



The Scottish Borders

For local policymakers

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Introduction

Abbotsford House and the surrounding areas on the Scottish Borders were subjects of a case study for the EU-funded SPOT cultural tourism project. In the region, we included Melrose, Galashiels and the Abbotsford house and grounds. A survey of businesses and visitors was carried out in 2021 when COVID restrictions were allowed, and interviews were conducted with key stakeholders. These activities took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns were intermittent, which certainly affected the findings.

Abbotsford House was the home of Sir Walter Scott and has been a visitor attraction since he built it in the early 19th century. The house and extensive grounds around it have been open to the public since his death. In 2013 it was taken over by the Abbotsford Trust and reorganized on a more commercially viable basis. They built the visitor centre, bookshop and permanent exhibition. They have also been improving the gardens. The Abbotsford Trust runs on a model of embracing the local community with a permanent staff of 30 and 250 volunteers.



Nearby Melrose is home to a famous ruined Abbey, **Melrose Abbey**, and a well-known **Rugby Sevens tournament**. It has recently opened the Trimontium Roman museum. It is a village with picturesque architecture and many small shops and restaurants as well as several hotels. It has long been geared up to attract and exploit cultural tourism.

Closer to Abbotsford is the town of **Galashiels**, the largest town in the Borders and is a considerable contrast to Melrose. Once an important textile centre, it has suffered from the closure of these industries and the relocation of businesses to out of town retail parks. These retail parks attract regional shoppers to Galashiels but have led to the closure of businesses in the town centre leaving many empty premises and a feeling of decline. In 2021 a new building opened in the centre of Galashiels, the Great Tapestry of Scotland, which hopes to attract visitors to the area combined with partial pedestrianisation of the town centre. However, as the Gallery opened in 2021, it has not attracted the numbers of visitors that had been hoped. Nevertheless, there is evidence of the growth of new small, cultural businesses and eateries around the city centre. The opening of a railway station to connect the borders in 2015 was intended as a way of revitalizing the region.

1. Evidence and Analysis

The **Abbotsford Trust** has been very proactive in developing activities in the area and throughout Scotland for which the 250th Anniversary of Sir Walter Scott's death proved an impetus. It has hosted festivals such as the Borders Book Festival and a heritage Christmas event, among others. The grounds are open to local people and the well-maintained walks and paths around the River Tweed are much appreciated with 70,000 visitors in 2020. Local people are offered discounts to visit the house and there is a school programme to engage children. The outreach and engagement activities have led us to describe this as an example of cultural tourism good practice. Being an independent Trust, the Abbotsford Trust are keen to raise their profile and are required to raise income, which has been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The town of **Melrose** has many attractions and is well developed as a rural centre for cultural tourism. Whilst it has suffered setbacks under COVID conditions, there was no evidence of premises being closed and in fact, the new museum at Trimontium has been opened.

The town of **Galashiels** is not yet established as a cultural tourism destination, but this could change as visits to the Great Tapestry of Scotland pick up in future, as is hoped. A new railway station opened in 2015 has enabled easy connections to Edinburgh and further afield along with a transport hub and bus station next to it. However, a bus that used to connect the different Abbeys in the area has been discontinued under COVID conditions. There is a bus that takes people to Abbotsford house, although most people travel with private cars.

There are many attractions in the town and heritage associations that are not well highlighted. For example, the statue of a local sweet seller suggesting a well-known Scottish children's rhyme is memorialized in the city centre but is difficult to find. The old mills are mostly derelict and empty. At the time of our visit all the hotels had closed, most of them permanently, so there was no place in the town to stay. A branch of Herriot Watt University has opened a campus there and brings students as well as cultural connections with textiles to the town, although these connections are not well exploited.

The Borders has a problem with branding. The tourist agency VisitScotland reorganization means that local visitor centres were closed down and tourism is advertised for the whole of Scotland. Businesses and others pointed out that the Scottish Borders is a problematical image as being "in-between" different places with no distinctive identity. The advertising mainly targets walking, fishing and outdoor pursuits rather than cultural tourism. In addition, there is a pessimistic mindset in the area of Galashiels termed "Aye been" meaning things have always been like that and there is no need to change.



2. Policy Implications and Recommendations

Our recommendations are focused mainly on Galashiels since other areas of cultural tourism are already well developed.

1. A **re-branding** of the Borders area as a destination for cultural tourism and not just for outdoor pursuits would have a positive effect, especially to encourage year-round tourism.
2. A **better transport** network linking Galashiels station with the Abbeys, as previously existed would build on the network of paths and cycle paths already established in the area to develop green and sustainable tourism.
3. In Galashiels, **more information is needed** about the kinds of visitors brought in by the Great Tapestry of Scotland and how this might connect to other visitor attractions and activities in the area. We have offered a survey at three-time points in 2022 to address this.
4. **More connection and information about the different visitor attractions within Galashiels** would help to keep visitors lingering for longer and exploring the town as well as bringing trade to the various cafes and craft shops that have opened in the area. We would suggest a cultural trail to link these attractions which could have both a leaflet and digital format using the good Wi-Fi connections available in the town. Information should be advertised at the transport hub as well as local eateries, hotels and businesses since the Visitor Centre has been closed down.
5. **Creating thematic cultural themes** such as around textiles might help to link the local University, the weaving tradition of the town, the Great Tapestry of Scotland and some of the local craft businesses such as the woollen shop and some of the local charity shops that offer local craft textiles. It might in the longer-term help to convert an empty factory into a textile museum.



FIGURE 1: ABBOTSFORD HOUSE. Author: Dr Stephanie Garrison



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