

Harcourt and the Bosworth Standard

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IN THE HARCOURT CHAPEL of Stanton Harcourt church in Oxfordshire is the tomb of Sir Robert Harcourt (1466–1513/17). Through a reference in W. E. Hampton's *Memorials of the Wars of the Roses*, I have recently become aware of the claim that Sir Robert was Henry Tudor's standard bearer at Bosworth; and that the standard in question still hangs over the tomb. 'What could it not tell us', asks one writer, 'of the deeds of prowess on the dreadful field; how the gallant dwarf . . . fought as only true heroes can fight, till he fell, faint with many wounds'.¹

The chapel in fact contains two ancient flags. The other hangs over the tomb of our Sir Robert's grandfather—also Sir Robert, killed in 1470. Almost nothing is left of the original silk of either flag, although fragmentary traces of red and of straight lines are just discernible on the one above Sir Robert II. Nathaniel Hawthorne visited Stanton Harcourt in the mid nineteenth century, and (while believing Sir Robert I to have been the standard bearer of Bosworth) was greatly impressed by Sir Robert II's flag. 'As it was absolutely falling to pieces, I tore off one little bit, no bigger than a finger nail, and put it into my waistcoat-pocket; but seeking it subsequently, it was not to be found.'² At some date, however, attempts have been made at conservation, with linen reinforcement and gauze: and this work, itself considerably decayed, is what remains over both tombs.

The flags are similar in size: about 165cm long by 56cm wide at the hoist. Their staffs are both 270cm long, topped by identical decorative metal finials. They are, then, a pair. In the early nineteenth century there was apparently a third, and also a 'surcoat' (probably a tabard).³ Both seem to have gone by the time of Hawthorne's visit. A helm, with a wooden Harcourt crest (on a ducal coronet, a peacock close), another supposed relic of Bosworth which hung above Sir Robert II's tomb, was stolen in the 1960's. Two coronets survive in the chapel.

The flags (a set, made of silk, and with decorative finials) were clearly for ceremonial, not battle use. Everything points to all these items, except the later coronets, being a single funeral achievement. The fashion for elaborate funerals of this sort lasted from the mid sixteenth century to the Civil War, and the Stanton Harcourt helm was dated to about 1580–90.⁴

As a funeral helm may well have been an old one, there are three Harcourts to whom the achievement could have belonged: Sir Simon (d.1577), his son Sir Walter (d.?1608), or the latter's son Robert (d.1631). Robert seems the most likely candidate: he was of some eminence (in 1609 he went on a voyage of discovery to Guiana, and later attempted to have it colonised); and his name makes confusion with the fifteenth century Sir Roberts more understandable. None of these later Harcourts had large monuments, which is why the achievement was arranged around those of the earlier generations.

The size of the flags makes it probable that they were what the seventeenth century called pennons. Long, tapering and rounded at the end, these bore the family arms (in the case of Harcourt, Gules, two bars or), or some other arms with which the individual was connected, in the hoist; while the fly would be filled with decorative scroll-work. Robert Harcourt, an esquire, would have been entitled only to pennons at his funeral: his father and grandfather, as knights, might have had standards as well.⁵

The story that Sir Robert II was Henry Tudor's standard bearer is a Harcourt family tradition: the earliest reference to it that I have found occurs in the family tree compiled by Joseph Edmondson, *Mowbray Herald Extraordinary* (d.1786).⁶ It seems quite likely that it grew up simply because of the dilapidated flag over his tomb. We cannot even say that he was at Bosworth: again, Edmondson is the earliest authority. All we know is that his father, John, fled England to join Henry in 1484, but died the following June. If Robert accompanied him, he may well have participated in the invasion of August, but there is no contemporary evidence. On the other hand, the Harcourts were for many years lords of the manor of Bosworth (two of them, in 1224 and 1285, obtained grants for the weekly market that turned the town into Market Bosworth⁷). This may be coincidence; or it may have given rise to the confusion on which the whole tradition is based.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. W. J. Monk, *Stanton Harcourt* (Witney 1893), p.26 (Reprinted from the *Witney Gazette*, Sept. 1893).
2. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Our Old Home* (Boston 1863), p.215.
3. M. H. Bloxam, *Fragmenta Sepulchralia*, (Oxford undated, but 1840-50), p.135.
4. Sir G. F. Laking, *A Record of European Arms and Armour through Seven Centuries*, Vol. 4 (London 1921), pp.115-6.
5. Diary of Henry Machyn, ed. J. G. Nichols, *Camden Society* 42 (1848), note upon Funerals in introduction, p.xxvii.
6. *The Harcourt Papers*, ed. E. W. Harcourt, Vol. 1 (Oxford 1876), p.244. For further information on the family, see: Josiah C. Wedgwood, Harcourt of Ellenhall, in *Collections for a History of Staffordshire* (1914) edited by the William Salt Archaeological Society, pp.185ff. William Harcourt-Bath, *Harcuria, a History of the Harcourt family from AD860-AD1930* (Typescript, privately circulated: copy in Bodleian Library). Kenneth Hillier, John Harcourt, *Ricardian* No. 54 (1976), pp.8-13.
7. *Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum*, Vol. 1 1204-24 (1833), p.589. *Calendar of Charter Rolls*, Vol. 2 1257-1300 (London 1906), p.285.