

# Destinations and People, People and Destinations

Discovering destinations through people, past and present

By **Tim Ambrose**

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**What makes a destination different?**

**What gives it its spirit of place?**

**Tim Ambrose argues that successful destination management is first and foremost about helping visitors explore and discover a destination through its people, past and present.**

Mention Chartwell and one thinks of Winston Churchill; hear the name Dorchester and Thomas Hardy comes to mind; see a road sign pointing to Stratford upon Avon and it is synonymous with Shakespeare.

The relationship between places and people is fundamental to identity and self recognition. We define ourselves and others in terms of place - where we born, where we live, where we went to school, where we were married, where we work, where we go on holiday. It has always been so; indeed, our surnames often derive from the practice in the Middle Ages of calling someone by the place that they came from, for example Robin of Sherwood, or John of Gaunt (Ghent), with a more contemporary example, Eric (of) Morecambe.

Figures closely associated in the public mind with a location may be historical or they may be contemporary. Whatever the case, these associations contribute in different ways towards our perception of the place, and thus its

destination brand, and may motivate us to a greater or lesser extent to visit the place. Such figures may be or have been architects, writers, artists, musicians, politicians, scientists, doctors, statesmen, soldiers, sailors, poets, sculptors, inventors, explorers, engineers, musicians, teachers, religious leaders, garden designers, entrepreneurs, or business people; the list is endless.

The location with which an individual is associated varies widely. The place may be small, an individual house (for example, Dove Cottage, Wordsworth's home at Grasmere or Monk's House at Rodmell, the home of Virginia Woolf) or a substantial city destination (for example, Barcelona and the architect Gaudi). It may be a cathedral or religious house, a castle or a palace, a house or a garden, a monument or memorial, or a restaurant or shop. It may be highly specific to the individual, for example Alloway and the birthplace of Robert Burns, or shared with others, for example Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey.

The type of association also varies enormously. The individual may have had a long association with the place, for example Wessex and Thomas Hardy or Bateman's and Rudyard Kipling, or a relatively short-lived association, for example Waterloo and the Duke of Wellington or Bannockburn and Robert the Bruce.

(From left to right) top :

Winston Churchill - Chartwell House ([www.briainonview.com](http://www.briainonview.com)), The Beatles - Abbey Road, John Lewis Department Store on Oxford Street ([www.briainonview.com](http://www.briainonview.com)), Lord Byron - Newstead Abbey, bottom : William Shakespeare - Stratford-upon-Avon ([www.briainonview.com](http://www.briainonview.com)), Robert the Bruce - Bannockburn, Duke of Wellington - Apsley House ([www.briainonview.com](http://www.briainonview.com)) inset : Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise - Morecambe Bay.



**Motivating forces**

We may be motivated to visit a destination principally because of the close association with an individual, for example Canterbury Cathedral and Thomas à Beckett, Newstead and Lord Byron, Abbotsford House and Walter Scott, or in a more contemporary sense Butler's Wharf and Terence Conran's restaurants or Liverpool and the early homes of John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Or we may discover an association between a place and a person while we are visiting for other reasons. Indeed, we may be motivated because of our fondness for fictional characters, for example Ashdown Forest and Winnie the Pooh or Brother Cadfael and Shrewsbury Abbey.

What generates the interest in these associations and why do people feel drawn to a place because of such associations? There is no single reason, but it may be through religious awe or reverence, the hope for a Saint's intercession, hero worship, curiosity and emotional resonance, study and research, a search for closer understanding of the work or contribution of the individual, an interest in the site as well as the individual or even 'a spirit of mild prurience' as



Simon Jenkins has described the reason for visiting country houses. At the same time, people from different cultures will have different reasons for visiting such locations. Whatever the case, millions of people visit these biographical destinations every year and their popularity shows no sign of diminishing in a world where contemporary culture lives and breathes through the cult of the personality.

Nonetheless people and places associated with them are subject to the change of fashion as both the direct knowledge or the memory of the individual change through time. Yesterday's heroes or villains may not be the heroes or villains of today and tomorrow. A good example of this is the Duke of Wellington, one of the best known Englishmen, whose 'shrine' is Apsley House in London. Wellington defeated Napoleon Bonaparte at Waterloo in 1815 and went on to Prime Minister from 1828-30. Apsley House was his London residence from 1817 until his death in 1852. In his day, Wellington as the saviour of Britain and Europe drew vast crowds of admirers - today, Apsley House is visited by some 60,000 people each year.





Beatrix Potter -  
Hilltop, Sawery, Cumbria



Antonio Gaudi -  
La Familia Sagrada, Barcelona



William Wordsworth -  
Dove Cottage, Grasmere, Cumbria

### Different approaches

Most of the examples above are biographical visitor attractions in their own right (you 'visit' individuals in the place(s) associated with them), and are managed and marketed as such. But the association of a well known individual and a place is also marked in other ways - for example through festivals and events, public art, publications and broadcast media, the naming of buildings, streets and squares, and information and interpretation.

A good example of the latter is the Blue Plaque scheme. The main purpose of the scheme has been to draw attention to buildings of interest because of their associations with famous people. Set up by the Royal Society of Arts in 1867, the scheme today is managed by English Heritage. There are some 800 plaques in London and the scheme has been extended to other parts of England including Birmingham, Portsmouth, Merseyside and Southampton. From 2004, the scheme is due for expansion year by year, region by region.

The main criteria are:-

- (i) There shall be reasonable grounds for believing that the subjects are regarded as eminent by a majority of members of their own profession or calling.
- (ii) They shall have made some important positive contribution to human welfare or happiness.
- (iii) They shall have had such exceptional and outstanding personalities that the well-informed passer-by immediately recognises their names.
- (iv) They deserve national recognition.

The scheme will have been extended to the whole country by c.2014. Its enlargement will not only have the benefit of recognising the contribution that the individual has made, but is also likely to generate a debate about how we recognise contributions to society in a broader sense. It will also be interesting to see the extent to which the scheme balances national and regional contributions.

### From aristocracy to meritocracy

Society has always lauded famous men and women and been interested in the places with which they have been associated, whether their fame is short-lived or long-lived. However, since the last War with the progressive democratisation of society and the rise and rise of public interest in history and heritage, interest in the 'ordinary' rather than the 'extraordinary' has increased. The growth in numbers of museums, the rise of interest in family history, the increasing levels of visitation at country houses and archaeological sites, the increasing numbers of web sites and the high viewing ratings for television programmes and films on historical subjects are all witness to the popular interest in history and heritage. But a key characteristic of this interest has been a focus on the lives of individuals across all levels of society. It can be argued that individual lives are the 'building blocks' of history and each one of us through our lifetime makes a contribution, however great or small, to history. An individual may affect millions of people, or just a few, in their lifetime and may continue to impact on and affect people's lives in different ways for years or even centuries to come.

How do destination developers and managers respond to these currents and trends? What roles do people associated



*John Lennon -  
Forthlin Road, Liverpool*



*Thomas Hardy -  
Higher Brockhampton, Dorset*

with destinations have to play in new development programmes? Or in brand development?

Asset audits are a useful first step in considering how most effectively to utilise individuals - historical and contemporary - to support destination development. Locum has recently conducted research for the North West Cultural Consortium which sought to identify a list of 50 'Cultural Gems' for the North West and use them to increase awareness of regional distinctiveness. The report focused on gems that can be visited by the public and amongst a range of other categories, we identified places where a close association exists between the place and a well known individual, past or present. Four of the fifty gems were of this type and celebrated John Lennon and Paul McCartney, Beatrix Potter, William Wordsworth, and Eric Morecambe - cultural 'champions' for the North West. Another category of gems identified in the study process was people gems - well known people associated with the Region who were not necessarily strongly connected with any one specific place but who could help support the North West in branding and promotional terms.

While this particular asset audit was at a large, regional scale and included other forms of cultural asset, the principle of examining what relationship individuals have with a place (of whatever size) through an asset audit is a sound first step in destination development terms. Research of this type allows individuals and their significance to the destination to be defined, considered and assessed against agreed criteria, for example in terms of product development, presentation and interpretation or branding. It allows destination managers to cast their net more widely than the great and the good, or the rich and the famous, and explore the contribution to a site or destination made by a much wider range of people.

A good early example of this approach within country house destinations is at the National Trust's Erdig near

Wrexham where the unusually close relationship that existed historically between the family of the house and their servants was used in a pioneering way as a basis to make life 'below stairs' visible and accessible to the visitor in a variety of different ways. This approach to presenting a country house through multiple perspectives, rather than through the conventional unilinear 'owner' perspective has been progressively developed elsewhere in the UK with significant success, particularly through education and lifelong learning programmes. Visitors are not only able to gain a broader range of insights into country houses (and other types of destinations) as complex social systems, but they are also able to relate to a broader range of characters associated with the house and its estates, here or overseas.

The principle of presenting places through a number of people associated with them, rather than through one or two individuals, is still perhaps surprisingly not as widespread as it might be and often not developed within a coherent framework for branding and promotional purposes. Opportunities exist to celebrate all manner of personal success and achievement of relevance to a destination through time and to identify the nature and extent of contribution that individuals have made to that destination. This approach fits well with the Government's citizenship agenda and reflects the value of using role models at all levels within society. This does not mean that there is a need for an array of new visitor attractions, although existing attractions might well consider the extent to which they are accurately reflecting the lives of the people that relate to the attraction! It does mean that in considering the strengths of a destination at whatever scale, the stories of the people of the place can be a highly effective means of developing and promoting a destination to new audiences and engaging them with the spirits of the place.

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