

Devon

Delights



From the timeless village of Clovelly in the north to the surprising Bickton Park Botanical Gardens in the south, Devon offers a wonderful mix of group friendly attractions. In this first of a two-part feature, Stuart Render goes exploring



The Temple Orangery at Bicton Park Botanical Gardens near Exeter was completed in the early 19th century. The building houses the Orangery Restaurant, the ideal location for one of Bicton's famous cream teas

"Suddenly, a hot gleam of sunlight fell upon the white cottages, with their grey steaming roofs and little scraps of garden courtyard, and lighting up the wings of the gorgeous butterflies which fluttered from the woodland down to the garden."

This is how author Charles Kingsley described Clovelly more than 150 years ago. He lived in the village as a child, returning many times as an adult. He wrote *Westward Ho!* while in Clovelly, with the village reportedly inspiring him to write *The Water Babies*.

In so many respects, little has changed over the last century and a half. Today's marketing describing the little village that's wedged into the fold in a cliff on the north Devon coast as being: "Where the steep, cobbled street tumbles down past gleaming white cottages to the tiny, deep blue harbour."

For the first-time visitor arriving by coach, Clovelly keeps her charms well hidden.

Coaches drop-off outside the excellent visitor centre before moving to a spacious, dedicated and free coach parking area. There are even facilities for washing the coach.

The visitor centre, with toilets, shop and a cafe, and modelled on a traditional Devon long barn, holds a prominent position up above and out of sight of the village. It offers a first class reception point for groups, and is the meeting point if you've booked a guide. If time permits, there's a 20-minute film that tells the story of Clovelly and sets the scene for what you're about to see. The film is narrated by actor Joss Ackland who lives on the edge of the village.

The main village, built around a steep, cobbled main street that leads down to the pretty harbour, is a short walk from the visitor centre. On the way you should stop at the craft workshops and the donkey stables.

The main street is too steep for motor vehicles so for centuries donkeys were the main form of transport. Pretty much everything and anything that needed to be delivered into and out of the village had to be placed on wooden sledges, with the donkeys providing the pulling power. Today, the donkeys have a more relaxed life, giving rides to children in the summer. However, there's still no motorised traffic

allowed in the main street and the sledges are very much in evidence, often tied up outside the houses.

As you leave the craft workshops and start the gentle descent to the start of the main village street, watch out for Mount Pleasant, a grassy picnic area with spectacular views through the trees to the Atlantic and the neighbouring cliffs.

And then you turn a corner and there, in all its splendour, is the main street. Stout shoes are the order of the day for a visit to Clovelly with the steep, cobbled street requiring care for almost every visitor, especially after a rain shower when the stones can become very slippery.

However, the extra care required is amply rewarded by the sight of the picturesque cottages. The village is privately owned and refreshingly un-commercialised – the visitor centre, well out of the way at the top of the hill, acting as the focal point for souvenir hunters.

Turn off the main street and explore the back alleys. Of note is the Methodist Chapel dating from 1820, the (Charles) Kingsley Museum, and St Peter's Chapel, opened in 1846 for those unable to walk to the parish church.

As you near the lower end of the main street you come to a lookout point, with yet another spectacular view, this time over Clovelly's delightful harbour.

Down on the quay is the Red Lion Hotel, a charming 18th century hotel. The quay and harbour are also the venue for Clovelly's varied events programme. This includes the popular Maritime Festival in July, Lifeboat Weekend in August, the Lobster and Crab Feast in September, and the Herring Festival in November.

After all the exertions of watching your step as you descend through the village, a welcome drink may be in order. However, if the thought of having to retrace your steps back up the hill fills you with dread, help is at hand. A Land Rover, which leaves from just behind the Red Lion, will take you back up to the visitor centre, using an access road that runs up behind the village. That journey in itself is quite an experience.

A visit to Clovelly, including time to have lunch in the cafe at the visitor centre, or perhaps a cream tea in the 17th century New Inn on

the main street, will take between two to three hours. The coach driver and tour leader get free admission and a £10 allowance against a main meal and drink. Groups of 20 or more pay a very good value £5.75 per person.

But before we take our leave of Clovelly there's one more very important point to make, or rather, one more very important person to meet.

Jana Edwards runs Clovelly Village Tours, offering a wonderful one-hour tour for just £3 per person. She meets the coach at the visitor centre and will escort you all the way to the harbour. On the way, well, the stories and a wealth of fascinating facts are, in this writer's opinion, an absolute must-have addition on any visit.

Dartington Crystal

Dartington Crystal is Britain's only remaining major crystal manufacturer. Located in Great Torrington, eight miles south of

The group rate for the Visitor Centre and Factory Experience is a very modest £4 per person.

A hive of activity

There are surprises to be had on a visit to the Quince Honey Farm.

Located close to the centre of South Molton, just off the main A361 Tiverton to Barnstaple link road, the family-run attraction is a hugely popular destination for groups of all ages.

If you were thinking that there's no such thing as quince honey, you'd be correct. The attraction was established in 1949 after George Wallace, a fiery Scotsman, was de-mobbed from the army. Near the end of his service he had become obsessed with the craft of beekeeping.

After gaining some practical experience at Yorkshire apiaries, he moved to Devon to live with his father in Quince Cottage. George set up two hives, calling his fledgling operation Quince Honey Farm. Today, his eldest son Paddy, Paddy's wife Jean and their sons Ian and Andrew



Ian Stuart guides a Stuart Line cruise around the picturesque Exe estuary



Bicton Gardens' famous Palm House, steeped in history and romance, dates from c1825-1830



Stuart Line Cruises offers a choice of group options departing from its Exmouth base

Bideford, Dartington gives visitors a unique opportunity to get up close with the glass blowers.

A group visit starts in the visitor centre where you learn about Dartington and the glass-making process. You're also likely to see Nick Davey at work. Nick is a master engraver renowned for his meticulous skill and artistic flair, and an established figure in the glassware industry. Highly regarded in his field he has produced prestigious commissions for a range of people from Joanna Lumley, to royalty and the Pope.

There are opportunities to have your hand or foot cast in glass for a souvenir or unique gift, or have a go at glassblowing. School groups can paint their own glass or make some jewellery.

However, it is the Factory Experience that marks Dartington out as a rather special attraction.

Leaving the visitor centre you enter the first part of the 'Experience' - 'The Blowing Room', described by the attraction as an opportunity to "experience the blazing glow and intense heat of the gas-fired furnaces".

Unlike some factory tours, this time you find yourself standing in front of the glass blowers as they work their magic. Each piece of Dartington glass is crafted by a team of between four and 11 glass-makers, and your walk-round lets you observe the different stages. An upper viewing gallery lets you see more of the process. This isn't accessible for wheelchairs.

At the end of the tour, which lasts around 30 minutes or so, you find yourself in the factory shop, surely one of the largest glass shops in the UK.

The contemporary Pavilion Cafe offers pre-booked groups a choice of morning snacks, lunch meal deals and afternoon tea.

While the full factory tour is well worth including in an itinerary, there are options to use Dartington as a stop-off for, say, lunch or afternoon tea and a visit to the shop. The factory tours operate on Monday to Friday, but it's worth noting that the staff lunch is between 11 am and 12 noon. Talk to Sue French, Dartington's Visitor Centre Manager to discuss options.

manage what is the largest honey farm in Britain.

But back to the surprises. As you might expect there's a great deal of information about honey bees.

But it's when you climb the stairs to the upstairs galleries of BeeWorld that the attraction really delivers. Standing in front of a glass panel, visitors look through to a hive, full of bees. A push of a button and the individual honeycomb panels start to move apart, revealing the intense activity as thousands of bees go about their business. These mechanically operated observation hives, introduced by Paddy, are renowned and acknowledged by beekeepers across the globe to be the most innovative in the world.

This isn't the only surprise. As you walk along the BeeWorld gallery, which stretches the entire length of the building, you come across the first of a remarkable collection of 18 working hives. Each is well protected so that the bees don't come into contact with visitors, but each gives you the opportunity to see the bees arriving and departing the hives. Use of the word departing is apt as the scene, to this writer at least, was somewhat reminiscent of aircraft landing and taking off from an airport.

The different hives all represent typical examples found in nature. In one, the bees have set up home in a red pillar box; in another it's a dolls house.

Even if your interest in bees is minimal, the hives are absolutely fascinating. You may very well find yourself just standing there transfixed as the bees go about their business. As you leave, there's an excellent shop selling all sort of honey and bee-related items.

A visit to the honey bee exhibition and hives, including a short introductory talk, and time for a cuppa, takes between one and two hours. The attraction's location means it's also possible to call in as a tea, cake or lunch stop-off en-route to and from north Devon.

Paddy says that he can tailor a visit to the needs of the group. Group rates, for 10 or more, for the combined talk, honey bee exhibition and hives, are £5.95 per person. A stop-off, including a talk and a cuppa, is £3.25 per person.



Magnificent Bicton

In the south of the county, near Exeter, Bicton Park Botanical Gardens is another quite remarkable find. Set in the picturesque Otter Valley, close to Budleigh Salterton and Sidmouth, this 63-acre site is notable for being one of Britain's most beautiful historic (and Grade 1 listed) gardens.

Coaches drop-off (and park for free) in a dedicated area in front of the main visitor centre. Just through the visitor centre is the starting point of the Bicton Woodland Railway.

A rare survivor of 18-inch narrow gauge, the railway takes a 25-minute trip around the grounds, an ideal way to see the parkland and to get an early orientation.

The centrepiece of Bicton is the formal Italian Garden, with its fountains, lake, flowerbeds and ornamental trees. It was laid out in 1735 with features added in the 19th century by Lord John and Lady Louisa Rolle. The gardens were opened to the public in 1963.

leave, there's an opportunity to peruse the well-stocked gift shop and garden centre.

Lunches, teas and light refreshments are served in the spacious Orangery Restaurant. Groups can take a cream tea for £4.25 per person.

The recommended dwell time is two and a half hours, but it's a good half-day destination for most groups. The park is wheelchair friendly with smooth paths in the main garden areas and easy access to the train and toilets. Take a look at the website to get a feel for the quite remarkable mix of features that makes Bicton stand out.

The group rate, for 16 or more, is a very reasonable £4.95, or £5.95 to include the train ride.

On track for smiles

An opportunity to ride on a heritage tram rarely fails to please. There are currently 10 locations around the British Isles that offer the chance. These include the living history museums at Beamish in



Covello's much-photographed main street - picturesque, cobbled and steep



A ride on the Bicton Woodland Railway is an ideal way to see the parkland



Covello guide Jana Edwards with one of the wooden transport sledges



The centrepiece of Bicton Park is the formal Italian Garden. Laid out in 1735, it survived the new fashion of more naturalistic parklands typified by the designs of Capability Brown due to its position away from and out of view of the main house.



The unique mechanical observation hive at Quince Honey Farm



Covello's harbour, with the Red Lion Hotel on the left, is the setting for a range of different festivals across the year



A visit to Dartington Crystal in north Devon gives visitors the opportunity to see master engraver Nick Davey at work. Visitors can have their purchases engraved while they wait



See the glass blowers at work at Dartington's 'Factory Experience'

But what marks Bicton out, especially among groups who are likely to be familiar with other gardens across the country, are the surprises at every turn. The historic Palm House and other 19th century glasshouses will appeal to plant lovers. Close to the main entrance is a full-size cast bronze elephant that forms the centrepiece of a water feature that periodically sprays cascades of water from its trunk. The Countryside Museum features a huge collection of exhibits, including traction engines, that mirror the changes to village life, farming horticulture, social history and rural crafts. At one end of the museum is the Reg Imray Motor Museum, a select collection of motorcycles and cars spanning 70 years of motoring, lovingly restored by a local motoring enthusiast. In another part of the gardens is the delightful Shell House containing an international collection of seashells. Then, before groups

County Durham and the Black Country museum in Dudley in the West Midlands, the extensive network of the Manx Electric Railway on the Isle of Man, the Great Orme Tramway in Llandudno, the excellent National Tramway Museum at Crich in Derbyshire, and the lesser known but equally fascinating Wirral Transport Museum in Birkenhead. Heritage trams also operate in Blackpool, working at peak times in between the town's recently introduced fleet of modern trams.

But there's only one place in the UK where you can ride on half-scale trams that are replicas of classic British tramcars from various cities.

The Seaton Tramway is a 2ft 9in (838mm) narrow gauge electric tramway which operates on a three-mile (4.8km) route through East Devon's Axe Valley between the coastal resort of Seaton, the small village of Colyford and the ancient town of Colyton. The line used to be

part of the route of the former London & South Western Railway branch line. The journey time is around half an hour end-to-end. This might seem generous for a three-mile run, but the trams travel at a gentle pace giving visitors plenty of opportunity to take in the surroundings and observe the wildlife in the estuary. There's also an unusual interlude which sees the tram stop at a level crossing at Colyford while the driver activates the automatic barriers.

There are 13 trams in the fleet, but it's the open-top double-deck trams that are, unsurprisingly, the most popular.

A visit will usually start at the northern end of the line at Colyton. This is a delightful station with full facilities and plenty of room for the coach to drop-off and park. There's also the Tramstop Cafe, which, together with the modern 80-seat Garden Room conservatory, can provide

both a meeting area for groups as well as a separate dining area. Light refreshments, lunches, cream teas, or dinner can be booked in advance.

It is also possible to reserve table space at certain times of the year. For details, telephone the restaurant direct on 01297 552717.

Colyton also has a well-stocked shop with a wide range of tram-related souvenirs and unique gifts.

When it comes to the journey, groups of 20 or more will get their own tram, which will run to the group organiser's requirements (subject to the scheduled timetable). The average seating capacity on a tram is around 35, but several trams can operate together for large groups. There's no extra charge for this - you simply pay the rate per person.

The group rate, for 12 or more, is £9 per person return, or £6 single. Coach drivers and group organisers get free travel (when bringing



groups of over 20). It's also possible to hire a tram outside of normal operating hours. Seaton Tramway has joined with the nearby Donkey Sanctuary at Sidmouth to offer joint packages.

Glorious river cruise

Some 20 miles to the west of Seaton, and south of Exeter, Exmouth is the home of Stuart Line Cruises.

A finalist in the National Coach Tourism Awards 2015, and a member of the Coach Tourism Council, the family-run business has been operating river cruises since 1968.

There's an extensive choice of cruise options, however, for most groups it will be the River Exe Cruise, the Round Robin Cruise, or the Jurassic Coast Cruise that are likely to fit in to a typical itinerary.

The River Exe Cruise is a 75-minute circular cruise leaving from Exmouth. Prices, for groups of 15 or more, start at £5 per person. The Round Robin includes a one-way river cruise from Exmouth to

outside seating, a bar, and toilets. There are also joint packages with Powderham Castle and with the South Devon Railway at Buckfastleigh. We'll be looking at those two attractions in the October issue.

One-stop tour planning

With so many group and coach-friendly visitor attractions, it can be quite a challenge for tour planners to decide what to put in an itinerary.

The good news is there's help at hand. The Devon Association of Tourist Attractions (DATA), which operates under the brand 'Devon's Top Attractions', is a tourism organisation representing around 40 of the county's leading visitor attractions.

It operates a 'one stop' information shop for tour planners, offering local knowledge, an image bank and useful contacts. It can also put together familiarisation visits for coach or tour operators who wish to try before they buy. DATA has recently celebrated its 30th anniversary. To become a member a tourist attraction has to go through a tough



Seaton Tramway's Gareth Richards, Sue Bowman and Lee Taylor



The Quince Honey Farm team – Ruby Mapp, Joe deWitt-vine and Paddy Wallace



Quite a surprise – Quince Honey Farm has a collection of 18 different hives

Topsham, free time in Topsham, and then a train ride back to Exmouth. Prices are £7.50 per person. The Jurassic Coast Cruise takes groups out to see the famous Jurassic Coast World Heritage site, including the oldest section, known as the Triassic Era, famous for its deep red colour. On-board catering is also available.

Stuart Line Cruises offers a personal welcome on arrival, and a full commentary during the cruise. There's free coach parking in Exmouth and the driver can sail free of charge. Each boat has inside and

inspection process and meet extremely high quality standards. It is then inspected on a regular basis to make sure these quality standards are maintained. DATA also publishes and distributes 1.2 million copies of 'The Complete Guide to Devon', a useful road map showing all its member attractions, beach guide and tide tables.

➤ In next month's issue we'll be taking a look at more of Devon's group friendly attractions, and some group friendly hotels

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