

Northumberland Holiday July 2025

Day 1 - Barnard Castle

Day 1 and I am due to meet up with fellow travellers the majority of whom I don't know. I'd taken the mantle from Prue who had been an excellent tour guide, so I had some big shoes to fill. I didn't need to worry as in true u3a fashion everyone was so friendly it was an easy transition.

After a comfort stop, we soon arrived at the Bowes-Lyon museum. With a magnificent façade and a very tight entrance for our driver Jake (we all breathed in as he navigated the entrance earning a well-deserved hand of applause) we disembarked and walked into this wonderful building. The museum did not disappoint with 3 guides waiting to take us round. An excellent addition was fold up stools for members who found standing (and there was a lot of it) difficult. The stools were then folded up and carried as we moved on. Our guide was full of quirky knowledge such as the very small figurine of a monk carrying a bundle of whatever he needed. It was only when you looked behind him that you could see the bundle had a pair of shapely ankles!

The restaurant was very nice with a great menu that everyone seemed to be enjoying. On the holidays I ran at another u3a there was a tradition of soup and a roll for lunch which I was more than happy to continue as were the other 4 members on my table.

It was then time to move on to our hotel in Newcastle

Pam Simpson

Day 2 – Hadrian's Wall

Roman Empire for nearly 300 years. Kevin, our Ancient Briton guide wearing full Celtish armour, met us by the lake at Cawfield. He explained the functions of his apparel and his two swords. We climbed up to Mile Castle 42, high up in a commanding position and sat on the wall listening to Kevin explaining that Hadrian started to build his wall in 122AD with 12,000 soldiers along the whole length; it took less than 10 years to complete the 80 Roman miles (73 modern miles), with 80 Mile Castles along its length.

Next, we visited Vindolanda which was built south of the wall adjacent to another Mile Castle. We walked through the excavated remains of a small town where the Celts and the Romans appeared to have lived close to each other, followed by the Roman Fort where Kevin identified the most important buildings.

In the Vindolanda Museum we saw many artifacts excavated from the Roman occupation of the area including shoes, implements, coins, weapons, jewellery and pottery.

We returned to Newcastle via Hexham where we looked round the twelfth century Abbey, which has been the parish church of Hexham since the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1537.

Hugh Carter

Day 3 – Bamburgh and Coast

"I am Uhtred, son of Uhtred, Lord of Bebbanberg and I will reclaim what is mine. Destiny is all."

As someone whose nose is rarely out of a book, Bamburgh conjures up for me the lost Earldom of Uhtred the hero of Bernard Cornwall's Saxon Chronicles and the TV series the Last Kingdom.

We arrived in Bamburgh village on a beautiful summer day, The later rather large Norman Castle, looming above us guarding the coast in an overbearing manner, lightened by the sunlight. The village is very picturesque, featuring local stone, with shops, cafes and a pub.



We Bensons, Barnes and Rickerbys, followed our noses (signpost) and had a very pleasant walk to the blue flag beach, an expansive unblemished strand, edged by The Bamburgh Dunes, a site of Special Scientific Interest and patrolled by swooping birds, A welcome discovery was the Coffee Hut, serving a delicious blend, worth the walk for alone.

In the village a must visit for some was the Museum, dedicated to local legend, Grace Darling. The first purpose-built lifeboat was stationed at Bamburgh in 1786, but sadly no longer. England's most northerly, Bamburgh Lighthouse overlooks the bay and Farne Islands.

(I must also recommend series of Northumberland Detective Novels by L J Ross bear titles reflecting some of our trips, Bamburgh, and Belsay on that day alone. Unfortunately, Holy Island was not on our itinerary this trip.

Janet Benson

Day 4 – Bishop Auckland and Angel of the North

My pre-visit check of our itinerary and noting that Bishop Auckland, was 'a medium sized, former mining town', did not prepare me for it being so visually attractive. Equally impressive was its well organised visitor attraction package which covered the entrance fee to three separate attractions.

The town had an impressive main square, with well managed traffic lanes and drop off points. It was bordered by the visitor centre, the mining museum, incorporating a viewing tower, shops, cafes, a well visited (by the group) Wetherspoons, and Spanish art gallery the other side. At one end there was the crenelated archway to the Bishop of Durhams's Palace, and on the opposite side was the beginnings of the town's shopping street.

We were met by tourist office staff and led onto the driveway leading to the Bishop's Palace. The Palace was built on the side of a steep hill, with a garden wall on the righthand side, and the fantastic tiered terraced garden covering the valley side. On the left-hand side was the imposing palace itself, a bowling green and more gardens.

We all had a guided tour of the Bishops Palace, visiting first those grand stately rooms – the throne room and resplendent dining room and hearing about its alterations over time. We then toured the study, library and living quarters of former Bishops. In room, which was

once the sitting room of Bishop Wellby, a recording of him being interviewed on TV was playing. In it he was justifying his forthright views on Christianity and the virgin birth – which caused a scandal at that time.

Under the chapel was the newly created Faith Museum, showing evidence of the spread of Christianity throughout the ages, including the influence of the Northumbrian saints. There were four named gardens, Paradise Garden, Faith Garden, Bishop Cosin's Garden. However, the most spectacular garden and an example of gardening perfection, was the steeply terraced, walled garden.

Something that was unmissable, was the view of the surrounding countryside, from the viewing tower, attached to the mining museum. In this museum were some excellent paintings of pit workers underground, their cramped conditions in the tunnels and coal wagons on their tracks. These works were by a local artist to remind of conditions in former harder times.

In contrast to these mining scenes was the art displayed in the Spanish museum. It had portraits of the Spanish court in its golden era, a model tomb/shrine in Moorish style, plus typical Spanish design tiles, spread over several floors. Bishop Auckland was a town of contrasts and splendid sights and well worth visiting.

Cathy Platt

Day 5 – Ripon and Home

We joined our coach to travel home from Newcastle visiting Ripon, North Yorkshire. It is a small place to have such a large church at its heart. In medieval times Ripon was larger and more significant than places like Leeds and Sheffield. It was involved with the wool trade but was never touched by the Industrial Revolution.

Ripon was certainly hot when we arrived, temperature in the region of 30 degrees, but we were kept cool in Ripon Cathedral. The cathedral church, now known as St. Peter and St. Wilfrid dominates the city and surrounding countryside. Our guides were extremely knowledgeable. The cathedral has been welcoming people for over 1,350 years, since the time St. Wilfrid dedicated his first church to St. Peter. We visited Wilfrid's Anglo-Saxon crypt, the oldest built fabric of all England's cathedrals. It is believed to have been consecrated in 672. Standing in the Quire looking up and back towards the organ is a wooden hand believed to be unique to Ripon Cathedral. It dates from 1695 and allowed the organist, at that time seated directly above and with his back to the choir, to beat time. Apparently, it still works, however, with modern technology it is now redundant as the organist can now watch the conductor via a television monitor.



Encompassing, old with the new the cathedral has several modern works of art. Three of Harold Gosney's statues depicting Mary and Christ at different stages of his pilgrimage. I have included a photo of Mother and Infant (1999). It stands 5 feet 2 inches tall, sheet copper pieces were cut, annealed, folded and beaten to relate to the natural form.

The metalwork of the Holy Spirit chapel, including the screen, was the work of the renowned silversmith Leslie Durbin and was erected in 1970.

We rejoined our coach after having some free time in this charming city for our homeward journey.

Tricia Barnes