



# Durham Discoveries



Photo credit: Raby Estates.

• Experience incredible new developments at Raby Castle.

**Come and see what this amazing county has to offer, with a packed two-night fam trip in July including a spectacular show and fascinating attractions.**

If you think you know Durham - think again! Recent years have seen significant enhancements to the county's group travel offer, and with even more exciting developments set to open this spring and beyond, there has never been a better time to visit.

Running from 12th - 14th July 2024, this Reader Club familiarisation visit, hosted by Discover Durham, includes a special pre-season preview of *Kynren - An Epic Tale of England*, and visits to The Auckland Project, Beamish, The Living Museum of the North, Raby Castle, and The Bowes Museum. It costs £50 per person, which includes entry to all of these amazing places, plus transport throughout the weekend to each attraction, as well as evening meals and a lunch on Saturday 13th July.

The small fee also covers two nights' accommodation at the welcoming Park Head Hotel, which is conveniently located in Bishop Auckland and is an ideal base for group visits to the county.

## Here's what you can expect...

### Kynren - An Epic Tale of England

The lucky readers coming along will enjoy a special preview performance of *Kynren - An Epic Tale of England* before the 2024 season officially opens. The spectacular, multi-award winning, live outdoor theatre production, features a 1,000-strong volunteer cast and crew, performed on a gigantic 7.5-acre stage.



Photo credit: Beamish Museum.

• Step into the past as you explore what's new at Beamish, The Living Museum of the North.



You will watch legends come to life and travel through 2,000 years of history, while hearing about the new Viking Village pre-show experience, a recreation of a ninth century village, complete with cookhouse, cottages and a working blacksmith's forge.

### The Auckland Project

Together we will also get the chance to discover Auckland Castle, once home to the mighty Prince Bishops. In addition, the group will explore The Auckland Project's unique collection of heritage attractions, galleries and gardens. The Spanish Gallery was recently named North East England's Small Visitor Attraction of the Year, and the Faith Museum, the latest addition, opened in October and explores 6,000 years of British history through the lens of faith.



Photo credit: Visit County Durham.

- The Bowes Museum is just one of the many stops on this packed itinerary.

### Beamish, The Living Museum of the North

The incredible developments at Beamish Museum continue, with more additions to the already fantastic range of experiences set to open this year. In the 1950s Town a toy shop, electrical store and cinema will be opening their doors. And a Georgian-themed tavern will tempt taste buds, as it becomes the latest in the museum's unique food and drink offer.

### The Rising at Raby Castle

Ambitious renovations and developments have been under way at Raby, one of the finest medieval castles in England, to create a visitor destination unlike any other. Our readers will experience the remodelled five-acre walled gardens, restored heritage buildings, stylish shopping and local food and drink.

### The Bowes Museum

Finally, discover outstanding collections of art, fashion and design which is all housed in the beautiful French-style Bowes Museum set in gardens and parkland. And after four years and more than 1,500 hours of painstaking work carried out by specialists, the iconic 250-year-old life-size Silver Swan, the only one in the world, is now wowing audiences once again with daily performances.

Be sure to join us on this fam visit, which is sure to tempt you into booking a follow up trip, so your whole group can enjoy the many delights of Durham. ■



- The Faith Museum explores 6,000 years of British history.

Photo credit: The Auckland Project.

## The details...

**Dates:** Friday 12th – Sunday 14th July 2024.

**Cost:** £50 per person.

**Visits on the trip:** Kynren – An Epic Tale of England | The Auckland Project | Beamish, the Living Museum of the North | Raby Castle | The Bowes Museum.

**Accommodation:** two nights' stay at the Park Head Hotel in Bishop Auckland.

**What else is included?:** transport throughout the weekend, as well as evening meals, breakfast on the Saturday and Sunday, plus lunch on the Saturday.

Our hosts have advised that there will be sufficient time for arrival and departure, and specific timings will be confirmed in due course.

**Deadline to apply:**  
**Sunday 26th May 2024.**

- You'll get to see a special performance of Kynren on the trip.



Photo credit: 11Arches.

## How Reader Club works

These fam trips provide group travel organisers with the chance to familiarise themselves with venues, attractions and destinations they feel may be of interest and suitable for their group. It's a 'try before you buy' scenario, and all GTOs are welcome, but please only join us if this is a viable option for your group.

Apply online, click to  
[groupeisureandtravel.com/readerclub](https://groupeisureandtravel.com/readerclub)

You can also scan this QR code using your smartphone's camera to access the application form directly.





# Discovering Durham: big, small, old and new

**Rob Yandell joined our group of readers as we explored Durham during a busy fam trip weekend.**

**A**s I departed Durham after a busy three days, I reflected on how many boxes had been ticked whilst visiting the county: convenient hotel close to all the attractions with easy coach parking; passionate, knowledgeable people who understood how to welcome groups; a varied mix of attractions all within a short distance and a fantastic guide.

I arrived at the Park Head Hotel, just outside Bishop Auckland, and met up with GTOs and coach tour operators, all eager to start exploring. We were welcomed by Sarah Johnson of Visit County Durham and introduced to our Blue Badge Guide, Anna Unger of Northern Secrets.

## The Auckland Project

The Auckland Project is a regeneration charity that is transforming Bishop Auckland and the surrounding area, with huge investment into attractions such as Auckland Castle and businesses, including the Park Head Hotel.

As we pulled up at Bishop Auckland Market Place, the regeneration was evident. Auckland Tower, which opened

## Reader comment...

*“Beamish Museum was the highlight for me. I didn’t know anything about the north but now I want to come back and bring customers.”*

**Isabelle Dudley, Three Star Coaches**

in 2018, immediately captures your attention. Its 15-metre-high viewing platform offers a great outlook and there is a free exhibition about the town’s history on the ground floor.

It was a short stroll to Auckland Castle, once the seat of the Prince Bishops of Durham and a reminder of how much power was afforded to them by the Norman Kings of England. The castle reopened in 2019 after a three-year restoration programme and has a story that stretches almost 1,000 years. The Auckland Project’s team provided a warm welcome and led us past the Walled Garden, one of three new gardens to open this year. The Great Garden will follow in 2025, as will a garden-focussed tour option.

St Peter’s Chapel is magnificent and as we made our way through the various rooms we saw the Zurbarán paintings and a link to the Spanish Gallery close by (like many of the stories we heard over the course of the weekend, it’s a good one). What may surprise some is that Auckland Castle

## Reader comment...

“We’ve had the most wonderful experience; we’ve been to places we haven’t been before. I would certainly bring a group and quite likely next year – I’ve already made enquiries.”

Margaret Thorpe, Knowle & Sevenoaks U3A

is now also home to the Faith Museum, which opened last year and has a remarkable collection of treasures and objects that tell the story of how faith has shaped lives and communities. It is an exceptional attraction with changing exhibitions, guided and curator tours.

Nearby and back on the Market Place was the Spanish Gallery, which opened in 2021, in possibly the most surprising place to find the UK’s first gallery dedicated to the art and culture of the Spanish Golden Age. There are masterpieces by the likes of El Greco and Murillo across four floors inside two magnificent Grade II listed buildings.

The variety of our afternoon continued across the road at the small and rather wonderful Mining Art Gallery which was the first attraction to open as part of The Auckland Project in 2017. It showcases not only works from the mining communities but art from those who worked in the mines themselves.



- There was plenty of history to explore at the Bowes Museum (top) and Raby Castle.

## A new chapter for a castle and a huge museum

Our second day began with a short coach journey to Raby Castle, built by the powerful Neville family in the 14th century.

Our guide, Nick shared a number of stories and explained why the oldest piece of furniture in this Medieval castle is from the early 18th century. As we took the tour we saw priceless paintings by Reynolds and Van Djik in the Dining Room, but it was the Baron’s Room that I was most struck by; it is quite something at 132-feet-long and is said to be the biggest single room in a private residence in England.

What was particularly exciting about our visit was being able to see The Rising, the biggest restoration project at Raby Castle for decades which has brought a host of new features and attractions. The Walled Garden has been reimaged, while the Vinery Restaurant adds a stylish and airy recreation of the historic glass house with private spaces for groups.

Previously hidden from view, iconic heritage buildings have been opened up with the Coach House and Stables boasting original 18th century features and now telling the story of the castle’s history as well as introducing the sights, sounds and landscapes of the estate. There is also a small retail space.

A new coach park is due to open and the flow down into The Rising will be a great introduction to the visitor experience. I would recommend visiting the small exhibition space prior to walking down to the castle. We could have stayed at Raby longer but it was time for another ‘wow’ moment as we pulled up at the Bowes Museum at Barnard Castle.

It is as if you have been transported to France as you look up at a building more akin to a palace, packed full of incredible collections of art, design, textiles and ceramics. The story of its founders is as remarkable as its galleries, and we even got to see the ‘Silver Swan Performance’.

Our readers enjoyed a tasty afternoon tea (groups can book) in one of the museum’s palatial spaces over-looking the gardens. For art enthusiasts, in particular, this is a museum you can truly lose yourself in and, as a group, you will be well looked after with various tours and talks available.

### Get help with Discover Durham

Through the website you will find group information, offers and contact details for the attractions included in the itinerary, as well as other group-friendly attractions and accommodation in the county, and tour guides. There is also a monthly email newsletter with the latest group travel news for the county.

[www.discoverdurham.co.uk](http://www.discoverdurham.co.uk)





• Not even the weather could deter the group on their visits to Kynren and Beamish Museum.



Later, we took a scenic drive through the Pennines National Park, then had a little time at the hotel before a fantastic tapas dinner at El Castillo at the Spanish Gallery in Bishop Auckland.

## Show time with Kynren

The weather was not kind throughout a large portion of our weekend so I can confirm that you can enjoy Durham in all weathers and at any time of year. One of the biggest reasons many people visit in the summer is Kynren. The show has a cast and crew of 1,000 volunteers who create a very special show on a seven-and-a-half-acre-stage. Voted Best Event for Groups in 2023 by readers of Group Leisure & Travel, Kynren is produced by 11Arches, sister charity to The Auckland Project.

Its first season was back in 2016 and since then Kynren (which means 'generations') has grown. Its scale and production are spectacular, but it is the volunteers of all ages that make it truly special as they tell a range of stories across 2,000 years of history in front of 8,000 people. It was the highlight of the weekend for many in our group and my high expectations were exceeded, even if we were all wearing ponchos. Kynren usually has several shows across Saturday evenings between July and September and in 2025 they are set to add an exciting daytime offering.



## More photos and info from our trip

See more photos and find out what else you can do when visiting Durham on the Group Leisure & Travel website. Scan the QR code on your mobile device or go to: [www.groupleisureandtravel.com/readerclub](http://www.groupleisureandtravel.com/readerclub)

## Where we stayed: Park Head Hotel

Our three-star hotel, located just outside Bishop Auckland, was comfortable and convenient. It had a major refurbishment 18 months ago and is well-appointed alongside its nice design touches. The hotel is just one of the businesses to have benefitted from The Auckland Project and has 38 en-suite bedrooms, offering a good option for groups.

[www.parkheadhotel.co.uk](http://www.parkheadhotel.co.uk)

## A glimpse of Durham City and then Beamish Museum

Our first day started with a trip through Durham City where the new coach park was pointed out and we got to spy the cathedral and castle in the distance. We didn't spend any time in the city but with it being so close to everything we visited, it's an obvious itinerary addition for groups.

Then to our last stop: Beamish, The Living Museum of the North. I have always wanted to visit and what a place it is. I cannot imagine anyone going and not being bowled over by it, regardless of age. I would recommend the best part of a day to experience the sights, sounds and smells (even tastes), of the past. There is free entry for GTOs and coach drivers and reduced rates for groups of 15 or more.

We spent time exploring the 1900s town, wandering in and out of homes and shops. It was incredible; I have never been anywhere like it. History is all around you, from a 1950s hairdressers (yes, you can get a retro hairdo), to a bakery, pub and Suffragettes demonstration in the 1900s Town. There was so much more to see, such as the 1940s Farm, the 1900s Pit Village and the Colliery.

Like everywhere else, the team at Beamish Museum were so pleased to see us, to tell us how much they love welcoming groups, to explain the service and options available - that was the case all weekend. Yes, Durham loves groups and I can't think of one reason not to take yours, but a million why you should. ■