

Making a Martyr of Yourself: the story of a community play

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by **Catriona Troth**



The Townsfolk of Hamersham (photo by Phillip Troth)

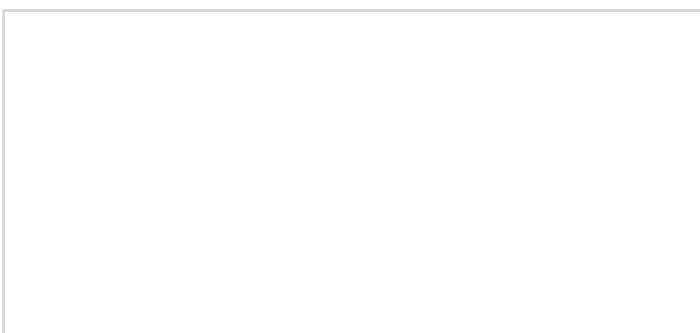
For six months of the past year, I have been part of a group of over a hundred men, women and children making martyrs of ourselves in the service of drama.

We have been taking part in the fourth production of a community play telling the story of the Amersham Martyrs—a group of Lollards (early Christian Protestants) who were burnt at the stake for heresy in the first part of the 16th Century.

Performed in the parish church of St Mary's, the play is an extraordinary operation, involving two alternate casts for the scripted scenes, an adult company, a student company (11-18 year olds), a children's company (under 11s), a choir, musicians – not to mention costumes, props, lightning, and four stages that must be struck each week through rehearsals and performances and put away in time for Sunday service.

Like the Passion Plays at York Minster and Coventry Cathedral, it is a promenade performance, with the action moving between the four stages and the audience following on foot. But it is what happens around the four scripted scenes that plunges the audience into the 16th Century from the moment they enter the church and makes the experience unforgettable.

In the Beginning





Stan Pretty (photograph by Margot Hutcheson)

It was in the year 2000 that the [Amersham Museum](#) first approached local actor Stan Pretty with the idea of marking the Millennium by putting on a play about the Amersham Martyrs.

Pretty immediately understood that the real drama lay in how these events would have affected the people living in a small market town, and that therefore what was needed in order to tell the story was not a small theatre piece, but a community play.

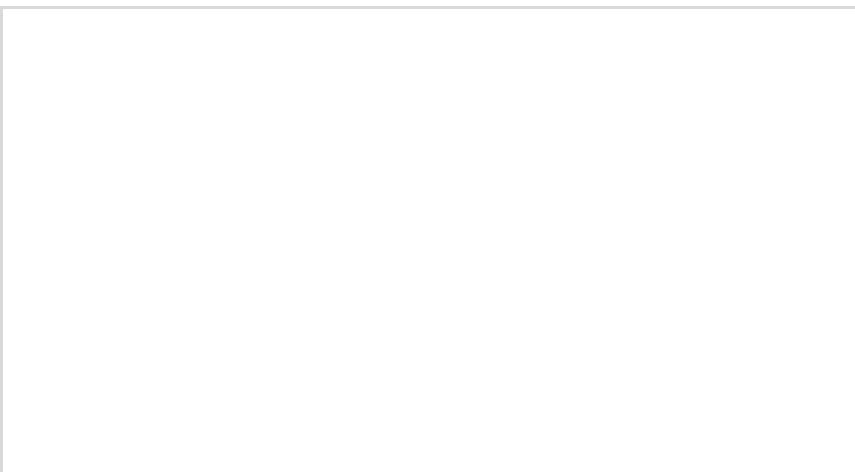
Thus it was that the first company of volunteers set out to research the story of the martyrs, using Foxe's Book of Martyrs and Lollards of the Chilterns by W H Summers as their starting point. It soon became clear that information was thin on the ground and much would have to be filled in from imagination and deduction.

A small group of writers – Mike Consden, Peter Harland, Garry Marshall, Lin Spoor and Henry Wiggier – started work with Pretty on the scripted scenes, with ecclesiastical historian Brett Usher later providing input. Then over Christmas and New Year 2000/2001, Pretty polished the final draft, giving it dramatic shape and ensuring it worked to time.

In that original production, music was provided by a children's choir from nearby St Mary's School. But since the play's first revival, in 2004, Music Director Rachel Hewitt has worked with adult amateur musicians and choristers to bring in music from the period – initially pieces by Byrd and Tallis, and latterly William Cornysh and John Sheppard.

The Martyrs of Amersham has since been staged in 2001, 2004 and 2011 (the quincentenary of the burning of the first martyr, William Tylesworth). Pretty's achievement was recognised in 2004, when he was awarded an MBE for an outstanding achievement in drama. Then in 2015, the [Amersham Society](#), keen to ensure that knowledge and experience was retained for the second quincentenary in 2021, suggested the play be revived for 2016.

Delving into History





Market Day in full flow (photo by Phillip Troth)

Pretty's final script remains largely unchanged. What happens around those scenes, as I discovered, is developed from scratch by the company for each new set of performances.

The company, many of whom had never acted before, gathered in the church in early September 2015. Our first task was to deepen the research into the history of Hamersham (as it was then known) and of life in the early 16th Century, building on what had been done each previous time.

I was assigned to the 'Trades' group and my first assignment was to find out what a currier did. (Currying, I discovered was part of the process of turning hides into leather. Tanners, like Shakespeare's father, took care of the chemical part of the process – curing the hides with various unpleasant substances, including urine. Curriers took the cured hides and stretched and scraped them with tools to soften them and produce leather of the required thickness.)

My most fascinating discovery was that if you have a surname ending in 'ster' or 'xter', then it is a fair bet that you are descended from a tradeswoman who ran her own business. We all know that a spinster was a female spinner – but a webster was a female weaver, a baxter a female baker and a huxter a female hawker – someone who went from place selling goods produced by someone else.



Tug-of-War at the Charter Fair (photo by Phillip Troth)

From the knowledge gained, the next stage was to develop our own characters. We had to decide our names, our trades, where we lived, how we spent our days – and most importantly what we thought of these Lollards who

were causing all this trouble in the town. Did we support them, openly or secretly? Or did we see them as dangerous heretics who must be stopped?

Pretty and his co-director, Sally Alford, then used hot seating and speed dating exercises – where our fellow actors could ask all manner questions about us, our families, the town, church life, the recent harvest and so on – to get us used to thinking and acting in character.

All this was so that, when the audience enters the church, they find themselves, not in a makeshift theatre, but in the midst of a functioning 16th Century town on market day, with everyone going about their business and paying these interlopers absolutely no heed.

As the play commences and the scripted scenes are played out, the townspeople continue to mingle with the audience and to offer reaction and commentary on what is happening. A procession of people carry faggots to the site of the burning (an act for which they are awarded forty days off purgatory). A red carpet is rolled out for the Bishop and Archdeacon, and so on.

Enter the Audience

By the first performance, we had been researching, developing characters and story lines, and rehearsing for almost sixth months. But as soon as we had an audience, everything changed. Instead of the wide open spaces of the church to work in, we must work our way through a crowd – some of whom were paying attention to us, others not. From night to night, we never knew who we would meet as we made our way up the nave with our baskets of goods for market. We had to ignore 21st Century friends trying to say hello, but respond to whichever 16th Century neighbours and their storylines we encountered along the way. It was exhilarating but not a little unnerving.



The Bishop loses his temper (photo by Margot Hutcehson)



Joan Norman is dragged away (photo by Margot Hutcheson)

The characters I find most fascinating are the three key women in the story – Emmy Tylesworth, wife of the first martyr to burn, described affectionately by her husband as ‘a true known man’ (i.e. a recognised dissenter) and who supports him even when her heart is breaking. Sarah Scrivenor, wife of one of Tylesworth’s protégés and mother of his four young children, who, knowing that the growing Protestant movement in Europe must soon bring religious freedom, begs her husband to recant and when he refuses, flings the words at him: ‘Have your martyrdom, John Scrivenor – it will be the only selfish thing you have ever done!’ And finally Joan Norman, who mocks the Bishop’s ecclesiastical court, plays word games with the Bishop himself, and is dragged away still vowing to say her prayers in English to her dying breath.

Taking part was tremendous fun, but highly emotional. David Cuffley, one of the two actors who played John Scrivenor, told me how, between two performances, he took a walk through some nearby fields and came across the site of a bonfire. A big circle of ground was completely blackened, and there was ash beneath his feet. “It was a very strange feeling. I went and stood in the middle of the circle. It struck me then with such force what these people had been willing to endure.”

The hardest part, for me, was being part of a crowd reacting to one of the darker moments of the play – the branding of Tylesworth’s daughter, Joan Clark, a scene that often left me close to tears – but then having only a couple of minutes while the choir sang to find a burst of energy and high spirits for the start of the Charter Fair. That Fair scene is so necessary, for audience and actors – an interlude of joy and fun in what would otherwise be an unremittingly grim story. But making that switch was tough. I’d find myself standing in the dark, shaking the tension out of myself through my hands.

It’s likely to be 2021 before the play is staged again. But being part of something like this creates a sense of community that people want to hang onto. They also want to continue telling the story. Since that original production in 2001, small groups of volunteers, in costume, have led what are known as ‘Martyrs Walks’ – guided tours of Amersham take place once a month through the summer and share some of the history we have learnt. This time, I’m planning to be part of that.

Do you have a piece of local history that is just aching to be told? A community play might be one way of bringing that story to a wider audience, and drawing the community together in the process.