

SOLEM A TERGO RELIQUIT: THE TROUBLESOME BATTLE OF BOSWORTH FIELD

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In a recent issue of the *Ricardian Register*, Geoffrey Richardson (2001) was kind enough to reply to some of the observations that I had made on the representations of Bosworth Field on a selection of the earliest County maps of England (Hancock, 2000). In so doing, he raised a number of points about the Battle upon which I would like to take the opportunity to comment further.

As one who seeks consensus, I would first like to note some of our major points of agreement. The first of these is a shared interest in retaining a common name for the Battle. It is possible that a name acts as an important descriptor and so in itself a name is not unimportant. For example, the 1996 edition of the Pitkin Guide to the 'Wars of the Roses' shows the Battle of Stoke (1487) as occurring near Stoke on Trent, not close to the actual site near Newark in Nottinghamshire. This error is corrected in the later 1999 edition but shows what problems can arise from names and their misinterpretation. So naming, which some might consider mundane, is not necessarily a trivial matter. However, at the present time, there is little direct benefit in generating greater confusion by a proliferation of names and Bosworth Field is surely the preferred appellation. Even Foss (1998), in his text that presents a new perspective on the Battle, continues to use Bosworth Field as a subtitle to his work. Richardson and I, also in concert with many other commentators, agree on the importance of the Battle. At one stroke, the path of English history and possible world history, took a sudden turn, for we cannot forget that Henry VIII's division with the Catholic Church caused radical change in the landscape of the sixteenth century and arguably in life since. Given this pivotal nature of the Battle of Bosworth, much frustration subsequently arises from the unsatisfactory state of knowledge concerning what precisely transpired on August 22nd 1485.

The Death of Contemporary Evidence

The first major point upon which we disagree concerns the nature of existing evidence about the Battle. Richardson points to a number of sources, but the central problem here is that, with one exception, they are not contemporary with the Battle itself. It is true that the Croyland account is very

near to being a contemporary one, unfortunately, there is almost no direct information about the disposition of the battle itself (and see Harris, 1981). Specifically, the Croyland Chronicle states that:

"A battle of the greatest severity now ensuing between the two sides, the earl of Richmond, together with his knights, made straight for king Richard: while the earl of Oxford, who was next in rank to him in the whole army and a most valiant soldier, drew up his forces, consisting of a large body of French and English troops, opposite the wing in which the duke of Norfolk had taken up his position. In the part where the earl of Northumberland was posted, with a large and well-provided body of troops, there was no opposition made, as not a blow was given or received during the battle. At length, glorious victory was granted by heaven to the said earl of Richmond, now sole king, together with the crown, of exceeding value, which king Richard had previously worn on his head. For while fighting, and not in the act of flight, the said king Richard was pierced with numerous deadly wounds, and fell in the field like a brave and most valiant prince." (Ingulph, 1865, pgs. 503-504).

This is the only information the Croyland Chronicle provides and thus no wonder Kendall (1955) lamented that "*there exists no satisfactory contemporary, or even near contemporary account of the battle.*" There might have been some hope that a letter dated March 1st, 1486, from Mossen Diego de Valera to the monarchs of Castille and Aragon may have provided more detailed information. Unfortunately, as the commentary by Nokes and Wheeler (1972) on this letter makes clear, virtually every time de Valera supplies anything like factual information, it is almost always incorrect. A detailed reading of de Valera's letter raises particular concerns since, as the original author himself notes, his account is at best second-hand, being derived from 'trustworthy merchants' who were in England at the time of the Battle. Given the nature of Merchants and their role in medieval warfare, it is a reasonable inference that they garnered their information from others making this a third-hand account at best. As we shall see, like other sources, tantalizing glimpses are offered but unfortunately they cannot be substantiated in respect to an authoritative source.

Such is this unfortunate lack of information that even Burne (1950, pg. 137), of whom Richardson is a strong advocate, reports that: “*Bosworth Field was thus one of the most important battles ever fought on English soil. Unfortunately, it is worse documented than any that even approach it in importance.*” In this, Burne is assuredly correct. Richardson is constrained to cite Polydore Vergil as a primary source but here again we find many vexing problems. It appears fairly certain that there was at least an eighteen year hiatus between the Battle of Bosworth and Vergil first starting his work. Although we suspect that he wrote his observations on the Battle in 1509, his text was not published until the Basle edition of 1534. I shall not dwell here on Henry VII’s patronage of Vergil since that topic is discussed in detail by others (Ellis, 1844, pg. i-xxxii; Hay, 1952). However, given that Bosworth was probably the height of Henry’s personal military career, it is hard to see how a historian he directly sponsored would deal dispassionately with such a topic. While claiming Vergil as a critical source at one moment, Richardson immediately contradicts him the next by asserting that Henry fled before Richard, reporting that “*I doubt he finished running until he reached the top of Crown Hill, where his minions would have been able to halt his flight with assurances that ‘The Monster was dead.’*” (Richardson, 2001, pg 11). I can find no support for this proposition. In direct contrast, Vergil actually reports that Henry keenly offered himself to the struggle, since all hope of safety lay in arms. We must remember that, like Richard, on this occasion Henry also hazarded his life on the outcome. While some of us might lament the eventual resolution of the conflict, I do not think we should fall into the Shakespearian trap of making Henry the archetypal coward. If subsequent behavior is in any way indicative, we do know that Henry never personally fought in Battle after Bosworth. So perhaps Vergil is being somewhat generous in the matter of Henry’s personal conduct at this juncture.

Despite any inherent biases, Vergil’s account of the Battle is problematic in a number of other ways. In particular, he has been the source of much confusion with his observation “*solem a tergo reliquit*” rendered in the Camden Society’s publication as “*he left the soon (sun) upon his bak*” (

parentheses mine), (Ellis, 1844, pg. 223). This notation alone has been the topic of extended discussion because, given the Battle occurred in the early part of the morning and the sun therefore must have been in the Eastern quarter, Henry with the “soon on his bak” is constrained to have been moving westward at some time during the engagement. Unfortunately, a number of commentators, (see the comments on Sir James Ramsey’s conception by Gairdner, 1896, pg. 163; and see Makinson, 1963, pg. 241) have thus produced complex configurations and movements of the respective forces just to cope with this one observation. Prior to Vergil, reports such as that in the records of the City of York, are largely confined to a simple record that the Battle has occurred. Unfortunately, they contained little contextual detail. Vergil’s account of the Battle was not published until some forty-nine years after the event and clearly not contemporary, gives us some tantalizing glimpses of the action. However, like all remembered events recalled much later, the picture presented is selective, flawed and incomplete. Such is the nature, even of eyewitness testimony (see Loftus, 1979).

Lest anyone be misled into believing Vergil’s actual account of the Battle is an extended one, I should note that it takes essentially only four pages of his book on Richard III (Ellis, 1844, pg 221-224), which is one of three books on different Kings in this particular volume which itself totals some two-hundred and twenty-seven pages in length. Thus, while Vergil is often cited as an authority, as Richardson does, we must remember that this is a very limited set of observations and

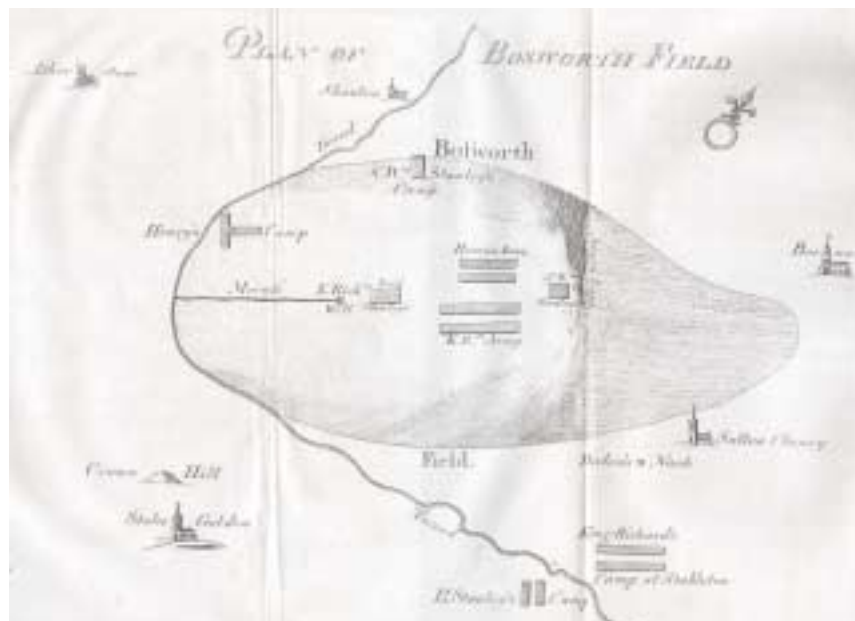


Figure 1. Reproduction of the basic cruciate form of the Battle as conceived by Hutton (1788). Note that the angles of engagement seem altered in this representation, as North is not to the top of the Map.



Figure 2. Pridden's Map of the Bosworth Conflict.

Vergil is elevated to this authoritative eminence, partly because he was consciously writing a 'history,' but largely because of the paucity of other sources. The upshot of these observations is that I stand by my earlier observation that there is a dearth of accurate, contemporary evidence concerning the Battle and this remains, even to the present day, a major source of frustration. Indeed, if this were not so, there would be fewer disagreements such as the present one to resolve!

Configurations of the Battle

There are three major configurations that have been forwarded concerning the Battle of Bosworth and the difference between these depends directly upon the actions of the Stanley contingent. The classic, cruciate form has Richard approaching from the East and Henry from the West, while Sir William Stanley and Lord Stanley are positioned to the North and South respectively of the focus of action. Several commentators rotate the cruciate form away from the simple, cardinal directions of north, south, east and west (e.g., see Burne, 1950), however, the fundamental relationship between the different forces remains relatively constant. The original source

for this configuration is most probably Hutton (1788) and in Figure 1, I have provided a reproduction of his illustration. It is of course, possible to transpose Lord Stanley and Sir William Stanley, between their Northern and Southern positions but all of the commentators who support the cruciate configuration have Lord Stanley to the South and Sir William to the North (see Burne, 1950; Haigh, 1995; Hutton, 1788; Kendall, 1955; Ross, 1981). To the present, I have found no exception to this.

The major competitor to the cruciate form of the Battle is the triangular configuration. In this situation, the forces of the Stanley's are arrayed together and there are two natural variations on this configuration. The first is with the apex of the triangle to the north with the Stanley's approaching from the Near Coton direction. Supporters of this configuration include Rowse (1966), Kinross (1968), Cheetham, (1972) Ross (1976), and Smurthwaite (1988). A colorful and impressive version of this conception is given in Figure 3. It shows the apex north configuration that also includes Richard's charge down Ambien Hill. Other than Lord Stanley's presence with his brother, this represents the standard situation as represented on the ground in Leicestershire today. The second variation on the triangular form is with the apex of the triangle to the south with the Stanley forces close to the Stoke Golding and Dadlington area. This is the conception supported primarily by Bennett (1985) and subsequently by Foss (1998).

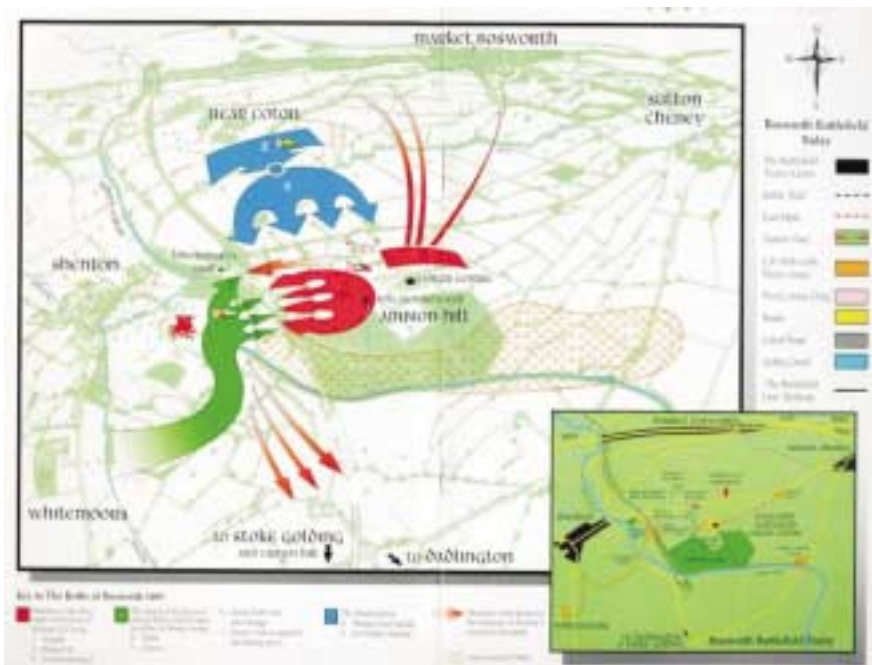


Figure 3. A colorful and pleasing illustration of the standard view of the Battle configuration in which the Stanley forces are coalesced into a single unit to the North (Reproduced with the permission of Leicestershire County Council).

To illustrate this, I have reproduced Foss's conception of the Battle in Figure 4 that provides a number of detailed points about the encounter (see also Foss, 1998, Figure 3, pg. 50). One question that must arise as we consider Foss's re-conceptualization concerns the role of Northumberland and his forces. Given the configuration shown here in Figure 4, it is hard to understand why Richard did not



Figure 4. The reconceptualization of the Battle in a triangular configuration with the apex, consisting of the Stanley forces, to the South. (This map is reproduced from Foss, 1998, with the permission of the author and the publisher, Kairos Press, Newton Linford, Leicestershire, England).

bring Northumberland up on his left flank, adjacent to the position of Lord Stanley. Tactically, this places two uncertain forces in close proximity and while it may be true that Richard suspected the loyalty of both to a greater or lesser degree, it still leaves him a direct line of retreat to the north, toward his 'home' region of strongest support in Yorkshire. While against such an observation, Foss may argue timing of advances and encounters in the Battle might preclude such a move, this would essentially represent further rationalization and in essence, the final story of the Battle is certainly yet to be written.



Figure 5. The memorial stone at the site presently identified as that at which Richard III died 'fighting manfully in the press of his enemies.' Author's photograph.

The Site of the Battle

Regardless of the configuration of the forces present at the battle, there is continuing dissension over the exact location of the major engagements. Many authors have sited the confrontation between the vanguards of the respective armies, led by Norfolk and Oxford, at the base of Ambien Hill, near to the position of the modern railway station. Richard's charge is then traditionally positioned slightly to the north and west (see Figure 3) ending in the location of the stone memorial adjacent to the current roadway, which is illustrated below.

Among others, Foss (1998) has a radically different location for the Norfolk-Oxford encounter as well as the direction and location of Richard's charge. In trying to establish the truth between such disparate accounts, we have to understand the challenges facing the different commentators through the ages. Until relatively recently, there was no coordinate system available through which to communicate location. In the absence of an arbitrary, numerical framework even near contemporary commentators such as Croyland, were faced with significant problems. The only landmark noted in near original sources is the marsh, which we are told was drained in the century following the Battle. While the Sence Brook is a salient feature, its course may well have changed, especially with the introduction of intensive agricultural development in the area. Thus we are left with natural features such as Ambien Hill and Crown Hill, and local village locations. Given the presence of a Roman Road in the area, which must have been of considerable transportation value, it is unfortunate

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that no commentator orients the site with respect to this roadway. However, we must remember that there is no reason that any of the individuals present, or the subsequent commentators, would necessarily have known that this road was of Roman origin, especially being a local throughway. What all commentators do is to identify the site in accordance with their own expertise and bias. Thus Croyland notes that:

"On departing from the town of Leicester, he was informed by scouts where the enemy most probably intended to remain the following night: upon which he encamped near the abbey of Mirival, at a distance of about eight miles from the town" and "down to this battle, which was fought near Mirival and which took place on the twenty-second day of the month of August in the year of our Lord 1485."

As an individual familiar with clerical matters, he sites the Battle accordingly. John Rous, an individual with Warwickshire connections, indicates that the Battle took place on the Warwickshire/Leicestershire border (see Foss, 1998, pg 32). Richardson (2001) is an advocate of Burne (1950) who uses his own notion of 'inherent military probability.' Here, we find Burne using his own military expertise to infer the site and the action of the Battle. Thus, as with Croyland, we have an individual imposing his own interpretation on events founded upon his own personal bias. Rendering one's opinion under the banner of an acronym does not absolve it from its biases nor elevate it in terms of an evidentiary foundation. Unfortunately, as I have noted elsewhere (Hancock, 2001), when the evidence under-specifies the solution, opinion inevitably fills the vacuum. As with other episodes in Richard's life, such opinion is bound to vary and polarized positions are most liable to emerge. While Richardson postulates that the early county maps of the area help distinguish between the different accounts of Burne (1950) and Foss (1998), and potentially those of other commentators, I find that the information that they each provide is fundamentally too general to make any such determination. And, of course, we cannot forget that these maps do not represent contemporary sources and could not be considered definitive evidence even if such a determination could be made (Hancock, 2000).

A Way Ahead

With Bosworth, we have very little evidence drawn from the site itself. Some artifacts of dubious provenance have been collected (and see Foss, 1998, pg. 71-74). Unfortunately, these provide little in the way of definitive evidence. Yet this need not necessarily be so. There has, to my knowledge,

been very little in the way of a systematic archaeological investigation of any of the putative sites of engagement. However, there is no fundamental reason why such a programmatic evaluation could not take place and the Ricardian Society is surely the body to sponsor such an investigation. An intensive local search may provide the hard evidence that would become the basis upon which to accept or reject several of the competing hypotheses concerning the site of the action and the configuration of the forces arrayed. However, as a scientist I cannot help but note that further evidence often raises more questions than it answers. It appears that further scholarly work will be forthcoming on the Battle in that the recent issue of *The Ricardian* (Volume XII, No. 153) noted that Michael K. Jones is preparing a work on Bosworth. Let us hope that new insights and information are forthcoming from such efforts.

I cannot conclude the present observations without come comment on eyewitness testimony. From the foregoing, what it appears that we most crave as historians and Ricardians is an eyewitness account of events as they occurred on the morning of August, 22nd 1485. However, even were such accounts available, we would still have to exercise considerable care. For, we know from contemporary research on eyewitness testimony, especially to stressful or traumatic events, what is reported is often either distorted or simply wrong (Hancock, 1997). Memory itself is not a simple chronometric record of events but is a highly selective and biased sample of reality (Loftus, 1979). As such, even though Vergil claims to have interviewed important individuals, alive at the time of Richard's reign, we must be very careful interpreting such recollections, especially those pertaining to traumatic occasions such as battle.

Final Comments

I am very hesitant to disagree with any individual whose surname can well be interpreted as 'Richard's son.' However, I take issue with one final implication of Richardson's observations. While he admits that Foss may well have walked the Battlefield (a perambulation we all seem to have taken), Richardson affirms that Foss is simply wrong. He indicates that I would have done better to search a little further. I think any unbiased reader in comparing the works of Burne (1950) and Foss (1998) would have to conclude that the latter provides a much more thorough exposition concerning all the information available on the Battle. Certainly Burne (1950) has some interesting ideas but Foss is much more detailed and focuses his whole book on Bosworth. Burne (1950)

in contrast, dedicates only one chapter among many in his book to this specific Battle. This could be interpreted as my favoring Foss's conception. However, this is not the case since I believe that at present, the state of evidence is insufficient to either accept or reject his proposition. What is evident is that Foss has explored the issues more deeply than any previous researcher, even searching out the geology of the locale to support his contentions. In any comparison of the two sources the superiority of Foss's treatment is evident. I am sure that readers who search a little further will agree with me.

In the last analysis, it is very much up to Richardson, if he prefers the interpretation of the Battle given by Burne over that given by Foss. That is his prerogative. However, he is incorrect in his criticism of 'not searching further' when it is manifestly obvious that all sources consulted by Burne are actually dealt with in greater detail in Foss's text. In such circumstances, it would perhaps have been better if Richardson himself had read a little more carefully. I hope the preceding remarks are taken in the spirit of our collective efforts to reveal the truth of the late King. I do not think even a complete knowledge would exonerate Richard of all acts that today we might consider repugnant. However, I do believe such knowledge would reveal a very different character than that which history has foisted on us and one who would deserve to enter the lists of the very best of those who have ever worn the crown of England.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to Dr. Peter Foss for his comments on the present work and to Robin Stevenson of Kairos Press of Newton Linford, LEICS and Dr. Foss for permission to reproduce the Map shown in Figure 4. The permission of Leicestershire County Council to reproduce Figure 3 is also gratefully acknowledged.

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