

## ExeDFAS June Trip to Buxton



It was a case of "rain NOT stopping play" (nor dampening spirits , despite a delayed pick-up time – the cause of which was completely out of the control of ExeDFAS ) as we joined a group of friendly members waiting to board the coach to visit some of the marvels and treasures of Derbyshire , namely Buxton, Chatsworth , Hardwick, Bolsover and Haddon Hall.

Tony and I had previously enjoyed our organised special study days and a day trip, but this was our first "Away Time" with the Group. We were soon to discover that this 4 day tour was another highly organised, well thought out and planned exercise. An opportune moment to again warmly thank Caroline and Maureen. Yes, there were some changes to timings – but all made towards our comforts to suit weather conditions, or to allow an additional last minute plan to fit in an unscheduled visit to Bolsover Castle, which was another worthwhile, enriching experience.

Our dedicated driver proved to be friendly and caring, and kept us regaled with a battery of anecdotes , and being knowledgeable about the countryside , landmarks and villages we passed through – including Well Dressing Festivals in the unspoilt village of Ashford in the Water, on the River Wye – we reached Buxton in good time. Checking in to the Barcelo Hotel we discovered that Caroline had arranged for a cup of tea to be ready to welcome us in the Hotel lobby which was appreciated by all.

As programmed we then had time to explore the town centre of Buxton, the Pavilion Gardens, and the Opera House, before returning to shower and change for dinner. Each evening the members met in the Bar for pre-dinner drinks and chat, and we were appreciative of the suggestion that we should sit with different people each evening, affording the opportunity to widen our circle of friends and meet up with different Committee Members. We personally welcomed this idea.

The following morning, fortified by a robust buffet style breakfast, we assembled to board the coach for our visit to Chatsworth, the family home of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. We were privileged to have a private tour (before the general public was admitted) and this made it very comfortable, allowing time for questions, and giving an opportunity to return later to look again at areas that enticed us for further viewing. This sumptuous home, exuding wealth, and displaying treasures beyond the imagination, was overwhelmingly impressive. The word "awesome" springs to mind! Tony and I acknowledge that we are "hoarders". The Duke and Duchess are "collectors" of a quite different class!

Their wide ranging interests in the arts (including works of modern art) have manifested themselves in the wondrous displays and collections of priceless furnishings, galleries of Italian statues, glorious paintings, sculptures and treasures collected from around the world.

The sun shone for us as we wandered through the delightful landscaped gardens of the estate, to see the impressive Cascade and Emperor Fountain, the Kitchen Gardens and the ruins of the Great Conservatory, all inspired by Joseph Paxton, the head gardener.

The following day dawned cold and grey for our morning visit to Bolsover Castle. As we drew near to the site there was a striking view of the impressive remains cresting a hill top in a superb defensive position. Here, we were issued with individual head sets so that we could explore at our own pace. This particular Sunday happened to be Fathers' Day so there were many family groups enjoying the site. We stood and braved the cold winds to watch a demonstration of how to don a suit of armour!! This was a revelation as the pieces of armour were "layered" up, each one needing to be hoisted on in correct order, linking on to the piece beneath. We were shown how Henry VIII donned his armour (requiring help from his trusted valet) and in no circumstances would he have been able to rush into battle! As his girth increased over the years so did his pieces of armour need to be modified! The surprising outcome was to appreciate how flexible the armour was, allowing unsuspected mobility.

More than happy to return to the warmth of the coach we progressed on to Hardwick Hall – More Glass than Wall!

On arrival, after assembling for a "Photo Call", there was a sudden dash in the direction of Lunch Foodies! (We made an observation that ExeDFAS members were easily as enthusiastic about feeding the inner man as feeding the soul as were we, and we never failed to find we were not alone – whenever we entered any café/restaurant area. Well, priorities are important....)

At Hardwick we were free to wander at will and some of us also made time to visit the Old Hall, situated at one side of the Hardwick Estate, and built by Bess in 1590. At the Old Hall again we were able to tour the preserved ruins with head sets which we found to be most helpful as one could linger or move on more quickly as one wished. Personally, ever since reading Mary S. Lovell's biography of Bess of Hardwick I have an abiding fascination with this woman - surely a woman ahead of her time and an inspiration to any female, having given birth to 8 children, outlived 4 husbands, becoming an astute business woman and living until the ripe old age of 81. (I think?) Consequently, I felt a real presence of Bess wherever I wandered and it was such a privilege to be able to visit the museum room where some sheets of her correspondence were displayed – showing her contacts with Dukes, Queens, servants and lovers and her disappointing deteriorating relationship with a formerly cherished granddaughter. Our eyes were opened to some aspects of the Elizabethan world. As at Chatsworth, also at Hardwick we marvelled at the Gideon Tapestries hanging in the Long Gallery, the amazing fireplaces, carved wooden furniture and the compelling realisation that much of the interior of the house was much as it

would have been in Bess' time a fine example of an Elizabethan house. The formal gardens and lawns were a delight; if only the sun had shone warmly to enhance them (or even just shone!)

On our final day we left promptly to view Haddon Hall, and then to make our homeward journey.

After a short distance, however, a concern was expressed from the front seats, and our ever cheery, caring driver and leaders suggested a "lay-by halt" so that the presence of "rings and things" could be verified. All was well!! So onward to Haddon. For most people, it seems, including ourselves, Haddon proved to be the star of the tour, (and I hastily add, the home produced luncheon fare was very good too). The Hall and surrounds, bathed in sunshine (hurrah). We were divided into 2 groups, to be taken by well informed guides to view the courtyard, chapel, kitchen, banqueting hall, the parlour and the highlight of this gem of medieval and Tudor architecture – the Long Gallery. Here, where there were diamond panes of glass set at angles to maximise the amount of daylight cascading through the windows of the Gallery, the sun came dazzling in, allowing us to readily imagine the family and guests strolling for their promenades, their long, heavy elegant dresses saved from trailing in the dirt and wetness of a garden promenade. Built from Derbyshire gritstone and limestone the exterior walls were soft and pretty with trailing, climbing roses. Haddon Hall has been described as the most perfect of English Houses to have survived almost as it would have been in the Middle Ages. We felt the air of history all about us, the peace and tranquillity enhanced by the flowery shrubberies, herbal borders and descending terraces, I felt I could happily "move in." We felt it was the crowning glory of all the places we had visited and was a fitting conclusion to a wonderful ExeDFAS tour.

If ever this tour should be repeated in future times we suggest you sign up quickly!

And now .... Tony and I look forward to the trip to the Hashemite Kingdom. Sally, here we come.

Valerie Hanson, July 2011