Portsmouth Historic Dockyard: Museums which nurture maritime and intangible heritage in new ways

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Maritime industrial heritage sites

• To appeal to mass tourists (and comply with H&S), maritime industrial heritage sites must follow museum conventions in their presentation and interpretation.

• But to distinguish themselves from the homogeneity of glass cases and captions, they can creatively exploit their original characteristics:
  • The impression that one has wandered into a busy workshop takes the tourist outside the normal museum experience.
  • It is a gain that the tourist is engaging with his or her own eyes, not reading an introduction board.
  • Visual cues are unmediated.
  • Other sensory experiences (smell, vibration, awareness of spaces, touch, hearing) result in much more dynamic physiological engagement than in a static museum.
Industrial heritage sites - Dockyards

• Industrial heritage sites developed for cultural tourism can tell us so much more about people than royal/aristocratic houses and country estates.

• Dockyards, even more than single industry sites such as coal mines or steel mills, offer a unique potential for tourism innovation because they are such rich cultural locales.

• With their associated ordnance, hospital and victualling installations, dockyards include a wide range of building types which built, fitted out, supplied and repaired naval ships and supported their personnel.

• They have morphed from noisy, dirty, oily, dusty, shadowy and often unhealthy workspaces into (mostly) pristine, spotlit, ventilated and polished public spaces, because they are now marketed and compete with other commercial leisure activities such as theme parks.

• (But dust and smells are part of the sensory experience.)
Dockyard & fishing museum particularities

• A major objective of all historical sites is to re-use their buildings and fund restoration and maintenance at a time when state funding is being reduced, so visitor income must be increased.

• Maritime/fishing museums such as Kaap Skil and Douarnenez and dockyards also have historic boats and engineering equipment to maintain, increasing expense and complexity.

• In Europe the marketing of former dockyards such as Chatham, Bremerhaven, Den Helder, Hellevoetsluis, Rochefort and Venice, some in less obvious tourist destinations, must attract mass tourists as well as niche enthusiasts.
Innovative interpretations

• How have they done that? Not by ‘dumbing down’, but by interpreting their cultural heritage and buildings holistically, authentically and sustainably.

• What is there not to like in this approach?

• Should visitors be warned?

• I would argue not.

• Visitor attractions should take people’s bodies and minds into different worlds so that they think differently, gain new insights and learn with all their senses.
Proven and innovative methods of presenting intangible assets:

• Using short oral history extracts to present personal stories to which everyone can relate
• Employing tour guides with a personal connection to the artefacts
• Creating new buildings as foils to historic ones
• Utilising buildings in new ways
• Returning authentic uses of buildings
• Startling visitors out of their preconceptions
• Removing barriers between visitors and artefacts
European examples
Kaap Skil, The Texel
Bremerhaven Maritime Museum
Rochefort
Venice Arsenale
Chatham Ropemaking

HMS Gannet
Innovative case studies at Portsmouth Historic Dockyard

- Mary Rose Museum
- Boathouse Four
Mary Rose Museum

• Mary Rose was launched at Portsmouth in 1511. She sank in 1545 during an engagement with a French invasion fleet, just outside the entrance to Portsmouth Harbour.

• In 1982, in a rare and innovative enterprise, the ship and the majority of her artefacts were raised and brought into the dockyard.

• With the re-opening of the Mary Rose Museum in July 2016, following a multi-million-pound investment which included significant Heritage Lottery Funding, visitors can now get closer to Mary Rose than ever before.

• The public can now see the ship without barriers, with many of the artefacts displayed alongside the walkway.
New *Mary Rose* exhibits draw more visitors

- Exhibits explore shipboard lives from the possessions of known individuals such as an archer, the carpenter and the surgeon.
- 66 innovative re-enactments of life onboard are presented by museum staff and volunteers, projected onto the hull of the ship.
- Physical artefacts such as rosaries, nit combs, tankards and musical instruments have broadened our knowledge of Tudor social life.
- *Mary Rose*’s particular underwater environment means that organic finds have survived: leather, wood and textiles, which do not usually endure in terrestrial sites.
- In 2016 *Mary Rose* received just over 320,000 visitors, consistently scored 100% in the mystery shop satisfaction survey and was the second most visited attraction on the site after HMS *Victory*. 
Boathouse Four

• The building was constructed in the rearmament period before the Second World War and has been restored and converted into a Boatbuilding Skills Training Centre where a new generation of students are learning traditional boatbuilding techniques.

• Boathouse 4 is home to the UK’s largest collection of small royal naval craft. The *Forgotten Craft Exhibition* tells heroic stories of the small boats which were the backbone of the Royal Navy.

• They range from wooden cutters, which ferried Lord Nelson to and from his flagship, to the Cockleshell Heroes in their canoes and the powerful motorboats that helped to win the Second World War.

• Visitors can see historic boats being repaired by trainees giving them new life through traditional crafts. These skills are much in demand today to build and conserve wooden boats.
Returning BH4 to authentic re-use

• An attractive and sustainable approach.
• Occupying a working space brings the activities within personal experience.
• The resonance of Boathouse Four, with the sea pounding the lock doors, the smells of old and new timber, sawdust, rope, tar, oil and paint, the sound of hammers, saws and drills, the feel of boats which have sailed round the world or along local coasts, built by local boatbuilders, gives deep understanding and insight.
• It uniquely combines a nationally accredited traditional boat building training programme (International Boatbuilding Training College) with a visitor experience:
  • Between its re-opening in October 2015 and October 2017 BH4 had 419,257 visitors
  • Daily 2pm public free tours of the workshop floor: October 2015-2017 had 2,681 participants
  • Private interest group tours: October 2015-2017 had 467 participants
  • Open Workshop tours during events such as the Victorian Festival of Christmas had 31,091 participants
  • 2017-18 IBTC students: 32 (4 female)
  • 2017 IBTC graduates: 20, all gaining employment in marine or heritage industries: 3 on Warrior 1860
  • 2017 BH4 volunteers: 72, almost 50% female compared with 2013: 40 volunteers and only 1 female
Innovative case studies

• Boathouse 4 differs from a typical ‘museum’ because it is functioning once again as a workshop, and is somewhat noisy, dirty, oily, dusty and shadowy, but of course, safe. On the site where boats have been repaired since the 1790s, visitors can see decayed historic boats being restored by trainees, giving them new life through traditional crafts.

• Such initiatives broaden our idea of what a museum is and how we can experience cultural collections in new ways.

• Museums/visitor attractions should be diverse. Their differences widen destination choice, thus relieving pressure on more obvious tourist targets, thus Venice Arsenale complements St Mark’s Square and Mary Rose and Boathouse 4 complement HMS Victory.

• Theme parks take us into pretend scary places - industrial museums take us into really creative places.

• Portsmouth Historic Dockyard is not unique in presenting an industrial site, but is unique in using it to renew the workforce which is necessary to repair the historic ships which visitors want to see. It thus differentiates itself from other industrial attractions.
Benefits of such initiatives

• Visitors
  • handle artefacts
  • see authentic work
  • view the repair and production of actual boats
  • experience new research

• Are these museums meeting a basic human need, giving a deeper meaning, satisfying curiosity or taking them out of their normal life? Research suggests they are doing all this and more:
  • broadening our idea of what a museum is
  • enabling visitors to experience their cultural collections in new ways
  • attracting new audiences
  • widening community participation
  • enriching the visitor experience through volunteers
  • combining old and new in a constantly changing harbour scene enriched by the operational Royal Navy

• The role of the Portsmouth Naval Base Property Trust is crucial. As a sustainable conservation trust, it directs funds to enhance conservation and innovative interpretation.
Selected reading


• Stephen J. Calver & Stephen J. Page (December 2013). Enlightened hedonism: Exploring the relationship of service value, visitor knowledge and interest, to visitor enjoyment at heritage attractions, Tourism Management, 39, 23-36, claim that heritage attractions can connect conservation and authenticity positively.


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