**Wives of Wilton House, a talk by Micky Foster.**

**18 Earls and 26 wives.**

Mrs Foster’s primary career was in teaching but now she works as historian at Wilton house, whose history goes back to the time of Henry VIIIth. In his capacity as asset stripper of the monasteries, the King had presented the land and monastery at Wilton to William Herbert, long respected firstly as a bodyguard and shortly to be granted a knighthood. He came from an illegitimate line of the Herberts of Raglan Castle, a ‘bit of a rogue’ he was involved in a murder scandal, disappeared to France before returning to respectability in Royal service. He married Anne Parr, sister of Queen Catherine, Henry VIII’s last wife. William’s progress into higher circles thus made it necessary for him to be elevated to an earldom. He became the Ist Earl of Pembroke.

Queen Catherine outlived the King. Her sister, the Countess of Pembroke died before the Earl and at the time of her death she was Lady in Waiting to the future Queen Mary, being well qualified as having been in the same position to all the six Queens of Henry VIIIth. William and Anne had a son and a daughter. He married again but there were no further children.

However even in the senior aristocracy women rarely reach a high profile. They are often more or less anonymous, a point emphasised by Mrs Foster in her description of the present Wilton House, which like many others, is full of family portraits or disputed subjects or simply ‘wife of ….’ without even a first name. This is misery for historians but there was nothing miserable about the speaker’s spirited presentation. There was so much charm and spirit that the complexity of the subject, every detail collected within her wonderful memory, was presented so that the audience found themselves in a fascinating maze of stories but without a map, maybe in a fog. An absence of family diagrams or trees was frustrating.

Judging by her numerous stories there must have been some sadness tragedy and anger in the long history of this family – there have been eighteen Earls. For example there was a divorce in the reign King Edward VI who was a protestant, which was cancelled when Queen Mary succeeded him. Imagine the unhappiness there must have been behind just that one story.

After the Civil War and Restoration Louise de Kerouille came from France to be one of the mistresses of Charles II. This was in the time of Philip the seventh Earl, a ‘spare’ who had succeeded having had no expectation. He married Louise’s sister Henrietta. He contracted the ‘pox’ as a youth, presumably syphilis (presumably treated with mercury). He became mad, maybe from the mercury as well as the syphilis. At the age of 24 he got into a fight and was beaten up. Two years later he was sent to the Tower accused of blasphemy. He contrived, as a peer, to be tried by the House of Lords thus escaping execution. Another fight resulted in a prosecution for murder. Again he was able to be judged by his peers with just six finding him guilty, forty finding him guilty of manslaughter and the rest not guilty. Following yet another prosecution for murder, the House of Lords sent a petition of Pardon to the King. This was granted in the form of Rustication, meaning he was confined to Wilton House where died at the age of thirty one.

Henrietta survives as a free woman going back to France, taking most of the contents of Wilton with her. Later, numerous family court cases to no avail lost all the lands in legal fees.

Yet further stories of marriage divorce and scandal followed, and judging by the questions from the audience we were mostly confused but better informed, and definitely appreciative.