English Heritage Battlefield Report: Northampton 1460

The Battlefield of Northampton (10 July 1460)

Parish: Northampton

District: Northampton

County: Northamptonshire

Grid Ref: SP 763589

Historical Context

By 1459, the nine year rivalry between the supporters of Richard, Duke of York, and the preferred counsellors of the Lancastrian King Henry VI, had again degenerated into open conflict. Although the Yorkists were initially triumphant, winning the Battle of Blore Heath in September, their army disintegrated shortly afterwards. The Yorkist leaders were forced to flee abroad, the Duke of York to Ireland and the Earls of March, Salisbury and Warwick to Calais.

The exiled Yorkists, however, were soon planning a return. After sending a number of letters to England - most notably to the Archbishop of Canterbury - justifying their conduct, the Calais lords landed in Kent in June 1460. Within a few days they controlled the county, a success multiplied when London surrendered to them in early July. The King and his army, meanwhile, remained in the Midlands, anxious to prevent an invasion from Ireland by the Duke of York. However they did move their base nearer to London, from Coventry to Northampton.

The Calais lords were determined not to give King Henry the opportunity to augment his army by calling in contingents from around the country and so, leaving the Earl of Salisbury to besiege the Tower of London, they pushed on from the Capital quickly, without waiting for a landing by the Duke of York. On 5 July Lord Fauconberg led out an advance guard; Warwick and March followed with the main body soon after. The Yorkists came up with the royal army, waiting to the south of Northampton behind entrenchments, on 10 July.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

The contemporary chroniclers are much more precise about where the Battle of Northampton was fought than they are with regard to most other battles of the Wars of the Roses. A pro-Yorkist London chronicler of the time, whose work was published in 1856 as *An English Chronicle of the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI*, recorded that 'The kyng at Northamptone ... ordeyned there a strong and a myghty feelde, in the medowys beside the Nonry [Nunnery] ... havyng the ryver at hys back'[1]. This places the royal army south of the River Nene near Delapre Abbey. Jehan de Waurin, the contemporary Burgundian chronicler, also reported that the royal army was stationed outside Northampton, in a park (presumably a predecessor to the 17th-century Delapre Abbey park) by a little river (*en ung parcq oultre la ville sue une petite riviere*)[2].

Further evidence as to the battlefield's location is provided in *A Short English Chronicle* (which, according to its nineteenth century editor James Gairdner, was written soon after 1471). This chronicle comments that the battle took place 'be syde Northhampton in the Newfelde be twene Harsyngton and Sandyfforde'[3] (Hardingstone village lies on a hill almost a mile to the south of Delapre Abbey; the site of Sandyford is discussed below[4]). John Benet, the vicar of Harlington in Bedfordshire, tends to agree with this general siting of the battlefield. His Latin chronicle, which dates from between 1462 and 1471, states that King Henry's fortified camp,

containing 20,000 men, was positioned between Hardingstone and Delapre Abbey (*Et iuxta Northampton' Castrametatus est rex in campo inter villam que vocatur Hardyngeston et domum monialum que vocatur de Pratis cum xx^{ti} milia hominum bellatorum...*)[5].

Next for consideration is the chronicle of John Stone, a monk of Christ Church, Canterbury. The fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Bourchier, witnessed the fighting, probably explains why Stone could be so precise in his location of the battlefield:

'And for the feldys name of that oon parte on the northest syde it is callyd Cowemedewe. And that othir parte is I callyd Menthynfeld. And for the othir part is I callyd of tyme Sandyngford bregge nexte the towne. On the est syde there is a water melle [that] is called Sandford melle'[6].

Cow Meadow was on the north bank of the River Nene outside the town walls to the south-east of Northampton. 'Menthyn' field is harder to pinpoint but is unlikely to be equated with land adjacent to Marvell's Mill, or 'Merthensmylne', which lay outside Northampton further west because of the distance from the town. However, 'myncen' is Old English for a nun, and if Menthynfeld has an acceptable root as 'the Nuns' field', the land beside Delapre Abbey would make an attractive speculation. Perhaps the name had become transformed into 'Moorfield' by 1740, for this is how the area west of Cow Pasture and south of Cow Meadow is labelled on a pre-Enclosure survey[7].

'Sandyngford bregge nexte the towne' is unlikely to be the South Bridge on the London road out of Northampton because a bridge had existed there since 1200 and at no time does it appear to have been referred to as Sandyford. Sandford Mill, Sandyford and Sandyford Bridge are presumably at the same place, and equation with St Peter's Bridge is doubtful. The only remaining plausible option is the Nunn Mills area, where the bridge led into Derngate and which would justify its description as 'nexte the towne'.

Although John Stone omits to mention either the River Nene or Delapre Abbey, from his description of the battlefield it is clear that he is referring to the same general area as the other chroniclers. This is confirmed when he goes on to mention that the Archbishop of Canterbury watched the battle from Queen Eleanor's Cross (then, as now, 'headless'), on the hillside outside Hardingstone (*Archiepiscopus Cant' Thomas Bowshir tempore belli stetit in monte, qui vocatur Crux sine capite*).

Having reviewed the various locations of the battlefield suggested by the chronicles, the King's entrenchments would appear to have been sited close to the River Nene and close to Delapre Abbey. More detailed definition requires an element of landscape reconstruction.

Landscape Evolution

In 1460, the River Nene flowed along its natural course to the south of the town and was bordered by flood meadows. Across the river at South Bridge there was a small settlement at Far Cotton. Delapre Abbey, the 12th-century Cluniac nunnery, was still in use. A stream, known in 1740 as the Fullbrook, flowed northwards past the nunnery. Land all around the Abbey but away from the meadows was probably under plough; ridge and furrow can still be clearly seen in Delapre Park on land to the west of the lake. The area was crossed north to south with a track from Northampton's East Gate, crossing the river at Nunn Mill, and leading south to Hardingstone. To the south-west, Queen Eleanor's Cross had been erected c.1292 above the meadows and on the London road.

After the Dissolution in 1538, the abbey was rebuilt as a mansion in the early 17th century and a Park and Great Lawn created. The ditch and ha-ha faced with stone can clearly be seen to the west and south of the house. Delapre Wood appears as a Plantation on maps in the mid-18th century but whether this was newly planted or an existing wood is uncertain.

The map of 1740 has already been called upon in connection with the site of 'Menthynfeld'. A potentially decisive piece of evidence is also depicted on the map and its terrier - the existence at that time of a boundary labelled Battle Dyke running east-west between Hardingstone and Delapre. The explanation of this feature as a remnant of the King's defences seems attractive. By this time there were several enclosed fields but the landscape emained dominated by open fields.

The fields of Hardingstone parish were enclosed between 1765 and 1776, those of Northampton Borough by an act of 1778[8]. A new canal was proposed in 1767 running east-west across the battlefield but it was never built, the route chosen being later used by the new railway. The abbey and its grounds were again refashioned in the late 18th and 19th centuries, emerging as a country house with an ornamental garden to the east and further on the establishment of a Home Farm with its enclosed fields.

The 20th century has brought railway sidings, industrial buildings and factories along the River Nene and settlement at Cotton End has expanded to Far Cotton. The River Nene has itself been canalised to follow a new course to the south and to form a great lake. This lake, with Delapre Abbey and its grounds, forms Delapre Park, owned and managed by Northampton Borough Council as a Leisure and Recreation Amenity. The largest part of the land is given over to Delapre Golf Complex. Other sports facilities include an equestrian area with jumps, and water sports on the lake.

To the south and east of the battlefield area is the newly built A45, part in a cutting, and part elevated. New light industrial buildings are being built along this road. A new hotel complex has also been built close to the site of the Home Farm.

The Battle: its Sources and Interpretation

The sources for the Battle of Northampton are plentiful and reasonably informative. Part of *An English Chronicle's* description of the battle has been cited already, but the full account now follows:

> The kyng at Northamptone lay atte Freres [Friars], and had ordeyned there a strong and a myghty feeld, in the medowys beside the Nonry, armed and arayed wythe gonnys, hauyng the ryuer at hys back.
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> The erles with the nombre of lx M[l], as it was sayd, came to Northamptone, and sent certayne bysshps to the kyng besechyng hym that in eschewyng of effusyone of Crysten blood he wolde admytte and suffre the erles for to come to his presence to declare thaym self as thay were. The duk of Bukynghame that stode besyde the kyng, sayde unto thaym, 'Ye come nat as bysshoppes for to trete for pease, but as men of armes;' because they broughte with thayme a notable company of men of armes. They answered and sayde, 'We come thus for suerte of oure persones, for they that bethe aboute the kyng bythe nat oure frendes.' 'Forsothe,' sayde the duk, 'the erle of Warrewyk shalle nat come to the kynges presence, and yef he come he shalle dye.' The messyngers retorned agayne, and tolde thys to the erles.
>
> Thanne the erle of Warrewyk sent an herowde [herald] af armes to the kyng, besechyng that he myghte haue ostages of saaf goyng and commung, and he wolde come naked to his presence, but he myghte nat be herde. And the iii[de] tyme he sente to the kyng and sayde that at ii howres after none, he wolde speke with hym, or elles dye in the feeld.
>
> The archebysshoppe of Caunterbury sent a bysshoppe of this lond to the kyng with an instruccione, the whyche dyd nat hys message indyfferently, but exorted and coraged the kynges part for to fygte, as thay sayde that were there. And another tyme he was sent to the kyng by the

> commones, and thanne he came nat ayene [again], but pryuely departed awey. The bysshop of Herforde, a Whyte Frere, the kynges confessoure, ded the same: wherfore after the batayle he was commytted to the castelle of Warrewyk, where he was long in pryson.

> Thanne on the Thursday the Xth day of Juylle, the yere of oure Lorde M^{l}cccclx, ay ii howres after none, the sayde erles of Marche and Warrewyk lete crye thoroughe the felde, that no man should laye hand vpponne the kyng ne on the commune peple, but onely on the lordes, khyghtes and squyers: thenne the trumpettes blew vp, and bothe hostes countred and faughte togedre half an oure. The lorde Gray, that was the kynges vawewarde, brake the feelde and came to the erles party, whyche caused sauacione of many a mannys lyfe: many were slayne, and many were fled, and were drouned in the ryuer.

> The duk of Bukyngham, the erle of Shrouesbury, the lorde Beaumont, the lorde Egremount were slayne by the Kentysshmen besyde the kynges tent, and meny other knyghtes and squyers. The ordenaunce of tyhe kynges gonnes avayled nat, for that day was so grete rayne, that the gonnes lay depe in the water, and so were queynt and myghte nat be shott[10].

According to this chronicle, when the Calais lords with 60,000 men approached the King's position they sent some of their ecclesiastical supporters as emissaries, but they were rebuffed by the Duke of Buckingham. Further attempts to establish a channel of communication having proved unavailing, battle became inevitable, a prospect which so alarmed more than one bishop on the Yorkist side that they left the earls' camp. Battle commenced at 2pm on 10 July and had lasted only half an hour when the Lancastrian Lord Edmund Grey of Ruthin changed sides and the Yorkists emerged victorious. A number of the leading Lancastrian nobles were killed; many of the common soldiers drowned in the Nene. Apart from the treachery of Grey another reason for the Yorkist triumph appears to have been that the royal artillery was extinguished by the heavy rain.

Many of the details provided by *An English Chronicle* are corroborated by the contemporary Burgundian chronicler, Waurin. He begins by stating that the Earl of Warwick viewed the positions of the King's army from a 'mountain': this might either be a misnomer for Hardingstone Hill or else, as has been suggested, a reference to the slightly more prominent peak a mile to the west, Hunsbury Hill, site of an ancient hill fort. Whichever, we then hear once again of the Duke of Buckingham's rejection of overtures from the Calais lords. The herald reports Buckingham's words back to them,

> ... and on that, without waiting any longer, they sent their men forward in good order to invade their enemies. Soon after the said herald had left, the Duke of Buckingham called together all the lords who were around the King and said to them: 'Good lords, today it is necessary for us to fight, because our enemies are marching forward', and they all replied 'we will stand our ground, because there are enough of us', which there were, around 50,000 [*Waurin had already computed the Yorkists as 80,000 strong*]. And to him who says that those who reckon without one's host customarily reckons twice over; I say to him that it is very difficult to guard against a traitor, as you can hear, because before going into battle the Earl of Warwick had ordered his war chiefs to warn their men that all who bore the *ravestoc noue* [the black ragged staff - the badge of Grey of Ruthin] were to be saved, for it was they who were to give them entry to the park. After the Earl of Warwick had had his men instructed in what they must do, he sent forward the advance guard, commanded by Lord Fauconberg, which descended to the bottom of the valley; and the earls of March and Warwick led the [main] battle, which pushed so far forward that they came to fight hand to hand in a great struggle which lasted three hours and would have lasted much longer had Sir Ralph Grey not betrayed the Duke of Buckingham by allowing the Earl of March inside the camp on his side, as a result of which there was much killing. King Henry was captured by an archer called Henry Montfort and the Duke of Buckingham, Lord Chursbury, Viscount Beaumont, Sir Thomas Fyderme and many other great lords were killed. In this defeat the dead numbered 12,000 and the prisoners were a

great multitude[11].

The most interesting aspect of this account is the claim that Lord Grey's treachery was premeditated, he and Warwick having reached a prior agreement. Once the Yorkists had advanced down into the valley (i.e. from Hardingstone Hill) the struggle is meant to have lasted three hours, but the half hour mentioned by *An English Chronicle* sounds more likely. Grey's allowing of Edward Earl of March into the Lancastrian position was decisive.

Waurin gives a second account of the battle, which clearly originates from a different source, later in his chronicle. This, however, is so at odds with other versions of the battle that Lord Grey of Ruthin ('le seigneur de Greriffin'), after defending the town of Northampton against the enemy, is held to have been executed by the victorious Yorkists for his pains. The Lancastrian entrenchments outside Northampton, defended by artillerymen who loaded their cannon only with blanks, are represented as falling through the treachery of others[12].

The *Register* of Abbot John Whethamstede of St Albans is another contemporary source which deals with the Battle of Northampton in some detail. It states that the Yorkists proceeded with 60,000 men to Northampton, outside which the King had constructed his fortified camp (*Dominus Rex suam posuerat castrametationem*). The Yorkists sent the Bishop of Salisbury to negotiate with the King but the Lancastrian nobles, who were confident because of their engines of war and the strength of their fortification (*tam de machinis suis bellicis, et fortitudine castrametationis*), returned an insulting answer. Upon this the Yorkists attacked in three divisions, the first led by the Earl of March, the second by the Earl of Warwick, and the third by Lord Fauconberg. Thanks to the treachery of Lord Grey the assault was successful 'for as the attacking squadrons came to the ditch before the royalist rampart and wanted to climb over it, which they could not quickly do because of the height ... the lord [Grey] with his men met them and, seizing them by the hand, hauled them into the embattled field'. Following their defeat many of the fleeing Lancastrians were drowned in waters swollen by the unseasonal rain[13].

In its essentials Whethamstede's account is not greatly at variance with what we have learnt about the battle from other sources. The treachery of Lord Grey is given due prominence and confirmation is provided that it had been raining heavily. In contrast, the chronicle attributed to William Gregory (mayor of London, 1451-2), in common with the majority of other shorter descriptions of the battle[14], does not get round to mentioning Lord Grey, although it does refer to the many drownings. The extract which follows begins with the Yorkist leaders crossing from Calais:

Alle soo thes for sayde lordys came agayne unto Sondewyche the xxi day of June nexte folowyng. And the comyns of Kente and there welle-wyllers brought hem to Lundon, and so forthe to Northehampton. And there they mete with the kynge and foughte manly with the kyngys lordys and mayny, but there was moche favyr in that fylde unto the Erle of Warwycke. And there they toke the kynge, and made newe offycers of the londe, as the chaunceler and tresyrar and othyr, but they occupyde not fo[r]the-with, but a-bode a seson of the comyng of Duke of York owte of Irlonde. And in that fylde was slayne the Duke of Bokyngham, stondyng stylle at hys tente, the Erle of Schrovysbury, the Lord Bemond, and the Lord Egremond, with many othyr men. Ande many men were drownyd by syde the fylde in the revyr at a mylle. And that goode knyght Syr Wylliam Lucy that dwellyd be-syde Northehampton hyrde the gonne schotte, and come unto the fylde to have holpyn ye kynge, but the fylde was done or that he come; an one of the Staffordys was ware of hys comynge, and lovyd that knyght ys wyffe and hatyd hym, and a-non causyd hys dethe[15].

However interesting the explanation provided for the death of Sir William Lucy might be (another source identifies John Stafford as the executioner), the reference of most immediate relevance to this study is to the drownings which occurred 'beside the field [of battle] in the river at a mill'. It will be recalled that John Stone

also mentioned a watermill at Sandford, which was thought to be at the modern-day Nunn Mills to the north of the battlefield which were owned by Delapre; if this were the site of the drownings it would help identify a Lancastrian line of retreat.

Another short account of the Battle of Northampton is given in the commonplace book of a citizen of London, Robert Bale (*d*. 1461?). His estimate of the strength of the Yorkist army as 160,000 men (as opposed to 20,000 Lancastrians) is so exaggerated that it highlights the futility of attempting to determine the number of combatants in the battle. All that can be deduced from the figures provided by the chroniclers is that the Yorkists were more numerous. Bale's resume of events begins with an unusual appreciation of the strategic situation facing the Yorkists: they advanced from London in two bodies, anxious to prevent the King's army retreating to a stronghold in the Isle of Ely.

> And on the friday and Saterday suyng they brake agein and departed in two weyes that is to wite oon wey toward Seint Albons and that other wey toward Ware because that the seid lordes wold mete wt the king and countre wt his ost and lett and stopp them their entre into the Isle of Ely, wher then the kings counceill hadde proposed as was seid to have left the king and for their strength and saufgard ther to have hiden. But in as moche as the kings counseill might not opteyn that purpose they set a feld beside Northampton and thedir cam the seid lordes and their peple departed in iiii Batailles and ther was nombred than of them C lx M and of the kings Ost xx M. And on the thursday was Bataill in which wer slain in the kings Ost the Duk of Buk, the Erle Shrovesbury the lord Beaumond the lorde Egremond and many other gentiles and of other to the nombre of l [50] persones and on the other partie not over viii persones...[16]

Despite the enormous numbers supposedly involved in the battle, Bale believes the casualties to have been light - fewer than sixty killed. Nearly as low an estimate of the dead is made in the *Annales* formerly attributed to William of Worcester - 300, although this chronicle adds that many fugitives perished by drowning[17]; *A Short English Chronicle* also draws attention to the 'many ... knyghtes and squyers, and many comyners [who] were drowned'[18]. Waurin, in contrast, put the dead at 12,000.

Indication of Importance

Politically Northampton is one of the more important battles of the Wars of the Roses. After it, the Duke of York for the first time pressed his dynastic claim to the throne and by so doing ushered in a new and bloodier phase of the civil war. The Act of Settlement of October 1460, by which York was declared King Henry VI's heir, was unacceptable to Queen Margaret, since her son was thereby disinherited. Her resistance to the compromise provoked a desperate war of succession, with the result that four fierce battles - Wakefield, second St Albans, Mortimer's Cross and Towton - were fought within little more than six months.

Tactically the Battle of Northampton is of interest because it featured an assault on a fortified camp, protected by entrenchments and artillery. The use of fortified camps was common in continental warfare at the time and although the Duke of York had dug his army in at Crayford in 1452 and Ludford Bridge in 1459, Northampton was the only occasion during the Wars of the Roses that entrenchments were actually attacked.

The sources for the Battle of Northampton are, as previously remarked, reasonably plentiful, so the course of events can be reconstructed with a fair degree of certainty.

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 position of the King's entrenchment forms the focal area for the battlefield. To the north-east the battlefield area follows the old course of the River Nene to which the battle migrated as the Royal army fled. The line of the A45 forms a pragmatic boundary on the south and east sides of the battlefield. To the west, the London Road to just beyond the entrance to Delapre Abbey forms an appropriate boundary, encompassing the Eleanor Cross. The northern boundary follows the margins of the former depot and railway yards before closing the circuit at the Nene, so including Delapre Abbey where the captive Henry VI was taken immediately afterwards.

References and Bibliography

1*An English Chronicle of the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI*, J S Davies ed. (Camden Society 1856) p96.

2Waurin, Jehan de, *Recuiel des Croniques et Anchiennes Istories de la Grant Bretagne, a present nomme Engleterre*, V, Sir William Hardy and E L C P Hardy eds. (Rolls Series 1891) p323.

3Printed in *Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles*, J. Gairdner ed. (Camden Society 1880) p74.

4It is equated with St Peter's Bridge by Sir James Ramsay in *Lancaster and York* vol. 2 (Oxford 1892) p227. R Ian Jack, in the best modern study of the battle - 'A Quincentenary: The Battle of Northampton, 1460' *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, 3 (1960) p23 - appears to endorse the identification. However, reassessment by Glenn Foard of Northamptonshire Heritage in a paper for publication in 1995 casts doubt on this site.

5*Benet's Chronicle: John Benet's Chronicle for the years 1400 to 1462* G.L.Harriss and M.A.Harriss eds., in Camden Miscellany, vol. XXIV (London 1972) p226.

6*The Chronicle of John Stone* W.G.Searle ed. (Cambridge 1902) p80.

7Hall, D.N. 'Hardingstone Parish Survey 1972' *Northamptonshire Archaeology* 15, 119-32.

8*Ibid* pp19-23 and 29-30; vol. 4 of the same series L.F. Salzman ed. (Oxford 1937) pp252-4.

9Six-inch Ordnance Survey map 1887; one-inch Ordnance Survey map 1835.

10 *An English Chronicle* pp96-7.

11 *Waurin* op. cit. pp299-300.

12 *Ibid*. p323.

13 Whethamstede, John *Register* in *Registra quorundam Abbatum Monasterii S Albani* H.T. Riley ed. (Rolls Series 1872) pp372-4.

14 An exception is the *Annales*, formerly attributed to William of Worcester *infra*..

15 *The Historical Collections of a Citizen of London in the Fifteenth Century* J. Gairdner ed. (Camden Society 1876) p207.

16 *Six Town Chronicles of England* R. Flenley ed. (Oxford 1911) pp150-1.

17 *Annales [rerum anglicanum]* in *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France*, II pt2 p773. Formerly attributed to William of Worcester.

18 *Three Fifteenth Century Chronicles* p74.