**Transformation, meaning-making and identity creation through folklore tourism: the case of the Robin Hood Festival**

**Abstract**

Folklore tourism is often regarded as a subset of heritage tourism, although it has received less attention than comparable heritage events based on documented historic events such as civil war re-enactments and living history sites. Although the ‘theming’ of landscapes and the journeying to places based on their literary association enjoys a long tradition, this paper focuses on the relationship between tourism and folklorism. It explores how folklore events appropriate contemporary and social interpretations of stories to entertain whilst also outlining how legendary historical personalities can play a role in generating tourism. In 2013, a constructivist methodology was employed using 20 in-depth interviews and participant observations to generate qualitative data at the Robin Hood Festival in Nottinghamshire, UK. Numerous themes emerged after coding including the way folklore events blend historic fact and fiction, the power of the imagination to create spaces, and the importance of natural settings and spaces to transform people and places. However, three dominant themes emerged which are specifically presented in this paper, these are: a) a sense of freedom and escape felt by participants, b) camaraderie and inter-personal social authenticity, and c) the transformation of self and creation of alternative (additional) social identities.

**Introduction**

Although folklore tourism could be regarded as a subset of cultural and heritage tourism, it has received less focus than comparable heritage events based on documented historic events such as civil war re-enactments and living history sites (Chronis, 2005; Mittelstaedt 1995). Although the ‘theming’ of landscapes and the journeying to places based on their literary association enjoys a long tradition (Hemme, 2005), this paper specifically focuses on the relationship between tourism and folklorism. It explores how folklore events appropriate contemporary and social interpretations of stories to entertain and attract visitors, rather than looking at folklore in its purest sense in terms of music, art, literature and knowledge being passed down through generations and becoming part of a culture. In tourism research, the area of folkloristics has been approached in a myriad of ways, although it is usually presented as intangible cultural heritage or living heritage based on the three distinct concepts of folk, nation and culture (Henriques and Custódio, 2008).

This paper examines the characteristics and attraction of ‘folklore tourism’ through the lens of the Robin Hood Festival in Nottingham in England where qualitative data was generated from 20 in-depth interviews with event participants plus periods of researcher participant observation. It showcases the ways fictional and mythical personalities generate tourism interest and explores how landscapes evolve to meet the interests of visitors enthralled by mysterious figures. Similar tourist studies into folklore-inspired activities include fairy tales associated with Hans Christian Andersen in Fyn in Denmark (Knudsen and Greer 2011), the German ‘Fairy Tale’ Route (Hemme, 2005), the legend of King Arthur in South West England (Earl, 2008), the Australian convict Ned Kelly (Frost, 2006), and the dark tourism figure of Dracula (Light, 2007).

The story of Robin Hood forms the inspiration for numerous films, poems, and books. Regarded as England’s greatest outlaw, his story of robbing the rich to give to the poor is a captivating and enduring legend (Knight, 1994). Notably, the five-day Robin Hood Festival is unlike historic re-enactments because there are no agreed and documented truths and historical facts. Rather, it blends personal imagination and historical accuracy, thereby generating a myriad of reactions that range from a sense of personal transformation to escape, akin to the work on fairy tales and their role in meaning-making and fostering personal narrative play (Knudsen and Greer, 2011).

We build on the premise that identities are fluid and different elements of our personalities can become more or less evident in particular circumstances and environments (McGuiness, 2004). This paper is based on data which seem to suggest events based on folklore tales (which encourage attendees to imagine places, wear costumes and perform stories) are actually less about facilitating an escape from everyday life, but instead present an opportunity to develop a better (and truer) sense of oneself. In creating a distance from everyday life, this kind of event encourages participants to reflect and better understand themselves through a process of character adoption and identity development to generate a form of existential authenticity (Wang, 1999).

**Folklore Tourism and traversing the boundaries of fact and fiction**

Folklore festivals are an increasing popular form of heritage tourism (Hannam and Halewood, 2006; Ma and Lew, 2012; Stoeltje, 1992), with organisations such as the European Association of Folklore Festivals (2016) promoting a plethora of events “to preserve, develop and make popular the folklore of the different European nations”, and companies offering tourists opportunity to engage in art and dance (http://folklore-festivals.com). In the fields of folklore studies, ethnology and anthropology, work has focused on the interplay between folklore and tourism, such as Bauman’s (1992) text on cultural performances, communicative forms and popular entertainments, where chapters draw attention to the interactional co-presence of participants and explores how folklore is embedded into festivals and events. Specific contributions such as Kirshenblatt‐Gimblett and Bruner (1992) on tourism and folklore highlight how visitors become part of the process of embedding folkloristic stereotypes. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995) further suggests folklore is made and not found in terms of the production of the touristic through story, myth and legend, and her later work on destination culture and folklore unpacks the concept of intangible heritage, where at folkloristic festivals, “Performers are carriers, transmitters and bearers of traditions, terms which connote a passive medium, conduit, or vessel, without volition, intention or subjectivity” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, p.58). Likewise, Stoeltje (1992) finds that they provide vessels for the articulation and expression of a collective recognition of heritage and inherited rituals.

The process of engaging with a festival where one dresses as fictional characters is one worthy of further investigation. Folklore festivals (as opposed to those based on documented historical events) may offer an opportunity to interrogate concepts of escape, imaginative freedom and personality. This sense of escape in the literature links to the work of Crompton and McKay (1997) who conceptualise the ‘escape-seeking dichotomy’ with ‘escape’ from a daily routine forming one of the key motivators of tourists. Among the different degrees of mental and emotional escape, Inglis (2000) suggests that escape through self-improvement is a consequence of prolonged touristic engagement at extended cultural events which play a pivotal role compared to more brief and temporary spatial (physical) escapes; thus directly improving the overall mind, body and spirit. In Turner’s (1969) seminal writing on ritual and communitas there is a useful theorisation for folkloristic events, where performance encourages activity in liminal spaces, fostering occasions that traverse past and present, continuity and change. Through the lens of a costumed event that blurs the boundaries of the historic and folklore, and fact and fiction, we can explore what is happening in an event setting where tourists are wearing masks, costumes and acting out different (imaginative) lives. This links well to the seminal work by Winnicott (1953) who introduces the concept of ‘transition’, and the potential for play in childhood which is carried into adulthood. His work highlights the potential for inventive scenarios (perhaps like a Robin Hood festival) to create the capacity for imaginative creation and personality change through wearing masks and costume (also Emigh, 1996).

This feature of imaginative creation is present in literature that explores the dynamic interplay between tourist experiences and the way it challenges regular levels of escapist norms through the adoption of different characters, costumes and identities at events (Richards and Wilson, 2006). Larsen (2008) further suggests that tourism does not always create different ontological worlds to the ‘everyday’ despite the concept of emotional and physical detachment from daily life being profound. Behar (2009) and Buccitelli (2013) claim that everyday life has a significant part to play in folklorism because it is seeks to assimilate more mythical perspectives into today’s world, allowing individuals to bring their daily lives and imaginations into one more complete and combined whole. Indeed, they suggest folklore tourism may bring us closer to who we really are, offering a vehicle to both traverse and occupy liminal spaces between our lives and our imagination.

Travel is often theorised as having a restorative potential which combats routine life with imaginative phases, possessing the power to bring out our actual self that may be ordinarily hidden (Edensor, 2001). Folklore and historic re-enactments are said to encourage the transformation of memory, history and personal narrative into a visible leisure performance, where individuals draw on nostalgic symbolism as a way to recollect and tie together their past and present lives (Stankova and Vassenska, 2015). This identity formation is presented in much of the literature as a metaphorical knitting together of all personal and collective narratives of someone’s life through organised touristic activities (Wu, Zhu, and Xu, 2000); forming individual identity where participants uncover parts of themselves they feel unable to ordinarily display. Tourism has been presented as a vehicle that provides occasions for a person to display a different (or even a more authentic) identity, a personality or facet which is usually forgotten or made invisible by the routine of quotidian life and hectic work schedules (Edensor, 2001). It is this longing to resurface and desire to be in a different phase of time which is intrinsic to certain folktale narratives and fuels the growth of folklore touristic visitations and cultural event development (Kaasik, 2008; Järv 2010).

**The medieval hero of Robin Hood**

Robin Hood who famously ‘stole from the rich, to give to the poor’ remains an attractive character in English folklore, and is believed to be the only antique hero that is mythologically alive today (Moxon, 2012). Sherwood Forest is synonymous with him and provides the backdrop to the myth’s evolution through history and culture. Robin Hood remains a brand with considerable merit and provides a universally recognisable image used to promote tourism in the Nottinghamshire area of England. The character has been embraced by different literature types from ballads, to poems, to stories, to blockbuster Hollywood movies and has remained universally popular regardless of historical validity or fact (Shackley, 2001). Despite ongoing debate about his existence, his flamboyance as an outlaw who supposedly was the champion of the socially and economically repressed has been embraced by movie makers and literature. His love story involving Maid Marion provides a romantic focus and places such as the church where he supposedly married in Edwinstowe remains popular with tourists (Shackley, 2001). Such sites exemplify the prominence of this mystical character and the opportunities for related tourism are plentiful (MacKay and Fesenmaier, 1997).

Knight (1994) has presented Robin Hood as neither a Saxon Hero fighting the Normans, nor as one who lived in the period of Prince John or King Richard, nor a historical figure. In reality, Knight suggests he was probably a yeoman or an earl who fled to the forest to escape from the law. His various incarnations have perpetuated through different interpretations from different historians, mythologists or through folk literature in the form of ballads (Barczewi, 2000). Interestingly, there is no specific evidence to suggest that he existed during the reign of King John (the villain in Robin Hood stories) and Ibeji (2011) claims that the only king mentioned in records from the time is ‘Edward our comedy king’ which most likely refers to King Edward II’s visit to Nottingham in 1324. The legend is ambiguous, but alluring for that very reason and the stories continue to be passed onto children by adults who themselves heard it as children (Holt, 2011). Imagination over his historical accuracy seems to supersede historical truth which has led to the formation of various stories fashioned from people’s imagination, touristic places, and assumptions. The legend is kept alive is through folklore festivals, where the tales are re-enacted with a mix of stories and imaginations woven out of historical instances (unlike re-enactment where the stories strictly follow historical facts). This character provides a fascinating focus given the blurred distinction between fact and fiction, where stories contain both historical truth and assumptions which perhaps provides more opportunity for imaginative development and creative engagement than a purely fictitious fairy tale.

**Methodology**

Given the limited published work drawing on empirical data on tourist engagement with folklore festivals, it was deemed that a case study employing qualitative methods was appropriate to generate deeper insights and explore new themes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Yin, 2013). The study was designed around the five day Robin Hood Festival in 2013 held at Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire. The intention was to prompt reflection and capture the impressions of participants to aid a wider exploration of personal meanings and reflections. Such rich and personal aspects lend themselves to in-depth interviewing and observation techniques (Babbie, 2007; Sarantakos, 2005).

Once ethical approval was given, a pilot study was undertaken at the Gladiator Games in London to trial the interview questions (Figure 1). Some re-enactors and tourists were interviewed on their experience and feelings while participating in the historic re-enactment event. Most of the participants spent considerable time emphasising the importance of their own research into their chosen character and their place in Roman history. It was during this pilot that the differences between an historical re-enactment festival and a folklore festival came to light. The almost obsessive need for historical accuracy, fact and detail was apparent in the responses from those participating in the Gladiator Games at London’s only Roman amphitheatre. For example, several interviewees from the pilot had exactly replicated the detail of costumers and weapons based on Roman recollections and followed curator notes and biographies of known figures recorded in the Museum of London. In contrast, participants in the Robin Hood study were less wedded to historical accuracy and were afforded artistic licence and creativity in terms of imaginative costume and character development. It is clear that the distinction between folklore and history is perhaps less than sharp in this instance, especially with a story like Robin Hood which relies on some facts of location (Nottingham) and history (places and monarchs) (Shackley, 2001).

**[Insert Figure 1 near here] Figure 1: A combat scene from the Gladiator Games held in the Guildhall Yard of London. Photo by author.**

Following the pilot, some interview questions were revised to focus more on Robin Hood and more probing questions were added to reflect the more imaginative nature of the legend and story. For example, it became less about historical accuracy of place (e.g. the detail of the gladiator arena) and more about how it links to respondent’s own imagined sense of place and feelings, with questions asking: ‘How does this festival and landscape match your own expectations and images of the landscape and setting for the Robin Hood stories?’, ‘How do you think this story and more widely folklore history have influenced you?’, and ‘How do you feel when you meet other characters of the story in a performance?’ .

Interviews offer an effective method of generating detailed information from active participants and not just observers (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland, 2006). A range of questions allowed participants to respond with descriptive answers that could encompass several dimensions of the event and its various aspects; exposing the interview participant’s feelings and observations of their experiences (Patton, 2002). As Babbie (2007) has espoused, an interview allows for a more viable, iterative, and continuous data generation vehicle. Aside from a few demographic questions, the questions were structured under a number of key topics drawn from themes in the underpinning literature which included questions on visit motivation, imagination, engagements and activities, identity, nostalgia, and performativity.

A convenience sampling strategy was adopted which involved approaching people around the site to see if they were willing to be interviewed. This approach was pragmatic and sought to ensure an appropriate research population was interviewed in a purposive way to ensure a mix of respondents was secured (i.e. gender, age, costume, nationality). The interviews were conducted during performance breaks to ensure a wide range of participants were included. Most interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour in duration (see Table 1 for list of interviewees and characteristics). This sample is a small selection from the estimated 35,000 visitors, but high quality qualitative content was generated and themes began to be repeated by interviewee sixteen through a process of data saturation. The concept of data saturation was introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and describes when no new additional data are found during collection that further develops a conceptual category, (see also Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). Participants were given pseudonyms and these are noted in brackets where quotes are used in the findings. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of each participant.

**[Insert Table 1 near here] Details of interviewees**

A dual methodological approach was designed involving the in-depth interviews with participant observation based on a topic guide that covered aspects such as setting, costumes and artefacts, behaviour and actions, interaction and communication with others, and the environment. Key performance places were identified by analysing official event maps and spaces of core activity were noted, then performers who had agreed to the research were closely observed alongside more general observations of the event. Specific attention was placed on recording the mannerisms and interactions of visitors with a view to understanding their levels of engagement at the festival. Observations were noted down and photos and videos were taken as a way of preserving the atmosphere and feeling of the place after the event (Silverman, 2013).

A constructivist version of grounded theory in line with Goulding (1999) was adopted which encouraged a more reflexive strategy where themes from earlier literature could inform question development and data analysis. This guiding analytic process rests on locating key conceptual categories and accounting for relationships, and is achieved through the standard grounded theory stages of ‘open’, ‘axial’ and ‘selective’ coding. To effectively manage the data being generated, the software ‘NVivo’ was employed to help identify common themes through frequency counts and modelling (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). The data were interrogated in phases to formulate connections which offered an appreciation of concepts in terms of their dynamic relationships (Goulding, 1999). After open coding of categories (nodes), ‘selective’ coding allowed categories with explanatory power to emerge as the central ‘storyline’ that pulled categories together including ‘Nvivo’ codes which coded the words of participants verbatim (principles of grounded theory). The procedure aimed to combine general categories and concepts from the open coding stage, example nodes included ‘Folklore of Robin Hood’, ‘Camaraderie and Inter-personal social identity’ and these were linked to assigned participant attributes such as nationality, age, gender and role. The categories were then placed within a wider framework of axial coding and subsequently re-examined within a selective coding stage. For example, under the node ‘The transformation of self and creation of alternative (additional) social identities’, selective codes included ‘timelessness’ and ‘embodiment’, and under these included themes such as ‘changes in self’, ‘changes in energy levels’, and ‘becoming more gentle’.

**Findings and discussion**

Based on the observations, the festival was found to be a vibrant, colourful and interactive space. Field notes recall,

“When I entered the festival site, the first thing I noticed was the bowing branches of trees filled with ‘little Robin Hoods’ armed with toy swords, bows and arrows – figures fighting the Sheriff’s men. Medieval comedians welcomed visitors and played old-fashioned musical instruments causing melodies to fill the air at the entrance. Visitors (men, women and children) entered with looks of amazement and excitement. It seemed to me that Sherwood Forest was generating an alluring medieval ambience and the Robin Hood festival was all set through sounds, costume, music, dance and atmosphere”.

And later, we note, “Near the large old oak tree a medieval puppet man was mesmerizing the flocks of people assembled in front of him with stories of crusades of King Richard and relayed instances from the stories of the first and only antique hero to be mythologically alive today, Robin Hood”.

Numerous themes emerged by bringing together these recollections and the coded data from interviews. These included the blending of folklore stories to create events, the power of the imagination to create spaces, authenticity, indulgence, childhood recollection and the importance of setting and spaces to transform people and place. However, three recurrent themes emerged which generated more coding than any other area, these were (i) a sense of freedom and escape (around 16/20 participants referred in some way to this); (ii) camaraderie and inter-personal social authenticity (12/20 interviews linked to this); and (iii) the transformation of self and creation of alternative (additional) social identities (14/20 interviews mentioned this).

**The freedom to imagine and escape**

Firstly, around 16 interviewees mentioned that the festival fuelled their imagination and many commented on how it created a welcome environment away from the mundanity of everyday life. It gave them ‘freedom’ to think differently about the world and their role in it. Some participants expressed a sense that folklore events and similar forms of intangible heritage gave them “wings to fly with their imagination” (Lorna) and enjoy spaces of difference. Although Edensor (2007) has suggested that tourism is not about removing oneself from everyday constraints, participants frequently commented about the event allowing themselves to temporarily suspend their ‘normal’ thinking and lives (coded comments from Steven, Adrian, Bryan and Mickey). However, what seemed most pervasive were characters positioning themselves in a nexus between the real and the imagined, the spaces of normality and arenas of imagination. Visitors reflected on the ability to move between their own imaginative and factual and historic construction of the folklore characters,

“[t]here are so many different pieces of the story, Robin Hood is such a wonderful story because there are so many different ones from all over the country and some from other parts of the Europe. I suppose it helps your imagination to grow. This portrayal, is what happened according to my own research and imagination” (Lorna, dressed as a medieval chemist).

Lorna believed the myth of Robin Hood lies in the scattered pieces of stories from all over the Europe, and the story presented at the festival is the culmination of its different parts intersected with the research of different participants and augmented by imaginative assumptions. Steven (dressed as Robin Hood) also expressed a feeling that the stories allowed him to “think differently about the world”. Interestingly, a Japanese tourist (Mickey) made links to an historic character in Japan called *Nezumi Kozō* (meaning The Kid Rat) who became a similar legend at the beginning of the 19th century around 500 years after Robin Hood is thought to have been alive. It is clear the scattered pieces are not just in Europe, but are global in their appeal and reach.

Several respondents stated that there are no particular limitations or specifics in the stories because the accuracy of events regarding Robin Hood are not formally documented. Consequently, a different kind of freedom can be enjoyed in the portrayal of the stories than re-enactors at events such as the Gladiator Games and civil war events that are often factually bounded portrayals (Strauss, 2003). For example, Jon (a potter) felt that Robin Hood should be regarded as a Saxon terrorist linked with the Norman Conquest; an interpretation built on some historical knowledge but more on his own imagination and identification of him as a mythical hero. Despite Robin Hood being presented as an historic figure in regional narratives, the freedom to assume a folklore character is distinctive when compared with living history events, Steven claimed despite research, “parts must be my own creative interpretation”. Folklore tourism events seems to allow for the development and evolution of understandings as myth gets interpreted through different people and activities. As each aspect of the folklore story is circulated, the data indicates that aspects are a constant state of flux and modification (whether this be different costumes, stories or interpretation). There is no doubt based on our observations, the question about who Robin Hood actually was will always be under constant construction and debate – and of course remain a source of significant commercial income!

Interviewee, Charles (dressed as a medieval surgeon) believed Robin Hood would have been regarded as a local freak, and the story of stealing from the rich giving to the poor has been fabricated through years of myth and interpretation. What is enticing about this form of heritage tourism is that folklore and legend foster an imaginative environment “unshackled by historical truth” (Charles) and without adherence to historical facts. Due to documented historical evidence, opportunities for imaginative expression and exploration at historical re-enactment festivals are often limited, and are often susceptible to negative stereo-typing by the museums and heritage academe (Carnegie and McCabe, 2008). Whereas folklore festivals can foster creativity and the re-creation of stories; interpretations and stories evolve as they pass from person to person, and place to place so the task of interpreting and analysing folklore is rarely fully accomplished (Workman, 1996).

Freedoms from the constraints of historical narratives and the ability to imagine different histories was an important factor in giving participants a sense of freedom to explore ideas, and enjoy a different life for a while. For example, George, a photographer by profession, drew heavily on his sense of personal escapism, “I think there is a degree of escapism, to breathe fresh air. I escape from normal life mainly, when I am in the forest I am in another world, it’s like going to another planet and you can live in harmony with your imagination and dream dreams”, Bryan (an archer) also expressed “it’s a world away from everything else”. This sentiment was shared by many in costume such as Lorna, Steven and Denise. On further analysis, the comments coded as ‘freedom’ were less about physical freedom, but more about spiritual freedom and the opportunity for quiet reflection. The festival ambience was described by around 11 respondents in terms of its slower pace of life which encouraged deep contemplation, offering a rare opportunity to step back from, (not out of) one’s regular life, with words used coded including ‘peaceful’, ‘calmer’, ‘slower, and ‘relaxed’.

One of the local residents, Simon stated, “ you can become one with the place as well, and with nature a little bit I guess, if you come around here it’s like meditating, you get the atmosphere and the ambience of festival”. This sentiment was shared by several others, where the forest setting provides a place of reflection, and the importance of this silence to participants was tangible, as conceptualised by Kaaristo, (2014) where silence is one method of identification in tourism which needs to be carefully mediated. Our data indicate the importance of silence in allowing individuals to remove themselves from their normal spaces to reflect. A tourist from Japan was especially keen to express the importance (and spirituality) she felt which was perhaps a reflection of her own background, “there is a simple life here, things done simply and it does make the whole place feel very peaceful, this has surprised me…I feel calm here, being in nature and enjoying things made from nature” (Mickey).

This link to nature and sense of serenity is perhaps surprising when folklore festivals are often associated with music, merriment and sound (as our field notes recall), yet it is the quiet in the forest that draws people to the event. Notes from our observations reflect this apparent paradox in sound and silent. This seeming blending of tourist identities is based on what is performed in the setting and leads to enhanced levels of interactive communication and the development of a sense of calm. This experience is created between the spectator and performer and is the outcome of the temporary suspension of the emotional and social ‘clutches’ of contemporary living settings, thereby fostering what Thompson and Schofield (2009) refer to as ‘restoration of equilibrium’ through a recovery approach and the importance of engaging with the environment, and what Ingold (1986) might refer to as the ‘appropriation of nature’ and its restorative power in society.

One example of this restoration through nature was the relationship participants had with the trees and the surroundings. Owen, a medieval street comedian spoke enthusiastically about escape from modernity through the landscape and the role of the 800 year old ‘Major Oak’, “It’s fantastic, look at just behind me the Major Oak, it is the most famous tree in England. Its huge, it’s massive, for a piece of landscape it is very aesthetically pleasing and outlives us all; a witness of the past” (Owen). The Major Oak tree was found to be the main natural attraction, forming a focal point in the observational data (Figure 2, and see field notes). In describing the age of the tree, he sought to capture the simple attributes of the forest and nature. It is this old oak tree that plays a vital part in identity maintenance; providing a visual living anchor to the past whilst allowing new and old participants to become connected with its story. This bridge across time period was also well expressed by Jon (the Potter) who explained his interpretation of this phenomenon of temporal movement,

 “By looking at and taking part in this festival it’s always a mirror to the past and a mirror to the present. It’s a mix and make up of who you are socially. What we are doing here, it was exactly done 500 years ago. We know that the major oak here is around about 500 years old. I would have been passing through the middle ages…as a travelling potter and as a journey man who would be travelling, transporting from one town to next and do months’ work in the next town working as another potter and moving on again. I know the potter is there [points to tree]... this is timeless”.

The festival is characterised by many by its ‘slow pace’, and this mediation of a slower pace came across powerfully, with Mike (local costumed tourist) feeling,

“Yes, modern life is absent here, at least for two to three days, which is almost like you are playing the part and living. It’s a chance to discharge from work or business, no issues, no busyness not using mobile phones, all the time for example, you realize or would be able know how important it would be to write a letter, here you can send a letter to somebody else in the camp, no telephones work here”.

Another tourist interviewee, Clive added, “Everything is so fast in the current world, here you have to get things done before the sun goes down because you have not got electricity or lighting things can happen so much slower or of more relaxed pace”. Time and pace were dominant factors mentioned when interviewees were keen to emphasise the difference to their daily lives. Andy (another tourist, although dressed as Robin Hood) relaxing under a tree shared this feeling, “you can relax little bit, there is less pressure, more slow pace, it’s quite chilled”.

**[Insert Figure 2 near here] Figure 2: A ‘witness of the past’, the Major Oak forms the backdrop to the festival in the Sherwood Forest. Photo by author.**

In the literature, folkloristic engagement has already been presented less as an escape and more as a modern day vehicle to facilitate an amalgamation of fact and fiction; a blend of true self and presented identity. Another participant summarised this situation, “By looking at and taking part in this festival it’s always a mirror to the past and mirror to the present. It’s a mix and make up of who you are” (Jon, the Potter). This interviewee who impersonated a medieval potter explained his adoption of a character was not about seeking escape, but about helping him to understand himself better, adding he is interested in how “this process of identification and identity maintenance is taking place in one’s self”. Despite the frequent comments relating to temporal and special escape, responses very much depended on respondents backgrounds. Some participants did not feel a differentiation between their own lives and that lived during the festival. The puppeteer, George claimed he lives his life linked to the medieval period and sees little difference, “One thing is interesting when people look at my costumes they would say I am a medieval person” he shows the texture of his costumes reminiscent to the old period. “I have always been in a slow paced life of calmness; I lived without electricity, like 10 years ago I got electricity”.

**Camaraderie and inter-personal social authenticity**

The second most coded category linked phrases which could be described as a ‘sense of camaraderie’ aligned to being part of a social network which fostered interaction, allowing people to co-experience lived history with others. Wang (1999) has highlighted how intense sociality in the company of others enhanced a sense of inter-personal security through sharing and communicating the same experience as others. Two interviewees described this an “oneness experience” (Colin and Mickey), supporting the view that shared myth-making is an important part of shaping community identity and fostering celebration (Carnegie, 2006; Field, 2006). Our observations suggest the event provides a platform that legitimises actions and activities of participants and performers, and may be conceptualised as the universalization of folklore tourism where there is a synthesis and coming together of imagination, heritages, cultures, ideas, objects and experiences. Some Hindu texts describe this well, with work such as Adhikary (2009) adopting the Sadharanikaran Model of Communication which is used to explain the systematic representation of communication process where parties interact in a system for the attainment of commonness or oneness. The ‘Sadharanikaran’ is the point of dramatic climax when the actor living an experience through his acting on stage becomes one with audience who simultaneously start to relive the same experience. This is reminiscent of work by Urry (1994) and Featherstone (1991), who present the concept of the post-tourist playfully engaging with contrived and 'unreal' experiences which are made meaningful or frivolous through different forms of social and physical engagement.

Aspects of the festival seem to encourage our interviewees to share inner feelings with each other to develop feelings of camaraderie, encouraging people to make visible the hidden sides of one’s own nature and identity that link past and present times. It was apparent this event gave rise to experiences beyond just entertainment and leisure to the participants and the performers. Mike, dressed as a priest expressed this socializing side, “It’s like a holiday with friends where you get to socialize, get to learn from each other, things I am learning from my friends now what I didn’t know. It’s a different life here as contraptions of usual life are very much less”. Likewise, another explained the socializing and learning aspects, “Festival is better than the stories I have read or watched, here we actually get to see how ordinary people like candle makers and black smiths live. It’s a scratch and sniff experience - everything I love it, sometimes that can bring it more to life” (David, guard). The social interaction of the visitors with the costumed players form the major essence of the festival.

When George, the puppeteer, tells the story of Saxons and Normans, the whole forest seems momentarily transported in the minds of those present to medieval times. Performers engage in acting that draws visitors into an arena of medieval time travel and the characters portrayed provides a glimpse of their social and personal identity. Description, understanding and enhanced portrayal of the narrator’s character and for the identity come through the narration (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001). As visitors participated, it was apparent that the event was helping to build a temporary group identity with visitors linked through the narratives of the story tellers (Figure 3). People joined to share in ballads and singing, building sharing understandings and fostering camaraderie.

**[Insert Figure 3 near here] Figure 3 Ballard singer at the Robin Hood festival singing with children. Photo by author.**

Interviewees frequently made links to a vision of the past whilst building a common cultural identity in the present (at the festival). One example is Jemma who commented on the personal growth and self-confidence she gets from participating, “It motivates my love for the trees forest, nature and my profession. It gives me a sense that I want to keep going, because it keeps growing and changing”. However, Justin added a more cynical view and shared his doubts about getting into a time period which was not all that positive – an inauthentic reconstruction of the past perhaps (see Lowenthal 2015).

“It is hard because I am an historian, I know the past wasn’t necessarily wonderful. People don’t know history much, they think the past must have been wonderful, it was harmonious. On the other hand, the reality of the past was pretty tough as well but still we like pretending so there is a nostalgia for the past, but perhaps it never was” (Justin).

**Identity transformation**

The third emergent theme indicated that the festival facilitated a transformation of self, where people suggested their behaviour changed as they explored different identities to themselves (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006). Many of the participants meticulously researched their characters before arriving, to the point where some felt they adopted the traits of the folklore character. In many cases, this characteristic was confidence, “I suppose I am happier doing this than I used to be. Sometimes I feel like surfing, you are really on the top of the wave it impossible to be knocked off that what I can describe me, that the way I can describe it. It is brilliant, really gliding. There is change in me over time, ooh waah! This really is working!”, this was George (puppeteer) getting overwhelmed as he felt a sense of ‘surfing’ at the festival. An American tourist, Denise described how she felt less shy once she is in costume,

“I feel less shy because when I am in costume and as I am turning into a performer there. I play different characters and change with each costume. I feel better about myself because I thought I looked better, because I had beautiful things on my body like corsets and as such”.

Moreover, taking part in festival gives her chance to be more creative and unique with costumes. “I like to be original and unique and dressing up at a festival gives me the opportunity to be creative and being as an individual”.

Toelken (1996) has previously identified the role of folklore in the creation of self-identity, and links it to how we understand our own identities, claiming it does not change us, but is an extension of one’s original self, where characteristics are developed and refined. Participant Robert exclaimed,

“I have become gentler because I used to be a soldier in real world, it was ‘chop, chop, chop’, but now I am able to be much gentler and to talk more quietly to the people and not to shout at them, yes it has developed me as a person as well”.

Another tourist dressed as a comedian, Owen endorsed this by stating

“I feel lot bigger, I become more louder, obviously I can’t become like that every day, I feel confidence, approachable, lots of smiling it’s lovely, it’s good. Come away with a good feeling, you got to become someone else, a transformation absolutely”.

Justin, also claimed he felt empowered when talking about a mythical and fictitious world.

For many, the Robin Hood festival seemed to have a transformative power, often concentrated on emphasising personality traits and increasing levels of confidence. Throughout the data, several participants alluded to temporary identity transformation through their costumed persona. Conversely, for some it offered an extrapolation of real life where they are doing similar kinds of work to the characters they are portraying. Lorna (medieval chemist), relates her character with her actual job as she is a chemist in real life “It’s an extension of who I am really... at the Robin Hood festival the part of my character relates to my own basic character. It doesn’t feel any difference from the character I play, it is an extrapolation of what I do in real life any way so it doesn’t really feel any more different than the actual life to be quite honest”. In reflecting on her childhood she draws parallels with her involvement with the innocence of the Robin Hood stories (Figure 4), “It takes me to the memories when I have first watched or read the story initially... I suppose it is the innocence in the story remembering what it was like to as a small child walk through the forest and that and you know each time you looked at it something changed but it always the same”.

**[Insert Figure 4 near here]: Figure 4 Gathering memories for a life time. Photo by author.**

Timothy (musician) seems to contradict the theme, claiming he is not transformed in terms of identity, but does experience something outside the ordinary, “Not changes as such, I am still me it’s an emotional enjoyment; music itself is very emotional, when it is combined with folklore it adds more. Being in the aura of oneness with music and me, absolutely one with the tune…but while playing music there is very much a spiritual feeling there so I cannot relate myself with anything else”. He explained that subtle changes in his feelings are difficult to explain, but claims when he plays medieval instruments he feels escape, but limited self-transformation, “I just enjoy playing music so playing music is itself an escape for me, so it is obvious the festival is not giving any particular liberation for me maybe I don’t need it. Here there is no difference from the modern world for me”. On probing, he felt that he was so immersed in medieval music in his life that this festival was merely an extension of that activity.

A greater awareness of self-identity seemed to be experienced by many interviewees. Many were keen to evidence their ‘inside’ story teller and identity to others. They almost created another reality of their self-identity to help understand the situatedness of themselves and their engagement with others. As Jon reveals, “there is one pottery in the village to make a big community... in reality in all villages there would have been a pottery and everybody would be working in that village, but not alongside another who is performing farming duties”. The story teller can unearth the present through an interpreted version of the past, and vice versa. As their character engages with other tourists, they themselves gain knowledge through interactive and conversation. They are often small meetings, but subtle knowledge construction is influenced by negotiated instances of creativity, emotional engagement and reactivity.

**Conclusion**

The Robin Hood festival has been presented as an example of how heritage and folklore tourism can draw on a figure or place’s mythical nature and present it in a way that creates a celebratory national history (Barczewski, 2000), where tourists and local people join to live the life of real and imagined literary ﬁgures. This study which draws on qualitative interview data and observations suggests that some participants and tourists feel their identity is changed, and some find a truer sense of self in what Wang (1999) might refer to as a more ‘authentic self’. The study of folklore tourism through the Robin Hood festival has provided an illuminating vehicle that helps to explore the way folklore tourism and heritage can foster a process of self-observation, personal reflection and expression of individual freedom. The concept of escapism as a motivation continues to be pervasive (Cho 2012; Crompton and McKay 1997), and we believe that this study adds to work identifying the ways individuals escape from their daily lives through touristic participation and differing degrees of embodiment, transformation and performativity.

We argue that folklore tourism requires further research in terms of other events, and other groups of tourists. It requires more data from other heritage events to help us explore similarities with other folklore and historically-influenced festivals in other international contexts. Our data and findings suggest folklore stories which are played out in touristic events can be conceptualised within three dominant themes (although this is by no means an exhaustive list). The first is this kind of folklore festival can act as a vehicle to engage with one’s imagination and creative side (not to imagine something new, but often to supplement one’s imagination), secondly this kind of event fosters a deep sense of camaraderie as a result of identifying with a social network and group that co-experience an ‘imagined’ many visitors can develop and enhance personal attributes and characteristics. Such ideas are cognisant with some of the work on actors who transform when they are playing another character or persona (Barba and Savarese, 2011). Finally, we found that the Robin Hood festival (and potentially other folklore tourism events) allow tourists to place themselves in a situation where they can experience a trance-like (pseudo) escape, removing themselves from not only the normal routine of life, but they transform and adopt an imaginative, aesthetic and folkish identity, or what has been regarded as a transcendental escape. Such identities are enhanced and developed both socially or individually from the original self, without ever really losing the core identity and physical body.

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**Table captions**

Table 1 List of interviewees at the Robin Hood Festival

**Figure captions**

Figure 1: A combat scene from the Gladiator game held in museum of London. Photo by author. Pilot Study.

Figure 2: A ‘witness of the past’, the Major Oak forms the backdrop to the festival in the Sherwood Forest. Photo by author.

Figure 3: Ballard singer at the Robin Hood festival singing with children. Photo by author.

Figure 4: Gathering memories for a life time. Photo by author.