

Unlocking the Potential of Church Tourism

by Andrew Duff

Tourism Insights, September 2009

Summary

Visits to churches and other religious heritage sites are on the up. And churches are increasingly looking towards tourism as a way of generating much needed funding and reconnecting with the community. There are synergies to be gained from local authorities and businesses working with churches to enhance the local tourism offer. This article examines the increase in church tourism and provides guidance on how destination managers and churches can tap into the tourism market to the benefit of the local economy.

Introduction

An increasing number of people are visiting churches and other religious heritage sites – awareness of their significance as attractions is growing. That also means great potential for tourism professionals to help enhance the contribution such places make to the overall visitor experience of a destination. Meanwhile, those involved in the care and maintenance of churches look for ways in which the cultural and spiritual assets of which they are stewards can be opened up more effectively for both residents and visitors.

Are churches the hidden giants of tourism destinations? What is the actual scope and scale of church tourism, why do people visit churches, and how can the visitor potential be realised in practice? This article provides key facts, examples of practice and suggestions for action.

A rich and diverse heritage

As for the scale and range of the heritage asset, the currently accepted best estimate [\[1\]](#) is as follows.

- Four World Heritage sites in the UK specifically include church buildings: Durham Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, Canterbury Cathedral, Fountains Abbey.
- Of 16,000 Church of England church buildings, 4,200 are Listed Grade I, representing 45% of all secular or religious buildings listed at this grade, and a further 8,000 are Listed Grade II* or II.
- There are 340 Listed buildings of national importance in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust.
- Other Listed faith buildings include 622 Roman Catholic, 537 Methodist, 306 Baptist and 69 Congregational churches, 28 synagogues and one mosque.
- A further 146 ecclesiastical sites are in the care of English Heritage or the National Trust.

Note: whilst much of the available data in this article relates specifically to England, some references are made to experience in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and the author believes that the general assumptions and recommendations are equally applicable across the UK.

Expressions of evolution

Churches are, of course, first and foremost places of worship where people meet to celebrate their faith and mark significant life events. However, the process of communities building, adapting and renewing their sacred spaces over centuries of social, economic and cultural change has endowed historic churches with more than a patina of age: they are tangible expressions of the evolution of British culture, local heritage, family history and tales of human events and achievements, embellished with architecture, art and craftsmanship [\[2\]](#).

Simon Jenkins, author of *England's Thousand Best Churches* expresses this well: 'To make the acquaintance of an English church is to witness the breeze of history make its imprint on stone, brick, wood and plaster. No church is identical with any other. Nowhere else in the world are places of worship so idiosyncratic as in England. Each arose from its particular landscape and culture, reflecting local materials, patronage and politics, even the liturgical views of the vicar. The humblest church is a casket of varieties.'

[\[3\]](#)

Thus our churches are a cultural asset contributing to local distinctiveness, integral to the communities and destinations within which they have evolved.

Underutilised assets?

Whilst fewer people attend church services regularly today, more are visiting churches outside formal service times. This reflects, in part, a growing interest in cultural heritage and in family history, but also a more individualistic approach to spirituality. Meanwhile, changing demographics and urban and rural settlement patterns mean that the historic asset is often underutilised. Combined with ever increasing costs of maintenance and repair, this is driving a renewed emphasis on finding more community-based uses and widening public access to the heritage these churches represent.

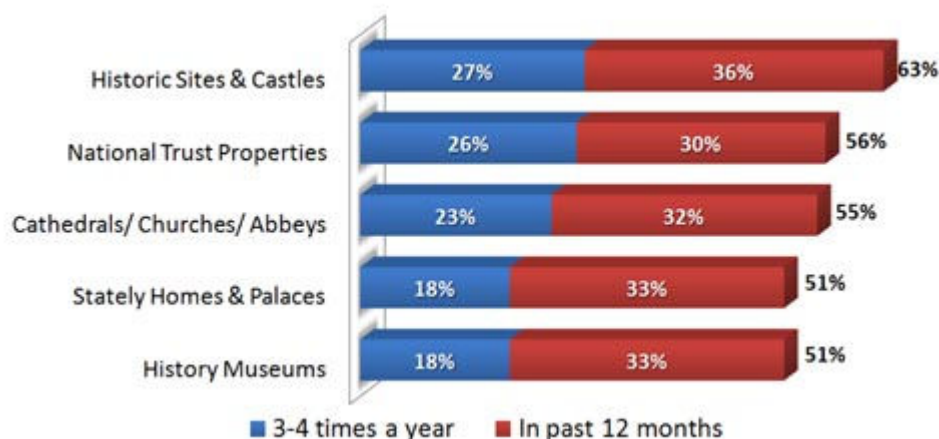
These buildings are a fragile resource, non-commercial and almost entirely dependent upon voluntary effort. If they are not supported and promoted to help them open up, welcome visitors and tell their stories, a vital part of English culture and history could be irretrievably lost.

Visiting facts and figures

Whilst cathedrals and churches attract substantial numbers of visitors, obtaining reliable data is difficult. Only a few major sites charge for entry, and whilst many are staffed by volunteers at least some of the time, just as many others are open without anyone in attendance. The following are some key indicators.

- Statistics for English tourism reveal that 55% of all day trips include at least one visit to a cathedral or church (see Figure 1) [\[4\]](#) – the third most visited of all types of attraction.
- A North West Faith Tourism Scoping Study [\[5\]](#) estimated 17 million visits to 45 cathedrals and 52 places of worship.
- Ecclesiologist Trevor Cooper [\[6\]](#) suggests that each parish church typically receives around 700-4,000 visitors each year.

Figure 1: Frequency of visiting attractions (top 5)



VisitBritain England Fact Book – Key Statistics about English Tourism, May 2009.

VisitBritain's report on the 2008 Survey of Visits to Attractions [\[7\]](#) sheds further light on this. Whilst the 'places of worship' sample comprises just 103 sites, this does cover the full range of types of site from cathedrals and places of pilgrimage, through major churches down to smaller churches. From this data, and informed by knowledge of local patterns encountered in several parts of the country, it is possible to estimate around 40 million visits to churches per annum, which compares realistically with the broader 35 to 50 million range suggested in the Sacred Britain report in 2006.

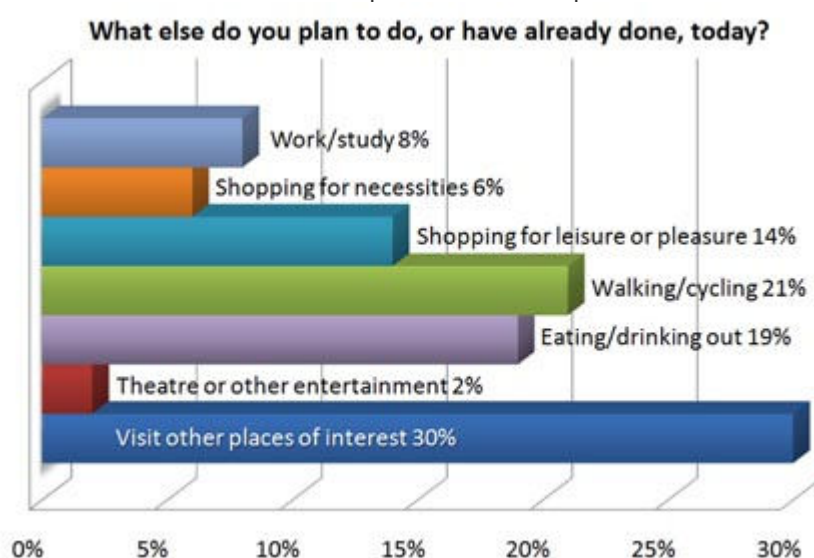
Research by the Churches Conservation Trust [\[8\]](#) shows that visits to churches do involve local overnight stays, and that they take place as part of a trip involving other complementary leisure activities (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Most visits to churches are non-local



Source: Churches Conservation Trust visitor survey 2006.

Figure 3: Most visits to churches are part of leisure trips



Source: Churches Conservation Trust visitor survey 2006.

Economic impact

Arguably, visits to churches have economic value, as people will typically spend money on travel, food and other items as part of a day out, and accommodation if staying in the area.

A report commissioned by the Association of English Cathedrals and English Heritage in 2004 [\[9\]](#) estimated that visitors to cathedrals generate £91 million in spend and directly support 2,600 jobs. This would equate to around one third of average day visitor spending.

It seems realistic, therefore, to assume that visits to churches represent at least a part share of the value of a day trip. Assuming a modest 20% of the average £43 value of a day trip [\[10\]](#), not including accommodation costs, the value of church visits to the tourism economy would be at least £350 million each year.

It is, however, impossible to put a monetary value on the importance of historic churches to the character and distinctiveness of destinations. Even for those visitors who do not enter into church buildings, they form part of the scenery and sense of place.

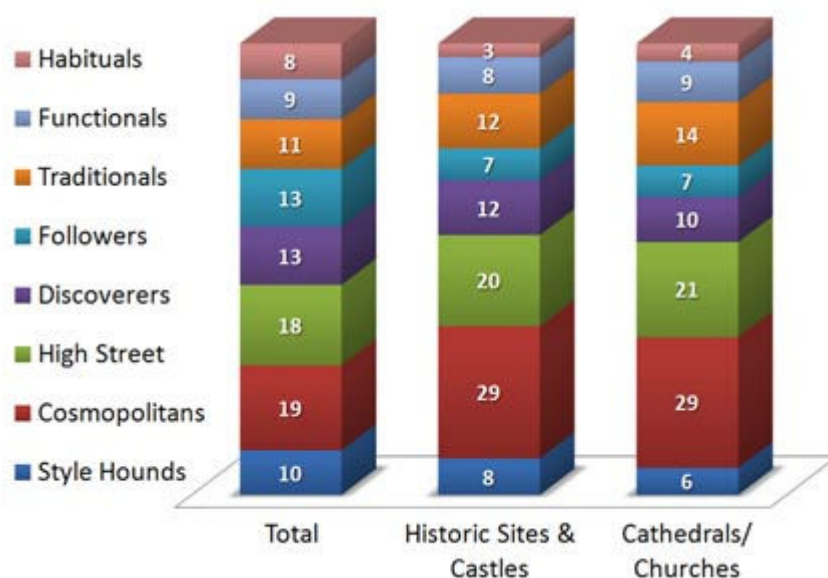
Visitor profile

A recent Tourism South East study [11] examined the profile, behaviour and motivations of day trippers in the London/South East region, using the Arkenford segmentation model (see the November 2008 Tourism Insights article, [Segmenting the Tourism Market](#)). This enabled day trip behaviour to be analysed by VisitEngland's core target market segments (see Figure 4).

For activities undertaken at least three to four times a year the profile for visits to cathedrals and churches is broadly similar to visits to historic sites and castles. It is spread well across all segments, but most strongly amongst Cosmopolitans, High Street, and Traditionals segments (64%), followed by Discoverers.

Arguably this is significant data, suggesting that none of the segments generally targeted by tourism destinations should be overlooked in terms of potential to visit churches.

Figure 4: Day trip activities undertaken at least 3-4 times a year by Arkenford market segments (extract)



Source: VisitBritain England Fact Book – Key Statistics about English Tourism, May 2009

The national Sacred Britain strategy [12] identified a number of market segments for whom churches could be points of interest. These also included some of the 'Arkenford' domestic market segments targeted by tourism destinations:

- UK Traditionals and Functionals, especially family-related visits and activities
- UK Cosmopolitans for whom churches could be points of interest within value-added cultural short-break visits
- UK Discoverers for whom churches could be points of interest within country walking, cycling or other activity breaks.

In addition, some special interest activities and overseas markets, could be targeted including:

- 'Educationals' including adult groups and 'out of the classroom' activities.
- 'Church crawlers' – the small but committed core market for exploring churches.
- UK and international 'ancestral tourism'.
- USA travel organisers specialising in religious heritage and cultural routes.

Why do people visit churches?

Whilst many people visit churches with some spiritual inclination, it is also clear that visitors do not need to be 'believers' to enjoy exploring the cultural assets and associations represented by churches. As Simon Jenkins asserts, 'An English church is more than a place of denominational worship. It is the stage upon which pageant of community has been played out for a millennium' and, 'These churches were, and still are glorious... a dispersed gallery of vernacular art... without equal anywhere in the world.'

Despite the popularity of visiting churches, spirituality is not generally the primary reason for making a trip. In a recent study of the relationship between English parish churches and the heritage visitor market [\[13\]](#):

- 87% of respondents said that their visit to a church was secondary to other activity
- more than one-third of the respondents were members of the National Trust and/or English Heritage
- only 11% of those interviewed were visiting churches in pursuit of an interest in architecture.

People visit churches as part of a wide range of activities:

- points of interest on a walk, cycle-ride or car drive
- family history
- interest in notable people, writers, and/or artists
- exploring stories of places, such as battlefields and areas of heritage interest
- cultural activities, such as concerts or art exhibitions
- nature and wildlife interest of churchyards
- decorative arts and architectural appreciation
- an opportunity for quiet reflection in a place considered to be a 'sacred space'.

People interested in visiting churches have not always pre-planned their visit or sought out detailed information in advance. Indeed, VisitBritain research shows this is true for one in three visits to attractions of all kinds [\[14\]](#). For most visitors there is more likely to be a general interest in visiting churches as part of a trip to a destination known to offer a number of points of interest. This has implications for the way in which churches might be presented as part of the wider destination visitor offer.

Spiritual tourism

The notion of 'pilgrimage' is enjoying resurgence, albeit generally defined in looser ways - spiritual tourism in the 21st century embraces a range of possibilities relevant to UK destinations.

- Pilgrimage – UK sites such as Iona, Whithorn or Walsingham are attracting growing numbers of intentional pilgrims.
- 'Softer' pilgrimage trails – of wider appeal but with some spiritual connotations – with examples including St Cuthbert's Trail from Melrose in Scotland to Holy Island in Northumberland, and St Patrick's Trail in Ireland.
- Retreats - visits to priories and religious houses continue to attract more staying visitors, perhaps encouraged by recent TV documentaries. The Franciscan Friary, Alnmouth in Northumberland and the Buddhist meditation centre at Conishead Priory, Ulverston in Cumbria are just two examples of many that welcome visitors from around the UK and beyond.
- Multi-faith visitor activity – faith trails and tours have been promoted in Liverpool, Leicester, Birmingham and other destinations, offering fascinating opportunities to increase understanding of different cultures and help to promote community cohesion.

Of course churches, especially those off the beaten track, can offer a sense of tranquility and spiritual retreat that can contribute to the quality of the recreation which many visitors seek – consciously or not – whilst on holiday.

Trails involving churches

Apart from the popular 'Ride and Stride' [\[15\]](#) events promoted by [County Church Trusts](#) (see also [The Times](#)), there is little evidence that many visitors follow church trails literally. Trail leaflets seem to be

more useful as a means of raising awareness and helping visitors to identify places of most interest to them, whereas books such as *Lakeland Church Walks* [16] and local leaflets on walks which include church visits, appear to be a more effective means of promotion.

An interesting example is the work of the **Glendale Gateway Trust** in Northumberland, a community-based approach that includes ten local churches integrated within a wider 'micro-destination' offer. A map guide '[Discovering Glendale and Wooler](#)' shows heritage churches, a cycle route and other places of interest. The churches are also featured in an online trail created in [Google Maps](#).
Regional initiatives and resources

Some of the most interesting approaches to church tourism have taken the form of area-wide visitor development initiatives, some of which have been pioneering multi-faith collaboration. Leading examples are as follows.

- [Scotland's Churches Scheme](#) covers over 1,000 churches of all denominations, offering advice and resources to member churches, a series of area guidebooks, and a comprehensive new website.
- [Divine Inspiration](#) in Coventry emphasises capacity building, recruiting 'ambassadors' from churches and encouraging them to open regularly and welcome visitors.
- [Heritage Inspired](#) works with heritage faith buildings in South Yorkshire, organising open days, guided walks and other events, training workshops for volunteers and producing interpretative materials and visitor trails.
- [North West Multi-faith Tourism Association](#) has introduced a 'Marque for Excellence' to recognise sacred spaces including mosques, temples, synagogues and gurdwaras as well as churches that reach the Association's standard in welcoming visitors.
- The [Churches Tourism Association](#) is good for resources, advice on welcoming visitors to places of worship, and enhancing the visitor experience and tourism potential.

Scope for action

With so many people already visiting churches, is there a need for further action?

Churches are invariably overshadowed by the attention given to castles, palaces, stately homes and museums. This is to some extent understandable in that most of these other attractions are commercial in nature with consequently higher revenue yield – charging admission, employing staff to deal with visitors and (not least) able to contribute directly to tourism destination revenues for marketing campaigns, etc.

However, the non-commercial nature of churches should not cloud the fact that these assets are of great visitor interest and form an essential part of the local heritage and tourism fabric that makes destinations so rich and engaging.

Historic churches are mostly Anglican [17], but there is also a rich Roman Catholic heritage [18], not to mention Methodist [19] and other non-conformist heritage around the country. Jewish heritage has also merited recent attention [20], and places of worship associated with other faiths are also experiencing increasing visitor interest.

Churches do not stand apart, of course, they cross-cut with a range of other potential heritage and wider themes such as: saints and legends, castles, coast, family history, walking routes, and so on. Church tourism can also help to spread visitor activity beyond the obvious 'honeypot' attractions, and there is potential for churches and their stories to play a part in the strengthening of secondary visitor destinations, building upon aspects of history, community and sense of place.

Examples of visitor welcome: St Paul's Jarrow

Whilst for most churches the steps taken to welcome visitors may be relatively modest, there are many good examples of churches catering effectively for visitors around the country. St Paul's Church in Jarrow (illustrated below), for example, welcomes over 20,000 visitors each year, with well-lit displays, interpretation panels, volunteer-run gift shop, and space for quiet reflection. Schools groups are invited to don monks' habits and experience monastic life for 15 minutes.

Actions for destination managers

Practical actions destination managers can take to enhance the contribution of churches to the visitor economy could include the following ideas:

- Encouraging historic churches and other heritage faith sites to be **open to visitors regularly, publicise opening times**, and to **research their visitors**. Priority could be given to sites of particular heritage significance or local interest such as a notable person or story. St Aidan's Church in Bamburgh, Northumberland, for example, notable for its association with Grace Darling (the 1838 lifeboat heroine) as well as Aidan (one of the pioneer saints of Northumbria) caters for visitors in modest but effective ways including welcome signs, interpretation leaflets and simple story panels.
- Encouraging sites to carry out an **audit of their heritage** and the stories these places represent and develop proposals to interpret this more effectively. [The National Association of Decorative & Fine Arts Societies](#) (NADFAS) has a network of volunteers who can record the contents of churches. Some churches, such as St Mary of Charity in Faversham, Kent, have succeeded in obtaining [Local Heritage Initiative](#), funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to undertake interpretation projects.
- Ensuring that churches which have demonstrated a commitment to welcoming visitors and raising their tourism profile **included in the destination tourism information database**. A good starting point would be to encourage churches to sign the National Code of Practice for Visitor Attractions [\[21\]](#). The Saxon Sanctuary at St Peter's Church in Wootton Wawen, near Coventry (illustrated below), is an interesting example of visitor interpretation and branding of the visitor experience.
- Encouraging churches to **network with local tourism businesses**, such as pubs, guesthouses, local tour guides, and to join local tourism associations.
- Interpreting and promoting the relevance of churches' heritage and associated stories within the **mainstream tourism product offer and marketing campaign themes**.
- Inviting churches to **collaborate in area or thematic 'cluster' initiatives** such as town trails, heritage trails, 'micro-destination' schemes or events. One of the best examples of an events programme involving churches is the annual area-wide [West Lindsey Churches Festival](#).
- Encouraging church volunteers to take part in **local tourism workshops** and relevant **training** opportunities.



Photo: Andrew Duff.



Photo: Michelle Duff.

Conclusion

Visiting historic churches may not appear to be the initial reason or motivator for UK leisure trips and short breaks, but the evident scale of visitor activity together with the wide geographical spread and local distinctiveness of the heritage assets suggest that church tourism offers a viable tourism opportunity for destinations.

Our historic churches are capable of responding to a wide range of interests, from casual curiosity, through family history, exploring local heritage, to more serious engagement. Offering points of interest in every locality, they offer ample scope to add value and contribute towards sustainable, authentic community tourism.

With some encouragement from tourism destination managers, those involved with this heritage can take practical steps to raise their profile, improve their marketing and get involved in local tourism networks and initiatives that will help to engage the interest of more visitors and enhance their enjoyment of the destination.

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About the author

[Andrew Duff](#) is a tourism consultant with over 30 years experience in tourism marketing, business development and online services. Current work includes advising several organisations on churches and heritage visitor development. He was Head of Marketing for the Churches Conservation Trust from October 2005 to June 2006 (on secondment from VisitBritain). Previous roles have included Head of E-Tourism Development at VisitBritain, and Head of Development Services at Northumbria Tourist Board. He serves as Chairman of the Marketing & Technology Network of the European Travel Commission, and a Trustee of the Churches Tourism Association.

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