

Destination Retail Therapy

Shopping for souvenirs

By Sam Phillips

As the souvenir shop has become an accepted part of any visitor experience, our expectations of the products on offer have got higher and higher. Sam Phillips looks at how destinations are rising to this challenge, what are their options and are they getting it right?

At the end of a perfect day out at a museum, gallery or stately home do you look forward to heading into the gift shop? Or do you dread it? Do you view your purchases as supporting a cause, as souvenirs to treasure? Or as a cave-in to pester power? Whatever you think, the days of a simple cup of tea and a postcard after a hard afternoon's sightseeing are over.

Since the early Christian pilgrimages, tourists have collected tokens as reminders of their visit to a place. By the 18th century the gentlemen of the Grand Tour had become the ultimate collectors (perhaps pillagers) of art and antiquities. Travelling Europe looking at sites of architectural interest they might have asked Mr Canaletto to paint a keepsake of Venice or haggled over a spare piece of a Roman temple. Today our souvenirs are generally more humble but they are proffered to us in an often calculated, not-to-be-missed opportunity for the attraction we have visited to make extra revenue from us before we leave. You would be surprised, certainly in the UK, to tumble out of a museum, gallery or exhibition and not be hurled into a bright, modern gift shop. And as savvy consumers we expect to be tempted and engaged by interesting 'stuff'. To satisfy us, and to make the most of the opportunity, heritage and cultural attractions have had to arrive at a happy marriage of academia and commercialism.

The major sites still in family ownership were quicker out of the gate to embrace commercial enterprise in the form of a shop, thanks to sheer necessity. In the public sector, and particularly since lottery-funded developments came into being, the shop and its offering have become part of the enhancement of the whole visitor experience, together with the café, the friends' clubs and the educational facilities. And after entrance fees for major museums were abolished in 2001, in some cases causing visitor numbers to soar and income to drop, the shop became an ever-more important function for raising additional revenue. The pressure on these retail outlets to perform in terms of income and creating inspirational products has never been greater. As well as focusing on the shop, many of these institutions have turned their attention to licensing their archives, images and intellectual property as another important revenue source.

The reasons quoted for selling merchandise in the shop are twofold: firstly, for income and, secondly, to enable the attraction brand to step outside the place and be introduced to potential new visitors. The evolution of the shop in the National Gallery in London is a good



example. As its postcard stand became a fully-fledged shop it began printing more of its own greeting cards and distributing them widely to other retailers.

This resulted in a healthy business (the story goes that the profits from National Gallery Publications provided the £1m that clinched the acquisition of the Casper David Friedrich winter landscape in the early 90s). Eventually the risks associated with printing and holding its own stock led the organisation to license the production of products to third parties instead. The Sainsbury Wing added extra retail space and now the shop has a fully-developed retail offering including a stunning collection of publications that establishes it as an expert on art history and technique as well as being a good shop. And it even cocks a snook at its own popularity, stocking a T-shirt bearing the slogan 'Show me the Monet'.

In addition, at major museums like this, the merchandise produced for temporary 'blockbuster' exhibitions can add 30-60% of turnover to the takings from the entry fees that are permitted for these shows.

The National Gallery's story is typical of the development of the most sophisticated museum shops. There are, in the main, three sorts of products you will find there now. The first is the traditional souvenir, bearing the logo, name or image of the place. This will be manufactured for the shop and held in stock – useless to any other destination. Secondly, there are products bought in by the retail outlet that are appropriate but which are also widely available elsewhere. The third category is licensed products. These are objects made by a manufacturer under licence from the museum or attraction for wide distribution at retail. Licensing is a sound and growing part of many attraction businesses and takes many forms. Some organisations, for example, can license the images from their archives for greeting cards, jigsaw puzzles or table linen. The National Trust's photography archive is a good example. Some hone in on their special expertise such as the Science Museum range of toys. Others aim to act as inspiration – the Museum of Domestic Architecture, for example, which opens its archives to designers and manufacturers. Taking an image from an archive and paying to use it as a two-dimensional object like a greeting card seems simple. Other things require more imagination on the part of the manufacturer: York Minster, for example, where silverware has been translated into jewellery, or The Tate Gallery range of household paints.

It's not always the case that licensed products appear in the retail outlet at the associated destination (you'll find the Tate paints in Homebase not on Millbank). In fact licensing from heritage sites relies on creating products that can stand alone, on the high street, out of their natural context. However, where appropriate these products can appear in the shop, resulting in a bonus retail possibility for the licensees or manufacturers as well as being interesting for consumers. Many collections have images that





become iconic, such as the 'Angel' T-shirt from the London Transport Museum or Monet's ubiquitous water lilies. And it should be no surprise that the home of decorative arts, the V & A, has the licensing programme most

others aspire to.

The main challenges in licensing a collection, exhibition, cultural place or destination lie not just in allowing the vulgar wind of commercialism to blow into a world that exists principally for conservation and education. It is the ability of manufacturers to navigate their way around a major archive and then create beautiful products from it that is key to a successful product range. As organisations find solutions to this the licensing business is becoming increasingly sophisticated, particularly now that a number of specialist agencies are working in this field.



Licensing is the process of permitting a manufacturer to use your intellectual property on its product, for which it pays you a royalty. Licensing a children's TV series, for example, is a simple

transfer or reinterpretation of the characters and values of that series onto products that are suitable for the show's audience.

In industry-speak we say that a Bob the Builder Hat or a Teletubbies Toy extends the child's experience of the TV show off the screen.

Licensing paid \$5.8bn in the US alone in royalties last year and it encompasses products licensed from sports brands (think Manchester United branded drink bottles), personalities (Britney Spears cosmetics, for example), corporate brands (such as a Michelin foot pump) and, of course, cultural or destinations such as museums and galleries.



The most satisfying experiences of shopping at visitor attractions seem to rely on having a mixture of souvenirs, clever product sourcing and

licensed products. What better, for example, than buying a lion at the end of a trip to Longleat? Or The National Gallery's 'Grow your own still life' seed pack with Van Gogh's Sunflowers on the packet? The V&A, perhaps the biggest hitter in museum merchandise, can stock a mixture of specially manufactured souvenirs, licensed products and items selected and bought in because of their appropriateness. Its buying clout allows it to do this and so now it's a place to do your Christmas shopping, a showcase for young jewellery and textile designers and a thriving souvenir shop. In fact, its V&A branded mouse mats and chocolates are squashed into an inconspicuous corner to make space for the more original products. Elsewhere in the museum you are spilled out of the Vivienne Westwood exhibition (for example) into a special boutique for a punk fashion experience. Shop fittings, Sex Pistols music and the products on offer raise the heartbeat

after the exhibition atmosphere and place you right back into a shopping frame of mind. Yes, I wanted the tartan welly boots and the tie and the very expensive boned corsets. Tacking it on the end of a visit gave me a 'once only' sense of urgency. It was certainly a great shopping experience. I hope it made money for the V&A. And I think it enhanced the whole trip.

At the Guinness visitor centre in Dublin, you rise up the building, taking in the exhibits as you go, and exit into a high glass rotunda, in the middle of which is

a bar serving you a complementary pint of the black stuff. There is no merchandise up here (you get your chance later, downstairs and again at the airport where the outlets collectively turn over 4m Euros a year). But this is the ultimate 'stuff'



to consume at the end of the trip as you overlook Dublin, the city Guinness is so closely associated with. And successful merchandise doesn't have to be on a grand scale. Tintern Abbey in Monmouthshire is a ruin but the shop is a clean, modern building and the range of merchandise thoughtful and evocative. After wandering the Abbey grounds piecing together the ruin in your mind, it's satisfying to come across something so complete, so finished. Personally, I treasure two bits of merchandise for the way they still evoke a visit: a packet of modelling clay from the Rococo exhibition at the V&A (which an artist friend has since transformed into something mantelpiece-worthy); and a traditionally made wooden box from the Hancock Shaker village in the USA.

Fortunately, most souvenir shops have moved beyond the dreary mouse-mat and silk tie in an attempt to offer imaginative, exclusive and engaging products for all ages. But along with the stunning successes there are still some disappointments. When it doesn't work souvenir merchandise is disappointing. Our current obsession with personalised things can go badly wrong. When the same mustard labelled 'specially made for Blenheim' is also 'specially made' for somewhere else you can't help but feel you've been short-changed. A glance at the pocket money areas of many national museums can reveal a disappointing selection of stationery items and toys, all clearly made by the same manufacturer but with different names stamped on the side. It cannot possibly be the case that tapes of whale music and jars of jam enhance the architectural grandeur of Blenheim Palace or Hardwick Hall, for example. In fact they can make some National

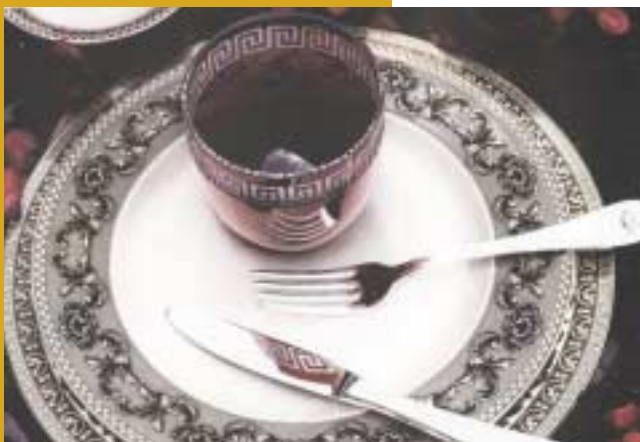
Trust shops feel like the local garden centre. But it's what the

Trust has found sells in its shops and it all adds to the needy coffers in an essential way. We have to conclude that as visitor destinations get better at choosing and designing products, the shop will become an ever more important part of the visitor equation. So will the products, whether they are souvenirs found only in the shop itself or items licensed by third parties and proudly bringing their qualities to the high street.



Sam Phillips is Editor of License!Europe, Europe's leading magazine for the licensing and brand extension industry.

Rules of the Souvenir Trade



do:

- Offer clever, innovative, thoughtful, exclusive product at your shop. Stock a mixture of traditional souvenirs, licensed product and other appropriate products.
- Invent a truly pleasurable retail experience: a clean, calm, modern shop that is a million miles away from the hell of Oxford Circus.
- Create a 'once only, never to be repeated' opportunity for the visitor.
- Be true to the brand and the attraction's mission. Strike the delicate balance between commercialism (not exploitation) and conservation.
- If you can, identify your 'hero' product (the Longleat Lion or the picture of the skating vicar in Edinburgh, for example) and make the most of it.
- Play to your strengths – provide expertise, inspiration, imagery or fun for children, for example.



don't:

- Label-slap. A boring range of predictable, unimaginative tat with a label slapped on the side won't sell.
- Stock product that has no resonance with or connection to the brand. Cuddly gorillas at an aquarium don't really fit.
- Compromise the integrity of the brand. If an attraction includes in its mission education, preservation or conservation, products such as novelty condoms, toy guns or computer games may not be suitable.
- Treat the visitor as a fool. The same rules as the high street apply and indeed are stricter given the visitor knows he/she is a sitting duck. Offer value for money, quality and choice.
- Provide the same old format. Be bold and different with your retail offer or environment. Try to delight your visitors with, say, a complimentary gift. Try the 'free pint of Guinness' idea.