

Connecting with the past: meeting the needs of Ancestral Tourists in Scotland

Dr Matthew Alexander

Dr Derek Bryce

Dr Samantha Murdy

University of Strathclyde, UK, matthew.j.alexander@strath.ac.uk

Extended Abstract

Keywords: Ancestral Tourism; Heritage Tourism; Scotland

1.0 Introduction and Literature Review

An ancestral legacy is often viewed as the epitome of heritage tourism (McCain & Ray, 2003) and can generate the feelings of personal attachment craved by many tourists (Timothy and Boyd, 2006). Ancestral tourism supports individuals who, despite an existing identity in one country, feel a connection to another 'homeland' (Palmer, 1999). McCain and Ray (2003) suggest that tourism associated with personal legacy offers an experience with functional, social, emotional and epistemic value dimensions (Williams & Soutar, 2009). However, there is scant research which considers the added value that ancestral tourism can provide to a destination despite the range of benefits that may be accrued by communities which meet the needs of ancestral tourists (Timothy, 1997). This abstract represents work in progress to explore how a destination attempts to meet the needs of ancestral tourists and the impacts that this can have on the destination.

Scotland, a nation which maintains and projects powerful brand signifiers of its cultural heritage (McCrone, Morris and Kiely, 1995), witnessed considerable emigration between the 18th and 20th centuries. Although much was voluntary and motivated by a search for economic opportunity, the enforced clearing of Scots as part of wider economic restructuring generates particularly evocative images. By 1914 more than 2 million Scots had emigrated, mainly to the British Dominions of Canada, Australia and New Zealand¹. An estimated 800,000 visitors a year are estimated to come to Scotland with ancestral motivations but a global Scottish diaspora (which could number between 40 and 80 million) is estimated to have a potential worth of several billion pounds to the Scottish economy over the next decade (Visit Scotland).

2.0 Research Design

We explored a range of attractions that ancestral tourists visit from national museums and archives to local heritage centres and museums and explored how the needs of ancestral tourists are met through a qualitative study with field visits to 29 museums, heritage centres, and archives throughout Scotland. We engaged in 32 in-depth interviews with curators, archivists, and volunteers alongside participant observation within the attractions. Interviews centred on issues such as types of ancestral visitors, the visit itself, challenges and future of the sector. Thematic analysis was conducted to evaluate the data using NVivo 10.0.

4.0 Findings and Observations

Key themes include ancestral tourist types, the emotional nature of experiences and imagined past brought by visitors and operationalizing ancestral tourism.

When discussing key terms identified within the literature, such as ancestral, genealogical, and roots tourism, participants identified overlap between terms but a broad consensus emerged which saw visitors somewhere along a spectrum from those travelling to experience where their ancestors were from, to those actively exploring their own family history (e.g. using public records).

my gut feeling is that they would sit together but genealogical tourism is for a specific, I am going to go and find out where my grandmother lived, I am going to the house that I know she lived at (KB).

Some participants discussed a need tourists had to collect family history data as far back as possible. In a sense, they were attempting to 'bag generations' in an almost competitive way. Tourists identified as 'generation baggers' also sat within the group of more active ancestral tourists.

¹ Personal communication with David Forsyth: Senior Curator, Scottish Social History and Diaspora.

Most tourists seek information that will connect them in some way to their ancestors and the results can elicit strong emotions.

It can be quite powerful sometimes, actually there was one instance of a family, I think from Canada if I remember rightly, whose uncle had been an artist in the City and they did not really know much about him, wanted to know if we had anything by him in the collection, by chance we did have something in the collection but we also had a portrait bust of him which was done by another sculptor and we got those out in the collection for them and they were literally moved to tears by coming face to face with their ancestors (MB)

In some cases the connections generated through the visit can be even more real than viewing an artefact or document. In several interviews participants' recounted stories of connecting visitors to distant relations still living in the area or, in one case another visitor who had just left the building. However, providers are often required to explain that the ancestors are not quite who or what visitors expect them to be and this can elicit disappointment. At the Culloden battlefield where Scots fought on both sides this can be particularly emotive:

we get people who expect [their ancestors] to be on the Jacobite side and find out that actually their family was affiliated with the Government soldiers and Hanoverians and that is an interesting, it is an interesting thing to see, some people get very emotional about it and they seem to have invested a huge amount in this idea of being Scottish and being Jacobite when in reality the story of this uprising is incredibly complex and just because you are Scottish you are not a Jacobite and people are dealing with a Civil War (KB)

In some cases tourists look for some grand event to tie their ancestors to, or believed them to be much more prominent than the records suggest. In other cases, tourists held different expectations of what life had been like in the past, and were unable to (or did not want to) comprehend the information they had been given, one participant discussed the need for those involved in family history research to conduct 'myth-busting' (KB). In essence many visitors come to Scotland with what was seen by participants as an 'imagined past' which can present a challenge. In Sutherland a part of Scotland where the infamous highland clearances were most severe the curator of the Dunbeath heritage museum noted how:

sometimes they [visitors] think it was worse here than what it really was and that these folk were forced to leave but you explain the economic situation to them, the climate, the number of people in a family, six sons, they don't all stay at home and even today that doesn't happen so why should it have happened before.

The notion of tourists with an imagined past and the potential disappointment that the truth about ancestors can bring mean that those involved with ancestral tourism at the operational level walk a fine line between providing a memorable tourism experience and delivering an honest account of a visitor's ancestral past.

The relative importance of ancestral tourism to Scotland was highlighted by many of our participants:

I think to Scotland more broadly it is very valuable in terms of the offering that we have in Scotland and it is very much based on heritage, history, people, stories, battles and I think that Scotland has got a very strong brand (KF)

However this importance ran contrary to the resources that many participants were able to commit to providing the uniquely personalised service that ancestral tourists require. Larger archive centres have clear charges for the time spent by professionals on genealogical work but for smaller, voluntary museums this can be more of a challenge and intensive research work by volunteers is often provided at no cost which reduces the potential economic impact that ancestral tourism might make to the economy.

Our research reveals a spectrum of ancestral tourists from roots tourists who appear to be satisfied with putting their 'feet on the ground' where their ancestors lived; to genealogy tourists who often visit with an obsession for 'generation bagging' and gaining detailed documentary insight into their ancestral past. Ancestral tourists often make a large emotional investment in their visit and require significant time from staff at an attraction. This creates challenges both in terms of resourcing attractions and offering an experience that is both an authentic but satisfactory to the expectations of the ancestral tourist.

We aim to contribute to heritage tourism studies by revealing how extensive and well preserved archives, local knowledge and a passion for family history can serve to generate unique and deeply emotional tourism experiences for ancestral tourists. Despite the often 'cottage industry' nature of many ancestral attractions (often reliant on volunteers and local 'good will') the outcome of the visit can often be greater satisfaction and a strong repeat visitation pattern.

References

- McCain, G., & Ray, N.M. (2003). Legacy tourism: the search for personal meaning in heritage travel. *Tourism Management, 24*(2003) 713-717.
- McCrone, David; Morris, Angela and Kiely, Richard (1995) *Scotland the Brand: the making of Scottish heritage*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Palmer, C. (1999). Tourism and the symbols of identity. *Tourism Management, 20*(3), 313-321.
- Timothy, D. (1997) Tourism and the personal heritage experience. *Annals of Tourism Research 27*(2), 751-54.
- Timothy, D. J., & Boyd, S. W. (2006). Heritage tourism in the 21st century: Valued traditions and new perspectives. *Journal of heritage tourism, 1*(1), 1-16.
- Williams, P., & Soutar, G.N. (2009). Value, satisfaction and behavioral intentions in an adventure context. *Annals of Tourism Research, 36*(3) 413-438.