

Field Visit to Stonehenge and Salisbury

Theoretical Underpinning

Both Stonehenge and Salisbury Cathedral have multiple stories that attract people to the sites.

The Cathedral includes:

- Being the best example of 13th Century architecture – early English gothic style
- Having the tallest spire in the country
- Possessing an original of the Magna Carta
- Being a mother church for over 750,000 people

Stonehenge's multiple stories include:

- The importance of the site and its surrounding landscape
- The mystery of how it was built – the distance traveled, the accuracy of its positioning
- The mystery of why it was built and what uses it may have had
- The age of the site – previous henges dating back 5000 years
- Being the best example of a circle of standing stones in the world

Stonehenge's stories are expressed throughout the visitor experience beginning with the site access tunnel which has artistic representations as to how the land may have looked before any henge was built. The supplied audio wand talks of the mysterious feat of engineering to transport stones from Wales and how it was built so accurately to align with the phases of the sun. This highlights the fact that no-one can really tell what it was for (with any real accuracy) but acknowledges the significance of the site by exploring the previous henges built on the site, the surrounding area with its long barrows and other archeologically significant features.

The Cathedral explains its stories in a more low key way. Visitors are given leaflets on entry providing a map of the Cathedral and highlighting specific points of interest along with a brief history. The leaflet also mentions the age and dimensions of the cathedral, its prominence in the diocese and its architectural significance. There are a lot of messages that the leaflet attempts to express, which does result in reducing the importance of the building to soundbites. If visitors only take this and do not embark on the tour, they may be missing a great deal of the history and significance of the Cathedral. It is also emphasised that it is a working church and that regular prayers are said regardless of the numbers of tourists who may be visiting.

Practical Detail

The signage directing road users to Stonehenge is very poor. There are no signs until the visitor is very close to the site - and I know from personal experience that one visitor was sure they were lost even though they had a road map! Even once at the site, directions to the main visitor entrance were confused. The toilet block was a distraction and may be interpreted as a precursor to the entrance. From what I could see there was only a spray painted direction to the ticket office on the car park floor. Once at the main entrance, the first thing you realise is how very small it is and how narrow the access tunnel is. It was very crowded on a weekday in Spring; it must be horrendous on a busy summer weekend. There is minimal publicly available information about the site and no free basic guidebook. The visitor is provided with a free audio commentary wand (available in various languages) which provides the background story and specific things to look out for. The commentary is built around 7 markers surrounding the stones where guests are told to stop, look and listen. As the pathways are quite narrow, congestion could be a major detriment to visitor enjoyment. The commentary also encourages the listener to look at specific things and then rush on to the next marker. Even though there is the option to pause the commentary, I would assume many people don't, so don't have the time to stop and appreciate the site in full. The commentary is sanitised and simplified, presumably to make it accessible to all ages and levels of education. It includes ambient noise to assist the listener in empathising with the stories, but these seem to be irregular and half-hearted.

Salisbury Cathedral is well signposted from the town centre. On almost every junction there is a signpost directing the visitor to interesting and important locations. Inside the cathedral the visitor is almost left to roam free, there are large floor standing signs directing to the facilities, gift shop and chapter house. There is a simple small display expanding on the history and building techniques and an artist's model recreating the original building site. Leaflets are handed out by the guides who are also there to answer any questions. The tour guides also offer a more personal touch; they can interact with the visitors, can elaborate on interesting aspects, can provide anecdotal information and provide a more hands-on approach to the stories behind the building. They also have the disadvantage of having the opportunity for distraction – whether by other tour groups, by other activities or other tour groups and can also forget their “patter” – again detracting from the visitor experience.

Management

Each site is managed by a different organisation. Stonehenge belongs (in part) to English Heritage whilst the Cathedral is privately managed. The Cathedral remains true to its higher purpose – not letting tourism get in the way of the religious aspect - with less overt emphasis on the commercial aspect. It does seem less professional; tour guides are volunteers – people with time on their hands who have an enthusiasm and a love for the building and its history. Although Stonehenge is more professional in its organisation, it leaves a lot to be desired and doesn't do justice to a World Heritage Site. Considering the number of visitors to the site (over 836, 000 in 1999/2000 – Stonehenge: Information for Tutors and Students of Tourism Studies (English Heritage 2002), the site access, gift shop and other visitor facilities are woefully inadequate. There is a controversial World Heritage Site Management Plan being implemented which will include site landscaping, hiding the roads under ground and a brand new visitor centre which allegedly will improve the surrounding area and the sustainability of the site and hopefully should improve the visitor experience. This is an example of how a national heritage association plans for the future. They are constantly learning from public demand, from historical discoveries and developing heritage philosophies and will implement new ideas to improve the visitor experience whilst maintaining the integrity of the site and creating an income to support the site. The Cathedral is a working church above all; tourism is an extremely beneficial sideline.

Impression

Expressing a preference is very difficult. Stonehenge is magnificent and majestic but loses points for the poor facilities and disappointing experience that seems to be forced upon you. With an enthusiastic and efficient tour guide, the Cathedral provides a more interesting and thoughtful experience really expanding on the lesser known aspects of the building and its history. My personal preference would have to be Stonehenge without the annoying audio commentary and the irritating other visitors!