

Wakefield Historical Society

“New Research about the Battle of Wakefield” by Paul Dawson

Wednesday 10th December 2025 at 7pm.

Paul Dawson intriguingly began his lecture by reminding those present that we think we know all there is to know about the Battle of Wakefield. Namely that Richard, Duke of York, tries to seize the throne and fails. He reaches Sandal castle, his favourite castle, and while leading a foraging party, he is attacked, captured and beheaded.

But is this true?

Paul outlined the range of local primary sources he had researched – letters and personal papers, legal documents, manorial and local governance documents and fiscal papers. On interrogating all these sources, Paul has reached a different narrative for the events of that time.

But first he led us through the exceptionally complex bureaucracy of the time and the unique arrangements of 15th Century local government. Through the evidence in particular of the Court Rolls for the manor of Wakefield, 14th Century maps and other contemporary records, Paul demonstrated that there was a clear distinction between the places of Wakefield and Sandal at that time.

Equally, those records show minimal household expenditures at Sandal Castle in December 1460 and that the Duke of York and his men were instead based in what would then be considered the nearby town of Wakefield.

Sandal Castle itself was small and not suited to host a full military retinue, in short there was nothing which allows it to function as a castle but rather it was perhaps a short-term hunting lodge.

So, leading onto the events of December 1460 – on 9th December, Richard leaves London with Rutland, Salisbury and relatively few men, probably in the region of 50 to sixty. He and they arrive at Conisborough, on either 19th or 20th December. On 29 December, he leaves Wakefield heading for York when his party is ambushed and robbed at Swillington. Two men are killed and another two are wounded. The Duke of York is captured alive and taken back to Wakefield.

The date of the battle is given in the inquest and postmortem documents. These contemporary accounts also indicate that Queen Margaret, Beaufort and Neville are not in Wakefield at that time.

Subsequently, Clifford orders the execution of some prisoners and his men run rampage through Wakefield, destroying mills and the bakehouse, slaughtering livestock and setting

the castle on fire. Weapons had been captured from the Duke of York's baggage and taken by Clifford's men to Pontefract.

All the accounts from the 1460s indicate that the Duke of York (along with the earls of Rutland and Salisbury) was murdered and probably killed close to where he is buried at Pontefract Friary.

Paul summarised his conclusions as to how the myth of the Battle of Wakefield was created by the Yorkist party as an act of propaganda to give the Duke of York a more fitting death. Furthermore, the Battle of Towton as we are told of it, was also an invention – there was no such battle, but rather a clash of professional armies including with Burgundian mercenaries.

Paul told us that the chroniclers gave a different truth to dated manorial and fiscal records in Wakefield. The chronicles were largely literary creations to tell easily accessible romantic stories.

The speaker was thanked for delivering a fascinating and thoroughly researched piece of historical study which had been extremely thought-provoking and entertaining for all those present.

Steve Hargrave

05 01 2026