

Bosworth Field: A footnote to a controversy

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EIGHT MONTHS and twenty seven days before Henry VII's accession the planets, according to the Italian astrologer William Parron, had foretold the ascendancy of the Tudor dynasty and Henry VII's victory. That, which to human reason might have seemed impossible was, by the prophecy, by the appointed order revealed by the stars (aided and abetted by Henry Tudor's manifold and outstanding virtues) possible and indeed inevitable. Parron was writing, with hindsight and sycophancy, more than a decade after the battle of 22 August 1485: but unless those same stars yield up their secrets in less cabalistic a form we may never know in its entirety the full story, the exact geographical location, of every stage of the battle that cost Richard III his life and won the crown for Henry Tudor. Recent controversy and scholarly investigation, not least in the pages of the *Ricardian* has, however, brought us closer to an understanding of the events of 22 August 1485, if not yet to a consensus, and has highlighted the problems and limitations of the sources.

By the first quarter of the sixteenth century 'Bosworth' was an accepted shorthand reference to the battle.² It was, for example, so cited in the Dadlington licence (and there is nothing unusual in the fact that the licence was not enrolled); it is there on the memorial brass to John Sachaverell, erected about forty years after his death on the field of battle.³ But the encounter, was not fought at or immediately beside Market Bosworth itself, wherein lies the problem. One thing is certain. Greater understanding will not come, as the lengthy footnotes to the recent spate of articles well illustrate, except by a careful and thoughtful reading of the available literary and manuscript evidence; a punctilious consideration of the often unsatisfactory archaeological data; and last, perhaps least, an alert perambulation of the disputed area, however much the topography has changed in the succeeding centuries. To none of these criteria, even the last, would I lay claim.

It can be instructive to take a magnifying glass to one small piece of evidence in the hope of finding an insight on the whole. But often, as the enquirer pursues the vistas so given, the glass will be shattered, the hypothesis destroyed. For a fragment is only part of a jigsaw; the enquiry private, and often short lived. Revisionism is a truism of history. Sometimes it leads us nearer to an always relative truth; and often it gives rise to healthy and stimulating debate, witness the now seminal article by Colin Richmond. But it should be

based on sound research followed, in due course, by the public exposition of an argument which the author is prepared to defend, even if subsequently modified. A thesis cannot be attributed on the basis of an informal discussion of a specific document in answer to a specific question, isolated from its fellows and entirely unresearched. A misunderstanding, however generously acknowledged, remains a misunderstanding nonetheless: but it is only its continued currency that moves me to reply. The documents formerly in the custody of the Exchequer of Receipt, readily available to historical enquiry through the pages of Campbell's *Materials*,⁴ are a small part of the jigsaw with which to reconstruct Henry VII's 'victorious field' (the term in which official references to Bosworth were made). They are not the bedrock on which to ground a revolution. I am not, and have no claim to be, a historian of Bosworth Field, revisionist or otherwise. My own interest in Bosworth lies in the consequentials of the battle — Henry VII himself (and no-one reading his will could doubt, for all the harshness of his later years, his continuing sense of obligation and emotional commitment to the men and events which had won him the crown); the way in which the records enable us to identify the names and fortunes of some of the protagonists on either side; and the opportunities and opportunism opened up by Henry's victory.

Just over two weeks after the battle, and within five days of the new King's entry into London, workmen moved in on Coldharbour, the house in Thames Street which Richard III had so recently granted to the heralds. Funded out of the customs of London, and thus ultimately out of the Exchequer at Henry's order, they prepared the house for Margaret Beaufort, Henry VII's mother, and made rooms ready for Elizabeth of York, for Margaret's receiver general, Reynold Bray, and for the young Duke of Buckingham. They set a scutcheon of her arms in a window on the waterside, where, perhaps, they could be seen from the Thames, and set quarrels of her arms, and those of her husband; Thomas Stanley, in newly glazed windows.⁵ It is true that the full refurbishment was not completed until after Christmas; but Coldharbour was to become Margaret's principal London residence and glittered again, for example, in 1501, when no less than £666.15s.8d. was spent on cloth of gold, silks, velvets, other 'necessaries' and sundries, and refurbishment of the house, when Margaret and the Earl of Derby stayed in London for a month for the occasion of Prince Arthur's marriage to Catherine of Aragon.⁶ But the rapid and confident assertion of power, display and dynastic triumph in 1485 captures my imagination in a way that the topographical niceties of the battle fought on 22 August fail to do. The debate I have followed with interest, with respect for and appreciation of the work done. I have not myself contributed. My sole acknowledgement to the quincentenary was a small exhibition, staged in homage to two kings, the study of whose reigns has given me much pleasure. It began with Richard of Gloucester as good lord and ended with Henry VII in state. It proposed no thesis, and could say little on the battle itself. For Dr. Starkey I cannot answer: but the myth of my revisionist assertions I would hope to lay to rest.

I began with William Parron; Mr. Armstrong grimly notes that his departure from England may have been in part prompted by the inaccuracy of his prediction concerning the longevity of Elizabeth of York, and the

consequent loss of his credibility with the King.⁸ No less should the historian of Henry VII's reign be wary of earning the King's posthumous contempt by grounding his theorising on insufficient, or insufficiently considered, evidence.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Bodleian Library, MS Selden Supra 77, fos. 15-15v. For Parron, see C. A. J. Armstrong, 'An Italian Astrologer at the Court of Henry VII', in ed. E. F. Jacob, *Italian Renaissance Studies* (London, 1960), pp.433-54.
2. Thus D. Williams, ' "A place mete for twoo battayles to encountre": the siting of the Battle of Bosworth, 1485', *Ricardian*, vol. 7 (1985), p.92. We might perhaps note other contemporary or near contemporary names for Towton — 'Northfield' (vague) and 'York field' (twelve miles away).
3. 'Hic iacet Johannes Sachaverell armiger . . . Qui quidem Johannes obiit in bello Ricardi tercii iuxta Bosworth anno domini mccccxxxv. I am indebted to Dr. D. Crook for a photograph of the brass. For the date, M. Clayton, *Catalogue of Rubbings of Brasses and Incised Slabs* (Re-issue, London, 1968), p.47.
4. W. Campbell (ed.) *Materials . . . of the Reign of Henry VII* (Rolls Series, London, 1873), i, 188, 201; P.R.O., E 404/79.
5. P.R.O., E 101/474/3, *passim* (extracts transcribed in *Archaeologia*, vol. 76, pp.43-50); Campbell, *Materials*, i, 475-6; A. Wagner, *Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1939), pp.95-6. A stone fragment carved with the portcullis still remains at the College of Arms.
6. SC 6/Eliz/3368. The total cost, including diets, was in excess of £1,000. The refurbishment itself cost a mere £62.4s. 2d. — but was under the charge of the 'master' of St. Bartholomew — surely the same William Bolton who became master of works for the building of Henry VII's chapel at Westminster.
7. Note of documents used deposited with the Barton Library.
8. Armstrong, *Italian Astrologer*, pp.453-4.