



Great Houses of North-West England

Historic Lancashire: architecture and decoration, art and furniture

2–10 July 2026 (MM 106)

9 days

Speaker: Anthony Lambert

The finest country houses and gardens in north-west England, spanning the 14th to the 20th centuries.

Special arrangements with owners and inhabitants of the houses and private, out-of-hours visits.

Galleries containing outstanding collections of paintings, sculpture and exceptional furniture.

These nine days in Lancashire and Cumbria will introduce you to the counties' finest 'standing romances', in the words of the 19th-century author Harriet Beecher Stowe, who at the time was describing the remarkable Speke Hall. We will delve into all aspects of the country house – architecture, furniture, decoration, works of art; gardens and parks; daily life; conservation and custodianship.

Home to Liverpool and the Lake District, these are counties of extremes, from the rugged peaks of the Lake District to the lush greenery of northern Lancashire's forests. The wealth of the industrial cities and towns from textiles and other manufactures allowed the creation of fine civic buildings, parks and museums. In contrast, there are relatively little-known areas of great natural beauty, such as the Forest of Bowland, wild parts of the Pennines and areas of the Lake District that were once part of the county of Lancashire until the reorganisation of borders.

Within these beguiling, varied landscapes are magnificent country houses; those we see span six centuries. They include Speke, Rufford and Samlesbury, black-and-white 'magpie' houses – the epitome of Tudor architectural style, and among the best surviving timber-framed great houses in the country. There is Dalemain, originally a pele tower gradually enlarged with Tudor and Georgian additions. The imposing Georgian red-brick Lytham Hall by John Carr of York has a staircase hall thought to be one of his finest works. Then there is Blackwell, in a lovely Lakeland setting, an outstanding example of Arts & Crafts design.

Several of the homes have been in the same family for generations, bearing the imprint of the personalities that lived there, some of whom we will encounter during



Cover: Liverpool, St George's Hall and Lime Street Station, 19th-century lithograph by Charles Wilkinson.

specially arranged private visits. Lancashire was known for a large number of recusant families, entailing the creation of priest holes, and we will explore the historical role of Catholic families.

Besides these houses and their delightful gardens, there is time spent in impressive art galleries. The Victorian industrialists bought world-class art and bequeathed their collections to the county's museums and galleries, and we visit the best of these at Port Sunlight, Preston and Liverpool.

Itinerary

Day 1: Liverpool. The coach departs from the hotel in Liverpool at 1.40pm and Liverpool Lime Street station at 2.00pm. Visit the beautiful Tudor manor house, Speke Hall, on the banks of the River Mersey. First of 2 nights in Liverpool.

Day 2. Morning spent in the Williamson Art Gallery & Museum in Birkenhead, followed by a tour of the Port Sunlight Village and visit to the Museum and Garden Village. Afternoon will see us visit the nearby Lady Lever Art Gallery, which possesses one of the finest collections of fine and decorative art in Europe.

Day 3. Visit the Walker Art Gallery, with paintings from the 13th to the 20th centuries with a Pre-Raphaelite collection that is among the best in the world as well as important collections of sculpture, furniture and ceramics. In the afternoon, we visit Rufford Old Hall, with an outstanding Tudor Great Hall and the only known surviving example of a 16th-century carved wooden screen made of bog oak. First of 3 nights in Blackburn.

Day 4. Visit the half-timbered stately home of Samlesbury Hall, built under the instruction of Gilbert de Southworth in 1325 as his family seat, as it celebrates 700 years. Only a few miles away, see the magnificent views of Lancashire, the Lake District and Wales which have been enjoyed for a millennium from the site of the hilltop Houghton Tower, the existing structure of which was built in 1565 by Thomas Houghton.

Day 5. Begin the day at Lytham Hall, a grandiose Georgian hall with ornate and colourful interiors. Then return east to the Harris Gallery in Preston, which houses an exceptional Victorian art collection. Enjoy a private visit and dinner at Browsholme Hall.

Day 6. Visit the Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery.

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Day 7. The historic seat of the Gillow family, the still-inhabited Leighton Hall holds a fascinating collection of Gillow furniture and objets d'art. Some miles north we find the Elizabethan structure of Levens Hall, another privately owned house, built around a 13th-century Pele tower. First of 2 nights in Windermere.

Day 8. Among the Cumbrian hills sits the eclectic mansion Dalemain, marrying medieval, Tudor and Georgian architectural design. Head west across the Lake District to Mirehouse, a lived-in 17th-century mansion on Bassenthwaite Lake with magical views of the surrounding landscape.

Day 9. Marvel at the architecture of the Blackwell Arts & Crafts house, nestled in gardens designed by Thomas Mawson and home to works of exquisite craftsmanship. Finish at Oxenholme station by 12.45pm, served by fast services on the West Coast main line.

Lecturer

Anthony Lambert. Historian, journalist and travel writer. He has worked with and for the National Trust in various capacities for almost 30 years. His books include *Victorian & Edwardian Country House Life* and he writes regular profiles of country houses for the Historic Houses Association magazine. He has written numerous travel and guide books, including over twenty on railway history and travel, and contributes to a wide range of newspapers and magazines.

Practicalities

Included: hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 5 dinners with wine and 2 lunches with water, coffee; travel by private coach or taxi; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Crowne Plaza, Liverpool (cpliverpool.com): 4-star hotel in the heart of the city with views of the River Mersey. *Single occupancy rooms are doubles for sole use.*

Northcote, Langho (northcote.com): 4-star hotel on the edge of the Forest of Bowland with a Michelin-starred restaurant. *Single occupancy rooms are doubles for sole use.*

Holbeck Ghyll, Windermere (holbeckghyll.com): 4-star country house hotel set in private woodlands and gardens, comfortable furnished. *Single occupancy rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? A good level of fitness is necessary. It should not be attempted by anyone who has difficulty with everyday walking and stair-climbing. Coaches can rarely park near the houses, many of the parks and gardens are extensive and the houses visited don't have lifts (nor do all the hotels).

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.