

# FOOTWEAR OUTLINES AT BOLSOVER CASTLE

(‘ONE FOOT FROM THE PAST’)

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Visitors to Bolsover Castle are today seeing the results of a recent major programme of renovation that has helped to enhance the Castle’s status as one of English Heritage’s showpiece properties in the Midlands. The site is famed for its distinctive and ornate mock-castle, a *folie de grandeur* of 17th century whimsical architectural taste. At the core is the keep, the so-called Little Castle, designed and built by John and Huntingdon Smythson for the Cavendish family somewhere between about 1608 and 1621 (Faulkner 1985, 52, 53). The keep is approached through an enclosed forecourt whose circuit includes four small lodges. In 1993 the two easterly lodges were the subject of major repair and were re-roofed (Figs. 1, 2).

In the process of stripping off and disposing of old and weathered lead sheeting from the roof of Lodge 1, a number of graffiti markings were noticed. The English Heritage Historic Properties Inspector then responsible for the area had the remaining lead panels

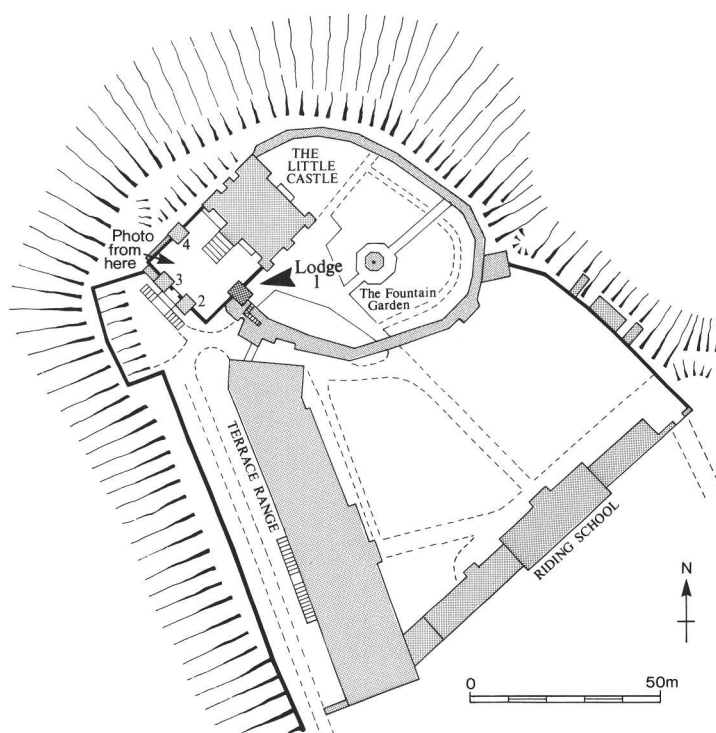


Fig. 1: A plan of 17th century Bolsover Castle, showing the position of Lodge 1.

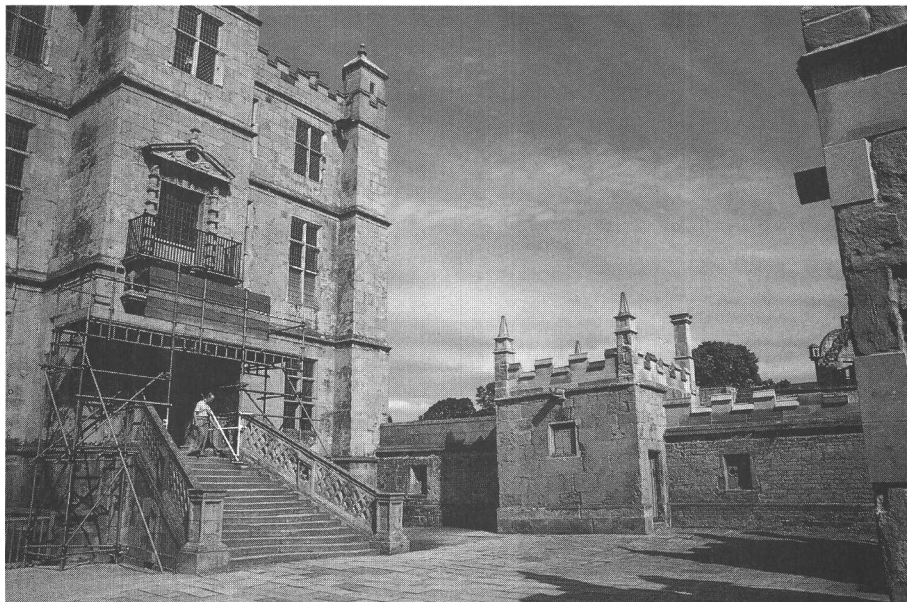


Fig. 2: A view of Lodge 1, taken from the west and after renovation.

retained so that these markings could be investigated further. Trent & Peak Archaeological Trust, at the time recording some of the castle stonework ahead of its repair, was asked to examine the leadwork as well. Several other markings were subsequently found on the two western lodges, 3 and 4, when these were renovated.

Most of the marks proved to be the outlines of people's footwear and accompanying dates on some of them indicated a 19th century origin. Although some of the lead had already been disposed of, the remaining portions from Lodge 1 featured the full and partial outlines of 172 shoes and boots, 7 hands and 11 miscellaneous drawings and initials. The clearest outlines had been made using a tool or tools of some description, which helped to produce various rouletting effects (Fig. 3); these may have included saddlers' or other leather-workers' implements. Other markings had been scratched on using pointed implements or penknives, and some of these were scarcely visible to the naked eye; yet more markings may well have weathered away completely.

The footwear impressions were almost invariably of a single foot, never a pair, and some were so arranged as to suggest the actions of group members. The footwear outlines varied in detail: many included lines to denote heels and foresoles, some had markings to indicate nails or pegs, and a few even indicated repair patches. Many just show the bare outline, but even here the shape of the toe, the width of the waist and the roundness of the heel are indicative of changing fashion in the 19th century. A number, for instance, have the straight toes that were popular between 1830 and 1860 (Denise Snell *pers. comm.*).

In most cases it is possible to distinguish whether a right or a left foot was being copied. In a proportion of cases 'straight' shoes were evidently being worn. These were in universal use up to about 1790, when distinctive left and right feet reappeared in

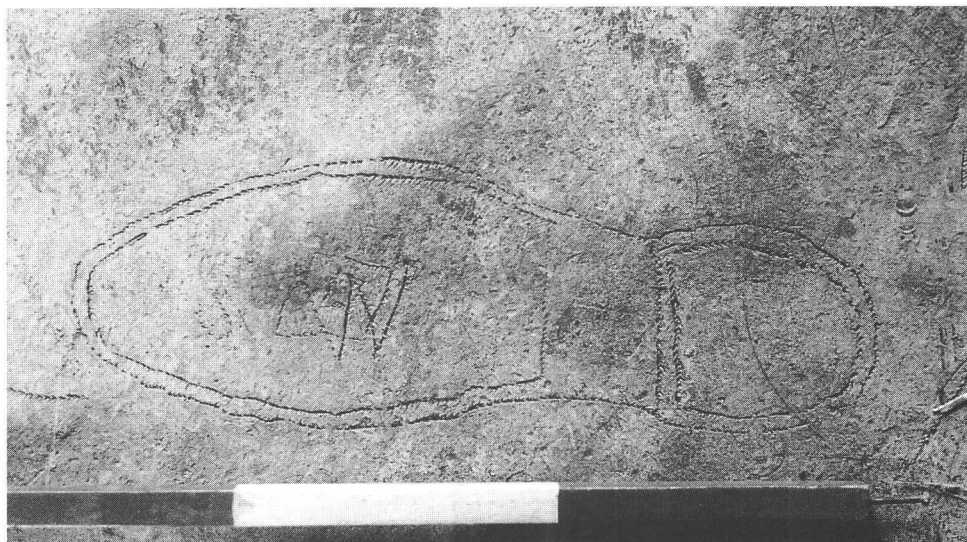


Fig. 3: Detail of a footwear outline, probably made using a tool of unknown description.

footwear (Swann 1982, 32). As late as 1850 some 'straights' were still to be found in the Bolsover area.

By far the majority of the marks were left by men. Of the 140 complete outlines, about 20 were probably made by women, with a similar number probably youths' shoes. Only about 2–3 outlines can be linked to children's feet. There are two instances where one outline is contained within that of another and these may indicate a pair of related people. Nearly half of the markings include the initials or names of the inscribers, and an eighth of the total were dated (Fig. 4). The latter start and peak in the 1820s, with declining numbers in subsequent decades, up until the turn of the century. Of the names (including those on lodges 3 and 4), most are common English surnames such as Lee, Holmes, Bennett, a number of which can be found in 19th century census returns for Bolsover. The most easily identifiable name is J. Catherall, dated 1836. This was almost certainly left by Jabez Catherall who is recorded in parish records as marrying a Mary Brown in Bolsover in 1839.

### **Bolsover Castle**

Bolsover Castle has attracted sightseers since the mid-18th century when it was abandoned as a home by the Portland family in favour of Welbeck. The impressive Terrace Range was stripped of building materials and its shell intentionally left to mellow into a romantic ruin. The rest of the castle was cursorily maintained and the Little Castle was used as the town's vicarage for a period. The castle grounds appear to have become a tourist venue for guests of the Portland family, and local people alike.

Visitors were able to reach the lodge roof via an adjacent stairway leading to a walkway on the top of the wide wall that encircles and provides a view of the so-called Fountain Garden. This wall is thought to follow and retain fragments of the inner bailey wall of the Medieval castle. In 1851 the British Archaeological Association held its Congress in Derby and visited Bolsover on an excursion. Their Proceedings reported: 'It

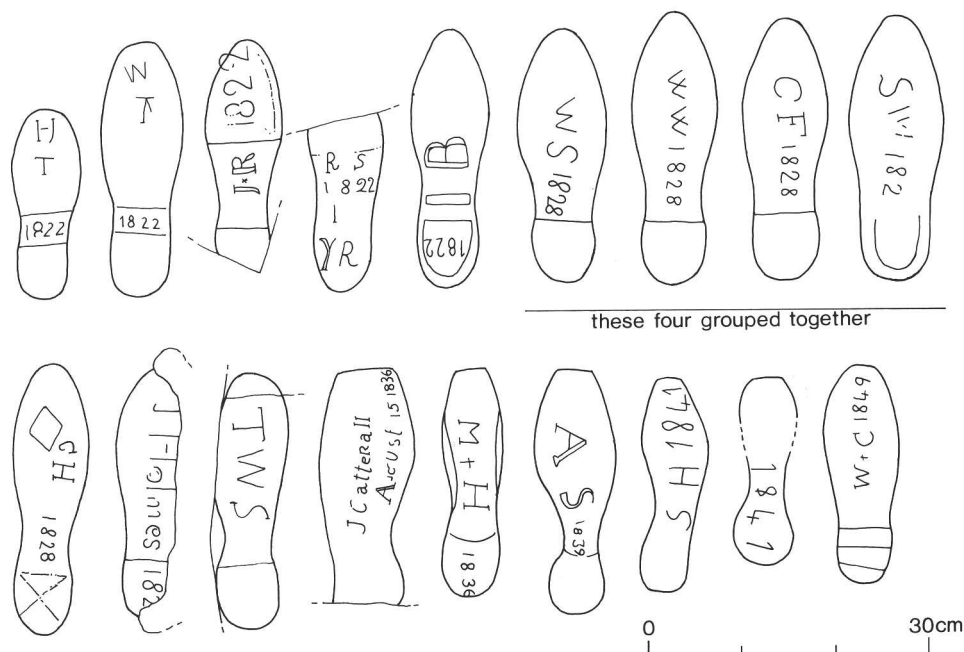


Fig. 4: Simplified outlines of the earliest dated examples.

is difficult to conceive a more beautiful and striking view than that which is enjoyed from the rampart which surrounds the old garden' (Gray 1894, 35).

The markings may have been started by workmen in the 1820s and then imitated by later visitors, many of whom went to some trouble to produce detailed outlines of their footwear. Names and initials suggest that a cross-section of society was visiting the castle during this time. The frequent occurrence of three initials in a name may suggest that a person of a higher social standing than the typical contemporary Bolsover resident was just as likely to feel the need to leave a tracing behind. Such visitors would have been welcomed to the castle by the Reverend John Hamilton Gray and his wife, both of whom were resident in the Little Castle for most of the mid-19th century (Gray 1868). As acting guardians of the castle, the Hamilton Grays may have seen this as a harmless pursuit, nay a little superstitious in nature. At least whilst people were engaged on the roof they were not causing more serious damage elsewhere (for a partial ruin, Bolsover Castle has surprisingly little graffiti on its stonework). Alternatively, the marks may have been left during the frequent times the incumbents were away from home. Whether or not the markings were made with the Hamilton Grays' acquiescence is difficult to determine.

### A custom?

What was the significance, if any, of leaving behind the outline of one's footwear? In historical times, the occurrence of such markings is usually associated with plumbers leaving their 'signature' on newly-laid lead sheeting; these can still be seen on many church roofs today (Dr Chris Brooke *pers. comm.*). When plumbers started doing this is unknown. The folklorist George Ewart Evans recounted the interesting story of the King

of Denmark who, on a visit to see King James I of England in the early 1600s, left his footprint on the roof of Westminster Abbey (Evans 1969, 217, 218). Whilst well aware of the practice, and that people other than plumbers were just as likely to engage in it, Evans admitted his ignorance as to its origins.

Similar markings are known from secular sites and on different surfaces, with examples as diverse as plaster floors in farm buildings and on gravestones, a good example of which can be seen in Repton churchyard, Derbyshire. The practice may well have been common in the 18th and 19th centuries but folklore literature appears to have generally ignored this curious and perhaps widespread activity. One can speculate that perhaps the shoe or boot had some peculiar significance as a form of signature — a personalised means of leaving one's mark for posterity, especially at a time when footwear was hand-made and probably more varied in appearance. As part of the individual's attire, its size, shape, condition and fashion conveys much about a person's physique, personality and social standing. It probably came to be considered lucky to leave such a mark, and there are parallels for this idea in other cultures (Jobes 1961, 593). Curiously, the custom lives on to this day; since the 1930s celebrity customers at Grauman's Chinese Restaurant in Los Angeles have been invited to leave their footprint in cement.

Should any reader know of other groupings of footwear markings, or examples dated to before 1800, the author would be pleased to hear about them.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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