

Christmas Past: Hever Castle

by Owen Emmerson



Hever Castle's Inner Hall

One of the most evocative and exciting times to visit Hever Castle – Anne Boleyn's childhood home in Kent, England – is during the Christmas period, when twinkling Christmas trees and roaring log fires prove to be a sensory overload. The beautiful Italian walnut in the impressive Inner Hall takes on a heady scent as the sharpness of the pine needles blend with the smoky oak; the flickering light from the flame transports visitors back in time to Christmases past. The smell of the open fire is particularly good at carrying you back to earlier times as it is a smell that transcends time. I am incredibly privileged to get to walk in the footsteps of Anne Boleyn here at Hever Castle most days of the week, working as Hever's Castle Supervisor, and I can honestly say that there is nothing quite like a Hever Christmas. This year, Hever has themed Christmas around the much-beloved story of Alice in Wonderland. Hever's [Alice in a Christmas Wonderland](#) takes visitors on an unknown, magical journey down a rabbit hole; with an interactive trail, stunning lights in the award-winning grounds and a castle bejewelled with traditional trees. Visitors today can be transported to a traditional yet psychedelic journey through a Christmas Wonderland while enjoying hearty festive food and something strong and hot to drink. This post will tell you a little of the history of the Christmases that were experienced at Hever in the time of the Boleyn families ownership of the castle, and it will also show you how to make two Tudor key items of a Tudor Christmas for your own Christmas celebrations.



Hever Castle's Drawing Room

Drink me?

It is not hard to see parallels between Alice's 'drink me' moment, and the decision that Hever's most famous resident – Anne Boleyn - made while celebrating Christmas at Hever Castle in 1526. Alice was transported into a curious and sometimes dangerous world of painted red and white roses, and cries of “off with their head” from a despotic monarch; Anne was transported into a bloody schism to solidify the succession of the conquering family who united the red and white roses of Lancaster and York, and she ended up being decapitated upon the orders of her equally tyrannical husband, King Henry VIII. Happily, Alice retains her head. Historian David Starkey recently [argued at Hever](#) that the Boleyn family were in residence at the castle during the Christmas of 1526, for it was to Hever that Henry wrote to Anne thanking her for the jewel ship that she sent to him for his New Years gift on 1st January 1527.¹ It was at Hever during that Christmas, Starkey argues, that Anne Boleyn made the decision to say yes to Henry's proposal, setting in motion a schism that would see Henry break with Rome and pronounce himself head of his own catholic Church of England. It is hard to imagine a more monumental decision than that which Anne made between the crenellated 14th Century walls. The Boleyn's were moving from a position of wealth and status into the ranks of the Royal Family.

It is easy to imagine Christmas being a particularly lavish, warm and cosy

1 See Ridgway, C, [<https://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/when-did-anne-boleyn-say-yes-to-henry-viii/>]

affair at Hever back in 1526. Thomas Boleyn had risen under Henry VII and had hosted the victor of Bosworth Field at the Boleyn's Norfolk estate of Blickling. He had become a trusted diplomat to his son, Henry VIII, and had gained a significant fortune and portfolio of properties following his advantageous marriage to Lady Elizabeth Howard. Hever Castle had been purchased by Thomas' grandfather, Geoffrey Boleyn, and it proved to be the ideal central base when Thomas needed to work between Court and Dover – Hever being half a day's ride from both. Thomas had made a comfortable, cosy home for his wife and five children, and Elizabeth Boleyn was given a lifetime's interest in Hever for her life as part of the dower settled by Thomas' father, William Boleyn. Two of the Boleyn children – Thomas and Henry – died while at or nearby Hever, and the remaining three children, Mary, Anne and George would have known Hever intimately, beginning their education here. They would likely have spent some of their childhood Christmases here at Hever too, but none of them could have been as lavish as that of 1526 when the Boleyn's were riding high. Henry VIII's first Christmas as King cost above the equivalent of £13.5 million in today's money, and while the Boleyn's Christmas would have been pale in comparison, it was a time when much effort and expense was afforded to decorating and feasting during the twelve days of Christmas. Many of the traditions of the Tudor Christmas we would recognise today.

A Tudor Christmas with the Boleyns.



Tudor Christmas was celebrated from 25th December – 6th January: the twelve days of Christmas. Alison Sim has the perfect analogy of this period as being a kind of safety valve, where the pressures of the winter period were let out, and the of-

ten-raucous celebrations brought warmth and merriment to the household.² This is a period where communities around Hever and the neighbouring villages downed tools – most works were forbidden during this period – and gathered to be merry to celebrate the birth of Christ and the passing of midwinter.³ The four weeks leading up to the Christmas festivities – Advent - would have been a period of fasting, and this fasting would have been heightened on Christmas Eve, where foods such as eggs, cheese and meat were off-limits. Breaking this period of fasting would commence on Christmas Day, and there was a real emphasis in wealthier households on good feasting after this period of sobriety.

Many of the traditions of Christmas have their roots, not in the Christian tradition, but derive from much earlier, pagan, Viking and Roman cultures. The birth of the Roman God, Mithras was celebrated on 25th December, after the festivities of Saturnalia, which was a period of much merriment. Indeed, Christmas only became associated with 25th December in the 4th Century, because of its links with feasting, new birth and raucous celebration. This in part explains why there is a sense of continuity through the ages with regards to festive items such as holly, ivy, mistletoe, the yule log and marzipan, because they are not Christian traditions, rather Christianity incorporated them into their sacred feasts. Not all the twelve days were celebrated equally; the banquets on Christmas Day (25th December), New Year's Day (1st January) and Twelfth Night (or Epiphany) were considerably grander than the other seven.

It was on Christmas Eve that the young Boleyn Family would have lowered Hever's drawbridge and ventured out into the freezing Weald. The preparations for Christmas were carefully divided by gender – the Boleyn's were living in a highly patriarchal society – and Thomas would have taken his three sons out into his estate with the menfolk to fell a tree. Meanwhile, Elizabeth would have taken Anne, Mary and their maids to collect holly, ivy, mistletoe and other evergreens from the forest. The Yule Log, a sizable green log, would then have been dragged back over the drawbridge, into the medieval Great Hall, which Thomas Boleyn had made more comfortable with the addition of a side fireplace and an enclosed roof to replace the former central hearth. The family would then have 'dressed' the Yule Log in wetted ribbons, holly and Ivy to help it burn longer: The Yule Log had to ceremoniously burn continuously for the twelve days of Christmas. To light the log, perhaps one of the Boleyn girls fetched a bundle of cloth that contained the charred remains of last year's Yule Log. The new wood would then have been lit from the old.

After the Yule Log was ablaze, the Boleyn women would use the rest of the evergreen to deck the halls with boughs of holly. The holly gained significance as

2 *Sim, A, Food and Feast in Tudor England, 1st ed. (Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1997), p.113 and for further reading see Sim, A, Pleasures and Pastimes in Tudor England, 1st ed. (Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1999).*

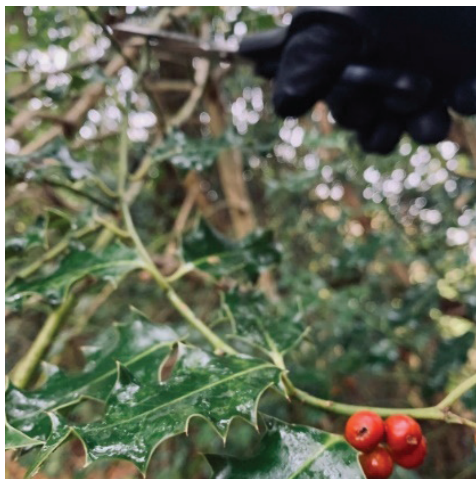
3 *It is important to note here that for those facilitating the feasting and merriments at court and in manners across the kingdom, Christmas was most certainly a time of labour.*

symbolising the crown of thorns believed to have been worn by Christ, with the berries symbolic of his blood. Ivy came to symbolise the symbiotic relationship between faith and gods support; ivy requiring the aid of a tree to grow and thrive. One of the decorations that the Elizabeth, Mary and Anne may have made together was a Kissing Bough; a kind of 3D forerunner of our more 2D wreath, and from where our tradition of kissing under the mistletoe derives. As a research venture for an incredibly exciting project that Claire Ridgway and I are undertaking (soon to be announced!) I decided to try to recreate two traditional Tudor Christmas items – The Kissing Bough and a Marchpane – to see what the tasks the Boleyn’s would have undertaken would have been like. Here are instructions of how to create your own Tudor Kissing Bough or Marchpane.

A Tudor Kissing Bough



It became traditional to make this globe-like bough of evergreen’s and to embrace your visiting peers and loved ones under it when visiting during the twelve days of Christmas. Once a kiss had been had beneath it, the recipient was supposed then to pluck one of the white berries from the bough, and when all the berries had gone, no more kisses were allowed under it.



To create your Kissing Bough, you will need:

- Enough long sprigs of Holly – preferably with berries - to half-fill a bag for life
- Ivy
- Artificial berries if Holly is bare
- A few sprigs of Mistletoe
- Thin green gardeners wire and/ or green gardeners tape
- A pair of wire clippers
- Dried Fruit, such as Oranges or Lemons



Step 1: As Holly has a natural curve to it, incrementally place successive pieces of Holly on top of the last, wiring each new section to the one before. This will create a natural curve until, eventually, the two ends meet to form a circle.



Step 2: Repeat this process until you have two hoops of Holly of the same size. Then squeeze one hoop into the other, wiring the two ends together to form a globe-like sphere.

Step 3: To decorate the bough further, add shorter sprigs of Holly where necessary and then wrap Ivy around and between the Holly. Tie the Mistletoe to the bottom of the bough, and some twine at the top, in a loop, so that you can hang the decoration.



Step 4: It was traditional to hang fruit in the centre of the Kissing Bough, and I decorated mine with dried oranges, decorated with the initials of the Boleyn children in black, highlighted with gold. You can create a loop with wire to hang them from the bough by pushing the wire through the fruit and twisting the ends of the wire together. Suspend the decorated fruit from the top of the bough with string, wire or ribbon.



You can see the recreation of the Boleyn's Kissing Bough in the Queen's Chamber at Hever Castle throughout the Christmas period. Another traditionally Tudor item that you can see at Hever this Christmas is an Anne Boleyn themed Marchpane, located in the Great Hall, where such delicacies would have been enjoyed.

A Tudor Marchpane



A Marchpane is very much like marzipan, but unlike its use as an icing today, it was considered the centrepiece dish of the banquet in and of itself during the Tudor period. Although cooking was very much a male activity, work with sugar was often completed by the senior woman of the household as sugar was such an expensive commodity, rather like tea being guarded by the mistress of the house sometime later. The Marchpane, unlike marzipan, was then baked until firm and would have been decorated with bright coloured sugar paste and gold leaf. This Marchpane is decorated in the style of Anne Boleyn's White Falcon badge, which she adopted in 1532. Here's how to make it:

Ingredients:

For the Marchpane

- 450g/16oz ground almonds
- 250g/8oz icing sugar (powdered sugar)
- 1-2 tbsp rosewater (If you would prefer a more almondy Marchpane, then add a tsp of almond extract and two tbsp of water to bind the paste together.)

For the Icing

- 200g/7oz icing sugar
- 1 tbsp rosewater (or water)
- Red, Black, Green, Blue and Gold food colouring
- Gold leaf (if you can afford), if not edible gold paint is just as effective



Step 1: Preheat oven to 150°C/ gas mark 2.

Step 2: Combine all of the dry ingredients into a mixing bowl, and add the liquid to it, mixing the paste together into a firm dough. Add more rose water (or water)/ sugar until you have a firm dough that holds together.



Step 3: Dust your surface and rolling pin with icing sugar, and roll half of the marzipane into a round disk, about the thickness of a £1 coin.



Step 4: Transfer the disk to a baking parchment-lined baking tray and bake the marchpane base for 15 minutes.

Step 5: While the base is drying out in the oven, roll the remaining piece of dough out to create the decorations that will sit on top of the base. To create Anne Boleyn's White Falcon, I printed and then cut out an image (below) and cut around the picture as a template.



Step 6: While the base is drying out in the oven, roll the remaining piece of dough out to create the decorations that will sit on top of the base. To create Anne Boleyn's White Falcon, I printed and then cut out an image (below) and cut around the picture as a template.

Step 7: Bake the decorations you have chosen at the same temperature for 15 mins until the Marchpane has dried out. Wait until the marchpane is wholly dried before decorating.

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Step 9: To decorate, mix the remaining 200g/7oz of icing sugar with the rose-water (or water) and divide half of the mixture between four bowls. Then add a few drops of food colouring into the containers, making red, blue, black and gold icing. You can build up layers of colour by using a paintbrush to add colour to your decorations. When you have iced both the decorations and the base, you can stick the decorations on by using a bit of white icing between them.

I hope if you decide to make either of these Tudor Christmas items that you enjoy the process of walking in the historical footsteps of the Boleyn's as much as I did. If you would like to see the Boleyn Kissing Bough or Anne Boleyn Marchpane as well as Hever's spectacular *Alice in a Christmas Wonderland*, you can visit the Hever Castle website for all of the event details, prices and opening times at <https://www.hevercastle.co.uk/whats-on/hever-castle-christmas/> I have been privileged to have visited all of the Christmases that Hever has hosted and I can honestly say that it is an experience to remember. Catch it while you can.



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Further Reading/ Bibliography

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