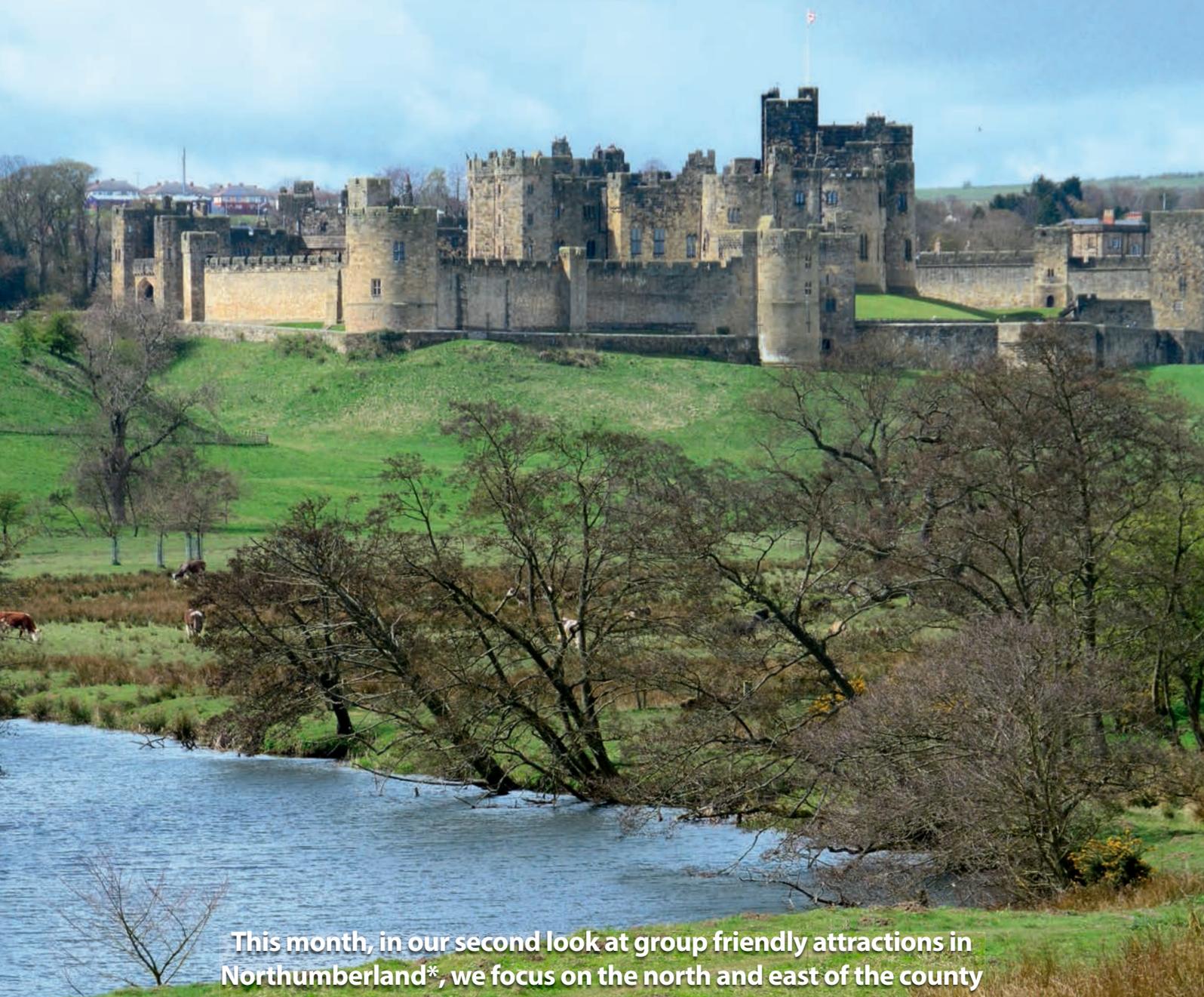


"It rhymes with beetle"



This month, in our second look at group friendly attractions in Northumberland*, we focus on the north and east of the county

* - Part one appeared in June 2015

I'm standing outside the Flodden Visitor Centre in Branxton, a Northumbrian village located just four miles from the Scottish border.

The visitor centre contains a wealth of information about the Battle of Flodden Field, one of Britain's bloodiest battles, that took place on 9 September 1513.

Elspeth Gilliland, Tourism Manager with Ford & Etal Estates, the large Northumberland estate that includes the battlefield site, has popped inside. She encourages me to join her, but I'm really rather hesitant to do so. I have good reason.

The Flodden Visitor Centre is housed in a traditional Giles

Elspeth leads me to what she says is undoubtedly the most impressive – the Lady Waterford Hall.

"The building was commissioned in 1860 by Louisa Anne, Marchioness of Waterford, and owner of Ford Estate," she explains. "It was the village school until 1957. Today it's used as the village hall."

The building looks very pleasant but I'm struggling to see why it's so special. Elspeth spots my look of bemusement.

"Ah, it's not the exterior that's special," she

drawn machinery, was opened to help preserve the declining number of heavy horse breeds. Free to enter, it survives primarily on fundraising events and donations from the public.

Every penny goes into keeping the horses and preserving the heritage for future generations.

The Centre offers groups a choice of a tour or wandering around free flow.

The highlight is undoubtedly the opportunity to get up close and personal with the Clydesdales.

They really are gentle giants. Picnic options are also available at £5 per person.

local fields. We can take groups round the mill, showing them the milling process and our museum."

The highlight of a visit is undoubtedly the water wheel. I'm given the opportunity to turn the handle that opens the water sluices. As I do so, the building creaks and groans, and the water wheel starts to turn.

"There you are," says Sheila, with a huge smile on her face," she's come to life."

Sheila's reference to the waterwheel as a 'she' prompts the obvious question.

"Oh, she's definitely a she," comes the response. "I've never thought of her as anything else!"



The Heatherslaw Light Railway offers a sedate 25-minute journey alongside the River Till



Looking for accommodation with a difference? Guzyance Hall, a privately owned country house, might fit the bill



The walls of the Lady Waterford Hall in the 'model' village of Ford are covered in scenes from the Bible



Hay Farm heavy Horse Centre gives visitors the opportunity to get up close with Clydesdale horses

Gilbert Scott red telephone box – surely a contender for the title of 'Smallest Visitor Centre in the World' – and there's really only room for one visitor at a time.

The battlefield monument itself sits just a few hundred yards beyond the village. Coaches drop off in the car park from where there's a five-minute gentle climb to the monument along specially laid wood-chip pathways. The pathway is also wheelchair accessible.

The hilltop location is completely exposed to the elements, making it a fair weather option. It's also not a walk for the less able. However, for those who do make the effort there are ample rewards, with some magnificent views across the surrounding fields and across to the Cheviot Hills to the south.

An interpretation board explains what happened when the invading Scots army under King James IV met the English army commanded by the Earl of Surrey. It was a decisive English victory.

James IV was killed in the battle, becoming the last monarch from the British Isles to suffer such a death.

Home to the Joicey family for more than a hundred years, Ford & Etal Estates, a regular exhibitor at tourism trade shows, is a traditional agricultural estate offering a mix of group friendly visitor attractions dotted around its 16,000 acres.

As we leave the unique Flodden Visitor Centre behind Elspeth explains that the estate largely became the attraction it is in the 1970s and 1980s.

"There really is something for everyone," she says. "We have a working corn mill, a 15" narrow gauge steam railway, some stunning pre-Raphaelite paintings, a heavy horse centre, a castle, and home baking in our tearooms."

We head off to visit the next attraction. On the way Elspeth picks up on my pronunciation of Etal.

"Many people put the accent on the second part of the name," she says. "It's actually much simpler than that. All you have to do is remember that Etal rhymes with beetle."

Pre-Raphaelite decoration

We stop in the picturesque village of Ford, a 'model' village that boasts an array of fascinating buildings.

says, "it's the interior. Come inside."

Lady Waterford was a keen English artist associated with John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite movement. In 1862, she began what's been described as her 'great experiment', covering the walls of the schoolroom with scenes from the Bible.

The murals took 21 years to complete. The characters in them were modelled by children from the school and their parents from the village and estate.

It is a remarkable sight and my earlier bemusement changes to admiration for something that's surprising and, as a result, well worth a visit.

A five-minute drive from Ford is Hay Farm Heavy Horse Centre, home to a number of animals including ten rare breed Clydesdale Heavy Horses.

The Centre, which features a display of vintage horse



The monument to the Battle of Flodden Field

A female watermill

Our next stop is at Heatherslaw, halfway between Ford and Etal.

"Many groups will start their visit to us here," explains Elspeth. "There's a visitor centre, full-size this time, and a tearoom that's ideal for groups."

Heatherslaw Corn Mill, sitting on the bank of the River Till, is the only working water mill in Northumberland. Powered by a 16ft water wheel, there's a 700-year-old history of milling on the site.

We meet Sheila Connell, the Assistant Miller.

"We offer groups a 10 minute introduction that explains the history of the mill," she says. "The fully-restored mill machinery, including three different pairs of millstones, still makes high quality, stoneground, wholemeal flour from wheat grown in the

Compared to many mill attractions, Heatherslaw's working credentials, and the opportunity to hear from the miller, make it stand out.

A visit includes climbing a number of wooden staircases to reach the upper levels. However, a DVD can be shown to anyone less able on their feet. The group rate for 11 or more is £3.20.

Slow train to Etal

Heatherslaw is also the starting point for a ride on the Heatherslaw Light Railway.

Leaving the mill, Elspeth leads me across the bridge to the little station, and then surprises me by revealing that this delightful 15" narrow gauge railway (think Ravenglass & Eskdale Steam Railway for size) was only built in 1989.

The route runs along the banks of the river giving views of the Northumberland countryside and the Cheviot Hills to the south. There's a choice of enclosed and open carriages.

It's a very sedate journey, taking 25 minutes to cover the 6.5km to Etal station, located on the edge of the village and in the shadow of Etal Castle.

The castle, a ruined medieval fortification, is managed by English Heritage. There's an exhibition outlining the story of the bloody Anglo-Scottish warfare of this border castle. The group rate (11 or more) is £3.66.

There's not a huge amount to see, so for an itinerary that's likely to include many of Ford & Etal Estates' other attractions, the castle is probably best left for private groups, or as a picnic location on a sunny day.

We've now walked the short distance into the centre of Etal village. It's the end of my tour and I join Elspeth in The Lavender Tearooms, a traditional tearoom that welcomes pre-booked groups, offering morning coffee, light lunches, afternoon teas, and home-made cakes.

"We're only ten miles from Berwick, and a few miles from the Scottish border at Coldstream, so we're ideally located for tour planners looking to refresh a visit to the Borders," she says. "We're about 20 miles from Bamburgh Castle, so again, if a tour planner has a coach heading up or down the A1, why not come and pay us a visit. We can arrange tailor-made itineraries based around



A delightful discovery – Doxford Hall Hotel near Alnwick

Accommodation options

In the first part of this feature (*Coach Monthly*: June 2015) we looked at accommodation options at Slaley Hall near Hexham, and Riverdale Hall Hotel in Bellingham near Kielder Water. In the east of the county are two hotels that are worth a closer inspection, and a country house that might appeal to specialist tours.

Doxford Hall Hotel

Located about ten miles north of Alnwick, the four-star Doxford Hall Hotel is an impressive hotel that really does offer something a little out of the ordinary.

Each of the 31 luxurious bedrooms in the main house – there are a further three in the neighbouring Coach House – are furnished with lavish bedding, beautifully crafted furniture and bespoke bathrooms. Each room is named after historic Northumberland castles or influential characters from north east England. The original part of the house dates from 1818, with a new section that was completed in 2008. The main restaurant, with 16 tables of twos and fours, dates from 1901. There's a wonderful library, full of 'readable' books, all sourced through Oxfam!

Group check-in is carried in the Morning Room, an area separate from the main reception, with its own coach turning circle. Extra staff are brought in to ensure the process is done quickly and efficiently. There's a narrow entrance to the main drive, but full size coaches can access it. But what makes this hotel stand out is the level of service. The staff are smartly dressed and attentive, but not overly so. The hotel says it would be five-star but not all the areas are accessible. Rates for groups come in at the high end. However, the hotel says it aims to be flexible and invites tour planners to get in touch.

The Hog's Head Inn

Sitting alongside the A1 on the southern edge of Alnwick, The Hog's Head Inn offers 53 spacious rooms. Built in 2012, and one of four properties in the Inn Collection Group, the three-star property has a mix of double, twin and family rooms, all furnished in a contemporary style. Rooms facing towards the A1 are double glazed and there's free wi-fi. The large pub restaurant is connected to the hotel offering general dining or separate sections for groups. Menu choice for groups is 3+3+3. The hotel offers a free room for the coach driver.

Guyzance Hall

Located a few miles south of Alnwick, Guyzance Hall is a privately owned, 15-bedroom country house that can be hired en-block for a group. The Hall sits in 350 acres, surrounded by exquisite gardens. There's a magnificent dining room, lounge and drawing room.

The General Manager is Mike Chambers. "Many private groups hire the Hall as a self catering let," he says. "However, I'm keen to talk to coach tour operators looking for somewhere special for a group of up to 30. We can arrange breakfast, but evening meals need to be taken elsewhere. I can advise on suitable options for this. We charge for the group, not by room or person. We usually let the whole Hall, including the billiard room, library and tennis court, but we can close sections off to bring the price down. I have weekend availability and would be delighted to welcome any tour planners who want to come and see what we have to offer!"

Hidden away in the Northumberland countryside, access is cosy and not suitable for a full size coach. However, if you have a small group, and are looking for premium accommodation, Guyzance won't disappoint.

how long a group has. Journey times between all the attractions on the estate are in the region of five to ten minutes so we're very compact. We're also a one-stop-shop and can make all the arrangements for all the attractions on the estate as well as familiarisation visits for organisers."

Television boost

I say my goodbyes to Elspeth and drive cross country to the A1. I have a meeting with Chris Calvert, Director of Bamburgh Castle.

It's late afternoon as I drive down the hill in the centre of the village of Bamburgh. Ahead of me, the castle rises up from the ground, the sun's rays catching the stonework and turning it a golden colour. It's an impressive sight.

Chris tells me that the recent second series of ITV's *Tales from Northumberland* with Robson Green has brought a tourism boost across the county.

"For many of us involved in tourism in the county, one of the most frustrating things we have to put up with is watching coaches passing through on the way between London and Edinburgh," he says.

"You can see Bamburgh Castle across on the coast for many miles, so I often wonder what passengers must think as they drive on by without stopping. However, in the wake of the Robson Green programme, we're finding many more tour planners and coach operators are now taking a closer look at what the county has to offer."

Bamburgh Castle is the Royal Seat of the Kings of Northumbria, and has been the family home of the Armstrongs since 1894. Chris explains that the Armstrong and Aviation Artefacts Museum, which tells of some of the remarkable achievements of the first Lord Armstrong and his trail blazing engineering career,



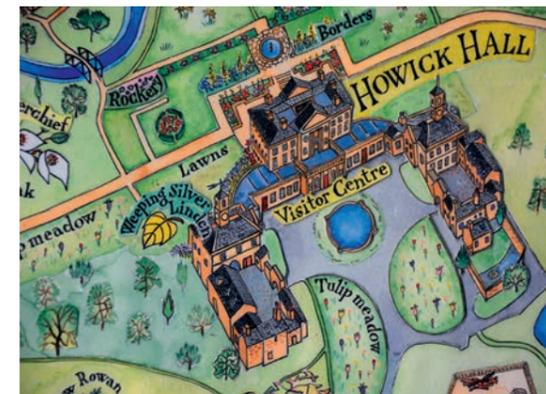
Assistant Miller Sheila Connell prepares to turn the wheel to bring Heatherslaw Corn Mill to life

as well as housing aviation artefacts from two world wars, has been re-interpreted. But there are other changes taking place in the castle as well.

"One of our main attractions is the displays of items from the family collection," he says. "From time to time we discover new items, and we put those out around the castle. The castle might look the same from the outside, but inside there's always something different."

Chris says that tour planners should allow a minimum dwell time of around one and a half hours, or two hours if you're going to include refreshments.

"We give a 10-minute introductory talk to groups, either on the coach, or on the lawn in front of the castle," he says. "Then it's free

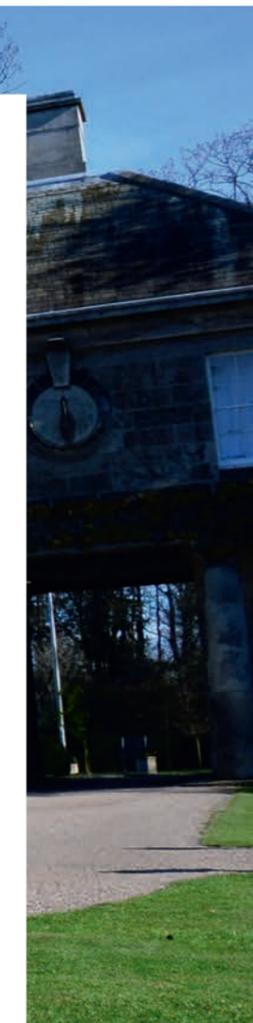


Part of a map of Howick Hall Gardens drawn by Morpeth-based artist Sarah Farooqi that sits in the visitor centre

flow, although a guide can be arranged if required. We can also arrange vouchers for tour managers to give to passengers so they can eat and drink when they like."

The coach drop-off point is at the bottom of the main drive. However, for passengers with impaired mobility, the coach can drive further into the castle and drop off at Battery Gate. The group rate (15 or more) is £8.40.

If time permits, it's worth considering a stop-off in Bamburgh village itself. The Grace Darling Museum tells the story of the local girl who became famous for helping her father to rescue the survivors from the SS Forfarshire when the ship was driven by a storm onto Harcar rocks on 7 September 1838. Groups can also visit the 13th century St Aidan's Church and walk along the beach.



Earl Grey's cuppa

On my next day in Northumberland my itinerary takes me to Howick Hall Gardens & Aboretum, located about seven miles north of Alnwick, along tree-lined rural roads that require careful navigation. There's a good reason why this is an attraction that's worth searching out – it's the home of Earl Grey tea.

The attraction here is primarily the gardens, closely followed by the Earl Grey Tea House.

Howick Hall itself, home to the 2nd Earl Grey, for whom the famous tea was blended, isn't open to the public, and is largely derelict.

Admission prices are £6 for the over 60s and £7.70 for other adults. The coach driver and group organiser can enter free of

When booking a visit to Howick, tour planners will be asked if they want to visit the Earl Grey Tea House as a group or individually.

The Tea House, operated separately to the rest of the attraction, and located in the old Ballroom of Howick Hall, says that to avoid busy times, groups are encouraged to book at 10.30am or 2.30pm.

Coaches park for free in a signed area of the main car park.

'Brancaster Castle' anyone?

Throughout this visit to Northumberland, Robson Green's *Tales from Northumberland* programme keeps getting mentioned

opened this year linked to the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo. It tells the fascinating story of Major Henry Percy, an ancestor of the present Duke of Northumberland, who brought news of Wellington's success back to England.

There's also a Remembrance exhibition linked to the anniversary of WWI, housed in the original room used in the past by the castle's butler. It's hard not to make the link with Mr Carson in *Downton Abbey*.

Saying goodbye to Daniel, I join Caroline for a cuppa in the courtyard cafe.

"For pre-booked groups of 14 or more we offer discounted rates and a meet and greet," she says.

"The coach driver receives free entry and a voucher for a meal.

The group leader also receives free entry.

"We can also offer special tours, in addition to the admission price. These include Alnwick on Location, with costumed guides, the State Room tour, including a dedicated 'Downton Abbey' tour, and a Historical Grounds tour.

"We also offer our traditional joint packages with The Alnwick Garden. Our Group Visits guide, available on the website, gives full details."

What's your poison?

It's a short walk from the castle to its neighbour, The Alnwick Garden. I meet the Garden's Group Sales Manager Tracey Cullen. ➔



Alnwick Castle is making the most of its appearance as 'Brancaster Castle'



"Welcome to my castle!" Bamburgh Castle's Chris Calvert would like more A1-bound coaches to call in



The magnificent Cascade in full flow at The Alnwick Garden

charge. I mention the prices here because you might be thinking of calling in to sample the Tea House as part of a refreshment stop-off. You can certainly do that, but you have to pay your £6 entrance fee first.

It makes for an expensive 'tea and pee' stop.

However, for groups interested in the 90 acres of gardens, this is an attraction worth considering.

The gardens operates an extended season to include the popular Snowdrop Festival in February, and the autumn colour in October and November.

During the main season there are spectacular displays of daffodils, tulips and rhododendrons in April and May.

Tour planners can book a free guide, and on this visit I have the pleasure of spending time with the excellent Peter Regan.

Meeting me at the Admissions Kiosk at the end of the main car and coach park, he tells me that many visitors seem surprised to discover that the house isn't part of the visit.

"It was built in 1782 by Newcastle architect William Newton," he says, as we make our way around the outside of the building. "It hasn't been lived in since 1967 but there are plans to restore it. The first stage is our Visitor Centre which recently opened in part of the front hall area."

I'm keen to find out more about Earl Grey, knowing that the link between a nice cuppa and the traditional coach tour passenger couldn't be stronger. Peter offers me a potted version of the story.

"The tea was specially blended by a Chinese mandarin for Charles, 2nd Earl Grey, to suit the water from the spring at Howick" he says.

"Bergamot was used to offset the taste of the lime in the water. Lady Grey used the tea in London when entertaining as a political hostess. It proved so popular that she was asked if it could be sold to others. That's how Twinings came to market it. Sadly, the Greys failed to register the trade mark and have never received a penny in royalties."

Peter explains that the gardens are deliberately presented as a private garden and are kept free of commercial exploitation.

"We tailor our tours to the requirements of the group," he says. "A typical tour will take around 90 minutes and include parts of the gardens and the church."

because of the real boost it has brought to visitor numbers. But there's another television series that, because of a single episode, has changed the visitor experience at what is one of the county's tourism big-hitters.

In July and August 2014, filming took place at Alnwick Castle for the Christmas special of the ITV drama *Downton Abbey*. The castle (see page 19) starred as 'Brancaster Castle', the home of Lord and Lady Sinderby and the setting for the Crawley family shooting party. The filming focused largely on the castle's State Rooms and exterior views.

I meet Admissions Sales Manager Caroline Robinson at the Gatehouse.

"Prior to Christmas we were already known for being Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the first two Harry Potter films," she says.

"That link remains as strong as ever, especially for our overseas visitors.

"But now, primarily for our domestic visitors, that one-off episode broadcast last Christmas has changed what we do."

I'm intrigued what Caroline means by this so she leads me into the courtyard where we come face to face with a large floor to ceiling publicity photograph showing some of the *Downton* cast on location.

She shows me part of the courtyard where visitors can watch a short film on a giant screen that features the scenes from the episode that were filmed at the castle.

"It's very popular with UK visitors," she says. "It also sets the scene for what we've done inside the castle."

Caroline hands me over to Daniel Watkins, Alnwick Castle's Head Guide, and we make our way along the tour route. In each of the State Rooms there's what I might describe as a 'Downton' display featuring costumes, props and photos, together with a panel explaining the link to the rooms that we're in. It's nicely done and doesn't overly detract from the splendour of the state rooms and Library.

"Our staff have had to learn all about *Downton* so they can answer questions," says Daniel.

"Now, in addition to taking about the history of the castle, they are able to talk about Lady Mary Crawley!" A new exhibition has





Conveniently located alongside the A1 at Alnwick is The Hog's Head Inn



The imposing view of Bamburgh Castle as you drive through Bamburgh village



Elspeth Gilliland of Ford & Etal Estates at the very unusual Flodden Visitor Centre

"The Garden is always changing," she says. "Through the Venetian gates at the top of the Grand Cascade is our ornamental Garden, a structured garden brimming with plants.

Depending on the time of year, there's always something new to see.

At the centre is a bubbling pool that runs into two small secret gardens.

Our Poison Garden is also proving popular. After all, where else can you legally see cannabis plants?"

Tracey explains both she and Caroline can discuss itinerary options with tour planners.

"Many groups will spend the day in Alnwick, visiting us here at the Garden in the morning and having lunch in our unique tree House Restaurant, then walking over to the castle and having a look around the town itself.

The Garden, castle and town are all in close proximity to each other."

My visit to Alnwick brings my visit to Northumberland to an end and time to catch up with my hosts, Northumberland Tourism, the destination management organisation for the county. Natalie Wood is the group travel contact.

"We can help with enquiries, itineraries and introductions," she says. "We can also arrange familiarisation trips for organisers. Give me a call and let's see how we can help."

After spending a few days in the county I can begin to see how the wide choice of different attractions and destinations could be combined to offer a first class touring itinerary.

The links with Earl Grey, *Downton Abbey*, and Capability Brown (see part one of this feature in the June issue of *Coach Monthly*) could prove invaluable in attracting bookings to a tour.

There's a real enthusiasm among the people I met on this visit, an enthusiasm that could be just what's needed to encourage coach tour operators to consider Northumberland for 2016 and beyond.

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