

**Wixford –  
History happened all around us**

**Wixford Village Hall  
December 2024**

- Welcome to you all, fellow Wixford residents.
- And to a couple of friends from Exhall for whom what I say about Wixford is just as applicable to their own village.
- This talk is a companion piece to my July talk on Wixford and is designed to show that the village is not an island unrelated to what went on all around it.
- And a great deal did...

- We live in one of the most important regions of England in terms of our History's significant events.
- This is because of its proximity to Wales, which for many centuries was a prime recruiting ground – but also a potential danger on England's Western flank.
- And because of its defensible waterways – the rivers Teme, Severn and Avon
- And of its safe distance from London and from the coast where invasions might occur...



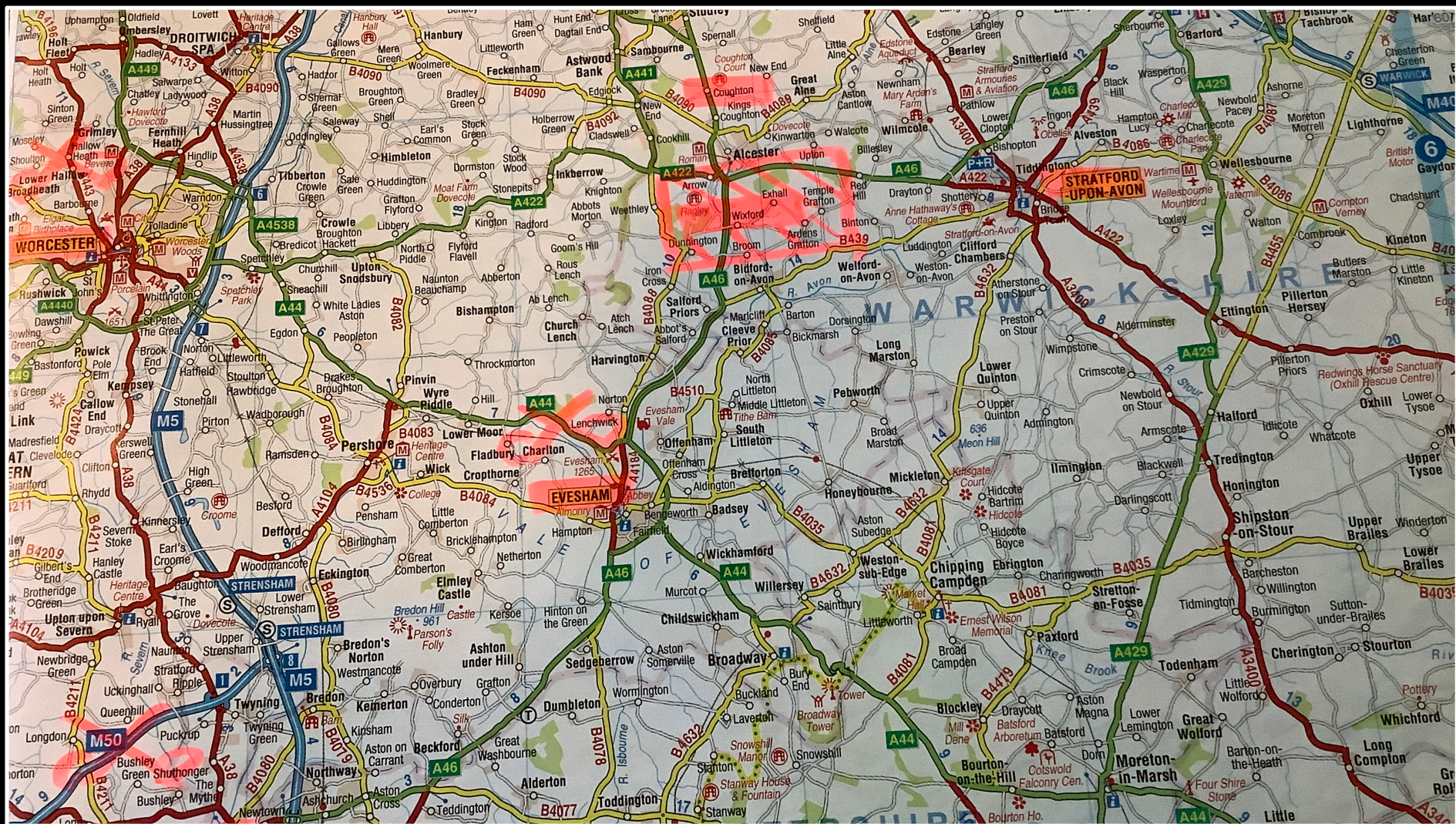
- That distance mattered within living memory:
- In 1940, when German invasion seemed inevitable, plans were laid to move King George VI and family to Madresfield near Worcester, and for Winston Churchill and the government to move to Spetchley Park between Wixford and Worcester.
- Tank traps were dug along the Teme and Avon and Worcester prepared for a last stand at Market Cross in the centre.
- So – our distance from London continues to be a significant factor...

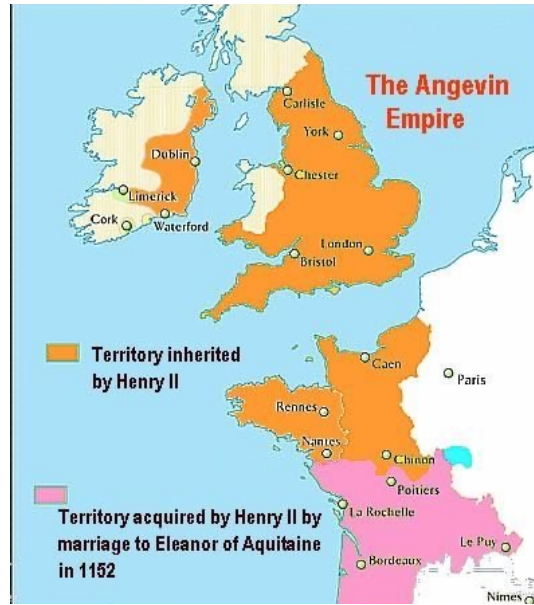


- But that apart, I am going to talk briefly about **six** important moments in our national history which occurred within striking distance of little Wixford, a hamlet of 40 souls for much of this period.
- Wixford villagers would not have travelled far, but news of these tremendous events would have percolated through via river and road from Stratford and the West.
  
- The Battle of Evesham
- The Battle of Tewkesbury
- The Dissolution of Evesham and Worcester religious houses
- The emergence of William Shakespeare
- The Gunpowder plotters and Coughton Court
- The two Battles of Worcester

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- I would have liked to have included several other historic places close to Wixford, full of important History, like Kenilworth Castle, home and family base of Henry IV and England's greatest king, Henry V, victor at Agincourt
  - But we have enough to be getting on with....







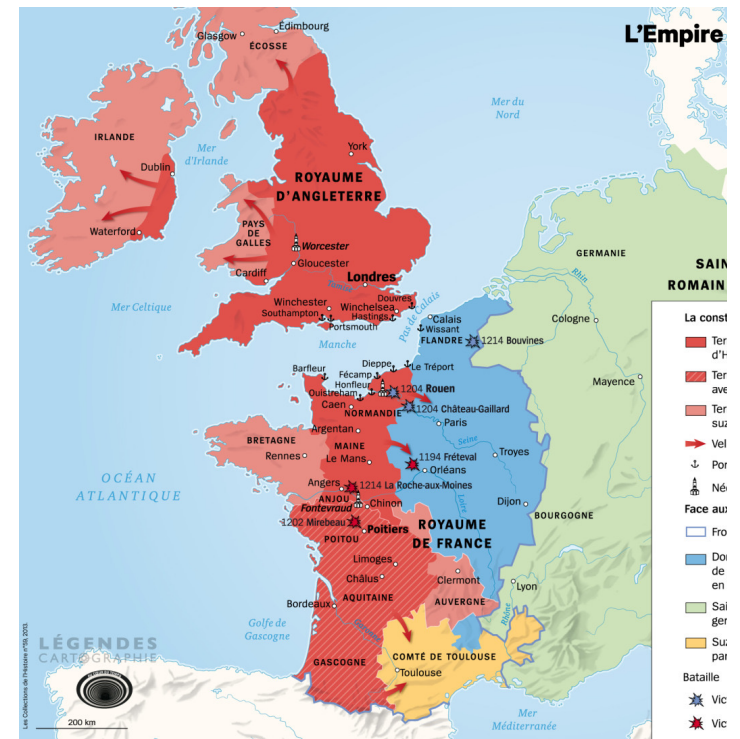
- We start with the great Battle of Evesham 1265, just 7 miles South of Wixford, hugely important in the story of how England developed a unique Parliament.
- First some background: fifty years earlier King John had died and was buried in Worcester Cathedral alongside his favourite saint, Wulstan.
- He was buried in Worcester because London was occupied by French invaders.
- He had been a disastrous King: tyrannical, divisive, ignoring his baron's advice, but above all, losing much of the Angevin Empire in France, carefully assembled by his father Henry II. The loss of Normandy – since 1066 governed by English kings – was humiliating.
- Unsurprisingly his reign ended with his surrender to the barons at Runnymede, with the signing of Magna Carta.
- Surely his son, the boy King Henry III acclaimed in Worcester in 1217, would be better?







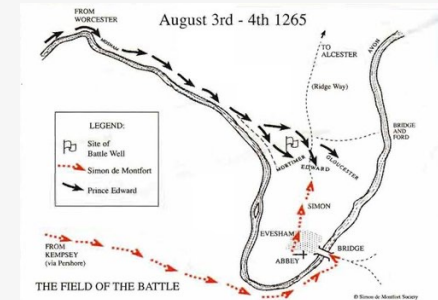
- But he wasn't.
- He was weak and idle, indulged his favourites (his wife's relatives, the French Lusignans); and for lengthy periods he ignored the Magna Carta which had guaranteed Englishmen their property and their right to common justice rather than be subject to a king's tyrannical whims.
- And he was no fighter, avoiding necessary conflict with the ambitious French king.
- He failed to impose law and order and there were many private wars which went unpunished.
- So senior nobles struggled to get him to listen to them, not his favourites, and to respect the Magna Carta. Led by a great noble with lands in Gascony and in Leicestershire, Simon de Montfort, they tried to rein Henry in.
- Unavailingly; he kept reneging on promises...

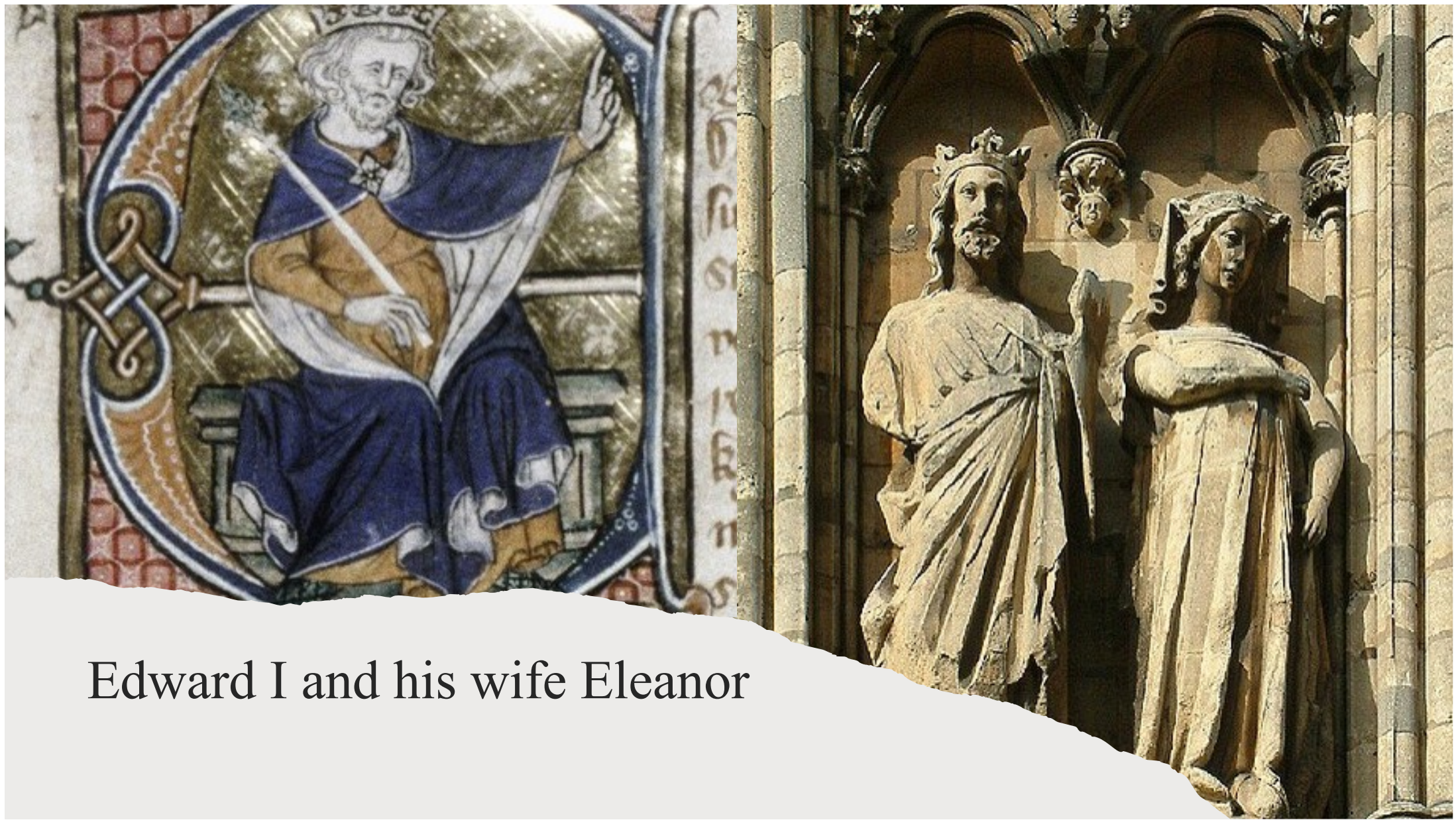


- Simon de Montfort was motivated by: pride as a great noble; by personal ambition; having been a successful if harsh viceroy in Gascony, and much more capable militarily than his king; and by a genuinely strong belief in reform.
- He felt he had to remove the king and raised an army.
- His Parliament in the year that he held Henry II captive after a battle of Lewes 1265 was broad-based including ordinary citizens as well as gentry. He evidently believed in including taxpayers in decision making. He is thought of as the founder of the modern Parliament.
- But Henry's son Prince Edward could not tolerate Simon's ambition and threat to the King and his Prince. So, when Simon marched from Sussex to deal with Prince Edward, he looked to catch Edward in the West of England, where Simon could recruit Welshmen led by Llewellyn, his ally.



- And the two forces met in August 1265 at Evesham, Edward gathering an army twice the size of Simon's, and marching from Worcester and taking the high ground on Greenhill, to the North of Evesham, blocking Simon's advance from the South.
- Simon's army was crushed and his Welsh allies abandoned him; knights were specifically ordered to seek out, surround and cut down Simon and his son. The mutilation of Simon's body is graphically illustrated; he was buried in the Abbey.
- It was the end of a dangerous, significant baronial threat to the Crown.
- The Plantagenet dynasty had been saved.
- Prince Edward would inherit the throne and become a great king – Edward I
- But he learnt from Simon – he regularly used Parliaments, promised to respect Magna Carta and sought to impose law and order in England.





Edward I and his wife Eleanor

- And so to the Battle of Tewkesbury, (18 miles South of Wixford), one of the most important battles in the Wars of the Roses.
- The Wars were fought between two hereditary lines stemming from Edward III: the **Lancastrians**, heirs to John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and Ed III's 3rd son, who was succeeded by Henry IV and Henry V; and the **Yorkists**, descendants of Edmund of Langley, Duke of York, Ed III's 4<sup>th</sup> son.
- While there were competent Lancastrian kings there was no trouble.
- But the great warrior king Henry V (Agincourt) was succeeded by a child in 1422, Henry VI, who when he grew up turned out to be a disastrous ruler. Sainly but inept.
- Only his powerful and ambitious wife Margaret of Anjou gave him some backbone.

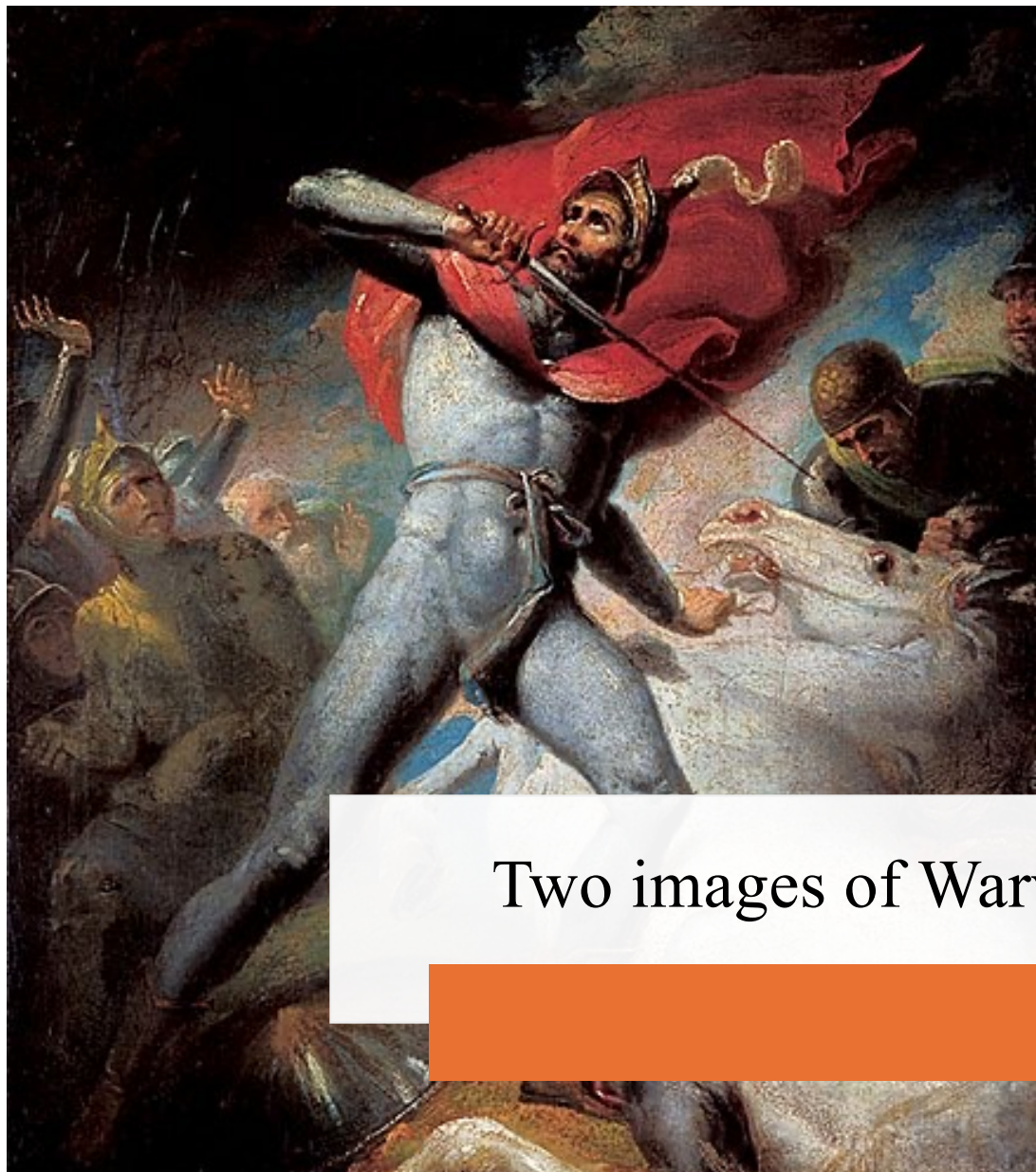


- There are several golden rules for English kings if they want to be successful:
- Choose the right advisers (senior nobles) and don't have favourites
- Be militarily brave and strong
- Take an active interest in decision-making
- Keep law and order.
- Henry VI failed on every count:
- He steadily lost his father Henry Vth's French conquests to Joan of Arc and a revived French monarchy (Charles VII)
- He was lacking in energy and initiative and chose the 'wrong advisors'.
- By 1455 the senior noble Richard, Duke of York had had enough – open war (Lancaster v York) broke out.
- And in a decisive battle in 1461 at Towton in Yorkshire the Lancastrians were massacred and the Yorkists seized power.

- It was the bloodiest day's battle in English History – 28,000 men died in Bloody Meadow.
- King Henry was captured. Margaret would flee to France.
- Edward IV the Yorkist son of Richard became King. He was very different from Henry, a strapping physical specimen, energetic and charismatic.
- But across the next 9 years his relations with his powerful, ambitious cousin who helped him at Towton soured. This was Warwick the Kingmaker.
- By 1470 Warwick was in open rebellion; and he even allied with Margaret of Anjou in exile in France aiming to release Henry VI and remove Edward...







Two images of Warwick the Kingmaker

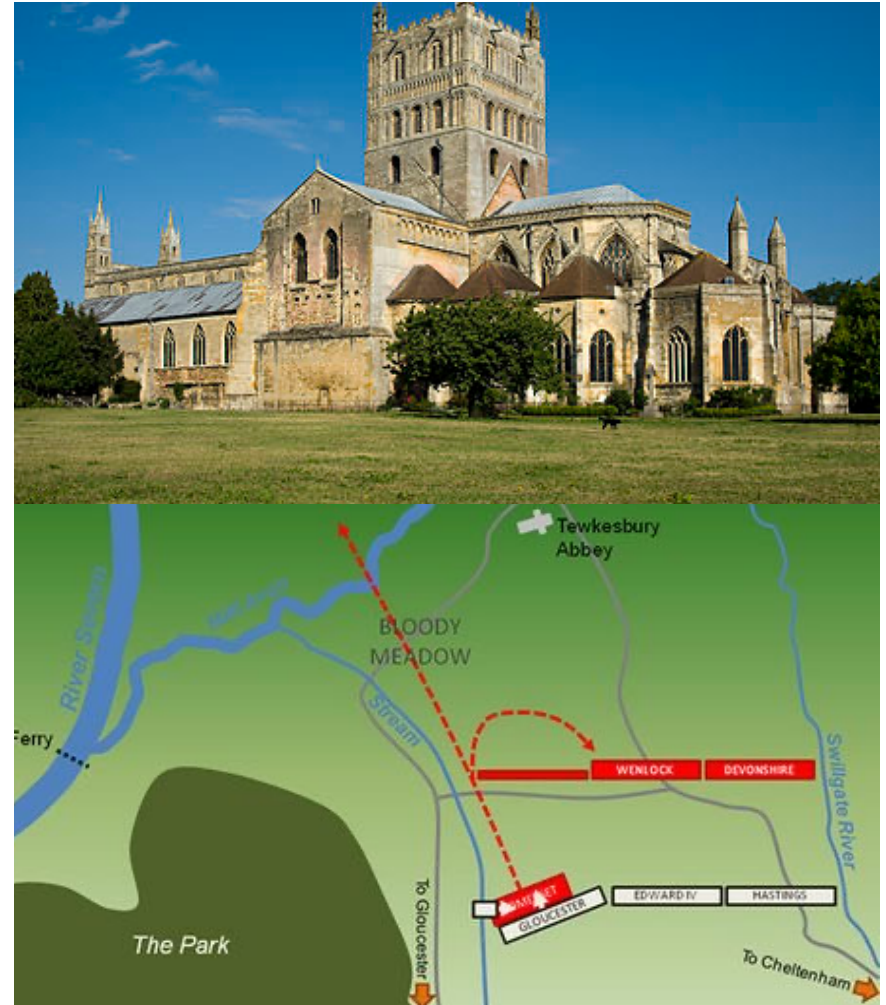


- Warwick invaded with one army from France and was caught at the Battle of Barnet – where he was killed by Edward IV’s forces.
- Meanwhile Margaret and her young son, Edward (called the Prince of Wales) invaded with a separate army coming up through the West Country aiming to join with the Lancastrian Tudors and their Welsh army.
- Edward set off from London to catch them, passing through the Cotswolds and finally catching up with Edward and Margaret at Tewkesbury on 4 May 1471.
- And the scene was set for one of the greatest English battles.
- Margaret would watch on from the Abbey Church tower; her young son would fight in the vanguard for the Lancastrian cause against the Yorkist usurper Edward.



Edward's forces drove the Lancastrian right wing back, and then massacred it in (another) Bloody Meadow.

The young prince Edward was killed. And the Lancastrian general, the Duke of Somerset, was executed having sought sanctuary in the Abbey.



- Edward IV was restored to the throne. Henry VI was quietly murdered in the Tower of London at the hands of Richard of Gloucester (later Richard III)
- Margaret of Anjou was permanently imprisoned.
- The Battle of Tewkesbury secured the throne for the Yorkists until Edward's death in 1483.
- It was a comprehensive victory.
- Only Richard's later unpopularity and defeat by Henry Tudor at Bosworth would undo the Yorkist triumph.



- Wixford's villagers would have felt keenly the impact of another seismic event in English History, the Dissolution of the Monasteries.
- Two rich, nationally important, religious houses were in striking distance of the village:
- Evesham Abbey and Worcester Priory.
- Evesham was especially relevant for services in Wixford Church were led by clergy appointed by the overlord, Evesham Abbey.
- Which was well endowed and was an extensive land-holder.
- It had been founded in Saxon times in 709 on the spot where Eof, a swineherd, had a vision of the Virgin Mary.
- Evesham (Eof'sHomme) grew up around this famous abbey.





- By 1530 religious houses like Evesham owned 25% of England's wealth, her sheep pastures, her mills and arable lands.
- Henry VIII and his chief minister Thomas Cromwell (of Oversley castle, Wixford) cast hungry glances at these houses.
- For several reasons Cromwell set out to destroy them:
  - To pay for the King's foreign wars
  - To destroy institutions which still – after Henry's Break with Rome, the Reformation of 1533/4 – looked to, obeyed, the Pope in Rome.
  - And after a great Northern rebellion against this policy (the Pilgrimage of Grace) Cromwell accelerated his destruction.
- Evesham was rich; and its end was abrupt – at an Evensong in September 1539 the King's commissioners broke in and while the choir was singing 'Deposuit potentes' ('He hath put down the mighty' – from the Magnificat) they were stopped dead from continuing.
- And the land passed to the King who gave it to a supporter Sir Philip Hobby.

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- In October 1540 the demolition of the abbey was underway. There was much theft of the building stone by townspeople. But in 1554 the Catholic Queen Mary gave the bell tower to the people of Evesham.
  - Over in Worcester, the great Priory church, a plum benefice (one bishop became Pope Clement VII) with its 27 manors, its fish ponds, its princely prior with his retinue of 20 gentlemen, was also in Cromwell's sights.
  - Henry and Cromwell took a personal interest in Worcester, appointing a known real firebrand Hugh Latimer to be bishop in 1537
  - He found ignorance, sexual misconduct, idle monks.
  - And evidence that the Prior might have harboured and tolerated a monk with sympathies for the Pope, for Rome, and for the old Queen Katherine of Aragon.
  - And so in late 1539 Worcester's great monastic foundation was surrendered by prior More who was blackmailed into giving it up.





- But though the shock waves of this action – the transfer of land ownership of numerous manors between Worcester and Wixford (like Crowle) for example – were considerable, Worcester didn't suffer as much as Evesham:
- Yes, it lost some beautiful buildings like the Guesten (for monastery guests)
- And these ruins illustrate the destruction of naves, dorters, choirs and steeples all round England





- But – the Cathedral survived intact.
- So did the cloisters and the refectory, given to the new King’s School on College Green.
- So – some good came out of the dissolution, even if much of Worcester Priory’s wealth disappeared into the pockets of the King and his favourites.

- Soon after these tumultuous events in Reformation England a child was born (1564) seven miles from Wixford who would go on to be lauded as the greatest writer in any language, and at any time. Quite an accolade.
- He was – William Shakespeare of Stratford upon Avon.
- And although he would spend most of his adult life as a player and playwright in London, his formative years were here in SW Warwickshire.
- And he knew the countryside around Stratford very well; and would have known of Wixford and the bridge over the Arrow.
- And his writings reveal just how much South-West Warwickshire, the character (even the dialect) of its people, their occupations; and the education he received at the Grammar School in Stratford ...
- How much they all shaped the language and the plotting of his plays.



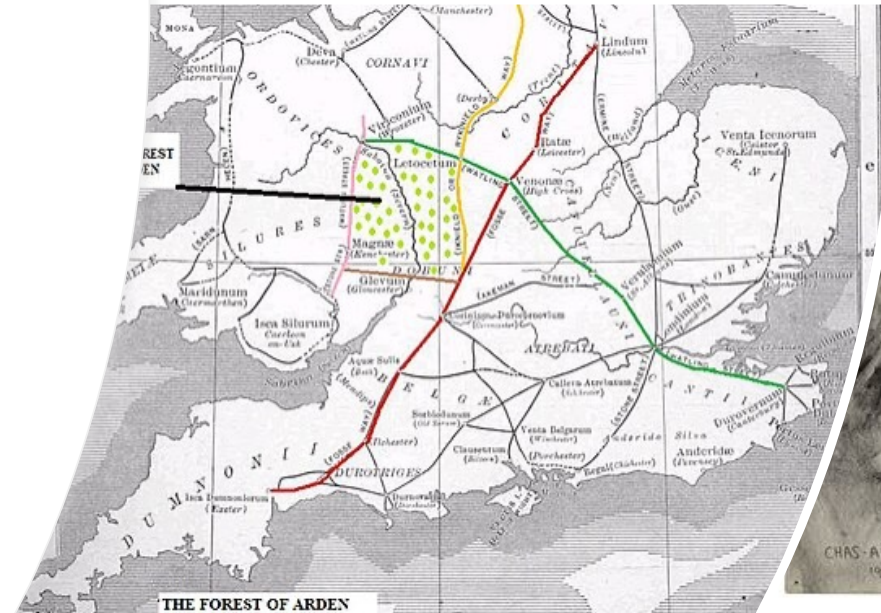
- Aspects of the young Shakespeare's life and experience would have readily resonated with Wixford villagers:
- His family was Papist, his father John being a closet Catholic all his life, while it seems likely William followed suit until he was an adult.
- Wixford – under the protection of the Throckmortons – was famously/notoriously Catholic well beyond the time of Shakespeare's death.
- It appears that William Shakespeare married a heavily pregnant Anne Hathaway with special dispensation in Temple Grafton church, just 2 miles away.
- The reason he didn't marry in Stratford is that the vicar there was a Puritan; Temple Grafton's priest – John Frith *'was an old priest, unsound in religion, who can neither preach or read well, and stays loyal to the old religion.'*
- So, it is probable that the Shakespeare family chose him for a traditional (Catholic) ceremony.



- Wixford – and Shakespeare in Stratford – both experienced the great Arden Forest, where it was said that a squirrel could travel from Stratford to Birmingham without ever having to touch the ground.



- The Forest inspired Shakespeare to set two of his greatest works (written in the 1590s when he was in London and clearly nostalgic for his home county).



- They are *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*.





- The magical words of Oberon, king of the fairies, illustrate both Shakespeare's familiarity with Warwickshire fairy folklore, but also a knowledge of the natural world around him.
- *I know a bank where the wild thyme blows, Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows, Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine, With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine, And there sleeps Titania some time of the night, lulled in these flowers with dances and delights.*
- And in *As You Like It* (said to have been written in Billesley Manor) the Forest of Arden plays a central role as a refuge from the oppressive court, its pastoral simplicity contrasting with a corrupt aristocratic court life-style. The green world of Arden stands for freedom and the honesty of nature.





- Many of Shakespeare's 'low-life' characters are clearly based on rural types he had met in his time in Warwickshire:
- The 'rude mechanicals' in *Midsummer Night's Dream* – Quince, Bottom the Weaver, Snug, Flute, Snout and Robin Starveling...
- Or the description of the itinerant workforce by Mistress Quickly at pea-picking time in *Henry IV part 2*: 'with long black coats and black beards and black tea cans a dangling in my face and shoes that looked as if they'd been tramped to the end of the earth and back ... and strange names they had like feet hitting gravel: Dag and Lop and Clommer and Glauncher and Dink.' Here (to the right) she is 'Hostess,' serving Falstaff with ale.



- Finally, Shakespeare's schooling at the grammar school in Stratford clearly influenced him;
- Here he was taught Latin and Greek and we know he encountered the works of *Ovid* in his schoolroom (where he would have learnt the story of Pyramus and Thisbe acted out by those same rude mechanicals in *Midsummer Night's Dream*).
- He also encountered the Roman comedies of Plautus with their plots of mistaken identities which he used himself in *Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*
- And quite evidently his teaching and his own reading helped develop an extraordinary facility for language. It is said that he has left us 1700 new words in the English language.
- And we know he was an avid play-watcher; and it seems in 1587 (aged 23) he witnessed the travelling *Queen's Men* players come to Stratford; joined them. And the rest is History.
- **So – in conclusion the world's foremost playwright grew up close to Wixford and was shaped and influenced by his formative years in this area...**



- The Gunpowder Plot of November 1605 was a desperate Catholic plot to blow up King James I, his family and his Protestant Privy Councillors, with c.30 barrels of gunpowder secreted in the vaults below the Palace of Westminster.
- The aim was to place Catholic King Philip III of Spain on the throne.
- The architect was Robert Catesby (far right) and the primary assassin was to be Guy Fawkes, apprehended in the act of inspecting the charges (near image)
- And Warwickshire was intimately involved; and more particularly – Coughton Court.





- The Throckmortons, Wixford's landlords, were renowned Catholics. Two of the plotters – Catesby and Tresham were close relatives.
- But Coughton's owner Thomas Throckmorton had rented his house to one of the chief plotters Sir Everard Digby.
- The plotters – Digby himself, Catesby, Tresham, the Wintour brothers – were all in London. But gathered in Coughton that November 5 1605 were sympathisers waiting for the good news of Catholic success:
- The Jesuit priest Father Garnet; the renowned maker of priest-holes, Nicholas Owen, Lady Digby herself and the Catholic Vaux sisters, related to Catesby.
- But instead Thomas Bates, Catesby's servant, rode in to Coughton's courtyard at 2am on November 6<sup>th</sup> with the news that the plot was unmasked, and that the plotters were running for their lives.





Nicholas Owen's  
Priestholes.

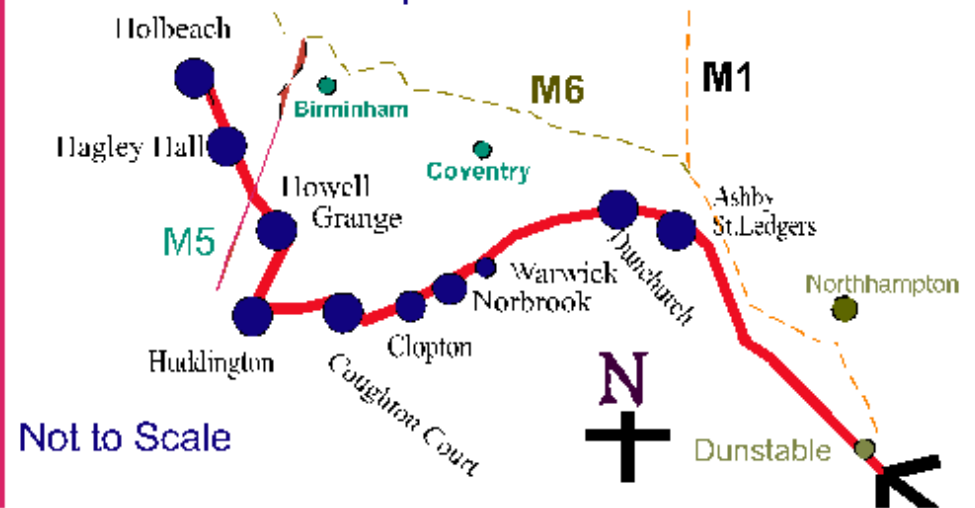
- Garnet and Owen instantly fled to Hindlip House near Worcester. Both would be caught, taken to London, and hanged, drawn and quartered.
- The others rode frantically across Warwickshire and Worcestershire to Huddington, then Hagley Hall and finally they were surrounded in Holbeach House in Staffs.
- All were executed, and the government's response was savage.
- The Throckmortons went unscathed, but anti-Catholic feeling, fuelled by the sense that all Catholics were traitors, grew and would have much affected Wixford's overwhelming traditional, Catholic populace.
- The first thing Parliamentary soldiers did in the Civil War from 1642 was to vandalise Catholic Coughton, set fire to its tapestries and draperies and loot its silver and artefacts. The folk memory of 1605 was strong.



Nicolaus Odöenez Anglus Soc. I. E. S. U. odio Religionis Catholicae

### Route taken by the Conspirators on their way to the Planned Rising in the Midlands

Click on Blue dots for descriptions





- And, appropriately, my final set of important moments close-by Wixford are concerned with the English Civil Wars 1642-51.
- Wixford was caught between the great Parliamentary fortress Warwick castle, home of the Puritan and leading noble rebel, Lord Brook (Warwick), and the Royalist centre of Worcester (Charles I's *'faithful city'*).
- And inevitably there was much military traffic, much looting, much depredation as soldiers passed to and fro, fighting over the boundary areas (Wixford and Exhall) between Royalist Worcestershire and (largely) Parliamentary Warwickshire.
- The very first action of the First Civil War took place just a few miles away from here in September 1642.



- By summer 1642 Charles I had lost control of London to Parliament. Its rebellion was fuelled by Parliament's distrust of Charles who had wanted to rule without Parliament, had tyrannical leanings, was married to a Catholic and clearly disliked Puritans (of which there were many among England's gentry).
- He made his headquarters at Oxford and then moved on to Shrewsbury to recruit from the North-West and Wales, favourable to his cause.
- And he ordered Sir John Byron – seen here, every inch the Cavalier – to bring his plate and treasure chest to Shrewsbury from Oxford.
- In September he set out for Shrewsbury from Oxford, first for Worcester (supposedly loyal). He was pursued by a Parliamentary force led by a John Brown, and Colonel Sandys + 1000 dragoons, who first tried to break into Worcester, withdrew to Upton on Severn, and then set off back towards Worcester, aiming for the bridge at Powick.
- They were unaware till too late that the King's nephew, the redoubtable cavalry commander of the 30 Years War, had arrived in Worcester to aid Byron.



- This was Prince Rupert of the Rhine.
- There are several accounts of what happened at Powick.
- One has Rupert's troops undercover, in ambush on the Worcester side of the bridge, surprising the advancing Parliament troops.
- Who were roundly beaten back, with their commander Colonel Sandys shot down.
- Another colourful account sounds like a *Boy's Own* story.
- It was recorded by a Parliamentary soldier, Nathaniel Wharton suggesting the encounter took place on the bridge itself, not on the Worcester side of it:







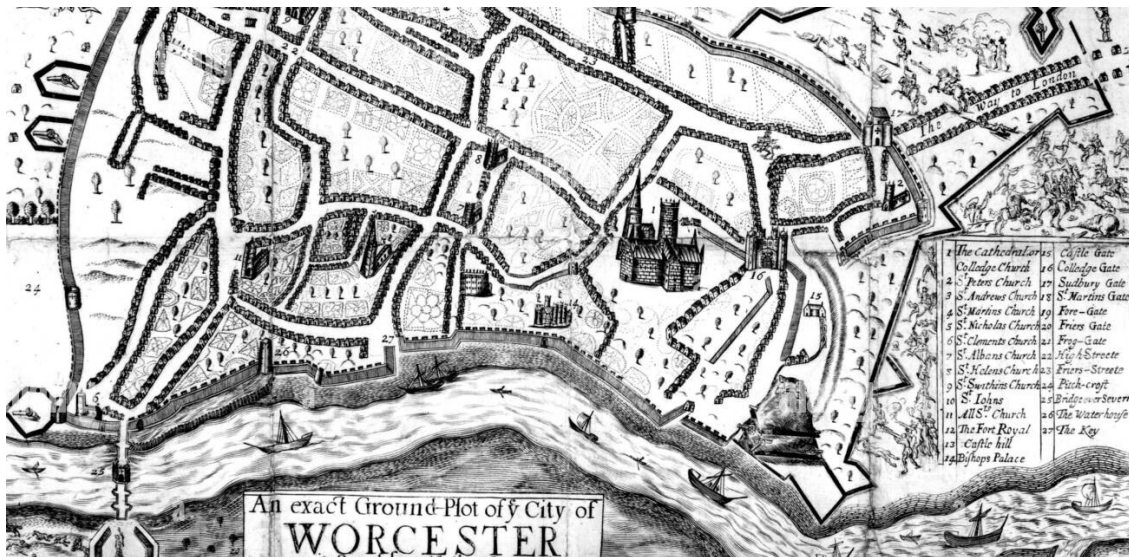
## The Battle of Powick 1642



- *The Prince met Sandys (Parliamentary forces) on the bridge. He asked them who they were for and Sandys answered: 'For King and Parliament.' He replied – 'Not for the King alone?' And he Sandys replied 'No.' Then said the Prince, 'For the King have at you,' and the Colonel replied, 'For the Parliament, have at you.' And so they discharged at each other.*
- *The rest followed them and presently those cavaliers in ambush down the lane fired upon them and also the musketeers behind the hedges. The horsemen immediately fell to their swords. I heard the Prince say that our men fought more like lions than men.*
- *The cavaleers (sic) boast wonderfully and swear most hellishly that the next time we meet they will make a mouthful of us. But I am persuaded the Lord has given a small victory, for they left at their fright in the city some horses, trunks etc.*

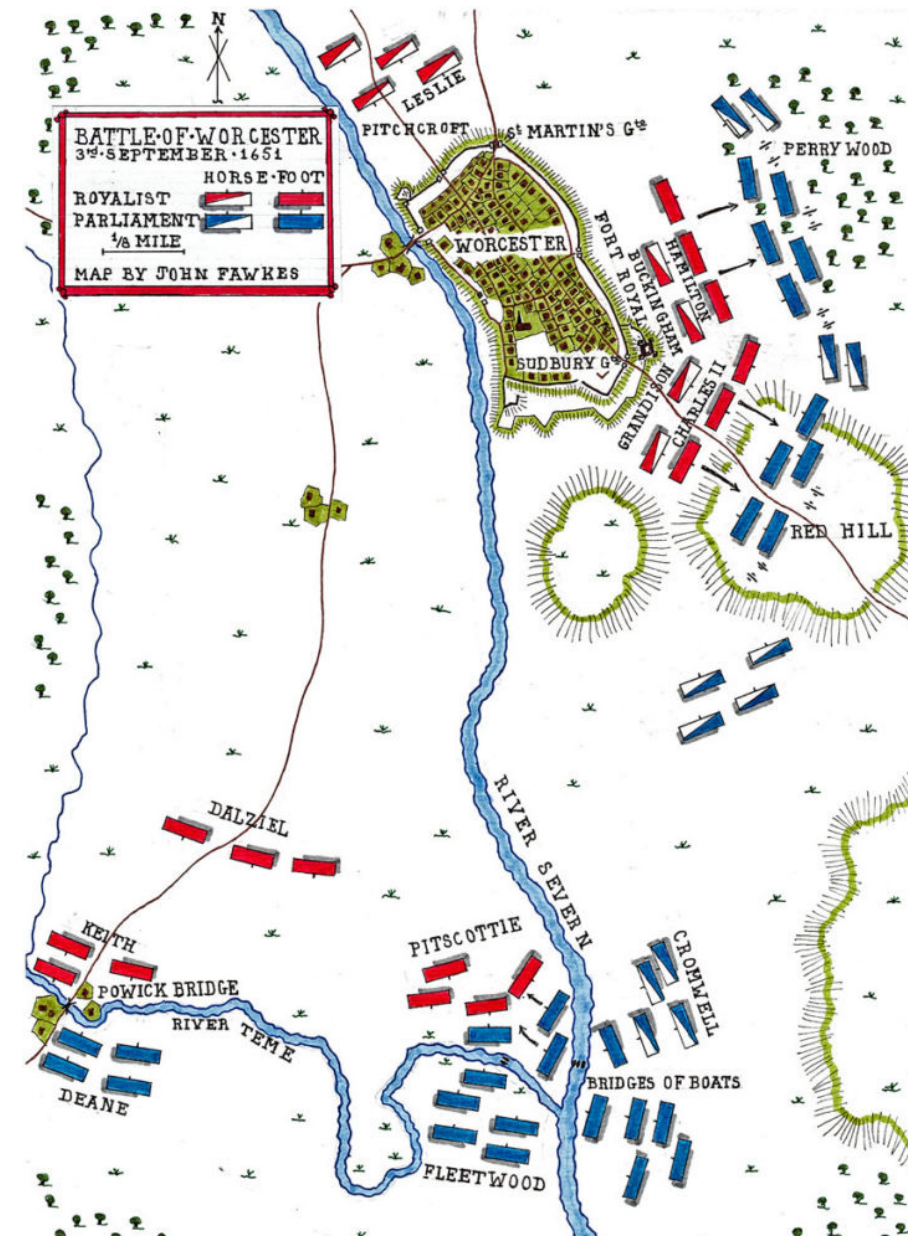
- In fact – the Royalists, having given their enemy a bloody nose, gathered up the plate and treasure and – protected by Prince Rupert’s horse – escaped North to Shrewsbury, leaving Worcester to the tender mercies of Parliamentarians.
- Who stabled horses in the Cathedral nave, smashed up the famous organ, terrorized the good people of – Worcester with fines and imprisonment.
- And then evacuated Worcester in order to rush pell-mell to Edgehill near Kington for the great battle (October 1642) which effectively stopped the King from getting to London.
- Worcester – reoccupied by Royalists – was fortified and held until the end of the Civil War. It was the last city to surrender (to Colonel Rainsborough) in summer 1646.
- After which, a frustrated Roundhead Army, led by Cromwell and Ireton, decided that while Charles lived there would always be a danger of a Royalist revival.
- So – Charles I was executed, late January 1649.
- But this was not the end of it...





- Charles I's son had escaped to the Continent on his father's execution.
- In 1651, with Scottish support he invaded Scotland, gathering troops, then marched South, down the West side of England, aiming to recruit from loyal Welshmen and to make 'Faithful' Worcester his base.
- He fortified it, rebuilding the fort (Fort Royal) to the South East of the city.
- And prepared to meet the inevitable counter-attack from Oliver Cromwell.

- Cromwell's army of 30,000 (the largest of the whole century) marched from Nottingham, and camped in the fields between Wixford and Evesham. It was now that Wixford Church was ransacked and graffitied by Parliamentary troops (see next slide). There would have been soldiers billeted in every house, shed, barn and stable.
- Another army led by Fleetwood aimed to cross the Rivers Teme and Severn south of Worcester to create a second front.
- Cromwell would hold Red Hill and Perry Wood to the West and South - West of the city.
- On September 3 1651 Royalist troops sallied out attacking Red Hill and Perry Wood. And Cromwell moved West with some of his troops to support Fleetwood's southern attack.
- Charles II watched the battle from the cathedral tower.
- But when parliamentary troops stormed downhill to take Fort Royal, they could turn cannon and fire down on the city.
- Charles realized the game was up; Cromwell's troops surged down hill, took the last fortified gate at Sudbury and stormed into the Cathedral.





- Charles sped out of the North gate to Boscobel in Staffs, thence via Bristol, then Shoreham back to the Continent.
- His Scottish soldiers were massacred in the cathedral and surrounding streets; *'the cathedral was very noisome from the number of rotting cadavers'* (over 3000)
- *'All houses were ransacked from top to bottom.'*
- This great Parliamentary victory ushered in the Republican Commonwealth; Cromwell would become Lord Protector.
- The battle of Worcester was considered historic. The last battle between British armies on our national soil. The Parliamentary chaplain addressed the Roundheads after the battle thus:



- *‘When their wives and children should ask them where they had been and what news, they should say they had been at Worcester where England’s sorrows began, and where they were happily ended.’*
- He spoke too soon; when Cromwell died there was a power vacuum; and enough influential figures concluded it was safe to invite back the Stuart king.
- In 1660 he was returned and restored.
- And with that final moment of my talk about History all around us, we must end.
- I hope you agree that we live in a very interesting and historic part of England...

