

Sir Rhys ap Thomas 1449-1525



Rhys ap Thomas was the youngest legitimate son of Thomas ap Gruffydd of Carmarthenshire and Elizabeth daughter of Sir John Gruffydd of Abermarlais. He was born in 1449 during the reign of Henry VI. This king's reign was marked by confusion, violence and discord. Henry VI was blamed for the loss of the Bordeaux region which was England's last major land possession in France.

He was a Welsh soldier and powerful landholder who rose to prominence during the wars of the roses and was instrumental in securing the victory of Henry Tudor at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485.

He remained a faithful supporter of Henry and was rewarded with extensive lands and offices in South Wales. Some sources claim that Rhys personally delivered the death blow to King Richard III on Bosworth Field.

The defeat of Henry VI led to his suffering the first of several bouts of mental illness. The first recorded incident occurred following the final defeat of English forces in France at the Battle of Castillon in 1453. This battle marked the effective end of the Hundred Years War and France's victory over England in the long conflict was now finally complete.

By 1460, after decades of increasing unrest amongst the nobility a powerful group of noblemen threw their weight behind the claim of Richard, Duke of York to challenge the right of King Henry VI to rule England.

Richard was from the House of York and Henry VI from the House of Lancaster. The famous 'Wars of the Roses' were now well and truly underway.

Despite his failings most Welsh landholders supported Henry VI as their rightful king. This was because many of these powerful Welshmen owed their lands and their titles to his father and grandfather. Both Henry IV and Henry V had rewarded prominent local landowners in return for their loyalty to the English crown during the revolt of Owain Glyndŵr.

This was the last great Welsh revolt against English rule in Wales and lasted from around 1400 to 1412. Welsh landowners such as Rhys' family therefore chose to support Henry VI rather than side with the rival Yorkist claims to the throne.

In 1461 when Rhys ap Thomas was twelve or thirteen, a Lancastrian army was raised in Wales under the most powerful Welsh landowners of the day, Jasper Tudor. Jasper was the Earl of Pembroke and moved his army into England to support Henry VI.

However Jasper was defeated by Yorkist forces at the Battle of Mortimer's Cross. Rhys's grandfather, Gruffydd ap Nicholas, was killed in the battle. Within a few weeks, Edward of York was proclaimed King Edward IV and the main Lancastrian armies were crushed at the Battle of Towton in Yorkshire. A bloody battle in which thousands of men were killed.

Some estimates claim almost thirty thousand dead and that did not include the wounded or those captured and were killed later on.

Some Lancastrians including Rhys's father Thomas, continued to resist the Yorkist forces. Rhys' father, Thomas and his older brother Owain defended Carreg Cennen Castle, near Llandeilo against the forces of Edward IV. They were eventually forced to surrender in 1462 after a siege.

The victorious Yorkists demolished many of Carreg Cennen's defences so that the castle could not be used as a Lancastrian stronghold ever again. The lands of the defeated Lancastrians were confiscated and Thomas with the young Rhys went into exile at the court of Philip the Good, the Duke of Burgundy.



Carreg Cennen Castle

Rhys and his father returned to Wales in 1467 and were soon able to regain some of their former lands.

In 1470 Henry VI briefly returned to the throne of England and many of his Lancastrian supporters, such as Rhys' family, regained the lands that the Yorkist King Edward IV had taken from them. Many were lucky enough to retain their estates even after the return of Edward IV as king in 1471.

Rhys' father died in 1474 and as Rhys' two elder brothers had already also died Rhys was to inherit all his father's estates.

In 1483 Edward IV died. His son, Edward V was still a boy and therefore as a minor he could not succeed his father as king due to his young age. He was only twelve years old when Edward IV's surviving brother Richard Duke of Gloucester (later Richard III) swiftly moved to take custody of his young nephews. Richard claimed that both needed his special protection as both were too young to succeed their father and rule as kings in their own right. In reality Richard had no intention sharing power with them or their mother and took total control of England's government after 1483.

Richard quickly went further to enforce his claim on the throne He declared his nephews to be illegitimate and seized the throne for himself.

Edward V and his younger brother (those famous Princes in the Tower) disappeared and were probably murdered. If not by Richard, then certainly by his supporters who probably acted on his direct orders.

Soon after this however some of Richard's own supporters turned against him. The Duke of Buckingham led a revolt aimed at restoring the House of Lancaster. The revolt failed.

Buckingham had raised a force at Brecon in mid-Wales but storms and floods prevented him crossing the River Severn to join other rebels in England. The weather affected the morale of his men. His cold, hungry and downtrodden soldiers soon deserted him. Buckingham was betrayed and executed shortly after.

Those same storms prevented Henry Tudor from landing in the West Country.

Rhys ap Thomas had refused to support the Buckingham's uprising. We can safely assume that having seen the family estates lost and then regained, Rhys did not want to risk losing them all over again. He would almost certainly have also lost his life as well as all his lands if he had become embroiled in a failed revolt against Richard III.

As a reward for his neutrality in the Buckingham's revolt, Richard made Rhys ap Thomas his principal lieutenant in South West Wales and granted him an annuity of forty marks for life. Part of this deal meant that Rhys was required to send his son Gruffydd ap Rhys, to King Richard's court at Nottingham as a noble hostage. This was often done in the "Middle Ages" when a king wanted to ensure the support of his nobles

Nevertheless despite this royal command Rhys was able to avoid the obligation to hand over custody of his sole legitimate son. He claimed that nothing could bind him to his duty more strongly than his conscience. He is supposed to have taken a solemn oath to the effect that, "Whoever ill-affected to the state, shall dare to land in those parts of Wales where I have any employment under your majesty, must resolve with himself to make his entrance and irruption over my belly." In other words Rhys promised to give his own life to defend Wales from Richard's enemies, whoever they might be.

Despite this apparent oath of loyalty to Richard III, Rhys ap Thomas was playing his cards close to his chest. He is strongly suspected of maintaining correspondence with Henry Tudor of the House of Lancaster.

Henry Tudor was still in exile in France but was preparing an attempt to invade and overthrow King Richard III. These suspicions about Rhys were to be confirmed by the events of 1485.

On 1st August 1485 Henry Tudor with a small force of English exiles and French mercenaries set sail from Harfleur in France for Wales.



Harfleur

With a favorable wind, they landed at Mill Bay near Dale on the north side of Milford Haven. This was close to his birthplace in Pembroke Castle.

At this point, Rhys should have mobilised his forces and engaged Henry Tudor. He had sworn that binding oath to do this as part of the deal that allowed him to keep his son from Richard III's clutches. Instead Rhys ap Thomas joined with Henry Tudor.

Folklore tells us that the Bishop of St. David's (a diocese that crops up more than once in the histories of the South Wales Chapels of the Commemorative Order of Thomas of Acon) offered to provide absolution for Rhys, from his previous oath to Richard III.

The Bishop of St. David's also suggested that Rhys fulfil the strict letter of his vow by lying down and letting Henry Tudor physically step over him. This undignified action on Rhys's part might have weakened his authority over his men.

Instead Rhys is said to have come up with an ingenious solution and stood under the Mullock Bridge about two miles from Dale while Henry and his forces marched over it. Thus Rhys had indeed only allowed Henry's forces to enter his lands by passing over him physically. There was of course the Mullock Bridge in between them.



Pont Mullock Bridge

From that point on, Henry's and Rhys' forces marched separately through Wales. Henry Tudor took the coastal route through Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion before turning east at Machynlleth. Rhys recruited more and more men as he proceeded cross country from Carmarthen to Llandovery and on to Brecon; then north through Builth, Rhayader and Llanidloes.

The two men reassembled their combined forces at Welshpool. Having enlarged the size of the army the Welsh force was described by chroniclers as being large enough to have "Annihilated" the rest of Henry's army. How true this was we do not of course know.

These forces travelled through Wales on their journey to face Richard III and crossed the border into England.

On 22nd August 1485 the armies of Henry Tudor and Richard III met at the Battle of Bosworth, near Market Bosworth, in Leicestershire.

Before the battle it was estimated that Richard has some ten thousand men and Henry had only about half that number. Richard may have had the larger army but he was worried about the true loyalties of many of his men and even of their commanders.

During the night before the two armies clashed, a number of Richard's troops slipped away and deserted him using the cover of darkness.

As the day of battle dawned the odds were no longer as decisively in Richard's favour as they had been only twenty-four hours earlier. To make matters worse for Richard he could not even be sure of the loyalty of those men that had remained with his army; and he was now to face Henry Tudor later that day.

A further complication was the role that the Stanley family and their troops might play in the coming battle. The Stanley's were officially on Richard's side but remained to the flank of the battlefield and did not at point during that day help Richard by engaging Henry Tudor's men. In actual fact they only entered the fray as Richard III was killed and after Henry Tudor had turned the battle in his favor.

This crucial moment in the battle took place when Henry Tudor thought that his forces were going to be broken by Richard's troops. Henry therefore rode towards Lord Stanley to beg him for assistance against Richard's army. This left Henry vulnerable to a swift flanking attack.

At this point Richard III launched a cavalry charge at his rival by riding at speed down Albion Hill from where he had been observing the battle that was taking place beneath him. Richard knew that if Henry Tudor could be killed then the battle was a good as over.

According to a contemporary ballad, Rhys ap Thomas' men halted Richard III's cavalry assault. We are told that a key commander of Richard III, the Duke of Norfolk, was killed by arrow fire and that Richard and his royal bodyguard were soon under considerable pressure from Rhys ap Thomas' troops.

Richard was soon unhorsed and surrounded by Rhys' troops. He was probably stunned by the force of a fall from his steed as he was travelling at speed and was totally encased in a heavy it of the finest steel plate armour that could be produced in the 1480s.



At that crucial moment whilst he was temporarily incapacitated, it is thought that one of Rhys ap Griffiths' men drew a long dagger and cut the leather strap that secured Richard's helmet to his head.

Without his helmet to protect his head, Richard was now vulnerable as he was surrounded on all sides by Rhys' men and his head was clearly exposed and unprotected from those assailants that now surrounded him.

The famous fifteenth century Welsh poet Guto'r Glyn suggests in one of his works that Rhys ap Thomas himself was responsible for killing Richard. Referring to Richard's emblem of a boar, Guto'r Glyn wrote, using the cynghanedd dramatic style of epic Welsh poetry, that Rhys "Lladd y baedd, eilliodd ei ben" This translates as "Killed the boar, shaved his head"

This may well be an exaggeration of Rhys' role in killing Richard III on the battlefield that day because Welsh poets and bards, such as Guto'r Glyn, were directly employed by members of the Welsh landowning class to compose works on their behalf.

Guto'r Glyn was therefore expected to refer to and praise the epic deeds of his paying patron. Guto'r Glyn also goes on to describe Rhys' actions at Bosworth Field with the accolade that Rhys was "A Syr Rys mal sŷr aesaw, A'r gwayw'n eu mysg ar gnyw mawr" This translates as "Like the stars of a shield, with the spear in their midst, on a great steed"

Had Guto'r Glyn not attributed the famous deed of killing Richard III to Rhys ap Thomas then he probably would not have been paid for his literary efforts. We must therefore take the words of this Welsh poet with a large pinch of salt.

In reality, it was almost certain one of Rhys's Welsh soldiers had actually killed Richard III. The Burgundian chronicler, Jean Molinet, wrote that one of Rhys' men, said to be Wyllyam Gardynyr, struck the actual death-blow with a some sort of two-handed melee weapon such as a halberd or more likely a bill.

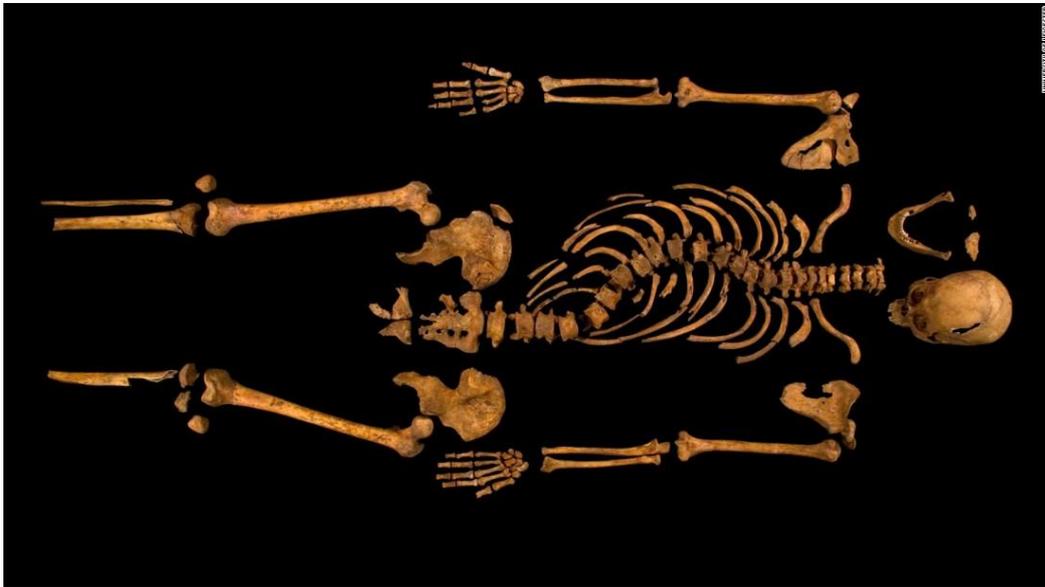


Halberd

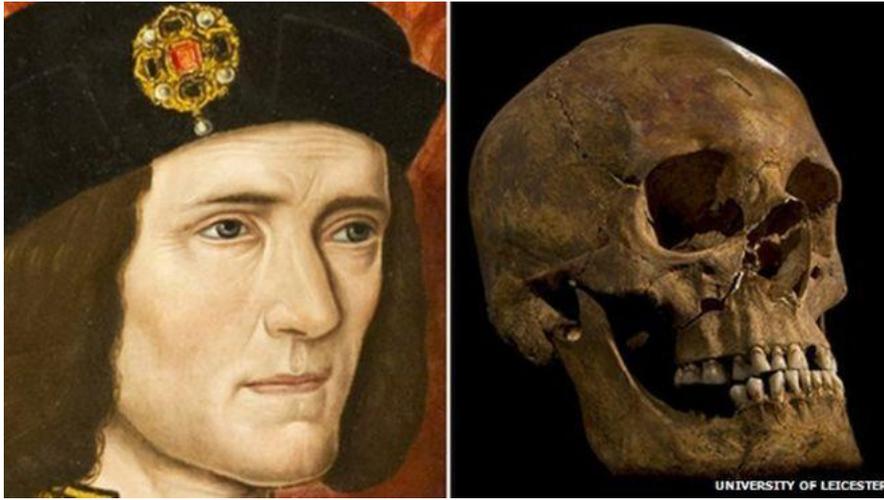


Bill Hook

As far as Richard III's death is concerned the recent discovery of his remains underneath a carpark in Leicester, prove that he was struck with several severe blows to the skull just before he died.



The photographs of his skeleton



These show the death blow to skull and this was a slicing blow directed at the head.



An examination of Richard's remains shows a deep cut beneath chin that is consistent with this cutting or slicing action.

At the conclusion of the battle with Richard now dead, Henry was undisputed king of England and Rhys ap Thomas was knighted on the field of battle for military services to the new king. From that point he was to be known as Sir Rhys ap Thomas.

Sir Rhys demonstrated his continuing loyalty to Henry VII throughout the years of his reign (1485-1509). He fought for his king by defeating a Yorkist rebellion at Brecon in 1486 and by helping to defeat the Yorkist pretender Lambert Simnel in 1487.

Sir Rhys was also involved in other military campaigns and these included one against another Yorkist pretender, Perkin Warbeck. Rhys helped to defeat the Cornish Rebellion in 1497 and assisted in capturing the Cornish rebellion's leader, Lord Audeley.

For this and other loyal deeds Rhys was awarded the title of Knight Banneret. This is a title below the rank of Earl or Duke but one that allows the recipient to carry his own standard into battle as opposed to serving under the standard or banner of another. It is a title that is traditionally awarded after victory on the battlefield.

As further reward for his continued loyalty to Henry VII, Sir Rhys went on to acquire more lands and several lucrative offices throughout South Wales. He was appointed Constable and Lieutenant of Breconshire, Chamberlain of Carmarthenshire and Cardiganshire, Seneschall

and Chancellor of Haverfordwest and Builth, Justiciar of South Wales and even Governor of all Wales.

He controlled crown castles and residences at places such as Carew, Kidwelly, Narberth and Aberystwyth. His hunting lodge was at Neuadd Wen between Kidwelly and Carreg Cennen.



Carew Castle



Kidwelly Castle



Narberth Castle



Aberystwyth Castle

He was made a Privy Councillor and in 1505 he was made a Knight of the Garter, which he celebrated with a great tournament at Carew Castle in 1507. The Order of the Garter is the

highest order of chivalry and was founded by Edward III in 1348 as a special honour for the closest friends and most loyal supporters of the monarch.

In origin it was essentially an aristocratic society and an exclusive gentlemen's club where the king and his closest twenty-five companions went hunting, feasting and drinking together as friends. They fought side by side on the battlefield and essentially partied just as hard off the field of combat as they fought when upon it. Every nobleman wanted to become a member of the Order but admission was limited to twenty-five knights and entry to the Order was at the personal invitation of the king.

The tournament that Sir Rhys held to celebrate his new honour was one of the last major medieval style jousting tournaments held as such events were passing out of favour as the 16th century was now underway.

A thousand persons attended the event and came from all over Wales. There were five days of jousting, hunting, feasting and revelry. At the head of the banqueting table was an empty chair with a velvet cushion to represent Henry VII.

It should be noted Henry never returned to Wales after winning his victory at Bosworth Field in 1485. This is despite the fact that his army was composed of thousands of Welshmen. At the entrance to Carew Castle Sir Rhys placed a painting of St. George and St. David embracing. Such was the feeling of admiration for Henry Tudor amongst his Welsh subjects such as Sir Rhys.

After the death of Henry VII in 1509 Sir Rhys remained a loyal supporter of his son, Henry VIII.

Rhys and his own son, Sir Gruffydd, with five hundred of their men took part in a military expedition against the French in 1512. Sir Rhys distinguished himself at the siege of Guyenne in South West France in that campaign.

In 1513 Henry VIII assembled one of the largest English armies ever seen in the 16th century to invade France and Sir Rhys was again willing to serve his monarch in military operations. Sir Rhys gained acclaim at the Battle of Guinegate in 1513.

This battle is otherwise known as the 'Battle of the Spurs' and was the only major land encounter fought by Henry's army in that campaign of 1513. This was when Henry VIII was a young and energetic king in his early twenties and keen to lead his first ever English invasion into France.

During the rest of this French campaign Sir Rhys commanded Henry's light cavalry, the troops were also known as the "Northern" horse. These troops came from the lawless lands between the Scottish and English border. They were famed as raiders, scouts and light cavalry.

Rhys' arrival with his Border Horse frequently prevented surprise French attacks on the main body of the English invasion forces. There were occasions when he was personally responsible in forcing the French forces to retreat, often at some haste. Sir Rhys had a knack of arriving in the right place at the right time and either forced off the French enemy or threatening to turn the tide of an encounter in favour of the English forces.

Later in the campaign Rhys was tasked with recovering two of Henry's newest and favourite artillery pieces that had been taken on the 1513 campaign but had been captured by the French. He was also to be found riding out with numerous scouting operations and driving off French raiding cavalry units that were attacking Henry's supply lines.

As Napoleon told us “An army marches on its stomach” and Henry’s troops were entitled to a daily ration of eight pints of ale when on military campaign. Sir Rhys’ actions ensured that such vital supplies were maintained to each and every one of Henry’s troops.

He also acted with distinction at the siege of Therouanne where his cavalry were tasked with scouring the surrounding countryside to prevent any French relief forces from making a surprise attack and by doing lift the English siege of the town. The campaigns of 1512 and 1513 were his last as a military commander. He was well over sixty years old but he was performing as well as a leading soldier that were half his age.

Rhys was married twice. His first wife was Eva, daughter of Henri ap Gwilym of Cwrt Henri. His second wife was Janet, daughter of Thomas Mathew of Radyr. Sir Rhys employed Ieuan Rudd, a famous Glamorgan bard, to write a cywydd on the marriage feast following his wedding with Janet. (A cywydd was a poem written in rhymic metre that was popular with the Welsh nobility from the early fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries.)

Although Rhys had numerous mistresses and several illegitimate children, his only legitimate son, Gruffydd ap Rhys, predeceased him in 1521.

Rhys himself died at Carmarthen Priory in 1525. Like so many famous Welshmen before him he entered the walls of a monastic centre just prior to his death.

After Henry VIII suppressed the monasteries, Rhys’ tomb was moved to safety at St. Peter's Church which is also in Carmarthen. The tomb was moved to that location in order that it would not be destroyed during Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s. Sir Rhys’ tomb can still be seen at St Peter’s Church to this day and those who have seen it will testify to the fact that it is a very fine resting place for this famous and successful Welsh knight.



Tomb in St. Peter's Church Carmarthen

On his death Rhys' estates and offices were meant to pass to his grandson and heir, Rhys ap Gruffydd. However they were taken by Henry VIII and given to Lord Ferrers instead. Rhys ap Gruffydd was later beheaded by order of Henry VIII in 1531 for treason.

Rhys had been involved with fighting Ferrers over his inheritance and was also accused of provoking civil unrest amongst the citizens of Carmarthen who were still angry over his loss.

The Sir Rhys ap Thomas Chapel No. 40 of the Commemorative Order of St Thomas of Acon in the Province of South Wales was consecrated on 28th February 2005.

As in all the chapels within our province, the founders wanted to name their chapel after a person of considerable historical importance and one who was directly linked to the geographical area where the chapel was originally consecrated.

The founders of this chapel in Carmarthen certainly achieved this by naming their branch of our very fine order after a key landowner, politician, administrator and royal soldier. An extremely important and successful nobleman. A man who lived through and achieved so much during the reigns of both Henry VII and Henry VIII.

Rhys' court of arms is incorporated into the banner of the Sir Rhys ap Thomas Chapel. His final resting place, at St Peter's Church, is but a stone's throw from where our chapel meets at the Masonic Hall in Carmarthen.



The three ravens on the Rhys ap Thomas Chapel banner can be seen on Sir Rhys' court of arms and are a reference to the Ravens of Urien. Urien was a sixth century British ruler of Rheged, a Brythonic kingdom in the north west of England and south west of Scotland. These ravens are mentioned in a poem by Tudur Aled, who was another Welsh sixteenth century bard. Aled wrote in praise of Sir Rhys. Aled was born in Llansannan, Denbighshire in 1465. He was renowned throughout Wales as a superb praise poet of both noblemen and religious leaders. Aled wrote of Sir Rhys ap Thomas and his successful 1513 French campaign saying that Rhys was "Trecha un draw'n trychu'n y drin, Tair bran, ond Duw a'r Brenin" This translates as 'Superior in advancing to the slaughtering battle, Are the three ravens, next to God and the King'

Also on the Sir Rhys ap Thomas chapel banner are the Welsh dragon representing Wales of course and the Red Rose of the House of Lancaster.

Sir Rhys' family fought and some were to die, in the cause of the House of Lancaster. Rhys of course served Henry Tudor (Henry VII) and his son Henry VIII with distinction. It is not an exaggeration to say without the help of Sir Rhys ap Thomas then Henry Tudor would never have been at the Battle of Bosworth, let alone win that day and become Henry VII as a result.

Perhaps those of us meeting in his memory should proudly proclaim that without Sir Rhys ap Thomas then the Tudor dynasty would never have existed. This in turn would mean that there would have been no Henry VIII and therefore the famous split with Rome and the Pope may never have taken place.

This would mean that the entire history of Britain as a whole would have turned out in a very, very different way. Rhys ap Thomas would probably be rather pleased to be accorded that special status in British History.

Sir Rhys was not a man without some scandal associated with him. Towards the end of his life in 1520 he was accused of certain crimes by the Head of the Commandery of the Knights of St John that was based at Slebech.

This was a famous foundation of the Knights Hospitaller on banks of the Cleddau River in Pembrokeshire. Sir Rhys was accused of having unlawfully taken timber belonging to the Knights of St John, of extorting large sums of money from tenants living and working on land belonging to the Order and it was even claimed that Sir Rhys' men had broken into the residence that belonged to local head of the Order.

Whether these crimes really happened, or not, we do not know that no case was ever proved in his lifetime. We do know that after Rhys died his lands and estates were taken from his grandson and given to Lord Ferrers. This meant that the House of Dinefwr was no more.

Sir Rhys is destined to be remembered as the last great warrior Welshman of the Middle Ages. He lived to see both the Middle Ages end and the early modern age begin with the coming of the sixteenth century and the arrival of the Tudors. Sir Rhys still has his place in our national history.

We should all also be proud of the fact that because of the presence in Carmarthen of the Sir Rhys ap Thomas Chapel of the Commemorative Order of St Thomas of Acon, he will always have his rightful place, secured for posterity within our collective Masonic memory.

For further reading on the life of Sir Rhys ap Thomas

1: *'Sir Rhys ap Thomas'* by David Rees, published by Gomer Press 1992

2: *'Sir Rhys Ap Thomas and His Family: A Study in the Wars of the Roses and Early Tudor Politics'* by Professor Ralph Griffiths, published by the University of Wales 2014

3: *'The Man Who Killed Richard III: Who Dealt the Fatal Blow at Bosworth?'* by Dr Susan Fern. Published by Amberley Publishing 2015

For military matters during the reign of Henry VIII

4: *'Henry VIII and the invasion of France'* by Charles Cruickshank published by St Martin's Press 1990

5: *'Henry VIII's Army'* by Paul Cornish and Angus McBride, published by Osprey 1991