

Medieval Fact Sheet

The Battles of Ferrybridge and Towton 1461



Dacre's Cross, that commemorates the Battle of Towton

Introduction

The Battles of Ferrybridge and Towton were fought on 28th and 29th March 1461 when the wars known as the Wars of the Roses were at their height. They resulted in King Henry VI being deposed and succeeded by King Edward IV.

Hostilities had broken out in 1455, when Richard Duke of York rebelled against King Henry VI and ambushed him and his chief followers at St. Albans. This marked the beginning of the Wars of the Roses. The followers of the Duke of York were called Yorkists and, as King Henry VI was also Duke of Lancaster, his followers were called Lancastrians. In June 1460, King Henry VI was defeated and captured at the Battle of Northampton, but the Lancastrians raised a new army in the North and defeated and killed the Duke of York at Wakefield in December. This was followed by a March south, victory at the second Battle of St. Albans in February 1461 and the release of the King following which they retreated to their strongholds in the North.

Meanwhile, Edward Earl of March, the 'son' of the Duke of York defeated a Lancastrian army at Mortimer's Cross in Herefordshire and advanced to London where he was 'elected' King. He then marched north to do battle with the Lancastrians.

King Henry VI entered York and placed his army under the command of Henry Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, and Lord John Clifford.

The Battle of Ferrybridge

When Edward IV reached Pontefract, probably on Friday 27th March, he sent John Radcliffe, Lord Fitzwalter, with a small force to secure the bridge at Ferrybridge, where the main road from Pontefract to York crossed the River Aire. These men are described in Hearne's Fragment as the 'forepickers' of the Yorkist army.

The bridge at Ferrybridge was substantial. During the fourteenth century, bars had been built across the bridge so that tolls could be taken, and in 1340, 1356, 1359 and 1362 grants of pontage had been made for bridge repairs. It is likely that the Lancastrians had earlier destroyed the bridge, and that Fitzwalter's men repaired the bridge during the evening of Friday 27th March.

Lord John Clifford's force, the 'Flower of Craven' was a unit of lightly armed cavalry, probably 500 strong, who were renowned for their skill and valour in border fighting, and who were probably hand-picked for their loyalty to Clifford and their hatred of York. They clearly had no difficulty in fulfilling the first part of their plan that was to capture and destroy the crossing at Ferrybridge and the Yorkists who held it.

Their purpose was to force the Yorkists to fight their way across the Aire, leaving them tired and reduced in numbers when they reached the main Lancastrian position at Towton. In fact, they came close to achieving more than this, because when news of Fitzwalter's defeat reached Pontefract, panic began to grip the Yorkist army. Edward Hall, a contemporary chronicler, records the Lancastrian position at the time:

"Let no man think or yet imagine, that either the Council of King Henry, or his vigilant Queen, either neglected nor forgot to know or search what their enemies did, but that they prepared to their power all the men they either could persuade or allure to their purpose or take their part. And thus, thinking themselves furnished, committed the governance of the army to the Duke of Somerset, the Earl of Northumberland and the Lord Clifford, as men desiring to revenge the death of their fathers slain at the first Battle of St Albans. These noble captains, leaving King Henry, his wife and son for their safeguard in the City of York, passed the River Wharfe, with all their power, intending to prohibit King Edward to pass over the River Aire, and for the more expedition and exploit of their purpose... the Lord Clifford determined with his light horsemen, to make an assault to such as kept the passage of Ferrybridge, and so departed from the great army on the Saturday before Palm Sunday, and early before his enemies were awake, got the bridge, and slew the keepers of the same, and all such as would withstand him. The Lord Fitzwalter, hearing the noise, suddenly rose out of his bed, and unarmed, with a poleaxe in his hand, thinking that it had been an affray amongst his men, came down to appease the same, but before he could say a word, or knew what the matter was, he was slain, and with him the Bastard of Salisbury, brother to the Earl of Warwick."

Early in the morning of Saturday 28th March 1461, Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, approached Ferrybridge with a troop of cavalry. The 'Flower of Craven' included a contingent of mounted archers. These attacked Warwick's men, killing or dismounting many of them and wounding Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick in the leg. After this, he decided that discretion was the better part of valour and he retreated to Pontefract to report his findings to his master.

Edward Hall describes the effect on Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick:

"When the Earl of Warwick was informed of this feat, he like a man desperate, mounted on his hackney, and came blowing to King Edward saying 'Sir, I pray God have mercy on their souls, which in the beginning of your enterprise hath lost their lives, and because I see no success of the world, I remit the vengeance and punishment to God our creator and redeemer' and with that he alighted down and slew his horse with his sword, saying 'Let him fly that will, for surely I will tarry with him that will tarry with me' and he kissed the cross hilt of his sword."

This was an attempt to steady the nerves of the main Yorkist army that now advanced upon the "Flower of Craven" at Ferrybridge. Before the advance, King Edward IV addressed his army, offering them the choice between departure, and great rewards following certain victory. Rewards were also offered to those who would kill deserters.

Jean de Waurin, another contemporary chronicler, confirms that Lord John Clifford may have advanced south of the river and encountered a small Yorkist force, before retreating to hold the river:

"As soon as (the Yorkists) had made camp, John de la Pole sent a small company to find out the strength of the enemy, but they went so far forward that a guard saw them and raised the alarm. The small party was in so much danger of being routed that the Earl of March had to send reinforcements for his reconnaissance troops. They managed to push the enemy back to the bridge where they formed a defensive line. When the Earl of March heard about this he ordered all his council and troops to move closer to the enemy, and after he had made a new camp he went to see the situation with his commanders. After studying the enemies positions the courageous and pious Earl of March declared it was necessary to gain the passage rapidly as they would not be able to press their advantage further otherwise. Therefore, the order was given to attack the bridge which had been fortified by the enemy, and it so happened the battle lasted from midday to six o'clock in the evening and there died more than 3,000 men on both sides."

It is recorded that during this action King Edward IV fought on foot and Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick was wounded by an arrow. Many men were drowned in the River Aire and in the surrounding marshes. William Gregory, another contemporary chronicler, adds that:

"Lord Fitzwalter was slain at Ferrybridge and many with him were slain and drowned. And the Earl of Warwick was hurt in his leg with an arrow."

It seems likely then, that Lord John Clifford and the 'Flower of Craven' succeeded in taking the bridge and in killing Fitzwalter and his men who had been charged with its rebuilding and its defence. There then seems to have been a confrontation with Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, who appears to have been on a reconnaissance when Lord John Clifford's archers ambushed him. Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick then retreated to Pontefract where he advised King Edward IV of events. King Edward IV then took the decision to attack Lord John Clifford who succeeded in defending his position at Ferrybridge. To this point the action was a great success for Lord John Clifford and the 'Flower of Craven'.

When George Neville, one of the Yorkist commanders, wrote to Coppini, the Milanese ambassador, he recorded that:

"Our adversaries had broken the bridge which was our way across, and were strongly posted on the other side, so that our men could only cross by a narrow way which they had made themselves after the bridge was broken. But our men forced a way by the sword, and many were slain on both sides. Finally, the enemy took to flight, and very many of them were slain as they fled."

What caused Lord John Clifford to flee, however, was not the main Yorkist attack at Ferrybridge, but news that Lord Fauconberg, accompanied by Walter Blount and Robert Horne had forded the River Aire upstream at Castleford with a contingent of mounted men including archers, and was threatening to cut off Lord John Clifford's line of retreat to Towton.

Edward Hall records that:

"The Lord Fauconberg, Sir Walter Blount and Robert Horne, with the forward, passed the river at Castleford, three miles from Ferrybridge, intending to have environed and enclosed Lord Clifford, and his company, but they being thereof advertised, departed in great haste towards King Henry's army."

With Lord John Clifford departed, the Yorkists made a makeshift repair to the bridge and made a crossing. Jean de Waurin records that they:

"Took the bridge and all the army went over it the same night."

However, as Edmund Hall records, on the way back to Towton the 'Flower of Craven':

"Met with some that they looked not for, and were attrapped before they were aware. For the Lord Clifford, either from heat or pain, put off his bevor, was suddenly hit with an arrow, as some say without a head and was stricken in the throat, and incontinent rendered his spirit... And all his company almost were slain, at a place called Dintingdale, not far from Towton."

That this ambush took place is not open to doubt. However, the incident has given rise to considerable controversy about whether Lord John Clifford and the "Flower of Craven" were betrayed by the Duke of Somerset as the Lancastrian army appears to have made no attempt to rescue Lord John Clifford and the 'Flower of Craven'. Three possible reasons have been advanced for this: First, they were unaware of the attack; Second, they were unaware of the Yorkist numbers and decided not to intervene; and Third, Treachery!

The Lancastrian army, with 60,000 men was encamped at Towton, The Duke of Somerset, their commander, was aware that the enemy was at Pontefract, and that Lord John Clifford had set off to engage them at Ferrybridge. In this situation it is inconceivable that he would not have appointed sentries and scouts to observe movements near the Lancastrian camp and to report on enemy movements. Even if it were dark, foggy or snowing, the news that Lord John Clifford had been ambushed less than a mile from the Lancastrian lines would have been reported to the Duke of Somerset. It should be remembered that Lord John Clifford's intelligence while he had been in action at Ferrybridge had been good enough to know that the Yorkists had forded the river at Castleford.

Similarly, the size of the attacking Yorkist force would have been reported. It would therefore have been possible for the Duke of Somerset to dispatch a small force to rescue Lord John Clifford with some prospect of success and without endangering the main Lancastrian army.

So that leaves us with the possibility of treachery. Lord John Clifford had been instrumental in the victories at Wakefield and St Albans. There appears to have been a division in the Lancastrian command between the court party and the Borderers, and that Queen Margaret of Anjou appeared to show favour to Lord John Clifford. Could it be that the Duke of Somerset, a Duke of the blood royal, envied the success and favour enjoyed by Lord John Clifford, a mere Border Baron, and was therefore not greatly concerned at the prospect of his loss on the eve of battle? The answer to this question, on the balance of probability is "Yes".

Whatever the reason, however, Lord John Clifford and the "Flower of Craven" perished at Dintingdale. It is certain that his death deprived the Lancastrians of one of their best commanders, and that the adverse effect on morale was considerable. In later years a cross was erected, of which only the base now remains. It is known locally as the 'Leper Pot' and is pictured below:



The 'Leper Pot' at Dintingdale.

Arthur Clifford, writing in 1817 takes up the tale:

"After the victory of St Albans, the Lancastrians found it necessary to retreat into the North, to recruit their forces, where Lord Clifford's interest was so strong, and his friends so daring and vigilant, that Queen Margaret was soon enabled to form an army of 60,000 men. The command of the whole army was given to Lord Clifford, the Duke of Somerset, and the Earl of Northumberland. In the meantime, King Edward IV, having assembled another powerful army, left London, and advanced by easy journeys to Pontefract, where he rested, and appointed Lord Fitzwalter to keep the pass of Ferrybridge."

"Lord Clifford, who was eager to revenge the death of his father, and friends, was well prepared to receive his enemies; and it being determined that King Henry, with his Queen and son, should for their better safety be left in the City of York, it was then resolved that the pass of Ferrybridge should be recovered at all hazard. This daring enterprise was committed to Lord Clifford who departing from the main army with a competent number of light horsemen, very early in the morning, on the Saturday before Palm Sunday, made such expedition that he gained the bridge, and slew the guard, The Lord Fitzwalter, hearing the noise, rose out of his bed, as did the bastard of Salisbury, brother to the Earl of Warwick, who suspected it was a mutiny among the soldiers; but they were immediately attacked by the Lancastrians and slain. Upon this, King Edward, encouraging his men, and thinking loss of time might endanger the rest of his forces, resolved to bring his fortune immediately to the trial of a Battle. Finding it impossible to force the passage of Ferrybridge, he ordered his vanguard to pass the river three miles above it, at Castleford. Lord Clifford, observing this movement, was retiring on the main army of the Lancastrians, when he was suddenly encompassed by the enemy; and perceiving no hope of escape, he encouraged his men to sell their lives as dearly as possible. He defended himself with his small force for a considerable time, with the greatest bravery, to the astonishment and even envy of his enemies; but feeling himself overcome with heat and fatigue, he had unloosed his gorget, when he was shot through the throat with an arrow, and instantly fell dead on the field."

Contemporary chroniclers also recorded the event. Hearne's fragment records that:

"When the foreprickers came to Ferrybridge, there was a great skirmish in which John Ratcliff, then Lord Fitzwalter was slain."

Arthur Clifford states that:

"Lord Clifford was only 26 years old when he was killed and had not enjoyed his lands and honours more than five years after the death of his father. His body was buried presently after his death... near the River Aire not far from Ferrybridge, where a little chapel was afterwards erected, but which is long since decayed and gone to ruin."

It is not known exactly where Lord John Clifford lies buried. However, his widow was on her father's estates at Londesbrough in East Yorkshire at the time of the battle, lived there for the remainder of her life and is buried in Londesbrough Church. Next to her grave beside the altar of the Church is an unmarked grave that is believed by some to be the grave of Lord John Clifford!

The Battle of Towton

As Lord John Clifford had been one of the three senior commanders of the Lancastrian army, and as the Clifford estates were amongst the largest in the North of England and staunchly Lancastrian, there must have been many thousands of Clifford's retainers within the 60,000 strong Lancastrian army.

Lord John Clifford would have brought to Towton more men than the 500 crack horsemen who shared his last hours, last victory and ultimate defeat at Dintingdale. Still with the Lancastrian army at Towton would have been the bulk of the Clifford retainers - Billmen and Bowmen - who presumably fought the forthcoming battle under the command of Sir Roger Clifford, brother to Lord John Clifford, probably on the Lancastrian left which was commanded by the Earl of Northumberland.

After the Battle of Ferrybridge and the ambush at Dintingdale, the Yorkist army advanced through the snow to take up positions around the village of Saxton, and possibly the town of Sherburn in Elmet. Jean de Waurin wrote that:

"It was so cold... with snow and ice that it was pitiful to see men and horses suffer, especially as they were badly fed."

The Yorkist baggage trains carrying artillery, tents and food were delayed, probably because of the damage to the river crossings, and most Yorkist soldiers were obliged to sleep in the fields, while only the Yorkist commanders found any shelter. The Duke of Norfolk's contingents were particularly delayed due to problems with recruiting and transport, combined with the illness of the Duke himself. His forces were not to reach Towton until some hours after battle had been joined. According to Hearne's Fragment, small groups of Lancastrians and Yorkists, possibly foraging or scouting parties met during the night and became involved in skirmishes.

Jean de Waurin tells us that on the following morning of Palm Sunday:

"When the Earl of March and his lords were told that King Henry was nearby in the fields they rejoiced, for they wished for nothing more but to fight him. The Earl called for his captains and told them to put their men in formation and to take their positions before the enemy came too close. And so it was he organised his battles, and he sent some men to look around the area because they were only four miles away from the enemy. They did not go very far before they spotted the reconnaissance party from the enemy, and they quickly returned to the Earl of March to tell him that they had seen large numbers of men at arms in the fields and the banners of King Henry."

"They told him how the enemy was manoeuvring and their position, and when the Earl was warned of this he went to his cavalry, which he had positioned on the wing, and said to them 'My children, I pray today that we shall be good and loyal to each other because we are fighting for a good cause!' After they had all echoed this thought a messenger came to tell the Earl that the vaward troops of the King had started to move forward and the Earl went back to place himself behind his banners."

This account suggests that King Edward IV was at Sherburn in Elmet on the morning of Palm Sunday, some three miles behind the Yorkist vaward at Saxton, when he heard news that the Lancastrians were forming up for battle to the south of Towton. It also suggests that some, at least, of the Lancastrian army may have advanced to Towton from Tadcaster only on the morning of Palm Sunday.

It appears that the Lancastrians, being first to arrive, took the higher ground with their right flank protected by the Cock Beck and their left flank protected by the marshes east of the Ferrybridge Road. In front of them was a shallow depression in which stakes were probably placed to impede the Yorkist advance. Behind them was the main road to York.

In view of the large number of men present there was little room for manoeuvre. The Lancastrian army formed in two battles, the right commanded by the Duke of Somerset, and the left by the Earl of Northumberland. To the front were contingents of archers and to the rear the reserves.

Polydore Vergil, another contemporary chronicler, gives an interesting description of what happened next:

"It came to pass by mean of the soldiers, who as their manner is, like not upon lingering, that very self same day, by day break in the morning, after he (Henry VI) had with many words exhorted every man to do his duty, he was forced to sound the alarm. His adversaries were there as ready as he."

King Henry VI was not there in person at this time, and it is probable that his heralds were addressing his army with words prepared by the King. However, it does suggest that the Yorkists achieved their positions with a speed that surprised the Lancastrians.

The Yorkist army advanced north, and upon reaching the top of the plateau above Saxton, saw the Lancastrian army waiting for them on the higher ground above Towton. Edward Hall recorded that this happened at about nine in the morning, and said that:

"When each party perceived each other they made a great shout, and at the same instant time there fell sleet or snow."

The Yorkists adopted a formation that mirrored that of the Lancastrians, with Lord Fauconberg's archers to the front, the left wing commanded by King Edward IV, the right wing commanded by Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, and the reserves to the rear. They would have to start the battle without the Duke of Norfolk and his East Anglians.

King Edward IV then ordered his army to give the enemy, whether a nobleman or a commoner, no quarter. Vengeance and bloodlust motivated the Yorkist army that had come to exact revenge for the executions after the Battle of Wakefield, and for the pillaging of Yorkist towns to the south of the Trent during the Lancastrian advance on St. Albans. And the Lancastrians, even without Lord John Clifford, still sought revenge for the murders committed at St Albans in 1455.



The Battlefield viewed from the Lancastrian position. The Yorkists lined up on the ridge where there is now a tree.

Lord Fauconberg's archers attacking the Lancastrians opened the Battle. Edward Hall describes the ensuing archery duel as follows:

"The Lord Fauconberg, which led the forward of King Edwards battle 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 stand still. The northern men, feeling the shoot, but by reason of the snow, not perfectly viewing the distance between them and their enemies like hardy men shot their sheaf arrows as fast as they might, but all their shot was lost and their labour in vain for they came not near the southern men by forty tailors yards. When their shot was almost spent, the Lord Fauconberg marched forward with his archers, who not only shot their own 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 battle was joined."

The Lancastrians had been severely disadvantaged by the weather. A combination of a southerly gale and poor visibility had caused their arrows to fall short of their target. In contrast the arrows of the Yorkists had found their mark in the Lancastrian ranks.

The Lancastrian plan to retain the higher ground and force the Yorkists to attack uphill under attack from archers therefore had to be abandoned. Instead the Lancastrians attacked the Yorkist lines hoping to win in hand to hand combat, making advantage of their superior numbers.

Edward Hall records that the Lancastrians:

"Seeing their shot not prevail, hastened forward to join with their enemies"

This advance was seen by the Yorkists, and described by Jean de Waurin:

"At that moment (Edward IV) saw the army of the Earl of Northumberland coming for battle, carrying the banner of King Henry. The Earl of March rode his horse along his army where all the nobles were and told them how they had wanted to make him their King, and he reminded them that they were seeing the next heir to the throne which had been usurped by the Lancasters a long time ago. He suffered his troops and knights to help him now to recover his inheritance and they all assured him of their desire to help and said that if any wished not to fight they should go their own way."

"So, all of them hearing this good request by the young Earl, who was already thinking as a King, shouted in unison that they would follow him until death if necessary. Hearing this support, the Earl thanked them, jumped from his horse and told them, sword in hand, that on this day he would live or die with them in order to give them courage. Then he came in front of his banners and waited for the enemy which was marching forward with great noise and shouting King Henry."

The Lancastrians approached the Yorkist lines where the battlefield was broader, and their greater numbers would therefore be an advantage. Despite the setback of the archery duel, all was not lost. When the Lancastrians came close, Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, ordered the Yorkists to charge. Battle was joined. Despite having to fight uphill, however, the Lancastrians gained ground despite heavy losses, not only in the hand to hand combat with the Yorkists, but in the crush of thousands of men struggling through mud in a snowstorm. Shortly after the Earl of Northumberland's Battle closed with the Earl of Warwick's men in North Acres, the men of the Duke of Somerset engaged the men of King Edward IV to the west.

Polydore Vergil recorded the extent of the carnage as the two armies fought:

"So great was the slaughter... that the very dead carcasses hindered them that fought."



Re-Enactment to commemorate the Battle of Towton

The Lancastrian advance continued, however, with the greatest progress being made by the Duke of Somerset's men who progressed across Bloody Meadow, driving the Yorkists back towards Saxton. It is believed that the Lancastrians had placed a party of mounted men with spears in Castle Hill Wood, with a view to their attacking the Yorkist left flank as it was pushed back towards Saxton. Certainly, this device had proved effective at Wakefield, and at Towton a similar attack was mounted that caused the Yorkist left to retreat in confusion. As Waurin reports:

"When Lord Rivers, his son, and six or seven thousand Welshmen led by Andrew Trollope, following the Duke of Somerset himself with seven thousand men, charged his cavalry who fled and were chased for about eleven miles. It seemed that Lord Rivers troops had won a great battle, because they thought that the Earl of Northumberland had charged on the other side, unfortunately he had not done so, and this became his tragic hour for he died that day. During this debacle, many of the Earl of March's soldiers died, and when he learned the truth of what had happened to his cavalry he was very sad as well as very annoyed."

The ambush was therefore a partial success from the Lancastrian point of view in that the Yorkists had sustained losses and given ground. However, it did not break the Yorkist lines, and the inability of the Earl of Northumberland to make a similar breakthrough on the left wing led to the battle lines skewing so that the Lancastrian army faced east rather than south. This meant that the Lancastrian army's back was to the Cock Beck, rather than to the road to Tadcaster and York.

It was impossible for any soldier to fight continuously for hours, and so it was the practice for tired units to withdraw from the front line to allow fresh units to take their place. Having withdrawn from the battle, the main priority of the soldier would be to drink, and to do this he would usually remove his helmet and/or his bever. One of the Lancastrian commanders, Lord Randolph Dacre was in the process of doing this in the field known as North Acres when he was shot in the throat by a crossbow bolt and died instantly. It is likely that the bolt was shot by a crossbowman whose mission was to single out the Lancastrian leaders, although another possibility is that it was a chance shooting. Either way, Lord Randolph Dacre was dead.

This left the Lancastrian left, which included the Border contingents without their most senior commanders. Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, and Lord Randolph Dacre had followed Lord John Clifford to an early grave. Doubtless knights like Sir Roger Clifford attempted to step into the breach, but at a time when a man owed his allegiance to his 'good lord' morale was bound to be affected when that 'good lord' lay dead.

Then disaster struck the Lancastrian left as fresh soldiers under John Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, joined the forces of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick. Hearne's fragment records that:

"About noon, the aforesaid Duke of Norfolk, with a fresh band of good men of war came to the aid of the newly elected King Edward."

The slow advance of the Lancastrians was first halted and then reversed. Then the Lancastrian line broke as men fled the battlefield back towards Towton, Tadcaster and York, with the Yorkists in pursuit.

Polydore Vergil recorded the reaction of Henry Beaufort, Duke of Somerset when he:

"Espied the forces of his foes increase, and his own somewhat yield, whom when by new exhortation he had compelled to press on more earnestly, he with a few horsemen removing a little out of that place, expected the event of the fight, but behold, suddenly his soldiers gave the back, which when he saw this he fled also."

Henry Beaufort, Duke of Somerset therefore fled the field, and with him fled the Earls of Exeter, Devon and Wiltshire. On their way to York they destroyed the bridges over the River Wharfe to slow the Yorkist advance and thereby enable them to flee north with King Henry VI, Queen Margaret and Prince Edward. In so doing they also impeded the retreat of the Lancastrian army.

As the Lancastrian army had become arrayed from the north to the south its line of retreat lay westwards, down from the plateau of Towton to the valley of the Cock Beck, over the beck, and then to Tadcaster where the River Wharfe would have to be crossed to reach either York, or any of the routes west or north away from Towton and the Yorkists. However, the Cock Beck proved a formidable barrier to so many men attempting to wade across at once, and while doing so they became easy targets for Yorkist archers, billmen, or men at arms. It is believed that much of the slaughter that took place during the rout was in the valley of the Cock Beck, although mounted men at arms pursued the defeated Lancastrian army along the whole length of the road to York.



The slope that descends from the battlefield to the Cock Beck

The Croyland Chronicle records that:

"For their ranks being now broken and scattered in flight, the Kings army eagerly pursued them, and cutting down the fugitives with their swords, just like so many sheep for the slaughter, made immense havoc among them for a distance of ten miles, as far as the City of York. Prince Edward, however, with part of his men as conqueror, remained upon the field of battle and awaited the rest of his army, which had gone in various directions in pursuit of the enemy."

Edward Hall recorded that the Lancastrians:

"Like men amazed, fled towards Tadcaster Bridge to save themselves, but in the mean way there was a little brook called Cock, not very broad but of great deepness, in the which, what for haste of escaping, and what for fear of followers, a great number were drent and drowned, in so much that the common people there affirm that men alive passed the river upon the 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."

George Neville, Bishop of Exeter, and King Edwards Chancellor wrote that:

"There was a great conflict, which began with the rising of the sun and lasted until the tenth hour of the night, so great was the pertinacity and boldness of the men, who never heeded the possibility of a miserable death. Of the enemy who fled, great numbers were drowned in the river near the town of Tadcaster, eight miles from York, because they themselves had broken the bridge to cut our passage that way, so that none could pass, and a great part of the rest who got away who gathered in the same town and city, were slain and so many dead bodies were seen as to cover an area six miles long by three broad and about four furlongs. In this battle, eleven lords of the enemy fell... with some knights, and from what we hear from persons worthy of confidence, some 28,000 persons perished on one side and the other. O Miserable and luckless race."

Richard Beauchamp, Bishop of Salisbury reported that:

*"The Heralds counted 28,000 slain, a number unheard of in our realm... **without** counting those wounded and drowned."*

The Croyland Chronicle records:

"Those who helped to inter the bodies, piled up in pits and in trenches prepared for the purpose, bear witness that eight and thirty thousand warriors fell on that day besides those who were drowned in the river before alluded to, whose numbers we have no means of ascertaining. The blood too, of the slain, mingling with the snow which at this time covered the whole surface of the earth, afterwards ran down in the furrows and ditches along with the melted snow, in a most shocking manner, for a distance of two or three miles."

It is not clear whether the victorious Yorkists followed up their pursuit of the fleeing army by pillaging the towns from which they had come. However, it is known that the burgesses of Beverley gave gifts to Yorkist Lords and three pounds to one Captain Henry Awger to secure a proclamation from Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick 'that no one should plunder'.

An insight was gained into the manner of the deaths sustained at Towton, when building work at Towton disturbed a mass grave found to contain the remains of 37 men, 29 complete with skulls that had perished at the Battle of Towton. All had been stripped naked before burial and had been tumbled into a pit in layers and covered with twenty inches of soil. The only possession discovered was a small silver ring.

The men were aged between sixteen and sixty, and their skeletons showed that they had followed a regime of strenuous exercise since childhood rather like that of a professional athlete. This is unusual among fifteenth century skeletons, and so it is thought that they were professional soldiers. Three or four of them showed evidence of having drawn heavy war longbows.

The injuries that they had sustained were far more numerous and serious than would have been required to kill them. Furthermore, the bodies had been mutilated either before or after death.

The inference is obvious. These men had not been killed fighting or defending themselves. They had been taken prisoner, stripped of their armour and possessions and then tortured and murdered. The reason for the torture is likely to have been revenge. The reason for the removal of the ears and noses of the men can be found in Papal Bulls of the time that 'suggest that disfigurement like this would put the soul in danger of not being resurrected; that it marked the victim out as a rebel not worthy of salvation'.

The unprecedented number of deaths at the Battle of Towton can therefore be attributed not only to the scale of the battle and the adverse conditions of the rout, but also to a deliberate policy of genocide on the part of the victorious Yorkists.

Conclusion

Arthur Clifford describes the Battle of Towton thus, and ascribes the Lancastrian defeat to their being dispirited by the death of Lord John Clifford:

"Next day, being Palm Sunday, both armies were in sight of each other, between Saxton and Towton, King Henrys forces being computed at 60,000 men, and those of King Edward at near 50,000. Our historians have given a particular account of this dreadful battle, which lasted three days; and which were slain on both sides, 36,776 persons, all Englishmen. The Earl of Northumberland, led the advanced guard, and perceiving that the snow which fell in the faces of his men prevented them from discerning how they shot, he led his forces on to the charge, sword in hand, when a bloody conflict continued for ten hours with doubtful success. But the Lancastrians, dispirited by the death of their Lord Clifford, and their other chiefs, were completely defeated. The Battle of Towton was the Pharsalia of England."

After the Battle, George Neville, Bishop of Exeter, and no friend of the Lancastrians, wrote to Coppini, the Papal Envoy, and said:

"O, Merciless and Luckless race, and Powerful people, would you have no spark of pity for your own blood, of which we have lost so much of fine quality by the civil war."

The outcome of the battle, though, was that King Henry VI, without the support of Lord John Clifford and the "Flower of Craven" lost both the battle and his throne.



King Henry VI

Edward, Earl of March returned to London to be crowned King Edward IV. He ascended a throne, however, that was tainted with the blood of the men who he had murdered at Towton.

In all, 28,000 men lost their lives that day. The effect on the towns and villages that had sent their sons to fight at Towton for their lawful King Henry VI must have been devastating. Indeed, the tax records of many northern towns, including Carlisle and Kingston on Hull, show reductions in the tax revenues in the years following 1461 that may have been due to reductions in the number of able bodied men working within those towns because of the carnage at the Battle of Towton.

The Lancastrian leaders, including Lord John Clifford were attainted as traitors, even though they had fought for their anointed King. King Edward IV confiscated their estates and either gave them to various Yorkists or retained them for the Crown.

Adrian Waite
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About the Fact Sheets

These fact sheets are written by me (Adrian Waite) unless otherwise stated. Their purpose is to provide basic information and some analysis and comment on medieval historical subjects. They therefore do not provide information about events prior to the fifth century unless this is needed to set events in the medieval period in context and do not cover events after the early sixteenth century. The subjects may be historical buildings, events, people; how medieval history is researched, managed or presented today or other subjects. They are published on the 'AW-History' website and are freely available. I hope that people enjoy reading them and that they encourage readers to explore medieval history further. Feedback about the fact sheets is always welcome and should be addressed to me at adrian.waite@awics.co.uk.

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