

**MEMBERS MEETING February 2008 “Bolsover Castle Past and Present” Talk by John Taylor illustrated with slides**

By way of introduction John explained that he used to work for the Inland Revenue but left their employ 10 years ago to pursue his interest in history. He is now a volunteer guide for English Heritage at Bolsover Castle. John's interest in Bolsover Castle began when he was taken there as a small boy. His maternal grandmother's surname was Bolsover so he believed then that he was related to the people who lived there. This was the start of his life long interest in the castle. Bolsover Castle was built on a permeable magnesium limestone ridge in 1186. This is not the castle that we see today. The remains of the original castle are buried under the present one. The castle we now know was built in what was then Mercia. Bolsover, as a place was mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086 as having “14 ploughshares”. There are various theories as to how Bolsover got its name, one is that it was named after “Ball Man”. Whatever the origins of the name it is known by the local inhabitants as “Bowser”! 6

When the Normans built the original castle they used 4,000 - 5,000 men, mostly soldiers and sailors and therefore it was built very quickly. The Saxons were better builders than the Normans and in 1186 they added a mote and bailey together with a palisade. The original castle was built in the same style as the castle at Peveril. William Peveril, the illegitimate son of William the Conqueror, was given honours by his father and also accumulated much wealth. In the 1970's archaeologists constructed a facsimile of the original Bolsover Castle. Its exterior would have been white making it stand out in a dramatic way. One of John's slides shows him standing on the wall walk illustrating the panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. In 1553 George Talbot the 6th Earl of Shrewsbury acquired Bolsover Castle. His second wife was Bess of Hardwick. He was her 4th husband. Bess was a hard person. Queen Elizabeth I adored Bess but even she put her in the Tower on two occasions. It was Bess who began the Cavendish line. All of her children were from her second marriage to Sir William Cavendish. Her three sons were William, Henry and Charles. William was her favourite, Henry was the black sheep of the family and Charles was the best looking. Hardwick was Bess' childhood home. She was born at a farmhouse there in 1528 and died at the new hall in 1608, coincidentally 400 years ago this year. The farmhouse survives today and Bess' blood runs through the Cavendish dynasty. The 6th Earl of Shrewsbury died in 1592. His son Gilbert became the 7th Earl of Shrewsbury. He was married to one of Bess' daughters and was stepbrother and brother-in-law to Sir Charles Cavendish! Bess' daughter Elizabeth married Charles Stuart, Earl of Lennox in 1574. The couple died young leaving Bess with the guardianship of her royal grand-daughter, Arabella. In 1608 Gilbert passed Bolsover Castle to Sir Charles Cavendish on a token lease of £10 for 1000 years. In 1612 Charles' life changed and he started buying property and purchased Bolsover and Welbeck. Work on re-fashioning Bolsover started with the “Little Castle” a skilful representation of the medieval keep. He employed the best architectural stone mason, Robert Smythson, who had worked at places like Longleat, Woolaton and Burton Agnes. Robert Smythson was by then in his 60's and was helped by his son John Smythson. Robert Smythson died in 1616 and Sir Charles Cavendish died in 1617. His son William the Earl of Newcastle continued with the plans to knock down the medieval keep. The old castle was demolished in 5 weeks and the excavations were used as a base for its replacement. John Pearson the biographer of the Cavendish family stated that the Earl of Newcastle was by far the grandest of the

family but was foolhardy. In 1610 his father placed him in the royal household of Prince Henry to learn horsemanship and become a master of horse. He was trained by the best in Europe and built up a friendship with the king. His father's tomb in Bolsover church is fashioned in alabaster and Ashford marble and was made by the Smythsons. The tomb also features his mother Catherine and includes portraits of his brothers William and Charles. In 1612 William was sent by the king to the Duke of Savoy in northern Italy to learn the ways of courtiers. He became a favourite of the Duke who gave him a bejewelled saddle, now kept at Welbeck by the Dowager, Alice. When he returned to England he aspired to be at the top of the nobility. By 1617 John Smythson's plans for the new Bolsover were complete but the art works were added later. These were similar to those in a gothic castle designed by Inigo Jones. The designs were classic and featured a baluster painted in expensive green paint, a split pediment, a figure of Hercules taking over from Atlas, two lions, the Cavendish coat of arms and King Charles himself. It was in an infusion of styles. In 1619 King James I made him Viscount of Mansfield. The king also visited Welbeck. At Bolsover the first of the grand rooms, known as the Anteroom, houses a painting of Hercules. The picture is styled on the classics. The belief at the time was that to achieve nirvana you had to start at the bottom. The picture features the four humours including melancholia. The globe in the picture represents the horoscopes and the stars. One of the other rooms is known as the "Pillar Parlour". It also is a fusion of styles. The fireplace is gothic with classic Doric columns. The vaulted ceiling is decorated with horses. It was here that the Earl of Newcastle housed Charles I and his wife Henrietta during their sumptuous stay in 1634. On one day, 13 July 1634, the Earl entertained the king with a feast that was unparalleled. It cost £15,000 (one million pounds in today's money).

Records for the period show the huge cost of the feast. 6500 birds were served including peacocks and swans. The cost of one tablecloth alone was £160. Workers were imported to do the gruelling work of catering for the king and his 250 courtiers. In addition to the feast Ben Johnson wrote a masque entitled "Loves welcome to Bolsover" which was performed for King Charles and the Stuart court. All the characters including the royal party wore costumes and sweetmeats were served on silver platters by angels and cherubs. Today weddings are performed in the room called the "Star Chamber". Originally this room was used to try and judge people. But in 1641 when Parliament was abolished it became a place to entertain and eat. The room has been painstakingly restored to its original glory. Its ceiling is painted in the original vibrant blue colour with 250 stars made of lead coated in gold and a centre of roses and leaves. The massive fireplace here incorporates the Talbot dogs from the family coat of arms. A room adjoining the Star Chamber features red damask curtains, blue panelling and marble from Italy, it is known as the "Marble Closet" and was used by Margaret Cavendish the Earl's second wife to do her writing. She is reputed to haunt the room. Upstairs there is a withdrawing room known as the "Duke's Chamber". This room houses a large collection of telescopes. One is dated 1603 and is 18 feet long. Further up there is a room called the "Heaven Room". This contains a painting of Christ ascending into heaven with putti and cherubs. In the garden there is a fountain in the shape of a naked female statue said to represent Venus/Aphrodite. Nicholas Pevsner described it as the rudest statue in the country! In the 1630's William added the vast and stately rooms of the terrace range. Originally it had a one hundred and forty-foot long gallery which was then shortened. The outside featured cannon pilasters. There is a Flemish influence on the gables. The entrance is approached

by a flight of stone steps and one can imagine that King Charles I must have entered here when he visited the castle in 1634. Sadly the building is now a romantic ruin, the roof is said to have gone to Welbeck in 1752.

The last of the additions to the castle is the cavernous riding house with its magnificent roof. It is ninety feet long and was built for “menage” (similar to dressage). Here military horses would have been schooled in various manoeuvres. In 1638 William Cavendish became tutor to Charles II, age 8, in menage and fencing at Richmond Palace. In 1651 William wrote a book on horse training. There is a portrait of William at the time of the civil war. In 1641 he was general in chief of the royalist forces. His critics labelled him lazy and that he lay in bed until 11.00am, however, on the battlefield he was brave. He retained 3,000 troops, the Newcastle White coats and they were loyal to the death. He supported the royalist cause and lent the king £93,000 (equivalent to £6.2 million in today’s money). William was condemned unfairly when the royalists were defeated at the battle of Marston Moor. In reality the royalists were outnumbered. After the defeat by Cromwell in 1644 William went to the continent. His first wife Elizabeth had died on 17 April 1643 and at the French court he met and fell in love with Margaret Lucas who was 30 years his junior. He wrote her 70 love sonnets. Virginia Wolfe unfairly described Margaret as “man-like” but this may have been because there were few women in royal society in the 17c. Sadly William was impotent and despite various potions tried by both parties they were unable to have children. William returned to England after the restoration of the monarchy, on the return journey their coach was mobbed by admirers at Gainsborough. They were the pop stars of their day. In 1660 William became “Gentleman of the Bedchamber” to the king and was made Lord Lieutenant of Nottingham. In 1665 he was given a Dukedom. A picture of the long gallery in 1916 shows a photograph of the 230 “Bolsover Lads”. They had taken practice pot shots here and the bullet holes are still visible. Sadly 175 of them were slaughtered along with the “Sheffield Lads” in World War I. In conclusion to his talk John urged members to visit the castle where there is a visitor centre and free guided tours. The Star Chamber is a splendid venue for weddings and can accommodate a few or many. In addition the castle hosts living history events like jousting to give a flavour of the medieval period. The 2008 season starts on 4th March. Yvonne Mason gave the vote of thanks.