Plymouth: A Holiday Destination for American Tourists

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In the 1920s, Plymouth's Publicity Committee wanted to encourage more American tourists to come to Plymouth, but how did they pitch their publicity? The Committee asked two questions:

1. How do we publicise Plymouth as a holiday destination for Americans?
2. When American passengers embark in Plymouth from the Cunard Line or other large ships, how do we encouraging them to stay for a few days before leaving for London?

Their publicity mostly concentrated on Americans seeing Plymouth as an attractive place where their ancestors, the Pilgrim Fathers, set sailed from. In 1920 as the tercentenary anniversary approached, they began their publicity campaign in earnest. Plymouth as the final port of departure for the Mayflower in 1620 was one of the key sites for the 300th anniversary celebrations.

In January 1920, Mayor Lovell R. Dunstan was in contact with the secretary of the Anglo-American Society in London, and in April 1920 Plymouth undertook to provide accommodation for 10,000 pilgrims and oversea visitors in connection with the Mayflower celebrations. However, in July 1920, Mayor Mr Dunstan was appealing for help with accommodation for their American visitors. In fact, lack of accommodation for visitors was a problem that Plymouth faced during the 1920s; there were not enough hotels or other accommodation in Plymouth.

Plymouth Mercantile Association publicity (sending guidebooks to Florida, Maryland, Illinois, New Jersey, New York City and Montana) was certainly reaping dividends as Americans landing at Plymouth in 1925 no longer immediately left for London; they often spent two or three days in Plymouth sightseeing.

By 10 July 1925, a reporter from the *Western Morning News* was asking whether Plymouth could induce Americans who land in their port to stay in the town:

> There are undoubtedly sufficient attractions in and around Plymouth to assure any visitors from across the Atlantic an interesting sojourn, for apart from its historical connections, the town is a wonderful centre for tourists who wish to see the unequalled beauties of the district. I suggest not distributing pamphlets at the docks as the passengers already had their itinerary mapped out and, although some stay a day or two in the port, they are comparatively few. [1]

[1] *Western Morning News*, 10 July 1925.

The solution would be, he suggested, contacting American tourist agencies as attractive tours are planned by them in advance (with most of the travelling public coming by one of these tours) and they go where the agency tells them.

> If the agencies could be convinced, and they would not want much convincing, that Plymouth would be a good spot to stop for a few days, hundreds of tourists would come to Plymouth and the town would greatly benefit.
>
> The only way to get at these agencies is to start a propaganda campaign in America. Once the tourist thinks of stopping at Plymouth he would inquire at his agency and if the agency had been sufficiently circularised they would be impressed and include Plymouth in their itinerary. Some of the American tourist agencies already realise the advantages of a stay in the Westcountry as is evidenced by the fact that the travellers under an agency who landed at Plymouth from Montreal on Monday spent a whole day in Plymouth and then proceeded to Torquay, Dawlish, Teignmouth, Newton Abbot and Exeter arriving in London after three days in the West.
>
> Mr Edgar Bowden, secretary to the Plymouth Chamber of Commerce, told me yesterday that one idea they had in mind was to open a bureau at the Docks if the Great Western Railway Company were agreeable where passengers could get all information about Plymouth.
>
> Lack of accommodation was mentioned again, a day or two ago over 800 passengers landed in one day from New York at Plymouth, the majority of them coming under the auspices of one big agency or another. If these 800 were due to stop at Plymouth for a day or two, where would they be accommodated? All the hotels in the town could not put up 800 visitors at once in the middle of the week.[2]

The previous article evoked a response from one reader:

> Sir; In reference to your article 'Plymouth's Appeal to America' may I say that I am an American, making my twelfth visit to England my first visit being in 1891. This is the first time I have ever visited Plymouth. I find it an ideal place from which to visit South West Devon and Eastern Cornwall. The hotel accommodation is quite up to that of Liverpool and a long way ahead of Southampton.
>
> It would be a waste of time to meet American tourists on arrival, but the tourist offices in New York should be given more information as to the advantages of your city. I would also suggest informing the Automobile Club of America, New York office, as they not only look after those who bring their cars but others as well. The proper literature left with the principal hotels in the leading American cities would be advisable. You can rest assured that I will advertise the advantage of landing in Plymouth and making that city the headquarters for at least a week to all of my friends.
>
> Archibald D Davis, Hoe Mansion Hotel.[3]

And another response from two Americans:

> Sir, Your journal recently spoke of Plymouth as a place that should attract Americans. Will you kindly permit two American women, who for the last four years have spent most of August in Plymouth to express gratitude for its unfailing charm? We have found here one of the best hotels in Great Britain; a surrounding loveliness of sea, river, woodland and moor

[2] Ibid.

[3] *Western Morning News*, 14 July 1925.

that is inexhaustible; a wealth of old churches and on rainy days there are the Museum and the Library, in whose invaluable Devon and Cornwall reference-room I have spent scores of happy hours.

In his book "Certain Delightful of English Towns," our eminent man of Letters William D. Howells has given pages to the praise of Plymouth, this hotel and the Hoe. He thought the Hoe one of the finest marine parades in Europe. Long may it so continue, preserving its greenness and avoiding excrescences that are unseemly, then, if motor cycles subdue their hysteria and dogs dwelling near the Hoe restrain their noisiness, how restful, as well as interesting, this Plymouth will be!

H.H. The Grand Hotel.[4]

In 1925 Mr W. T. Coath wrote to the newspaper saying what an excellent season he had with his Eddystone Cars. He believed their increased popularity was due to advertising in the *Western Morning News* and *Evening Herald*, both sources having bringing remarkable results. He reported that in the early part of the season, the American tourists availed themselves extensively of the opportunity of seeing the countryside by this firm's charabancs.[5]

Figure 1: American Hoteliers visiting Plymouth with the Mayor, courtesy of Chris Robinson.[6]

[4] *Western Morning News*, 5 August 1925.
[5] *Western Morning News*, 3 October 1925.
[6] Chris Robinson's Plymouth, <https://chrisrobinson.co.uk>.

In 1926 a group of American hoteliers visited Plymouth. In May 1926, the Mayor of Plymouth read a letter from Mr William A. Ryan of 51 Linden Street, Boston, sending his goodwill and enclosing a photograph of the Mayor and Mayoress (Mr and Mrs R. J. Mitchell) presenting a bouquet to the Mayoress of New York (Mrs James J. Walker) on occasion of the arrival of the American hoteliers when they came to Plymouth. He said that in Plymouth they had the most remarkable outpouring of hospitality that has ever occurred.[7]

In August 1926, Mr R. J. Mitchell, Mayor, received a letter from Maurice Hemsing from 218 Brady Street, Iowa, saying:

> I shall never forget the warm-hearted hospitality and delightful courtesies you extended to me as a member of the American Hotel Association European Tour. Anticipating only a cordial reception I was overwhelmed by the wonderful entertainments, unexpected thrills, unbounded joys and happiness I experienced.[8]

In August 1926, the Savoy Picture House in Plymouth showed a special advertising film showing beauty spots and points of historical interest in Plymouth. This film, taken by the Plymouth Incorporated Mercantile Association, was to be sent to America for the American Hotel Keepers' Association, who had visited Plymouth during that year. They had been so impressed by the town's beauties that they asked if the film might be taken to show their friends in America.

Commencing with some excellent 'shots' with remarkable power and clarity are those places associated with the fame of Plymouth. The Hoe Promenade is a masterpiece of screen photography. The Citadel Gate, Plymouth Sound, Drake's Island, St Andrew's Church and the Royal Hotel are all produced with delightful effect, while exceptionally fine and coloured glimpses of the Barbican, the Mayflower stone, the arrival of American airmen at the Barbican and splendid 'shots' of the Hoe appeared on the screen in Pathé colours.[9]

An article in November of that year declared advertising was necessary:

> Plymouth enjoys many advantages as a health resort. If it is to hold its own with both English and Continental holiday centres the town's attractions must be advertised. At present Plymouth is hiding its light under a bushel. It is even more happily placed than other resorts by virtue of the fact that thousands of tourists from America and other countries land here every year. Yet because they do not know of the advantages to be derived from a stay in the town they pass through to London and other centres. If these and other holidaymakers are to be induced to stay in the town, which justly claims to be the Centre of a Hundred Tours, the facilities offered to the tourist must be broadcast.[10]

In March 1927, the Mayor believed that 30,000 Americans would visit England and that it was up to Plymouth, as its shop window, to entice those hundreds of passengers who will disembark at the port to stay in the West. The Great Western Railway Company opened a publicity

[7] *Western Morning News*, 22 May 1926.
[8] *Western Morning News*, 27 August 1926.
[9] *The Bioscope*, 12 August 1926.
[10] *Western Morning News*, 13 November 1926.

department in Fifth Avenue, New York, and commenced a publicity campaign for the benefit of American tourists who intended to visit Britain.

Mr Ernest Underhill of the Plymouth Publicity Committee said that in the past the average American visitor confined his stay to the interval between landing from the liner in the Sound and departing within an hour or so on the start of a hectic tour around London, Stratford-on-Avon, Bath and other centres, but he wanted to entice them to stay awhile in Plymouth. 'Plymouth enjoys a name with which to conjure in America and citizens of the States are every ready to display interest in a town with which the history of the New World is so closely bound.'

The Mayor said:

> No other resort in the West has such a wealth of scenery to offer. The wild magnificence of Dartmoor and the charm of the rivers offer the holiday-seeker a variety of beauties and to the American Plymouth is a great centre of attraction, because from its shores set sail the Pilgrim Fathers.[11]

In February 1928, Plymouth Publicity Committee reported that it was decided to send as early as possible a large supply of guidebooks and advertising matter relating to Plymouth to the United States, in order to encourage American tourists to land at the port and stay.[12]

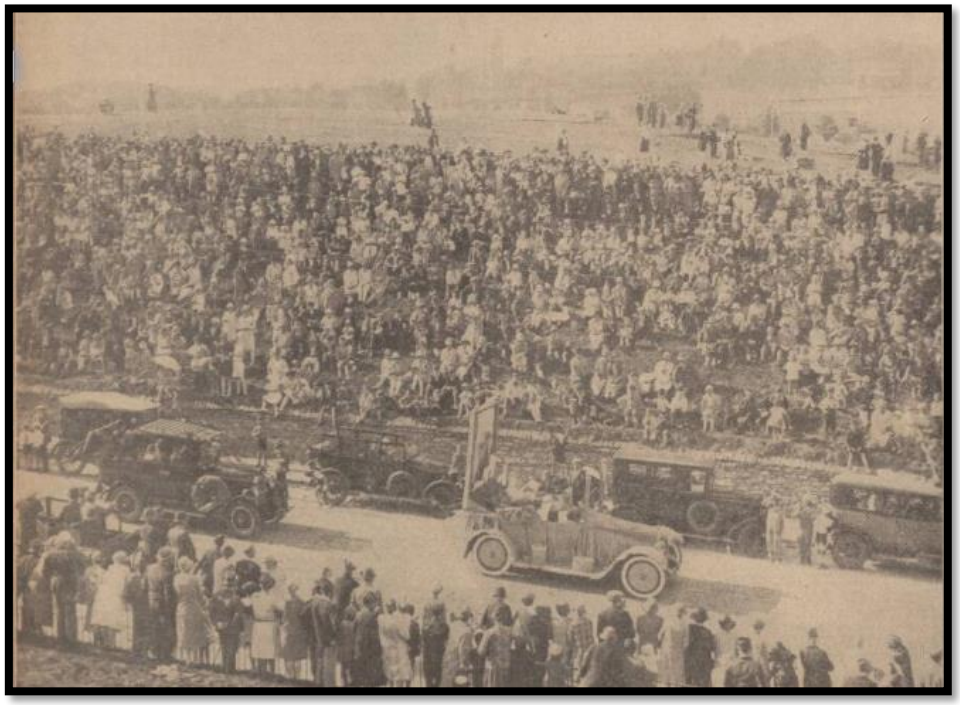

Figure 2: Every point of vantage was eagerly seized by the crowds who gathered to witness the decorated car parade in Plymouth Week. This photo depicts the scene on the slopes of the brickfields during the passing of the procession.[13]

[11] *Western Morning News*, 24 March, 1927.
[12] *Western Morning News*, 1 February 1928.
[13] *Western Morning News*, 12 July 1928.

In July 1928, Mr Wilber J. Carr, assistant secretary for State at Washington, who, with his wife, had been staying for a few days at the Grand Hotel, entered with zest into the spirit of Plymouth Week and as the guests of Lady Astor and Dr A. B. Cooke (American consul), have attended all its attractions. Mr Carr had been particularly impressed by the manner in which the event was organised and said to a reporter, 'I spent a most delightful day yesterday watching the opening of your Plymouth Week and those wonderful exercises at Home Park. I consider it a most creditable event and it seems to have gone off most satisfactorily.'

Figure 3: Mr Wilbur J Carr (left), with Mrs Wilbur Carr and Dr A. B. Cooke, admiring the beauties of the Hoe.[14]

In October 1928, a group of American tourists were at a dinner of the Master Bakers' Association at Plymouth. The Mayor, Mr Priest said he would like to see Plymouth derive more benefit from the Atlantic traffic. Plymouth, he said, was the stepping-off ground from America to the continent of Europe, and he should like to see the thousands of passengers calling at Plymouth induced to spend at least a few days in the city:

> It is to me a matter for regret that Americans who land at Plymouth should be whisked away by ocean mail trains without the city having the opportunity of entertaining them for a while and it would be a good thing for trade generally if those passengers stayed with us for a time.[15]

In January 1929, Mr R. A. J. Walling gave a talk on his recent tour in America at Plymouth Rotary Club. Asked by a Rotarian if he found Plymouth sufficiently known in America, Mr

[14] *Western Morning News*, 11 July 1928.
[15] *Western Morning News*, 18 October 1928.

Walling replied that a vast number of people were interested in the city from the historical point of view:

> If Plymouth could get effective publicity in America, especially on the advantage of people landing at Plymouth it would be helpful. How to secure that publicity was another question. To pitch 10,000 booklets or leaflets into America would be like dropping a farthing in a pond. Publicity would require a great deal of organisation and expenditure, but he was quite sure the results would be good.[16]

In February 1929, a group of businessmen in Plymouth were introducing a scheme for Devon to publicise to Americans and colonials who responded to the 'Come to Britain' movement the attractions that Devon has to offer.

[16] *Western Morning News*, 19 January 1929.