



The Battle of Shrewsbury, 1403

Alexander Rose is the author of *Kings in the North: the House of Percy in British History*, which tells the story of that dynasty from 1066 to 1500.

“Doomsday is near; die all, die merrily”

Hotspur, *Henry IV Part 1* : act 4, scene 1

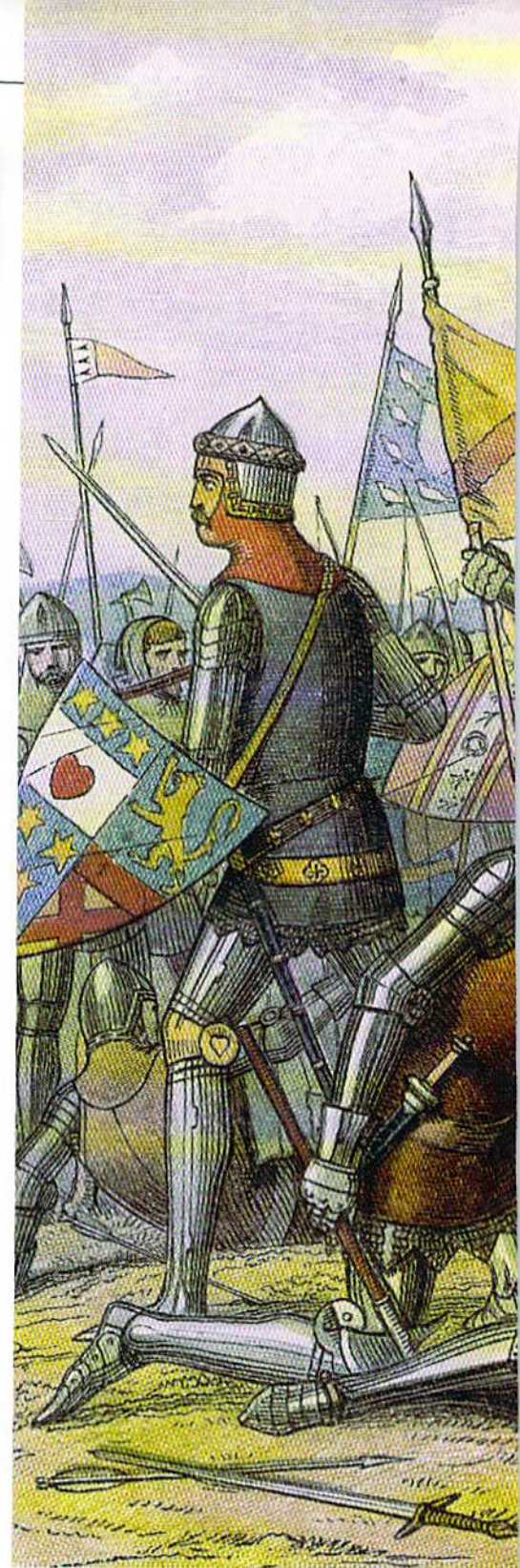
600 years ago, in a field just north of Shrewsbury, thousands of men came to a brutal end. Alexander Rose looks at the battle that almost changed the course of history

SIR HENRY PERCY – BETTER KNOWN as Hotspur (apparently for his devastating, and breakneck, charges into the midst of the enemy) – was a superstitious fellow. At midday on 21 July 1403, when he stood insolently facing the king of England outside Shrewsbury, he called for his famous crescent-handled sword, a weapon that had seen him safely through a score of battles and melees with the Scots. “Alack, my lord,” replied his esquire, “it was left behind at the village where you encamped overnight.” Upon learning the place was named Berwick, Hotspur groaned, “Then has my plough reached its last furrow.” Long ago, a soothsayer had predicted

that Hotspur would die before Berwick. The northern lord had assumed that this omen referred to the town and castle of Berwick on the Scottish border, not a Berwick in the south.

The soothsayer would be proved right. Within a few hours, the most renowned warrior in Europe would lie lifeless, an arrow having pierced his eye. With Hotspur’s death, Henry IV could rest easy on his throne. The Percy menace – for the moment, at least – was over.

Shrewsbury was an important battle. If Henry had lost, he and maybe also his son (later Henry V) would have been executed. So there would have been no ‘unto the breach’ at Agincourt, no Henry VI, and thus no Wars of



the Roses. What happened that day at Shrewsbury ignited the fuse that would eventually explode into decades of fratricidal bloodshed that ended only with the death of the Yorkist Richard III at Bosworth in 1485 and the installation of Henry VII’s Tudor dynasty.

FROM FRIENDS TO FOES

The Percys and Henry IV hadn’t always been enemies. Quite the opposite, in fact. Hotspur’s father, the Earl of Northumberland, had been the most trusted ally of John of Gaunt, Henry IV’s father. It had been Gaunt who arranged for his friend to receive the exalted title of ‘Earl of Northumberland’ in the first place, and

THE DEATH OF HOTSPUR

This Victorian depiction of the battle from *A Chronicle of England* shows the fatal arrow being withdrawn from Hotspur's eye



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back to their families. Still unpaid by the king, they had staved off an invasion and captured five Scottish earls, four barons and dozens of knights worth tens of thousands of pounds – and yet Henry wanted them held prisoner in London for his own political reasons. With ill-concealed grace, the Percys reluctantly sent their captives to Henry: all but one – the doughty Earl of Douglas, an old foe of Hotspur's.

In March 1403, Henry granted the Percys the entire South of Scotland in lieu of the £20,000. A nice present it certainly was, albeit with one catch: a rather angry nation of Scots, who didn't recognize London's sovereignty. From Henry's point of view, however, he had discharged the debt. It was now the Percys' problem.

And that 'problem' was threatening to explode. By June, Northumberland's spies were informing him that a Scots army was massing for a summer offensive. When Henry offered help, however, Northumberland strangely implored him to remain in London. Perhaps smelling a rat, Henry started marching anyway towards the Border in mid-July. Arriving in Nottingham, astounding news awaited him. The Percys had raised their banners in rebellion against the Crown. They had made this king; they could also unmake him. And they knew just the man (and boy) to help them do it.

WELSH SUPPORT

The man was Owen Glendower, a cultured Welsh landowner who had fallen out with one of Henry's favourites and been in open revolt since 1400. In 1401, he had captured Sir Edmund Mortimer, Hotspur's brother-in-law who married Glendower's daughter whilst in captivity. Thanks to Mortimer's intercession, Hotspur and Glendower met and by early 1403, the Percys, Mortimer and Glendower had secretly confederated to oust Henry.

Even the Earl of Douglas had thrown in his lot: partly because he loathed Henry, partly because Border honour dictated that noble prisoners stood by their captors until ransomed, and partly because if he fell into Henry's

Northumberland took a central role in ousting Richard II and making Henry Bolingbroke king of England in 1399. Northumberland was allowed to run the North of England as almost his own realm, his brother Thomas (made Earl of Worcester) was appointed Admiral of England, and Hotspur (now in his mid-30s) was given charge of North Wales.

But beneath the surface all was not well. In the two years preceding Shrewsbury, the Percys had slowly fallen out of love with Henry. Much of their disgruntlement boiled down to money. Henry had guaranteed Northumberland a very tidy £1,500 a year as Warden of the Anglo-Scottish border in peacetime (rising to £6,000

in war), Worcester about £330 and, indicating how highly his martial talents were appreciated, Hotspur a lavish £3,000. In addition, he promised that he would reimburse the Percys some £20,000 for the 'out-of-pocket' expenses they had incurred fighting the Scots. Unfortunately, Henry was severely cash-strapped and failed to keep his promise. He made matters worse when, after the Percys destroyed a Scottish army in 1402 at Homildon Hill and taken a rich haul of noble prisoners, he forbade ransoming them.

For the Percys, Henry's order was outrageous. According to ancient Border custom, prisoners were the property of their captor, who treated them with every courtesy until 'selling' them

Did you know... The Battle of Shrewsbury was the first time that longbow faced longbow on English soil?

Shakespeare's Shrewsbury

The Battle of Shrewsbury has not only made its mark on history, it also lives on in literature as the climax of Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1*. Here we see the war-hungry, courageous Hotspur pitted against the seeming wastrel Prince Hal. Shakespeare decided to make the two protagonists the same age (20) for dramatic effect, however, in reality, Hotspur was about 38 and Prince Hal only 15 at the time of the Battle of Shrewsbury.

Much of the play is taken up with the build-up and preparation for the battle. The battle itself is depicted as a series of one-on-one encounters (the limitations of the stage preventing any scenes of mass combat). The deaths of thousands of archers and foot soldiers isn't commented on. It's the deaths of the nobility that provide the tragedy. However, this shouldn't surprise us, as even up until the last century the ruling classes have had scant



Richard Burton as Prince Hal in the RSC's 1951 production of *Henry IV Part 1*

regard for the common foot soldier. As Falstaff says, in act 4 scene 2, of his ragged bunch of soldiers: "they'll fill a pit as well as better".

◁ hands he would be cooling his heels in jail for the foreseeable future.

Crucial to the campaign, however, was that Mortimer was the uncle of a very important boy: Edmund Mortimer (Earl of March), who enjoyed a strong claim to the throne through his descent from Edward III. Throughout his reign, Henry was neurotic about a more legitimate claimant turning up. Well, now there was one, and in 1403 the Percys were proclaiming him as the rightful King of England.

Back in Nottingham, Henry heard rumours that Northumberland was tacking towards Wales, not Scotland. The king knew Hotspur was in Chester busily recruiting soldiers, and that Mortimer and Glendower were somewhere in Wales raising their levies. He also knew that Worcester, acting as the rebellion's treasurer, had stolen funds from the Prince of Wales's headquarters in Shrewsbury. Hoping to defeat



Froissart's *Chronicles* (late 14th century) shows a near-contemporary image of English bowmen

Hotspur before the rebels could consolidate their forces, Henry raced westwards for Wales.

For his part, expecting Mortimer and Glendower's imminent arrival, on 20 July Hotspur had calmly camped on a crop-covered plain a few miles north-west of Shrewsbury. No doubt it was something of a shock to see royalist, not rebel, forces appear over the horizon.

LET THE BATTLE COMMENCE

At midday on 21 July, the arrows of the rebel longbowmen, commanded by, of all people, Douglas, shattered the king's infantry. Henry's archers replied in kind. After several failed charges, Hotspur and Douglas gathered 30 knights and, intent on killing Henry, hacked their way towards the royal standard fluttering tantalisingly ahead of them. They could hear the buoyant rebels behind cheering "Henry Percy King!" but eventually their platoon was pushed back. Meanwhile, Prince Henry's division had outflanked Hotspur's right and was wheeling to the rebels' rear. Hotspur, lifting his visor to survey the situation, suddenly fell lifeless as a steel-tipped arrow smashed through his eye-socket. Seeing him collapse, the king raised a triumphant call, "Henry Percy dead!", that was quickly taken up by his men. Confused and leaderless, the rebel army wavered and broke. Worcester and Douglas were captured alive (though a missing testicle now complemented one of the latter's eyes, lost at Homildon).

Henry grieved over Hotspur's corpse but had it disinterred after rumours he had escaped alive. To demonstrate to all England that the rebellion had been crushed, Hotspur's body was quartered and divided between Chester, London, Bristol and Newcastle. His head was jammed onto a spike over York's northern gate, where it could glassily stare at Percy country. As for Worcester, he was ignominiously executed.

The indefatigable Douglas was thrown into a dungeon, but was released four years later when he promised to remain loyal to Henry IV. Mortimer and Glendower, hearing news of the defeat, melted away, their whereabouts unknown.

What of Northumberland himself? Henry promised the errant earl clemency if he surrendered. But it was not long before Northumberland, Mortimer and Glendower were causing trouble for Henry again. Following several skirmishes and a couple of narrow escapes, Northumberland was fatally trapped on 19 February 1408 at Bramham Moor in Yorkshire. His head was sliced off and impaled on a spike on London Bridge.

As for Mortimer and Glendower, Prince Henry was determined to end the Welsh insurrection once and for all. After besieging the last rebel stronghold, Harlech, for four months in 1408-09, the victorious English found Mortimer's remains lying inside. He had starved to death. Glendower, however, once again escaped the net. He never surrendered, and is thought to have died peacefully in 1417.

And what of the enigmatic boy, the Percy's Great White Hope, who caused Henry such conniptions? He kept Edmund, Earl of March, under a very beady eye indeed, as did his son. March would die issueless and obscure in 1425. Posthumously, however, the Mortimers did have their revenge on Henry's descendants. March's great-nephew was Edward IV, Yorkist ouster of Henry's grandson, the ill-starred Henry VI. Shrewsbury cast very long shadows indeed. ☹

→ Find out more

BOOKS

Kings of the North by Alexander Rose Weidenfeld & Nicholson, PB, £8.99, June 2003

A swashbuckling account of the House of Percy, now out in paperback.

A Bloody Field by Shrewsbury by Edith Pargeter *Headline*, PB, £7.99, 1992

A novelist's retelling of the battle.

EVENTS

READER OFFER Living with the Battle of Shrewsbury, 19-20 July, West Mid Agricultural Showground, nr. Shrewsbury, off the A528 Shrewsbury is running a whole summer of events to commemorate the 600th anniversary of the battle. This weekend of medieval re-enactment, archery displays and craft demonstrations is not to be missed. Adults £3, concessions £2, family ticket £10 (admits 2 adults and up to 3 concessions). *Living History* readers can get two entry tickets for the price of one, see voucher on page 93 for further details.

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