

READER HOLIDAYS

Crufts 2005 Dog Show

2 Days - March 12, 2005
from only **£79.95**



- Price includes:
- Return coach travel
 - 1 nights accommodation
 - Cooked breakfast & three course evening meal
 - Entrance to Crufts Dog Show
 - Trip to Stratford-upon-Avon
 - Services of the tour driver

Tour organised by Diamond Holidays, ABTA W0352

Daniel O'Donnell

Live at Blackpool Opera House
2 Days - April, 2005
from only **£109.95**



- Price includes:
- Return coach travel
 - 1 Night half board accommodation
 - Ticket for Concert
 - Visit to Oswaldtwistle Shopping Village
 - Services of the tour driver

Tour operated by Henry Shaw City Cruiser ABTA V1801

The Eden Project

5 Days - Feb 21, 2005
from only **£169.00**



- Price includes:
- Return coach travel
 - 4 nights accommodation
 - Rooms with private facilities
 - Cooked Breakfast
 - Three course evening meal
 - Entrance to Truro, Falmouth, Looe and Polperro
 - Entrance to The Eden Project

Tour operated by Diamond Holidays ABTA W0352

Swiss Glacier Express

Switzerland & Austria
8 Days - May 28, July 9, 2005
from only **£345**



This is a truly European panoramic holiday, staying in both Austria and Switzerland. Enjoy classical mountain scenery, peaceful Alpine pastures, picture postcard villages with wooden chalets bedecked with flowers, crystal clear lakes and crisp mountain air.

Price includes:

- Return coach travel
- Local departure points
- British coach with drinks service & WC
- Return Channel crossing
- Two nights B&B in France
- Five nights HB in the Arlberg region of Austria
- Journey from Chur to Andermat on the Swiss Glacier Express
- Excursions to Bavaria, Lake Constance and Lindau

Tour organised by Mistral European Holidays - ABTA V0669

Iceland - Just For A Day

From Durham Tees Valley
1 Day - April 20, 2005
from only **£189.00**



Shrouded in mist and steam from beneath the earth's surface, the extraordinary island of Iceland was pushed up from the North Atlantic seabed by volcanic forces that are still active today.

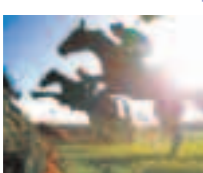
Price includes:

- Specialty chartered, non-smoking flight to Keflavik
- Hot breakfast, outbound & hot meal on return flight
- Services of Transair escort for the day
- All transfers abroad
- Return coach travel
- Remainder of the day free for exploring

Tour organised by Transair Travel, ABTA V4462

'Grand National' Weekend

2 Days - Apr 9, 2005
from only **£99.00**



- Price includes:
- Return coach travel
 - Local Departure Points
 - Admission to Steeplechase enclosure at Aintree
 - Visit to Chester
 - 2/3 Star hotel in Cheshire/Flintshire
 - Dinner and breakfast
 - Accommodation in rooms with private facilities

Tour organised by Shearings Holidays ABTA V5468

Oban Tribute Break

5 Days - Jan 24, 2005
from only **£144.00**



- Price includes:
- 4 nights half board
 - Day trip to Fort William
 - Half day tour to Isles of Skye and Easdale
 - Music & dancing inc cabaret entertainment
 - Return coach travel
 - Enclosure at Aintree
 - 2/3 Star hotel in Cheshire/Flintshire
 - Dinner and breakfast
 - Accommodation in rooms with private facilities

Tour organised by Shearings Holidays ABTA V5468

Disneyland Paris

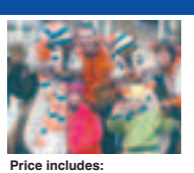
WINTER DREAMS

2 Nights - Jan 16, 2005
From Only **£79.95**

1 Day Park Hopper Pass
2 Nights - Mar 28, 2005
From Only **£129.95**

3 Day Park Hopper Pass
3 Nights - Mar 28, 2005
From Only **£149.95**

3 Day Park Hopper Pass
Tour organised by Henry Shaw City Cruiser ABTA V1801



- Price includes:
- Return coach travel
 - Return Channel crossings
 - Park hopper ticket
 - Park hopper ticket
 - Day trip to Fort William
 - Disneyland

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It began here: Christmas 2004 at Polam Hall, with the young boarders gathering in the stairwell where, in 1853, the first Christmas tree in the district was revealed

Picture: CHRIS BOOTH

The Polam pioneers

While Christmas trees stand twinkling in many a living room across the district today, it was only in 1853 that Polam Hall brought the tradition to the area

INVITED to the Procters' Boarding School for girls to see what is called 'a Christmas tree', wrote a grumpy Edward Pease in his diary on December 21, 1853. "I did not feel inclined to go. About 70 were present."

Edward could have harrowed for England, but in turning down the kind invitation of Misses Jane and Elizabeth Procter, he missed out on a little piece of history.

For at Polam Hall on that date, what was probably the first Christmas Tree in the south Durham district was revealed.

In deepest history, the decorating of an evergreen tree was a pagan ritual performed in the depths of bleakest winter.

It crossed into Christianity in the 7th Century when St Boniface was converting the Germans. He used a triangular fir tree as a visual aid to represent the Holy Trinity.

Then, he stumbled upon some pagans worshipping around an oak tree. He angrily cut the oak down - and a fir miraculously sprang up in its place.

Martin Luther, in the 16th Century, was the first to decorate a

ECHO MEMORIES
BY CHRIS LLOYD
A WALK IN THE PARK
online: www.thisisthenortheast.co.uk



Edwardian days: An Edwardian postcard showing Jonathan Backhouse's grand ivy-covered entrance to Polam Hall

fir tree, putting candles upon it to show children how the stars twinkled in the sky on the night that Jesus was born.

It became a Germanic tradition, crossing to this country in 1800 when Queen Charlotte, the German-born wife of George III, dressed a tree for Christmas Day at Windsor Castle.

Due to their German background, this remained a part of the British Royal family's Christmas - Victoria remembered being entranced by a tree as a child in the 1830s. But the same background meant the Royal family was not popular with the British people and no one copied their Germanic ways.

Queen Victoria and her German husband, Prince Albert, changed that. They made royalty fashionable, and when, in

1848, the Illustrated London News showed Victoria and Albert gathered around a candle-lit Christmas tree, their children looking up at it in awe, the nation followed suit.

Victoria's trees were in pots upon round tables, the presents collected on the tabletop beneath.

Albert was evangelical about Christmas trees, sending them as gifts to schools and hospitals. And so the idea spread.

It appears to have arrived in Darlington by 1853 and, although Edward Pease decided it wasn't worth bothering with, the Polam Hall Christmas Tree Party became the most important seasonal social gathering for the next 50 years.

Edward was of an older generation of solemn Quakers; his children and grandchildren introduced more open to frivolity. Even so, it is remarkable that a Quaker school like Polam should embrace something as showy and vulgar as a Christmas tree.

But, for all their frightening photographs, the Procter sisters were extremely outward-going. As we saw last week, they even had the world-renowned trapeze artist Blondin perform in their garden in 1872 - an entertain-

ment which probably would have horrified Edward.

So, a tall tree was taken through the huge door that Jonathan Backhouse had added to Polam in 1825, and erected in the magnificent 40ft stairwell behind.

The tree created such excitement that a 350-line poem was written about the 1861 party.

For several weeks if you happened to fall
In the way of the Ladies of Polam Hall,
You would hear them talk, if they talked at all,
Of a Great Event, that was shortly meant
To make their acquaintances hastily run
With promise of Pleasure and Prizes and Fun,
Each hoping to find, some Gift to his mind,
That grew on a Tree, of a marvellous kind.

On Thursday the Ladies devoted the morning,
To hanging the Gifts on the Tree for adorning,
And all the arrangements most duly completing
With a great deal of help, while the Friends were at Meeting,
There were things of all colours, white, amber and black,

And things that were meant to go off with a crack.
There were things made of silver and things made of gold,
And things to be held, and things that would hold.

All the leading Quakers - or "Friends" - came in carriages from all the biggest houses from miles around to the party. Except Edward, of course. And "Our Friend, Isaac Sharp, who had travelled much lately, was too busy to come, but regretted it greatly."

The tree party evolved into what today we would regard as the seasonal raffle or tombola held in aid of the local school. The poet explains:

The Tickets, with numbers, were chosen by Lot,
And everyone wondered what Prize he had got.
As Arthur and Gurney and Henry Fell Pease
Were with scissors invested, and proceeded with ease
To cut down from the Tree all the gifts they could see
And to hand them about as the numbers might be.

It was, of course, a lottery as to whether the present was suitable for the ticketbearer:
And a slight disappointment was

seen on his face,
When a 'talented man' drew a handkerchief case.
But he presently managed a bargain to strike,
And made an exchange with a lady, Miss Pike.

And a nice pair of slippers was won by his brother,
But the pair that he wanted was gained by another.
One very nice girl got a packet of soap
That was worthy of washing the hands of the Pope.

And a very nice lady who came out of France,
Drew the flowers she had made, by a very nice chance.
And when on the Tree there was nothing to see,
The Friends then assembled for coffee and tea.

After which, with best wishes and kindly expressions,
The guests then departed with their various possessions.

The Christmas Tree Party continued until the First World War, when the school realised that such gaiety was no longer appropriate.

Of course, Polam Hall still has its Christmas services and its Christmas tree still stands in the stairwell - although it is not quite as tall as it was in the Procters' day.

The arrival of the Shahzada

TO complete our history of Polam Hall, it was built in 1793 by draper Harrington Lee. It was bought by banker Jonathan Backhouse in 1825, who enlarged it. After his death, it was sold in 1850 to the Thompson brothers, William and Robert. They rented it to the Procter sisters for use as a Quaker ladies' finishing school. The Thompsons went bust in the 1870s, and one of their largest creditors, Arthur Pease, of Hummersknott, became Polam's new owner.

The Procter sisters, as we have seen, were remarkably adventurous. Aged 65, Elizabeth was taking a party of children on a tour of the Rhine to Switzerland when she died in the Hotel du Cygne in Frankfurt in August 1881.

The following summer, her sister Jane, aged 72, was visiting a former pupil in Rome when she

passed away. Both ladies were buried in the cities where they died.

Without the Procters' drive, Polam struggled. But in February 1888, the Lockwood sisters, Hannah and Rachel, were looking for a home for their Kendal Quaker ladies' school. They came across the Pennines and found Polam "gaunt and comfortless with its bare dripping trees and paths deep in unwet autumn leaves" - but decided to stay. They brought eight children and five staff with them. By 1893, they had 30 boarders and 23 day pupils.

Perhaps the Lockwoods' best move was to appoint an effervescent 30-year-old, Helen Bayes, as head in 1894. As a schoolgirl, she had bowled out her headmaster at cricket. Now she introduced the game to the girls of Polam, along with hockey, golf and bicycling. She built a gymnasium

in 1895 and, in 1897, had the field by the Skerne levelled into a hockey pitch.

WITH the school firmly established, it bought its premises from Arthur Pease in 1900.

But before departing the Polam scene, Arthur created one of the most colourful episodes in the school's history.

In July 1895, he held the Royal Agricultural Society's week-long show at his Hummersknott home (now the centre of Carmel School). More than 100,000 people attended. The guests of honour were the Duke and Duchess of York, and Nazrulla Khan, the Shahzada of Afghanistan.

The Shahzada needed a bed for the night, and Arthur offered him Polam. The girls were shunted out, the furniture hidden away, the rooms redecorated and incense burned throughout to re-

move any "female pollution".

The Shahzada and his entourage - which included the Kotwal of Kabul and the Nakim Bashi - were met on the Monday evening at Bank Top station by a 100-man guard of honour, and driven through the town.

He came with cases of oranges, sacks of rice and live sheep and chickens, which were slaughtered, cooked on a specially-constructed stove and served from great brass dishes carried on his servants' heads.

On Tuesday morning, the Shahzada demanded a visit from Darlington's premier gunmaker, Joseph Forestall Smythe (the fellow who, as regular readers know, accidentally blew up Blackwellgate in 1894).

"His Highness exhibited great interest in the various big game weapons, several of which he purchased including a hammerless walking-stick ball and shot



Leading the way: The gym at Polam Hall, created by Helen Bayes

gun with a supply of ammunition," reported 'The Northern Echo'.

Then it was off to the show-ground, although, as he left Polam, the Shahzada - the heir to the Afghanistan throne - breezily inquired if he might be able to buy it.

After a stroll round the butter-making and poultry-dressing displays, the Afghan entourage returned to Bank Top for the evening train to London.

"Some were wearing turbans and others caps of astrachan," said the Echo's reporter stationed at the station.

"One had a bright green cloth edged with red lovingly tucked under his arm; another carried a prosaic portmanteau; a third had a mysterious bundle enclosed in a white cloth and a fourth, umbrella in hand, had a few gay blossoms beneath his fingers."

Can Polam ever have seen anything quite so colourful since?