

II.—THE BATTLE OF HEXHAM, 1464.

BY DOROTHY CHARLESWORTH.

Read on 26th September, 1951.

Accounts of the battle of Hexham, which ended, by the total defeat of the Lancastrian forces, the four years' warfare between Henry VI and Edward IV, have always been very brief and somewhat confused. In spite of its importance, contemporary chroniclers tell us very little about it. Warkworth's chronicle does not even name the site and Gregory's chronicle hurries over the battle but lists in full the executions which followed. It seems that Worcester wrote a full account of the battle, but unfortunately a page is missing from the MS. at this point and his chronicle is resumed in the middle of the description. Even its date was forgotten. Waurin, a late fifteenth century writer, places it a year too early and the sixteenth century chroniclers, Hall and Grafton, give it under the year 1462, although their description of the site is more accurate than that of earlier writers. Fortunately there is an official source, the *Year Book de Termino Paschae*, 4 Edward IV,¹ which describes the site and gives the exact date of the battle, 15 May, 1464. But the inaccuracies of the chroniclers have become better known than the entry in the *Year Book* and many local historians have been misled. Brand is uncertain of the site and quotes two rival opinions, one in favour of the low ground near the Tyne, the other for a site near Linnolds, without judging between them. Hodgson makes a very

¹ *Year Book*, extract published in Surtees Soc. *The Priory of Hexham*, i (1864), pp. cviii-cxi.

brief reference to the battle, but he gets the date correct. His successors have added nothing to his description but have been less accurate. Bates thought that two battles were fought, one in 1463, the other in 1464, although it is clear even from the meagre descriptions of the chroniclers that whatever date they may give, it is one and the same battle that they are describing. Even the *Northumberland County History* shows some indecision. While volume IV (p. 48) follows the lead of Bates and gives two battles, one in 1463, the other on 4 May, 1464, both volumes I (p. 47) and VI (p. 75) give only one battle and that fought on 8 May, 1464.

Altogether the battle has received far less attention than it deserves and I know of no attempt to place it in its context as the last major incident in the campaigns of the early years of Edward IV. C. S. Perceval² sorted out the chronology of these years, but he was concerned to attempt to treat the movements which lead up to the battle in any detail.

It is rather surprising that a battle was fought at Hexham at all, and to explain it the movements of the Yorkists and Lancastrians after the Duke of Somerset's escape from Wales in December, 1463,³ must be considered. His return to the Lancastrian party seems to begin a new policy. Except for an eighteen days' siege of Norham in the summer of 1463⁴ the Lancastrians had made no attempt to do more than hold the three important castles of Alnwick, Bamburgh and Dunstanburgh, where they had retreated after the battle of Towton. They had lost them for a time and regained them, but had attempted no further advance. Probably their forces were at no time large enough to enable them to take the offensive. But early in 1464 a new and aggressive policy was adopted, apparently under Somerset's influence. On his escape from Wales he made straight for Newcastle,⁵ hoping

² *Archæologia* xlvii, pp. 265-94, *On some inaccuracies in the ordinary accounts of the early years of Edward IV.*

³ *Gregory's Chronicle*, p. 220 (Camden Soc., 1876); *Paston Letters*, iii, p. 151 (ed. J. Gairdner, 1910).

⁴ *Gregory*, p. 220.

⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 223.

to find it still garrisoned by his own men, whom Edward IV had sent there at the time when Somerset was high in his favour. Somerset expected to find them ready to change their allegiance again, as he had done, and to hold the town under himself for Henry VI. But some time before he arrived in the north-east the garrison of Newcastle had been changed and Lord Scrope⁶ with some of Edward's household was captain of the town. Somerset never reached Newcastle. He narrowly escaped capture at Durham⁷ and disappeared. He may have gone north to Alnwick, where Henry was himself at this time, according to the *Year Book*,⁸ although its evidence on this point is not entirely reliable as it includes in the list of those with Henry Queen Margaret and de Brezé, both of whom were in France.⁹ But Henry is more likely to have been at Alnwick than in Scotland where he usually lived, since the Scots were treating for peace after Warwick's relief of Norham and his capture of Berwick.¹⁰ To expel Henry was an obvious preliminary. The *NCH* i gives Bamburgh as his residence, but there is no positive evidence of this. On the other hand Somerset may have gone no farther north than Tynedale, where some places were held for the Lancastrian party. Henry VI had issued letters of protection to William Burgh,¹¹ constable of Prudhoe castle in December, 1463, so presumably that castle was in Lancastrian hands as well as the tower of Hexham and the castles of Bywell and Langley, which the Yorkists took after the battle of Hexham.¹² When next he is heard of it is in this district. Sir Ralph Percy and Sir Humphrey Neville,¹³ with some troops, joined him with the intention of stopping Montague from going north to conduct the Scottish peace commissioners to York. The success of negotiations between Scotland and Edward IV would be fatal to the Lancastrian cause, since for the past three years they had relied on Scotland as a base. Henry VI and Margaret, when she was not

⁶ *ibid.*¹⁰ Stow, *Annales* (1615), p. 417.⁷ *ibid.*¹¹ *NCH* i, p. 46.⁸ Surt. Soc., p. cviii.¹² *Brief Latin Chronicle*, p. 179 (Camden Society).⁹ See p. 9.¹³ *Gregory*, p. 224.

in France, lived there rather than in one of the northern castles and they had assembled their forces, many of which were supplied by the Regent, there. Somerset made every effort to prevent the negotiations at York. With his small force, "four score spears and bows too" he laid an ambush for Montague "a little from Newcastle in a wood",¹⁴ but the plan was known to the Yorkists and Montague took another route to Newcastle and there gathered "a great fellowship" before moving north to Norham. Somerset prepared to meet him again, since a successful battle would not merely cripple Montague, but would delay negotiations and might even make the Scots reconsider negotiating. After the failure of his ambush he must have hurried north to Alnwick and there gathered reinforcements. The Lord Hungerford,¹⁵ captain of Alnwick, amongst others joined him, and his force was increased from eighty to five thousand,¹⁶ if Gregory's estimate is to be believed; probably it was not nearly so large. But still he was no match for Montague, who completely routed his men at Hedgley Moor, where he tried to bar Montague's passage. The battle was fought on April 25 and Montague continued safely north to Norham where he met the Scots and escorted them south.

After the rout of his forces Somerset seems to have withdrawn south again to Tynedale, taking the main part of the Lancastrian forces with him, but leaving garrisons at Alnwick, Bamburgh and Dunstanburgh. Probably Henry VI accompanied him, although it is difficult to see why Henry should leave the comparative safety of Alnwick, with Bamburgh in easy reach and the possibility of escape by sea. But there is no doubt that he was at Bywell before the battle of Hexham and it seems most likely that he moved at this time with Hungerford and the other Lancastrian leaders. Somerset probably intended to collect his forces for a decisive battle and Henry's presence would serve to rally his

¹⁴ Gregory, p. 224.

¹⁵ Hungerford was sent to France by Margaret in July, 1463, but must have returned soon after.

¹⁶ Gregory, p. 224.

supporters. The Lancastrian position was growing worse and only a successful battle would retrieve it. Part of Henry's trouble was that his followers only supported him in the hope of personal profit and would always desert to the Yorkists if they could strike a bargain with Edward IV, as Somerset, Percy and Grey had done in 1463. His other main difficulty was financial. Edward as the *de facto* king controlled the parliamentary sources of revenue, and since most of the country was in his hands he could gather taxes to support his army in the field. Henry could only rely on voluntary contributions, a valueless source, as his followers had lost their estates, and on help from France and Scotland, from which he had received some help in the past, but which was now withdrawn, the French having negotiated with Edward IV at Saint Omer in the autumn of 1463, and the Scots now negotiating at York. The commons rose on his behalf in Lancashire and Cheshire in March, 1464,¹⁷ but had soon quietened down again. Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland and Westmorland were mainly Lancastrian in sympathy. Edward did not attempt to raise any levies in those parts when he sent out writs to the sheriffs of the other counties.¹⁸ But Henry was unable to take advantage of their loyalty. Some of the party funds had been misappropriated. Gregory's chronicle,¹⁹ describing the capture of Tailbois in a coal pit near Newcastle after the battle of Hexham, says that *he hadde moche mony with hym, bothe golde and sylvyr, that shulde hav gon unto King Harry; and yf it had come to Harry, lat kynge of Ingelonde, hyt wolde have causyd moche sore sorowe, for he had ordynyd harneys and ordenance i-nowe, but the men wolde not go one fote with hym tylle they had mony.*

Henry VI and his forces must have arrived in Tynedale at the end of April. Henry stayed at Bywell. The story of the Yorkists finding his helmet, *cum corona et gladio*, when they took the castle is not a later fiction, like the tales which

¹⁷ *Paston Letters*, iii, p. 152.

¹⁸ Rymer, *Foedera*, xi.

¹⁹ Gregory, p. 226.

connect Margaret with the district, but is mentioned in a contemporary record.²⁰ Montague returned to Newcastle after taking the Scots to York and on *the xiiii daye of May, my lorde Mountague toke hys jornaye toward Hexham from Newcastle*.²¹ He must have advanced along the Carrel gate, on the north side of the Tyne, and this raises a problem. His objective was Hexham and not Bywell, nor do the Lancastrians seem to have been concerned with the fate of Bywell castle. Henry VI must have moved before the battle and the headquarters of the army have been at Hexham. Henry's exact movements at this time are uncertain. There is no contemporary evidence that Henry was still with his party at the time of the battle. Yet it has often been asserted that he was present on the field. Only Hall and Grafton, sixteenth-century chroniclers, say that he was there.²² Stow, on the other hand, also a late chronicler, states that Henry fled four days before the battle.²³ He is the only one who gives this information and its source cannot be traced, but it seems highly probable. Neither Montague nor Somerset could have ignored Bywell if Henry had still been there and the battle would surely have taken place near there rather than near Hexham, if he had remained in the castle as is sometimes assumed. It seems reasonable to believe that Henry fled before the battle, probably as soon as the news that Montague was preparing to advance was learned. He seems to have gone westwards²⁴ rather than to Scotland, where Gregory²⁵ says that he fled. There he would be in danger of being handed over to Edward, as the peace negotiations were in progress. In the north of England the danger of betrayal must have been as great, but probably some of those who fled with him came from the north-west. He was

²⁰ *Brief Latin Chronicle*, p. 179.

²¹ *Gregory*, p. 224.

²² Hall, *Chronicle* (1809), 260; Grafton, *Chronicle* (1809), ii, p. 3; *NCH*, vi, p. 75.

²³ Stow, *Annales*, p. 418.

²⁴ *ibid.* says to Lancashire.

²⁵ *Gregory*, p. 232. He is not well informed of Henry's movements and even gets the place where he was captured wrong, giving Furness Fell.

at one time sheltered at Crackenthorpe near Appleby, and in July, 1464, was captured near Clitheroe in Lancashire, by Sir Thomas Talbot.²⁶

Montague's advance along the Tyne was unopposed. Bywell castle was apparently not taken until after the battle of Hexham;²⁷ the Lancastrian garrison must have been withdrawn before he came as he could hardly have ignored it. It is just possible that he advanced along the south side of the Tyne, but there does not seem to have been any road along that side and Prudhoe may have held a Lancastrian force, although the only suggestion that the Lancastrians held it is Henry's letter to William Burgh. There is no mention of it in the *Year Book* or the *Chronicles*. Somerset must have selected the site of the battle to dispute the crossing of the Devil's Water, the last obstacle between Newcastle and Hexham. Montague presumably crossed the Tyne at Bywell or Corbridge. The Devil's Water can only be forded at a few places above Dilston, and there seems no doubt that it was above Dilston that the battle was fought, although some have tried to place it on the level ground between Hexham and the Tyne. This, however, will not fit the contemporary descriptions of the site. The *Year Book*²⁸ describes the site as *un lieu appelle Livels, sur le ewe Devyls* and Worcester²⁹ as a hill one mile from Hexham. Hall and Grafton follow the *Year Book*, calling it a "fair plain called Livels".³⁰ Later writers formed no exact idea of the site. T. C. Anstey and J. Gibson³¹ paid a visit to "what we of Hexham regard as the field of battle, viz. the ground between Dukesfield and Linnels on the south side of the Devil's Water". "Y.H. of Newcastle" was "assured that the battle happened at a place called Lennolds, south-west of Hexham and that the lines of entrenchment are still to be seen."³²

²⁶ *Warkworth's Chronicle*, p. 5, and notes on p. 41 (Camden Soc., 1839).

²⁷ *Brief Latin Chronicle*, p. 179.

²⁸ Surt. Soc., p. cix.

²⁹ Worcester, *Annales*, p. 779, printed in *The Wars of the English in France*, ii, part 2, Rolls Series.

³⁰ Hall, p. 260; Grafton, ii, p. 3.

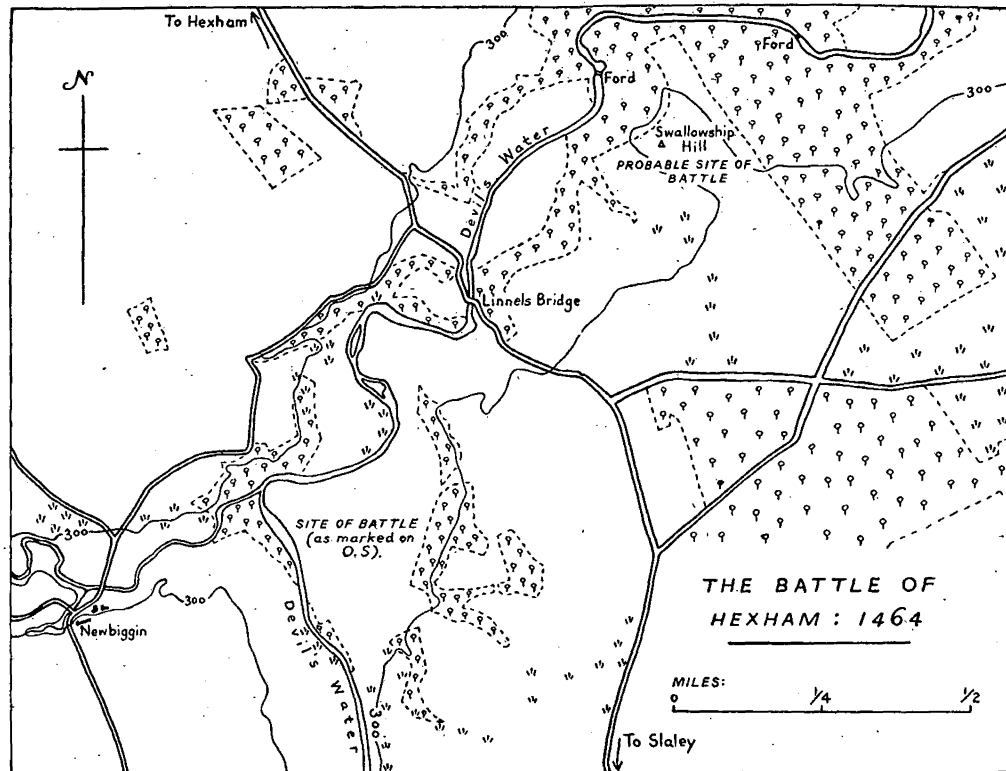
³¹ *AA* (3), vi, p. 6.

³² *Gentleman's Magazine* (1778), p. 507.

J. H. Ramsey offers a detailed description of the site,³³ "a meadow of some 15 or 20 acres on the banks of the Devil's Water; a nice sheltered camping ground, if concealment was the object, but a very bad battle field, a mere trap in fact, with one entrance and no outlet, the meadow being enclosed on one side by the bushy banks of the river and on the other by steep wooded heights." His description is that of the site marked on the Ordnance Survey six-inch map and it is hardly possible that this is the correct place. His own account of its defects make it unlikely, although Raine³⁴ thought that Somerset might have chosen such a site in an attempt to prevent his troops from fleeing as soon as the enemy came upon them. But Montague's objective was Hexham and this site is a long way south of Hexham and moreover it does not command any crossing place of the Devil's Water. Had Somerset really drawn up his troops on the site given by the Ordnance map Montague could have crossed the stream lower down without opposition and cut him off from his base. The three obvious crossings for anyone advancing on Hexham from the east are all lower downstream, and there is one site which commands them all. Swallowship Hill is the obvious site for the battle to have been fought. It commands the crossing at Linnolds, to the south of the hill, the ford near Swallowship well to the west and another ford to the north of the hill, where the Devil's Water is running west to east. Moreover it does not only control these crossings, it looks over a wide district and from there Somerset would be able to see Montague's advance, and if he showed any intention of crossing the Devil's Water between Dilston and the Tyne, Somerset could, without much difficulty, have marched to intercept him. Swallowship Hill seems to be the place that Anstey and Gibson are trying to describe and I think they are right. This site fits as well as the Ordnance site the description of Worcester and the *Year Book*, while tactically it is far superior.

³³ *Lancaster and York* (1892), ii, p. 303.

³⁴ *Surt. Soc.*, op. cit., introduction, pp. civ-cvi.



The actual battle must have been brief, although Grafton calls it "a sore fought field".³⁵ Montague must have encamped somewhere near the site on the night of the 14 May and the battle have occurred early in the day, as Somerset was executed in Hexham that same day. The Lancastrians seem to have scattered and tried to save themselves almost as soon as the Yorkists attacked. There is no mention of anyone being killed on the field, although the list of executions of those who tried to escape and failed, is long. If the Lancastrian numbers were really 500 to the Yorkists' 10,000 as Worcester says,³⁶ this is not surprising. But no doubt he exaggerates the difference in numbers. Warkworth³⁷ gives Montague only 4,000 and says that Somerset "gathered a great people in the north country", but gives no figures. He says that the commons of the Lancastrian party made no attempt at all to withstand Montague's attack and their leaders seem to have been no bolder. Hexham was another rout like Hedgley Moor, but with more disastrous results. Montague was not hindered, as at Hedgley Moor by the necessity of meeting the Scots commissioners, from pursuing the fugitives and few escaped.

It has often been claimed that Queen Margaret was with the Lancastrian forces when the battle was fought, but this is impossible. There is no reason to doubt the story of Margaret and the robbers which Chastellain had at only second hand, but Queen's cave in West Dipton Wood cannot be the scene of her adventure and some other explanation for the name Queen's Letch must be found. Neither Chastellain nor Monstrelet, who both give the story, say that it took place near Hexham. They give no locality at all. It is certain that she had left England before the battle was fought and had not returned. The time of her departure can be accurately determined. It must have been early in August, 1463. On July 22 she was in Edinburgh and wrote to

³⁵ Grafton, ii, p. 3.

³⁶ *Annales*, p. 779.

³⁷ Warkworth, p. 5.

Louis XI from there.³⁸ The letter is only dated by the day and month, but 1463 is the only year in which it could have been written, since Louis XI only succeeded Charles VII on July 22, 1461. Margaret could not know of his accession to write to him on the very day, and in 1462 she was not in Edinburgh but at Rouen collecting troops and money to renew the campaigns against Edward. It is not known exactly when she left Edinburgh, but she moved to Bamburgh and embarked there³⁹ for Sluys, where she arrived sometime between 6 and 10 August.⁴⁰ The Duke of Burgundy, in a letter to Louis XI from Boulogne on 24 August, 1463, writes⁴¹: *et vous soit plaisir de savior . . . que j'ay recue voz lettres a Dourdan le xix jour de ce mois, faisant mancion de la recepte de mes lettres que nagaire par avant je vous avoie envoyées, vous advertissant de la venue de la royne d'Angleterre en ma ville de L'Escluse*. These letters which point to August as the date of her departure must outweigh the testimony of Worcester⁴² who says that she left in April, 1463. In any case his statement is open to doubt since he has just described the arrival of the English ambassadors at Saint Omer and then continues, *in eodem mense Aprilis*. The ambassadors certainly arrived there in August, so possibly his April is merely a slip. Margaret's adventure with the robbers could not then have taken place near Hexham. Possibly Norham was the scene of the story, but it might have happened at various places and times after the battle of Towton. Gregory says that after the siege of Norham she was forced to flee⁴³ and take ship for France where she arrived destitute.

No attempt was made to rally after the battle of Hexham. Henry was in hiding, Margaret abroad, Somerset dead and many others were executed or else in various refuges in the

³⁸ J. Calmette and G. Périnelle, *Louis XI et L'Angleterre* (1930), pièces Justificatives 19.

³⁹ Worcester, *Annales*, p. 39 note.

⁴⁰ Calmette and Périnelle, p. 39 note.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, pièces just., 20.

⁴² Worcester, *Annales*, p. 448.

⁴³ Gregory, p. 220.

North Tyne area and in Cumberland. Humphrey Neville lived on an island in Derwentwater for a time, then moved to Yorkshire. Tailbois is stated to have been captured in a coal mine near Newcastle or by some in the North Tyne district. Sir Ralph Grey, who was not present at the battle, held out for a time at Bamburgh, but the attempt to hold it was not long lived and like Alnwick and Dunstanburgh and the three Lancastrian posts in Tyndale, Hexham, Bywell and Langley, it fell into the hands of the Yorkists. By the end of June, 1464, the whole of England was for the first time since the beginning of his reign under Edward's control.