AUTO ASSEMBLY 2014

Welcome to Auto Assembly!

We at Auto Assembly are proud that you have decided to attend our convention, but we realise that you may want to turn your weekend away into a full holiday. For most people, the West Midlands is not the first place they think of when planning a holiday in England, and so we have compiled this tour guide for our attendees to enable everyone to make the most of staying in this culturally and historically rich area of the UK.

This guide will concentrate only on attractions within the geographic areas of the West Midlands and Warwickshire. If you are interested in making attractions in London part of your holiday, there are plenty of guides available focussing on our capital city offering extensive information on sightseeing destinations.

Rail links connect Birmingham International to London Euston, with trains departing up to four times an hour.

Auto Assembly makes its home at the Hilton Metropole in Birmingham, next to the NEC. The hotel is well served by public transport links, being within walking distance of Birmingham International rail station and Birmingham International airport.

The Hilton has fantastic onsite facilities, including an indoor pool, a sauna and spa centre, gym and fitness facilities and a steam room. Dining at the hotel is a pleasure, with a choice between their on-site restaurant, cafe, bar or room service, with food prepared throughout the day.

With multilingual staff on hand to assist our international guests, and accessible amenities for disabled guests, we are confident that you will be comfortable and well-cared for during your convention weekend.

This guide has been compiled by Auto Assembly volunteers. None of the attractions advertised are in any way affiliated with Auto Assembly. Attraction prices and opening hours correct at time of writing.

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Black Country Museum

The Black Country is the area name which refers to the area of the West Midlands to the north and west of Birmingham, lying between the city and Wolverhampton. Widely regarded as being the first industrial landscape of the Industrial Revolution, the Black Country gets its name from the amount of soot and black smoke which filled the air from the many heavy industry factories operating during the 19th Century.

Located in the heart of the Black Country, the Black Country Living Museum offers a snippet view of life in industrialised England. Covering 26 acres, pf reclaimed industrial land, the museum is mostly open-air, including reconstructed buildings and vintage transport.

The museum grounds include a mineshaft and colliery, as the area was famous for its coal mines, and the shaft is open to visitors. Demonstrations are performed throughout the day of a wide range of crafts, including glass cutting and sweetmaking, and the museum boasts a number of working exhibits, including a Victorian tramline and 1920s cinema.

Throughout the museum there are authentic Victorian-period shops staffed by museum staff in period costume, offering a range of authentic hand-made souvenirs, and there are plenty of onsite cafes and food shops offering local cuisine cooked following traditional recipes. The museum are particularly proud of their fish and chips.

Admission: £15.95

Opening hours: Mon - Sun 10am - 5pm

Accessibility: 35 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with onsite parking.
Rail links from Birmingham New Street to Tipton

Rag Market

The second indoor market is known as the Rag Market because of its history and reputation for supplying an extensive range of fabrics. The market remains today a brilliant source for all sorts of fabrics, including bridal silks, and this is reflected in the presence of several independent fabric shops in the vicinity.

Alongside the fabric stalls, the Rag Market boasts an eclectic range of goods, including toys, fancy dress, modelling supplies, clothing, DIY hardware, pet supplies and cosmetics. It is recommended that you bring cash if you are planning a trip to the markets; most stalls will not accept card, and the ATMs on site charge for money withdrawals.

Within walking distance of Birmingham´s New Street station is a number of shopping markets, including outdoor stalls, two indoor complexes and the Bullring shopping centre. While big, familiar brands take up most of the units in the Bullring, the nearby markets offer locally-run stalls selling a huge range of goods, primarily at discounted prices.

The open market, which surrounds the other market buildings, offers a wide range of fresh produce including exotic fruits, eggs and dairy products, and the first indoor market acts as a wholesalers, offering a fantastic range of butchers, fishmongers and horticultural stalls.

Admission: Free

Opening hours: Tues, Thurs, Fri, 9am - 5pm; Sat., 9am - 5.30pm

Accessibility: 20 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with nearby parking.
Rail links from Birmingham International to Birmingham New Street

Blists Hill & Ironbridge

Blists Hill Victorian Town is a reconstructed open air museum on and around the still-standing Blists Hill ironworks and foundry, in the heart of the industrial revolution. The site is made up of both original and replica buildings, most of which are furnished in typical Victorian fashion and are open to the public. Many of the buildings function as shops and craft workhouses, manned by staff in period costume, as much of ther merchandise is produced onsite using authentic methods.

Some monuments at Blists Hill are originals from the industrial era, including the blast furnaces and the beam engine on display, which were used in the production of pig iron between 1832 - 1911. Coal for the foundry was mined on-site; the mine shaft and machinery used to operate the lift is still on display today, with demonstrations of the lift in action available on request.

Alongside the foundry and mine, visitors are able to visit small crafts and supplies shops, such as a shoemaker, a butcher, a chemist, a confectioner and a baker. The New Inn, an authentic public house, offers food and some locally brewed ales, while providing period entertainment, and there are examples of the difference living standards of the Victorian working class, from the cramped terraced houses to the separated but pitiful Squatters Cottage.

The Blists Hill site leads on to the Iron Bridge, the world's first cast-iron arch bridge, constructed across the river Severn in 1779 using iron smelted in the Blists Hill blast furnace. Prior to the bridge's construction, the only manner of crossing the Severn near this point was by ferry, and the new bridge was so important that it leant its name to the settlement of Ironbridge, which built up around it.

Admission: £16.00

Opening hours: 10am - 5pm

Accessibility: 1 hour drive from Hilton Metropole with accessible parking.
Rail links from Birmingham New Street to Telford Central, then bus routes to available to site.

West Midlands Safari

Voted the best attraction of the West Midlands in a recent survey, the West Midlands Safari & Leisure Park offers an interesting and varied day out, combining the wildlife closeness of a true safari with the attractions and rides of a traditional funfari.

The most well-known attraction of the park is the drive-through safari, allowing guests to drive their vehicle through nine open-field reserves, each housing free-roaming wildlife from different areas of the world. The 4 mile drive passes through 100 acres of reserve, include an African reserve for Savannah herbivores, a Eurasian exhibit homing a variety of middle-eastern animals, and a Lion reserve, holding a pride of 13 lions.

The park has a high focus on conservation, running breeding programmes for some of its resident animals, many of which are members of species under threat of extinction. For example, the park is home to the only pride of rare white lions in the UK, as well as a number of endangered white tigers. The breeding programmes for these animals are intended to preserve their rare coloration without inbreeding and exposing the offspring to genetic mutations.

Alongside the safari drive are a number of zoo exhibits, such as a reptile house, aquarium, which features a 15 minute sea lion showing, and dark house, where nocturnal animals such as bats can be seen.

Admission: £17.99

Opening hours: Mon - Sun 10am - 4pm

Accessibility: 50 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with onsite parking.
Because of the layout of the park it is not recommended going without a car

Kenilworth Castle

Constructed continually from the Norman to Tudor eras, Kenilworth is a grand castle matching nearby Warwick in size and magnitude. Kenilworth was a semi-royal castle, used frequently by many English monarchs while not officially serving as their seat. John I, Edward II and Henry V are known to have used the castle, and Elizabeth I made many visits to then-inhabitant Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester.

Kenilworth was partially destroyed by Parliament forces in the Civil War to remove its functionality as a Royalist fortress close enough to challenge the stronghold of Warwick. Though skeletons of the keep and great hall were left, only two buildings of the complex remain inhabitable.

One of the buildings, Leicester's Gatehouse, has been restored and acts as a museum of castle life, with furnished living quarters and exhibits of Elizabethan life on the top floor. Aside from this museum and accessibility to remaining structures of the castle, the site sometimes hosts period events such as jousts and faires.

Within the castle grounds are impressive Elizabethan gardens, landscaped in the 16th Century and heavily influenced by Italian Rennaissance landscaping. The gardens include a large timber aviary and statues based on Greek mythology. All gardens and buildings are currently open to the public.

Admission: £9.00

Opening hours: 10am - 5pm

Accessibility: 30 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole accessible parking.
Rail links from Birmingham International to Coventry, then busses from Coventry to Kenilworth.

Abbey Fields

Built around the same time as the first structure of Kenilworth Castle, the religious site at Abbey Fields started life as a priory for Augustinian priests (approx. AD1124). With the addition in 1291 of St Nicholas' church, which remains today, and the accumulation of wealth, the priory was upgraded to an abbey in 1447 and dedicated to St Mary.

The abbey grounds were extensive, including much of the surrounding park. However, the lands were seized by Henry VIII and the abbey dismantled as part of the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Most of the buildings were destroyed, with the exception of the barn, which has today been converted into a museum of excavated artefacts found on the site.

Aside from the barn and gatehouse, all that remains of the abbey today are some of the ruined cloister walls and a single water pump. Today, the abbey grounds have been turned into a family park, including a stream and a lake, with several walkways offering scenic views.

Abbey Fields park is across the road from Kenilworth Castle, and boasts fantastic views of the castle over the lake. St Nicholas' church, with its Norman Gothic arch entrance, remains a functional place of worship open to visitors. Best visited as part of a day trip to the castle, Abbey Fields is a short walk from several well-reputed pubs and restaurants, including the Queen and Castle pub, which itself offers good views of the castle ruins.

Admission: Free

Opening hours: Sundays 2.30pm - 4.30pm (barn museum), park open 24/7

Accessibility: 30 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with accessible parking.
Rail links from Birmingham International to Coventry, then bus links from Coventry to Kenilworth.

Lunt Roman Fort

Constructed as one of many military forts erected throughout the Midlands in response to Boudicca's rebellion against Roman occupation, the earliest evidence for occupation at the Lunt site dates it to AD 60. Lunt Fort sits near to two major Roman roads, the Fosse Way and Watling Street, and is well-supplied with natural resources, including water from the Avon and timber from the Forest of Arden.

The entire surrounding area seems to have been heavily militarised, and Tacitus reports that regiments in the area, most of which would have been recruited from native Briton tribes, were frequently mobilised during the winter of AD 60 - 61 to prevent any uprisings following Boudicca's defeat.

It has been estimated that 480 foot soldiers and 120 cavalrymen resided at Lunt Fort, and, in AD 64, a gyrus was constructed at the site. The gyrus, a circular enclave used for training horses, is the only example of such a feature found anywhere in the Roman empire.

The Fort was finally abandoned in AD 80 after Roman forces began to push north in an attempt to conquer the whole island. Though the original timber structure was lost, relics and pottery were found in the 1930s and the site was subject to a full excavation in the 1960s. During the 1970s, the timber buildings were partially reconstructed along the foundation lines of the originals and the site was opened to the public.

Admission: £3.75

Opening hours: 11am - 4pm, Tues - Friday only

Accessibility: 20 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with some available parking.
Rail links from Birmingham International to Coventry. Bus connections to Baginton (Bus 539).

Compton Verney

Built in 1714 and continuously developed and extended throughout the century, Compton Verney house sits in 120 acres of parkland landscaped by Capability Brown. Vacant after the end of World War II, the run-down building was bought, restored and repurposed into an art gallery. The house was used as on-site filming for the 2012 Hollywood film Gambit.

Compton Verney houses six permanent art collections with a focus on representing areas which are otherwise under-represented in other British galleries and exhibitions. Alongside the permanent collections are temporarily hosted guest exhibits, which have included a range of art styles and sources, from modern creators to famous masters.

As well as having the largest collection of British Folk Art in the UK, Compton Verney hosts permanent collections representing art from Naples, China, and Northern Europe as well as a collection of British portraits and a display of works both produced and obtained by artists Enid Marx and Margaret Lambert.

One of the main exhibits hosted at Compton Verney for 2014 is the Moore-Rodin show, the first exhibit solely dedicated to showing and comparing the works of sculpture masters Henry Moore and Auguste Rodin. This exhibit is hosted in both the grounds and galleries, and will run until August 31st, 2014.

Admission: £13.60

Opening hours: Tues - Sun, 11am - 5pm

Accessibility: 40 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with free onsite parking.
Rail links from Birmingham Snow Hill to Stratford-upon-Avon Station, then bus or taxi to the site.

Coventry Cathedral

Though the remains of the original cathedral were left as a monument to the war and the hardships Coventrians had survived, a new cathedral was commissioned in the 1950s. Built adjacent to the gutted ruins, the new cathedral's foundation was laid in 1956 by the Queen.

The spire is open to the public during cathedral opening hours, with guests allowed to climb at all times except during bell ringing sessions. There is a Blitz Experience Museum located in the ruins, open only on Wednesdays and Saturdays except for pre-booked tours. The Museum contains reconstructions of five rooms from the 1940s.

Coventry Cathedral was a 14th Century Gothic-style church given cathedral status in 1918 after having been one of the largest parish churches in the country since its opening.

Because of its large car manufacturing plants, Coventry was targeted by the German Luftwaffe during WWII. In November 1940, Coventry was devastated in one of the first city bombings of the Blitz. Struck directly by one of the bombs, the original building was almost completely destroyed.

Exploring the ruins, survivors found two pieces of roof beam which had fallen in the formation of a cross. This became the focal point of a memoral altar, still standing in the ruins today.

Admission: £8.00 to New Cathedral. No charge to access ruins.

Opening hours: 10am - 5pm

Accessibility: 20 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with limited parking.
Rail links from Birmingham International to Coventry.

Coughton Court

Located in east Warwickshire, Coughton Court is the name of a Tudor-era country house and its 25 acre grounds. Acquired in the late 15th Century by the Throckmorton family, the land on which Coughton Court stands was developed in the early-mid 1500s.

Although the Throckmorton family have resided in Coughton Court for 600 years since acquiring the land, the house and its gardens were gifted to the English National Trust in 1946 on the condition that a 300-year lease be granted to the family for their continued residence. The Throckmortons manage and maintain the house and gardens on behalf of the National Trust.

Coughton Court is notable for its connection to two attempts to assassinate English monarchs. Firstly is the 1583 plot to assassinate Elizabeth I, known as the Throckmorton Plot, and secondly is an implied link to the infamous 1605 Gunpowder Plot, during which conspirators including Guy Fawkes placed gunpowder in Parliament cellar in an attempt to assassinate James I and his government.

As well as the house and gardens, Coughton boasts collections of historical objects, educational talks, annual festivals, shops and a restaurant offering locally made food and souvenirs

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Admission: £9.60

Opening hours: Wed - Sun, 11am - 5pm

Accessibility: 30 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with free onsite parking.
Rail links from Birmingham New Street to Redditch

Stratford Butterfly Farm

There is a fantastic range of butterfly species living at the farm from a range of different habitats, including some native British species and some giant, hand-sized beasts, making it one of the most popular places to visit in the UK according to a TripAdvisor poll.

Aside from the butterfly greenhouse, the farm has two other main areas: the arachnid house and the insect house. Creatures in both these exhibits are contained behind glass, and include bioluminescent scorpions, giant rainforest millipedes, praying mantis and a colony of leafcutter ants. Additionally, there are some semi-domesticated birds in the complex, including quails, and two iguanas who are given free range of the park.

Located in the Warwickshire town of Stratford - upon- Avon, the butterfly farm is an artificially-maintained habitat for exotic and rare butterflies, the plants they live and breed on and some other species, including arachnids, insects and some reptiles.

The farm is divided into the three main areas. The largest of these, and the only area where the animals are not kept behind glass, is the butterfly greenhouse, a large walk-through glass structure. All through the year it is possible to see butterflies at varying stages of their life cycle, and feeding tables are situated next to the walkway. Being socialised around humans, the butterflies are extremely comfortable landing on visitors or feeding on offered fruit.

Admission: £6.25

Opening hours: 10am - 6pm

Accessibility: 35 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with available parking.
Rail links from Birmingham Moor Street to Stratford.

Shakespeare's Birthplace

Located in the centre of scenic Stratford-upon-Avon, this Tudor timber house is the house in which William Shakespeare was born and spent his childhood, and the house he returned to with his new wife, Anne Hathaway.

Being a visitable tourist location for over 250 years, Shakespeare´s birthplace, in addition to shaping the character and works of one of history´s most famous authors, has attracted visitors well-known in their own rights, including Charles Dickens, John Keats and Thomas Hardy.

Dedicated actors perform excerpts from Shakespeare´s works every day, inviting visitors to request scenes and even join in the performance.

Housed within the Shakespeare Centre, the Shakespeare´s Treasures exhibit displays objects and paintings associated with the life and times of Shakespeare. The display is rotated every 6 months and includes priceless artefacts such as documents and books.

There are five properties managed by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, all within a short walk of each other, and it is possible to purchase an inclusive ticket to visit all of them. They include Shakespeare´s house, Anne Hathaway´s cottage & gardens, Hall´s Croft, Mary Arden´s Farm and Nash´s House. Admission to Shakespeare´s grave is included.

Admission: £15 for Shakespeare´s houses; £22.50 for all Shakespeare Birthplace Trust buildings

Opening hours: 9am - 5pm

Accessibility: 35 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with some available parking.
Rail links from Birmingham Moor Street to Stratford.

Warwick Castle

First developed as a motte-and-bailey castle by William the Conqueror in 1068, Warwick Castle sits on a hill above the river Avon, overlooking the county town of Warwick and its surrounding countryside.

A military fortress throughout medieval England's history, Warwick remained key in the Civil War as a Parliamentarian stronghold. The castle, and its stunning grounds landscaped by Capability Brown, remain fully standing today, and have been converted into a brilliantly informative and family-friendly day out, hosting events and attractions such as jousting tournaments, falconry displays and the world's most powerful working trebuchet.

Warwick boasts one of the UK´s largest collections of medieval weaponry and armour, much of which is on display in the great hall. One of the most impressive permanent exhibits is the Kingmaker show, a walk-through timeline of the living conditions, war preparations and technology of the 16th Earl of Warwick (1428-1471).

The ramparts and towers are open to the public. With a total of 530 uneven steps, the climb can be exhausting, but the breathtaking views of Warwickshire´s rolling green countryside are well worth the effort, with Stratford-upon-Avon (10 miles away) being visible on a clear day.

Admission: £16.80 (does not include admission to optional attractions)

Opening hours: 10am - 6pm

Accessibility: 40 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with plenty of nearby parking.
Rail links from Birmingham Moor Street to Warwick Station.

Guy's Cliffe

Guy's Cliffe is a Saxon-era hamlet, getting its name from the folklore figure Guy of Warwick, who is said to have dwelled there in his retirement. This legend led to the establishment of a chantry. During the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII, the chantry passed into private hands and became part of the landowner's estate.

A country house was built in the 18th Century on the estate and, though the land was eventually split for sale, and the house fell into disrepair, the ruins are still standing today. Guy's Cliffe House has, over the years, built up a reputation as one of the most haunted sites in the UK, with many visitors reporting ghostly activity in different forms. With cellars, caves and a Masonic Temple to explore, even sceptics will have something to interest them.

Millwheel at the Saxon Mill

Guy's Cliffe House is privately owned, and is only open to the public for pre-booked guided tours. These tours are approximately an hour in length, and normally take place twice a day for the over-14s. However, because the venue is used for other functions, tour schedules may sometimes be disrupted so it is recommended to check the website for availability.

Just down the road from Guy's Cliffe House is the Saxon Mill, a bar-restaurant housed in a converted mill building dating back to Saxon England. Even if you don't intend to eat, it is worth taking the detour to see the building; some of the Saxon architecture is still intact, and the millwheel continues to spin, powered by the waters of the river Avon.

Admission: See website: http://www.guyscliffehouse.co.uk/tours/

Opening hours: Pre-booked tours only

Accessibility: 30 minutes drive from Hilton Metropole with limited parking.
Rail links from Birmingham Moor Street to Warwick.