

English Heritage Battlefield Report: Barnet 1471

Barnet (14 April 1471)

Parish: Barnet, Hertsmere

District: Barnet, Hertsmere

County: Greater London, Hertfordshire

Grid Ref: TQ 247979 (centred on Hadley High Stone)

Historical Context

The Battle of Barnet was the last act in the estrangement of King Edward IV and the mightiest subject in the land, the Earl of Warwick. One time intimates, the King's preference for a Burgundian rather than a French alliance had ruined their friendship. Warwick restored the Lancastrian King Henry VI to the throne and Edward fled to the Continent. In March 1471, however, Edward returned and landed in Yorkshire. A lightning campaign left Warwick outmanoeuvred and Edward in possession of London. Warwick, advancing from Coventry, had hoped to find Edward barred from the Capital; he could then have crushed his opponent under the City walls. But it had turned out otherwise and Warwick chose to offer battle ten miles north of London near High, or Chipping Barnet, occupying, as has been observed, the highest ground on the road between London and York.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

Barnet battlefield lies a short distance to the north of High Barnet. According to contemporary (or near-contemporary) accounts the struggle took place either a mile or half-mile away¹. There is little point in trying to determine which claim is the more exact: we do not know, for a start, how extensive the purlieus of High Barnet were in 1471. However, it is worthwhile attempting to pinpoint any topographical references made by contemporary chroniclers.

The *Great Chronicle* states that the Earl of Oxford, leading the Lancastrian vanguard, 'pycchid his ffeyld upon the playn withouth the toun well lyke a myle thens'². Edward Hall, although he wrote his *Chronicle* a generation or two later, clearly felt this observation sufficiently accurate to bear repeating: 'This tounne [High Barnet] standeth on an hill, on whose toppes is a faire plain, for two armies to joyne together...'³. The chronicle *Historie of the Arrivall of Edward IV in England* informs us that when the Yorkists encountered the Lancastrian foreriders in High Barnet they 'chaced them out of the towne, more some what than an halfe myle; when, undre an hedge-syde, were redy assembled a great people, in array, of th'Erls of Warwike'⁴. Thus far we have a hedge line on a plain north of High Barnet. But the most detailed description of the ground belongs to a source which only came to light this century. Gerhard von Wesel, a Hanseatic merchant living in London, reported on the battle in a letter home:

Warwick and his liegemen and followers, who had been at Coventry, pitched camp a mile beyond the said village [High Barnet], right beside the St Albans high road, on a broad green. King Edward's followers, not knowing exactly in the darkness where their opponents were, rode on to that same place in the night and pitched their camp on the other side of the aforementioned high road in a hollow, on marshy ground, right opposite Warwick⁵.

The broad green referred to would appear to be Hadley Green. It stands on a plain, surrounded by falling ground, approximately a mile to half a mile north of High Barnet astride the old St Albans road. Certainly, it is in the vicinity of this patch of ground that historians, whatever their view of the dispositions of the two sides both before and during the fighting, have located the battle. At this stage that is sufficient; discussion of the precise alignments of the Lancastrian and Yorkist battlelines can wait.

The battlefield of Barnet today is partially built over. The village of Monken Hadley, which last century was little more than a manor house, a manor farm, windmill and parish church, now boasts many more houses lining the old St Albans road and the road to Hatfield. High Barnet has encroached on the southern reaches of Hadley Green itself. On the western part of the 'plain' is a golf course, traversed by footpaths. Hadley Green remains mostly intact, framed in a triangle of roads. To the south-east and north-east the ground, which in these areas falls away from the plateau most sharply, affords impressive views. Hadley High Stone, situated where the roads south from St Albans and Hatfield meet (map reference TQ 247979), was erected by Sir Jeremy Sambrook in 1740. It bears an inscription commemorating the battle.

Landscape Evolution

As we have seen, contemporary accounts record that the battle took place on high open ground about a mile north of High Barnet. There are references to the broad green, the St Albans high road, a 'hedgeside' and marshy ground on the right flank of the Yorkist line.

The limit of the built-up area of High Barnet in 1471 was considerably further south than today. However, the line of the A1000 follows broadly its earlier route, the actual line surviving as a boundary some 200m west of the eighteenth-century turnpike road. The marshy ground referred to is likely to be in the valley of the Monken Mead Brook, though there is also a smaller valley running east south-east from Hadley Green. The 'hedgeside' referred to may be the old hedgerow with bank and ditch which runs north-westwards across the golf course (a survey by the Hendon and District Archaeological Society suggested that the hedge is of ancient origin⁺). While this western part survives, the route of its continuation eastwards across the northern edge of the green is represented now by the continuation of the footpath.

These surviving features of the battlefield landscape were set in a predominantly heathland environment with only sporadic enclosures. The land, both enclosed and common, was used extensively for grazing, not least because of the livestock passing along the Great North Road and through Barnet market⁺⁺. Only to the north of the battlefield area does the field pattern take on the regular appearance of Parliamentary enclosure.

Urbanisation in the 18th and 19th centuries saw settlement expand along the Old St Albans Road in Chipping Barnet - along High Street and Wood Street in particular and north and east of Hadley Green. The settlements remained confined to the roads, and featured many prominent public buildings - churches, almshouses, schools and a militia barracks.

Hadley Green has remained largely intact since the 1880s, although 20th century housing development has linked High Barnet and Barnet as one built up area. High Barnet, consisting of mostly 1930s and later housing, has expanded over farmland on the southern edge of the battlefield area. Much of Hadley Wood to the east has been built over. The designation and maintenance of the Metropolitan Green Belt has ensured that the area north of High Barnet has remained open land used for agriculture and recreation.

In view of the changes that have taken place it is perhaps the more surprising that what appears to be an ancient

⁺HADAS newsletter 43 (September 1974).

⁺⁺Dr P.J. Taylor, pers. comm.

stretch of hedgerow should have survived to the west of the battlefield on the site of the present golf course. As will be seen later in the report, it has been contended that this is the hedge behind which the *Arrivall* states the Lancastrians were arrayed before the battle.

The Battle: its sources and interpretation

One of the earliest modern writers to attempt a description of the Battle of Barnet was Alfred J. Kempe, a contributor to the *Gentleman's Magazine*⁶. Little time need be spent dismissing his conclusions. One of the things of which we can be certain about this battle is that on the west flank the Lancastrian division outflanked its Yorkist opposite number, and that on the east flank the reverse held good. The *Arrivall* puts it thus:

So it was, that the one ende of theyr batayle ovarrechyd th'end of the Kyngs battayle, and so, at that end, they were myche myghtyar than was the Kyngs bataile at the same [end] that ioyned with them, whiche was the west ende ... And, in lykewyse, at the est end, the Kyngs battayle, whan they cam to ioyninge, ovarrechyd theyr batayle, and so distresyd them theyr gretly...⁷

Kempe, however, represents the Yorkists massively outflanking the Lancastrians in the west and the situation reversed in the east: the complete opposite of the evidence.

The next article of significance appeared in January 1882 in the *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society*. Frederick Charles Cass was rector of Monken Hadley and knew the area well. His account of the battle contains some shrewd topographical observations. In particular, his placement of the Lancastrian line is plausible.

A person taking his stand at Sir Jeffrey Sambrooke's obelisk, and looking southwards, will notice that the ground rises, with a scarcely perceptible ascent in front, towards the present Hadley Green, whilst, to the left, commences a rather considerable depression to the north of Hadley church, from which depression there is once more a rise in the direction of the Common eastwards. Warwick would hardly have allowed this to lie in his immediate rear, though it might have served as a protection to the left flank of his line. If then we suppose that this wing rested upon it, or was drawn slightly in advance of it, we may easily conceive of the whole position as extending westwards, past Old Fold Farm, then a moated manor-house ... which may have been within the line or behind it, to the point where the meadows touch the existing New Road [to St. Albans]. Somewhere here the right flank may have been posted..⁸

Warwick's wish to avoid having difficult ground immediately to the rear of his left flank would account for the Lancastrian line being drawn up further to the west than King Edward expected. Edward formed up his army the night before the battle and had no opportunity to see exactly where Warwick had made his dispositions. The fog which descended on the battlefield the next morning prevented any rectification of the two sides' battle lines to take account of the fact that the Lancastrian right extended beyond the Yorkist left and the Yorkist right beyond the Lancastrian left.

Any hopes that a historical consensus might emerge regarding the position of the battlefronts were dashed when Sir James Ramsay published his *Lancaster and York* in 1892. His interpretation of the battle has Warwick's line extending, not from east to west, but from north to south along the line of the old St Albans road either side of Hadley High Stone. 'From that position', Ramsay averred, 'he could take the King's troops in detail as they came out of the narrow street of Barnet'⁹. According to Ramsay, however, Warwick's plan was thwarted when Edward, under cover of darkness, marched round the east of the plain above Barnet and took up position facing Warwick's army in the valley created by Monken Mead Brook.

Ramsay's interpretation was expanded upon by C R B Barrett in *Battles and Battlefields in England* (London

1896). The battle took place on a north-south axis along the Barnet-St Albans road. As did Ramsay, Barrett took note of the contemporary reference to Warwick's army being drawn up 'undre an hedge-syde'. Ramsay had thought that 'the "hedge-syde" mentioned in the Arrivall as marking Warwick's line might be the west boundary of the Heath'; Barrett decided 'such a boundary might with considerable probability have fringed the road'¹⁰. Ramsay, in describing the course of the battle, touched upon the consequences of the Lancastrian success on the right of their line being counterbalanced by the Yorkist success on the other flank (on each wing, it will be recalled, the right-hand divisions of the two armies outflanked their opponents). 'What with the advance on his [King Edward's] right and the retreat on his left, it would seem that at the last the two lines had almost faced about; and that Edward's men were looking south, and Warwick's men were looking north'¹¹. This development was taken to have had dire results for the Lancastrians. We know from the *Great Chronicle* that the Earl of Oxford commanded the Lancastrian right wing and that at the outset of the battle his men prevailed against their immediate opponents:

...afftyr the Sunne was upp, eythir hoost approachid unto othir, But than it happid to be soo excedyng a myst that nowthir hoost cowde playnly see othir, soo that It happid therle of Oxynfford to sett upon the wyng or end of the duke of Glowcetirs people [actually Lord Hastings' division] & afftyr sharp ffygh slew a certayn of theym & put the Remenant to fflygh, and anoon as they had a while chacid such as ffled, soom Retournyd & ffyll to Ryfelyng & soom of theym wenyng that all had been wonne, Rood In alle haast to london & there told that kyng Edward haddf lost the ffeeld ... Then afftyr this ffayt was doon by therle & he parceyvid well that he had erryd of his waye, he then wyth such as were abowth hym sett upon the Remenant of that hoost and held batayll wyth theym.¹²

Oxford then, led what he could of his command back into the fight. This was the decisive moment of the battle and John Warkworth's *A Chronicle of the First Thirteen Years of the Reign of King Edward the Fourth* takes up the story:

But it hapenede so, that the Erle of Oxenfordes men hadde upon them ther lordes lyvery, bothe before and behynde, which was a sterre withe stremys, wiche [was] myche lyke Kyng Edwardes lyvery, the sunne with stremys; and the myste was so thycke, that a manne myghte not profytele juge one thyng from anothere; so the Erle of Warwikes menne schott and faughte ayens the Erle of Oxenfordes menne, wetyng and supposyng that thei hade bene Kyng Edwardes menne; and anone the Erle of Oxenforde and his menne cryed "treasoune! treasoune!" and fledde away from the felde withe viii c. menne¹³.

What had happened, according to Ramsay, was that Oxford had led his men back to the battle and they, appearing out of the mist in the rear of their own side, 'were received as enemies'. The similarity of the Earl of Oxford's and King Edward's liveries compounded the confusion. Barrett explained the theory more fully:

When the fight began, the two opposing armies lay practically north and south, the Yorkists attacking uphill. The Yorkist right, outflanking the Lancastrian left, drove it back on the centre ... The Lancastrian right chased the Yorkist left off the ground. When the two centres were closely engaged, [the Lancastrian centre] being worsted slightly, bent round so as to face more towards the north, while Edward faced more to the south, the position of the Yorkist right and the Lancastrian left having also similarly changed. Thus when Oxford returned from Barnet, whither he had gone in pursuit of the fugitive wing of the Yorkists, he would naturally come up in the rear ... of the then Lancastrian centre¹⁴.

In support of his contention regarding the alignment of the two armies and how this subsequently changed Ramsay quotes from an account of the battle written by Edward's sister, Margaret of York, to her mother-in-law, the Duchess of Burgundy. In her letter she stated how 'mon dit seigneur et frere se porta si honnestement que, là où il avoit le visage vers le vilage où Warwicque estoit parti, qui est à dix mil de Londres, nommet Vernet [Barnet], il se

trouva le dos en la fin contre icelui village¹⁵. But whilst the reference, it is true, supports Ramsay's belief that the battle lines swivelled during the course of the fighting (although probably not as much as 180 degrees), it does nothing for his argument that the two sides were originally ranged from north to south rather than east to west. Instead, Margaret of York's version of the battle has her brother facing south at the outset and Warwick facing north, which is inconceivable.

Ramsay's belief that the Lancastrian line faced east rather than south exasperated Lt-Colonel A H Burne when he wrote the chapter on the Battle of Barnet in his *The Battlefields of England* (London 1950)¹⁶. Burne, it should be remembered, lived in Barnet for 30 years and walked his dog across the battlefield every day. He characterized the identification as 'preposterous'. Nor was he impressed with the notion that Oxford's men would have returned to the battlefield in the Lancastrian rear. Rather than attempt to refute Ramsay's interpretation he preferred to proceed by means of what he termed 'inherent military probability' which, in his view, is that Warwick would have occupied the cross-ridge that runs astride the old St Albans to Barnet road at Monken Hadley. In an effort to define the Lancastrian position more exactly he searched the battlefield for any sign of the hedge mentioned by the Arrivall and discovered one along the crest of the ridge on Barnet golf course. Accompanied, as it is even today, by evidence of a bank and ditch, Burne considers the hedge to be of sufficient antiquity to have served as the 'hedge-syde' behind which the Earl of Oxford's division would have sheltered before the battle.

If Burne had wished to refute Ramsay's arguments he could have done so simply by drawing attention to what the Arrivall stated about the two sides' lines of battle¹⁷. It referred not to the northern and southern extremities of the Yorkist and Lancastrian lines - as would have been the case if the Ramsay thesis held good - but to 'the west ende' and 'the est end'. This bears out the contention of Burne and, before him, Cass. The two armies faced each other across the old St Albans to Barnet road, not along it.

However, all is not quite so clear cut. It has to be admitted that the more recently published testimony of Gerhard von Wesel does tend to support the Ramsay thesis. It will be recalled that von Wesel wrote how 'King Edward's followers, not knowing exactly in the darkness where their opponents were, rode on to that same place in the night and pitched their camp on the other side of the aforementioned [St Albans] high road in a hollow, on marshy ground, right opposite Warwick'. This description would answer exactly Ramsay's placing of the Lancastrians behind a hedge west of the St Albans road with the Yorkists down in the marshy valley of Monken Mead Brook to the east. However, only the most recent historian of the Battle of Barnet has been able to acknowledge, in passing, that von Wesel poses a problem. Peter Hammond, in his *The Battles of Barnet and Tewkesbury* (Gloucester 1990), attempted to reconstruct the course of the Duke of Gloucester's advance on the Yorkist right against the division of the Duke of Exeter.

On Edward's wing Gloucester was so far to the right [i.e. the east] that he was almost off the high ground [of the plain], and on advancing into the mist found not only that he was unopposed but that he was going downhill. He must have realized from the noise what had happened and swung his men to the left, up the slope, and made a flank attack on Exeter. The hollow out of which Gloucester made his attack may have been marshy, which would account for von Wesel's remark that Edward's line was on marshy ground: it cannot have been so in general because of the nature of the area¹⁸.

Thus Hammond hazards an explanation for von Wesel's comment even though, in doing so, he does not relate it to the Ramsay thesis. Hammond prefers not to acknowledge that doubt might exist about the alignment of the armies fighting the battle - whether they were arrayed from north to south or east to west. Hence his assumption that von Wesel's reference could not pertain to Edward's line as a whole because it was drawn up on the same plain as Warwick's army facing north.

Hammond's reluctance to reopen the debate is understandable. His book was not intended to investigate

interpretations but rather to set out what appeared to him 'the simplest and most likely course of events'. Since ultimately this report has to do likewise an account of the probable course of the Battle of Barnet is given below. It will be noticed that the verdict, after due weighing of the conflicting evidence, favours the interpretation of Burne over that of Ramsay. This is primarily because the belief of Ramsay that Warwick, in order to defeat the Yorkists as they issued out of the narrow street of Barnet, would deploy his men in column along the Old St Albans road, appears too inept tactically to warrant consideration.

The Course of the Battle

After Edward's withdrawal from Coventry the Earl of Warwick had followed the Yorkist army southwards to London, probably in the hope that he would find an advantageous moment to attack while the King's troops were establishing themselves in the capital. But the speed with which Edward had consolidated his hold on the city confounded Warwick's plans. As night fell on 13 April 1471 the Earl's outposts around High Barnet were driven in by Edward's vanguard and the King made camp in line of battle across the road leading into the north of the town. The Yorkist army was 10,000-12,000 strong while Warwick, who had deployed his army on the plateau running southwards from Hadley Green to Barnet, commanded in the region of 15,000 men. The two armies spent the night within earshot of each other, so close that when Warwick ordered a night bombardment of Edward's position his guns overshot their target.

On 14 April Edward's army advanced to the attack between 4am and 5am, while the ground was still obscured by a heavy mist. Edward's deployment on the previous evening had left his troops slightly out of alignment with the enemy, and the Yorkist right flank in the east overlapped Warwick's left flank, and *vice versa* in the west. Each army was deployed in three 'battles' or units. The Yorkist 'battles' comprised that of Richard Duke of Gloucester on the right, Edward with the Duke of Clarence in the centre, and Lord Hastings on the left. The Lancastrian 'battles' were under the command of the Earl of Oxford on the right, the Marquess of Montagu in the centre and the Duke of Exeter on the left.

When battle was joined, the morning mist and the speed with which Edward advanced gave little opportunity for the misalignment to be corrected, and though the King's right effectively took Warwick's left in flank, Edward's own left under Hastings was driven back through the town by Oxford's attack. This was Oxford's undoing, for while a proportion of his men disappeared in pursuit of the beaten Yorkists, the rest fell to looting Barnet. When Oxford had gathered together the remnants of his force he retraced his steps northwards and, since he was approaching from the direction of the Yorkist position, was promptly fired upon by Montagu's men. This was too much for Oxford's troops and many of them, putting up a cry of treason, fled from the field.

In the centre, where the battle was being conducted at close quarters by a mass of struggling men, their vision of events on the battlefield still obscured by the mist, the cry of treason was quickly taken up. The uneasy alliance of former Yorkists and Lancastrians that constituted Warwick's army broke down. As his opponents' battle line degenerated into chaos Edward, seizing his moment, launched his reserve into the attack. After a brief but hectic *melée* the Lancastrians broke and fled. Warwick, struggling to regain his charger at the rear of his army, was caught and killed, possibly near the site of the present-day Hadley High Stone. Casualties on both sides were comparatively heavy, the Lancastrians alone losing over one thousand men, and although the total Yorkist loss was probably only half that many of Edward's most constant supporters were numbered amongst the casualties.

Indication of Importance

There is no disputing that Barnet is one of the most important battles of the Wars of the Roses. Even if it had not been one of the two battles fought in quick succession in 1471 (the other being Tewkesbury) which finally established King Edward IV firmly on the throne of England, it would be memorable for marking the end of the career of the Earl of Warwick who, known by his sobriquet 'Warwick the Kingmaker', is one of the few personalities of the fifteenth century that the popular imagination today can recall to mind.

Compared with many other mediaeval battles the contemporary sources provide us with a good idea of what actually happened once battle was joined. This increases its significance. The contention that the hedge which crosses the golf course to the west of the battlefield is the same one mentioned by the *Arrivall* over 500 years ago would make it an important survival.

Although much of the battlefield is today built over, which prevents the visitor gaining an impression of the battlefield as a whole, there remain sufficient open spaces to make a visit to Barnet rewarding. For instance, the golf course to the west of Monken Hadley is crossed by a public footpath which, at one point, runs alongside the ancient hedge behind which the Earl of Oxford's division was possibly drawn up. Hadley Green, over which King Edward's division would have advanced to the attack, and the western edge of Monken Hadley Common, which the Duke of Gloucester's division would have crossed as it brought pressure to bear, can be freely traversed by the public. A path runs away from Hadley to the south-east across some small enclosures; from this direction the steepness of the ascent to the plateau upon which the battle was fought can be appreciated. A similar view of the climb to the top of the plateau is available to the north from the track that runs behind the housing to the right of the Hatfield Road.

Battlefield Area Description

The battlefield area boundary defines the outer reasonable limit of the battle, taking into account the positions of the combatants at the outset of fighting and the focal area of the battle itself. It does not include areas over which fighting took place subsequent to the main battle. Wherever possible, the boundary has been drawn so that it is easily appreciated on the ground.

To the west of the battlefield the boundary line is drawn along the New St Albans road, the A1081. This affords just about sufficient room for Oxford's wing to sweep down and drive the Yorkist left under Lord Hastings back toward Barnet. For illustrative purposes, the full extent of the battlefield is represented by a dashed line stretching to the junction of the road with the A1000 in the south before heading eastward to open ground again. The Registered battlefield area, however, skirts the built-up area on its southern side.

From point TQ238979 in the north-west the boundary line cuts across the golf course, using existing boundaries for convenience. The ground enclosed by the line allows enough room for the Earl of Oxford's men to be deployed behind 'the hedge' identified by Burne. The battlefield area then cuts across to the Barnet Road, between the last houses on the northern edge of Monken Hadley before heading east downhill to Monken Mead Brook and rejoining the county boundary. As well as allowing for the deployment of Warwick's left wing, by tracing this line the monument to the battle at Hadley High Stone is included in the battlefield area.

The line of the battlefield area now turns southwards past Monken Hadley church and on to King George's Field. Including this space in the battlefield area enables part of the terrain over which the Duke of Gloucester's division launched its improvised flanking attack against the Duke of Exeter to be represented.

Notes

1. A half mile: *Historie of the Arrivall of King Edward IV, A.D. 1471* ed. J Bruce (Camden Society 1838) p18; *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century* ed. N Davis (Oxford 1971) vol. 1 p438. A mile: *The Great Chronicle of London*, eds. A H Thomas and I D Thornley (London 1938) p216; 'The Newsletter of Gerhard von Wesel, 17 April 1471' by John Adair *Journal of the Society of Army Historical Research* xlv (1968) p68.
2. *Great Chronicle* p216.
3. Hall, Edward *Chronicle* (1809 edn.) p295.
4. *Arrivall* p18.
5. von Wesel *op. cit.*
6. *Gentleman's Magazine* xxii (1844) pp249-55.
7. *Arrivall* p19.
8. Cass, Frederick Charles 'The Battle of Barnet' *Trans. of the London and Middlesex Arch. Soc.* vi (Jan. 1882) p25.
9. Ramsay, Sir J H *Lancaster and York* (London 1893) p370.
10. *Ibid.*; Barrett, C R B *Battles and Battlefields in England* p196.
11. Ramsay *op. cit.* p372.
12. *Great Chronicle* pp216-7.
13. Warkworth, John A *Chronicle of the First Thirteen Years of the Reign of King Edward the Fourth*, ed. J O Halliwell (Camden Society 1839) p16.
14. Barrett *op. cit.* p196.
15. *Anchiennes Croniques d'Engleterre par Jehan de Waurin* ed. Dupont (Societe de l'histoire de France, 1858) iii 212-13.
16. Burne, Lt-Colonel A H *The Battlefields of England* (London 1950) pp 108-116.
17. As C L Scofield does in *The Life and Reign of Edward the Fourth* (London 1923) i p578.
18. Hammond, P W *The Battles of Barnet and Tewkesbury* (Gloucester 1990) p76.
19. Cass *op. cit.* p46.