An Early History of Bolsover

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**Timeline (for British Human Occupation)**

(dates are approximate, BC – Before Christ)

**Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age)**

Lower - 850,000 – 120,000BC

Middle - 120,000 – 45,000BC

Upper - 45,000 – 8,000BC

**Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age)**

- 8,000 – 4500BC

**Neolithic (New Stone Age)**

- 4,500 – 2,500BC

**Bronze Age**

- 2,500 – 700BC

**Iron Age**

- 700 BC – AD43

**Roman**

- AD43 – 420

**Anglo-Saxon**

- AD420 – 1066

**Viking**

- AD865 – 1066

**Medieval**

- AD1066 – 1500
Introduction

This paper is designed to give you, the reader, an alternative explanation on the origins and development of the town of Bolsover in North-East Derbyshire. A recent book on Bolsover, *Bolsover: castle, town and colliery* by Philip Riden and Dudley Fowkes (2008) as part of the Victoria County History’s *England’s Past For Everyone* project, documented Bolsover's development from the Medieval period onwards, and the several thousand years of history before this was only touched on fleetingly. The aim of this paper is to fill in those gaps and provide the foundations for the development that occurred in the Medieval. Earlier books on Bolsover of particular note are the Reverend E. Andrews Downman’s *History of Bolsover* (1895) and Clive Hart’s study *Bolsover: a Town is Born* (1988) both of which provide, albeit in very different forms, a wealth of information on the town. But again, neither focus on the early period of Bolsover’s origins. Again, this paper hopes to address this.

In the beginning

Bolsover’s most famous export is undoubtedly Dennis Skinner, Labour MP and the ‘Beast of Bolsover’. Yet, Mr. Skinner was not the original ‘beast’, far from it. 300 million years before him there lived in Bolsover the original beast and his story starts back in 1978. Early in 1978 the miner Malcolm Spencer was working on coal seam D4 at Bolsover Colliery when he found something that looked like a fossil amongst the coal (his deputy, Terry Judge, was a keen fossil hunter and had infected some of his men with this interest), wrapped it up in a bag and placed it in his locker, ready to show Terry when the two next met. Upon seeing the fossil, Terry decided to show it to the Mine Geologist who believed it was a dragonfly, but a second opinion was sought from the Regional Geologist. It was then sent to the Institute of Geological Sciences before making its way to the British Museum (Natural History) where Dr. Paul Whalley studied the fossil. Two years later the fossil was declared as a new species of dragonfly and given the name *Erasipteron bolsoveri* (Gracefully-winged of Bolsover). Its 20cm wingspan meant it was then the largest specimen found in the British Isles but a similar fossil had been noted in Czechoslovakia in 1933. Remarkably, in August 1978, Graham Bell found another fossil in the same seam –
another dragonfly! This one was even larger than the first, with a wingspan of around 50cm, and was given the name *Typus ailuculum* (Giant dragonfly of the dawn). Similar fossils had been found in France, Russia and America but never before in Britain. Unfortunately, for some reason, it never gained the fame of the first fossil.¹

So the Bolsover dragonflies could well have been some of the earliest inhabitants of the area, when the region was subtropical. But who were the earliest human inhabitants? The answer to that goes several thousand years back to the Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) period.

**Bolsover in Prehistory**

The Palaeolithic age is split into three periods – Lower (before 120,000 years ago), Middle (120,000-45,000 years ago) and Upper (45,000-10,000 years ago). All three of these periods are represented in the Bolsover region. For the Lower Palaeolithic, a stone hand-axe was discovered at Shirebrook (of ‘flake hand-axe’ type), although this is now lost.² Middle Palaeolithic (Neanderthal) sites are known in the area at Whitwell (Ash Tree Cave), Creswell (Mother Grundy’s Parlour, Robin Hood’s Cave, Pin Hole, Church Hole) and at Langwith (Langwith Bassett Cave). Late Upper Palaeolithic occupation is known at all of the above Middle Palaeolithic sites with the addition of the Whaley Rock Shelters I and II, Whaley and at the caves at Markland Grips, nearr Clowne. All of these sites are located on the Magnesian Limestone ridge, whose western edge culminates at Bolsover. Far-reaching views are afforded from Bolsover and on a clear day the World War memorial tower at Crich in the Peak District can be seen some 30 miles away.

Although no definite occupation evidence is known at Bolsover for the Palaeolithic, we have noted that the hunters were in the immediate locale and most likely passed through the area occupied by Bolsover today. We now know, for the Late Upper Palaeolithic, that the hunters were travelling from areas such as Holland, Belgium and Germany to the east of Britain in the winter and making their way over a land mass known as Doggerland which now lies buried under the North Sea. From there they would travel into Britain following the river systems and migrating reindeer into the Bolsover region, using the gorge at Creswell Crags as a natural gateway through the
higher ground to each side. From here the hunters followed the reindeer into the Peak District of Derbyshire in late spring / early summer as the Peak was a reindeer calving ground – they went there to have their young. As Bolsover lies in between Creswell and the Peak District (and has one of the only easily navigable routes down onto the coal measures below via the Hockley Valley – today known as Station Road) we could expect our hunters to almost certainly be using the area, not least for the extremely useful vantage point that Bolsover would offer.

As we move on in Prehistory into the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods we see more conclusive evidence for human occupation at Bolsover. A possible Late Upper Palaeolithic camp site in the field above Mill Farm, Whaley discovered in the early 1980s has later been shown to have been Late Mesolithic / Early Neolithic based on the flint tools found there.³ Excavations at Sherwood Lodge, Bolsover by Trent & Peak Archaeology revealed another site used in the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age. Four pieces of pale-grey chert were recovered that matched typological finds from both the Elmton area and Mother Grundy’s Parlour, Creswell and this appears to suggest some link between these sites and that at Bolsover. Further finds of flint tools at a Bolsover garden at Wesley Manse, Hilltop also attests to Mesolithic occupation.

Downman, in his History of Bolsover, mentions that the first settlers at Bolsover were the Phoenicians (Iron Age people) and that they built a pagan temple in Bolsover, either on the site of the current St. Mary and St. Lawrence church on High Street or on the site of the present castle. There appears no hard evidence to support this theory and the construction of later buildings would have destroyed any potential archaeological remains of this temple. However, returning to the site at Sherwood Lodge excavations discovered an enclosure ditch with evidence of a timber palisade. Inside this was an area of industrial activity including hearth pits, gullies, slag and other metallic residues and an oval ‘cut’ feature that had an in-fill relating to lead-working. Excavations also revealed a number of post-holes that surrounded an area used for iron-working. Not only does this prove Iron Age habitation and subsequent ‘industry’ at Bolsover, the post-holes may suggest some form of permanent building. So if the Iron Age people were living and working at Bolsover, perhaps there could have been a temple at Bolsover after all.
Further evidence for Iron Age occupation comes in the discovery of an Iron Age coin found near Scrattawood, Whitwell. The coin is a Gallo-Belgic E class stater that dates to c. 50-25BC. In The Handbook of British Archaeology Adkins comments that ‘Gallo-Belgic E coins consist of uniface gold staters (blank on one side) and represent the largest wave of coinage into Britain’. The fact that it was found near Whitwell is interesting as the Iron Age hillfort at Markland Grips is only a mile or two away from here. Relatively small excavations by Harry Lane in 1969 revealed only two pot sherds, although it was shown that modern ploughing had destroyed much of the potential archaeology from what is a huge defended settlement. The earthworks that remain reflect a triangular-shaped enclosure with triple ramparts and ditches that enclose an area of around 12 acres.

Markland Grips is one of seven Iron Age hillforts in Derbyshire, and yet interestingly the other six are all within the Peak District. The furthest east, and closest to our Bolsover region, is Gardom’s Edge at Baslow. So quite a distance away. Therefore, what on earth is a hillfort doing this far east? The historian Mark Todd believes that the lack of coinage evidence in the general Bolsover region suggests that the Magnesian Limestone ridge was the western territorial boundary of the Coritani tribe (who occupied Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire in the Iron Age) and that the people of Derbyshire may well have belonged to the Brigante tribe. This would mean that the hillfort would appear to be defensive and may further support the idea that Bolsover itself started as an Iron Age hillfort. This will be discussed further when we look at the Medieval defensive earthworks.

If we consider the name of Bolsover then Iron Age links again become apparent. The latter half of the name, ‘sover’ most likely derives from the word ‘sovre’ meaning high place or settlement, so Bol-sover literally translates as ‘settlement of Bol’. However, Bolsover is not the original spelling of the town and is referred to as Belesovre in the Domesday Book (AD1086). Therefore, we are now looking at ‘settlement of Bel’. We can trace Bel back to the Babylonians where he was a god, but the word is also often used to simply mean ‘lord’ or ‘master’. In 1940, WHD Rouse wrote in Book 40 of his edition of Dionysiaca of a hymn sung by Dionysus to Tyrian Heracles:
‘the Greeks were as firmly convinced as many modern Bible-readers that the Semites, or the Orientals generally, worshipped a god called Baal or Bel, the truth of course being that ba’al is a Semitic word for lord or master, and so applies to a multitude of gods. This “Bel”, then, being an important deity, must be the sun, the more so as some of the gods bearing that title may have been really solar.’

So perhaps this Bel relates in some way to the suggested pagan temple at Bolsover. Downman suggested that Bel could have been a British (ie. Iron Age) god of fire and perhaps had links with the smelting of both tin and lead in the area. So, again, the name of Bolsover (or Belesovre) has certain links that could relate to an Iron Age origin for the town.

Roman occupation

The nearest Roman fort to Bolsover was at Chesterfield (Cestrefeld in Roman Times) and finds in the area of the parish church and the market square have shown it was built around AD54-55 and was abandoned by AD140. A further large fort (Navio) was located at Brough-on-Noe near the junction of the Hope and Edale valleys in the Peak District. The fort was occupied between AD75-120 so corresponds generally to the occupation at Chesterfield. In the Bolsover region itself several sites attest to small-scale Roman occupation, with a number of camp and villa sites in the area that may well relate to the larger forts nearby. Two minor Roman enclosure settlements are known at Barlborough and at Old Bolsover, while a larger settlement has been investigated within Scarcliffe Park. Here a stone-built enclosure dated to the 2nd century AD and work by the archaeologist Harry Lane in the 1960s suggested the site at Scarcliffe may well have been used for lead smelting.\(^6\) A potential Roman occupation site in the field adjacent to Whaley Rock Shelter No. II, evidence from the site of Sherwood Lodge, Bolsover and two Roman villas discovered by Major Hayman Rooke in 1786 at Mansfield Woodhouse further reflect a Roman presence in the area.

There is also evidence to suggest that the Romans were also using the caves of the region, as Roman artefacts were discovered at the caves at Whaley, Whitwell and
Creswell Crags. Indeed, the Church Hole cave at Creswell has quite a rich Roman accumulation including bronze brooches, coins, pottery and a bone dagger hilt. Clive Hart suggested in his *North Derbyshire Archaeological Survey* that no known burials of Roman date had been found in the region, but recent radiocarbon dating on human remains from Robin Hood’s Cave at Creswell gave a date of 1,785 ±50 radiocarbon years, which gives an approximate date of between AD165-265, right in the middle of the Roman period. Finally, three Roman coin hordes are known from Stuffyn-Wood, Shirebrook (found in 1770), Whitwell (comprising two jars of coins found in 1850) and a large hoard discovered near Scarcliffe in 1876. This latter hoard, known as the ‘Langwith hoard’, comprised over two thousand coins all dating to the last half of the 3rd century AD and was found 0.6m below the surface.

The Anglo-Saxon / Viking period

The only apparent evidence from this period relates to the church of Ault Hucknall, which has its foundations in Saxon times. Again place name evidence suggests a similar derivation to that of Bolsover. ‘Hault’ (later to become Ault) means ‘high’ and ‘Huck’ most likely relates to a person (Hucca?), so a translation would be ‘Hucca’s high settlement’. There has been a church at Ault Hucknall for over a thousand years, but a local tradition suggests that at one time there was a much older settlement in the area known as ‘Griff Wood’. This may well translate as ‘grove by the graves’ and could well fit in with a prehistoric settlement, which fits into wider landscape associations. It is, however, strange that no mention is made of Ault Hucknall in the *Domesday Book*. The structure of the church itself reflects at least six phases of building within the West wall, including several pieces of re-used Anglian masonry. The window in the West wall is typical of an early Northumbrian single-splayed design of the Saxon period and a statue inside the church of a ‘Green Man’ is really interesting as this is of Pagan tradition and may hint to earlier, pre-Christian roots for the site.

The nearby estate of Sutton Scarsdale also has Saxon foundations as the original hall was part of the Saxon estate belonging to Wulfric Spott who died in AD1002, and given the close proximity to Ault Hucknall there may well have been some link.
between the two sites, although this is impossible to prove today. Certain records exist that suggest there may also have been a Danish camp in the area, around the Moor Field region of Bolsover (close to the present day Moorfield School site). Three separate accounts from the early 17th century document the camp, which supposedly existed on a hill, although the name of this hill varies slightly between accounts – Swantinge Marie Hill and Swantinbarre Hill both being mentioned. A document from AD1635 entitled *The Article for the Boundary of the Lordship of Boulser* details how this hill, when approaching from the south, lies with Scarcliffe Grange to the east. Today Rotherham Road (known locally as the ‘ramper’) follows the north/south alignment and, when the current farm of Scarcliffe Grange is to the east, only traverses one hill in the general area. This is right on the corner of Moor Lane, and Rotherham Road (which holds its origins at least as early as the Roman period) dissects the hill itself. This must be the hill referred to in the 17th century documents but as far as the author is aware, no ‘Danish’ artefacts or any archaeological site has been noted in the vicinity.

The church of St. Mary and St. Lawrence in Bolsover itself may also hold its origins in Saxon times, although the earliest noticeable stonework within the current building dates to the Norman period (c. 1066 onwards).

The early Medieval period

It is curious that *Domesday Book* mentions the town of ‘Belesovre’ but does not note a castle there. From this, we can only take it that there was no castle at Bolsover when the Normans conquered Britain in AD1066. At the time of *Domesday*, in AD1086, William the Conqueror granted Bolsover to William Peverel who also owned land at Castleton in the Peak District. By the 12th century we know a wooden castle existed at Bolsover, which was soon replaced by a stone structure, but nothing remains of either of these early buildings – the present castle at Bolsover dates to the 17th century. However, William Peverel’s stone castle at Castleton – Peveril Castle – still survives today, albeit as a ruinous shell, so we could suggest that the structure at Bolsover looked quite similar especially as both Bolsover and Castleton towns are laid out on an early Medieval ‘grid system’. This layout is still retained at Bolsover today and is one of the few examples to survive in Britain.
The Medieval town of Bolsover developed in three clear stages as put forward by Clive Hart in his 1988 study. Phase one is the so-called ‘Domesday Phase’ and incorporated the castle and related defensive earthworks and a small market town. Phase two saw the expansion of the town and further defensive earthworks added, notably those that ran from the present day Town End up past the church and to the corner of High Street where the petrol station is today. These earthworks were destroyed when the road was widened (except for a small section that still exists behind the petrol station) but can clearly be seen on Downman’s sketch of 1895. The Norman church of St. Mary and St. Lawrence was built within this phase and can be seen on Clive Hart’s plan. Phase three was the ‘burgage plot’ phase and saw additional field systems incorporated (namely Wood Field (later Limekiln Field), Middle Field and Moor Field) and the earlier defences added to in order to close-in more of the area around Dykes Close. During the Barons’ War of AD1215-17 the constable at Bolsover, Gerard de Furnivall, was instructed to either hold the town from the enemies or raise it to the ground if defeat looked likely, which may relate to the further strengthening of the defences. Later earthworks were added in the Hornscroft area in the 17th century that relate to the present castle structure and the threat of Civil War. What is interesting to consider regarding the earthworks is that they are extremely irregular compared to more general Medieval designs in that they do not ‘surround’ the town but instead take advantage of the natural escarpment of the Magnesian Limestone ridge. This is markedly similar to the defensive earthworks at Markland Grips and may attest to a much earlier defensive settlement at Bolsover in the Iron Age, the later Medieval earthworks incorporating an earlier design.

The church of St Mary and St Lawrence

As has been discussed the present church may well hold its roots in Saxon times and may have been built on top of an earlier, Iron Age pagan religious site. The earliest stonework of the existing structure is clearly Norman – the tower with its arched doorway is of typical Norman design and the stonework is less structured than the main body of the church. In many ways it follows the development of the castle, as each time modifications or additions were added to the castle, so too were they regarding the church. The final addition to the church was the 17th century Cavendish
Chapel that ties in with the final stage of the castle. However, some interesting features of the church attest to a much earlier history. Above the priest’s doorway on the outside of the rear of the church is a stone tympanum with the scene of the Crucifixion carved onto it. Downman believed this was possibly Saxon and dated to around AD1000, and although we cannot be certain of this dating it is clearly much-weathered and most likely predates the 13th century.

Inside the church there is a rather rare stone engraving of a Nativity scene known as the ‘Manger of Bethlehem’. Approximately five feet long and two and a half feet high, the piece dates to around AD1300 when it was given to the church at Bolsover. With the threat that the Civil War brought to the area it was buried in 1644, face-down near the priest’s doorway in order to save it from the threat of the Iconoclasts. This fear turned out to be unfounded as there was little damage done to the church when the Parliamentarians captured the town in 1644, save for the ‘ancient church plate’ and the church bells going missing (most likely plunder as opposed to any great religious desecration) and it was the castle that bore the brunt of the destruction.

Certain entries in the Calendar of State Papers for Bolsover clearly show that the order was that the strong points of the castle and its defences should be demolished in order to render it useless as a garrison in the future.

The Nativity engraving is documented in the 1786 edition of The Gentleman’s Magazine, which details the piece shortly after it was discovered:

‘If you think fragments of ancient sculpture worthy of a place in your valuable repository, the enclosed drawing of one is at your service. About fourscore years ago a stone was taken up, which served as a step to the north door of Bolsover Church, co. Derby. On the lower side was discovered ancient rude sculpture in very high relief representing the Nativity. The Virgin Mary appears to be sitting in a stable with a mutilated figure of our Saviour in her lap, who seems to have had one hand on a dove; the other figure, standing on the side, was probably intended for Joseph. In the background an old man is seen coming into the stable. The two camels’ heads are looking into the manger; the great projection of these heads from the background is very singular. The stone is five feet by three. I think it appears from the drapery and
other parts of the sculpture to be the work of the thirteenth century, if not anterior to that period. It was then probably held in high estimation, and from the situation in which it was found, I should imagine it was put there as a place of safety during the frequent attacks that were made on Bolsover Castle, or to secure it in later times from the fanatic fury of the Parliament's forces when they took possession of the castle. The stone now stands against the wall in the chancel.

Finally, there are four Medieval stone grave slabs from Bolsover, two of which are still retained inside the church. From looking at the diagram a clear evolution in design can be noted, getting more intricate as time progresses. The earliest marker features a number of engraved tools – an inverted hammer or axe, some pliers or tongs and three circular instruments that could be horse-shoes, which may suggest the grave slab was that of a farrier or blacksmith in the late eleventh / early twelfth century given Hart’s attribution to circa AD1100. This depiction is quite rare, and the author has only noted one other of a similar design in Derbyshire in the graveyard of Ault Hucknall church. Here a tomb bears the engravings of tools but dates from AD1690 and is said to be from a master carpenter that worked on nearby Hardwick Hall. A similar grave slab was noted by the author at a church in the small French town of Trans-le-Forêt in Northern Brittany, again with tools present but with a date of AD1807.

Conclusion

So it can be seen that there is much history to be found at Bolsover before the Medieval period. There are notable prehistoric sites in and around the town and there is a good case for Bolsover as a settlement evolving out of a defended Iron Age hillfort. Future research and archaeological investigations may confirm this theory one way or the other, but for now we can only ponder the thought. The existence of Anglo-Saxon sites in the locale at Ault Hucknall and Sutton Scarsdale provide a glimpse of the wealth and power that must have existed in the area before the coming of the Normans in AD1066, and the potential for a Danish winter camp at Bolsover may tie-in with the large winter camp at Repton, Derbyshire to the south, where the Viking ‘Great Army’ overwintered in AD873-74 after conquering York, and also the
Viking cemetery site at Ingleby, Derbyshire. With the closure of the Bolsover Colliery, where our story of Bolsover began with the discovery of the dragonflies in the 1970s, the economy and employment had to diversify considerably. Today, tourism provides Bolsover’s main source of economy and an ongoing project by Derbyshire County Council, Creswell Heritage Trust and partner bodies aims to boost this tourism factor in the local area. It is hoped this short booklet has gone some way to highlight the rich history and heritage that Bolsover and the surrounding region has to offer, other than the more obvious sites of Bolsover Castle, Stainsby Mill and Hardwick Hall.

Endnotes

1 – The story of the Bolsover dragonfly can be found in Tony Smith’s article in the Derbyshire Local History magazine The Tup from 1993. The article is also available online at http://www.derbyshire-dragonflies.org.uk/history.php
2 – Clive Hart The North Derbyshire Archaeological Survey, (Sheffield, 1984)
4 – Roy & Leslie Adkins The Handbook of British Archaeology, 1998, p. 94
5 – Mark Todd The Coritani, (London), 1973
6 – see Harry C. Lane Scarcliffe Park: A Romano-British Rural Native Settlement in East Derbyshire, Bulletin 25 of the Peakland Archaeological Society
8 – see Clive Hart Bolsover: a Town is Born, (Chesterfield), 1988, Fig. 6