

# Images of Rurality: Commodification and Place Promotion

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## Abstract

*It is argued that rural areas and landscapes can increasingly be regarded as places of consumption rather than production. This is reflected in the emphasis which appears to be placed on attracting visitors to rural localities. While some rural locations are long-standing tourist attractions, others are increasingly endeavouring to promote themselves through the 'marketing' of local uniqueness. An emphasis on local heritage frequently underpins these attempts and landscapes, local individuals or families, events, traditions, building styles are amongst the 'resources' put into the service of place promotion. The use of local heritage as a mechanism to promote rural places opens up a series of issues including those of authenticity, romanticisation, sanitisation, contestation and dissonance. These place promotional trends are reflected in the importance attaching to tourism in rural development strategies pursued at a local level. In this way development funding and the various local strategies devised by local partnerships appear to increasingly emphasise the importance of attracting visitors. This apparent commodification of the countryside appears to be motivated by a number of concerns. While the desire to generate revenue is clearly one of these, social and cultural factors may also play a role. In turn, these place promotional initiatives affect both visitors' and local residents' perceptions of place. This paper explores aspects of the historic and contemporary promotion of rural places.*

## Keywords

Rurality; commodification; place promotion; tourism; heritage; rural development

## 1. Introduction

In 1992 Paul Cloke suggested we were moving towards a 'pay as you enter' countryside - an allusion to the growing shift away from what have been referred to as landscapes of production to landscapes of consumption as rural places are increasingly subjected to the tourist gaze. While Cloke's somewhat pessimistic vision has not yet materialised, we are nevertheless in an era where rural places are increasingly endeavouring to re-imagine themselves in order to deal with the broader processes of rural change and restructuring to which they have been subjected. With the decline in importance of agriculture both in terms of its economic output and employment levels, there has been a need to re-package the countryside in different ways. Coupled with increases in leisure time this has meant that rural tourism has grown. Many rural development programmes have supported rural

tourism in a variety of ways whether through the enhancement of infrastructure or support for tourist accommodation.

The idea of the rural as a place to visit is of course nothing new. There is a long history of rural tourism driven by a pursuit of idyllic escapes, love of nature, outdoor activities, recreational motivations, etc. However, in the past visitors tended to be drawn (and continue to be) to particular highly valued locations such as the Lake District and the Brecon Beacons; places and landscapes whose value is reflected in their official designation as National Parks, AONBs, etc. In recent years, however, more and more places are endeavouring to promote themselves and to claim a share of a growing visitor market.

Alongside tourism development objectives there is an increasing emphasis on aspects of local culture and place distinctiveness reflected in a burgeoning heritage industry which tends towards the identification and promotion of elements of local uniqueness. There are more and more overt attempts to present places as possessing something of historical or cultural merit that distinguishes them from other places and hence makes them somewhere worth visiting. This attempt to promote some form of local distinctiveness is part of a broader strategy of place promotion which is seen as necessary in a competitive visitor market. This can be seen as the commodification of place whereby the place becomes a product that can be packaged, presented and sold (Urry, 1995).

In order to do this places can be seen to focus on a range of items and landscapes, local individuals or families, events, traditions, building styles are amongst the 'resources' put into the service of place promotion. While areas such as the Cotswolds are seen to have a long history of visitor attraction and have achieved a national and indeed international stature (though itself a response to earlier periods of economic change), numerous other localities are now on the way to being commodified. Here it is suggested that particular places may become "centres of spectacle and tourist consumption rather than places of material production" (Mordue, 1999, p631).

This paper firstly outlines some issues and tensions surrounding these contemporary trends. It then highlights some examples drawn mainly from the English west midlands.

## **2. Key Issues**

Within this arena of rural place promotion, as indicated above, local heritage in its various forms is pressed into service. The idea of preserving elements of the past has a long history and can be traced back well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From a rural landscape perspective, it is evident in the idea of countryside conservation and the creation of the National Parks and AONBs in the UK reflects the 'national' value placed on certain landscapes (Aitchison *et al*, 2000). The vast increase in the number of museums, heritage centres and interpretative centres in Britain provides a measure of the significance of this trend leading one author to comment that "heritage is everywhere" (Lowenthal, 1998). To some extent it might be argued that the current interest in rural heritage is driven by a fear that the rural is disappearing - similar to the attitude of those in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who felt that industrialisation and urbanisation were heralding the end of rural life and landscape.

Within the arena of heritage and place promotion, two broad issues emerge. The first of these can be considered technical in the sense of what is available, what is usable, how it can be used, how it might be displayed, etc. There are clearly issues to do with what is practical and what is feasible. It may make sense to focus on some things and not on others. The second set of questions relates to what might be seen as more political issues concerning what is selected, who does the selecting and the messages conveyed (or intended for conveyance) through this process. Decisions must be made as to what elements of the local are promoted; what is included, what is excluded, what is to be displayed, what is not to be displayed. The significance of individual items, events or specific locations as well as their potential as exhibits must be assessed. However, this is more than a straightforward 'technical' difficulty related to resource availability, time, financial or other constraints. There are also wider considerations involved in the selection and presentation of particular items pertaining to local heritage. Thus some individual(s), event(s) or location(s) are selected and drawn upon while others are not and questions of the inherently selective nature of this arise (Wright, 1985, Walsh, 1992, Lowenthal, 1998).

While heritage is a means of representation, one which produces particular sets of meanings, it is also an economic and cultural product which is both bought and sold (Graham *et al*, 2000). Heritage and (presumed) local distinctiveness are treated as resources which can be utilised to achieve particular ends. These ends may be economic, educational, cultural or social. Heritage projects afford local people, as well as visitors, an opportunity to learn more about the locality and to make that knowledge available to a wider audience both local and external. Inevitably this means there are tensions. Key tensions surround the need to generate revenue on the one hand while producing something of educational value. Linked to this are tensions surrounding the perceived authenticity (or lack of it) of some versions of the local past. The issues of sanitising and romanticising the past are common criticisms of the broader heritage industry (Storey, 2004). There are risks of presenting a view that does not offend the sensibilities of local people or particular interest groups and which can be regarded as 'entertaining' for visitors. Past struggles may be ignored or played down in the presentation of a somewhat rose-tinted perspective on the past. This may ignore the very real hardships experienced by sections of rural society.

The perceived need to offer something which might be deemed to entertain may of course serve as an additional impediment to the portrayal of authenticity. People, it might be supposed, do not wish to visit locations where they will be confronted with uncomfortable or disturbing reminders of the past. In recreating the past, it may be seen as more marketable to present enjoyable and uplifting experiences rather than ones which make people depressed, angry or upset. This means there is a risk (or a deliberate strategy in some cases) of promoting a romanticised version, one which people are comfortable with. While recreating battle scenes may contribute to a renewed interest in local or even national history but it is unlikely to recreate a sense of terror, pain or those other negative features of violent conflict.

Notwithstanding these concerns, it must be recognized that the selective nature of heritage promotion inevitably means that only partial views can be presented and there is no guarantee that the version of events depicted is accurate. More pragmatically, it is important to realise that “the sheer pastness of the past precludes its total reconstruction” (Lowenthal, 1985, p214). Ultimately, elements of local heritage can be interpreted in different ways by different people and by different groups and a product can be consumed in a variety of different ways. This dissonance means it is highly unlikely that there will be universal agreement over what constitutes an authentic representation of the past.

### **3. Rural Development and Place Promotion**

Some place promotional or branding projects emerge from formal bodies such as local authorities or tourist agencies while others emerge from local groups, reflecting the increasing involvement of community bodies and local partnerships within changing modes of rural governance. Given the emphasis on community and partnership in contemporary rural development discourse, it might be suggested that this is highly appropriate given that “heritage is a community resource, and thus all sectors of a community should be involved in its planning and development” (Timothy and Boyd, 2003, p279). Place promotion, it can be argued, may take on a community-building role. Local people may become mobilised around the creation of a local heritage project. Such projects may provide a focal point around which groups and individuals coalesce, thereby engendering a sense of dynamism in the locality. However, there is always a risk of assuming that the residents of the locality have a shared sense of that past and that they can agree on what are legitimate elements to portray. This is unlikely to be the case and, as suggested above, the past is more likely to be a subject of contestation than consensus.

Throughout the UK there have been a wide range of heritage related projects supported by rural development programmes. While in the past bodies such as the National Trust concerned themselves with castles and stately homes, more recent emphasis has been on buildings such as tithe barns and other small scale vestiges of the past. Local music festivals, interpretative centres and heritage trails have all been boosted by rural development funding.

Within the West Midlands numerous examples abound. While the region contains many well-established sites such as the Malverns, the Elgar trail and so on, recent years have seen a proliferation of new attempts to place swathes of the countryside or individual places on the visitor map. Within Herefordshire this emphasis on the past and on place distinctiveness manifests itself in a variety of ways with the county tourist authority urging people to visit “a county of unspoilt countryside, market towns of distinctive character and a wealth of varied landscapes from an historic City to fascinating villages”

(<http://www.visitherefordshire.co.uk/home.asp?customtemplate=pages/homepage.txt>).

They further suggest that “to really experience the essence of Herefordshire, visitors are advised to venture down the less travelled roads and explore the myriad of villages and hamlets that pepper the landscape.”

(<http://www.visitherefordshire.co.uk/home.asp?customtemplate=pages/senseof.txt>).

More specifically we can identify the use of heritage trails within the county exemplified by the Black and White Village Trail centred on the style and appearance of timber-framed buildings. Of course individual places along a trail may endeavour to position themselves in a certain way in order to distinguish themselves from other points on a wider route. Thus Pembridge presents itself as “the heart of Herefordshire’s black & white village trail” (<http://www.mediaeval-pembridge.com/>) while another of the villages announces that “Eardisland is essential England”.

Local products can also act as the peg on which to hang promotional material. A good example is the Herefordshire Cider route which promotional material refers to as “the real Cider Country” (<http://www.ciderroute.co.uk/site/index.html>). This presumably serves to distinguish it from ‘fake’ cider trails!! More specifically, some places may concentrate on a local product; for example, an element of a Local Heritage Initiative project in the village of Much Cowarne in Herefordshire was concerned with a local variety of red apple and its links to cider production.

([http://www.lhi.org.uk/projects\\_directory/projects\\_by\\_region/west\\_midlands/herefordshire/much\\_cowarne\\_conservation\\_project/much\\_cowarne\\_.html](http://www.lhi.org.uk/projects_directory/projects_by_region/west_midlands/herefordshire/much_cowarne_conservation_project/much_cowarne_.html))

Local historical figures may be pressed into service such as Francis Kilvert, a local cleric in the Herefordshire-Radnorshire border area in the 1870s. The Cleric’s Trail is a themed walk built on aspects of his life and is an example of the utilisation of an individual in order to promote a particular route through part of the county. The Mortimer Trail running some 30 miles from Ludlow to Kington was officially opened in 2002 and refers to an important family dominant in the area in medieval times. Similarly, the Simon Evans Way – a walking route though part of neighbouring South Shropshire is named after a local poet and postman. These sit alongside well-established walking routes like the Offa’s Dyke path.

An extension of this idea is to market a locality under a ‘brand name’ – often linked to a local personality. The idea of place branding has a long history reflected in ideas of the Lake District, Peak District, Cotswolds and so on. However, its contemporary usage as a promotional tactic is evidenced through the use of literary figures with the likes of Thomas Hardy’s Wessex providing a classic example. Catherine Cookson country in the north east is another long-standing example of local ‘branding’ (Pocock, 1988, 1992). Similarly the appellation Cordell Country to a section of the South Wales valleys around Abergavenny and Blaenavon has been used as a promotional device linking local landscapes and activities to the writer Alexander Cordell (<http://www.cordellcountry.org/cordell.html>).

Intriguingly, the same individual(s) may be claimed by more than one place. The Bronte sisters form an element in the place promotional strategies of two different localities. We are familiar with Bronte Country in Yorkshire which “is a jewel just waiting to be discovered” (<http://www.visitbrontecountry.com/why.htm>). However, Northern Ireland has also cashed in through the designation of the Bronte Homeland with an Interpretative Centre between Rathfriland and Banbridge, the locality in which Patrick Bronte (father of the authors) grew up.

A very recent example of the 'country' designation is the south Shropshire market town of Cleobury Mortimer where a local development partnership has recently adopted the title of 'Cleobury Country'.

"Set deep in the English Countryside facing three of England's greenest shires Cleobury Country typifies rural village life ... This quiet corner of rural England, tucked away between the Clee Hills and the Wyre Forest, is the perfect place to unwind and experience a different pace of life. Whether your idea of relaxation is through walking, cycling or on horseback Cleobury Country can offer you some glorious scenery and wonderful old buildings"

<http://www.cleoburycountry.com/cleobury/www/index.cfm?objectid=C0FBB72D-0AED-74D4-9357D08FCAC541C6>

The aims of the local partnership are quite explicitly linked to the idea of place promotion through an emphasis on local heritage and on local identity. They seek to:

- "Promote and celebrate the rural heritage of our special landscape
- Provide fresh experiences and new opportunities for all
- Develop and strengthen the Cleobury Country identity and lifestyle"

#### 4. Conclusions

In terms of the future of rural places, the emphasis on local distinctiveness and attempts to utilise local branding has a number of implications. As with other dimensions of rural development there is no single agreed view regarding what might be promoted and how. Questions which clearly emerge from this relate to decision making, (non)selection, success, tensions, interpretation and sustainability. While there may well be educational and community benefits accruing to some of these initiatives, ultimately it is pertinent to ask if everywhere is going to lay some claim to uniqueness and endeavour to promote itself as somewhere worth exploring. Places are competing against each other with each location endeavouring to portray itself as different to everywhere else.

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