

Richard III and the Men who Died in Battle

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One thing we know absolutely for certain about Richard III is that he prized loyalty: his chosen motto proves it. He must also have been aware from a very early age that a man's ultimate loyalty was to follow his lord into battle, to fight and die, perhaps die horribly, for him. His own father, with his loyal followers, was killed at Wakefield. Men would later die fighting loyally for his brother Edward, and for Richard himself. Indeed, men also died fighting loyally for the Lancastrian side.

Battlefield corpses might be subject to indignities: looted, left to rot to discourage others, or cleared away into mass graves. Richard III had strong views on the subject. There is a little-known document in the Duchy of Lancaster archives that shows his concern that the men who died in battle should receive proper Christian burial.

Towton was his brother Edward's battle, the longest and bloodiest battle ever fought in England, after which, according to George Neville, Chancellor of England, 'so many dead bodies were seen as to cover an area six miles long by three broad and about four furlongs'. This cannot be taken literally; Neville must be including the scattered corpses of those overtaken and cut down while fleeing, and those who had stumbled away to die of their wounds in the distance. Andrew Boardman in his recent analysis of the battlefield believes that it was fought 'in a very circumscribed area of just over half a square mile'. Many of the bodies choked the Cock Beck, which ran red with blood.

Wherever they were, there would have been an urgent need to bury the bodies as quickly as possible. What was the system for the mass burial of battle casualties? Obviously, bodies of men of rank and wealth would be removed by their followers, especially if they were on the winning side. This happened to Lord Dacre, whose body was taken to Saxton churchyard. Possibly survivors who could find their dead friends or relatives and had the means to hire a cart would be able to remove their bodies to be taken care of individually. But for the vast majority their funeral 'rites' would be to be put together into a pit. Would any attempt be made to consecrate the ground – would a chaplain walk round as men dug the pits, and say a few prayers and sprinkle holy water?

Edward IV had taken some thought for the bodies.

There is a papal bull dated 6 November 1467 that shows that some of the dead were buried in the cemetery of a chapel of St Mary at Towton, and others were buried near it. The bull describes the chapel as *fere desolata & destructa*, 'almost abandoned and ruinous', and says that Edward IV was intending to repair and enlarge it so that divine services could be held there (*ut ibidem divina observantia peragentur*). It promises some time off purgatory for people who visited the chapel and contributed to the repairs. There is also a memorandum dated 14 December 1472 in The National Archives to the effect that four (named) men are guaranteeing that Miles Chapman, chaplain of St Mary's Chapel near Towton, would spend all the alms and offerings received there on repairs to and beautification of the chapel, having deducted his own wages of ten marks a year.

Whatever happened to the fabric of the chapel, it seems that Richard III was concerned for the mortal remains of the men who died in the battle. Within months of becoming king, he arranged for

the recoverable dead of Towton to be given *ecclesiasticam sepulturam*, 'Christian burial'. The document setting out his intentions is recorded in the register of grants of the Duchy of Lancaster, and is very revealing. The document is in Latin; this is a fairly literal translation of the relevant portions:

The king to all to whom [this letter will come] greeting.

Know that, whereas a few years ago, namely at the time when our brother King Edward of famous memory first began to wield the royal power rightfully due to him, our same brother, leading a great army, was forced to fight a battle in the field of the vill of Towton in our county of Yorkshire when certain men at the time opposed and rebelled against him and his royal right, and with the assistance and help of God won a victory by his efforts in the same battle – and a number of noblemen sprung from the family of our said brother and ourselves, and other leading men and people of this kingdom in a great multitude (the pity of it!) were cut off from this human life, and their bodies put in three pits in the said field and other nearby places completely without any Christian burial, as is well known [*corpora . . . extra ecclesiasticam prossus sepulturam terciis concavis notorie tradita*] – wherefore we, deeply sorry [*pro affectu compacientes*] that the dead should be buried in this way, in these last months [*iis proximis mensibus*] have caused their bones to be exhumed and given Christian burial [*ecclesiasticam sepulturam*], partly in the parish church of Saxton in our said county of Yorkshire and its cemetery, and partly in the chapel of Towton and its surrounding.

Presumably, Richard's concern was to get the bodies into properly consecrated ground, as he had had them exhumed. If it had been rituals and prayers that had been lacking, these could have been performed over the existing burial pits. He goes out of his way to give his brother Edward all the praise he can – he was 'of famous memory', the rightful king, who only fought when he was forced to, and won a victory with God's help – but there seems to be an underlying rebuke for his treatment of the bodies, and consequent disregard for the souls, of those who had died for him.

In November 1483 Richard had paid £40 for 'the chapel' at Towton to be built. Harley 433 (II 39) records 'A warrant to the Receivor of Pountfret to pay & deliver to Thomas Langtone & William Salley for the bilding & edifieng of the Chapelle at Tawton xl li. Yeven the xxvijti day of Novembre Anno primo'. The Duchy of Lancaster grant quoted above concerns the salary of a chaplain who is to sing for the souls of the dead of Towton. It continues:

Now, wishing indeed to perform a service pleasing to God in this matter, and desiring greatly the rest and health of the souls of the aforesaid dead, of our special grace and from our certain knowledge and spontaneously we have given and granted, and by the tenor of this present letter give and grant, to the proprietors [impropriators?] of the said parish church of Saxton and the present and future churchwardens or guardians of its fabric an annual rent of seven marks of legal money of England coming from our honour and demesne of Pontefract . . . annually at the feasts of Pentecost and St Martin in Winter in equal portions for ever, for the support and maintenance of sir John Bateman, chaplain; and when he retires or dies, or in any other way relinquishes the underwritten charge . . . another suitable perpetual chaplain [is to be] nominated and set in place . . . who will celebrate masses and other divine offices in the aforesaid chapel of Towton for the healthy state of us and of our most dear consort Anne, Queen of England, and of our dearly beloved firstborn son Edward, . . . and for the souls of the aforesaid dead, as long as we shall live, and for our souls and theirs and the souls of all the faithful departed when we have departed from the light of this life . . . Given at London on the 19th day of February in the first year [of our reign] [1484].

Richard's concern for the souls of the men who died at Towton may well have sprung from his personal religious feelings about what was due to the dead, but it also points to a real appreciation of their loyal sacrifice. Side by side with this endowment the chapel at Towton we may set his endowment of prayers for men who had died for him at Barnet or Tewkesbury. Charles Ross comments on Richard's 'conspicuous loyalty to, and generous treatment of, the men who had been in his service as Duke of Gloucester', pointing out that this extended to people of humble or comparatively obscure origin. He cites the indentures of 1477, drawn up between Richard and the President and Fellows of Queens' College, Cambridge, regarding four fellowships that Richard was endowing there in return for prayers for the good estate and the souls of himself and members of both his immediate and extended family, both of the House of York and the House of Neville. Richard also stipulated that other souls were to be prayed for:

the soules of Thomas Par, John Milewater, Christofre Wursley, Thomas Huddleston, John Harper and all other gentilmen and yomen servanders and lovers of the said duke of Gloucetr, the wiche were slayn in his service at the batelles of Bernett, Tukysbery, or at any other feldes or jorneyes.

Ross concludes his article by remarking, 'it is . . . [a] fact that six years after their deaths in battle the memory of his former servants (none of them great men in terms of worldly consequence) was still held by Richard in active and affectionate regard. As a side light on his character, this circumstance deserves consideration.'

Notes

1. Letter from George Neville, bishop of Exeter and Chancellor of England, to the Papal Legate Francesco Coppini (Hinds, A. B., ed. (1912) *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts in the Archives and Collections of Milan*, vol. 1, London.)
2. A. Boardman (2000) in *Blood Red Roses*, ed. V. Fiorato, A. Boylston and C. Knüsel, Oxbow, p. 27.
3. TNA C 270/26/30. Calendared in J. A. Twemlow, ed. (1933) *The Calendar of Papal Letters XII*, p. 623, HMSO. 'Near it' is *iuxta illud* in the Latin, so the 'it' is the cemetery, not the chapel, which would have been written *iuxta illam*.
4. TNA C 270/26/30.
5. TNA DL 42/20 fo.14.
6. C. Ross (1985) 'Some "Servants and Lovers" of Richard in his Youth', in *Richard III, Crown and People*, ed. J. Petre, Gloucester, pp. 146–8. The article first appeared in *The Ricardian*, Vol. IV, No. 55 (December 1976), pp. 2–4.