

INTRODUCTION

‘The history of a battle is not unlike the history of a ball. Some individuals may recollect all the little events of which the great result is the battle won or lost, but no individual can recollect the order in which, or the exact moment at which, they occurred, which makes all the difference as to their value or importance.’

The Duke of Wellington, 8 August 1815

The date 1485 is seared into our national memory. Learnt by every school pupil, there is good reason to consider it one of the key events in British history. The battle of Bosworth, where the twenty-eight-year-old Henry Tudor defeated Richard III, was the moment when the Tudor dynasty was born.

Yet for all its fame as one of the most significant battles in British history, Bosworth remains tantalisingly elusive to the historian. Compared to other battles that took place during the civil wars of the fifteenth century, contemporary accounts of the battle are relatively sparse. This book attempts to take a fresh look at the battle, drawing together the widest possible range of sources, as well as investigating unpublished manuscripts which shed new light on the period. This has meant returning to the original documents, including the handwritten manuscript of Polydore Vergil’s *Anglia Historia*, one of the principal sources for the battle now remaining in the Vatican Library in Rome, in order to thread together as accurately as possible what might have occurred during the morning of 22 August 1485.

Shakespeare’s depiction of Richard III crying out on the battlefield, offering to surrender his kingdom for a horse, has long been exposed as the stuff of legend. What is often less clear is that Bosworth was won not merely by the actions of Henry or Richard on the battlefield, but through the actions, or inaction, of others present on that fateful day. I have sought to understand these individuals’ separate motivations, what drove each man to take up arms against his king, in order to

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comprehend why Henry Tudor, against all the odds, was able to defeat Richard's army, a force twice the size of his meagre band of exiles, French mercenaries and Welshmen. In the centuries since Henry was crowned on the battlefield we have accepted a version of history which, from the moment that Richard's body lay still warm in the Leicestershire mud, was written exclusively by the winning side. Bosworth quickly became the providential story of good versus evil, of the innocent Henry, a David-like figure facing down the monstrous goliath of the tyrant Richard III. The truth, as this book attempts to reveal, was far more complex.

Yet rather than focus exclusively upon the movements of the battle itself, which, as Wellington wisely noted, can rarely be recalled with definitive certainty, *Bosworth* is intended to be more than just a detailed account of the battle alone. It charts the rise of the Tudors, at times an improbable saga of how Henry Tudor came to be crowned King of England. In doing so the book reveals a narrative of triumph against adversity, itself a gripping tale of how one man survived persecution and endured exile to seize the throne. Henry's journey to Bosworth is one of extraordinary perseverance; driven to flee to Brittany aged only fourteen, he spent his formative years as a prisoner, locked away in distant castles. It was a life filled with uncertainty and danger. On several occasions, Henry was forced suddenly to escape from one country to another, a fugitive whose claim to the throne would have seemed at best laughable.

The rise to power of the Tudors, a humble Welsh gentry family, in the space of just fifty years, was nothing less than remarkable. From Owen Tudor, a servant at the royal court who wooed the widowed Catherine of Valois, Henry V's queen, to the plight of their children, Edmund and Jasper Tudor, who rose through the ranks at court to join the most important noblemen of the realm, the Tudor story is one of romance and hardship. It is also one set against a backdrop of a bloody and brutal age, in which the politics of the fifteenth century gave way to civil strife, with the feuding houses of Lancaster and York descending into war. It was a time when men found themselves forced to make a choice between rival camps, when the wrong choice could lead to ruin or death. The Tudors were no exception. Henry Tudor's mother, the wily Margaret Beaufort, found herself on either side of the dynastic

divide, before seizing her moment to help place her own son on the throne. From the instability caused by the vacuum of power left by Henry VI, through the battles of the 1460s and 1470s, Henry Tudor's survival lay not only in his mother's hands, but those of his dedicated uncle Jasper, who, almost like a surrogate father, ensured the boy's survival and masterminded his eventual triumph. With the ascendancy of Richard III, Henry found his own claim to the throne bolstered by hundreds of exiles from the English court; upon landing in Wales, he was joined on his march through the country by other leading figures such as Rhys ap Thomas. *Bosworth* charts their stories too, along with the many other actors on the stage who came together to forge the Tudor dynasty.

It is important to remember that *Bosworth* was not simply a culmination of Henry Tudor's victorious campaign, but is also the ending to the tale of how Richard III lost a kingdom. Henry's success owed everything to the tragic fate of the last Plantagenet king, whose rule seemed doomed from the moment he decided to seize the throne from his young nephew Edward V, right down to the dying moments of the battle, when Richard found himself deserted by his supporters and the king chose to throw caution to the wind and launch himself upon this young upstart pretender to his throne.

Since I began researching the book, for a battle fought more than half a millennium ago, events have moved fast. In 2010 news broke that the battle site had been 'rediscovered' two miles down the road from where it had been mistakenly believed to have been fought. More importantly, new finds relating to the battle, including more than thirty cannon balls, the largest collection of shot ever discovered from a medieval conflict in Europe, had been unearthed in the fields around the new site of the battle. Among the most treasured finds was a boar badge – as the emblem of Richard III, a clear sign of his army's presence in the location. It renewed a sense of determination in my own mind that the story of the battle was only just beginning to unfold. During the course of my research, which has taken me across the archives in Vannes, Nantes and Paris, returning to the remote castles where Henry Tudor was imprisoned during his youth, such as the Tour d'Elven, still hidden away in deep forest miles from habitation, I have sought to recreate as best as possible Henry's own experiences. By making use of

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the surviving French material detailing Henry's exile, down to the black fur gown he was given, I have tried to bring Henry to life, while recognising his utter dependence on his foreign hosts. Charting Henry's remarkable march through Wales in August 1485, one of the few successful foreign invasions of Britain, I attempted to recreate the journey myself, admittedly with the aid of my car, starting at the terrifyingly sheer cliffs of the Pembrokeshire coastline in sleeting rain, and ending up at the battle re-enactments of the Bosworth Battlefield Centre. My research even took me to the top of St Margaret's Church in Stoke Golding, clinging to a thirty-foot wooden ladder inside its tower as I peered out from the same spot where onlookers had watched the battle unfold over 500 years before.

Then in autumn 2012, as I had just finished the first draft of the book, a team of archaeologists from Leicester University made an announcement that hit the global headlines: beneath a council car park in Leicester, they had discovered the bones of a man believed to be Richard III. I rushed up to Leicester as soon as I heard the news, finding myself standing in a long queue that wrapped around the block, as I patiently waited my turn to enter the car park. At the front of the line, marshals wearing luminous jackets ushered the next group in, and they hurried forward as if desperate to get to the front of a rock concert. There was no music to be heard, yet the excitement among the chattering crowd felt as if the assembled throng were awaiting the arrival of a celebrity. Several months passed as tests were performed on the remains, until on 4 February 2013, just as this book was being sent to the printers, the announcement was made that the bones were indeed Richard's. A Postscript to the main text reveals the full extent of this discovery, and its implications for our understanding of Richard's final moments. It is perhaps just the latest twist in this compelling tale, rich with drama right to the end, as England's last Plantagenet king fought to his final breath, becoming the last monarch to die on a battlefield. There may be more still to discover, but for now, I hope that this book will help us understand not only one of our most important battles, but an event that opened one of the most dramatic chapters in British history, the reign of the Tudor dynasty.

A NOTE ON MONEY AND DATES

English monetary values are recorded as being in pounds (*l*) shillings (*s*) and pence (*d*), with twenty shillings in the pound and twelve pence in the shilling. The mark was a unit of account, with one mark being worth thirteen shillings and four pence, therefore $\frac{2}{3}$ of a pound. There are many pitfalls to estimating the value of currency across the centuries, however a useful guide is the National Archives' Currency Converter (see <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency>) that suggests one pound in 1480 would have been worth an equivalent of £504.59 at 2005 prices, with one shilling worth an equivalent of £25.23 and one penny equalling £2.10. The standard unit of French money was the *livre tournois*, divided into twenty *sols* (later *sous*), which was worth twelve *denier*. One *écu* was worth the equivalent of six *livres tournois*. The value of the *livre tournois* to the pound fluctuated, however it is estimated that there were ten *livres tournois* in the pound, with one shilling being worth two *livres tournois*.

Dates are given according to contemporary sources that followed the Julian calendar in use at the time. With the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar in 1752, account should be taken of the fact that these dates do not match with the exact dates of our current calendar. The difference between the two calendars in the fifteenth century is nine days, so the Battle of Bosworth, while fought on 22 August in 1485, would have actually been 13 August in our contemporary calendar.

PROLOGUE



7 August 1485

As the sun lowered beneath the horizon across the Milford estuary, a flotilla of thirty ships drifted across the mouth of the Haven, their sails billowed by a soft southern breeze. It had been a week since the fleet had sailed from the shelter of the Seine at Honfleur, but the ships had made fast progress in the balmy August weather. Onboard, sharpening their battle axes, knives and swords, over 3,000 men waited. They included a rabble of 2,000 Breton and French soldiers, many only recently released from prison, 'the worst sort', 'raised out of the refuse of the people', 1,000 Scottish troops and 400 Englishmen whose last sight of their country had been two years previously, when they had fled in fear of their lives.

The ships entered the entrance of the estuary where looking leftwards, the dark red sandstone cliffs, several hundred feet in height and impossible to scale, gave way to a small cove, hidden from sight from the cliffs above. High tide had passed an hour previously, allowing the ships to creep silently to the edge of the narrow shoreline for the troops to disembark. At first the Frenchmen seemed reluctant to move, fearful of what might be waiting on shore. Yet there seemed to be little sign of armed resistance, no troops shadowing the cliffs or boats patrolling the haven, in spite of reports that the previous year a company of men had been stationed there, ready to sound the alarm in case of invasion.

Their arrival had stirred no one. The nearest town of Dale was a mile and a half away, yet the bay was secluded from the sight of its castle by a large promontory. Only a watermill on the edge of the shore, fed by a stream running off the headland and into the bay, gave any sign of habitation. Soon the waters had clouded with sand as the men began to

heave cannon, guns and ordnance from the boats, leading horses from the ships and onto land.

From one of the boats stepped a twenty-eight-year-old man. Pale and slender, above average height with shoulder-length brown hair, he had a long face with a red wart just above his chin. Yet his most noticeable feature to those who had met him was his small blue eyes, 'cold and sober', which gave out the impression of energy and liveliness whenever he spoke. Stepping out of his boat, the man took a few steps forward on land he had last set foot upon fourteen years before. Kneeling down in the sand, he took his finger and drew a sign of the cross, which he then kissed. Then, holding up his hands to the skies 'meekly and devoutly' he uttered the words, 'Judica me deus et discerne causam meam'. It was the first line from the forty-third psalm: 'Judge and revenge my cause O Lord', which the soldiers now began to sing. As the words of the psalm echoed around Mill Bay in the darkening evening, one line in particular must have stood out above all others: 'O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man.' The march across Wales to win a kingdom had only just begun. For Henry Tudor, his arrival to claim the crown of England was the end of a journey that had lasted his whole life. The moment of reckoning had arrived. All he could hope for was that God, at least, would take his side.