

Discover County Durham: Hidden Gems and Railway Heritage with Michelle Gorman (Ep 117)

UK travel Planning podcast helps you plan your perfect UK vacation

intro: Welcome to the UK travel Planning podcast. Your host is the founder of the UK travel planning website, Tracy Collins. In this podcast, Tracy shares destination guides, travel tips and, itinerary ideas, as well as interviews with a variety of guests who share their knowledge and experience of uk travel. To help you plan your perfect UK vacation, join us as we explore the UK. From m cosmopolitan cities to quaint villages, from historic castles to beautiful islands, and from the picturesque countryside to seaside towns.

Visit County Durham is featured in this episode of UK travel Planning podcast

Tracy: Hello and welcome to episode 117 of the UK travel Planning podcast. Today I'm thrilled to be joined by Michelle Gorman, the managing director of Visit County Durham.

Tracy: Now, if County Durham wasn't on your.

Tracy: Travel radar before, it certainly will be after this episode, Michelle takes us on a journey through this stunning northern county, discussing its diverse geography and the four district areas it's divided into. We explore some of the county's must see

attractions, including the magnificent Durham Cathedral, the Auckland Project, the historic Raby Castle.

Tracy: And the fascinating Beamish Museum.

Tracy: We also delve into the exciting plans for next year's bicentenary of the birth of the modern railway, a momentous event with projects and celebrations that will highlight County Durham's rich railway heritage. Before we wrap up, Michelle shares a valuable tip for anyone planning their first visit to the county. But as always, we start the conversation with Michelle by asking her to introduce herself and explain her role as managing director of Visit County Durham.

Michelle Gorman is the managing director of Visit County Durham

Speaker D: My name is Michelle Gorman. I'm the managing director of Visit County Durham. And, I have worked with Visit County Durham since it was first set up in 2006. And I've held, various roles, but all tourism related, all working with tourism businesses and, you know, promoting our fantastic assets and promoting our fantastic region as well. And then the role that I'm doing at the moment is as managing director, which is, you know, a great, great job. I mean, it. Tourism is such a people industry and it's, you know, I get to meet a so many different people from different walks of lives, from, you know, people who own, ah, a sort of yurt at the bottom of their garden to the general manager of a global hotel and everything that goes in between that. So I feel very privileged to do what I do and to be able to promote such fantastic county and all we have to offer.

Tracy: Oh, yeah, that's fantastic.

Tell us where County Durham is situated in the UK

And I think for our listeners, particularly who are listening from America or Australia all around the world, tell us where County Durham is situated in the UK.

Speaker D: Yes, so County Durham is in the northeast of England, so we're not that far away from the scottish border. We're in between York and Edinburgh, so I think a lot of people have heard of York and obviously Edinburgh, being Scotland's capital. And then over to the west of us we have got Cumbria and the Lake District. So we're surrounded by some stunning destinations. But we ourselves are also a very stunning destination.

Tracy: Absolutely. And also other population, just thinking in terms of comparing it to other parts of the world. And I was talking to someone the other day who was actually saying that it's just a little smaller than Rhode island in the US. So to give american listeners a kind of perspective, that's the size and the population is around about 870,000 people who live in County Durham.

Speaker D: Yeah, well, that's being english government and having such a. Quite a heritage government system. the county itself has got a population of around about half a million. But then we've got broad areas which we cover through is called the ceremonial county. So it's an ancient sort of historic kind of legacy. And that brings in sort of other areas which take that population up to around about 870,000. And I mean, the county itself is around about 862 sq. Mi, but then when you bring in that ceremonial element to it, it goes up to just over 1000 sq. Mi, so. And as you say, it's just a little

smaller than Rhode island in the US.

Tracy: And, yes, and a beautiful county. So as you know, we were talking earlier, I'm originally from Northumberland, so I absolutely love the north of England. And actually my great grandfather spent some time working in Durham because I'm a coal miners great granddaughter. okay.

Speaker D: Okay.

Tracy: Yeah. And, when I was a child in Northumberland, at school, we would often go down to County Durham to visit Beamish, which I know we'll talk about in a bit.

County Durham is home to a number of historic sites and attractions

But what would you say to anybody who's thinking about visiting Durham for the first time? Why visit Durham? What

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is there there that would capture their imagination?

Speaker D: Okay, we've got a rich history and heritage. So County Durham is home to a number of historic sites and attractions, including Durham Cathedral and Castle, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site. It was one of the first in the UK to be inscribed on the, UNESCO list. And as you've already mentioned, we've got a really strong industrial past and a really strong industrial heritage. The region is known for its mining heritage

and, you've already mentioned the fantastic Beamish museum, which offers a glimpse into the county's industrial past. You know, our stunning landscapes as well. We have, outstanding landscapes and it is quite diverse. So over to the west of the county. We've got rolling countryside with rugged moorland, and that is also a UNESCO global geopark as well. Over in the north pennines, national landscape. So we've got two UNESCO designations, one for our built heritage and one for our stunning landscapes. And then we've got a heritage coastline as well, and fantastic towns and villages and our, religious heritage with Durham Cathedral, it goes back for hundreds of years. You've got the awe inspiring Durham cathedral with its breathtaking architecture, and it's famous as the shrine of St. Cuthbert and the resting place of the venerable bede. So our christian heritage is very, very strong. So we've got, I think, quite a diverse offer, you know, which will appeal to people who, you know, really do want to immerse themselves into Britain's history.

Tracy: Oh, absolutely. And what would be some of the must visit places that you would recommend that a first time visitor considers adding into their itinerary? Michelle?

Speaker D: Okay, I've already mentioned the world heritage site of Durham Castle and cathedral. But Durham city itself is surrounded by a river, and the castle and the cathedral sit on that peninsula. So you've got, the riverbanks are very unspoilt and it brings in elements of the city and different perspectives and different viewpoints. So, the city itself is very, you know, still looks like a mediaeval city. So you do feel like you're stepping back in time. We've got the Auckland project over in Bishop Auckland, which is to the southwest of Durham city. And that is home to a fascinating regeneration project. A philanthropist moved from London back to Bishop Auckland in 2012 and has invested almost 200 million pounds of his own money into regenerating Bishop Auckland and some of the fantastic, attractions there. So we've got all Auckland Castle, which is the

country home of the prince bishops of Durham. So the bishops used to come from Durham cathedral on a weekend to relax. Over in Auckland, Castle also invested, in a spanish art gallery, a mining art gallery and, a faith museum. So bringing in again that, that christian heritage. We've got ancient pilgrimage roots as well. For people that are interested in walking. We've got the official start of the Compostella de Santiago. Starts in county Durham, the english way. that starts in a place called Finkel Abbey and takes you onto the cathedral, then down into Bishop Auckland and into the Faith Museum. Other things include the Bowes Museum. it is a purpose built art gallery. It was built by Josephine Bowes and her husband John. They opened it in 1892. And they used to travel Europe buying this eclectic mix of paintings and porcelain and clocks and, you know, all to house in this fantastic museum to share with the people of, the north of England. And the museum itself is built in the style of a french chateau. So you'll be in a traditional english market town and you'll come around the corner and see this absolutely magnificent building which is just so unexpected. and then we've got castles as well. We've got quite a lot of castles but we've got Raby castle, which is one of Britain's finest mediaeval castles built in the 14th century by the powerful Neville family. And as you're travelling around the county you will see references to the Neville family. and they've got a stunning walled garden. So we've got quite a lot of walled gardens and, you know, sort of country estate gardens as well. And then, of course, if people are interested in film and tv, Harry Potter was filmed in the cathedral. When you walk around the cathedral cloisters you can quite imagine yourself taking part in the quidditch match and, you know, walking around in your gown. Downton Abbey was filmed at Beamish museum and

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Speaker D: we've got various other films as well that have taken place in the.

Tracy: County and there's always a lot of interest. I know when I chat with people about British, TV programmes and where they were filmed it comes up a lot, particularly Downton Abbey. Vera gets mentioned. I mean, there's just been some amazing programmes that have been shot up in the north of England. Like you say, using Beamish to record some scenes in Downton Abbey is perfect. And I have to say, when I'm in Durham Cathedral you really can imagine that kind of whole Harry Potter theme and that whole, you know, it just fits in really well, doesn't it?

Speaker D: It does, yes. And you can actually go now. The cathedral have opened up professor McGonagall's classroom. So you can go in there. And, I mean, they do afternoon teas in there. So if you're fortunate enough to be visiting at a time when they're putting an afternoon tea on it's definitely worth going in to have that as a treat.

Tracy: Oh, yeah, that's. I'll add that into my itinerary when I visit, I think. Sounds, really good.

Durham city is very accessible by public transport

So, how easy is it to get around County Durham itself in terms of, kind of what transportation would I need?

Speaker D: Okay, so Durham city, is very accessible. It's 3 hours by train from London, two and a half hours by train from Edinburgh and if you're just sort of staying within the city then the city's very walkable. And the public transport network within the city centre, and going out to some of the other towns and villages is really quite good. We're really very well connected as we've got such a rural county as well. So if you're going over to

the west, you restart to border onto, I said, the lake district. And we do go up to Northumberland and it's very sparsely populated up there. So you know, public transport becomes a bit more challenging. So you know, you would need to maybe use private hire, either a taxi or you know, self drive if you felt confident enough to drive over. in the UK our roads are not that busy and you do get to see some amazing views. we're also very close to Newcastle Airport so it's a 35 minutes drive. and again very accessible by public transport. So there's a train station within the airport which will take you into Newcastle. And then from Newcastle it's a 15 minutes train ride, from Newcastle into Durham. So, you know, I mean, if you did want to go to other parts of the region, we really, that east coast rail network is really fantastic. So if you wanted to go to Darlington for example, to the south of the county or heading up to the north of the county to Newcastle and into Northumberland, we're really quite connected.

Tracy: That's good. And I think, hiring a car as well will give you great accessibility to County Durham and Northumberland as well because there are regions that if you have a car you can get out and see a lot more. luckily we've got that very good, train line up the east coast as well, which means that you can access the cities really easily. And I actually did my teacher training lectures and tutorials in Durham city. So I used to go quite often from Newcastle Durham on that train line, to have those on a Saturday morning, which was always a lot of fun.

Next year marks bicentenary of birth of modern passenger railway

I was going to ask as well. so my husband is a massive, massive train fan as all our listeners will know. we love travelling by train and that's connected with a very big event that is coming up next year. And I'm really excited, Michelle, to hear all about this. And I

know Doug's actually already put on the calendar for next year that he's going to be doing as much as he can. He wants to find out because he's so excited about this. so would you like to explain a little bit about what's going to be happening?

Speaker D: Absolutely. So, yes, next year is a really significant year for the region. it's the bicentenary of the birth of the modern passenger railway with celebrations going to be taking place throughout 2025. so the Stockton and Darlington railway opened on September 27 in 1825. And as I said, it was the world's first passenger railway and it connected people with places and communities and it ultimately transformed the world. It transformed the way that we can experience other places. And, it had a. Such an impact on so many different areas in so many different countries. I mean, we're still doing it now, aren't we? I mean, rail travel, as you've said, your husband is an enthusiast and rail travel, heritage rail travel is really important, but so is that modern day railway as well. And it's just such a fantastic way to experience a country as well. So. But for us to mark the 200th, anniversary of that momentous first journey, three councils in the area, so this is Darlington, Durham and, Stockton on Tees, along with, a combined authority, have all joined forces with a range of national and international partners as well to deliver a

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Speaker D: series of significant projects throughout the bicentenary year that really brings that story to life. I mean, we've got the railway, 200 celebrations. As I said, our national tourist board, visit England and visit Britain are fully behind this, as is our government as well. And we've got our rail operators, such as our national rail networks and INER and, you know, all sorts of diverse partners that have come together because this really is a significant moment, in British history and history that went out and

changed so much of the world. And just a small anecdote. So, when we first started talking about this project, this was back in 2016, we started making plans for what's going to be happening in 2025. I can remember attending the first event, where we're all getting to know each other and somebody read out an excerpt from a newspaper at the time and talked about all of these people being on this first train and they were screaming. It was like a terror ride for them. You can just imagine it must have been like a roller coaster journey, you know, because, I think the fastest they'd ever been on was a horse, you know, and to all of a sudden, to be static in a carriage, but you're moving at, what was in those days an incredible pace must have been truly exhilarating. And it's, you know, to take yourself back to those 200 years and imagine a world without passenger transport it's, Yeah, it's fascinating. And that resonated with me and it really stuck, you know, again, going back to tourism and that people connection. For me, it's always about the people.

Tracy: Oh, absolutely.

National Rail Museum is celebrating its 50th anniversary with a nine month festival

And what sort of, events and projects have you got?

Tracy: Can you see what sort of projects.

Tracy: And events are going to be happening next year around that?

Speaker D: Well, it's all under wraps at the moment. There's going to be a big reveal.

The big reveal is happening in September, but it's been described as a fantastic nine month festival, which are going to be at the heart of the celebrations. And there will be internationally significant projects which will shine a light on the history and the future of transport as well. So it's not just looking backwards, this is looking forward as well. To give that contemporary visitor experience, a walking trail has been developed. so we've got the fantastic, locomotion, which houses. It's a train museum and it's a sister museum to the train museum in York. National Rail Museum, should I say. And it has just finished an engine shed which houses the biggest collection of engines in Europe. So there will be all sorts of celebrations happening there and some really important trains which again, is all under wraps. there are some really important trains will be, travelling up to locomotion and up to the area, you know, to really celebrate and shout about this momentous occasion.

Your husband loves going to the York train museum so add that into your itinerary

Tracy: So I have to give you a little antidote from myself, actually, Michelle, about this because I was talking to my husband about locomotion. Cause he absolutely loves going to the York train museum. And my husband has already looked at a day that he is gonna travel. will stay in with my parents near Birmingham. He's actually gonna travel up specifically cause he wants to go to that museum. And he's already organised with my brother who lives in Stockton. So they're going to go up on a Friday. He just cannot wait to see it. He's really excited about it. So that's already in our itinerary for next month. He was like, no, I have to go. So I'm looking forward to him reporting back on that and, taking lots of pictures and videos.

Speaker D: Absolutely. I'm absolutely delighted to hear that. I mean, I have to say that is one of my favourite museums. I absolutely love it. I love all forms of, This is how I've ended up in tourism. I love all forms of transport and travel. So planes and, you, know, trains for me, I find them really exciting and they've got some stunning exhibit in locomotion so I know that your husband, if he's an enthusiast, he will have a great time. He will really enjoy the experience at locomotion and I look forward to hearing about it. I'm going to have to cheque in with you and find out how the trip went.

Tracy: Oh yeah, absolutely. I say he's really, really excited about it. And I know a lot of our, podcast listeners as well enjoy train travel. So add that into your itinerary. You know, don't just go from York, straight up Tenborough, there's a lot of places to visit and stay at in between Durham and Northumberland, and I'm going to champion both those counties. You need to stay, you need to explore and see, learn about the history of the north, because I'm very passionate about that. As I say, I'm a coal miners, ah, granddaughter and great granddaughter.

Michelle shares tips on visiting County Durham for the first time

Also, I just want to ask Michelle, because I always ask at the end of a podcast the same question. So I know all of my listeners will be waiting for this one question that I'm going to land on you now. and that is, what would be the one tip that you would share for somebody planning to visit county Durham for the first time?

Speaker D: I think

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Speaker D: my one tip would be to speak to some of the locals. Ah, the local people. We have such a warm and friendly community welcome from people and they're so proud of their place. So to really immerse yourself in that northeast life and to get under the skin of the county, try and speak to some of the locals, try and, you know, experience some of those local places, not just the big, I mean, the big iconic things that we've already spoken about. You know, to me they're a given, but that would be my one tip. Yeah, get to. Get to know the locals.

Tracy: Oh, I love that. I absolutely love that, Michelle. That's a, that's a brilliant tip. And, I have to say, thanks so much for coming on the podcast, this week and sharing all about Durham, County Durham and why people should visit this beautiful county.

Speaker D: Thank you so much. And thank you again for inviting me. And I hope your listeners enjoy hearing more about County Durham and we look forward to welcoming them in the future.

Tracy: Thank you for tuning in to this.

Tracy: Week'S episode of the UK travel Planning podcast. As always, show notes can be found@uktravelplanning.com.

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Tracy: We love to hear from you and you never know.

Tracy: You m may receive a shout out in a future episode, but as always.

Tracy: That just leaves me to stay until next week. Happy UK travel planning.

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