

**THE  
BATTLE OF  
WAKEFIELD**



Keith Dockray  
and  
Richard Knowles

## **The Battle of Wakefield and the Wars of the Roses**

**KEITH DOCKRAY**

THE BATTLE OF WAKEFIELD, fought on 30 December 1460 (almost certainly, and unusually, during the afternoon), was the fifth of about fifteen set-piece military confrontations that punctuated the so-called Wars of the Roses between 1455 and 1487. The most serious and protracted civil wars England had experienced since the Norman Conquest, their origins can be found mainly in the political turmoil occasioned by the disastrous rule of the third Lancastrian King Henry VI (1422-1461). In particular, the King's simplicity of mind and pathetically trusting nature left him fatally vulnerable to grasping favourites and unscrupulous ministers: even in the 1440s and early 1450s, when he remained more or less *compos mentis*, it was bad enough; once he had suffered a complete mental breakdown in 1453, from which he probably never completely recovered, his shortcomings became ever more evident and he was certainly incapable of containing the mounting baronial rivalries that eventually culminated in out-and-out civil war.<sup>1</sup>

Ever since he had attained his majority in 1437, Henry VI's failure to control royal patronage judiciously had encouraged baronial jealousy and resentment. In particular, since the late 1440s, there had developed an increasingly bitter personal rivalry between Richard Plantagenet Duke of York, the most powerful magnate in the land (who also happened to have a strong claim to the throne), and Edmund Beaufort Duke of Somerset who, despite bearing a good deal of responsibility for the loss of virtually all England's possessions in France by the autumn of 1453, enjoyed more than his fair share of the fruits of royal favour in the early 1450s. Richard of York certainly resented his own treatment by the crown: indeed, he even mounted an unsuccessful *coup d'état* in 1452. When, in the winter of 1453/4, York forged an alliance with the Nevilles of Middleham (who very much dominated the North of England), and their great rivals, the Percy Earls of Northumberland, threw in their lot with the corrupt Lancastrian regime, the possibility of civil war soon became a subject of conversation in London, especially since Henry VI's formidable Queen, Margaret of Anjou, was now beginning to emerge as a political force as well.

Perhaps war might still have been avoided had Henry VI remained in the schizophrenic stupor that enveloped him in August 1453: certainly, while the King was out of action in 1454, York and his friends made a better job of governing England than had Somerset and his cronies. Unfortunately, in December 1454,

Henry recovered at least most of his senses; Somerset and the old court clique soon re-established themselves in power; and the Queen, whose single-minded determination to ensure a safe succession for her son Prince Edward of Lancaster made her a natural enemy of York, now had every intention of making the house of Lancaster unassailable. York and his Neville allies retired to their estates and proceeded to arm. The result was the first battle of St. Albans, a major brawl between rival lords and their retinues, fought in the streets of St. Albans in May 1455. On one side were Edmund Beaufort Duke of Somerset, Henry Percy Earl of Northumberland and Thomas Lord Clifford, committed upholders of the Lancastrian regime; on the other was Richard Duke of York, in alliance with Richard Neville Earl of Salisbury and his son Richard Neville Earl of Warwick (Warwick the Kingmaker). During the action Somerset, Northumberland and Clifford were all killed; Henry VI fell into the hands of York and his Neville allies; and a precarious Yorkist administration was set up. What gave the battle its long-term significance, however, was the fate of the leading Lancastrian magnates: indeed, it may have set in motion a series of blood feuds that were to re-surface with a vengeance at Wakefield in December 1460. Certainly, Edmund Beaufort Duke of Somerset was killed and his son Henry Beaufort might well have thirsted for revenge; so too was Henry Percy second Earl of Northumberland (perhaps deliberately singled out for slaughter by the Nevilles), and this gave added venom to the Percy/Neville feud in years to come; and young John Lord Clifford's behaviour at Wakefield can best be explained by deep resentment at his father's fate during the fighting at St. Albans.

Within less than a year the Queen and the court clique reasserted themselves; York and the Nevilles were once more excluded from the inner circle of politics; and, in all probability, only the reluctance of most lords to become involved prevented a rapid resumption of military conflict. Eventually, in September 1459, came an indecisive engagement at Blore Heath, followed by the rout of the Yorkists at Ludford Bridge outside Ludlow in October of the same year. Richard of York fled to Ireland, while the Nevilles and Edward Earl of March (York's eldest son and the future Edward IV) escaped to Calais; at the Coventry Parliament in November 1459 the leading Yorkists were pronounced traitors and their lives and property declared forfeit; only force could now serve to restore their position. The early months of 1460 saw a tremendous Yorkist propaganda campaign mounted from Calais, as a prelude to the landing of the Nevilles and Edward Earl of March in Kent in June 1460. Meeting no serious opposition - indeed, gathering a good deal of support as they went - they gained entrance to London at the beginning of July. A few days later they defeated the Lancastrians at the battle of Northampton, captured Henry VI, and established a government in his name. In September 1460 Richard of York, at last, returned from Ireland and, to the dismay of practically everybody, claimed the throne for himself during a dramatic scene in Parliament. It was a great political miscalculation: the best York could get, and that reluctantly,

was the promise of the succession after Henry VI's death. Margaret of Anjou, for one, was certainly not prepared to accept the so-called Act of Accord, since it involved cutting out her beloved son Prince Edward of Lancaster; a powerful Lancastrian army was assembled in the North of England; and, within a few weeks, Richard of York lay dead on the battlefield at Wakefield.

Fifteenth-century battles tend to be poorly reported: only rarely do chroniclers give much detail of the fighting, and the battle of Wakefield is no exception. Indeed, since it was a great Yorkist defeat and in the North of England, the sources are even worse than usual: most chroniclers were firmly pro-Yorkist and, inevitably, inclined to pass over the battle of Wakefield as quickly as possible; moreover, since they were, by and large, writing in southern England, they may not have been very well-informed even in what they do say. No contemporary or near-contemporary Lancastrian account of the battle survives; early Tudor sources are both late and liable to prejudices of their own; and there are no authentic northern reports of the action.<sup>2</sup>

Of the sources we do have, perhaps the most nearly contemporary is an anonymous *English Chronicle* edited by J. S. Davies for the Camden Society in 1856.<sup>3</sup> Ending with Edward IV's securing of the throne in 1461, and probably written not very long after, it is one of the most valuable sources we have for the period 1458 to 1461 in general and the battle of Wakefield in particular. Yet its author took a firmly pro-Yorkist line; he was highly critical of Queen Margaret of Anjou and her affinity; and he placed much stress on what he clearly regarded as the abject betrayal of Richard of York by the Earl of Westmorland's brother John Neville. *John Benet's Chronicle*, a recently discovered source, also has the advantage of being contemporary: it ends, abruptly, in 1462, and internal evidence suggests it must have been written before 1471. John Benet, a Bedfordshire cleric, either wrote it himself or copied it into a common-place book he was compiling. It is composed in Latin; its political stance is consistently pro-Yorkist; and, unfortunately, its account of Wakefield is brief to say the least.<sup>4</sup> Rather more substantial are the *Annales Rerum Anglicarum*. Again, this is a Latin compilation; of rather uncertain date (but, since it ends in 1468, it may have been put together fairly soon after); and anonymous. Historians used to think it was written by the fifteenth-century antiquary and topographer William Worcester but, in fact, he was not the author. Although neither impressive nor, always, accurate, the *Annales* are certainly interesting on Wakefield and, indeed, contain a certain amount of information not found in any other contemporary or near-contemporary source.<sup>5</sup>

The abbey of St. Albans had a long tradition of historical writing which, exceptionally, was still being maintained in the early part of Edward IV's reign. The so-called *Register of Abbot Whethamstede* may, indeed, have been written by John Whethamstede (Abbot of St. Albans, for a second time, from 1452 until his

death in 1465) or, more probably, compiled by a fellow monk with his active encouragement. It ends in 1461 and, whenever finally put together in the form it has come down to us, it certainly contains material that is strictly contemporary for the years 1458 to 1461. Also, writing at St. Albans, its author was nicely placed for obtaining news, not least from the frequent (and sometimes important) visitors to the abbey. And, although consistently pro-Yorkist in sympathy, the *Register's* compiler was by no means uncritical of Richard of York: for instance, while stressing the treachery of the Lancastrians at Wakefield, he obviously did *not* approve of York's earlier behaviour in claiming the throne. The *Register* is certainly an interesting source for the battle of Wakefield and, even more, its immediate consequences: namely, the southern progress of the victorious and disorderly Lancastrian army, the sufferings of St. Albans at its hands, and the second battle fought there in February 1461.<sup>6</sup>

Another abbey where the medieval tradition of historical writing was still in evidence in the later fifteenth century was Crowland in Lincolnshire. Two continuations of a spurious older chronicle - sometimes known as *Ingulph's Chronicle* - contain a certain amount of information about Wakefield and its consequences. The so-called first continuation, probably written by a prior of Crowland abbey, was put together shortly after January 1470 (when the narrative ends). Mostly, it is dominated by the history of the abbey itself, but it does contain interestingly critical comments on York's decision to engage the Lancastrians at Wakefield, as well as a notably vivid account of the behaviour of Margaret of Anjou's army during its subsequent march south. This was obviously a matter of great concern to the author, hardly surprisingly since the Queen's marauding force passed within a few miles of the abbey. As so often, the tone is pro-Yorkist, but even more striking is the continuator's almost fanatical fear of northerners.<sup>7</sup> The second continuation overlaps the first and is, in fact, the most important narrative source we have for the reign of Edward IV (1461-1483): its anonymous author, probably writing in April 1486, certainly achieves a degree of objectivity entirely absent from the earlier chronicle. Unfortunately, he has very little to say about the battle of Wakefield and its aftermath.<sup>8</sup>

The most important development in historical writing in fifteenth-century England was the emergence of a strong tradition of compiling chronicles in London. A whole series of interlocking and overlapping London chronicles survive, often drawing heavily on each other, even to the extent of reproducing errors: for instance, *Vitellius AXVI*, *Fabian's Chronicle* and the *Great Chronicle of London* all tell us that Richard of York left London for the North of England on 2 December 1460 (whereas he probably did not set off until several days later). Not surprisingly, these narratives tend to be rather parochial to London and, in particular, they are often hazy about events occurring far from the capital. However, given the lack of other sources and in view of the fact that either they or earlier chronicles from

which they derived information seem to be reasonably contemporary, we can draw on their contents - albeit, with a good deal of caution. Most important - and, probably, most nearly contemporary - is an anonymous continuation of what James Gairdner christened *Gregory's Chronicle*. Covering the period 1452 to 1469 (when it suddenly breaks off), it was perhaps written by a London clergyman not too many years later. It is certainly a valuable source for the last years of Henry VI's reign and, indeed, the best of the London chronicles for the lead-up to the battle of Wakefield.<sup>9</sup> The *Short English Chronicle*, ending in 1465, also seems a contemporary or very near-contemporary source for the early stages of the Wars of the Roses: unfortunately, it has little to offer on the battle of Wakefield.<sup>10</sup> More problematic are three London chronicles put together during the reign of the first Tudor King Henry VII (1485-1509): *Vitellius AXVI*, Robert Fabian's *New Chronicles of England and of France* and the *Great Chronicle of London*. Earliest of the three is *Vitellius AXVI*, probably written during the 1490s but almost certainly drawing on an earlier (now lost) chronicle.<sup>11</sup> *Fabian's Chronicle*, probably written by a prominent London draper Robert Fabian not later than 1504, adds a few details on Wakefield.<sup>12</sup> The *Great Chronicle of London*, probably also the work of Fabian (who died in 1513), is frequently the most detailed of the three: regrettably, its author provides nothing new on Wakefield.<sup>13</sup>

Another writer at work in the reign of Henry VII was the Italian cleric and Renaissance humanist Polydore Vergil. Scrupulous in the handling of written source material, and in a good position to interview men at the king's court who could remember back a long way, Vergil was, however, writing half a century or more after the battle of Wakefield was fought: it is difficult to accept his *English History* as in any sense a primary source, especially since he has Queen Margaret of Anjou at Wakefield when, in fact, she was in Scotland at the time.<sup>14</sup>

Even more dubious is *Edward Hall's Chronicle*. Writing in the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547), Hall died in 1547 and his *Union of the Two Noble Families of Lancaster and York* was published posthumously in 1548.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, Hall had no first-hand knowledge of the last years of Henry VI's reign and, indeed, there can have been no one still alive when he was at work who could remember Wakefield; he drew heavily on Polydore Vergil (not least in accepting Margaret of Anjou's presence at the battle); and there are other disturbing errors as well: for instance, in a famous passage describing the fate of Richard of York's second son Edmund Earl of Rutland at the hands of 'Butcher' Clifford, he represents him as a boy of twelve (when, in reality, he was seventeen); also he tells us that among the slain at Wakefield were Sir Hugh and Sir John Mortimer - but, in fact, Sir Hugh died in May 1460 (over seven months before the battle was fought) and the only possible John Mortimer was just three years old in December 1460 (a bit young for combat even in the fifteenth century!).<sup>16</sup> On the positive side, Hall *may* have had access to more nearly contemporary sources of a private kind. By his own account,

his ancestor Sir David Hall lost his life at Wakefield and he may have been able to draw on family material relating to the matter (as well as oral tradition).<sup>17</sup> Even so, there is no way Edward Hall himself can be regarded as either a primary or a reliable source: the main interest of his chronicle, in fact, lies in its presentation of stories that (either directly or via Raphael Holinshed) found their way into William Shakespeare's *Henry VI*.

Apart from these sources, there really is not a great deal. There are one or two other London chronicles but they add little to our store of knowledge.<sup>18</sup> A relevant letter survives in the Paston collection and we have a couple of reports put together by Milanese envoys.<sup>19</sup> Edward IV's first Parliament in November 1461 passed an act of attainder condemning thirty-six named Lancastrians for their culpability in Richard of York's 'murder' at Wakefield.<sup>20</sup> And, finally, there is a highly dubious account of what is supposed to have happened at Wakefield in the pages of the Burgundian chronicler Jean de Waurin.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, by the end of November 1460, the North of England in general, and the county of Yorkshire in particular, was in a condition of political and social chaos, and this is crucial to understanding not only events at Wakefield on 30 December but also the biggest military confrontation of the entire Wars of the Roses: the battle of Towton, fought, a few miles from the city of York, on 29 March 1461. For much of the 1450s, in fact, Yorkshire had been thrown into turmoil by a great feud between the two most powerful aristocratic families in northern England: the Nevilles of Middleham and the Percy Earls of Northumberland.<sup>22</sup> The Nevilles, headed by Richard Earl of Salisbury, had embarked in 1453 (if not before) on a deliberate policy of extending their already enormous power in the county. The Percys, in consequence, found their zones of influence (particularly in the East Riding) under ever-mounting pressure and were determined to resist. It is certainly no coincidence that, at the first battle of St. Albans in May 1455, Henry Percy second Earl of Northumberland fought for the house of Lancaster, while Richard Neville Earl of Salisbury and his son Richard Neville Earl of Warwick were prominent in support of Richard of York. The battle settled nothing. Indeed, Northumberland's death there only served to enhance Percy determination to resist Neville aggrandisement and, following the Yorkist humiliation at Ludford in October 1459, the Percys certainly did their best to seize the initiative in the North of England. Once the Yorkists had won the battle of Northampton in July 1460, captured Henry VI and established an administration in his name, the Nevilles proved no less determined to restore their old dominance in the North. The result was anarchy! When, furious at the Act of Accord cutting out her son from the succession, Queen Margaret of Anjou began a vigorous recruitment campaign, the situation became even more desperate and dangerous. The Queen, in fact, had every intention of fighting back with every weapon in her considerable armoury. She certainly

enjoyed a great deal of northern support, and, it is clear, substantial areas of the realm simply ignored Richard of York's government in London. In Yorkshire, moreover, York's estates, and those of the Nevilles, became a prime target for devastation, as the *Annales Rerum Anglicarum* record:

The Earl of Northumberland, the Lords Clifford, Dacre and Neville, held a council at York [in November 1460], and destroyed the tenants of the Duke of York and the Earl of Salisbury.<sup>23</sup>

The Lancastrian leadership, meanwhile, demonstrated real military panache in establishing a powerful force in the vicinity of Hull. As the anonymous continuator of *Gregory's Chronicle* reported:

[The Queen] sent unto the Duke of Somerset, at that time being in Dorsetshire at the castle of Corfe, and for the Earl of Devonshire, and for Alexander Hody, and prayed them to come to her as hastily as they might, with their tenants as strong in their harness as men of war, for the Lord Roos, the Lord Clifford, the Baron of Greystoke, the Lord Neville and the Lord Latimer [all northern lords] were waiting upon the Duke of Exeter to meet with her at Hull. And this matter was not tarried but full privily wrought; and she sent letters unto all her chief officers that they would do the same, and that they should warn all the servants that loved her, or purposed to keep their office, to wait upon her at Hull ...

According to the same source, in fact, an army of some 15,000 men was soon in place in Yorkshire and ready for action.<sup>24</sup> Northern lords and their retinues were certainly prominent, and not just those listed by *Gregory's Chronicle*, for Henry Percy third Earl of Northumberland, in particular, was fully determined to resist Richard of York, his Neville allies and the Act of Accord. And even if, as was reported, strong arm tactics had been employed to boost recruitment, it was a formidable force indeed.<sup>25</sup>

News of this great Lancastrian gathering in the North eventually reached London and, not surprisingly given the speed with which it had been assembled, occasioned a good deal of astonishment (if not disbelief) there. In fact, Richard of York may never have fully realised just what awaited him in Yorkshire, and this may go some way towards explaining (it not excusing) his rash behaviour at Wakefield.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, however, this was not a situation that could be ignored and it became even more threatening when, in December 1460, Margaret of Anjou journeyed to Scotland in search of yet more support.<sup>27</sup> Richard of York, at the very least, needed to recover control of his lands in the West Riding (centred on Wakefield), garrison castles such as Pontefract with reliable men and, if at all possible, establish a loyal regime in the city of York.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, on 9 December 1460, backed by a commission of array (essential for recruiting purposes) but probably no more than a few hundred men, York, his second son Edmund Earl of Rutland



and Richard Neville Earl of Salisbury left London for the North; his eldest son Edward Earl of March was despatched to Wales, to tackle Lancastrian support there, at about the same time; while Richard Neville Earl of Warwick remained in London to maintain Yorkist rule in the capital and south east (and, of course, hang on to Henry VI). As *Whethamstede's Register* puts it, Richard of York:

... set out towards the North, and there set out with him the illustrious and notable Lord Richard Neville Earl of Salisbury. Journeying together they gathered a great force of people as they went, by authority of a royal commission, as a protection for their own persons and to put down and repress the multitude of their adversaries. They journeyed with their forces separately, in order to find places to stay more easily on their journey, [until] they came at last to the town of the said Lord Duke of York [at] Wakefield.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, York did *not* have an easy journey northwards: for one thing, appalling weather meant he had to contend with widespread flooding, waterlogged roads and broken bridges; for another, at Worksop in Nottinghamshire, a contingent of the Duke of Somerset's men surprised and inflicted casualties on one of his forward patrols. Nor, seemingly, did he recruit as well as he might have hoped. Nevertheless, on 21 December 1460 he reached Wakefield and the relative security of his own castle of Sandal<sup>30</sup> (see Figure 1). By then York, his second son Edmund Earl of Rutland (described by *Gregory's Chronicle* as 'one of the best disposed lords in this land'), Richard Neville Earl of Salisbury and his son Thomas Neville had certainly been joined by, among others, a number of loyal northern knights such as Sir Thomas Harrington, Sir James Pickering and Sir Thomas Parre.<sup>31</sup> Also, he had the comfort of knowing that his long-time retainer Edmund Fitzwilliam was holding Conisbrough castle.<sup>32</sup> Even so, his forces remained insubstantial to say the least.<sup>30</sup>

The Lancastrians, meanwhile, had not only garrisoned nearby Pontefract castle but also settled their very considerable army in its vicinity. Moreover, since they controlled most of the countryside round about, York found himself both boxed in and seriously lacking supplies (since his officials at Wakefield had not been able to stockpile the necessities of life in advance of his arrival).<sup>34</sup> Even so, as long as he remained within the confines of Sandal, he was probably safe enough: indeed, with Christmas fast approaching, there is some indication that the rival commanders negotiated an armistice for the duration of the festive season.<sup>35</sup> No doubt Christmas celebrations within the castle walls, however muted they may have been, further depleted Yorkist supplies. Certainly, by the time Christmas was over, Richard of York and his friends felt they had little alternative but to sanction foraging operations in order to replenish them.<sup>36</sup> These, in turn, are generally regarded as crucial in explaining not only the commencement of the battle of Wakefield on 30 December 1460 but also its nature and outcome.

Now, however, we enter notably controversial territory. According to the Burgundian chronicler Jean de Waurin, the Yorkists were, in fact, tricked into leav-

ing the security of Sandal castle and the villain of the piece was the veteran campaigner Andrew Trollope (who had already played a crucial role in the Yorkist rout at Ludford in October 1459, when he and his Calais contingent defected to the Lancastrians during the course of the action). Trollope, Waurin tells us, devised a ruse whereby, on 29 December 1460, 400 of the Duke of Somerset's men, disguised in Warwick the Kingmaker's livery of the ragged staff, insinuated themselves into the Duke of York's garrison (on the pretext of being reinforcements from Lancashire). Next morning, Trollope himself materialised, leading yet more camouflaged troops, and lured the Duke out into the open. Then, as soon as York's force emerged, depleted as it was by the absence of foraging parties, Somerset's men (who were in readiness near at hand) launched a surprise attack and the Yorkists were doomed.<sup>37</sup> It is certainly a nice story but not, in the final analysis, a convincing one: no other source has it and Waurin, notoriously unreliable at the best of times, had probably picked up Yorkist propaganda (circulating on the Continent) designed to explain away a disastrous defeat; also, it seems rather unlikely that Richard Neville Earl of Salisbury, at least, could have been so deceived by men sporting his son's livery. More plausible, perhaps, is an alternative story of treachery related by the *English Chronicle*:

... the Lord Neville, brother to the Earl of Westmorland, under a false colour went to the Duke of York, desiring a commission of him for to raise a people for to chastise the rebels of the country.

Once he had obtained his commission (York 'deeming that he had been true and on his part'), the chronicler continues, 'he raised to the number of 8000 men', and then defected with them to the Earl of Northumberland, Lord Clifford and the Duke of Somerset, who were 'the adversaries and enemies of Duke Richard'. Certainly, such a tale of deception fits in well with this pro-Yorkist writer's persistent emphasis on 'the malice of the northern men' who 'loved not' the Duke of York and the Earl of Salisbury, only awaiting a 'convenient time' to fulfil their 'cruel intent'.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps, at the very least, the Lancastrians deliberately broke the terms of the Christmas truce, and were given the opportunity to do so by the unwise behaviour of the Yorkist lords themselves. The *Register of Abbot Whethamstede of St. Albans*, at any rate, conveys just such an impression: its author believed the northerners attacked in bad faith, before the day agreed for battle, when they realised the southerners were out foraging without having taken proper precautions in the event of an attack.<sup>39</sup> A Milanese agent, probably reporting rumours circulating in London, recorded on 9 January 1461 that Yorkist lack of discipline (in allowing a large part of their force to go pillaging and searching for food) provided the Lancastrians with just the opportunity they were looking for.<sup>40</sup> And such an interpretation is implicit in the remark of the *Annales Rerum Anglicarum* that:

... while the Duke of York's people were wandering about the district in search of

victuals, a horrible battle was fought ...<sup>41</sup>

It is certainly difficult to understand why Richard of York allowed himself to be manoeuvred into fighting a battle at all: he would surely have been better advised, even if food was at a premium, to stick tight within the walls of Sandal castle and await the arrival of reinforcements. It is odd, too, that, with such veteran campaigners as Richard Neville Earl of Salisbury, Sir Thomas Harrington and Sir Thomas Parre in his team, he was not prevailed upon to hold back from what really does seem to have been an extraordinarily rash decision to engage a much larger army on grounds of its own choosing. Indeed, if we are to believe Edward Hall, his own ancestor Sir Davy Hall, York's 'old servant and chief counsellor', advised the Duke to:

... keep his castle, and to defend the same with his small number till his son the Earl of March was come with his power of march men and Welsh soldiers; yet he would not be counselled, but, in a great fury, said, 'A Davy, Davy, hast thou loved me so long, and now would have me dishonoured ... Their great number shall not appal my spirits but encourage them, for surely I think that I have there as many friends as enemies, which at joining will either flee or take my part. Therefore advance my banner in the name of God and St. George, for surely I will fight with them, though I should fight alone'. The Earl of Salisbury and other of his friends, seeing his courage, resolved themselves to his opinion, and ordered their men, and set them forth in warlike fashion, for their most advantage.<sup>42</sup>

What seems to have happened, in fact, was that York, throwing caution to the winds (or, at the very least, on the basis of inaccurate intelligence reports of enemy strength and disposition), chose to lead his men in a wild rush down the castle hill; the Lancastrian leaders, who had marshalled their forces nearby, allowed him to reach level ground between Sandal and Wakefield; and, as soon as he was thoroughly exposed, they closed in on him and battle commenced.<sup>43</sup>

No one can know for certain just what the size of the two armies was at Wakefield: chroniclers are notoriously unreliable on such matters and their estimates vary considerably. What does seem clear, despite a Milanese envoy's report that York and Salisbury would have been three times stronger had all their men been present, is that the Lancastrians had much the bigger army on the day.<sup>44</sup> According to *John Benet's Chronicle* there were about 20,000 Lancastrians and York's army numbered 12,000; *Gregory's Chronicle* put the Lancastrians (at Hull) at 15,000, while York had 'great people'; the *Annales Rerum Anglicarum* record a 'great army' of Lancastrians and 6000 Yorkists; and *Edward Hall's Chronicle*, for what it is worth, estimates the Lancastrian army at '18,000 men or, as some write, 22,000', while York had with him 'not fully 5000 persons'.<sup>45</sup> What is clear is that, while the Lancastrians fielded a respectable number of peers and their retinues, Richard of York had hardly any aristocratic support beyond Richard Neville Earl of Salisbury and his own seventeen year old son Edmund Earl of Rutland.<sup>46</sup>

Contemporary and near-contemporary sources tell us virtually nothing about the battle itself: 'a horrible battle', according to the *Annales*; 'a great journey', declares *Gregory's Chronicle*; 'a sharp fight', says Robert Fabian.<sup>47</sup> Polydore Vergil, no doubt reporting erroneous stories he picked up half a century later, places Margaret of Anjou (who was, in fact, in Scotland) at the centre of the action:

... when she understood that the enemy approached, forthwith she made head against them and gave them the charge. At the beginning the fight was mightily maintained mutually, while that a great part of them who were in the front of the battle being killed, the Duke of York's small number was environed by the multitude. Then the Queen, encouraging her men, vanquished the residue of her enemies in the moment of an hour.<sup>48</sup>

Even Edward Hall does not have a great deal to say about the fighting itself:

The Duke of Somerset, and other of the Queen's party, knowing perfectly that if the Duke got the victory, their days were numbered and their livings left bare, like men quickened and desperate, for the safeguard of their lives and defence of their goods, determined to abide the chance, and to espy their most advantage, and so appointed the Lord Clifford to lie in the one stall and the Earl of Wiltshire in the other, and they themselves kept the main battle. The Duke of York with his people descended down the hill in good order and array and was suffered to pass forward, toward the main battle; but when he was in the plain ground between his castle and the town of Wakefield, he was environed on every side, like a fish in a net, or a deer in a buckstall; so that he manfully fighting was within half an hour slain and dead, and his whole army discomfited.<sup>49</sup>

All we can say with a reasonable degree of certainty, however, is that the battle was fought later in the day than normal; it did not last very long; and it was a crushing Yorkist defeat.<sup>50</sup>

Just how many died in the action is impossible to establish, although, clearly, far more Yorkists perished than Lancastrians. According to *Gregory's Chronicle*, the Yorkists 'lost in that journey the number of 2500 men' while, 'in the Queen's party, were slain but 200 men'; *John Benet's Chronicle* put the death toll at 'about a thousand men'; the *Annales* suggest just over 2000, the *English Chronicle* about 2200, and *Whethamstede's Register*, much more conservatively, put Yorkist losses at 700.<sup>51</sup> Among Yorkists left dead on the field were William Lord Harrington (Salisbury's son-in-law), Thomas Neville (Salisbury's son), Edward Bouchier, Sir Henry Radford, Sir James Pickering, Sir Thomas Harrington (who was either killed during the battle or died of his wounds the following day) and, perhaps, Sir Thomas Parre.<sup>52</sup> If we are to believe *Whethamstede's Register*, Richard of York and Richard Neville Earl of Salisbury were taken alive during the battle and, there-

after, treated 'with great mockery', especially the Duke of York:

They stood him [York ] on a little anthill and placed on his head, as if a crown, a vile garland made of reeds, just as the Jews did to the Lord, and bent the knee to him, saying in jest, 'Hail King, without rule. Hail King, without ancestry, Hail leader and prince, with almost no subjects or possessions'. And having said this and various other shameful and dishonourable things to him, at last they cut off his head.<sup>53</sup>

In fact, Richard of York almost certainly met his death during the fighting.<sup>54</sup>

No doubt York's fate was particularly welcomed by Henry Beaufort Duke of Somerset, since his own father's death at the first battle of St. Albans had at last been avenged. The death of Edmund Earl of Rutland was an additional bonus. Although most chroniclers simply record his demise at Wakefield, the *Annales* tell us that:

...in the flight after the battle Lord Clifford killed the Lord Edmund, Earl of Rutland, son of the Duke of York, upon the bridge at Wakefield.<sup>55</sup>

Again, there may well have been a blood feud element in Rutland's killing. Certainly, this is how it came to be presented in the sixteenth century. Edward Hall, in particular, could hardly contain his emotions when relating how John 'Butcher' Clifford took a bloody revenge for his father's death at the first battle of St. Albans:

While this battle was in fighting, a priest called Sir Robert Aspell, chaplain and schoolmaster to the young Earl of Rutland, second son to the Duke of York, scarce of the age of twelve years, a fair gentleman and maiden-like person, perceiving that flight was more safeguard than tarrying, both for him and his master, secretly conveyed the Earl out of the field, by the Lord Clifford's band, towards the town; but ere he could enter into a house, he was by the said Lord Clifford espied, followed and taken, and by reason of his apparel, [he] demanded what he was. The young gentleman, dismayed, had not a word to speak, but kneeled on his knees imploring mercy, and befitting grace, both with holding up his hands and making dolorous countenance, for his speech was gone for fear. 'Save him', said the chaplain, 'for he is a prince's son and, peradventure, may do you good hereafter'. With that word the Lord Clifford marked him and said: 'By God's blood, thy father slew mine, and so will I do thee and all thy kin', and with that word struck the Earl to the heart with his dagger, and bade his chaplain bear [to] the Earl's mother and brother word what he had done and said. In this act the Lord Clifford was accounted a tyrant and no gentleman ...<sup>56</sup>

And William Shakespeare seized on such a splendid story with appropriate gusto in *Henry VI Part 3*.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps there are shades of the blood feud, as well, in the fate of Richard Neville Earl of Salisbury: at any rate Henry Percy third Earl of Northumberland had the satisfaction of seeing his father's death at St. Albans and his brother Tho-

mas Lord Egremont's at Northampton revenged (when both Salisbury and his younger son Thomas Neville bit the dust). Salisbury, in fact, escaped from the battlefield. During the following night, however, he was captured and taken to the Duke of Somerset at Pontefract. Somerset might well have been prepared to allow his prisoner to ransom himself, it seems, but the local population in Pontefract (where the Earl had been a highly unpopular royal steward) had other ideas. As the *English Chronicle* puts it:

The Earl of Salisbury was taken alive, and led by the said Duke of Somerset to the castle of Pomfret, and for a great sum of money that he should have paid had grant of his life. But the common people of the country, which loved him not, took him out of the castle by violence and smote off his head.<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps the Bastard of Exeter, an illegitimate brother of Henry Holland Duke of Exeter, had a hand in Salisbury's death as well; moreover, if we can rely on the *Annales*, an even more gruesome ritual followed:

...the same night [as the battle of Wakefield was fought] the Earl of Salisbury was taken by a servant of Andrew Trollope. And next day the Bastard of Exeter slew the said Earl of Salisbury at Pontefract where, by the counsel of the lords, they beheaded the dead bodies of the Duke of York, the Earls of Salisbury and Rutland, Thomas Neville, Edward Bouchier, Thomas Harrington, Thomas Parre, James Pickering and John Harrow, mercer, and set their heads upon divers parts of York.

And, the chronicler adds, 'in contempt they crowned the head of the Duke of York with paper'.<sup>59</sup> This was certainly not a story Edward Hall could resist and, as usual, he tells it with questionable flourishes of his own:

... this cruel Clifford, not content with this homicide [the Earl of Rutland], came to the place where the dead corpse of the Duke of York lay, and caused his head to be stricken off, and set on it a crown of paper, and so fixed it on a pole, and presented it to the Queen, not being far from the field, saying 'Madame, your war is done, here is your Queen's ransom', at which present was much joy and great rejoicing ... [The Queen] caused the Earl of Salisbury, with all the other prisoners, to be sent to Pomfret, and there to be beheaded, and sent all their heads, and the Duke of York's head, to be set upon poles over the gates of the city of York.<sup>60</sup>

Historians have generally been critical of Richard of York's decision to fight the battle of Wakefield at all, for reasons that were already being put forward by the first continuator of the *Crowland Chronicle* in the 1470s:

... Richard Duke of York incautiously engaged the northern army at Wakefield, which was fighting for the King, without waiting to bring up the whole of his own forces; upon which, a charge was made by the enemy on his men, and he was without mercy or respect relentlessly slain. There fell with him at

the same place many nobles and illustrious men, and countless numbers of the common people, who had followed him, met their deaths there, and all to no purpose.<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps York should never have risked journeying to Wakefield in the first place: had he halted his northward progress in the Midlands, concentrated on recruiting more men, and allowed the northern Lancastrian army to march south to him, the outcome might have been very different. Once he did arrive at Wakefield, he certainly seems to have shown extraordinary complacency. Even if there was deception afoot in his camp (and there might have been), he should have been more alert than he was to the possibility; his lack of awareness of the scale of Lancastrian preparations suggests, at the very least, defective provision for information-gathering; he placed altogether too much confidence in his opponents' intentions regarding the Christmas truce; and, most fatal of all, his lax discipline, his sanctioning of large-scale foraging raids into potentially hostile territory, and his foolhardy decision, on 30 December 1460, to abandon the security of Sandal's formidable walls, point to a lack of not only military sense but commonsense as well<sup>62</sup> (see Figure 2).

Fortunately for the Yorkists, Margaret of Anjou (who journeyed from Scotland to York early in January 1461) and her military advisers entirely failed to reap the benefit of the great Lancastrian success at Wakefield. Nor did a further convincing victory at the second battle of St. Albans on 17 February 1461 bring the rewards it might have done. Part of the problem, clearly, lay in the appalling behaviour of the Lancastrian army during its march south in the early weeks of 1461.<sup>63</sup> London, sympathetic to the Yorkists anyway, found the prospect of such a force within its walls terrifyingly unpalatable. The Queen, perhaps foolishly, rejected the option of storming the city and, instead, retreated back to the North. Meanwhile, Richard of York's eldest son and heir Edward Earl of March (who, even at the age of nineteen, was already showing signs of outshining his father both politically and militarily), defeated the Welsh Lancastrians at Mortimer's Cross, rendezvoused with Warwick the Kingmaker, entered the capital (amidst considerable rejoicing, it seems) and seized the throne for himself as Edward IV. Not that he tarried long in the south of England, for Margaret of Anjou's northern army remained undefeated. And this time, at the biggest and bloodiest battle of the Wars of the Roses, it was the Yorkists who won overwhelmingly: by the evening of 29 March 1461 the snow-laden battlefield at Towton had turned red with Lancastrian blood and the humiliation of Wakefield had been entirely avenged.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For recent discussions of Henry VI, the politics of the 1450s and the origins of the Wars of the Roses, see: R. L. Storey, *The End of the House of Lancaster* (London 1966); C. Ross, *The Wars of the Roses* (London 1976); B. P. Wolffe, *Henry VI* (London 1981); R. A. Griffiths, *The Reign of Henry VI* (London 1981); J. Gillingham, *The Wars of the Roses* (London 1981); A. Goodman, *The Wars of the Roses* (London 1981); P. A. Johnson, *Duke Richard of York 1411-1460* (Oxford 1988); A. J. Pollard, *The Wars of the Roses* (London 1988); M. K. Jones, Somerset, York and the Wars of the Roses, *English Historical Review*, vol. 14 (1989), pp.285-307.
2. The main narrative sources covering the battle are analysed in C. L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford 1913) and A. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England II: c.1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century* (London 1982).
3. J. S. Davies (ed.), *An English Chronicle of the Reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI*, Camden Society (London 1856), pp.106-7.
4. G. L. and M.A. Harriss (eds.), 'John Benet's Chronicle for the Years 1400 to 1462', *Camden Miscellany XXIV*, Camden Society (London 1972), p.228.
5. J. Stevenson (ed.), 'Annales Rerum Anglicarum', *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France*, vol.2 part 2, Rolls Series (London 1864), pp.774-5. There are translations in I. D. Thornley (ed.), *England under the Yorkists 1460-1485* (London 1920), pp.8-9, and A. R. Myers (ed.), *English Historical Documents*, vol.4, 1327-1485 (London 1969), pp.285-6.
6. H. T. Riley (ed.), *Registrum Abbatiae Johannis Whethamstede*, vol.1, Rolls Series (London 1872), pp.376-81 (York's claim to the throne and its reception), 381-3 (Wakefield), 388-96 (northern army and second battle of St. Albans). I am grateful to Dr. Pauline Stafford for providing me with a translation of the *Register's* account of the battle.
7. H. T. Riley (ed.), *Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland* (London 1854), pp.421-2.
8. N. Pronay and J. Cox (eds.), *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations 1459-1486* (London 1986), p.113.
9. J. Gairdner (ed.), 'Gregory's Chronicle', *Historical Collections of a Citizen of London*, Camden Society (London 1876), pp.209-10.
10. J. Gairdner (ed.), 'A Short English Chronicle', *Three Fifteenth Century Chronicles*, Camden Society (London 1880), p.76.
11. C. L. Kingsford (ed.), 'Chronicles of London III: Vitellius AXVI', *Chronicles of London* (Oxford 1905), p.172.
12. H. Ellis (ed.), *Robert Fabyan: The New Chronicles of England and of France* (London 1811), pp.637-8.
13. A. H. Thomas and I. D. Thornley (eds.), *The Great Chronicle of London* (London 1938), p.193.
14. H. Ellis (ed.), *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History*, Camden Society (London 1844), pp.108-9.
15. Edward Halle, *The Union of the Two Noble Families of Lancaster and York* (1550 edition, reprinted by the Scalar Press, Menston 1970), ff.98-9.
16. G. H. White (ed.), *The Complete Peerage*, vol.11 (London 1949), pp.252-3; C. L.



Scofield, *The Life and Reign of Edward the Fourth*, vol.1 (London 1923), p.121 n.2; *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1452-61, p.593.

17. *Hall's Chronicle*, ff.98-9, where we are told that Sir Davy Halle, Richard of York's 'old servant and chief counsellor', died in the battle. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature*, pp.262-3, accepted that Davy Halle, captain of Caen at the time of its fall in 1450 and afterwards in the service of Richard of York, did lose his life at Wakefield; also that Edward Hall may well have been indebted for information on Yorkist affairs generally, and for his 'excellent account of the battle of Wakefield' in particular, to material or tradition handed down in his own family. Scofield, *Edward IV*, vol.1, p.121, n.1, concurred in Sir Davy Halle's fate in the battle but remarked on the 'doubtful authenticity' of Edward Hall's details of the action. However, Johnson, *Duke Richard*, Appendix 3, found no evidence of David Hall as a servant or annuitant of York; he does not figure at all in *CPR* 1446-52 and 1452-61; and the earliest specific reference to his death at Wakefield seems to be in *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p.109.

18. See, for instance, R. Flenley (ed.), *Six Town Chronicles* (Oxford 1911), pp.151-2.

19. J. Gairdner (ed.), *The Paston Letters*, vol.3 (London 1904), pp.249-50; A. B. Hinds (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers Milan*, vol.1.1385-1618 (London 1913), pp.39, 42-3.

20. J. Strachey and others (eds.), *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, 6 vols. (London 1767-77), vol.5, p.477.

21. W. and E. Hardy (eds.), *Recueil des Croniques et Anchiennes Istories de la Grant Bretagne par Jehan de Waurin*, vol.5 (London 1891), pp.325-6.

22. Much the best discussion of northern politics 1450-1461 is to be found in A. J. Pollard, *North-Eastern England during the Wars of the Roses* (Oxford 1990), chs.10 and 11.

23. *Annales*, p.774. *Whethamstede's Register*, p.381, similarly tells how the people of the North 'at the instigation of the Lady Queen Margaret and of many lords who had taken her side', were proving actively hostile to Richard of York. There is record evidence, too, of Henry Percy third Earl of Northumberland, John Lord Clifford, Ralph Lord Dacre of Gilsland and Sir Thomas Neville (probably John Neville who, like his brother Ralph Neville second Earl of Westmorland, was a Lancastrian partisan) devastating the estates of both York and Salisbury in south Yorkshire: Johnson, *Duke Richard*, p.222. As early as 28 July, indeed, commissioners were appointed to arrest and commit to prison 'certain persons of Yorkshire who wander about the country spoiling, beating, maiming and slaying'; a further commission to arrest and commit to prison 'all oppressors, plunderers and slayers of the King's people, and their favourers, abettors and receivers in the county and city of York' followed on 26 August; and, on 14 October, yet another commission was set up, this time 'to arrest and commit to prison all persons guilty of unlawful gatherings, congregations, associations and combinations, and to expel the evildoers in the castles of Pontefract, Wressle and Penrith, and, if the castles hold out, to make proclamation that the occupants thereof withdraw under pain of forfeiture, and if they still retain the castles, to call together all lieges of Yorkshire and other counties adjacent to storm the same': *CPR* 1452-61, pp.607, 610, 651. The Yorkist regime seems to have been singularly ill-informed regarding its aristocratic support in the North, since the October commission included Henry Lord Fitzhugh, Ralph Lord Greystoke and Ralph Lord Dacre among its members, all of whom, when it came to the crunch, proved Lancastrian loyalists (although Fitzhugh and Greystoke may well have had misgivings),

24. *Gregory's Chronicle*, pp.209-10. According to the *Annales*, p.774, 'the Duke of Somerset and the Earl of Devon, with many knights and gentlemen of the west parts, fully armed, came through Bath, Cirencester, Evesham and Coventry to York'; the *English Chronicle*, p.106, remarks that Somerset and Devon had 800 men with them; while *Hall's Chronicle*, f.98, has it that Margaret of Anjou 'a manly woman more used to rule and not to be ruled ...counselled by the Dukes of Exeter and Somerset. . . assembled together a great army'. Perhaps, as Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, p.42, suggests, Hull was chosen because of the opportunities it provided for victualling an army by river and sea; also, of course, the East Riding was very much a Percy zone. Goodman is certainly right to emphasise just how striking an achievement it was to assemble so substantial a force, and so quickly, out of the normal campaigning season.

25. Northerners seem to have been particularly angry at the Act of Accord. The Queen's northern supporters, reported the second Crowland continuator, 'found this decree of parliament both detestable and accursed' and, accordingly, 'the people and the nobles of those parts rose up with the aim of changing it': *Crowland Chronicle*, p.113.

26. *Gregory's Chronicle*, p.210, remarks: 'All these people were gathered and conveyed so privily that they were whole in number of 15,000 ere any man would believe it; in so much if any man said, or told, or talked of such a gathering, he should be disgraced, and some were in great danger, for the common people said by those that told the truth, "Ye talk right ye would it were", and gave no credence of their saying. But the last the lords purposed to know the truth'. This certainly carries more conviction than the statement in *Hall's Chronicle*, f.98, that Richard of York in London had 'perfect knowledge of all these doings'.

27. The early Tudor writers Polydore Vergil and Edward Hall, who have Queen Margaret in Wakefield at the end of December, are in error since, in fact, she was in Scotland for ten or twelve days over the New Year: Wolffe, *Henry VI*, p.326.

28. Johnson, *Duke Richard*, *op.cit.*, p.220.

29. *Whethamstede's Register*, p.381. Chroniclers offer several dates for York's departure from London: *Vitellius AXVI*, p.172, *Fabian's Chronicle*, p.637, and the *Great Chronicle*, p.193, all give 2 December; *Benet's Chronicle*, p.228, has 5 December; and *Gregory's Chronicle*, p.210, probably the most reliable and certainly followed by the majority of historians, suggests 9 December. York seems to have been recruiting men in the southeast and home counties for some time before leaving London, but it is impossible to say how many had joined him. It is improbable that he already had the 'many thousands of soldiers' mentioned in the *Annales*, p.774, or the many knights and squires and 'great people with them' suggested by *Gregory's Chronicle*; p.210. The estimate in Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, p.42, that York had 'a few hundred men' and Salisbury 'at most a hundred' when they left London is probably nearer the truth. In their wake, we are told, followed 'one called Lovelace, a gentleman of Kent, with great ordnance of guns and other stuffs of war': *Six Town Chronicles*, p.152.

30. *Annales*, p.775. The author of the *English Chronicle*, pp.106-7, remarks that York, Rutland and Salisbury, 'a little before Christmas. with a few persons went in to the north (to) repress the malice of the northern men, the which loved not the said Duke of York nor the Earl of Salisbury, and were lodged at the castle of Sandal and at Wakefield'.

31. *Gregory's Chronicle*, p.210; *Annales*, p.775. Sir Thomas Harrington of Hornby, Lancashire, and Brierley near Barnsley in the West Riding of Yorkshire, was a long-standing retainer of Salisbury; he fought at Blore Heath in September 1459 and, subsequently, was

imprisoned in Chester castle and attainted by the Coventry Parliament; and, according to *Gregory's Chronicle*, he was already in York's entourage by the time he left London on 9 December 1460. Sir James Pickering, an East Riding knight, had proved his loyalty to Richard of York as early as 1453/4; perhaps at Blore Heath, he was certainly at Ludford (for which he was attainted); and he seems to have enjoyed York's full trust in the autumn of 1460. Sir Thomas Parre, of Kendal in Westmorland, had similar credentials; apparently, he was at both Blore Heath and Ludford, and he, too, was attainted for his pains in November 1459. See J. C. Wedgwood, *History of Parliament 1439-/509, Biographies* (London 1936), pp.426-7 (Harrington), 682-3 (Pickering), 662 (Parre); also *Benet's Chronicle*, p.224 (where Harrington is said to have been captured following *Ludford* and imprisoned in Chester castle), *Annales*, p.771 (for Pickering at Ludford), and *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, vol.5, pp.349-50 (for Coventry attainders).

32. Edmund Fitzwilliam of Wadworth, near Doncaster, was constable of Conisbrough castle and, indeed, following the battle of Northampton in July 1460, he had seized artillery from Sheffield and mounted it on the castle; Johnson, *Duke Richard*, pp.222-3, 231. York's own artillery included ordnance and canon from the Tower of London; Griffiths, *Henry VI*, p.870.

33. Individuals known to have been supporting Richard of York included his retainer Edward Bourchier, the veteran campaigner Sir Henry Radford, John Harrow, a London mercer who had been in the force which secured the surrender of the Lancastrian garrison in the Tower of London in July 1460, the Hull merchant Richard Hanson and, perhaps, the bailiff of Wakefield, William Burton; *Annales*, p.775; *Vitellius AXVI*, p.172; Johnson, *Duke Richard*, pp.222, 229; Wedgwood, *Biographies*, p.12 (Hanson), 429-30 (Harrow). Yet, although York *may* have enjoyed a considerable degree of popularity among the lower orders in his lordship of Wakefield and probably had enough men to sustain a defensive strategy, it is significant that only £4 6s 7d was spent on his household in Sandal in December 1460; Johnson, *Duke Richard*, p.222 n.154. Arguably, indeed, he might have done better to halt in Doncaster, or even Nottingham, accumulating further recruits and supplies, and tempting the northern Lancastrian army to venture into less friendly territory. Griffiths, *Henry VI*, p.870; Goodman, *Wars of Roses*, p.43.

34. According to the *Annales*, p.775, while York and his men 'kept the feast of Christmas' at Sandal 'the Duke of Somerset and the Earl of Northumberland with the opposite party lay at Pontefract'; *Whethamstede's Register*, p.381, remarks that, when the Yorkists heard the Lancastrians were coming in large numbers and had laid out their camp nearby, they 'chose for themselves a site next to the town', awaiting 'the day appointed between them respecting the time of battle'; and the *Short English Chronicle*, p.76, reports that, when York, Rutland and Salisbury 'with much other people rode northward to keep their Christmas', there 'lay in their way at Wakefield to stop them the Duke of Exeter, the Duke of Somerset, the Earl of Wiltshire, the Lord Roos, with other lords and much other people'. See also Scofield, *Edward IV*, vol.1, p.120; Johnson, *Duke Richard*, p.222; Gillingham, *Wars of Roses*, p.119.

35. *Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles*, 'Brief Notes', p.154, where we are told that Somerset negotiated a truce with York to last until after Epiphany (6 January).

36. *Annales*, p.775; *Whethamstede's Register*, p.382.

37. Waurin (see n.21) vol.5, pp.325-6; Goodman, *Wars of Roses*, p.42; Gillingham, *Wars of Roses*, pp.120, 122. 38. *English Chronicle*, pp.106-7. The figure of 8,000 men in John

Neville's company is clearly an exaggeration.

39. *Whethamstede's Register*, p.382.

40. *CSP Milan*, vol.1, pp.42-3.

41. *Annales*, p.775.

42. *Hall's Chronicle*, f.98. Stirring as this story is, it must obviously be treated with a great deal of caution, not least since it seems to derive in part from Polydore Vergil. Richard of York, Vergil tells us, 'consulted with his friends as touching the assailing of his enemies. Some there were who thought it not meet to join battle before his son Edward should come with new forces; but the Duke, trusting to his own knowledge in warfare, and the valiance of his soldiers, issued out of his camp against his enemies in good array'; *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p.108. Interestingly, a Milanese correspondent, writing soon after the battle was fought, believed the Yorkists lost at Wakefield because they made a 'rash advance': *CSP Milan*, vol.1, p.39.

43. Historians certainly need to beware of going beyond the evidence here, and not all have been sufficiently cautious. A. D. H. Leadman, for instance, declared in 1891: 'The Lancastrians were posted some eight or nine miles off in the vicinity of Pontefract. Provisions must have run short at Sandal, for a foraging party was sent out on Monday the 29th, in quest of fresh supplies, and whilst incautiously scouring the country, they ventured too near the enemy, and being sighted by some Lancastrians, an alarm was raised, and the Yorkists, being hotly chased, were forced to retire within the walls of Sandal. After this episode the main body of Lancastrians advanced upon the castle, and so very carefully did their leaders arrange their troops that the greater portion of them lay in ambush. The castle was therefore completely environed, whilst the duke remained in utter ignorance of his enemies' tactics, and thus unknowingly was led into a trap. Vexed at want of success on the part of his foragers, and hunger staring him in the face, York decided to give battle to the pursuers. This step was taken against the advice of Sir David Hall, who strongly urged him to await help from the Earl of March. But no! York would have his own way! So on Tuesday, the 30th December, 1460, the gates of Sandal castle were suddenly thrown wide open, and York, leading his men in good order, passed down the hill on to the level ground, where he at once charged the Lancastrians with terrific force, and a short, very sharp, and decisive battle took place.' (*Battles Fought in Yorkshire*, 'The Battle of Wakefield', pp.86-7).

44. *CSP Milan*, vol.1, pp.42-3.

45. *Benet's Chronicle*, p.228 (both figures are probably too high); *Gregory's Chronicle*, p.210; *Annales*, p.775; *Hall's Chronicle*, f.98 (even the lower Lancastrian figure seems high, while the Yorkist total may be an underestimate).

46. *Benet's Chronicle*, p.228, names the Duke of Somerset (Henry Beaufort), the Earl of Devon (Thomas Courtenay), the Earl of Northumberland (Henry Percy), Lord Roos (Thomas Lord Roos), Lord Clifford (John Lord Clifford), Lord Neville (presumably John Neville, brother of the Earl of Westmorland), Lord Fitzhugh (Henry Lord Fitzhugh), Lord de la Warr (Richard West Lord de la Warr) and Baron Greystoke (Ralph Lord Greystoke) as fighting for Lancaster, while Yorkist casualties resulting from the battle included the Earl of Salisbury, the Earl of Rutland, Lord Thomas Neville (Salisbury's son) and Lord Thomas Harrington (presumably Sir Thomas Harrington of Hornby); *Gregory's Chronicle*, p.210, has the Duke of Exeter (Henry Holland), the Duke of Somerset, the Earl of Northumberland, Lord Roos, Lord Neville and Lord Clifford in 'the Queen's party', while the Earl of Salisbury, the Earl of Rutland, Lord Harrington (presumably eighteen year old William Bonville

Lord Harrington), Sir Thomas Neville and Sir Thomas Harrington are identified as fighting for York; the *Short English Chronicle*, p.76, names the Duke of Exeter, the Duke of Somerset, the Earl of Wiltshire (James Butler) and Lord Roos as leading the Lancastrian force which 'fell upon' the Yorkists 'and slew' the Duke of York, the Earl of Rutland and the Earl of Salisbury; and, among Lancastrians later attainted for their part in the battle of Wakefield, were Henry Beaufort Duke of Somerset, Thomas Courtenay late Earl of Devon, Henry Percy late Earl of Northumberland, Thomas Lord Roos, John late Lord Neville, Sir Alexander Hody and Andrew Trollope: *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, vol.5, p.477.

47. *Annales*, p.775; *Gregory's Chronicle*, p.210; *Fabian's Chronicle*, p.638.

48. *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p.108.

49. *Hall's Chronicle*, f.99.

50. Leadman (see n.43), p.87, once more stretches the very limited evidence beyond credibility: 'The Yorkists fought well and hard, when suddenly the ambuscades which lay behind the castle on both sides, issued simultaneously from the woods that had hidden them - the light horse led by Lord Rosse, and the light-armed foot under the Earl of Wiltshire. Both fell to work with deadly effect on the flanks of the Yorkists, who, after severe and gallant fighting, found they were hemmed in "like unto fish in a net", and being overpowered, surrendered. The duke defended himself most valiantly, yet within half an hour of leaving his castle he was slain. Wakefield Green was covered with wounded and dying men and mangled corpses, and the victory remained with the followers of the Red Rose'.

51. *Gregory's Chronicle*, p.210; *Benet's Chronicle*, p.228; *Annales*, p.775; *English Chronicle*, pp.106-7; *Whethamstede's Register*, p.387.

52. *English Chronicle*, pp.106-7 (Lord Harrington 'a young man', Thomas Harrington knight, Sir Thomas Neville 'son to the Earl of Salisbury', Sir Harry Radford knight); *Annales*, p.775 (Thomas Neville 'son of the Earl of Salisbury', Thomas Harrington, Thomas Parre, Edward Bouchier, James Pickering, Henry Radford); *Gregory's Chronicle*, p.210 (Lord Harrington, Sir Thomas Neville, Sir Thomas Harrington).

53. *Whethamstede's Register*, p.382.

54. *English Chronicle*, pp.106-7; *Benet's Chronicle*, p.228; *Annales*, p.775; *Short English Chronicle*, p.76; *Vitellius AXVI*, p.172.

55. *English Chronicle*, pp.106-7; *Benet's Chronicle*, p.228; *Short English Chronicle*, p.76; *Vitellius AXVI*, p.172; *Annales*, p.775.

56. *Hall's Chronicle*, f.99. The details of this story cannot be verified, although it is perhaps significant that Hall is wrong about Rutland's age (he was 17 not 12) and C. L. Scofield, at least, could find no reference elsewhere to Robert Aspall: Scofield, *Edward IV*, vol.1, p.122. The early Tudor antiquary John Leland, who visited Wakefield during his travels, recorded the 'common saying' in the town that 'the Earl would have taken a poor woman's house for succour, but she shut the door, and straight the Earl was killed': L. Toulmin Smith (ed.), *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about 1535-1543* (London 1907), vol.1, p.42.

57. W. Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 3*, Act I Scene 3.

58. *English Chronicle*, pp.106-7.

59. *Annales*, p.775. Other chroniclers tell a similar story. *Whethamstede's Register*, p.382, remarks: 'The Lord Salisbury they took with them to the castle of Pontefract and there, at the impious, shameless and savage instigation of certain perverse men, they beheaded him'. *Vitellius AXVI*, p.172, reports that 'the Earl of Salisbury was taken alive; and John Harrow, a

captain of London, Hanson of Hull; which were after brought to Pomfret, and there beheaded, and their heads set upon York gates'. *Fabian's Chronicle*, p.63S, elaborates a little: '...the Earl of Salisbury was there taken alive with divers other; When the lords upon the Queen's party had got them victory, anon they sent their prisoners to Pontefract, the which were after there beheaded, that is to mean, the Earl of Salisbury, a man of London named John Harrow, and another captain named Hanson, whose heads were sent unto York, and there set upon the gates'. *Polydore Vergil's English History*, p.109, remarks that 'their heads, put upon stakes, were carried to York for a spectacle to the people, and a terror to the rest of the adversaries'. The Earl of Salisbury's widow certainly believed she knew who was responsible for her husband's death since, after Edward IV's accession, she made a formal appeal of murder against 9 obscure men as principals and listed 39 others as accessories (the majority of them retainers and tenants of the Earl of Northumberland): Storey, *The End of the House of Lancaster*, p.194.

60. *Hall's Chronicle*, f.99.

61. *Ingulph's Chronicle*, p.421.

62. Recent verdicts on the battle, all critical of Richard of York's behaviour in varying degrees, can be found in: C. Ross, *Edward IV* (London 1974), p.30, and *The Wars of the Roses*, pp.50-1; J. R. Lander, *Government and Community: England 1450-1509* (London 1980), p.212; Griffiths, *Henry VI*, p.870; Gillingham, *Wars of Roses*, p.120; Johnson, *Duke Richard*, pp.221-3; Pollard, *North-Eastern England*, pp.281-2. Most interesting, perhaps, is the verdict in Goodman, *Wars of Roses*, pp.42-3. The Wakefield campaign, he suggests, reveals a new style of military leadership among the Lancastrians: devious, inventive and quick to exploit opportunities. The complacency shown by York and Salisbury over Christmas may, in fact, have stemmed in part at least from their failure to grasp that they were dealing with opponents who, even at this major festival in the Christian year, were not prepared to keep faith with them. Nevertheless, Goodman concludes, in underestimating their opponents the Yorkist leaders *did* commit a cardinal military sin.

63. *Ingulph's Chronicle*, pp.421-3; *Whethamstede's Register*, pp.388-90; *Paston Letters*, vol.3, pp.249-50.

First published in *The Ricardian* Vol. 9, No. 117 June 1992 and republished as an off-print.

© Richard III Society

This document is not to be reproduced without the permission of the Society.

## **The Battle of Wakefield: the Topography**

**RICHARD KNOWLES**

CONTEMPORARY EVIDENCE FOR THE BATTLE OF WAKEFIELD in 1460 is, as Keith Dockray emphasises, slight and vague as to the sequence of events. Later antiquarian writers have embroidered these slim facts to create more vivid, and in some cases highly coloured, accounts,<sup>1</sup> none of which is wholly convincing. These writers often make unsupported assumptions and incorporate errors relating to the topography of the area of the battle. These errors inevitably lead us to make flawed interpretations of that December day in 1460.

The major misconception in this regard is the frequently quoted one that the ground between Sandal and Wakefield was open, unenclosed land, and that there were conveniently sited heavily wooded areas close by in which a body of armed men could be concealed.<sup>2</sup> In point of fact what little evidence exists rather points to the opposite of these two factors. The Enclosure map for the Township of Sandal dated 1800 shows a well established field system, much of which must have been laid out by the late fifteenth century<sup>3</sup> (see Figure 5). The narrow fields can clearly be seen between the castle and the river, covering what is thought to be the area of the fighting. Confirmation of the existence of these fields in the fifteenth century, probably hedged, possibly ditched, is confirmed by an unpublished deed of *c.1415* which refers to one by the name of 'Castlefield'.<sup>4</sup> This named field is shown on the 1800 Enclosure map. Further evidence comes from a mid-eighteenth century manuscript plan of a small part of this same area which certainly indicates substantial hedges.<sup>5</sup> All of this suggests that the majority of the area in question was under cultivation and the only nearby wooded area would have been Sandal Park, some forty acres surrounding the castle and this substantially paled. An army would not have been able to march with any ease through a paled wood.

Sandal Castle is now fully documented following the excavation programme of 1964-1973<sup>6</sup> (see Figure 6). It is located on the crest of a ridge on the south bank of the River Calder. It overlooks the town of Wakefield, which developed on the high ground of the north bank about two miles distant. It has a commanding view for a number of miles in each direction, which makes the apparent surprise element of the battle more difficult to explain satisfactorily. The excavations confirmed the site of the main gate of the castle as facing north towards the town (see Figure 3). Clements Markham,<sup>7</sup> writing in 1886, wrongly suggests that the main gate faced south and, as a result, concluded that the Yorkist force must have marched around the castle to meet the Lancastrians (see Figure 4). He should have known better, as a drawing of the castle prepared in 1562 for a Duchy of Lan-

caster survey had been published first in 1753 and many times after this<sup>8</sup> (see Figure I). The site can be orientated from this drawing. As already mentioned, close by the castle was the Park, and as a rent roll of 1545-6 relates:

the parke adionyng conteyneth by estimation xl acres well paled wherein are xxx fallowe deere or therabouts.<sup>9</sup>

This would have presented a formidable obstacle around the castle, although it was obviously not large enough to have supplied sufficient meat for the garrison during the busy Christmas of 1460. The foraging parties referred to in the near contemporary accounts may have been into the town of Wakefield, or more likely to one of the parks on the north bank of the Calder, either the 'olde parke' or the 'newe parke', both of which are recorded in a survey of 1564.<sup>10</sup> The new park in particular is said to have been 'well replenished with deare to the numbers of three hundreth'. These parks complete with pales are clearly shown on the John Speed map of the West Riding dated 1610.<sup>11</sup>

It is not surprising that Richard Duke of York chose Sandal in which to spend Christmas of 1460. He was, after all, lord of the manor of Wakefield, an extensive and well documented landholding, stretching west up the Calder valley with Sandal Castle as its administrative headquarters at its eastern end, and Sandal Township being itself part of the manor.<sup>12</sup> L. A. S. Butler makes a convincing case for the significance of Sandal as an excellent, rather special stronghold, and the excavations provide good evidence indicating a cosmopolitan lifestyle within its walls.<sup>13</sup>

The Lancastrian force was, as we know, based in Pontefract, about nine miles to the east of Sandal. They would have approached from the east on the higher ground through the village of Crofton and drawn near to the village of Walton, thus being reasonably hidden from view from the castle by the continuation of the ridge on which it stands. The medieval road system was of course very different from that we know today. The main route south from Wakefield passed over the medieval bridge with its chapel. It was virtually a third its present width, the sequences of its widenings being visible in the style of its arches. The bridge is aligned to the present A61, Barnsley Road, the current A638 Doncaster Road being an eighteenth century turnpike road as indicated on the 1800 Enclosure map, where it can be seen to cut across the earlier field system. The medieval route to Sandal rose up a slight incline before falling and following what is now Manygates Lane, then following the low lying land between the castle and the river, and continuing south. The route can be followed today by a footpath and hedgerow. The present A61 past the church is again an eighteenth century turnpike road.

What the weather was like on 30 December 1460 the contemporary accounts fail to tell us. Perhaps the very lack of information indicates that it was not particularly inclement. At this distance we cannot tell. We do, however, have evi-



dence that the Duke of York's journey to Sandal was difficult, with waterlogged roads and broken bridges, and it might be that the low ground was heavy and wet and the river high. All the more reason for the Lancastrian force keeping to a route on the higher ground.

Many writers have speculated on the sequence of events leading up to the actual fight and death of the Duke of York. The simple truth is that we just do not know what happened, and there is insufficient evidence to form any firm conclusion. The weather may have been fine, wet, bright, or it might have been misty. The latter eventuality would help explain the stories of an element of surprise, but on the other hand it would have made the essential timing of the Lancastrian attack more difficult. All of these elements we just have no firm evidence for and can be no more than speculative.

Most recent accounts of the battle have part of the Lancastrian force, some say that led by the Earl of Wiltshire, descending from the high ground to the south of the castle and charging right around it, in full view of the remaining garrison, between it and the river, across the low lying, possibly heavy, ground and taking the Yorkist force in the rear.<sup>14</sup> This appears to ignore the difficulties of the terrain and at the very least it would have involved a long exposed approach. It is not supported by any contemporary evidence and seems hardly tenable. A study of the topography makes possible a further tentative hypothesis. It would seem that the Lancastrians, having from the start of the campaign a plan to avenge the first battle of St. Albans, took advantage of local knowledge within their force regarding the terrain. Having followed the higher ground route towards Walton they then turned north and followed the contours of the land, hugging the eastern edge of the ridge, behind Sandal Church, partially at least, their numbers being hidden from view from the castle by the fall of the land. What happened next is not at all clear from contemporary and near-contemporary accounts. Perhaps a smaller element of the Lancastrians did move out across the flat land of Sandal Common, with its more open field system, and harass one of the foraging parties returning from the north bank of the river, a story much favoured by later writers. Certainly *something* enticed the Duke of York to leave the safety of the castle. The accounts do indicate he was then attacked by a larger body of men. They could have followed the same route across the flat land striking the right flank of the Duke's forces, turning it in a clockwise direction and forcing them back onto the narrower fields leading down to the river, with no possibility of return to the relative safety of the castle. This would be the killing field of the short lived battle, perhaps for once aptly described in Hall's Chronicle as 'environed on every side, like a fish in a net, or a deer in a buckstall'. This hypothesis at least has the Lancastrians on reasonably open, flat ground to marshal their forces and places the brunt of the attack clearly on the traditional site of the death of the Duke, marked now by a nineteenth-century monument which was placed on the site of a stone cross erected some time after the bat-

tle and destroyed in the Civil War in 1645. The site was remembered in folk memory as marked by three willow trees.<sup>15</sup>

It seems that the nature of the fighting and the topography would support the more conservative chroniclers when it comes to numbers present. In all probability it was more of a brutal skirmish than a set piece battle. As Dockray indicates it seems the event may have been marked by careful planning and timing on the part of the Lancastrians and poor intelligence and a lack of commonsense in the Yorkist camp. The physical remains of the battle add little to the story. The actual site of the fighting is now covered by a housing estate, and a railway cuts across the ground as well. The site of the castle of course survives, and a good idea of the general layout of the terrain and fall of the land can be gained from its heights. Perhaps one of the most striking observations from that vantage point is: how could a large body of armed men be concealed from the garrison unless visibility was poor?

The now mutilated nineteenth-century memorial to Richard, Duke of York still stands in Manygates Lane on the traditional site of his death (see Figure 2). J W. Walker, the Wakefield historian, records earlier reports that when the foundations of a now demolished house on the site, Portobello House, were being dug in 1825 human bones, broken swords, spurs and fragments of armour were found.<sup>16</sup> The find site and house are marked on the 1890 Ordnance Survey map, it is next to the river in a direct line west from the Duke of York monument, just where the Yorkists would be pushed by an attack coming from the east. Nothing further is known about these remains, and unfortunately none of them now survive. Walker also records and provides illustrations of a number of finger rings reputedly found in the area, but again details of the find location are lacking and their present whereabouts are unknown.<sup>17</sup>

One item that does survive is a sword, supposedly found on the site of the battle.<sup>18</sup> However, upon examination, little is actually known about the finding of this sword. It was formerly in the collection of H. C Haldane of Clarke Hall who records the find thus; 'dug up a few years ago during the operation of cutting a main drain near the site of the Battle of Wakefield'.<sup>19</sup> The sword is of an unusual sort, not a knightly weapon, but single edged, possibly cut down from a larger blade. It has a curious guard with an extension of the cross guard protecting the back of the hand. Whilst this is a late medieval form, some concern may be felt that this particular type of sword has tended to be dated by the Wakefield example despite its rather doubtful provenance. The weapon is now in an anonymous private collection.<sup>20</sup>

It can now be seen that both the documentary and physical evidence for the battle is slight and illusory. Perhaps in the final analysis it is the political implications of the battle rather than the tactical disposition that really matter. However

this may be the students of battles can ponder over the evidence and arrive at their own conclusions.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

I am grateful for the assistance of John Goodchild, W.M.D.C. Archivist, in the compilation of this note. My thanks to Wakefield Historical Publications and Wakefield Museums, Galleries and Castles, for the use of the plans, maps and photographs.

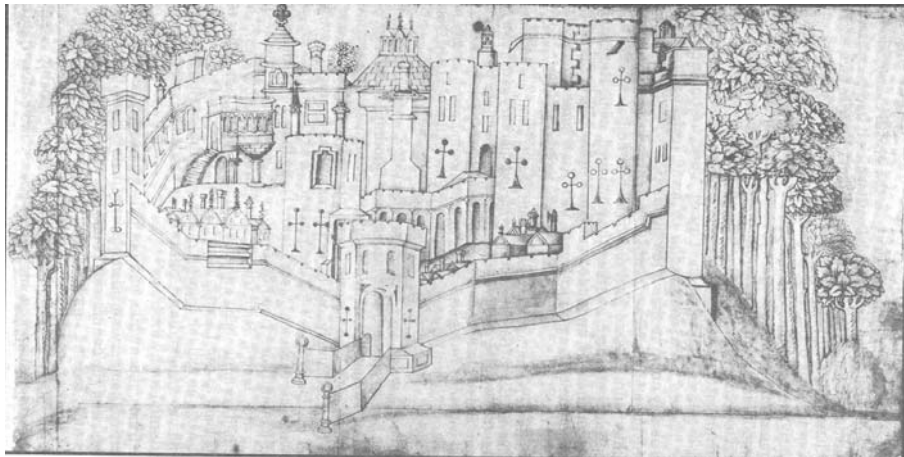
1. See for example, Alfred W. Stanfield, *Sandal; Sandal Castle and the Battle of Wakefield ...*, Wakefield n.d., pp.20-43.
2. Alex D. H. Leadman, *Battles Fought in Yorkshire*, London.1891, pp.81-93, and Alex D. H. Leadman, The Battle of Wakefield, *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, vol. 8 (1888), vol.10 (1888), pp.348-360.
3. Enclosure map for the Township of Sandal 1800; there is a copy at Wakefield Library H.Q. Local Studies Dept.
4. Wakefield Library H.Q., John Goodchild Loan Collection: Sandal Medieval Deeds.
- 5: *Ibid*. For fifteenth-century illustrations of cultivation and field systems, including hedges, around medieval castles, albeit in a French context, see the manuscript 'Tres Riches Heures' of the Duc de Berry, the original of which is in the Musee Conde, Chantilly. For a facsimile reproduction see J. Longnon & R. Cazelles *Les Tres Riches Heures de Duc de Berry* (facsimile), London and New York 1969.
6. P. Mayes and L. A. S. Butler, *Sandal Castle Excavations 1964-1973*, Wakefield 1983. L. A. S. Butler, *Sandal Castle, Wakefield: The History and Archaeology of a Medieval Castle*, Wakefield 1991.
7. Clements R. Markham, The Battle of Wakefield, *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, vol.9 (1886),pp.105-128.
8. *Vetusta Monumenta*, Society of Antiquaries, London 1753, engraved by George Vertue, pp.105-128. The original survives in the Public Record Office, MPC 97 (ex DL 31/116).
9. Public Record Office, SC11/981, Rent Roll of the Manor of Wakefield.
10. Public Record Office, DC 44/114, Commission of Enquiry and Survey of Pontefract and Sandal Castles.
11. John Speed, *Theatre of the Empire of Gt. Britain*, London 1611/12.
12. The original manuscript Wakefield Court Rolls, surviving back to the thirteenth century, are now kept at the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Leeds. These are being gradually transcribed and published as part of the Wakefield Court Rolls Series of that Society's publications.
13. L.A.S. Butler (see n.6), p.62.
14. See for instance: Howard Green, *The Battlefields of Britain and Ireland*, London 1973, pp.90-92. Terence Wise, *The Wars of the Roses*, London 1983, p.11. A more recent example: Ivan E. Broadhead, *Yorkshire Battlefields*, London 1989, perpetuates the error of the main gate of the castle facing south.
15. W. S. Banks, *Walks About Wakefield*, London and Wakefield 1871, pp.382-83.

16. J. W. Walker, *Wakefield, its History and its People*. 2nd ed, Wakefield 1939, p.166.
17. *Ibid.* p.166.
18. Described in G. M. Wilson, Notes on some early basket-hilted swords. *Arms and Armour Society Journal*, vol. 12, no.1 (March 1986) p.2.
19. H. C. Haldane, Relic of the Battle of Wakefield 1460, *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, vol.22 (1913), p.128. H. C. Haldane, *Clarke Hall, its Builders and Owners*, Wakefield 1957, p.33.
20. Christie's Sale Catalogue, 14 April 1966, item 176, plate xii.

First published in *The Ricardian* Vol. 9, No. 117 June 1992 and republished as an off-print

© Richard III Society

This document is not to be reproduced without the permission of the Society.



*Figure 1.*  
*Drawing of Sandal Castle made for a Duchy of Lancaster Survey in 1562. Original at the Public Record Office (now TNA), London, MPC97 (ex DL 31/116)*



*Figure 2. Duke of York Monument, c. 1900.*



*Figure 3*  
*Sandal Castle from the air, looking north towards Wakefield.*



*Figure 4*  
*Excavated remains of main gate, on the north side of Sandal Castle.*

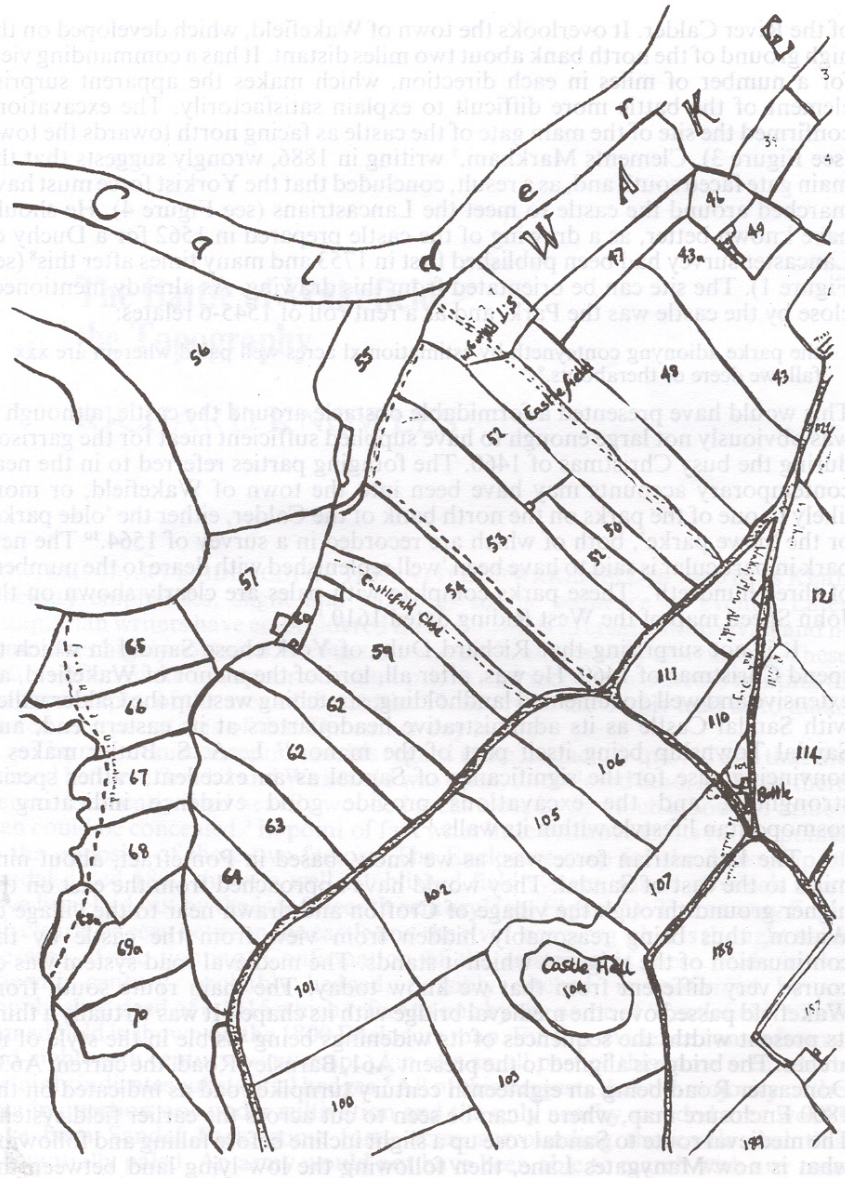


Fig 5  
 Enclosure Map of Sandal Township, 1800: detail of area around Castle.



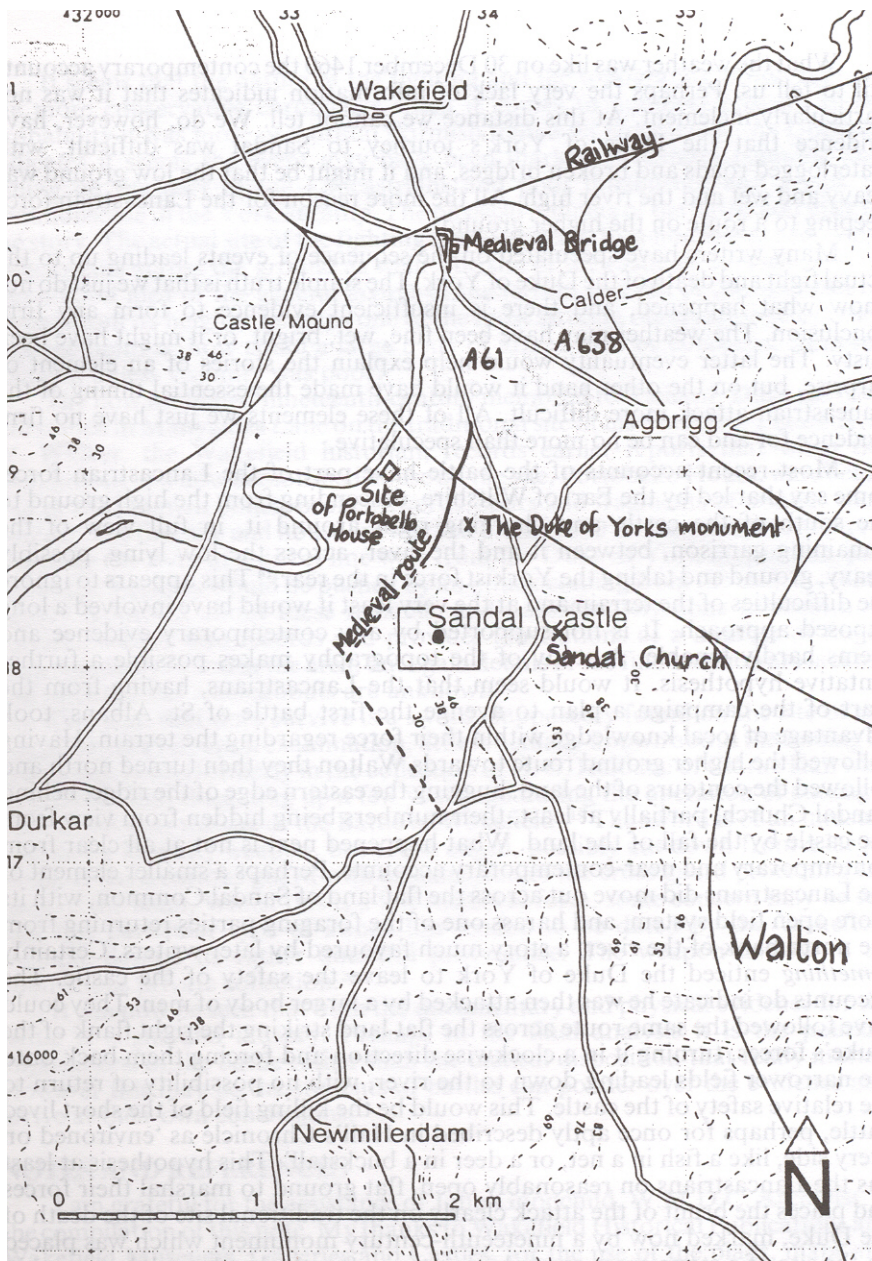


Fig 6  
Plan of the area of the Battle of Wakefield with contours..