

Sources for the Battle of Shrewsbury.

by Susan Laflin-Barker

There are few contemporary histories. Froissart's Chronicle runs from 1326 to 1399 and is an account of the deeds of the nobility especially in France. His account of the events of 1399 contains many inaccuracies.

There are some accounts produced by the monks at St Albans, including the "Annales Richardus II et Henricus IV", attributed to William de Wyntershyll, and the "Historia Anglicana" of Thomas Walsingham. These are the main contemporary sources for the battle of Shrewsbury and translations have been published (Calvert, 1898). They were written to show support for the King and deplore the folly of rebelling against the Lord's Anointed, but there is no reason to doubt that their account of the battle is an accurate representation of current gossip. There is no indication that either account is based on an eye-witness report.

Reverend Fletcher published a Bibliography of Battlefield, relating to the Battle of Shrewsbury, its aftermath and the building of the college and church at Battlefield. In addition to the contemporary sources mentioned above, he also includes a number later accounts - probably the most influential of these was Holinshed's Chronicle, which was used by Shakespeare as the basis for his historical plays - the relevant ones being Richard II and Henry IV parts one and two. These plays had a dual purpose - to provide entertainment and to show support for the Tudor dynasty. The accounts since then have been based on these sources, interpreted in the light of whatever philosophy was currently fashionable.

So far as the individual battles are concerned, historians have attempted to reconstruct these from contemporary accounts. The information is usually incomplete and often contradictory, so such reconstructions are hypothetical and experts often disagree over some or all of the details. Burne, with his principle of "inherent military probability", has reconstructed many battles and has published two (slightly different) accounts of the Battle of Shrewsbury. Bennet suggests that Burne's experience of twentieth-century warfare and his use of modern maps may not always give the true probabilities for medieval battles.

Contemporary or near-contemporary accounts are an important source, but have to be used with care. The information they contain is usually incomplete and may contain inaccuracies for various reasons. They need to be checked, where possible, against other types of information. For example in 1403, the patent and close rolls give information about the King's location and actions in the days leading up to the battle. There are several approaches which can be used to identify the site of the battle. For the battle of Shrewsbury, the foundation charter claims that the church (still standing) was built on the battlefield. Comparing the accounts of the movements of the participants before the battle with the present-day landscape and the surviving field-names with the names given in the accounts also helps - for example the field-name "King's croft" probably indicates the position of the King's baggage and "Akeley" probably corresponds to the "field called Hateley". Some of the details remain open to argument, but the main picture is clear and has been described in Burne's reconstruction.

