

Colchester, a developing visitor destination

As the recession bites, we are told that holidaying at home is all the rage ('staycation' has been coined for the trend). How will destinations out of the 'top twenty' exploit this interest? And can they be spared insensitive Trump-style mega-developments?

David McCaskey, a Wivenhoe resident, analyses and evaluates those factors – from infrastructure development to promotion – which have, and will continue, to facilitate the town's tourism growth.

IN THE LAST decade Colchester, Britain's oldest recorded town, has started to realise its potential as a tourism destination. Alongside its Roman walls and recently discovered chariot racetrack, the borough contains such delights as Mersea Island with its world-famous oysters and its Olympic yachties, the jewel that is Wivenhoe. Nearby in Wivenhoe Park, the University of Essex was ranked ninth out of over 150 HE institutes in the recently published Research Assessment Exercise. The 'uni' is a major employer and a generator of substantial tourism. The Borough is further enriched through the inclusion of that area of outstanding natural beauty, Constable's renowned Dedham Vale.

To Colchester, tourism is now estimated to be worth around £200m pa and creates 6,000 jobs. These latest turnover statistics show that the value of tourism rose from £63m in 1993 to £197m in 2007. The Borough council are actively involved in facilitating and promoting this growth, whilst ensuring that standards of current and planned future tourist amenities are of an exemplary standard that upholds and provides a tourist experience which will be both repeated and highly recommended to friends and family.

We open with two quotes: the first will illustrate the 'amalgamation' or mix of disciplines which assemble under the umbrella of destination management and the second will demonstrate the tensions in balancing

the needs of the locals with those of the visitor, enhancing the quality of life for each in a sustainable manner.

In his introduction to *Managing the Tourist Destination*, Frank Howie suggests that:

Destination management has a key role in addressing the many and sometimes conflicting issues that arise in contemporary tourism. Destinations present complex challenges ... they must face the demands of tourists, who are now more experienced and have greater expectations, and the needs of tourist-related

the tensions in balancing the needs of the locals with those of the visitor, enhancing the quality of life for each in a sustainable manner

businesses as well as those of the residential community. As there is rarely a single 'owner' there is less chance of a coherent set of goals and objectives. As a discipline, or more correctly an amalgam of more established professions, destination management must respond to the reality that a destination is more than the sum of its parts and contribute positively to the synergy that can emerge when these components are functioning together as a harmonious whole.¹

Patrick Lavery suggests that:

sustainable tourism is seen as a model form of economic development which will improve the quality

of life of the host community; provide a high-quality experience for the visitor; and, in the long term, maintain the quality of the environment on which both the local people and the visiting tourist depend.²

Quality v. development

To illustrate the above, you will find two current high-profile cases cited where these complex challenges and conflicting issues may be evidenced. First, the

‘an asset for the community, an amenity for local people and a draw for tourists giving open access to the countryside and providing hundreds of jobs’

very controversial planning case involving the granting of permission to Donald Trump to build ‘the World’s greatest golf course’, a £1bn costal resort north of Aberdeen on what has been described as ‘a rare and ecologically sensitive stretch of dunes overlooking the North Sea. Here, the high-rise timeshare blocks have already been dubbed ‘the Benidorms’ by disaffected and angry residents.³

Recently, in Colchester, in a not dissimilar manner, plans have just been unveiled for submission to the council for a £20m heritage-and-conservation centre in the Dedham Vale.⁴ From the site promoters, Bunting and Sons, Kate Bunting, a family partner, proclaims (as she perhaps would say?):

Horkesley Park will be an asset for the community, an amenity for local people and a draw for tourists (estimated at 485,000 pa) giving open access to the countryside and providing hundreds of jobs (c. 155). It will be a big thing for Colchester.

It is hoped that this facility can be opened in 2011 in time for the London 2012 Olympic Games. Whilst it is claimed that the built development can be absorbed without causing harm to the Dedham Vale landscape, there are immediate local concerns about the raised volume of traffic in the surrounding villages.

There are already calls for a thorough analysis of the application and reportage of residents’ fears of negative repercussions from the proposal.

Whilst some may come out in support of the Bunting viewpoint, many stakeholders are vehemently opposed to what they see as the desecration of what is almost hallowed ground through the introduction of this ‘gimcrack theme park’. The *Essex County Standard* newspaper is full of comment. The jury may be out for this planning application, but needless to say, there are many other plans afoot to help grow Colchester’s visitor potential.

Colchester’s developing infrastructure

Let’s consider Colchester’s infrastructure. Probably the most significant development was the electrifica-



Colchester relaxes:
left The Rose & Crown pub on the waterfront at Wivenhoe and right Sailing on the Colne Estuary at Mersea (both by Chris Reeve for Colchester Borough Council)

tion of the railway during the 1960s, which brought Colchester within the magic 'one hour to London' commuter belt. Since then commuting has increased twenty-fold and property prices have almost caught up with other earlier-connected SE commuter towns. A benefit of later development is that the town centre has retained more of its original market-town characteristics unlike, for example, the concrete jungles which emerged in the 1960s in Croydon and in Aylesbury to name but two.

2012 potential

At the time of the railway modernisation, the significance of Colchester's 45-minute link to Stratford East was hidden, and its 2012 Olympic and Paralympics potential unknown.

Recently, this has come to the fore as a number of sites in and around the town were approved by the Olympic Authority as training camps. Their availability is displayed in the international brochure issued to all competing countries. Premises include:

- ❑ Colchester Garrison for Archery, Athletics, Basketball, Judo and Volleyball
- ❑ Leisure World for Basketball, Fencing and Table Tennis
- ❑ University of Essex for Basketball and Football.

This news was warmly welcomed, as Colchester's intent is not only to maximise the business opportunities presented but to ensure that they have a good share of this global showcase and can establish a legacy of gains for years to come.

Regrettably, there has not been commensurate development in its road links.

The A12 has been described one of

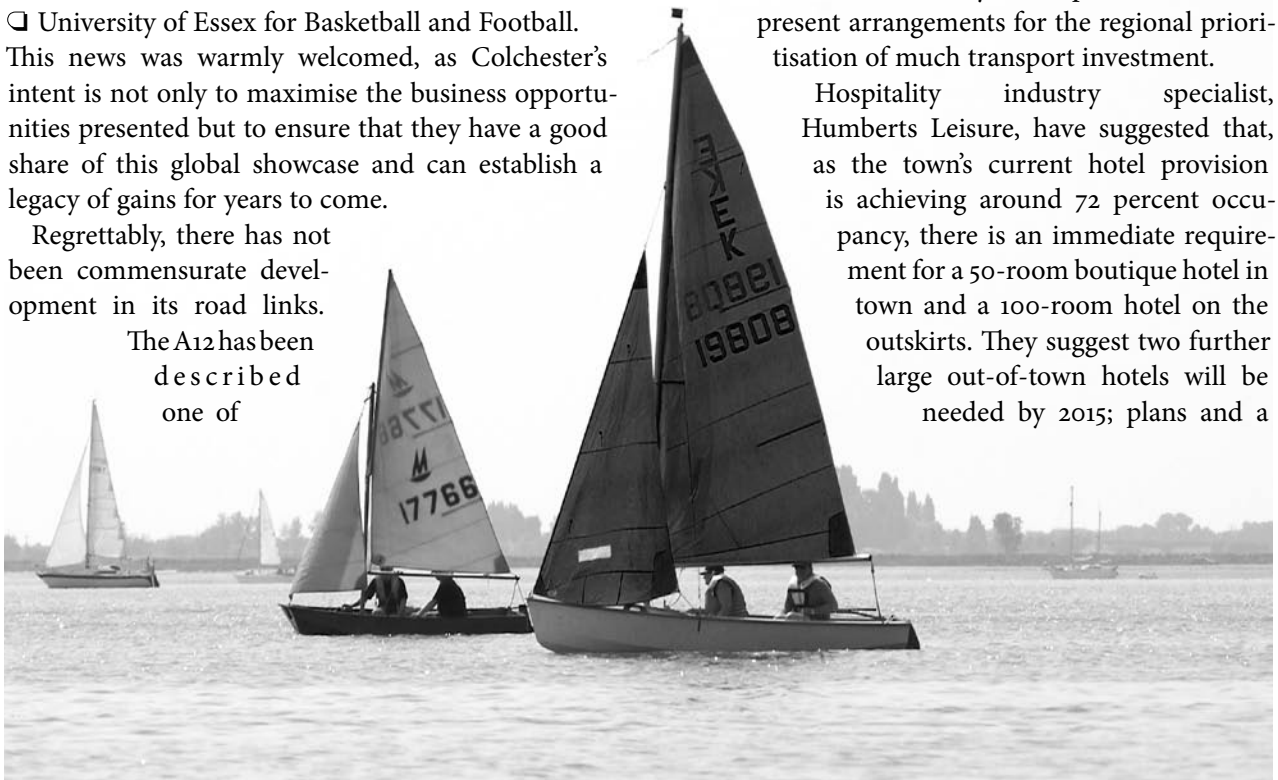
the worst or most difficult road links in the UK. It runs for 121 miles between London and East Anglia and has unofficially been the 'Great East road' since Roman times, connecting Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk to London. Essex County Council has just completed a commission of inquiry into what can be done to alleviate the black spots on this route which they estimate add many millions of pounds to transport costs. This is seen as a major inhibitor to tourism growth

On the other hand, the accelerated growth of

Essex University is about to embark on a £250m investment programme in its student provision, most of this will be spent on their Colchester campus

Stansted airport, with its much-improved A120 link road, has enhanced accessibility, as have the developments at Harwich and Felixstowe (Bathside Bay) with their passenger and freight links to Holland and Scandinavia. Despite its increasing significance to the nation's economy and despite earlier plans to upgrade to dual three-lane standard as far as Colchester, the notorious A12 is now unlikely in the foreseeable future to see any development under the present arrangements for the regional prioritisation of much transport investment.

Hospitality industry specialist, Humberts Leisure, have suggested that, as the town's current hotel provision is achieving around 72 percent occupancy, there is an immediate requirement for a 50-room boutique hotel in town and a 100-room hotel on the outskirts. They suggest two further large out-of-town hotels will be needed by 2015; plans and a



number of feasibility studies are already in the pipeline to meet these predicted needs.

Other developments which will increase Colchester's pull-factor are the new 'U's 10,000-seater community stadium and the redevelopment of the St Botolph's quarter with its exciting £16.5m visual-arts facility. Not only will this will open up views of the Roman Wall, the development of shops, workshops and cafes will rejuvenate what is currently a rather rundown part of the town. Of course, for every keen gardener, there is a must visit to Beth Chatto's Gardens to stock up from her great nursery.

Despite the credit crunch and as recently reported, Colchester is seen as swimming against the national trend with a forecast that 17,000 'new' households will be built over the next five years.⁵ In turn, this will be significant in generating even more tourism, through visiting friends and relatives.

Finally, and yet another bonus, Essex University is about to embark on a £250m investment programme in its student provision, most of which will be spent on their Colchester campus. As their spokesperson has said, 'this should prove to be a major shot in the arm for the town's economy and provide employment for Colchester's workers.'

The jewel that is Wivenhoe

This is probably best captured in Tom Dychoff's *Guardian* series 'Let's move to'. In his report on 27 March 2007 he extolled Wivenhoe's virtues thus:

What's going for it? How did this one slip through the net? A miracle! A miracle! That very rare beast: something lovely and affordable within commuting

distance of London. A-sweet-as-apple-pie fishing town with a direct rail link to Liverpool Street in 60 minutes and glorious property for a song. Historic

Colchester with its university and history and good shops and growing arts and cultural life, is four miles north. The underrated Colne Estuary and Essex coast is on your doorstep. It is described as, a proper, 'real' town with proper people living in it, including, for a limited period only, genuine fishermen. Corduroyed boffins from Essex University on the edge of the town. Residential artists add a cosmopolitan edge as does the worldwide diversity of both under- and postgraduate students at the 'uni' who lodge there.

Before your visit, why not take a virtual tour via the Wivenhoe Encyclopaedia? (www.wivenhoe.gov.uk). Perhaps I should mention that I am a Wivenhoe resident.

Jonathan Clarke's sculpture of Queen Boudica who burnt Camulodunum (Roman Colchester) to the ground in AD60 (Colchester BC)



Colchester natives from Mersea Island

Why not discover all about these local delights from their websites:

- **Richard Haward Oysters** Growers and suppliers of Colchester native oysters and gigas rock oysters from West Mersea, Mersea Island, Essex since 1792 when William Haward sailed to deliver oysters. (www.richardhawardsoysters.co.uk).
- **The Company Shed, Mersea Island** The 'Company Shed' is a renowned Mersea Island establishment serving the freshest oysters and seafood. Featured on many food programs and in numerous publications (www.west-mersea.co.uk/Mersea_Island_Company_Shed.htm)
- **Fishing for Beginners** The Moon and the Tides (www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/classic/A810127)

A process of continuous feedback and improvement

The town takes part in an ongoing Destination Benchmark survey of visitors' opinions. Findings consistently show that visitors love the upkeep of the parks and gardens: here Colchester is seen as the national leader compared to other historic towns. The quality of service at the visitor-information centre has again proved to be a winner with Colchester coming top of the poll.

Value and quality in accommodation and hospitality services graded well. Room for improvement was identified as being needed for toilet facilities and street cleanliness. A toilet strategy was implemented with funding of £800,000. This gave the opportunity to develop the toilets into a more distinctive part of the visitor experience by bringing artwork to public toilets... well worth a visit. This 'Creative Convenience' programme has proved to be a real winner in the Lion Walk and Dedham amenities. All loos will be brought up to and maintained at this high standard. To match this, a street-care strategy has been implemented to address the cleanliness issue.

Recreational shopping – best in region

Vene Vidi Visa

'We came, we saw, we did a little shopping' is an entirely appropriate parody for today's Colchester. The latest CACI survey (2008) shows that, because of its idiosyncratic mix of large chains and smaller independent stores along with its historic attractions, Colchester's town centre has greater pulling power for shoppers and tourists than its nearest regional rivals, Chelmsford and Ipswich. Colchester is now 43rd in terms of its regional footprint of the 2,500 shopping centres surveyed in the latest CACI market analysis.

Gianni Moscardo's study of shopping as a destination attraction confirmed the frequency of shopping behaviours as part of a tourist experience.⁶ He acknowledged the paucity of research in this area and identified two core types of motive for shopping: instrumental and expressive. The expressive motive comes into play where shopping as an activity is the

desired experience or an end in itself—in this cohort were serious shoppers drawing relaxation, social stimulation and/or status benefits. By contrast, the cohort with the instrumental motives tended to shop

- for souvenirs to meet social or cultural obligations
- for life necessities or
- used shopping as a way of experiencing local culture.

The report concluded that tourist shopping is a multidimensional phenomenon worthy of greater study. To maintain its edge and currency in such a dynamic activity a sustained analysis of visitor shopping expectations, motivations and fulfilment is recommended to Colchester's retail consortium.

Promotion – We're best in the region!

Colchester's Tourist Information Centre (TIC) yet again, won the award for the best TIC in the regional Enjoy England Awards for excellence last year.⁷ TICs from Essex, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire as well as Norfolk and Suffolk were mystery shopped with the Colchester Centre being deemed the very best. Of particular merit were its 'friendly and knowledgeable staff' and 'its integrated approach to customer services, its work with partners, its investment in staff training and development and the importance given to customer care.' Officials comment on this result: 'we are absolutely delighted to win this award, we have been fortunate with the investment we have been able to make in the building and the services we can offer. However, these are no

Coach tourism is both environmentally friendly and an important social aspect of clubs and societies around the country

use if we don't have the people to carry out the work. We have been lucky in having a fantastic, high-performing team of people with a range of experience and skills.'

The Centre had 530,569 customer contacts in 2007: this included 402,050 web users, 17,367 phone calls and 101,222 callers through its doors. Latest figures show that the website has 63,000 hits per month so, what do they find? Maria Sicilia and Raquel Perez

of the University of Murcia showed that websites are powerful tools for promoting identities, building images and constructing relationships with audiences.⁸ The site can contribute significantly to the city reaching its marketing goals and achieve the following advantages:

- the web is used as a 'pull' medium giving the audience more control than traditionally
- each individual selects only the content which is of interest to them
- the access to information is realised in a dynamic and active form
- information-dissemination costs are cut—a large amount of information can be transferred at minimum cost
- the internet increases the potential for reaching varied target markets
- the content is accessible 24/7 from any location connected to the web.

From the study, it was clear that 'the internet represents an effective medium to help contribute to a city's positioning. The website of a city represents a city's window into a connected, global and electronic world.' If a city was taking advantage of this medium this should be evidenced from its website through examination of its content and interactive features; they analysed the content and design of the websites of 24 EU capital cities.

Content was evaluated using criteria such as the amount, variety, relevance, timeliness, reliability, scope and usefulness derived from an earlier study by Jonathan Palmer which established usability, design and performance metrics.⁹ Interactivity was seen as a

second critical aspect. Here individuals could interact with the text so that—unlike linear text where readers are encouraged to read in a particular order—non-linear content based on hyperlinks encourages readers to select information most appropriate to them.

You can judge for yourself the quality, quantity and interactivity of Colchester's website: it certainly stands up well by comparison to the EU capitals visited in the survey cited.¹⁰ Nothing is more dynamic than a website: it requires constant updating and regular restructuring as the technology evolves. Why not conduct a comparison survey for yourself?

Print promotion

The town's brochure, features Boudicca as its cover girl, an ultra-modern representation of Queen Boadicea who, with her warriors, laid waste to Roman Colchester in AD60. The sculpture was cast in aluminium by Suffolk artist Jonathan Clarke; located near the town's main railway station, it is fast becoming an icon for Colchester.

The brochure has evolved dramatically over the last few years. It entirely eschews the tired traditional brochure-speak and incorporates many of the recommendations to be found in Molina and Estoban's study of brochures.¹¹ The photography is superb and the copy is contemporary, addressing the needs of a range of potential visitors; there is much pride in this latest version.¹²

Thirty-five thousand brochures are printed and distributed to tourism information centres throughout the UK. A scaled-down version is available



Aerial view of Colchester Castle
and entrance to Castle Park
(Van Cols)

at all attractions and hospitality venues as well as in major supermarkets. In addition, 1,000 Group Travel Organisers' guides are published which are mailed to current coach users and are taken to 'travel trade' exhibitions. Coach tourism is both environmentally friendly and an important social aspect of clubs and societies around the country. This is such a key market for Colchester that a dedicated website contains information particularly relevant to them.¹³ Representatives from the visitor-services team attend and promote at a wide range of shows and exhibitions. Joint campaigns in partnership with the local train operator are targeted at couples and families.

There is significant use of public relations with press releases regularly achieving coverage in both national, local and special interest media. In partnership with other local authorities, PROMPT (Promoting the Region in Overseas Markets in Partnership Together) supports a programme of overseas exposure. Highly effective and targeted campaigns are carried out with DFDS in Germany and Stenaline in Holland. Increased emphasis is being developed with the region's low-cost airlines, which operate through Stanstead, Luton and Norwich airports. Advertising is placed in publications which target day-trippers and short-breakers in such media as Travel GBI *ETB Let's Go Guide*, the travel-trade directory overseas guide.

Indeed, every opportunity to promote Colchester as a visitor destination is embraced. Colchester's Tourism Development Officer sums up the strategy:

Colchester is on the cusp of something great. There are few visitor destinations, especially in the East of England, which can claim to have such potential. Tourism and visitor services are being developed and improved through clear strategies that demonstrate Colchester's ambition and intention to sustain and grow visitors actively, to retain its current visitor base and capitalise on its potential and ambition to be a prestigious regional centre.

In fact, it's not about tourism or art or culture specifically, there are other models for development. It is about using culture in its widest sense in the regeneration of people and places to make a destination for the future.

Creating a place which can compete effectively for inward investment and enhance its regional, national and international standing.¹⁴

Fundamentally it's about making a place for people:

a place where people want to be—a destination of choice.

References

- 1 F. Howie *Managing the Tourist Destination* (London, Cengage Learning 2005)
- 2 P Lavery *Travel and Tourism* 5th ed (Elm Publications 2002)
- 3 *The Guardian* 4 November 2008. The link below takes you to one of many articles and analysis to be found in the quality press: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/nov/04/donald-trump-scottish-golf-course>
- 4 <http://www.horkesleypark.co.uk/>
- 5 BBC TV *Inside Out* 11 March 2009
- 6 G Moscardo 'Shopping as a Destination Attraction' *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 10 (4) 2004 pp 294-307
- 7 Wendy Brading 'Promotion - We're best in the region!' *Essex County Standard* 31 October 2008
- 8 M Sicilia and R Perez 'How do EU cities utilise their websites? A Content Analysis' *Journal of Internet Business* (5) 2008
- 9 Jonathan W Palmer 'Website Usability, Design and Performance Metrics' *Information Systems Research* 13 (2) June 2002, pp 151-67
- 10 www.visitcolchester.com
- 11 A Molina and A Esteban 'Tourism Brochures: Usefulness and Image' *Annals of Tourism Research* 33 (4) October 2006 pp 1036-56
- 12 Please access it when on line at www.visitcolchester.com; you'll find this an entirely professional and captivating treatment.
- 13 www.colchesterforgroups.co.uk
- 14 David would particularly like to thank Karen Turnbull for the materials provided and for our well considered discussions while preparing this article.



DAVID McCASKEY is lecturer in management at Colchester Institute, Centre for Management Studies. He holds an MBA, is a Fellow of the Institute of Hospitality, a Chartered Marketer and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Email: www.wivenhoe.gov.uk/people/mccaskey.htm