

The Second Battle of St Albans, 1461

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Abstract

The second battle of St Albans occurred early in the fifteenth-century civil wars. Although not usually regarded as important, it gave the supporters of the Duke of York, who had been defeated and killed six weeks earlier, a vital breathing space. This they used to gather an army with which they were able to rout their enemies. The sources of evidence for the events during and surrounding the battle are, as ever at this period, imperfect, but they do reveal the constraints under which commanders operated then and the opportunities available, sometimes, to some of them. In this case, it will be argued that some recent evidence has been under-used, leading to misinterpretation, not only of the events themselves, but also of the rival commanders' actions and strategies.

Introduction

The immediate context of the second battle of St Albans, fought during the fifteenth-century English civil wars, was the political compromise reached between the king, Henry VI, and Richard Duke of York in October 1460. York's allies, led by the Earls of Salisbury, Warwick and March, respectively his brother-in-law, nephew, and eldest son and heir, had returned from exile in Calais in the summer of that year. Their forces had defeated a royal army at Northampton in July and they had taken control of King Henry and the government.

York himself had been in exile in Ireland. When he eventually arrived back in the late autumn he converted what had, at least ostensibly, been a struggle for power into a dynastic conflict by laying claim to the throne. He was unable to persuade the lords who were already assembled for a parliament to depose Henry, although they accepted the justice of his claim. Instead, after some hard negotiation, it was agreed among those present that Henry would remain on the throne for life but that York would succeed him instead of the young Prince of Wales. Absent during these negotiations was the queen, Margaret, and her supporters. She forcefully rejected attempts to persuade her to accept a compromise that would disinherit her son. In late December 1460, her supporters defeated York near Wakefield and the duke and

the Earl of Salisbury were killed. That set the scene for the battle at St Albans seven weeks later between armies fighting, on the one hand, in support of the Yorkist cause (and crucially holding the person of the king, and so able to claim to fight in the name of King Henry) and, on the other, on behalf of Henry's wife, Queen Margaret.¹

An article about this particular battle requires justification: there are quite a few modern accounts of it.² The first reason for re-examining it is that the undertaking is likely to prove fruitful. It is not true, as Colonel Alfred Burne said in his *Battlefields of England*, that 'the records of the battle are more than usually scanty, even for that period'. He himself, according to the bibliography for the relevant chapter, relied on six primary sources, five fifteenth-century, one sixteenth-century.³ They are the ones cited by Sir James Ramsay in his account of the battle, published nearly sixty years earlier.⁴ By the time that Burne wrote, however, in the middle of the twentieth century, there were several more available than this, although two useful contemporary sources, 'John Benet's Chronicle' and the missing final section of a 'London' chronicle (that is, one arranged by London mayoral year), 'Robert Bale's Chronicle', were not published until 1972 and 2014 respectively.⁵ This matters because, although Professor Anthony Goodman's *The Wars of the Roses* made use of a large number of sources, both English and foreign,⁶ and his work appears in the bibliographies of some later commentaries, it is Burne's version of events that has dominated subsequent interpretations. This affected even Goodman; although he realised that Burne had misidentified the final position of the main part of the king's army, he accepted the latter's claim that Warwick chose it because he was initially expecting an attack from the north or

¹ By this stage, given that the political contest had become an avowedly dynastic one, it would be reasonable to refer to the two sides as 'Yorkists' and 'Lancastrians' (although in fact the Duke of York had claimed the throne by descent from Edward III's second son, the Duke of Clarence, not his fourth son, the Duke of York; the Duke of Lancaster, King Henry's ancestor, had been Edward III's third son). As it was important morally and practically to be able to claim to act with the king's authority, however, and all the surviving sources for this battle refer to the 'king's party/council/army' or the 'queen's party/army', that is the terminology used here.

² E.g. in A. W. Boardman, *The Battle of Towton* (Stroud: Sutton, 1994), 39-45; P. A. Haigh, *The Military Campaigns of the Wars of the Roses* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), 46-54; P. Burley, M. Elliott & H. Watson, *The Battles of St Albans* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2007); and most recently, D. Cohen, *Battles of the Roses* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2022), 59-65.

³ A. H. Burne, *The Battlefields of England* (London: Penguin, 2002), 503.

⁴ J. H. Ramsay, *Lancaster and York* (2 vols., Oxford: Clarendon, 1892), 2: 244-7.

⁵ G. L. Harriss & M. A. Harriss eds., "John Benet's Chronicle for the Years 1400 to 1462," *Camden Miscellany*, 24 (Camden Society, Fourth Series, vol. 9), 151-233; H. Kleineke, "Robert Bale's Chronicle and the Second Battle of St. Albans," *Historical Research* 87, no. 238 (2014): 744-50.

⁶ The most significant narrative accounts, all, with the exception of Polydore Vergil, 15th century ones, are discussed in the Introduction: A. Goodman, *The Wars of the Roses: Military Activity and Society, 1452-97* (London: Routledge, 1981), 8-12.

north-east.⁷ More seriously, in terms of exposing the problems with the dominant interpretation of events, he did not explicitly say so when he thought it incorrect. A re-examination which uses a wider range of sources, does not take Burne's interpretation as a starting-point, and addresses any misinterpretations and their consequences, should enable us to improve our understanding of the battle.

The second reason for looking at it again is that the events surrounding the battle display clearly one of the features of these civil wars that affected other contemporary battles: the great difficulty that commanders had in getting intelligence about a mobile enemy. By re-examining the impact that it had on this particular battle, we can understand the others better, too, and the constraints and opportunities that shaped military strategy at this period.

The third reason is that the strategy of the commanders of the two armies has been almost completely misunderstood. That of the commanders of the king's army, attributed to the Earl of Warwick, has been widely condemned. Ramsay remarked that 'the want of boldness and resource exhibited by Warwick were such as to justify the contempt with which ... his generalship was viewed by that accomplished soldier, Edward IV' (York's eldest son, then Earl of March).⁸ Burne, despite not having much regard for Ramsay's judgement as a military strategist, as opposed to as a historian,⁹ nevertheless agreed: Warwick's strategy was 'plebeian'; determined to protect London, he adopted a defensive and therefore a passive strategy and spent the four days between his arrival at St Albans and the battle constructing a widely extended position which he protected with cannon and various defensive devices.¹⁰ On the other hand, Burne considered the queen's strategy (and he did think it was hers) to have been 'unusual, brilliant, and phenomenally successful'.¹¹ The battle was remarkable, he said, for including 'three tactical features almost unheard of in medieval warfare – a night approach march followed by a dawn attack; a flank, instead of a frontal attack, and an army occupying a position several miles in length'.¹² For a single battle to possess not one but three 'almost unheard of' tactical features invites the obvious question: did it really?

The availability of and problems with the evidence

Like Burne, modern accounts of the battle rely to a considerable extent on three

⁷ Goodman, *The Wars of the Roses*, 46.

⁸ J. H. Ramsay, *Lancaster and York*, 2: 247.

⁹ Burne, *Battlefields of England*, xvii-xviii.

¹⁰ Burne, *Battlefields of England*, 233, 242.

¹¹ Burne, *Battlefields of England*, 241.

¹² Burne, *Battlefields of England*, 232.

narratives: the *Register* of Abbot John Whethamstede of St Albans, another London chronicle, ‘Gregory’s Chronicle’, and the work of Jean de Waurin, a contemporary Burgundian commentator, published in the original language as *Anchiennes Croniques d'Engleterre*.¹³ Although Whethamstede’s *Register* is undoubtedly useful, all three have to be used with caution.

According to Abbot Whethamstede, the fighting began with an assault by the queen’s troops on St Albans itself. This was beaten back by a small number of archers based around the great cross in the marketplace. Having retreated westwards, the attackers followed a lane which led them onto the high street close to the northern end of the town. There they encountered a company of soldiers which held them for some time. When they finally managed to break through onto the open ground of Bernard’s Heath just beyond the town’s end they were confronted by some 4-5,000 men, Abbot Whethamstede estimated, of the king’s *praecursores*, and a great battle ensued. Eventually, however, the defenders, seeing nobody coming to their aid from the greater part of the king’s army, lost heart and fled; the pursuit lasted until nightfall.

The abbot might well have been able to view the fighting near the marketplace, given how close the abbey is to that location. On the other hand, there is no suggestion that he witnessed anything else or knew much about what happened beyond the town’s northern outskirts. The reliance on his account therefore results in what is almost certainly undue prominence being given to the fighting in and just outside St Albans at the expense of any that occurred in other locations. It is certainly unsafe to assume that he provided ‘the fullest account of the battle’.¹⁴ What he did provide was the fullest account of the fighting in and close to St Albans.

Burne thought that ‘Gregory’s Chronicle’ was the best of the available accounts of the battle, if ‘silent as to movements and localities’.¹⁵ Unlike the *Register*, it was written in English. At his liveliest, the author, who spoke of himself as having been a mayor of London, seems to be engaged in a conversation with his audience (and it does sound as though he

¹³ H. T. Riley ed., *Registra Quorundam Abbatum Monasterii S. Albani, qui Saeculo XVmo Floruere: Vol. I, Registrum Abbatiae Johannis Whethamstede, Abbatis Monasterii Sancti Albani, Iterum Susceptae, Roberto Blakeney, Capellano, quondam Adscriptum* (London: Longman, 1872), 388-92; J. Gairdner ed., *The Historical Collections of a Citizen of London in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Camden Society, 1876), 211-14; E. Dupont ed., *Anchiennes Croniques d'Engleterre, par Jehan de Waurin, Seigneur du Forestel; Choix de Chapitres Inédits Annotés et Publiés pour la Société de l'Histoire de France* (3 vols., Paris: Renouard, 1858-63), 2: 263-6.

¹⁴ Pace Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, 46.

¹⁵ Burne, *Battlefields of England*, 243-4.

expected to have an audience).¹⁶ And therein lies a problem. What we have here is a man of strong opinions who included in his account the sort of circumstantial detail that leads readers to believe that, if he was not actually present, he knew what he was talking about.¹⁷ Consequently, his account of the second battle of St Albans has greatly influenced judgements about its conduct. This is despite the fact that, as the authors of *The Battles of St Albans* commented, it is difficult to understand what exactly he *was* saying about that.¹⁸

His narrative began with a bald account of the battle, in which his main comment was that '[t]he substance that gate that fylde were howseholde men and feyd men. I wene there were not v M^l men that fought in the Quenys party, for [t]^e moste parte of Northeryn men fledde a-way'. (If this happened, nobody else noticed it.) He went on to tell a story about what occurred at Dunstable on 16 February, the day before the battle, saying that the town was defended on behalf of the king by men under the command of a butcher who committed suicide, apparently out of shame at his defeat. Not until he had described the aftermath of the battle in St Albans did he launch into the comments that have commanded much of the attention of later historians:

[t]he lordys in Kyng Harrys party pycchyd a fylde and fortefyd hyt fulle stronge, and lyke unwyse men brake hyr raye and fyld and toke a-nothyr, and or that they were alle sette a buskyd to batayle, the Quenys parte was at hond whythe hem in towne of Synt Albonyes, and then alle [t]yng was to seke and owte of ordyr, for hyr pryckyrs come not home to bryng no tydyng howe ny that the Quene was, save one come and sayd that she was ix myle of. And ar the goners and borgeners [Burgundians] couthe levylle hyr gonnys they were besely fyghtyng, and many a gynne of wer was ordaynyd that stode in lytylle a-vayle or nought.¹⁹

Despite saying that the redeployment was unwise, the problem that he described seems to have been that it occurred too late as a result of faulty intelligence, not that it happened at all. He also criticised the defences with which the king's commanders fortified their positions before ending his account with a story about one of the queen's greatest captains, Andrew Trollop, who 'was hurte and myght not goo for a calletrappe [caltrop,] in hys fote'. On this basis, it was clearly not true that the defensive devices he described only

¹⁶ Gairdner, *Historical Collections of a Citizen of London*, 179.

¹⁷ It should be said that his latest editors thought he was a man of moderate political opinions, if clearly a Yorkist: D. Embree & M. T. Tavormina eds., *The Contemporary English Chronicles of the Wars of the Roses* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2019), 12.

¹⁸ Burley, Elliott & Watson, *The Battles of St Albans*, 73.

¹⁹ Gairdner, *The Historical Collections of a Citizen of London in the Fifteenth Century*, 212-3.

hurt ‘owre parte with Kyng Harry’.²⁰ His story about the defence of Dunstable illustrates another weakness with his account: he presented what were very probably facts but exaggerated or embellished them or, as here, omitted important details in order to focus his audience’s attention on a specific aspect of the story. According to the *Annales*, a generally well-informed source, Edward [*recte*, Robert] Poynings had been sent to Dunstable with a company of at least 200 Norfolk footmen, who were killed when the town was attacked.²¹ The most notable thing about Gregory’s account, however, is that it is almost completely different from Abbot Whethamstede’s. Apart from the mention of the queen’s forces arriving at St Albans before the king’s forces were ready, nothing in it resembles the abbot’s description of the fighting in the town.

‘Gregory’ certainly made a few errors. He said that the king’s forces under Norfolk and Warwick left London on 17 February, and that Warwick accompanied the king to St Albans. As we shall see, neither of these things is true. Admittedly, his description of the battle was written some years later, around 1470. Even so, it is unsafe to assume that he was an eyewitness. Although the chronicle was attributed by its original editor to William Gregory, it may not in fact be even partly by him: he died in 1465.²² And yet, of the three aldermen and sometime mayors of London who were absent from a meeting of the city’s Common Council on the day of the battle, the only one who could definitely have been with the king’s forces – in fact, almost from the time they left the city – was, ironically enough, Gregory.²³ Perhaps the somewhat incoherent tale told by ‘Gregory’ reflects the fact that, although he reached St Albans on the day of the battle, he was almost immediately caught up

²⁰ Gairdner, *The Historical Collections of a Citizen of London in the Fifteenth Century*, 213-4.

²¹ J. Stevenson ed., *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France during the Reign of Henry the Sixth, King of England* (3 vols., London: Longman, 1861), 2: ii, 776. For Robert Poynings’ death, see J. Gairdner ed., *The Paston Letters* (6 vols., London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), 4: 308 fn. 1.

²² Gairdner, *Historical Collections of a Citizen of London*, iii-vii. For a summary of the discussion about the authorship, see Embree & Tavormina, *Contemporary English Chronicles of the Wars of the Roses*, 3-16. ‘Gregory’ seems to have completed his work shortly after he wrote the last extant entry, relating to 1469: Embree & Tavormina, *Contemporary English Chronicles of the Wars of the Roses*, 10-11. Given his enthusiastic support for Edward IV, his reference to Warwick’s brother John as ‘thys good Erle [*sic*] Mountegewe’ suggests that the entry concerned, for 1464-5, was written before Montagu’s abandonment of Edward IV in September 1470: Gairdner, *Historical Collections of a Citizen of London*, 224.

²³ London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) COL/CC/01/05/004, Journals of the Common Council, Jor. 6, photo. 453. The others absent on the day were Ralph Verney (absent 17-19 Feb.) and Geoffrey Boleyn (absent 17 Feb.). Gregory was absent from 14 to 25 Feb.: COL/CC/01/05/004, photos. 452-8.

in the turmoil and did not really understand what was happening and why.²⁴ Alternatively, he was simply picking up on some of the stories about the battle in order to air his opinions.

Then there is Jean de Waurin's version of events. He was certainly not an eyewitness. He said that the king's forces left London on the Thursday before 'Quaresme' (Quadragesima), that is, on 19 February, and headed for St Albans, where they believed the queen's forces to be. Having spent the night at 'Bernay' (Barnet), they continued to St Albans. That night, the king's commanders learned that the queen's forces were marching towards them and decided to give battle the following day (21 February). Apart from informing his readers that Warwick commanded the main battle and that a man called Lovelace, who, he said, had been made 'capitaine de ceulz de Kent ... et son grant maistre d'hotel [captain of the Kentish contingents ... and his great chamberlain of the household]' by Warwick, was placed in command of the vanguard, he provided no details of the fighting itself.²⁵ Instead, he devoted considerable attention to his story about the treachery of Lovelace, 'ung escuyer ... qui avoit renom d'estre le plus expert en fait de guerre qui feust en Engleterre'.²⁶ He said that the queen had promised this man a large sum of money and the earldom of Kent if he reported the dispositions of the king's forces to her. This he duly did and, after the Duke of Somerset (commanding part of the queen's army) had attacked, caused chaos in the opposing ranks by claiming to the king and those with him that Warwick had fled. Having been arrested sometime after the battle, he was brought before the Earl of March, confessed, and was executed.²⁷

The only thing that this account has in common with Whethamstede's *Register* is that it identified a (different) problem with the vanguard, assuming that that was what the abbot meant by *praecursores*. Waurin's version of events illustrates the difficulty that his work can present to those wanting to use it to understand this period. Almost nothing in his account of the prelude to the battle is correct, and yet there almost certainly was an overnight stop at Barnet.²⁸ Moreover, his story about Lovelace is similar to, but in important respects not the same as, the account in another contemporary chronicle, perhaps written in Canterbury and,

²⁴ If so, Verney is the likelier candidate (Boleyn died in 1463). He might even have had some military experience: on 8 Dec. 1429, a Ralph de Verne of London was granted letters of protection when going to France in the retinue of John bastard of Clarence: *The Forty-eighth Annual Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1887), 266.

²⁵ Dupont, *Anchiennes cronicques d'Engleterre*, 2: 262.

²⁶ Dupont, *Anchiennes cronicques d'Engleterre*, 2: 264.

²⁷ Dupont, *Anchiennes cronicques d'Engleterre*, 2: 263-6, 270-1.

²⁸ "John Benet's Chronicle" also mentioned Barnet as the initial destination of the king's forces under the Duke of Norfolk: Harriss & Harriss, "John Benet's Chronicle," 229.

therefore, just possibly, reflecting local rumour or knowledge. This claimed that the king's party lost the field 'thorow the withdrawyng of the Kentisshmen with thayre capteyne, called Lovelace, [who] fauored the Northe party, for as moche as he was take by the Northurnmen at Wakefeld whan the duk of York was slayne, and made to theym an othe for to saue his lyfe, that he wold neuer be agayns theym'.²⁹

That some grain of truth existed at the heart of Waurin's story is also shown by a comment in 'Robert Bale's Chronicle' that 'oon called lovelac a Gentilman of Kent folowed [York and his allies north prior to the battle of Wakefield in December 1460] wth greet ordenannce of Gounes and other stuffs of were'; this must be the same man.³⁰ Lovelace could well have been present at the battle, therefore, perhaps in charge of one of the companies of the vanguard, and by withdrawing his men from the fight he may have caused serious problems, although there is nothing whatsoever to suggest that he held an important command and no likelihood that he did.³¹ On the other hand, Warwick's brother, George Bishop of Exeter, writing about the battle a month later, said nothing at all about treachery.³² And the fact that a man as sympathetic to Warwick as Robert Bale claimed almost ten years later that there was 'treson wrought in the Kinges ost' but made no connection between this and 'Lovelac' makes it very unlikely that, as is sometimes alleged, Warwick blamed Lovelace for the defeat at St Albans.³³

The difficulties presented by Whethamstede's *Register*, 'Gregory's Chronicle' and Waurin would matter less if what the Milanese ambassador to the Duke of Burgundy described as a 'letter written to the Dauphin by one who was at the great battle' had survived (the writer was quite possibly Jean Lord de la Barde, who had been sent from Burgundy to England in September of the previous year).³⁴ Unsurprisingly, since the dauphin, the future

²⁹ J. S. Davies ed., *An English Chronicle of the Reigns of Richard II, Henry IV., Henry V., And Henry VI. Written before the Year 1471*, Camden Society, 1st Series, LXIV (1856): vi, 108.

³⁰ R. Flenley ed., *Six Town Chronicles of England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911), 114-53 at 152.

³¹ The Lovelaces were certainly a Kent family; Richard Lovelace of Betherden (died 1511), who went on to make a military career under Henry VII, or his father, also Richard, of Bayford (died 1466), a member of the Mercers Company of London, have been suggested as Waurin's Lovelace: A. J. Pearman, "The Kentish Family of Lovelace," *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 10 (1876): 186-220 at 190-8. Neither of Warwick's most recent biographers mentioned a Lovelace among his retainers, servants or associates, apart from Geoffrey, his warrenor: M. Hicks, *Warwick the Kingmaker* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 49; A. J. Pollard, *Warwick the Kingmaker: Politics, Power and Fame* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

³² A. B. Hinds ed., *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts in the Archives and Collections of Milan 1385-1618* (London: HMSO, 1912), 60-3 at 61.

³³ Flenley, *Six Town Chronicles*, 199; Kleineke, "Robert Bale's Chronicle and the Second Battle of St. Albans," 748-9.

³⁴ Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts ... of Milan*, 54-6 at 54.

Louis XI of France, had taken refuge in Burgundy at the time, it has not. And although the Milanese ambassador provided a précis of it in his own letter of 9 March, it lacked almost all the detail that the original letter reportedly contained and at times it seems as though something has been lost in translation. There are however some other contemporary sources which provide evidence about the circumstances surrounding the battle, and other narratives which are, like ‘Gregory’s Chronicle’, near-contemporary in the sense that they are likely to have been written by men who were adults at the time. These are helpful, not only as a means of testing the information given by Whethamstede’s *Register*, ‘Gregory’ and Waurin, but also because they offer some important additional details about the battle. Using them, we can get closer to understanding the events leading up to the battle and the battle itself.

Reconstruction of events in the weeks before the king’s forces left for St Albans

If ‘Gregory’ was right to say that there was considerable confusion in the king’s army at the beginning of the battle, it echoed the confusion beforehand. The first problem faced by the king’s council in London after news of the disastrous battle at Wakefield reached it was that it did not know when – or even, for certain, whether – the queen and her supporters would head southwards in the attempt to exploit their recent victory by annihilating the rest of their enemies. On 23 January, a young man called Clement Paston reported from London that the queen’s supporters ‘will be here soner than men wen, I have arde sayde, er iij. weks to an ende’.³⁵ Margaret was still at York on 20 January 1461, however, and the *Annales* said that she did not leave Yorkshire until shortly after the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 2 February.³⁶ Evidence about her line of advance also appears contradictory. According to contemporary jottings published as ‘Brief Notes’, as her forces moved south, they destroyed ‘almost all the towns on the way to St Albans’. Those listed lay to the east, along the Great North Road and the Old North Road, the furthest south being Royston.³⁷ In a letter written on 14 February, however, a London-based Italian merchant called Carlo Gigli remarked that, although the queen’s forces were said ‘to be about thirty miles from here ...’, they do not seem to have passed Northampton’.³⁸ Northampton is on the route down the spine of the country, to the north-west of St Albans. Although this evidence appears incompatible, it is not: the queen’s commanders might well not have left together or moved along a single

³⁵ Gairdner, *Paston Letters*, 3: 249-50.

³⁶ Stevenson, *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France*, 2: ii, 776.

³⁷ ‘Brief Notes’ in Gairdner, *Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles*, 148-63 at 155.

³⁸ Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts ... of Milan*, p. 48.

route. Common practice during this period was for the commanders of an army – at least, one that was travelling any distance and where a confrontation *en route* was not anticipated - to send the footmen on ahead of most of the cavalry (as happened before Northampton, Towton, Edgcote, and, reportedly, after Empingham), occasionally on different routes with the intention of meeting up closer to where the enemy was believed to be (Towton).

The king's council did not of course simply sit and wait for news. Clement Paston also reported in his letter of 23 January that John Lord fitzWalter had been despatched northwards and had captured two hundred men in the service of Andrew Trollop, the queen's famous captain. Perhaps it was from these men that the council got the information that persuaded it that at least some of the queen's forces were on their way and led it to order the arraying of troops in seven southern shires on 28 January.³⁹

Meanwhile, as Goodman noted, from early January 1461 onwards the council took a series of measures which were aimed at suppressing support for the queen and raising money and men for itself.⁴⁰ It was worried that Queen Margaret's leading supporters might head for the Welsh marches, where the Earl of March, York's eldest son, then was.⁴¹ Most of the measures taken in January and early February, however, focused on East Anglia. Queen Margaret had considerable support there. Initially, not knowing for sure that her forces were on their way south, the council was attempting a delicate balancing act: on the one hand, it believed that it would soon need soldiers itself; on the other, it wanted to prevent the queen's supporters in the east country either rising up in her support or joining her. The upshot was a chaotic situation. An unsigned and undated letter among documents relating to the Paston family of Norfolk is probably from this period, late January or early February 1461.⁴² The writer mentioned that, among other sources of alarm for men who supported the king and his council, there were 'gret gaderyng of pepill' at Castle Rising and in two other places, 'and it is wele undyrstand they be not to the Kyng ward'.⁴³ Moreover, despite orders 'that pepill should not up tyll thei were sent for, but be redy at all tymes, ... most pepill owt of this cuntre have take wages, seying thei woll goo up to London; but thei have no capteyn, ner rewler

³⁹ H. Nicolas ed., *Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council of England* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1837), 6: 307-10.

⁴⁰ Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, 44-5.

⁴¹ *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Henry VI, Vol. VI, A.D. 1452-1461 [CalPR 52-61]* (London: HMSO, 1910), 657, 20 Jan. 1460 commission to bailiffs of Shrewsbury to repair town walls and to keep out the duke of Somerset and others of the queen's leading supporters.

⁴² Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, 45.

⁴³ It was almost certainly in response to this situation that on 7 Feb. the escheator in Norfolk and Suffolk was ordered garrison Castle Rising: *CalPR 52-61*, 658.

assigned be the commissioners to awayte upon, and so thei stragyll abowte be theym selfe'.⁴⁴ The king's forces seem to have had an unusually large number of men who had volunteered for this one occasion individually or in small groups. That would have implications for discipline and for the adequacy of the provision of supplies. *An English Chronicle* commented on the 'vndysposycion of the peple of the kynges syde, that wold nat be guyded ne gouerned by theyre capteyns'.⁴⁵ The dauphin's correspondent said that 'not a few' of the king's 120,000-strong army (he thought that the queen's army was about half this size) left before the battle because of a lack of victuals.⁴⁶

Since 'Robert Bale's Chronicle' reported that 'Lovelac' took many guns and other equipment to York and his allies prior to the battle of Wakefield in December, one might expect that in February the king's army suffered from a shortage of gunpowder artillery.⁴⁷ But evidently not. Not only did it have a company of Burgundian hand-gunners but, according to the generally well-informed author of the account of events in 'John Benet's Chronicle', the Earl of Warwick left London 'cum magna ordinancia'.⁴⁸ It looks as though the king's commanders laboured under some disadvantages, therefore, but they alone probably do not explain why they were defeated at St Albans.

The council's greatest problem was almost certainly that the majority of the king's leading noble councillors, John Duke of Norfolk, the Earl of Warwick, Warwick's brother John Lord Montagu and, probably, Henry Viscount Bouchier and his brother John Lord Berners, were unable to leave London in order to raise men in the regions where they were strongest: above all, in East Anglia and the West Midlands. The exception was William Earl of Arundel, who was commissioned to bring the men that he had been told to raise in Sussex and Hampshire to join the king.⁴⁹ Consequently they had relatively few men from the local town and shire levies and from what Goodman called 'large and skilled retinues' which would have brought discipline to an otherwise disorderly army. Two days after the battle Carlo Gigli commented that 'the strength *di qua di Chenti di Signori* said to be under the

⁴⁴ Gairdner, *Paston Letters*, 3: 265.

⁴⁵ Davies, *An English Chronicle*, 108.

⁴⁶ '[L]e gente del Rey ... , ben CXX^{me}, de li quali se ne partitte per diffecto de victualia non puochi': P. M. Kendall & V. Ilardi eds., *Dispatches with Related Documents of Milanese Ambassadors in France and Burgundy, 1450-1483, vol. II* (Ohio: Athens University Press, 1970), 151. Those numbers are, needless to say, unreliable; the Milanese ambassador told the Duke of Milan that he was 'ashamed to speak of so many thousands': Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts ... of Milan*, 56.

⁴⁷ Flenley, *Six Town Chronicles*, 152.

⁴⁸ Harriss & Harriss, "John Benet's Chronicle," 229.

⁴⁹ *CalPR* 52-61, 307-8.

leadership of the Earl of Arundel and also of the Duke of Norfolk, was incorrect, so there is less harm done'.⁵⁰ This was probably a reference to the men whom the lords Cobham and Bergavenny were ordered to raise in Kent under the commission of 28 January (neither man is noted as having been present at the subsequent battle). Kent was evidently expected to be a major source of manpower: in addition to the two noblemen, six men and the sheriff were ordered to array men there.⁵¹

These problems were aggravated by the failure of the Earl of March to join his allies before the battle. Howell Evans, in his *Wales and the Wars of the Roses*, was scathing of the suggestion that the earl could not have reached his allies in time. He believed that March had deliberately delayed until after he knew of the defeat at St Albans, in order to weaken a 'dictatorial' Warwick's ability to resist his own determination to seize the throne.⁵² Early in February March had defeated a force under the command of two of the queen's supporters at Mortimer's Cross and captured and executed Owen Tudor, King Henry's stepfather. Tudor's execution without the king's specific authorisation was an unconscionable act and it does suggest that March had already made up his mind to depose the king. On the other hand, allowing, not just Warwick, but his other leading allies, to face destruction would have been a very great gamble.

The alternative explanation for the delay is that the earl's original instructions required him to subdue and control Wales and the Welsh marches and that he did so until he was commanded to do otherwise.⁵³ It was not until 12 February, by which time reports of the victory at Mortimer's Cross had reached London, that the council despatched a commission to him covering Bristol and seven western and south-western counties to raise men 'to go with him against the king's rebels'.⁵⁴ The process was probably still under way when March heard about the defeat at St Albans, probably on the 19th. That day, Carlo Gigli reported that Warwick, the other king's councillors and Montagu had apparently survived the battle, but their whereabouts were unknown, although they were thought to be hiding in the London

⁵⁰ Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts ... of Milan*, 49.

⁵¹ The italicised section is translated in Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts... of Milan*, 49, as 'of the men of Kent with nobles'. '[O]f the men of the nobles of Kent' seems better.

⁵² H. T. Evans, *Wales and the Wars of the Roses* (Cambridge: CUP, 1915), 154, fn. 57, 78-9.

⁵³ As William Herbert and two others had previously been ordered to do; they had also been told that, should they manage to arrest the 'leders pryncipall', they were to imprison them 'unto the tyme ye have knowlache from us what be doo furthermore for thaire punysshment': Nicolas, *Proceedings and Ordinances of the Privy Council of England*, 6: 304-5 at 305.

⁵⁴ *CalPR* 52-61, 659.

area.⁵⁵ Even if March had completed the musters by then, he can hardly be blamed for delaying for a short while. But although it was almost certainly unavoidable, the absence of his tenants and retainers and the local levies he had been commissioned to raise, when combined with the problems his allies had had in mustering a reliable army from their own resources and supplying and controlling the volunteers, very probably was critical to the outcome of the battle.

Reconstruction of events leading up to and during the battle

The king's forces left London on 12 February. So said *An English Chronicle*, 'John Benet's Chronicle' and 'Robert Bale's Chronicle',⁵⁶ and it is confirmed by Carlo Gigli in his letter written from London on 14 February.⁵⁷ Most of the sources said simply that they went to St Albans. Burne was puzzled by what he believed to be the fact that Warwick had chosen a destination which would enable the queen's forces to by-pass him.⁵⁸ In fact, however, the earl did not initially head for St Albans. According to 'John Benet's Chronicle', the royal forces were divided into two. One part was commanded by the Duke of Norfolk and escorted King Henry north-westwards up the Great North Road to St Albans. The other, commanded by the Warwick, took the direct route north and headed for Ware on the Old North Road.⁵⁹ Goodman thought that this was a 'preliminary line of advance', perhaps chosen in case 'the northerners failed to swing westwards to St Albans'.⁶⁰ But St Albans and Ware are both about 25 miles from the city of London, to which the journey between Ware and St Albans adds some 16 miles. It seems improbable that Warwick would have transported (a large amount of and/or heavy) artillery on a lengthy dogleg on the off chance that his enemies would use the Old North Road. He and his allies evidently took seriously the possibility that their enemies would head for London by the more direct route.

Moreover, Carlo Gigli's comment that the queen did not seem to have passed Northampton does not suggest that this was fresh or surprising news at the time he wrote, on the 14th. It may be, therefore, that her route was known to the king's commanders before they left London two days earlier. Anyone heading towards London from Northampton would join the old Roman road, Watling Street, which would lead them straight to St Albans, about

⁵⁵ Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts ... of Milan*, 49.

⁵⁶ Davies, *An English Chronicle*, 107; Harriss & Harriss, "Benet's Chronicle," 229; Kleineke, "Robert Bale's Chronicle and the Second Battle of St. Albans," 749.

⁵⁷ Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts... of Milan*, 48.

⁵⁸ Burne, *Battlefields of England*, 232-3.

⁵⁹ Harriss & Harriss, "John Benet's Chronicle," 229.

⁶⁰ Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, 45.

forty-five miles to the south-east. By going to St Albans and Ware respectively, the king's commanders were in a position to block two of the three main highways to London, Watling Street and the Old North Road; the third, the Great North Road, lay between them.

The Duke of Norfolk evidently reached St Albans on 13 February, although Warwick with his ordnance could well have taken longer to get to Ware. If the list of towns in the 'Brief Notes' correctly tracks the route of some of the queen's forces down the Great North Road and then the Old North Road, they must have turned westwards at or south of Royston, their last known location, and Warwick found that out in time to reach St Albans before the battle. But even with limbers to speed up the transport of the cannons, he is unlikely to have arrived there before the 15th. The one certainty is that he himself did not have four days in which to prepare his position there.

Being unaware of Gigli's comment about the queen being north of Northampton, Burne assumed that the whole of her army had travelled south on the Great North Road. He thought that, having started along and then for some reason turned west off the Old North Road, her commanders had decided to head south 'on the axis Bedford-Luton-Harpenden' with the intention of approaching St Albans from the north.⁶¹ Warned by Lovelace that the enemy knew of the change of course and had disposed his forces to counter an attack from that direction, however, they had again turned aside, attacking Dunstable, just west of Luton, before heading for St Albans down Watling Street.⁶²

Dunstable was attacked on the 16th. Burne believed that news of the disaster did not reach the main body of the king's forces, and its commanders had no idea before the assault on St Albans began the next day that the enemy might approach the town from the west side.⁶³ The first statement might or might not be true; the second is incorrect. While 'Gregory' did say that the king's forces were not ready when the attack on St Albans began, he did not claim that they were taken completely by surprise. According to him, they had been redeployed and were preparing to fight *before* the queen's forces reached the town, not in reaction to the initial assault. They had presumably reacted, if not to the news or the absence of it from Dunstable, then to the scout's information about the enemy being nine miles away.

The other reason why they were supposedly caught completely by surprise was that their enemies marched their men through a February night in order to launch an attack on St

⁶¹ Burne, *Battlefields of England*, 233.

⁶² Burne, *Battlefields of England*, 234-5.

⁶³ Burne, *Battlefields of England*, 235.

Albans early on the following morning.⁶⁴ This definitely did not happen.⁶⁵ Two days after the battle, Carlo Gigli wrote that '[a]bout an hour after midday a skirmish was begun with the king's foreguard. They say that it lasted until six'.⁶⁶ The dauphin's correspondent also said that the battle began after midday.⁶⁷ For the reasons already given, it is in any case highly unlikely that the king's commanders were unaware that the queen's forces were to the north-west of them. Indeed, that was almost certainly why Poynings and his men had been sent to Dunstable.

Then there is the question of where exactly the fighting occurred, apart from in St Albans itself and just to the north of the town. Burne believed that the king's commanders would have wanted to make use of an ancient double-banked ditch known as Beech Bottom Dyke. It lies a valley separating Bernard's Heath from Nomansland Common, and runs for almost a mile roughly south-west to north-east between the roads leading north from St Albans (to Harpenden and Luton) and north-eastwards (to Sandridge and Wheathampstead). Burne thought that the king's commanders would have found this 'splendid and formidable obstacle' irresistible. So they reinforced the dyke, placing the left wing (Whethamstede's *praecursores*) there, straddling the Harpenden/Luton road, and the centre and the right wing at Sandridge; it was only when they heard that the queen's forces were in fact approaching down Watling Street rather than from the north or north-east that they redeployed the left wing to Bernard's Heath, just north of and facing St Albans, and began moving the centre and right wing to the same location.

The problem with this interpretation is that there is no evidence either that the queen's commanders ever intended to approach St Albans from Luton via Harpenden or that their opponents had concluded that they would. But even if the king's commanders were not expecting their enemies to approach from the north, they still could not be certain from which direction they would come. Burne left hanging the question of why one part of the queen's army had abandoned the Old North Road.⁶⁸ It could be that it had been decided that the army should meet up at Dunstable. As a result, the part that had been on the Old North Road cut

⁶⁴ Burne, *Battlefields of England*, 235.

⁶⁵ The earliest surviving narrative source to refer to the battle as beginning early in the morning (reportedly at three o'clock) seems to be the London chronicle in a Cotton manuscript, Vitellius A XVI, the relevant section of which its editor believed had been written 'at least as late as the end of the reign of Edward IV' (he died in 1483): C. L. Kingsford ed., *Chronicles of London* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1905), xvi, 153-264 at 173.

⁶⁶ Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts... of Milan*, 49.

⁶⁷ Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts ... of Milan*, 54.

⁶⁸ Of the primary sources cited by Burne, only "Brief Notes" mentioned any of these towns, and then only referred to 'St Albans near Luton': Gairdner, *Three Fifteenth Century Chronicles*, 155.

across-country to the intersection with the Great North Road and then continued westwards, roughly along the line of the ancient Icknield Way. (A possible explanation for the destruction of Poyning's detachment would be that it was trapped between the enemy forces approaching from Northampton and those entering the town from the east.) Alternatively, the part of the queen's forces that had been on the Old North Road could have turned south at the intersection and headed down the Great North Road towards Hatfield.

Crucially, the only sources to state where most of the fighting occurred did not place it on Bernard's Heath. A contemporary poem said that 'Upon a shrof Tuesday on a grene leede/Be-twix Sandricche [Sandridge, a village about two-and-a-half miles north-east of the centre of St Albans] and saynt Albons, many man gan blede'⁶⁹ and the final section of 'Robert Bale's Chronicle', that 'upon the Tewesday folowing [17 Feb] the King being in a feld beside Seint Albons called Sandell and his Baner displaied, ther cam ageinst him the Quene, ... and other in nombre of c ml peple estymed weell horsed and arrayed', 'Sandell' no doubt being an error for Sandridge.⁷⁰ The most precise location was given by *An English Chronicle*, which said that when the king heard that the queen's forces were close, he headed out of St Albans and 'took hys felde ... in a place called No-mannes land, and there he stoode and sawe his peple slayne on bothe sydes', and by 'Brief Notes', which likewise said that the fighting occurred at Nomansland.⁷¹ In other words, the main battle took place on the high ground to the north, not to the south, of Beech Bottom Dyke.

That leaves unanswered the question of whether the implication by 'Gregory' that the king's commanders redeployed the entire army is correct, and, if so, whether it was originally deployed within St Albans, as Goodman tentatively suggested,⁷² or divided, with the left flank on the higher ground immediately to the south of Beech Bottom Dyke and the centre and right wing near Sandridge, as Burne argued,⁷³ or along the south-west to north-east ridge of Bernard's Heath, following the line of the Sandridge road, as Ramsay proposed.⁷⁴ There is no evidence to support any of these suggestions, although the Yorkist commanders clearly were in St Albans before they deployed. There is however the statement in 'John Benet's Chronicle' that, when the queen's forces arrived in the St Albans area, the king went out in order to confront them about a mile out on the eastern side of the town (*ex parte orientale*

⁶⁹ R. H. Robbins, *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 215-18 at 216.

⁷⁰ Kleineke, "Robert Bale's Chronicle and the Second Battle of St. Albans," 749.

⁷¹ Davies, *An English Chronicle*, 107; Gairdner, *Three Fifteenth Century Chronicles*, 155.

⁷² Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, 46.

⁷³ Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, 46; Burne, *The Battlefields of England*, 233.

⁷⁴ Ramsay, *Lancaster and York*, 2: 245.

ville).⁷⁵ Might Norfolk, on hearing that his enemies had abandoned the Old North Road, have deployed his forces in the belief that they would approach down the Great North Road, to the east of St Albans? He and his allies certainly took precautions against an attack on the town (the archers in the marketplace and the footmen at the top of the high street) which would have been as effective against an assault from the east as from the west. But while it *could* be that the main part of the forces redeployed from due east to their final position shortly before the battle began, that seems extremely unlikely, given the probability that the commanders knew several days beforehand that St Albans could be attacked from the west. The (admittedly not very satisfactory) explanation may be that the author meant the whole of the eastern side of the town, which would include Sandridge, to the north-east.

There are other possibilities, given that ‘Gregory’ was prone both to exaggerate and to omit information. One is that there was no redeployment, just a single deployment, which is what *An English Chronicle* seems to suggest. The other is that only the *praecursores* were redeployed, from Sandridge to a position on Bernard’s Heath just outside St Albans. Unless further information emerges, unfortunately, it seems impossible to answer the question.

As to the suitability of the final site, Burne may well have been right to believe that the king’s commanders attempted to exploit Beech Bottom Dyke. Although it could easily be outflanked,⁷⁶ it would have presented an obstacle to the enemy as he advanced towards the higher ground of Nomansland Common behind, obstructing his view and interfering with his ability to bring artillery to bear and, depending on its state of preservation in 1461, breaking up his advance or deflecting him onto ground of the defenders’ choosing. The problem was that time for preparing the site was short, which may well explain the decision to send a detachment forward to the northern outskirts of St Albans. Separating the *praecursores* from the main body by as much as two miles had significant drawbacks, however: it probably

⁷⁵ Harriss & Harriss, “John Benet’s Chronicle,” 229. The Bishop of Exeter, Warwick’s brother, placed the battle ‘near’ rather than ‘in’ or ‘at’ St Albans: Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts... of Milan*, 61.

⁷⁶ It may have been somewhat longer to the east in 1461 than it now is and was almost certainly more complete. The earliest Ordnance Survey map (1834) shows a noticeable dogleg in the Harpenden road (still largely present as Old Harpenden Road), which suggests that, although the dyke originally extended at least a few hundred yards further to the west, by the time that the road was established only the section to the east remained as a substantial structure. The Sandridge road, on the other hand, is shown as slightly altering direction for a few hundred yards, mirroring the trajectory of the dyke, possibly because it extended further as a substantial structure at its eastern end when the road was formed. The OS map shows another road, Valley Road, cutting through the duke about halfway along, but that is not present on Thomas Smith’s 1806 map: OS 1st Ser. Sheet 46 (1834), C. Smith, ‘New Map of Great Britain and Ireland’ (1806), GB Historical GIS, University of Portsmouth, History of Sandridge, in St Albans and Hertfordshire, Map and description, *A Vision of Britain through Time*. URL: <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/place/4391>, accessed: 23 Mar. 2024.

deprived the main body of a stiffening of reliable troops, and it may have left the *praecursores* to face the full weight of the enemy attack for too long.

Whether the battle began when the queen's forces entered St Albans rather than when, according to the dauphin's correspondent, '[t]he Duke of Somerset after midday came with 30,000 horse to scent out the Earl of Warwick and the king's forces', there seems to be no way of knowing, since horsemen could have skirted the town at any point. The *Register*'s account does however suggest that the battle in and just to the north of St Albans was quite protracted. Meanwhile, Somerset '*li fecero assai lasso assalto*, and the Earl of Warwick decided to leave the *campo* and break through against them. Accordingly with 4,000 men he pushed through right into Albano, where the queen was with 30,000 men'.⁷⁷ If, by '*li fecero assai lasso assalto*', the writer meant that the assault was very weak (which seems the obvious translation), Warwick's decision to break out of his position makes sense. He took the opportunity to go to the relief of the *praecursores*: an assault on a weary enemy might have succeeded in tipping the latter into flight.

In the event, it was the king's forces that fled. Most contemporary writers and chroniclers offered no explanation for that, although 'Brief Notes' said that, when the Burgundians fired their guns, a contrary wind blew the fire back in their own faces and burned and killed eighteen of them – horrific, but hardly a battle-losing event, one would have thought.⁷⁸ 'Gregory' thought that the gunpowder artillery generally proved worse than useless. Waurin attributed the defeat of the king's forces entirely to the treachery of Lovelace, and *An English Chronicle* blamed both Lovelace's actions and the indiscipline of the king's troops.⁷⁹ Abbot Whethamstede believed that northerners were naturally more ferocious and possessed more stamina than southerners.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, the Milanese ambassador's summary of the letter from the dauphin's correspondent is especially unhelpful at this point: it did not explain how or why the Earl of Warwick, having led his men to St Albans, found himself alone at dusk. All that it said was that, hard-pressed by Somerset's men, Warwick set off back for his *campo*, only to hear what sounded like shouting from there to the enemy, which led him to suspect treachery. He therefore got away as best he could.⁸¹ Presumably the reinforcements had arrived too late or were insufficient to provide the support that the

⁷⁷ '[L]i fecero assai lasso assalto' was translated in Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts ... of Milan*, 54, as 'wore them down with his attack' and in Kendall & Iardi, *Dispatches ... of Milanese Ambassadors in France and Burgundy*, II, 150, as 'launched a very feeble assault'.

⁷⁸ Gairdner, *Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles*, 155.

⁷⁹ Davies, *An English Chronicle*, 108.

⁸⁰ Riley, *Registrum Abbatiae Johannis Whethamstede*, 391.

⁸¹ Hinds, *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts ... of Milan*, 54.

exhausted *praecursores* needed and (or), as the Milanese ambassador's summary suggests, Warwick's detachment was forced back from St Albans and in turn found itself under heavy attack.

Finally, very little has been said so far about how events appeared to the queen's commanders. If the reason why they abandoned the Old North Road was that they had realised that the Earl of Warwick was ahead of them, and if that information came, say, from sympathisers in London, rather than their own scouts, they would also have known that the king's forces were divided and that the other part was at St Albans. At that stage, they might have hoped to be able to attack the Duke of Norfolk before Warwick was able to join him and therefore decided to combine their own forces at Dunstable before launching their assault (approaching from the west would avoid the risk of being trapped between Norfolk and Warwick). But by the time they arrived at St Albans, it looks as though they knew that the king's forces had left: judging by the weakness of their initial assault, as reported by Abbot Whethamstede, they were expecting to encounter nothing more formidable than a detachment such as the one that Poynings had commanded at Dunstable. What they may well not have known is where the king's forces had moved to. The comment by the dauphin's correspondent about Somerset and his cavalry coming to 'scent out' Warwick suggests that the duke was trying to find his adversary. The queen's commanders, too, were having to deal with a changing and uncertain situation.

The strategies of the king's commanders

The last reason given for revisiting the subject is the widespread belief that the battle revealed grave deficiencies in the generalship of the Earl of Warwick, in particular, compared to what Burne believed was the strategic brilliance of Queen Margaret.

As we have seen, the basis on which Burne reached his conclusions was almost entirely wrong. The fact that the queen's commanders managed to get their men to the field of battle so far to the south in February, and got them there in a fit state to fight and win, is to their credit. But to describe their strategy as brilliant would, on the basis of the available evidence, be going much too far. Neither set of commanders seems to have had a monopoly of good intelligence; both reacted to the other's actions; there were no night marches or flank attacks and, if anyone was taken completely by surprise, it was one small detachment. On the other hand, the king's commanders deprived themselves of valuable support by leaving London to confront the queen's forces before the arrival of the men from Kent. Goodman also considered that Warwick made errors which resulted from an absence of that 'single-

mindful generalship which put strategic considerations before popularity'. In his view, the claims made by the king's council about 'evil northern intents put pressure on Warwick to go out and repel the invaders ... He might have won by sitting tight in London ... and waiting for March's victorious army to arrive from the west before striking at exhausted and probably retreating northerners'.⁸² The first question in reaching a judgement on the strategy adopted is, therefore, did the king's commanders have a practicable alternative?

The answer is, probably not. It looks as though they delayed their departure from London as long as they safely could, given the doubts about exactly how far south the queen's forces had got. They would certainly not have been confident that they could win simply by withdrawing behind London's walls and leaving it to the young earl of March to confront their enemies. March was not militarily experienced (although he did have the assistance of some experienced captains);⁸³ he was still relatively untested both in battle and, more importantly, in independent command, and his recent victory at Mortimer's Cross seems to have been won against what may have been a considerably smaller force under undistinguished leadership.⁸⁴ There was no way for his allies to know how he would react when facing a large, recently victorious army, and he might well have been unable to raise sufficient numbers of men in the western shires in the available time or, indeed, at all.

There were of course alternatives to retreating into London: for example, they could have abandoned the city immediately in order to head west to join March, as they did after the battle. In so doing, however, they would have risked drawing the queen's forces after them before March was ready. On the other hand, if that did not happen and her forces had reached the outskirts of London unchallenged, they would have avoided what seems to have been quite a hard-fought battle (and so have been fresher), would have had to deal with London governors and population that had been abandoned to their fate (and so might well have been more compliant), and would have had access to the greater resources of a much more populous area (and so would not have started to starve). Her commanders would have

⁸² Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, 48.

⁸³ Pace C. L. Scofield, *The Life and Reign of Edward IV, King of England and of France and Lord of Ireland* (pb. edn., 2 vols., Croydon: Fronthill, 2016), 1: 22 n. 5; Goodman, *Wars of the Roses*, 49. Of the four battles he is supposed by then to have taken part in, Ludford was probably not a battle at all and he was not present at first St Albans, despite the claim in "Brief Notes" that he was: of the other noblemen said to have been with the Duke of York at the time (Norfolk, Viscount Bouchier and Lord Cromwell), none was, and the author made no mention of the noblemen who were there (Salisbury and Warwick), according to a contemporary herald's accounts: Gairdner, *Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicle*, ("Brief Notes"), 151-2; C. A. J. Armstrong, "Politics and the battle of St Albans," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 33 (1960): 65-7 (the 'Fastolf Relation').

⁸⁴ 51,000 against 8,000, if the *Annales* are to be believed!: Stevenson, *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France*, 2: ii, 776.

been in a position to recruit from the eastern and southern shires without impediment and to attack any late-arriving enemy contingents from there. Refreshed, re-supplied, and with additional recruits, her army would have presented a formidable challenge to the earl of March, with or without his allies. It is far from obvious that they would have done better to avoid a battle. Certainly the author of the *Annales* was of the opinion that, had the queen and her commanders continued on to London with their army, ‘they would have had everything at their will’.⁸⁵

For Queen Margaret, the second battle of St Albans proved to be a pyrrhic victory. She had done her best to counter the propaganda of the Duke of York and his allies which, as the letters written by her and in her young son’s name to the mayor and aldermen of London complained in late 1460, claimed that ‘we ... should newly drawe toward you with an unsen power of straungeres ... disposed to robbe and spoile you’.⁸⁶ It did not work. When, in the wake of the battle, she asked for provisions, the efforts that the king’s council had made to arouse the fears and to win the support of both the authorities in London and its population paid off. The mayor and aldermen of London undertook to send her what she needed providing she agreed to remain at a (considerable) distance, and she withdrew to Dunstable.⁸⁷ A riot by some of the city’s populace meant that the mayor and aldermen were unable to honour their undertaking. In a relatively rural area, her commanders could not feed their men without the promised supplies. That created the conditions for the rapid disintegration of her army.

The king’s commanders did not cover themselves in glory at St Albans, but they responded quickly and logically to an existential threat. Their use of propaganda was undoubtedly both a help and a hindrance. They did however do what they could to compensate for some of the serious manpower problems they had partly as a result. Their

⁸⁵ Stevenson, *Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France*, 2: ii, 776.

⁸⁶ M. L. Kekewich et al., *The Politics of Fifteenth Century England: John Vale’s Book* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), 142-3. Neither letter is dated. Letters from the queen, the prince, and the Earl of Pembroke were however read to the mayor and aldermen of London in early Dec. 1460: LMA, COL/CC/01/05/004, Jor. 6, photo. 425. Prince Edward’s letter was clearly written between the compromise over York’s claim to the crown being reached in late Oct. and York’s death in late Dec. Whether the queen’s letter was the one received then is less certain. On the one hand, it refers to reports of the queen’s imminent arrival with a large number of ‘straungeres’, which seems to fit the circumstances of early 1461 better; on the other, it talks of the duke as if he was still alive, and the admittedly battered city journal records no subsequent letter from the queen. On balance, it seems likely that it too was received in Dec. 1460: Kekewich et al., *John Vale’s Book*, 142 and note, B. M. Cron, “Margaret of Anjou and the Lancastrian March on London, 1461,” *The Ricardian*, 11 (1999): 590-615 at 593-4.

⁸⁷ LMA, COL/CC/01/05/004, Jor. 6, photo. 454.

actions bought time during which they were able to raise better-quality troops in the shires that they had been unable to access before the battle; and, critically, they lived to fight, at Towton, another and altogether more successful day.