

A place mete for twoo battayles to encountre': the siting of the Battle of Bosworth, 1485 by Daniel Williams

One of the fascinating, though hitherto neglected, aspects of the study of medieval warfare is to analyse the elements of circumstance, topography and military skill which determine precisely where an impending battle will take place. In the case of Bosworth Field, such an investigation is particularly appropriate in this quincennial anniversary of that Battle. Of equal importance, the fame of Bosworth throughout those succeeding centuries has elicited sufficient evidence to make such an analysis feasible.

At first glance, the location of a medieval battle appears a somewhat capricious phenomenon. Two armies (in this case three) converge, confront and fight; they then either die or depart the victor or the vanquished. Yet like so many other facets of the serious study of warfare in the late middle ages such judgements are misleading. Skill played a larger role than blind chance. Indeed there existed serious manuals to advise a commander how to: 'take fyrst if he may the advantage of the ground & the best waye for hym self to the hurt and hynderaunce of his enemies'.¹

English armies, in particular, were forced by necessity to learn well the lessons of the disasters at Bannockburn in 1314. The skills they quickly acquired ensured their success against the Scots at Halidon Hill (1333) and against the French at Crecy, Poitiers and Agincourt; tactics not forgotten during the period of the 'Wars of the Roses'. One essential factor in these spectacular victories was the careful choice of a defensive site by the English commander exploiting to his own advantage the natural topographical features of the battle landscape. Medieval warfare was much closer to nature than its modern counterpart and success much more dependent upon factors of climate, environment and topography. Commanders were taught to instinctively look for useful defensive and offensive advantages. At a time when archery was still the most effective means of tactical bombardment and defence against cavalry attack. Having the wind behind you was of crucial importance: 'the shoot of an arrow borne wyth the help of the wynde alighteth more sore and bereth a grette strengthe And also mynussheth and taketh away the force of the shot of the contrary part'.²

An elevated site 'the hyghest ground'³ would give a skilled warrior certain initial tactical or even psychological advantages. The Tudor chronicler Raphael Holinshed commenting upon Richard III's disposition of his forces at Bosworth, observed that the King:

*...ordered his fore-ward in a marvellous length, in which he appointed both horsemen and footmen, to the intent to imprint in the hearts of them that looked a farre off a sudden terror and deadlie feare for the great multitude of armed souldiers.*⁴

If we are to believe the evidence of the more contemporary Stanley source, The *Ballad of Bosworthffelde*, this had its desired effect upon Lord Stanley at least:

*then he remoued unto a mountaine full hie and looked into a dale full dread: 5 miles compasse, no ground they see ffor armed men and trapped steeds.*⁵

Equally in this era when commanders could see no further than good eyes and the elevation of horseback would allow, an elevated site would give them a panoramic view of the battle field which in conjunction with an effective intelligence system of mounted scouts (a number of the sources for Bosworth write of Richard's effective use of 'scurryers'), could facilitate tactical manoeuvres like the deployment of cavalry in flanking attacks. Conversely the best means of defence against such mounted attacks were archers, guns or the protection of an area of swamp or marsh on your flank, impenetrable to heavily armoured cavalry.

But before the most advantageous location could be chosen and occupied by an astute field officer, the hostile forces have first to converge upon the area of the actual battle site. In the case of Bosworth there is sufficient evidence to determine how and why the various contingents were to confront each other in West Leicestershire. As in many other aspects and episodes of that battle, the position of the Stanleys was to be a determinate factor.⁷

The line of march of Henry Tudor's invading army is authentically detailed by Polydore Vergil which can be corroborated by other sources. The Stanleys, Sir William from the rear and Lord Thomas ahead, effectively shadowed, even protected the route of the Tudor invasion through the Midlands from Stafford to Bosworth. Describing the Earl of Richmond's entry into Lichfield, Polydore comments:

*The third day before Thomas Stanley had bene at the same place. ..who understandinge of Henryes approche went without delay to a village cauldy Aderstone meaning ther to tarry till Henry showed draw nere.*⁸

By this point on his 'victorious journey' the Earl of Richmond's force was being shadowed by other, more hostile, scouting patrols sent out by Richard at Nottingham. According to Polydore, the King's scouts and informants first made contact with the invading army at Lichfield and reported back their intelligence to Nottingham. This form of espionage, again advocated by The *Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyualrye*,⁹ was common practice during the 'Wars of the Roses'. Clarence's correspondence with Henry Vernon of Derbyshire in March 1471¹⁰ during Edward IV's Yorkshire invasion gives some indication of how this shadowing was carried out through a covert network of regional retainers and supporters sending out mounted scouts and passing the intelligence gleaned on to the defending commanders. Conversely The *History of the Arrival of King Edward IV* covering the same 1471 period, reveals how an invading army

was able also to gather intelligence and support by similar covert means. Describing the three thousand well-armed men who joined King Edward at Leicester the narrator added:

And in substance they were such as were towards the Lord Hastings, the King's Chamberlain and for that intent, above said, came to him stirred by his messages sent unto them and by his servants, friends and lovers, such as were in the county (of Leicester).¹¹

Once contact had been made, Richard's shadowing patrols never lost touch with both the hostile invading army of Henry Tudor and the potentially hostile Stanley forces, by this time camped near Atherstone; certainly until the night before the battle. It was news of the proximity of these two armies to Atherstone, a day's march from the town of Leicester, received by Richard, perhaps on the evening of Friday 19 August, that decided the King to make the first move in this deadly game of topographical chess. Richard III with his northern supporters, marched in battle formation from Nottingham to seal the dangerous gap between them and his southern supporters under Norfolk assembled at Leicester, early the following Saturday morning.¹²

Leicester, because of its strategically important position and the provisioning facilities offered by the Honour of Leicester within the Duchy of Lancaster, had been a place of military assembly throughout the 'Wars of the Roses'. As early as 1459, Henry VI summoned his East Anglian and Midland supporters to array at Leicester.¹³ It has already been shown that Edward IV was to do the same thing in March/April 1471. There are other examples. Nearer to the time of Bosworth, Richard III ordered his supporters to rendezvous with him in that town on 21 October 1483 to begin his successful pre-emptive strike against the West Country supporters of the Buckingham revolt.¹⁴

Once the King reached Leicester at sunset on Saturday, 20 August, Polydore's commentary must give way to a more precise, probably eyewitness, account of events in that town up to Richard's departure for Bosworth Field the following Sunday. The Continuator of the *Croyland Chronicle*, describes vividly the scene within the town:

Here was found a greater number of warriors than had ever been seen in one place before in England, all prepared to take the King's part.¹⁵

He also relates that on the following Sunday morning scouts brought back intelligence of the whereabouts of his enemies and the most probable sites of their encampments that evening. Again Richard reacted to this news with textbook precision.¹⁶ A good fifteenth-century commander was advised 'after the supposyng that he hathe of commyng of his aduersaries/to lodge his oost in the best wyse he can/ and to take fyrst yf he may the aduantage of the grounde & the best waye for hym self to the hurt and hynderance of his enemies'.¹⁷ In other words, to seize the topographical initiative, which is in fact what the last Plantagenet did.

He led his army westwards out of Leicester towards the exact location of his enemies, over the open fields between Desford and Peckleton in the general direction of Sutton Cheney. On the high ground beyond that village, Richard selected the best defensive site for his camp and the imminent battle; Ambion Hill with its westerly ridge facing the line of march of his enemies and its southern flank protected by an extensive marsh. Control of this sound defensive position meant that the king's army not only effectively barred the route of the Tudor advance but also denied those advantages to his enemies: textbook precision.

But, where precisely did Richard's scouts locate the enemy forces and so give him the initiative? To answer that question we must examine the clues offered by the unknown writer of this section of the *Croyland Chronicle*. It is apparent from his narrative of the events of the next forty-eight hours that the Continuator and other clerics within the King's entourage were left behind at Leicester as the army departed that Sunday morning. Perhaps Richard was giving himself room for unethical manoeuvres after his victory like those of Edward IV after Tewkesbury.¹⁸ At all events the indignation of the narrator may be gleaned from his comments that 'At dawn on the Monday morning there were no chaplains present to celebrate mass on behalf of the King'.¹⁹ As well as affording more clues to his identity, this interpretation would also explain why the Croyland account of the battle is brief and lacking in detail though what he does have to say corroborates Polydore Vergil.²⁰

He was, however, present in the town when the news of the whereabouts of Richmond and the Stanleys was brought to the king. They were at Merevale Abbey a mile or so north west of the village of Atherstone, in conference. *The Croyland Chronicle* mentions Merevale twice. Near the very end of his remarkable analysis of political events between 1459 and the death of Richard III, he relates 'We ... have brought the narrative down to this battle which was fought near *Mirival*'.²¹ More significantly he tells us that on the Sunday night before the battle Richard's army was 'encamped near the abbey of Mirival at a distance of about eight miles from that town' (Leicester).²² Allowing for approximations this would place Richard's camp, as an army marches, that is across country, about nine miles from Leicester and about five miles from Merevale Abbey. Which is almost exactly the position of Ambion Hill. This hypothesis is supported by Holinshed's *Chronicle* published in 1577, which supplies some precious, though tantalizing, snippets of local knowledge. He writes: 'King Richard pitched his field on a hill called *Anne Beame*, refreshed his souldiers and took his rest'.²³ The first printed map of this area, Christopher Saxon's map of Warwickshire and Leicestershire published a year earlier in 1576, clearly traces the characteristically 'pear shape'²⁴ of Red Moor Plain, with the representation of a hill upon it that lies almost exactly upon the site of Ambion Hill. William Burton, the seventeenth-century Leicestershire historian does not mention Ambion Hill in his very brief 1622 description of the site of the battle under the town of Market Bosworth.²⁵ He does refer to it obliquely, however, in the manuscripts for his revised 1642 second edition, never set to print because of the Civil War and Burton's own death three years later in 1645.²⁶ In his holograph manuscript Burton wrote:

It was foretold that if ever King Richard did come to meet his adversary in a place that was compassed with towns whose termination was ton [i.e. Shenton, Sutton and Oadlington] that there he should come to great distress; or else upon the same occasion did happen to lodge at a place beginning and ending with the same syllable An (as this of Anbian) that there he should lose his life, to expiate that wicked murder of his late wife Anne.²⁷

Apart from the last reference to a seventeenth-century historical aberration, the rest is based upon local oral traditions, recorded by a man born in Lindley who owned the manor of Dadlington adjacent to the battlefield:

by relation of the inhabitants, who have many occurrences and passages, yet fresh in memory; by reason, that some persons thereabouts, who saw the battle fought were living within less than forty years: of which persons myself have seen some, and have heard their discourses, though related by second hand.²⁸

William was born in 1575 and his researches began well before the turn of the century.²⁹

With Richard's path to Bosworth Field completed, it is appropriate to return to Henry Tudor and his prevaricating allies camped near Atherstone and located by Richard's scouts. According to William Button, a minefield of misinformation,³⁰ writing in 1788, the meeting between Henry and his stepfather took place in the Three Tuns public house at Atherstone. Apart from this inappropriate or perhaps anachronistic setting for such a meeting we must beware of the 'admirable Button' as far as Inns are concerned.³¹ Edward Hall, writing in the reign of Henry VIII informs us that the meeting took place in 'a lytle close.'³² would it be too fanciful to see this as an allusion to the vale of *mira vallis* the Latin form of Merevale?³³ At all events the connections between the two armies camped near Atherstone and that religious house are close and intimate.

After Bosworth, the abbot of Merevale wrote to Henry VII reminding him of his promise of a grant to the abbey 'in perfatte and perpetuall Remembrance of your late victorious felde and Jounay'.³⁴ More specifically on 7 December 1485 Henry VII granted 100 marks to the abbey in compensation for

right gret hurtes, charges and lossis by occasioun of the gret repayre and resorte that oure people commyng toward oure late feld made, as welle unto the house of Mira valle aforesaide as in going over his ground, to the destruction of his cornes and pastures.³⁵

A further reward of 10 marks was paid under the Privy Seal shortly afterwards.³⁶ A religious house affording neutral ground and sanctuary would have been the most fitting and under the circumstances of this evidence, the most likely venue for a meeting between a would-be-king and a would-be-earl to decide the course of the ensuing battle.

A further problem concerns the precise location of Henry Tudor's camp near Atherstone. Once again there is evidence to suggest that it was located near the small village of Witherley to the east of Atherstone. On 29 November 1485 'oure well beloved subgettes John Fox parson of Wyderby and John Atherston, gentleman' were given the large sum of £72 2s 4d by the crown to distribute amongst the people of Atherstone and a group of neighbouring villages as reparations for the damage caused by the two armies.³⁷ In addition to the £13 from that source, Fox was awarded a further £12 2s for his parishoners.³⁸ A manuscript listing the knights created by Henry of Richmond on his route to Bosworth contains a heading of knights dubbed at 'Wryth' which is most probably a contraction of the sixteenth-century or earlier alternative spelling of 'Wytherley'.³⁹

At all events, the list of villages that were paid compensation presents a useful and accurate guide to the direction of the Tudor army's line of march along its last stage to Bosworth Field the day before the battle. That is across the open fields between the villages of Atterton and Upton to the north and Fenny Drayton to the south ...in a straight line to the western fringe of Red Moor Plain. Tradition has it that Henry VII's camp the night before the battle was located at White Moors a mile or so east of the now deserted village of Upton. On a nineteenth-century tithe map of the area the field to the south of the present day Whitemoor covert was named camp field. Its location in sight of Richard III's camp on Ambion Hill would imply that the King had arrived first from Leicester and had seized the best vantage point. It also fits in with Polydore's account that Henry:

encamped himself nighe his enemyes wher he restyd all night.⁴¹

The movements of the third Bosworth contingent, that of the Stanleys, is the most difficult to trace. One thing is clear, despite the confusion in this matter created once again by Hutton,⁴² the Stanleys were together and visible to Richard on the morning of the battle. Their most probable location was at Hanging Hill on the rising ground to the north of Red Moor Plain, just south of Market Bosworth and its neighbouring hamlet, Near Cotton.⁴³ Such a position equates with the Stanley ballad sources *Bosworth ffeild* and *Ladye Bessiye*. Although they portray the details of the battle in a different way, there is an underlying consensus of events that would imply a common eyewitness source. Most of the detail concerns the location of Lord Stanley and confirms Polydore's statement that Thomas himself played no part in the battle but left the actual, last-minute fighting to his brother Sir William. To quote *Ladye Bessiye*

And I my selfe will hover on this hill/that ffaire battle ffor to see.⁴⁴

More to the point, both ballads state that Richard, on the morning of the battle, could see Lord Stanley's banner⁴⁵ which would only be possible if Thomas was to the north of Ambion Hill, not as Hutton claims to the south. Sir William Stanley and his mounted force probably moved forward towards the other two armies and took up a stance near the northern

flank of both the major armies.⁴⁶ This Stanley advance, after they had refused to join him on the hill, was quite legitimately interpreted by Richard III as a *prima facie* act of treason: advancing against their sovereign lord with banners unfurled. He ordered that the hostage, Lord Strange, the Stanley heir 'should be instantly beheaded'.⁴⁷

Thus by the early morning of Monday 22 August 1485 two hostile armies were closing in on Richard III's well chosen, elevated position on the western slopes of Ambion Hill. It might be useful at this point to discuss the evidence for the location of the precise area of the ensuing clash of arms. However, one important *caveat* must be borne in mind: the confusion and detail chaos of a battle situation. The only topographical certainty must be where the battle began and where it ended.

William Burton, our late sixteenth-century historical source informs us that the battle took place on

*a large flat plain and spacious ground three miles distant from this Towne (Market Bosworth): between the Towne (sic) of Shenton, Sutton, Dadlington and Stoke.*⁴⁸

So the battle itself was fought, not upon the summit of Ambion Hill but on the lower ground leading up to the escarpment of the western slopes of the Hill, along which Richard drew up his vanguard on the morning of the battle. The earliest references to the battle describe it as Rodemore⁴⁹ or Redesmore.⁵⁰ That is Red Moor Plain of the eighteenth-century maps,⁵¹ a region of terracotta-coloured soil recorded fairly accurately upon Saxon's 1576 map and Burton's 1622 amended version as a pear-shaped uninhabited area of waste with a wide base to the south west narrowing to its head just east of Market Bosworth. Those who walk the area can see the red soil that gives the location its name. Ambion Hill at the time of the winter or spring ploughing is a particularly good vantage point in this respect. The early sixteenth-century *Chronicle of Calais*, names the battle field *Bosworth Hethe*⁵² and all subsequent accounts Bosworth Field: the Field designating a battle field. There is one interesting exception. Early in the reign of Henry VIII, in August 1511, the king from Nottingham castle, granted the church wardens of Dadlington a licence to collect alms for the building of a chapel to commemorate the battle, 'standing on the ground where Bosworth field, otherwise called Dadlyngton field in our county of Leicester was done'.⁵³ It is interesting to speculate whether the young Henry paid a visit to the battle field to witness the scene of his father's victory (on the actual date of the battle?). The area of Dadlington and Stoke Golding would have been particularly appropriate for a royal visit – perhaps the first! – because upon Crown Hill in that location Henry VII was crowned symbolically before his victorious army. Polydore records that Crown Hill was the furthest extent of the rout: the last classic stage of a medieval battle. He tells us that after Richard's death the Earl of Oxford 'put to flight them that fought in the foreward, whereof a great company wer killed in the chase'.⁵⁴ Their bones and their arrow heads were all that remained of these last casualties of the battle, when their open grave was inadvertently unearthed during the 1584 Enclosure of the lordship of Stoke Golding.⁵⁵ Incidentally, Polydore records that the crowning took place at the end of the chase upon 'the *next* hill'.⁵⁶ Stoke lies upon the next hill to the South of Ambion.

There are three final factors that authenticate further the western slopes of Ambion Hill as the spot where the main battle took place. The local tradition of King Richard's Well identified in print for the first time in William Hutton's *Bosworth Field* published in 1788 on his extraordinary map,⁵⁷ but based on an oral tradition already ancient by the late eighteenth century. The eighteenth-century revival of interest in the site of the battle⁵⁸ was to supply most of the evidence of archaeological finds upon Ambion Hill. William Hutton, John Nichols and John Throsby all record in their printed works the finding of cannon balls and other relics upon the site of Hewit's cottage, the location of the present day Glebe Farm.⁵⁹ Throsby, a far more circumspect and reliable authority in these matters than Hutton or Nichols, tells us in his *Select Views of Leicestershire*, published in 1789:

*I saw a cannon ball, found upon Amyon Hill in Bosworth-field at Mr. Lee's of Peckleton. It was perceived, that gentleman informs me, in digging for a post-hole a few years since. At the same time and place, some pieces of iron or brass, resembling coffin handles, were discovered which he thinks might be pieces of armour. The ball is 3 lbs weight and appears to be of cast metal (the right size to be fired by a serpentine field piece of the Fifteenth century). In Upton lordship a mile from Amyon Hill, was found a ball about a pound weight. Two balls, Mr. Lee informs me, were found upon or near Amyon Hill, which were some time shewn chained together at a house in Sutton Cheynell. In this lordship (which includes Ambion Hill) the battle was fought, and there many of the killed were buried ...*⁶⁰

Burials upon Ambion Hill itself, and not those at Stoke or Dadlington were also found in the early nineteenth-century. It is recorded that:

*... about the year 1812 when the late Mr. Morris of Sutton Fields [who by 1789 had acquired Bickley's cottage and land, the present site of the Battlefield Centre] was making a drain some eight feet deep in what he called the 'Rough Meadow' he found a large deposit of human and horse bones covered over with oak boughs before the earth was cast over them. With these was found the head of a halbert.*⁶¹

The speculation about nuts and a Civil War engagement in volume two of the *Leicestershire Architectural and Archaeological Society* is a classic red herring.⁶² The Civil War incident was a recorded minor cavalry engagement with only six fatal casualties.⁶³ These bones were far more likely to have been of those Bosworth warriors slain in the carnage between the two vanguards and the victims of the last charge of Richard III.

Finally there is the location of the spot at which Richard himself met his death, the 'Sandford'⁶⁴ of the first Tudor proclamation. This has been identified as the point at which the present Sutton Cheney to Shenton road passes over the brook that flows from Bosworth. From earliest times the inhabitants of Shenton and Sutton had the right to extract sand

and gravel from the extensive pit that can still be seen on the northern summit of Ambion Hill. The road over which the villagers passed with their carts was still known in the mid nineteenth-century as the sand road; where if forded the brook was known as the Sandeford.⁶⁵ Such a location fits in with the well authenticated tradition from the last fifteen years of the fifteenth century that Richard was killed in a ditch or a stream.⁶⁶ The location of the Sandford, near the north east quadrant of Ambion Hill, is also consistent with the direction of Richard III's final charge against his Tudor enemy 'out of th one syde without the van warde'. Which almost succeeded but for the overwhelming flanking attack by Sir William Stanley and his mounted retainers in the words of the *Ballad of Bosworthfeilde*

*downe att a backe [bank] then cometh hee & shortlye sett upon the Kinge.*⁶⁷

The last piece in this historical jigsaw is to ascertain who might have guided the armies to their last encampments and along their converging courses in the early morning of 22 August 1485? On Henry VII's side there were a number of men with local knowledge. William Burton's ancestor John de Hardwicke, Lord of nearby Lindley, who joined the future King the day before the battle with men and horses and served him as a guide upon the morning of the battle.⁶⁸ There was also Robert Harcourt son and heir of the former lord of the manor of Market Bosworth, disinherited by Richard III for his complicity in the Buckingham Revolt. Robert was made a Squire of the Body to Henry Tudor and later knighted. His 1485 battle standard still hangs in the family church at Stanton Harcourt, Oxfordshire.⁶⁹ There is evidence to suggest that Henry VII's redoubtable supporter Sir John Cheney, who throughout the battle stood close to the future king⁷⁰ held land in the neighbouring lordship of Dadlington so his local knowledge may also have guided the Tudor army.

Nor did Richard III lack supporters familiar with the local topography. William Catesby who according to Thomas More as Lord Hastings' deputy 'much rule bare in al the county of Leicester',⁷¹ was the only important follower of King Richard to be executed after the battle.⁷² Another close associate of the King, Sir Marmaduke Constable, took over the Hastings governance of the West Midlands after the fall of Buckingham and was granted the manor of Market Bosworth forfeited by Robert Harcourt's father John Harcourt.⁷³ Constable's headquarters during the greater part of Richard's reign was at Tutbury castle some twenty miles to the west of that town.⁷⁴ Because of the difficulty he experienced with his new tenants⁷⁵ loyal to their ancestral lords the Harcourts, it is probable that Sir Marmaduke visited and perambulated his newly acquired estate.

Thus Richard too would have been advised and guided to 'a place mete for twoo battayles to encountre'. Within the locality of Red Moor Plain, the King, an experienced and successful field commander, carefully chose the best position for his forces; Ambion Hill and its protecting marsh. With the advantage of the ground, of numbers and of superior military skill, it is hard to understand how Richard III lost the Battle of Bosworth. The lesson of history is that the God of Battles is a capricious Lord. In the words of *The Great Chronicle of London* describing the victory: 'Thus by grete ffortune & grace upon the fforesaid xxii day of august wan thys noble prince the possecion of thys land'.⁷⁶ In other words, Henry Tudor was a very lucky young man who throughout his reign himself ascribed his victory to divine intervention.

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