Young Historians win English Heritage Award

English Heritage is sponsoring an annual Young Historian Scheme Award organised by the Historical Association. The first winners were Surbiton High School in Surrey for their project based on visits to Bolsover Castle and Wingfield Manor in Derbyshire. Their teacher, Dr. Elizabeth Griffiths, explains the aims of the project and we also include some extracts from the prizewinning entries by the pupils, all aged 13-14.

The Year 9 History trip to Derbyshire was designed to explore the development of the English country house from the fortified medieval manor to the grandiose structures of the eighteenth century. The same classes had visited Penshurst Place in Year 8 and now they were ready for a more comparative approach. The idea was to link the social and cultural themes specified in CSU Medieval Realms with those outlined in CSU2 The Making of the United Kingdom; and also to demonstrate how buildings reflect all types of historical change - political, religious, economic, and technological as well as the more obvious social, cultural and aesthetic.

We chose five historic properties: Haddon Hall, Wingfield Manor, Bolsover Castle, Hardwick Hall and Chatsworth House all have unique architectural and historical interest like Bolsover Castle but as they are in very good condition you cannot imagine what they would have been like to live in when they were first built. Bolsover Castle intrigued me as it seems to be in a very strange condition... when we went to see it, it seemed sadly deserted... when I first walked up and saw the Long Terrace Range I was very impressed. It had a glow of grandeur about it, even though there are no windows and the ceilings of rooms have slowly crumbled away. The Long Terrace Range are ruins and as ruins it is very tricky to know how to present them... you can use your imagination but only so far... as ruins they are primary evidence, but once you start muching around and changing or rebuilding them, they become a sham. Chatsworth may be quite amazing but it is far rather modern, in the way that it has been changed so much over the years, even though the original architecture still stands. Bolsover felt entirely different - perhaps English Heritage is right to leave it alone and let it speak for itself. But I still think that an audio tape would be useful, and perhaps a more colourful guide, with reconstructions of what it might have been like. Colourful guides are a very good idea in my opinion as they can open people's minds and expand their imaginations. I did like the information panels in the Little Castle - but you couldn't take them away with you.

Kate Randles gave an empathetic account of Bolsover Castle called 'More than the eye can see' focusing on the Riding School:

In this project I shall be focusing on 'The Riding School' which was designed for William Cavendish by Humphrey Smythson between 1630-40. I feel that this small part of the huge building is an appropriate focal point because the idea behind this amazing piece of architecture was 'The Revival of Chivalry'. I stood in the midst of a turbulent crowd of eager upper fourths in the first floor gallery of the Riding School Range at Bolsover. Learning on the stone ledge of the window or screen I was enthralled and fascinated by the view in front of me... I could just imagine the scene - fine ladies and gentlemen clad in fine silken clothes of all colours and styles all gathered to admire William Cavendish's feats on horseback. The atmosphere seemed to reach its climax and swallow me up completely; in fact it was almost as if... as if... this was all really happening. No!

I closed my eyes and upon opening them again looked down at the intricately below: Wingfield Manor, Derbyshire.

The Riding School, Bolsover Castle, Derbyshire. empty Riding School and saw a man with long dark hair riding upon a beautiful black stallion. Looking more carefully this time I recognised the man to be William Cavendish himself, clad in a white leather jerkin, feathered hat, leather boots with spurs attached and a red baldric sash around his midriff. The hat had a high crown and broad brim with three red feathers protruding from the back of the hat which he wore in a cocked position. This added to his air of dignity and his respect for all the latest fashions in clothing and the way in which...
Developing Fieldwork Skills at Kirby Hall

Regular teacher-training sessions are currently being run by the Northamptonshire Archaeology Unit's Education Service at Kirby Hall, introducing ideas for on-site fieldwork and the use of historical and archaeological sources.

Kirby Hall, an English Heritage property in Northamptonshire, is mainly known as a splendid Renaissance mansion, now in ruins, once the home of Queen Elizabeth I's favourite, Sir Christopher Hatton. However, traces of the medieval village of Kirby are still to be found, and archaeologists have recently discovered evidence of the original design and layout of the gardens.

For five years, school pupils in Northamptonshire had experienced 'real' dirt archaeology alongside the professionals at Stanwick Roman Villa. So when digging finished in summer 1991, we were faced with a problem. Teachers had come to value a site where children could both learn fieldwork skills and feel the excitement (and frustration) of making new discoveries about the past.

Excavation like Stanwick has had its disadvantages, too, for it had tended to reinforce the misconception that archaeology is only about digging. So the end of the 'Stanwick era' provided us with a challenge.

Could we demonstrate that the true excitement of archaeology lies more in discovery than just in digging, in understanding, not merely unearthing? Kirby Hall seemed a promising site to consider. Evidence for the medieval village of Kirby exists in earthworks and air photos, early maps and back-references by eighteenth-century local historians. The village disappeared and the splendid Renaissance mansion of Kirby was built, improved, and extended for Sir Christopher Hatton and his successors. In its heyday, it boasted one of the finest gardens in England. Numerous letters and accounts survive.

The site:

Fieldwork at Kirby Hall, Northamptonshire.

Fieldwork at Kirby Hall. Broughton: Kirby in 1694.

Excavation is not just about discovering the past; it is also about teaching the present and future. "In teaching children to dig," Hatton wrote, "we educate them to discover the secrets of a people, and learn to think and reason for themselves, and to form the right judgments of those things which they will one day have to correct." This is as true today as it was then. Kirby Hall, a site that has been the subject of numerous archaeological projects, is a testament to the enduring appeal of fieldwork in education.

Bolebroke Castle is a fine Eel of Chesterfield on the A632. On Map 120, set SK 473 07. It is located on the hill above the town of Bolebroke, dominating the surrounding countryside. The 'Little Castle' is a folly with intricate carvings, frescoes and wall-paintings. There is also a seventeenth-century inhabited wing which is still used on occasion.

To book a free educational group visit and see the opening times ring 0902-765105.

Wingfield Manor in Derbyshire is a 2m N of Ripley off the B5305. On Map 130, set SK 745 48. This is a late medieval manor house where Mary Queen of Scots once spent part of her imprisonment. It is now a substantial but roofless ruin. To check access ring 0902-765105.
Beware of doors - they can give the wrong signals about the age of a building. This is because the wood from which they are made rots, and replacements are subject to the stylistic whims of the owners. The doorways surrounding them, on the other hand, usually give strong and reliable clues about date.

An Open and Shut Case

The first doorways, those in the 17th century, are mostly framed, wooden and small, and have a door of rough planks similar to the original. The Georgian doorways, those in the 18th century, are much more elaborate and have an elegant door shape, which is also relatively large. Details of the original doorways change throughout the Victorian and Edwardian periods (those in the 19th century) until the 1930s, when they arrive at a simple door opening. Doorways were used in doors, and many modern doors incorporate glass in their design.