



Yorkshire Forward

Bedale Renaissance

Tourism Study

KNA Ltd
22nd March 2004

Final Report

KNA Ltd

,

Bedale - Renaissance Market Town

March 2004

Tourism Commentary

Introduction

Bedale has made its name as a thriving North Yorkshire market town, with excellent accessibility giving its proximity to the A1, particularly for day visitors. It is a convenient stopping off point for car-borne tourists travelling north-south and for holiday makers travelling west to the Dales and or Lake District.

Bedale is a historic town, its history can be traced back to Saxon times, when the tracks from Ripon, Northallerton and Wensleydale all converged. The Market Charter was granted in 1251 and the market is still held in the town centre every Tuesday. The character of the town centre has been retained and Bedale's reputation as one of the best preserved small market towns in North Yorkshire, is well deserved.

The current visitor profile, which is largely contained to the Easter – October months is one of day rather than staying visitors, the latter gravitate more naturally to the Dales/ Lake District or Moors, respectively to the immediate west and east of Bedale.

Current Tourism SWOT of Bedale

Strengths

- Good road accessibility
- Wide range of visitor attractions
- Attractive and historic town centre
- New attractions opening, or to be developed in the future
- Proximity to the Dales and Moors

Weaknesses

- Lack of quality accommodation
- No access by train; no coach park
- Poor existing signage
- Lack of co-operative marketing and promotion
- Low-key market fare

Opportunities

- Opening and associated development of Bedale Station
- New visitor attractions
- Coordinated Chamber body to incorporate retail, food and beverage outlets and tourism operations
- Improved visitor access and offer by improvements to Beckside/Leech House and new coach park.

Threats

- Relief road and its location
- Lack of adequate signage from A1/new bypass
- Shop closures continue – (no replacements for those currently closed)
- Local authority marketing spend continues to be concentrated away from Bedale.

Bedale's Current Key Visitor Attractions

3.1 Given that all of the town's attractions are all open from around March to October, and have yet to be seen in operation, it is not easy to suggest ways where they could be developed/improved further. It is in the areas of promotion and marketing where possible more significant improvements could be made.

3.2 *Big Sheep Little Cow*

This family business has been in existence for fifteen years, opening each year from Easter to October. Visitor numbers reached 20,000 in 2003, with visitor breakdown 60:40 child:adult. Big Sheep Little Cow is predominantly a family attraction, currently with relatively little to attract older children and the typical middle-aged Dales visiting couples. Average length of stay is around two hours.

Improvements needed

- New entrance and car park (current access is completely unsatisfactory and parking is in the attraction's fields – maximum number of cars – 50). New refreshment facility to cater for up to 80 visitors.
- Developments to enable the attraction to appeal more to older children and adults. The Watermill Project (already commenced), if completed, to show a working mill, will assist in that objective.
- Improved collaboration with existing and future attractions in Bedale e.g. Wensleydale Railway/Bedale station and Thornborough Henges.

3.3 *Thorp Perrow Arboretum and Falconry*

This attraction has been open for around 20 years with visitor numbers steadily increasing until reaching 52,000 in 2003, with a March to October opening period for its visitor facilities [the Arboretum is however, open at weekends throughout the year]. The current visitor breakdown is 70:30 adult: child with families visiting the falconry element of the attraction (displays four times a day). Average length of stay is three hours.

Improvements needed

- New café/restaurant facility – the current tearoom can only seat 50 – creating great difficulties at busy periods.
- Developments to attract more children and family groups – the Army are scheduled to embark on a children's boarded walkway over the Springs in the coming year).
- Improved collaboration with other Bedale attractions.

Bedale's Current Key Visitor Attractions

3.4 *Wensleydale Railway*

The diesel engine train ran at certain key periods during 2003, e.g. May to July and then until October (Northallerton to Layburn), plus journeys over the Christmas period.

The Directors of the Railway estimate that if the above visitors to the Railway over the 2003 trial periods were replicated over a full Easter, Summer and Christmas period – numbers would total around 40,000. Around 20% of all visitors were children.

Bedale's Current Key Visitor Attractions

Improvements needed

- To make Wensleydale Railway more of a universally appealing visitor attraction – the increasing number of “steam days” – (Leeming Bar to Redmire) and “Thomas the Tank Engine” opportunities will help in this regard.
- Opening of Bedale Station and associated complementary re-development. This is essential if Bedale is to maximise opportunities from the railway given that most visitors will arrive at either Northallerton or Leeming Bar.
- Better coordinated marketing and event management with Big Sheep Little Cow.

3.5 Summary

This synopsis of Bedale's attractions has concentrated on the current major 'icons' in the town's portfolio. This is not to suggest that others do not and will not play a part in the future. Bedale Hall, St Gregory's Church, Camp Hill Aerial Extreme and Thornborough Henges, if allowed to be developed, will ensure that there is a rich variety for Bedale's day visitors in the years to come.

Current estimates at existing attractions suggest that the majority of visitors are originating from around 1-1.5 hours drive time of Bedale. Given that this would suggest that many visitors would be willing to spend up to one day in Bedale at any one time and given their relative proximity, would then be likely to re-visit the town if their experience was a good one, it is suggested that: -

- The attractions discuss ways in which joint ticketing /reduced admission/ season tickets at an accompanying Bedale attractions could be undertaken;
- Ensure that wherever practicable, major event days at a particular attraction are coordinated with those at a complementary town attraction, hereby maximising the opportunity to capture visitors. A weekend of such events could also assist in the drive to secure a greater number of staying visitors, thereby offering greater benefit to the retail, food and beverage and accommodation operators in the area; and
- Coordinate better their own advertising programmes to ensure other Bedale attractions are promoted to a much greater extent than currently.

The Potential Impact of Bedale Station

Bedale station, if developed sympathetically, in accordance with the needs of the current residents and visitors and the future needs of the town, could be the hub of Bedale.

The station and its immediate surrounding area is a key strategic location as it will be:

- The first “destination” seen by car-borne visitors from the east
- The potential site for a new car park, access to Big Sheep Little Cow and stop for Wensleydale Railway
- At the centre of possible new enhanced development around The Leech House and Becksdale Harbour.

It is therefore important that this key site meets Bedale’s current and future needs. It is understood that proposals currently exist for a development at the station building comprising a mix of craft workshop units, multi-purpose space and conference facilities for around 100 delegates.

It is assumed that there is a feasibility study quantifying the existing and future supply and demand issues, gap(s) and Bedale opportunity for the above development. In the absence of a robust study particularly quantifying the supply and demand issues, the management, funding and ongoing viability of such a project would be open to question. The lack of parking space for the conference facility would also be a key issue. A project incorporating tourist information and interpretation, clear signage, craft workshops, office space and some basic, good quality food and beverage outlets would appear to be more appropriate for this location.

Bedale's USP (Unique Selling Position) and Future Marketing Endeavours

Bedale has historically been known as “The Gateway to the Dales”, signifying the town being a convenient stopping-off point before the more established holiday destinations to the west. Continued use of this label cannot assist the town in its efforts to persuade more people to visit and stay longer. Additionally, there are a number of other towns that could similarly claim to be “gateways” – e.g. Ripon and Leyburn (Dales) and Northallerton and Easingwold (Moors). What is needed is a ‘hook’ which will demonstrate Bedale’s distinctiveness, ideally something which cannot be found elsewhere in the Dales, or indeed North Yorkshire.

The Dales is known for its scenery, unspoilt countryside, and popular riverside beauty spots. Hotels and country inns and self-catering cottages also provide examples of quality accommodation. In terms of visitor attractions, there is a variety of historic, cultural and some family orientated facilities liberally sprinkled around the Dales.

By and large, the majority of the Dales market towns appeal to couples without children, empty-nesters or the middle-aged.

Bedale could, given the variety of attractions and proposed future developments, carve-out a niche for itself as offering “something for everyone”. This could be undertaken if the following are undertaken:

- Thorp Perrow offers more attractions to appeal to young children.
- Wensleydale Railway run more ‘steam engine days’ and “Thomas the Tank Engine” events.
- Big Sheep Little Cow adds to it offer by developing more of interest to adults (e.g. The Water Mill) and explores synergies with Thornborough Henges.
- St Gregory’s Church, builds on its currently successful “craft stalls”, its children’s heritage trail and linkages with other Bedale attractions.
- Continued development of the Thornborough Henges initiative whilst The Friends explore complementary exhibitions with Bedale and other regional attractions.
- Further development and marketing of these attractions plus Camp Hill Aerial Extreme, The Leech House, Bedale Beck will ensure that the town can appeal to all ages and demographic groups. Bedale would then become known as “The Dales Family Town,” arguably something which is unique to the region.

The success of any new marketing ventures with ‘Bedale – The Dales Family Town’ as its strapline, will nevertheless be contingent on:

- Extensive co-operation amongst the key attractions
- Concerted efforts to offer joint-ticketing programmes, discounts to other Bedale attractions, season tickets etc.
- Marketing other Bedale attractions on their own websites and advertising material etc.
- Ensuring that major events/festivals dovetail, wherever practicable, with other Bedale attractions/events.
- Proactively cooperating with the other main operators in the town – shops, restaurants, and inns to ensure that the visitor perceives there to be a seamless quality of service and welcome throughout the town.

