

Wars of the Roses to Dissolution 1461-1538



This paper covers from the time of the middle of the War of the Roses with Edward IV having just gained the throne from Henry VI in 1461, to the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in 1538. Henry would live another nine years after that date, dying in 1547.

Information about direct involvement by kings in eastern Sussex during these years is quite limited. The first part of the period is taken up by the final years of the Wars of the Roses and it can be surmised that the national focus of activity was mostly well away from south-eastern England. Kings in this period were Edward IV 1461-70; Henry VI restored 1470-71; Edward IV 1471-83; Edward V briefly in 1483; Richard III 1483-85; Henry VII 1485-1509 and Henry VIII 1509-47.

Edward IV

Edward IV is recorded as having visited Battle and possibly Hastings twice – firstly on Friday 21 August 1461 when only 19. Soon after his accession he granted the Rape of Hastings to William, Lord Hastings. There is no indication of why the Rape was granted to William Hastings as his base was the Midlands, and he had no other obvious connection with eastern Sussex, bar his name. He was already wealthy, but it may be that he just wished to become Baron Hastings of Hastings.

Edward had been at Sandwich then Ashford before he visited Battle and Hastings. He had only just been crowned aged 18 on 28 June 1461 and learnt on 22 July the situation in France had swung in his favour when Charles died and was succeeded by his son Louis XI – the real prospect of immediate French intervention in England subsided. Edward left London on 13 August when he travelled to Sittingbourne, then Canterbury and Sandwich until travelling to Ashford on 20th, then on to Battle Abbey. After leaving Battle on 22nd he travelled to Lewes, Arundel then back to Westminster, before leaving again for Bristol, the Welsh Marches on 4 September aiming to organise a Welsh campaign against his opponents.

Edward IV had been defeated by the Lancastrians at the Battle of Edgecote Moor in July 1469. He re-engaged the rebels at the Battle of Losecote Field or Empingham on 12 March 1470. Having won he then chased the rebels south-west towards Exeter but they escaped to France, where they allied with Margaret of Anjou, Henry VI's wife. From Exeter he moved to Salisbury. This episode may have led to his second visit to Battle which was on 3rd June 1470. Edward moved on from Salisbury to Southampton then to Canterbury, via Battle. This may have been related to the need to organise ships from both Southampton and the Cinque Ports for a blockade of French ports.

Later in 1470 Edward IV was forced to flee by the Lancastrians. Lord Hastings of Hastings supported the House of York and fought alongside Edward at the Battle of Mortimer's Cross and was present at the proclamation of Edward as King Edward IV in London on 4 March 1461 and also when Edward secured the crown at the Battle of Towton.

Hastings became a key figure in the realm, notably as Master of the Mint and Lord Chamberlain. Whilst Master of the Mint he introduced the coinage of gold nobles worth

100d*, and two other gold pieces worth 50d and 20d, which appears like an early attempt at decimalisation! He also undertook some ambassadorial duties in France, Brittany and Burgundy. When Warwick drove Edward IV into exile in 1470, and Henry VI was briefly restored Hastings went with Edward, and accompanied him back in the following spring. He raised troops for Edward and served as one of the captains of the Yorkist forces at both Barnet and Tewkesbury.

Henry VI again

For six months in 1470-1471 Henry VI was restored to an essentially puppet kingship, but Edward then had a victory at the Battle of Barnet, and Henry VI was 'lodged' in the Tower of London. Edward IV followed this with a victory at Tewkesbury at the end of which Henry VI's son, also named Edward, was executed. This was closely followed by Henry VI's own death in the Tower of London on the 21st of May 1471.

Edward IV again

On 15th December 1471 Edward IV issued a charter of a general pardon to John (Newton), Abbot of Battle, for all offences before this date and for all moneys etc. owed before the 9th year of his reign. Similar pardons were issued to others and these must relate to the above events of 1470-71 when Henry VI was briefly restored.

Edward V, Richard III and Henry VII

In 1483 Edward V of course barely reigned at all and was not crowned, and was 'disappeared' with his brother by Richard III, with Richard III taking the throne. No records from Richard III's short reign appear to involve eastern Sussex apart from those relating to the demise of the Lord of the Rape, Lord Hastings of Hastings just before Richard's crowning.

Richard of Gloucester had tried to obtain Hastings support, Hastings was reluctant, but eventually supported Richard's formal installation as Lord Protector of Edward V and collaborated with him in the royal council. Suddenly on 13 June 1483 during a council meeting at the Tower of London: Richard of Gloucester, supported by the Duke of Buckingham, accused Hastings and other council members of having conspired against his life with the Woodvilles (Edward IV's queen's family) with Hastings's mistress Jane Shore (formerly also a mistress to Edward IV), acting as a go-between. Hastings was immediately beheaded in the Tower courtyard without any formal trial. Gloucester acceded and reigned from 26th June being crowned Richard III on 6 July 1483. There was no obvious effect on the Rape except that the Rape briefly reverted to the crown. (See Collectanea paper A2.5 on Rapes of Sussex etc. for more detail).

The final victor of the War of the Roses after the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 was Henry VII. He visited Battle Abbey on 17th Aug 1488, and also briefly Rye en route from Lewes to Charing. Rye spent £2 18s 11d on the king's entertainment. A year afterwards a ship was built at Rye for the king, so it was probably a good meal.

Rye seems to have slowly regained some prosperity at and after this time, maybe because Winchelsea was now in severe decline after its inner harbour became silted and difficult. By 1475 its inner port had closed to ships of any size although there was still limited access from the outer port further away across the Rye Camber.

Henry VIII

Henry VII died in 1509 and his son Henry VIII became king. Winchelsea somehow managed to supply four ships and 15 sailors for Henry VIII's expedition to France in 1520 for the events of the Field of the Cloth of Gold. This may have been with some assistance from Tenterden, by now an associate member of the Cinque Ports.

The friendship made with France in 1513 did not last long and in 1522 and 1526 French ships entered the Camber, which was protected by a small, round artillery tower, constructed by Henry VIII between 1512 and 1514, which would later develop into Camber Castle.

Dissolution

There is, of course, no doubt that on 27th May 1538 the town of Battle changed forever. It moved from a town that supported an abbey to being the manor of a trusted confidant of Henry VIII, Sir Anthony Browne, which would henceforth have to pay its own way. It is interesting to note that the lands of Syon Monastery and its manor of Brede including some lands in old Hastings formerly belonging to Fécamp Abbey and slightly later the assets of the near defunct Collegiate Colle of St Mary in the Castle at Hastings would also be allocated to Sir Anthony Browne, to fill a defensive power gap in eastern Sussex.

The growth of Battle had stalled at the start of the 16th century, and it was now to grow very little until the end of that century. Estate information about Battle at the end of the 15th century until 1538 is available from Searle, with amplification from Martin and Whittick's masterly study 'Building Battle Town' which of course extends forwards to 1750, beyond our scope. It appears that the centre of the town in terms of house numbers remained static, but at the expense of the periphery. However the abbey was selling off plots around the old market at the junction of High Street and Mount Street and the market itself demised, with commerce continuing from shops along the High Street and Upper Lake. A market was revived in 1566 after the dissolution, and this took place on the Abbey Green.

The lay subsidy returns of 1524 and 1525 can be cross referenced with the court rolls. 25 of the 43 families assessed at £5 and over lived along the High Street, as did six or the wealthiest eight. The house of William Boyes, 76-77 High Street, erstwhile abbey carter and inquest juror is one of the largest medieval houses to survive. Some of the more prosperous inhabitants, whose services to the abbey manor may no longer have been required or were reduced may have left the town. Certainly there is some evidence (*from the author's personal genealogical data*) that at least some of the Boyes family moved to Hastings, where one would soon become mayor.

The Austin Friary at Rye was suppressed on 18th December 1538, and the Greyfriars and Blackfriars at Winchelsea also disappeared although their buildings were apparently empty and forsaken and in a very poor state. Robertsbridge Abbey was surrendered on 16 April, 1538. Its last abbot was Thomas Taylor and there were eight monks. The manor of Robertsbridge included parts of Ewhurst, Northiam, Whatlington, northern parts of Sedlescombe and Brede and it was passed to Sir William Sidney, along with lands in Kent in exchange for lands in York and Lincoln. He had been with Henry VIII at the Field of the Cloth of Gold and was tutor and steward to his son, Prince Edward.

Below is the instruction from King Henry VIII to the dissolution commissioners to proceed to Battle. It would have been in Latin and dated sometime after February 1538, when the commissioners were sent out.

The letter Patent from King Henry VIII to the commissioners, Gage and Layton

"Henry the Eighth &c.

To our Trusty &c. For as much as we understand that the monastery of Battell, is at this present in such state as the same is neither used to the glory of God, nor to the benefit of our common wealth. We let you wit, that therefore being minded to take the same into our own hands for a better purpose, like as we doubt not the head of the same will be contented to make his surrender accordingly ; We for the special trust and confidence that we have in your fidelity, wisdoms, and discretions have, and by these presents do authorize, name, assign and appoint you, that immediately repairing to the said house, ye shall receive of the said head, such a writing under the convent seal, as to your discretions shall seem requisite, meet and convenient, for the due surrender to our use of the same, and thereupon take possession thereof, and of all the goods, chattels, plate, jewels, implements, and stuff, being within or appertaining thereunto. And further causing all the goods and implements to be indifferently sold, either for ready money, or days upon sufficient sureties, so that the same pass not one year and a half, ye shall deliver to the said head and brethren, such part of the said money and goods, as ye by your discretions shall think meet and convenient for their dispatch, and further, to see them have convenient pensions by your wisdoms assigned accordingly, which done, and moreover seeing the rightful and due debts thereof paid and satisfied, as well of the revenues as of the said stuff, as to reason and good conscience appertaineth, and your charges reasonably allowed, ye shall proceed to the dissolution of the said house, and further, in your name take possession of the same, to be kept for our use and profit. Ye shall furthermore bring and convey to our tower of London, after your said discretions all the rest of the said money, plate, jewels and ornaments, that in any wise shall come to your hands by means of the premises, or any part thereof, straightly charging all mayors, sheriffs, bailiffs, constables, and all other our officers, ministers and subjects, to whom in this case it shall appertain, that unto you and every of you in execution hereof, they be helping, aiding, favouring and assisting, as they shall answer unto us to the contrary, at their uttermost perils, &c. Given &c."

The commissioners Gage and Layton arrived at 'Battel', towards the end of May 1538. The following is a translation from the Latin of the actual deed of surrender, dated 27 May 1538. It was signed by the abbot and all the monks. Reading the above this was clearly a surrender that could not be refused. A number of abbots including those of Reading, Colchester and Glastonbury were actually hanged for their resistance.

"To all the faithful in Christ, to whom the present writing shall come, John, abbot of the monastery of Battell, in the county of Sussex, otherwise called John, abbot of the monastery of St. Martin, of Battell, in the county of Sussex, otherwise called John, abbot of the monastery of Battell, in the county of Sussex, of the order of St. Benedict, and the convent of the same place, health everlasting in the Lord : know ye that we, the aforesaid abbot and convent, with our unanimous assent and consent, deliberate minds, certain knowledge, and mere motion, for certain just and reasonable causes, us, our minds and consciences especially moving, have freely and spontaneously given, granted, and by these presents do give, grant, render, and confirm, to our most illustrious prince and lord, Henry the VIIIth, by the grace of God, of England and France king, defender of the faith, lord of Ireland, and on earth supreme head, all that our monastery or abbey of Battell aforesaid ; and also, all and singular manors, lordships, messuages, gardens, curtilages, tofts, lands, and tenements,

meadows, feedings, pastures, woods, rents, reversions, services, mills, passages, knights-fees, wards, marriages, bond-men, villains, with their sequelcommons, liberties, franchises, jurisdictions, offices, courts-leet, hundreds, views of frankpledge, fairs, markets, parks, warrens, vivares, waters, fisheries, ways, passages, void grounds, advowsons, nominations, presentations, and donations of churches, vicarages, chapels, chantries, hospitals, and other ecclesiastical benefices whatsoever, rectories, vicarages, chapels, chantries, pensions, portions, annuities, tithes oblations, and all and singular our emoluments, profits, possessions, hereditaments, and rights whatsoever, as well within the said county of Sussex, as within the counties of Kent, Southampton, Devon, Worcester, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Berks, Oxford, Wilts, Cambridge, as elsewhere within the kingdom of England, Wales and the marches thereof, to the said monastery or abbey of Battell aforesaid, in any wise belonging, appendant, or incumbent ; and all manner, deeds, evidences, writings, muniments in any wise concerning or belonging to the said monastery, manors, lands, tenements, and other the premises, with the appurtenances ; or to any parcel thereof, to have, hold and enjoy the said monastery or abbey, site, grounds, circuit, and precinct of Battell aforesaid ; and, also all and singular lordships, manors, messuages, lands, tenements, rectories, pensions, and other the premises, with all and singular their appurtenances, to our aforesaid most invincible prince and lord the king, his heirs and assigns for ever. To whom, in order to give all the effect of right which can or may thereupon come, we do in this behalf (as is meet) subject and submit ourselves and the said monastery or abbey of Battell aforesaid, and all rights to us, in any wise acquired, giving and granting, to the same royal majesty, his heirs and assigns, all and all manner of full and free faculty, authority and power of disposing of us, and the said monastery of Battell aforesaid, together with all and singular manors, lands, tenements, rents, reversions, services, and every the premises, with their rights and appurtenances whatsoever; and of alienating, giving, converting, and transferring, at his free-will and royal pleasure, to whatsoever uses pleasing to his majesty, ratifying, and by these presents we do promise to ratify, and for ever to confirm such dispositions, alienations, donations, conversions, and translations, to be henceforth by his majesty in any wise made. And, that all and singular the premises may have their due effect, the elections, moreover, to us and to our successors; and also all complaints, provocations, appeals, actions, suits, and instances, and all other our remedies and benefits whatsoever, in any wise competent, and hereafter to be competent to us, perhaps, and to our successors in this behalf, by force of the disposition, alienation, translation, and conversion aforesaid, and other the premises. And all exceptions, objections, and allegations of deceit, error, fear, ignorance, or other matter or disposition, being wholly set aside and removed, we have openly, publicly and expressly, and of our certain knowledge, and voluntary inclinations, renounced and yielded up, and by these presents we do renounce and yield up, and from the same do recede in these writings. And we, the aforesaid abbot and convent, and our successors, will warrant the said monastery or abbey, precinct, site, mansion and church of Battell, aforesaid, and all and singular the manors, lordships, messuages, gardens, curtilages, tofts, meadows, feedings, pastures, woods, underwoods, lands, tenements, and all and singular other the premises, with every their appurtenances to our aforesaid lord the king, his heirs, and assigns, against all men for ever, by these presents. In witness whereof we the aforesaid abbot and convent have caused our common seal to be affixed to this writing, dated the 27th day of the month of May, in the thirtieth year of the reign of our illustrious lord the king."

John, abbot of Battell; Richard Salehurst, prior; Clement Westfeld ; John Henfeld ; John Hastings, sub prior ; Thomas Levett ; Vincent Dunston ; John Benyng; Clement Gregory; Thomas Cuthbert; William Ambrose ; Thomas Bede ; John Jerome ; Edward Clement; Bartholomew Ciprian; John Newton; and Richard Tony.

The seals

Two seals were affixed to the deed of surrender.

The obverse one of white wax was the abbey seal and represents a large and handsome church, or maybe a gateway, with a tower and four turrets, within a border in which is the legend, " SIGILLVM CONVENTVS SANCTI MARTINI DE BELLO."



The reverse one of red wax was the abbot's seal, which represents a gothic canopy, ornamented above with the history of St. Martin dividing his cloak with the naked beggar. Under the canopy is the figure of a mitred abbot, with his crozier in the right hand, in the other a book: in each of the side compartments is a figure; one a bishop, the other a female with an olive branch, representing peace; beneath the figures are two shields; one bearing the arms of England and France, quarterly; the other, the arms of the abbey. Gules, a Cross, Or, between four Crowns, Or. Around the whole the legend "SIGIL : JOHES : DEI : GRA : DE BELLO."



The next document, dated 6 July 1538, refers to the pensions given to the abbot, the monks and permanent employees of the abbey

Information in this document shows that the abbot, by letters patent, was granted out of the revenues of the monastery, a pension of 100 marks (£66.67). This seems to have been a standard pension for an abbot. The sixteen monks who signed the surrender also had pensions: Richard Salehurst 15 marks or £10; Westfeld, Henfeld, Hastings, Levett, Dunstan, Benyng, Gregory, Ambrose, and Bede 10 marks or £6.67 each; Cuthbert, Jerome, Clement, Ciprian and Newton, 9 marks or £6 each. Willis says that he '*found no pension assigned to Tony except he be the same with Richard Ladde a novice, whose name is put separate in the Pension Book, in a distinct place after the rest.*' His allowance was only 4 marks (£2.67). A later document dated 1553 shows that pensions were also paid to lay employees of the abbey – "There remained in charge £26.33 in Annuities payable out of the revenues of this convent, besides the ... pensions to ex-monks." There is also a record in 'Monasticon' that the prior and monks at the Priory of Brecon were also pensioned off for the total sum of £29.15.

Biography

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