

The secret life of Lord Clifford

Martin Hickes

The rich feudal history of Yorkshire at the time of the War of the Roses is the stirring backdrop to a dramatic first novel by Leeds writer Peter Algar.

As with many successful authors, IT and client services expert Peter, from Horsforth, turned to a true tale from history to weave the fictional account for his novel *The Shepherd Lord*.

Peter, who works for IBM, hopes the tale, which has the Battle of Towton, the history of the Clifford family, Skipton Castle and the landed gentry of the North of England at its heart, will have broad appeal in Yorkshire.

The novel draws on a wealth of Yorkshire place-names and settings, including Lawkland, Eldroth, Threlkeld, Skipton, as well as Cumbria and the Yorkshire Wolds, and a 'lost' legend.

Peter says: "*The Shepherd Lord* is based on a true story that has been all but ignored for centuries, and that I felt was bursting to be told. The main protagonist is the young Henry Clifford, the tenth Lord Clifford. Henry is spirited away after the Battle of Towton on 29 March 1461 – which I'm sure many will know for being the bloodiest battle in English history.

"This is done out of fear that the rival Yorkist faction will take his life in reprisal for the rebellious actions of his father – the Lancastrian general and ninth lord, John Clifford, who opposed the forces of Edward IV.

"Young Henry is brought up as a simple

shepherd boy in disguise by a character called Tom Lawkland, in order that his noble background is not betrayed. All this is set against the backdrop of the bloody feud between the Yorkists and Lancastrians.

"The plot is then narrated by Tom (the shepherd that raises Henry) until it is felt safe to reveal his true identity and to attempt to reclaim his birth-right. Like some of the very best tales in literature, it contrasts a life on the run against an idyllic pastoral backdrop, and of course the wonderful feudal history of the War of the Roses that we are fortunate to possess in this part of the world.

"It all came about because I was researching distant ancestors in both Tristram Bolling, and Robert Bolling, of Bradford's Bolling Hall, who were reluctant combatants at the Battle of Towton, in feudal service to their overlord John Clifford.

"One of the things that struck me was a petition by Robert Bolling – a Lancastrian supporter – to the then Yorkist king Edward IV, asking for his lands back after he had been 'attainted'.

"In English history, this is a metaphorical 'stain' which arises from being condemned for a serious capital crime, like treason. It entails losing not only property and hereditary titles, but typically also the right to pass them on to heirs.

"After Towton, Robert Bolling was indeed condemned for high treason for assisting Clifford, but managed to get his lands back – however, it took fourteen years.

“Part of his defence was that he claimed his military actions against Edward IV were undertaken out of allegiance to Clifford – to whom the Bollings owed a ‘knight’s fee’ at times of war, or a feudal loyalty.

“His son, Tristram, was in the army of John Clifford – part of the 500-strong light cavalry unit called the Flower of Craven.

“Effectively, at that time, the Cliffords, the Nevilles and the Percys held most of the land in the north of England. Reading this background brought me to the key theme of the novel, being that John Clifford was killed on the eve of the Battle of Towton, at Ferrybridge.

“His son and heir Henry was then literally spirited away after the bloodshed, and became, if history is to be believed, a shepherd boy, to prevent Edward IV having him hunted down and having the Clifford heir killed. There had long been a terrible history of ‘bad blood’ between the Cliffords and the House of York.”

The Battle of Ferrybridge, 28 March 1461, was a smaller clash between the houses of York and Lancaster just one day before the larger battle of Towton, on a snowy Palm Sunday, which it is said ‘saw the local beck run red with the blood of the slaughtered’. After Towton, which took place about eleven miles (18 km) from York, the Lancastrians fled to the city, home of ‘Clifford’s Tower’.

Peter adds: “What really intrigued me was that no one really knows what happened to the young Henry Clifford between 1461 and 1485. After the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, and the death of Richard III, he was restored to his land and titles. But some historians agree for a period of that time he was a shepherd – and my novel speculates on this.

“I did manage to source some of the background on the so-called ‘Shepherd



*Peter at his book launch event at Bolling Hall.
Photo by Martin Hickes.*

Lord’ thanks to *The Shepherd Lord of Skipton Castle* by Richard Spence, a work by Wordsworth, and a poem popular in Tudor times called the ‘Nut-brown Maid’ which mentions the character, but much of the history on him is lost.” ■

Peter writes under the nom-de-plume of George Peter Algar. He is already planning a sequel to The Shepherd Lord. Part of the proceeds of the book are being donated to the Towton Battle Society. www.towton.org.uk. The Shepherd Lord is published by Melrose. ISBN 9781906561963. Price £9.99 There is also a special trailer based on the author’s own screenplay at the website www.theshepherdlord.com.