

## **Morris Dancing in “The Tudors”**

For those of you who missed it, “The Tudors” (First Season) was a 10 episode BBC TV screening in 2007 of a programme “loosely” based on the life and times of Henry VIII ca. 1530 at the time of his disenchantment with his first wife (Catherine of Aragon), his attraction to Anne Boleyn and the demise of Thomas Wolsey. The series starred Sam Neill as Wolsey and Jonathan Rhys Meyers as Henry VIII.

I use the term “loosely” because a certain amount of literary licence has been taken by writer Michael Hirst, who readily admitted in his Radio Times interview that this is a dramatic production designed for entertainment, NOT to be mistaken for a documentary. Hence events such as Wolsey’s suicide, the murder of the King of Portugal by Henry’s sister, and others should be viewed in this context and not taken as an accurate record of history.

I open with this caveat to commence the defence against possible forthcoming observations on the morris dancing scene set to appear in the Second Season scheduled for screening this year. This is currently due for February, so depending on Harry’s publication date you either may, or may not, have seen it yet.

Producer, Michael Hirst, who also wrote the screenplay for “The Tudors” was Oscar nominated for his script for Cate Blanchet’s first great success “Elizabeth”, and has for some time been a friend of Martin Foster, the present Squire of Icknield Way Morris Men. As anyone who knows Martin will testify, when he hits his vocal stride he isn’t easily stopped, and he has been badgering Michael for some time to include some morris in his Tudor creations.

Hence the telephone call that came out of the blue in mid-September 2007. Although yet to be shown in the UK at that time, the First Season had seen great success in many countries around the world and filming was underway at AB Productions in Co. Wicklow for the Second Season. The production team were shooting a Whitsun Sportes scene with Anne as the new Queen (she was crowned June 1533 so presumably Whitsun 1534) and morris dancing was IN! IWMM were asked to get a team together, fly to Dublin ready for a days filming on a specific date.

The Squire duly picked a select 6 plus musician and the team grey-beards started to debate what Tudor morris might have looked and sounded like without time to really do any adequate research. I have tried to note some of our thinking in this account but as you will see in the world of show-biz historical accuracy is a secondary consideration.

Our thinking started with what music to use, knowing that most of the tunes we use these days date from post-Tudor times and have origins in country dancing. Also the reference musical works covering the period such as the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book (1610), D. R. Wilson’s Historical Dance, Orchesography (1589) by Jehan Tabourot (aka Thoinot Arbeau), and Tylman Susato’s Book of Dance Music (1551) are really aimed at recording the Pavaues, Galliards, Branle, Allemandes, Tourdion and other formal court dance styles rather than morris (mourisco etc.).

We were also aware of John Ward’s hypothesis (1) of a single musical origin for a particular morris tune of which he traced many variations. In John Forest’s analysis (2) of Ward’s argument it would appear that this was based on elite sources and was therefore likely to be more biased towards court morris as opposed to rural morris. The tune in question was the antecedent of the Staines Morris (Staines Morris) tune from which other varieties branched. With no time to explore these further (e.g. Weelkes versions) we opted for Staines as one tune to work with. A further possibility was The Kynges Morisco; present in the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, a tune of Moorish origin and popular throughout Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately the format did not easily lend itself to the dances in mind. We therefore settled for La Mourisque from Tylman’s Danserye, courtly and contemporaneous with the dramatic activity. We has settled to dance to recorder and drum since as Henry VIII had a collection of over 70 when he died it seemed like a good instrument with which to curry favour with the monarch.

As for dances, we had been given no idea as to what was expected of us and prepared for being both in a fixed location or processing/”coming on”. The most comprehensive guide to what may have happened in Tudor morris is John Forrest’s Chapter 4. Already the dance was influenced sufficiently

by country dancing for there to be a differentiation between rural and court morris (outdoor and indoor dances). Unfortunately our designated activity didn't fit either category in that it was a court event (the Whitsun Sportes were intended to be in Royal grounds with Royal entourage in attendance) but clearly outdoors with various other activities (Maypole dancing, archery, etc) underway.

It seemed reasonable to distil from Forrest's accounts that the court dance may still have a competitive nature to it as opposed to a country dance approach. Also, that a ring dance would be a possibility, although the dancers might be described as "loosely" in a circle with individual competitive actions. There is plenty to validate the use of six dancers but no scope on the day to introduce competing for the favours of a lady(ies) central to the dancers.

The first dance we chose to adapt was "Green Garters" the Ducklington maypole dance with plenty of circular figures and asking dancers to individualise as much as possible. This is an interesting concept when you've spent most morris practices trying to knock them into all doing precisely the same thing! The modern version of Staines fitted the dance well.

The second dance adapted was Bledington Saturday Night, largely because it is mostly figures in line (not unlike the scene in Vinckenboom's "The Thames at Richmond" ca.1620) and can finish with a circular figure. Although from a later period there is some suggestion that dances may have been in a single file at times and this dance did offer the "getting on" opportunity if we needed it. Again Tylman's tune fitted perfectly.

We had given some thought to costume and referred to the useful short history by Borys (3) although we knew this was in more than capable professional hands. Joan Bergin won a Primetime Emmy for the Tudor costume designs in Season 1 and has been nominated for the Costume Designers Guild Award for 2008; she also has 7 other award nominations to her name.

It had been decided we were "a morryske dancyd by the kynges yong gentyllmen..." and as Knights of Court we were suitably attired. Even earlier than this period there are accounts of dress uniformity for the dancers although many descriptions suggest more glitter and elaboration than we ended up with. Yes, we used handkerchiefs and this was solely our decision to deviate from the almost certain absence of handkerchiefs in morris at this time. Handkerchiefs seemed to appear after the flappy pendant sleeves became a victim to changes in fashion, but on the day we were one act on a set of over 180 performers and our reasoning was that handkerchiefed arm movements would elevate our performance above head high and be more conspicuous on camera.

Having made as good a preparation as we could muster in short time the select and freshly instructed seven duly set off to Heathrow to fly to Dublin at the appointed time. However no sooner had they parked their cars when the message came through the mobile telephonic device that it was bucketing down in Co. Wicklow and all filming was off, - try again next week.

Well, this is all well and good for professionals but for at least 2 of the elite group their day-job was going to put them out of the country on business. So there was hasty regrouping and new men drafted in. The next Thursday we got away successfully but with Graham, our sole recorder player in Bratislava and despite 5 concertina players in the group we could not produce our music in period style. However, a hasty call to the Director's resourceful assistant discovered a musician in the cast and "Props" had found a very nice 16<sup>th</sup> Century bass recorder.

The day of filming started at 5:30 and we spent 14 hours on set, fighting the onset of dusk. The first problem was that despite having a Grade 8 in Jews Harp or whatever, our new musician (Enda Gallery) couldn't get a squeak out of the ancient recorder, let alone Staines Morris! Plan B was to record 2 concertinas playing it and playback over the set sound system; however whilst still in the planning stage the call came to get the morris dancers on set and see what they do. Since most of the extras and crew were Irish none of them had a clue what to expect from morris dancers. There was no choice but for one of us to hum Staines whilst going through our carefully rehearsed evolutions. The trial take went very well until the assistant Director came on set saying "Er, we're picking up a humming noise in the cans, can we loose it please?"

We duly explained that morris dancing usually accompanies a sound of some sort but when we came to shoot the live scene with 180 people about their activities (and the set sound system pumping out a

Maypole Dance), it was pretty hard work concentrating on the humming. As it happened, the scene only allowed scope for the Green Garters circular dance so once Enda had seen the dance a few times he could at least nod his recorder in time with the humming.

A second problem was that the Tudor shoes were exceedingly uncomfortable to walk in, never mind energetic capering. This problem was relieved by doing the rehearsal shots in trainers and changing for the live shots. It will be interesting to see if continuity picked up on this and whether we were consistent! Needless to say there were umpteen takes for different events and camera angles, finishing with an overhead shot from a crane requiring a very tight circle to get on screen. Come nightfall we were pretty exhausted and glad of a microbrewery down the road in Bray where we enjoyed a few pints of porter.

We have recently learnt that Season 1 of the Tudors, with 2 Golden Globe nominations, is still being sold to numerous countries all around the world with viewing figures now over 200 million, including coast to coast screening in the USA, and is grossing millions of Euros. We settled for a one off lousy payment instead of a lucrative box office deal; **we've got to get a new agent!**

*Sem Seaborne with helpful comments from Jim Birch. Ickniel Way Morris Men Inc.*