

English Heritage Battlefield Report: Towton 1461

Towton (29 March 1461)

Parish: Towton, Saxton with Scarthingwell, Lead

District: Selby

County: North Yorkshire

Grid Ref: SE478386 (centred on Dacre's Cross)

Historical Context

The political instability of that period of English history now known as the Wars of the Roses again degenerated into open warfare once the Act of Accord of October 1460 named Richard Duke of York as King Henry VI's heir. Queen Margaret refused to accept that her son should be disinherited and she raised an army in the north to support the cause of the Lancastrian dynasty. Initially her crusade prospered: the death of the Duke of York at the Battle of Wakefield in December left an eighteen year old, Edward, Earl of March, as the Yorkist heir. However, Edward proved himself by winning the Battle of Mortimer's Cross on the Welsh borders in February 1461 and the political establishment in London, terrified of Queen Margaret's marauding northerners, had the young man declared King Edward IV.

Edward left London on 13 March to try conclusions with his opponents. Such was the horror felt at the northerners' depredations that he was able to recruit a large army in the south of England and the Midlands. Although historians often express doubt about the numbers that were eventually involved in the Battle of Towton - contemporaries felt sure that over 100,000 were present - it is clear that the two armies were of an exceptional size for the age. There was a sharp fight at Ferrybridge on the River Aire on 28 March which the Yorkists won, followed by the largest battle of the Wars of the Roses at Towton the next day. After ten hours of the severest fighting King Edward's men emerged victorious. King Henry and Queen Margaret fled to Newcastle and from thence to Scotland to continue the war as best they could.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

About the general location of the battlefield there is no dispute. It is situated three miles south of Tadcaster between the villages of Towton and Saxton in North Yorkshire (the two villages are one and a half miles apart).

In the Act of Attainder passed in the first year of Edward IV's reign the battle is referred to as having taken place 'on Sondag called comynly Palme Sondag, the xxix day of Marche ... in a feld bitwene the Townes of Shirbourne in Elmet, and Tadcastr ... called Saxtonfeld and Tawtonfeeld, in the Shire of York'¹. John Leland who, in the course of his travels visited the area approximately eighty years after the battle took place, noted that 'This feeld was as much fought in Saxton paroch as in Towton, yet it berith the name of Towton'. Having talked to people whose recent forebears would have witnessed the battle, he was told that the bones of men killed 'at Palmesunday feld' were now buried in Saxton churchyard: 'They lay afore in 5 pittes, yet appering half a mile of by north in Saxton felde'².

There are several Sites and Monuments Record entries relating directly to the Battle: the battle cross (SMR No. 9607.01), various burial mounds or sites of such mounds (SMR No.s 9609.02100, 9607.02100, 9607.02.200) and the stump of Lord Dacre's Burr Tree (SMR No. 9607.05). In addition, just outside the battlefield area are the remains of Richard III's commemorative chapel and further burial pits on Chapel Hill (SMR No. 9603.04) and Lord Dacre's (and others'?) graves in Saxton churchyard together with the church itself (SMR No. 9639.02). The Sites and Monuments Record also notes various finds of rings, arrowheads and coins (SMR Nos. 9607.02010, -.02011, -.03000, .04000 and -.04100), although all the original objectes appear to have been lost.

The Battle of Towton was fought on a plateau which rises to an average height of 150 feet. The elevation of the plateau is most apparent to the east where the ground falls away into the expanse of the York plain. To the west is a steep sided valley through which flows the River Cock. The ascent from Saxton village to the south is a steep one but rather gentler from the village of Towton in the north. The plateau itself is bisected by a dip which is shallow to the east (an area known as the North Acres) but which becomes progressively deeper further west. At this point 'Towton Dale', as it is called, emerges into the valley of the River Cock.

Landscape Evolution

Contrary to the belief of Alex Leadman, local historian and author of an article on the Battle of Towton, who wrote that 'At the period when the battle took place the whole of the ground would be unenclosed, chiefly moorland'³, field evidence suggests that the battle was fought on agricultural land between two villages. The appearance of the landscape in March 1461 would have been largely hedgeless open fields, used for grazing after the Autumn harvest, with perhaps some early-season ploughing and with substantial woods on both flanks.

The field patterns in Saxton parish show evidence of arable medieval open field patterns in the hedge boundaries, which are of characteristic 'reversed S' form (most clearly seen in the 1849 Ordnance Survey and Enclosure maps and extending almost to the parish boundary). Similarly, much of Towton parish land in the battlefield area appears to have been an open field rigg-and--furrow landscape. The North Acres area features a substantial bank (including old burr elm stumps) running across it which could have been produced by ploughing - a 'headland'. Further evidence for ploughing exists in the form of medieval lynchets below Castle Hill Wood.

This agricultural landscape was flanked on the west by the wooded Cock Valley - Renshaw Woods are listed as ancient semi-natural woodlands as are Towton Spring and Carr Woods to the east. Place-name evidence suggests coppicing in Towton Spring woodlands whilst the name Carr Woods suggests heavy, waterlogged ground.

The landscape was crossed by roads and tracks. The hedgerows around the bridleway called Old London Road are certainly old enough (from field evidence) to have been there in 1461. It was here, where the track descends to the River Cock, that the fleeing Lancastrians came to grief after the battle. The present B 1217 Saxton-Towton Lane would also have been present in 1461, judging by its relationship with field boundaries. Other tracks, such as that leading to the Trigonometric Point, follow the old field boundaries and therefore could too be old. The present A162 Barkston-Towton road could also be on an old line subsequently improved by eighteenth-century turnpiking.

Parliamentary enclosure in the early nineteenth century subdivided the existing fields rather than imposing a new system on the landscape. The recent removal of hedges in accordance with post-War agricultural practice has served to return the landscape to something of its medieval character.

The Sources

Towton is an important battle which is singularly ill-served by its source material. The Old English Chronicle or *Brut* concludes at the accession of Edward IV. Warkworth's Chronicle does not begin until after Edward's coronation, which took place following the battle. Other writers merely mention the battle or, if they do more, mix up their account of it with the fight that took place at Ferrybridge the previous day⁴.

The sources that actually detail the course of the battle are few. Anthony Goodman, a particularly rigorous

historian of the Wars of the Roses who avoids using the later histories of Tudor writers because it is generally impossible to check their sources of information, relies on the description of Towton given by the Burgundian chronicler, Jean de Waurin. Goodman admits that Waurin's version is 'largely uncorroborated'⁵; it is more important, however, that he was contemporary with events. Waurin's account of the battle, which follows a full description of the action at Ferrybridge, begins with the Yorkists spending a night in the open, suffering from the cold and snow. Presently they hear that 60,000 Lancastrians are arrayed nearby. The Dukes of Somerset and Exeter lead the Lancastrian advance guard, the Earl of Northumberland the main battle.

When the Earl of March [Edward] and his supporters were warned that King Henry was in the field they rejoiced, because they wished only to fight; the earl told his captains to ready their men to take the field before the enemy approached too close, which they did diligently: so it happened, while the battles were ordered scouts were dispatched to reconnoitre the land, and since the two armies were only four miles apart they very soon detected the enemy's scouts, upon which they sent word to the Earl of March how they had seen a great abundance of armed men in the field, and remaining long enough only to see the royal standard they returned hurriedly to Edward Earl of March, to whom they recounted the manner in which the enemy were arrayed. When advised of this the earl went the length of his battles until, reaching the cavalry, he said to them with a smile 'Friends, I ask that today you might be good and loyal to one another, because we fight in a just cause', to which each assented with a loud cry. Then word came to the earl that the king's advance guard were advancing; the Earl Edward had scarcely time to regain his position under his banner when Lord Rivers and his son with six or seven thousand Welshmen led by Andrew Trollope, and the Duke of Somerset with seven thousand men more, charged the Earl of March's cavalry, put them to flight and chased them for eleven miles, so that it appeared to them that they had won great booty, because they thought that the Earl of Northumberland had charged at the same time on the other flank, but he failed to attack soon enough, which was a misfortune for him as he died that day. In this chase died a great number of men of worth to the Earl of March who, witnessing the fate of his cavalry was much saddened and angered: at which moment he saw the Earl of Northumberland's battle advancing, carrying King Henry's banner; so he rode the length of his battle to where his principal supporters were gathered and remonstrated with them....

Edward reminds his supporters that they had wished to elect him king and so put an end to the Lancastrian usurpation. He asks them to help him recover his inheritance. This produces the desired effect.

Thanking them for their response the earl dismounted and, sword in hand, affirmed that this day he wished to live or die with them....Then he put himself before his standard facing his enemies, who advanced purposely yelling "King Henry!" So followed a day of much slaying between the two sides, and for a long time no one knew to which side to give the victory so furious was the battle and so great the killing: father did not spare son nor son his father. But finally, through the great efforts principally of the Earl of March, God gave him victory and he gained the day over his enemies.

In conclusion Waurin decides that the hardest fighting of the day was in the Earl of Warwick's quarter. Informants who had been present at the battle told him that the majority of Lancastrian leaders had been either killed or captured, and that the casualties altogether totalled 36,000 men⁶.

But the vast majority of writers on the Battle of Towton have preferred not to use Waurin. Goodman concedes that the Burgundian's occasional difficulties with English personal and place-names might make historians prejudiced against him: mistakes betoken unreliability. Most accounts of Towton follow instead the version of events that first appeared in the *Chronicle* of Edward Hall. This is one of the accounts by a Tudor writer that Goodman prefers not to use (the chronicle first appeared in 1548, although it had been completed a decade

earlier). Historians who base their accounts of the battle on Hall have not been ignorant of the drawbacks of the source. Clements Markham, who published an article in 1889⁷, appreciated that there was no way of knowing where Hall, writing seventy years after the battle, had derived his information. But for want of a contemporary description of the battle (Waurin's History, which is contemporary, was only published as part of the *Rolls Series* in 1891) Markham felt justified in turning to the narratives of those who lived nearest in time to the events they describe. Edward Hall was, at the time of writing, simply the best qualified.

Hall's account of the fight for the Ferrybridge crossing the day before Towton is common to all the others that have come down to us. Where he differs is in his description of the interception of the Lancastrians retreating from Ferrybridge 'at a place called Dintingdale, not far from Towton'. Here, he tells us, the notorious Lord Clifford was killed when struck in the throat by a headless arrow. His command was annihilated. Meanwhile, the Yorkist main body, having crossed the River Aire, advanced to unite with its victorious advance guard:

The Lord Fauconbridge, having the vanguard, because the Duke of Norfolk was fallen sick, valiantly upon Palmsunday in the twilight, set forth his army, and came to Saxton, where he might apparently perceive the host of his adversaries, which were accounted 60,000 men, and thereof advised King Edward, whose whole army, they that knew it, and paid the wages, affirm to 48,660 persons, which in company with the Earl of Warwick set forward levying the rearguard under the governance of Sir John Wenlock, and Sir John Dynham and other. And first of all he made proclamation, that no prisoner should be taken, nor one enemy saved. So the same day about nine of the clock, which was the 29th day of March, being Palm Sunday, both the hosts approached in a plain field, between Towton and Saxton. When each part perceived other, they made a great shout, and at the same instant time, there fell a small sleet or snow, which by violence of the wind was driven into the faces of them, which were of King Henry's part, so that their sight was somewhat blemished and diminished. The Lord Fauconbridge, which led the vanguard of King Edward's battle (as before is rehearsed) being a man of great policy, and of much experience in martial feats, caused every archer under his standard, to shoot one flight and then made them to stand still. the northern men, feeling the shot, but by reason of the snow, not well viewing the distance between them and their enemies, like hardy men shot their sheaf of arrows as fast as they might, but all their shot was lost and their labour vain for they came not near the southerners, by forty tailor's yards. When their shot was almost spent, the Lord Fauconbridge marched forward with his archers, which not only shot their own whole sheaves, but also gathered the arrows of their enemies, and let a great part of them fly against their own masters, and another part they let stand on the ground which sore annoyed the legs of the owners, when the battle joined. The Earl of Northumberland, and Andrew Trollope, which were chieftains of King Henry's vanguard, seeing their shot not to prevail, hastened forward to join with their enemies: you may be sure the other part nothing retarded, but valiantly fought with their enemies. This battle was sore fought, for hope of life was set on side on every part and taking of prisoners was proclaimed as a great offence, by reason whereof every man determined, either to conquer or to die in the field. This deadly battle and bloody conflict, continued ten hours in doubtful victory. The one part some time flowing, the sometime ebbing, but in conclusion, King Edward so courageously comforted his men, refreshing the weary, and helping the wounded, that the other part was discomfited and overcome, and like men amazed, fled toward Tadcaster bridge to save themselves: but in the mean way there is a little brook called Cock, not very broad, but of a great deepness, in the which, what for haste of escaping, and what for fear of followers, a great number were drenched and drowned, in so much that the common people there affirm, that men alive passed the river upon dead carcasses, and that the great river of Wharfe, which is the great sewer of the brook, and of all the water coming from Towton, was coloured with blood. The chase continued all night, and the most part of the next day, and every northern men, when they saw or perceived any advantage, returned again and fought with their enemies, to the great loss of both parties. For in this three days were slain (as they knew it

wrote) on both parts 36,776 persons...⁸

There is unfortunately little in common in the Waurin and Hall versions of the Battle of Towton. Nor do things improve when the third major source is consulted. 'Hearne's Fragment', written c 1520 by a Yorkist sympathiser who claimed to have known Edward IV, suggests that the battle was conducted overnight.

Thereupon they [the Yorkists] ever advanced themselves till they came to Touton, 8 miles out of York, upon a Friday at night, abiding the residue of their company, the which were assembled in good order on the Saturday, then being Palm Sunday-eve: and about 4 of the clock at night the two battles joined, and fought all night till on the morrow at after noon; when about the noon the foresaid John Duke of Norfolk with a fresh band of good men of war came in, to the aid of the new elected King Edward. This field was sore fought. For there were slain on both parts 33000 men, and all the season it snowed⁹.

In point of fact the idea that the battle could have been fought overnight is now disregarded. But the notion that the scales of fortune at Towton were tipped by the arrival late in the day of men of the Duke of Norfolk's division (presumably commanded by a deputy, if Norfolk really was ill) finds favour with historians: it adds desperately needed detail to their interpretation of the battle.

The other writers and chroniclers who touch upon Towton might mention the snow or the large number of Lancastrian fugitives that were drowned; heap panegyrics on the steadfastness of the Duke of Norfolk, the Earl of Warwick and Lord Fauconbridge; and conclude by attempting an estimate of the number of casualties of the fighting (most calculations range between 28000 and 36000); but they otherwise fail to elaborate upon the ebb and flow of battle. The one exception to this is the writer of the *Brief Latin Chronicle*, whose work features in the Camden Society volume *Three Fifteenth Century Chronicles*. The volume's editor, J. Gairdner, believes the author to have been contemporary with the events he describes and there is a reference in his brief account of Towton which partly corroborates the version of the battle of another contemporary, Waurin. According to the *Brief Latin Chronicle's* writer the two armies clashed between Ferrybridge and Tadcaster and 'very many horsemen on the side of King Edward turned their backs' (*plurimi equestres armaciores ex parte regis Edwardi terga vertentes*)¹⁰. It then falls to Edward to animate his men which he does so successfully that he leads them to victory. This, of course, is similar to Waurin's account: the cavalry breaking at the first shock with the onus thereafter thrust on Edward's qualities of leadership. Waurin gains credibility.

The Battle

It appears safe to assume that the fighting at Ferrybridge occurred during the morning of Saturday 28 March. Hall's tale of the skirmish later in the day at Dintingdale, which is just to the east of Saxton, is worth retaining because it sheds light on the fate of Lord Clifford, who achieved notoriety for his actions at the Battle of Wakefield. The fact that the Lancastrian commanders allowed Clifford's detachment to be destroyed little more than a mile from their main position does not commend their generalship.

The Yorkists are considered to have spent the night of 28-9 March camped south of Saxton. They then advanced up the slope from Saxton to the plateau early on Palm Sunday morning. Sir James Ramsay, in his *Lancaster and York*, places the Lancastrian battle line at the southern edge of the plateau above Saxton¹¹, an interpretation which is followed (rather surprisingly) by C L Scofield in her biography of Edward IV¹². This is, however, scarcely the 'plain field' mentioned by Hall, and all other commentators allow that the Yorkists were drawn up on the southern side of the plateau with Towton Dale and the North Acres between the two armies.

Thereafter the sequence of events was perhaps as follows. The battle begins with an exchange between the two sides' archers. Because of Lord Fauconbridge's cunning and the strength of the wind which blew snow into the Lancastrians' faces, the Yorkists get the better of the duel. The Lancastrians attack. Their vanguard, which would have been positioned on the Lancastrian right (i.e. to the west) and which at least both Waurin and Hall

agree had Sir Andrew Trollope in the lead, achieved success against the Yorkist cavalry opposing it. According to the *Brief Latin Chronicle* the fleeing Yorkist cavalry ransacked their own baggage train. The Lancastrian success on the western side of the battlefield accords with a tradition often cited (but for which the evidence is elusive) that they previously concealed men in Castle Hill Wood which, during the course of the battle, emerged in ambush¹³. The assumption therefore has long been that the Yorkist left was under particular pressure.

The exhortations of Edward however stabilise the situation. The two sides' main bodies lock in combat. At noon, after about three hours fighting, the Duke of Norfolk's division arrives on the battlefield. Since these reinforcements approached from Ferrybridge it is accepted that they would have marched directly along the road to Tadcaster and emerged on the battlefield upon the Yorkist right. The intervention of Norfolk's men, for want of an alternative explanation, is held to have slowly shifted the advantage to the Yorkists. Steadily, during the course of ten hours of fighting, the Lancastrians were forced back until their line crumbled and the struggle degenerated into a series of combats over the plain stretching towards Towton and beyond. The road towards Tadcaster reached a bottleneck at the crossing of the River Cock and at this point the slaughter was immense. Dead bodies lay upon the ground for many miles beyond the battlefield: the heralds after the battle computed the dead at 28,000.

Indication of Importance

The presence of over 100,000 men and upwards of 28,000 deaths makes Towton the largest and bloodiest battle ever fought in England. Even if the figures are incorrect it is clear that contemporaries - who were able to make comparisons with other battles of the Wars of the Roses - considered Towton to have been an exceptionally sizeable and sanguinary struggle. The significance invested by contemporaries in the Battle of Towton had much to do with the way in which it was regarded as the grand climactic not only between the Houses of York and Lancaster - each of which now had its rival kings - but between the prosperous south and the rapacious north¹⁴.

The sheer scale of the battle, and the fact that its outcome saw one dynasty removed from the throne of England and another elevated in its stead, makes Towton of the greatest importance.

For such an important battle the written sources are disappointingly few. The two major sources - the writings of Hall and Waurin - portray the events of the battle differently: historians differ over to whom to lend greater credence. Archaeological methods, in terms of identifying grave pits etc., hold considerable potential for increasing our knowledge of the battle.

Battlefield Area

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.

The western edge of the area is delimited by the River Cock, from the point where it meets the Old London Road in the north as far as Castle Hill Farm to the south-west. This ensures that such important features as the Cock crossing where the Lancastrians came to grief, the Bloody Meadow, Castle Hill Wood and the tumuli near Castle Hill Farm are included in the battlefield area. From Castle Hill Farm the boundary line follows exiting field boundaries across to Catchers Lane, across Whithill Field and the A162 road as far as Carr Wood, where it turns north.

On the eastern side, the battlefield area takes in a series of fields beyond the plateau and the Tadcaster-Ferrybridge road. There are two reasons for this. The first is that writers tend to be aware that, in view of the large numbers present, the frontage of the lines of battle on the plateau are very narrow. To

compensate they a) represent the two armies as each ranged in multiple lines of battle (this, it is claimed, is how the battle could last ten hours: fresh men were continually being fed into the fighting) and b) the left and right flanks of the Lancastrians and Yorkists respectively are shown as falling off the eastern edge of the plateau. This, therefore, must be allowed for. Second, space must be created for the belated intervention of the Duke of Norfolk's division to take effect on the Lancastrians' open left flank. A margin extending some 400 metres beyond the road should be sufficient.

The boundary line rejoins the A162 just to the south of Towton, runs south of the centre of the village and then continues along the Old London Road as far as the River Cock. The lines of the road and the Cock create a funnel, channelling the Lancastrian fugitives to their doom at the river crossing. Although the rout continued beyond the crossing, the focal point at the crossing is considered to be an appropriate point at which to draw the boundary.

Notes

1. *Rotuli Parliamentorum* ed. J Strachey and others (1767-83) V pp477-8.
2. *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the Years 1535-1543* ed. by Lucy Smith (London 1907) I p43.
3. Leadman A D H 'The Battle of Towton' *The Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal* 10 (1889) p293.
4. George Neville, the Bishop of Exeter (and Warwick's brother), is one guilty of conflating the fight at Ferrybridge and the Battle of Towton. See his letter to the Bishop of Teramo in *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts, relating to English Affairs, existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice...* I (1202-1509) ed. R Brown (London 1864) pp99-100.
5. Goodman, A *The Wars of the Roses* (London 1981) p5.
6. Waurin, Jehan de *Recueil des Croniques et Anchiennes Istories de la Grant Bretagne, a present nomme Engleterre* v, ed. Sir William Hardy and E L C P Hardy (Rolls Series 1891) pp339-341.
7. Markham, C R 'The Battle of Towton' *The Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal* 10 (1889) p1.
8. Hall, Edward *Chronicle* (1809 ed.) pp253-4.
9. 'A Remarkable Fragment of an Old English Chronicle or History of the Affairs of King Edward the Fourth', in Thomas Hearne's *Sprotti Chronica* (Oxford 1719) p287.
10. 'A Brief Latin Chronicle' in *Three Fifteenth Century Chronicles* ed. J Gairdner (Camden Society 1880) p173.
11. Ramsay, Sir James *Lancaster and York* (Oxford 1892) ii 278.
12. Scofield, C L *The Life and Reign of Edward the Fourth* (London 1923) i 163.
13. Burne, A H *The Battlefields of England* (London 1950) p99.
14. See for example the register of John Whethamstede in *Registra quorundam Abbatum Monasterii S. Albani* ed. H T Riley, I (Rolls Series 1872).