

A new welcome for coach tour operators from the Blackburn Market team of Anita Coupe, David Smith and Debra Houldsworth



Witches, chocolate and cheese

The Lancashire mill town of Blackburn may be more famous for its football team than its tourism offer. But as Stuart Render discovered, a new initiative is aiming to attract coach tour operators

The welcoming smile is enough to draw me closer to the counter. "Would you like to try some cheese?" The invitation comes from Michelle Ruby, the proprietor of Ruby's Cheese, one of 120 stalls on Blackburn Market. In front of her, hand-written labels promise an extensive range of cheesy delights, from the exotic - Sticky Toffee Cheddar, Pineapple Twist, or Applewood Smoked - to the somewhat more traditional - Wensleydale and Cranberry, and Colston Bassett Blue Stilton.

Michelle, whose products are mostly sourced from local producers, has had a stall on the market for 15 years. "We try to offer a few surprises," she says, offering me a piece of White Stilton, Mango and Ginger. "Since the Markets team launched the new tourism initiative, we've had more groups coming in."

Passing me a nice piece of Bradburys Bowland, a Lancashire cheese with apple, raisins and cinnamon, she says that if she spots an accent from out of town she will often ask where the person is from.

"We're seeing more people from other parts of north west England," she says, "and quite a few from Yorkshire. We have the town's largest selection of cheeses and I always have a few flavours for people to try. "We like to be a little bit different. It adds to the experience."

Michelle's reference to the new tourism initiative reminds me why I've come to Blackburn.

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, through its Blackburn Market team, is hosting a two-day familiarisation trip for group travel organisers and coach and tour operators. The trip has been organised by group travel specialists Steve Reed Tourism.

Anita Coupe is Events Co-ordinator with the Blackburn Market team and explains the thinking behind the visit.

"Earlier this year we launched a one-stop-shop for coach tour planners," she says. "We can suggest attractions for tours coming into the area, and then help tour planners create their own itineraries. We're delighted to offer coach companies and group travel organisers the opportunity to combine a visit to the market with a visit to a number of exceptional local attractions."



Samlesbury Hall, home of what must surely be one of the most entertaining group tours in the country



Coaches visiting Houghton Tower – which these days is a manor house, not a tower – drop off by the main entrance

Anita explains that a typical itinerary will see the coach drop its passengers off close to the market.

"A new multi-million pound bus and coach station development next door to the market is due to be completed at the end of the year," she says. "It will provide a new gateway to the town, with coaches dropping off in dedicated coach bays. We will welcome the group to the market and give them complimentary drinks vouchers. There will then be time to shop, as well as watching any events and demonstrations that we have on. We can offer a fascinating walking tour of the town or a coach trip to one of our local attractions such as Samlesbury Hall, Houghton Tower, The Chocolate House or a canal boat cruise."

The market team recognises the importance of looking after the coach driver.

"The driver can park the coach for free, and then get a free lunch," says Anita. "The driver and courier, or tour manager, can also take advantage of a number of discount offers."

While there's little doubt about the market team's enthusiasm to work closely with tour operators, what about the market itself?

Located in the centre of the town, Blackburn Market occupies the ground floor of the newly refurbished £66m Mall shopping centre. Markets can often be a hit and miss affair, but this one is different. There's a contemporary and modern feel to the place, but with everything you might expect to find in a traditional market. There's a dedicated food and drink court and a 100-seat cafe (Butler's) where groups can have reserved seating.

David Smith is Blackburn Market's Commercial Manager.

"We believe we have something rather special here," he says. "Having coaches drop off close-by, and next door when the new bus and coach station opens, means we're ideally placed for groups starting their visit to the town and the area. My deputy, Debra Houldsworth, Anita and myself are keen to hear from tour planners looking to find out what we have to offer."

Not your usual cathedral

A short walk from the market brings you to the Cathedral Church of St Mary the Virgin, otherwise known as Blackburn Cathedral. From the outside it looks as traditional as most other cathedrals. But step inside and you find yourself in a light, airy and, to this writer's mind at least, an unexpected interior.

The Anglican cathedral exhibits a blend of early Georgian and 20th century architecture. As well as being a place of prayer and hospitality, it celebrates the arts, with displays of modern art that are both surprising and thought provoking in equal measure.

On this visit there's an opportunity to see 'Fallen', an installation by Martin Walters that features 100,000 poppies. Above the west door is 'Christ The Worker', a giant and imposing sculpture by artist John Hayward. It's well worth visiting the cathedral's website (www.blackburncathedral.com) to see examples of these and many of the other designs. Events Co-ordinator Phil Hunwick, who's responsible for group visits, explains that the cathedral charges £40 per group for

a daytime tour. "The tour takes around 90 minutes and we can offer a general or bespoke tour depending on the specific needs of the group," he says. "We also offer lunchtime concerts that take place between 1pm and 4pm on most Wednesdays during school term time. These can be anything from an organ recital to instrumentalists and singers."

The cathedral's Cafe in the Crypt is open on Tuesday to Friday from 9am to 2.30pm offering cooked meals, sandwiches, homemade cakes and hot and cold drinks.

The cathedral sits on the edge of a site currently undergoing a major transformation. The redevelopment of what's known, not altogether unsurprisingly, as the Blackburn Cathedral Quarter, will feature a new 70-seat cafe and a new Premier Inn.

Murder most horrid

Unusually for a trip of this kind, our hosts, the Blackburn Market team of David, Debra and Anita, are accompanying us throughout. It demonstrates their commitment to the coach and groups market and is good to see.

As we leave the cathedral we're met by a rather unusual sight. There's a gentlemen wearing a full Victorian outfit, complete with top hat.

Anita is clearly enjoying the surprised look on our faces. Our confusion is short-lived however as we soon discover this is Simon Entwistle, tour guide and professional storyteller, and the proprietor of Top Hat Tours.

Simon leads us round the centre of Blackburn, stopping at regular intervals to regale us with tales of mystery, murder, intrigue, and legend. What's particularly noticeable is the way Simon projects his voice, delivering his speeches with clarity, and animating them in true theatrical style. It's a joy to watch, but it never goes over the top. There are many other tour guides who could learn a thing or two from Simon's excellent style.

His expertise expands well beyond Blackburn and he can accompany groups on guided walks exploring haunted ginnels, cobbled streets and burial grounds in Clitheroe, Whalley, Slaidburn, Skipton and Kendal.

Chocolate delights

Rejoining our tour coach we arrive at what appears, on first inspection, to be a rather non-descript industrial estate. Glenfield Park is just a mile or so from junction six of the M65, and a short trip from the centre of Blackburn.

However, first impressions are deceptive, because as we leave the coach and head for a doorway we spot the signs for The Chocolate House. Established in 1983, this small family-run business specialises in making hand-made chocolates, truffles, fudge and speciality items.

Susie Bristow is the proprietor and chocolatier. Her husband Cliff and mother Shirley make up the family team.

"I started making fudge in my mother's kitchen over 25 years ago as a hobby," she says. "After a while I added chocolates, developing different types of centres and testing them out on grateful relatives and friends! My wonderful hobby grew, and today we now use around five

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tonnes of pure Belgian chocolate a year.’

A visit lasts around one and a half hours and is split into four parts. Groups are welcomed with a hot drink and the opportunity to sample chocolate buttons and truffle. Susie then presents an informative 30-minute talk and demonstration that shows how she makes, coats and decorates the chocolates. It’s fascinating stuff, but there’s an added bonus in store.

As you enter the cosy presentation room, and there’s room for up to 35 people at a time, you’re given a raffle ticket. At the end of Susie’s presentation, all the chocolates that have been made are raffled off. It’s a nice touch. The third part of the visit gives us the opportunity to



A demonstration of the art of chocolate making at The Chocolate House is given by Susie Bristow



If you like cheese...! Michelle Ruby of Ruby's Cheese offers shoppers an eclectic mix of flavours



Cruising along: Gina Halden and Jenny Kirkwood from Greatdays



Samlesbury Hall's Lauren Catterall with 'witchy' tour guide Joanne Halliwell

see the chocolate-making kitchen where there are more examples of Susie’s skills.

Last, but certainly not least, there’s a small shop where you can buy a remarkable range of what we might call choccy delights.

In a world of large commercial visitor attractions, The Chocolate House is a rather special find. Unlike most chocolate factories, there are no separate production and visitor areas. Susie and her family alternate between intensive chocolate making and welcoming groups. Tours are available at 10.30am or 2.30pm, and there’s a special evening tour at 7.30pm. Rates for the daytime tours are a very reasonable £4.75 per person for groups of 20 or more. You can also book afternoon tea and a home-made buffet for £5.50 per person.

“Everything is made fresh,” says Susie, “whether it’s the biscuits, cake or chocolate mousse. There’s very little walking and there are no steps, and coaches park for free outside the front door.”

Witch tour is best?

Samlesbury Hall, on the road from Blackburn to Preston, is a half timbered black and white medieval house built in 1325 as a family home, and is our evening destination on our fam visit.

As a building it makes for a fascinating destination for a group visit.

But there’s something else that makes this a stand-out attraction, and the something else is a witch!

In 1612, three women from the village of Samlesbury – Jane Southworth, Jennet Bierley, and Ellen Bierley – were accused by 14-year-old Grace Sowerbutts of practising witchcraft. Their trial at Lancaster Assizes was one in a series of witch trials that included the well known Pendle witches. All three of the Samlesbury women were acquitted when grace’s testimony was found to be false.

Today, Jane Southworth has been brought back to life by actress and tour guide Joanne Halliwell.

She greets us in the main hall, wearing her trademark ‘skin infection’ make-up (a sight familiar to many visitors at tourism trade shows around the country), and in full costume.

After dinner, she invites us on a tour of the Hall, mixing humour and history in what has to be one of the best tour experiences in the land!

Be warned though, some of the content is a touch ribald, and full of innuendo. Joanne says that she adjusts her presentation to reflect the type of group and how a group responds to the early part of the presentations. Clearly our group is up for anything as she soon has David Smith (Blackburn Market) and Steve Reed (Steve Reed Tourism) on their knees, bending over, or lying on the ground. They seem to

enjoy it rather too much! Samlesbury also offers separate history, ghost and candlelight tours. Prices range from £6 to £10 per person for groups of 20 or more and include admission to the Hall.

There’s a range of catering options and coach drivers receive free admission and a free meal. Coaches, which need to access the Hall via the golf centre entrance, park for free.

Samlesbury Hall makes a refreshing change from many other old houses and stately homes, with no roped off areas, no ‘do not touch’ signs, and no strategically placed pieces of holly or other spiky items to stop you sitting on chairs.

The attraction promotes itself as an opportunity to be “transported

back in time where ghosts walk the rooms and history comes alive”.

Combine a visit with the unique and very wonderful skills of Joanne Halliwell and you’re likely to have a very satisfied group.

A tower that isn’t

On day two of our fam trip, with the Blackburn Market team of David, Debra and Anita still accompanying the group of coach operators and group travel organisers, we arrive at Hoghton Tower.

Located just six miles west of Blackburn, Hoghton Tower is generally regarded as being one of the finest Renaissance buildings in the country.

The ancestral home of the de Hoghton family, the Grade 1 listed building is actually a fortified 16th century hilltop manor house and the only baronial hall in Lancashire.

Guided tours, which last for around an hour and a half, include the impressive Tudor bedroom and the Great Hall. There are underground passages and dungeons and a permanent collection of Dolls Houses.

A word of caution though. There are many steps so this isn’t a tour for those less able on their feet. Hoghton Tower is also well known for its grounds and Walled Gardens. The Vaio Tea Room offers home-made cakes and hot and cold meals.

Hoghton is open to the public on selected days, but pre-booked groups are welcome all year round on Monday to Thursday and on some Sundays and Fridays. Tours usually take place at 10am or 3.30pm.

The group rate, which includes the house tour and gardens, and is available for a minimum of 20, is £6 for adults (retired) and £8 for other adults. The prices include Gift Aid.

Gentle cruising

Meandering through the Lancashire countryside, the Leeds Liverpool Canal offers tour planners the opportunity to include a relaxing cruise in a Blackburn or Lancashire itinerary.

Canal Boat Cruises of Riley Green, another attraction and location within a few minutes’ drive from Blackburn and all the attractions mentioned so far, operates Romance, a 40-seat restaurant boat that provides the ideal location for a delightful afternoon tea.

The company offers a two or three-hour cruise from Riley Green Marina, passing through delightful countryside. Depending on your choice of cruise you’ll pass through Withnell Fold Nature Reserve, past an old paper mill, through the lovely hamlet of Wheelton and Johnson Hillocks before descending two locks. A typical two-hour cruise with

tea and coffee is £11 per person for groups of 20 or more. A Lancashire Cream Tea and sandwiches costs £15.50 per person.

Accommodation option

On this visit we stay at the Samlesbury Hotel, located close to junction 31 of the M6 between Preston and Blackburn. Formerly the Swallow, and now part of Squire Hotels, which also owns The Hydro at Windermere and Etrop Grange at Manchester Airport, the four star, 80 bedroom hotel reopened in December 2013 after a multi-million pound refurbishment. Mark Illingworth, the hotel’s General Manager, says: “Our hotel is well located for groups, near to many top attractions and destinations, and

very handy for the great shopping experience provided by Blackburn Market. We’re also in a great position to act as a base or a stop-over for groups visiting the Lake District, Southport and Blackpool.”

10-minute fish and chips

Finding restaurants that understand the importance of providing a speedy lunchtime service for groups can often be a challenge. One restaurant that has absolutely mastered the art is the 200-seat Olympus Fish & Chip Restaurant in the centre of Bolton.

Proprietor Tasos Pattichis, a regular attendee at tourism trade shows, and often to be seen handing out red roses, says that he and his team pride themselves on working closely with coach tour operators to ensure itinerary timetables are met.

“We offer a serving promise of between seven and 10 minutes,” he says: “I like to think that we have something special, both in terms of the quality of our fish and chips, and the service and ambience of the restaurant. Coaches can drop off outside and I will meet and greet and guide the group to their reserved seating. There’s free coach parking nearby.”

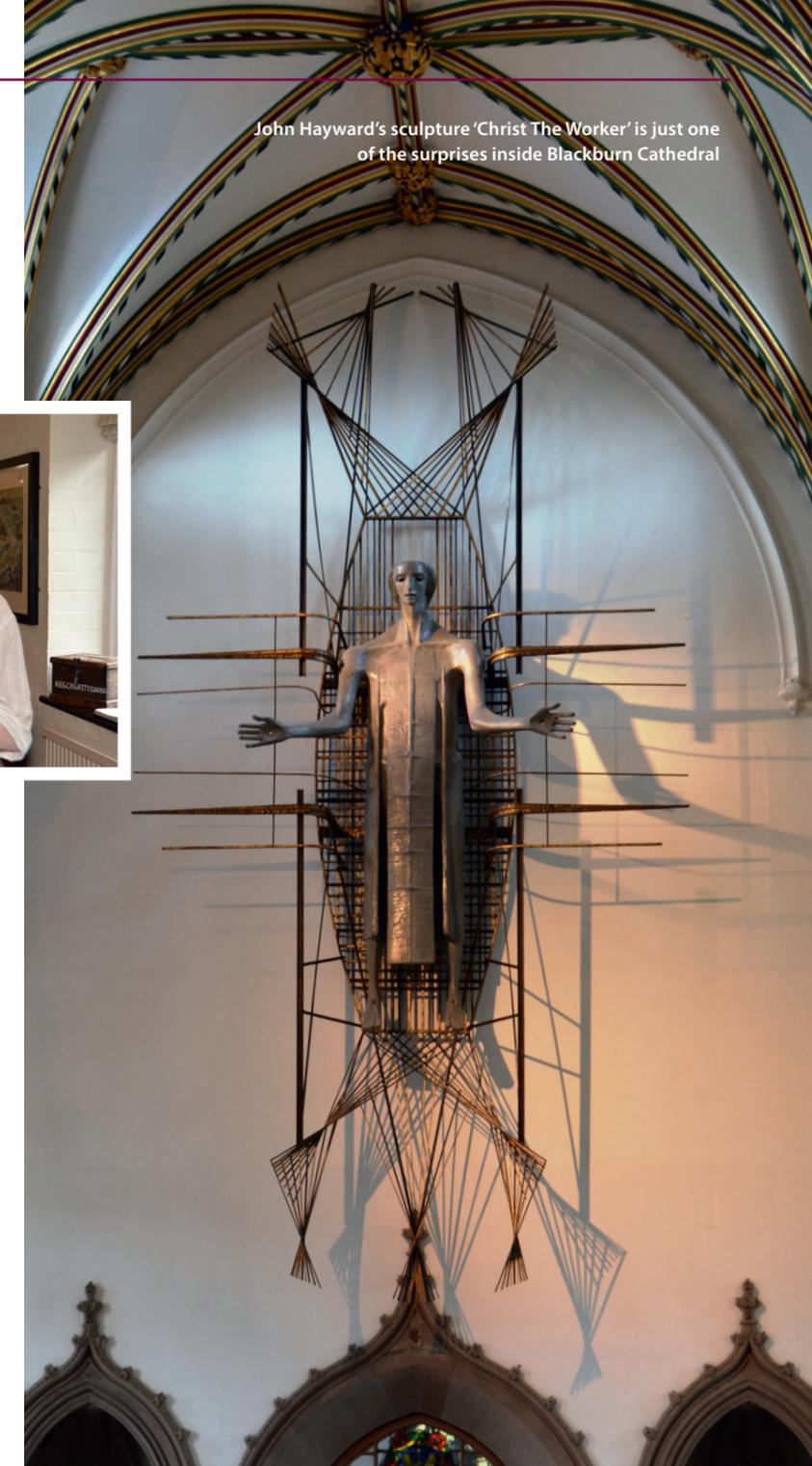
Prices range from £8 for a single course option (cod, chips and peas served with bread and butter, tea or coffee), to £11.50 for a two-course meal plus afternoon tea. The light and airy restaurant, which features award-winning toilets, also boasts a pianist, adding to the overall dining experience. To be fair, Bolton is a good 40 minute coach journey from Blackburn. However, together with the Blackburn Market team, Tasos shares an enthusiasm for making the tour planner’s job as easy as possible. The Olympus Fish and Chip Restaurant is a meal stop worth closer inspection.

COACH MONTHLY SAYS

From witches to chocolate and from canal cruising to old houses, the Blackburn area has a surprising number of group-friendly attractions.

But what makes this visit stand out is the enthusiasm of the Blackburn Market team. Giving their time to fully accompany the group of coach operators and group travel organisers over the two days of the visit demonstrates a commitment to this industry that’s all too often missing elsewhere. However, what’s really important here is the way the team has established a one-stop-shop to help tour planners put together a day excursion or a longer touring holiday. Talk to the team, give the tour an imaginative title, and you could have something new for next year’s programmes.

John Hayward’s sculpture ‘Christ The Worker’ is just one of the surprises inside Blackburn Cathedral



Leading the tour group through the town, Simon Entwistle of Top Hat Tours, meets Cllr Alan Cottam, Mayor of Blackburn