

The Peak District of Derbyshire

Acrise Faulkner - takes a trip in the comfort of a luxury coach

As a child born and bred in London, I was very lucky that my parents and godfather often used to take me to see other parts of the country. Since, however, their roots were mostly in North Yorkshire and Scotland, we always seemed to bypass Derbyshire. So, I was really pleased to be invited to spend a long weekend in Buxton getting to know something about the county.

The other reason for my eager anticipation was that it was a coach tour. The last time I'd been on a coach tour was way back in the late 60s with my mother when we did a couple of weeks touring in Switzerland. I can still remember the feeling of excitement as the wonderful scenery unfolded in front of me as I sat perched up in my vantage point high above the road. After that air travel with its promise of speed and convenience tempted me away from coach travel. However, as air travel seems to be not quite as convenient as it promised and to tell the truth not really all that quick

nowadays, I've often thought of giving coaches another go. I don't drive but I'm sure that coach travel must be wonderfully relaxing for a habitual driver – no need to be forever watching the road ahead, constantly alert and no need to worry about finding a petrol station or falling asleep at the wheel – just sitting back for once, leaving the driver to worry about directions and parking and enjoying the scenery and listening to a guide telling you all those things you'd probably never find out otherwise. Nowadays coach travel is, of course, very different from the late 60s. It's much more convenient with some companies actually picking you from your door so you don't see your luggage until the first hotel and on board there are lavatories, air conditioning and even coffee available.

We started our weekend in Buxton where we were based at the Barcelo Palace Hotel. The hotel was comfortable and our room was huge. The staff were really helpful and the food good so I guess we can forgive a little drowsiness

and understand it is soon to have a complete makeover. The popular perception of coach trips – apart from the rather loud and louche lot on the TV show – is of a coachful of senior citizens. While our party probably did have a majority of people who could enter into a discussion, as we did, of who recorded "Tell Laura I love her" (it was Ricky Valens!), there was a fair mixture of ages and the atmosphere was lively and fun. As we were promised at the start, we did get chatting quickly and made friends. I am sure coach travel must be a very pleasant and safe option for singles.

Our programme was very full so that we could see as much of Derbyshire as possible. We began our first day in Buxton, a lovely Georgian spa town with 23 acres of parkland, which immediately reminded me that this was Mr Darcy's county and I could imagine characters straight out of Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* visiting the spa and the charming opera house. We boarded our coach and immediately I was aware of how much better



Crich Tramway Village, a lovingly restored period village that is also home to the National Tramway Museum.



Acrise Faulkner by one of the luxury coaches

my view was over the countryside from the coach than it would have been from a car. Our guide told us our journey would consist of glorious view after glorious view punctuated by interesting sites and villages. The scenery was certainly breathtaking and it was really refreshing for tired Londoners to gaze on rolling fields with sheep, lambs, cows and calves peacefully grazing. I came to love those lush green fields over the 2 days, criss-crossed as they were by stone walls. I learnt a lot about stone walls and wallers during the trip. Apparently when the mining industry collapsed, many miners retrained as stone wallers – how wonderful to spend all your days outdoors after life down the pit. I liked the story that when the walls are restored, the workmen often find babies' shoes at the bottom put there to ward off evil by their innocence. I was glad to here they left them there when they rebuilt the walls.

As we drove through the Dark Peak and White Peak, taking in the Long hill as it runs through the Peak District National Park and the snake pass, the guide told us stories about each village we passed. Some stories were light-hearted and even naughty but some were sad and shocking like the story of what happened to the children bought from London's workhouses and worked to death in the mills or the tragic tale of the village of Eyam which sacrificed itself by imposing quarantine on the village to stop the spread of the plague and lost most of its inhabitants. She told us too, about customs like the Shrovetide football match at Ashbourne which starts at 2pm with 100s of players and goals 3 miles apart. It is repeated on Ash Wednesday, seems to have no rules and could be dangerous to get involved in!

We stopped for coffee at the Bull's Head in Castleton famous for its Blue John jewellery and ornaments and went onto to their gastro pub The Red Lion near Chesterfield where town meets the countryside and the Peak District meets Robin Hood country. We passed the famous crooked

spire church, St Mary and All Saints and the largest church in the county. The spire stands 228ft and leans 9ft 5ins from the centre. It was twisted when green timber was used during construction and 32 tons of lead put on it. As the timber dried out the weight of the lead twisted the spire.

After lunch we went to the Crich Tramway Village. The guide said it was probably of most interest to men but I loved going back in time. When you enter you are given an old penny so that you can pay for your tram ride. The conductor then clips a ticket for you just like the old days, hence the term 'clippy'. From the old horse trough on the way to the restored buildings at the tram depot, it certainly looks authentic. I was excited to see trams like the ones I'd seen as child in the 50s and some looking just as if they'd come out of those last scenes of Dr Zhivago. There is also a fully restored pub where you can have a drink or afternoon tea and I gather they host special events there too. I would love to have gone to the Titanic evening where passengers had dinner and were briefed on their voyage before taking the tram to the embarkation point. We left there in the early evening and drove back to the hotel past yet more lovely villages complete with greens and duck ponds as well as the spa village of Matlock Bath, the medieval Haddon Hall and the town of Bakewell, which, by the way, the guide informed us was famous for pudding not tart. I certainly slept well that night and felt I'd learnt so much in one day and I'd never see all there is to see or do all there is to do in this county which is only 60miles North to South and 35miles East to West –what a revelation - talk about a treasure trove!

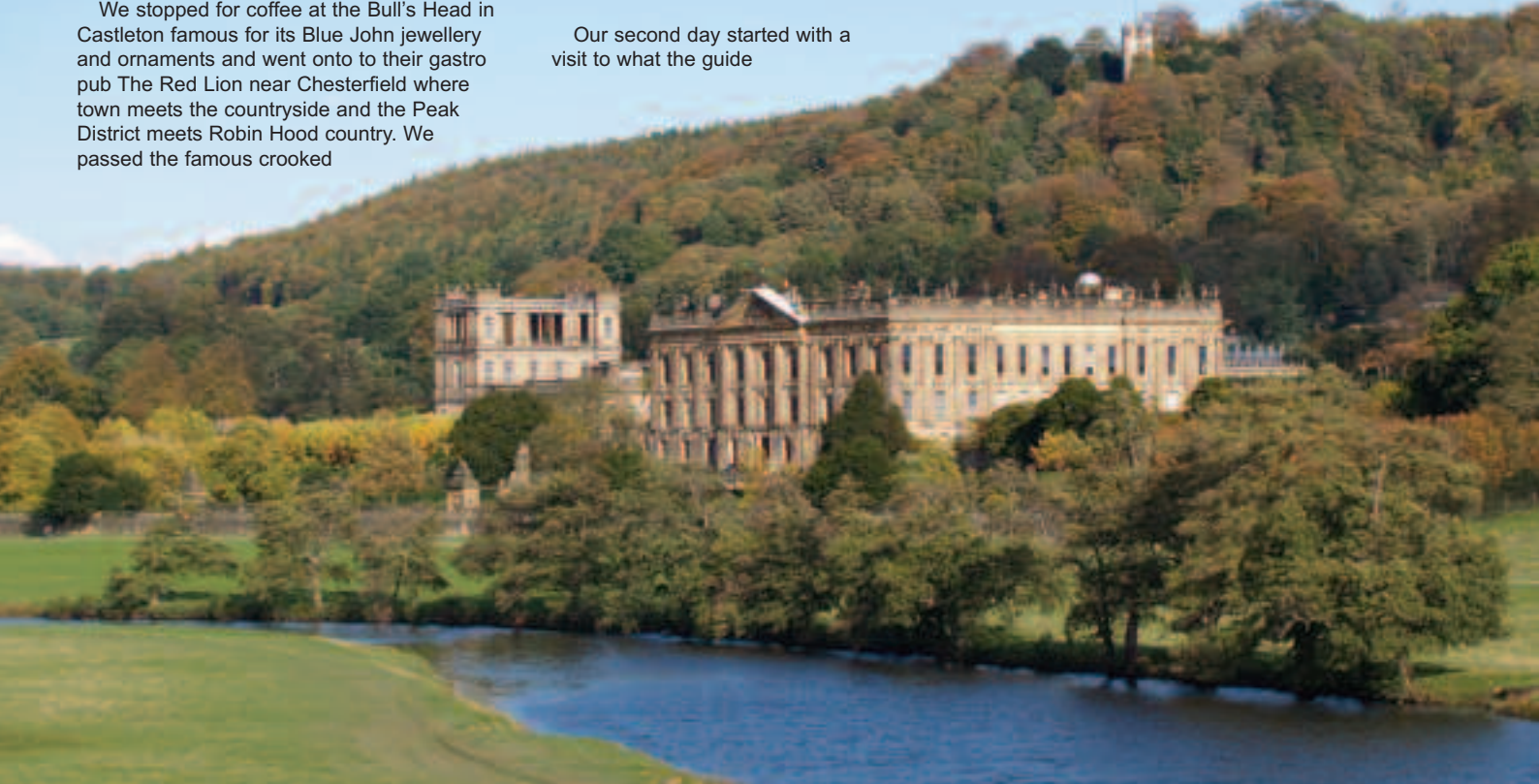
Our second day started with a visit to what the guide

described as possibly the most beautiful village in Derbyshire, Tissington, where we toured the famous well dressings with a local who had lived there all his life before visiting Tissington Hall. Sir Richard FitzHerbert and his wife are very much part of their village and open their lovely home to the public for about 28 weeks every year. It certainly had a really homely feel which contrasted with our next stop which was Chatsworth House. It is a truly magnificent house dating right back to Bess of Hardwick. After a tour of the house, we had lunch and visited the vast park covering 400 hectares enclosed by a 9 mile long dry stone wall and deer fence and which on that day was hosting horse the international trials and so was buzzing with visitors. Sadly, though this was used for Pemberley in the film *Pride and Prejudice*, no Mr Darcy was to be seen.

We definitely could have spent lot more time exploring the house and gardens with its wonderful water features but we had to catch a train back to London. However, I shall certainly find an excuse some time very soon to go back and see all the things the guide told us about us for myself. I am sure it'll take quite a time to get to the bottom of this lovely county.

I would like to thank Chris Wales and Paul Ovington of the Coach Tourism Council, Jeanette Sykes of the Derbyshire Peak District Tourist department and Sally Andrews of Andrews Coaches for giving us such a great opportunity to visit Derbyshire and see its many attractions.

For more information about coach excursions around the UK visit;
www.findacoachholiday.com



The magnificent Chatsworth House, where *Pride and Prejudice* was shot - alas Mr Darcy was not in!