

## TUDOR FAMILY SCANDAL

On 8<sup>th</sup> February 1437 a royal funeral procession wound through the streets of London. At its heart was a hearse pulled by horses and bearing a Queen's coffin. It was draped with red cloth of gold. On top lay her effigy carved in wood and dressed in a mantle of purple satin. The head, resting on a velvet cushion, bore a crown of silver gilt, while the face was painted to look as the lovely Katherine of Valois had in life, the eyes blue and the lips red.

At Westminster the coffin was carried into the Abbey under a canopy of black velvet hung with bells that tinkled as it moved. Katherine was buried in the Lady Chapel, so called because it was dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Her tomb had been built close to that of her first husband, Henry V, the great victor of Agincourt. His successes would be remembered in song and tales of chivalric romance for generations. BUT there was nothing in this scene to suggest Katherine had left behind a grieving widower, and if her second husband – Owen Tudor - witnessed her funeral it was only as an obscure face in the crowd. Some stories the Tudors liked to remember about their past. But as I discovered during my research for 'Tudor', my biography of the dynasty, the first Tudor romance was a story they preferred to forget.

I am the historian Leanda de Lisle, uncovering the Tudors and Stuarts behind the myths

It is not certain when, or how, the Queen met the modest Welsh squire Owen Tudor. What information we have suggests he had found a position in Katherine's household as a chamber servant in around 1427. The widowed Queen was then twenty-six, and her son, aged seven, was considered old enough to be raised by men in the masculine business of rule. Since she was no longer required full time at court a new household was being set up for her.

Owen, meanwhile, had arrived in England from Wales. Owen's grandfather had been ruined after taking part in a great Welsh rebellion against Henry V's father, Henry IV in 1400, and they were seeking a new life. Owen's Welsh name, Owain ap Maredudd ap Tudur, meant, 'Owen son of Meredith son of Tudor', but that was too much of a mouthful for the English so he had become simply, Owen Tudor. If the attempts to anglicise it had gone differently we might have had a dynasty of Merediths. Not that it had seemed very likely that Owen would spawn a dynasty at all. He was, however, about to marry very well indeed.

Katherine was lonely and resentful that the Council, whom Henry V had appointed to rule during his son's minority, had forbidden her from re-marrying. She was expected to wait at least until Henry VI had reached his majority and could approve a match. This was backed with an Act of Parliament that threatened to confiscate the lands of any great man who ignored the injunction. It never occurred to anyone that Katherine might marry instead a mere chamber servant. Later some wondered if Katherine chose to marry Owen specifically because he was, 'a poor man', who posed no threat to the king or his nobles, and so the Council, 'might not reasonably take vengeance on his life.' But if so, Owen also appealed to Katherine in a more straightforward way.

Although the early Tudor historian, Polydore Vergil, claimed Owen was 'adorned with wonderful gifts of body and mind', we hear little about his mind from anyone else. Other reports point exclusively to his physical attractions. One account describes how the Queen fell in love with Owen after coming upon him swimming naked. But the most repeated story, and the one most likely to have some basis in fact, describes how Owen came to her attention in dramatic fashion during a party in her household. There was music playing, and her servants were dancing. As Katherine watched, Owen performed a leap which span out of control, and he fell straight into her lap. As an Elizabethan poet asked, 'Who would not judge it fortune's greatest grace, Since he

must fall, to fall in such a place'? It was not long before Katherine and her handsome chamber servant were married and, according to a rather disapproving sixteenth century account, when they made love she would scream in ecstasy.

By 1437 they had four children. But the English elite complained bitterly that the Queen should have 'proved unable to control her carnal passions', and with 'no man of birth neither of livelihood'. The king's Council decided it was best therefore that the marriage remain secret until Henry VI had grown up and could decide what to do about it.

The king was sixteen and his mother was dying from a 'grievous malady', before he learned she had married, and that he had half siblings, bearing the strange name, 'Tudor'.

In his anger and grief he had Owen imprisoned for a time.

But in 1439 Owen was pardoned, and by 1444 was the king even referring to him as 'our well beloved squire'. Still, Henry VI was determined to keep a close grip of future marriages within his family.

In 1453 it was Henry VI who arranged the betrothal between Owen's eldest son, Edmund Tudor, and the nine-year old Margaret Beaufort, who, like the king, was descended from the royal House of Lancaster. That year was, however, to be a disastrous one for the king. He lost the English war in France and had a mental collapse. This weakness encouraged the ambitions of the rival House of York, and a spiral of violence began.

Owen Tudor fought loyally for Henry VI in what later became known as the Wars of the Roses, and was one of the commanders of the royal forces confronting Yorkists at Mortimer Cross, Herefordshire in 1461.

The battle is remembered for the three suns that appeared in the sky, a phenomenon caused by light passing through ice crystals. Under those suns the Lancastrians fought and lost. Owen was captured and taken to Hereford.

It was only when a Yorkist soldier grabbed the collar of his red doublet to expose his neck, that Owen realised he was to be executed. Facing the block he managed a joke, recalling with dry wit how, 'The head that shall lie on the stock was wont to lie on Queen Katherine's lap', the woman he had loved and married against all the norms of their times. Then, at the fall of the axe the life that began with a trip at a party was ended.

Owen Tudor's head was placed on the top step of the market cross where a woman, 'combed his hair and washed away the blood off his face', before she placed candles around him. No one has yet suggested who she was. The watching crowd thought she was mad, as she carefully lit over a hundred small flames. She was surely, however, the grief-stricken mother of Owen's illegitimate son, David, who was almost two. Even as an old man in his fifties, it seems Owen had had the power to attract a woman's love.

Owen was buried at the Hereford Greyfriars. Sadly his tomb was swept away at the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Henry VIII did not think the memory of a humble Welsh squire worth saving. Today, Owen Tudor's body lies under a 1970s housing estate: the forgotten ancestor of our best-known dynasty.

Katherine lay in her tomb only until Henry VII disinterred his grandmother from the Lady Chapel when he was reworking it to build his wife's tomb and his own. Her body, loosely wrapped in lead, was placed by Henry V's tomb monument. This was intended as a temporary arrangement. But Henry VIII made no effort to complete his father's wish and, shockingly, for the next two hundred years she lay abandoned

in a coffin above ground, that exposed her skeleton from the waist up. In 1669 the diarist Samuel Pepys celebrated his birthday by paying a small fee to give her a kiss. Her body was placed where it lies today, under the altar in Henry V's chantry, only during the reign of Queen Victoria.

Remarkably her wooden effigy, which was displayed at her funeral, remains in the Abbey museum, dressed in her painted red undergarment.

There is more on the illegitimate descendants of Owen Tudor, as well as his royal descendants, in my biography of the dynasty - Tudor, which I hope you will enjoy