



A COUNTRY RESIDENCE

ELVASTON CASTLE

Elvaston Castle, as we see it today, dates from the early nineteenth century and the time of the Gothic revival. It was Charles, 3rd Earl of Harrington, who ordered the rebuilding, to replace the old brick-built, gabled manor house that had been home to the Stanhope family for some two hundred years. A small part of that building remains at the right hand end of the south front, where a red brick section with mullioned windows bears the date 1633. That would have been during the lifetime of Sir John Stanhope who lived at Elvaston in the years leading up to the civil war, and it is thought that he may have replaced an earlier, perhaps Tudor, manor house. Some of the rooms behind those mullioned windows are in keeping with the date; one is the old library, completely panelled in oak.

The 3rd Earl was sixty when he turned his attention to rebuilding Elvaston, by which time he was established and influential enough to commission the leading architects of the day. He chose James Wyatt who began his designs for Elvaston in 1812.

James Wyatt was a Staffordshire man who at the early age of fifteen was taken to Italy by Lord Bagot to become a pupil of Antonio Visentini in Venice. He quickly acquired great skills as an architectural draughtsman and two years later moved on to work in Rome. After his return to England he designed the Pantheon in Oxford Street, acclaimed by Horace Walpole as '*the most beautiful edifice in England*'. That was in 1772 when Wyatt was twenty-six.

Following this success James Wyatt was appointed Surveyor General to the Crown where his work included alterations to several of the royal palaces and the building of a castle, for George III, at Kew. He also received many private commissions and during his career worked on over a hundred country houses in England, Ireland and Wales.

Wyatt's great love was Gothic architecture and it was this style which brought him fame. His greatest masterpiece is probably Belvoir Castle, remodelled for the Duke of Rutland in the early years of the nineteenth century. His skills as a Gothickist were sought

also for restoration work in colleges, churches, and cathedrals, among them Lichfield and Salisbury.

Elvaston Castle was one of James Wyatt's last commissions and he did not live to see his designs carried out. He was killed in a coaching accident in September 1813 and another two years were to pass before Lord Harrington appointed Robert Walker to continue the work. He was a much younger man than Wyatt, a pupil of Thomas Leverton's, who had entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1792. Walker never achieved fame but from 1815-1819 he supervised the rebuilding of Elvaston Castle to James Wyatt's design.

The new castle with its battlements and turrets



Charles, the 3rd Earl and his wife.



Jane, Countess of Harrington (portrait by Joseph Wright of Derby).

was linked to a large courtyard, complete with a water tower of the same Gothic design. On the south side of this new courtyard was the hound enclosure and two gatehouses, one either side of a Gothic archway. On the west side, another archway under a clock tower led through to the pump yard, with its deep coach wash, coach house and harness rooms, beyond which lay a fine new stable block.

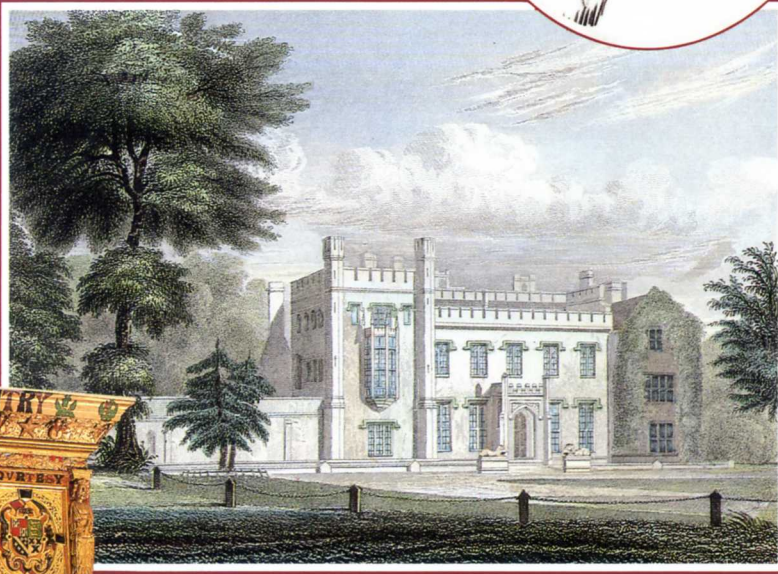
Nearby, on the south-west, Elvaston Church, with its much earlier, embattled tower, complemented the scene.

James Wyatt, 1746–1813.

The 3rd Earl would have liked a new landscaped garden to complete his plans and with this in mind he approached Capability Brown. He turned down the commission explaining that, 'the place is so flat and there is such a want of capability in it'. However, he did present a disappointed Lord Harrington with six seedling Cedars of Lebanon which were planted to the east of the castle and grew into magnificent trees.

After Lord Harrington's death in 1829 it was left to his son, Charles, to finish the work at Elvaston. The 4th Earl, like his father, favoured the Gothic style but in his case it was an obsession and for the next twenty years he watched over the creation of a garden that became the talk of England.

Lord Harrington, the 'Beau' Petersham of earlier days, began by appointing a new architect to rebuild the east wing of Elvaston Castle and refurbish parts of the interior. He commissioned Lewis Cottingham who, like Wyatt, was a devotee of the Gothic style and much in demand.



Elvaston Castle, circa 1823.



PHOTO: JOHN WARTON.

Armorial fireplace in the library.

Lewis Cottingham was born in Suffolk in 1787 and apprenticed to an Ipswich builder before moving to London, where his architectural career began in 1814. He designed his own house in Lambeth and included a museum which over the years he filled with collections of medieval woodwork, Gothic carvings, and plaster-casts showing many different architectural styles.

After his death these collections formed the nucleus of the Royal Architectural Museum.

Among Cottingham's major designs were Snelston Hall in Derbyshire and the new Armagh Cathedral. His restoration work was to be found in colleges and churches all over the country but particularly in the cathedrals of Rochester and Hereford.

The east front of Elvaston Castle was completed in 1840. It overlooks the long tree-lined Elvaston Avenue and with its symmetrical nine-bay façade is most impressive. The centre is decorated with a number of coats of arms. At the top are the arms of the Earls of Harrington. Below them are those of Leinster, Bedford, Newcastle, Somerset and Grafton; five ducal families to which the Earls of Harrington were related by marriage.