

THE SHEPHERD LORD

John Clifford strides across the late medieval scene as one of its larger than life characters. Shakespeare's series of plays on the Wars of the Roses, Henry VI Parts I – III are resonant with his deeds. The Cliffords of Skipton, one of the most powerful families in Yorkshire, were committed Lancastrians. Lord John, also known as Blackface Clifford because of his gruesome reputation, was a formidable warrior – one of the most feared commanders of his day. But when he was killed at the Battle of Towton he left his young son, Henry, to face the wrath of the vengeful Yorkists. According to tradition, however, young Henry was sheltered by local common people. For many years, so the story goes, Henry lived incognito as a humble shepherd, earning himself a new title - the Shepherd Lord. When Henry VII gained the throne, in 1485, Lord Henry Clifford was able to reclaim his birthright, returning to his family home.

Cynics may argue that this story is just Lancastrian propaganda. The Clifford family though, have no doubt about the provenance of this story. Arthur Clifford in his book *Collectanea Cliffordiana*, first published in 1817, asserts "*the elder (Henry) she placed at Longsborough (Londesborough), in Yorkshire, where she herself then lived, with a shepherd, who had married one of her inferior servants, an attendant on his nurse; where, though he was brought up in no better condition than the shepherd's own children; yet as he grew to discretion, he cheerfully submitted thereto as the only expedient for the preservation of his life, supporting himself with hopes of better days in time.*" Lady Anne Clifford, writing a century after the Shepherd Lord's death describes him as "*a plain man, who lived the part of a country life, and came seldom to court or London, except when called to parliament.*"

Lord Henry Clifford's life is well documented, as you would expect, apart from the years 1461 to 1485 when he was in hiding. During this period, only two source documents which name him as the beneficiary in wills, have emerged so we have no real knowledge of his life then. We do know however, that when he was restored to his lands and titles, he eschewed the grandeur of Skipton Castle for the peaceful surroundings of Barden Tower, a former hunting lodge, which he restored. There is therefore perhaps some firm basis for the legend.

This romantic story has been taken up by many over the centuries. The poem, *The Nut Brown Maid*, alludes to the encounter of a young noblewoman with an outlaw. After she agrees to marry him, the outlaw in question turns out to be an Earl's son. It is commonly believed that this was based on The Shepherd Lord story. This Tudor poem was all but lost for posterity but it was Samuel Pepys, no less, who found it amongst a bundle of accounts in Antwerp and had it published. Next we have William Wordsworth's poem *Song, at the Feast of Brougham Castle* which recounts the fable. It is also said that Emily Brontë based the character of Hareton Earnshaw, in her powerful novel *Wuthering Heights*, on Henry Clifford. Lately, George Peter Algar has dramatised the tale in his novel *The Shepherd Lord*, to popular acclaim.

The Shepherd Lord is available for purchase at the towton.org.uk shop