

Music in Tudor Walthamstow

Background

This is a resource to support school groups learning local and Tudor history at KS2. It is designed to be used in conjunction with the information panels.

At the time when Henry VIII was spending his father's legacy on bringing both London and the Royal Palaces to the highest level of luxury and taste, Walthamstow was still a country village – or, more accurately, a string of hamlets joined by lanes. Church End, where the church was and is, was one of these. A time traveller from the present day would find the nights dark, the roads muddy and the buildings few and unfamiliar. The church was in the same place but the windows and doors and stonework different. The house one day to be called the Ancient House was a farmhouse surrounded by meadows and fields. High Street and Hoe Street were in the same places, but lined only with a few substantial houses. There was no Lea Bridge Road, and anyone wanting to travel to London needed either to go south to Stratford and cross the Bow Bridge or cross the River Lea by the ferry at Tottenham. For those wanting to save the price of the ferry fare or bridge toll, there was always the Black Path from Walthamstow to the City. This was the drovers' road where animals were driven to be sold at the London markets.

But this was a privileged area, with prosperous farms, many producing some of the already immense quantities of produce needed to feed London. It was a good place, too, for people who had made a fortune in London to buy a house and land so their children could grow up in healthier air. Two of the Bassanos did just that, acquiring at least two houses and plots of farmland, one near what is now the High Street and the other in the Wood Street area. The Bassanos became well respected members of the local community for several generations.

While we do not have detailed descriptions of the Bassanos' house, it is very likely to have been a timber framed house similar to the one now known as the Ancient House, which was rebuilt in the years before the Bassanos' arrival, and which was typical of the area. If so, it was a hall house, with a central living area and with extensions on each end, one for the kitchens and the other for private space and bedrooms for the family. By the time the Bassanos came to Walthamstow the house might well have had brick chimneys and a separate dining room for the family rather than the whole household, including the servants, eating together every day. There would certainly have been several living-in servants to do the work of the house, and more to run the home farm that would have produced much of the food for the household.

At this time anyone who could afford it would eat as much meat or fish as they could. This, though, was cooked in many different ways – joints were appreciated, but so were spiced stews and pies. Better-off people would eat vegetables in season, for example a dish of peas or asparagus. And everyone would eat vegetable broth in winter when food was short, especially after a bad harvest. Everyone ate a lot of bread, fine white manchet for the grandest, coarse rye bread for those at the bottom of the social heap, and something resembling modern wholemeal for those in between. There were, as yet, no potatoes, tomatoes or tea or coffee or chocolate. Most people drank ale (not yet

beer) with most meals, with wine for the better off. Fruit was regarded with suspicion as being indigestible, and usually cooked before eating.

At this time, as we have seen, most music and entertainment happened at home. And everyone expected to sing, dance and, ideally, would play one or more musical instruments.

There were Bassanos in Walthamstow for at least a hundred years – one of them had to pay extra tax in 1615 instead of helping to maintain local roads. And in London, there were Bassanos living at their house in Mark Lane until at least the 1640s.

Activity

At this time Midsummer was the occasion for a party. Using the information in this document, on the panels and from your own knowledge, you and your group can plan a midsummer dinner and entertainment for the Bassanos and their guests. It's the summer of 1546, the King is increasingly disabled by his ulcerated leg, and can no longer dance. So the Bassano brothers have taken the risk of coming home to Walthamstow for the celebration – although they could join the Court at Greenwich if recalled.

For the party you will need to plan:

- the food and drink – lots of different dishes. The group should write up a shopping list and a menu. Remember you can only have items that are in season, or are preserved. The very nicest, most expensive things, can be reserved for the most important guests.

- the music. Important anywhere, but especially in this house. There are several pieces on the site, and links to more information at the end of this resource.

Dancing – pavane instructions at the end of the resource

- the stories. Each one of the Bassano family should tell a story about an aspect of how the family lived in Venice, made their fortune, were persuaded to give England a try; how they came here by ship and their first impression of London; how they had to play and sing for the King to see if he liked them; life at Court; life in London; coming to Walthamstow.

You then give the party! And ask your group to write a letter to the family back in Italy letting them know how it went.

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