



## DORCHESTER TOWN COUNCIL

### DORCHESTER HERITAGE JOINT COMMITTEE

#### Reflections on the Dorchester Heritage Tourism Strategy from Bernard Lane Red Kite Environment

##### 1. On the purpose of the strategy

The Strategy seeks to encourage visitors to come to the town, stay longer, **if possible overnight**, and spend more in local businesses, particularly outside of the main summer holiday season.

Why seek overnight visitors in particular? There are three key reasons.

- (1) Overnight visitors normally have much higher spending levels than day visitors: up to five times greater. **That is partly because overnight visitors tend to have higher incomes. It is largely because their overnight stay brings in a considerable income, in the form of a "rent". And they usually have an evening meal**
- (2) Overnight visitor spending usually stays in the community much more than day visitor spending and employs more local people. **That is largely because of the "rent" payment they make to stay overnight. Purchases of meals sees some income go to out of area food suppliers, although a lot remains paying for local labor to prepare and serve meals.**
- (3) Overnight visitors have fewer negative environmental and community impacts on a destination for a given expenditure: much of the time they are asleep.

In contrast day visitors usually spend relatively little, but can put additional strains on car parking, litter collection and local people's feelings about "their" town. But, it is much easier to attract day visitors than overnight visitors, and it takes time to bring hotels, guest houses and Airbnbs into use. At this early stage, all visitors should be sought. **Spending by day visitors in shops is important, and helps maintain high street shops, but most shop purchases involves paying out of area suppliers.**

##### 2. On the Dorchester Tourism Market

The heritage tourism market has expanded not just in Dorchester but worldwide, in part because the typical heritage tourist is a member of the growing number of well educated people in the UK who want more than the traditional sun, sea and sand experience when travelling. Heritage tourism has also benefitted from the increasing number of well presented TV programmes about heritage themes. This is backed by a now extremely enterprising heritage industry, ranging from the National Trust, through English Heritage and its Welsh, Scottish and Irish counterparts, to numerous privately owned heritage visitor attractions, of which the Duke of Devonshire's Chatsworth House is probably the most successful, with well over 600,000 visitors to the house annually, plus many more to its adjoining food markets, events, gardens, playgrounds, numerous cafes and restaurants, and hotels.

There is a real opportunity to promote Heritage Dorchester across Dorset and particularly to short break staying visitors from the London region, and from a 90 to 120 minute travel time generally. . Its potential strengths lie in its rich cultural and heritage based resources, its compact easy to walk size and its easy and rewarding access to nature and attractive walks. But, although Dorchester has much to offer the “heritage” visitor, the offer is not well defined or well known amongst its target market and target geography.

The 2016 Blue Sail Report found that typical visitors to Dorchester were aged 40+, in socio-demographic groups A and B, living within two hours travel time north and east of Dorset and are looking for:

- Rounded **and satisfying experiences**. **Tourism is part of the experience economy**.
- Character, quality, distinctive accommodation (hotels, guest houses, self-catering), independent restaurants and cafes serving quality food, **plus independent unique and even quirky shops**.
- **An historic** environment with good public realm and public spaces.
- Distinctive cultural attractions, history, heritage, crafts, local festivals and events.
- Relaxation and time together.

(**adapted** from Western Dorset Growth Corridor Development of Tourism Product & Offer, Blue Sail, June 2016; cited in the Heritage Tourism Audit for Dorchester Red Kite Environment November 2020)

### 3. On the delivery of tourism locally

It should also be noted, however, that there is considerable uncertainty about the future funding of the public sector’s work on tourism. **The public sector has traditionally provided much of the marketing for tourism destinations, has provided or assisted local tourism information centres, and signposting and managerial support**. The great early days of the West Country Tourist Board are now over: it and its web site have been replaced by a rather slim and often terse South-West England section of Visit Britain’s web site. On the crowded Visit Britain site, clicking on Dorset provides a list of 50 possible destinations in the county. Dorchester is not mentioned. Putting Dorchester into the question box produces the answer “ Did you mean Colchester ?”

The Chairman of the British Tourist Authority wrote in the Authority’s 2018 – 2019 annual report:

“We live in uncertain times. As we started the year we knew that we would see a Comprehensive Spending Review, a new relationship with the European Union, after Brexit on 31st January 2020 and the impact of the agreed Tourism Sector Deal. What we didn’t know, were the exceptional challenges that would be presented to the travel industry, thanks to COVID 19.”

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/889873/British\\_Tourist\\_Authority\\_Annual\\_Report\\_\\_\\_Accounts\\_for\\_the\\_Year\\_Ended\\_31\\_March\\_2019.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/889873/British_Tourist_Authority_Annual_Report___Accounts_for_the_Year_Ended_31_March_2019.pdf)

**Across the UK most local authorities have cut back on support for tourism and tourism marketing**. Few local authorities now employ tourism officers: 20 years ago the majority did that. As a result there is also no internal pressure or interest in many local authorities to grant planning permission for hotel conversions or to new build hotels. **And many councils have withdrawn to a greater or**

lesser extent from local tourism information provision. But some have helped to create successful volunteer staffed centres.

#### 4. On Sustainability

Tourism has long been known to be a leading contributor to carbon emissions through transport and accommodation, as well as physical impacts on the built and natural environments. Tourism has become a national and international fast-growing activity, expanding its visitor numbers and becoming not just one market but many niche markets. Heritage tourism is one of those many niches.

Some local authorities – but not all - intervene to assist and manage destinations as a whole by setting up tourist information centres, web sites and producing other marketing materials. They do that because in some places tourism is responsible for high levels of local employment, or because some areas need economic regeneration through tourism. But in the UK it is not a statutory requirement for the public sector to work with tourism in these ways, and public sector marketing of destinations is currently declining. The public sector has, however, two important special features. It can market destinations as a whole, rather than individual businesses. And it can set policies for tourism development and management using the strength of its marketing and physical planning powers. This leads to the discussion of tourism management using the concept of sustainable tourism discussed below.

What is Sustainable Tourism?

Sustainable tourism is a concept that was created and **first** implemented in the European Alps in the mid 1980s to control and plan tourism, protecting landscapes, townscapes and traditional ways of life from the impacts of tourism's rapid growth. It has since become a world-wide concept backed by research findings and a range of tested management tools. The concept is backed by the UK government, by many other national, regional and local governments, and by industry bodies including the UN's World Tourism Organization and the tourism industry's World Travel and Tourism Council.

Sustainable tourism is a positive approach intended to reduce the tensions and friction created by the complex interactions between the tourism industry, visitors, the environment and the communities which are host to holidaymakers. It is an approach which involves working for the long-term viability and quality of both natural and human resources. It is not anti-growth, but it acknowledges that there are limits to the growth **of tourism**. Those limits will vary considerably from place to place, and according to the management practices available. Sustainable tourism planning techniques are used in many National Parks, architectural Conservation Areas, and World Heritage sites. Locally, sustainable tourism policies have been embraced by South Somerset, parts of West Dorset, and West Oxfordshire.

Sustainable tourism's success requires partnership working between tourism interests, local government planning policies and the communities involved. The aspirations and knowledge of tourism businesses, **local councils**, community concerns and natural / built heritage issues are, following stakeholder consultations, brought together in a sustainable tourism strategy agreed to, and managed by, the local or regional sustainable tourism partnership usually working with the local council. An independent broker normally acts as chairperson, with access to independent technical advice as necessary. Research shows that the skills of the broker are central to the success of most partnerships.

## Sustainable tourism development and management strategies

Dorchester needs a Sustainable Tourism Development and Management Strategy if it is to create a viable, long term heritage conservation policy which can use tourism revenues to support the local economy. The strategy can be designed to:

- Create a viable long-term heritage conservation policy which can use tourism revenues as a tool to justify the conservation of specific and collective heritage sites and areas.
- Use the income from tourism spending to stop further shop closures, and help re-use empty shops as new retail and hospitality sites.
- Develop new jobs, while helping to preserve existing service sector jobs.
- Stimulate new overnight accommodation provision, providing high levels of locally retained income.
- Reduce reliance on low yield day trip tourism, which can bring damaging impacts to the character and fabric of the town.
- **Set up a marketing policy to help develop and manage tourism in a sustainable way.**
- Support and encourage existing and new public transport systems and avoid pressure on town centre car parking. In Dorchester's case, the Town could enter into a partnership with one or both of the railway companies to encourage and market the town to railway passengers. Both the town and the companies would benefit financially, and politically, by signing up to a well publicised partnership. Great Western inherited membership of the Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership many years ago, which has served all the stations between Weymouth and Bristol well for over 20 years. (see [www.heartofwessexline.org.uk](http://www.heartofwessexline.org.uk))

Research shows that few tourists travel alone, and that successful destinations need more than one market niche. Heritage tourism needs to be backed, therefore, by quality shopping, food and entertainment / cultural attractions.

## 5. On The Vision

The heritage tourism field is one with many destinations, and very strong and long established competition, across the region, the nation and internationally. If Dorchester is to be successful, and to create a viable heritage tourism industry within five years, it has to understand its main markets. And it should present its heritage in a strikingly new and fashionable way. More of the same as other destinations will not be enough. **Dorchester has to stand out if it is to succeed.** The Red Kite Heritage Tourism Audit for Dorchester suggests a strategy:

- Using Dorchester's especially strong rail links and long distance bus connections to base its tourism on low carbon transport in line with **solving** Climate Change issues.
- Using the ease and pleasure of walking between the numerous heritage sites to create a low carbon "wellness" destination **different to most other heritage tourism destinations.**
- To stress the remarkable Museums Mile as an extremely effective wet weather heritage resource, plus offering a research tool for family and other heritage research.
- To exploit Dorchester's ease of access to natural heritage and biodiverse walking routes acting as **an outdoor** Covid-19 free resource
- To develop smart phone accessible heritage interpretation walks using music and theatrical commentaries, complementing the traditional information boards, and creating an almost unique but proven product.

- Developing a heritage independent shopping / restaurant / historic inn experience based on the USA's and Canada's successful Main Street regeneration programmes, to act as a second niche tourism experience.
- Boosting the personal and special nature of Dorchester's tourism by creating volunteer led information and interpretation programmes.
- Working with the University of Bournemouth Tourism Management Department as an advisor on sustainable tourism
- Working with Dorset County, the Duchy of Cornwall, **and perhaps central government,** to fund and test a model new low carbon form of low carbon heritage conservation linked tourism, capable of being used elsewhere.

If necessary, crowd funding the above using the expertise of the Triodos Bank

## **6. On Performance Measurement and Marketing**

Tourism is no longer a highly seasonal activity, it is year round, and heritage tourism is an especially non-seasonal activity. The market demand side of tourism is very competitive and requires skilled marketing, and market relevant and satisfying product development, often including regular product developments and a supply of new events and attractions.

The supply side of tourism is essentially about income and profit for its providers, the great majority of which are private sector. These businesses rarely work together in formal ways. If tourism cannot pay its way it does not survive.

Tourism is in many senses a fashion business. Tourists choose to visit destinations, and to take part in activities that they believe to be fashionable. They are guided in their choices by radio, TV and press reports, by their friends, and increasingly by social media. Marketing materials must be aware of all this.

The public sector provides much of the infrastructure for tourism to take place, including roads, signage and the granting (or not) of planning permissions for developments to take place. They also, to some extent, protect some heritage sites from development or demolition, using listed building legislation, and conservation areas and other methods, and rural area protection systems including National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs).

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