



# The Oxford Household

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## A Military Summary of the Wars of the Roses

*by Simon Blackwell*

The start is open to debate as some people put 1403 the battle of Shrewsbury as the spark. This was the first attempt to remove a Lancastrian king by force of arms despite the fact that the chief rebels - the Percy's were Lancastrians in later years. They took on (under Henry Hotspur Percy), the King Henry IV and his son the future Henry V. Hotspur was defeated and slain among with most of his noble rebel followers. The young Henry, Prince of Wales and future King earned his spurs at the cost of a nasty face wound.

The first part of the wars really took off in the 1450s with peasants revolts, and more importantly feuding between the great houses of the Percy's and the Neville's. Their vying for influence with an unstable monarch eventually led to open warfare.

The first major action was where Lancastrian blood was shed in the streets of St Albans (1455). Somerset, the Queen's incompetent favourite and Northumberland were among the chief casualties. A contemporary account states that Somerset, denied quarter & cornered was cut down by the sweeping stroke of a poleaxe after felling four Yorkists - despite this, no more than 150 Lancastrians lost their lives.

The feud flared again in 1458 with Salisbury championing the Yorkist cause and earning a Yorkist victory over Audley (slain) at Blore Heath. Two mounted cavalry charges were repulsed by Salisbury's men and when some 500 Lancastrians deserted it was all over. Possibly 2,000 Lancastrians and about 200 Yorkists perished. Less than a month later the result was reversed with an ignominious defeat of the Yorkists at Ludford Bridge

Warwick then took up the Yorkist cause in 1460 and a combination of energetic leadership, wet weather ruining the royal Lancastrian gun powder & the treachery of Grey of Ruthyn resulted in a Lancastrian defeat. Buckingham, Shrewsbury and Egremont were the main nobles that perished. Worse still, the King was captured and taken to London. Yorkist success was short lived however. Owing to a heavy handed assumption of power by York, in December of the same year he was ambushed at Sandal/Wakefield.

The Queen's ungovernable host led by the vengeful sons of those slain at St. Albans annihilated York's force and had his head and those of his chief supporters impaled on poles at the entrance to the city of York. York's severed head was adorned with a paper crown in a fitting gesture. Warwick was then brushed aside by the pillaging Lancastrians at St Albans in 1461.

Indecision cost them however, as Edward, Earl of March fought a textbook fight against the pro Lancastrian Welsh at Mortimer's Cross. Owen Tudor was summarily executed. Everything came to a very bloody head in March 1461 when at Towton, in a blizzard, the larger Lancastrian army was eventually worn down and broken by the Yorkists. Some accounts claim that as many as 80,000 were involved in the battle although a more pragmatic figure would be somewhere in the 20,000s. Needless to say, thousands lost their lives in the bloodiest battle to ever be fought on British soil. Edward's chilling order to spare no nobles appeared to have brought the Wars to an end as the flower of Northern chivalry was struck down.

In 1464 the surviving Lancastrians tried to resurrect the cause. Montagu representing the Yorkists met them at Hedgely Moor. After Percy fell leading Somerset's van the Lancastrians lost heart and fled. The strength of the Lancastrians in their traditional northern strongholds was now crumbling. Somerset tried to make a stand at Hexham but as Montagu's forces approached his army began to melt away. Surrounded, Somerset's force was beaten very quickly and he became the next noble casualty. After Hexham only Bamburgh, Dunstanburgh and Alnwick castles remained Lancastrian. One by one these were threatened and actually received bombard damage. Capitulation swiftly followed.

In 1469 all the remaining surviving Lancastrians were in exile (Beaufort, Tudor & Exeter). However fortune appeared to favour them when Warwick fell out with Edward. Jasper Tudor returned to Wales and began an uprising. Warwick sided with the Lancastrians and landed in the Kent from Calais & marched on London. Edward was in Nottingham dealing with another rebellion. His supporters Devon (Stafford) and Pembroke (Herbert) were marching to assist him. The northern rebels under Conyers intercepted Pembroke at Edgecote. More treachery followed with the Kings vanguard changing sides to the rebel Lancastrians. Maybe as many as 4,000 Yorkists were slain including Pembroke and the fractious Devon. Warwick then captured Edward but released him shortly after. The year 1470 saw Sir Robert Welles backed by Warwick, and Edward's wayward relative The Duke of Clarence begin a rebellion in Lincolnshire. Edward's response was to execute Welles' father and then set out for Welles himself. They met at Empingham where a few artillery rounds were enough to cause such panic in Welles force that a general rout ensued. The Lancastrians threw off their tell tale livery coats giving rise to the name of the battle "Losecoat Field". Welles was beheaded after implicating Warwick & Clarence.

In 1470 Warwick drove Edward out of England and reinstated Henry VI. Edward returned in 1471 but the whole Lancastrian pack of cards collapsed after two disastrous defeats firstly in Barnet then Tewkesbury. Barnet was fought in the fog where confusion reigned supreme. Oxford routed Hastings' Yorkist wing but on returning to the fray misjudged his position, in the mist his banner was mistaken for Edward's and he was duly attacked by his erstwhile allies of Warwick. Suspicious of treachery being afoot, Oxford left the field in disgust leaving Warwick to slog it out with Edward, and Richard of Gloucester. Eventually superior numbers told and Warwick was slain in the free for all melee. At Tewkesbury, the hotly pursued Lancastrian army under Somerset was caught. The campaign ended in bloody carnage and rout where the young Lancastrian prince, Edward of Lancaster was slain in the field, and Somerset dragged from sanctuary in a nearby church to answer the axe man. The twice redundant Henry VI was then done to death shortly after in the tower

After a relative period of peace Edward died in corpulent middle age in 1483 His son Edward V was to follow but after a power struggle ensued, Richard of Gloucester seized the throne and his nephew mysteriously disappeared. In 1485, Henry Tudor invaded and brought Richard III to account at Bosworth. Here the chickens came home to roost for a man surrounded by enemies. Treachery once again played its part as the Stanley's and Northumberland defected to the cause of Tudor. The last Plantagenet King died fighting (note new research may paint a different picture of some of the accepted views of Bosworth)

The final chapter happened in 1487 when the King Henry VII met the last diehard Yorkist army of Irish and German mercenaries at Stoke Field. An impostor was put up to champion the Yorkist cause and after a particularly savage fight where the English longbow men played havoc with the lightly armed and poorly trained Irish Bonnachts and Kerns, the rebel army fled. The Germans who fought in good order capitulated after the death of their captain Martin Schwartz. Lincoln, the chief Yorkist rebel was also killed in the fighting. Casualties on both sides were reported as being very heavy.

The above is by no means exhaustive, numerous smaller scale skirmishes and sieges took place (Solefields (1450), Hewarth Moor (1453), & Nibley Green to name a few), but this article should provide the reader with a quick overview on the period.