

## **Narratives of health and hospitality: Strathpeffer Spa c.1866 – c.1946.**

This paper examines the history of Strathpeffer Spa (the UK's most northerly spa) between c.1860 and c.1946 using a range of printed primary and archive sources. Drawing upon Hansen's (2012) work in business history it demonstrates the value of a cultural and narrative approach as a means of understanding the development of a distinctive hospitality-based community. Strathpeffer Spa was founded for the business of health, with the entire village dependent upon the spa and engaged in the provision of hospitality for those who came to 'take the waters'. From c.1866 a powerful 'health narrative' dominated the village community. At the heart of this was an emphasis on Strathpeffer as a destination devoted to the requirements of 'health seekers' and 'invalids', and where meeting the needs of this particular clientele was paramount (Fortescue-Fox 1896). Hospitality at Strathpeffer was, thus, medicalised into a prolonged health-giving experience, a narrative that was created and sustained by key members of the community, and which became deeply embedded in the fabric and purpose of the village. Although the emphasis on this 'health narrative' proved initially to be successful, in the longer term it became a contributing factor in Strathpeffer Spa's declining fortunes. The value of a narrative approach for understanding the sustainability of hospitality-based communities is discussed.

### **Key words**

history  
hospitality  
tourism  
culture  
narrative  
Scotland

### **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to apply theoretical approaches extant in business history to the history of hospitality. The need for a critical and interdisciplinary approach to hospitality,

in all its forms, has been acknowledged, with historical approaches noted as being particularly worthy of critical attention (Lashley et al. 2007; Lynch et al. 2011; Wilson et al.

2012; Walton 2012a). Spas have been subjected to scrutiny by critical hospitality scholars from a historical perspective: Cameron and Cave (2013) have looked at image and identity in the hospitality sector in two towns in colonial New Zealand. More work remains to be done, however, in terms of understanding the dynamics of spa communities, but also in developing and applying new approaches to the history of hospitality and tourism communities in general. With this in mind, this paper draws upon the work of business historian Per Hansen (2007, 2012, 2014), taking what Hansen describes as a cultural and narrative approach to examine Strathpeffer Spa, a distinct hospitality-oriented community located in the Highlands of Scotland. Strathpeffer Spa provides us with a discrete area of study. Founded purely for the business of health and hospitality, from its inception Strathpeffer was dependent upon the spa and its patrons, with the village comprising (in addition to the pump room) ‘several large hotels and most of the other houses ... erected for the accommodation of visitors’ (Anon. 1886a: 3). At Strathpeffer, hospitality manifested as a cultural form – as a collective idea and way of thinking and being – as well as a commercial activity. Visitors were encouraged to stay ‘for six weeks, possibly longer’ (Fortescue-Fox 1896: viii), with all aspects of hospitality at Strathpeffer medicalised into a prolonged health-giving experience, a narrative that became deeply embedded in the fabric and purpose of the village. For the purposes of this paper, the smallness of the village is its strength – the 1901 census records only 354 residents present during the winter (out of season) months (Anon. 1911a: 1002). As a result, we are able to hear the voices of key individuals, and to analyse the narratives at play in the community in a way that might not be possible in a more substantial or less isolated location. Strathpeffer Spa, as a geographically isolated nineteenth-century planned village, provides us with an example of what might be termed a ‘hospitality community’

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governed by its ‘community narrative’ (see map in Figure 1). Critical hospitality seeks to find new ways of understanding hospitality. Here, I address one of the fundamental questions posed by this journal: ‘how might we study hospitality?’ (Lynch et al. 2011: 5). In its widest perspective, the paper suggests a way in which the historical study of hospitality – whether concerned with the community, the institution or the individual (Hansen 2012) – might move in a new direction.

## 2. Literature Review

An extensive body of literature has been reviewed to set this research in context. The following sections explain Hansen’s theory concerning the value of culture and narrative, clarify the usefulness of business clusters, networks and communities as a viable focus for study, and provide a general outline of the history of spas.

### 2.1. Culture and narrative

In an approach that echoes the viewpoint of critical hospitality scholars and harmonizes with the underlying principles of this journal, Hansen stresses the importance of interdisciplinary work for enriching epistemological and ontological debate in the field of business history (Lashley 2000; Lashley et al. 2007; Lynch et al. 2011; Hansen 2012). Whilst acknowledging his discipline’s roots in economics and the social sciences, he argues for the value of what he terms a ‘cultural and narrative approach’. Culture and narrative, as interpretative concepts, have been recognized by scholars of critical hospitality. Selwyn has pointed to the importance of understanding hospitality in relation to the community, and the ways in which societies might ‘change, grow, renew and reproduce themselves’ over time, and takes a broadly cultural

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approach in so doing (Selwyn 2000: 19). Interpretations of culture are rooted in anthropology. Candea and Da Col, (2015) have highlighted the need for more critical engagement of anthropologists with hospitality, a call answered most recently in Lynch's (2017) analysis of welcome 'as a multifaceted phenomenon pervading everyday life' (Lynch 2017: 177). Equally, narrative approaches have found their way into hospitality and tourism studies (Lichrou et al. 2008; Tusseyadiah et al. 2010), though primarily as a research method, rather than as an 'analytical strategy' (Hansen 2012: 710). What Hansen offers, however, is a perspective that combines culture and narrative as anthropological concepts as a means of interpreting the history of a business organisation. This approach might be equally useful when applied to the history of a business community.

Hansen's view of culture and narrative owes much to the same social sciences that underpin much of critical hospitality thought. Drawing inspiration from sociologists such as Grant McCracken (1986), and anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz (1973), Hansen points to the significance of values, ideas and beliefs in understanding the ways in which businesses are developed and sustained, and the circumstances of their success or decline (Hansen 2014, 2012: 694-5). Following Lipartito (1995), he links his work on culture to the definition set down by Geertz: '[m]an is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs' (Geertz cited in Hansen 2012: 694). The links between society and culture are strongly reciprocal, culture is not something 'possessed' by an organisation or community, rather it is the lens through which they see their world, understand it and give it meaning (Hansen 2012: 694-5). Emphasis on the 'cultural turn' means that history becomes more socially oriented, more focused on the activities of actors, their interaction with artefacts, and with the environment, with the institutions they have created and the circumstances of their world (Fass 2003: 39). A cultural approach means creating 'our own constructions of other people's constructions of what

they and their compatriots are up to.’ (Geertz 1973: 5). Patterns of behaviour and reciprocal understanding are created and sustained in ways which might be strengthening, but which might also prove to be destructive or disabling. A cultural approach to the history of Strathpeffer Spa will help us to understand how those who lived in, worked in, and visited, Strathpeffer Spa interpreted the village, its role and purpose, and to understand the consequences of this over time.

Of course, as Hansen notes, analysing culture is ‘not an experimental science in search of laws, but an interpretive one in search of meaning’ (Geertz 1973: 5). Interpreting meaning requires an exploration of language, for it is through language – through narrative – that we interpret the world (Hall 1999). The links between culture and narrative are explicit: it is narrative that gives meaning and significance to rituals, activities and artefacts; narrative that shapes individual and collective identity. At the same time those self-same artefacts, rituals and activities support the narratives that give them significance (Hansen 2014). For Hansen, therefore, narratives are ‘the basic instruments for ordering reality, assigning causality and constructing meaning’. They are ‘shared and collective’ and ‘shape collective identity’ (Hansen 2012: 696-7). They can be empowering and cohesive, forging organisational, community, regional or national identities. But they can also become constraining; they can result in what Eichengreen and Temin have called a *mentalité*, whereby actors become unable to see any way of behaving other than that dictated by the prevailing narrative (Eichengreen and Temin 2010: 371). Narratives might work at a global, national or local level. Eichengreen and Temin’s work focuses on the Great Depression and international adherence to the gold standard, for instance, while Hansen’s work is an exploration of organisational culture, and of company narratives within a firm (Hansen 2007). We suggest that the cultural and narrative approach may prove equally illuminating when applied to a community, in this case one which existed

almost solely for the purposes of hospitality, and ‘to meet the various needs of health seekers’ (Fortescue-Fox 1896: vii).

## 2.2. Clusters, networks and communities.

We refer to Strathpeffer Spa in collective terms: describing it as a ‘hospitality community’, the narrative that sustains it as a ‘community narrative.’ Hansen uses the term ‘community’ when describing the possibilities of the narrative approach (Hansen 2012: 701), though he does not address a community himself. There is a long tradition amongst business historians, as well as sociologists of tourism and hospitality, of considering communities as discrete entities worthy of examination. Studies of business communities are extant – coal mining, mill settlements, textile villages, fishing villages, for example, all have their own histories, in Scotland as elsewhere. Historical studies of ‘business clusters’ are also not uncommon, such as McIntyre et al.’s work on the Hunter Valley wine producers (McIntyre et al. 2013). In relation to hospitality and tourism, the idea of ‘tourism areas’ and hospitality ‘networks’ have also attracted scholarly attention. Of particular relevance here is Walton’s (2014a) analysis of the development of the hotel and spa resort Mondaritz Balneario, which he describes as an ‘industrial colony’, a ‘self-contained economy and society ... a locus for the validation and reproduction of social and political capital.’ (Walton 2014a: 1047). Walton likens the spa complex to an aristocratic stately home: ‘a focus for ostentatious hospitality and recreational activity, an outpost of metropolitan sophistication in a bucolic setting, and a provider of opportunities for local people’ (Walton 2014a: 1048). Focusing on a wider locality, Cirer-Costa has examined Majorca as a tourism cluster (Cirer-Costa 2014), and Garay and Canoves have looked at Catalonia, as a ‘tourism area’ from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the start of the

21<sup>st</sup> (Garay and Canoves 2011). From sociology and tourism studies, work by Tinsley and Lynch (2001), Grangsjö (2003) and Tinsley and Lynch (2007) have demonstrated the importance of networks within close-knit rural communities, and have observed the interdependent nature of businesses in a tourism destination, while Hamilton and Alexander have considered the role of community engagement in the regeneration of social places, recognising the importance of community co-creation if local tourism undertakings are to succeed (Hamilton and Alexander 2013). What these studies have in common is an emphasis on community, on co-operation, and on the symbiotic nature of interrelated small-business practices in localities where the provision of hospitality is the principal business undertaking. An examination of the 'community narrative' at Strathpeffer will not only provide a new way of thinking about the history of hospitality, but will also add a new dimension to our understanding of the life-cycle and dynamics of business- and hospitality-oriented communities.

### **2.3. Spas in history**

There are numerous histories of spas, not at all surprising given that the earliest spas predate Roman times. Spas have been explored from different historical perspectives and in different international contexts. In Europe in particular, the study of spas as places of health, leisure, philanthropy, and consumerism, has a particularly rich history. In the United Kingdom, Borsay (2000) has analysed the success of Georgian Bath in a medical and philanthropic context; Adams' (2015) study has updated the work of Porter (1990) and Hembury (1997), to give us a comprehensive history of the spa phenomenon in England from its mid-Victorian heyday to modern times; whilst Durie (2003a) and Bradley and Dupree (2001, 2003) and Dupree et al. (1997) have looked at the development of spa and hydro resorts in Scotland and their relationship

with medical professionalisation. Walton has done much to link spa development with tourism in the British, European and global context, with case studies, as well as edited collections (Walton, 2014a, 2014b, 2012b, also Bacon 1998); and there has been work that looks at resorts in France (Cossic and Galliou 2006; Mackamen 2001, 1998), Spain (Walton 2014a), as well as the spas of Eastern Europe, New Zealand and America (Steward 2000; Chambers 2003; Cameron and Cave 2013). Spas have variously been interpreted as sites of health (Bradley and Dupree 2003), leisure (Porter 1990) and philanthropy (Borsay 2000). They were places where town and country met (Borsay 2012); where the body was controlled and disciplined (Mackamen 2001); where middle class values were mediated and reinforced and the *habitus* of consumer society as described by Bourdieu was forged and consolidated (Chambers 2003; Mackamen 1998). The spa was where Simmel's social interactions took place – where what others thought, and what one thought that others thought, became all encompassing (Ashley and Orenstein 2007).

Spas have been pinpointed as locations where the lucrative business of 'health tourism' began (Mackamen 1998; Porter 1990; Connell 2006) and continues (Erfurt-Cooper and Cooper 2009; Smith and Puczko 2009, 2014), for it was at the spa, in all countries and contexts, that the invalid members of Veblen's 'leisure class' congregated (Adams 2015; Walton 2012; Chambers 2003; Frawley 2004; Hembry 1997). Living a life of unfettered consumption, along with the stress of city life, meant that fatigue and poor health were rife amongst the burgeoning bourgeoisie (Frawley 2004). The antidote for 'these inevitable ills' was the spa, a place of order and ritual, specifically designed, organised and marketed 'with a view to meeting ... the varied needs of the health seeker' (Fortescue-Fox 1896: vii).

Spas came in all shapes and sizes, and had their origins in a range of contexts. In Europe, and England, the larger and more well-established spas such as Spa, Baden Baden, Vichy, Bath, Leamington, Buxton and Harrogate had long histories as centres of health and leisure and had



grown into substantial towns by the late seventeenth century (Adams 2015). Others, such as Mondariz Balneario in Spain, and Woodville and Matlock in England, were founded in the mid nineteenth century by individual entrepreneurs – often these were not medical entrepreneurs – with customers drawn from the nearby industrialised cities of Manchester or Birmingham, or in the case of Mondariz, from all over Galicia (Adams 2012, 2015; Walton 2014a). In Scotland, the development of spas was small scale, restricted by poor infrastructure, lack of investment, a short summer season and robust competition from other more developed destinations (Durie 2006a). Of all the spas in Scotland – Durie cites 16 of them in existence in 1840 – only Strathpeffer was able to offer any meaningful competition to the spas of Britain and continental Europe (Durie 2006a: 433). Despite the wide ranging literature exploring the history of spas, only a sample of which had been noted above, none employs Hansen’s cultural and narrative approach (Hansen 2012).

### **3. Method and Sources**

Hansen (2012) and Walton (2010) emphasise the value of qualitative methods in business history, a view which fits well with the critical and qualitative agenda of much of critical hospitality research (Lynch et al. 2011). The value of micro-history must also be acknowledged, whereby culture, language, artefacts and activities are scrutinised for meaning. Micro-history ‘asks large questions in small spaces’ (Joyner 1999: 1; Szijarto 2002; Magnusson and Szijarto 2013), with the personal, and the local, becoming significant, and wider conclusions implied by detailed and intimate study (Levi 2003; Holt and Popp 2013). This study of Strathpeffer Spa draws upon the micro-historical approach, using a range of sources to make deductions about a

small locality, with a view to drawing wider conclusions about tourism and hospitality-based communities.

As is the case with all historical research, we are bound by the constraints of available sources. Walton (2012a, 2010), Pope (2000) and Durie (2012) have all stressed the fragmented and diverse nature of historical evidence for the historian of hospitality: business undertakings are often local, even domestic – such as the economies of small guest house owners, or family-run hotels – with records being patchy, partial or non-existent. The evidence obtained for this study is drawn from a wide collection of qualitative primary sources, which were examined over the course of a number of months: guidebooks, medical handbooks, newspapers, advertisements, letters, private correspondence, and private papers from the Cromartie Estate, all were used to shed light on the community narrative. Newspaper data bases and library catalogues were searched for contemporary printed sources. The Highland Archive Centre in Inverness provided hospital minute books, photographs and advertisements, whilst other printed sources were discovered in the medical pamphlets collection at the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh, and the National Library of Scotland. Family papers for the Cromartie Estate were located in the National Archives of Scotland, and permission was obtained from the Estate to go through private papers pertaining to the management of Strathpeffer Spa. Time was limited so as not to intrude on privacy, and three days intensive searching through the available family papers took place at Castle Leod, in Strathpeffer Spa. As with all historical research, a lot is read and a little gleaned. The approach is inductive: starting with Hansen's theory of culture and narrative as a 'means of constructing collective identity' (Hansen 2012: 697) and searching for evidence that would allow us to uncover and analyse the narratives at work in the spa village. By manually coding the data collected the themes outlined in the following sections – the aristocratic entrepreneur, the medical

entrepreneur, scenery and sport, hosts and visitors, ritual and custom, narrative voices – became clear.

#### **4. Strathpeffer Spa: Beginnings, material development and the aristocratic entrepreneur.**

To begin with, a description of the foundation of the village sets the scene for the emerging narrative themes. The project to commercialise the Strathpeffer sulphur springs and develop the surrounding land was, from the outset, an ambitious one. Owned by the Duke of Sutherland, the parish of Flodderty on the Cromarty Estate in the county of Ross-shire where the spa was located was ‘mountainous, wild and pastoral [with] long, dreary winters’ (Anon. 1861: 1175). The principal Scottish cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh were some 200 miles away, with (prior to 1888 and the opening of the railway bridge over the Firth of Forth) limited rail links with the more populous south (Butler 1975) (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1: LNER Tourist Routes in the Scottish Highlands, c. 1930 © National Railway Museum, London, Science and Society Picture Library. Strathpeffer Spa circled. Glasgow and Edinburgh can be seen in red near the bottom of the map.

Figure 1: LNER Tourist Routes in the Scottish Highlands, c. 1930 © National Science Museum. Strathpeffer Spa circled. Glasgow and Edinburgh can be seen in red near the bottom of the map.

The site of the spa village itself was unprepossessing: 'a marshy valley, occupied by stagnant waters, large reeds and a few stunted alders' (Groome 1894: 410). In 1819 the potential of the sulphur springs at Strathpeffer was noted, and a small wooden pump room erected (Barron 1903: 166). By 1820 the *Aberdeen Journal* noted upwards of 145 visitors – all but five of them from the local area – attending Strathpeffer over the course of the 'season' (May to October) (Anon. 1821: 4), and plans for 'a lodging house upon an extensive scale' were drawn up on behalf of the Estate the following year (Anon. 1818: 3). Little more was made of the venture until 1860, however, when the 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke gave '[a] sum of about £2,500' for the improvement of the Strathpeffer pump room and the building of lodging houses, post office and shops beside the Strathpeffer wells (Richards and Clough 1989: 269).

With the accession of the new Countess of Cromartie (and Duchess of Sutherland) in 1866, development proceeded more methodically. Under the direction of William Gunn, the factor (land agent) for the Cromartie Estate, from this date the land near the sulphur springs was feued (rented out) for the building of villas, hotels, shops and guesthouses, all with a view to servicing the hospitality needs of the spa-goers (Anon. 1866). The construction of the village – including pump room, bath house and Pavilion – was systematic, meticulous and well-planned. Each building was designed to look different to the other, with Italianate towers and balconies incorporated into the designs in the hope that 'the style ... [would] vividly recall ... some celebrated foreign spas' (Tubergen and van der Linden 2002: 274; Anon. 1889: 7; Manson 1881: 3). Five different types of water were made available in the Strathpeffer pump room – four strengths of sulphur water, and one of chalybeate (iron) (Fortescue-Fox 1896: 12-14). Nearby lawns were laid out for tennis and bowls; a cricket pitch, curling pond and golf course were created, ornamental gardens landscaped, trees planted and paths and roads improved in and around the new village, all for the convenience and enjoyment of visitors (Fortescue-Fox 1885).

The investment encouraged other stakeholders: in 1885 the Highland Railway Company opened a branch line and railway station in the village, bringing trains from London directly to the Spa every Tuesday during the summer, (Butt 1995; Butler 1975; Durie 2010; Vallance and Clinker 1971). In less than 40 years a ‘handsome and thriving little town’, planned and developed as a centre of health and hospitality, had emerged from the sulphurous mud of a highland cattle field (Anon. 1889: 7. See also figure 2 below). ‘[T]he enterprise of Her Grace in doing so much for the place’ was acknowledged by Strathpeffer residents: ‘[p]rivate enterprise has made Strathpeffer into “the Harrowgate [sic] of Scotland”’ (Anon. 1881: 3).

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Clearly, the village of Strathpeffer Spa was created solely for the purpose of selling the waters, and for the provision of food, drink and accommodation to those who sought them out. Of particular significance is the role of the Cromartie Estate in financing and directing the enterprise. The ending of the Highland clearances in the 1850s meant that alternative means of income generation were keenly required by many Scottish aristocratic families (Sheard and Dunning 2013: 51-55; Tindley 2010: 85 Holderness 2000: 183-4). Richards notes that the second Duke of Sutherland (1786 – 1861) was keen to develop ways of generating income that did not require involvement with heavy industry (Richards 1973: 284). By 1850 investment in the highlands was already underway, with the Sutherlands ‘sponsor[ing] the construction of the Highland railway to the extent of almost £¼ million’ (Richards 1973: 13). The development of Strathpeffer as a health resort was a natural adjunct to this kind of investment in an area that had seen resistance to clearances that had taken place on the Cromartie Estate as recently as 1853 (Anon. 1889: 7; Anon. 1881: 3; Richards 1973: 13).

As the owner of the spa, deciding on the layout of the village, the design of the buildings and gardens, and dictating the very purpose and function of the community, the Cromartie Estate was instrumental in defining and controlling the community narrative right from the outset.

Controlling Strathpeffer Spa's narrative (Hansen 2012: 698) added to the Estate's formal power, something which was of paramount concern to Scottish landed aristocracy throughout this period (Richards 1973: 284-5). The Estate remained closely involved with the organisation, appearance and purpose of the village, and with the running of the spa business, until both were sold in 1946. As we shall see, this long term interest in – and influence over – Strathpeffer Spa was to have profound consequences for the village's community narrative, and for the direction of its fortunes.

## 5. The medical entrepreneur

If the aristocratic entrepreneur was essential for establishing Strathpeffer Spa and defining its purpose (Anon. 1881: 3), the medical entrepreneur was an indispensable collaborator. The sulphur springs of Strathpeffer had been publicly referred to for the first time in 1772 (Munro 1772). Chemical analysis revealed them to be both sulphurous and chalybeate (iron), allowing Strathpeffer to offer a unique selling point: the 'strongest sulphur waters in Europe' (Kaye 1920, 32). Like other spa settlements, this emphasis on the waters' therapeutic properties was important for the commercial success of Strathpeffer and the community that grew up alongside it (Adams 2015: 5-6). Spa treatment relied heavily on quality and uniqueness of the springs, with the purchase and consumption of the waters a key component of treatment. Medical and scientific validation was essential if a spa was to thrive (Durie 2003a; Dupree et al. 1997). Granshaw describes medical men who chose spa work as a career as 'ambitious entrepreneurs, but something of outsiders' in the profession (Granshaw 1989: 202). For an enterprising doctor without connections who wished to make a career for himself, ensuring that 'the waters' might only be safely taken 'under advice' (Groome 1894: 406) allowed for the paid-for, controlled

administration of the mineral springs over a prolonged (and therefore lucrative) period of time (Mason 1881: 11). Professional success, without loss of legitimacy, was the hoped-for outcome. Dr David Manson, resident physician at Strathpeffer for more than ten years, Dr William Bruce, chief medical officer of health for Ross-shire and (in particular) Dr Robert Fortescue-Fox, resident physician at Strathpeffer Spa throughout the 1880s and 1890s, were key medical entrepreneurs at Strathpeffer, attaining both respectability and reputation for themselves in the process (Mowat 1981: 504; Adams 2015: 8). They were involved with all aspects of spa business, from therapeutics (including the development of new methods of taking the waters), the administration and day-to-day running of the village, and the planning and execution of marketing communications – sales promotion, public relations, promotional literature and advertising, all of which served to produce and reproduce Strathpeffer's narrative of health and hospitality (Manson 1884; Fortescue-Fox 1889; Kaye 1920).

Five different types of water were offered to health-seekers in the Strathpeffer pump room. Four wells offered sulphur water, all at varying strength, and one offered chalybeate spring water (Fortescue-Fox 1920: 12-14). As we have seen, the purchase and consumption of the waters for commercial gain was the sole purpose of Strathpeffer, and from the outset a persuasive 'health narrative' underpinned all public discourse pertaining to the village. Promoted robustly by the medical men employed by the Estate (Mayer, 1933), this discourse drew firmly on the language of science and medicine for rhetorical effect. Brochures, advertisements, and press releases detailed the manifold health benefits of Strathpeffer's waters. Citing 'Dr Medlock of London, Dr Murray Thomson of Glasgow ... Professor Christison ... and others' as experts in water analysis, the constituent minerals were outlined using technical language that gave the springs the magical allure of scientific approval (Manson 1866: 5; Kaye 1920: 18-22). Pamphlets and booklets (aimed predominantly at patients and 'invalids' as well as their doctors), extolled

the virtues of the spa and provided detailed explanation of what this actually meant for the health of the consumer. (Kaye 1920: 32-3; Manson 1884; Manson 1881; Fortescue-Fox 1889, Glynn Grylls 1908: 1-2, 186).

Drawing upon a widespread fascination with science as a means of commodifying health (Ueyama 2010), throughout the period the various ways of taking the waters dominated the spa's correspondence with the wider world. From simply drinking the sulphur waters – Strathpeffer Spa's original and unique purpose – other 'hydropathic' therapies were quickly developed, so that by the interwar period there were nineteen different types of bath and massage available. These included the Pulverisation Bath, Plombieres Treatment, Nauheim Bath, Radiant Heat Bath, Schwalbach Bath and Aeratone Bath (Kaye 1920: 32-3, 59-63; Anon. 1892: 141; Strathpeffer 1886: 20-38; Mitchell 1937). Promotional material explained the myriad 'electrical therapeutics' available, from the 'radio-active properties of the peat' in the 'Peat Bath' to the 'oscillatory nature' of the 'the High Frequency Current Bath' (Anon. 1922: 6; Anon. 1920: 3 Kaye 1920: 123-5). This highly-medicalised version of Strathpeffer was disseminated locally, nationally and internationally via pamphlets sent out to doctors 'at home and abroad', through advertisements and press releases in Scottish and British newspapers, and through international publications aimed at the European spa-going community (Anon. 1918: 3; Fortescue-Fox 1885).

## **6. Scenery and sport**

A cultural and narrative approach emphasises the importance of looking at a wide range of phenomena – artefacts, events, institutions, practices, even environment and geography (Hansen 2012). At Strathpeffer Spa, in addition to baths, douches and draughts of water,



Strathpeffer's medical men also ensured that various other elements and activities – highland air, quietude, scenery and a bracing climate, various sporting and outdoor pursuits – were also accorded healthful significance. Air was given added health-related value, being 'laden with the ozone of the Atlantic, clarified by its passage over miles of heather and mountain' and far removed from 'the exhalations of teeming millions further south' (Bruce, nd. c.1880: 157, Luke 1919). The climate – even the daylight (the 'solar radiation') – was invested with 'salubrious' properties, and the unruly Scottish landscape was tamed and civilised for the use of invalids, and disciplined into 'large gardens ... lawn tennis courts and croquet and bowling greens' (Anon. 1886b: 81; Anon. 1913: 6; Anon. c.1920: 119 and 135). Sport too was added to the litany of medicalised activities (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2010). In addition to tennis courts and a bowling green, Strathpeffer boasted a golf course, opportunities for angling and shooting, guided walks and motor car excursions, as well as 'guides and ponies to the summit of Ben Wyvis' (Anon. 1911a: 27-8; Anon. 1911b: 3; Anon. 1886b: 81). 'Outdoor amusements and exercise' were accorded therapeutic worth, their value to mind and body due to 'the stimulus they afford to the nervous system' (Manson 1866: 5). With all this healthfulness easily accessible, and advertised as being available from any hotel or guest house in the village, 'a more ideal spot for the treatment of an invalid could hardly be imagined' (Fortescue-Fox c.1918: 134).

As Durie notes, countryside sports, as well as climate and scenery, were 'central elements' in the promotion and perception of a distinct nineteenth century narrative, 'Scotland for health' (Durie 2003b: 86). And yet how did this narrative gain credence, how did it become embedded in the Scots' broader understanding of their countryside, and the world's perception of Scotland? Strathpeffer, as a micro-historical study, suggests some answers. Hansen explains: narratives allow actors to make sense of what they do. In so doing, they give meaning to the world around them, and to others, creating and recreating the structures and patterns that guide

the meanings they ascribe to their world (Hansen 2012: 695 and 700). Strathpeffer's medical men drew upon their professional status and the rhetoric of hydrotherapy to add legitimacy to the spa community's emerging narrative, ensuring that it emphasised the importance of health, and proffered the village as a means of achieving it. 'Strathpeffer for health', they suggested, should be the watchword of both residents and visitors alike (Cromartie 1887).

## 7. Hosts and visitors

The link between the 'health narrative' and its attendant forms of hospitality are implicit – in the ways the waters were promoted as favourable for the restoration of health, and the rendering of the rugged Scottish countryside into an environment that was accessible, welcoming and congenial to those in need of rest and rejuvenation. The links are also *explicit*, for the reception, welcome, and accommodation of guests, visitors, and strangers, were central to the success of the spa village (Fortescue-Fox 1886). During the peak months of the season, July and August, Strathpeffer was home to 'upwards of 800 invalids' (Fortescue-Fox 1885), many of whom were advised to stay in the village for 'six weeks, possibly longer' (Fortescue-Fox 1896). The accommodation required to house and cater for these numerous long-term 'strangers in the glen' (Anon. 1886a: 3) was extensive, largely comprising 'elegant villas ... containing suitable apartments for visitors ... who prefer to remain in the Strath for the season' (Anon. 1886a: 3). By 1914 there were seven hotels, the largest (The Highland Hotel) boasting 140 rooms; along with 43 villas, cottages and lodging houses all catering for visitors (Anon. 1914b: 3-5; Durie 2006a: 442). Advertisements listed their various advantages, a choice of words which resonated with the health narrative embedded within the interests of the village: 'fine high situation near wells

and baths', and 'comfortable boarding house. Invalid dietary skilfully attended to' are typical examples (Anon. 1914b: 8). The large hotels were no different, with 'invalid diet', 'healthful views', 'bracing climate', and 'private walkways to ... the wells' consistently advertised (Anon. 1881: 3 Anon. 1886b: 80-83; Anon. 1914b, 3). '[E]very modern comfort and convenience' was provided, with those twin pillars of healthful civilisation 'thorough ventilation and drainage' emphasised by hoteliers and medical men alike (Manson 1881: 4; Anon. 1886b: 80).

Berger has argued that the development of large hotels acted as a symbol of a nation's civilisation and urbanity (Berger 2011). Certainly, it was important to the residents of Strathpeffer that they could offer visitors the same luxuries and comforts as might be found in the more developed south, and Strathpeffer Spa existed as much for hospitality as it did for health – certainly it could not claim to provide the latter, without also offering the former (Manson, 1881: 4 - 6). Estate Factor William Gunn explained the connection between the two in material terms: '[t]he more the spa is developed, the more lodging accommodation we have ... In this way, the one is entirely dependent upon the other' (Gunn 1891: 20-38). The embodiment of this interdependency, might be seen in the (1897) winner of the local derby, the 'Strathpeffer Hoteliers Cup': a horse named 'Sulphur Boy' owned by the Ben Wyvis Hotel (Anon. 1897, 5).

To what extent did Strathpeffer's visitors contribute to, and strengthen, the community narrative? The English middle classes discovered the highlands during this period, allowing the hoteliers and guest house owners of Strathpeffer to draw on a growing mass of consumers (Smout 1983: 115). Hansen notes that 'humans ... make sense of the world by telling stories' and those stories then 'frame the way ... citizens ... see the world.' (Hansen, 2012: 696 -697). Robert Louis Stevenson, who stayed in the village at the Ben Wyvis Hotel in July 1880, vividly frames the 'invalid' world of Strathpeffer:

I had an evil day when I / To Strathpeffer drew anigh,

For there I found no human soul / But ogres occupied the whole.  
 They had, at first, a human air / In coats and flannel underwear  
 They rose and walked upon their feet / and filled their bellies full of meat.  
 They wiped their lips when they had done - / but they were ogres every one ...  
 By limp and totter, lisp and droop, / I singled each one from the group.  
 I knew them all as they went by - / I knew them by their blasted eye!  
 (Stevenson 1880, quoted in Stevenson 1911: 9).

Stevenson's assessment of the spa's visitors as a mob of venal epicureans plagued by ill health due to their own excess is supported by other, less partial, evidence (Fortescue-Fox 1885). Promotional literature, in which the link between mode of living and bad health was made explicit, reveals a specific market – what the *Ross-Shire Journal* vaguely referred to as 'the opulent' (Anon. 1900: 3) and who Fortescue-Fox repeatedly described as 'invalids' and 'health seekers' (Fortescue-Fox 1885; Fortescue-Fox 1896: vii). Health complaints were described as 'arising from the habits of modern civilised life', as well as from 'disturbing influences [such as] business anxieties and the electric telegraph' (Fortescue-Fox 1896: viii and 84; Anon c.1920: 129-131). The diseases catered for were those also associated with age and decadent living – twin luxuries of the middle classes, a distinct socio-economic group wealthy enough to be able to 'bring their own ... bath chairs' (Gunn 1885).

## 8. Ritual and custom

In addition to the importance of individuals (such as doctors, visitors and estate managers) and artefacts (such as advertisements, douches and bath chairs), Hansen also notes the importance

of ritual in the creation of narrative. At Strathpeffer Spa, as at so many other such middle-class health resorts, the nature of the ‘cure’ was planned and regulated in ritualistic form to ensure the maximum visibility of those in attendance. The pump room was open from 7:30am to 9am and then 12 to 1:30pm daily, the limited times at which the waters were dispensed encouraging the formation of crowds in the pump room, and allowing visitors to see and be seen (Anon. c.1920: 121-2). Other aspects of the cure – promenading whilst drinking the daily draught, walking, outdoor sports and, from the early twentieth century, motor car excursions, meant that ‘health-seekers’ sought health in the most organised, regular and visible ways possible (Fortescue-Fox 1889: 91-3). The consumption of associated philanthropic pursuits was an equally important middle-class ritual. As Adams remarks, ‘[c]harity was both fashionable and worthwhile, providing a vehicle for advertising the efficacy of the waters’ (Adams 2000: 0-1). Thus, another ‘scheme’ for the development of Strathpeffer Spa, and another way in which the ‘health narrative’ was made visible and sustained, was the foundation in 1897 of the Nicolson Mackenzie Memorial Hospital (Anon. 1897b, 1-2). Run by a committee of self-styled ‘promoters’, The Nicholson Mackenzie Memorial Hospital was ‘supported by voluntary contributions from visitors’ thereby adding to the emotional loyalty regular patrons might feel towards the spa (Anon. 1897b, 11-2 and 9-10). Middle-class philanthropists might display their names, and their munificence, to their fellow invalids via the annual list of subscribers.

The village narratives of health and hospitality, both of which were dear to the hearts of the middle classes and which they as a group could conspicuously enjoy (Frawley 2004; Adams 2015; Walton 2012), provided the frame through which the village and its purpose was perceived by its guests (Hansen 2012: 697). The rituals of the spa added to this dimension of the narrative. Including guests, only 354 residents are recorded in the 1901 census, whilst at peak season visitors outnumbered residents by some four to one (Anon. 1911a: 1002), so the smallness of the

village meant that it was almost impossible not to see, and be seen by, the resident middle-class invalids. The meanings ascribed to the various social rituals by visitors and residents – meanings which were reinforced and recreated by their highly visible nature –formed an essential part of the villages’ distinct community culture, recreating and sustaining the community narrative (Hansen 2012: 695).

## 9. Narrative voices

As noted above, embedded within any understanding of narrative is the important issue of power. As Hansen suggests, whoever controls what might be focused on or what might be left out of the community narrative is exercising power. Controlling the narrative invests whoever exercises formal power with legitimacy, and without legitimacy few such individuals would last for long (Hansen 2012: 698; Lipartito 1995: 11 and 14). Robert Fortescue-Fox, resident physician at Strathpeffer Spa from 1885 to 1905, and William Gunn, Factor and agent of the Cromartie Estate during the same period, are the foremost individuals in the creation of Strathpeffer’s community narrative.

Both men were employed by the Cromartie Estate. As such, they were engaged to create and sustain the health and hospitality narrative that had underpinned the foundation of Strathpeffer Spa in 1866. Fortescue-Fox was a singular voice from the early 1880s until well into the twentieth century (Fortescue-Fox 1933). Throughout his tenure as Resident Medical Officer he pushed for investment in the spa’s facilities, from the purchase of bath chairs, to the provision of gymnasium apparatus, and the renovation of the ‘douching accommodation’. He promoted the place tirelessly as a spa resort in pamphlets and press releases. He organised the visits of groups of European doctors and ‘Harley Street men’ in promotional tours of the facilities,

urged the Cromartie estate to improve the roads and pathways around the village for the comfort and safety of infirm guests, and was instrumental in the foundation of the Memorial Hospital (Cromartie 1887, Gunn, 1891; Blunt-Mackenzie 1933; Manson 1884; Fortescue-Fox 1889; Kaye 1920). Even many years after he had retired, his opinion was still sought by the Estate, as they struggled to find ways of making the spa, and the village, thrive once more (Blunt-Mackenzie 1933 and Mitchell, 1937).

William Gunn was senior director at the Strathpeffer Hotel Company (the limited company set up to administer the running of the Ben Wyvis Hotel – the village’s largest hotel up to 1912). In addition, his role as Factor saw him orchestrating new building works at the spa, acting as agent in the feuing of the land in the village for the Estate, managing the spa accounts, liaising between the Estate and guest-house owners, organising public events as well as marketing and advertising, and generally taking the spa ‘in hand’ to ensure its financial success (Gunn 1891). As *The Scotsman* noted, ‘much of the energy shown in improving the attractions of the Strath [was due to] to Mr Gunn, the factor’ (Anon. 1881: 3). Working on behalf of the estate for so many years, Gunn became something of an over-mighty subject. His involvement with the most luxurious hotel in the village (the Ben Wyvis Hotel) led to conflict with other, smaller guest houses (Gunn 1891). He developed a ‘hasty and intemperate manner’, and was described as ‘having had his own way in the management [of the spa] too long ... tries to assume a position beyond that of factor’ (Black, 1893; Anon. 1886e).

The role of individuals can be of great significance, allowing us to understand a world view that might prove vital in shaping the way in which an organisation frames itself and its place in the world (Hansen 2012; 699 and 711). As noted above, narratives can be constraining, preventing participants from seeing the world in a different way. The narratives adhered to by significant, influential individuals are ‘important factors in constricting organizational culture

and identity, creating organizational inertia, path dependence and blind spots' (Hansen 2012: 700). Both Fortescue-Fox and Gunn were committed to the 'health narrative' as a means of success for Strathpeffer – its spa, its community, and all associated business interests. William Gunn, in particular, was insistent: 'the more the spa is developed the more prosperous and popular it becomes ... this source of revenue is sure and, so to speak, perpetual, and the more the spa is developed the more demand we have' (Gunn 1891). He was vocal in his confidence that 'the attractions of the place as a health resort are of great value', and there was no doubt in his mind that 'Strathpeffer will have a successful future ... Increase of revenue is certain' (Gunn 1893). This belief in the value of 'Strathpeffer for health' was so deeply embedded in the village's internal narrative that any other means of developing the place was inconceivable to those involved in its day-to-day running. The success of Strathpeffer Spa as a destination – at least until 1914 – meant that the health narrative was doggedly adhered to. The importance of broadening the village's narrative to include other leisure pursuits was suggested: as early as 1885 Fortescue-Fox wrote to Gunn stressing the need to 'increase the efficiency of Strathpeffer as a pleasure resort' (Fortescue-Fox 1885). It is interesting to note that William Gunn, over-mighty subject and principal point of contact with the Estate, did not reply (Gunn 1885).

## 10. Decline

Throughout the period covered by this paper the prevailing narrative within the Strathpeffer community was what I have termed a 'health narrative', with all interests focused upon the spa and the success of the village as a middle-class health resort. As a result, Strathpeffer Spa operated as a successful spa business, and the village thrived, between 1866 and 1914 the number of invalids and health-seekers coming to Strathpeffer in an average season numbering over 800 (Fortescue-Fox 1885). Predominantly Scottish, but also English, with a



small number from Europe and the Empire (Fortescue-Fox 1885), during these years Strathpeffer Spa was the principal Scottish spa, its name ranking alongside prosperous English and European resorts (Anon. 1881: 3). Along with drawings from the pump room and rental from the refreshment rooms, by 1891 the yearly takings of the spa and its associated buildings, owned in their entirety by the Cromartie Estate, amounted to over £1800 (over £200,000) (Fortescue-Fox 1885; Gunn 1891, Gunn, 1893; [www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com)). In 1893 a valuation of Strathpeffer Spa in its entirety was undertaken (spa, feus, leaseholds, feuing grounds and property), and a value of £64,134, 6s and 6d was arrived at (Gunn 1893), a figure that might be averaged today at over £7m. ([www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com))

Although this emphasis on health and hospitality allowed the community to thrive, it had clear implications for the downward economic trajectory Strathpeffer experienced between the wars. Of course, there were a number of reasons for the decline of Strathpeffer Spa's economic fortunes post 1914 – disruption to train services, the remoteness of the village, the poor roads, the use of hotels and the Pavilion by the military during both world wars, the decline in wealth and dominance of the middle classes – all impacted upon the village, its therapeutic function, and the various hotels and guest houses that depended upon it, and all spas suffered a decline in fortunes after the first world war (Walton 2014) . Press releases from Strathpeffer implied that business went on as usual despite the outbreak of war, the *Ross-shire Journal* reporting that '[t]he work at the Pump Room continues as if nothing had happened' (Anon. 1914b: 3). Yet other voices were not so sanguine, with the *Highland News* predicting in 1914 that 'stark ruin may face the hotel keepers [of Strathpeffer]'. The hope that the hordes of people usually intent on travelling to the European spas would now 'flock to the north' also proved to be in vain (Anon. 1914a: 8).

Here, the cultural and narrative approach is instructive. As we have seen, Hansen argues that narratives produce inertia; they are often 'path dependent' and can result in an unwillingness

to see the world in a different way (Hansen 2012: 716). We can see this clearly at Strathpeffer during the years that followed the First World War, when the health narrative remained undimmed, regardless of overwhelming evidence that the spa could no longer be sustained as a lucrative business venture. Takings at the pump room declined (Cameron 1935). The question ‘could the place be revived so as to rank as a modern spa?’ dominated the Estate’s private correspondence during the 1920s and ‘30s (Fortescue-Fox 1933). The spa’s resident doctor retired, and a replacement could not be found. Doctors were pursued by the Estate, but not even those who had fled from Nazi Germany could be persuaded to come to Strathpeffer (Mayer 1933). The suggestion, in 1937, that a swimming pool might be a popular and worthwhile leisure venture was dismissed by Blunt-Mackenzie (director of the spa and husband to the new countess of Cromartie) in favour of more exclusive undertakings that drew once more on the ‘health narrative’, and were designed to appeal to Strathpeffer’s traditional customer base of bourgeois invalids: the purchase of the ‘aeratone’ therapeutic bath and the improvement of the douche rooms (Blunt-Mackenzie 1933, Mitchell 1937).

The Highland Railway, with so much invested in the success of the village – a branch line from 1885 and, from 1912, a 140 bed-roomed hotel – also adhered to the ‘health narrative’. A railway poster from c.1920 bore a colourful illustration of the crowded pump room (including a nurse-like figure dispensing the waters to a crowd of opulently dressed ladies and gentlemen) beside the words ‘Strathpeffer Spa: The Fountain of Health’. The village was described as being ‘for rest and recuperation’, with its principal attraction ‘the strongest sulphur waters in Europe’ (see figure 2, below).

[figure 2 about here. ]

Figure 2: Strathpeffer Spa, Highland Railway railway poster, c. 1920 © © National Railway Museum, London, Science and Society Picture Library.

But who, by 1920, wanted to spend six weeks in northern Scotland sipping sulphur water in the company of invalids? It is interesting to note that after 1924, when promotion of Strathpeffer as a destination became the business of the London Midland and Scottish – a national rather than a local railway company – a more general perspective was emphasised: transport posters from LMS were free of the constraints of the ‘health narrative’, and described the village simply as ‘Sweet Strathpeffer Spa, The Highland Resort’ (See figure 3 below). Equally tellingly, a second LMS advertisement stating ‘all the best spas are on the LMS’ listed all spas serviced by LMS locomotives – apart from Strathpeffer. This was not well-received by the Estate: ‘It appears they don’t like us,’ remarked Blunt-Mackenzie darkly (Fortescue-Fox 1933). In 1933 private correspondence from the Cromartie Estate gloomily described Strathpeffer as ‘a bankrupt and discredited show’ (Fortescue-Fox 1933). Three years later a proposal from the Estate to keep the pump room open all year in a final bid to increase revenue was ‘turned down by boarding house keepers’ (Anon. 1936: 8). Perhaps they, at least, could see the futility of the undertaking. In 1946, the village, and its spa, was put up for auction.

[Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3: Strathpeffer Spa The Highland Resort, LMS railway poster c.1925. © National Railway Museum, London, Science and Society Picture Library.

Hansen tells us that, ‘[f]rom a narrative point of view an organisation or nation or community or individual does not have only one history. Quite the contrary, an organisation’s history can be reframed by remembering some things and forgetting others. From this

**Commented [w4]:** These figures need to be referenced in the text itself ... and I am now wondering whether these might work better earlier in the article as illustrations of the spa/village and the narratives you reference.

I have referenced them in the text. I believe they should really go at the end when I am discussing the way the narrative changed.

perspective, when an organisation needs to change, then it needs to change the story it tells about itself' (Hansen 2012: 701). And yet, recognising the 'need to change' in the first place is paramount if a narrative is also to change. It is evident that at Strathpeffer, those who dominated the community narrative – Fortescue-Fox, Gunn, and latterly Blunt-Mackenzie (under advice from Fortescue-Fox) – did not recognise this need. Hansen argues that narratives can be fruitful, and lead to success – the income generated by Strathpeffer Spa prior to 1914 is evidence of this. But they can also become constraining; they can result in what Eichengreen and Temin have described as a *mentalité*, whereby actors become unable to see any way of behaving other than that dictated by the prevailing narrative (Eichengreen and Temin 2010: 371).

Walton has analysed the growth and long term success of Spain's Mondariz Balneario bottling plant and spa and found that it consistently succeeded in attracting consumers despite changes in the nature of demand and other exigencies (Walton 2014). Similarly, Adams argues that the spas of England did not decline, but found new ways of presenting themselves to a leisured public (Adams 2015: 27). At Strathpeffer, this proved not to be the case. Certainly, there were suggestions that a 'leisure / pleasure narrative' might profitably be pursued: in 1885 (Fortescue-Fox 1885; Gunn, 1885), and again in the early twentieth century ('Strathpeffer has the ideal climate for a *holiday* and health resort' (Anon. c.1920: 131) (my italics). But these narratives remained undeveloped. Advertising for the spa and for its lodging houses and hotels, as well as other forms of propaganda, remained devoted to the interests of middle-class invalids, rather than searching out new types of consumer – those in search of the leisure and pleasure of a highland holiday. In 1932, the Secretary of State for Scotland emphasised the importance of tourism for the future of the Scottish economy, stating that 'Scotland should get special consideration in this matter [which is] of vital importance in the highlands' (Anon. 1932). But 'tourism' equated with leisure, and with the masses, not with the medical treatment of chronic

health complaints suffered by the wealthy middle classes. By the interwar period the patronage of an aristocratic landowner (the Cromartie Estate and their representatives) was a naturally conservative force, holding Strathpeffer back from developing a more progressive community narrative – one which might have been prepared to embrace the less hierarchical and more evanescent needs of the tourist, the holiday maker and the day tripper.

## 11. Conclusions

This paper has endeavoured to contribute to the critical hospitality agenda by embracing a multi-disciplinary approach and demonstrating how the history of a hospitality-oriented community might be analysed and interpreted. The cultural and narrative approach developed by Hansen (2007, 2012, 2014) and applied here in the context of Strathpeffer Spa, suggests a way of using history as a means of understanding how and why a business community thrives and declines. It answers Walton's call for more historical work into the history of hospitality (Walton 2012a) and adds to work extant that addresses spas from a critical hospitality perspective (Cameron and Cave 2013). The cultural and narrative approach taken here demonstrates the importance of studying whole communities, the concept of the community narrative being of value as a theoretical and managerial tool which helps us to understand how and why a village dependent upon a particular industry might succeed, decline, revive or fail. The cultural and narrative approach can thus prove useful in our quest to understanding the forces which make a community sustainable, adding to work cited earlier – Walton (2014a), Hamilton and Alexander (2013), MacIntyre et al. (2013), Tinsley and Lynch (2007) – that seeks to explore the relationships and economies of rural communities based on tourism and hospitality, or on a single business activity. The application of this approach to

other communities, or in other hospitality and tourism contexts, would be of value to academics and practitioners alike.

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