

# 1497, CORNWALL AND THE WARS OF THE ROSES

Ian Arthurson *reassesses the Cornish rising of 1497 on its 500th anniversary*

**O**n the 400th anniversary of this rebellion there was a good deal of agreement about the Wars of the Roses: ‘The slaughter of people was greater than in any former war on English soil ... The standard of morality could not well have been lower ... Lust, cruelty and dishonesty were paraded before the eyes of the people.’<sup>1</sup> By 1981 this was no longer believed: ‘England was a society organised for peace, and ... the most peaceful country in Europe.’<sup>2</sup> K.B. McFarlane had shown that the nobility had not been wiped out by the wars. Others, earlier, demonstrated that while the elite was caught up in civil war the rest of the people stood aside.<sup>3</sup>

Two years ago it was stated that even the great majority of people near the field of battle were little affected.<sup>4</sup> This is the orthodoxy today, with one dissenting voice – Isobel Harvey’s.<sup>5</sup> Yet with her we should have cause to wonder. Firstly, there is the striking pattern in these wars; Cade’s Rebellion preceded the Civil War of the mid-1450s; the Northern and Midland Rebellions preceded Edward IV’s deposition in 1470; the 1497 rebellions failed, ultimately, to depose Henry VII. Clearly there was a popular constituency which the elite recognised and reacted to. Secondly, there is the nature of civil wars. We can see civil war beginning with the

gradual breakdown of normal political and personal relations amongst a very few at the top of society, leading finally to civil war. But once war is underway it does not remain in the hands of the elite. It spreads outwards and downwards into the hands of those on whom they rely – bankers, armies, soldiers, the populace; those who fight, refuse to fight, strike for pay and form opinions about those for whom they fight. Thirdly, there is this matter of opinions. The ordinary people were well informed on matters of politics. In 1497, for example, the king’s intentions were well known by many. Recently John Watts has shown, as Charles Ross did in 1976, how revolutionary this period was.<sup>6</sup> Between 1450 and 1500, principled objections to rulers developed from the idea of loyal opposition (blaming wicked ministers, but not the king), to a definition of opposition in terms of the defence of the commonweal, and finally to the claim that the commonweal would be best defended by a particular claimant to the

throne. Preference for a particular dynasty might thus be voiced: rule in the interests of the commonweal or suffer the consequences. And this brings us back to the beginning. In the Wars of the Roses popular rebellion tended to precede dynastic overthrow.

The story of events 500 years ago belongs not just to Cornwall, but to Britain – a point I make not to suggest some specious ‘British’ history but because of the geography of a whole set of events which produced, also, the Cornish Rebellion. There was war between Scotland and England; treason in Ireland; rebellion, twice, in Cornwall; and support for that rebellion in Wales, the Midlands, and East Anglia. The events themselves were tumultuous: regions were pitched against regions; and for a week in June 1497 events hung in the balance. After the rebels bypassed Exeter, would the town of Bristol fall to them? Would the nobility in substantial numbers declare for the rebels? Would the king raise a big enough

**Cotehele House, Cornwall, home of Sir Richard Edgcombe and his son Piers.** National Trust/Andrew Salter

army to crush the rebellion? Could the rebel advance be stopped? Was the royal family safe? Would the Scots invade and destroy Henry VII? And finally, at Blackheath, would the royal forces inflict a quick decisive defeat on the rebels? In the end the answers fell in Henry VII's favour. Bristol did not fall. Nor, despite temptation, did any members of the nobility other than James, Lord Audley, join the rebels. The king raised an army; but when almost 10,000 rebels reached London's outskirts considerably more force was necessary in crushing them than had been anticipated. Even though they were defeated on 17 June 1497, and their three leaders executed, rebellion continued, with support for Perkin Warbeck, well into the autumn of the year. Why Henry found wide support outside the west is not fully clear. Ultimately, though, such political solidarity relates to the Wars of the Roses just as much as the origins of the rebellion within Cornwall also did.

It is often claimed that this rebellion had its roots in economic and social discontents. Documents displayed in the Public Records Office in summer 1997 suggested links of a sort, between rebellion and aggrieved tanners. But few of the 80 plus Cornish rebels who can be named were actually called tanners and worked mines with their own hands. Moreover Cornwall, though a poorish region of England, was experiencing growing prosperity; nowhere more so than in the far west from where many rebels came. It is also difficult to square with the usual story of poverty the fact that Cornwall did not normally refuse to pay taxes, nor can many of those known rebels be identified as repeatedly criminally violent.

Instead, in 1497, as in 1450, serious grievances about government and mismanaged decisions about foreign policy exploded into rebellion. Gross political mismanagement within a county, indeed within a region, led to resentment of abuses by servants of Henry VII's household. Also as in 1450, there were particular local grudges which formed opinion: for example, the way in which the Duchy may have intruded members of Prince Arthur's Ludlow council into Cornwall. However, unlike 1450, the events of 1497 did not lead to civil wars. Why? An old view would suggest the remarkable powers of Henry VII. But given the quite appalling political situation in the south west this is not credible. Much more likely as an explanation of why full-scale civil war was avoided is not the assumed abilities of one man, but the long term revulsion caused by the wars themselves. In Gerald Harris' words, 'National crisis helped create the political climate in which a unitary polity could evolve.'<sup>7</sup> Though 1497 is in the tradition of 1450 and 1470 it also marks a turning away from politics like these. It stands in the same kind of relation to the Wars of the Roses as does Monmouth's rebellion to the civil wars of the 17th century.

The Cornish Rebellion broke out when collectors tried to raise taxes for Henry VII's war against Perkin Warbeck. No one would minimise the effect of the tax demand in producing rebellion, especially as the demand was massive and the method inquisitive and new. But it was not the only cause.

The rebellion is usually seen as a simple sequence of events from the rising of Michael Joseph at St Keverne, to Thomas Flamank's legitimisation of it at Bodmin, and the declaration at Wells of the third leader, Lord Audley, ending in an ignominious defeat at Blackheath. But this does violence to the detail of the narrative and the extent of the rebellion. Four

at least, possibly five, rebellions broke out once the whole movement started, and they have a fair amount in common. They found support among the middling sort, the yeomen, the artisans, the urban and the parish elites. People for whom morality and good government have always counted, for whatever reasons. That St Keverne rose first we know, as was made clear in a letter by William Godolphin.<sup>8</sup>

Rebellion was strongest in two areas, the Lands End peninsula and the centre of the county. Henry VII should have ruled central Cornwall easily through the Arundell family. But the principal Arundell, John of Lanherne, was young, inexperienced and had, for the son of one of Henry's great pre-Bosworth supporters, been dealt with in a bizarre fashion. It is hardly surprising, then, given the Arundell's' importance in Cornwall, to find a number of their tenant and client families involved in rebellion. Others whom the King might have relied on were in no place to stop insurrection. Henry's troubleshooter Sir Richard Nanfan was permanently absent, in Calais. The loyal Sir Richard Edgcumbe had died in 1489 and his son was at the beginning of his political career. However, Nanfan, Piers Edgcumbe and others were associated in this area with the breakdown of public order. Nanfan's deputy in the region, Roger Whalley, ran a reign of petty terror out of Park Manor in Egloshayle. Piers Edgcumbe was involved in a series of riots of escalating viciousness centred on Roche parish between 1489 and 1494. All this took place within two to three miles of Bodmin, where Edgcumbe raised his retinue of thugs, and only a mile or so from the Flamank home at Boscarne. What did Thomas Flamank give voice to in 1497: the demands of his neighbours for less thuggery from Henry VII's servants? The Justices Roll of 1494 bears renewed investigation. It has been used to demonstrate the parlous state of order in Cornwall, and to suggest that many rebels were violent, desperate men. But, on a closer look, it appears that more rebel names are found among those bringing the charges than among those being charged. Many of those being charged were elements in the Edgcumbe retinue; and Whalley's name appears there too. Up to a sixth of those making the charges were subsequently rebels. What they wanted in 1494 was peace in their locality. What they got in 1497 were taxes to finance the master of the men who had made their lives so miserable.

In west Cornwall Michael Joseph's rising is usually seen as a reaction to a corrupt tax gatherer, John Oby, the Provost of Glasney — a man murdered in September 1497. Oby was emerging in 1496 as a political force in Cornwall. In November that year he was commissioned as a JP; a few years before he had acted as host to government officials on embassy to Spain and Portugal. It is quite conceivable that Oby helped to collect the loans which Henry asked for in December 1496. They were paid promptly and perhaps Oby was corrupt in collecting them. But there were other reasons to hate him. He was the Bishop of Exeter's commissary — the disciplinary agent charged with maintaining standards of performance and care at parish level. It was his job to oversee parish maintenance of church fabric and to set timetables for renovation backed up with fines if, on investigation, the parish was deemed dilatory. Those rebelling in the far west, yeomen and gentry, were exactly the sort to encounter Oby at his least accommodating.

Lord Audley, in western Somerset, had similar experiences of the malpractices of the highly placed. Whatever latent negative reasons are given for his involvement in rebellion – poverty, temperament, worries about lack of influence – there was real trouble in his back yard caused by William Hody of Gotherney, then Chief Baron of the Exchequer (and in 1485-6, Attorney General). This man made a career of obtaining land under false pretences and the most flagrant example of this was against Alexander Pym, later a rebel. Hody forced the sealing of property documents against Pym's interests with the dead hand of a woman bearing a signet ring placed on her finger by the erstwhile Chief Baron. Audley, like Flamank, had to stomach this happening two miles from his home. Hody, indeed, connects Audley to Pym, the south Somerset rebel Sir John Speke, and the probable organiser of Warbeck's Cornish rebellion, Humphrey Calwodely of Helland. After the Simnel debacle of 1487, Hody got a part interest in the wardship of the son of the Cornish traitor, John Beaumont. John Speke's second wife was Beaumont's widow, who in attempting to recover her estates found that she had to allow Hody to take 800 marks from them, probably as quid pro quo for securing the eventual restoration of the estates. Is it surprising that her new husband, Speke, and her nephew, Humphrey, were rebels? William Hody of Gotherney in the Quantocks casts a baleful light upon the notion of good government; but then he, Nanfan, Edgcumbe (father and son), Oby and Whalley were the untouchables.

Yet politics could be pursued by other means than via the great and the not so good. The economic experience of Cornwall and Somerset since the Black Death had produced regions which were rich, assertive and capable of independent and concerted political action. The men of central Somerset knew exactly how to lobby their lords, which strings to pull, who to pressurise and who to petition. And they knew how to coordinate petitions across status boundaries in the jargon appropriate to the social group which they represented. Cornishmen knew how to defend their political and landed interests by petitioning king and law courts. Cornwall was the most litigious county in England in Star Chamber and Chancery. When the Cornish and then the mid-west rose, a region was saying that corruption, maladministration, and novelty were predatory upon the commonweal. And they named the predators: Cardinal Morton, Bishop Fox, Oliver King, the royal secretary, Sir Reginald Bray and Sir Thomas Lovell – the very men who had brought Henry VII to power in 1485. Was this a loyal protest? If so at first, by the time Perkin Warbeck arrived in Cornwall in the autumn, it had ceased to be. By then defence of the commonweal had moved from loyalty to dynastic challenge. Indeed those leading the rebellion of June were themselves closer to court and the royal family than is realised; and those caught up in the events were aware of issues wider, if not more painful, than heavy taxes: the legitimacy of the authority of he who compelled their payment.

Were the commons involved in the Wars of the Roses? Of course. In May 1497 the pattern of commons first, elite second, to create a rising was repeated, as it had been in 1470 and more generally in the civil wars. Were people affected by battles and marches? Of course: 'The number of them was increased, and they were favoured of the people as they passed the countries, for so much as they paid well for all thing that

they took.'<sup>9</sup> And did this have little effect on everyone? Of course not. It took the six south western counties almost ten years to purge themselves from the sin of rebellion. The rebellion of June 1497 was unique. No other late medieval or early modern rebellion ever escaped from its region of origin. Only the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and Monmouth's Rebellion of 1685 bear comparison and they both lacked the audacity of 1497: an advance of 300 miles to the threshold of power, 2 miles from the palace at Greenwich and across the river from the Tower of London.

This rebellion was an astonishing event. It is difficult after 500 years to hear the voices of those involved, and we need to remind ourselves of R.H. Tawney's words: 'Their silence is the taciturnity of men, not the speechlessness of dumb beasts.'<sup>10</sup> He was writing about documents. Extraordinarily, one very important voice almost survived. On the afternoon of his capture Michael Joseph was paraded through London in green and white Tudor Livery, and he addressed his amazed onlookers as if he was a free man. But the chronicler's record fails at this point and he did not tell us what Joseph said. However, Edmund Dudley, Henry VII's servant, who had observed events at first hand in London and the west, did leave an imprint of speech: 'I pray God save this realm from any such captain hereafter.'<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

1. A.J. Pollard, *The Wars of the Roses*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke and London, 1988), p. 13.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
4. A.J. Pollard (ed), *The Wars of the Roses*, (Macmillan, Basingstoke and London, 1995), p. 46.
5. I. M.W. Harvey, 'Was there Popular Politics in Fifteenth Century England?' in R.H. Britnell and A.J. Pollard (eds), *The McFarlane Legacy*, (Alan Sutton, Stroud, 1995), pp. 155-174.
6. Pollard (ed), *The Wars of the Roses*, (1995), pp. 110-133; John L. Watts, 'Ideas, Principles and Politics', esp. pp. 122-131; Charles Ross, *The Wars of the Roses: a concise history*, (Thames and Hudson, London, 1976), p. 43.
7. Britnell and Pollard (eds), *The McFarlane Legacy*; G.L. Harris, *The Dimension of Politics*, pp. 1-20, esp. p.17.
8. A.L. Rowse, *Tudor Cornwall*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1941), pp. 121-122.
9. A.H. Thomas and I.D. Thornley (eds), *The Great Chronicle of London*, (The Corporation of London, 1938), p. 276.
10. R.H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, (Longman, London, 1912), p. 121.
11. E. Dudley, *The Tree of Commonwealth*, (ed) D.M. Brodie, (Cambridge, 1948), pp. 91-92.

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