

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'All Museums Will Become Department Stores': The Development and Implications of Retailing at Museums and Heritage Sites

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Museums and heritage sites have provided merchandise for visitors to purchase since their earliest incarnations as public attractions in the 18th century. Despite this longevity scant academic research has been directed towards such activities. However, retailing – formalised in the emergence of the museum shop – offers insights into a range of issues, from cultural representation and education, to economic sustainability. This paper outlines the historical development of retailing at museums and heritage sites in the UK, before offering a summary of current issues, illustrated by a case study of contemporary retailing at Whitby Abbey. The paper demonstrates how commercial spaces have made, and continue to make, important contributions to visitors' cultural experiences and aims to frame this topic as a legitimate field of academic enquiry.

Introduction

Over the past generation, shops have become increasingly ubiquitous at museums and heritage sites in the UK. While there is no reliable means of determining the prevalence of such amenities, the most comprehensive estimate, based on the Museum Association's 'Find a Museum' database, indicates that roughly 80% of the 2,686 organisations listed offer some form of retailing (Larkin, in prep.). The recent growth of such amenities has been spurred largely by economic concerns, as institutions attempt to navigate a volatile funding climate by developing self-generated revenue. Such expansion has meant that museum shops in

the UK now generate more than £100m per annum across the sector (Neville, 2013).

While the growing development of shop revenues reflects the professionalization of selling practices, it is also indicative of the importance of the shop to visitor satisfaction. Recent research across six museum and heritage sites in England, showed that 80% of visitors had some interaction with the shop (Larkin, 2016: 289). Inevitably, the growth of retailing has implications for visitors' museum experience and for the presentation of culture more broadly. These are evident in the popularisation of the phrase 'exit through the gift shop', which highlights the effect the shop can have on the configuration of the visit, and also the fact that museum shops are increasingly marketed as attractions in their own right (*The Guardian*, 2015). Perhaps most significantly, as retailing becomes increasingly sophisticated and

products (re)present site collections in a variety of forms, visitors are presented with opportunities to relate to culture in qualitatively different ways from those provided in the galleries (cf. Macdonald, 2012).

Despite the increased prominence of the shop within the museum and heritage visit, it is not taken seriously as a topic of academic enquiry. In intellectual terms the shop suffers in relation to the cachet of the 'authentic' objects in the galleries. Moreover, responses to this space in popular culture are often satirical, in the form of cartoons or, more recently, a music video (College Humor, 2013) or products are dismissed as symbols of the sanitised contemporary presentation of the past (cf. 'tea-towel history', see Monbiot, 2009). The result is that neither academics nor practitioners have developed the tools or conceptual approaches to analyse the museum shop effectively, and therefore do not clearly understand how commerce within a cultural context may influence the visit. Consequently, the shop (alongside the café) is among the least scrutinised and therefore most poorly understood aspects of the contemporary museum experience (Fig. 1).

The broad purpose of this article, therefore, is to highlight the cultural significance of retailing at museums and heritage sites and to justify academic study of this area.



Figure 1: Banksy: *Exit through the gift shop* (Reproduced with permission of Pest Control acting on behalf of the artist).

It explores the historical development of these activities, then considers key questions concerning the growing sophistication of museum retailing, illustrated with a contemporary case study. Ultimately, this paper aims to draw attention to the shop as a legitimate facet of the museum experience, and to encourage readers to consider its capacity to influence the presentation and consumption of culture at museums and heritage sites.

Historical development of museum retailing

The history of museum retailing in the UK is not well-understood (Macdonald, 2012: 53). There appears to be a feeling within the sector (gleaned through conversations with practitioners and visitors) that museum shops emerged in the 1970s as the result of the nascent consumer culture. While in some ways this is correct – the scale of such practices did change substantively at this point – this belies a more nuanced understanding of both institutional operations and visitor behaviour. Rather than an unprecedented commercial intrusion into cultural space, changes in the 1970s were a contemporary manifestation of longstanding visitor desires to 'take something away' from cultural sites.

The earliest example of such visitor behaviour is found in the practice of medieval pilgrimage (c.1100–1400 CE). As pilgrims visited holy shrines they sought spiritual intercession through association with holy relics. This extended to chipping fragments of masonry from saints' tombs, which were then preserved as talismans to ensure close physical connection to an intangible spirit (Webb, 2000: 85). Recognising pilgrims' need to forge such links, markets for specially manufactured items like ampullae and pilgrim badges developed at popular shrines (Bell & Dale, 2011: 624). While such decorative items assumed a religious significance, the visual reference to visited shrines also performed a 'souvenir' function, offering cultural cachet to the wearer. Pilgrimage also resulted in the production

of the first guidebooks, providing advice on routes and accommodation, eventually expanding to highlight other cultural sites pilgrims could visit during their journey (Houlihan, 2000).

While pilgrimage constituted a religio-cultural experience, the rudiments of contemporary visitor behaviours are evident in this practice. Similar desires to orientate, connect to, and commemorate museum experiences can be traced from the emergence of public museums in the 1760s. The provision of retailing since this point has been influenced by a range of social, cultural, and economic factors (particularly as cultural heritage has assumed a quasi-religious character in contemporary society).

Early catalogues and guidebooks – orientation to education

Visiting cultural sites became a popular leisurely pursuit in the mid-18th century among the aristocratic and merchant classes. As such attractions developed, so too did the paraphernalia associated with them. Catalogues were produced and sold at the outset. Early examples provided visitors with basic details of what they were looking at in a period when it was uncommon for such information to be displayed in the exhibition hall. For example, at the 1760 Society of Arts exhibition in the Strand, London – often considered the first exhibition of contemporary art – admission was free but an accompanying catalogue was sold for 6d, providing a brief justification for the exhibition and noting the exhibited artists' names and the titles of their artworks (Taylor, 1999: 8–10).

As exhibitions and related attractions increased in popularity, so too did the quality and utility of catalogues and guidebooks, to the extent that they had a profound impact on the nature of the experience itself, aiding visitors' ability to navigate and interpret the site. For example, with the late 19th century surge in country house visiting, the owners of well-trafficked houses produced portable guidebooks which '...describe[d] features of house and garden in order of interest' (Harris,

1968: 60). These offered guided itineraries, highlighting objects of cultural importance (Anderson, 2014) and obviating the need for (often poorly educated) servants to show visitors around the property. Similarly, the British Museum issued its first guide, the *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum*, in 1808 which provided a concise commentary on the Museum's rooms in the order the visitor would tour them. This enabled the visitor to navigate through the Museum and, significantly perhaps, ushered in the abolition of unpopular mandatory guided tours – often the source of visitor complaints – just two years later (Leahy, 2012: 30–31).

The substance of the information conveyed varied widely. At some institutions, informal arrangements with amateur authors resulted in catalogues and guidebooks of dubious veracity. Of the catalogue at the Tower of London, Robert William Buss noted that:

in the main it is tolerably correct; but it contains a few of the fanciful and absurd stories handed down from the old catalogues . . . and still retailed by some of the elder warders, who are, on that account, not unfrequently exposed to ridicule

(HoC, 1841: 149).

Popular attractions like the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, sold brief guidebooks, while aristocratic collections opened for public viewing were the subject of compendious *catalogues raisonnés*, comprising essays contextualising the collections in art historical terms (cf. Waterfield, 1995: 44–46). In this early period, catalogue production was often spurred by individuals rather than institutions; national collections were often content for the private sector to produce guides rather than doing it themselves.

However, the importance of these catalogues for the public was highlighted in the 1841 Select Committee on the protection of National Monuments. The Committee took evidence from state supported sites and, having noted the variability of the price and

quality of catalogues available, reemphasised the responsibilities of national institutions in educating the public:

Your Committee refer to the evidence concerning catalogues, and are of the opinion that, where the collections will allow it, cheap catalogues . . . should be provided at our national collections, as a valuable mode of disseminating knowledge, and rendering those collections more generally useful

(HoC, 1841: vi).

From this point catalogues at state supported sites were provided through the public purse which enabled them to be sold at subsidised prices. Thus, over the course of 100 years, catalogues and guidebooks developed from simple checklists of exhibited material into useful tools for the exhibition visitor. Perhaps the most appropriate symbol of this can be seen in the Albert Memorial in Kensington Gardens, London, in which Prince Albert – sponsor of the 1851 Great Exhibition – is seated with the exhibition's catalogue on his knee, with a finger marking his place.

Mechanical reproduction and the dissemination of collections

The provision of catalogues and guidebooks was spurred by popular demand, and this too played a role in museums' early experiences with tangible forms of reproduction. For example, following the British Museum's acquisition of the Parthenon Marbles in 1816, European and American cultural institutions requested plaster cast copies for display purposes. The Museum obliged, and in the process discovered a domestic demand for such reproductions, and subsequently set up a casting service at the public expense (Wilson, 2002: 127). From 1838 the Museum included lists of casts available to purchase in the endpapers of its catalogue. These lists became increasingly expansive, covering 14 pages at their height, before they were removed from the endpapers in 1859

PRICES OF CASTS FROM ANCIENT MARBLES, BRONZES, ETC., IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.		
ELGIN MARBLES. PEDIMENTS, ETC., OF THE PARTHENON.		
Nos. [painted black.]		£ s. d.
65.	Hyperion	1 10 0
	Right Arm of Hyperion [separate]	0 10 0
66.	Heads of Horses of Hyperion	3 0 0
71.	Theseus	8 0 0
77.	Ceres and Proserpine	36 0 0
74.	Iris	12 0 0
72.	Torso of Victory	3 0 0
67.	One of the Fates	16 0 0
63.	The two other Fates	36 0 0
68.	Horse's Head	0 18 0
70.	Ilissus	8 0 0
76.	Torso of Cecrops	3 0 0
118.	Fragment of the Head of Minerva	0 5 0
75.	Fragment of the Body of Minerva	1 10 0

Figure 2: Price list of casts featured in the endpapers of the 1840 edition of the *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum* (Courtesy of HathiTrust).

(Fig. 2). By this point, other reproductions such as fictile ivory (plaster casts of ivory objects) and electrotypes of metal objects were being pioneered by private companies such as Elkington & Co (f.1830s) and D. Brucciani (f.1850s), who worked in conjunction with museums, particularly the South Kensington Museum, to reproduce and sell their art works, both on site or from their company headquarters (SAD, 1860: 136)

A similar pattern emerged with photography, which museums initially employed to visually document their collections. Perceiving popular interest in such reproductions, the government intervened to deter commercial photographers, taking production into its own hands to ensure that photographs of the national collections were available to the public at subsidised prices. In 1859, the government archive of photographic negatives was centralised at the South Kensington Museum where prints were made and sold on site or were available to order. The demand was unprecedented, with nearly 13,500 photographs sold in 1859/60 alone (SAD, 1860: 137). The Museum maintained this rate of production

for four years before logistical issues necessitated that it appointed the Arundel Society, a charitable organisation whose remit was to disseminate knowledge of art, to continue production (DSA, 1866: 28).

The relationships that museums forged with the private sector in this period were crucial to their ability to successfully merchandise their collections. For example, the National Gallery was approached by private photography companies in the late 19th century to photograph its collections. Under such arrangements the Gallery benefitted through having its pictures visually catalogued for research purposes, while the companies were often allowed to sell their photographs in the Gallery's entrance hall. This was evidenced in 1884, with a complaint recorded in the National Gallery's minute book (volume 5, p. 306) against a Gallery attendant accused of stealing photographs from Mr Morelli's photography stall.

In addition to growing audiences (and forms of engagement) at the national institutions in this period, the public was seeking other cultural experiences. Historic buildings and monuments were increasingly perceived as part of the national heritage, resulting in mass tourism to such sites. Intriguingly, prior to the introduction of visitor infrastructure, tourists – like pilgrims – fashioned their own mementos. At Stonehenge '... people regularly chipped the stones for souvenirs. . . one visitor, in 1871, complained that "a constant chipping of stone broke the solitude of the place" (Thurley, 2013: 124). Capitalising on this appetite, business developed around privately owned heritage sites. By the early 20th century at Stonehenge, visitors were offered various trinkets, including 'a wide range of crested china; miniature replicas of ancient pots, boxes. . .' (Richards, 2009: 12). Significantly, these objects were explicitly souvenirs rather than educational aides, signalling an underlying desire to engage with such sites in different, more personal ways,

and ones harking back to the quasi-spiritual connection of pilgrimage.

The rise of postcards and the formalised trading space

Despite emerging popular interest in cultural sites, established institutions eschewed the provision of souvenirs. Moreover, as privately owned sites were taken into state guardianship (e.g. Stonehenge in 1918) the sale of such merchandise was curtailed. However, there were renewed efforts to make educational provision more stimulating for an increasingly interested public. National institutions did this in part by running their trading activities more professionally and ensuring that they played a more direct role in the visitor experience. Designated catalogue stalls were introduced for the first time by the British Museum (1912) and the National Gallery (1915) – replacing somewhat ad hoc sales measures – while the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) repositioned its stall towards the entrance (1912). This more professional approach ensured trading was responsive to public desires, and can be seen in the development and sale of museum postcards.

Postcards attained enormous popularity in the UK by the end of the nineteenth century, and private firms were supplying sites like Warwick Castle and the Tower of London (Staff, 1966: 65). The British Museum entered into arrangements with Oxford University Press, and its newly operational catalogue stall was stocked with catalogues, guidebooks, and postcard sets. Of its first year of operation the Museum noted that the stall:

. . . has been strikingly successful. [a return] showed an increase of nearly 2000*l.* in sales during the past 16 months, as compared with the same period next preceding. The number of picture post cards sold amounted to about 155,000 . . . the existence of the stall has greatly stimulated the sales of guide-books and catalogues, as well as photographs

(British Museum, 1914: 15).

The provision of stalls and popular material expanded across the sector; by the 1920s the major London museums – the British Museum (Natural History), the Science Museum, the Wallace Collection, and the Tate had all introduced stalls, while postcards were increasingly available at provincial institutions too.

Despite public enthusiasm, the scope of museum merchandise did not expand further in the period to the Second World War, remaining primarily documentary in character with some concessions to more light-hearted products like Christmas cards (British Museum), or wall calendars (National Trust). What did change was the *nature* of these publications, as the decreasing price of photographic illustration enabled the production of publications combining image and text, such as the 'small picture books' published by the V&A in 1926 (Burton, 1999: 188). The range and quality of such publications is exemplified by the fact that the New York Metropolitan Museum staged an exhibition of museum publications from the British government inventory in 1934, comprising 'handbooks, guides, scholarly publications, pamphlets, reports, maps, color prints, postcards, photographs, posters, and casts' (Anon, 1934a).

The increasing ability of museums to reproduce their collections visually with clear and concise commentaries on their importance enabled them to 'extend the visual influence of their collections' (Anon, 1934b) and meant that retailing was deemed 'one of the most important sides of their activities from the standpoint of contact with the public' (RCNMG, 1930: 45). This had implications for both the institutions and the public. For perhaps the first time, visitors could voice their appreciation of cultural objects to the institution itself through the purchase of items like postcards. At about this time, Barton (1934: 309) highlighted the potency of visual reproductions on the education of taste. Addressing museums generally, he noted:

All of you are forced by circumstance to retain on your walls many pictures that you know are bad, pictures that you would burn if you could. Might you not at least refrain from trading in postcards which perpetuate these empty survivals, and the sale of which appears to invest them with official commendation.

Thus, even in this early form selling spaces had the capacity to become areas for dialogue between the visitor and the institution; auxiliary fora for the representation of culture, qualitatively different to the exhibition galleries themselves.

Post-war and the rise of consumer culture

In the post-war period, the rapid reconstruction of Britain's infrastructure and moves to reorient the economy away from its industrial base profoundly influenced the cultural landscape. The urge to preserve the swiftly diminishing (often industrial) heritage resulted in the establishment of a number of independent, privately owned attractions (Hewison, 1987), which sought tourist revenue to contribute to their preservation. Such attractions generally operated outside of traditional state funding mechanisms, and brought a new imperative to the sector: profit. Consequently visitor amenities that both entertained and satisfied visitors were increasingly highly valued (Hewison, 1991: 166), including provision of popular souvenirs that reflected the emerging consumer society.

The pioneers of such approaches were the founders of the 'Stately Home Business', who opened their houses to tourism from the late 1940s. In need of revenue, private owners tended to be more receptive to consumer demand. For example, at Beaulieu Abbey (and its accompanying Motor Museum) merchandising expanded from postcards and pencils to a range of 500 lines, including 'china and leatherware, and most important, items decorated with old cars . . .' (Montagu, 1967: 174–5). The National Trust (with its

many historic houses) soon followed suit, with site-based sales emerging in the 1960s, retailing scarves, placemats, and its iconic tea towels. The popularity of such souvenirs set a template for newly formed independent museums to follow.

State sponsored museums and sites took longer to adopt such approaches, with the national museums opening designated shops in the 1970s, while the then Ministry of Works' successful publication schedule was broadened to a wider range of merchandise with its transfer to English Heritage in 1983. While catering to growing demand, the decision to introduce such products was largely spurred by economic necessity and pressure from government to maximise self-generated revenue, a trend that continues today. This saw museum merchandising change dramatically; the number of third party suppliers increased and so did the nature and type of products stocked – to include clothing, foodstuffs, children's games and toys, gramophone records and craft objects. Museums began to find alternative ways to represent their collections, with products developing from an educational focus to enhancing the visitor experience. Such products offered visitors a means of communing more closely with the cultural material in the galleries and thus had implications for their understanding and enjoyment.

Conceptualising issues surrounding museum retailing

With the introduction of broader merchandise in the 1970s, questions began to be asked within the sector about the proper role of the shop, and of merchandising in particular (Sekers, 1977). Generally speaking, these questions have not been answered and grow more complex with the expanding sophistication of museum and heritage retailing. A common refrain within the sector is to talk of the shop as 'extending the experience' – while this is true, it is vital to define and examine the role and affective nature of the shop and to better understand its influence on visitor experience.

As museum shops offer more sophisticated and bespoke products, they make an important conceptual move from being passive providers of commemorative material to agents of cultural production. In many ways this serves to translate the culture of the site into a contemporary idiom for the visitor. As Gazin-Schwartz (2004: 100) contends 'for tourists, the shop provides not education but an experience that links sightseeing, and also the . . . sites being seen, to their own world, a world that is in many ways constructed by commerce and consumerism'. Such a statement raises stimulating questions surrounding the cultural role of the shop: To what extent do products reflect an accurate understanding of the site? How does the merchandise help visitors commemorate their visit? Can merchandise provide auxiliary ways of representing culture? It is important to attempt to address these interpretative possibilities as part of the wider experience of the site.

Firstly, the shop offers visitors alternative means of sensory engagement to the exhibition galleries. Museums and heritage sites are primarily consumed in visual terms, with artefacts presented in glass cases or behind stanchions. While museum shops support a repertoire of visual images, they also offer the visitor the ability to engage with culturally-themed products through touch, taste and smell (Macdonald, 2012). Visitors may consume food or drink made following traditional recipes, play imaginatively with bows and arrows, buy perfumed products, or browse in the shop to music chosen for its links to a site. It is important to consider the extent to which these auxiliary sensory inputs extend and complement the visual character of the visit, or whether they may be ultimately detrimental to the cultural experience.

Moreover, museums that offer replicas of their collection – such as miniature Greek statues – enable visitors to possess culture, to add to their personal collections and forge a connection to the original object or the broader cultural expression. Moving from

strict verisimilitude, product development is increasingly 'inspired by' the collection, such as contemporary fashion created by high street clothing store Oasis from designs in the V&A archive (**Fig. 3**). Such collaborations can give design or objects a 'second-life' beyond the confines of the museum, while offering the wearer a closer engagement with the original material culture. However, blurring these boundaries may have implications for artistic integrity, as in the case of a museum selling earrings modelled on patterns by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, despite the fact that Mackintosh never designed such jewellery himself (Weeks, 1997).

Beyond direct issues of representation, museum shops need to be mindful of their tone in relation to the wider site. Shop products are often light-hearted, in contrast to a potentially more serious presentation of material culture elsewhere. Flippancy can be appropriate and in some cases add nuance to the visit – such as the recent popularisation and sale of 'museum [rubber] ducks' – whose kitschy design relates to the institution and its collections in a somewhat

ironical way. However, serious ethical concerns arise when pursuing retailing at sites of negative heritage. Such issues were recently played out at the 9/11 Museum, New York, which was accused of trivialising the events commemorated by offering inappropriate souvenirs, including a United States shaped cheese plate with hearts marking the site of the terrorist attacks (Makarechi, 2014). Here important questions need to be addressed about how the shop relates to and reflects the nature of the site itself.

On a broader level, retail spaces have the potential to influence initiatives across the site. Museums and heritage sites generally aim to be inclusive spaces. Dame Helen Ghosh, Director-General of the National Trust, recently noted 'It is not surprising . . . that the kind of places that we own are places where the middle classes feel more comfortable, because it is more part of their cultural life', and that consequently some visitors to Trust properties may feel 'this place isn't for them' (quoted in Hope, 2015). Attempts at cultural inclusivity are vital, but it is important to consider how facets of



Figure 3: Oasis dresses inspired by V&A prints (and sales tags) on sale at Binns department store, Middlesbrough. (Photo author).

the institutional infrastructure may deter visitors. Museum shops which employ marketing approaches aimed at appealing to specific target audiences, may risk alienating or excluding visitors by pricing them out of participating in this facet of the experience.

These are some of the issues that museum shops are increasingly encountering – other concerns include the gendered nature of retailing, or the question of what messages such spaces convey to visitors for whom the shop constitutes their *only* encounter with a cultural site. Crucially, museums respond to and market their collections in different ways – often conditioned by their budget, location, visitor profile, and staff experience, which, in part, is what makes the study of the shop stimulating. Each site/shop relationship brings different issues and baggage to bear on the visitor's encounter with culture, and some site specific issues are highlighted in the following case study.

Whitby Abbey: merchandise as context

Whitby Abbey is a ruined 13th century monastic house in North Yorkshire, operated by English Heritage (see Whitby Abbey website). The site's retailing is extensive, with over 500 products reflecting the site, the English Heritage brand, and wider aspects of English history. The organisation's current strap-line invites visitors to 'Step into England's story' and the shop provides an array of merchandise to help them do so. Products range from inexpensive key-rings, to limited edition replica medieval tapestries made by 'Master Flemish weavers' priced at £300. In particular, the shop sells a number of 'affective' products which afford visitors the ability to engage with or literally consume the site (e.g. jam, biscuits, wine), replicas (e.g. jewellery) and children's toys (e.g. bow and arrow set). These products help to provide a wider historical, cultural, and geographical contextualisation for the site. Taken together, they augment the visitor experience and work to situate the site in a number of wider narratives.

In many ways, the common theme of the shop commodities helps to provide a chronological depth for the site by locating it in a historical narrative. The products offer a visual repertoire of England's history, whether through a linear timeline (found, for example, on tea towels), or other signifiers (e.g. Roman Britain or World War II themed products), against which the Abbey can be contextualised. In so doing the products collectively reinforce the site's 'past-ness'. Furthermore, many products (particularly consumables) emphasise that they have been manufactured using traditional methods (e.g. jam) or by skilled artisans. In locating their production in these terms, such items offer a tangible expression of the history that visitors ostensibly come to heritage sites to experience, and have the capacity to engage visitors, often through literal consumption of the past. During my fieldwork, for example, one visitor noted that sampling mead on site provided a sensory insight into what life would have been like in the medieval period.

The products also allow visitors to engage with interpretations of the monument beyond the strictly academic. Whitby Abbey's popular contemporary image is largely conditioned by its association with Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*, in which the eponymous vampire enters England by making landfall in the town. English Heritage retails these associations, selling the book itself and a variety of themed 'gothic' products. Significantly, these products facilitate an imaginative re-use of the monument that is not offered in the archaeologically and historically rigorous interpretation provided around the site. This is particularly interesting given English Heritage's 'rational' presentation of its medieval sites (stripped masonry) as opposed to 'romantic' (ivy covered, overgrown) ruins. Here the shop encourages popular alternative narratives to those given in the academic presentation of the ruins, which contribute to a multi-faceted experience of the monument.

Finally, the shop helps to situate the site in the wider geographical context. This is

particularly important, 'so you know where you are', as one couple noted. This is achieved through offering local products, such as cakes from Botham's bakery. However, a more significant factor in expanding the regional personality of English Heritage shops is its recent adoption of pro-active selling practices by offering visitor tastings (e.g. jam, chutney, wine). These are conducted by staff who have received special training, and, while undoubtedly improving sales, they also provide a substantial form of visitor engagement. In many instances they provide an opportunity for staff (unencumbered by the admissions desk, etc.) to talk to visitors more openly, both about the site and the wider area, offering local insight and humanising the experience. Thus the shop is able to provide a space for visitors to engage with local people that may be more difficult to engineer elsewhere onsite (**Fig. 4**).

The principal question in relation to this retailing is how appropriately the shop (re)



Figure 4: Samples desk at Whitby Abbey, offering visitors the opportunity to try food and drink in the museum shop (Photo: author).

presents the site to the visitor. Given that it has the capacity to offer alternative understandings of the site, do these still adhere to English Heritage's underlying vision? Considering the organisation's current values statement it would seem that an engaging shop does fit its visitor-focussed mission, acting as an alternative forum for accessing the past:

Gone are the days when people learned about history simply from reading books. People are increasingly looking for experiences that bring history to life in an engaging way and nothing beats standing on the spot where history happened. We offer a hands-on experience that will inspire and entertain people of all ages. Our work is informed by enduring values of authenticity, quality, imagination, responsibility and fun. Our vision is that people will experience the story of England where it really happened.

(English Heritage, n.d.)

From this example, it seems that the shop has the capacity to play a substantive role in the visitor experience. Merchandising enables the site to engage with different narratives (cultural, local) and ultimately to augment the visitor's experience. Yet, for all the potentially beneficial ways in which the shop may contextualise a site, there is also a risk that some products render the past in uncritical and commercial ways that the more formally curated aspects of the site may work hard to avoid. While English Heritage offers opportunities which could extend the cultural experience, it also retails clichéd images of knights (for boys) and princesses (for girls), teddy bear monks, and beer-hall tankards, rather than more historically substantial products.

Ultimately, successful merchandising must constitute a balance between commercial viability and cultural appropriateness to the site. Through conceptualising the museum shop and understanding the dynamics at

play, practitioners will be best placed to maximise the potential cultural capacity while mitigating less desirable aspects.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the development of shops at museums and heritage sites and highlighted the fact that such areas have always acted as important points of intersection between visitors and the institution. Further work is needed to assess the various and growing forms of representation that the museum shop offers. Such studies should serve to bring academic legitimacy to this field of study, to ensure that the cultural role of the shop is taken more seriously, and to enable practitioners to make informed, collaborative decisions about issues of onsite representation. If we accept Falk and Dierking's (1992) assertion that the museum experience is increasingly conceived as a holistic one, then all aspects of the museum and heritage complex require as thorough a curatorial oversight as the exhibition galleries themselves. Through renewed attention to this increasingly integral aspect of the museum and heritage complex, it is possible to evaluate the opportunities and pitfalls that it can bring to the broader representation of culture.

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The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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