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***Commentary and Creation - writers on life and travel in heath, moor and bog***

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**Abstract**

***Macbeth - Scene 1. - A desert Heath***

*'When shall we three meet again  
In thunder lightning, or in rain?  
When the hurlyburly's done,  
When the battle's lost and won,  
That will be ere the set of sun,  
Where the place?  
Upon the heath ..... Fair is foul and foul is fair,  
Hover through the fog and filthy air'*

William Shakespeare 1600s

The meeting of the three hags or witches upon the desert heath with its fog and foul air both reflects an image of this landscape and also impacts indelibly on the psyche of the reader from Shakespeare's time to our own.

Writers from Thomas Pennant and Samuel Johnson in the 1700s, to Alfred Wainwright and H.V. Morton in the 1900s, have created and sold images of landscapes, of people, and of culture. This was in part to a curious public, but also to those that followed as visitors and tourists. Authors such as Thomas Hardy and Daphne Du Maurier helped to create images of a cultural landscape and then they and their works have become a part of the visitor attraction and experience – absorbed within that which they in part created. Researchers such as Ouseby (1990) have addressed these issues and for specific regions such as Cornwall papers by Birks (1997) and Moody (1997) provide insight into particular aspects.

In contemporary landscapes heaths, commons, moors, bogs and fens are often places to visit and to recreate. For example, the North York Moors National Park receives around 1.4 million visitor days per year, and Exmoor the same. They may re-connect us with nature and with history, and are often important in leisure and tourism as either backdrops for activities and visits, or as the primary focus for the same. Yet our images and expectations are frequently based not on direct experience, but on the observations and imaginations of earlier visitors and commentators. Literary associations, place names, and even topographic names and descriptions may influence – positively and negatively - the desire to visit, to partake, and to experience. Some at least, are acquired culturally over generations and over centuries. Furthermore, they interact intimately and directly with aspects of human psychological relationships to both landscape and to nature itself. Both reverence and fear influence these responses.

Fashions, art, science, transport and communications have all played significant roles in the emerging sense of place and culture that now translate into the tourist landscape. These places are fearful as waste and wilderness, yet being far from the madding crowd draw the visitor to escape from the modern world to rejoin nature and the cultural past. The reality may owe as much to fiction and careful packaging as it does to nature and history. Hollywood and the Victorian writers for example, draw visitors to the ancient heathland and Royal Forest of Sherwood as much as by any real understanding of the nature and history of the area. The media in its diverse forms both feeds off these images, and also develops, presents and event

creates them. This may be from *Brontë Country* and *Last of the Summer Wine* in the Pennines of West Yorkshire, to *Heartbeat* on the North York Moors.

Ouseby (1990) and others have developed ideas of the relationships between people and tourism in relation to aspects of the English landscape, and in terms of nature and mountains in particular. This is something to be explored in more detail but this short paper is perhaps a small contribution to the theme. It is in part a spin-off from research on the cultural history of heaths, moors and bogs.

These issues are explored and developed through the accounts of travellers and commentators in Great Britain from the medieval to modern times. The relationships to contemporary visitor and tourist perceptions are then examined through recent research on the North Yorkshire Moors and Dales by *Questions Answered Limited* for the *Yorkshire Tourist Board*.

## Introduction

Giblett (1996) describes the perceptions of wetlands:

*"Wetlands are not always, and for some not ever, the most pleasant of places. In fact they have often been seen as horrific places. In the patriarchal western cultural tradition wetlands have been associated with death and disease, the monstrous and the melancholic, if not, the downright mad. Wetlands are 'black waters'. They have even been seen as a threat to health and sanity, to the clean and proper body, and mind. The typical response to the horrors and threats posed by wetlands has been simple and decisive: dredge, drain or fill and so 'reclaim' them. Yet the idea of reclaiming wetlands begs the questions of reclaimed from what? For what? For whom? A critical history of wetlands' drainage could quite easily be entitled 'Discipline and Drain'."*

Images and reactions to nature and landscape occur in the literature of travel writers and of others. In England in 1624 the anonymous author of *A Relation of a Short Survey of Twenty-six Counties* wrote in horror of the Lake District - that it was '*...nothing but hideous hanging hills and great pooles, that in what respect of the murmuring noyse of those great waters, and those high mountainous, tumbling, rocky hills, a man would think he were in another world.*'

Yet on the Continent, mountains had long been admired but not necessarily with enthusiasm but with awe. Conrad Gesner (1541) (In Hadfield, 1967): '*... resolved for the future, so long as God grants me life, to ascend divers mountains every year .... What must be the pleasure, think you, what the delight of a mind rightly touched, to gaze upon the huge mountain masses for one's show, and, as it were, lift one's head into the clouds? The soul is strangely rapt with these astonishing heights*'.

Charles Cotton in 1681 in the *Warden of the Peak*: described it as '*Environ'd round with nature's shames and ills, Black heath, wild rock, bleak crags and naked hills.*' Transfer of visions and tastes from travellers. This was at odds with the formal and with God's creation and was linked to an abhorrence of the *Fall* from grace of Mankind.

Writers such as Joseph Addison (1701-3) were influential in both reflecting and determining taste in *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy in the Years 1701, 1702, 1703*. '*I was most pleased with the beautiful prospect ..... a more broken and interrupted scene, made up of an infinite variety of inequalities and shadowings, that naturally arise from an agreeable mixture of hills, groves and valleys.*

Over the centuries images of heathland and moor have been created by writers, artists and nowadays photographers. Some are factual and others are romanticised. The observers and

portrayers themselves fall into distinct groups in terms of their objectives, backgrounds, and target audiences. Many accounts are the itineraries and diaries of gentlemen (and gentlewomen) travel writers and topographers. These include the classic accounts of Daniel Defoe, Thomas Pennant, Samuel Johnson, and Dorothy Wordsworth *etc.* They observe and describe the landscapes through which they travel, the people they see, and those with whom they share hospitality. Their reactions to experiences and to environments helped forge the images and perceptions of their contemporaries, and still affect us today.

Defoe's description of the Peak District moors in 1724 (though often misquoted) influences reactions and expectation to this day. *'This, perhaps, is the most desolate, wild, and abandoned country in all England.'* Around Lancaster the hills were *'... high and formidable only, but they had a kind of inhospitable terror in them ..... all barren and wild, of no use or advantage to man or beast.'* Westmoreland is described as a *'... country eminent only for being the wildest, most barren and frightful of any .....'* *In the south-west, Devon was '...at first sight, a wild, barren, poor country; ...'*

Other writers such as novelists use these landscapes as backdrops for commentaries on specific communities and the lives of selected people. Thomas Hardy's novels of Dorset draw on personal knowledge of people, landscapes and events. As with Conan-Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles*, where the unfortunate convict on Dartmoor is mauled to death by the ferocious hound, and the villain then sinks to his slow death into the peat bog, they create an image that is burnt into the corporate imagination. The impact is deep and long-lasting and is reflected in contemporary reactions and images of these landscapes. Another way in which the public imagination is stimulated and fixed is through the vehicle of news reporting – in newspapers and magazines, and on television. Crimes on Cannock Chase and on Saddleworth Moor still impact on people's sense of place even though transposed geographically many tens of kilometres across the landscape; from West Yorkshire to the North York Moors for example. The image of the *'Moors Murders'* generated a negative views of these landscapes that resonates across the corporate mind even today; and through this has a direct bearing on tourists and other visitors.

Other commentators have helped to create our images of these areas. W.H. Hudson and Richard Jefferies for example are two writers that followed Gilbert White in bringing insight of the countryside and nature to an increasingly urban population. This urban population has become the visitor and tourist now seeking to re-connect to the same experience. Gilbert White himself writing about his parish of Selborne set in a landscape of farmland, woodland, common and heath, gives a comforting feeling of stability and sensitivity in the lowland, pastoral setting. Not for White the murderer fleeing across the howling moor, or sinking slowly to his untimely end in a peat bog. Selborne has become a major visitor attraction, and White's main book *The Natural History of Selborne* (with its clever guise of letters penned to his friends and correspondents) is the fourth most published book in the English language, with well over 200 editions and translations.

These descriptions may be reassuring and comforting, or suggesting fear and trepidation, nature and challenge in the untamed wilderness. Travellers across Fowey Moor near Bodmin in Cornwall in the 1700s were advised to make their Wills prior to departure. The itinerant preacher John Wesley found his crossing of *'the great pathless moor'* extremely daunting and eventually found his way to Bodmin drawn only by the sound of the Town's evening curfew bell.

The impact of these writers and their descriptions, accurate or not, have had a huge influence on the perceptions and attitudes of visitors and others to these landscapes. In reviewing the classic work of Emily Brontë *Wuthering Heights*, Dante G. Rossetti wrote in 1847 that *'The action is laid in Hell ---- only it seems that the places and people have English names there.'*

The windswept moors are the setting for this most tragic and stirring of love stories. Even the 'hero's' name '*Heathcliff*' evokes the wild moorland landscape in which the story takes place. Their tempestuous relationship takes place within an equally wild and tempestuous environment. Brontë provide a brilliant example of scene setting in a novel and this evocation of the Yorkshire Moors, with their accompanying great houses is both dark and terrible.

Added to this is the portrayal in popular imagery of Conan Doyle's hero Sherlock Holmes in the *Hound of the Baskervilles* written in 1902: '*At Baskerville Hall on the grim moors of Devonshire, a legendary curse has .....*' and so it goes on. Both Conan Doyle's and Brontë's images have been further portrayed on television and in films to give an image of moors, heaths and bogs and wild, windswept landscapes, untamed, threatening and for many frightening. Moreover, you don't have to go there to know this; it is so deeply ingrained!

But the image is not clear cut. The same desolation that brings fear is also beautiful. Stapleton the villain of *The Hound* says: '*It is a wonderful place, the moor. You never tire of the moor. You cannot think the wonderful secrets which it contains. It is so vast and so barren, and so mysterious*'. Watson on the other hand describes '*..... that great Grimpen Mire, with little green patches everywhere into which one might sink and with no guide to point the track.*'

Another Conan Doyle hero Brigadier Gerard describes the landscape as: '*It is a bleak place this Dartmoor, wild and rocky - a country of wind and mist. I felt as I walked that it is no wonder Englishmen should suffer from the spleen.*' The 950 square kilometres of the Dartmoor National Park, with its 33,000 residents, attracts around 10 million tourist visitor days per year. The image is comforted by the picturesque villages and hamlets surrounding the moor, and providing a welcome in food and accommodation, but the backdrop is the vast expanse of wild landscape. (In the case of the North York Moors for example, this amounts to around 490 square miles of Moorland). The fear can be safely experienced in comfort and at a distance. Out on the moor Watson hears the Hound for the first time. '*A long, low moan, indescribably sad, swept over the moor. It filled the whole air, and yet it was impossible to say whence it came. From a dull murmur it swelled into a deep roar and then sank back again into a melancholy, throbbing murmur once again.*'

And later with Holmes: '*..... there rose out to the vast gloom of the moor that strange cry which I had already heard upon the borders of the great Grimpen Mire. It came with the wind through the silence of the night, a long, deep mutter, then a rising howl, and then a sad moan in which it died away.*'

In his diary Watson describes the '*..... Bleak, cold, and shelterless moor*', and states that '*No one could find his way into the Grimpen Mire tonight.*' Then he describes their way through the bog: '*..... green-scummed pits and foul quagmires which barred the way to the stranger. Rank reeds and lush, slimy water-plants sent an odour of decay and heavy miasmatic vapour into our faces, whilst a false step plunged us more than once into the dark, quivering mire, which shook for yards in soft undulations around our feet. Its tenacious grip plucked at our heels as we walked, and when we sank into it it was as if some malignant hand was tugging us down into those obscene depths, so grim and purposeful was the clutch in which it held us.*'

Just the stuff to attract visitors! The story was a huge success and led to *The Strand* magazine running to an unprecedented seven printings. It is also clear that the successes of stories and books such as this had, and still have, major impacts on visitors to an area. Loch Katrine in the Scottish Trossachs had particular association with and was the inspiration for, Walter Scott's poem *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). It sold 25,000 copies in only eight months and led to a dramatic increase in visitors to the Scottish Highlands (Hanley and Wildman, 2003).

## Visions and images

The perceptions are of course dependent on the vision and the viewer. Wild areas of unkempt countryside did hold real threats and fears for the unknowing traveller. Until the 1700s and the early 1800s they were also unbelievably difficult terrain to traverse. Added to these is the complication of language (in Wales, Ireland, Scotland and Cornwall) or at least dialect (in other remote heath and wetland areas of England); a further factor to put the traveller at a disadvantage and in a fearful state. Not only would this affect the feelings in terms of unease and vulnerability, but it separated the traveller, observer, and perhaps writer from the native people.

In this respect it is worth briefly considering who was writing and for whom the words were written. A casual inspection of relevant literature suggests a number of identifiable groupings, though some may fall into more than one category:

<i>A first analysis of writers and their target audience</i>		
<b>Writers</b>	<b>Contemporary Audience</b>	<b>Examples and comments</b>
Novelists writing about the area in which they live or have lived	Educated middle class readers of contemporary literature; in the towns and cities and in the big houses	Emily Brontë; Thomas Hardy;
Novelists writing about the area but only acquainted through visiting	Educated middle class readers of contemporary literature; in the towns and cities and in the big houses	Arthur Conan Doyle; Walter Scott;
Commentators on the life and landscape of an area and usually resident within it	Educated middle class readers of contemporary literature and initially their contemporaries with similar interests; in the towns and cities and in the big houses	Gilbert White; W.H. Hudson;
Travel writers on a tour or similar visit specifically in order to commentate upon it	Educated middle class readers of contemporary literature and particularly those now beginning to adventure out and start the move towards tours and tourism; in the towns and cities and in the big houses	Thomas Pennant; Samuel Johnson; J. Boswell; William Cobbett;
Travel writers on a tour or similar visit writing as an incidental aspect of the visit	Business and social colleagues, and perhaps family; generally educated middle class and mostly in the towns and cities, and in the big houses and their estates	Dorothy Wordsworth;
Travel writers on a tour or similar visit concerned with their business writing either as a report for a specific business purpose or as incidental to their visit, and commentators on the working landscape	Business and social colleagues, and perhaps family, especially if they are involved in business; generally educated middle class and mostly in the towns and cities, and in the big houses and their estates; sometimes in military commissions	Edmund Burt; Peter May; Arthur Young;

One of the issues here is that clearly with matters of literacy and of social order and distinction, in many cases these writers are on the outside looking in. This even applies when they are native to a region or to a specific area. The cultural, educational and social

distinctions would have separated them from those more intimately involved in the day-to-day landscape. Also, and perhaps equally important is that their audience also lies well outside the landscape, culture and people of the heath, moor and bog. They are writing for their own, at least in terms of social standing and educational status. As tourism developed the audience clearly broadens to the present situation of mass tourism and mass communication. In many cases too, they wrote through the eyes of the romantic seeing a people and a landscape perhaps separated from the reality of the poor folk's daily grind. This is not always the case, and a half hour of Hardy's Egdon Heath in *Return of the Native* (1878) or *The Woodlanders* (1887) gives a very stark view of the life of the commoner and peasant in these subsistence environments.

## **Yesterday's Cultural landscape – Today's Tourism Destination**

An important point to consider is the extent to which these landscapes of moor, heath, common, marsh and bog, impacted upon ordinary people until relatively recently; certainly until the latter end of the Parliamentary Enclosures in the mid 1800s. They were widespread and abundant landscapes and figured centrally in the survival of ordinary working people. A key factor here is that they were far less important to the middle classes, to the educated and to the landowners. (See for example Rotherham (1999)). The middle class traveller, or resident in the rural landscape would be very aware of the moor, heath, common, and bog, but they were culturally separated from them. Perhaps here is the seed of the fear and loathing of the unknown.

Given this unpromising beginning it is surprising in many cases how these landscapes have grown to be the tourism and recreational destinations of today. The Peak National Park of Defoe's description receives around 22 million or so day visitors per year, and the New Forest (with its ancient woods set amongst extensive heaths and bogs) has around 8 million. In fact today's tourists and day visitors love heaths and commons. This has been so much the case that many sites were badly damaged or even destroyed by insensitive holiday and recreational developments located in or on them during the 1970s and 1980s. More recent initiatives such as at Centre Parcs and the Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre in Sherwood Forest have been much more directly involved in safeguarding and enhancing the heathland heritage on which they are based. In popular tourist areas such as the North Norfolk Coast, the heaths that fringe the raised land above the coastal belt are very popular with visitors, campers, walkers and wildlife enthusiasts. Unlike many wooded landscapes the heath offers the visitors a big sky and a distant gaze.

Dorset is a major tourism destination with its historic market towns, its seaside resorts and a tolling landscape. Yet here is the desperate landscape of the poor people portrayed so vividly by Thomas Hardy but now presented to the visiting public as '*Hardy Country*'. Much of the landscape has gone, with heaths and commons lost to the plough or simply abandoned, yet the visiting public feel a connection to a rural and rustic past, albeit through the visitor centre and tea shop.

However, the big sky landscapes can also be frightening and intimidating, and the public's responses to moorlands and bogs are less certain. An experiment that I used to do with first year undergraduates at Sheffield Hallam University exemplifies this. Without any background briefing, I would take a new cohort of maybe forty to fifty students out onto Stanage edge and Ringinglow Bog in Sheffield's Peak District. I would give them around half an hour in small groups to reconnoitre the area and then ask for their feelings and impressions of this landscape. The response was very positive from around half the group, and most of these were individuals familiar with these landscapes, either local people, or perhaps with an interest in rock climbing or in walking. At least half the students did not like the area and

found it 'bleak', 'desolate', 'empty', 'cold', 'too open', 'hostile' etc. My qualitative assessment was that the most damning comments were from students originating from urban, lowland areas. They found this a very uninviting and unfriendly landscape and were visibly shocked when told that it was the second most popular park in the world (after Mount Fuji in Japan).

As Birks (1997) discusses for the Jamaica Inn near Bodmin Moor in Cornwall, much of the visitor experience is constructed by sets of signifiers brought together to construct a set of meanings. He points out of course that in practice many visitors are capable of constructing their own spheres of sociality and don't necessarily need them to be constructed for them. How we the visiting public do this is complex and varying through time, space and through social evolution.

## What's in a name?

Name, identity and brand are clearly important for any site, area, or region that is or might be a tourism locale, or other visitor destination. Many place names are ancient in origin and often relate to land use or cultural occupation etc. Some of these are clearly developed over time to a particular brand or image. Others are straightforward impositions, and the most obvious is that of the 'Pennines'; that vast tract of moor, heath bog, and farmland that makes up the spine of England and Britain's first long distance footpath. Although the name 'The Pennines' sounds authentic with a hint of Celtic origins, it isn't. The name was the invention by writer Charles Bertram (1723-65) when he attributes it to the chronicles of Richard of Cirencester, something that he himself was believed to have forged. Until this time there was no single name for the area. The name appears to be derived in part from the Apennines in Italy. Although a deliberate fraud, the name has achieved resonance and is a hugely successful brand.

Recent studies commissioned by *Yorkshire Tourist Board* are extremely interesting in this context. This work undertaken by *Questions Answered Ltd* gives a fascinating insight into contemporary awareness and responses to areas such as the North York Moors as visitor destinations. The study involved focus groups of a diverse socio-economic background and from different parts of England. It not only raises issues of response, image and awareness, but basic matters of geographic location!

The North York Moors were described as barren with little formal interest other than the 'great outdoors.'

Some extracts and quotes exemplify this:

*'.....Moors are very bleak. Bleakness, isolation if you want to be alone go to the Yorkshire Moors. If you want to get lost and never found, go to the Yorkshire moors'.*

*'No villages or accommodation or anything, I should imagine. It's all ..... A bit more desolate isn't it?'*

*'Cornwall is very bleak and rugged and wild and wonderful ..... which I tend to think of as the Moors'.*

*'.....really bleak places that are good for walking, windswept and weather beaten. ....but bleakness can be attractive at certain times of the year'.*

*'I think of heather and possibly walking but not much to go to, there wouldn't be much to go for.'*

*'The Moors would be purple, brown and bleak with long grass'.*

*'Land and the sky, stunning and dramatic!'*,

*'Who would want to go to the Moors in the winter?!'*

*'Very, very bleak. You feel as if you're going for ever, even in the car and it's all the same scenery – seems endless.'*

*'.....the countryside would go on and on for ever without much in it.'*

*'..... going out on those Moors .....are you going to come back? You could get lost.'*

<b>Some key words and phrases from the focus group interviews</b>	
Very wet and not very inspiring	Expanse of open space – freedom – walk around
Isolation, rugged but beautiful	Heavy rocks and bracken
Apprehensive ..... but therapeutic	The fog!!
'Brontë country'	Lack of accommodation
Dangerous and rugged	Bad weather
Cold and chilly	Desolate – no trees
Not safe – fear of getting lost	Changeable weather
Slow, winding roads	Murders and werewolves
Wildly beautiful ..... like a desert ..... beautiful but harsh	Bleak, eerie, scary, rawness, poor weather
Awesome	Snow
Expansive	Cold and depressing
Harsh	Bleak and unwelcoming
The Moors Murders - Saddleworth	Murders on the moors
Less welcoming with cold rooms in the houses	Not safe
Scary	Apprehensive
Rustic, basic , lacking commercialisation	
<b>In Summary: <i>The Moors are dangerous, they are scary - and the weather's bad; and there's a lot of them!!</i></b>	

A further issue to emerge from this research was the poor level of knowledge of the geographic location of areas such as the North York Moors within Yorkshire. This seemed pretty good for the groups from Leeds and Nottingham, but very poor for group Based in the south of England. This raises all sorts of issues in terms of branding and promotion.

## Conclusions

Clearly our perceptions of heath, moor and bog influence our desire to experience and to visit. These are affected by the feelings and translations or constructions of feelings by those who have gone before. Work in North Yorkshire indicates some of the issues that then emerge for tourism and leisure managers – matters of branding, promoting and portraying these landscapes. Of course that which is terrifying and desolate on the one hand can be inspiring and beautiful on the other. Perhaps feelings of fear and loathing are better from a tourism perspective than downright dull, boring and cold or wet. Fear can translate into excitement and a desire to visit and to partake.

Images of death and of murder still resound across our moorland and heathland landscapes. The moor murders are still a negative influence and may stop people coming to the North York Moors. This is a fear compounded by a lack of geographic knowledge – since the Moors Murders were in the West Yorkshire Pennines, a long way from the North York Moors.

But Conan Doyle's image of the great Grimpen Mire run deep. These are feelings and responses that have been with us for centuries. Thomas Preston touring Cornwall in 1821 described the landscape between Bodmin and Truro '.....' *the most dreary possible, a complete moor with scarce a dwelling visible, you may travel for miles over a swamp and see nothing but a few men at work at what is called 'streamwork'.* He could almost have been one of the North York Moors focus group members.

In 1754 Caesar Thomas Gooch wrote that *'I have now seen a great deal of Cornwall and think it upon the whole a dismal country to live in ..... the inland dwellings are a vast distance from the neighbours, everywhere surrounded with rocky mountains, and the prospects chiefly over barren lands.'* (In Deacon (1997)). As a landscape portrayed by the emerging Romantic movement the same area could be described by Cyrus Redding in 1842 as *'.... the land of the wild, the picturesque and the imaginative.'* This was not a view shared by all, for example the Rev Warner in 1809 had suggested that *'...however valuable it may be from a commercial pint of view, it can offer no claim to the praise of the picturesque or beautiful.'* (In Deacon (1997)).

It should also be remembered that beauty is of course in the eye of the beholder, and many things stem from this. The itinerary of the French aristocratic travellers Alexandre de La Rochefoucauld and Maximilien Lazowski in 1785-86 gives some insight into this (Scarfe, 2001). They were repelled at least at first by wild and uncultivated land – and especially in Scotland by poverty. North of Aberdeen they described as: *'.... The whole aspect of the country is so awful that the pleasure of travelling is nil..... The views over the landscape are very melancholy, almost wholly uncultivated and extremely hilly'*. This compares with their impression of Leeds; *'..... altogether a beautiful town'*. *'Three miles from Leeds you see it in the middle of a beautiful valley that contains both a canal and a river and is built over with immense numbers of houses; I think it's the richest view I ever remember looking at. This derives from the abundance of coal mines...'*

The eye of the beholder is important today as it was then. Very often however, the images we have are not through our own eyes but those of some third party; maybe contemporary through books or the media, or perhaps from decades or centuries ago.

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