

County Durham

As you will know by now, no holiday or day out is complete for me unless I've rooted out a place of worship! The ways in which people have expressed their love of God in the past holds a fascination for me that I like to share with others.

In this series we have visited many remote churches that are within half a day's travel from Sedgley; however this story relates to a week's holiday in the farthest reaches of England - County Durham: due to its remoteness it's far less well known and visited by fewer people than closer locations such as the Lake District, Yorkshire and Lancashire. It is the 'Land of the Prince Bishops', who held the northernmost land of England for centuries as a bastion against the Scots.

At the end of April 2014 my wife Magda and I travelled north to a holiday cottage in Middleton-on-Teesdale. Leaving Sedgley at 11.30am, we took the M6 north, stopping twice, arriving at 4.30pm. Alas it rained most of the way!



Leny's Cottage, Middleton in Teesdale

We were delighted with the cottage: it was an old family house recently renovated by the owner, who also owns other holiday cottages in the area. It had a great kitchen and good selection of units old and new. There were lovely views from the windows - with sheep and newborn lambs in the field nearby.



The Silver Swan automaton at Bowes Museum

After a comfy night's sleep, it was still raining! We headed out to Barnard Castle and visited the Bowes Museum, where we had a good walk round and lunch in the cafe. The museum is best known for its grandeur, resembling a French chateau, and its emblematic silver swan, an 18th century automaton model that is activated each day at 1pm. Alas we didn't see it in action but it was very impressive in its cabinet nonetheless.



Ornamental gardens at the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle



Martin in front of the impressive frontage of the Bowes Museum, which resembles a French chateau.



The octagonal market hall/town gaol at Barnard Castle.

We parked back in the town of Barnard Castle and took a walk around, then went down to the river by the castle. At the bottom end of the town there's a very distinctive octagonal structure that has been used for various purposes over the centuries - including town gaol and as a market hall. I went into St Mary's church where a youth theatre group were rehearsing a production of Macbeth!



The village of Middleton-in-Teesdale, gateway to the North Pennine Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

On Sunday we walked around the village of Middleton on Teesdale which is close to where we were staying, collecting the Sunday paper and milk. The village is situated at the gateway to the North Pennines, an area of outstanding natural beauty. In the afternoon we headed off to Eggleston Hall and nursery gardens.



The ruins of 12th century Egglestone Abbey, built for the Premonstratensian Order of monks.



The 'White Canons' or Norbertians who founded the abbey at Egglestone.

We had lunch at the gardens and a walk around the plants and borders. We then drove to Egglestone Abbey, the ruins of a 12th century abbey built for the [Premonstratensian order](#), which is located close by an example of a medieval packhorse bridge.



Durham Cathedral.



The Sanctuary Knocker on the front door of the cathedral.



The shrine of St Cuthbert.



Tomb of the Venerable Bede.

On Monday we made for Durham and the Cathedral, which towers above the medieval city and where there are still echoes of the city's importance as the seat of the Prince Bishops who once governed this area. From 1836 the castle has housed University College, the foundation college of England's third oldest university. The most fascinating aspect of the cathedral from my point of view were the Shrine of St Cuthbert and the tomb of the Venerable Bede in the Galilee Chapel. There was a very good guided walking tour of the building that we tagged onto.



Where two dales meet, a view over Middle Teesdale and Lunedale.



High Force waterfall, on the River Tees.

Tuesday was the first day with any sunshine to shout about! We headed to High Force waterfall on the River Tees, where the river drops 21 metres over the Whin Sill into a plunge pool below. There is a 1/3 mile walk through woodland from a car park along a well maintained gravel path.



The stump of a 320 million year old fossilised tree at Stanhope.



12th century St Thomas's Church, Stanhope.



The ford and stepping stones at Stanhope.

Afterwards we drove through parts of the North Pennines, Weardale and into Stanhope where we saw the 12th century church of St Thomas. In the grounds there is an ancient relic of a fossil tree some 320 million years old. There is a beautiful walk along the river and a ford with stepping stones.



Spectacular portcullis at Raby Castle.

On Wednesday we spent the day at Raby Castle and went on a castle tour with probably the best guide we have ever come across.

The most memorable part was the chapel, with recent murals of some of the past occupants of the castle including [Cecily, the mother of Edward IV and Richard III](#), who was born at the castle (and whose character figured prominently in the BBC series *The White Queen* which was shown in 2013).

On Thursday it was cold and rained all day. We initially set out to visit the palace of the bishops at Bishop Auckland, but were nearly thwarted because the tourist signage was so poor.

We 'overshot' and ended up in Tony Blair's former constituency in Sedgefield, taking lunch in the newly built tourist centre at Hardwick Park, which is famous for its beautiful ornamental gardens and lake, Gothic ruin and Temple of Minerva. The Hall is now a hotel.



The spectacular chapel ceiling at the Palace of the Bishops.



The lectern and altar in the magnificent St Peter's chapel.

Finally getting back on track we retraced our route and followed the signs to the Auckland Castle, Palace of the Prince Bishops, one of the most important bishopal palaces in Europe.

Following the Norman Conquest and the Harrying of the North, the Bishop of Durham was granted exceptional powers to act as a political and military leader. With Auckland Castle as his seat of power in North East England, the King allowed him to raise taxes, mint coins and hold his own parliaments. Such royal privileges made the Bishop of Durham the second most powerful man in the country, ruling the area between the Tyne and the Tees.



The heraldic shields of the Prince Bishops of Durham, going back to the 12th century.

St Peter's Chapel is absolutely breathtaking. Looking upwards there is a stunningly intricate colourful painted roof. On the walls are the heraldic shields of the Bishops of Durham from the 12th century.



Portrait of Justin Welby, our current Archbishop of Canterbury.



The Zurbarán exhibition, portraits of the 12 sons of Jacob who founded the 12 tribes of Israel.

There is an exhibition of portraits of former Archbishops of Durham including Justin Welby and Michael Ramsay. There is also a Zurbarán exhibition which is quite majestic - thirteen exquisite paintings of Jacob and his twelve sons hang in a purpose built gallery at the Palace. The masterpieces are the work of Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664) and are among the most significant treasures of religious art in Europe. There is also a temporary exhibition about how religious art made Tudor England which runs till September 2014. It features a Book of Hours that belonged to Margaret Beaufort the 'Red Queen' and mother of Henry VII.



Tea in the library.



Our neighbours in the library/tea room were Jonathan Garnier Ruffer (left) and his business manager.

We spent our final moments at the Palace of the Bishops in the oak-panelled splendour of the library, reclining in sumptuous leather armchairs while sampling tea and cake. We were privileged, because on this occasion our neighbour on an adjoining table (having tea and talking with his business manager) was investment manager **Jonathan Garnier Ruffer** who in 2011 saved the Zurbaran paintings from being sold off with a donation of £15 million, placing the paintings, along with the Castle, in the care of the Auckland Castle Trust.

He is indeed the saviour of this illustrious attraction, which is undoubtedly the most impressive (and best interpreted) attraction of its kind that I have visited, here or abroad.

That was the last day of a very memorable visit to Durham. In contrast to the journey there, we came back via Scotch Corner and took the A1/M1 route back to the Midlands.

Martin and Magda Jones
May 2014

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Martin and Magda's trip to Lindisfarne in 2013:

[In Search of St Aidan and St Cuthbert](#)

