

THE BATTLE OF BOSWORTH

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After a study of several different accounts of this battle only one thing will be clear, and that is that we know very little about it. A large part of what we think we know, we do not know at all, but have come to accept it due to constant repetition. A good example of this is to attribute Richard's charge to desperation. We are told in all seriousness that Richard, an experienced and successful commander, with the advantage of numbers and ground, was very soon on the verge of defeat. In a vain attempt to retrieve the situation, he leads a cavalry charge with the intention of killing Henry Tudor. He rides across the front of a body of troops known to be hostile to him, presenting them with a golden opportunity to cut him off from the main body of his army.¹ When these troops promptly take advantage of this opportunity, he is so surprised that he proclaims to the world that he has been betrayed.²

To explain these unlikely events we are given the following information:

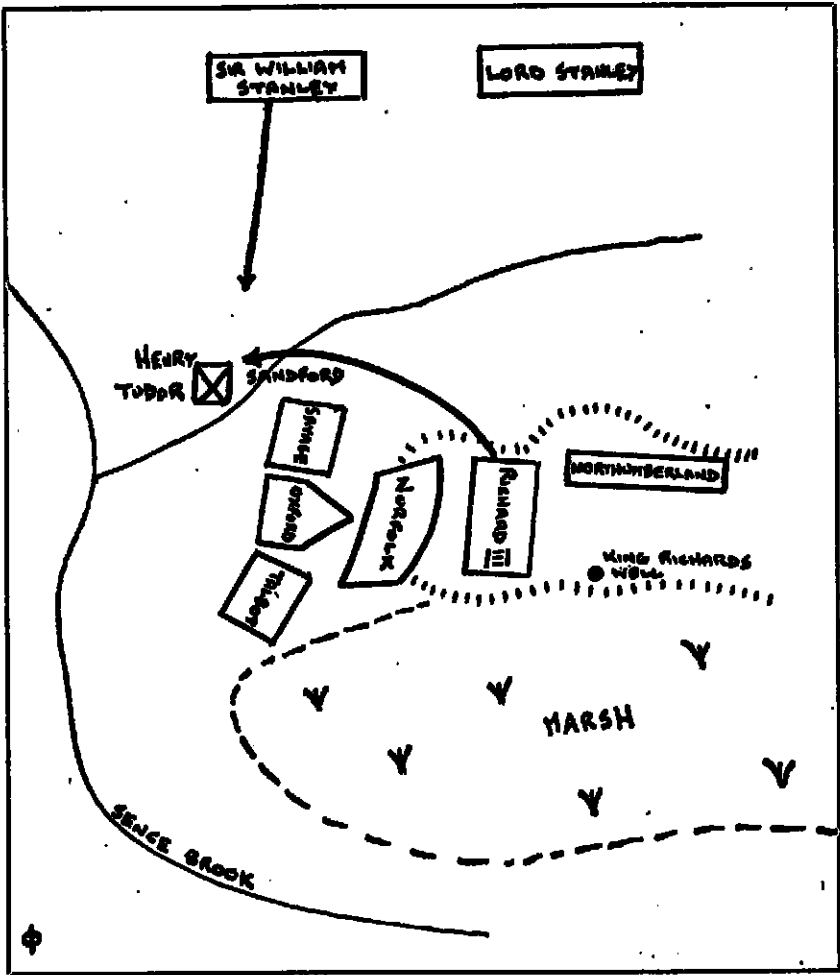
- (i) Richard had reason to doubt the loyalty of Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland.³
- (ii) Many of Richard's men had deserted, and others would have done so had they been able.⁴
- (iii) The Duke of Norfolk was killed, and the Earl of Surrey captured, fairly early in the battle.⁵

It is quite possible that some, or even all of this information, is false. Less than a year after the battle the Croyland Chronicler was writing that some of Richard's chief men had fled, when they had in fact been killed as shown by P. M. Kendall.⁶ The proclamation issued by Henry Tudor after the battle, gives the false information that Lincoln, Surrey and Lovell, were among the slain.⁷ The statement in York City records that it was Norfolk who betrayed Richard is also false.⁸ We should treat other information with the utmost suspicion, especially when it does not accord with common sense.

It is not doubted that there were desertions. What is questionable is that they were one-way traffic. P. M. Kendall tells us that two men called Brecher were executed at Leicester because they had caused much execution in the rebel ranks.⁹ As these two men were from the West country which was predominantly Lancastrian, is it not possible that they had deserted from the rebel army to the King, and were recognised by Tudor's officers after being captured? As to those who wished to desert Richard but could not, it can be argued that where some had gone, others could follow if they so desired.

If the morale of the Royal army was low, that of the rebels could scarcely have been any higher. They were a polyglot collection of English, Welsh, French, and apparently a few Scots.¹⁰ They were outnumbered, and their enemies had the advantage of ground. The man that they followed had never been in a battle before, and the promised Stanley assistance did not now look like materialising. Hardly a situation to promote confidence.

Neither is it necessary to believe that Norfolk was killed in the early stages of the battle, or that Richard made his charge because he was desperate. Indeed it makes more sense to believe that up to the point of Stanley's intervention, the



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1. The armies are shown at the point when Richard began his charge. Norfolk has engaged Tudor's army, and is forcing back the left wing under Talbot. Northumberland is in a position to intercept an advance by the Stanleys. The position of Lord Stanley is somewhat doubtful; where placed he could help or hinder either side.
2. Northumberland, either through treasonable design or confusion, does not move when Sir William Stanley attacks Richard, who has charged out of his middle ward, accompanied by a small party, upon Henry Tudor.
3. After Richard's death the royal army fled north-eastwards between Northumberland and Stanley, or southwards between Talbot and the marsh.

Royal army was winning quite handsomely. Before we examine this possibility, let us first look at some other points of interest.

The first is Vergil's statement that Tudor's men had the sun on their backs.¹¹ The sun only rises due east, and sets due west, on two days in a year. These are known as the Spring and Autumnal equinoxes,¹² and fall near March 21 and September 23 each year.¹³ After the Spring equinox the point of sunrise moves northwards along the horizon until for several days around midsummer it remains stationary, before moving back in a southerly direction until it once more rises due east at the Autumnal equinox.¹⁴ This movement of the sun averages a little over 12 degrees per month.¹⁵ The battle was fought on August 22, or August 31 of Gregorian era.¹⁶ This means that the sun had not yet completed its return to the east, being some three weeks short of this. It can therefore be said with confidence that on the morning of the battle, the sun rose several degrees north of east and there is no way of stretching a point in Vergil's favour. There are four possible explanations for Vergil's statement:

- (i) It is incorrect. Vergil misunderstood, or was misled by, his informants.
- (ii) It is incorrect. It is a product of Vergil's imagination.
- (iii) It is correct. Therefore the positions of the armies and/or Tudor's route from Whitemoors must be wrong.
- (iv) It is correct. The positions of the armies are also correct. Therefore the battle must have been fought in the afternoon, not in the morning.

The first two are the most likely explanations, yet some writers still use Vergil's tale as though it were true.¹⁷

The second item is the position of Lord Thomas Stanley's force, as there is disagreement on this. Some place him to the south of Ambien hill and the marsh.¹⁸ Others place him to the north of the hill, near to his brother William.¹⁹ The northern position seems to be the most logical for the following reasons:

- (i) Stanley intended to be on the winning side, but favoured Tudor. From the north he could help or hinder either side. From the south he could help Richard but could attack him only with great difficulty because of the marsh.
- (ii) From the north he could communicate easily with his brother, and with Henry, and with Richard. He could not do so very easily from the south.
- (iii) The main pursuit by Henry's victorious army was to the south towards Stoke Golding. It follows then that the bulk of Richard's men fled in this direction. If Stanley had been to the south he would have been perfectly placed to intercept them, and very few, if any, would have escaped.

We are told that Percy was stationed to the right and rear of the Royal army to watch the Stanleys and because Richard did not trust him, or that Percy volunteered for this post because he did not wish to fight.²⁰ It is equally possible that he was stationed there because it was necessary. The northern slope of Ambien hill is a steep one, but it is by no means unassailable. To leave it unguarded would be to invite an attack by the Stanleys. It is probable that Percy's presence made an already difficult slope too hazardous for the Stanleys

to attempt. It may be that, because of Percy's subsequent treason, Richard has been endowed by later writers with suspicions that he never had.

If Tudor propaganda is disregarded it can be seen that what should have happened, probably did happen. The Royal army with all the advantages, was very soon on the way to victory. In order to match the length of the Royal line, Oxford would either have to stretch his own line very thin or leave himself without a reserve. The left wing under Savage had to protect Henry Tudor who stationed himself behind this wing in order to be as close as possible to the Stanleys. The left wing was also without a natural anchorage such as the marsh which protected Talbot's right wing. For these reasons it is probable that Savage's left wing was numerically the stronger of the two, not the other way round as given by D. T. Williams.²¹

If Talbot's weak right wing began to crumble, this could be the reason for Richard's charge. A swift attack on the rear of the rebel left wing would have the enemy in a pincer and provide the opportunity to kill Henry Tudor, thus putting a quick end to the battle. It had the added advantage of possibly ending the battle before Stanley could intervene. As this could not be guaranteed however, Richard took precautions. Before the fighting began Richard had sent a message to Stanley, ordering him to take his place in the line or forfeit the life of his son.²² He had done so not with the hope that Stanley would comply, but to deter him from joining Tudor. No doubt Richard would have been happy to keep Stanley out of the battle altogether. This threat had so far had the desired effect. As an added precaution Richard now ordered Percy to prevent Stanley from interfering with him, should he attempt to do so. Richard then was no desperate berserker, neither was he imbued with the death wish. He merely took a calculated risk. This action would have been typical of the man, the stroke being swift and deadly. Placing his trust in speed and surprise rather than numbers, and with supreme confidence in himself and his trusted comrades, Richard would not have doubted for a second that he would succeed.

At first all went well, the Stanleys made no move to interfere with him as he rode out to attack Tudor. Richard however had overplayed his hand. Stanley must have realised that if Richard's threat was genuine, then his son was now dead and revenge could be exacted. If the threat was not genuine, Richard was now not in a position to carry it out. Either way Stanley felt himself free to do as he pleased and Richard's bluff was called. Stanley ordered his brother to attack the King.

Victory was almost certain for Richard. Tudor's men were in confusion, the red dragon standard was down and Henry himself was only a few feet away. Then everything changed. Richard found himself surrounded, with Tudor's men to the front and Sir William Stanley's men on the other three sides. He looked towards the hill and saw Percy's men standing motionless in their original position. Turning his back on Percy and preferring the company of Ratcliffe, Brackenbury and others, he hurled himself once more against Henry Tudor. It was now that the repeated shouts of "Treason" could be heard. They were not directed against Stanley from whom treachery had been expected, but against Percy from whom it had not.

After Richard had been killed, Tudor and Stanley joined in the main battle. As the word that Richard was dead ran through the Royal troops, they began to

surrender or flee in large numbers. The so-far successful left wing of Norfolk's force were the last to receive the news and the last to continue fighting. It was probably at this point that Norfolk was killed and Surrey captured, as they tried desperately to keep their men in some sort of formation.

As we know the flight of most of the fugitives was towards Stoke Golding. If this Royal army had been losing from the start, why did they choose to run in this direction? Before they could do so they would first have to fight their way through Talbot's men, or struggle through the marsh, or both. It would have been easier simply to turn about face, run back up the hill, and make their escape towards Sutton Cheney. If Talbot's wing had been forced backwards however, the whole rebel line would have taken on the appearance of the hands of a clock, with the time at a quarter past ten, when viewed from the top of the hill. This would have left a gap between Talbot's men and the marsh, through which some of the Royal troops could have escaped to the south.

In the interest of justice it must be said that the case against Percy is not very strong. It rests as far as can be seen on these four points:

- (i) His troops took no part in the fighting.
- (ii) The Croyland Chronicle attests to his "neutrality" as P. M. Kendall puts it.²³
- (iii) He was murdered by the men of the north, in revenge for his having betrayed Richard.²⁴
- (iv) He was not attainted after Bosworth.²⁵

The first may not have been Percy's fault. If Stanley did not attack then Percy could not defend. He did not assist Norfolk, but if the Duke had been winning he would not have needed help anyway. It is just possible, if unlikely, that when Richard made his charge he left Percy high and dry on the hill and he never had a chance to fight. The Stanleys had an understanding with Tudor that they would assist him if an opportunity arose.²⁶ Percy could not have been involved with this because he did nothing positive to help the rebels. He could have fallen on Norfolk's rear, but he did not. In fact he seems to have done nothing at all, and it may be that he was by nature vacillating, and entirely lacking in initiative, rather than a deliberate traitor. Certain it is that he cannot compare with the Stanleys who, as traitors, were in a class of their own.

As for the second point, P. M. Kendall has already shown the unreliability of the Croyland Chronicle with regard to Bosworth.²⁷

For the third point it can be argued that Percy was murdered while trying to collect an unpopular tax, and that the collector would have been murdered whoever he was. Even if we allow that the mob used the tax as an excuse to avenge Richard, this proves only that it was believed by some that Percy was a traitor. Who should know better than we, that popular belief does not always equate with truth? Let us assume for a moment that Percy did not betray Richard, but that it was generally believed that he did, what could Percy do about it? To deny it would only antagonise Henry Tudor, and Percy had already spent some time in the Tower,²⁸ which seems to have been poor reward for helping Tudor to gain a throne. He could only keep quiet and hope that people would forget about it.

The fourth point is the only one that has any real merit, and this is the one responsible for Percy being blamed in the preceding account of the battle. There is still room for doubt however, and it is possible that Henry Percy has been as unfairly treated as the man he is accused of betraying.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. P. M. Kendall, *Richard III* (1955), p. 366.
2. P. M. Kendall, p. 367.
3. P. M. Kendall, pp. 353-4.
4. A. L. Rowse, *Bosworth Field and the Wars of the Roses* (1966), p. 300, p. 304. On p. 304 this author does not use the word deserted, but says, "for when King Richard was killed, all men forthwith threw away weapon and freely submitted themselves to Henry's obedience; whereof the most part would have done the same at the beginning, if for King Richard's scurriers, scouring to and fro, they might so have done." A desire to submit to the enemy before being defeated amounts to the same thing as a desire to desert.
5. A. L. Rowse, p. 303; P. M. Kendall, p. 365.
6. P. M. Kendall, p. 492.
7. P. M. Kendall, p. 492.
8. P. M. Kendall, p. 493.
9. P. M. Kendall, p. 363; p. 368.
10. P. M. Kendall, p. 492.
11. Polydore Vergil, *English History* (ed. H. Ellis), 1844, p. 223.
12. G. S. Hawkins, *Stonehenge Decoded* (1965), p. 125.
13. H. J. Brnhard, D. A. Bennett, H. S. Rice, *New Handbook of the Heavens* (1948), p. 20.
14. R. J. C. Atkinson, *Stonehenge* (1960), p. 93.
15. G. S. Hawkins, p. 125.
16. Clements R. Markham, *Richard III His Life and Character* (1906), p. 154.
17. A. L. Rowse, p. 303; D. T. Williams, *The Battle of Bosworth* (Leicester University Press 1973), p. 14.
18. P. M. Kendall, text p. 357, map p. 262; Clements R. Markham, p. 153 and map.
19. A. L. Rowse, map p. 282; D. T. Williams, p. 10 and map.
20. A. L. Rowse, pp. 301-2; P. M. Kendall, p. 359.
21. D. T. Williams, p. 14.
22. P. M. Kendall, p. 359; A. L. Rowse, p. 302.
23. P. M. Kendall, p. 492.
24. P. M. Kendall, p. 384; Clements R. Markham, p. 154.
25. Clements R. Markham, p. 252. Markham gives a list of those attainted after Bosworth. Percy is not among them.
26. P. M. Kendall, p. 352.
27. P. M. Kendall, p. 492.
28. R. L. Storey, *The Reign of Henry VII* (1968), p. 67.