English Heritage Battlefield Report: Shrewsbury 1403

Shrewsbury (21 July 1403)

Parish: Shrewsbury

District: Shrewsbury and Atcham, Astley, Pimhill

County: Shropshire

Grid Ref: SJ 512172 (centred on church)

Historical Context

On Saturday 21 July 1403 the army of the Lancastrian king Henry IV and that of the rebellious Percy family met in battle to the north of the town of Shrewsbury in Shropshire. That the Percy family rebelled against Henry may be counted as surprising since the Percies had been instrumental in helping Henry to seize the throne in 1399 from Richard II. Yet the nobles of the Border country were turbulent subjects, and from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries the most challenging rebellions against the Crown began in the north of England.

That the northern barons were able to take up the sword with such ease against their monarch stemmed largely from the nature of their existence on the Border. Ever since Edward I had attempted to subjugate the Scots, northern England had known little peace. Major wars were rare, but in the absence of a lasting settlement between the Scots and English kings, their Border subjects indulged in almost permanent skirmishing with the opposition. Control of the Border region lay with wardens appointed by the king. The wardens attempted to defend the Borders and prevent their compatriots violating official truces. This was an uphill task for every landowner constructed his own small fortress and trained his followers in the arts of war. Whenever possible he plundered his neighbour across the border.perfected the skill at arms needed to defend his home or recover his plundered possessions.

Foremost among the English King's northern subjects were the Earls of Northumberland, the Percies. At the beginning of the fifteenth century the Percies supremacy on the Border was confirmed by the appointment of the Earl of Northumberland as warden of the west march and of his son Hotspur as warden of the east march. These offices provided the Percies with both power and wealth since they could raise troops in peacetime at royal expense. The Percies were therefore men whom the king alienated at his peril.

The quarrel between Henry IV and the Percies arose ostensibly over the question of cash provided for the defence of the north against the Scots. The Percies claimed that they had not been fully compensated for their military expenditure and even went so far as to deny the king one of the prisoners, the Earl of Douglas, taken at the Battle of Homildon Hill in 1402. Notwithstanding that prisoners were by right the monarch's to ransom, the Percies argued that Douglas' ransom would be necessary to defray their own expenses. In reality the Percies grievances were more probably personal and political, stemming from their lack of opportunity under Henry for personal aggrandizement. Whatever the actual reason for their treason, the Percies hatched a scheme to divide England in conjunction with Edward Mortimer and the Welsh patriot Glyn Dwr.

Hotspur rode south early in July 1403 with 160 followers. His ultimate destination was Shrewsbury where he may have arranged to join forces with Glyn Dwr. First, however, he spent some days in Cheshire raising an army with which to fight the King. Cheshire was a natural recruiting ground for it was the county in which Richard II's archer bodyguard had been raised, and it had been the only region which had attempted to resist Henry's seizure of the throne in 1399. Hotspur shrewdly began his recruiting drive by announcing that Richard

was still alive and more rashly, that the deposed monarch would join the army on 17 July at Sandiway. The King meanwhile had been hurrying north to support the Percies against a possible invasion by the Scots, and it must have come as something of a shock to learn, when he reached the Midlands, that his wardens of the Border were in rebellion. Despite the confusion which must have resulted, Henry had reached Lichfield by 18 July and Stafford the day after. Hotspur had assembled his army at Sandiway and then set out for Shrewsbury. Both armies reached the vicinity of Shrewsbury on 19 or 20 July with Hotspur approaching from the north and Henry from the east.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

The traditional site of the battle lies to the north of Shrewsbury in the area surrounding Battlefield Church. There are no clear locations for the battlefield presented in the chronicle record, and the extent of its precision ranges from the generalities of John Waurin - 'the Lords Percy....chose the best and most advantageous position possible, which was near Shrewsbury....'[1] - to the somewhat more definite view of Adam of Usk - 'in the field of Berwick (where the king afterwards founded a hospice for the souls of those who there fell) two miles from Shrewsbury'[2]. The hospice mentioned by Adam of Usk is the College of St Mary Magdalen, Battlefield, and the principal purpose of the College was to provide intercession for the souls of those slain in the Battle of Shrewsbury. Charters of the College state that the church is situated on the site of the battle, and as the land on which it stands was acquired in 1406, only three years after Henry's victory, there is little reason to doubt that the founder of the College would be able to pinpoint the scene of the fighting with some certainty.

Whether the church marks the centre of the battlefield is not stated, but the presence of a large common grave within its foundations implies that its site must be associated with the fighting itself. Although this grave is not the only burial on the battlefield, the mass burial is strong evidence that a hotly contested part of the battle, at the least, took part near to the church site. No one carries the bodies of the lesser folk killed in a medieval battle very far before they are interred and certainly not at the end of a warm summer's day. We thus have a battlefield whose position is firmly anchored by that of the church which commemorates the actions and those who died there.

Although Henry IV provided the bulk of its endowment and figured as founder in 1410, the college owed its inception to Roger Ive, its first master. Ive had been rector of Albright Hussey, the parish in which the battlefield lay, since 1398. In 1406 he obtained a licence to acquire a two-acre site in Hateley Field from Richard Hussey, the lord of the manor, with the object of building a chapel there so that daily masses might be celebrated by himself and a fellow-chaplain for the souls of the slain. The main part of the church was completed in 1409, and the site was described in some detail in 1410. It was surrounded by a ditch with two 20ft entrances to the north and south and within it was the large common grave.

At various times the engagement at Shrewsbury has been known as the Battle of Berwick Field, the Battle of Bull Field, and the Battle of Hussee Field. Today we have the place names 'Battlefield' and 'Upper Battlefield' which perpetuate the traditional link between the site of the church and the fighting on 21 July 1403. Another name mentioned in association with the location of the fighting is 'Old Field', which it has been suggested in John Priestly's thoughtful work on the battle[3] may have been situated some way to the south of the church. The traditional sight of Hotspur's death was identified in the nineteenth century as being a mile to the west of the church near Albright Hussey. In 1881 Charles Darwin, who had lived in Shrewsbury in the 1820s, recorded[4] that while a field to the north of the River Severn close to Shrewsbury was being ploughed a large number of arrowheads were revealed. Unfortunately Darwin did not mention the location of this find.

The spread of particular localities associated with the battle suggests that while the heaviest fighting was perhaps close to the site of the church, the battle itself may have become one of combat between groups, rather than an engagement which retained any strong cohesion. Indeed chroniclers remarking that the fighting and the subsequent casualties were spread over an area of up to three miles.

The ground on which the armies deployed is mentioned in general terms by the chroniclers. Waurin states that the scene of the fighting was flat and difficult to approach:

> Now King Henry the night before had send spies and runners to ascertain the comportment of his enemies, which runners brought back word to him that for certain they were quietly awaiting him in a very fine plain, but the way to enter it was very difficult for him and his forces, while it was most advantageous for his enemies, who numbered more than eighty thousand men, and among them a great body of Scotch and Welsh.[5]

The ground to the south-east of Battlefield Church is low-lying and the difficult approach probably refers to the fact that the direct route to this area from Haughmond Hill involves negotiating an extensive area of uncultivated ground bisected by a small but steeply-sided valley. Such an approach would have been avoided.

The orientation of the armies during the battle is not clear from the surviving documentary evidence. Traditionally it has been assumed by historians that the rival forces deployed facing each other north and south, with Hotspur starting the battle to the north of the church and Henry to the south. From the point of view of terrain we have a military crest, albeit a comparatively shallow one, immediately west of the church. If Hotspur deployed his army on the ridge he could not only have monitored Henry's approach from the south-east, but was also provided with his ground of advantage mentioned by the chroniclers. We have seen that the King's army was forced by the terrain to approach from the south, there to be joined by the Prince of Wales. There is a shallow valley 800m to the south and south-west of the Church. Whilst not presenting a significant obstacle to the approaching armies, this feature may have provided the route along which the Prince of Wales led an outflanking movement which was partially or wholly obscured from the view of the main rebel force. This could explain how he came to penetrate the rebels' line.

The Landscape Evolution

The chroniclers provide little clear information as to the nature of the ground over which the battle was fought. The main contemporary comment on the ground across which Henry's troops advanced is made in *Annales Henrici Quarti*:

> They [Percy's army] chose, as it seemed, the more advantageous ground, as the King's army, should it wish to engage, would have to advance across a broad field thickly sown with pease, which they had further twined and looped together so as to hamper an attacking force.[6]

Archaeological survey is more illuminating: the remains of ridge and furrow can still be seen near the church, cut by the channel feeding water to the moat and fishponds of the College and overlain by the broad ridges of drainage improvements from the Agricultural Revolution. To the south-east of the church there are no traces of former ploughing. It can be inferred, therefore, that the Collegiate Church was established within the former arable land but at its margin, with pasture or lowland heath further east. It seems likely that the establishment of the College, which necessitated fishponds for a source of food, may have resulted in the conversion of the former arable south of the Church into pasture and the consequent preservation of the ridge and furrow earthworks.

The battlefield today is still primarily agricultural in nature. The low land is still dominated by pasture; the battlefield itself remains in arable use in general. The modern world has imposed itself to some degree through the presence of the railway and the gradual northwards spread of Shrewsbury - when Richard Brooke visited the battlefield in 1851 he could remark that it lay three and a quarter miles to the north of Shrewsbury.

Immediately to the south of the Church are a number of ponds and this feature of the landscape has caused some confusion amongst historians. The ponds have been taken as evidence of field fortifications erected by Hotspur or Henry, and thus as a firm guide to the location of at least one of the opposing army's deployment. Alternatively they have been seen as representing the 'pass' which one chronicler maintains cramped the King's deployment and channelled his attack[7]. Sir James Ramsey built his whole interpretation of the battle around them, deploying Henry's troops in conformity with their position. No contemporary source mentions the ponds in recounting the fighting and it is clear that they are the remains of the College's fish ponds, therefore post-dating the battle.

The Battle: its sources and interpretation

When Hotspur arrived before Shrewsbury he found the gates defended against him and royal troops, possibly under the young Prince of Wales, already in possession of the town. The Percies therefore withdrew approximately three miles to the north-west to the village of Berwick, thereby preserving their line of retreat to the north. Henry was under pressure of time to attack the rebels before they were able to carry out any proposed juncture with Glyn Dwr. Henry spent the night near Haughmond Abbey, before swinging round to the west in the direction of Harlescott. Hotspur was aware of the movement of the King's army for he marched his own force eastwards to the ridge close to the later site of the Collegiate Church. From here the Percies could observe the ground towards Haughmond Abbey and the approach of the King.

The pattern of deployment of the rebel army is not known, but it is asserted by Waurin that the King's army marched in order of battle, with a van, a main battle, and a rearguard:

...and when the king found himself in the country he made his dispositions of vanguard, main body, and rear guard, of whom he delivered the command to those whom he thought proper and worthy to undertake it. He in person led the main body, the Duke of York, his uncle, being with him, and the young Duke of Gloucester, the Earl of Arundel, the Earl of Rutland, and many other great lords. In the vanguard were the Earl of Warwick, the Earl of Exeter, the Earl of Somerset, the Lord de Ros, and many other great barons, and in the rear guard were the young Duke of Surrey and many wise and distinguished knights, and when they were all assembled they numbered fully twenty-six thousand archers and three thousand men-at-arms, but at last there were more than sixty thousand men.[8]

The order of march most probably became the actual deployment of Henry's forces, for we know that the first clash of arms came when the royal vanguard advanced against Hotspur's line.

We have no firm evidence for the size of either army, although it is always assumed that Hotspur was outnumbered. Waurin's estimate of 60,000 royal troops present on the battlefield appears extraordinarily high, and the figure of '14,000 excellent men' given in the *Annales Henrici Quarti* is more acceptable. Confusingly John Capgrave in the *Chronicle of England* also credits Percy with an army of 14,000 men ('In the ost of Herry Percey were, as is wrytyn, XIIII. thousand men'). There was a general reluctance to commence the battle and a great deal of time was spent in negotiation:

... and when the fighters on both sides were waiting for battle, the Abbot of Shrewsbury and the clerk of the privy seal served as a delegation on behalf of the king, to offer Henry [Percy] peace and pardon, if he would desist from his adventure. As a result of their persuasions Henry was ready to negotiate; so he sent with them to the king his uncle, Thomas Percy, who explained the causes of this rebellion and demanded a real reformation. When the king had condescended as far as reason would allow and had humiliated himself otherwise than became a king, Thomas Percy returned to his nephew and reported the contrary of the royal replies; thus he inflamed the mind of the young man and impelled him to battle, even though he was

> reluctant to fight.[9]

Finally, only some two hours before dusk, the royal vanguard under the Earl of Stafford closed upon the rebel position. As Henry's troops approached they were met by a deluge of arrows from Hotspur's Cheshire archers. An archery duel now developed which caused heavy casualties:

> Therefore the archers of Henry Percy began the fight and the place for the missiles was not on the ground ... for men fell on the kin's side as fast as leaves fall in autumn after the hoar-frost. Nor did the kin's archers fail to do their work, but sent a shower of sharp points against their adversaries.[10]

Surrey's vanguard had the worst of this duel and as well as losing many of his men as casualties a significant number apparently fled from the field in panic. Seeing the discomfort of his vanguard, Henry led his main battle forward to its relief and at this moment Hotspur led a group of horsemen forward in an attempt to kill the king:

> Thenne was there a strong and an hard bataille, and meny were slayn on bothe sides : and whanne sere Henry Percy saw his men faste slayn he pressid in to the bataille with xxx men, and made a lane in the myddille of the ost til he cam to the kyngis baner, and there he slow the erl of Stafford and ser Thomas Blount and othir: and atte laste he was beset aboute and slayne, and anon his ost was disparblid and fledde.[11]

Although Hotspur's foray did kill Stafford and Henry's standard bearer, Sir Walter Blount, it failed to find the King, and Hotspur himself was cut down and killed.

As the news of Hotspur's death began to spread among his army, Henry appears to have launched a counter-attack which may have included an outflanking movement by a body of troops under the Prince of Wales. Certainly the Prince does seem to have been instrumental in turning the tide of the battle:

> Meanwhile the destruction dealt by the arrows, which were flying like a hailstorm from both sides, was very great. The Prince, then fighting his first battle, was shot in the face by an arrow : boy though he was, he did not falter, but with courage beyond his years, disregarding his wounds, cheered on his troops to vengeance.

> Thus it happened that his division reached the main body of the enemy before the rest, breaking their line, and overthrowing all opponents. Passing right through he faced about, and thus closed them in between his own division and that of the King. The rebel army fell into a state of great perplexity, not knowing whether they were fighting against the King's party or their own. While they were in this uncertainty Henry Percy was slain, by whose hand it is doubtful, nor were his soldiers aware of it, thinking that he had either seized the king's person, or doubtless, perished in the attempt. They therefore, to encourage their own men, took up the war cry, "Henry Percy king!" But the King understanding the object of these cries, and anxious to prevent the enemy from prolonging the contest in a vain hope, and also to check the slaughter shouted with all his might, "Henry Percy is dead!" As this shout was passed forward, the most eager of the combatants began to retire, seeing that their only hope lay in flight.[12]

Hotspur's army began to disintegrate in flight and what was already a rather dispersed conflict probably spread its boundary even wider at this point as many desperately tried to defend themselves from the now triumphant royal army. For the period, casualties were high, and indeed were regarded as exceptional by contemporaries. Estimates have placed the dead and wounded at well over 5,000 men with Henry's army alone possibly losing 3,000 wounded:

> There fell on the king's side ten knights, many squires, more yeomen, and three thousand were gravely wounded. On the rebel side fell most of the knights and squires of the Country of Chester, to the number of 200, beyond the gentlemen and footmen whose numbers we do not know ...[13]

Contemporaries were shocked by the extent of the slaughter and the intensity of the fighting:

> A more stubborn fight, it is maintained by those who were present, was never known. Very many of the combatants on both sides struggled with such obstinacy that when night came on they did not know which side had won; and they sank down in all directions a chance-medly of weary, wounded, bruised and bleeding men.[14]

Indication of Importance

Today the battle is popularly remembered in the context of Shakespeare's play *Henry IV Part I* in which the last two acts are principally concerned with Shrewsbury. In reality, and to contemporaries, the battle was important politically because with Hotspur's death the Percy challenge to Henry IV was crushed, biographically in the military career of Prince Henry, later Henry V, victor most notably at Agincourt in 1415, and militarily because it was the first major battle in which English archers had fought against each other on their own soil. As such it provided a brutal lesson in the effectiveness of the longbow in the hands of skilled exponents. Contemporaries were agreed that Shrewsbury was, in the words of a French chronicler, 'a battle unparalleled in history'. As one chronicler recorded the sanguinary nature of the battle was due to the deadliness of the longbow and the bitterness of feeling between the armies:

> And on the other side the Lords Percy, warned of the coming of their enemies, ordered forward their vanguard led by the Earl of Douglas, and then when they came in sight of each other the archers dismounted uttering a loud and horrible cry which was dreadful to hear, and then began to march at a good pace in good order against each other, and the archers to draw so fast and thick that it seemed to the beholders like thick cloud, for the sun which at that time was bright and clear then lost its brightness so thick were the arrows, and this was helped by the dust which flew about together with the breath of the men who began to get heated, so that the air was quite darkened. After the arrows were exhausted they put their hands to swords and axes with which they began to slay each other, and the leaders of the advance guards striking their horses with their spurs and with lances couched struck each other. And the men and horses were slain in such wise as it was pitiable to see. None spared his fellow, mercy had no place, each one tried only to escape and put himself at the head of this party, for theire was no friend or relation, but each one thought of himself, so they fought with such equality of bitterness that it was a long time before one could conjecture to whom would remain the day and victory.

While the chronicle record provides only a small part of what we would wish to know about the battle in terms of its site, its development, and the size of the contending forces, the existence of the Collegiate Church provides a powerful argument for accepting that at least part the fighting was close to the site of the church. The presence of rising ground to the immediate west of the Church provides a viable military crest and Hotspur's ground of advantage; his army would have stretched from the site of the church to Albright Hussey

along the ridge. The level ground to the south of the church, under arable in the medieval period, provides few clues to the precise disposition of the King's forces, except that the upper edge of the valley forms a southern and south-western limit.

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 uses the railway embankment as a convenient eastern margin. On the north side the parish boundary, which is likely to have formed a physical barrier to movement, provides a pragmatic as well as realistic boundary between Battlefield Farm and Albright Hussey manor house. Whilst this leaves the site of the chapel outside the boundary, its rôle in the battle is unclear. On the south-western side, the shallow valley must be included to provide the mechanism for Prince Hal's surprise approach on the rebels' right flank. Further south, the crest of the valley is just sufficient to allow for the deployment of the King's army beyond the rebels' bowshot with the vanguard advanced and Henry and the Prince of Wales' battles drawn back in support.

Notes

1. *A Collection of the Chronicles and Ancient Histories of Great Britain, now called England, by John Waurin*. Ed. Sir William Hardy. 1887 pp58-59.

2. *The Chronicle of Adam of Usk*. Ed. Sir Edward Maunde Thompson. 1904 pp252-253.

3. Priestly, E.J.*The Battle of Shrewsbury 1403*. 1979 p10.

4. Darwin, Charles *The Formation of Vegetable Mould*. 1881

5. Waurin *Op. Cit*.

6. *Annales Rich II. Et Hen IV*. Translated by E.Calvert and published in Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Natural History Society. 2nd Series. Vol. 10 1898 pp295-305.

7. For example: '....the King approached Percy (advancing secretly beyond a certain narrow passage)'. Bower, Walter *Scotichronican*. Ed. D E R Watt. Vol. 8. 1987.

8. Waurin *Op. Cit*.

9. *Annales Rich II. Et Hen I Op. Cit.*

10. *Ibid*.

11. *English Chronicle*. Camden Society 64. 1855.

12. *Annales Rich II. Et Hen I Op. Cit.*

13. *Ibid*.

14. *Ibid*.