

### **OpenLearn mini documentary**

*England's Historic Battlefields: the Wars of the Roses*

**David Grummitt and Graham Evans :**

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DAVID GRUMMITT: Battlefields are an integral part of our nation's story. Battles determine the fate of individual kings, change the country's linguistic and cultural character, and defined our very identity. As such, the places where these clashes of arms took place are contested spaces whose meaning and significance, and even their location is hotly debated and even today fought over.

While the swords, arrows, and guns of the past have been replaced by academic debate and popular argument, there is no doubt that battlefields remain significant sites of history, memory, and heritage. Historic England, the body responsible for maintaining and curating England's historic landscapes, lists 47 historic battlefields in its database. These range from the Battle of Maldon in 991, where the Vikings defeated the Anglo-Saxon army of King Ethelred, the unready to the Battle of Sedgemoor in 1685, where the rebellious Duke of Monmouth was defeated by the forces of King James, the second.

Organizations like the battlefields trust work hard to raise awareness of Britain's military heritage. Yet, the history relating to historic battlefields is often hard to unravel. There is frequently little to see above the ground and few, if any, traces of the battle remain today, while the historical record is often biased in favor of the victors.

Many of England's battlefields are identified with the Wars of the Roses, a dynastic struggle fought between the Houses of Lancaster and York between 1455 and 1487. The battles of the Wars of the Roses ranged from relatively small skirmishes involving a few hundred men, like at Saint Albans in 1455, to large pitched battles, like Towton, involving several thousand combatants. They were fought the length and breadth of England from Kent to Northumberland during 22 years of intermittent civil war, which saw the English throne change hands on no fewer than six occasions.

Battlefields have always been sites of commemoration. First, it was necessary to remember and honor the dead on both sides that had fallen there. Second, battlefields became sites of political and cultural importance, where the legitimacy of the winning side, particularly during the Wars of the Roses, was established and maintained in the public memory. For battlefields

to be commemorated and their significance remembered, they had to be named. Naming a battlefield is one of the most important steps in a battle becoming part of our national heritage. Yet, the process of naming a battlefield could often take many years.

Towton was most frequently referred to as the Palm Sunday field in the years immediately after 1461, a reference to when it took place, not its geographical location. It was also known as York Field and the Battle at Sherburne beside York before being settled upon as a Battle of Towton in the 19th century. The Battle of Bosworth in 1485, one of our best remembered medieval battles was variously known as Redmoor, Sandford, Dadlington, and Brown Heath, until the name Bosworth seems to have been settled upon in the early 16th century.

The process of naming a battlefield then was often a lengthy process, but once named, it was committed to public memory, even if the precise location of that battle was subsequently lost. In 1994, Dr. Andrew Brown of English heritage said, when establishing the register of battlefields, "Battlefields may not be as obviously presentable as castles or abbeys, but they do create feelings of contemplation and empathy with visitors." Battlefields are thus a vital part of the heritage industry, or what we might call now public history.

In July 1460, a rebel Yorkist army met a Royal Army at Northampton in what are now the grounds of Delapré Abbey. The battle ended in a Yorkist victory and the capture of King Henry the sixth by the rebels. For centuries, the battlefield was largely forgotten until it was threatened with development. In 2014, the Northamptonshire battlefield society was established with the aim of preserving the historic battlefields of the county.

GRAHAM EVANS: Historic battlefields, they are key points in our history where matters are brought to a head, where a nation could go in one or two directions and the outcome of the battle will determine the direction of our history. There is a phrase, "Why should you care about it?" It's just a field. And one of the things that we've had here is the Battle of Northampton. The part of the direction of the fighting was probably driven by the ridge and furrow farmland.

If that ridge and furrow is plowed out of the landscape, that information that we would otherwise have about how the landscape looked at the time of the battle and how that might have influenced what happened might be lost. Unlike listing a building, a registered battlefield does not preserve the battlefield forevermore. If there is a need for the battlefield to be developed, if there's need for the use of land, or if there is an overriding local requirement, then the battlefield will be lost.

One of the things we say about battlefields in this area is, we need to look after them because one of the things we're not doing is making any more of them, hopefully. So what we've got, we really need to make sure we understand it's important.

DAVID GRUMMITT: So historic battlefields do matter today as part of our public history, and sometimes they can arouse quite heated debates. In 2021, Royal Mail issued a set of stamps commemorating the 550th anniversary of the Battle of Tewkesbury and featured paintings by the renowned historical artist Graham Turner of several battles of the Wars of the Roses.

One stamp featured the Battle of Edgcote in Northamptonshire, fought on the 24th of July, 1469 between Yorkist forces, led by the Earl of Pembroke and Northern rebels led by Robin of Redesdale. The title on the stamp read, "The Battle of Edgcote Moor, 1469," something that drew an angry response from many local historians.

GRAHAM EVANS: Edgcote has always had two names-- so it's the Battle of Hedgcote-- or Edgcote or the Battle of Banbury. It's known as the Battle of Banbury to the Welsh, Edgcote to the English. It's never been called Edgcote Moor, which is the name on the stamp. That's an affectation from a book written in the 1990s. And Edgcote is not on Moorland as it would have been understood. So it conveys a completely inaccurate view of the area where it was fought, which was over farmland in Central England. Learn the name, get it right, and that's the key to memory processes, which are triggered when we talk about the battle.

DAVID GRUMMITT: Battles do not end when the fighting has stopped in the middle ages as today, the meaning and significance of a battle is argued over and contested as soon as peace descends upon the landscape. The battles of the Wars of the Roses are often mysterious affairs, and in some cases, we cannot even be sure where that battle took place, yet their significance to local communities then and now cannot be doubted. Locating and naming a battlefield is an important part of the process by which the past is owned and made sense of, thus becoming history and part of our shared national heritage.

These historic battlefields as the work of the Northamptonshire Battlefields society and the battlefields trust show and not just restricted to the great battles of British history, battles like Bosworth, Hastings, and Naseby. But they cover some 2000 years of our shared heritage. The work done recently to identify, preserve, and remember the historic battlefields of the Wars of the Roses is a good example of this. These sites are indeed an integral part of the UK'S local and national heritage.

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