

RALLY TO THE CROSS

As the 550th anniversary of the Battle of Towton approaches, journalist Martin Hickes explores a new mystery from the Wars of the Roses.

Palm Sunday sees the 550th anniversary of the Battle of Towton and people still commemorate the fateful day, when the bloodiest battle in English history was fought, at Dacre's Cross in the village of Towton.

This memorial to the battle of Towton was erected just within the bounds of living memory, in 1939 by James R. Ogden, of Harrogate, an archaeologist and lecturer. The cross had been lying forgotten in a hedge bottom and he raised the money to have it erected by giving a number of lectures to pay for its restitution. Back then it was known as the Towton Cross but over the years it has been given the name of Dacre's Cross after one of the leading Lancastrian commanders who died a gory death at the battle, his throat pierced by an arrow

The cross however, has nothing to do with Lord Dacre, who was buried, mounted on his horse, in Saxton churchyard. His tomb is still there to this day. The cross is more than likely to be the only visible relic of the chantry chapel that was built to commemorate the events of that visceral day on Palm Sunday 1461, which are still etched in the consciousness of many a Yorkshireman and woman.

For devotees from the Towton Battlefield Society and other historians, a new campaign is mustering to find what is becoming a symbolic emblem for them of the piety of the Yorkist victors after the crushing defeat of the Lancastrian forces.

If unearthed, it could represent one of the most significant battlefield architectural finds in years, and perhaps spark a whole new debate about the true nature of the House of York's most infamous king.

Although the Wars of the Roses were eventually won by Lancastrian Henry Tudor (VII) with his defeat of the Yorkist Richard III at Bosworth Field in 1485, for years after the victory at Towton the Yorkist faction was in the ascendancy. New evidence is emerging that 'selfishness of aim' was not all there was to it. Richard – installed as king in 1483 – was, it seems, actually immensely penitent over the bloody rout.

Some historians and enthusiasts now think the bloody massacre – which saw hastily buried bodies on both sides rot in the putrid fields of Towton for twenty years or so – became a stupefying embarrassment for Richard's administration.

Historian, author, and TBS associate George Peter Algar says:

“When Richard III ascended the throne of England in 1483, there was unfinished business to attend to and it would not wait.

“The north of England was still reeling from the shockwaves of the battle of Towton and the mass graves there were a grim reminder of man's inhumanity to man.

“The adult male population of some entire villages had been wiped out and the poor souls had not been given a decent Christian burial. “

“Richard’s period of office as the Governor of the North of England brought him into contact with the mess that was the Towton battlefield, the site of his brother Edward IV’s greatest victory and Britain’s biggest ever battle. “

“Towton was a bloody encounter, with no quarter given. Chivalry was dead and Edward gave the order to take no prisoners. Some of his captives, who numbered among the defeated nobility, were brutally executed, as evidenced from the skeletons found in the mass grave during excavations at Towton Hall.

“Estimates vary but the consensus view is that 28,000 men were killed on that day and they were buried in mass grave pits all around the villages of Towton and Saxton. “

“The grave pits were a constant and nagging reminder of the civil war that had torn England asunder and the land was not fit for the plough, so great was the stench of the rotting corpses leaking methane gases from the graves. The stench would have been bad - a big build up of methane gas; people were very fearful of noxious gases when a tomb was exhumed so think on the scale of a mass grave. “

Newly crowned, Richard set about exhuming the grave pits in 1484 and giving the bodies a decent Christian burial with the words ‘Their bodies were notoriously left on the field....and in other places nearby, thoroughly outside the ecclesiastical burial-place in these hollows. Whereupon we, on account of affection, contriving the burial of these deceased men of this sort, caused the bones of these same men to be exhumed and left for an ecclesiastical burial in these coming months, partly in the parish church of Saxton in the said county of York and in the cemetery of the said place and partly in the chapel of Towton....and the surroundings of this very place.’

“He also granted £40.00 to re-edify the chapel, originally raised by his brother Edward IV, in atonement for the massacre at this battle, that still rankled with his northern English subjects. A permanent chaplain was appointed, funded from revenues from the Honour of Pontefract.”

“In Richard’s mind, if the land was turned back to pasture and the plough, the encounter would be a distant memory and the nation would be one again.”

It is this chapel, which lies somewhere among the wreck of the rolling downs of the battlefield, which has become the new quest of the Towton enthusiasts, 550 years on.

Unfortunately Richard was killed at Bosworth in 1485 and the work on the chapel was never finished. Whilst it has been suggested that Richard’s defeat may have ended this second effort at a memorial chapel, new research by Dr. Philip Morgan of Keele University, shows that appeals for further funds continued to be made in the reign of Henry VII. On 22 July 1486 Archbishop Rotherham offered indulgences to those who would contribute to the completion of:

a certain splendid chapel expensively and imposingly erected from new foundations in the hamlet of Toughton, upon the battleground where the bodies of the first and

greatest in the land as well as great multitudes of other men were first slain and then buried and interred in the fields around, which chapel in so far as the roofing, the glazing of the windows, and other necessary furnishings is concerned, has not yet been fully completed.

When Leland, the poet, antiquary and licensed surveyor of monastic libraries, passed by in 1540 he described it as a 'great chapel' begun by Richard III but not finished, the foundation stone of which had been laid by Sir John Multon's father. This unsatisfactory narrative can only point to a site where the memory and its management were regularly contested and finally lost, perhaps within a generation.

This cross is the focal point of the battlefield memorial service that is held every Palm Sunday, to venerate the dead of both sides who fell on that fateful day on March 29th 1461. But the chapel's exact location has not been fully established and more research needs to be conducted.

"But the chapel is a particular symbol of Yorkist piety. What Richard III set out to do, members of the Towton Battlefield Society aim to preserve. The search for the exact location of the chapel is still on but the memory of those that died that day will never be forgotten."

Prof Francis O'Gorman, Head of the School of English at the University of Leeds, from nearby York, says:

"It is easy to think that Richard gloated over his victory. And the idea of Towton simply as a ruthless bloodbath created by merciless ambition has persisted. Typically, in the nineteenth century, the poet Francis Turner Palgrave imagined the scene: 'Ne'er since then, and ne'er before,' he said,

*'On England's fields with English hands
Have met for death such myriad myriad bands,
Such wolf-like fury, and such greed of gore:---
No natural kindly touch, no check of shame:
And no such bestial rage
Blots our long story's page;
Such lewd remorseless swords, such selfishness of aim.'*