

A Gem of a Place

by River Wolton

Commissioned for the re-opening of Bolsover Library

by Derbyshire County Council Cultural and Community Services

Voice 1: young man

Voice 2: man

Voice 3: woman

Voice 4: young woman

Narrator: It starts deep underneath, magnesian limestone
stretching to the east, and to the west -
coal, a forest long before the wolves
and mammoths roamed at Creswell Craggs
and Iron Age hands cut out their shapes in rock¹.
Millenia lay down the trees and fossils
that will lie in wait.

Chorus:

Listen a while.

**Here are the ghosts that wander past
like dragonflies² that hover over time.**

Voice 1: A mercenary from Caesar's legions, I stand
on this ridge above the Hockley Valley,
gaze upon the Vale of Scarsdale and
along the North Road hear the marching beat
of men to whom the southern seas still whisper
while they forge routes into a cold, grey land.

Narr: A Viking - Bul or Bol - bequeaths his name³,
takes refuge at this well-defended spot -
so like a dragon-prow that cleaves the wind.

Now a Saxon farmer bends over the fields

¹ Creswell Craggs is the site of Britain's only known Paeleolithic cave art

² Fossils were often found deep in the coal seams. In 1978, miners at Bolsover Pit discovered two giant dragonflies of the Carboniferous period (300 million years ago). One, with a 22 inch wingspan, was declared a new species and named *Erasipteron bolsoveri* (gracefully-winged of Bolsover). It is now in the Natural History Museum, London.

³ Bolsover means 'slope of Bol'. K.Cameron, *The Place Names of Derbyshire* (1959).

with little time to ponder on the view.
His tools – the axe, shears, sickle, ring -
are carved on his stone coffin lid⁴
and overseen by corbel-heads that grimace
as they lift St Mary and St Laurence's roof.⁵

**Chorus: We Normans claim this fine strategic outpost,
suppressing all rebellion to the west,
strengthening our rule over the lead mines
and the hunting forest of the Peak.**

Voice 2: Belesoure's recorded in the Domesday book⁶,
William the Conqueror grants it to me -
Peveril. With earth-works, timber walls
my new castle blossoms. Like its twin
at Castleton, a market town is laid out
in a linear grid, its central axis -
your Castle Street, Middle Street, Church Street.

A stone keep is built, a stocky curtain wall,
but my son forfeits all the land and manor
to the crown and flees to exile for his part
in poisoning Ranulph, Earl of Chester.

Narr: Pause in the 13th Century: a market
charter's granted to the bustling town
which hosts King John en route from Nottingham.
A broach spire soars from the church tower
(little else survives the later fires)
and a stone screen is carved: Mary
with a midwife while the cows look on

⁴ Now inside the parish church

⁵ The corbel heads are now set in an internal wall of the church

⁶ 1086

and Joseph dozes on his staff.

Voice 4: On Easter Monday and Midsummer's Day
hawkers and fairgoers fill our lanes.
Each week the Friday market's full
of fine victuals, hogs, rabbits, cheese.

Voice 3: In 1216 the castle is besieged.
Those who don't man the garrison
or fight the Barons' Wars
must break our backs tilling the land,
raise cattle, pigs and corn,

Narr: but the next
centuries bring plague, waste and decline.

While seasons roll through spring, harvest and snow
the ruined castle's passed from hand to hand
until it falls to Bess of Hardwick's son -
Charles Cavendish, inheriting her appetite
to build. He hires John Smythson, architect:

Voice 1: fresh from building Hardwick, Barlborough
and Wollaton, I start plans for the Keep.
My son, John, settles in the town
and with my grandson Huntingdon
gives form to Cavendish ambition
(our memorial is next to theirs.)

Narr: Work begins in 1612:
Moor Quarry limestone (later used for Parliament).
William, Charles' son, rolls out the grand designs -
layers of a lost world of romance:

Voice 2: my Little Castle's like a jewellery box,
rooms of marble, silver cloth, shell gold;
cherubims that point the way to Heaven.
Cavaliers flounce in panelled rooms
blind to the oil-painted words
high on the ceiling:

'All is Vanitie'.

Narr: His second wife, the poet Margaret Cavendish⁷
puts it like this:

Voice 3: prone to mad passions
but redeemed by virtue. Here is William's refuge:
philosophy and art can fill his senses.

Picture July 30th, 1634.

King Charles I and his French queen
process along the Terrace Range; Ben Jonson's
masque – 'Love's Welcome at Bolsover'⁸-
rings through the courts, the Venus garden
fills with anyone who's anyone,
dressed to the nines, adorned with flowers.

Voice 4: Dozens of us cooks and maids sweat
in the cellar kitchens and the bakery.
Tables seven yards long groaning with fish;
thirty swans and thirty peacocks, geese,
hens, pullets, pigeons, partridges and gulls,
redshanks, bitterns, curlews, quails, lapwings.
A lake of wine, a broad river of ale.

⁷ Margaret was a prolific writer of poetry, philosophy, biography and science fiction.

⁸ £14,000 was spent on the visit (around £1m in today's money). The historian Clarendon described it as a 'stupendous entertainment, which (God be thanked) though possibly it might too much whet the appetite of others to excess, no man ever after in those days imitated'.

And all to curry favour with the King.

Narr: Within eight years, the Civil War breaks out.
Cavendish commands the northern troops,
cities are seized from Cromwell's roundheads but
besieged at York and trounced at Marston Moor
he flees to Rotterdam.

The king's beheaded.

Royalist lands are forfeited. During
twelve exiled years, now Duke of Newcastle,
William invents methods of dressage, writes books;
returning home, spends his last days
training horses in the indoor Riding School.

Chorus: **So much for the nobility, who find
their final resting places in the church.**

Narr: The line dies out, and later owners strip
the castle roof to furnish Welbeck Abbey.
Meanwhile Peter Fidler,

Voice 1: that's me! born
down at Sutton Mill, I sail for Hudson Bay,
trade furs, and map large parts of Canada.

Narr: Other ghosts stir.
As widely known
as Sheffield knives and just as shiny,
Bowzer buckles decorate the shoes
that strut down London streets. Tobacco pipes
from Shuttlewood are smoked around the world.
New Byron Brickworks grow apace
and quarry fireclay due south of Carr Vale.

Coal has been gathered here for centuries;
now industry has infinite demands.
In 1889, the Duke of Portland
grants Emerson Bainbridge license to mine:

Voice 2: Bolsover Colliery Company is born.
Winifred 'The Miner's Duchess' starts the wheel.
The Top Hard seam is glorious and wide,⁹
three thousand tons heave daily from the ground -
the Portlands get sixpence for every one.

Chorus: **Pit sinkers, joiners flock from Langley Mill,
Moor Green; from Yorkshire, Durham, Cumberland
and Wales.**

Voice 3: Irish families move in
at Langwith Junction; while some farm-hands
at Palterton lay down ploughs for good.

Voice 1: Wages compare well to other pits,
though in the early days the butty-men¹⁰
are coalface kings; we have to slip them
an orange with a sovereign in the skin
to buy work for next day or next week.¹¹

Narr: Within three years the Model Village
of New Bolsover is built beside the pit
from Byron bricks, Welsh slate. Allotments,
institute, shops, schools and hall, a chapel

⁹ Pete Jones, adapted from Haigh (1998) p 23.

¹⁰ Butty-men were foremen in charge of an 80 yard section of coal. They hired and fired at will, and paid the men what they chose.

¹¹ Pete Jones, from Haigh (1998) p 23

and an orphanage. The tub railway
brings a half-ton of allowance coal
to the road outside each door.

The population grows tenfold, the air is thick
with smoke, the headstocks in the valley roll
day in, day out for the next hundred years.

Voice 2: I start as a bricklayer's apprentice;
once at t'pit you do as you are told.
No boots or helmets; you go to work in caps
and even slippers. Tough, terrible days,
at times the pit roof almost on your head.
All that rock, it makes your belly ache.
A twelve-hour night-shift seven days a week.
Human life in them days is cheap.¹²

Voice 3: Workhouse is Scarsdale in Chesterfield;
poor relief's doled out in Tithe Barn school
at Cotton Street - if your kids don't go it in't paid.
Many die young from consumption.¹³

Voice 4: Grandma keeps Old Thatch pub at Hill Top,
she makes oat cakes and pykelets,
knits stockings for the vicar at the castle.
Grandad's manager at Markham Pit
and later keeps the Anchor. Best beer's thruppence
in t'parlour. Swan's the oldest public,
where the Duke of Portland holds his court.¹⁴

Narr: The strike of '26 means soup kitchens
for some, and black tar crosses

¹² Alf Bentley, from Haigh (1998) p 29

¹³ Ethel Hodkin, from Haigh (1998) p 62

¹⁴ Ethel Hodkin, from Haigh (1998) p 78

on the windows of the ones who work¹⁵.

Voice 3: Monday wash days start at six a.m.
well water fills t'copper to t' brim.
The fire lit as hot as it can get
and we'll be washing, washing all day long.
At night mangling and ironing.
On wet days we light another fire
and drape clothes about and turn and turn.¹⁶

Voice 1: As children we come out of Sunday School
down Buttermilk Lane (before Coalite stood there)
to the Doe Lea. Green fields. River-swimming.¹⁷

Voice 4: Roller-skating down middle of Welbeck Road
across Rotherham Road to Whaley quarry.¹⁸

Voice 1: The Cundy House has cool, clear water,
walking home from school across the Parks
we have a drink and fill our bottles up.¹⁹

Voice 4: We play in t'castle grounds and 'dungeons'
chased off by John Radford, caretaker.²⁰

Voice 1: Sledging downhill at first sight of snow
and looking out for sticklebacks in spring.²¹

Narr: And still each year the farmers sow the seed
and roll the land.

¹⁵ A.W., from Haigh (1998) p 19

¹⁶ Ellen Spray, from Haigh (1998) p 93

¹⁷ Ken Leaning, from Haigh (1998) p 33

¹⁸ Pam Ashley, from Haigh (1998) p 61

¹⁹ Kath Palmer, from Haigh (1998) p 65

²⁰ Betty Hunter, from Haigh (1998) p 67

²¹ Robert L. Robinson *My Bolsover*

Voice 4: I always help me father
making haystacks, stooking corn,
he shows us how to bend us knees and waft it in.²²

Voice 1: We kill our own pig. Salt it on a salting stone.
Hams rubbed with saltpetre keep two years,
Mother makes them into beautiful pork pies.²³

Voice 3: There's never any women down t'pit
so we work in 'Bolsover Home Grown
Fruit Preserving Company' (Jam Factory).
Strawberries do well round here but soon
we're bringing plums and apples up from Evesham,
Scottish raspberries, fresh oranges
and Spanish lemons via Liverpool.²⁴

You'll find us at Prew-Smiths hosiery
on Oxcroft Lane, or Pleasley Mills -
weaving blankets in t'dust and noise,
or Robbo's bandages in Chesterfield.²⁵

Narr: Few buses, fewer cars, but you can take
Woodhouse Coaches from the Market Place
or catch the train at Scarcliffe to Skegness.²⁶
The Picture Palace at Carr Vale puts on
dancers, acrobats, musicians, while
The Plaza (later Somerfield) shows
Tarzan and Flash Gordon matinees.²⁷

²² Ellen Spray, from Haigh. (1998) p 56

²³ Ellen Spray, from Haigh (1998) p 105

²⁴ Haigh (1987) p 11

²⁵ Sue Dodsworth, in conversation with R W

²⁶ Norah Ley, from Haigh (1998) p 60

²⁷ Robert L. Robinson *My Bolsover*

Voice 3: Bowzer's a mass of grocery shops -
Mary Blatherwick's up Welbeck Road,
Daisy Lynn's, Winifred Yates' and mine.
Every day folk from Cow Tail Row
come in for threepenn'orth of pot herbs.
You can buy anything at Scarratt's shop
down Hockley - pots and pans, wallpaper
and paint. The supermarkets kill it off,
that and t' yellow lines all over place.²⁸

Voice 2: During World War II, I'm headmaster
at the National School and command
the local Home Guard: 'A' company
stretches from Glapwell to Stanfree.
On practise manoeuvres we capture
the police station at Brimington Road!²⁹

Voice 1: The Feast (held since Elizabeth the First)
is brandy snaps, dodgems, roundabouts³⁰
the 'Swinging Boats', hot engine oil and steam.³¹

Chorus: **Throughout the '50s the Illuminations
bring a half a million people to our town,**

Voice 3: even Blackpool folk come here to steal ideas!
Sherwood Lodge lights up with Robin Hood
and fairytales, like Disneyland³². Cherry's
Icecream on Moor Lane does a roaring trade.

²⁸ Anne Woodhouse, from Haigh (1998) p 69

²⁹ R. Fletcher, from Haigh (1998) p 110

³⁰ Betty Hunter, from Haigh (1998) p 32

³¹ Robert L. Robinson *My Bolsover*

³² Haigh (1987) p.3

The chapel pantomime's an annual highlight
and Handel's Messiah in full costume
at Congregational Church goes down
so well we have to sing it all again!³³

Narr: Betty Mapley's father works at Glapwell pit,
they live by Nag's Head on Station Road:

Voice 4: though I'm a clever lass, there's no point
sitting eleven-plus - the uniform's too dear.
But when I find out what a library is
it's wonderful! I come home with four books,
within a few days I'm back for more.
Reading in bed each night by candlelight.³⁴

Voice 1: I grow up in the Market Place - a house
demolished in the '60s clearances.³⁵
A row of cottages on High Street go,
outdoor privies, back yards, wells, ginnels,
blacksmiths, shops, barns and Georgian houses.³⁶

Narr: The Colliery Cricket Club's renowned,
the Silver Band gives concerts on the green,
the St John's Ambulance, a Boys' and Girls' Brigade
win cups and medals all across the land.
From 1970 the Bolsover Society
brings Tchaikovsky's 1812, Welsh choirs
and grand pianos to the Assembly Rooms.

³³ Joyce Leaning, from Haigh (1998) p 125

³⁴ Betty Mapley, quoted in Bell (2006)

³⁵ Sue Dodsworth, in conversation with RW

³⁶ Bunty Margerrison, from Haigh (1998) p 95 -96

Wine and song's exchanged on visits
to Decazeville, Bolsover's French twin.³⁷
In 1973, a group's abroad when they see
a colliery disaster in the news –

**Chorus: the Markham pit cage cuts short nineteen lives
and seriously injures eleven men.**³⁸

Narr: In '76, a brand new limestone building
with a steep pantile roof springs up on Church Street.

Voice 2: To be honest we're gobsmacked by its size.
Two floors, a record and a reference section,
a meeting room which hosts the Camera Club,
Civic Society, literacy groups and floral art.³⁹

Voice 3: Warm, light and free, the library becomes
a focal point of the community.
If anyone wants anything it's here,
near to the post office and the market square.⁴⁰

Narr: In the strike of 1984
the library's a mine of information
and advice on welfare rights. The town's
hit hard. A Derbyshire pit, a Nottinghamshire Union,
and the membership is half and half.⁴¹

³⁷ Don Bateman, from Haigh (1998) p 33 - 36

³⁸ 'When a serious accident occurs in a colliery, the difficult conditions and the fact that hundreds of men are working deep underground can soon turn an incident into a major disaster.' Bell (2006). Although Bolsover suffered no major disasters, other local pits did. In 1938, 79 men died at Markham and 40 were injured. In 1950, 80 men died in a fire at Creswell pit. The nature of the fire meant that the area had to be sealed off for a considerable time. It was a year before all the bodies could be recovered.

³⁹ Bernard Haigh, former Group Librarian at Bolsover and Assistant City Librarian at Derby, founder and Secretary of Bolsover Civic Society, in conversation with RW

⁴⁰ Gill Morley, former Library Manager at Bolsover, currently Principal Area Manager, North, Cultural and Community Services, in conversation with RW

Voice 2: The feelings run so deep, cause such division.
Families and friends are split apart.⁴²

The pit shuts down in '93. Terrible times.
But miners are resilient. The unimaginable comes
and when it does you have to just move on.⁴³

Narr: The stench of Coalite, sirens of the pit
and factories, the motion of the winding-gear
are gone; we no longer work and play
and breathe in the same air. But cleaner industries
are taking root, many commute for work
and speed of change pulls everyone along.
The Beast of Bolsover⁴⁴ has fought our corner –
Skinner's Junction will soon multiply
the stream of visitors that venture up

Voice 1: to taste the Food Fair's delicacies,

Voice 2: browse the stalls of the October fair,

Voice 3: marvel at the Firework Extravaganza,

Voice 4: join the Lantern Carnival at Christmas,

Voice 2: wander in the Castle's ornate rooms

Voice 3: or trace the footsteps of a unique past.

Narr: If you are passing through this way,
or if this is your birthplace, haven, home

Chorus: **these living voices join with all the ghosts
that you have heard, to say 'Welcome to Bolsover'.
You'll travel far and wide to find**

⁴¹ Ian Blakeley, from Haigh (1998) p 17

⁴² Ian Blakeley, from Haigh (1998) p 21

⁴³ Ian Blakeley, from Haigh (1998). p 24

⁴⁴ Dennis Skinner, MP for Bolsover since 1970

a prouder or a friendlier place than here.

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