

English Heritage Battlefield Report: Boroughbridge 1322

Boroughbridge (March 16 1322)

Parishes: Boroughbridge; Milby; Langthorpe

District: Harrogate

County: North Yorkshire

Grid Ref: SE 398672

Historical Context

King Edward II had hated his cousin Thomas of Lancaster, the most powerful noble in the land, ever since Lancaster played a prominent part in the murder of the royal favourite Piers Gaveston in 1311. For ten years the bad blood between the two left public policy in tatters, particularly with regard to the war against Scotland. In 1321 the King installed a new favourite, Hugh le Despenser the younger, who quickly proceeded to make himself as obnoxious to the barons as Gaveston had been. Despenser's energetic pursuit of an inheritance claim in the west of England alienated a number of powerful nobles, including Sir Roger de Mortimer and Sir Humphrey de Bohun, Earl of Hereford.

Sensing an opportunity, Lancaster, whose failure fully to support the King against the Scots had made him unpopular, endeavoured to harness the nobles' dissatisfaction. In July 1321 Parliament was prevailed upon to pass sentence of banishment against le Despenser and his father. This action, however, neither cowed the King nor helped preserve the peace. At the end of 1321 King Edward led an army to the Welsh Marches to quell a rebellion headed by the Mortimers. Disappointed in the support they expected from Lancaster, the Mortimers surrendered. This left Edward free to turn against the northern lords who, too late, rose in arms. Lancaster assembled his confederates at Doncaster. The Earl of Hereford was sent to besiege Tickhill Castle, which successfully held out against him for six weeks. Lancaster himself led an army to confront the King, who was now marching northwards, and the two sides met at Burton-on-Trent. Eventually the royal forces found a way across the river and Lancaster, seeing himself outnumbered, retreated.

His flight discouraged supporters of the barons' cause: castles surrendered; promised reinforcements evaporated. Lancaster wished to try and hold out in Pontefract Castle but his comrades preferred to continue their retreat and head for Dunstanburgh in Northumberland. Although he disagreed with this strategy, believing that to take refuge so far north would make accusations of collusion with the Scots seem plausible, Lancaster deferred to his fellow barons. The rebels continued northwards, reaching Boroughbridge on Tuesday 16th March 1322, only to discover that Sir Andrew de Harcla, Warden of Carlisle, commanded the bridge across the River Ure. Lancaster and his friends were trapped: King Edward was in pursuit behind, so they either had to negotiate with Harcla or fight their way past him.

Location of the Battlefield

Boroughbridge grew up at the point where the historic Great North Road crosses the River Ure. Today's bridge at the northern end of the town occupies the approximate position of the old bridge, across which the rebel barons attempted to force a passage. The hillock north of the bridge, where until recently a cattle market stood (in 1993 it was given over to housing), would have been the obvious place for Harcla to station part of his army.

Besides assaulting the bridge, the barons also tried to get across the river at a ford. The ford has long since disappeared but writers on the battle tend to agree that it once existed a few hundred yards east of the bridge near

Milby. The basis of this belief is the presence, a short distance to the south-east of Boroughbridge, of the ancient Roman town of Isurium, where the village of Aldborough now stands: the ford is assumed to have been the townsfolks' means of crossing the Ure.

Landscape Evolution

Although Aldborough had grown up in Anglo-Saxon times on the ruins of the Roman settlement of Isurium, the earliest reference in the records to Boroughbridge - Pons Burgi - occurs only in 1155, when the town was enfranchised by Henry II. By 1300, however, Boroughbridge's importance as a point of transit was well established and the royal revenue from the mills, fishery, tolls and stallage of the town amounted to £66 per annum.

In 1318 Boroughbridge was burnt by the Scots and suffered fresh damage four years later during its occupation by Lancaster's followers. An inquisition reported that the town granary had been ransacked. In mediaeval times the town was set back from the bridge, but its subsequent growth has carried the town to the riverbank and beyond: Boroughbridge now spills over to the north bank. The wooden bridge across the Ure had been replaced by one of stone by the time Leland visited Boroughbridge in c.1540. It was widened in the eighteenth century.

The scene of the fighting by the ford remains open ground. To the south of the river are the lush meadows of The Holms; to the north the fields around the hamlet of Milby. But even here changes to the landscape have occurred. The ground on the south side of the river where the battle was fought was enclosed in the eighteenth century¹. Apart from the small embankment belonging to a disused railway, the chief alteration on the north bank is the eighteenth-century river cutting intended to improve navigation on the Ure, the Milby Cut. In 1767 an Act of Parliament was passed to make the Ure navigable as far upstream as Ripon, which necessitated the digging of the Milby Cut. At this point, for a thousand yards of its length, the river now has a dual channel.

The Sources

In as far as the Battle of Boroughbridge finally resolved the longstanding tension between King Edward and his overmighty subject, the Earl of Lancaster, the battle is mentioned in all the chronicles and contemporary histories. Only three of them, however, describe the events of the battle in any detail. The first, the Chronicle of Lanercost, compiled at the Augustinian priory of the same name in Cumberland, is a contemporary source. Harcla gathered his army from the area surrounding the priory, so subsequent events were clearly of interest to the chronicler.

Now when that valiant and famous knight Sir Andrew de Harcla, sheriff of Carlisle, heard of their approach, believing that they intended to go to Scotland to ally themselves with the Scots against the King of England, acting under the King's commission and authority, he summoned, under very heavy penalties, the knights, esquires and other able men of the two countries, to wit, Cumberland and Westmorland, all who were able to beat arms, to assemble for the King's aid against the oft-mentioned Earl [Lancaster]. But when the said Sir Andrew, on his march towards the King with that somewhat scanty following, had spent the night at Ripon, he learnt from a certain spy that the Earl and his army were going to arrive on the morrow at the town of Boroughbridge, which is only some four miles distant from the town of Ripon. Pressing forward, therefore, at night, he got a start of the Earl, occupying the bridge of Boroughbridge before him, and, sending his horses and those of his men to the rear, he posted all his knights and some pikemen on foot at the northern end of the bridge, and other pikemen he stationed in schiltrons, after the Scottish fashion, opposite the ford or passage of the water, to oppose the cavalry wherein the enemy put his trust. Also he directed his archers to keep up a hot and constant discharge upon the enemy as he approached.

On Tuesday, then, after the third Sunday in Lent, being the seventeenth of the kalends of April [16 March 1322], the aforesaid Earls arrived in force, and perceiving that Sir Andrew had anticipated them by occupying the north end of the bridge, they arranged that the Earl of Hereford and Sir Roger

de Clifford (a man of great strength who had married his daughter) should advance with their company and seize the bridge from the pikemen stationed there, while the Earl of Lancaster with the rest of the cavalry should attack the ford and seize the water and ford from the pikemen, putting them to flight and killing all who resisted; but matters took a different turn. For when the Earl of Hereford (with his standard-bearer leading the advance, to wit, Sir Ralf de Applinsdene) and Sir Roger de Clifford and some other knights, had entered upon the bridge before the others as bold as lions, charging fiercely upon the enemy, pikes were thrust at the Earl from all sides; he fell immediately and was killed with his standard-bearer and the knights aforesaid, to wit, Sir W de Sule and Sir Roger de Berefield; but Sir Roger de Clifford, though grievously wounded with pikes and arrows, and driven back, escaped with difficulty along with the others.

The Earl [of Lancaster's] cavalry, when they endeavoured to cross the water, could not enter it by reason of the number and density of arrows which the archers discharged upon them and their horses. This affair being thus quickly settled, the Earl of Lancaster and his people retired from the water, nor did they dare to approach it again, and so their whole array was thrown into disorder. Wherefore the Earl sent messengers to Sir Andrew, requesting an armistice until the morning, when he would either give him battle or surrender to him. Andrew agreed to the Earl's proposal; nevertheless he kept his people at the bridge and the river all that day and throughout the night, so as to be ready for battle at any moment.

But during that night the Earl of Hereford's men deserted and fled, because their lord had been killed, also many of the Earl of Lancaster's men and those of my Lord de Clifford and others deserted from them. When morning came, therefore, the Earl of Lancaster, my Lord de Clifford, my Lord de Mowbray and all who had remained with them, surrendered to Sir Andrew, who himself took them to York as captives, where they were confined in the castle to await there the pleasure of my lord the King².

The Lanercost chronicler is particularly good at describing the tactics employed by Harcla's border levies. Accustomed to fighting the Scots they copied their method of warfare. Lancaster's rebel force contained a disproportionate number of mounted chivalry - barons, knights and their retainers - so for Harcla's spearmen to mass in schiltrons was the best means of countering this threat. But as it happened, the difficulties involved in forcing a river crossing, and the fact that Harcla (unlike the Scots) could call upon an efficient force of archers, made the precaution less necessary. The Earl of Hereford was unable to force the narrow bridge and died in the attempt. Lancaster's cavalry was even less successful at the ford and completely failed to get to grips with the enemy.

The account of the battle in the *Life of Edward the Second*, written by the so-called 'Monk of Malmesbury' (?d.1326), supplies some additional detail:

When they [the rebels] reached Boroughbridge, that there at any rate they might rest for a night, who should be there but Andrew Harclay, that active soldier, already aware of the Earl's flight. He had fully informed himself of the Earl's order of march and his plans, and had arrived with some 4,000 men, whom he had led with all speed to that place. The Earls were settling into their lodgings in the town, when they heard that Andrew and his followers had come to destroy them utterly, so they left the town to meet their opponents in two columns. The Earl of Hereford crossed by the bridge with his men-at-arms, but none of them was mounted. For the bridge was narrow, and offered no path for horsemen in battle array. The Earl of Lancaster with his knights made their way to the ford of the river. But Andrew Harclay, like a prudent knight, had shrewdly stationed a force of men-at-arms opposite each crossing. The Earl of Hereford forthwith attacked the enemy, but at length fell badly wounded in the fighting and died. Three or four knights were killed with the Earl in that conflict. Roger de Clifford and very many others returned to the town badly wounded. Others, trying to cross the ford, were lamentably cut up by a shower of arrows; but after the death of the Earl of Hereford their zeal for battle cooled off, and

they at once retreated. But the Earl of Lancaster made a truce with Andrew Harclay to keep the peace until the morrow; and when this was done each returned to his lodging. On the same night the sheriff of York came with a large force to attack the King's enemies; relying on his help Andrew Harclay entered the town very early, and taking the Earl of Lancaster and almost all the other knights and esquires scatheless, led them off to York and imprisoned them. Some left their horses and putting off their armour looked round for ancient worn-out garments, and took to the road as beggars. But their caution was of no avail, for not a single well-known man among them all escaped³.

Malmesbury, in common with the Lanercost chronicler, emphasises that good intelligence regarding the enemy's movements enabled Harcla to reach the bridge over the Ure first. The rebels, in contrast, were negligent: they failed to secure the bridge before seeking quarters. Malmesbury's description of the rebels leaving the town before attacking Harcla confirms that in 1322 the town was set back from the bridge.

We learn from Malmesbury that, to attack the bridge, Hereford and his followers had to dismount. Their assault fails. The attempt to cross the river at the ford is equally ill-fated. Malmesbury, as did the Lanercost chronicler, informs us of the truce which followed. Next day Lancaster and his surviving friends were captured by Harcla, assisted by Sir Simon Ward, Sheriff of York, who had arrived on the scene during the night.

The final detailed account of the Battle of Boroughbridge is taken from the *Brut, or the Chronicles of England*. The *Brut*, compiled during the reign of Edward I, originally concluded in 1307 but was later updated to 1330. It was translated from the French later in the century. In the extract which follows the Chaucerian English has been modernized.

So went they [Lancaster and his friends] together into the North; and with them they had 700 men of arms, and come to Boroughbridge.

And when Sir Andrew of Harcla - that was in the North Country through ordinance of the King, for to keep the country of Scotland [in check]- heard tell how that Thomas of Lancaster was discomfited, and his company were discomfited at Burton upon Trent, he ordained him a strong power, and Sir Simon Ward also, that was sheriff of York, & come & meet the barons at Boroughbridge; & anon they broke the bridge, that was made of tree. And when Sir Thomas of Lancaster heard that Sir Andrew of Harcla had brought with him such a power, he was sore afraid, & sent for Sir Andrew of Harcla, & with him spake ...

Thomas of Lancaster's attempt to recruit Harcla to his cause is unavailing. The two sides commence hostilities.

There might men see archers drawn up on both sides; and knights also fought together wonder[fully] sore; and among others, Sir Humphrey de Bohun, Earl of Hereford, a worthy knight of renown throughout all Christendom, stood and fought with his enemies upon the bridge. And as the noble lord stood and fought upon the bridge, a thief, a worthless creature, skulked under the bridge, and fiercely with a spear smote the noble knight into the fundament, so that his bowels came out there. Alas the sorrow! for there was slain the flower of solace and of comfort, & also of courtesy. And Sir Roger of Clifford, a noble knight, stood ever, and fought, & well and nobly him[self] defended as a worthy baron; but at the last he was sore wounded in the head, & Sir William of Sulley & Sir Roger of Bernesfeld were slain in that battle. And Sir Andrew of Harcla saw Sir Thomas of Lancaster's men left and slain. Anon he & his company came to the gentle knight, Thomas of Lancaster, & said 'Yield, Traitor! Yield!' The gentle Earl answered so, and said: 'Nay, lords! Traitor be we none, and to you will we never us yield while our lives last; but believe we have to be slain in our truth, than yield ourselves to you'. And Sir Andrew again cried upon Sir Thomas's company, yelling as a wolf, and said: 'Yield you, traitor taken! Yield you!' and with a loud voice said: 'Beware sirs, that no man of you be so hardy, upon life and

limb, to mishandle Thomas of Lancaster's body'. And with that word, the good Earl Thomas went into a chapel, and said, kneeling down upon his knees, and turning his face towards the Cross: 'Almighty God! To you I yield myself, and put myself into thy mercy'. And with that, the base worthless creatures leapt about him, on every side that Gentle Earl ... and despoiled him of his armour, & clothed him in a robe of Ray, that was his squire's livery, and forth led him unto York by water⁴.

The *Brut* is sympathetic to Thomas of Lancaster's cause and tends to concentrate more on the exchanges between the Earl and Sir Andrew de Harcla than the battle itself. In the *Brut's* account of the interview between Lancaster and Harcla (omitted in the extract given above) we are first given Lancaster's manifesto against the King and then, once his overtures to Harcla are rebuffed, hear the Earl's startling prophecy that within the year Harcla himself would be accused of treason 'and in worse death ye should die, than ever did knight of England'. That the prophecy was promptly fulfilled presumably did not concern the continuator of the *Brut*. As far as the writer was concerned Harcla was already a 'forsworn man' and guilty of ingratitude: 'for through the noble Earl of Lancaster he undertook the arms of chivalry, and through him he was made knight'.

The emphasis laid by the *Brut* on personalities extends to the Earl of Hereford, whose grisly death on the bridge is recorded with graphic detail. There is no reference, however, to the separate and distinct fighting at the ford. The *Brut's* account of the battle concludes with a description of the seizure of Thomas of Lancaster in the chapel at Boroughbridge.

As stated earlier, the other chronicles do little more than mention the Battle of Boroughbridge and supply a list of the notables executed in its wake. The St Albans Chronicle of John of Trokelowe provides at great length the judgement passed upon Thomas of Lancaster at Pontefract Castle a few days after the battle⁵. The Meaux chronicler and Geoffrey le Baker mention the circumstances of the Earl of Hereford's death⁶. But none of the chronicles add anything else of significance.

Indication of Importance

If King Edward II had been other than he was, the victory gained on his behalf at Boroughbridge should have been of the greatest importance. The capture and subsequent execution of Thomas of Lancaster removed a longstanding source of conflict from the political scene. Lancaster's followers too suffered terribly; the executions made amongst the rest of the nobility were the most extensive since the Conquest. Yet Edward failed to take advantage of the opportunity presented for a fresh start. The King's character was incapable of reformation and his many follies, including his continued patronage of the Despencers, provoked such a reaction that he was eventually deposed and murdered.

The written sources for the Battle of Boroughbridge illustrate the course of the fighting well. In particular, the Lanercost chronicler's account of the dispositions of Harcla's army enables an assessment to be made of the place of the Battle of Boroughbridge in the development of tactics. In 1904, T F Tout published an article arguing that the fact that the borderers' knights and men-at-arms fought on foot was the earliest fourteenth-century example of the revival 'of the new English policy of dismounting', later carried forward at Halidon Hill and Crecy⁷. This is a good point, even if Tout is tempted thereafter into making the comparison between Boroughbridge and these later battles too all-embracing. The Lanercost chronicler, after all, stresses that Harcla's defensive formation was inspired by the Scots, who placed their reliance on the spearman, not the archer. And, as is well-known, it was the English archer who was to be the agent of victory at Halidon Hill and Crecy.

According to T S Turner, who wrote his *History of Aldborough and Boroughbridge* in 1853, when 'many years ago' the ground was lowered below the bridge to counter flooding at a place called Old Banks, a quantity of bones, armour and weapons was found. In 1852 the monument traditionally

associated with the battle, an ornate column, was moved from Boroughbridge market place to Aldborough, where it remains to this day.

The growth of the town of Boroughbridge and the changes made to render the River Ure navigable have obviously altered the character of the battlefield. Nevertheless, by following the public footpaths which run along both banks of the river, it is still possible to view the ground where the fighting to wrest control of the ford would have taken place. The value of a visit to Boroughbridge is increased by the fact that the Battle of Myton, fought only three years before, took place little more than a mile further downriver.

Battlefield Area

The battlefield area boundary defines the outer reasonable limit of the battle, taking into account the positions of the combatants at the outset of fighting and the focal area of the battle itself. It does not include areas over which fighting took place subsequent to the main battle. Wherever possible, the boundary has been drawn so that it is easily appreciated on the ground.

The battlefield area for Boroughbridge need not be large because the numbers involved were not great. Harcla, according to the Lanercost chronicler, had a 'somewhat scanty following', which Malmesbury puts at 4,000 men. The *Brut* tells us that the rebel barons were accompanied by 700 men at arms, but this should not be inferred as being the full extent of their power: the barons probably had a number of less well equipped followers. Even so, the barons were undoubtedly outnumbered, hence the dismay that the *Brut* informs us was felt by Lancaster when he saw that Harcla 'had brought with him such a power'.

From Tinkler Lane in the north-east the battlefield area follows the dismantled railway westwards, passing south of the site of the station to meet the road. For illustrative purposes, the full extent of Harcla's deployment is represented by a dashed line. This provides Harcla's men with a position 200-300 yards deep, sufficient to enable some of them to occupy the advantageous rising ground by what was the Cattle Market and for the army as a whole to dominate the two river crossings with its archers. The battlefield area does not include the new housing north of the roundabout but heads south-westwards to the end of the Milby Cut.

To the east Tinkler Lane, which runs from Milby to the river at Nab End (where the Milby Cut begins), provides the boundary. The reasoning here is that the ford was probably west of this point on the river, since when the Milby Cut was dug to make the Ure navigable the shallows by the old ford were presumably one of the hazards that needed to be by-passed. Across the river, on the south bank, the battlefield boundary heads west over The Holms, leaving space for Thomas of Lancaster's horsemen to draw up opposite the ford.

Again, for illustrative purposes the full extent of the battle, which includes the northern part of Boroughbridge itself, is represented by a dashed line. The battlefield area for the purposes of the Register returns to the riverside past the cricket pavilion and follows the south bank of the river, past the site of the bridge and across to complete the circuit at the end of the Milby Cut.

Notes

1. See Sir T Lawson-Tancred *Records of a Yorkshire Manor* (London 1937), Robert Kettlewell 'On a Tithe Map of Boroughbridge' *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 37 1848-51 pp397-401, and T S Turner *History of Aldborough and Boroughbridge* (London 1853).
2. Extract translated from the Latin in *English Historical Documents 1189-1327* ed. by Harry Rothwell (London 1975) pp275-6.
3. Extract translated from the Latin in *ibid.* pp285-6.
4. *The Brut or the Chronicles of England* ed. F W D Brie (Early English Text Society, London 1906) i 217-220.
5. *Chronica Monasterii S. Albani Johannis de Trokelowe Annales* ed. H T Riley (Rolls Series 28, London 1866) pp121-124.
6. *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa* ed. Edward A Bond (Rolls Series 43, London 1867) ii 342; *Chronicon Galfridi Le Baker de Swynebroke* ed. Edward Maude Thompson (Oxford 1889) p14.
7. Tout, T F 'The Tactics of the Battles of Boroughbridge and Morlaix' *English Historical Review* 19 (1904) pp711-15.