

*Towton 2011: A Palm Sunday Diary*

Friday April 15th, 5 am: All the plans have been laid, the re-enactors and exhibitors confirmed, the volunteers mustered – we're ready to roll! So I'm up with the lark on this fine sunny morning, sitting with a big pot of coffee writing my shopping and 'To Do' lists. First things first – take Doggett his breakfast and make his lunch sarnies – then it's off to the supermarket for a few weekend essentials.

8 am: Back home, I load up the picnic basket and cool-box with emergency snacks... including those all-important coffee bags to get me going in the morning! After a quick check of the emails for any last-minute hitches (yup – a couple of drop-outs, and a couple of late bookings to make up for it!), and a quick phonecall to touch base with Chairman Mark, it's on with preparations... trekking up and down from the loft with armloads of baskets, weapons and bedding, scrubbing out and oiling the cauldrons and big cast-iron frying pan, packing authentic crocks, lanterns, candles and pee-pots into baskets, and soft kit/modern clothes into bags... ticking them all off the list one by one and piling them ready by the back door.

12.30 pm: Mick comes home, grabs a hasty lunch, then his work-mate Mark helps him clear all the gardening gear out of the van so it can be filled up again with event stuff. A firm believer in medieval gender roles, I let the blokes load the heavy things: the cast-iron fire range and fittings; our own tent and the TBS pavilion; archery net; drums of rope and scores of iron rods for making the arenas. Meanwhile I clear off and dismantle the kitchen table which goes with us, then take over from Mark loading the rest... up and down the garden path with benches, stools, longbows, pole-arms etc etc etc...

2.30 pm: Argh! We've forgotten the archery net-poles! A good deal of swearing ensues as we have to partially unload again to get the long, unwieldy things in. Ah well, it could have been worse... we could have left them behind altogether.

3 pm: Right, the futon and bedding are in... good grief – have we finished? We exchange uneasy glances... it's so long since we did an event we're sure we must have forgotten something crucial. I check the list yet again... no, seems like it's all there (unless there's something crucial I forgot to put on the list, of course!). I guess we'll find out for sure when we get there...

3.45 pm: Snacked, showered (last time we'll be properly clean all weekend!), last-minute round-the-house chores done – and Team Helmick's on the road! I sniff. 'There's an ominous tickle at the back of my nose,' I remark. 'Probably dust from the groundsheets,' Mick replies. Hmm... let's hope so.

4.30 pm: Wow! True to their word, the police have set cones on the roads into Towton; and at the field, the early squad have worked wonders. Mrs. Verity's men have mowed the grass, the rubbish skip and Portaloos are in place, the tables for exhibitors already set out in the Barn, several *Frei Compagnie* tents erected – and a huge red & black pavilion has appeared by the gate. It belongs to Chris 'Duggie the Wood' Douglas, a very jolly furniture-maker we met at The Original Re-enactors Market a couple of months back, and it looks mighty impressive.

4.45 pm: After a bit of joshing around, we set to. Up goes our tent; and while Mick and the crew put up others and start laying the arenas out, I furnish it. Ah... it smells lovely: canvas, hessian, ingrained woodsmoke and cut grass – delicious. And what luck it's such a beautiful afternoon... everything unloaded from the van can lie about quietly on nice dry grass in the sunshine, with no panicking to get it all under cover before the rain starts! Makes life so much easier – I can put all the baskets, bags and weapons round the edges before bringing in the futon that takes up so much floor space in the middle. I grin wryly as I lay it all out, knowing that however logically I try to arrange it, stuff always gets lost; and by the end of the weekend it'll be stirred up into a horrible, higgledy-piggledy 'tent-stew'.

8-ish: We've fallen to on a flask of hot soup, butties and onion bhajis, and we're pretty much done for the night. So we gather round the camp-fire and pass round a flagon of Bramble Nouveau – Mick's first attempt at a blackberry and elderberry wine – 'a robust young wine with a deep garnet colour and full fruity nose'. It's very drinkable (not to mention powerful) already... I wonder if the rest of the batch will survive the two year's maturing he has planned for it! Much pleasant conviviality ensues, everyone happy and excited about the weekend and enjoying the clear, still, cool evening.

9.45 pm: It's no good. Fun notwithstanding, I'm done for – must go to bed. Nose is very stuffy – probably all the pollen and dust – so I take a big snort of nasal spray. Argh! Feels like I just jabbed my sinuses with a knitting needle... and now I've got a sore throat, too. I rummage vainly through the medicine basket: sun-screen, insect repellent, anti-histamines, witch hazel, eye-drops, assorted painkillers – our travelling pharmacy has all the stuff to deal with our usual re-enactment ailments – but no cough and cold remedies! Oh dear – this has caught me on the hop. All I can do is take a couple of aspirins, rub some lavender oil into my neck glands, pop in my ear-plugs and burrow under the duvet... and have almost dozed off by the time Mick comes in half-an-hour later.

Saturday 16th April, very early: Ooh er... bit of a restless night, repeatedly woken by need to blow nose, cough and spit, drink water – and use the urinal, on account of all the water drunk! I unplug my ears; the dawn pigeons are cooing, rooks cawing, little birds tweeting; I gaze up at the ridge-pole, wondering just how bad this cold will get and whether I'll need to blag a lift home tonight. There's a big sore dry patch at the top of my throat, deep in my sinuses... but at least I'm not running a fever, all achey and chilly.

6-ish: Hurrah – Mick's awake! First drinks of the day on events are definitely man's work. But this morning the camp stove won't work for him either, so he roots out the old faithful Kelly kettle and brews up. Ah... membranes lubricated by coffee and fresh orange juice, I start feeling better.

7-ish: Other folk emerge into the fresh early chill, and hang around the camp fire with our cuppas while Fran cooks up a great mass of bacon and sausage for our breakfast butties. It's another glorious morning, so I pop off a few photos:

8-ish: The lads set up the archery range while other folk trickle in and avail themselves of the seemingly endless heap of buns and hot pork products – among them Daisy the Doberman, a regular local visitor. She lucks out this morning... as well as the inevitable titbits she cops for a whole sausage I drop en route from frying pan to platter. It's so hot she worries it for a while before she can manage to swallow it – but she gets there in the end.

10-ish: I go with Mick and Steve to the Co-op in Sherburn for some cold cures and throat sweets – feeling OK, but nose running like a tap. On the way back we collect archery butts and stands from the Crooked Billet... and soon after we get back to camp, the camera crew arrives. We're all delighted to see Roger Keech and his team again – they're spending the whole weekend here, shooting footage for two BBC programmes on Towton to be screened later this year. Meanwhile re-enactors and traders are coming thick n' fast, and the camp's taking shape...

Midday: Alex and Fran have laid out a goodly repast for our lunch. Suitably refreshed, I kit up as 'Jack Doncaster' to do a little interview with Roger. On previous filming sessions I've come up with some decent soundbites, but it doesn't really happen today... I feel dull, uninspired, and afraid I've let him down – the cold's bunged my brain up. Fortunately he has better luck with our patron, Robert Hardy, who's come along for an interview and to record an item for the new TBS website!

2-ish: Our squad of media tarts from the Frei Compagnie, Beauforts, Knights in Battle, Buckingham and sundry others arm up to do battle in the gorgeously inauthentic sunshine. This is Roger's chance to shoot some combat scenes while the site's empty of visitors and John the cameraman can get in amongst the action. First Des and other gunners bang away; we're having a lot more gunnery this year in honour of the lead shot and gun fragments Simon Richardson unearthed on the battlefield. Next it's the turn of us archers, and Doggett, 'The Face of Towton' gets a

speaking part: John mikes him up to record the cries of, 'Nock! Draw! Loose!' First Cap'n Doggett has us shooting some sharps at the butt; then we lob a few red-heads across the field; and then, as the following pic by Roger Keech shows...

...a mighty cohort of warriors appears over the brow of the hill – led by Allan Harley of the Beauforts, with a 'battle-cam' mounted on his shoulder. Great – we're allowed to shoot them! (Only 'not the camera, please' implores John). And it's just as well Allan has his mail mini-skirt on... he takes several hits to the, ahem, 'lower openings' as we strive not to hit said camera.

Next we stage a melee, with Yorkist and Lancastrian archers lobbing at each other over the heads of the clashing infantry. Suddenly, Ow! Someone (Mick Weaver, I later discover) shoots me smack in the left, ahem, pectoral – even through my padded jack, it still hurts. 'Oh – dead', I say in surprise. Down I go... and as battle rages all round, someone kicks me gently in the head – thank goodness I'm wearing my shiny new sallet. Heaven knows what John's microphones are picking up from all this... I can hear combatants swearing, messing about, cracking jokes... and as I open my eyes and say 'Can I stop being dead yet?', I realise he's filming from just behind my 'corpse'...

4-ish: The dead arise, all soaked in sweat. A few hardy Beaufort and Knights in Battle 'tinnies' stay kitted up for some more filming:

But I've had enough; I 'de-Jack', whinge at Big Mick for killing me, then muster the *Frei Compagnie* bun-slicing team to help prepare for the evening BBQ. Paul Griffin and 'Tall' Mike Wilson cook away manfully, and at:

5.30-ish: Doggett goes round the camp with the cry 'Barbeque!' At first I think (as usual) we've over-catered... but as people flock in, it turns out that this year, we could have done with more – especially as some early-birds have had seconds – and thirds!

7-ish: For once, (probably due to my tantrums in committee), we have enough of a clean-up team – the Barn's pristine again in jig time. So, since it's a perfect evening and we've still got some energy left, a little gang of us (Doggetts, Stu & Dawn, Alex, and Adam from the Saviles) decide to work off the burgers and buns by walking the battlefield. We've all yet to see the new trail, complete with the magnificent interpretation boards that miraculously sprang up over the past week... so first we hike our usual route up Old London Road and around Towton plateau. To my great woe, like 'Dirty McSquirty' in the Perishers, I pick up a coterie of black flies hovering a foot above my head. 'What blood group are you?' asks ecologist Dawn. 'O', I reply. 'Ah – their favourite,' she nods sagely. Glumly, I jam my sun-hat back on and turn up my collar – naturally, I forgot to wear bug-spray – so am relieved when a light breeze springs up and blows them away before they start biting.

We work round to Dacre's Cross; decide we're all too foot-sore to take in the last board a bit further down the B1217 towards Saxton; and head back along the new roadside footpath to Towton. It's great – now you can safely walk a full circuit, and only the last couple of hundred yards into the village (as yet) have no fenced-off footpath. But by the time we get back to camp, Mick and I are both limping; between his arthritic foot and my dodgy lower back, we hardly make up one fit re-enactor between us.

9.30 pm: Rats – despite all the camp-fire fun going on, I'm just too tired and achey to join in. I make my apologies and limp off to our tent. It's much colder tonight; but with Mick's big red coat as a bedspread, a long-sleeved T-shirt on and a shawl round my head, I'm still plenty warm under the duvet and two woolly blankets! I plug up my ears against the sounds of merrymaking, take a couple of aspirins, suck a couple of throat sweets and snuggle down; give Mick a cuddle to warm him up when he joins me a bit later; then I'm out like the proverbial light...

Sunday 17th April, 5.30 am: Great – a much better night's sleep! Need a pee, though... then more snooze. I avail myself of the urinal and am just about to crawl back under the duvet when I notice the sheepskin rug's wet. Oh no – I've spilt (or missed)! Cue 15 minutes on hands and knees,

soaking up said spillage with wads of loo roll. By now I'm fully awake... and soon Doggett is too, so he gets up and gets the kettle on. And in spite of the late-night carousing, other folk rise early too...

7-ish: Camp fire's re-lit, breakfast is cooking, folk are already getting into kit. I start collecting up rubbish and stowing modern gear in the tents... can't have beer cans, plastic bags and tins of powdered milk contaminating our 15th century environment!

8.30 am: On go shift, under-kirtle, over-kirtle and head-dress; I'm being a respectable woman this morning. I go help Peter Algar set out our table of his Shepherd Lord novel and my two Wakefield books in the Barn, then our best-laid plans start going agley...

9.00 am: A great crowd of walkers arrives! Peter is despatched (an hour earlier than expected) to guide them round the battlefield. I flap; I'm supposed to be welcoming Sunday re-enactors, then going to the captain's meeting at 9.30 to talk through the afternoon's battle plan. Manage to snag a TBS volunteer to mind the shop so I can attend. Roger and John record proceedings, and I feel a little nervous; the plan's more ambitious this year, I hope we get through it OK!

9.45 am: The event's officially started and folk are flocking in – 100 people set out on one guided walk! While the Barn's still relatively quiet I chat to some fellow exhibitors: Pam Judkins from Wakefield Historical Society, the artist Graham Turner, Julian Humphrys from the Battlefields Trust, photographer Rae Tan... then the morning passes in a blur of meeting visitors and selling books.

11.15 am: I hear banging outside as the first firepower show begins. Despite two layers of woollen kirtle, I'm getting chilly in the big shady barn; I poach Christine Taylor from the TBS stall to mind the shop while I go outside to warm up! And it's a marvellous sight: the biggest, best camp we've ever had, craftspeople and traders of all kinds doing their thing, and absolutely heaving with visitors enjoying the sunshine, as another of Roger's pics shows:

Noon-ish: No sooner have I grabbed a quick lunch and gone back to the Barn than Peter reappears, looking somewhat heated after his long hike in the sun. I take him refreshments and leave him on the stall; it's time to get ready for the service.

12.45 pm: Beating his drum, Doggett leads around 100 re-enactors up to the mound – quite a sight. It's a special service this year; as well as the usual addresses from present and former TBS Chairs Mark Taylor and Martin Tarpey, we're treated to a heartfelt and moving speech by Robert Hardy. Prayers are said, wreaths are laid, then re-enactors and public alike file up to the wooden cross and lay our Palm Crosses; we started doing this three years ago, and it makes a fitting end to the memorial. Then it's back to the Barn to relieve Peter!

2-ish: Yikes! Best-laid plans agley once more. Peter has to don his chauffeur's hat again, and leave early to take Robert Hardy home... but I've got to arm up for battle! Choice is to shut up shop, or find someone- aha! I nab TBS member Dave Cooke, who seems happy enough to get off his feet in the shade and keep our bookstall open.

2.45-ish: Flitting back and forth between Barn and camp, I catch a little of Stu and Dean's combat demonstration – and run into Paula, my book distributor from York Publishing Services! I'm delighted to hear that she arrived with her family at 10.30, and they've stayed all this time because they're enjoying it so much. Then phew! I meet up with Jas Singh – his Sikh Gatka martial arts group are delivering the penultimate show of the afternoon, so it's good to know they're on site. I introduce Jas to Dave Skillen, who's sorting out the PA system for their performance; dash back to the Barn to make sure Dave Cooke's doing OK; then return to the field.

3.15 pm: The Gatka show starts – something a bit different for our 550th, giving visitors chance to see how people were fighting on the other side of the world while Towton was going on. I kick myself for not getting into my battle kit sooner... I only catch the first bit of the show before I have to duck back in the tent, wriggle out of my kirtles, replace with shirt, hose, padded jack and livery

tabard, grab my sallet and longbow and emerge as Jack Doncaster. But I hear it was spectacular, as Dave Skillen's picture shows:

3.45 pm: Mick and I lug the bag of rubber-headed arrows up to the main arena and wait nervously, hot sun beating on our helmets, watching the armies muster. The battle plan, clear enough in my head this morning, has faded away; I can remember the starting position, and that's about all. And oh, no... where's the portable PA? Too late, we realise it's not there for Tall Mike, the narrator. Luckily he's not afraid to raise his voice to the assembled crowd, but we feel bad he doesn't have the mic and amplifier he expected... I hope this isn't a harbinger of doom.

Then we're off... tunnel vision sets in; I move where I'm told, shoot when I'm told, barely registering what other folk are doing. Artillery booms, infantry clash, Yorkist and Lancastrian commanders hurl insults across the 'Ferrybridge' Mick & Co built on Saturday. Oh no: someone's gone down for real, with an epileptic seizure – what on earth do we do? Thank goodness, other members of his household know how to react; the action goes on around him and I suppose it looks like part of the show, soldiers ministering to a fallen comrade.

The climax approaches... we Yorkists outflank Lord Clifford at Dintingdale and wait tensely for Mick's cue, 'Archers on Clifford!'. When it comes, Alan Stringer and I nip round to get a clear shot,nock arrows, loose – and both hit him! Mine gets him smack on the breastplate; I roar, 'Clifford is slain!' Cheers from the Yorkists as they close in to finish off their opponents. And that's it, we've done it: the battle – and the event – are both over.

Hot and sweaty, we gather up arrows and trail off the field, watching anxiously as the ambulance rolls up. Luckily it's not needed; the guy who had the seizure is recovering just fine – and, I hear later, pleased that we didn't stop the show on his account. I chat to spectators, glad to hear they thought the battle looked good (it's usually the case – whatever flaws we're aware of as participants, the audience don't know; they simply accept what they see as how it was meant to be). Then I flop out in front of our tent (now full of people getting changed) and touch base with Roger's researcher, Brenda; the crew got some great footage, although she says they could do with another day's filming!

4.30-ish: Hats off all round, public drifting away, we're officially off-duty... still 'jacked up' I pack away our stuff in the Barn, pleased to find 18 copies of my books were sold during the day. Then at last our tent's vacant; I peel off the sweat-soaked battle gear, put on shorts, T-shirt and sun-hat, and get cracking with the packing!

7.15 pm: Groan... now the adrenalin's ebbed my cold's in full flow, my back's seizing up and I'm hobbling like an old lady, feeling very sorry for myself. But we're all packed away, Mick's taking tomorrow morning off to unload, and all I have left to do tonight is crawl into a hot bath before bed. 'Our boys' have been commemorated in style for another year so now, dirty and exhausted but happy – we can go home!

Helen Cox

April 2011