

Visiting Beamish Museum? How to Plan Your Day

Tracy Collins with Samantha Shotton, Beamish, The Living Museum of the North

IN THIS EPISODE

Tracy is joined by Samantha Shotton, Chief Operating Officer and Deputy CEO of Beamish, The Living Museum of the North, in County Durham. They cover what Beamish is and how the site is laid out by era, from the 1820s landscape at Pockerley to the 1950s town, the costumed staff and volunteers, where the buildings and objects come from, how to plan a full day, getting there and getting around on the historic trams and buses, where to stay nearby, accessibility, and Samantha's quickfire picks.

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01

Welcome

TRACY

What if you could walk into a 1900s sweet shop, ride a tram through a pit village and get your hair set in a 1950s salon, all in one day? In this episode, Samantha Shotton, Deputy CEO of Beamish, The Living Museum of the North, shares why this is history you can touch, talk to and even taste, and how to make the most of a full day there.

Hi everybody, and welcome to this week's edition of the UK Travel Planning Podcast. This week's episode is a very special one for me, and you'll hear why in just a moment. I was last at Beamish in June with Doug and my sister, and we had an absolutely brilliant day.

I know many of you tell me you have family who came from the North East, a grandfather like mine who worked down the pit, or a great-grandmother who left Durham for a new life overseas, and Beamish is a place to go and see what their world actually looked like. But even if you do not have a family connection, you will love it. If you're curious about how people in Britain really lived from the 1820s right through to the 1950s, Beamish belongs on your list. Let's get into it.

02

Meet Samantha Shotton

TRACY

Hi, Samantha. I'm so excited to welcome you onto the podcast today, because we're going to be talking about one of my absolute favourite places to visit when I'm in the UK, and somewhere that has huge childhood memories for me as well. As we were saying before we started recording, it had a massive impact on how I taught history as a history teacher. So we're going to talk all about Beamish Open Air Museum, a living museum in the north east of England. Samantha, would you like to kick off by introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about what you do at Beamish?

SAMANTHA

Yeah, of course. First of all, I'm so happy to be here. It's great to hear your stories about Beamish, because that's what it's all about. It's about those family stories. So I'm Samantha Shotton, I'm the Chief Operating Officer and Deputy CEO here at Beamish.

I've got a little story, if you don't mind me sharing. I came on a school trip as well, as you can imagine. The first carousel I took my son on was the one here at Beamish, and I did my work experience here when I was 15. And then three years ago, full circle, I came back around to Beamish, and here I am.

My role is very much all-encompassing. I look after the entire operation, so I'm here to ensure that the museum continues to be here, that it's sustainable, that it provides a fantastic visitor experience and that everything is running as we would hope. I get the very enviable position of having an overview of our collections, our people, our volunteers and our overall visitor experience. It's a lovely position to be in.

03

What Beamish is and where it is

TRACY Oh, absolutely, and Beamish is all about experience. We're going to talk more about that when we get into it, but tell us a little bit about what Beamish actually is and where it is.

SAMANTHA We describe ourselves as a living museum. We are in County Durham, near the town of Stanley and also near Chester-le-Street, so we're not too far off the A1 if you're driving up towards us. We are a massive museum. We have nearly 500 acres, and some of that is woodland, some of that is open green space, and some of that is carefully curated areas by era.

We've got a 1900s town, we've got a Georgian landscape, 1820s, we've got a brand new 1950s town, which is only a couple of years old, which is amazing, as well as a 1940s farm. We're a mixture of buildings that were here, buildings that were translocated, so taken down brick by brick and rebuilt here, and buildings that have been inspired by other buildings across the North East.

What we do is tell the story of the North, but I think what makes us unique, and we call ourselves the Living Museum of the North, is that we're not your traditional museum. We have a fantastic and dedicated workforce of over 500 people, supported by over 400 volunteers, and that means we're able to interpret through people. So when you come to our site, you'll get to walk through and experience the sights, the smells, the touch, the buildings. You'll be able to talk to real people who, like myself, I've got my little hat here, are wearing costume. We've got an in-house costume team that really adds to the tableau.

And I think what makes us so special, which is what we were chatting about with your early experiences of the museum, is that because of that interaction with people, it's really accessible. We can alter the information for our audience, we can respond to your individual interests, and it's a real opportunity, I hope in a non-intimidating way, for people of all ages and backgrounds to come here and get introduced to this rich history of the North East.

History you can talk to

TRACY

Oh, absolutely, 100 per cent. I visited in June with my husband and my sister, and my sister was like, we have to go and see the dentist. So we spent about 20 minutes chatting to the dentist about what it was like in the early 1900s, how we wouldn't have had teeth, and how you wouldn't necessarily have been able to afford to go to the dentist. Honestly, it was so interesting. I had to drag my sister away, because she was completely engrossed in chatting all about the dentistry, what it would have been like and how people coped when they didn't have their teeth. It was just really good fun.

I really want to get that across to anybody considering going to Beamish: it really is an immersive experience. You can ask questions of everybody who's dressed in the right costume for that particular era. You can ask them what their life is like and what it was like working in the shop. It really is like going back into the past and having the ability to do that, isn't it?

SAMANTHA

Yeah, I hope so. And I like to think that it's interactive as well. You can actually come in and go into a drift mine, and I just don't think you can really understand that until you get to see the claustrophobic conditions. But also, as you say, there's something about really being in a space surrounded by the objects we have here at the museum, while also hearing real stories that are informed by really robust research and oral histories and social histories.

What's nice as well is that we find lots of people can relate. Yes, some of the stories we tell are 100 years old, or 200 years old if we're looking at the 1820s, but there's something relevant there, something that chimes. We do go to the dentist. We do need to think about what happens if we buy too many sweets at the sweet shop.

We've also got some places where you can actually make a transaction. We do have a sweet shop. It's awesome, and it's very hard to resist. It's one of the downsides of working here, I suppose. But just as you would have made a transaction in a sweet shop then, you can come here, see the sweets being made and make a transaction. We've got a 1950s toy shop where you can do the same, and we've got a pharmacy. So it's really about tying that together and getting that connection and relevance to today as well.

TRACY

Yeah, it's absolutely fantastic. The sweet shop is irresistible, I have to say, and there's always a queue. We stood in the line, I went in, and I think each of us had two packets. Trying to decide between the sweets is really hard, because a lot of them hold memories of my grandparents. My grandparents were born in the early 1900s, so a lot of the sweets I knew, because they were what my granddad used to have. It

was fantastic being able to look and decide what we were going to have. And then we continued driving around the UK with all the sweets we had from Beamish in the car, which was amazing.

SAMANTHA So you've taken them on a road trip?

TRACY Yeah, on a road trip. I was actually telling my mum as well, because you've got a 1940s and 1950s area, which made her feel old, because she was born in the 1940s. She's in her mid-80s now, but I'd really like to take her, because I think it will take her back to what it was like growing up, her childhood. As you say, all the objects, everything is set as it was at that time.

05

The eras: 1820s, 1900s, 1940s and 1950s

TRACY So let's talk a little bit about the eras, because you've got the 1820s, 1900s, 1940s and 1950s. What does each one of those areas give a visitor?

SAMANTHA I'll start with the 1820s. We've got an 1820s landscape, so we've got a waggonway, which tells a really important story about early steam and rail travel in the North East. That's really fascinating, and you can have a go on it, which is awesome, and you get that real smell of the engines.

We've also got the beautiful Pockerley, which is an old farmhouse, so to speak. It's always been there and it sits beautifully in the landscape, and parts of it go back to the 1400s. We've been really careful about both the interpretation and the presentation of that building, right down to the heritage breeds we have. We have living collections, if you like. We have the right sheep in the landscape, and we've been really deliberate about that.

There's also something so peaceful about Pockerley. You can get in there, see what's in the garden, and we've got a beautiful landscape garden, see the railway at the bottom of the hill, talk to our engagers and see some heritage crafts. It might be that we're candle making or weaving some wool. We've got a new tavern up there as well, which is lovely, as well as some self-catering cottages. So we've really developed that area of late. It's a beautiful spot, and it tells the story of that time of cottage industry and the rural heritage of the North East, with some really interesting stories along an old drovers' route.

Then, if you work your way around, we've got a couple of areas that are based in the 1900s. We've got a 1900s pit village, where we tell the story of mining life. We've got our drift mine, which is on the site of an original drift mine, and we've got some cottages there, the schoolhouse you mentioned, which has held many memories for schoolchildren over the last 60 years, and our chapel, as well as a little colliery

narrow gauge railway. We tell the wider story of mining, which obviously played such a big part in our region. We actually have some team members and volunteers who were miners themselves, so they are really able to tell that story.

And then we've got our 1900s town. I'm representing the pit village, by the way. I've got my hat on.

TRACY

Ah!

SAMANTHA

You mentioned the sweet shop and the dentist, and the 1900s town really shows the difference between those communities to a certain extent. You get to start to see professions. We've got a piano teacher, we've got the dentist, as you mentioned, we've got the bank, we've got the Co-op and we've got a garage. It's based a bit on Bishop Auckland, but it's a typical market town, if you like, and it shows another element of the area.

I don't want to use the word iconic, but it's often the image people have when they think of Beamish. We have a fleet of historic transport as well, so you'll see our trams and our buses, which you can ride on if you want to, coming through the town. The 1900s is brilliant. It's a really interesting time in British history, that Edwardian period.

Then we've got our 1940s, and we tell that at our 1940s farm. It's the home front, essentially. We've got some of our Land Girls and what that meant. We do a lot of education work up there as well, and you get to see that rural change between the 1820s and the 1940s.

Which brings us up to our newest exhibits, which are the 1950s. We have a 1950s farm as well, so we carry that story through from rural Weardale, and we've also got our 1950s town. There are a couple of key features. We've got our Grand cinema from Ryhope in Sunderland, and we show films in there. We've got an electrical shop, the toy shop I mentioned, and a house. Norman Cornish, who's a local artist, we've got a domestic setting from him, as well as allotments and a bowling green.

We've really been able to tell some national stories. You've got the foundation of the NHS, you've got social security and miners' welfare. What's been really exciting is that it's also the setting for our health and wellbeing work. We create non-clinical settings and groups for people who might be living with dementia, and give them a space to have a purpose, in a comfortable space where they do crafts. We've got a men's group, and they make bags and do some really beautiful things. Being dementia friendly is a really key part of who we are and of our accessibility, and our 1950s area is where we base that now.

The 1950s town

- TRACY** Oh, lovely. It's a lovely area, as you say. When was the 1950s area completed? Because the last time I was there, I can't remember it being there, so I guess it must be fairly new.
- SAMANTHA** It is, yeah. With help from some partners and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, we did a big capital investment programme to build the 1950s. Some of our buildings are older than others, so our Welfare Hall was one of our earlier introductions, and we did our last one not last year, but the year before. What we're really proud of is how we've tied that together and been telling wider stories. We were also recognised as Art Fund Museum of the Year in 2025, which was a huge achievement and accolade for us. We were really proud of that and of what the team had managed to achieve.
- TRACY** Oh, very well deserved, honestly. I loved the 1950s, because I was born in the 1960s, so going through the houses that were set up in the 1940s and 1950s again reminded me of my grandparents' house. Some of the things you see are the things that would have been in our grandparents' house if you're my generation, so you recognise them. I also liked the hairdresser's. I thought that was really cool.
- SAMANTHA** The hairdresser's is brilliant. Our team in there are trained and can do updos, so that's another way you can get involved. You can get your hair done in a 1950s style and go and enjoy the museum with your hair done. It's brilliant. It's just another chance to get really involved and immersed in what we've got.
- TRACY** Oh, I'll have to do that next time. I have to say, I was too busy shopping in the sweet shop and in the toy shop, looking at the toys. In there as well there are examples of very early tumble dryers and washing machines, and fridges, I think it was a fridge. I was like, oh my goodness, it was the early start of that kind of thing. We're 70 years on, but it feels like more than a lifetime ago, the difference between where we are now and how it was for a housewife in the 1940s and 1950s. That was really interesting as well. I was fascinated by that.

Things to take part in

- TRACY** Now, we've talked a little bit about the sorts of things people can do, so tell us a bit more about what they can take part in. Because it really is, as I say, interactive, immersive and accessible. There are lots of different things you can do.

SAMANTHA Yeah, absolutely. When you come to see us, you'll be able to take part in any of the activities that our team are doing. I've mentioned the transport, which is really key. It's a real highlight for people. But you'll also be able to see some of the heritage crafts that our team are doing, so you might see them knitting or sewing. We tend to do children's activities, especially during the holidays, but we've always got something to take part in, whether it's feeling the money in the bank, feeling the weight and seeing what that looks like.

We also have a really active events programme. We've just done a horticultural show, for example, where lots of our team got involved, and people could come in and take part in that rural tradition, which is really nice. We're working with a community this weekend coming, so that's going to be really exciting. There are also times when we'll do a 1950s quiz, for example, and we do community groups.

We have play spaces. We've got a 1950s play area, to modern safety standards, obviously. We have a baby clinic, so children can bring their baby to the NHS baby clinic to be checked, and we're really trying to open up that space for play. We've got a bowling green, and when the weather's good we like to get the bowls out and let people have a go. Again, feel the weight, touch it, feel the texture, have a go on the grass.

Another thing that really brings the atmosphere alive is music. We have a volunteer choir, which is incredible. We also work with local brass bands, the sounds of the region. At a weekend you'll be able to see bands in the bandstand and listen to that, which is lovely.

The way our ticket works is a pay for the day, visit for the year model, so it's sort of unlimited. Even if you wanted to come to us every weekend just to see a different band, you could. I hope visitors feel that they're really part of what's going on, because they can come back, get involved and take on the different activities that we might do. We might be doing a trail.

The other thing that's so emotive for people is taste. We've mentioned the sweet shop, but we've got a bakery as well, and we've got fish and chip shops. In every area we do different food that fits in, inspired by the time. I think that's another way people can get that nostalgia and be part of the region. When you said dentist, I was thinking, I bet you remember the smell.

TRACY Yep, absolutely. Well, I don't like the dentist at all. I think it's bad enough now, but I'd hate to have lived in the 19th century or even earlier. First of all, the teeth situation. And I wear glasses as well, so it would have been disastrous. I wouldn't have been able to see and I would have had no teeth. What a sight that would have been.

SAMANTHA We might have pulled them out as a 21st birthday present for you.

TRACY

Oh dear. I know, the guy was talking about having your teeth out when you were going to get married. Well, I wouldn't have been able to see anyway, so I'd have had it.

You just think how much easier it is in the time we're in now compared with what it was then. This is about my grandfather. I'm a coal miner's granddaughter. My grandfather was in the coal mines, so I grew up with that whole culture. My grandmother was doing all the cooking and my granddad would come in. It was a completely different way of life to anything my daughter would experience now or have any contact with, really. So I think it's the ability to do all that at Beamish which brings it back to life. What you experience passes down the generations and makes it real.

SAMANTHA

I like to hope so. One of our most popular activities is where we tell the story of the suffragettes and suffragists. Our visitors can get involved and join our march with the suffragettes and suffragists, and they can shout and bawl and really make their voice heard. It's brilliant, actually. Again, it's galvanising that feeling and telling that really important story of where we are and where we've come from.

08

The people in costume

TRACY

Absolutely. Now I want to talk a little bit about the people and a little bit about the collection. We'll start with the living history side. I think I must have been about eight or nine when I first went to Beamish, and it had an impact on me. We've all been in a history classroom with a teacher who opens a textbook or gives you a piece of paper to fill in, and it's boring. I never, ever wanted to do that, and I swear part of that came from that experience of being immersed in it, and how much of an impact that leaves on you.

So that's how I used to teach, and we were talking about that before we started the podcast. I taught very much with art and drama, and I wanted to make it real, whether we were doing the Romans or whatever else. I didn't want it to feel like something that was just out of a textbook and had no relevance to the kids I was teaching. And I think that's what's amazing about Beamish when you go in, because you've got the people in costume. So tell us who the people are, and a little bit about the costumes as well, before we talk about the objects. It's the people that I find fascinating.

SAMANTHA

It's brilliant. We've got such a diverse workforce. As I mentioned earlier, we've got over 500 dedicated staff, which is amazing, and 400 volunteers, and you'll never be able to tell the difference. They're all our people, and that's what it's all about at the end of the day.

We have a very skilled costume team on site, and they put a lot of research into making sure that the costumes add to the experience. I wear costume every day, and I always think that if I walk across the street and I've added to that tableau and helped people understand what it could have looked like and felt like, that's really key. Even the practicalities of it really hit home for people.

It also facilitates a two-way conversation, which I think is really interesting. Obviously our team are very well trained and know the history of these objects inside out. But they're also constantly learning, because they're having conversations every day with people who have lived in the North East, and that's always building the stories we're able to tell.

We're really committed to expanding those stories as well. The communities of the North East aren't necessarily the same communities that were here in 1900, and their stories are relevant too. So how do we include that? How do we layer our stories and make sure that we are telling a representative story?

I think this is lovely. One of our 1950s semis is a domestic setting. We did a vote, and it was a house from Red House that was chosen. Two of the women who grew up in that house now volunteer with us, so there's a chance that you could be here at Beamish in a house from the 1950s with the women who grew up in it. I just think there's something so real and validating about the everyday experience, and that's what we try to give. We're celebrating the everyday stories, the social stories.

"There's a chance that you could be here at Beamish in a house from the 1950s with the women who grew up in it."

SAMANTHA

You mentioned remembering your grandparents' house. People didn't change their kitchens very often, for example. So if you were born in the 1960s, it's very possible you would have had 10 years of your grandparents' 1950s kitchen, and how that ties together is really lovely. But this museum only works because of the dedication of those really skilled and personable individuals. That's not lost on us, and I think it's what makes us unique.

TRACY

Oh, absolutely. I love the fact that you can walk into a house. We walked into one and there was a lady, I think she was kneading bread, which again is something my grandmother used to do all the time, and then she'd prove it in front of the coal fire. The husband was rocking on his rocking chair and talking to her in a proper accent. It feels very real. It literally is like walking into your grandparents' house.

And if you're coming to visit the UK from Australia or from America, you may have relatives from here. Quite often we talk to people who say, my great-grandfather was a coal miner from Durham or from the North East, or my great-grandmother moved over. This is a perfect way for you to go and experience what it was like. Quite often people will do the ancestry and trace it, which is great, and it's fantastic to be able to do that. But if you do that, you can also go somewhere where you can experience what it was like for those members of your family. Whether that was in the early 1800s or the early 1900s, you actually can get that experience.

I think it's about putting us in touch with the past, giving us that link with the past, which is so important. We should always be looking at where we are now relative to how it was for our relatives in the past, whether that was 50 years ago or 100 years ago or 150 years ago, because that's all made us who we are now. I think that's the uniqueness and the brilliance of Beamish, that it enables that to happen.

09

Where the buildings and objects come from

TRACY

Now, as well as your amazing staff, you also have some amazing buildings and objects. Where do they come from? I know some of them are moved brick by brick, aren't they?

SAMANTHA

Some of them are, yeah. Our collections are really wide-ranging, whether it's a building, a tram, a sewing machine, a clock or the photo archive I was mentioning.

What's really interesting is that we were set up by a gentleman called Frank Atkinson. He'd worked at the Bowes Museum in County Durham, and he was a collector, is how I'd describe it. He always had something in his pocket, an object to tell you about. He'd bring out a quoit and say, what's that? Which was brilliant. He was able to inspire people.

What we said is that it's not what's important to the curator, it's what's important to the people of the North East. It was open collecting at the time. We're not in a position to do open collecting now, but what he said was, if it's important to you, bring it in. So he was building our collections from everyday items. You might have a clock that's not particularly rare, but it is very representative of the time. Lots of people recognise it, it was important to people, it was on the mantelpiece, it was a key part of the home. That's how our quite eclectic collections have come together. It was what was important to people.

Where possible, we want them to be ticking. We have one of the most important working transport collections in the country, and they work, which actually preserves them in a way, because they're getting attention constantly.

Our buildings are a mix. We have some that we've taken down brick by brick, whether that's to save them or to tell the story, and rebuilt. I mentioned our cinema, which is from Ryhope in Sunderland, and we work with communities around that. Then there are things like the 1950s house I was explaining, which is a copy of a building. With some of our 1950s buildings, we've been able to make them more accessible for our visitors than they might have been in the 1950s, with widened doors and so on. And then we've got the buildings that were here already: Home Farm, which is our 1940s era, Pockerley, and of course the location of the drift mine. Those buildings were already on this beautiful site.

So we've got such a mix, and all of that combines to give that social history and story. You said it's very much about connections to the past, and you're absolutely right. People feel a real connection to objects. One of the things we really strive for is to create connection and conversation between people as well. Quite often I'll be out and about talking to people and there are four generations of a family on the visit, great-grandparents all the way down, and that's really lovely. It starts a conversation between the generations, and it builds that connection.

TRACY Yeah, absolutely, it does. My sister's 26 years younger than me, so she has a completely different experience from me, but it was just brilliant walking around and having those conversations about things we could remember and things that were relevant. My husband, unfortunately for him, is not from the North East.

SAMANTHA Oh, bless him.

TRACY I know, I know, he's not a northerner. But he got to experience that, and I said, look, I feel like this is also a way of getting to know me better, because I'm from that part of the world. It's like your identity is there as well.

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The schoolhouse

TRACY I'm going to swing back around to the schoolhouse, because when I think of Beamish, I think of the schoolhouse. Did that come in as a school, or was it built to look like a school? Because it's just so much like the school I went to.

SAMANTHA The school's a really interesting one. It's something people do remember, as you say, from their school visits. One of the things that surprises lots of people is the different entrances for boys and girls, and how that story comes to life. Our engagers in there are great. They're able to read the room and present a school experience so that children can understand how it could have been. They get to sit at the desks, for example, and then go out and play with a boomer in the yard.

TRACY Yes.

SAMANTHA Which is really interesting. I'll have to double-check the exact location that one came from, I'm afraid, but I can check and send that across.

TRACY Oh yeah. Unfortunately, the school that I went to, near New Hartley, has very sadly been knocked down and replaced by new homes. I used to drive past it, and that's gone. But when you go to the Beamish school, it's like that building was. It was a very old little school. Cold, all wood and stone floors, and dark corridors, I remember that. And then there wasn't enough room for all the kids, so we were outside in the mobile classrooms. They were a big thing in the 1970s, because there wasn't room for all the kids at that point.

11

How to spend a full day

TRACY Anyway, let's swing back around to what you would do. How would you recommend somebody spends a full day? Because obviously you can spend a full day there without any problem. Is there a best way to work round, or would you do it more randomly?

SAMANTHA I think it depends what you're interested in. If you're able to walk, we've got about 1.3 miles of loop, so the site is very walkable if you're able. You can either turn right and head to Pockerley and start with the 1820s, our oldest era first, or you can turn left and head to our pit village, which is quite often a firm favourite. People remember it, and I think it's a really great start to what Beamish is, that immersive element.

That being said, if you're really interested in our sweets, jump on the tram or the bus first, head round and get your sweets. You're sorted, you know you're covered. And there's something really special about being here early in the morning and seeing those spaces both when they're quiet and when they're bustling later in the day. You get two different experiences, both very much reminiscent of those eras.

I would definitely say don't miss Pockerley. It's a little bit further from the tram stop, but it is worth it to get up the hill and see the views. You get a great view of the museum as a whole, and you get to try some of our Georgian-inspired recipes up in the tavern, which is a newer experience for our visitors.

"Don't miss Pockerley. It's a little bit further from the tram stop, but it is worth it to get up the hill and see the views."

SAMANTHA

And a little bit of a pro tip. I was chatting to some of my visitor experience colleagues and they were saying, if you walk around to Pockerley, do it first. There's a tram stop and bus stop there. I think there's something about enjoying our rural location as well. Definitely build in some time to experience the transport, but you don't have to rely on it to get around. You can walk and enjoy that as well.

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Getting to Beamish

TRACY Oh yeah, the transport's amazing. I'm going to talk about that in a little while, but before we talk about getting around Beamish, we're going to talk about how to get to Beamish, because I know that question's going to come up. If people are coming from London, Newcastle or Durham, by train or by bus or by car, how can they get to Beamish?

SAMANTHA First of all, we're not too far from Chester-le-Street and not too far from Durham city centre, so if you're coming up on the northern main lines you can get to those locations by train. We do have a number of buses, and I would always encourage people to get the bus if they're able to. We give you 25 per cent off your ticket if you take the bus, and obviously it's a greener alternative that we're always going to be keen to promote.

In the summer, and it's just ended, I'm afraid, we do a Durham Explorer bus, so you can get on the bus and go to a number of different attractions. If you're looking to start with Beamish and then go further afield, that's a great option in the summer. But we do have service buses from Newcastle city centre, from Gateshead and from Chester-le-Street heading up towards Stanley, so that's the route you would want.

If you're coming by car, we have a large car park, and we've got brown signs off the A1, so if you're heading up north you can look out for us off the A1. I'd always recommend the bus, but there are car options as well, and our car park's free.

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Getting around: trams, buses and steam

TRACY Yeah, absolutely. So once I've got there by bus or by train or a taxi, or by bicycle, I'm sure my sister would say she'd cycle, honestly, she loves cycling, what about once I get there? Beamish is amazing, but I know a real highlight for a lot of people is how you get around the site. How does the transport work, and what sort of transport options do you have?

SAMANTHA As I mentioned, you can walk the site, which is lovely, and everybody's welcome to do that. But we also have our fleet of historic trams and historic buses, and they work on a circular route, so they're constantly going around the site. You can either get on and do a full route if you'd like to, or use it to get from era to era if you'd prefer. It means there's a bus coming every 15 to 20 minutes or so.

Historic transport wasn't necessarily built with accessibility in mind, so we also run an easy access bus with a tail lift for wheelchair users, and that is great. It's an adapted historic vehicle, which means you'll still have an opportunity to experience our historic transport. That's on call, so you would call up for it.

It's great, because you get to sit on the seats, you get to sit on the top. We've got some open-top trams and buses, and some closed-top as well, so there's a real variety. That is a huge draw, especially for some of our younger children, but also our enthusiasts.

That transport gets you around the site, but we also have opportunities with our steam, our rail. We recently reopened Rowley Station, where you can have a train ride down the track and back up, and we have our 1820s waggonway, where you can have a ride on that train as well. On selected weekends you'll see our colliery railway in operation too.

We also have our horse operations team. That's not something our visitors can get on, but you might see our horses in the field, you might see them working, and you might be able to join one of our horse weekends and see carriages going around the site. That's really exciting for people, and you get that progression up through the transport eras as well. But gosh, the trams and buses are absolutely stunning. They're a really interesting experience for people.

TRACY Oh, they're amazing. It's amazing to see them in all their glory. They're so well looked after and they're still going. I hate to think about the maintenance, but it's absolutely fantastic to be able to do that. Everybody waits at the stop to see what's going to come. Is it going to be the bus, or are you going to hop on the tram? We tried a few different things, because you want to. You think, I'm going to sit on the top, and then you realise how hard the seats were.

SAMANTHA Yeah, you think, oh gosh, I wouldn't want to go on a long journey.

TRACY Exactly.

TRACY Now, if somebody's planning to visit Beamish, how long would you recommend? I would say a day, and I'm sure you're going to say at least a day.

SAMANTHA And go back numerous times.

TRACY Exactly. Obviously, if somebody's in the UK for a few weeks and they're passing through, I would still say if you can give it a day, go and have that day. But as you said, you buy the ticket and you can go for 365 days, on whichever days you're open. I guess maybe not Christmas Day or Boxing Day.

SAMANTHA The days that we're open. I'd say at least a day. Since we built the 1950s town, I'd argue there's time to do more, especially if you want to get immersed in everything we have to offer.

Depending on when you're visiting, we also have some additional ticketed events. We have Halloween and we have Christmas. So if you're up for October half-term, for example, you might wish to join us for a Halloween evening, or if you're up for the festive season, we have Christmas evenings as well, which are really lovely. They evoke everything you think about for a historic Christmas, with all of the lights. It's a beautiful time of year to visit.

To make the most of your visit, I would say book online. It's always easier. Book in advance if you can, and turn up just before we open to really make the most of your trip. There is a lot to see, so please plan for that. If you need to do it in a shorter time, you can, that's absolutely fine. Everybody uses their pass differently, but I would recommend trying to carve out at least a full day for it. And then, if you're in the region, take advantage and go and see some of our lovely friends and colleagues at museums around the North East. I'd really recommend that.

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Where to stay and what else to see nearby

TRACY I was actually going to ask you about that, because we often have a lot of people who are planning road trips around the UK. Is there anywhere in particular you would say to base yourself, Durham, Newcastle, or maybe somewhere closer to Beamish? And I'm sure there are plenty of other places you'd recommend that would marry up with visiting Beamish.

SAMANTHA Yeah, absolutely. We are in County Durham, and there are some fantastic attractions on the doorstep. If you're coming up from the south, I would recommend heading to Bishop Auckland and seeing some of our friends at The Auckland Project, and Raby Castle as well. We've also got some newer cultural places in Durham, so you've got Redhills and you've got The Story. Then, a little bit further up, you've got the cultural delights of Newcastle city centre, and we're not much further from castle territory up in Northumberland.

TRACY Exactly.

SAMANTHA Coastal Northumberland, North and South Shields. I really recommend the North East. It has so many diverse attractions to offer. We're one of the most visited attractions in the region, and I think we're a great starting point to get that flavour of the North East. But please use us as a stepping-off point, because you can then either go further back in time and see a different aspect of our north-eastern history, or see how it's influenced the culture today. It's such a great place to visit.

County Durham's brilliant, actually. You can get down into Bishop Auckland, there's County Durham itself, you've got the rural, you've got access to the sea and access to the cities. It's a really nice hub. As I mentioned, we've got self-catering cottages. They're Georgian-inspired, and they're within the bounds of the museum, so you actually get to sleep here in our Georgian landscape. We've also got great partners. Beamish Hall Hotel is across the road, there's Lumley Castle Hotel, and there are great city centre options as well. So don't underestimate what the North East has to offer, is what I'd say.

TRACY Oh, no. Well, I'm always saying that as a Northumberland girl, a northern girl. Quite often I hear people say, we're going to York. And where are you going after that? Oh, we're going to Edinburgh. Hang on, there's a huge bit you're missing out in between those two. York's fantastic, Edinburgh's fantastic, but do not miss the bit in between, because often that's what people do. And I'm like, are you kidding?

"York's fantastic, Edinburgh's fantastic, but do not miss the bit in between."

TRACY

Then I have people saying, shh, don't spoil it, don't tell too many people. But those of us in the know say it is a beautiful and interesting part of England. And we're friendly, as you can tell. We're just a very friendly, outgoing, joyful people, I would say.

SAMANTHA Yeah, I think joyful is right. We've had a tough history, but we can really deliver on joy.

TRACY I think we can, and you're absolutely right. I don't want to go too much into the dark, but it's a tough background. When I look back at both sets of grandparents, the lives they had were really tough compared to where I am now, and I never take that for granted. As I say, that's the important thing about taking the generations and going around Beamish and experiencing that. I think it's just an unmissable thing to do.

Accessibility

TRACY Now, we've talked a little bit about the fact that it is a big site, and a little about accessibility. If people are visiting with limited mobility, or they're bringing small children with them, so I'm thinking wheelchairs or pushchairs, what should they do to prepare? And what do you have at Beamish to help with access?

SAMANTHA I would recommend checking out our website. We've got our accessibility information listed there, and I think that's always a great first step if you've got specific needs, just to make sure that we can meet them for you.

I wouldn't underestimate how large the site is. As I mentioned, we've got an easy access bus that is able to take manual wheelchairs. Unfortunately we can't take motorised scooters on that vehicle, so it's worth checking which is the best option for you. We have scooters to hire as well, so if you're coming and you think a mobility scooter would be helpful because of the breadth of the site, have a look in advance and book it in advance to guarantee that you've got it.

We've also been working on different levels of accessibility. We've got a Changing Places unit in the 1950s, and we've got some quiet spaces as well. We've got sensory bags for those who need them. There's an accessibility page on our website which gives information about the surfaces we have and how carers can access different areas, and we've got an accessibility toolbar as well, so that you can see what's going to be helpful for you individually.

We've got accessible parking if you need that, as well as accessible toilets in all of our areas. We've got an at-a-glance section on our accessibility, so have a check in advance, and if you've got any questions, our team would be more than happy to talk through any individual requirements.

TRACY Perfect, that's great, Samantha. I will link to that in the show notes for this episode as well, so if you're listening, we'll put a direct link in so you can check that out.

Quickfire round

TRACY Now, before we finish, I want to do a quickfire round with you. Are you ready for this?

SAMANTHA I'm ready, I'm ready.

TRACY All right. Which era would you head for first?

- SAMANTHA** I would head for the serenity of Pockerley first. I'd walk around there, and then when I was done, I'd be getting on the bus or tram.
- TRACY** Perfect. One thing to eat or drink on site?
- SAMANTHA** It's got to be fish and chips. We've got coal-fired, beef dripping fish and chips. We've got two fish and chip shops, one in the pit village and one in the 1950s. The one in the pit village is on coal, real coal fires. It's got to be fish and chips. Can you get more north-eastern than that?
- TRACY** No, you can't. You really can't. One thing that surprises people?
- SAMANTHA** I think one thing that surprises people is just how emotional it can be, for those connections, especially for bigger families, and that nostalgia and those memories of loved ones. I would also throw in that we are a charity and we do other work, like the dementia-friendly work I was mentioning earlier and our health and wellbeing programmes. We're an independent charity. We can only do what we do because people support us, and I think the breadth of things we're able to offer for different communities is sometimes a surprise to people.
- TRACY** Yeah, absolutely. It's fantastic. Best time of day to arrive?
- SAMANTHA** Oh, definitely as early as possible. Make the most of it, and then you get to see all aspects of the areas, when they're quieter, when they're busier, when it's sunnier. As soon as possible.
- TRACY** Perfect. And I always finish the podcast with the same question: what would be the one thing you'd want someone to know before they visited Beamish?
- SAMANTHA** I think it is this: you have an opportunity to really learn from real people. It's not about one version of history on one board, it's a two-way interaction. Come, make the most of the expertise and friendliness of our people, and have conversations. If you don't want to do that, you can enjoy it in your own way. So please feel that you can come here and be comfortable and learn and experience it in the way that works for you.

"It's not about one version of history on one board, it's a two-way interaction."

SAMANTHA

Until next week

TRACY Perfect. Well, it's been absolutely fantastic to talk to you, Samantha. I'll be back in the UK next June and July, so I'll be heading to Beamish again, I'm sure, because there's so much more.

SAMANTHA Please say hello.

TRACY I will do, absolutely. But thanks so much for coming onto the podcast and sharing all about Beamish. Hopefully people listening will be saying, I'm going to include it in my itinerary, which is what we want, because it is amazing.

SAMANTHA Honestly, my pleasure. It's been lovely to chat to you. Thank you.

TRACY And that brings us to the end of another episode. If Samantha has you adding Beamish to your itinerary, everything mentioned today is in the show notes at uktravelplanning.com/episode222, including the accessibility guide I promised, how to get there by train and bus, and places to stay nearby.

If you have a question about your own UK trip, do leave me a voice message through SpeakPipe. I'd love to hear from you. And if you enjoyed this episode, please share it with anyone planning a trip to the UK.

We also write a free weekly newsletter, The Great British Trip, which lands every Saturday morning, and the link for that is in the show notes too.

But as always, until next week, happy UK travel planning.

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