

## THE BATTLE OF TOWTON.

A.W. Boardman. 1994. Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., Stroud, £18.99. ISBN 0-7509-0771-1

The battle of Towton on March 29 1461 was undoubtedly one of the most important in the whole of the 'Wars of the Roses'. It was essential for Edward of York, who had just been proclaimed king, to win the battle since if he lost he would have been named as a traitor with no possibility of pardon. Similarly the Lancastrian party had to win to keep any real chance of retaining power. This book is the first full length account to be written of the battle. It not only covers the battle but sensibly starts earlier to set the scene and also describes the campaign leading up to the battle, although up to 1460 it is a somewhat breathless sprint through events. The second battle of St Albans is the first to be described in any detail. From the end of February 1461 onwards events are described as they happened using contemporary sources, starting with the march to the field and a useful discussion of the confusing skirmishes at Ferrybridge and Dintingdale on the day before the main battle, when the Lancastrians attempted to prevent the Yorkists from crossing the river Aire. The ground around and on which the main fighting took place is described with the eye of someone who knows the ground well, always useful when talking of a battle.

The course of the battle is described in detail. It was fought in a snowstorm, which must have added to the horrors. The placing of the troops is not such a problem in this battle as it is with many others from this period: it was fought on a plateau and the approximate position which all the troops occupied can be worked out relatively (only relatively) easily. The question of the numbers involved is discussed thoroughly. This is particularly important in this battle since it is always cited as the one in which more troops fought than at any other time in these civil wars. It is good to see that the author scales down some of the more outrageous figures, settling on about 25,000 men for the Lancastrians and about 20,000 for the Yorkists. This seems to me to still be too high. It seems unlikely that each of the peers present would be able to raise 2-3,000 men as Boardman assumes for example and we really do not have enough evidence to say how many (or which) towns raised how many troops for each side. The question of victualling this number of men (and indeed many horses) needs to be thought of too. However the author's reasoning is set out and can be agreed with or not.

It is slightly puzzling why the author discusses at some length the 'ambush' which the Lancastrians are said to have set on the left flank of the Yorkist army, rather similar to that set by the Yorkists at Tewkesbury. As he rightly says this 'ambush' has been mentioned in passing by many authors but there is absolutely no contemporary reference to it. Some very slight evidence is brought forward for believing there could have been an ambush but it does really seem unnecessary to take up two pages discussing how sound would have been the tactical decision to set an ambush if one had been set.

One problem with this book is the restricted range of books and articles used (although the major contemporary sources are cited) and the over reliance on some secondary sources. This is illustrated in the author's discussion of the burial site of Lord Dacre. Dacre was killed at Towton and buried in Saxton churchyard where his tomb still exists. The inscription is damaged and Dacre's title is obscured. As Boardman says the correct title is 'of Gilsland', which his source transcribes as 'of Greystock'. This cannot possibly be correct, as T.M. Fallow, 'The Dacre Tomb in Saxton Churchyard', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, vol. 10 (1889), pp.303- 308 made clear. Boardman says that the confusion of titles does not matter anyway because in 1461 they were both held by the same man, but this was not true until 1525, when the then Lord Greystock succeeded the title of Dacre of Gilsland. Oddly Scofield's *Edward IV* and Ramsay's *York and Lancaster* are not in the list of secondary sources, nor such useful modern works as A.J. Pollard's *North-East England during the Wars of the Roses*, (1990). Not all statements are given a source, although it is difficult to be sure, and references are in general treated in a rather cavalier manner.

To conclude, this book has been written by a man who has thought long and deeply about the battle of Towton, and what warfare in the middle ages meant for the participants and the wounded. He is not entirely at home with the wider picture within which the battle was fought and the phrasing is sometimes infelicitous or unclear (a 'dissipated army' (?) for example, p.46 line 8) but as an account of the battle it will certainly be essential to consult it in any future work. There are good maps, the index is adequate and the book is well illustrated.

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