents (who may be pacified by an old map, a mannequin in a doublet, and a plastic covered fact-folder.) Where recent money has been spent there will be interactive features that malfunction in interesting ways. Where the supernatural cannot be shoe-horned in, we may be inveigled into some low-level re-enactment or



be expected to ‘eek!’ at the suggestion that people like us once had to relieve themselves down a hole in the corner and never washed their hair.

Innovative curators and imaginative interpreters will, no doubt, fume at this caricature. But what is extraordinary is that, despite their best efforts, the dominant mode of heritage is still so surreally conservative and homogenous.

Of course, the objects, feelings, stories and values of this heritage script are not enforced through any one agency. They are part of a web of stories to be found in costume dramas, guidebooks, historical novels, advertising, signs and images, and even the stories that we tell each other about our own pasts. And as tourists, we don’t necessarily, or even usually, swallow this script whole. But it’s clear that there’s a strong thread of heritage kitsch that runs through the way our historical sites are managed and promoted, just as there’s a thread of political kitsch that quietly-spoken demagogues can appeal to. Where politicians talk of our wartime spirit or cricket on Middle England’s village green, the managers of stately homes and heritage mills offer potent fantasies about peace and quiet, the nobility of hard work, the camaraderie of defunct unions and guilds, our love of freedom, the continuity of proud traditions and the transience of change.

Now, you might imagine that something calling itself Counter-Tourism (which is where this article is heading) might heap scorn on such ideas – on ‘heritage kitsch’. But, unlike the lofty ‘Post-Tourist’ discourse of the last two decades in academia, Counter-Tourism actually *likes* tourists and the places they visit. It celebrates the excesses and dramas of the heritage site; it just wants to take them even further: to push them until they blurt out their sub-plots, to wind them up until their excesses tip over into something they were never intended to be. Rather than trying to squash their energies and absurdities, Counter-Tourism aims to use the tactics of the heritage industry (its quaint language, its reconstructions and artists’ impressions) as torches and touchstones for re-experiencing these sites.

In fact, most tourists are already halfway down this road anyway; they already get much of their enjoyment from heritage sites by jumbling up the different elements of the script, selecting choice bits, improvising new activities around them and then reconstructing the whole thing as something else. They get lost along set routes, touch things they’re told not to, and film objects from non-prescribed viewpoints. It’s this gently rebellious and unorchestrated activity and the memorable moments that it generates that underpin the idea of Counter-Tourism, which simply tries to draw attention to – and join-up – the subversions and tinkering that are going on already.

So, the quest of a counter-tourist is to pick through the ruins and skirt the neatly mown lawns, looking for signs of the unexpected, the unacknowledged and the unadmitted. To spot those moments when the industry overspeaks itself. To peep over the impressive boundary wall. To enquire like accountants into the source of the wealth and raw materials from which the palaces, model villages and stone columns were built. To listen to what *isn’t* said. To feel the site by ignoring all its signs. To use our bodies as guidebooks. To dream in iconic spaces. All these are tactics to help us easily, cheaply and instantly transform the way we consume our heritage. In fact, we can pretty quickly turn that consuming into inventing and imagining. In short, these



tactics help us acknowledge our associations and connections, best guesses and fantasies; interweaving these with the 'official' information in the guide book.

Here, then, is a handful of more detailed suggestions for experimenting with Counter-Tourism:

**Walk round a site barefoot.** This is a way of getting our revenge on the facts! Whether or not we buy the guidebook, hire the headphones or check the information points, it's almost impossible to ignore the factual: who, when, what for. And yet our skin is just as valid an organ as our brain for experiencing any space (fort, cathedral, palace). For one thing, it's probably the physical experiences that we will remember long after the dates are forgotten. For another, taking off our shoes, letting the floor leave its imprint on us, is a way of detecting just what impacts the past has made on the skin of a site – scrapings, sharpenings, residues, wastes. It is to act out a respect for materials as well as for signs and designs.

**Change pace radically - in one room take in every last detail, in another fly through and take a single snapshot with the camera of your mind's eye.** A change of pace is one of the surest ways to distract ourselves - to break habits we may have developed for half-reading the information boards; for looking straight ahead and not up and down. It also fore-fronts the story of the place. Forced to take in its every detail or grab a single one, we can get a very sudden sense of what has been included or left out by the site's managers and of what we have noticed or ignored.

**Lie down.** Unless it's going to endanger other people or spoil their pleasure, lie down and look at the ceiling or slide under the banqueting table. Under the ceiling we may disappear into a sea of iconography, sensing out how to swim there, learning new strokes; under the table we might find a route to a backstage of pencil scribbles, pasted notes, hidden repairs and accumulated dust. Imagine all the people who have lain down or fallen in a room over 500 years of different circumstances – erotic, artistic, violent. If lying down really is prohibited, then change position to meet the gaze of a statue or portrait. Ask questions of the subject of a portrait. Tell a statue about your visit.

**Do a bit of dusting.** Restore the domestic where it is hidden.

**Visit a heritage site as someone else.** Go as a Russian (unless you are, in which case it's a Fijian for you). Go as a psychotherapist, or as an inebriated Health and Safety inspector. Adopt an imaginary 'historic' character and look at the site with borrowed curiosity. If you like to act up, talk to each other in the accent or jargon of that 'someone else'. Send yourself a postcard from the site, written and signed by your alter ego. I once left an answerphone message for myself from the free phones at the Goonhilly Satellite Earth Station, forgot I had, and was pleasingly spooked a fortnight later when I picked it up and failed to recognise my own voice.

**Become your own tour guide.** Go with a partner, friend, parent or child to a heritage site, blindfold them and lead them round talking to them in 'heritij' - the special language used by heritage marketing officers that goes something like this:

*"Step back into yesteryear, unlock the secrets of the past, experience the sights and sounds of life below stairs as a real-life Elizabethan. There's fun for all the family as you venture into the dungeons. Are you brave enough to cross the haunted gallery?"*

**Spot the keywords that the marketing people have chosen for your site.** Look out for words like Inspiring, Connecting, Refreshing, Caring, Sharing, Learning and Communicating. Take them at their word and see what happens to you if you really act on them. See where else you can apply these keywords or bring your own alternatives.

These and a hundred more 'tactics' are the beginnings of a Counter-Tourist approach to heritage sites. The tactics are there to help us immerse ourselves in the atmospheres and ambiances of a place. They are there to help us redefine heritage itself and what it means to us.

And if, as English Heritage assures us, history surrounds us on every side, then everywhere is a heritage site to be subverted. Visit a Tourist Information Centre or Tesco as if it were a historic site. Or the street you walk down every day. Instead of getting out of 'tourist mode', Counter-Tourism wants you to get yourself into tourist mode more deeply, more often and in more 'wrong' places. To extend the boundaries of 'holiday'.

For those who are seized by these ideas, the Counter-Tourism project can provide the principles and tactics to take this all that bit further. Just as counter-terrorism sneaks amongst its enemies and distracts them from their targets, so counter-tourism prowls around the heritage industry, feeding off its mistakes and omissions, gently misdirecting things in the interests of change.

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