

TUDOR ROYALTY EXPERIENCE

by Ceri Creffield

Having been obsessed with the Tudors since the age of around fourteen, I have always wondered what it would be like to dress in Tudor costume. How would I look? How would it feel? What would it be like to sit, stand and walk in a gown and kirtle?

I finally got my chance to find out (not before time!) in September 2021 when I spent a day at Thornbury Castle swanning around in authentic Tudor dress. This indulgence was my sixtieth birthday present to myself, and I am only sorry I never got to do it when I was younger, slimmer, and more attractive!

The day began at 10.00am with a Prosecco and chocolates reception. The weather was sunny and bright as I entered the castle courtyard, promising fine perambulations about the grounds later on. Samantha, who organises the events and makes all the gowns, was awaiting us would-be Tudors in the banqueting hall of the castle, along with her two ladies in waiting, all in period dress. The ladies in waiting instantly made themselves busy offering us drinks and chocolates. They were to spend the day helping us to dress, sit and stand and providing us with refreshment – in short dancing attendance on us as if we were truly Tudor nobility. With a frisson of anticipation, I noticed that in the large, elegant bay window at the end of the hall stood a number of mannequins adorned in sumptuous Tudor finery, from glowing purple to soft pink to stunning gold and royal blue, all suffused

in the gentle morning light from the window. The party consisted of myself, a much younger lady and a couple with two young daughters who were celebrating the mother's fortieth birthday. There should have been a seventh participant but unfortunately someone had had to cancel.

Samantha began by demonstrating what was in store for us by robing the younger lady in what she called "the phoenix dress", an absolutely gorgeous ensemble of flame and orange in the French style. This is what most of us think of as authentically Tudor – the wide skirts with a train, the low square neckline, and the turned-back sleeves. Having modestly donned a linen shift in private, our model stood waiting to be clothed. The next step was the farthingale – a petticoat with a hoop. Samantha explained that Catherine of Aragon had brought the farthingale to England and that prior to that, ladies had relied on the bulk of their petticoats to bear out their skirts. A lady of the Tudor period would have worn many layers of petticoats over the farthingale but as a concession to the warmth of the day and to our comfort, the farthingale was the only petticoat we had to wear on this occasion. We do, after all, have a warmer climate today than in the 16th century.

Over the petticoat went a bum roll - a linen pad to be tied around the waist and worn at the rear to bear the skirts out behind.

Next came the kirtle with its stiff bodice, which was laced on both sides. Along the

neckline of the kirtle were many glistening jewels; these would be visible above the neckline of the gown itself and the hem of the shift would show above that.

After the kirtle, came the gown, cut low to reveal the jewels on the kirtle and put on like a coat and laced this time at the front. The lacing was covered by a stiff stomacher, a robust curved panel which once would have been pinned on with straight pins. Samantha's one concession to modernity in the costumes is the use of Velcro to fix the stomacher - less time-consuming and rather safer!

The sleeves of the gown came to just below the elbow, terminating in voluminous fur turn-backs. The lower



sleeves had to be fitted separately and tied on underneath. The beauty of having everything in distinct parts like this was that kirtles, gowns and sleeves could be mixed and matched creating many different outfits.

Jewellery followed and lastly, came the matching French hood.

The result was simply stunning. The ensemble was outstanding and suited our model perfectly. The colours were spot on for her. She looked every inch a true Tudor lady.

Now that we knew what to expect, it was the turn of the rest of us to be robed.

Full of anticipation, I stood in my shift while the farthingale was dropped over my head and tied around my waist. The purpose of the shift was to provide a washable layer of linen between the





human body and the more delicate and expensive fabrics of the visible clothing, protecting the finery and keeping the body fresh. A man's shirt would have served the same function. A lady of the court would change her linen every day; a queen might change it three or four times. Although a very simple garment, on mine the neckline had been worked delicately in blackwork, so that it would look attractive above the edge of the kirtle.

The heavy gold damasked kirtle itself was then lifted over my head and laced simultaneously on each side by Samantha and a lady in waiting. Any sensitive male readers may now want to skip to the next paragraph as I am going to talk about bosoms. Samantha makes gowns which can accommodate busts of up to forty-

three inches. (This is not one's bra size but rather the measurement around the chest.) Anyone wishing to take part who is more generously proportioned than this, must be content with a theatrical gown. As I was keen to experience the authentic sensation of wearing Tudor clothes, I was relieved that I was just about eligible to squeeze into my lovely royal blue gown. However, with a sixteenth century kirtle, a lady has a clear choice - to raise or not to raise. Either the bosom must be laced flat beneath the stiffened bodice, as in the case of our erstwhile young model in the phoenix dress, or it must be raised up, immodestly showcasing its expanse above the neckline. Anne Boleyn was once described as having a "bosom not much raised". Those of us who are well-endowed



have little choice. Rather than run the risk of bursting open the gown and of suffering painfully all day, the bosom must be raised. Hence while the kirtle was being laced, I needed to raise the said bosom by hand until the tension was firm enough to support it. Luckily for us, Tudor kirtles were never tightly laced in the rib-restricting way that Victorian ladies had to suffer. Before the invention of steel eyelets, any attempt to do so would have just torn the fabric. Hence the kirtle felt firm but not uncomfortable and certainly capable of supporting all it needed to.

The gown slipped over it easily and once it too was laced, the stiff stomacher was applied, encouraging me instantly to stand up straight with my shoulders back. The ladies of the Tudor court must have had wonderful posture!

Alas for the lady celebrating her fortieth birthday, she was not able to wear the



gorgeous gold gown selected for her, undone not by the bosom but by the upper arms. The tight fitted sleeves of a Tudor gown are unforgiving and do not stretch. However, she did look lovely in the burgundy and black theatrical gown in an Italianate style which Samantha had in reserve.

Meanwhile, I had a girdle of pearls fastened around my waist and another long string of pearls with a central jewel draped twice around my neck. The finishing touch was the French hood, also edged with pearls. Those hoods Samantha uses for the Tudor experience days are not strictly authentic; they are based on Alice bands and are lightweight, quick to apply and comfortable. She does make more substantial French hoods for her commissions, however, and also occasionally gable hoods. Although I much prefer the elegance of French hoods, I did wonder how it felt to put on a





heavier gable headdress, although I suspect that I would not want to wear one all day! I would imagine it as something akin to balancing a book on one's head in the days of finishing schools, encouraging the wearer to keep the head high. As it was, I had parted my hair in the middle – something I would never normally do – for the sake of authenticity, and as my long hair was securely tucked into the sleeve of black material at the back of the hood, I hoped I had some sense of what it was like to have one's head always covered in company.

Only once this was in place, was I allowed to view myself in a mirror. What a revelation! There was something startling and surreal about seeing my own face look back at me from this opulent Tudor

costume. I was so excited and delighted to see myself in period dress that I barely stopped grinning for the rest of the day.

After we were all dressed and had all posed many times for the photographer, we set off in stately procession around the grounds of the castle. Although it was September, the gardens still had the air of late summer about them and there were old-fashioned roses and herbs and bees to give the illusion of a more ancient time. I must admit to lingering behind a few times to watch the way in which the gowns swayed and rippled from behind as my companions walked along. There was something beguilingly graceful about the movement. There were plenty more opportunities for photographs on the way, both formal poses and a few snaps I took



myself. One highlight was climbing to pose on the mounting block in the courtyard which would have been used by Anne Boleyn during her stay, although her riding clothes would have been better adapted to climbing steps than our voluminous gowns.

One thing I realised early on was it is not a good idea to take a step back in a French gown. Most likely you will tread on your own train and find yourself pinioned to the ground, stumbling clumsily to regain your equilibrium. Similarly, it is not possible to slip past someone unobtrusively. To pass someone without impeding each other demands a wide berth. I was reminded of Catherine Parr and the Duchess of Somerset getting stuck in a doorway when each tried to claim precedence; it would have been all too easy for that to happen! Sitting down has to be done mindfully, with a straight back, an awareness of where the seat is, where your skirts are and most importantly, where your centre of gravity is. To take a seat at table, it is essential to have someone to tuck your chair in behind you. Suddenly that ancient courtesy made perfect sense! However, once you are seated, you are free to assume the most comfortable position without fear of being indecorous. Just take a look at any Tudor illustration of seated women and you will see that there was no necessity to keep the knees together!

Of course, one of the most striking aspect of Tudor female portraiture is the habitual pose where the hands are clasped in front of the body or else hold an object before them. I did not need to spend long in the heavy fur turned-back sleeves to realise that this was the most comfortable position in which to hold them. I tested



out the level of movement I had and found that I could raise my arms above my head but not for long. Later that afternoon, when the falconer was explaining something in great detail while his bird was perched on my gloved hand, I felt my arm grow heavier and heavier – and not from the weight of the falcon! It was a relief when I was finally able to lower it.

Wearing a French gown, then, was not compatible with any serious activity. As Samantha explained, we were wearing court gowns, designed to display wealth and rank, the conspicuous consumption of the 16th century with the yards and yards of material, fur, jewels and the richest materials. At court, a lady would typically only have worn this for four to six hours a day. At home or in private, something less elaborate and more



comfortable would be more appropriate. I could fully appreciate why Samantha herself was wearing an English gown with its fitted bodice and sleeves and narrower skirt. Although the fabric was no less magnificent, it was a far more practical choice for looking after a cohort of butterflies like us, weighed down by our own splendour.

After our wanderings, a hearty Sunday lunch was served with more prosecco and mead back in the banqueting hall. I am glad to say that knives and forks were employed. I don't think I would have dared to eat the meal Tudor style with just a knife and my fingers – not in all that gorgeous satin!

Feeling replete, we were then entertained on the lawns by “Robert Cheeseman”, the

King's Falconer and his beautiful birds, which we all had a chance to hold.

By now, we were attracting the attention of a great many people in and around the castle and we soon found ourselves invited to pose for official wedding photographs with the bride and groom whose reception was taking place in the castle. Many of the other guests also approached, asking to pose with us. We felt like celebrities!

After a cream tea (as if lunch had not been enough!) we were free to try our hand at croquet or at archery. Again our ample skirts and sleeves made the croquet very difficult and since no one had any idea of the rules, our attempts descended into anarchy. It may have been no coincidence that the best archers among us seemed to be the two young girls, who

lacked the turned-back sleeves in their costumes!

By now, we had been in our sumptuous robes for around six hours. I assume a real Tudor lady would have maintained a flawless posture but I was by this time forgetting to stand tall, resulting in a rather crumpled look. Much as I had enjoyed the experience, it felt like time to change out of my gown and back into my top and jeggings. Such unstructured clothing now felt both liberating and unsupported. It felt like something was missing! It was with a pang that I handed back my gown, kirtle, hood and jewels. How I would have loved to keep them all!

The whole day was an amazing experience and I felt it had given me a lot of insight into what a lady's life at the Tudor court would have been like. So much dressing and undressing! So much flaunting of one's wealth. So much of one's deportment and behaviour conditioned by one's clothing.

And all of this finery sewn by hand! As someone who can barely sew on a button, I am quite in awe of the work that goes into these outfits, even now with modern sewing machines. Perhaps it is just as well that I was born into the twentieth century and not the sixteenth and that I was only playing at being a Tudor. It was great fun, though, and I would do it again in an instant.

The Facebook page and website for the experience are: The Tudor Royalty Experience & Tudor Queens Wardrobe, and www.tudorroyaltyexperience.co.uk.

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