



John Blanke in his resplendent turban on the Westminster Tournament Roll

# JOHN BLANKE

## THE MOST FAMOUS AFRICAN IN TUDOR ENGLAND

Henry VIII's black trumpeter was no slave – the fact he had wages tells us that. But who was he, and where did he come from? **Miranda Kaufmann** fills in the blanks

**A**lthough at least 200 Africans lived in Tudor England, John Blanke is the only one for whom we have a portrait. Indeed, he appears twice – both times in the Westminster Tournament Roll, a 60ft vellum manuscript commissioned by Henry VIII in 1511. It was his proximity to the King that explains why he was portrayed. For John Blanke had worked at the Tudor court as a trumpeter to Henry VII and Henry VIII since at least 1507.

We know this because there are a series of records of him being paid wages. The first of these dates to early December 1507, when he was paid

20 shillings for the month of November, equivalent to a rate of eight pence a day. That meant his annual salary was £12, three times the average servant's wage.

We don't know how John Blanke came to England, but the most likely explanation is that he arrived from Spain in the retinue of Katherine of Aragon, who came to England in 1501 to marry Prince Arthur, Henry VIII's elder brother.

There were many Africans in Spain. Between 1441 and 1521, an estimated 156,000 Africans arrived in Spain, Portugal and the Atlantic islands. By 1550, Africans made up 7.5 per cent of the population of Seville. In 1574, the city was described as "a giant chessboard

containing an equal number of white and black chessmen", so it makes sense that Katherine could have had a black trumpeter in her entourage.

When Henry VII died in spring 1509, Blanke was one of the trumpeters who played at his funeral, dressed in black. A few weeks later, this time dressed in scarlet, he played at Henry VIII's coronation. Scarlet cloth was reserved for the higher-ranking royal servants, while lesser men wore red.

Both events were great royal spectacles. The funeral procession from Richmond to Westminster Abbey took two days, with large crowds gathered to watch. The coronation ceremonies stretched over three days, and included another



A black trumpeter appears (top left) in this tapestry of the 1520 Field of the Cloth of Gold. Could it be Blanke, in the employ of France?



Blanke seems to have been well regarded by Henry VIII, and may have been known to Katherine of Aragon



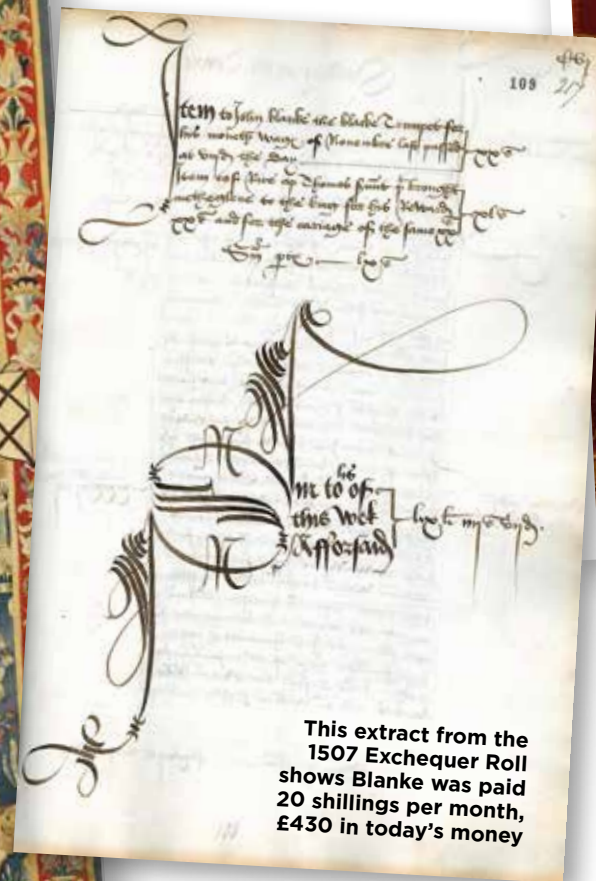
procession, a banquet and a tournament – all of which required a great deal of trumpet playing.

Shortly after Henry VIII came to the throne, Blanke petitioned him for a pay rise on the basis that his current salary was “not sufficient to maintain and keep him”. He points out that another trumpeter, Dominic Justinian, had died recently, and so the King could afford to promote him to a wage of 16 pence a day – especially considering Blanke’s “true and faithful service”, which he intended to continue for the rest of his life.

This was double what he was getting before. In a clever, though standard, final clause, it is stated that if the King signs the petition, that will be “sufficient warrant” for the request to be granted. Henry did indeed sign the document, and Blanke got his pay rise.

Blanke was not the only trumpeter paid at the rate of eight pence a day under Henry VII, and they were still being hired at that rate in the 1540s. But Henry VIII also employed another group of trumpeters at 12 pence a day. Wages, it seems, varied depending on experience, skill or length of service.

A couple of years later, Blanke was one of several trumpeters to play at the Westminster Tournament



This extract from the 1507 Exchequer Roll shows Blanke was paid 20 shillings per month, £430 in today's money

of 1511, held on 12 and 13 February to celebrate the birth of a short-lived son to Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon. He was born and named Henry on 1 January 1511. The tilting yard was outside Westminster Hall, roughly where Parliament Square is today. Stands were erected to seat the lords and ladies of the court, who looked on as costumed knights entered the lists in pageant cars, hung their shields upon artificial trees, and fought among elaborate scenic devices that transformed their combat into episodes from chivalric romances.

### BLOW BY BLOW

The trumpeters would have had to work hard, as they were required to provide fanfares at every stage of the proceedings. The extent of their workload is reflected in the fact that they were paid 10 times their usual day's salary for their services. In the Westminster Tournament Roll, they are shown twice; once at the beginning of the procession to the joust and again signalling the end of the day's sport. The tournament ended with a banquet, with entertainment provided by the King and his courtiers, who dressed up for a theatrical performance. Again, much trumpet music was needed.

In the roll, Blanke wears the same brown and yellow livery as the other musicians, and the rest of the royal entourage. But he is distinguished from his bareheaded companions by his turban. It is brown and gold in the first depiction of him, and green and gold



Black musicians were found in European royal courts as early as 1194

in the second. The turban suggests an Islamic heritage and its relatively flat shape is reminiscent of North African or Andalusian styles. This might give us a clue as to where Blanke was from. That said, Henry VIII enjoyed dressing himself and his courtiers in Turkish and Moorish fashions, and so may have chosen to dress Blanke in this way.

The next we hear of Blanke is that he married in 1512. We know this because the King gave him a wedding present. On 14 January 1512, a warrant was made by Henry VIII to the Great Wardrobe (the part of the royal household that kept the King clothed) to deliver to John Blanke, “our trumpeter”, a gown of violet cloth, a bonnet and a hat, “to be taken of our gift against his marriage”.

The ceremony probably took place at St Nicholas' Church in what is now Deptford. We don't know who he married, but it seems likely she would have been English. The fact that he married means he must have been a Christian by this time, as marriage required both parties to be baptised.

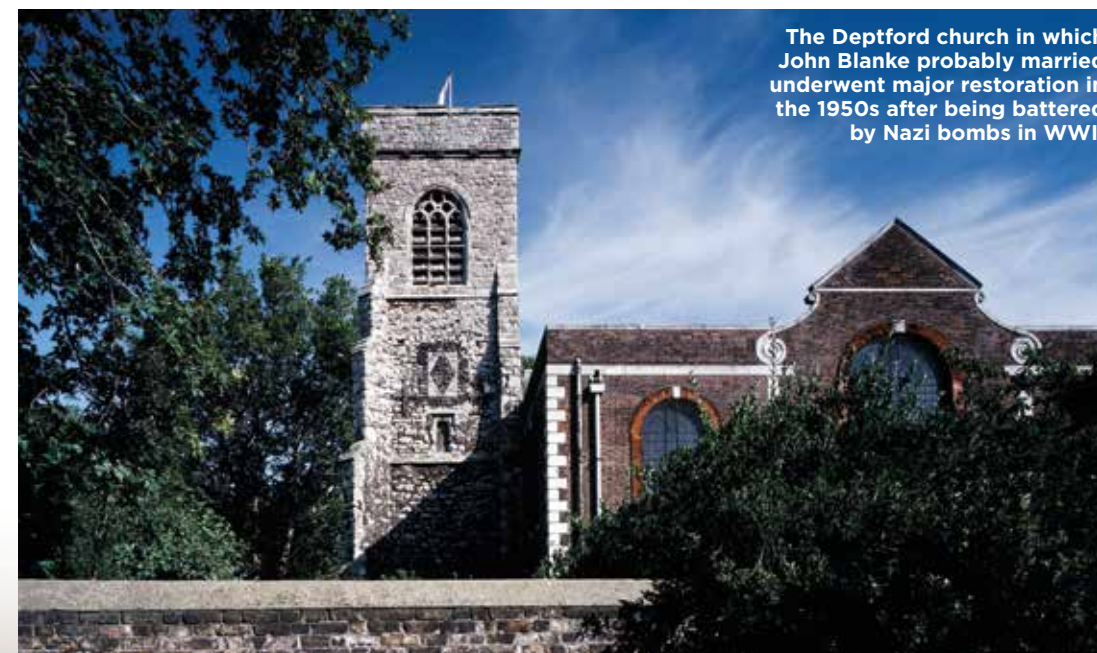
**“That he married means he must have been a Christian”**

The mention of this wedding present is the last we hear of Blanke in the records. He does not appear in the next full list of trumpeters in January 1514.

### THE PAPER TRAIL ENDS

We don't know what became of him. Perhaps he went to work in another European court; musicians were quite mobile at this time. Or his marriage may have given him the opportunity to take up a new profession – it was not uncommon for court servants to marry a widow and take on her husband's former trade in London.

A more morbid explanation is that he died. This could have happened in the fire that consumed the living quarters



The Deptford church in which John Blanke probably married underwent major restoration in the 1950s after being battered by Nazi bombs in WWII

of the Palace of Westminster in 1512, or at the Battle of the Spurs in France or the Battle of Flodden in Scotland, which both took place in 1513.

Was Blanke a free man? Too often, people assume that all Africans in Europe at this time were enslaved. We are bombarded with images of enslaved Africans, often dating to later periods or other countries, most recently in the film *12 Years a Slave* and the TV series *Roots*. But people at the time made other assumptions. For example, in 1572, Juan Gelofe, a 40-year-old African man enslaved in a Mexican silver mine, told an English sailor named William Collins that England “must be a good country as there were no slaves there”. Collins replied, “It was true, that they were all freemen in England.”

Gelofe and Collins were right – there was no law of slavery in England. As William Harrison explained in his *Description of England* in 1577: “As for slaves and bondmen, we have none; nay such is the privilege of our country by the especial grace of God and bounty of our princes, that if any come hither from other realms, so soon as they set foot on land they become as free in condition as their masters, whereby all note of servile bondage is utterly removed from them.”

The only known court case to explicitly consider the issue of slavery in this period resolved “that England has too pure an air for slaves to breathe in”. This played out in practice. In 1587, a Portuguese-Jewish doctor called Hector Nunes admitted in a petition to the Court of Requests that he had no remedy “by the course of the common law of this realm” to compel an Ethiopian who “utterly refuses to tarry and serve” him.

Africans themselves reported becoming free in England. In 1490, Pero Alvarez told the King of Portugal that he had been set free by Henry VII of England. And over a century later, Diogo, an African who was taken to England by an English pirate in 1614, reported to the Portuguese Inquisition that when he laid foot on English soil “he immediately became free, because in that reign nobody is a slave”.

John Blanke would also have become free when he arrived in England, if he was not free already. The fact that he was paid wages and able to marry are further indicators of his freedom. ◉

### GET HOOKED

#### BOOK

*Black Tudors: The Untold Story* by Miranda Kaufmann (One World, 2017) explores the lives of John Blanke and many more Africans who lived and died in 16th-century England.