

European Cultural Tourism Network.

1st Thematic Workshop

An Dun Transport & Heritage Museum.

Constance Hanniffy. Midland Regional Authority Ireland.

I am delighted to speak to you about Culture and Tourism in relation to transport as I have for eleven years operated An Dún Transport & Heritage Museum.

Culture as we all know is a definition about our past; it is the process of passing on our history, heritage and customs from one generation to the next. We have all inherited our culture to protect and distribute to future generations.

Many of us have invested heavily in ensuring that this precious gift or measure is delivered effectively.

Our culture has an economic impact particularly in the field of tourism products. Tourism products themselves are an unbroken chain of infrastructure and services, provided by public authorities, that starts with transporting the tourist by some means to a destination and is effected by road quality by public/private transport systems, water/sewerage systems, the environment, amenities and quality of life.

Accessibility and planning of archaeological sites and monuments, provision of information and marketing and network of tourist facilities, all of this creates the case for success.

I will now point the path which I walked in order to achieve my goal and establish An Dún museum.

Practical Advice on Setting up a Museum.

1. Choice of Project.
2. Focus & Plans (Planning, Layout, Exhibit Layout & Interpretation)
3. Funding Options (Private, Borrowings, State Funds).
4. Marketing Focus (Type of Market, Marketing Tools, Methods).
5. Operational Pitfalls.
6. Project Assessment -11 years on.
7. Influence of Outside Forces (Current Tourism Situation).
8. Location of Visitor Needs and Economy

I hope that my words of wisdom here today will define clearly for you the various steps undertaken by me during the preparation, establishment and operation of An Dún Transport and Heritage Museum.

It is unreal to think that my project was a pipe dream, not so much my dream as my husband Kieran's dream. His interest and concern for things old beggars belief. We both

came from families who tended to collect and hoard, so we had a huge amount of heritage, automobilia, cars etc in our possession. The government agency's area manager in the late '80's – early '90's often called to our furniture store and viewed in the adjoining garage our collection, and he felt we should consider a Museum/Heritage centre on a small scale. After much thought, debate, and argument we finally made the decision in 1993.

I first set about deciding if I should have a Museum or a Heritage centre, or a combination of both – then if I should have any additional visitor facilities.

You may ask where did I look for guidance?

I read a lot – books on tourism, reports etc. I visited a number of existing facilities both in England and Ireland, and then used my better judgement, and the following plan emerged.

1. Decision to focus on transport in the broadest sense, from the pony and cart, to the bicycle, from the motorcycle to the car, complimented with motor automobilia.
2. A decision to focus on our heritage with emphasis on rural lifestyle and culture.
3. A decision to compliment the project with tourism facilities – coffee shop, souvenirs, tourist information and toilet facilities.

Having arrived at this plan, I then set about organising the project.

Planning and Layout

How large? Position of facilities etc., something that I failed to give enough thought to.

E.g. I positioned the toilets at the end of my complex instead of adjacent to the coffee shop and souvenir shop and entrance.

Constructed entrance too open – thus allowing people to view some exhibits before paying.

Did not pay enough attention to front of museum, not attractive to passers by visually.

Lessons:

1. Pay attention to layout.
2. Pay attention to outside presentation/visual looks.

Having got through the planning process, and the building works underway, the next problem to be tackled was the layout of the exhibits, again extremely complicated and difficult.

The manner of display and information hoarding etc. Display was my choice, open and accessible, yes good in one sense but a problem to police.

Difficulty with so many exhibits, what to display, what not to display, “Keeping in mind the main theme of transport.”

Perhaps those are the nuts and bolts as were encountered, but funding had to be tackled also- How to spend – Hidden extras – where to source funding?

Well the first Leader Programme was there, the Enterprise Board was there, my own resources and a generous bank manager.

The next step that had to be faced was to identify the market and where to focus. This perhaps was the hardest part of the whole project. And I might add the help and advice from Tourism Ireland was not over helpful. I felt schools, active age groups, I.C.A. and Irish Tour Operators might be the way to go.

I wondered with little assistance as to how much of ones budget should be spent on marketing or where we should spend it.

I must admit that I did not handle this aspect professionally and there are reasons why:

1. Was I selling something that people needed?
2. Was I overshadowed by Clonmacnoise/Bog Rail?
3. Was there enough interest in Transport or indeed Heritage to generate income enough to keep the door open?

The answer to all three were negative.

I spent money badly in 1994/95. I went to the Bord Failte incoming tour operator workshops at enormous expense, to find myself talking to tour operators who weren't interested in the Midlands, in and out as fast as possible to either Galway or Dublin.

Since then I have become very focused on the source of my market and spread my small marketing budget wisely. For example, I was a founder member of Ely O'Carroll tourism in the early '90's, I was chair of the Board for a period and a member since its foundation, often wondering whether I was too far removed from the centre of action

Did the hotels or the tourist offices in Birr, Roscrea send people to me? Did the similar establishments in Athlone, Roscommon, Mullingar and Tullamore do likewise?

I have since discovered that Athlone, Mullingar, Roscommon was the areas that supported me most.

I quickly realised that Bord Failte workshops and the ITOA Workshops were a total waste of money, coach operators and drivers are a rare breed to be avoided.

So what do I do now to market?

1. Website.
2. Westmeath Tourism Guide, Leaflets in all hotels, Guesthouses, Tourist Information offices in Westmeath/Offaly/Roscommon, link with Viking Boat at Athlone and Athlone Castle – advertised in Ely O'Carroll, Shannon and MERTO brochures, associations, etc., try to get as much free advertising – open day once per year. “Free” radio tickets for competitions etc.

The operational pitfalls of any tourism business can be avoided by:

- Always remember you are providing a service.
- Never ask anyone to accept what you will not accept yourself.
- Set high standards and keep them.
- Don't rely on others for advice/help.

General Operational Pitfalls.

- Lack of Planning for Group visits.
- Lack of cleanliness – checking toilets/coffee shop.
- Not being available to give information and advice to tourists.
- Relying on enthusiasm to see you through.

Day visitor centres, like ourselves, need to be in a reasonable strategic position in relationship to other places of interest, e.g. Clonmacnoise, Birr Castle etc. It is only in recent years that the midlands location for holidays has been considered seriously. Previously one would have always looked at tourism locations adjacent to the Coast and larger cities. In attempting to ascertain "Visitor Needs" I think it is most important for all Product Providers to do research in the form of a questionnaire to their consumers or visitors requesting them to highlight their needs or preferences and also their comments with regard to the facilities, which are on offer in the area. One must ensure that one provides tightly focused questions, which will lead to comment. This information must be analysed and use to help improve customer/visitor needs.

If under "needs" one was to look at the qualities which a customer requires from an area. Straight away, one could say hospitality and friendliness is very important and good quality maps; signposting and scenery could closely follow this.

The employment potential stretches across each sector and the opportunity for sustained "all year round" employment will follow with the proper extension and management of the Tourist Season. There are key opportunities in this country, with the Peace Process and the proposed high-speed ferries and the fast sea links already in existence. The traditional mainland European, American and English Markets will reach their potential, coupled with this is the challenge of the eastern European markets, which are just opening up and showing serious interest in Ireland and its Tourism Products.

Marketing.

One needs to be no expert in marketing to know that the most effective means of marketing is 'word of mouth' because the experience has been transmitted by those who have visited, and most of all, have been impressed. One can spend thousands of Euro on Marketing and Advertising but if one is unable to satisfy the customer and their needs, all is lost. In Market Research, one must look at the markets available to them, i.e. if the market takes in the old, the young, special interest, families etc., one has to look as to how one will brand their products, how they will exploit the existing products around and how they will link and package complimentary features or products to theirs. One would

also enquire as to what the existing accommodation base is and how it could be expanded and upgraded. One would look, in our case, at how one would retain some percentage of the longer visitor to Clonmacnoise and how one would attract some of the River Shannon traffic to stay in the area and visit some of the products in the area.

In general, one would also look at the infrastructure and also investigate how one would upgrade shops, street lighting, roads etc., in order to give an overall visitor satisfaction and exploit to spend. One would also want to look at how to expand into a “shoulder season” and devise a promotional strategy for their product, e.g. mailshot to tour operators, provision of proper brochures, catering for foreign languages, this followed by personal calls to tour operators who would look at the regional tourist operations and Shannon Development, in order that a proper and viable promotional drive could be undertaken.

Product Development.

Here In An Dún, Transport & Heritage Museum you can find a product born out of love for our past heritage. Items lovingly restored and presented by their owners, a product which culminates in many years of collecting and interpreting by their owners. For any product to be developed in the tourism field, one must first have an interest in what one is doing and be in a position to give financial commitment to carry it through. As has been said in most tourism ventures, one must be prepared to wait before one will receive any financial return on their commitment.

The presentation of the product to the public or the visitor is important and one must keep in mind the type of punter one is aiming at and one must also provide the proper display material and interpretation. People’s expectations are high and you either sink or swim on how your first present your product. On your visit you can question further on this matter.