

Doncaster and the Wars of the Roses

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Doncaster was the scene of one of the crucial events at the beginning of the Wars of the Roses: a meeting in 1399 between Duke Henry of Lancaster, soon to become king of England and the noblemen whom he vitally needed as his supporters. King Richard had banished Henry, the son of John of Gaunt, then Duke of Lancaster, from England. When John of Gaunt died shortly afterwards, Richard confiscated his lands rather than allow his banished son to return to inherit them. Henry, the new duke, decided to return to England to claim his inheritance.

He landed at Ravenspur on the river Humber. Travelling through Yorkshire, he arrived at Doncaster. Here he met a group of his fellow-noblemen who were anxious to know his plans. In the Carmelite priory on the High Street, a site now occupied by the Mansion House and nearby buildings, he swore an oath that he had returned solely to reclaim the lands which were rightfully his by inheritance. Reassured of his aims, he gained vital political support from his peers. Political events, however, quickly overtook the limited aims which duke Henry claimed to have, and a few months after his return to England, he had taken the crown from king Richard. The dispossessed king was moved from stronghold to stronghold, until finally he was murdered in his prison at Pontefract castle in 1400.

King Henry IV enjoyed his triumph for only a few years, dying in 1413. His son, Henry V, spent much of his own brief reign campaigning to make good his claim to the throne of France. His early death in 1422 meant that his son, only a child in arms, then inherited the crown. Even worse, the child king, Henry VI, grew up to be a weak ruler. The repercussions of the great events of 1399 had left a legacy of political instability and a young and weak king made the situation even more unstable. Others thought that they had an equally strong claim to the throne than the usurping dukes of Lancaster.

Chief amongst these were the Yorkists, the Duke of York and his family and their followers. The stage was set for years of unrest. The long if intermittent conflict between the two factions claiming the Crown, the Lancastrians and the Yorkists, ran on for sixteen years from 1455 to 1471 and became known as the Wars of the Roses.

A decade before the conflict began, Doncaster had obtained a borough charter from king Henry VI in 1445, which is the subject of another webpage. A far more important borough charter was obtained from his Yorkist successor, King Edward IV in 1467.

By that date, the Wars of the Roses had produced many twists and turns. The Duke of York was killed at the battle of Wakefield in 1460. But a year later, the pious, ineffective king Henry VI had been deposed, and then murdered in the Tower of London. Edward, Duke of York, the son of the principal victim of the battle of Wakefield, had come to the throne with the title of King Edward IV.

The battle of Towton, in 1461, had claimed the life of the Duke of Northumberland, a leading opponent of the Yorkists. As a traitor, all his possessions consequently became the property of the Crown. Amongst them was the manor of Doncaster. (In fact, there was later a major dispute over whether the manor of Doncaster had actually belonged to the Duke of Northumberland, and this posed a serious problem for Doncaster corporation in the early seventeenth century, but this is another story.)

So the head of the House of York was now King of England and lord of the manor of Doncaster. Perhaps it was to strengthen his Yorkshire power base that Doncaster and several other important Yorkshire towns, including Pontefract and Scarborough, were granted higher status. What form this took can be seen on another webpage.