

BLUE SAIL ▶

VISITORS PLACES DESTINATIONS

MAIDSTONE SHARED STORY

MAY 2015

1 THE IDEA OF A SHARED STORY™

The most successful places have a simple Shared Story to tell. It's a commonly agreed way of describing the place, that everyone uses when they're planning how to invest in improvements or new experiences, and when they're talking to people who don't know the place.

It's a short and simple narrative that makes it clear what is special and different about the place. But it mustn't overpromise. It must go with the grain of the place, and be authentic and true. It focuses on **the distinctive qualities** that capture the essence of the place: **it isn't a list** of everything that's on offer.

If everyone uses the same broad ideas to *develop* the place, and then uses some of the same concepts and phrases to *talk about* the place externally, the image of Maidstone, and the actual experiences in the place, will be much stronger. And that will mean more impact, and more visitors. It will also raise positive awareness among other external people you are trying to reach with positive messages about the place.

We're not suggesting that the offer or marketing by all the various organisations, agencies and businesses in the area should be the same – far from it. Marketing communications – the tone of voice and vocabulary – will be different for different markets.

But the Shared Story should provide strong themes, ideas and inspiration that can be reflected in marketing and development. We hope stakeholders will use components from it to bring out what is special and different about this area, and to develop their offer. This will build a stronger, clearer picture in the marketplace – a 'shorthand' for the place. And it will inspire people to look for the next level of information.

The Story should set the agenda for developing and managing the destination and will now be used to guide the DMP's Action Planning stage.

Blue Sail has helped to develop the Maidstone Story by:

- ▶ Looking at what is currently being said and written about the place – by the tourism agencies, local businesses, travel writers and visitors
- ▶ Working with stakeholders in a creative workshop to explore what they believe is special & different about the place
- ▶ Applying our knowledge about what differentiates places in the crowded and competitive visitor marketplace
- ▶ Testing and discussing a first draft with the DMP Project Group before producing this final version.

2 THE MAIDSTONE STORY

This is the Shared Story for Maidstone. For annotations (explaining choices of words, phrases and emphases), see the next section.

At the heart of the Garden of England is Kent's historic county town of Maidstone, set in a region of wide fertile river valleys and ancient woodlands, dotted with prosperous villages. Less than an hour from London and you're in another, gentler world ...

The busy county town itself – the site of a famous battle from the English Civil War – stretches across one of England's great rivers, the Medway. To the north is the Pilgrim's Way, an ancient route from London to Canterbury along the tops of the North Downs. To the south is the gentle rolling landscape of the Kent Weald, with its oasts, orchards and vines ...

There's a strong Kentish feel to Maidstone and its villages ... the ragstone walls, the weatherboarding, the Kent peg tiles, the green hop ales, the soft fruit and top fruit ... apples and cobnuts, and bowls of cherries at the farm gate. The county town's roots may be Roman and medieval, but you could say the countryside – with its timbered 16th century houses – is quintessential Tudor England: it was Henry VIII, after all, who ordered the cherries to be planted, and who first called this "the Garden of England". And Leeds Castle – just east of the county town and known as "the loveliest castle in the world" – was home to six medieval queens then transformed into a fairytale Tudor palace.

This area at Kent's heart is the natural place to stay when visiting the county – half way between the channel ports and the capital city. It's a great base for exploring – along the Medway on a river cruise, hiring a boat or canoe, or walking and cycling beside the river. Following the Blossom Trail in the spring. Visiting vineyards in the autumn. Enjoying the best of Kent produce in contemporary restaurants and gastro pubs. It's Kent's capital for big events too – with tens of thousands at a time coming here for the South East's biggest pop concerts, classical extravaganzas, and business shows. And always within easy reach are Canterbury, Chartwell, Hever, Sissinghurst, Romney Marsh, and the coast.

3 WHY THESE WORDS, PHRASES & THEMES?

Para 1: The Story opens with the very positive imagery of “heart” and “Garden of England”. It uses “historic county town” to give Maidstone status. Then it links immediately with the rural. It mentions “prosperous” villages as this suggests there is a good quality hospitality infrastructure (places to stay and to eat). It positions the area as close to the capital, but a world away in terms of leisure and relaxation.

Para 2: This para focuses on Maidstone’s history and its river position. “Busy county town” suggests somewhere with the buzz and amenities of modern life (without overpromising ... the Story is about stand-out features for visitors compared to other destinations). The Story gives the River Medway status as “one of England’s great rivers”. “Ancient route” builds on the history of the area and locates Maidstone between London and Canterbury – two places with very high awareness. This para mentions “North Downs” and “Kent Weald” – both of which have salience as quality rural areas. “Oasts, orchards and vines” are all very positive and distinctive images, and directly linked to Kent.

Para 3: A key message for the Story is “a strong Kentish feel”. The list of Kentish attributes here is distinctive and appeals to the senses. A second very strong claim to stake (after “Kentish”) is “quintessential Tudor England”. Of course, like most of England, the area’s history is much longer and more complex than simply “Tudor”. But “Tudor” has a strong positive resonance, and this claim allows Maidstone to make the link with history and countryside, and to unpack the epithet Garden of England, giving it its historic provenance. While avoiding listing attractions, it’s important to include Leeds in the story – it’s one of Kent’s international icons. Leeds Castle has a long and varied history, but the focus here is on the medieval and Tudor links – linking it to both town and countryside.

Para 4: The final para focuses on location, and the idea of using this area as a base from which to explore the wider area – which research shows is a key reason for choosing it. While this is great for the accommodation providers, Maidstone doesn’t want to lose all the additional visitor spend so it first lists the things you can do *within* the borough, mentioning the outdoors activities, contemporary hospitality offer, and events – all three things that have a strong appeal to visitors. Many places have contemporary dining – so here this is linked to the strong local produce. Most places have events, so here the focus is on the large-scale events – this is distinctive, and enables Maidstone to stake a claim to being “Kent’s capital”, linking back to the “county town” status. Finally the Story mentions some of the famous place names around Maidstone that can easily be reached from here – gaining kudos by association.

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