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111 Places in County Durham That You Shouldn't Miss

Photographs by Laura Atkin

emons:

To our wonderful grandparents

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Foreword

Compact, cool and with the UNESCO-listed Durham Cathedral as its crown jewel, Durham is a very special city. Best explored on foot, there's plenty to discover as you pace its steep walkways: quirky bars, independent shops and centuries of history – from Roman to Norman. On a riverside stroll along the picturesque Wear, with charmingly aged architecture setting the scene, you'll soon understand why Durham is frequently voted as one of the UK's top city break destinations.

Beyond the city limits, there's more to uncover in every corner of the county. In small villages, larger towns and rural areas, Durham's deeply embedded industrial heritage (coal, lead mining and steelmaking) is time honoured, with public art and preservation efforts by passionate locals. Its natural splendour shines brightly – from the green valleys of the Dales, to its rare heathland, limestone grassland and regenerating coastal strip. That's before you even veer into the Tees Valley towns of Darlington, Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees.

Mulling over where to 'count' as County Durham for the purpose of this book was a challenge. After much deliberation, I decided to focus on the ceremonial county of Durham (rather than just the area served by Durham County Council), which includes three of five boroughs in the Tees Valley. How could I have done anything else? Darlington and Stockton-on-Tees are the birthplace of the world's first public steam passenger railway. Hartlepool is the home of renowned warship HMS *Trincomalee*. And how could you get so close to Teesside without indulging in a Parmo?

Travelling around County Durham to research this book was a joy. At every turn, places I visit often were illuminated, I saw new sides to places I hadn't visited for years, and I embarked on a number of unexpected adventures. The result is a hand-picked selection of curious, offbeat and historically significant places you simply shouldn't miss. I hope you enjoy them.

4__County Bridge

A bridge of boundaries

This Grade I-listed, three-arched stone bridge, also known simply as Barnard Castle Bridge, has a long history behind it. But located on the outskirts of the castle wall, allowing you a picture-perfect vantage point of its majestic ruins, the first reason to visit is the view. This view drew the artist J. M. W. Turner to sketch it in 1797.

Looking down, you'll see the billowing River Tees flowing away. On the opposite side to the castle, you'll catch a glimpse of green fields in the neighbouring village of Startforth. Whichever direction your eyes wander, resplendent is the word that springs to mind. Particularly if you can walk across and around on a clear day, when the sun is out and shining brightly.

But what of the history? Well, once you're standing on the bridge, you're technically straddling the former boundary between County Durham and the county of North Yorkshire. Walking around, see if you can spot any worn-down letters carved in the bridge denoting as much: YNR, standing for Yorkshire North Riding. Before 1974, Barnard Castle itself was part of North Yorkshire – though is firmly classed as County Durham today. As things stand, the invisible boundary now lies miles further south.

Cast your mind much further back, 650 years or so. Surprisingly, you'd still be standing on the bridge, albeit a much earlier version. It was originally built in the 14th century, but later recreated after damage suffered in the Siege of Barnard Castle in 1569 – a religion-fuelled 'Rebellion of the North', which rallied against the rule of Elizabeth I, the Protestant Queen of England, in favour of Mary, Queen of Scots, a Catholic. People say the date of the Siege was carved onto the bridge incorrectly at a later date – Historic England records show that a stone somewhere reads '1596'. While such a mistake would be a very cool find, unfortunately even eagle-eyed visitors might struggle to spot it.

Address A67, Bridgegate, Barnard Castle, DL12 8QF | **Getting there** 39 minutes from Durham by car, or train to Darlington, then bus X75/X76 Max | **Hours** Accessible 24 hours | **Tip** At the bottom of The Bank, just before you turn onto Bridgegate, there is a small pub called The Blue Bell.

34 *Albert the Good*

A headless mystery in the park

For around 160 years, a mighty oak tree has stood in Wharton Park. It was planted by the park's founder, William Lloyd Wharton, in 1863, two years after the death of Queen Victoria's beloved husband Prince Albert. At the planting, *Whilst we have time, let us do good to all men* was inscribed by the tree. It seems safe to say, then, that Wharton admired the late Prince Consort. However, he did not, as far as we know, place a small stone statue in front of the tree, atop a plinth reading: *Albert the Good.* But if you were to visit the oak today, that is exactly what you'd find.

Strangely, no one really knows who put it there. Did *Albert the Good* just 'poof' into existence? It is believed the sculptor was one J. Gibson. Other records suggest the statue simply just 'appeared' one day. A well-documented clue shows that children who'd visited the park in both the 1930s and 1940s said as adults, years later, that they could not recall ever seeing it. And then there's the question of which Albert the statue intends to represent.

Prince Albert is the obvious choice. He was often called Albert the Good, and the statue was placed by a tree planted in his memory. However, the figure is draped in a robe, and holds an orb in his right hand. These items form part of a monarch's traditional dress – but Albert was never the monarch. Was someone perhaps suggesting that he would have made a worthy king? Surely it couldn't represent his son, another Albert? After all, he ruled as King Edward VII from 1901 to 1910, and was commonly nicknamed Bertie. One (quite outlandish) theory is that the statue was supposed to be of Queen Victoria. In the ultimate twist, many years after its mysterious appearance, the statue suddenly became headless. Infuriatingly, this only begs more questions. When? Why? And where on Earth did ol' *Albert's* head go? Could it still be somewhere in Durham? The plot thickens.

Address Wharton Park, 10 Princes Street, Durham, DH1 4FJ, +44 (0)300 0262655, www.durham.gov.uk/whartonpark | **Getting there** 3-minute drive from Durham Station Approach or 8-minute walk | **Hours** Accessible 24 hours, although the car park is only open 10am–5pm | **Tip** Look out for a wooden statue of park founder William Lloyd Wharton. It was sculpted by Tommy Craggs and unveiled in 2016.

81__No Place

There's no place like No Place

OK, let's just get this out of the way. Yes, that's what it's really called. No, it's not a nickname. It's certainly not a wind-up. No Place is what you'll read on the road signs, your Google map, even the community noticeboard by the bus stop, when you make your way to this tiny village in Stanley, North Durham.

In the grand tradition of baffling, whimsical and at times completely nonsensical English village names that make you cock your head and go, 'They did that on purpose… didn't they?' No Place is unique. For one, a quick camera snap showcasing one of its several name-bearing signs acts as proof that, by the name's own admission, you've been to a place that isn't even really a place. Of course, though, it is a real place. Home to a tiny population, No Place has a few rows of streets, and a well-liked pub. It's also home to Beamish Primary School. Beside the school is a black bench with wheels for legs, and the back rest is made up of a cute, quirky pattern of cut-out steam train carriages.

Where the name comes from is not entirely clear. One theory is that it was a shortened version of 'North Place' or 'Near Place' and it simply stuck. Another, posited by the American magazine *Time* when it took interest in No Place back in 1954, reckons that, as it was sandwiched between two slightly larger villages, it was simply too petite to be given a 'proper' name. Now, it's sometimes called Co-operative Villas, too, as apparently a now-defunct local council wanted the name to be changed. The mystery of its origin remains, but let's be honest: wherever it came from, it's pretty cool – and among several unusual monikers used by a few small County Durham villages or hamlets. Just as curiosity-piquing are Pity Me, Fir Tree, Muggleswick, Bearpark, Billy Row, Metal Bridge, Quaking Houses and Burnt Houses – the latter two, fortunately, are not indicative of the state of the homes there.

Address No Place, Stanley, DH9 0QP | **Getting there** 18 minutes by car from Durham; Go North East bus 8 from Stanley, Chester-le-Street or Sunderland | **Hours** Accessible 24 hours | **Tip** Quaking Houses is also in Stanley if you want to see its sign. It's believed to be named after the Quakers, the religious group, who apparently settled there.