Wakefield

It was a cold but bright January day when we arrived in Wakefield. This was our very first visit on our trail, since it was the nearest Wars of the Roses battlefield to our home town of Manchester. At that point we had only done the barest minimum of reading and had no idea what to expect, thinking that Sandal Castle would probably be just a few stones in the ground. How wrong can you be!

But first we had to FIND Sandal! We had a very out-of-date map of the town centre but we headed first for the Museum, only to find that it was closed throughout 1999. Not a good start! (PS It is now open again and has a very good display about Sandal!)

The Tourist Information Office wasn't much help either. They 'thought' that the Art Gallery 'might' have some information. Off we went to the Art Gallery and yes, they did have an information sheet and also a couple of aerial photographs which showed us that Sandal was very much more than a few stones in the ground! They also gave us some vague directions about how to find Sandal: 'It's just off the Barnsley Road'.

Following the signs for Barnsley, we were crossing a bridge when we spotted a chapel over on our left. 'That's the Chantry Chapel!' we both exclaimed. Too late to turn back (the traffic was frantic!), we continued on our way, peering first left then right to try and spot a castle.

When we saw 'Sandal Magna' school, we knew we were on the right track, and then saw 'Castle Road' on our right. This took us through a housing estate and suddenly after a sharp left turn, there was the Castle!

Sandal Castle was probably first built in the early twelfth century after William de Warenne received the Manor of Wakefield from Henry I in 1106. Rebuilding started in the twelfth century and continued throughout the thirteenth century. The Manor reverted to the Crown in 1348 when John de Warenne died without issue, and in 1361 it was given by Edward III to his son Edmund Langley, Duke of York, and thus to the Yorkist house. (At the same time Edmund also received Conisbrough Castle near Doncaster which was where Richard of York's father was born). Sandal Castle was Richard of York's main base in Yorkshire, and later when Richard III came to the throne, he used Sandal for his Council of the North. When Elizabeth of York married Henry Tudor, Sandal was annexed to the Crown and gradually fell into decay. Surveys during the sixteenth century indicate that some floors and roofs were already missing, and the evidence shows that the only parts of the castle which were occupied were the buildings by the main drawbridge. Sandal was briefly re-fortified by a Royalist garrison in 1645 but was surrendered after only a few months in October 1645. On the orders of Parliament, the castle was stripped of its defences in 1646. The heap of stonework gradually became overgrown, and until 1963 all that could be seen was a grassy motte with – yes, you've guessed it, a few stones in the ground! However, extensive excavations between 1963 and 1973 have revealed the masonry that has survived, and at the end of 1999 Wakefield Council announced a £0.5 million project to make Sandal into a 'tourist attraction'. (Hopefully this means an information centre, maybe some sign boards – but not an amusement park!)

The most spectacular part of the castle is the Motte, a huge artificial mound built from the earth excavated from the surrounding moat. On this stood a stone keep which was circular with four towers. It was approached by a staircase rising from two drum towers in the inner moat. Parts of the drum towers are still standing and show the high quality of the masonry work at Sandal.

An unusual feature of Sandal is a Barbican, with its own moat, within the Inner Bailey. Round the inner perimeter wall of the Bailey are the remains of various domestic buildings, including a bakehouse and brewhouse added by Richard III in 1484.

From the Gatehouse in the outer curtain wall, you can look northwards towards Wakefield and see the area where the battle took place in December 1460. Recently I have seen various references to the 'Grand Old Duke of York' which claim that it was Richard of York who marched his men 'up to the top of the hill and marched them down again'. In fact this refers to a later Duke of York at the end of the eighteenth century, whereas it would be truer to say that our Duke of York marched his men DOWN the hill – and never came back up again. There seem to be as many different versions of the battle as there are military historians, and much has also been written about the reason for Richard of York's rash decision to leave the safety of Sandal to engage a force which outnumbered his own. Whatever his reasons, it led to his death along with 3,000 others on that cold December day. And the 'rainbow colours' mnemonic reminds us that '*Richard Of York Gave Battle in Vain*'.

It is said that Edward IV built a memorial to his father – a simple cross enclosed by a picket fence – at the site of his death, and that it was written into the terms of the lease that the tenant who occupied the land must maintain the memorial. This memorial was destroyed during the Civil War when the Parliamentarians destroyed the castle. Then in 1897 local residents built a new memorial, in the form of a stone monument decorated with carved roses. It bears the words: '*Richard Plantagenet. Duke of York, fighting for the cause of the white rose, fell on the spot in the Battle of Wakefield December 30th 1460*'. The memorial stands about half a mile from Sandal Castle, just within the boundary of a Victorian school on Manygates Lane (originally called Cock 'n' Bottle Lane) which was the lane down which Richard led his ill-fated force.

From Sandal, we retraced our route back to Wakefield Bridge. There is now a modern bridge over the River Calder but we found a small road which led us directly to the old bridge and the Chantry Chapel. The original bridge was built around 1342 and was widened considerably in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, on the east side of the bridge, the pointed arches of the fourteenth century bridge can be seen, whilst on the west side the arches are rounded. One source claims that the present pavement on the east side of the bridge is the width of the original bridge – about six feet wide. It was here that John Leland said that Edmund of Rutland was killed by Lord Clifford – but then Leland also says that the chapel on the bridge was endowed by Edward IV whereas it actually dates from 1357. It is one of only four bridge chapels still existing in England. After the Dissolution of Chantries in 1548 the chapel deteriorated and was later used for commercial purposes. In 1783 it was let out to an old clothes dealer who '*was in the habit of hanging upon the precious traceries his filthy wares.*' The Chapel was finally restored in the nineteenth century and again in the 1930's, but evidently the original medieval front with its fine carvings was removed and set up as the front of a boat house at Kettlethorpe. We did manage to get a peek inside the chapel, as (fortunately) some electricians were working on it at the time we visited – but it was difficult to tell which parts were medieval and which were more modern.

Our visit to Wakefield certainly got us off to a good start on our trail. Next stop – Towton!

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