

How dark is Dartmoor? An exploration of the motivating factors for visitors to Dartmoor Prison Museum

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As a Curator at Dartmoor Prison Museum, I am constantly asking myself if what we provide is what visitors want and if it isn't, what do they want? Dartmoor Prison Museum, although outside of the walls, is part of the operational prison, the reputation of which is known worldwide even amongst those with no interest in crime and punishment. The museum focuses on the history of incarceration at Dartmoor and how this has changed over time. This can lead to an assumption that the museum is a shop window for what happens behind the walls out of the sight of the public. By association, the museum serves to either reinforce or alter public perception. This question forms the basis for this article, with an added dimension as to how far the museum goes to adding to or changing the perception of visitors' understanding of crime and punishment in the UK.¹

When conducting the research, it was important to ascertain the existing knowledge of visitors and how their understanding and perception of the subject matter changed or was reinforced by their visit. The questions allowed for both quantitative data (i.e. how often, in a typical year, do you visit museums?), and qualitative data (i.e. what do you feel is missing?). This allowed for direct answers to multiple choice questions designed to ascertain levels of prior knowledge of the subject matter, whilst the open ended qualitative questions allowed visitors to expand on their answers and express their perceptions and experiences in their own words.

The questionnaires were directed at adult visitors as it was thought they would have developed a stronger view of crime and punishment over time. The number of completed questionnaires provided a wide sample, and these were allocated at random.

Demographic information regarding respondents was not collected as part of the questionnaires.

One key area of investigation was to look at whether the museum tells the story that Dartmoor Prison wants to tell or is driven by what the curators perceive the public want to see. The museum website quotes the mission statement from Prison Governor, Steve Mead (2021):² 'Dartmoor Prison has a long and fascinating history that has seen many changes in its fortunes. But it is also at the cutting edge of modern penal practice, developing ways to help offenders change their lives. I hope you will take the opportunity to find out more about this hidden but uniquely interesting world, and to think hard about the serious issues of crime, punishment and rehabilitation'.

The advent of 'dark tourism', defined by Sharpley and Stone as tourism to sites associated with tragedies, disaster and death,³ has increased the number of visitors to museums dealing with crime and punishment. Some see this as voyeuristic, and it was important to examine whether the museum reacts to this or is providing an educational narrative and allowing visitors to draw their own conclusions from their experiences. The investigation was also led by an article by Barton and Brown which looked at dark tourism and the modern prison, drawing on Dartmoor and the museum. This article argues that the museum plays on the notoriety of the prison and therefore gives visitors what they expect, a foreboding site overlaid with stories of famous inmates. It does not represent prisons today or address the rights and wrongs of penal servitude. It concludes with the opinion that as with other forms of prison tourism it is concerned with profits and does little to challenge ideologies.⁴ Twelve years on, it was interesting to see if there had been a shift in the narrative of the museum and public perception.

1. Please note that this article was researched prior to the temporary closure of Dartmoor Prison and restrictions on access to areas of the museum due to radon gas.

2. <https://www.dartmoor-prison.co.uk/>

3. Sharpley, R., & Stone, P. R. (2009). *The darker side of travel: The theory and practice of dark tourism*. Multilingual Matters.

4. Barton, A., & Brown, A. (2012). Dark Tourism and the Modern Prison. *Prison Service Journal*, 199, 44-9.

In the past twenty years dark tourism has gained academic attention, and considerable literature has been published. However, understanding of the phenomenon of dark tourism remains limited.⁵ Whilst there has been an increased supply of dark tourist sites, much less is known about the demand for these sites in terms of the motivations of dark tourists.⁶ Martini and Buda focus on death and disaster as a motive for tourism but acknowledge that this motivation can be linked to crime and punishment sites. Their key suggestion is that sites are engineered or adapted to cater for the tourist, arguing that dark tourist sites can elicit strong and complex reactions by their nature with many places being consciously constructed to enhance such reactions. They further argue that stakeholders involved in the development of a site are required to frame its story and meaning for tourism purposes.⁷

Lennon and Foley observe that scholars who have begun to explore the phenomenon of dark tourism provide a starting point for the study of prison history tourism.⁸ Stone puts this study into context, arguing that sites representing bygone penal and justice codes to the present-day consumer sit in the middle of dark tourism typology, where sites of actual death and suffering (e.g. Auschwitz), and sites associated with death and suffering (e.g. The London Dungeon) represent the extremes.⁹ Barton and Brown also recognise that prison tourism can be considered as part of the broader practice of dark tourism.¹⁰ This reflects a universal agreement that crime-and-punishment tourism sits within the dark tourism framework and the arguments presented in various texts seek to explore the motivations behind dark tourism and whether this forms the key *modus operandi* of crime and punishment museums.

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It is notable that written sources state that whilst there is growing international literature on prison tourism, there is little research to date exploring this in the UK.¹¹ Barton and Brown emphasise this point in relation to studies of prison museums.¹² This may be due to the lack of available sites with the widespread decommissioning of prisons in Britain only occurring in the recent past and not all have since been developed for tourism. Shrewsbury prison, closed in 2013, now operates as a tourist site, drawing on its reputation as the 'world's second most haunted jail'. Compare this to Holloway Prison, closed in 2016, whose reputation would make it a prime site for tourism but which has been sold for redevelopment of the land for housing.

Barton and Brown highlight how Dartmoor Prison attracted large numbers of visitors merely to observe it from the outside and still does to this day.¹³ This illustrates that prison tourism is multifaceted in that visitors are not merely looking for former sites they can visit but are prepared to visit an operational site in what Hodgkinson and Urquhart call 'the ultimate voyeuristic criminological experience.'¹⁴

Hodgkinson and Urquhart look at how prison tourism links to crime and punishment in the UK and highlight the growth of prison tourism in the UK. They question how these sites represent crime and punishment, focusing more on entertainment than the true history of the sites. It argues that sites are created to appeal more to dark tourists and not those who want to learn. Whilst acknowledging the fact that sites tend to oversimplify and sanitise the realities of punishment, it does argue that these sites have potential to challenge visitor perception which, if done ethically, can challenge stereotypes and modern punishment practices.¹⁵

5. Martini, A., & Buda, D.M. (2020). Dark Tourism and Affect: Framing Places of Death and Disaster. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 23(6), 679-92.
6. Hodgkinson, S., & Urquhart, D. (2016). Prison Tourism: Exploring the Spectacle of Punishment in the UK. In G. Hooper & J. Lennon (Eds.), *Dark Tourism: Practice and Interpretation* (pp. 40-55). Routledge.
7. See footnote 5: Martini & Buda (2020).
8. Lennon, J., & Foley, M. (2000). *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*. Continuum.
9. Stone, P. (2006). A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a Typology of Death and Macabre Related Tourist Sites, Attractions and Exhibitions. *Tourism*, 55(22), 154.
10. Barton, A., & Brown, A. (2015). Show Me the Prison: The Development of Prison Tourism in Britain. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 11(3), 1-41.
11. See footnote 6: Hodgkinson & Urquhart (2016).
12. See footnote 10: Barton & Brown (2015).
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14. See footnote 6: Hodgkinson & Urquhart (2016).
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Picken supports the points raised by Hodgkinson and Urquhart, stating that prison museums do very little to challenge commonplace ideas about punishment and the prison. This article argues that the sanitisation of history does not allow the visitor to empathise with prisoners.¹⁶ This raises an interesting question as to whether an accurate portrayal of crime and punishment should produce empathy. Whilst the treatment of prisoners in the past may appear barbaric to a modern audience, how do we emphasise that this was in keeping with the morals and ethics of the day?

Barton and Brown produced a critique of Dartmoor Prison in terms of its being a cultural icon.¹⁷ The article illustrates how myth and imagery of the site fuels the public perception of the prison. People visit with certain expectations based on what they have read or seen in the media with the backdrop of the moor always dark and mist-covered. They observe that the use of guns by officers and the shooting of escaping and 'mutinous' felons is one of the most controversial parts of the prison's history, with the remoteness of the prison and the dangerousness of its prisoners giving official legitimatisation to these actions.

Barton and Brown observed that whilst dark tourism may be associated with places of death, the link between dark tourism and prison sites may be symbolic given that a small proportion of people in prison have died in prison. In the case of Dartmoor, they state that in the public consciousness the prison was considered only one degree better than being condemned to death.¹⁸ This suggests that prison tourism in terms of deaths may only be related to sites of execution and does not address sites where suicide is prevalent. This would fit more accurately with dark tourism being associated with sites of suffering but does not appear to have the same draw as a site of execution.

The research explored these issues and examined how far the museum seeks to be a site of education and discussion or whether it functions as a site of entertainment. In this, does it address the needs of the visitor and what is it that the visitor is seeking during their visit?

The museum focuses on the history of incarceration at Dartmoor and how this has changed over time. This can lead to an assumption that the museum is a shop window for what happens behind the walls out of the sight of the public.

The study is based on fifty questionnaires distributed at random to visitors aged eighteen and over. They were asked fifteen questions made up of a mixture of multiple choice, yes/no answers and open-ended questions. The purpose of this was to ascertain visitors' interests and how the visit had changed or challenged their view of crime and punishment as represented by the museum.

Most visitors to the museum classed themselves as occasional visitors, with over half of respondents (53 per cent) stating that they only visit museums once in a typical year and 31 per cent visiting between 2 and 5 times per year.

Comments in the museum visitor book show a significant number of respondents stating they discovered the museum whilst passing by. Princetown, where the prison and museum are sited, is an isolated village on Dartmoor and is not readily 'passed by'. A number of tourists who come to Princetown are here to catch a glimpse of the prison itself and discover the museum whilst driving through the village, or those attracted by walking on the moor pass the museum as part of their perambulations.

More respondents (47 per cent) stated that they looked at the museum website before visiting. The responses support this assumption with comments such as 'checked opening times', 'no need to pre-book'. Comments such as 'price', 'dog friendly' and 'looked interesting and engaging' illustrate that the website is influencing the decision to visit. Interestingly in an increasingly digital age, eight percent of respondents stated they were not aware of the website.

Most respondents (69 per cent) stated that they had an interest in crime and punishment prior to their visit. An analysis of the respondents' interest in crime and punishment revealed that the difference in interest between true crime and crime fiction was fairly even, with respondents preferring to watch rather than read about the subject (51 per cent in both cases).

16. Picken, R. (2016). Experiencing crime and punishment: Emotions, perceptions and responses to crime and penal heritage in courtroom and prison museums. In *Our Criminal Past* - blog posted 21 March 2016.

17. Barton, A., & Brown, A. (2011). Dartmoor: Penal and Cultural Icon. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 50(5), 478-91.

18. See footnote 4: Barton & Brown (2012).

It is reasonable to assume that the average visitor has some awareness about the nature of crime and punishment in the UK. Asked whether the experience added to their knowledge, the majority responded in the affirmative. The majority of comments followed two main themes: firstly, that visitors' knowledge of how punishment has changed over time increased and secondly that their knowledge about how prisons treat prisoners today in terms of a rehabilitative culture also increased.

The results for how much visitors enjoyed their visit showed that, with the exception of one response, all stated that they had enjoyed it. None of the respondents thought that the museum romanticised crime or trivialised punishment. Comments included 'definitely not', 'rather the opposite, it acts as a deterrent', 'very factual', 'it shows exactly as it was like' and 'no, it educates'. These comments indicate that the museum does not trade on 'sensationalism' but offers an account of how prison was and still is.

Respondents were asked to use words to describe what they thought of the exhibitions. Most responded that they found it educational and informative whilst few or none found it trivial or too graphic. Another frequent comment was 'genuine', suggesting respondents recognised the link between the museum and the prison and the authenticity of the objects they were looking at. Taylor and Neill identify the power of 'in situ' learning where museum objects take advantage of the contextual integrity of the site by bringing to life the inherent connection between the object and setting.¹⁹

The qualitative data gives further insights into how respondents viewed the museum. Asked how far the visit satisfied their knowledge of crime and punishment, most respondents gave a positive reaction. Building on the educational and informative indicators above, respondents stated 'there is always more to learn,' 'it has improved my knowledge considerably,' 'reinforced prior knowledge and extended historical understanding,'. One respondent who prior to visiting stated they had no interest in crime and punishment commented 'having an open mind the visit was very satisfying'. Less positive comments included 'I thought there would be more torture apparatus', 'I wished to

learn more about recent history,' and 'would like to know more about why they commit crime.' The first of these comments alludes to a need to satisfy an interest in dark tourism whereas the second and third comments illustrate that whilst respondents were engaged with the exhibitions, they felt that more information could be provided on certain topics.

Feedback received as to what could be covered in greater detail included 'guided tours', 'actors to answer questions', 'more interactive exhibits for children', and 'more internal pictures of the prison'. The most common comment was that more information could be provided on current prisoners, their crimes and sentences.

Visitors were invited to comment on their favourite aspect of the museum. For most it was the representation of past and present cells which they felt gave a good insight into how incarceration conditions have changed. Another aspect was the personal effects of prisoners, whether models and paintings or items of contraband such as weapons they constructed out of everyday items such as toothbrush handles. One major comment was that respondents were unaware that the prison was originally constructed as a war depot during the Napoleonic Wars. For many this exploded the myth that Dartmoor Prison was built as a high security convict prison but explained to them

how and why Dartmoor Prison came into being.

Hodgkinson and Urquhart state that 'prison tourism is somewhat undeveloped in the UK' (p.4),²⁰ a claim supported by the responses received. Of those who had an interest in crime and punishment, only eight respondents had visited other crime and punishment museums. Comparisons were that Dartmoor portrayed a more realistic, factual and lifelike representation of past and present living conditions.

Conclusion

If taken in the context of the mission statement by the Prison Governor referred to above, visitors to Dartmoor Prison Museum responded positively. Respondents indicated that the museum enlightened them to its past as a war prison whilst taking them on a journey of penal practices over time. The museum

People visit with certain expectations based on what they have read or seen in the media with the backdrop of the moor always dark and mist- covered.

19. Taylor, E. W., & Neill, A. C. (2008). Museum Education: A Nonformal Education Perspective. *Journal of Museum Education*, 33(1) 23-32.
20. See footnote 6: Hodgkinson & Urquhart (2016).

also satisfied existing knowledge whilst adding to the knowledge of others. It was seen as an educative, informative and genuine institution by respondents which seeks to explain over two hundred years of the history of the prison. The responses received did not indicate that the museum used dark tourism either to attract visitors or to shape what it displayed. Whilst it could be argued that the website focuses on the darker side of incarceration with its famous ex-prisoners, it must be remembered that this is an advertising tool and under half of those who responded stated they had visited the website prior to their visit. It is possible that the notoriety of Dartmoor Prison itself serves as an advert for the museum with visitors expecting something akin to the institution portrayed by the likes of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. The fact that visitors discovered a balanced representation between punishment and rehabilitation may be the museum's greatest educative and informative feature.

Visitors to Dartmoor were attracted more to the historical site and there was little evidence that those visiting Dartmoor Prison Museum did so as dark tourists. Strange and Kempa observed that heritage designers of dark tourism sites arrive on the scene after places of suffering have become famous.²¹ It is certainly true that the museum draws upon the notoriety of the prison, however the responses reviewed here suggests that it did not cater for tourists' pre-conceived ideas. Similarly, there was little evidence to support Hodgkinson and Urquhart's statement that the presentation of the penal past for public consumption is often controversial as sites try to cater to often macabre public demand. The way that the museum is structured is more in line with their later statement that the penal tourist experience can be seen as an important means of shaping attitudes and understandings of prisons and prisoners today.²² It does not 'invoke an idealized and even mythical representation of all prisons' but places the development of the prison in an historical context.²³

The responses received did not indicate that the museum used dark tourism either to draw visitors in or in what they display.

The museum seeks to present the subject matter in an honest and non-sensational way, allowing visitors to form their own opinions on how crime and punishment operates now and in the past, and this is reflected in the visitor feedback. The use of genuine artefacts illustrates the stories being told which helps visitors relate to them and feel they are a part of that story. There is a tilt towards dark tourism in that the museum draws on the most notorious or well-known subjects as exhibits. Whilst the museum does not actively seek to generate discussion on crime and punishment in the UK, by reporting the facts, it allows the visitor to reach their own conclusions on the rights and wrongs of the exhibits they see.

To further explore how the subject is presented it would be useful to undertake more detailed like-for-like analysis, for example comparing Dartmoor with the Peterhead Prison Museum in Scotland. This would compare a museum attached to an operational prison with a museum set up in a decommissioned prison where the authenticity of the sites and objects carry equal weight. To marry this up with the subject of dark tourism, a comparative study could be conducted with those decommissioned prisons which actively market themselves as dark tourism attractions such as Shrewsbury Prison and Shepton Mallet. More research is also needed on the factors that influence new crime and punishment attractions such as the West Midlands Police Museum, Birmingham. An analysis of their development design in context with other new developments such as Tavistock's Museum of Policing in Devon and Cornwall would shed further light on the impact of dark tourism.

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21. Strange, C., & Kempa, M. (2003). Shades of Dark Tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 30(2), 386-405.

22. See footnote 6: Hodgkinson & Urquhart (2016).

23. See footnote 17: Barton & Brown (2011).