ON A BITTERLY COLD PALM SUNDAY, in 1461, in driving snow and wind, the bloodiest battle of the Wars of the Roses was fought near the village of Towton, just south of Tadcaster. Throughout the morning heavily armed men attacked each other with pikes and swords, until 'the dead hindered the living from coming to close quarters, they lay so thick'. By the late afternoon the Lancastrians' hopes of victory had vanished; escaping to the north-west, scores were drowned in the swollen Cock Beck — corpses lay 'over a space of nearly six miles in length and three broad' — and the snow was stained red. The battle, perhaps engaging as many as 50,000, was of profound significance: to Edward IV it meant a return to London and formal coronation; to the majority of magnates and gentry it 'now became prudent and realistic to acknowledge the authority of the new king'; and to a small town in north-west Leicestershire, nearly one hundred miles away, it signified major changes.

Ashby-de-la-Zouch — its suffix added to differentiate the town from three others in the county — was a quiet backwater in 1461. Although the 1446 taxation returns show it was one of the largest half dozen settlements in Leicestershire, there are few signs that the establishment of a weekly market and an annual fair in the early thirteenth century had led to any economic or social importance outside its own small area. Fragmentary clues in local records suggest what little prosperity there was came from cattle raising and leather working. The Zouch, a family descended from the earls of Brittany, had acquired the manor through marriage by 1160, and were to have connections with the town until 1399, when Sir Hugh la Zouch died without issue. They were not particularly rich — they seemed to have owned only one other manor, in Cambridgeshire — nor do they appear to have played any notable part in national politics. Ashby, under their aegis, remained a minor market town, with a few hundred inhabitants, a small church and a relatively insignificant manor house. On Sir Hugh's death the lordship of the manor, apparently in dispute, changed hands several times, finally coming into the possession of James Butler, Earl of Ormonde, later Earl of Wiltshire. One of the Lancastrians captured after Towton, he had short shrift on the block at Newcastle.

Professor Charles Ross is surely correct in his assertion that 'an important and necessary consequence of the change of dynasty in 1461 was a large-scale redistribution of political power at the regional and local level'. "Good lordship"
still remained the basis of government, and Edward IV's solution was naturally to turn to men who had shown both ability and loyalty. Amongst the offices showered on his friend Sir William Hastings — a barony, Lord Chamberlain, Master of the Mint, Steward of Leicester, Constable and Master-Forester of Castle Donington, Chamberlain of North Wales — the grant of the manor of Ashby may not have seemed particularly propitious. Yet, in establishing his position as Edward's surrogate in the Midlands, he chose to make the little town his headquarters.

Inevitably, Ricardians tend to be drawn in a myopic fashion to the events of June 1483 when they assess Hastings, perhaps forgetting the long record of loyalty and service he gave to the Yorkist cause. Charles Ross, in his mini-biography of Hastings, is clear in his approach: 'Of all Edward's councillors, none stood closer to him personally than Sir William Hastings. Their relationship was based on mutual trust and affection and compatibility of taste... There is abundant contemporary testimony as to his special standing with the king throughout the reign.' There has also been considerable research recently on Hastings' standing in the Midland counties. W. H. Dunham points out that... Hastings was 'no novice in the sophisticated politico-military machinations' of the age, seeming 'to have had the talent to organise, into an effective political force, his "well-wishers"; beginning to recruit retainers who were to form his company as early as 1461. Admittedly, Dr. Wright's recent thesis shows that the Hastings connection in Derbyshire — where the greatest number of his retainers lay — was never cohesive enough to be a political force; but his power was enough to neutralise other affinities in the Midlands, such as the Vernons and Talbots. It is also clear that from 1472 Hastings became a power within neighbouring Staffordshire, constructing a retained affinity with thirty-three Staffordshire-based men or with others closely involved with the county. They were men of note with an independent prominence among their peers, matched by a family history of tenure in the principal offices of county government.

Hastings may well have lacked the resources to finance an affinity beyond the honour of Tutbury and 'was certainly astute enough to realise how little his position was within the honour... Loyalty was to the stewardship not the steward'; but Ashby's fate depended very much on Hastings' own. In fact, for the next two hundred years the family continued to be active in national politics, and to maintain Ashby as their main seat.

The most tangible indication of Lord Hastings' connection with the town was his development of the manor house. A building had been on the site since the Conquest, and the earliest stonework dates from the twelfth century; but, apart from a huge mid-fourteenth century kitchen, the 1461 structure was that of a small, unpretentious manor. On 17 April 1474 Hastings was given licence by letters patent of the King at Nottingham, to erect and new-build houses, with lime and stone, at his manors of Kirby Muxloe, Bagworth, Thornton and Ashby. The words of the licence clearly envisage a major fortification. (The document reads: murellandi — to wall up; tourellandi — to make towers; kernellandi — to pinnacle; embattellandi — to embattle; turrellandi — to make loops or slits in the walls; and machecolandi — to make gratings on the battlements.) Over the next decade improvements were made to the existing
The castle of Ashby-de-la-Zouch in 1730. From the engraving by S. and N. Buck.
buildings — the great hall, solar and kitchen — and a fine chapel with rooms adjoining were erected. The masterpiece, the centre of the new defences which helped to create an extra, southern courtyard, was the great tower, with nearly nine foot thick walls at ground level, its own well, solar and great hall, and four storeys rising to a height of nearly ninety feet.

At the same time as Hastings received the licence to build the castle, he was given permission to enclose and impark 3,000 acres in Ashby. One park had existed since 1368, when it contained sixty acres, but Hastings considerably increased the amount of land imparked in the town, even though it is doubtful whether it ever totalled 3,000 acres. What is important in this context is that these licences to build a castle and impark on this scale suggest that Hastings was serious in his aim to make Ashby his principal seat.

Major alterations were also carried out on the ancient parish church of St. Helen's, a mere stone's throw from the castle. Late fifteenth century craftsmanship is apparent in the fine arcades, the clerestory, the nave roof, parts of the tower and the sacristy; whilst the chancel and Hastings Chapel date from this period. Two monuments remain from this period: the alabaster effigy of a pilgrim (possibly Hastings' younger brother, Thomas), and the sole surviving floor slab from the desecration of 1829.

The presence of such a powerful lord thus had considerable effect on the physical appearance of the town. There were other important economic advantages. When Hastings built his house at Kirby Muxloe, his warden was John Lyle, apparently of Ashby. 'Le freston' for Kirby was quarried at Alton, and the lead for the roof was bought 'by the hands of Rob Wodhous at Ashbeby'. Although the building accounts for Ashby itself do not survive, it seems likely that if Hastings used Ashby men at Kirby, he also employed other tenants in similar positions. The labourers were probably local men and most of the quarrying would be done locally. Moreover, the feeding and equipping of these workers must have brought trade to many Ashbeians who were not directly involved in the construction or attached to the household.

Another immediate economic consequence of Hastings' choice of the town as his main seat, was the addition of an extra fair. He was granted one for the eve of Pentecost (Whitsunday) and for four days afterwards, and another on the eve of St. Simon and St. Jude (28 October) and for four days afterwards. These fairs continued to be held on these dates for at least 200 years, and they were to last considerably longer than their predecessors. Quite clearly the residence of so large a household and the establishment of two five-day fairs every year must have stimulated local trade. In the earliest list of fines that were imposed at the manorial court, dated 1489, no less than thirty-eight locals were punished for failing to keep the assize of ale. Gradually, as trade increased, more men became involved with the opening of inns and the provision of food and lodging for travellers.

For two decades Ashby shared in the rise of Hastings' fortunes. It was the family headquarters to one of the most powerful men in the land. Thus, the bewildering sequence of events during the spring and early summer of 1483 must have been followed with some anxiety in the Midland town. William Hastings' personal link with Ashby may have been sharply severed in June, but his son, Edward, was to regain all the family lands after Bosworth. William's
grandson, George, was ambitious for the family fortunes, marrying in 1509 Anne, daughter of Henry Stafford, Duke of Buckingham. A favourite of Henry VIII, George regularly attended court, earning his master’s gratitude, a privy councillorship and the earldom of Huntington in 1529. The Hastings were to maintain their link with Ashby castle, defending it for Charles I in the Civil Wars, until its destruction in November 1648; whilst their connection with the town, even after the removal of the family seat to Donington Hall, has been preserved to the present day.23 The Hastings’ crest, a bull’s head, is commemorated not only in the name of the town’s oldest inn (which reputedly dates back to the fifteenth century), but in the emblems of both the local grammar school and museum. Moreover, the family device of the manche, or sleeve decorates castle walls and local buildings. Ashby owes much to the Hastings family — particularly that ‘honourable man, a good knight and a gentle,’24 who established his headquarters there over five centuries ago.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

4. The manorial records for Ashby were preserved by the Hastings family until 1927, when they were bought by Henry E. Huntington and were deposited in his library in Southern California.
6. Ross, op. cit., p.64.
8. Ross, op. cit., p.73.
15. R. H. Williams, The Parish Church of St. Helen, Ashby-de-la-Zouch (Ashby 1980), passim Hillier, op. cit., p.21.
17. Hamilton Thompson, op. cit., pp.229, 313 (Alton is 2 miles south-east of Ashby).
18. The stone was almost certainly quarried just to the north-east of the town.
20. Moxon, op. cit., p.35.
21. Ibid., p.36. The earlier fair was only for one or two days.
22. In 1627 the town boasted 'more than fortie' inns (see Hillier, op. cit., pp.79-81).
23. The Right Honourable Barbara Abney-Hastings, Countess of Loudoun, still 'owns' the castle, although it is on permanent lease to English Heritage, and lives next to the castle grounds.