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«Downton Abbey» and the TV-induced Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the tourism phenomenon generated by the television period drama "Downton Abbey" in Highclere Castle and the village of Bampton in Oxfordshire. Making its debut on the air in 2010 and now in its fourth season, the series has been watched by around 120 million viewers worldwide, mainly in English-speaking countries, bestowing extraordinary success on its principal location. However, while at Highclere Castle tourism initiatives are not linked exclusively to the television series, in the case of Bampton the tourist image of the village is built wholly upon it. To study its impact in terms of local development, normal data collection methods were not sufficient and it proved necessary to present a questionnaire to tourists participating in one of the many one-day organized tours. The results emerging from the admittedly small sample interviewed did confirm some trends already anticipated, such as the predominance of overseas tourists with a high spending capacity, dedicating a single day to visiting the locations and spending the rest of their holiday in London.

Keywords: TV-induced Tourism, Downton Abbey, Local Development, Highclere Castle, Bampton in Oxfordshire

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Introduction

The success of film-induced tourism in our society is well known - and equal to its popularity in academic research. Since the insight of J.-M. Miossec (1977) who asserted that "tourism is first of all image", a number of studies have examined the construction of tourist locations through different media, in particular via cinema (in Italy, the more recent publications include Fagiani, 2009; Nicosia, 2012; Zignale, 2014), but also in literature, postcards, brochures, posters, souvenirs, slogans, maps, internet and, of course, television (Bagnoli, 2006). All these media play a role in building myths – what Selwyn (1996) terms "myth making" – which serve to engage people emotionally (Kim, 2012), thereby directing them to a particular destination, enabling the site to join the contemporary sustainable tourism market (Calzati, De Salvo, 2012).

In this paper we will focus on the Anglo-American costume drama Downton Abbey, with the view to exploring the "TV-induced tourism" it has generated in the locations featured in the series.

1. The TV series

Downton Abbey is an Anglo-American drama series set in Yorkshire during the second and third decades of the twentieth century that has enjoyed worldwide success. It follows the lives of Earl Robert Crawley, Lord Grantham (played by Hugh Bonneville) and his family – composed of his American wife Cora (Elizabeth McGovern), their three daughters Mary (Michelle Dockery), Sybil (Jessica Brown Findlay) and Edith (Laura Carmichael) with their subsequent fiancés or husbands, and his mother the Dowager Countess Violet (Maggie Smith) – living in the luxurious Castle of Downton Abbey with numerous servants. The latter play an active part in the life of the house, so much so that in the series many have roles of comparable importance to those of some members of the aristocratic family: the butler Carson (Jim Carter), the housekeeper Mrs Hughes (Phyllis Logan), the valet Bates (Brendan Coyle) with his wife, the maid Anna (Joanne Froggatt), and several others.

The first season, comprising seven episodes, was aired in the United Kingdom on ITV in autumn 2010 and is set in the years between the shipwreck of the Titanic in 1912 to the outbreak of the First World War; the second, comprising eight episodes plus a Christmas special, was broadcast in 2011 and takes place during the Great War; the third and fourth seasons, each comprising eight episodes plus a Christmas special, filmed in the Scottish Highlands and London, and set in the years 1920 to 1921 and 1922 to 1923 respectively, were broadcast in 2012 and 2013. A fifth season is currently being filmed and is due to be aired in the United Kingdom in autumn 2014.

The story intertwines the life and times of more than twenty main characters in a highly intricate but coherent plot which, following its success in the UK, was greeted with acclaim first in the United States and other English-speaking countries and

subsequently all over the world, with a total of approximately 120 million viewers. This extraordinary global success is due to a number of factors: first of all, the highly captivating storyline written by Julian Fellowes, Shelagh Stephenson and Tina Pepler; but also the meticulously recreated setting, accurately reproducing the reality of early twentieth century Britain, thanks to historical adviser Alastair Bruce (Fumarola, 2013); the emphasis on the social changes affecting society after the First World War (Hoppestand, 2013); and "what it communicates about the cultural appetites of the present", as Byrne (2013, p. 16) remarks in his incisive post-modern analysis.

In Italy the first season was broadcast on Rete 4 in December 2011 but was less successful than in other countries. Viewing figures fell from 1,372,000 per episode (with a share of 5.5%) in the first season to 1,128,000 (share 4.7%) in the second, to reach 937,000 (share 3.9%) by the third season, and the broadcasting of the subsequent seasons is as yet unconfirmed. Its less than resounding success with Italian audiences probably has several causes: the extremely "British" nature of the series; the choice of channel on which it was aired, usually watched by a younger public; the frequent commercials interrupting the episodes, and so on:

(www.tvblog.it/post/484633/downton-abbey-su-rete-4-i-motivi-di-un-insuccesso-solo-italiano). We believe a major reason could also be the fact that a lot of Italian fans did not wait for it to be shown on national television, dubbed into Italian, but watched the series directly on the Anglo-American channels via modern means of communication.

The series has not only proved a huge hit with audiences worldwide but has also received great critical acclaim beyond all expectations, rewarding the production and leading actors with major awards including Emmys and Golden Globes. Another widespread effect, mainly seen in Anglophone countries, has been the social and cultural phenomenon journalists have dubbed "Downton-mania". An example of this is the Equality Titles Bill presented before Britain's House of Lords in 2013; the proposed law, aimed at ending gender discrimination and allowing women equal succession rights to hereditary titles, has colloquially been named the "Downton Abbey Law", reflecting the importance this issue has in the plot of the series.

So-called Downton-mania has also had a major bearing on film-induced tourism (or, rather, TV-induced tourism), as this paper will illustrate.

2. The locations

With the exception of the scenes set in the downstairs rooms and servants' bedrooms in the castle, filmed at the Ealing Studios in East London, all other scenes were shot in actual places, although none of them appears in the drama with its real name. It is interesting to note, by the way, that a village called Downton actually exists in Wiltshire, England, six miles south of Salisbury, where journalists Carter and Dodd (2013) writing in *The Telegraph* noted "legions of American tourists" in search of the locations featured in Downton Abbey!

The producers chose Highclere Castle in Hampshire for the residence of Lord Grantham, and the village of Bampton in Oxfordshire as the village of Downton. The two places dealt very differently with the opportunity to be the setting of such a

popular TV programme, as we will see below, after learning something more about them.

2.1. Highclere Castle

Highclere is a civil parish in the county of Hampshire (district of Basingstoke and Deane) with about 1,500 inhabitants, near the border with the county of Berkshire, about 60 miles SSW of central London.

The estate of the Castle of Highclere, which employs some 50% of the workforce of Highclere village (source: Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, 2002) is set in the countryside of the North Wessex Downs, protected since 1972 as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The castle was built between 1839 and 1842 in neo-gothic style by Charles Barry, the same architect who designed the Palace of Westminster, on the foundations of an ancient manor dating back to the Middle Ages. For more than three centuries the estate has belonged to the Earls of Carnarvon, a dynasty now in its eighth generation, with Lord George Herbert and his wife Fiona still living there with the heir apparent, Lord Porchester, and other children.

The castle, completed in 1878, comprises approximately 200 rooms, employing around 25 servants. Particularly worthy of note are the library, with more than 5,000 volumes, the most ancient of which is a play by Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto dating back to 1538; the saloon, over 50 feet high, comprising internal balconies and a monumental oak staircase; the dining room dominated by a painting by Van Dyck depicting Charles I on horseback; and around 50 bedrooms named after members of the Royal Family and ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Its illustrious inhabitants include Lady Almina, Alfred Rothschild's illegitimate daughter and wife of the fifth Earl, who in 1922 with Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun in the Valley of the Kings (Carnarvon, 2011). During the Great War, she converted the house into a convalescent home (one of the few real-life details transposed into the TV series), while during the Second World War it became a refuge for evacuated children (Carnarvon, 2013a). Its more prominent guests include Albert, Prince of Wales, who went on to become King Edward VII, Queen Elizabeth II, as well as numerous politicians, businessmen and Egyptologists who attended memorable parties thrown there. Worthy of note is the expression "very Highclere", coined by the novelist Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966), to mean something superbly carried out.

The stately home is surrounded by a 1,000-acre estate comprising woods, pastures, Bronze and Iron Age remains, a garden, cricket pitch and park. To maintain the park, designed by the celebrated eighteenth century landscape gardener Lancelot Brown, known as Capability Brown, and featuring endemic species such as *Rhododendron altaclarensis* and *Ilex altaclarensis*, about 25 gardeners are required.

The Castle of Highclere first opened to visitors in 1988; until then it had been possible to visit the park only. The present Earl and Countess of Carnarvon in recent years have also inaugurated an Egyptian Museum in the cellars of the castle where some of the

remains from the important archaeological activities of the Earl's great-grandfather are conserved and exhibited (Carnarvon, 2013b).

Figure 1: Highclere Castle



2.2. Bampton in Oxfordshire and other locations

Bampton is a civil parish in Oxfordshire (district of West Oxfordshire) with about 2,500 inhabitants, in the Thames Valley, about 70 miles WNW of central London. Bamptonians used to work mainly in agriculture and the leather industry, but today many of them work in the neighbouring towns of Witney and Oxford; a robust local development policy is currently being implemented in an attempt to stem the workforce drain.

As far as tourism is concerned, although Bampton has some interesting features, mainly natural beauty (woods, countryside) but also historical and cultural aspects (the church of Saint Mary the Virgin dating from the twelfth Century, fine stone buildings), it has always been of very minor economic importance for the village.

Tourist flows have, until recently, been limited to a few day trips from London, some trekking and hunting in the countryside, and holiday stays of varying lengths by

wealthy families. In recent years, the rediscovery of rural tourism appears to offer the English countryside a unique opportunity for local development, with the potential for high quality tourism for both hosts and guests, thanks to strong cultural attractions and the appeal of fine food and wine.

The prospect of Bampton acquiring global fame as a tourist destination came about in 2009 when it was chosen by the television companies Carnival Films and Masterpiece as the location of the exterior shots of the period drama Downton Abbey. While the Castle of Highclere seems to have been selected for very shrewd reasons (Mastropietro, 2007), the inhabitants of Bampton are fond of relating that their village was chosen by sheer chance. While the production team was searching for a location reminiscent of the Yorkshire landscape, a technician supposedly suggested Bampton. The director was ultimately very pleased with the choice because of the excellent state of conservation of the streets and houses, and the village authorities and local community also expressed their enthusiasm.

Figure 2: Saint Mary the Virgin, in Bampton



As well as Highclere Castle and Bampton, many other places have been used as locations in the series. Thanks to Sperati and Schreiner (2013), the seventeen locations in England and the one in Scotland are listed below:

- Akenham (Suffolk): Rise Hall (the war defence lines);

- Beaconsfield (Buckinghamshire): Hall Barn (Anthony Strallan's house), and Hall Place (interior shots of Isobel Crowley's house);
- Byfleet (Surrey): Byfleet Manor (exterior shots of Violet's house);
- Chalfont St. Giles (Buckinghamshire): the open-air museum of Chiltern (John Drake's farm),
- Eton (Berkshire): Eton College (location of the local fair);
- Halton (Buckinghamshire): Halton House (interior shots of Haxby Hall, the house Mary and Richard intend to buy);
- Horsted Keynes (West Sussex): Bluebell Railway (Downton station);
- Inveraray (Argyll and Bute, Scotland): Inveraray Castle (Duneagle Castle);
- Lincoln (Lincolnshire): Lincoln Castle (York prison);
- London: Charterhouse (location of the political meeting), Rules restaurant, Saint James Park, Royal Hospital Chelsea (military office), and Normansfield Theatre (location of the flower show);
- Lower Basildon (Berkshire): Basildon Park (the London residence of Lord Grantham);
- Rotherfield (Oxfordshire): Greys Court (Bampton Place);
- Runnymede (Surrey): President Hall (the General Register Office);
- Shilton (Oxfordshire): The Old Forge (the Red Lion pub);
- Swinbrook (Oxfordshire): The Swan Inn (the Red Lion pub);
- Tenterden (Kent): the historical trains used in the series are based here;
- Waddesdon (Buckinghamshire): Waddesdon Manor (exterior shots of Haxby Hall);
- West Wycombe (Buckinghamshire): the interior shots of the house where Cora and Violet have their lively conversation).

In the present paper, however, the analysis focuses on Highclere Castle and Bampton.

3. TV-induced tourism

Both Highclere Castle and Bampton are not new as cinema or TV locations. A number of movies and serials have in fact already been filmed there: some of the more recent ones in Highclere include the movies *The Four Feathers* (2002), *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), the television series *Jeeves and Wooster* (1990) and an episode of *Agatha Christie's Marple* (2004); and in Bampton the television film *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* (2011). What is really new to both sites is the extraordinary success they have achieved from the perspective of tourism thanks to the "Downton Abbey" series.

For such results to be attained, however, it has not been enough just to wait for tourists to turn up; indeed, some interesting initiatives have been undertaken by the local community. Examples include the web sites of the castle (www.highclerecastle.co.uk), Bampton's community magazine www.bamptonbeam.co.uk and parish council www.bamptonoxon-parishcouncil.gov.uk, which have been updated and enriched to include information about Downton Abbey; the various guided tours or itineraries available to the devotees

of the series (such as the "Downton Abbey Village" tour in Bampton); references to the programme in several tourist brochures (such as the one for Basildon Park where the phrase "This Georgian mansion [...] recently featured in Downton Abbey" has been added); the tea rooms serving meals or snacks based on recipes featured in the programme; several souvenirs (mugs, magnets, key-rings), DVDs, books, tourist guides reproducing pictures from the series on sale in the gift shop; pictures, autographs and other articles associated with the series are on show in many pubs, shops, restaurants and hotels (in Bampton the most frequent photograph is one of Lady Mary in her wedding dress at the local church); special return fares offered by taxi drivers from the town of Newbury (reachable by train in about one hour from London Paddington) to Highclere Castle for independent tourists; and so on.

There is an interesting aspect worth mentioning about the relationships between Newbury and Highclere. Although they are only 6 miles apart, Highclere is situated in the county of Hampshire while Newbury is in Berkshire. Relations between the two are nonetheless closer than those linking the village with its county town, Winchester, which is considerably further away (21 miles). The inhabitants of the village of Highclere use many services in Newbury, post is distributed through Newbury, and the railway and motorway connections with the rest of England also usually pass through the town. For all these reasons, Highclere is frequently thought of as being in Berkshire rather than Hampshire. In addition, in the closing credits of Downton Abbey, Highclere Castle appears to be in Berkshire.

However, we believe that in this case there is another reason for this, related to the construction of the site's tourist image. The common British perception of Hampshire, in fact, is of a dreary rural farming area; indeed, their inhabitants are often derogatorily referred to as *Hampshire hogs*. Berkshire, by contrast, conjures up images of sophisticated places of residence and holiday (the royal Windsor Castle, Eton College and Ascot horse racecourse are all in Berkshire). Thus, bearing in mind well-known concepts of tourist stereotypes (Bagnoli, 2011), the ongoing debate about authenticity (Buchmann et al., 2010), and economic interests (Connell, 2012) in film-induced tourism, it is not hard to understand why the Castle of Highclere has "moved house" from one county to another in the credits of a TV series!

In order to assess the impact of actions designed to develop a new tourist image through movies or television, it is of course necessary to have some tourist data relating to the locations before and after airing of the programme (Beeton, 2005). In this case, however, the researcher came up against two different sorts of problems. Firstly, the reluctance of individuals to provide information about their businesses; secondly, the fact that in England the collection of official tourist data is broken down by district or county, while in the case in hand it would have been useful to acquire data on a more local scale.

As far as Highclere Castle is concerned, the only information proffered locally was that visitor numbers increased five-fold following the broadcasting of the series, although no actual figures were provided, and the fact that tourists come mainly from the United Kingdom and the USA. From other sources, however, we learned that visitors

total around 1,200 per day, and that, including entry tickets and purchases in the gift shop and tea room, they spend about £38,000 per day (Francis, 2013).

Figure 3: Tourists arriving at Highclere Castle



Data provided by Newbury's Visitor Information Centre give us a more detailed picture. Visitors to the historical town centre of Newbury in the month of October numbered 20,450 per week in 2010, 20,520 in 2011, rising to 24,080 in 2012 and 25,090 in 2013. Even though these data measure day trippers and not tourists as such, and record numbers of people visiting the town nearest the castle rather than the castle itself, the fact that they increased by 20-25% following the broadcasting of the series is nonetheless significant.

As regards Bampton, during the five hours per day in which the Visitor Centre (located in the local library, transformed into the hospital of Downton in the series) is open to the public, between 100 and 200 people visit it daily. Before the series was aired, Bampton had no Visitor Centre, but local inhabitants state that only a handful of tourists per day came to the village.

Figure 4: Tourists visiting Bampton



Due to the almost complete lack of available data, in order to find out more about TV-induced tourism related to Downton Abbey, it was necessary to carry out some field research adopting the focused ethnography method (Knoblauch, 2005), i.e. a qualitative survey over a short-term visit.

4. The research

On April 16th 2014, we joined a tour billed as "Downton Abbey and Oxford Tour from London Including Highclere Castle", organized by the tour operator *Viator*. Other trips are of course available through other tour operators such as *Great British Tours* (offering a one-day private tour with a comparable programme), *BritMovieTours* (one-day tour – including Bampton, Rotherfield and Byfleet, but excluding Highclere Castle – for £95, or three-day trip for £717 with double-room accommodation), *Zicasso* (one-week private tour costing \$4,500 with double-room accommodation), or *Europetoo* (four-night trip costing £1,197 with double-room accommodation).

The chosen tour consisted of a full-day's journey to Oxford in the morning, moving to Bampton and Highclere Castle in the afternoon. The price was £109 which included the journey by coach and, crucially, entry to the castle (which costs £18). Entering the castle is in fact the most arduous feat to achieve for someone wishing to visit Downton

Abbey locations because, since the series has been shown, tickets sell out as soon as they are put on sale. Getting a place on the *Viator* tour was not easy either, however, as these tickets also sell out very quickly, as we will see later. In fact we had to book our tour at the beginning of December 2013 (i.e. four months in advance), when this was the only date still available, and by the middle of January 2014 all tickets had already sold out.

During the field visit, conversations based on a pre-prepared questionnaire were held with the tourists on the tour, designed to find out something more about the profile of TV tourists interested in Downton Abbey. However, regulations protecting respondents' privacy and sensitive data prevented the researcher from asking certain more detailed questions.

The first interesting data are about the profile of the people interviewed and their choice of tour.

The average of the age of the respondents was around 45, but the most frequent age group was 50 to 60 years of age. The great majority were from the USA and UK, while others were from Germany, Ireland and Australia.

The tour participants, travelling mainly with their partner, family or friend(s), although some were on their own, were all ardent fans of the series, the great majority having watched all four seasons, or at any rate, all those broadcast thus far in their home countries.

We have already mentioned the four months' advance booking to get on this tour. The same was true for most of the tourists interviewed, and in some cases they had booked five, six or even nine months earlier.

At this point in the conversations, a more trivial question was inserted to lighten the tone of the interview: "My favourite character in the series is...". The answers were nevertheless revealing as they were very evenly distributed between the characters: Violet, Mary, Mrs Hughes, Anna, Bates, Carson, Matthew, Robert, Sybil... It is likely that the fact that there is no single favourite character (with the exception of Violet, although she did not score a great deal more than the others) is a distinct benefit for the series, enabling it to be enjoyed by vast numbers of viewers, is one of the reasons for its enormous success.

Questions were subsequently asked about the tour itself, which had been given to a considerable number of the tour participants as a Christmas or birthday present. The respondents were asked to score the different places visited during the tour (the tour as a whole; in Bampton: Matthew's house, the "hospital", the church, the "pub"; inside Highclere Castle: the main hall, the library, the sitting rooms, the park, the tea room and gift shop).

The tour as a whole was quite well rated by the participants, but the individual places received a wider range of scores, usually high, but with three key aspects emerging. Firstly, the fictional pub in Downton, located in a house in the main street of Bampton, was even not mentioned by many participants, but this can be attributed to the fact that the tour guide did not clearly point it out. Secondly, again in Bampton, the fictional hospital of Downton – as mentioned above, now the public library of the village located

inside an old school building, inside of which a Visitor Centre has been set up since the series started – was not highly rated, possibly due to the tourists' great expectations of it. Lastly, Highclere Castle's tea room and gift shop received some negative scores, perhaps due to a low quality/cost ratio.

On the whole, the respondents declared themselves to be satisfied with the visit to Bampton, with the majority stating that they would not visit it a second time (the few that said they would intended to do so during the shooting of subsequent episodes). In the case of Highclere Castle, fewer of the tourists felt the visit had fully satiated them, with the majority saying they intended visit the castle again, but next time allocating more time or returning with other family members. As a memento of their visit, almost all the participants bought one or more souvenirs, with a maximum of six, showing a fairly high spending capacity.

Figure 5: Tourists making purchases at the Highclere Castle gift shop



The final questions concerned the respondents' overnight stays in the Downton Abbey locations. We have already noted that tourists generally tend not to stay in the surrounding areas due both to the low supply of accommodation in the countryside and because the sites are so easily reachable from London. The respondents in the main told us that they were on holiday for a period of between five and ten days and

that, in addition to this excursion, they intended to visit London or other British towns (such as Stratford-upon-Avon for the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth). As regards their interest in other Downton Abbey locations, it emerged that they knew nothing about them, with the exception of a few respondents interested in visiting the Ealing Studios in London where the interior scenes were filmed.

Conclusions

From the data arduously obtained from all our research, it can be concluded that Downton Abbey is an interesting case study about TV-induced tourism, at least as far as Highclere Castle and Bampton are concerned. Although the two sites have approached this opportunity very differently, and with very different results, both have been discovered by international tourism thanks to the "telly". If in the drama series, as well in reality, large estates have often been rescued through marriage to billionaire American women, this case demonstrates that in the third millennium, with its shortage of heiresses from the USA, there is another type of American who can help the British aristocracy to hold on to their properties. We are of course talking about tourists, in many cases the most significant source of revenue (Citarella, 2014).

It would be interesting at this point to assess the impact of the series on tourism at the other Downton Abbey locations, primarily on Scotland's Inveraray Castle, presented in the series as Duneagle Castle in the Christmas special of the third season, ancestral home of the Dukes of Argyll. In this case too, the grandfather of the current Duke married four heiresses in succession, but when fire devastated the castle in 1975 it proved necessary to raise funds in America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to pay for rebuilding work and to open it up to visitors, with up to 100,000 now arriving every year (Tweedie, 2013). Numbers have increased considerably following the broadcasting of Downton Abbey; this represents an excellent opportunity for the area if the Duke and his family, along with the local community, prove capable of exploiting its potential, managing resources skilfully, and creating and promoting an appropriate tourism image. (Scarles, 2004).

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