In 2005, for the first time ever, there were some 800 million international arrivals globally (WTO 2006a). This increase continued a trend from 2004 when Dawid de Villiers, Deputy Secretary General of the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), had announced that 2004 was going to ‘go into history as a very strong year for tourism’ as the number of international arrivals was estimated to be some 10% up on the previous year, setting an all time record (WTO 2004). Even factoring in the problems of the Iraq war, the SARS epidemic and the weak global economy, that percentage increase had indicated a real figure of some 42 million additional arrivals.

This figure has now risen to an extra 52 million arrivals – potentially an additional 104 million feet walking across heritage sites globally; 52 million people needing catering to heritage sites; 52 million people needing toilet and refreshment facilities at or near to heritage sites; and 52 million people needing to spend money in shops at or close to heritage sites.

In 2004 de Villiers concluded his briefing by saying:

We knew that prospects for 2004 were good, but the strength of the rebound has even surprised us. We are confident that the tourism sector is back on the right track after three difficult years.

On 24th January 2006 the WTO Secretary-General, Francesco Frangialli added that:

The tourism sector has gained substantially in resilience over the past years. In spite of the turbulent environment we live in nowadays, destinations worldwide added some 100 million international arrivals between 2002 and 2005. (WTO 2006a).

Of course the ‘resilience’ identified by Frangialli, and ‘the right track’ identified by de Villiers, are essentially the preserve of private company profit and national, regional, and on occasion local, economic stimulation and consolidation. Tourism continues to increase exponentially and is in fact the world’s fastest growing industry - with WTO projections estimating that international arrivals will reach 1.6 billion by the year 2020 (World Tourism Organisation 2006b). In 2001, US$463 billion were spent by tourists globally. In Egypt for example tourists in 1999/2000 provided US$2.2 billion income, making tourism the fastest growing sector of the economy. The global spending figure could easily double, and some argue triple, by 2020. Tourism is a huge business.

Tourism is also a business that impinges enormously on the cultural heritage sector. In 2002 some 60% of North American tourists to the UK cited cultural heritage as the main reason for visiting while in the USA 81% of all adult travellers include culture or heritage as part of their trip, a figure which translates to 118.1 million tourists visiting cultural or heritage sites annually (Arts Marketing 2004).

The tourism sector favours cultural heritage tourists as, again illustrated by American figures, cultural heritage tourists tend to be better educated and better off than other tourists. A quarter of cultural heritage tourists take three or more trips per year and cultural heritage tourists stay longer – four nights away rather than three. They therefore spend more than other tourists – US$23 as compared to US$457 – per person per trip (Arts Marketing 2004).

Most heritage professionals are of course already aware of the link between tourism and heritage. Many will be aware of the above or similar statistics and will be committed – to a greater or lesser extent – to interact with tourists. My purpose is not, therefore, to educate or inform, but rather to provoke the reader to dwell on the relationship between tourism and heritage and perhaps to reassess his or her part in that relationship particularly with regard to interpretation.

The relationship between heritage and tourism is rather like that of an arranged marriage between two medieval kingdoms – one a small, rather weak, kingdom ruled by the same family for centuries, and the other a larger and more powerful kingdom, recently created through conquest and turmoil. The marriage is arranged to cement peace between the two kingdoms, and so that the union will bring peace and mutual prosperity. Some of the extended family of the old kingdom refuse to come to the wedding, arguing that theirs is an ancient kingdom with no need for such unholy alliances, amid concerns about how can it protect its way of life, its traditions and principles? Some of the wicked uncles from the new kingdom know that, if necessary, they can ignore the marriage and loot the old kingdom with little effort and even less regard for its age-old traditions. Similarly, how can the tiny, under-funded and politically insignificant heritage sector deal with the fastest growing business in the world?

Many readers will share my concerns that the heritage sector is not ready to deal with the potentially massive increase in site visits suggested by the WTO figures; that many of our colleagues, just like the worries of the old kingdom, would prefer no increase in visitors – or even better – no visitors at all. Visitors are seen not as an opportunity to engage with the general public, but rather as a threat to a fragile and irreplaceable resource. As an archaeologist I understand these concerns, but as a heritage manager and as an educator, as someone who believes in the contemporary value of heritage, I know that a balance must be struck to allow this albeit fragile resource to benefit all and that it cannot be simply the preserve of academics alone.

Most colleagues in the sector have read and do support ICOMOS’ 1999 International Cultural Tourism Charter. Many colleagues will be aware of and will support the WTO’s Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (2001) and in particular Article 4: ‘Tourism, a user of the cultural heritage of mankind and contributor to its enhancement’. These international charters and codes reassure us that, at least at an international organisational level, the bride and groom are moving in the right direction. There is still fear however, that the groom will not treat his bride with the respect demanded by her lineage or with thinly veiled contempt for falling so low as to need to marry below her perceived status.
The sentiment is right but how will it translate into practical arrangements? Crucially, what impact does tourism have on cultural heritage sites, not just in terms of 'conservation versus access', but in terms of the messages that are delivered at such sites. It is these messages, or stories, that are fundamental in the relationship between the heritage and tourism sectors. These stories form the bridge between the heritage professional and the visitor. The heritage sector unfortunately lags far behind the museum sector in understanding its visitors. Research carried out for museums clearly shows that they do not have one uniform audience; rather each individual, each group, brings with them different backgrounds, different levels of knowledge, different interests, different dynamics – all of which will have an impact on their ability to interact with the stories being presented by museum interpreters (Mason 2005: 201).

This area of research has hardly been addressed by the wider heritage sector. However, if we extrapolate from the museum-based research, it would suggest that we should not be providing one standard interpretation as 'the truth' for any site, but rather presenting information in an accessible and non-dogmatic way, enabling our visitors to interact with the sites at their own level. In the words of the father of site interpretation, Freeman Tilden, we have to 'provoke' our audiences (Tilden 1977).

One important way to put this into practice would be to follow what American archaeologists of the 1960s and 1970s used to refer to as 'looking for the Indian behind the artefact' (see for example Flannery 1967). While the term 'Indian' may no longer be politically correct, the commendable intention was to implore archaeologists, increasingly preoccupied with identifying and demonstrating 'laws of cultural dynamics' (see for example Binford 1983) to step out of scientific comfort zones and dare to look for the people of the past. The point was surely that archaeologists had to not only (re)introduce people into their interpretations for them to be interesting, but, that if such people were missing from the interpretation archaeologists were failing in their responsibilities to society – an observation that led some to worry that society (certainly in North America) might be able to get on without archaeologists at all (Frits and Plog 1970). However, the introduction of people into this narrative is not easy, and the difficulty facing archaeologists is neatly summed up by the historian Michael King when he writes of pre-colonial New Zealand:

Who were the people of this era? That is a difficult, if not impossible, question to answer historically. Maori whakapapa offer names without remains – that is, stories without evidence – while archaeology offers remains without names – evidence without stories (2003: 67).

The fundamental goal for interpreters must be to put the story back into interpretation: to develop stories from the evidence, to people the past. During the preparation for the redisplay of the Alexander Keiller Museum in Avebury, UK in the early 1990s there was much discussion over whether or not to present a 3-D image of a Neolithic person (see Stone 1994). Designers and interpreters argued that such a model was essential; archaeologists were less convinced as they claimed such a presentation would be pure speculation. The final outcome was a full size model of a Neolithic man, but one split down the centre – providing two possible versions of how he may have looked. Further information was provided by a text panel where a 'Fred Flintstone' type figure was seen walking dejectedly away under the caption that no-one in the Neolithic looked like that. Visitors were encouraged to look around the rest of the exhibition and decide for themselves which version was most likely. The figure engaged them and provoked them and it began to help them to people the remains of the huge World Heritage site outside.

Another means of 'peopling a heritage site' is to do just that. At Great Zimbabwe groups from the local community perform tradition dances for visitors. Similar dances are performed at the Swahili site of Gede in Kenya, which is managed by the National Museums of Kenya (NMK). However, at Gede it is interpretation led not by evidence or academic understanding but rather by visitor expectation. Gede is a Swahili and an Islamic site, and the so-called 'traditional' African dances performed for visitors were never performed by its original inhabitants. The dance group, who actually perform just outside the site at Gede, come from over 100 miles away and have no link to the locality at all. The dancing at both sites is put on to entertain visitors who, so we are led to believe by tourist guides, expect to see such performances. The difference is that while the performance at Great Zimbabwe has at least some resonance with what at least one part of the local community believe may have happened there in the past, that at Gede is entirely constructed to satisfy a perceived visitor expectation. This fabrication of heritage can only undermine any possibility of the interpretation getting to anywhere close to the real stories of the site.

To some degree the damage caused by such misrepresentation can relatively easily be mitigated: the dancers can be removed and the problem solved – except that, in the Kenyan example, they dance on public land outside the site and the heritage authorities, in this case the NMK, have no power to move them on. The dancers are actively encouraged by tour operators, who build time into their itineraries for visitors to see their performance.
The problem of falsifying the past appears to be exacerbated at the Lake Malawi World Heritage Site where visitors are shown the graves of the first missionaries to the area. All well and good, except that the actual grave sites are unknown and the graves and memorials visited are simply a collection of headstones and memorials put together in a ‘cemetery’, the main function of which appears to be to encourage a longer visit and therefore the need for refreshments and the opportunity for craft sales. This link between developing and/or adding to a heritage site to encourage a longer stay is increasingly common practice. At Maddaba in Jordan, modern shops were demolished to exploit archaeological remains beneath them in an explicit policy to create an ‘archaeological park’, again with the intention of keeping people in the town for longer. The authorities responsible for the removal of shops in Jordan were doing so in order to reveal real archaeological evidence of Roman occupation so that they could tell a story appropriate to the site.

At Stanstead Mountfitchet in England, however, the remains of a real motte and bailey castle, protected by heritage legislation, are presented by a private owner in such a way as to make a mockery of our understanding of the early medieval period. Here the desire to tell a story and people the site has been allowed to create a fantasy world that bears almost no relationship to the authentic history of the site.

It need not be this way. There are examples of sites where the demands of tourists are met and visitors go away with a greater awareness and understanding of the past and the present. At Plimoth Plantation in the USA, the site of the first settlement in the so-called ‘New World’, visitors encounter a particular vision or (re)construction of the first settlement (see Stone and Panel 1999). Actors, working in ‘first person’, portray various characters of the settlement, but refuse to step out of their seventeenth-century personas, in order to discuss the interpretation with the visitor. In this way they present one interpretation only which is presented as ‘the truth’ for this site – a caricature of the past. However, if visitors make the effort to seek out the one wetu (local traditional Native American house) they will be confronted by members of the Wampanoag tribe who want to discuss, not the issues facing seventeenth-century settlers, but rather those that face their people today. Suddenly heritage interpretation is alive and well as the Native American interpreters confront visitors, provoking – indeed gently forcing – them to think, encouraging them to relate past to present, and perhaps even to the future.

The failure of many heritage sites to develop proactive, engaging, provocative interpretation is of major concern. The reasons for such failures are complex and are not the focus of this article. However, the implications of this failure are relevant here. For example at another World Heritage Site, Hadrian’s Wall in England, a number of issues have combined to force
those with responsibility for the site to confront the relationship between conservation, access and interpretation. The managerial concern of increasing erosion if visitor numbers develop as planned by tourism agencies has highlighted a long-term lack of investment in general maintenance, let alone major consolidation, as well as the fact that many of the exhibitions and displays along the Wall are old-fashioned and tired, frequently lacking any real interpretation. As the site is increasingly seen as a potential vehicle for major economic regeneration, these concerns have led the relevant Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), the conduit for national government funding with respect to economic growth, to become involved.

The RDAs are willing to invest some £56 million into the Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site as they believe that such investment will enable them to achieve government targets with respect to economic regeneration. Their only concern is that no-one currently involved in the management of the Site has the ability to deliver such investment to plan, to time, or on budget. As a result they have sought and received permission from the Department of Trade and Industry to create a new company that will oversee the management of Hadrian's Wall and the multi-million pound investment funding. As can be imagined, the response from those presently involved in the management of the Wall has been very mixed: from cautious welcome to downright hostility.

However, we need to ask the questions: What is the 'potential' of the Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site? What is its function in twenty-first century Britain? Is it a convenient archaeological site for academics pursue their personal research? Is it a tourist destination – a product, to be packaged and marketed as a commodity? Is it a vehicle for the economic regeneration of the North of England? Is it somewhere where the local community can walk their dogs and enjoy the scenery? Is it somewhere through which we can discuss the modern North – a multi-cultural region once more since the time Spanish cavalry, Iraqi boatmen and African auxiliaries jostled with Italian and other European legionnaires and merchants in the streets recently re-excavated by archaeologists?

It is all these things – but only if the bride and groom learn to live with each other, to give and take, not to sell themselves for quick returns, but to work together for a lasting, and mutually beneficial relationship.

Postscript

The visitor figures at the start of this article suggest almost exponential growth in tourism. However, as always, the devil is in the detail. Looking at figures for 2003 there was a 1.2% drop in tourist arrivals worldwide but a 10.3% increase in tourism arrivals in the Middle East. The total number of tourists in the Middle East rose from 27.6 million in 2002 to 30.4 million. Of these 42% were intra-regional tourists, which is an increasing common global trend: Europeans are staying in Europe; those from Asia and the Pacific are staying in Asia and the Pacific; and Americans are staying in America. We are all becoming more insular in our travel and seeing less of the world. Is it a corollary of this that society is becoming more insular in its thinking: that it will reduce its ability to understand and accept the views, backgrounds and aspirations of others?

An interesting, and largely unheralded, development within the WTO was the creation in 1986 of the International Institute for Peace through Tourism, an organisation founded in response to the growth in terrorism and the deteriorating relations between East and West. It is based on the premise that if people travel and see for themselves, then they will be less likely to support the extreme politics that lead to a breakdown of understanding and tolerance between those with different cultural backgrounds (IIFT 2006). Of course, one of the main things that people see when visiting other countries is the cultural heritage of that country. They visit places that are the responsibility of cultural heritage professionals. I was totally unaware of the work of the Institute until recently. I guess that most of my colleagues are similarly unaware of its work and/or remit. However, deploying the cultural heritage as a weapon in the search for world peace is a laudable aim: and one that would certainly induce me to attend, and support, any arranged marriage.

References


IIFT=International Institute for Peace through Tourism 2006 Home Page.
http://www.iift.org/ (accessed 29/1/06).


http://www.world-tourism.org/cdce_ethics/eng/principles.htm (accessed 29/1/06)


Endnote

1 It should be noted that the dancing at Great Zimbabwe also takes place outside the actual heritage site in what is referred to as the 'Traditional Village' as access to and 'spiritual' control over the site is disputed by different elements within the local community.