

The Cliffords during the Fifteenth Century

Summary

During this period the Clifford family were Lords of Westmorland with extensive lands in Cumberland, Westmorland, and Yorkshire, including such castles as Brougham, Appleby, and Skipton, and the Port of Hartlepool. They played a major part in the Hundred Years' War and the Wars of the Roses on the Lancastrian side, and in the Scottish wars; and were closely allied with the Percy Earls of Northumberland. During the Agincourt campaign John Clifford was one of the English commanders, and his son Thomas also became a commander in the war most notably at the siege of Portoise. In 1455 Thomas, Lord Clifford, was killed at the Battle of St Albans. His son John Clifford, known as "The Butcher" avenged his father's death at the Battle of Wakefield in 1460 by killing both the Duke of York, and his son the Earl of Rutland, only to be killed himself on the eve of the Battle of Towton in 1461. His brother, Sir Roger Clifford, survived the Battle of Towton, only to be executed in 1485 by Richard III. John Clifford's son Henry Clifford was dispossessed and went into hiding until 1472 when he made his peace with the Yorkist King Edward IV, and lived as a Gentleman at Londesbrough in East Yorkshire. In 1485, when Henry VII won the Battle of Bosworth, Henry Clifford was restored to all his father's estates, and played a prominent role, especially in the North of England, during the early Tudor period.

Introduction

This is brief history of the Fifteenth Century from the point of view of the Clifford Household.

The Clifford family first came to England with William the Conqueror and being given land in Herefordshire surrounding a village called Clifford, took the name Clifford as their family name.

In the 13th century, Roger Clifford found himself on the winning side at the Battle of Evesham, and was given Westmoreland as a reward. In the 14th the family also gained Craven in Yorkshire in exchange for land in Wales. At this time, the North of England was a lawless area, constantly threatened by the Scots, and ruled on the Kings behalf by a small number of wealthy families who were encouraged to build castles and raise large armies for the defence of the Border. The Cliffords became one of the most powerful families in Northern England, connected by marriage to other powerful Northern families like the Percies and the Dacres. They built castles at Appleby, Brough, Brougham and Skipton.. In the 1450's, England's nobles became divided between those loyal to King Henry VI, whose ancestors had been Dukes of Lancaster, and who were called Lancastrians, and those who supported the rival claim of Richard, Duke of York, who were called Yorkists. Unfortunately, King Henry VI was prone to bouts of insanity, during some of which Richard, Duke of York, managed to gain temporary control of the Kings Council. Most people in Northern England, including Yorkshire, were Lancastrians, and the main strength of the Duke of York lay in Shropshire. However, the Duke of York was supported by the Neville family, based at Raby Castle in Durham, who had a long running feud with the Percies and the Cliffords.

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"Hundred Years War"

In 1399 King Richard II was deposed and replaced as King by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Lancaster, who became King Henry IV – the first of the Lancastrian Kings. His reign was marked by revolts in Northern England and in Wales and latterly his declining health. He died in 1413 and was succeeded by his son, King Henry V.

Henry V revived the English claim to the throne of France and in 1415 launched an invasion. He captured the Norman town of Harfleur after a long siege, and then led his army across Northern France towards Calais where they could embark for England. On the way they were confronted by a larger French army at Agincourt and in the ensuing battle were victorious. This paved the way for a series of successful military campaigns in France that culminated in the Treaty of Troyes under which King Charles VI of France recognised Henry V as his successor. The treaty, though, was repudiated by the Dauphin and the war continued. King Henry V died in 1422 at the siege of Meaux. He was succeeded by his son, King Henry VI.

Henry VI was the only person ever to be crowned King of England and France – at the age of nine months! The new King's uncles were appointed as his regents, yet the gains that Henry V had made in France proved impossible to sustain. During the minority of Henry VI that lasted until 1440 the English possessions in France dwindled. When Henry VI achieved his majority in 1440 he found the crown was all but bankrupt and facing defeat in France. Attempts to retrieve the situation both through military action and diplomatic efforts for peace both failed. In 1453 all English possessions in France, with the exception of Calais were lost. Defeat weakened the crown and divided the nobility into factions.

Lord Thomas Clifford

Lord John Clifford entered into his estates during the reign of King Henry IV, but it was during the reign of King Henry V that he became most prominent. He accompanied King Henry V on his expedition to Harfleur and Agincourt. He commanded the English army that successfully laid siege to Cherbourg and received the surrender from the governor. He was also responsible for escorting the captive King James I of Scotland to France in an effort to prevent Scottish soldiers from fighting on the side of the French. He was with King Henry V at the siege of Meaux and was one of many who died there. He was 33.

Lord John Clifford's father-in-law had been 'Harry Hotspur' the son of the Earl of Northumberland who had led an unsuccessful revolt against King Henry IV in 1403. When Richard, Earl of Cambridge plotted to kill King Henry V prior to his embarkation for Harfleur he attempted to involve Lord John Clifford in the conspiracy. However, Lord John Clifford refused and the plot was uncovered. Richard, Earl of Cambridge and his fellow conspirators Richard Scrope and John Grey were executed at Southampton.

The actions of Lord John Clifford during these wars have been celebrated in poetry as follows:

With our late sovereign he embarked for France, Conducting to his aid a chosen band,
Of hardy mountaineers, the flower and pride, Of Westmorland, and Craven's rough domains,
There by his side, in many a toilsome march, And furious skirmish,
did they win their way, Resistless, till on Agincourt's proud plain, They rode triumphant
over their crest fallen foes, And trampled in the dust the power of France.

Oft have I heard, that in that glorious fight, With his own hand the gallant Clifford
slew Twelve of their bravest captains – but alas! Not all his valour could secure his
life Against the fated accidents of time. He, at the siege of some strong citadel, Was
by the sudden bursting of a gun, Deprived of life! O fatal, dreadful stroke!

Lord John Clifford was succeeded by his son, Thomas Clifford.

Lord Thomas Clifford

Lord Thomas Clifford was seven at the death of his father, but followed in his father's footsteps as a defender of the Border and a commander in the wars in France.

In 1435 Lord Thomas Clifford was responsible for arraying the men of all the counties north of the Trent against the Scots.

In 1438 Lord Thomas Clifford commanded the English army that besieged the French town of Pontoise. The siege was long and the English appeared to have little hope of success. However, Lord Thomas Clifford took advantage of a snowstorm to lead his men, dressed in white, to the gates of Pontoise and to scale the walls before they were seen. The town fell to the English. In 1440 a French army led in person by King Charles VII attacked the town that was defended successfully by Lord Thomas Clifford.

The 1440s saw a decline in royal authority and increasing feuding between retainers of the Nevilles and the Percies in the north. Being a cousin to Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, Lord Thomas Clifford sided with the Percies.

The early 1450s saw Lord Thomas Clifford back on the border to negotiate a truce with the Scots. By that time the wars of the Roses were about to begin.

Lord Thomas Clifford had a distinguished career as a soldier in France as well as Scotland and was a loyal and prominent supporter of King Henry VI. In May 1455, King Henry VI had called together a council at St Albans when the town was attacked by a Yorkist force. Lord Thomas Clifford organised the defences of the town, but eventually the Yorkists were victorious and succeeded in killing the Duke of Somerset, the Earl of Northumberland and Lord Thomas Clifford, and in capturing the King. Lord Thomas Clifford was probably killed by the Nevilles.

Lord John Clifford

The 20 year old John Clifford succeeded his father and swore revenge on his fathers murder. The following years were to see unsuccessful attempt to reconcile the Lancastrian and Yorkist factions before civil war broke out again in 1459. After an initial Lancastrian success Richard, Duke of York won the Battle of Northampton in 1460, captured the King, and had himself proclaimed Lord Protector. He then marched North to face the main Lancastrian army. The result was the Battle of Wakefield, in which Lord John Clifford led the Lancastrians to victory. After the Battle he had the body of Richard, Duke of York decapitated and his head displayed on Micklegate Bar in York. He also stabbed to death the Earl of Rutland, the son of Richard, Duke of York, with the words : "Your father slew my father, so I will you and all your kin." For this he was dubbed "The Butcher" by Yorkist propagandists. After the battle, Richard Neville, Earl of Salisbury, was captured and imprisoned in Pontefract Castle. However, he was dragged out of the castle and beheaded by a mob led by Sir Roger Clifford.

The Lancastrians followed up their victory with an advance on London. The army was told that it could pillage at will south of the Trent, which it did. The Yorkists attempted to stop the Lancastrians at St Albans, but were unsuccessful. The Lancastrians won the battle, rescued the King, and decided to return to the north. It is recorded that when the King was found, he was brought to meet the Queen in Lord John Cliffords tent.

The Yorkists were then welcomed into London and proclaimed Edward, Earl of March, as King. He claimed to be the eldest son of the Duke of York, but he was actually the illegitimate son of the Duchess of York and an archer of Rouen called Blaybourne. Supported by a force raised in London and by his cousin, Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, who was now the head of the powerful Neville family, Edward marched north in pursuit of the Lancastrians.

The Lancastrians chose to stand and fight on high ground near Towton in Yorkshire. On the eve of the battle, which was fought on Palm Sunday 1461, Lord John Clifford took the Lancastrians best light cavalry, the "Flower of Craven" to attack the Yorkists who had rebuilt the bridge over the Aire at Ferrybridge. The attack was a success. The bridge was destroyed, and the Yorkist units there were massacred. The whole Yorkist army then attacked the "Flower of Craven" but were beaten back. Lord Fauconberg, one of the Nevilles, then forded the river at Castleford in an attempt to outflank Lord John Cliffords position. Realising this, the Flower of Craven retreated, only to be ambushed by mounted archers at Barkston Ash. Lord John Clifford died when he was struck in the throat with a blunt arrow. This left Lord John Cliffords 2 brothers, Sir Roger and Robert Clifford to fight in the Battle of Towton. Here 60,000 Lancastrians faced 48,000 Yorkist in a snowstorm. Eventually the arrival of Yorkist reinforcements ensured a Yorkist victory. In the retreat the Lancastrians had to cross the Cock Beck, and the River Wharfe, and many were massacred or drowned in the attempt. 28,000 men lost their lives, 20,000 of them Lancastrians, and the land was stained with blood to the gates of York. Never before or since has there been such a loss of life in Battle on English soil.

Lord John Clifford was attainted as a traitor by the victorious Yorkists. His head was placed on Micklegate Bar, and his body thrown into a mass grave. His estates were given to various Yorkist partisans, particularly the Nevilles and the Stanleys.

Lord Henry Clifford

King Henry VI escaped the battle and went into exile in Scotland with many leading Lancastrians and what other men they could muster. Sir Roger Clifford and Robert Clifford were probably among them. From Scotland the Lancastrians made many attacks on Yorkist England, and succeeded in capturing a number of castles in the North of England. In 1464, Sir Roger and Robert Clifford succeeded briefly, in recapturing Skipton Castle. Defeat at the Battle of Hexham in 1464, and a truce between the Yorkists and the Scots, however, ended this phase of the war. King Henry VI was expelled from Scotland, arrested in Cumbria and imprisoned in the Tower of London. Lord John Clifford's 2 sons, Henry and Richard Clifford aged 8 and 6 at the time of the Battle of Towton went into hiding. Henry Clifford assumed the disguise of a shepherd's son in East Yorkshire, while Richard Clifford may have been sent to Holland. However it appears that by the late 1460s, the surviving Cliffords were living relatively openly in England. Henry Clifford, while disinherited by Lord John Clifford's attainder for treason, still stood to inherit considerable estates from his maternal grandfather, Henry Bromeflete, Lord Vescy, and he appears to have spent the Yorkist years engaged in managing these estates on behalf of his mother.

In 1470 Edward IV was deposed by Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick. He escaped to Burgandy, but in 1471 returned to England and was welcomed into York by Robert Clifford before going on to regain his throne at the Battles of Barnet and Tewkesbury in 1471. At the wedding of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, the climax of the party was a duel between Robert Clifford and John Cheyne. In 1483, Richard III acceded to the throne, and shortly afterwards faced a revolt by his erstwhile supporter, the Duke of Buckingham. Both Sir Roger Clifford and Robert Clifford were implicated, and when the revolt failed, both attempted to leave the country. Robert Clifford succeeded, but Sir Roger Clifford was arrested, tried, and condemned to death for treason. Despite an attempt by a mob led by a priest to rescue him while on his way to his execution, he was executed in 1485.

Sir Roger Clifford therefore spent his life fighting for the Lancastrian cause only to lose his life days before its ultimate success.

Later in 1485, Richard III lost his throne to Henry Tudor at the Battle of Bosworth. Whether Robert Clifford was in the Tudor army is not known. However, one of King Henry VII's first actions after the battle was to restore Henry Clifford to all the Clifford estates, making him the most powerful man in Northern England. He was then charged with receiving the lands of the traitorous Yorkists in Northern England into the King's hands. The Lambert Simnel uprising in 1487 saw Lord Henry Clifford defending York against the rebels, who included Lord Scrope. In 1497 the Perkin Warbeck revolt was supported by Robert Clifford, but after the failure of the revolt he returned to England and received a pardon in return for giving evidence against his former co-conspirator, Lord Stanley.

The career of Robert Clifford is remarkable, and it is obvious that most of his activities will never be discovered.

Lord Henry Clifford lived to see old age and the reign of King Henry VIII. He fought at Flodden at the age of sixty. He has gone down in legend as the 'Shepherd Lord' who grew up in rural isolation, and after his restoration became a recluse at Barden Tower in Yorkshire. The reality is somewhat different. He played a major role in managing his estates, in science, in war and in public administration. What he was doing "behind the scenes" in the years before Henry VII became King will probably always be a mystery.

Written by Adrian Waite