

Second Battle of St Albans

Wars of the Roses

by Harvey Watson

The late Alfred H Burne in his classic *The Battlefields of England*, published in the 1950s, wrote of the second battle of St Albans:

In more ways than one this is the most remarkable battle of the Wars of the Roses – and the most tantalising. Remarkable inasmuch as it included three tactical features almost unheard of in medieval warfare – a night approach march followed by a dawn attack; a flank, instead of a frontal attack, and an army occupying a position several miles in length. Tantalising, because the records of the battle are more than usually scanty, even for that period. As a result scarcely a single historian has ventured to compile a map of the battle, and most of them slur over the inherent difficulties and problems as if they did not exist, and pass on as quickly as can be decently be done to subsequent events.

In this article I will endeavour to accept Burne's challenge and establish what really happened at the second battle of St Albans in February 1461. But first we need to understand the background to the battle.

Background

The Lancastrian defeat and the capture of King Henry VI at the battle of Northampton in July 1460 left the Yorkists firmly in the ascendant. The duke of York had been in Ireland at the time of the battle, and when he finally arrived in London in October 1460, he made it plain that he believed that King Henry should now be deposed and replaced on the throne by himself. However, this was going too far for most of the noblemen present. They were well aware that the feeble-minded Henry was unfit to be king, but they still felt bound by their oath of allegiance to him. Eventually, a compromise called the Act of Accord was agreed. Henry was to remain king for the rest of his life, but the duke of York and his sons were recognised as the rightful heirs to the throne. Margaret of Anjou's son was declared to be illegitimate and to have no claim to the throne. The act was a clumsy compromise that guaranteed further conflict. Margaret would never accept a settlement that excluded her son from the succession. She was in Scotland making an alliance with the Scots. At the same time various Lancastrian peers were recovering from the shock of Northampton and, led by the duke of Somerset, were assembling a large army in Yorkshire.



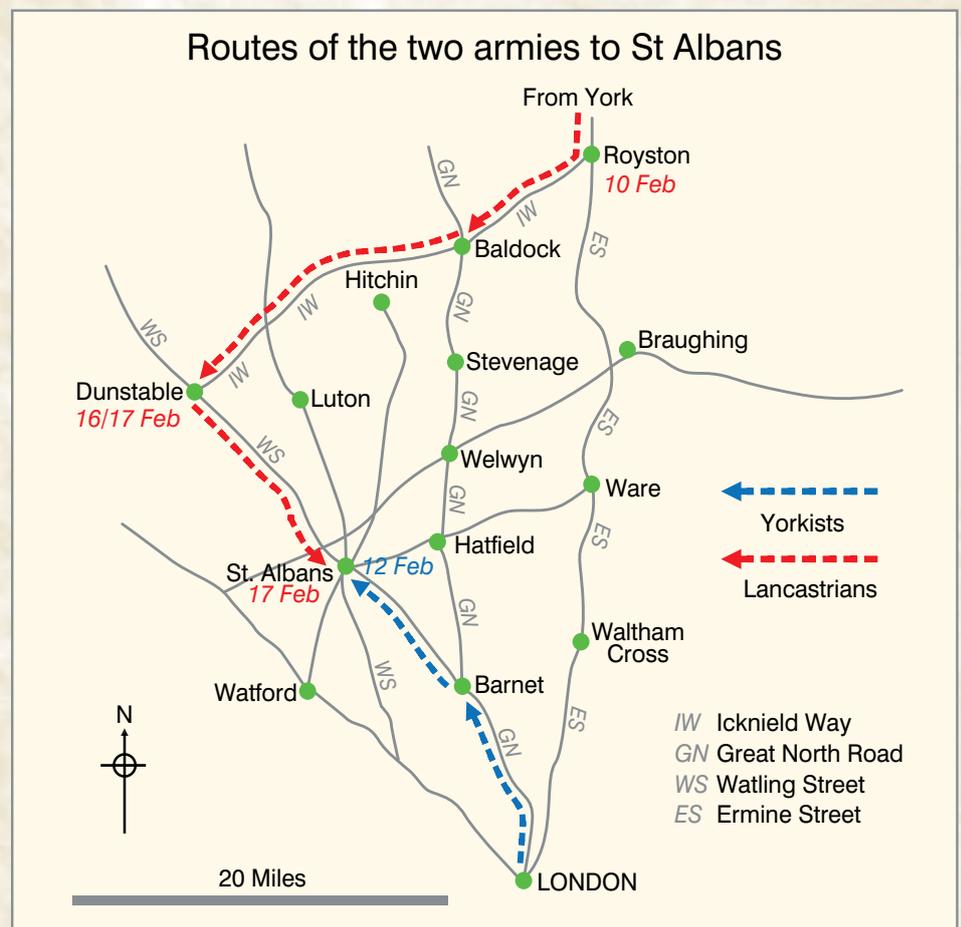
King Henry VI



Queen Margaret of Anjou, depicted in the Talbot Shrewsbury Book.

Action had to be taken, and whilst Richard Neville, earl of Warwick, (Warwick the Kingmaker), was left in charge of the king in London, the duke of York's eldest son, nineteen-year-old Edward, earl of March, (later King Edward IV) took a small army to keep an eye on the Lancastrian

supporters in Wales. At the same time the duke of York, his brother-in-law, the earl of Salisbury, and York's second son, the seventeen-year-old earl of Rutland, led an army into Yorkshire. At the disastrous battle of Wakefield, on 30 December 1460, York fell into a Lancastrian ambush





Bernards Heath – where it is crossed by the A1081 (previously the A6) heading north. Where the road disappears into the trees is the crest of the plateau. Warwick would have had a good vantage point from this position.



The Iron Age Beech Bottom Dyke – which Warwick incorporated into his defences. Even today, after 2,000 years of erosion, it is still an impressive sight.



Richard Neville

16th earl of Warwick (Warwick the Kingmaker), from the Rous Roll.

and his army was cut to pieces. York was killed in the battle and Rutland was deliberately murdered by Lord Clifford, Salisbury was captured alive and promised to pay a large ransom but was seized by a Lancastrian mob and beheaded. The severed heads of York, Rutland and Salisbury were impaled on the spikes of the Micklegate bar in the City of York. It was said that two spikes were deliberately left vacant so that they could eventually be adorned with the heads of March and Warwick.

In January 1461, Queen Margaret and her son, the young Prince Edward, led a huge Lancastrian army south. The Lancastrians wore the prince's badge of black and red with ostrich feathers, thus demonstrating their loyalty to the prince and their rejection of the Act of Accord. In theory the army was commanded by Henry Beaufort, third duke of Somerset, whose father had been killed at the first battle of St Albans in 1455. The army included Welsh, Scottish and French mercenaries.

As the Lancastrian army slowly advanced down the old Roman road of Ermine Street, it left a thirty-mile-swathe of destruction in its wake. A wave of horror swept across southern England. Once Margaret's army crossed the river Trent they seemed to believe that they were free to loot, pillage and rape as they wished. This proved to be a major strategic blunder, the behaviour of Margaret's army rallied support to the Yorkist cause across southern England. Ironically, Margaret's more undisciplined followers proved to be of little military value, happy to loot and pillage, they deserted wholesale when faced with the prospect of a full-scale battle.

Edward, earl of March, was a determined young man and was no doubt burning to avenge the brutal killing of his father and brother at Wakefield, but before he could start his march to join forces with Warwick news reached him that James Butler, earl of Wiltshire and Jasper Tudor, earl of Pembroke, had landed in Wales with an army of mercenaries and were raising

Welsh recruits with plans to join Queen Margaret's army.

Deciding that he had to deal with this threat first, he marched to intercept the two earls and defeated them at the battle of Mortimers Cross, on 2 or 3 February 1461 [Eds: See *Battlefield Volume 23 Issue 3, Winter 2019, for an account of the battle*]. This was the first of Edward's great victories in a career that not only made him the most successful military commander in the Wars of the Roses but also earned him the reputation of being one of England's last and greatest, warrior kings. However, although Edward was unstoppable on the battlefield he didn't always appear to grasp the overall strategic situation. Instead of immediately marching east to join forces with Warwick he wasted two weeks in Wales, ensuring that there were no further Lancastrian risings. This meant that Warwick and his army had to face Margaret's northern horde without Edward's support.



The sequence of firing a hand-gun. Photos Peter Shepherd and John Kliene.

The battle

Warwick with an army of approximately 10,000 men and accompanied by King Henry VI, marched from London, arriving at St Albans on 12 February. Warwick deployed his forces to the north of the town on Bernards Heath.

Bernards Heath is a plateau of high ground that dominates all the northerly approaches to St Albans, it also has the advantage of a major Iron Age ditch or dyke, now known as Beech Bottom, which runs for over a mile along the northern edge of the heath, in places it is over 30 feet deep. Even today, after 2,000 years of erosion, overgrown with trees and bushes and surrounded by suburban gardens the ditch is still an impressive sight.

Warwick made his deployments. John Mowbray, duke of Norfolk, commanding the vanguard, was most likely posted to the north-eastern end, on the far right,

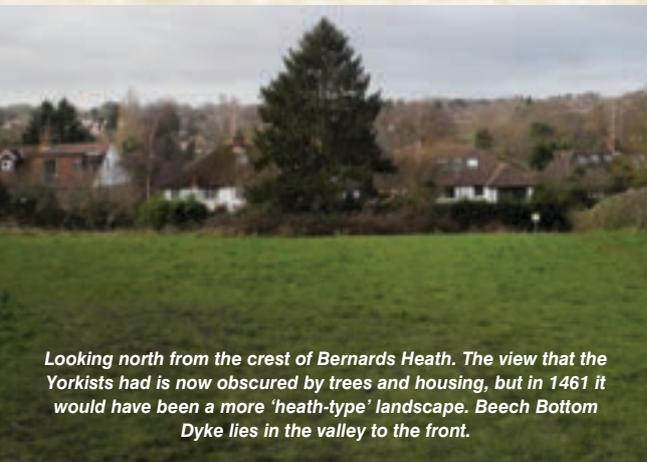
Warwick was in the centre and his younger brother, John Neville, Lord Montagu, was commanding the rear-guard on the left at the south-west end of the deployment. There was a small detachment of archers holding the centre of St Albans around the Clock Tower – probably also keeping their bows dry under cover if the Meteorological Office's account of the weather that day was true – and possibly a second detachment in the town in the vicinity of St Peter's church.

This conjectured deployment allowed Warwick to cover the two main roads coming in from the north, to maximise the benefit of the lie of the land, and to spread his forces over two miles, but still close enough to be mutually supportive. According to a contemporary chronicle 'The Lords in King Harry's party pitched a field and fortified it very strongly'. This conjectured deployment is confirmed by the one solid piece of battlefield archaeology we now have – a cannon ball

– and it avoids making Warwick have to disperse his army across too much territory. His big failure of generalship in the fight to come was that he allowed his three battles (and the outposted archers) to be engaged piecemeal and never support each other.

In fortifying their encampment the Yorkists employed a number of devices which were normally only used in defensive warfare. These included caltrops, iron nails twisted together so that one spike was always pointing upwards, and naval anti-boarding nets. These nets measured 24 feet by 4 feet and had a nail sticking upright at every second knot, so if laid out on the ground they would injure anyone trying to pass over them, effectively blocking any paths or gaps in hedges.

As well as these devices Warwick's Burgundian mercenaries were armed with cannon, and a terrifying new-weapon, the 'hand-gun'. These handguns, although crude and unreliable were nonetheless

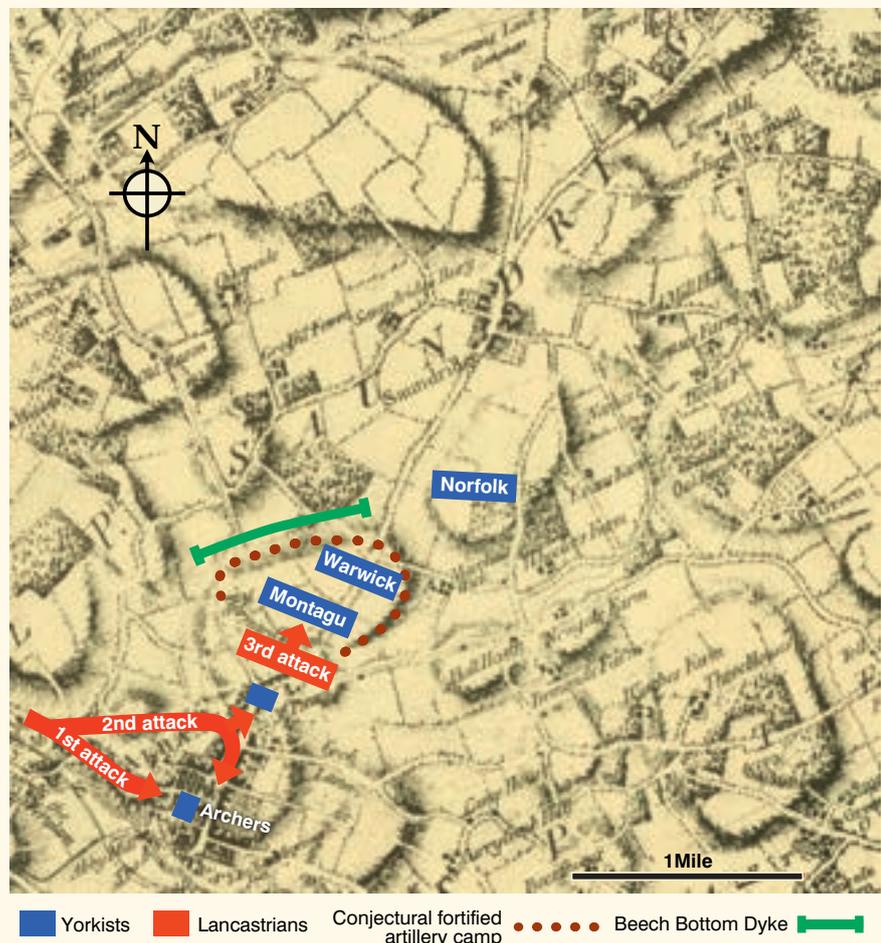


Looking north from the crest of Bernards Heath. The view that the Yorkists had is now obscured by trees and housing, but in 1461 it would have been a more 'heath-type' landscape. Beech Bottom Dyke lies in the valley to the front.



High Street and Market Place in St Albans, with the Clock Tower on the right. The first Lancastrian attack would have entered the area from the left (George Street) of the white building in the distance – only to be met by a flurry of arrows from the Yorkist archers in the surrounding buildings.

Second Battle of St Albans - Phase 1 The Lancastrian Attack



■ Yorkists ■ Lancastrians Conjectural fortified artillery camp ●●●●● Beech Bottom Dyke ———



Hand-gunners

At the second battle of St Albans, Warwick's army had a contingent of Burgundian gunners. The duke of Burgundy, who favoured the English, particularly the Yorkist faction, provided mercenary troops, especially gunners, to the Yorkists on a number of occasions during the Wars of the Roses. The second battle of St Albans was probably the first time that hand-guns had been used on English soil.

Warwick deployed the Burgundian gunners to create a strong defensive position at St Albans – although this was in vain as the Lancastrians attacked from the flank, rendering the guns virtually useless. As Gregory states in his chronicle:
And before the gunners and Burgundians could level

their guns they were busy fighting, and many a gun of war was provided that was of little avail or none at all.

The hand-gun was a fearsome weapon, although at second St Albans, again according to Gregory, they were just as lethal to the user:
But in time of need they could shoot not one of them, for the fire turned back on those who would shoot these things.

However, at least one hand-gun must have been successfully fired by one of the Burgundians, as there is a report of a Lancastrian being wounded by hand-gun fire – probably the first recorded gunshot casualty in England.



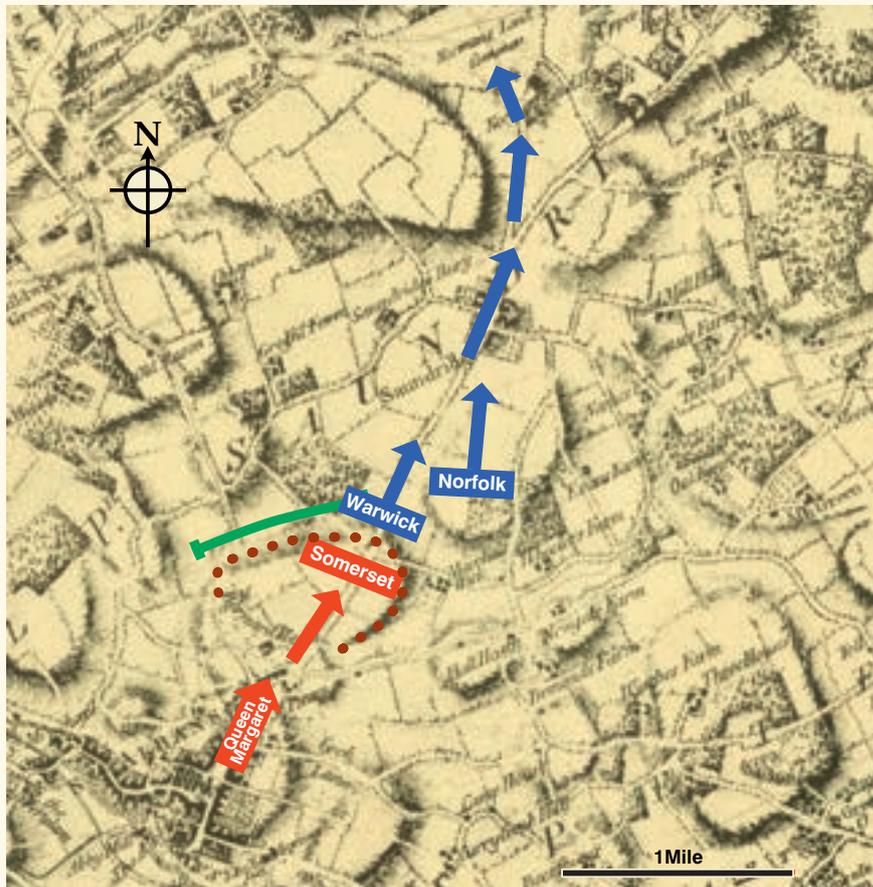
A hand-gunner firing from behind a pavise. Photo John Kliene.

the ancestors of the later muskets and rifles. The second battle of St Albans was probably the first time such weapons had been used in battle on English soil. They also used pavises, wooden boards that enabled the hand-gunners – and also archers – to shoot whilst remaining under cover themselves.

Meanwhile, the Lancastrians were marching down Ermine Street, but when they reached Royston around 10 February, they swung westward and marched the 27 miles to Dunstable, thus outflanking the Yorkist defences, placing themselves between the armies of Edward and Warwick.

Dunstable was held by a small Yorkist force and, according to one contemporary account, the local butcher had persuaded the townsfolk to defend the town against marauding Lancastrians. The townsfolk were massacred, the butcher survived but afterwards hung himself from remorse and shame.

Second Battle of St Albans - Phase 2 The Yorkist Retreat



■ Yorkists
 ■ Lancastrians
 Conjectural fortified artillery camp
 ●●●●● Beech Bottom Dyke
—



St Albans Clock Tower, Market Place. The Eleanor Cross would have stood in front of it, approximately where the circular seating now stands.

*Folly Lane/Catherine Street
– the Lancastrian second
attack advanced up this hill
into St Albans.*



The Lancastrian army didn't halt in Dunstable, and on the night of 16/17 February marched the 12 miles down Watling Street to St Albans. By dawn on the 17th they were in position on the outskirts of the town and ready to launch a surprise attack. Apparently one Yorkist scout had ridden into the town warning of the Lancastrian advance, but he hadn't been believed.

The Lancastrian tactics in this campaign; the ambush at Wakefield, the outflanking march to Dunstable, the night approach march to St Albans, followed by a surprise dawn attack, are surprisingly sophisticated for a medieval army. Much of the credit should go to the duke of Somerset's military adviser, Andrew Trollope, described by contemporaries as 'the great captain' and 'a very subtle man of war'. It is notable that, after Trollope was killed at the battle of Towton, Somerset never won another battle.

At dawn on 17 February, Trollope's vanguard crossed the river Ver near St Michael's church and entered the western end of St Albans. They encountered no resistance until they reached the market-place by the Eleanor Cross, when they were suddenly hit by a storm of arrows from the Yorkist archers in the town. The Lancastrians fell back in confusion. The Eleanor Cross has long since gone, but its original position is

clearly marked, and in other respects this part of St Albans has changed remarkably little in five-and-a-half centuries. The square is still dominated by the medieval Clock Tower, just as it was on that fateful February morning in 1461.

Trollope soon rallied his men and he was reinforced when Somerset and the main

town, another force in the northern end of the town, Yorkist archers in between and the rest of the Yorkist army on Bernards Heath and along the road to Sandridge. By midday the Yorkist archers had been eliminated and St Albans was firmly in the control of the Lancastrians who now advanced past St Peter's church to attack Montagu's division on Bernards Heath.

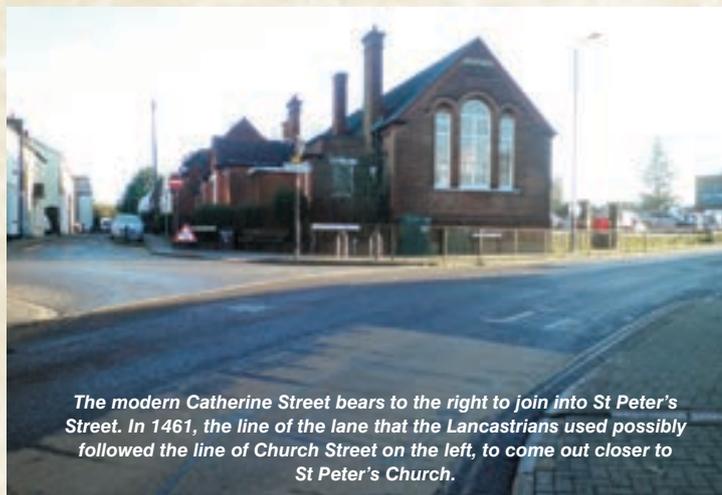


The Second Battle of St Albans by Graham Turner © – a preliminary sketch for a painting. The drawing shows the Lancastrians advancing to attack Montagu's rearguard on Bernards Heath. St Peter's Church and the town of St Albans can be seen in the background.

Abbot John Whethamstede gives a vivid account of the opening stages of the battle:

The Northern men coming to the town of the said protomaryr and hearing that the King with a great army and some of his lords was lying near immediately entered the said town, desiring to pass through the middle of it and direct their army against the Kings army. However, they were compelled to turn back by a few archers who met them near the great cross, and to flee with disgrace to the west end of the town, where by entering by a lane which leads from that

end northwards as far as St Peter's street, they had there a great fight with a certain small band of the people of the kings army. Then after not a few had been killed on both sides, going out to the heath called Barnet [Bernards] Heath, lying near the North end of the town, they had a great battle with certain large forces, perhaps four or five thousand of the vanguard of the kings army.



The modern Catherine Street bears to the right to join into St Peter's Street. In 1461, the line of the lane that the Lancastrians used possibly followed the line of Church Street on the left, to come out closer to St Peter's Church.



St Peter's Street – where Catherine Street joins it on the left. At the time of the battle the lane probably entered into St Peter's Street further along, closer to St Peter's Church, which can just be seen on the right.



Bernards Heath alongside Sandridge Road. The route of Montagu's division would have been over this area, which at the time would have been open heath with hedges alongside the road.



Whethamstede describes Montagu's division as the 'vanguard', originally of course, this division should have been the 'rear-guard' of the Yorkist army, but the Lancastrian attack coming from an unexpected direction had placed Montagu's men at the forefront of the action.

Montagu now had to redeploy his men to face south and the elaborate defences they had prepared, including the caltrops, nets and pavises were now useless. Worse still, in the damp windy conditions the Burgundian hand-gunners proved useless. According to Gregory's account some of the gunners succeeded in blowing themselves up. The battle soon turned into a grim slogging match with the Yorkists hoping for support from Warwick's division, but when Warwick finally arrived with reinforcements it proved to be too little and too late.

According to Whethamstede: *The southern men who were fiercer at the beginning . . . were broken very quickly afterwards, and the more quickly because looking back they saw no one coming up from the main body of the king's army, or preparing to give them help, whereupon they turned their backs on the northern men and fled. And the northern men seeing this . . . pursued them very swiftly on horseback and catching a good many of them, ran them through with their lances.*

As in so many battles in the Wars of the Roses treachery also played a part, when one Sir Henry Lovelace, described as a captain of a company of men from Kent, defected with his men to the Lancastrians. In later years Warwick appears to have used Lovelace as a convenient scapegoat to explain away his defeat, which in reality was caused by the failure of Warwick's

generalship. Nothing illustrates the confusion on the Yorkist side better than the fact that in the chaos of the battle they lost control of King Henry. As Gregory stated: *And in the midst of the battle King Henry went unto his Queen and forsook all his lords, and trust better to her party than unto his own lords.*

King Henry's tent had been pitched under an oak tree on Bernards Heath. According to some reports, Henry spent the battle laughing and singing, though it's not recorded whether this was because he was delighted to see the Yorkists being defeated or because his mental state was such that he could not understand the significance of what was happening. A messenger was sent to the northern lords telling them of Henry's location and several of them then conveyed the king safely to the Lancastrian army.

Meanwhile, Warwick was conducting a fighting retreat as he led his men through Sandridge and Nomansland common. Eventually Warwick was able to slip away in the gathering darkness with some 4,000 men. Warwick had lost over half his army in the battle but at least he had saved something from the debacle. Casualties on both sides were heavy and it's been estimated that by nightfall some 2,300 men lay dead or dying, either in the town or on Bernards Heath.

One of the Lancastrian of note to be killed in the battle was Sir John Grey of Groby. In later years this had unexpected consequences as Sir John left behind an attractive young widow, Elizabeth Woodville, who King Edward IV not only insisted on marrying, but then promoted the Woodville family as a counterbalance to the power and influence of the earl of

Warwick. The result was to split the Yorkist cause and lead to a tragic continuation of the wars.

Three captured Yorkist commanders were brought before Queen Margaret. After noblemen had been executed at Wakefield and Mortimers Cross they could have had little doubt about their probable fate, but what shocked contemporaries was the fact that Margaret encouraged her seven-year-old son Edward, to personally give the order for their execution. 'Let them have their heads taken off', ordered the young prince. Such incidents aren't easily forgotten and ten years later, when he was captured at the battle of Tewkesbury, the Yorkists immediately put him to death. Warwick's younger brother Lord Montagu was also captured but his life was spared, probably because Somerset's younger brother was a prisoner of Warwick's and if Montagu was executed his own brother's life would be forfeit.

After the battle, the Lancastrians celebrated in the Abbey. There were emotional scenes when King Henry was re-united with his family who he hadn't seen for eight months. Queen Margaret persuaded King Henry to knight his young son, and the prince in turn knighted some thirty Lancastrians who had played a prominent part in the battle. Amongst them was Andrew Trollope, who had apparently injured himself by standing on a caltrop, with a preposterous piece of false modesty Trollope apologised and said that the injury had prevented him from performing his usual heroic deeds as he had only killed fifteen of the enemy!

As the Lancastrians celebrated they must have believed that the war was virtually over, York and Salisbury were dead, Warwick was defeated, and perhaps most importantly, they had control over King Henry again. They had no way of knowing that Warwick and the earl of March were about to join forces, March would proclaim himself the rightful king and at Towton, just six weeks after second St Albans, the Lancastrians would be decisively crushed.

Further reading:

Peter Burley, Michael Elliott and Harvey Watson, *The Battles of St Albans* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2007)



St Peter's Street, in front of St Peter's Church. Some fighting probably occurred in this vicinity before the Lancastrians advanced further along the road and out of the town to confront Montagu's division on Bernards Heath.

Second Battle of St Albans

Recent Developments

by Peter Burley

The last ten years or so have been busy for this battle and its battlefield.

In 2011 the Trust held a two-day conference for the 550th anniversary of the battle. It was attended by 120 people over the two days and culminated with a very moving Requiem Mass for the 2,500 people killed in the battle – a rite which had not been celebrated in 1461. The conference was held and the Mass was celebrated in St Saviour's Church, which was not there in 1461, but now stands on the battlefield. Members of the Medieval Siege Society were the stars of the show.

In 2013 the BBC broadcast its historical drama series *The White Queen*, adapted from Philippa Gregory's Wars of Roses novels. The opening few seconds of the first episode showed Sir John Grey being killed at the battle. This set in motion the plot around the relationship between the now-widowed Elizabeth Woodville and King Edward IV. (Sadly, it was not filmed on location).

In 2014 the parish of Sandridge celebrated 900 years of their church and of their parish history – the battlefield was in the parish of Sandridge until 1904. The parish immediately identified the battle as the biggest event in their history and did it full justice with a weekend-long medieval fair and battle re-enactment – thank you to the Medieval Siege Society again. It was attended by thousands of people. (We won't say more here because it has been previously covered in a full article in *Battlefield*).

Also in 2014 the missing last page of *Bale's Chronicle* for the battle turned up out of the blue in an archive in Dublin. The full implications of this text are set out below.

In 2015 a cannon ball was found on the battlefield. It was authenticated as being from the battle by Glenn Foard. The site where it was found confirms the interpretation of the battlefield that Warwick the Kingmaker placed an artillery encampment on ground where his guns could counter the attack he expected the Lancastrians to make from the due north. The cannon ball is being conserved, but it has made one public appearance at an 'Objects on Demand' event held by the St Albans Museum in January 2016.

In 2015 a huge sinkhole opened up under a road on the battlefield. It made national news. It exposed the geological instability of the land around the battlefield caused



Re-enactors in St Albans with Warwick's standard – photograph from the St Albans Museum + Gallery website.

by centuries of clay and chalk mining in it. The legacy of the sinkhole is that some parts of the setting of the battlefield are still closed off from public access and the future of undeveloped land has been kicked into the long grass. For completeness, over the last twenty years, proposals for the land have ranged from a school, to affordable housing, to a hypermarket and to a new park.

In 2017 the tomb of the most authoritative chronicler of the battle was discovered just outside St Albans Cathedral. This was Abbot John (of) Wheathampstead (c.1392–1465). The discovery was made during an archaeological dig taking place prior to the construction of a new welcome centre and improved visitor facilities. The tomb contained his almost complete skeleton and a number of relics, which included three papal bullae – leaden seals issued by Pope Martin V (1417–31) – that left no doubt as to whose

the body was. He watched and reported on the first battle of St Albans in 1455, and again in 1461 on the opening stages of the second battle in the town centre and then talked to the leading Lancastrians that evening when they returned, victorious, to the Abbey. He wrote all this up in the Abbey's *Registrum*.

In September 2018 the local amenity society for the battlefield – the Friends of Bernards Heath (FOBH) – ran a Heritage Open Day event for the battlefield with sixty people attending. There was a talk, a guided tour of the battlefield with particular reference to Beech Bottom Dyke – the Scheduled Ancient Monument fortified by Warwick – and a magnificent tea in the local church hall at St Saviour's.

In 2019 FOBH and St Albans City & District Council brought a signage project to fruition to interpret all the historic open spaces in the area including Beech



The post-medieval cannon balls found on the second St Albans battlefield.



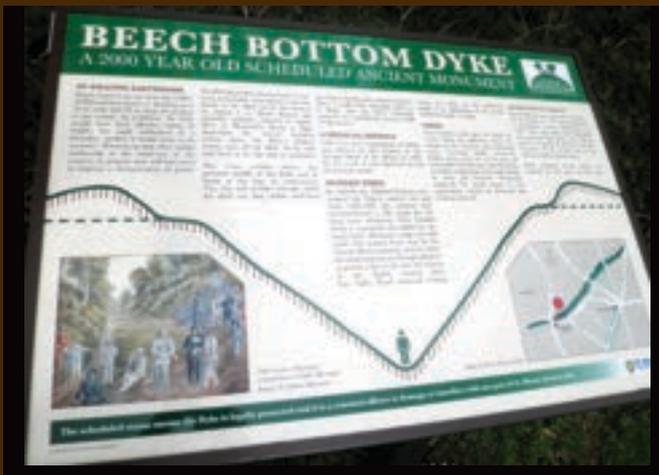
Abbot John of Wheathampstead – the face of an eye-witness to the second battle (and also the first battle) of St Albans. Facial reconstruction © Liverpool John Moores University and Facelab.



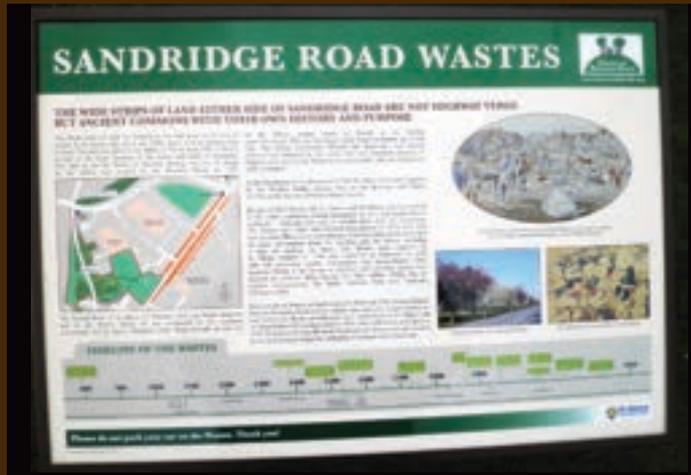
The grave of Abbot John of Wheathampstead when it was discovered, showing his skeleton and the three papal bullae. © Canterbury Archaeological Trust.



A portrait of Abbot John from the abbey's book of benefactors (British Library).



The information panel on Beech Bottom Dyke erected by the Friends of Bernards Heath and St Albans City & District Council.



The information panel on Sandridge Road Wastes erected by the Friends of Bernards Heath and St Albans City & District Council.

Bottom Dyke. All the signs mention the second battle.

Lastly in 2019 a competition was launched for a new children's playground. The brief was that the design should acknowledge that it was on a Wars of the Roses battlefield. Some designs included interpretation boards and play equipment themed on medieval warfare (rest assured, it is not as bad as it sounds!). We do not know, though, when the contract is likely to be awarded and work start.

The Bale Chronicle

The recently discovered missing page contains only 200 words, but it enables us to re-evaluate the Yorkist deployment and the closing stages of the fighting.

Other chronicles mentioned that the duke of Norfolk was present and commanded the vanguard of the Yorkist army, but

gave no other details on his role in the battle. Conventional wisdom became that he had been deployed too far to the north – perhaps even three miles away in Wheathampstead – to have played a part in the battle. Bale, though, stated that Norfolk took part in the fighting right at the end of the battle, in Warwick's retreat north through Sandridge, and was wounded.

If he was close enough to the road to Sandridge to have done this, then he must have been deployed much nearer to Warwick's main battle than previously assumed. This also allows us to infer that Warwick's three battles were deployed spaced more evenly apart on an east-west axis, and not with one completely detached. This makes much more sense of Warwick's generalship and of how the battle fitted into the local topography.

The logical place now to locate Norfolk's

deployment would be on higher ground to the east or northeast of Warwick's main battle and conjectured artillery encampment. This may be ground now occupied by the Jersey Farm Woodland Park and is open to the public. This public access only started in the 1980s, so for any earlier researcher the land would have been a closed book.

In Bale's account, Norfolk realises that the Yorkist army is being rolled up from the south and moves his troops south westward to cover Warwick's retreat – successfully.

An analysis of *Bale's Chronicle* can be found at:
 Hannes Kleineke, *Robert Bale's chronicle and the second battle of St. Albans*, *Historical Research*, Volume 87, Issue 238, November 2014, Pages 744–750,
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2281.12072>
 Published: 15 October 2014