English Heritage Battlefield Report: Tewkesbury 1471

Tewkesbury (4 May 1471)

Parish: Tewkesbury, Walton Cardiff

District: Tewkesbury

County: Gloucestershire

Grid Ref: SO 889316

Historical Context

In the evening of 14 April 1471, only hours after the defeat and death of the Earl of Warwick, the 'Kingmaker', at the Battle of Barnet, Queen Margaret with her son Prince Edward landed at Weymouth. With her plans thrown into turmoil by the news of the Lancastrian defeat, Margaret, accompanied by Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset and John Courtney, Earl of Devon, set out for the north-west. If her cause was to prosper she must recruit fresh, armed strength with which to challenge the victorious Yorkist king, Edward IV.

Edward anticipated Margaret's intentions and moved quickly to intercept her force before it could cross the Severn and join the rebels under Jasper Tudor in Wales. Having narrowly missed the Lancastrians at Sodbury, Edward caught up with Margaret at Tewkesbury on the evening of 3 May 1471. The climatic battle of the second phase of the Wars of the Roses was about to be fought.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

The battle took place in an area immediately south of Tewkesbury and bounded in the west by the Rivers Severn and Avon and in the east by the River Swilgate. Within that broad arena the initial deployment of the armies has been moved north or south depending upon the views of the historian and his interpretation of the available sources.

The contemporary (and near-contemporary) chronicles which deal with the events at Tewkesbury in 1471 enable an outline description of the battlefield to be drawn up. The *Short Arrivall* sets the scene:

> Intelligence of this (Margaret's march to Tewkesbury) being brought to the king, he instantly pursued them with his whole force, and made so rapid an advance, that on the 3rd of May he came within three miles of Tewkesbury, and there lay encamped in the open fields: the following morning, the king moved forward in the finest order, and came before the town, where he found the rebels drawn up and marshalled in a wonderful strong position.

The *Arrivall*, in describing the Lancastrian decision to spend the night of 3/4 May at Tewkesbury and there to offer battle, provides further detail of the ground on which Margaret's troops camped:

> ...the same nyght they pight them in a fielde, in a close even at the towndes ende; the towne and the abbey, at theyr backs; afore them, and upon every hand of them, fowle lanes and depe dikes, and many hedges, with hylls, and valleys, a right evil place to approche, as cowlde well have bene devised.

The Lancastrian army, which had reached Tewkesbury via the road from Gloucester, had not attempted to cross the River Severn and they were on guard against a Yorkist army approaching from the south east along the Cheltenham road. From the description in the *Arrivall* it is clear that the Lancastrian position, at least on the night before the battle, was to the south of the Abbey, in a field close to the edge of the town and that it drew its

strength from the nature of the ground rather than from any formal defensive works. The exact location or name of the field is not mentioned in either of the 'Arrivalls', but John Leland, quoting a monk of Tewkesbury Monastery, identifies it as follows:

> Eodem anno 3. No. Maii Edwardus Princeps Henrici 6. filius venit cum exercitu ad Theokesbyri, et intravit campum nomine Gastum.

Thus on 3 May 1471 (or 1470 as Leland's monk mistakenly records the year of the battle) Prince Edward, the son of Henry VI entered into a field named 'Gastum' at Tewkesbury. Further, the monk, in listing the battle dead who were buried in the Abbey, refers to those 'Nomina occisorum in bello Gastiensi prope Theokesbyri (....in the battle of 'Gastum' near Tewkesbury). Ever since, this identification has been taken to mean the Gaston field, a grazing area over 40 acres in size covering ground stretching approximately from Lincoln Green westwards to Bloody Meadow, eastwards to Gupshill Farm and northwards through the present cemetery to the Vineyards. 'Gaston', or in Anglo-Saxon 'gaers-ton' meaning 'grass town', is a common field name. The Gaston field was still pasture in 1632 and by 1825 it had been divided into seven sections, thus possibly accounting for it being known today as 'The Gastons'.

Somerset's advance took the Lancastrian vanguard:

> by certayne pathes and wayes therefore afore purveyed, and to the Kings party unknown, he (Somerset) departed out of the field, passed a lane, and came into a fayre place, or cloos, even afore the King where he was enbattled, and from the hill that was in one of the closes, he set right fiercely upon th'end of the Kings battayle....

Assuming that Somerset's men began their flanking march from the south-western edge of the Gastons they would cross the lane, which ran towards Tewkesbury along the eastern and northern edge of the Park, close to the spot where it turned north across Bloody Meadow to run along the western side of the Gastons. They would then encounter the northern sector of the Park ('a fayre place, or cloos,') before advancing across and down the slope falling from the high ground in the Park.

With the failure of Somerset's flanking attack and the disintegration of his vanguard the Arrivall records that his men:

> ...were gretly dismaied and abasshed, and so toke them to flyght into the parke, and into the medowe that was nere, and into lanes and dykes, where they best hopyed to escape the dangar....

The meadow thus identified is known today as 'Bloody Meadow' and its original character can still be appreciated.

Although the evocatively named 'Queen Margaret's Camp' - a moated farmstead scheduled as an ancient monument - formed part of the contemporary landscape of the battlefield, there is no evidence that it played any part in the fighting other than possibly as the site of a Lancastrian outpost during the night before the battle.

Landscape Evolution

Tewkesbury is situated on a narrow strip of land flanked by water. In addition to the Severn and Avon which flow to the west, the Carrant Brook and River Swilgate flow variously north, south and east of Tewkesbury, and for centuries the environs of the town have been susceptible to heavy flooding. Until the advent of modern engineering it was not possible to develop the low-lying water meadows and, with the exception of housing at Lincoln Green and on the high ground of Perry Hill/Prior's Park, nineteenth and twentieth-century expansion has been limited in the main to the north and east of the town. To the south, Tewkesbury maintains contact with an arable landscape and with the open acres of Tewkesbury Park, until the late sixteenth century a mixture of wood, arable and fenced deer park. It is now home to a golf course and country club. Parts of the battlefield area show

evidence of ridge and furrow in part broken by later hedgerows, demonstrating the evolution of the field system.

In the medieval period, because of the danger of flooding, Tewkesbury's population was centred in the immediate vicinity of the old town and the Abbey, with relatively isolated settlements such as the Vineyard, Southwick, Walton Cardiff, the Manor at Holme, and the farmhouses at Margaret's Camp and Gupshill, situated around the town on ground above the flood level. This historical pattern survives in many ways to this day, particularly to the south where small, irregular, densely-hedged fields, parkland, watercourses and deep lanes are still to be found.

The impact of Margaret's Camp moated site has been diminished by the spread of housing to the north and east, and the eastern portion of the Gastons has been built over. However, evidence of the dykes and pools which made Edward's approach to the Lancastrian position so difficult can still be seen in the area of the Vineyards, the Golf Course and Bloody Meadow.

The Battle: its sources and interpretation

There are two main contemporary sources for the Battle of Tewkesbury: *The Historie of the Arrivall*[1], and the *Short Arrivall*[2]. A third, brief source which may be contemporary (to within five years of the battle) has survived as a result of the historical fact-finding mission of John Leland, appointed as the 'King's Antiquary' by Henry VIII. Leland progressed throughout England collecting material of historical interest and he visited Tewkesbury Abbey shortly before its closure in 1540. There he discovered, and made notes from, 'a little book about the history of Tewkesbury Monastery' (*Libello de Antiquitate Theokesbiriensis Monasteriri*). Leland indicated that the last entries in the book related to events five years after the Battle of Tewkesbury, and the supposition has thus been made that these entries were the work of a monk living in the Abbey in 1471. The original manuscript has not survived and Leland's notes were not published in his lifetime, but they have been made available by subsequent editors[3].

As with most contemporary or near-contemporary accounts of historical events, the chroniclers of the Battle of Tewkesbury must be approached with caution. Those, such as Nicholas Harpisfield, Clerk of the Signet to Edward IV, who wrote the *Short Arrival* while in the King's service, almost certainly sought to maximise the difficulties Edward encountered during the battle in order to stress his valour in overcoming them, while those who supported Margaret, or who wrote with a Tudor monarch on the throne, such as Hall, were clearly aware of the proper line to take. Set against this 'propaganda' element in the case of Tewkesbury, is the fact that both the *Short Arrivall* and the *Arrivall* were probably written within a year of the events they describe by an author (Harpisfield) or authors who were almost certainly eyewitnesses. The *Short Arrivall* is not a later, edited version of the *Arrivall* but was the first account to be written, certainly before the end of May 1471, and it almost took the form of a 'newsletter' intended to inform Edward's European supporters of his success. The 'Arrivalls' thus have an immediacy and a confident use of detail which is not always present in chronicle history.

Like the chronicles, more recent writers agree that the Battle of Tewkesbury was fought to the south of the town in an area roughly bounded by the Swilgate to the east, Southwick Park to the south, the Avon to the west, and the Abbey fishponds (precinct) to the north. Where they disagree is upon the precise deployment of the armies within that area. These disagreements are not huge, covering in all only some 1,000 metres of ground north or south. They stem from uncertainty concerning the use by the Lancastrians of any existing fortifications outside Tewkesbury, from uncertainty over the extent to which contemporary buildings and enclosures may have limited the battlefield, and from a measure of doubt as to the exact pattern of the medieval roads serving Tewkesbury.

Despite its historic past there has been comparatively little archaeological work carried out at Tewkesbury, and since there have never been any archaeological finds which could be indisputably linked with the battle of 1471, information which might help to pinpoint the position of the rival armies is lacking. Moreover, the actual strength of the respective forces is not clear, with all that that implies for an assessment of their deployment. Somerset is usually credited with the larger force, possibly between 5,000-6,000 men, with Edward fielding approximately 4,000 men, most of whom were better equipped and armed than the Lancastrians. Artillery, more numerous on the Yorkist side than the Lancastrian, played a part in the opening stage of the battle, but there is no evidence that its presence significantly effected the deployment of the armies.

In seeking the position of the Lancastrian deployment, the *Arrivall* provides us with a description not only of the nature of the ground which Margaret's men took up, but also of their mental and physical state:

> ...they shortly toke theyr conclusyon for to go the next way to Tewkesbery, whithar they came the same day, about four aftar none. By whiche tyme they hadd so travaylled theyr hoaste that nyght and daye that they were ryght wery for travaylynge; for by that tyme they had travaylyd xxxvj longe myles, in a fowle contrye, all in lanes and stonny wayes, betwyxt woodes, without any good refresshynge. And for as mooche as the greatar parte of theyr hooste were fotemen, the othar partye of the hoste, whan they were comen to Tewkesbery, cowthe, ne myght, have laboryd any furthar, but yf they wolde wilfully have forsaken and lefte theyr foteman behynd them, and therto themselves that were horsemen were ryght werye of that iorwney, as so were theyr horses. So, whethar it wee of theyr election and good will, or no, but that they were veryly compelled to byde by two cawses; one was, for werines of teyr people, which they supposed nat theyr people woulde have eny longer endured; an other, for they knew well that the Kynge ever approchyd twoards them, nere and nere, evar redy, in good aray and ordinaunce, to and, padaventure, to theyr moste dyssavantage. They therefore determyned t'abyde there th'aventure that God would send them in the qwarell they had taken in hand. And, for that entent, the same nyght they pight them in a fielde, in a close even at the townes ende; the towne, and the abbey, at theyr backs; afore them, and upon every hand of them, fowle lanes, and depe dikes, and many hedges, with hylls, and valleys, a ryght evill place to approche, as cowlde well have bene devysed.

Nowhere does the *Arrivall* attribute the strength of the Lancastrian position to anything other than the natural difficulty of the ground. No mention is made by the chronicle of formal field fortifications or of the use of the remaining walls of an abandoned castle by the Lancastrians. Yet some later historians, notably Lieutenant-Colonel J D Blyth[4], have argued that the ruined walls of Holme Castle became a Lancastrian strongpoint. As Blyth believed that the ruins of Holme Castle stood on Holme Hill this left the Colonel with no alternative but to pull the deployment of the armies as far north as possible in order to accommodate this central defensive position. As we have seen the *Arrivall* makes no mention of a castle and subsequent excavation has shown that 'Holme Castle' as envisaged by Blyth never existed, even if ruined walls of the manor house complex did form part of the battlefield landscape.

This is not to say that the Lancastrians did not carry out some field fortification to strengthen their position and Edward Hall states that: 'The Duke of Somerset entending to abide the battayle lyke a pollitique warrior, trenched his campe rounde about of such an altitude, and so strongly....'[5]. Given the exhausted condition of the Lancastrian troops as stressed by the *Arrivall* it is unlikely that such fortifications took any more sophisticated form than felled trees and road blocks. Certainly there is nothing to argue against a Lancastrian deployment in the Gastons.

Notwithstanding the actual strength of the Lancastrian position, Edward had to force a battle while Margaret was still vulnerable. He had countered her strategically, but he needed to destroy her army quickly and decisively before it became a focus for wider rebellion, and before it could cross the Severn and effect a juncture with Jasper Tudor. Margaret and Somerset must have appreciated this Yorkist imperative and their initial deployment amidst difficult ground worked hugely in their favour. Any force seeking a speedy and complete victory would prefer to fight on open ground such as the 'great and a fair large plain, called a wold' near Sodbury Hill where Margaret had seemed prepared to offer battle two days earlier on 2 May.

Spurred on by his strategic concerns Edward IV advanced upon the Lancastrian position early on the morning of 4 May 1471. The Yorkist army was deployed in three battles with Richard, Duke of Gloucester commanding the vanguard, Edward the main battle, and Hastings the rearguard. Some 300-400 yards to the north the three Lancastrian battles under Somerset, John Lord Wenlock, and Devon waited for the first shock of action. The young Edward, Prince of Wales was in Wenlock's care with the Lancastrian main battle. Seeing the natural strength of Somerset's deployment, Edward attempted to soften-up the enemy with artillery and archery fire:

> Upon the morow followynge, Saterday, the iiij day of May, [the Kynge] apparailed hymselfe, and all his hoost set in good array; ordeined three wards; displayed his banners; dyd blowe up the trompets; commytted his caws and qwarell to Almyghty God, to owr most blessyd lady his mothar, Vyrgyn Mary, the glorious martyr Seint George, and all the saynts; and avaunced, directly upon his enemys; approchinge to theyr filde, whiche was strongly in a marvaylows strong grownd pyght, full difficult to be assayled. Netheles the Kyngs ordinance was so conveniently layde afore them, and his vawarde so sore appresyd them, with shott of arrows, thay they gave them right-a-sharpe shwre. Also they dyd agayne-ward to them, bothe with shot of arrows and gonnes, whereof netheles they ne had not so great plenty as had the Kynge. In the front of theyr field were so evell lanes, and depe dykes, so may hedges, trees, and busshes, that it was right hard to approche them nere, and come to hands.

The Yorkist bombardment it seems produced an immediate and significant result in that Somerset willingly abandoned his position and moved onto ground which apparently placed his own force in a less favourable position for battle:

> Edmond, called Duke of Somarset, having that day the Vawardeen, whethar it were that for he and his fellowshippe were sore annoyed in the place where they were, as well with gonnes-shott as with shot of arrows, whiche they ne wowld nor durst abyde, oe els, of great harte and corage, knyghtly and manly avaunsyd himself, somewhat asydehand the Kings vawarde, and, by certayne pathes and wayes therefore afore purveyed, and to the Kings party unknown, he departed out of the field, passed a lane, and came into a fayre place, or cloos, even afore the King where he was enbattled, and from the hill that was in one of the closes, he set right fiercely upon th'end of the Kings battayle....

The chronicler is himself uncertain as to what prompted Somerset to make this move. Hall believed that Somerset was tempted into this tactical error as a result of the Duke of Gloucester, commander of the Yorkist right wing, feigning retreat:

> The duke of Gloucester, which lacked no policye, valyantly with hys battayle assauted the treche of the Quenes campe, whom the duke of Somerset with no lesse courage defended, the duke of Gloucester for a very politique purpose, with all hys men reculed backe.

For a Tudor chronicler this provides a more acceptable reason for the initial Lancastrian setback, but it is not mentioned in the *Arrivall* which it surely would have been if only to reinforce the tactical skill of Edward's army. It is thus more probable that Somerset's advance was made in an impetuous attempt to escape the galling fire of the Yorkist artillery and archers, or as part of a pre-conceived plan to strike the Yorkist right flank via a route which had already been reconnoitred. If the latter, it badly misfired for in the words of the *Arrivall*:

> The Kynge, full manly, set forthe even upon them, enteryd and wann the dyke, and hedge, upon them, into the cloose, and, with great vyolence, put them upe towards the hyll, and so also, the Kyng's vaward, being in the rule of the Duke of Gloucestar.

Edward's success in repulsing the Lancastrian attack was due not only to the fact that Somerset's lunge struck the right centre of the Yorkist line rather than its flank, but also to the fact that the King had prepared a tactical surprise of his own:

> Here it is to be remembred, how that, whan the Kynge was comyn afore theyre field, or he set upon them, he consydered that, upon the right hand of theyr field, there was a parke, and therein moche wood, and he, thinkynge to purvey a remedye in caace his sayd enemyes had layed any bushement in that wood, of horsement, he chose, out of his fellashyppe, ijc speres, and set them in a plomp, togethars, nere a qwartar of a myle from the fielde, gyvenge them charge to have good eye upon that cornar of the woode, if caas that eny nede were, and to put them in devowre, and, yf they saw none suche, as they thowght most behovfull for tyme and space, to employ themselfe in the best wyse as they cowlde.

Finding no sign of a Lancastrian ambush party, the 200 mounted spearmen were free to intervene at a critical moment by striking the flank of Somerset's vanguard, thereby hastening its destruction and flight:

> ...for the sayd spers of the Kyngs party, seinge no lyklynes of eny busshement in the sayd woode-corner, seinge also goode oportunitie t'employ them selfe well, cam and brake on, all at ones, upon the Duke of Somerset, and his vawarde, asyde-hand, unadvysed, whereof they, seinge the Kynge gave them ynoughe to doo afore them, were gretly dismaied and abasshed, and so toke them to flyght into the parke and into the medowe that was nere....

It was too much for the Lancastrians and as his men began to stream away into the Park and Bloody Meadow pursued by the Yorkists, Somerset hastened back to his main battle under Wenlock which, apart from some desultory skirmishing, had yet to play any part in the fighting. In Hall's words: 'But whether the Lord Welocke dissimuled the matter for kynge Edwardes sake, or whether hys harte serued hym not, still he stode lokyng on'. According to Hall, Somerset took extreme action: 'seyng the Lord Wenloke standynge still, after he had reuyled hym, and called him traytor, with his axe he strake y braynes out of his hedde'. Wenlock certainly died on the battlefield but there is no additional evidence to support Hall's version of his death.

Edward now left the pursuit of the broken Lancastrian right to Gloucester and turned on the enemy centre. Despite their superior numbers the Lancastrians, no doubt disconcerted by the fate of Somerset's vanguard, quickly broke under this attack, joining their comrades on the right in flight. As the *Arrivall* succinctly described the end of the battle:

> ...the Kynge coragiously set upon that othar felde, were was chefe Edward, called Prince, and, in short while, put hym to discomfiture and flyght; and so fell in the chase of them that many of them were slayne, and, namely at a mylene, in the medowe fast by the town, were many drownyd; many rann towards the towne; many to the churche; to the abbey; and els where; as they best myght.

Probably 2,000 Lancastrians fell during the battle and pursuit and amongst them were Edward Prince of Wales, the Earl of Devon, Lord Wenlock, Lord Beaufort, and Sir William Rous. Somerset and others who fled from the field sought refuge in the Abbey and other nearby churches. Somerset and many of his supporters, all implacable foes of Edward IV, were tried and executed at Tewkesbury during the days following the battle.

Indication of Importance

Edward's victory at Tewkesbury, coming close on the heels of his triumph at Barnet, was a climactic point in the Wars of the Roses. It ended the long resistance of Henry VI and Queen Margaret and dashed hopes of a Lancastrian succession. Edward, Prince of Wales, was dead, his father would shortly be put to death, and Margaret was soon to be a prisoner. With the exception of some bloodless skirmishing against the rebels of Kent, Edward IV was never again to campaign on English soil. The second phase of the Wars of the Roses was over and Yorkist monarchs were to rule England for fourteen years.

The chronicle evidence for Tewkesbury allows the course of the battle to be reconstructed with some confidence even though uncertainty as to the precise deployment of the armies remains.

The topography of the southern part of the battlefield has retained its agricultural character and in many important respects the course of the fighting can still be followed on the ground, particularly in the area of the Park, in Bloody Meadow, and through the cemetery to the Abbey grounds. Whether this remains so depends upon the outcome of recent (1991) planning applications.

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 needs in principle to accommodate not only the Lancastrian and Yorkist initial deployments in and to the south of the broad area of the Gastons, but also Edward IV's tactical deployment in the Park, Somerset's flank attack, and the Lancastrian flight towards the Severn and Tewkesbury via Bloody Meadow and the Swilgate bridge.

Given that the combined size of the Yorkist and Lancastrian armies probably did not exceed 10,000 men the key phases of the battle can be accommodated within the following area. The Avon mill stream and the Swilgate were natural boundaries to the field of action and they serve to delineate the battlefield area in the west and east respectively. Turning south and then eastwards from just below the confluence of the Severn and Mill Avon the battlefield runs through Tewkesbury Park and past Southwick Park before turning north to follow the line of the Swilgate. This boundary accommodates the main Yorkist force as well as the ambush of spearmen on the western side.

For illustrative purposes, the full extent of the field of battle is represented by a dashed line running north of Prior's Park and following the Swilgate southwards. The battlefield boundary, however, in recognition of the extent to which this northern area has been developed, follows a line south-eastwards from near the Swilgate Bridge to skirt the housing estates and rejoin the Swilgate some 500m north-east of Margaret's Camp moat.

Notes

1. *Historie of the Arrivall of Edward IV. in England and the Finall Recouery of His Kingdomes from Henry VI. A.D. M.CCCC.LXXI.* ed. J Bruce (Camden Society 1838)

2. 'Account of King Edward the Fourth's Second Invasion of England, in 1471, drawn up by one of his Followers.' *Archaeologia*, Vol. 21, 1827, pp11-22

3. *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the years 1535-1543 Parts VII and VIII.* ed. L Toulmin Smith (London 1909)

4. Blyth, J D 'The Battle of Tewkesbury' *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* LXXX (1961) pp99-120

5. Hall, Edward *Chronicle* (1809 ed.) p300