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DEVELOPING IRELAND AS A SUCCESSFUL GARDEN TOURISM DESTINATION¹

THE CASE OF THE GREAT GARDENS OF IRELAND RESTORATION PROGRAMME

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Abstract

The marketing of Ireland as a garden destination has been evolving over the past six years. The complexity of Ireland's history and modern circumstances have led to the demise of Irish gardens over the past three centuries. An initiative entitled The Great Gardens of Ireland Restoration Programme has been operated under the Operational Programme for Tourism 1994-99 which has been funded by the European Union. The outcome of the scheme has been twofold; the funding has rescued a significant part of Irish heritage and history; it has provided many new comprehensive tourist attractions to both the domestic and overseas market. A more widely focused market should be targeted to ensure that tourism is successful in fostering sustainability in part of the Irish heritage. A Case study of Ballinlough Castle, County Westmeath outlines their part in the programme.

Key words: destination marketing, history of Irish gardens, garden tourism, marketing plans, evaluation process, relationship marketing, and sustainability

Ireland as a country has a complex history. This history has shaped the different cultural and historic elements which are attractive as part of the tourism package. They set the background to the destination and the enhancement of these, lead to the attractiveness of Ireland as a destination.

Destination marketing has been very much part of the Irish marketing strategy over the past decades. It has focused on selling Ireland as a destination to both those of Irish origin and roots and to the pure tourist who has visited through curiosity and interest in experiencing something other than a sun destination.

A destination can be viewed as an umbrella under which diverse sectors of the tourist industry can work in partnership to provide facilities and services for leisure and business travellers (Youell 1998). Attractions are very much part of a destination mix and can be a prime reason in attracting visitors to an area (Mill and Morrison 1992)

The central aspects of tourism are attraction and their capability of drawing people to them. Attractions are a central part of the destination mix. Destinations can be classified as either primary, in which they will have the appeal to draw visitors to stay for several/many days in one area. A secondary destination will be interesting to

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visitors on the way to a primary destination and will rely on attracting larger numbers of people for shorter periods of time.

Attractions may be manmade or they may be natural. Gardens, although often set in a natural environment are manmade. Their intergration with nature and the various degrees of management, provides the tourist with a unique view of an environment which has been influenced and moulded by forces beyond our control. Each garden tells a story which has been influenced by both micro and macroenvironmental factors and it is this that has been identified as a rich resource in Ireland tourism product.

The History of Gardens and Gardening in Ireland

The history of Ireland has seen the demise of the great house throughout the country. Associated with the British occupancy and wealthy Anglo-Irish landowners, a spate of attacks and burning were undertaken in the troubled period of the 1920's and these resulted in the destruction of a number of notable houses. On the formation of the new Irish State in 1922, many large estates were taken over or sold to the Land Commission. These events together with the increasing cost of running a large house and the difficulty in getting staff resulted in their decline. With them, went the many of the gardens.

The history of gardens in Ireland has also been dictated by the climate. The benign temperate climate is extremely favourable for the growth of a wide range of trees and shrubs as well as perennial plants (Davies 1979) This, together with the geology of the country which has been shaped by two glacial periods has led to a great diversity of growing conditions in a relatively small area.

Reference to gardens and gardening in Ireland goes back to the monks in the Middle ages. The main objective of gardening was to provide medicinal herbs and vegetables for daily living. The seventeenth century saw the beginning of cottage gardening and Ireland attracted a number of Protestant refugees who had small settlements around the country (Pim 1979). Plant collectors were a significant development in the 18th and 19th century and these bought back exotics from abroad, many of which are common in our gardens today.

A notable garden designer, who had a significant impression on garden design in Ireland was William Robinson who published a book in 1870 called *The Wild Garden*. This dictated much of the typical 'Irish' garden style, for which we are known. It is in direct contrast to other garden styles such as those of the British and the Continent, which are very much more formal in their style and design. This uniqueness which is very much a characteristic of Irish gardens, has helped to create the garden tourism attraction (George and Bowe 1986).

Gardens Visitors to Ireland

The Survey of Travellers (SOT) which is undertaken on behalf of Bord Failte (The National Tourist Board), indicates the popularity of number of activity areas. Activities undertaken by tourists are classified as either active and passive in nature. Active activities include walking, cycling and angling; passive activities include visiting historic monuments and visiting gardens. Visiting gardens is a passive activity, and like many attractions however requires the accessibility to a particular relevant site in order to satisfy the tourist experience.

Visiting gardens has been a popular activity in Ireland for over 30 years. A number of gardens have been open to the public notably Powerscourt, County Wicklow, Glenveagh Castle, County Donegal and Bantry House, County Cork. These continue to attract both the specialist plantsperson and general visitors from both domestic and international sources. More recently, with the increase in popularity of Ireland as a tourist destination, and the increased emphasis through advertising and other marketing tactics focusing on the environment, natural resources and culture, there has been, in tandem a large increase in visitor numbers to gardens. For example in 1989, 368,000 holidaymakers visited gardens in Ireland. In 1997, there were 547,000 overseas visitors to gardens in Ireland. Although, the figures are not directly comparable due to market type, the figure does show an increase of interest in visiting gardens. Since 1997, for statistical purposes, gardens have been classified with historic houses and castles, and comparative data is not available. At present there are 130 gardens open to the public in some form.

The Great Gardens of Ireland Restoration Programme was initiated as part of the Operational Programme for Tourism 1994-99. An allocation of £4 million was to be spent on the restoration of 30 gardens in Ireland over the six-year period. This allocation was provided on the basis that there were possibly over 100 gardens in Ireland of significant historical nature and these were identified as a potential national tourism resource.

A Manager was appointed to oversee the project, liaise with the garden owners and Bord Failte and report directly to the Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation through an appointed committee representing a wide range of garden interests.

The programme has a two pronged approach;

- a. it recommends allocation of funding to historic gardens in order that they can be restored and this in turn will contribute significantly to the protection and conservation of an important part of Irish heritage.
- b. the utilisation of tourism to provide a means of generating income to ensure the viability of the gardens, and to provide an income to contribute towards sustainability of the garden tourism operation far into the future.

The Marketing Evaluation Process

As part of the evaluative process to secure funding, each garden owner is required to submit a business/marketing plan.²

The marketing plan which includes both strategically and tactical activities addresses several important points;

- identification of potential target markets both geographically and by market segment
- competitive analysis and aspects of potential displacement - this in turn helps the promoter/garden owner identify the unique aspects of the garden being restored
- issues of pricing
- season extension
- details of start-up marketing and launch of the garden into the market place
- marketing budgets for the first 3 years
- market plan implementation and evaluation

Invariably, a SWOT analysis is carried out and marketing activities outlined directly related to the defined markets and type of garden. Co-operative extension and links with other similar gardens and attractions are encouraged. Co-operative marketing is also encouraged.

The uniqueness of each garden must be stressed and be a focus of it's restoration. This is determined by the depth to which the garden history was researched. Each garden has a story to tell. This story, which often spans several generations and events, is unique to each garden, and brings the experience alive to visitors.

It was necessary that there is united commitment and focus within the marketing plan for each garden. The plans are rolling documents focusing on the needs according to micro and macro variables, and are flexible depending on the garden and visitor needs. Both the strategic and tactical aspects require at least an annual review to assess effectiveness and efficiency. Garden owners and staff must be fully supportive of the implementation of the plan.

The marketing plans for the Great Gardens of Ireland Restoration Programme were compiled by the garden owners in conjunction with external consultants. The specifics of the evaluation process required that the garden owner had undertaken some market research to assess demand and also to develop an understanding into marketing the garden product. Part of their commitment was that the garden becomes a member of a Product Marketing Group (PMG), *Great Houses, Castles and Gardens of Ireland*, which is a co-operative marketing group initiated in the late 1980's. This group which was formerly known as the 'Gardens of Ireland' recently amalgamated with the Great Houses and Castles due to the similarity of their target markets.

The PMG is involved in international marketing of their members through the production of a quality colour brochure, attendance at trade fairs and advertising.

Pricing is an important part of positioning the garden tourism product. A standard pricing range is evident throughout Ireland and gardens tend to position themselves within this range. This price offers the core product of the garden and availability of facilities such as toilets and tearooms. Events, garden tours, educational aspects, art

² Acknowledgement to Bord Failte

and craft exhibitions, may be deemed as extensions and additional admission charged. Various techniques can be used in assessing pricing strategy and comparative pricing based on research carried out by Tourism Development International (1997) is used as a benchmark in many cases. General benchmarking is encouraged for all operational elements of the garden attraction as well as the constant sourcing of customer feedback through observation, self-administered questionnaires or postal questionnaires.

In attracting and building a customer base and increased market share, garden owners need to focus on a wider case of customers rather than just the customers themselves. As part of the concept of relationship marketing, six markets have been identified which been adapted from the Six Market Model (Payne et al. 1995) It is these markets that should be considered by those involved in the operation and management of the gardens. These markets may both directly and indirectly contribute to the awareness and hence increase paying visitors to the garden ensuring future viability and the sustainability of the garden.

- internal – this market includes the garden owner, family, friends and relations. The information must be up to date and available in order that they may act as ambassadors on behalf of the garden. e.g. are all these people aware of what the garden has to offer, it's facilities, what is happening there on a seasonal basis, it's opening times?
- referral – these include people in contact on a day to day basis e.g. banks, employees, other garden owners etc. Are they aware of the garden and what it has to offer? ? Maybe the bank managers mother is a member of a gardening club or has friends abroad who are enthusiastic about gardens who may provide a source of business

influence – influencers are involved in the dissemination of the information that is given to them. They will inform and can influence the potential customer. This group includes the media (local /national radio/newspapers/television), tourist offices and organisations. A very important part of this group are those who are involved with the specialist part of the market to be targeted i.e., journalist/writers, photographers associated with specialist garden magazines/programmes. A database of these people should be developed and regular relevant communication in the form of press releases/notes etc. on events/happenings should be included. Familiarisation's carried out in conjunction with other gardens and similar type attractions should also be considered.

- employee – people working within the garden should be enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the garden, it's history, plant knowledge and future plans. They then act as ambassadors telling those they come into contact with about the garden. Regular communication with all involved in the project, future plans and results will help to motivate them.
- Supplier – a number of suppliers will be involved in the development and operation of the garden. These could range from the milkman, producer of food/cakes, crafts to those directly involved with supplies to the gardens i.e. nurseries (both here and abroad), garden centres, garden supplies etc. All of these should be aware of what is happening and possess leaflets and information to disseminate to their contacts. Small posters and leaflets could be distributed

through garden centres and nurseries, in fact anywhere that the potential customer may originate from.

- Customer – this category needs to be defined. Other categories are using those who you are in contact with to distribute information to the potential customer. Some of them may be customers, some may not. The customer may have a variety of reasons for visiting a garden. It may be one of a number of attractions within a destination that they visit and they show only a general interest in gardens. The visitor may, however be a specialist plantsperson or garden enthusiast who has specially sought out such an attraction.

The above six categories can be divided into market segments which dictate the type of marketing carried out. A number of methods according to market segments are as follows;

- *Local* - the local market with frequent users is very important and the use of loyalty schemes i.e. discount admission or free admission when bringing two or more people/ free coffee/ season tickets can be encouraged. An incentive to return, using events, seminars, talks, musical evenings, afternoon teas that will attract customers and view the garden as a place that should be visited frequently. They will also bring visitors.
- *Domestic (day trip)* – these may originate from the nearest urban area and will generally be attracted through information received through the national media, specialist magazines, Internet, specialist clubs and garden centres.
- *Domestic tourist* – these will originate from other parts of Ireland and will have received information through the above channels, though also through tourist offices and tourist information
- *Overseas tourist* – these will receive information through tourist offices both here and abroad, tourist literature and the Internet. They constitute free independent travellers (FIT) and packaged groups. Specialist groups will often access the garden through handling agents and tour operators. Familiarisation's and distribution of information to relevant specialist and general overseas tour operators is therefore essential.
- *Specialist, educational, other (incentive/business/ conference)* – this group will also include specialist plantpeople who are generally accessible through specialist magazines, programmes and books. Educational groups are accessible through primary and second level schools and universities both here and abroad. Intermediaries are also important for this category.

Case study

Ballinlough Castle Gardens and Demesne, Clonmellon, County Westmeath

Ballinlough Castle Gardens were the first recipients of grant aid through the Great Gardens of Ireland Restoration Programme and have now completed its grant development. The gardens were officially opened in May 1998. Ballinlough Castle, whose architecture spans several centuries, is set in a wooded demesne and landscape. It features a three and half-acre (1.2ha) walled garden, which is divided into 4 walled sections. What was once an untapped resource, is now herbaceous borders, a lily pond, rose garden and a herb and fruit garden. In the greater demesne there is a wild

woodland garden which has been cleared. A famine lake, which was constructed as part a famine relief scheme during the nineteenth century, adds to the uniqueness of the location. There is also another spring fed natural lake which cover 9 acres. The surrounding estate was laid out in the eighteenth century beside the castle, which has been in the O'Reilly/Nugent family since it was built in the seventeenth century on the site of a towerhouse dated 1415. In 1812, Sir Hugh O'Reilly took the name Nugent and became the 1st baronet. In 1843, John, who was in the Austrian army returned to Ireland and became the 3rd baronet. His great nephew, Sir Hugh Nugent, succeeded his grandfather in 1927. At this time, the estate had been ³broken up as a result of the Wyndham Land Act, and the Land Commission had taken over the house. Sir Hugh was able to recover the Castle, which was due for demolition, and in 1931 began to plant the woodlands and repair the damage throughout the estate and gardens. The Castle was restored and the family returned in 1940.

When Sir John and his wife, Lady Penelope (Pepe), took over the estate, restoration work was slowly progressing. The advent of the Great Gardens Programme has aided completion and has opened the garden to the public.

A garden history search was undertaken and this was the basis on which work was progressed. The owners used the identified historic bones of the Castle garden, and pathways were set down as originally laid. A head gardener was appointed (Ursula Walsh) who completed her thesis on Ballinlough as part of her degree in Horticulture and effectively consolidated the garden history research. She is involved in meeting visitors as well as managing the garden.

Management of the garden is an important aspect and changes in the environment have created their own problems. i.e. clearing of a woodland area has led to greater light levels and hence change of vegetation. Strategic management plans are now required to accommodate changes and plan for the future. Visitor management polices are also important, and as the number of visitors to the garden increases flow management and yield management are two important areas to be considered.

In Ballinlough, both toilet, tea-rooms and plant sales are available to visitors. The Nugents have teamed up with Janet Drew, who has successfully established a business in the making and selling of homemade preserves and chutneys to gourmet retail outlets. Janet operates the tearooms – 'The Garden Cottage Tearooms' in the former groom's cottage where light meals are available. She uses the available soft fruits that are grown in Ballinlough in the production of her preserves and chutneys, which are also for sale.

Marketing of such a garden is important and both local awareness marketing as well as international marketing through tourist intermediaries is important.

Since the garden opened two years ago, visitors are invited to sign a visitor's book. The majority of groups are domestic in origin. Specialist overseas visitors, who occasionally visit the Castle, can now also visit the garden. Self-drive domestic and overseas visitors originate from Mainland Europe, British and Domestic markets, and mainly source their information through The Great Houses, Castles and Gardens of Ireland brochure.

Newspaper articles and specialist magazines have been very important in attracting visitors. Reminder advertising is used in some domestic specialist magazines and

³ Acknowledgement to Sir John and Lady Nugent, and Ursula Walsh, Head Gardener, Ballinlough Castle Gardens, County Westmeath

recent co-operation with local tourism interests and other gardens in the area have resulted in an increase in local day visitors. General advertising is costly and its cost efficiency is questioned though focused advertising through specialist media is successful. International marketing is carried out through their membership of The Great Houses, Castles and Gardens of Ireland Product Marketing Group.

Last winter, a short questionnaire was devised and sent to domestic visitors who visited the garden during the previous season. Their addresses were sourced through the visitor's book, information was sought on how information on the garden had been accessed, ease of access to the garden, quality of garden and facilities, and length of duration spent in the garden as well as general feedback. A small incentive in the form of a Christmas Hamper was offered to encourage return of the completed questionnaires. There was an 80% response rate and the subsequent information has helped to direct the management team in its' future developments and marketing.

Barriers to Development and Marketing of Gardens

Several barriers do exist to the successful development and marketing of garden tourism. Access for example, can be a problem. Many of the gardens are located in remote or out of the way locations. Most gardens are located off main roads and signposting due to planning restrictions can be difficult and costly to erect and maintain.

The seasonality of horticulture can also be a problem. The majority of the gardens are open to the public during the growing and flowering seasons which is usually May to September. They are encouraged to consider some planting which will extend the season i.e. Spring flowers and bulbs or autumn colour. Those this is undertaken based on the historical research of the garden. The development of educational courses (accommodation packaged), either directly involved in gardening, or in related areas can also help to extend the season and help to keep the garden activities alive during the low season and generating income.

Getting the product right is essential before marketing commences. Issues such as proper plant labelling, identification, plant sales and guided walks are elements that are expected from a discerning specialist market.

Conclusion

The main focus of this paper has been the development of garden tourism as part of enhancing destination attractiveness to both specialist and general visitors. It has seen the use of tourism as a means to creating value and sustaining part of Ireland's heritage. This has been carried out through the Great Gardens Restoration Programme. The funding of destination marketing is seen of paramount importance to the next period of tourism operation in Ireland. The indication is that an ongoing requirement for expenditure of £32 million (1998 prices) will be required to market Ireland to the international visitor (BF 1998). Individual attractions who produce a quality product and market their product both individually and co-operatively will help to sell Ireland abroad as an attractive destination offering a wide range of quality products and experiences. The creation of a unique and attractive destination mix is of utmost importance and on it will depend the success of marketing strategies

It is also interesting to note that in *Irish Gardening and Horticulture* produced by the Royal Horticultural Society of Ireland (1979) that a number of the extinct gardens in

their preface map have now been successfully funded through the Great Gardens of Ireland Restoration Programme.

In order to maximise marketing effort, a broad spectrum of markets should be considered. A marketing focus using the six-market model will help to ensure that all possible avenues are explored.

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