

SPOT project UK: Example of Good Practice

Abbotsford was the home of Sir Walter Scott, a renowned novelist of the early nineteenth century and was built by him as a retreat for his writing and for his household. Parts of it including his study and library have been preserved for posterity in exactly the way that he left it when he died. It also houses an archive of his work. Although few people nowadays read his novels, the places and characters he invented, as well as the whole idea of historical fiction were his legacy to the world. A number of his stories have been made into well known films and there is a station named after one of his novels in Edinburgh. All around the world the Scottish Diaspora have named places after his fiction.

Abbotsford is found on the Scottish Borders, a sparsely populated and under-touristed area. It lies between the de-industrialised city of Galashiels and the scenic village of Melrose with its medieval Abbey ruins.

Abbotsford house and gardens were run initially by his heirs but were reformed as the Abbotsford Trust in 2007. In 2014, the Trust undertook a major refurbishment of the estate and since then, a Visitor Centre, Gift Shop and café were built, housing a permanent multi-media exhibition about him with free entry. Entry into the house and gardens costs £11.75 for a full-price adult ticket. This ticket is valid for a year in case visitors want to return.

From 2021-22 Abbotsford are co-ordinating celebration of 250 years since the birth of Sir Walter Scott and despite the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 a series of festivals and events have been planned around Scotland which have attracted a widespread following.

The case study is an example of good practice for the following reasons: local community involvement, outreach to different communities,

Outreach to different communities: Although Walter Scott was a literary figure and the attraction he offers appeals mainly to educated cultural tourists, there has been a deliberate policy of outreach to wider groups and to the local community. There are story telling sessions in local schools planned to help younger people to understand his influence.

Local community involvement: Our research suggests that few in the local community visit Abbotsford House, but many people make use of the footpaths, woods and river walk that are constructed around the house. Until recently, free car parking and a mobile café in the car park offered facilities for large numbers of dog walkers, fishermen, bird watchers and people enjoying exercise. This was particularly popular during lockdowns in 2020-2021 when visitor numbers to the park rose to 70, 000 per year. However, its popularity has meant that they now need to charge for car parking. The walks are populated with benches and information boards linking the scenery to the author who originally loved it.

The town of Galashiels has suffered some of the decline of small towns throughout the UK as shops have moved to out of town shopping centres leaving the town centre with empty shops and boarded up premises. The Abbotsford Trust has tried to create a better visual experience by using the shop windows for “pop up” exhibitions and information posters about the house and the writer in some of the empty shop windows.

An important way in which the Trust involves local community members is by offering a discount for entry to the premises and by having a lively and year round set of activities, including an early nineteenth century themed Christmas celebration, a book fair, theatre and other events for children and families, guided woodland walks,

A major way in which the Trust has integrated members of the local community is through their programme of volunteers. The majority of the staff are in fact voluntary and people travel considerable distances to volunteer in the house and gardens. Altogether there are 250 volunteers and only 30 permanent staff. The volunteers act as enthusiastic guides and custodians in each of the rooms of the house, explaining the artefacts and history of the place. Other volunteers work in the gardens, helping to restore the gardens to their early nineteenth century grandeur using historically appropriate plants and gardening methods. The visitors we interviewed testified to how they appreciated the work of these volunteers.

The Abbotsford Trust were unable to supply audio guides for tourists and so they offered a downloadable app by phone.

Limitations:

Abbotsford is set in a rather remote place, mainly accessed by private transport. Although there is a bus service, most people travel by private car, which may exclude some people who do not own a car. The Trust however, has their own minibus which they use to pick up parties from the railway station or elsewhere.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected staffing because most of the volunteers were retired people and therefore vulnerable to infection. Many stayed away during this time when visitor numbers were restricted.

Although it is a charity and therefore cannot make a profit, the Trust has to cover its costs, including the maintenance of the house and gardens, which means that it must charge an entrance fee and lets out part of the house to private guests. The problem of covering costs is an ongoing concern for the Trustees and staff.

Although a significant historical figure, Sir Walter Scott is not known to most modern readers and there is therefore the need to rekindle interest in his work.

At present, most visitors use the grounds, but do not pay the entry into the house. They are local and do not see the point in returning to the house.