

The Battle of Wakefield

Prelude to Towton: The Battle of Wakefield

By putting a new king on England's throne, the Battle of Towton marked a climax in that long, bitter conflict between the royal Houses of Lancaster and York known today as the Wars of the Roses. But the reasons why Towton happened, and why it became 'the biggest, bloodiest battle ever fought on English soil', can be traced back to the events that preceded it by three months: the defeat of Richard of York in battle at Wakefield on 30th December, 1460.

Historical Background: The Royal Rivals

Wakefield itself came about after decades of unrest between supporters of the Lancastrian King Henry VI, and his cousin Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, both of whom (by virtue of their descent from Edward III) could make valid claims to the throne:

Henry VI was descended from King Edward's third son, John of Gaunt, second Duke of Lancaster. Gaunt's son Henry Bolingbroke, the third Duke, rebelled against the autocratic, partisan rule of his cousin Richard II, and deposed him in 1399. After reigning for 14 years as Henry IV, the first Lancastrian king's crown passed unchallenged to his ambitious and energetic son, Henry of Monmouth. Henry V was a shrewd and successful king, made massively popular by his conquest of France; and having been named heir to the French throne, consolidated his position by marrying Catherine of Valois, daughter of Charles VI. But Henry V was balked of an illustrious destiny by his untimely death, of dysentery, in 1422 – and thus the thrones of both England and France passed to his nine-month-old son, Henry of Windsor.

The sixth Henry's rival, Richard of York, could trace *his* royal descent on both the maternal and paternal lines. His mother Anne Mortimer was descended from Edward III's second son Lionel, first Duke of Clarence, and his father Richard, Earl of Cambridge, from King Edward's fourth son Edmund of Langley, first Duke of York. York's mother had died soon after his birth, while his father was executed in 1415 for rebelling against Henry V; so from the age of four Richard was raised as a ward of the Lancastrian court, until he was married (aged 12) to Cecily Neville, the youngest daughter of Ralph Neville, Earl of Westmorland. Arguably, this pedigree gave York the stronger claim – albeit one the adolescent Duke left in abeyance, content to serve the Lancastrian crown in the expectation of high office and a pre-eminent place on the king's council.

So the Battles of Wakefield and Towton might never have happened, had Henry VI been more like his father. Unfortunately, this proved not to be the case. Henry was in every respect unequal to the demands of 15th century kingship: indecisive, impractical, gullible, easily swayed by self-interested favourites - and literally weak-minded, having inherited a genetic tendency to mental ill-health from his French grandfather. He had also inherited, from Henry V, a complex and difficult problem: how to rule France when his uncle, Charles VII, refused to accept being disinherited as its rightful king. And while Richard of York, in his capacity as Lieutenant of France, strove to maintain control in Normandy, Henry and his advisers were repeatedly outmanoeuvred by Charles – who in 1444, offered the carrot of truce by proposing his niece, Margaret of Anjou, as a bride for the 23-year-old King of England.

By this time, trouble was already brewing between the Duke of York and King Henry's clique of courtiers back home. Although the Duke played an active part in the marriage ceremonials, entertaining Princess Margaret at Rouen and escorting the bridal party to Honfleur, on returning to England at the end of his tenure in 1445, he was accused of mismanaging affairs in Normandy. Despite his indignant rebuttals he was not re-appointed as Lieutenant of France; the office went instead to one of Henry's favourite relations, Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, while York was appointed Lieutenant of Ireland (a move some contemporaries, possibly including the Duke himself, regarded as tantamount to exile).

With Richard of York thus removed from the political mainstream, matters in England went from bad to worse. King Henry depleted Crown resources by doling out lands and favours hand-over-fist to his cronies, and squandered thousands more on costly building projects at Eton and Cambridge. The French territories his father had conquered were progressively lost; trade and economy suffered; England's people suffered from rampant corruption by royal officers; and the factious nobility (notably the Percy and Neville families) indulged their personal rivalries and power-plays unchecked by firm leadership.

The consequences, as Edward II and Richard II had discovered to their cost, were sadly predictable: chaos and rebellion. By 1450, followers of Jack Cade were calling for the King's closest advisers – or even Henry himself – to be replaced by Richard of York. The Duke added his voice to the commons' demands for reform, leading to an escalation of mistrust, enmity and violence between the emerging Yorkist and Lancastrian factions. Then in 1453, Henry responded to England's defeat in the Hundred Years War and expulsion from France with a complete mental breakdown. This gave York his first taste of ultimate power; with the King reduced to a vegetable state, he was appointed Protector of the Realm (confounding the hopes of the newly-pregnant Queen Margaret, who had wished to be regent during her husband's incapacity).

A year later, Henry VI marked his recovery by reversing the policies of the Protectorate - including clearing York's detested enemy, Edmund Beaufort, of treason, releasing him from imprisonment in the Tower of London, and binding the feuding Dukes to keep the peace or forfeit 20,000 marks. The King's attempt at peace-making was futile; York and his ally Richard Neville, Earl of Salisbury, felt they had no choice but to prevent a planned meeting of the great council, fearing that its intention was to indict them of treason or impose other punitive sanctions. So they took up arms and the outcome, on 22nd May, 1455, was a Yorkist victory at the first Battle of St Albans; the deaths of the Duke of Somerset, Earl of Northumberland and Thomas, Lord Clifford - and the turning point from resolvable quarrel to fatal vendetta.

The trauma of St Albans led to Henry's relapse and a second brief Protectorate for York; but matters were far from resolved, and the Duke had made an implacable foe in the form of Queen Margaret – a determined character who now increasingly dictated royal policy in lieu of her enfeebled husband. So the factional discord rumbled on, including assassination attempts on the Duke of York and on Salisbury's son Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, by the vengeful heirs of noblemen slain at St Albans; and by 1459, the situation had deteriorated to such an extent that both sides were again preparing for war. As their armies were converging on the Duke's town of Ludlow, a Lancastrian force under Lord Audley was defeated by the Earl of Salisbury at Blore Heath on 23rd September - but it was a short-lived triumph. King Henry's rare appearance on the field at the head of his army caused the Yorkist troops to defect; and recognising the hopeless position, their commanders (York, his eldest sons Edward, Earl of March and Edmund, Earl of Rutland, and the Earls of Salisbury and Warwick) fled into exile.

From Calais, Warwick and March mounted an energetic propaganda campaign, reiterating the Lancastrian regime's failings and the commons' complaints that were still unresolved since Cade's rebellion of 1450. Meanwhile in Ireland, Richard of York reached a fateful decision: frustrated by the years of misrule and his own political side-lining by Henry's more favoured courtiers, he would at last press his own claim to the throne.

By the summer of 1460, the Yorkists were ready to act. The Earls of March and Warwick defeated the Lancastrians at the Battle of Northampton on 10th July, and while Queen Margaret fled to safety with the young Prince of Wales, they took Henry VI into 'protective custody'. In September, the Duke of York returned from Ireland and marched to London,

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where he laid his hand on the throne in Westminster Hall, expecting a relieved nobility to immediately acclaim him as King Richard III. To his discomfiture, this did not happen; however, after much legal wrangling, a compromise was reached with the Act of Accord, which decreed that the Duke or his heirs would succeed after King Henry's death.

But Margaret of Anjou would no more accept this than Charles VII accepted the Treaty of Troyes, which had bypassed him in favour of Henry V. Utterly opposed to the disinheritation of her son, she promptly called on her adherents to overturn the Act – ideally by snuffing out the House of York in battle.

The Road to Wakefield

Between October and December 1460, Margaret's supporters mustered at Pontefract Castle, the great royal stronghold deep in the Duchy of Lancaster. They included York's estranged son-in-law Henry Holland, Duke of Exeter; the Earls of Devon and Wiltshire; Lord Roos; and several local magnates: Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, Lord Dacre and Lord Clifford of Craven. These latter, not wishing to confront York in London where he had all the resources of the capital at his disposal, hatched a clever plot to draw him into their own region of strength: they ordered their men to harass the northern estates held by the Duke and Earl of Salisbury.

This was a provocation York could not ignore, either as the King's Lieutenant or as a good lord to his tenants; and in December 1460, Yorkist forces accordingly divided to counter the various Lancastrian threats. Warwick remained in London 'caretaking' Henry VI; and Edward of March went to Shropshire to stop the King's Tudor half-brothers joining Queen Margaret's army, after which he would come to reinforce his father in Yorkshire. The primary task of confronting the rebels fell of course to the Duke himself; and together with the Earls of Rutland and Salisbury, and Salisbury's sons Sir Thomas Neville and John, Baron Montagu, he headed northwards in early December.

Their journey was not without incident. Around 21st December, a small party of Yorkist outriders collided near Worksop with the Duke of Somerset and Earl of Wiltshire's troops en route to Pontefract, and were 'cut off' from the main army (either captured or killed). But shortly before Christmas 1460, York and the bulk of his army had arrived at his castle of Sandal, a mile south of Wakefield, where they would pass the festive season preparing to do battle.

Although contemporary reports of the size of the armies vary widely, York is generally credited with around 5000 troops; his opponents, including a greater percentage of senior peers and Queen Margaret's recruits from Scotland and the border counties, may have had twice that number. So the Duke must have been delighted and relieved when on Christmas Eve (according to the *English Chronicle*) he received a visit from another of his Neville kinsmen-by-marriage, John, Lord Neville, requesting a commission of array to recruit troops on his behalf. It was a request the Duke readily granted; little did he suspect that it would lead to his downfall...

Richard of York Gives Battle in Vain

Evidence for the Battle of Wakefield is limited and confusing, and since the 15th century, various elaborate theories have been constructed to explain what happened next – why a veteran commander like Richard of York made the suicidal decision to leave a fortified position and attack a large army with a small one. Some people contend that the Duke was simply arrogant, stupid and reckless, disregarding good advice to stay put and wait for his son to arrive with reinforcements; or that he was goaded forth by insults to his honour or attacks on his foraging parties, then ambushed by Lancastrian troops hidden in convenient belts of

woodland either side of Sandal Castle. However, there may be a more straightforward and militarily plausible explanation for the course of events:

By Tuesday, 30th December, the Lancastrian army had marched from Pontefract and deployed on a ridge of high ground in the fields just south of Wakefield, with a loop of the River Calder behind them and protecting their right flank. In the meantime, if the account of Jean de Waurin can be believed, York received another visitor on the morning of battle: the erstwhile Yorkist ally Sir Andrew Trollope, bringing with him several hundred troops. But more importantly for the Duke, Lord Neville also arrived with a substantial contingent (said by the *English Chronicle* to number 8000, though this is probably a gross exaggeration).

Whatever the correct figure, with the armies now of roughly equal size, York had no need to risk weeks of besiegement while he waited for Edward of March to bring further reinforcements. He duly led his men onto what John Stow later described as the ‘plain field’, the mile of ploughed fields and rough common that lay between Sandal Castle and Wakefield, confidently expecting to win the day.

His first intimation that things were about to go badly wrong came (again, if de Waurin is correct) when Trollope’s men opened hostilities by turning on their supposed allies. Then, with the Yorkist troops irrevocably committed to action, came a far greater betrayal. Unbeknown to the Duke, Lord Neville had been in cahoots with the Lancastrians all along; the *Annales Rerum Anglicarum* names him, alongside Northumberland, Dacre and Clifford, as having devised the plan to draw York north by harassing his estates. Now he too joined the attack – taking his troops to the Lancastrian side.

Hopelessly outnumbered, ‘enviored on every side like a fish in a net or a deer in a buck-stall’ as Edward Halle described it, York attempted a fighting retreat, only to be cut down by sheer weight of numbers before he could regain the safety of his castle. Unable to reach or aid his father, the Earl of Rutland broke towards the town with other routing Yorkists, but was overtaken and slain by Lord Clifford (in revenge for the death of his father at St Albans) near St Mary’s chantry chapel on Wakefield Bridge. Up to 2000 Yorkists are believed to have died, many in the bottleneck loop of the Calder now known as Fall Ings; among the slain was one of York’s true Neville allies, Sir Thomas, whose brother Baron Montagu and father the Earl of Salisbury were both captured. Montagu was subsequently imprisoned in York, but Salisbury was beheaded the following day at Pontefract Castle, together with other prominent Yorkist captives – and the mangled corpses of Richard of York and his son Edmund of Rutland. All the heads (the Duke’s allegedly adorned with a mocking paper crown) were then paraded from Pontefract to York, to be spiked up on Mickelgate Bar and the other city gates.

And so the Battle of Wakefield was lost; but far from ending the war for the crown, by creating a new Yorkist heir-apparent it intensified the blood-feud to a fresh pitch of violence. Grief-stricken by the deaths of his father and younger brother, outraged by the dishonouring of their remains, Edward of March was bent on revenge – and on fulfilling his House’s destiny...

If you want to learn more about this, you can purchase the book *The Battle of Wakefield -Revisited* at the towton.org.uk shop.