1

Seventeenth century dance spaces: the infrastructure

Anne Daye

A man and a woman take to the floor to dance their galliard. For a while they are the centre of attention, and indeed they are at the forefront of our imaginations in the twenty-first century. Yet their dance was as much the result of an extensive infrastructure as of the excellent skills and prior instruction of the performers. This paper will explore the network of systems supporting the dance, by synthesising the disparate and varied records, including court financial documents, newsletters, eye-witness accounts. Starting with the nature of the spaces used for dancing, the preparation by court servants, and facilities for the participants, the discussion will then move to the etiquette of hospitality. Finally, I will survey what we know of the organisation of the music and the dancing itself.

Dancing took place in the great halls of medieval palaces and noble houses: all-purpose spaces, for eating, receiving important guests, holding martial contests, for plays and other entertainments or administrative duties. The concept of the upper end of honour and the lower end for service was fundamental to the organisation of events taking place within. The development of permanent spaces designed especially for dance was a slow process across the second half of the sixteenth century. According to McGowan's discussion of French dance, the first *salle de bal* was completed at St Germain in 1549. At Fontainebleau, a spectacular *salle de bal* was ready by 1560 and at the Louvre in Paris, Henri III created 'une salle tres vaste et tres grande destinée à la danse'[1] At other royal palaces and noble houses similar spaces followed. While English visitors experienced these wonderful rooms, there was no rush to create them here. On the other hand, at Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh, a *salle du balle* was in existence by the 1560s, presumably following French practice introduced by Mary Queen of Scots. It is called 'the dancing hous' and 'the dancing chalmer' in an inventory of 1582, embellished with great windows and armorial decorations[2]. The two key features of a ball room had been established: a spacious unfurnished rectangle and rich decoration.

At Whitehall, the practice of preparing an empty space to be a dancing room or dance theatre was well-rehearsed. For dancing or revels (the term 'ball' did not become current in English until the 1630s), the Great Hall, the Great Chamber and the Banqueting House were used. The Great Hall was the early Tudor structure of a single ground floor space, but the Great Chamber next to it was a first floor room and favoured for dancing during the reigns of James and Charles[3]. A single record of 1609 alludes to it as 'the Queenes Dauncing Chamber', which suggests that the Stuarts brought the concept with them from Holyrood[4]. In 1604 both the feast and dancing to honour the special embassy from Spain to sign the peace with England took place in one space, probably the wooden Banqueting House erected in 1581. Servants set up the throne, the buffets for plate and a long table for the three hour long feast, then cleared all away and rearranged the room for the dancing. While this was happening the royal party went to their rooms and the embassy was conducted to the privy gallery to admire the paintings, for about an hour. When they went back to the Banqueting House, the dancing was already underway; the king and queen took their places on the state and the Spanish party were ranged in a row on the king's side. Only men had attended the feast, now about fifty ladies of honour joined them for the dancing[5].

Dancing as a spectacle was a frequent occurrence at court, perhaps once or twice a week in the festival seasons at Whitehall[6]. The court masques were essentially an elaborated ball, and because they were important occasions, there are fuller records of the arrangements than of the regular dancings. The Great Hall was sometimes used but the preferred space was the Banqueting House, because it was larger and had the dignity of being a first floor room. James I replaced the 1581 wooden building with a stone one in 1606. This burnt down in 1619 so the beautiful building we now have designed by Inigo Jones opened in 1622. The drive to create an imposing room, yet keep it plain inside, suggests that its main purpose was the presentation of masques[7]. The ceiling paintings by Rubens were the only permanent embellishments, vulnerable to the excessive use of candles. So, a new wooden structure was erected by 1638, designed as a purpose-built dance theatre, called the Masquing Room. Only in use for the final two years of court masquing, it was pulled down during the Commonwealth. At the Restoration, Charles II converted the Great Hall into a theatre for dance and drama. This had a permanent stage and seating with a seated pit, over which a dance floor was laid for balls[8].

Financial records[9] give us an insight into the routine of making a bare space ready. First came the carpenters under the control of the Office of Works to board up the windows to protect the glass, and to build the scenic stage and set up the dancing floor. This was a shallow stage too, described as 'a false floor of tymber and boordes…to daunce upon'. It was then covered in green cloth, stitched and nailed into place by the matlayers, to create 'a fine and spacious area'. The carpenters set up the king's state or throne on a raised dais, called a footpace, surmounted by a canopy. They built boxes enclosing seats for the prestigious guests and around the three sides of the room workmen constructed tiers of bench seating fronted by railings called degrees, with ladder staircases for access to the upper levels. They finished their job by cleaning up with mops, besoms and pails. The next stage was called the 'Apparelling' under the control of the Lord Chamberlain's department and carried out by grooms of the Outer Chamber and other servants from the Wardrobe. Furniture and soft furnishings were their business. They brought drapes for the state, cushions, velvet-covered stools and carpets for the boxes, and further stools and benches to augment the seating. These teams also prepared rooms for practising, as well as tiring rooms for the masquers and the banquet room.

A third team set up the lighting. Wireworkers and chandlers from the Office of Revels took about five days to complete their job. Their first task was to protect surfaces with pasteboard. Then they twisted iron wire into rods to span the space, from which they strung great and small branches to hold quantities of wax candles. They added further brilliance by adding reflectors of plates and used assidue (a gold-coloured alloy of copper and zinc) to form plates, fringes and tassel for extra brilliance. With hooks, staples and nails they tensioned and fastened these, all soldered carefully to give strength. They passed ropes through pipes and pullies to raise and lower the branches. Large and small wall lights called prickers and wallers could be pushed into wooden surfaces, and further standing candlesticks were placed around, particularly near the throne. Extraordinary quantities of candles were required. The City accounts of a court masque at Merchant Taylors Hall in 1634 lists 54 pounds in weight plus 38 dozen of wax candles[10]. Quantities of torches were also used, perhaps to light the entrances. Four men attended each performance to manage the lighting and guard against fire. The space was only partially lit as the audience assembled, and then the full array lighted just in time for the performance.

A diagram of the layout by the carpenters for a pastoral in the Great Hall is considered to be a good guide to arrangements for the Banqueting House masques[11]. Here we can see the large state centre front facing the stage, the boxes with names for the occupants, and the degrees rising up the walls. As the Great Hall had a central hearth, it is clear that it was boarded over for dancing. After each

masque, workmen then swept in to take everything down for storage within the various departments. The carpenters' system was similar to a modern flat-pack, in which timbers for the degrees and stage, once cut to fit the space and marked, could be brought out of storage in Scotland Yard and reassembled time after time.

We have little solid evidence for access to the Banqueting House. The public entrance at the lower end of the room used for ambassadorial receptions was blocked by the stage. The public entrance and stairs used today occupy a penthouse added to the Banqueting House, just as in the past: no pompous entrance was ever created for visitors. The royal party could come through from their lodgings at the upper end, while distinguished guests would be escorted through the palace to enter nearby. Crowds of courtiers made their way along the passages and terraces of the palace, waiting their turn for entry. The rest of the audience would come through the court gate and enter from the courtyard: I think temporary access by ladder-type steps would have been necessary to arrive at the first floor and enter through a window space. A masque was a lengthy occasion, six or seven hours, more so for the lesser mortals who were in place two hours before the royal party came in. So what about refreshment and comfort breaks? The most honoured guests were given supper in the palace and adjacent noble houses beforehand and afterwards taken through rooms and galleries to another space, such as the Great Chamber, for the banquet. Here the highly decorative display of sweetmeats was viewed and traditionally scrambled at and thrown over by the crowd of courtiers. Presumably chamber pots and close stools were found in nearby lodgings for those with privileged access. The only clue as to how the rest coped is provided by Ben Jonson whose antimasque character of 1612 Robin Goodfellow recounts his attempts to get into *Love Restored*. He saw a wine-seller bringing refreshment for a country lady who had 'fainted… with fasting for the fine sight since seven o'clock i' the morning', and thought that might be a good ruse. He changed his mind when, shortly after, two men complained of being watered from above, as they were looking up ladies' skirts while waiting on the steps[12].

Dancing, plays and masques were an important part of royal hospitality, but technically they were private occasions. As such, invitations could be both a mark of honour and an expected courtesy to ambassadors representing their own countries at the English court. With a preference for good diplomacy rather than armed hostility, James instituted the office of Master of Ceremonies answering to the Lord Chamberlain, in line with European practice. The king and queen gave instructions which their officers carried out, building up precedence and procedures from experience in managing all aspects of diplomatic reception[13]. We have full and often tedious insights into the punctilious negotiations to ensure that each ambassador and his retinue were treated with the current respect due to him as representative of his master. The Master of Ceremonies visited each ambassador in advance to either issue an invitation or to explain why one was not forthcoming, and to discuss placement. The invitation had to be timed carefully, not to seem last minute, and in a judicious order in relation to other embassies. On the night, hopefully following a happy resolution of all the issues, he and his staff with the correct rank of English nobleman or woman, escorted the ambassador to the palace and passed him on to the Lord Chamberlain for seating in the masquing room. To be seated right by or on the presence was considered a very public declaration of favour. The distance from the presence was carefully weighed, as well as the order in relation to other ambassadors and the English nobility, and whether on the right hand or left hand of the king, queen or prince, or aslant in front or behind. A box offered a more private but still honourable situation. It was also possible for an ambassador and his train to choose to attend incognito, without formal invitation, and to be seated at a distance amongst lesser mortals, simply to enjoy the performance. It seems that men and women were ranged in gender groups. Many commentators testify to the spectacle of rich

costume (farthingales sometimes banned because of the cramped conditions) and sparkling jewellery (often hired) of the court ladies, and the chance to pick out the beauties, appreciate the generous bosoms on show and be catty about the ugly and skinny.

A chronic problem was the hostility between the French and Spanish ambassadors, so much so, that it was eventually accepted that they would be asked in alternate years. At *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* of 1618, the Spanish were given prominent favour, as a marriage between Charles and the Infanta was under discussion. Busino, the chaplain of the Venetian embassy has left a disgruntled account[14]:

> 'At the fourth hour of the night we went to court privately, through the park, and entered the royal apartments. His excellency was entertained a while by a principal courtier until everything was prepared, and we others of his retinue, all perfumed, escorted by the master of ceremonies, entered the usual box of the Venetian embassy, where unfortunately we were so crowded and uncomfortable that had it not been our curiosity we would have given up or expired. Moreover we had the additional curse of a Spaniard who came into our box by courtesy of the master of ceremonies, asking for only two fingers of room, though we had no space to run around in, and by God, he placed himself more comfortably than all of us. In short, I have no patience with these crows; it was observed that they had settled in all the best locations. The ambassador was near the King; others with gold chains round their necks sat with the lords of the Council; others were in their own box attending the ambassadress; and this fellow comes into our place!'

When the Inns of Court brought masques, their members were seated together in a gallery behind the state reserved for them. Meanwhile those who needed to oversee the performance were seated alongside the dancing space. The huge audience also included lesser folk, although probably no-one less than gentry or citizens of repute. Such individuals had to get past the guards at the court gate and further guards at all doors and courts within the palace, of which many were locked. By the Restoration the impression is of wider access, according to the diaries of Pepys and Evelyn, who appear to have ready access to see balls and masques. However, entrance was also being controlled by tickets and turnstiles by then.

The Lord Chamberlain and his staff were in charge in the room, ready to wield their white staves of office if needed. In 1605, we hear of confusion in getting in, with complaints about 'the fury of the white staffs'[15]. From a document of the Lord Chamberlain at the Restoration, we get a hint of the advance planning, instructions to officers and lists of guests, probably following an earlier practice[16]. Surprisingly not everyone was sitting down when the king entered, but a crowd might mill about on the central space until cleared away by the Lord Chamberlain. We get a sense of bustle, unlike the disciplined audiences of today. For example, the masquers themselves took seats amongst the audience during the revels, making conversation. King Charles and Henrietta Maria had a habit of sitting on the state after dancing their entries to watch the final show, and it seems that Charles sat with the queen to be addressed and watch the antimasques of *Coelum Britannicum*, before going behind the scene to make his entry as a masquer.

For dancing, a most important part of the infrastructure is the music. A band of violins was placed in a box to accompany the masquers' danced entries and the revels. The pattern of employment traced by Peter Holman shows King James's determination to expand their number[17]. A doubling from six to twelve was achieved by strategic manipulation of the places available, which were fixed by custom. New households for Anna and Henry permitted new instrumentalists to be employed and most were kept on when the household ceased. One eyewitness noted 25 – 30 violinists playing for the masque in 1618; a second eyewitness noted about 40 the following year[18]. This was certainly far more than the number on the court payroll, and Peter Holman casts doubt on the accuracy of the 1618 sightings. But could two different people have seen double,

or was the band augmented by extra recruits? By 1631, 14 violinists were in employment forming a five part violin orchestra of treble, contra-tenor, tenor, low tenor and bass. From 1660 a band of 24 violins was formed, including former players of Charles I's staff. Additional to the instrumentalists were the violin-playing court dancing masters, up to five c. 1612, including the French virtuoso Jacques Cordier. In advance of a masque, individual violinists, sometimes an ensemble, were paid extra fees for playing for rehearsals.

We have very little idea of the music played for the revels. The collections of dance music we have today in manuscript or printed form were aimed at amateur players, either as simplified parts, perhaps with written-out variations, or fantasies based on dance forms. Undoubtedly, the violin band played from memory and in well-rehearsed harmony and improvisation, knowing the expected tunes for measures and country dances, while drawing on an extensive repertoire of galliard and coranto melodies. I assume that the whole ensemble was familiar with the expected tempo and repeats for each dance. However, the choice of dances and the length of the revels was dependent on the wish of the participants on the night. An individual must have taken on a leadership role for the band, if only to communicate with the dancers, via the Lord Chamberlain. The likeliest candidate for intermediary is the dancing master.

The revels of a masque were a lengthy ball, but we have little information as to how it was organised. The Lord Chamberlain was the executive officer of the evening, and of seriously high rank: for example Thomas Howard, Earl of Suffolk from 1602 to 1614. An obvious aspect of his organisation was to place the ladies, or gentlemen, near the dancing floor ready to be invited. Busino in 1618 spots the ladies ranged in order ready to partner the masquers. It was expected that those in the favoured positions were ready to respond to an invitation to dance. If an ambassador was nervous of exposing himself and his master to ridicule, he negotiated in advance to be excused, through the ladies in waiting. There was one occasion on which the court ladies refused to dance with masquers whose rank they judged too low, causing a dreadful scandal, and the men were reduced to dancing together[19]. The king and queen took an active part in guiding proceedings on several occasions. Being very pleased with a masque at Lord Knowles' house at Cawsome, Anna of Denmark 'vouchsafed to make herselfe the head of their revels, and graciously to adorn the place with her personal dancing'. The scattered evidence indicates a practice of one amongst the dancers heading the revels[20], which may imply that they not only placed themselves at the head of the group dances but also made decisions about what was danced, in what order and how long the ball lasted. I suggest that there were also conventions that operated, understood by everyone, but not recorded for posterity.

The evidence indicates that at the English court the pattern of a ball was to commence with the measures, the company assembling in strict rank order. This was followed by the most important and lengthy episode of galliards, corantoes and lavoltas. Following the Restoration, a different convention ensued combining French and English practice: a court ball commenced with branles, followed by the courante and French dances, and ending with country dances. Although rank order operated in the Jacobean sequence of galliards and corantoes, there are glimpses of more spontaneity in the selection of partners: gentlemen masquers picking out the young ladies in 1604; while next time, the women masquers dragged in the ten-year old Prince Henry[21]. It may be that once drawn in to the revels by a masquer, a courtier could then approach another partner from the audience, like a regular ball. We know that King James was passionate about watching the revels. Having made his debut in 1618, Prince Charles was frequently seen to be in friendly competition with Buckingham to win the king's approval, and masques were delayed occasionally so that a favoured lady could be present for the revels. Those dancing were a small proportion of the large audience, the

rest watched and judged. Praise was expressed by the English as 'to bear away the bell for delicate dancing': a phrase derived from the bell given to the leader of a flock of sheep. Through observers, we get confirmation that graceful honours to the king and to the partner were the admired formalities before dancing.

Each ball drew on the contemporary repertoire of the royal and court dancers, and the dances were recognisable to foreign visitors. Court personnel also made sure that they were in fine fettle for the revels, with extra dance lessons beforehand. However, there were times when specific dances were prepared and rehearsed by musicians and dancers for the revels, when a particular compliment was to be made to an ambassador: in 1604 an Italian brando for the Spanish ambassador who had been governor of Milan; branles de Poitu for the French ambassador in 1611; canaries and spagnolettas for the Spanish ambassador in 1618[22].

This practice paralleled the wearing of Spanish or French dress to flatter the relevant ambassador. Being gorgeously yet appropriately dressed when under such scrutiny at a court dancing or masque revel involved a further network of tailors, embroiderers, jewellers and feather-makers and servants both noble and humble. The English were not quite so obsessed with recording the detail of clothing as the French, but two examples from the first two masques of the Jacobean reign at Hampton Court in 1604 illustrate a couple of issues, as seen with an ironic eye by Dudley Carleton. The noblemen's attire as Chinese Knights

> 'was rich but somewhat too heavy and cumbersome for dancers, which put them beside their galliards. They had loose robes of crimson satin embroidered with gold and bordered with broad silver laces, doublets and bases of cloth of silver, buskins, swords, and hats alike, and in their hats each of them had and Indian bird for a feather, and some jewels'. The ladies masked as goddesses: 'their attire was alike, loose mantles and petticoats, but of different colours, the stuffs embroidered satins and cloth of gold and silver, for which they were beholden to Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe…Only Pallas [Anna of Denmark] had a trick by herself, for her clothes were not so much below the knee but that we might see a woman had both feet and legs, which I never knew before'[23].

In the revels of a masque, the maskers wore the vizard, which was only taken off ceremonially, when they returned to the room after the formal exit dance at the end.

So humble workmen, competent musicians, court officers of high rank, palace guards, many servants and individual men and women of the nobility all had a role to play in support of that galliard or courante danced by a single couple under the gaze of a distinguished and knowledgeable audience.

References

[1] McGowan, M. (2008) *Dance in the Renaissance:European Fashion, French Obsession.* New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 68 - 70

[2] *Inventaires de la Royne Descosse Douiriere de France 1556 – 1569* (1863). Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, p. 145; Mill, A. J. (1927) *Medieval Plays in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Blackwood & Son, p. 335

[3] Thurley, S. (1999) *Whitehall Palace: an Architectural History of the Royal Apartments, 1240 – 1698*. New Haven: Yale University Press

[4] *Dramatic Reords in the Declared Accounts of the Office of Works 1560 – 1640* (1975/77). Malone Society Collections, Vol. X. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 21.

[5] *Relacion de la Iornada del Excelissimo Condestable de Castilla*. (1604). Valladolid.

[6] Practice can be gleaned from the dispatches of ambassadors: the Venetian letters are accessible in the Calendar of State Papers Venetian. Further dispatches have been translated and made available by John Orrell, including those of Amerigo Salvetti, the Florentine agent in 'Amerigo Salvetti and the London Court Theatre, 1616 – 1640' in *Theatre Survey* 1979 Vol. 1, pp.1 – 26. See also Gabaleone of the Savoy below.

English sources include newsletters from Dudley Carleton and John Chamberlain, see below.

[7] Daye, A. (2004) 'The Banqueting Housee, Whitehall: a site specific to dance' in *Historical Dance* Vol 4. No. 1, pp. 3 - 22

[8] Orrell, J. (1985) *The Theatres of Inigo Jones and John Webb*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[9] The information is drawn from three documents which extract information from court financial records with the purpose of illuminating the dramatic activities at court:

Dramatic Reords in the Declared Accounts of the Office of Works 1560 – 1640 (1975/77). Malone Society Collections, Vol. X. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dramatic Records in the Declared Accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber (1961/62). Malone Society Collections Vol. VI. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Source for Apparellings).

Revels Accounts (1986). Malone Society Collections Vol. XIII. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Source for lighting social spaces, not the stage).

[10] McGee, , C. E. (1991) 'Strangest consequence from remotest cause: the second performance of *The Triumph of Peace' Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* Vol. 5, pp. 309 – 342.

[11] Orrell, J. (1985) *The Theatres of Inigo Jones and John Webb*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 18

[12] Orgel, S.(1969) *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 188 - 192

[13] John Finett composed an account of his experience as deputy to and later main Master of Ceremonies, in order to establish precedence. From this and several ambassadors' dispatches a picture of diplomatic management emerges.

Finett, J. (1656) *Finetti Philoxenis*; Loomie, A. J. (ed.) (1987) *Ceremonies of Charles I: the Note Books of John Finett 1628 – 1641*. New York: Fordham University Press.

[14] Orgel S. & Strong, R. (1973) *Inigo Jones: the Theatre of the Stuart Court*. London: Sotheby Parke Bernet, pp.279 – 283.

[15] Lee, M. (ed.) (1972) *Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain 1603 – 1624*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, p. 67.

[16] Boswell, E. (1952) *The Restoration Court Stage*. London: George Allen & Unwin, pp. 182 - 183

[17] Holman, P. (1993) *Four and Twenty Fiddlers: the Violin at the English Court 1540 – 1690.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

[18] The first sighting is by Busino, see note 16 above. The second sighting is by Gabaleone, the agent of the Savoy, quoted in Orrell, J. (1979) 'The London Court Stage in the Savoy Correspondence, 1613 – 1675' in *Theatre Research* Vol. 3, pt. 2, pp.79 – 94.

[19] McClure, N. E. (1939) *The Letters of John Chamberlain*. Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, Vol.1, pp. 328

[20]Lee, M. (ed.) (1972) *Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain 1603 – 1624*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, p.44; Related in the Masque at Cawsome House 1613 by Thomas Campion printed by Nichols, J. (1828) *The Progresses, Processions and Magnificent Entries of James the First*. London, 4 Vols, p. 638.

[21] Lee, M. (ed.) (1972) *Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain 1603 – 1624*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp.53 – 54.

[22] See also Daye, A. (2009) 'Dancing for King and Country: the Jacobean Court Dancer' in *Kings and Commoners: Dances of Display for Court, City and Country*. Proceedings of the seventh DHDS Conference, 28 – 29 March.

[23] Lee, M. (ed.) (1972) *Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain 1603 – 1624*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, p.53.