**Heritage in absentia: Strawberry Hill House and ‘the virtual’ in the tourist destination**

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This paper explores the nature of ‘the virtual’ in Strawberry Hill House, a newly opened historic house in Twickenham. It is a heritage destination opened in 2010, recreated with National Heritage Lottery funding and ‘re-animated’ by a team of volunteer tour guides and room stewards. The house was originally built as the Summer house and Gothic Castle of Horace Walpole (1717-1797). Walpole was the son of Britain's first Prime Minister, a prolific letter writer and chronicler of eighteenth century life, grand tourist and travel collector, gothic revivalist and novelist, libertine and ‘outsider’. Walpole developed Strawberry Hill as an architectural experiment in visitor emotions with Medieval-inspired exteriors, trompe d’oeil decorations and faux papier-mȃché interiors, all complemented with a staged assemblage ranging from Cardinal Wolsey’s hat to a bust of Medusa, an exotic armoury and intricate collection of Holbein miniatures.

Walpole himself encouraged paying visitors to his house and in 1774 published a detailed guidebook with sketches that is now used as a pamphlet for self-guided tourists. Significantly, this Georgian era tourist guide book has been used in the conservation and the virtual development of the house as an award-winning heritage destination: the Lewis Walpole Library at Yale University, for example, hosts an online tour of the destination with images of the former contents of the house (<http://images.library.yale.edu/strawberryhill/tour_home.html>). This guidebook has become particularly important given the sale in 1842 of the entire contents of the house. It is a physical prop for guides and room stewards to use in describing the now ‘empty’ rooms and to cultivate the tourists’ imagination and fulfil their period expectations. It is also a key reference point for tracking down the ‘missing’ items in each of the rooms.

This paper uses long term ethnography as a room steward, interviews with the tour guides, and student project visits to the venue to unpack the different layers of fiction in the fabric of the building; in the volunteer and visitors’ re-animation of the owner Horace Walpole; and in the recreations of the tour of the house. It is suggested that the repertoire of the virtual have been in apparent in this site for centuries, predating the online and digital tourism era. It is also likely to post-date the present imaginary engagements with Horace’s gothic castle.

Bio

Jonathan Skinner is Reader in Anthropology in the Department of Life Sciences, University of Roehampton. He is also Chair of TECHNE (AHRC Doctoral Training Programme) Training Group. He has a particular interest in interviewing skills and qualitative research methods. He has undertaken fieldwork in the Eastern Caribbean on the island of Montserrat (tourism and trauma, colonial relations and disaster recovery) and in the US/UK (social dancing, arts health, contested heritage).