

# Visitors to the Great Tapestry of Scotland and its impact: a new kind of community heritage



November 2022



# SPOT & the Scottish Borders

In January 2020 we launched the EU Horizon 2020 funded project Social and Innovative Platform on Cultural Tourism and its Potential Towards Deepening Europeanisation (SPOT). We partnered with 14 other countries to explore the different manifestations of 'cultural tourism' across Europe.

Representing the United Kingdom within the wider consortium, our University of Aberdeen based team, focuses on the phenomenon of 'media tourism' in Scotland. By working with local communities our aim is to study this emerging form of cultural tourism and investigate the ways in which media tourism impacts rural communities.

We identify media tourism as any form of tourism which is inspired by popular culture, irrespective of medium. The contemporary forms of popular culture inspiring tourism to Scotland include film, television and literature. We chose to examine media tourism because of Scotland's burgeoning creative industries sector and the increased association with film, television and literature set in or featuring Scotland.



Our case study sites in the Borders are Abbotsford, Home of Sir Walter Scott and the Great Tapestry of Scotland. Fame literary author and Scots historian, Walter Scott is often credited with being the 'father of Scottish tourism'. As a result, Abbotsford, his baronial-inspired home, was one of the first locations to experience media tourism in Scotland.

The Great Tapestry of Scotland Exhibition Centre is a new addition to the Borders. This centre houses the Great Tapestry of Scotland, a 160-panelled wool and linen tapestry highlighting Scotland's history. These attractions, along with the town of Galashiels, were selected for study as they represent different types of cultural attractions unique to the area. Abbotsford represents a clear link to media tourism and the Great Tapestry of Scotland incorporates media within the tapestry panels. Galashiels was chosen as a place of study as it is currently undergoing a cultural regeneration in which tourism continues to be a key component of these developments.

From 2020 to 2022, the SPOT team sought to bring together the voices of various interest groups in developing tourism in the area. Emerging from this effort, we engaged with residents, local business owners and visitors, in addition to meeting with members of the community council, councillors for Galashiels, and managers of local cultural attractions. Additionally, in the summer of 2022, the SPOT team conducted a visitor survey at the Great Tapestry of Scotland. This magazine highlights some of our findings.





# Cultural Tourism & the Borders



VisitScotland's 2019 visitor insights for the Scottish Borders indicated that tourism in the area is slowly increasing. The SPOT survey carried out in Summer 2022 reflects a wider trend observed by VisitScotland- that the majority of visitors to the area are from Scotland or England (i.e., domestic). The location of the Borders lends itself to being easily accessible for people from both the north of England as well as the central belt and south of Scotland.



The SPOT survey found that visitors were day trippers to Galashiels and the purpose of the visitor's trip was specifically to visit the Great Tapestry of Scotland (58.2%), followed by being on a holiday (30.4%) or visiting friends and family (8.2%). This does not align with the 2019 survey report by VisitScotland. VisitScotland found that from 2016-2018, the most popular activities undertaken by visitors to the Scottish Borders related to outdoor excursions, eating, going to the cinema, or visiting family/friends. The SPOT survey indicated that more than half of the visitors surveyed were visiting specifically to see the tapestry and other cultural attractions.

The word cloud is a visual representation of responses to the question 'what other attractions have you visited or will you visit near here on this trip?'. Excluding the tapestry, the most popular responses were Abbotsford, home of Sir Walter Scott, the adjacent town of Melrose, and the surrounding ruins of abbeys which are spread throughout the Borders area.



This emphasis on visitors engaging with cultural attractions, rather than emphasising nature walks, dining, or visiting friends/family suggests that the tastes of visitors to the Borders could be shifting with the arrival of newer cultural attractions (i.e., the Great Tapestry). More research will be needed over a longer period of time to assess this potential shift.



# Galashiels, the Borders and 'a line between two places'?

From interviewing various stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality industry, it is clear that the sentiments surrounding tourism in Galashiels, and the wider Borders area, is divided. Branding was identified as a key issue within the Borders, with one cultural attraction manager in Galashiels describing the Borders as 'a line between two places'. From engaging with local councillors, attraction managers and tourism strategists, we found that this 'between two places' feeling was in part due to the rebranding of the Scottish Tourist Board into VisitScotland in 2001. Part of this rebranding strategy was the regional closures of tourism offices in the Borders, which removed much of the individual marketing of the towns. As a result, regional identities and towns within the Borders lost tourism branding at the individual level and, instead, became unified under the singular identifier of 'The Scottish Borders'.

## 'Aye been.'

We also found that tourism development in Galashiels is a complex web of challenges and attitudes towards welcoming (or resisting) change. A particular challenge to developing cultural offerings and developing Galashiels as a place to visit is what has been described by business owners, residents and tourism bodies alike as a persistent 'aye been' attitude. This mentality is rooted in the belief that Galashiels has always been a particular way and there is no need to change it.

The attitude towards the future of tourism development in Galashiels tends to be a mixture of both pessimism and optimism. At the local level the installation of the Galashiels rail station in 2015

aided in connecting Galashiels to the rest of Scotland, however, rather than bringing visitors into Galashiels, the feeling is that the railway tends to take people out of the area.

Another issue raised by the residents of Galashiels is the decline of the high street. Residents credit the arrival of chain stores such as Tesco and ASDA just beyond the high street with 'sucking the life out of the high street'. Our visits to Galashiels in late 2020 captured this decline with images of empty shops and for let signs.



While the in-betweeness which is associated with the term 'Borders' prevails, there is an injection of optimism with the arrival of new cultural attractions such as the Great Tapestry of Scotland and, with it, the arrival of new sole traders and independent businesses.



# SPOT & the Great Tapestry of Scotland

From April to September 2022 the SPOT team carried out 5 rounds of visitor surveys at the Great Tapestry of Scotland. Each round of data collection took place over a period of one week, with 78 surveys collected in April, 111 in June, 98 in July, 100 in August and 77 in September. In total, we collected 464 surveys, of which 130 surveys were from local residents. The goal was to systematically gather insight into who was visiting the tapestry. We also sought to capture these visitors' attitudes and engagement with local area in regard to cultural tourism.

From this survey, we were able to determine what kinds of tourists are visiting Galashiels, their impressions of the tapestry and how the area's cultural regeneration project is being recognised by both visitors and locals.

## Visitor Trends

For visitors visiting the area on holiday, the top 3 types of holidays were rural holidays (46.1%), touring holidays (25.1%), and cultural holidays (13.2%). The top 3 accommodation types (excluding 'own home') were hotels (14%),



Airbnbs/Guest house/B&Bs (12.6%), or with family and friends (12.4%).

The visitor market also tended to be domestic, with visitors identifying as living locally (28.3%) or in another part of the United Kingdom (61.2%). Of the 281 visitors who identified as from the rest of the UK, 70.71% felt more positive about Galashiels after visiting the Great Tapestry of Scotland, 29.29% said they felt the same and none stated that they felt less positive. This indicates that the exhibition centre is proving to be an asset in improving the impressions of Galashiels by both domestic and international visitors.





# Towards Cultural Regeneration?

Over the past two years, the SPOT team made over a dozen research trips to Galashiels and during this time have documented evidence of cultural regeneration. This sense of regeneration and optimism does range. As part of the SPOT survey we asked participants about the ways in which Galashiels could be improved for visitors. Some visitors and locals voiced dismay at the number of empty shops on the high street with the high street being described as ‘dismal’ and ‘tatty’. Local visitors in particular noted that the high street could be filled with independent shops if only the rates on the high street decreased. Some visitors also noted that the tapestry is not enough to keep people interested in Galashiels and that there is little else to do in the town besides viewing the tapestry. In looking to improve the town’s cultural offerings, visitors suggested introducing new attractions connected to the town’s character such as a textile museum and workshops. These workshops could demonstrate how stitching was done and offer hands-on insight into the local craft and history of woollen mills. It was also suggested to introduce a mill and weaving pop-up exhibition to tie into the town’s industrial history.



## Shifting Attitudes?

Despite these critiques of Galashiels’s tourism potential, there is also evidence of optimism and of improving local attitudes towards regeneration. Over the course of our visits, we have noted considerable improvements to the area such as the removal of dust bins on the high street, the use of empty shops to house pop-up information on Abbotsford and the Great Tapestry of Scotland, and murals relating to local history, tradition and culture.

These observations were also made by visitors, particularly those local to the area and the survey found that most visitors are optimistic that the new cultural attractions, such as the tapestry, will improve Galashiels for visitors and that there is evidence of ‘green shoots of recovery’ and a ‘springing back to life’. This has also translated into improved attitudes towards the tapestry and toward Galashiels by locals. The SPOT survey showed that of the 130 visitors who identified as living locally, 84.5% said that they felt more positive about Galashiels after visiting the tapestry, 15.05% said they felt the same and none said that they felt less positive.

In looking ahead there are endeavours to build up the cultural offerings which can brighten up Galashiels. These include the Galashiels tapestry panel that will be on display at the Interchange bus and train station. This panel not only connects with the local community and history but also will also include stitches made by the public.





# SPOT-lighting GALASHIELS



In Autumn 2022 the SPOT team produced a short film highlighting cultural tourism and cultural-led regeneration in the Borders area, with a particular emphasis on Galashiels. The film draws on interviews conducted with local stakeholders including:

- Euan Jardine, Galashiels and District Councillor
- Mike Gray, Chair of Energise Galashiels Trust
- Sandy Maxwell-Forbes, Centre Director of the Great Tapestry of Scotland
- Giles Ingram, Chief Executive of the Abbotsford Trust

The film also features local businesses and sites of interest including:

- Abbotsford, Home of Sir Walter Scott
- Alex Dalgetty & Sons Bakery
- Bank Street Gardens
- Heriot-Watt University Scottish Borders Campus
- Old Gala House
- REBORN Cafe: Creative Borders
- Tartan Plus Tweed
- Unwind Yarns
- Why Not?

The SPOT team would like to thank the Galashiels community and businesses for their help in the making of this film. The film can be accessed online at:



**SPOT-light on Tourism: Galashiels**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-BQU3T4lik>





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VisitScotland, 2019. Scottish Borders Factsheet 2019.  
<https://www.visitscotland.org/binaries/content/assets/dot-org/pdf/research-papers-2/regional-factsheets/scottish-borders-factsheet-2019.pdf>