

Thomas, Lord Stanley

by Michael Iliffe

Thomas Lord Stanley was the son of Thomas, 1st Baron Stanley. The 1st baron was a younger son of Cheshire gentry who had been elevated to the peerage. Thomas, his son, became the 2nd Baron Stanley at his father's death in 1459, and in 1461 became Chief Justice of Cheshire.

In 1472 he married Eleanor, the sister of Richard Neville ("the kingmaker"). They had four sons that we know of; George, Edward, Edmund and James. George was to become Lord Strange, James joined the Church, Edward and Edmund played no part in the politics of the time. Lord Stanley's brother, William, later became Sir William Stanley.

After the death of his wife, Eleanor, he married Margaret Beaufort in 1482, and became the step-father of Henry Tudor, son of Edmund Tudor, the Duke of Richmond, who died in 1458. Margaret was the daughter of John, 1st Duke of Somerset; she brought him great wealth, and a wife of breeding and accomplishment. Thomas and Margaret had no children together.

During the personal rule of Henry VI, Lord Stanley became Controller of the Royal Household, and in times of crisis the court looked to him to provide troops in the North-West.

Stanley's greatest danger came in 1459, when Queen Margaret made a bid to recruit him directly in Cheshire, when the Yorkists were mobilising and sought assistance from the Stanleys. To add to his dilemma, his father died that year, leaving the 24 year old Thomas to weather the storm.

At the Battle of Blore Heath that year, young Stanley played a game of brinkmanship and held his retinue and levies some miles from the encounter. He narrowly missed being attainted by Henry I. He kept a low profile during the upheavals of 1460-1461 and was a notable absentee at the Battle of Towton. However, he was quick to share in the fruits of the Yorkist victory.



In the crisis of 1470-1471 he flirted with the Nevilles, played some part in the re-adeption of Henry VI, but again disappointed his allies by making no effort to resist the return of Edward IV.

Once again he was notably absent at the Battles of Barnet and Tewkesbury in 1471. But he joined Edward's army after Tewkesbury, before Edward's return to London. Edward knew that Stanley had been sympathetic to Warwick's cause, and by 1471 he was considered to be a sufficiently unreliable supporter, and was watched by Clarence's spies.

He worked in Chancery for many years under Edward IV, and managed to match his eldest son, George, with the heiress of Lord Strange of Knockin, providing him with an independent title of Lord Strange, and endowment in the north of Shropshire, and family ties to the Woodvilles. By 1478 Lord Stanley was a member of the Royal Council.

Richard, the king's brother, may have been "Lord of the North" but Stanley had many holdings in Lancashire, Cheshire and north Wales and could have been named "Lord of the North-west". The close proximity of their holdings brought them into conflict over power in the North.

In 1469, Edward IV granted Richard, Duke of Gloucester, estates in Lancashire, which confronted the influence of Lord Stanley and his brother Sir William Stanley. After Edward's return in 1471, he modified Richard's grants to appease Lord Stanley, but warned Stanley to stop meddling in the offices granted to Richard.

Stanley made the most of his position in Lancashire, since 1461 he had been the Steward of Halton, Tottington, Rochdale and Penworthen, and he continued to pay himself as both Steward and Constable on authority of letters prior to Edward's flight. In 1469 Edward endorsed an exchange of Skipton in Craven from Richard to Stanley. Stanley gave Richard Chirk.

The lord of Hornby Castle was Sir Thomas Harrington. He and his eldest son, John, were killed at the Battle of Wakefield on the Yorkist side in 1460. The heiresses of the estate were two daughters, who were seized by their uncles, James and Robert Harrington, who held on to their lands. The Harringtons were eventually called to Chancery by the king's attorney, and the wardship of the daughters was handed to the Stanleys, who promptly married the girls into the family. However, they could not gain possession of the castle, as the Harringtons had secured a new sponsor, Richard Duke of Gloucester. The dispute was resolved in 1475, when Hornby Castle was confirmed to the daughters and hence the Stanleys.

In 1483 at Richard's coronation, Lord Stanley bore the Constable's Mace, and his wife, Margaret Beaufort, followed Anne's train. He and Lord Strange were in Richard's party during the royal progress through England, and Lord Stanley was appointed a royal councillor, and was kept close to the king.

The Stanleys must have feared that Richard's accession would be followed by re-adjustments to the balance of power in the North-West, as Richard had numerous Lancashire followers, whose influence could be enhanced at the Stanley's expense.

In June 1483 Richard had probably discovered that Edward IV's old councillors had conspired to depose him, and control England through Edward V, who was still a minor, and was unable to rule in his own right. At a council meeting, Richard had Lord Hastings arrested and beheaded. Lord Stanley was lightly wounded during a brief scuffle at his arrest. The Great Chronicle of London states that

"Richard would have dealt with the Lord Stanley in the same manner, saving that the Protector feared the Lord Strange, his son who was in Lancashire, wherefore the Lord Stanley was set at liberty unhurt."

Stanley was restored to his position in the Council almost immediately after the affair.

Later in the year Buckingham lobbied Lord Stanley to join his rebellion against Richard, but Stanley knew that Richard had granted Buckingham estates in North Wales, close to his own holdings. Stanley decided to look after his power base in the north-west, and supported Richard by providing troops against Buckingham.

After Buckingham's defeat and execution, Richard showed his gratitude for the Stanleys unexpected support. Lord Stanley succeeded Buckingham as Constable of England and was made a Knight of the Garter. He inherited Buckingham's lordship of Kimbolton in Hertfordshire, and was authorised, with Sir William Stanley, to seize manors, lordships etc. in the counties of

".....Lancashire, Cheshire, Wiltshire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Bedfordshire, Somerset, Rutland, Oxfordshire and Wales, late belonging to Thomas St. Ledger, Thomas Marquis of Dorset and Henry Duke of Buckingham – rebels."

Lord Stanley was also granted an annuity of £100 by Richard. Sir William Stanley was made Knight of the Body, Chamberlain and chief justice of North Wales, and constable of the castle and captain of the town of Caernarvon, with 23 soldiers.

The Stanleys were now supreme in the countryside between Shrewsbury and Lancaster, and prominent throughout North Wales and parts of the midlands. The Stanleys at this time could only have been rivalled by the Howards in wealth and influence in the kingdom.

Richard was careful to reward his Lancashire followers with properties elsewhere in the country, to avoid any appearance of undermining the Stanley's authority in Lancashire.

However, it was now known that Lord Stanley's wife, Margaret Beaufort, was deeply involved in the Buckingham rebellion. On Richard's request, Parliament did no more than confiscate her estates and titles. In an excess of leniency, and as a further reward for Stanley's loyalty, Richard gave her into Stanley's keeping, and transferred her estates to him on his agreement to keep her "in some secret place, or home, without servants or company".

However, she remained free to conspire and organise an intelligence service for her son Henry Tudor.

In February 1485 Richard made James Harrington Chief Forrester of Bowland in Lancashire. He had held this position as Richard's deputy, so his appointment made little practical difference, but, given the rivalry between the Stanleys and the Harringtons, it was perceived as a snub to Lord Stanley. Richard had also decided to re-open the question of the Harrington inheritance, possibly to adjust in Harrington's favour. It seems that Richard mis-judged the avarice of the Stanleys.

In July 1485, with the threat of Henry Tudor's invasion in the air, Lord Stanley requested permission to visit his family and estates in Lancashire, as he had been at court for the last two years. Richard was faced with a dilemma. Stanley had been at his side, and was associated with him in all the principal acts of his reign, but he was also married to Henry Tudor's mother. Richard could either agree on his absence, and risk that Stanley would lead his 3,000 Lancashire men to Henry's camp, or risk insult to the man who had taken Richard's part against his own wife in 1483. His compromise invited both treason and insult. He could go, providing he sent his eldest son, Lord Strange, to the king at Nottingham, which he did. Lord Stanley's family were deeply involved in Henry's invasion. His wife had raised money, planned and prepared the way for it. His nephew, Sir John Savage was with Henry Tudor. His brother, Sir William Stanley and his nephew Thomas Savage were also involved.

Upon hearing of Henry Tudor's landing in August, the king sent orders for Lord Stanley to present himself at Nottingham Castle without delay. Richard feared what in fact had happened, that Lord Stanley was sitting on the fence. He returned a message that he was not able to come because of the "sweating sickness from which he was suffering.

His son, Lord Strange, who had prepared to escape from the king, was seized. He revealed a conspiracy to support Tudor between himself, his uncle Sir William Stanley and Sir John Savage. He did not name Lord Stanley as a conspirator. Strange asked for mercy and promised his father would come to the king's aid. He wrote to his father announcing the danger he was in and urged him to come to the king's aid.

On 15th August Lord Stanley rode out from his home at Latham, with retainers and levies joining at Warrington and other centres. He headed for Newcastle-under-Lyme and proceeded to Lichfield, where he presumably consulted with Sir William Stanley and Henry Tudor in secret. Lord Stanley's force withdrew to Atherstone by 10th August, as if retreating before the rebel advance. He did not join Richard's forces, but withdrew to Hinkley where the Fosse met Watling Street. He appeared to be blocking the road to London, and could defend his movements in sound strategic terms.

It is surmised that Lord Stanley met with Henry Tudor and his brother Sir William at the Three Tuns Inn at Atherstone on the night before the confrontation, assuring them of his support at the critical moment of the battle.

On the morning of the battle, Richard gave orders that Lord Strange should be executed if Lord Stanley turned traitor, he felt little confidence in Stanley's support even though he was holding his son hostage for his good behaviour.

Looking over the field of battle, Richard saw Lord Stanley's 3,000 men keeping apart, capable of attacking either side. With Lord Stanley's reputation as a ditherer in battle, Richard may have felt confident of his not making a move until the battle was irretrievably won or lost. However at the critical point of the battle, Lord Stanley attacked Richard's cavalry charge, and the king was killed.

After the battle Lord Strange was retrieved unharmed. Lord Stanley participated in the round-up of the gentry who had taken to horse. Finally, Tudor and his captains, who now included Lord Stanley, gathered on a small hill, now known as Crown Hill, and were acclaimed by the throng, and according to tradition, Lord Stanley placed Richard's coronet on Henry Tudor's head.

William Catesby was captured, and appealed to his wife's uncle, Lord Stanley, to save him, but he was nevertheless beheaded on 25th August.

Lord Stanley was made Earl of Derby, and secured the Duchy of Lancaster for himself. He also joined the new king's Council. Lord Strange also joined the Council. Sir William Stanley was made Lord Chamberlain after the battle.

Tudor said of Lord Stanley that he was;

"... the king's right entirely beloved father, in consideration of the good and praiseworthy services performed by him before now with great personal exertions and costs. Now lately in the king's conflict within the realm of England."

Margaret Beaufort's estates and titles were returned to her as a practical reward for her support. Both Margaret and Lord Staley attended Henry's coronation. Stanley carried the Sword of State.

In 1487, Henry Tudor owed his victory at the Battle of Stoke to the Stanleys, who committed a "great host" under Lord Strange to defeat the last vestiges of King Richard's loyalists.

In 1495, Lord Stanley's son, Sir William, the Chamberlain of the Household, confessed to "treasonable talk", and was executed. I can find no further reference to Lord Stanley after this, but he must have witnessed Henry's marriage in 1486, the birth of Prince Arthur in 1487 and the birth of Prince Henry in 1491.

The Stanley family were an example of a family "on the make". It was obsessed by land acquisition, offices and titles, from which wealth derived.

Richard feared and mis-trusted him. More than any other, he was one of the most powerful men in his realm. Richard must have known the maxim, "to hold your friends close, and your enemies closer".

Lord Stanley was able to advance the careers of his family through sound leadership, and in times of national crisis, withheld commitment, and was able to put his weight behind political stability. Love him or hate him, he was a man typical of his times.