

Causes of the Battle of Shrewsbury.

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There were many possible causes of the battle and those chosen by any one account will depend on the point of view of the writer. The pride and greed of over-mighty and rebellious nobles is often blamed for this and other civil wars and the supporters of one or other of the protagonists will seek to justify their actions. One important point to remember is that all medieval kings - good or bad, strong or weak - were chronically short of money. Indeed an ability to guess what level of taxes would be both high enough to keep the kingdom out of debt and also low enough to avoid rebellions was an essential quality for a successful king and few kings were successful for long. In order to understand the events of the weeks leading up to the battle of Shrewsbury, it is necessary to consider the earlier history and probably start with the events following the death of Edward III in 1377.

Edward III had a large family, but only the descendants of his three eldest sons need be considered. The eldest was Edward, the "Black Prince", who died before his father and who left a son, Richard, who was ten years old when king Edward died. The second son, Lionel Duke of Clarence, had a daughter Philippa who had married Edmund, Earl of March. The third son, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, had several sons and Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford was the eldest. When Edward died, his grandson Richard was crowned King and a Council of Regency set up until he was old enough to govern by himself.

By 1399, over twenty years later, Richard had removed his council and Bolingbroke was in exile. When John of Gaunt, died in March 1399, Richard II broke his word to preserve Bolingbroke's inheritance during his exile and seized the lands and revenues held by John of Gaunt. This departure from the usual custom and threat to the normal rules of inheritance, caused alarm and consternation throughout the nobility of England. During Richard's absence in Ireland, Henry Bolingbroke and a few supporters landed at Ravenspur in Yorkshire to claim his inheritance. He was joined by the Percys (the Duke of Northumberland and his son Henry Hotspur), and his support grew as they marched west across England. When the news reached him, Richard returned from Ireland, but by the time he met Henry in south Wales that August, Henry's support was overwhelming.

Richard, now a prisoner, was persuaded to abdicate and this decision was reported to an assembly gathered in Westminster Hall in September 1399. The death or abdication of a defeated king was necessary for his successor to be legally valid. The assembly (not a parliament - Henry carefully did not set a precedent for a king requiring the approval of Parliament to become king) agreed that the throne was now vacant and Henry stated his claim as a descendant of Henry III (through both maternal and paternal lines) and an adult, ready and able to provide the good government needed by the realm. Since the English claim to the throne of France depended on descent through a female line, Henry could not make any claims which suggested that descent through the female line was invalid. However Philippa's grandson Edmund Mortimer was only eight years old in 1399 and her son Roger had died before this, so their claim could be ruled out on the grounds that Edmund was too young. Henry's

claim was agreed by the assembly and he was crowned on 13th October of that year. Richard was to remain a prisoner and his prison (Pontefract) was kept secret. The main reason for demanding Richard's abdication was that he had failed to supply "good government", the final example being his attempt to deny Henry's right to inherit his father's lands and income. Previously Richard had been over generous to a small group of favourites, so that there were many noblemen who were disappointed by his previous behaviour and could not expect any improvement in the future. He had also shown vindictiveness to those who opposed him and insisting on Henry's right to inherit was a serious opposition to his wishes which might expect equally serious reprisals if Richard had continued as king.

A rebellion in January 1400 was suppressed and the ringleaders executed, but it may have sealed Richard's fate. His death from starvation was announced soon afterwards and he lay in state in St Pauls before being buried at Kings Langley in Hertfordshire. Even so, the rumours that he was alive and able to lead rebellion against Henry continued for many years. For the next few years, Henry was surrounded by enemies - the French, the Scots and the Welsh. He was permanently short of money and relied on the Percys, whose aims of extending their influence in the Scottish marches agreed with Henry's need to keep the Scots at bay.

An additional problem was the revolt led by Owen Glendower, initially in north Wales. His fortunes varied, but in June 1402 he captured Sir Edmund Mortimer, Hotspur's brother-in-law. King Henry declined to ransom Sir Edmund and, in due course, Sir Edmund changed sides (declaring his allegiance to Richard, if still alive, and after him to Edmund, the twelve-year-old Earl of March) and married one of Glendower's daughters. Later that year, in September, the Percys gained a victory over the Scots at Homildon Hill and captured many noblemen. Henry arranged for their ransoms and kept all the ransom money. As king he was entitled to keep it and doubtless needed the money, but this was a cause of grievance on the part of the Percys who said they were owed money by Henry for their service against the Scots. All these things came to a head in the summer of 1403. The Percys, who had supported Henry's claim to the throne up to this point, now claimed that it was not valid and rebelled against him. The result of this rebellion was the battle of Shrewsbury.

References

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