

**UNKNOWN SOLDIERS: THE DISCOVERY OF WAR GRAVES FROM THE
BATTLE OF TOWTON AD1461**

Tim Sutherland

Introduction

The following paper, written by way of a thank you to Arnold Aspinall for all his dedicated work, summarises the archaeological surveys and excavations carried out as a part of the Towton Battlefield Archaeological Survey Project (TBASP) at Towton Hall from 1996 to 2006.

The Project began at the hall following the excavation of a medieval mass war grave in September 1996, and it is here that some of the more interesting excavations have subsequently taken place. Battlefield, or more correctly, Conflict Archaeology had not been conducted as part of a multidisciplinary project in Britain prior to the TBASP. During its initial conception a variety of survey methods were considered and then rejected due to a number of factors, time and money being the most pressing. A great deal of time was spent searching, not only for the best way forward but for funding to be able to proceed. Very little finance was forth coming and so in order to progress further survey methods had to be economised and volunteers sought. One of the first of these was Dr. Arnold Aspinall, recently retired head of Department of Archaeological Sciences. Another was John Crummet, for many years a technician for the same department who was also about to retire. Both men had taught the author during the BSc Archaeology and MSc Archaeological Prospection degrees at the University. Both men provided their own time and often their own expenses so they could move the project on, such was their conviction that funding would be made available. If it had not been for these two men the author could not have proceeded. However, due to the enthusiasm generated by this small team others later joined in. Since that time over one hundred people have volunteered and worked for the project and the results have steadily improved in terms of locating evidence of the 1461 conflict.

There have been some who have inferred that a project such as this would be a waste of time as it could, at best, only confirm things that we already knew about the conflict. However, this project has highlighted, among other important issues, a forgotten method of manufacturing medieval arrowheads. It has located individual graves of combatants and mass graves in the centre of the Towton battlefield which are providing details of undocumented burial practices. It has also suggested that the accepted history of the conflict that took place on 29th March 1461 has been significantly misinterpreted since the early nineteenth century.

However, that is the broader picture. This paper focuses on the physical evidence for the 1461 conflict that has been discovered at Towton Hall, thanks to the dedication of the original survey team.

The Historical background

The small village of Towton is situated four kilometres to the south of the market town of Tadcaster and 18 kilometres southwest of the city of York, the medieval secular and ecclesiastical centre of northern England. This small medieval hamlet gave its name to what is regarded as the largest battle ever fought on British soil, with over 100,000 combatants allegedly taking part and approximately 28,000 dead (English Heritage 1995). The Battle of Towton took place on Palm Sunday, 29th March 1461 between the armies of King Henry VI of the house of Lancaster and Edward Earl of March, later Duke of York, of the house of York. Preceding the battle Edward had been proclaimed the new king, and after his victory at Towton he was crowned King Edward IV (Myers 1969)

It is known from King Edward IV's 1461 Act of Attainder that the battle took place '*in a field ...called Saxtonfield and Towtonfield*' (Strachey, 1767), upon the rolling landscape on the very edge of the vale of York. However, although much has been written about the battle, most of it is based on surprisingly little primary historical resources. Secondary historical documents, mainly eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century works (e.g. Drake (1736), Leadman (1891) and Boardman (1996) reiterate and embellish the earlier sources whilst adding local legends and folklore.

The most tangible evidence for the battle came from the excavation of a mass grave containing the remains of approximately 50 individuals, which was excavated and recorded during building work at Towton Hall (Sutherland 2000a). A radiocarbon date confirmed that the skeletons were contemporary with the battle. Detailed analysis of the excavated material revealed that all individuals were males who had suffered extensive trauma, inflicted by swords, knives, bills, and war hammers (Boylston *et al.* 2000). The published results, 'Blood Red Roses, The archaeology of a mass grave from the Battle of Towton, AD 1461' (Fiorato *et al.* 2000) created considerable interest and was covered by a successful award winning television documentary of the same name (Lyons 1999).

The Towton Battlefield Archaeological Survey Project

Following on from these primary discoveries it was decided to initiate an extensive landscape survey project to reveal further archaeological evidence from the battle (Sutherland 2000b). As most of the field boundaries from the period had been removed and other landmarks connected with the battle destroyed, it was clear from the outset that the integration of several site assessment techniques was required to draw meaningful conclusions. The project therefore relies on the re-analysis of existing data from the *North Yorkshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record* (SMR), maps and aerial photographs, and the collection of new data through geophysical surveys, field walking and dedicated metal detector searches.

In 1997 the author instigated further archaeological work at Towton Hall in an attempt to recover additional evidence of the conflict, and in particular of other

burials. One of the first of these surveys involved the testing of an electromagnetic survey instrument, which had been adapted from the Whites TM808 twin coiled metal detector by John Crummet of Bradford University. The survey was carried out in the front garden of Towton Hall a few metres to the southeast of where the mass grave had been discovered in 1996. In order to log the results taken from the instrument the readings were initially recorded using pen and paper. Later, following the donation, by Roger Walker (Geoscan Research), of a DL15 data logger, which was then attached to the TM808, the data could be recorded automatically. The data was compared to that of other geophysical surveys undertaken over the same area using fluxgate gradiometry and earth resistance instruments resulting in comparative information which aided the subsequent interpretation. The EM 'metal mode' survey, for example, clearly shows the non-ferrous metal anomaly (copper cables) running between the outside middle of the hall and the outdoor lamp standard to the south-southeast (as highlighted by the low resistance anomaly – its service trench - on the earth resistance survey). Several anomalies were highlighted during the surveys but non were interpreted as evidence of further mass graves.

In 1998 the owner of the hall granted the archaeological team permission to excavate the site of a planned footpath across the centre of the oval front lawn of the hall providing the opportunity to check some of the survey results. The excavation resulted in the discovery of extensive building rubble, a stone wall dating to the medieval period, and several non-ferrous and ferrous artefacts including a medieval silver penny from the reign of Edward I, and one human tooth. This tooth lay within the backfill of the late eighteenth century building rubble suggesting that somewhere within, or close to, the structure of the hall the workmen had disturbed human remains.

In 2002 the author was given permission to excavate a test pit behind shrubs, beneath the window of the dining room of the hall in order to assess whether or not any other graves lay between the lawn and the hall. The limited excavation uncovered a human femur lying in disturbed natural gravel. In order to assess whether this was another mass grave or a single interment the size of the trench was expanded. This revealed the lower half of a single skeleton, that of a small mature male, which lay in a west east orientation and exhibited evidence of rickets (Holst 2004). The remains were examined and recorded in situ by Malin Holst of York Osteoarchaeology Ltd. and reburied where they were discovered. No evidence of trauma or for the date of the skeleton was discovered. Only one side of a grave cut was apparent during the excavation, a fact which was to become of interest in the interpretation of a later excavation.

In 2002 the owner of Towton Hall also provided the archaeological team with an opportunity to verify one of the historical documentary references related to the cellar in the hall. In 1994 an authority on the battle, Andrew Boardman, reiterated a local story which stated that during former building works, '*...the cellars of Towton Hall were extended to meet a solid wall of human skeletons in the late 1700's*' (Boardman 1996, 96). In order to check this story the author gained access to the cellar and located the only part of the cellar wall that had been disturbed and rebuilt. This stood in the northeast corner of the cellar. Subsequently, when the top few courses of stone from the rebuilt area were removed stratified layers of debris and rubble were recorded. This contained fragments of moulded plaster which once formed part of high status room decoration, a broken copper alloy spur, and a very well preserved

coin dated suggesting that the remains had been deposited some time after this date. Additionally, there were several fragments of human remains, including finger bones and teeth. To the surprise of everyone involved, beneath the rubble was a partially demolished stone staircase which must once have provided access to the cellar before the present front door had been constructed above the stairwell in the eastern exterior wall of the hall. The human remains provided yet more evidence of a disturbed grave but no sign of the mass of bones suggested by Boardman (1996) and earlier authors.

In 2003 the author was given the chance to uncover the remaining part of the 1996 mass grave, which at the time had been hidden beneath the concrete foundation of the former garage that had been demolished in 1996. Beneath the concrete the remaining parts of the skeletons from the 1996 mass grave were uncovered, recorded and excavated. Immediately next to the mass grave, however, lay the remains of another individual. The skeleton was that of an adult male which exhibited evidence of severe head trauma (Holst 2004) suggesting a link to the battle of Towton. Unfortunately, the top half of the skeleton also lay beneath the corner foundations of the hall and so most of the upper part of this skeleton was not accessible.

It was then apparent that the most probable place to locate additional human remains would be beneath the dining room of the hall, as this is the part of the hall nearest to the 1996 mass grave. Unfortunately, it was considered unlikely that permission would be granted to gain access to this area. It was therefore a great surprise and a privilege to be given permission to excavate this area in 2005. The excavation was very kindly funded by the Royal Armouries, Leeds

Excavations in the dining room of Towton Hall, 2005

Beneath the carpet, floorboards, and joists there was a layer of very well sorted former topsoil. Below this was a level layer of stones that appeared to have been naturally sorted over a great deal of time to form a layer which was almost like a yard surface. This was uniformly spread across the excavation area apart from in the southeast corner of the room, where there were several much larger stones.

Upon excavation this area revealed two grave cuts, one containing a single individual (Skeleton 110) and the other a triple burial (Skeletons 111-113). Skeleton 110 was male, 36 - 45 years old and approximately 172cm in height. It had been buried very close to the old ground surface and had 2 flat stones placed upon its shoulders at the time of burial. Skeleton 111 was the most northerly of the triple burials, was male, 36 - 45 years old and approximately 184cm in height. Skeleton 112 was the middle burial of the three and lay above the other two. It was a male, 26-35 years old and approximately 181cm in height. Skeleton 113 was the most southerly of the three, was male, 26 - 35 years old and approximately 174cm in height (Holst forthcoming).

The analysis of an archaeological section across the southern end of the room indicates that the hall had been built some time after the burial of the individuals. This compares favourably with the discovery of the two skeletons that lay outside and beneath the foundations of the hall.

To the west of the single individual there was a shallow depression filled by stones, suggesting the former location of a small intrusion. Special Find number 4, a small ceramic bead, was also discovered in this location.

Interpretations

The four burials located beneath the dining room of the hall each exhibited evidence of severe head trauma caused by sharp and blunt implements. These injuries would suggest that the individuals were killed in 1461 as part of the conflict.

It is possible that the bead beside a small pit-like feature was from a rosary and that the depression next to where it was found represented the location of a small grave marker, over which a rosary or a necklace might have been placed by someone who had buried him or visited the grave.

The locations of two individual burials immediately next to multiple graves might or might not be a coincidence. It is possible that an individual was deliberately buried next to each of the two multiple graves and if this interpretation is correct then it is possible that they represent individuals who had a higher social status or rank to those in the multiple graves.

The grave cut from the southern side of the first individual discovered outside the hall in 2002 could not be located, as if it might once have been part of a larger internment. As the tower attached to the front of the hall was constructed some time after 1700 (Buck 1720) it is possible that the construction of this disturbed a multiple grave, the contents of which were then removed. This might then have led to the story of human remains being discovered during the construction of the foundations of these building extensions in the late nineteenth century, and mistakenly attributed to the development of the cellar.

It is evident from the trauma on most of the skeletal remains discovered from Towton Hall that all the individuals took part in the battle of Towton. The fact that these burials were all laid out in the Christian manner (east-west and supine with the head to the west) sets them apart from those discovered during the 19996 mass grave excavation which were generally buried in a variety of orientations. It is possible that the individual and triple interments were offered more respect than those in the mass grave and therefore might represent burials of the Yorkist dead, whilst the mass grave represented those from the Lancastrian faction.

It is possible that by obtaining evidence of former diet by chemically analysing the human remains it might be possible to highlight social differences between any of these individuals. It is also feasible that one of the skeletons is that of one of several leading members of the aristocracy who were killed and buried somewhere on or near the Towton Battlefield. One such individual was John, 9th Lord Clifford, nicknamed the 'Butcher' or 'Black Faced Clifford' (Clifford, 1987). Future scientific methods might make such an interpretation feasible. Future research will therefore attempt to discover if any of the skeletons can potentially be identified.

Conclusion

From its initial conception, the Towton Battlefield Archaeological Survey Project has attempted to relocate and record evidence of the 1461 conflict. At the time of its instigation there were no set procedures as to how one might archaeologically record the location of a medieval conflict. By applying a multidisciplinary array of archaeological techniques to the problem it has been shown that by scientific analysis, trial and error, an enormous amount of good will and a certain amount of luck, this goal has been successfully achieved.

This brief paper forms a minute part of those results, and as such, the archaeological remains at Towton Hall, should be viewed from a broader perspective. They are however, together with the hundreds of medieval artefacts, arrowheads and other mass graves, located across the battlefield itself, historically important and currently unique.

This project is, therefore, leading the field, and at Towton, as this historical conflict between two English kings attests, there have been some quite impressive leaders in what are some very large fields. It is therefore with unceasing gratitude and respect that I dedicate this paper to Dr. Arnold Aspinnall, my former Head of Department, my close friend and now, due to our respective families genealogical detective work, possibly even my relative (but that is another story). He is, without doubt, a distinguished leader within his own field - that of the archaeological sciences. Without his enduring endeavours, this project and perhaps more importantly the archaeological sciences, would not be as successful as they are today.

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