

Stoke Field 1487

1. Mounted archer of the Royal army

This man wears the Tudor livery colours of white and green indicating his position as a royal soldier. He is a mounted archer, he would ride to battle, but fight on foot, possibly remounting to assist harrying a broken and retreating enemy.

He wears a 'sallet' helmet and a mail collar to protect his throat and beneath his livery jacket he is protected by a 'brigandine', a fabric body armour lined with iron plates. This was a relatively light and flexible form of body defence. He also wears a fully sleeved padded 'jack' and a mail shirt. He also has plate armour on his legs with his riding boots turned down.

The archer's arrows are in a canvas bag hanging from his horse and his bow is covered and slung across his back until needed for action. He carries a sword and dagger as side arms.

It was the archers of the royal army who caused such slaughter amongst the fleeing rebels, particularly the lightly armed Irish that the gulley down which they fled is called 'Red Gutter' or 'Bloody Gutter'.

The German mercenaries of the rebel army did apparently have some hand gunners but the superior numbers and skill of the royal archers proved to be far superior. These mercenaries stood their ground instead of retreating and most were killed, a contemporary writer described their bodies as resembling Hedgehogs from the number of arrows protruding from the bodies.

2. Billman, The Earl of Oxford's retinue.

This man represents the heavy infantry of the Royal Army. He is particularly in the service of the Earl of Oxford. Oxford had been a supporter of the Lancastrian cause throughout the 'Wars of the Roses' and he commanded vanguard of the royal forces at Stoke Field and much of the direction of the battle. This soldier wears Oxford's red livery and white star badge on his jacket.

The royal forces were far better equipped than the rebels and although English military fashion was generally more conservative than some European contemporaries they still were very well equipped. This soldier wears a visored 'sallet' on his head and his lower face and throat are protected by a plate 'bevor'. He also wears a full breastplate and his arms are protected by simple plate 'splints' that tie on to his padded 'jack'. He has Italian style steel gauntlets and his upper legs and knees have plate armour. His loins are protected by mail.

The soldier carries a good sword and a 'bollock' dagger, but his main weapon is the pole weapon he carries. These weapons came in a variety of types from relatively simple weapons derived from agricultural hedging bills to complicated shaped weapons. All had a similar function with an axe type cutting edge, a hook of some sort to the rear and a spike or spear head, all on a shaft of 6 to 8 feet in length. The soldier shown is carrying a 'Halberd' of Italian design. Soldiers armed with such weapons were generically called spearmen or billmen and together with the men at arms made up the hand to hand forces of the royal army.

3. Irish 'Kern'

The basis of the revolt leading to Stoke Field was the pretender Lambert Simnel, allegedly the Earl of Warwick, son of the Duke of Clarence. He had come to the attention of the Yorkist John de La Pole, Earl of Lincoln and Margaret of Burgundy, the sister of the late Richard III. The revolt was raised and the bulk of the rebel army was made up of Irish warriors and a German and Swiss mercenary force provided by Margaret of Burgundy.

The man shown is one of the Irish mercenaries, a 'Kern', a lightly armed warrior' but supposedly having the advantage of mobility. He has no body armour whatsoever and wears traditional Irish robes of saffron colour. His whole costume and demeanour was considered anachronistic to English contemporaries. This illustration is based around a slightly later depiction of 'Kerns' by Albrecht Durer. The bare feet, heavy moustache and odd hair style adds to the quaint barbaric nature of these warriors.

He is armed with a long axe and a broadsword of particularly Irish design with the tang of the sword going through a hollow ring rather than a solid pommel. Some of these warriors were armed with little more than a wicker shield and a handful of light javelins (darts) and a long knife.

They did not prove to be effective troops against the royal forces at Stoke Field and the vast majority of them could not stand up to the more modern soldiers in open battle. Many were killed by the royal archers as the rebel army broke and ran whilst more drowned trying to swim the river Trent.

4. German or Swiss mercenary.

This man represents one of the 2000 mercenaries provided by Margaret Duchess of Burgundy for the rebel army. Commanded by a noted Captain Martin Schwarz these soldiers formed the backbone of the rebel forces.

These mercenaries were the latest type of soldier in Europe, trained for the new type of warfare with pikes, a system that was yet to be even considered in England, although one such unit of French pikeman may have greatly contributed to the demise of Richard III at Bosworth. Mercenaries like these men were professional soldiers and fought as units, blocks of pikemen interspersed with handgunners and certain elite men armed with double handed swords to break into enemy blocks. They were the forerunners of the slightly later 'Landsknechts'.

The illustration is partially based on an Albrecht Durer woodcut of 1497 and illustrates the flamboyant dress of these soldiers compared to the more conservative English. The soldier here wears a blackened 'sallet' helmet with a fixed visor, he has tilted it back on his head for better vision. His body is protected by a blackened 'Gothic' style breastplate. Armour was often blackened as a protection against rust. That is all the armour he wears, relying on mobility in combat. Beneath his armour he wears the latest fashion doublet, bi coloured and with the sleeves tied with points at the elbow and shoulder and his ruffled neck shirt has the sleeves puffed out at the joints. His particoloured hose fit his legs tightly. Beneath his helmet he wears a linen coif over his hair.

His main weapon is a fearsome double handed sword, the blade being perhaps 5 feet long, his subsidiary weapons are a good German style sword and a Swiss style short sword.

At Stoke Field Martin Schwarz and his men disdained to flee the field with the rest of the rebel army and held their ground and died there.