

Heritage body demands Marketing Edinburgh chair withdraws 'Disneyfication' comment

Marketing Edinburgh have an annual Christmas drinks party to tell everybody what they have been up to in the last year to promote the city, and also to forge good relationships made with those in the press and tourism organisations. Sadly, I was not able to be at the bash at The Balmoral last Thursday evening.

I am even more sad now that I appear to have missed the beginning of what is amounting to a public row between the Chair of Marketing Edinburgh, Gordon Robertson, (who I clearly recall speaking extremely well at the same event last year) and the Chief Executive of Edinburgh World Heritage (EWH), Adam Wilkinson.

EWH says it is set up 'with the aim of ensuring that the city's World Heritage status is a dynamic force that benefits everyone. Our mission is to connect people to their heritage in everything we do – whether through the conservation of historic buildings, delivering improvements to the public realm, or engaging people directly with the rich heritage of their city.'



Adam Wilkinson Director Edinburgh World Heritage

Today Adam Wilkinson has called for a public retraction of comments made by Gordon Robertson at the annual party last week, saying that it was inappropriate to claim that critics of Marketing Edinburgh want to 'preserve the capital in aspic' and suggesting that Disneyfication of the capital would not be a bad thing. In other words he is calling for criticism of EWH and perhaps other bodies to be retracted. (The speech has since been published in full and you can read it below).

TOURISM DEBATE

The tourism debate has been raging in Edinburgh all year. There are those who want to increase the number of tourists coming to Edinburgh, but who want some ring-fenced spending raised through a Tourist Tax to maintain the infrastructure here. This includes the council and COSLA. That move will require Scottish Government legislation and they have agreed to consult on the matter. There are others who believe that we have enough tourists here already and should limit the numbers.

Gordon Robertson recognised that debate in his speech saying that even those who are jaded by tourism could love our tourism industry. Marketing Edinburgh is funded by The City of Edinburgh Council to promote the city, to sell it to the world and to attract visitors to come here for pleasure and for business. Robertson continued by saying that the 'tourism bad' narrative had been allowed to overcome the more positive benefits that tourism brings to any city.



Outlaw King Scottish Premiere, Edinburgh, 19th October 2018

Actor Chris Pine with director David Mackenzie

Credit – Wattie Cheung / Netflix

Creator / Photographer -Wattie Cheung / Netflix

Marketing Edinburgh promotes Edinburgh as a film location and the fact that the Netflix movie Outlaw King was premiered here is a testament to their success in that space. Hot on the heels of Trainspotting 2 and Avengers during the previous year, their work appears to be paying off.

But the comments in Gordon Robertson's speech have enraged the boss of EWH who has taken offence to the body being categorised as one which hates tourists.

Adam Wilkinson, Director of Edinburgh World Heritage, said today: 'Edinburgh World Heritage works hard to ensure that the reason Edinburgh is such an attractive destination – our extraordinary historic environment – is conserved and remains a joy for all.

'Through almost 1,500 projects, large and small, we have helped to ensure our historic tenements, shops, major buildings and public spaces are cared for and conserved to a high standard. This summer we also began to find a sustainable use for the Tron Kirk and have welcomed over 250,000 visitors to our exhibition about our World Heritage Site which explains what's special about the city through the views and opinions of local people.

'For Mr Robertson to imply that Edinburgh World Heritage 'hates tourists' in a highly public setting is at best ill-judged, and at worst, an outright slur and suggests a simplistic view of this city's complex challenges. We formally request a public retraction.

'We will continue to call for a sustainable tourist industry in Edinburgh that balances the needs of visitors, residents and local businesses. We will also continue to ensure Edinburgh avoids the overtourism experienced by European cities such as Amsterdam, Venice and Dubrovnik'.

RESPONSE FROM GORDON ROBERTSON

Gordon Robertson, Chair, Marketing Edinburgh told The Edinburgh Reporter this afternoon: "Edinburgh's historical significance and its importance to its tourism offering is not in doubt. Neither is the vital contribution that heritage bodies make in preserving it.

"As my speech made clear, we all want an Edinburgh that is a world class tourism destination and proud of it – a vibrant, modern city that conserves and celebrates its heritage. That looks forward, yes, but understands where it's from. A city that invests in itself, that understands why others come and welcomes them.

"However, I believe that the conversation around Edinburgh tourism has to remain open, inclusive, lively and humorous – just like the attributes that this city is famed for."

There is certainly a debate going on – what do you think? Do add your comment below.

TEXT OF GORDON ROBERTSON'S [SPEECH](#) to Marketing Edinburgh Christmas Drinks Reception 13 December 2018

["Everybody hates a tourist"](#)

No, that's not an excerpt of the minutes from Edinburgh World Heritage, it's a lyric by Jarvis Cocker from his crowning achievement – Pulp's "Common People".

I think we can all agree that it's one of the best songs of the 90s.

But tonight, I'm going to disagree with Jarvis.

I'm going to look at how he's wrong and with the right focus we jaded Edinburghers can learn to love our tourism industry.

You see, I don't think that everybody does hate a tourist. Not really.

Of course, Jarvis is talking about a rich woman who wants a holiday with the poor, to see how they live – not an American family, staying in an Air BnB, shouting loudly along in a silent disco and blocking the path on the Royal Mile as they watch a guy in a kilt swallow a sword

But the line jumped out to me on a recent listen because if an alien had landed in Princes Street Gardens this summer, it might get the idea that more than just a pithy lyric, it was almost our strapline.

Evening News commentators, heritage bodies, politicians of all hues and administrations, residents, businesses all voicing concern. Our Council has no-one looking after tourism, our city is dangerously overrun, etc. Twitter carnage – and for God's sake, don't look at the comments below the stories. In fact, you should never, ever do that, no matter the story.

Sometimes the negativity is wearing – to paraphrase Noel Gallagher, that other 90s hero of mine: "They're the angriest people you'll ever meet. They're like a man with a fork in a world of soup."

All this against a backdrop of squabbling on a potential tourism tax – a heady mix of consultation, huffs, anger and strange to report – consensus.

The word "disneyfication" has been bandied about as a critique of the way Edinburgh is headed.

Having been in Disney this year with my family, I'm not so sure Disneyfication is a bad thing? At least they've invested

in their sites, they have a plan, it provides thousands of jobs, their well-trained staff provide a fantastic experience and they're extremely profitable which is used to invest back into the product.

It'll never catch on here.

Those that rail against disneyfication and are generally down on Edinburgh's increasing popularity seem to want us not to develop, to be preserved in aspic.

Look – none of us want to live in a theme park, but I think that with a better conversation and smarter thinking we can decide on the right balance.

An Edinburgh that is a world class tourism destination and proud of it – a vibrant, modern city that conserves and celebrates its heritage. That looks forward, yes, but understands where it's from. A city that invests in itself, that understands why others come, and welcomes them.

And I think we have the tools and more importantly, the people to do it.

I have looking round the room tonight, we are blessed with talent. There is passion, there is energy, there is skill, there is creativity, there is belief, there is accountability.

The team at Marketing Edinburgh, with John Donnelly at the helm, does a fantastic job, embodying all of the qualities I've just listed. It is a joy to work with them – and they do wonders with less city funding and the general state of change we find ourselves in.

I could say that about all of us in tourism and the job that you do with the challenges that face us are spectacular.

How have we in this great industry allowed others to push this tourism bad narrative and lose the battle of demonstrating the benefits that tourism brings to this city?

I think that there are two areas of focus – the story and the product.

The story. I don't think we've done a good enough job in telling our story. As we grow and as budgets tighten, it's only the tourism bad arguments that come through. Good for Brian Ferguson, bad for us.

Any one of us could, and we do, trot out the economic arguments. They're convincing and available. They chime with decision makers, those that give us our funding and the wider industry. I'm not sure they bring it alive though.

We talk about jobs and we talk about economic impact. It can be a dark art – for example the way we measure the impact of films made in Edinburgh. Marketing Edinburgh does a stellar job in this space, with 'Outlaw King' the latest in a long line of blockbusters filmed here. They generate income when they're being filmed and they attract tourists in their droves, generating millions of pounds of economic impact. But what does that mean to the resident with 4 air bnb flats on their stair? Or the commuter stuck in traffic? Nothing.

We need to be better at telling that story – drawing the lines between the prosperity that we as an industry create and the lives of Edinburgh residents. We need to demonstrate that we do think about the impact of our activities and that we consider our heritage – that it's not just a slide to crass commercialism, but that it benefits our city and our country.

There's another strand to this story. I think there's another, more intangible, dimension to what we do.

I think tourism, well managed, lifts a city. It brings in different ideas, different cultures, different languages.

I think one of the pleasure of the crowds in August is that mix of languages, the babble. It's certainly a buzz in my day job as the airport fills with different nationalities.

And as we struggle with Brexit, what better way to ensure that others across the globe know we're open, willing to collaborate and partner than tourism?

It is a gateway to Scotland for many. Many come back. Many stay, contributing to our society.

It's a key industry in navigating through the turbulence ahead.

At the risk of sounding like Monty Python – "What's tourism ever done for us" is a question we all should be able to answer fully.

The second focus must be product.

This is really what we've been discussing – what are we offering the world?

What are our priorities? What is our focus? What are we going to invest in?

I mentioned the tourist tax debate. I think one of the positive aspects of the debate, and we must welcome the way the Council has approached this, is that conversation around tourism is improving.

We're getting the necessary viewpoints, we're getting ideas, we're getting opinion in a way that we didn't before.

I think the new voices in the debate are welcome and useful.

The level of consultation and engagement has been great and I think has set a benchmark for how we should tackle these issues. Love it or hate it – your opinion has had a platform and your voice has been heard.

At Marketing Edinburgh, we've been considering the product and examining how other cities manage their tourism. It's clear that we as a city need to manage tourism better and have a

clearer idea of what we are offering.

That's why we've commissioned global research looking at other cities approaches to inform our move to a tourism management organisation.

Our product – the city, its past, its people, its future – is unparalleled. It's a privilege to be involved in sharing the gifts we have with the world.

Before I finish, I want to thank everyone here for your support of and collaboration with Marketing Edinburgh this year.

We cannot do what we do with you and your input.

I'm optimistic for 2019, despite the uncertainty of Brexit.

I'm optimistic that with a better understanding of tourism and a renewed focus on its management we can build secure a sustainable model for the future.

I'm optimistic that we can find agreement on why tourism in Edinburgh can be good and consensus on how best to manage it.

I'm optimistic that we can prove Jarvis wrong on tourists but agree with him that the world is going on outside.

We need to make the world welcome.

Thank you, have a great night.