

Rural Tourism in Great Britain

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In this short presentation I shall refer briefly to the history of rural tourism in Britain but I shall give much of my time to discussing events of the last ten years.

Rural tourism has a long history in Britain particularly in the western regions of the country from Dorset, Devon and Cornwall in the South-west to the Highlands of Scotland. This distribution coincides with the relatively poor, higher land of mixed farming. It also often coincides with areas containing our National Parks and coasts noted for their scenic quality, il not for their weather!

The development of RT in Britain as with so many forms of tourism is linked to the development of transport, initially in the late nineteenth century railways and in this century the motorcar.

Growth in the tourism market in the 1950's and 60's saw major developments in our coastal resorts while the 1970's and 80's witnessed an equally large decline due to the development of the package holiday market principally to the Mediterranean.

Over this period rural tourism maintained a relatively stable market share.

Inevitably most of the enterprises working in rural tourism providing accommodation or visitors attractions were small scale ;; enterprises and this led to the development in most "Counties" (Districts?) of marketing cooperatives some of which began to operate in the late 1940's.

These cooperatives usually comprised 20-30 members and concentrated their efforts on a limited amount of promotional activity, although by the mid 1980's many of them were giving more of their time to ensuring high standards from their members.

During the 1980's a number of agencies developed which took a much wider regional or national view while at the same time specialising in terms of their membership and objectives. I will return to these developments in a moment.

In analysing RT in the UK in the 1980's we see a number of factors which have had a major influence upon RT

These are:

1. Major changes in EC and UK Government Agricultural Policy.

2. Counter-urbanisation, a movement of people out of the major cities to small towns and cities in the Countryside.
3. A rapid growth in consumer Environmental awareness and the related developments of terms such as Green and Sustainable tourism, linked to the perception that these ideas were particularly appropriate to rural tourism.
4. The perception by local tourist boards that central government favoured an emphasis upon rural tourism due to its economic and employment potential.
5. A thorough review of the overall educational and training needs of the tourism industry with the associated development of a wide range of new courses.

Market research in the 1980's revealed that:

21% of British tourist nights were spent in the Countryside 52 million long holidays (more than 3 nights) 12 million were short breaks, 7 millions were business trips.

Visitors to rural areas spent £3000 million, (Over seas £200 million), 850 million tourists, 1900 million day visitors.

Main reasons were: the Countryside, the Scenery, Friendly people, Peace and Quiet. Value for Money, Interest in understanding the Countryside.

Response of Rural Tourism Organisations.

The 1980's saw the emergence of a number of national organisations in the recognition that small local / regional units were finding it difficult to compete nationally and internationally. A limited range of examples of these responses include:

The British Tourist Authority

Farm Holiday Bureau, (Now an Agricultural Cooperative)

Scottish Farmhouse Holidays (Members cooperative serviced accommodation)

Wolsey Lodges (Members cooperative-serviced and self-serviced accommodation)

Classic Cottages (Family run business offering a letting service for 300 + privately owned self catering cottage properties)

(See accompanying slides and limited selection of Brochures).

The Future

AT appears to attract visitors from the higher socio-economic groups and education and income are forecast to grow in the future. Importance of "retired", "third age market".

Forecast growth in the short break market, coupled with indications that RT may be more recession proof than some other sectors of the Holiday market.

Improving transport and access Links.

Greater cooperation between the many agencies, European commission, Governmental and non Governmental with an Interest in Rural areas.

Environmental and health concerns may result in more British people actively seeking UK based holidays.

But

Rural tourism industry is still very fragmented and lacks coordination.

While the strength of RT is in many ways due to its being Anti-Urban some (not all) visitors are often looking for urban levels of sophistication in terms of facilities and services

Many new entrants providing accommodation, developing attractions, etc., fail through lack of awareness, training and resources. Not certain that they appreciate what "tourism" is and what the expectations of their visitors are.

The supply is unbalanced with an over-supply in heritage / crafts.

Information, communication, Interpretation is often of a very poor standard.

Do all RT facilities by definition have to be small scale? Large scale ones provide far more employment for example and may well be less environmentally damaging.

Strong pressures opposing development in rural areas.

What should the marketing strategy be Cultural perhaps rather than Spatial? The motor car is vital!

The Farm Holiday Bureau - a National Organisation

Prime function is the promotion of Farm Holidays sell-catering and bed and Breakfast - usually with Evening Meal. Individual members (1000+) belong to a local (of which there are 81 in UK) which is affiliated to a regional committee of the FHB. Representatives of the regional committees form the management group of the national FHB. National organisation has 3 full time members of staff.

Local groups are essentially self help marketing organisations, individuals must belong to a local group as well as national FHB, must be inspected by Tourist

Board, must earn a proportion of their income from Agriculture. Membership of FHB depends upon number of rooms varies £100 - £176/yr to a maximum of 10 rooms .

From '83 - '89 received grant aid from a number of sources now 99 o self funding.

Host should increase visitor awareness regarding farming and the Countryside.

Most local groups produce their own brochure plus paying for inclusion in the annual national Farm Holiday Bureau Guide

Stay on a Farm. This guide sold for £150 (1500 Escudos) B a B costs range £10-30, average £16.50 / night Dinner £9.

In 1991 commissioned the preparation of a Strategy Cultivating Farm Tourism

Ten point strategy

Recruit more members

Improve customer feedback and market research

Improve the main guide Stay on a Farm

Improve promotion and corporate identify

Improve communication within the organisation Improve regional and local marketing

Encourage high standards and training

Develop new initiatives in growth markets****

Improve enquiry handling and booking

Review staffing and resources at the national office

****New Business leaflet this year.

Wolsey Lodges - a National Organisation

Non profit making organisation started by a regional Tourist Board in 1983 with 13 houses now self financing, with 215 houses, in 5 continental Europe.

Accommodation in comfortable private houses - often of historic interest.

New and existing members regularly inspected by independent inspectors.

Membership cost a E1 00 joining fee, then annual charges in 1993 - E21 0 for brochure production plus 8,5 x Room rate, (ie if room rate E30 fee of E255).

Prices vary from E20 - E35 per person per night Bed and Breakfast Dinner between E15 - E20 per person.

Room rate partly reflects status of the house, emphasis very much on staying with the family. Normal to expect to dine with your host once during your stay.

Dinner may only be available 5 nights a week.

Some houses are non-smoking houses.

You may book direct with the house or through a central office. The central office will accept payment by Credit Card, as do some individual houses.