

The Battle of Towton

At just after 9.00 am on the morning of Sunday 29th March 1461 two huge armies were assembled on a plateau of land a dozen or so miles south west of York, England's second largest city. Each army had been raised to fight for a different king through royal commissions of array, with refusal to enlist being punishable by death. In some areas the two sides had competed to recruit, which might give a few an option, but in those regions where one side dominated, there was no such notion of choice. As the country was scoured for troops, even the ill-equipped, the well-named 'naked men', those who in more desperate times would have been left behind, were conscripted.

The two kings were very different. Henry VI of the House of Lancaster had become King of England and of France since before his first birthday; the pious, passive and uncomprehending thirty-nine-year-old Henry had been crowned and anointed in both London and Paris before the age of ten and his position was seen to be ordained and safeguarded by God. In contrast, the vigorous eighteen-year-old giant that was Edward IV of the House of York had no such divine protection, having been merely acclaimed by his troops, by the citizenry of London and by a minor proportion of the nobility and that less than a month before. Symbolically, Edward had to vindicate his right to the throne by force of arms, illustrating 'God's approval' by a decisive victory. Strategically, Edward had to destroy the Lancastrian power base north of the Trent and to take their bastion, the city of York.

The Lancastrian army was around a third larger than their Yorkist opponents at the outset of the battle. It contained the greater proportion of England's nobility, the country's governing warrior class, who with their household men-at-arms, provided the best armed, armoured, trained and organised troops; even those who were best fed and the strongest. The Lancastrians also had the better ground and this was no accident, for they had selected the plateau of land between the two small North Yorkshire villages of Towton and Saxton as the ideal place for luring their opponents into a pitched battle between the natural barrier of the River Aire and the city of York. But first, the Yorkists had had to cross the Aire, as described in the account of the Battle of Ferrybridge on this website, and this had all been part of the Lancastrian strategic plan.

In Victorian times, it was customary to regard Wars of the Roses commanders as dim-witted thugs with no grasp of strategy or tactics. This is a fallacy. Admittedly there were certainly some brainless nobles, such as the 'violent and stupid'¹ Duke of Exeter, but it was a different type of man who gave the armies their strategic direction. The Lancastrian army at Towton was commanded by Henry Beaufort, 2nd Duke of Somerset, who had amongst his battle honours the victory at Wakefield (see Battle of Wakefield .pdf on this website) with its defeat

and the death of two of the seemingly indispensable older generation of Yorkists: Richard Duke of York himself and Richard Neville, Earl of Salisbury. Somerset's military advisor was a non-noble, Sir Andrew Trollope, who had caused, by his defection, the earlier rout of the Yorkists at Ludford Bridge in 1459, and who, most recently, had been knighted for his decisive action and bravery at the 2nd Battle of St Albans just a month before Towton.

Trollope's importance and his cunning were recognised by contemporary chroniclers, one of whom described him as a 'magno capitaneo and quasi ductore belli' and another as a 'tres subtil home de guerre'. He was a professional soldier of long experience who, like his contemporaries, had access both to 'fight books', manuscripts illustrating combat techniques, and to manuals of tactics and strategy that captured the best of the still highly relevant ancient Roman expertise as well as that of more contemporary commanders. The Lancastrian tactics in the days leading up to Towton mirror the advice of these manuals.

The River Aire, rising in the Pennines and flowing east before conjunction with the Ouse and then reaching the sea at the Humber Estuary, is the first of a number of river barriers blocking an army marching northwards from the South and Midlands. It is also the main physical obstacle for an advance on York and, as such, it was a natural place for the Northern based-army to block its southern counterpart, by control of the two direct crossing points: the bridge at Ferrybridge and the ford at Castleford. With such control, the defenders could aim to keep their opponents on the south side for as long as possible, there to be wracked by hunger (the Yorkists were after all trying to find provisions in enemy territory at the end of winter), by the diseases which threatened any medieval army trapped in one place for too long, and by the desertion of soldiers a long way from home. Then, having let time do its work, the defenders could withdraw in good order to lure their enemy forward to do battle on a day and in a place of their choosing.

That this possibility did not translate into reality was surely more by accident than by design; the result of the extraordinary speed of the Yorkist advance and its consequence that, when they reached the Aire, the Yorkists found the bridge at Ferrybridge only partially destroyed and, even more importantly, the ford at Castleford not yet defended. With the Yorkist army on the north bank of the Aire sooner than anticipated, the Battle of Towton took place on Palm Sunday, a day which for the men of that highly-religious age should have been one of peace and not war.

But the River Aire was just the first line of defence for the Lancastrians. Their secondary position, at Towton, was one which would have appeared to be exceptionally strong in all

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anticipated weather conditions. This can be seen by looking at the terrain today: it is agricultural land, as it was then, and has not been built upon. The nature of the farmland in 1461 was different to that of today in detail rather than substance. In 1461, there was some pasture, some arable and some managed woodland. Trees and bushes were also probably individually dotted around the plateau, but woods in any profusion were to the west, that is to the right and rear of the Lancastrian position and thus would have given them the security and visibility of facing open ground. The Lancastrians also had the higher ground, for the plateau itself was not flat but of undulating land and they were on the highest point of the northern part of the plateau, from which the land slopes down from north to south for around 400 yards. This position corresponded to the very point where the Cock Beck, down in the valley below, snakes sharply inwards before snaking out again; its complete protection from flank attack on a narrowed front made it extraordinarily strong. To the left the ground fell away towards marshland. To the right, it dropped precipitously to a small but boggy flood plain leading to the Cock Beck, with the stream arching around to the back of the position. The Cock Beck is one geographical feature of the battlefield that has changed since 1461, a result of the enclosures and marshland drainage schemes of later centuries, and an alteration that remains after the more recent removal of the hedging that has returned the terrain to its 15th century aspect.

Even in modern times, Cock Beck, in extreme conditions, can burst its banks and flood a wide area; but in medieval times, before the later drainage schemes, it could act as a fast flowing storm drain, channelling water from the vicinity of Leeds and York, further to the north, a vast area. In 1461, there was a bridge across Cock Beck, behind the Lancastrian lines to the north-west: but if this, and the Tadcaster bridge over the River Wharfe, into which the Beck flowed, were cut, then the Lancastrian army would be completely protected from flank attack. The Yorkists had to attack from due south and up the slope. The 15th and 16th century chroniclers point to this, but they do not represent the true disadvantage of the Yorkist opening position: indeed, we have only recently discovered the exact opening positions of the two armies through the painstaking archaeological work of Tim Sutherland and Simon Richardson. They have been able to pinpoint these literally by tracing lines of arrow heads, west to east / east to west across the battlefield. Thus the hungry and numerically inferior Yorkist army, unable to outflank their opponents, had no alternative but to attack up the rising ground. The Lancastrian trap was set.

This was the alarming position facing the Yorkist troops and their commanders at the outset of the battle. Aside from the young king, their chief commanders, when the battle commenced, were his cousin and Salisbury's son, the younger Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick (known to history as Warwick the Kingmaker) and the Uncle of both men, William Neville, Baron Fauconberg, who had had many years experience of fighting in France. Such experience now served him well at a time of rapidly changing weather. It is not known exactly how long before the battle's onset that a wind of blizzard strength, carrying sleet or snow, began to blow from the south or south-east, but it could not have been long, or the troops would have been arrayed differently. Similarly, we cannot know whether there had been an extended period of precipitation before the battle, but it is thought that Cock Beck had been in spate. But change in the weather there was, and the experienced Fauconberg, in charge of the Yorkist archers, turned this situation to the Yorkist advantage. For whereas the Lancastrians, blinded by these new conditions, loosed off volley after volley of arrows towards the Yorkist lines, with no idea of their impact; their clear-sighted Yorkist counterparts were directed by Fauconberg to shoot once and then, with adjustments made for the wind, to shoot repeatedly and with deadly effect into the Lancastrians. For the wind had made the crucial difference: the Lancastrian arrows fell short, whilst those of the Yorkist archers struck home. The latter increased their advantage by moving forward, picking up the previously ineffective Lancastrian missiles and shooting them too. Only relieved by the need for the archers to replace damp bowstrings with dry ones kept under their hats - for in such conditions they needed to have several strings to their bow - these deadly opening artillery exchanges were greatly in the Yorkists' favour. In order to prevent further carnage, the Lancastrian men at arms had to move forward, they had to abandon their advantage of ground. But they still had the advantage of numbers.

It is possible that it was at this point in the battle that the position of the two armies on the battlefield pivoted and that instead of facing north/south, they tilted north-west / south-east. The impact of the charge of a heavily armed and armoured infantry force – and all set-piece Wars of the Roses battles were infantry engagements at least until the pursuit stage – would have been colossal. The impact would not have been evenly-distributed, with the Yorkist lines buckling at various points. The Yorkists came under great pressure, both now and in the hours that followed, with the front-lines of the two forces jammed together in the trough between two areas of rising ground. We know this because chronicles, albeit Yorkist

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in sympathy, highlight Edward's role in rallying his troops when it appeared that his lines would break. The young king's commanding physical and symbolic presence on the battlefield was crucial. Physically Edward was a rallying point, at almost six foot four, he stood head and shoulders above the average man; not only would his men have been able to see his standard (probably borne by an even greater giant, the six foot seven David ap Matthew), they would have been able to see their leader's personal vigour, bravery and direction. Edward's symbolic power to the Yorkists was important too, for there was no counter-balancing rival royal presence on the Lancastrian side. The enfeebled Henry VI, who had never taken an active part in a previous battle, was safely ensconced in York with his Queen, Margaret of Anjou, and his son Edward of Westminster, Prince of Wales, there to expect news of a victory. Thus, though the Lancastrians had the comfort in fighting for a crowned and anointed monarch and, by that, of seemingly having God and 'right' on their side, they did not have inspiration the Yorkists gained from seeing the personal valour, killing power and clear direction of a young, vigorous king, fighting with and for them in the most appalling conditions.

The conditions were indeed appalling, as hour followed hour, with snow or sleet in the air, as ice became slush on the ground mixed with blood. It is said that at points in the line, the men at the front had to pause to allow mounds of bodies to be cleared and enable them to continue without impediment. Lulls in the fighting were also inevitable as a few exhausted nobles and their men at arms, at the epicentre of the violence, would need to be replaced by others and allowed to snatch a few moments rest and some fortifying swigs of wine at the rear of the line, before returning to the fight. The commanders on both sides would have appreciated the consequences of their lines breaking in disorder: the Lancastrians having created a position where they could not be outflanked, knew that they had a combination of swollen river and marsh to their rear and sides; but the Yorkists, even if they did not have knowledge of the exact contours of the land around Towton itself – which is unlikely – knew that the River Aire, which had been the impediment to their advance north, would now become the great barrier to their retreat, with Lancastrian horsemen overtaking the fleeing Yorkist rabble and blocking the crossings at Ferrybridge and Castleford.

All the while, as the Yorkists hung on, their commanders hoped for reinforcement. They knew that perhaps 5,000 troops assembled by the Duke of Norfolk were on the move towards them, but also that at one stage they had been more than a day's march behind.

But, at last, these troops arrived on the battlefield, not in orderly fashion to reinforce the Yorkist rear, but possibly due to poor visibility and the contours of the battlefield rather than martial intent, into the side of the Lancastrian line. If the battle lines had not pivoted forty-five degrees before, they did so now. Yet still they did not break.

However, late in the day, one of the lines did break: soon the Lancastrians were in full disordered flight. We cannot know the exact cause, perhaps the Lancastrians lost an important commander: Allan Harley of the Wars of the Roses Federation surmises that perhaps at this point the Earl of Northumberland, who we know was critically wounded, was pulled out of the line; Graham Darbyshire, Secretary of the TBS, suggests that this may have been the moment when Lord Dacre, resting at the rear, was shot by a sniper from a burr tree. Certainly, the loss of a noble would have been disastrous for his men at arms: they would have lost their paymaster as well as their leader and this might have made them risk the lances of their own prickers – the horsemen with orders to kill deserters without compunction. But as a few men rapidly became an army in full flight, it was the pursuit troops of the enemy rather than those of their own army which became the cavalry to fear.

The Lancastrian commanders had set the trap; now it was sprung, but on themselves. Escape from the battlefield was extraordinarily difficult, shown by the great numbers of Lancastrian nobles who were cut down, a fate that befell Sir Andrew Trollope who it is believed died in the fight rather than in flight. But it was not just the nobility who were targeted. The struggle within an increasingly embittered and vindictive aristocratic elite had widened, as battle succeeded battle during the First War of the Roses, to embrace the gentry – forty-two captured Lancastrian knights were executed immediately after Towton on Edward's orders - and then the common man. There was no quarter given, no chance of surrender.

There may have been a guiding hand directing the slaughter – possibly Warwick the Kingmaker who had been wounded by an arrow to his leg at Ferrybridge – may have been to the rear on higher ground issuing orders. More likely, the Yorkists given Edward's proclamation that 'no prisoner should be taken, nor one enemy saved'², needed no additional direction as they surged forward with adrenaline levels produced by victory and the pursuit of enemies seeking escape by one of two treacherous routes.

The first of these was to the rear of their pivoted lines, which funnelled them down sharply sloping and then precipitous ground through what is now known as Towton Dale and Bloody

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Meadow to the flooded boggy ground surrounding the fast-flowing waters of Cock Beck. Even without the attention of their opponents, many would have died under the crush of their comrades, but they also offered slow moving targets for enemy infantry as well as cavalry and very possibly archers shooting down from above.

The alternative was to escape up the slope at the back of the Lancastrian starting position into open country, cavalry country, there to be the prey of Yorkist horsemen. That said, many did reach the crossing point over Cock Beck, the bridge on the Old London Road towards Tadcaster, only to find that it had been broken, which gives its name to the same place today, 'The Bridge of Bodies'. For those who got across, there were further obstacles, such as the River Wharfe at Tadcaster and then further open country towards York. When such conditions are considered it is far from inconceivable that the Lancastrians could have lost half their army at Towton.

Some, however, did escape, including the Duke of Somerset, who in haste gathered Henry VI, the Queen and the Prince at York, before rushing headlong to escape over the Scottish border.

The victorious Edward stayed some months in the North, seeking the capture and supervising the execution of fleeing nobles and attempting, with Warwick, to secure the region. Then, satisfied with the progress made, in June he was back in his capital. There, on June 28th, in Westminster Abbey, he was anointed and crowned with extraordinary magnificence. Edward IV of the House of York had secured his throne, at least for a time.

George Goodwin is the author of *Fatal Colours: Towton 1461 – England's Most Brutal Battle* (with an Introduction by David Starkey) now published in the UK by Weidenfeld & Nicolson and to be published (April 2012) by W.W. Norton in the US. The above, a condensed and adapted version of one of the chapters in the book, has been specially rewritten for the Towton Battlefield Society and for this we offer George our utmost thanks. For further information on *Fatal Colours* see www.georgegoodwin.com or purchase this book at the towton.org.uk shop.

1¹ Prof Ross

2² Hall, *Chronicle*, p. 255. Also cited in Humphrys, *Clash of Arms* (2006), p. 83.