

The Role of the Barber Surgeon in the Wars of the Roses

Blood and gore were at the heart of the October meeting of the History Group when we were treated to a talk by Eddie Smallwood. Eddie is a volunteer at the Bosworth Battlefields and specialises in many aspects of this period in history.

Battlefields in the Wars of the Roses saw much loss of life, but many who were wounded did survive. The barber surgeon was usually male, and his skills – though crude by today's standards – were crucial for survival.

Eddie set the scene by describing the range of weapons that were in use at the time and the types of injuries that these caused. The longbow was formidable and in the hands of an experienced archer could launch 10 to 12 arrows a minute. So with a large number of archers as part of the attack, casualties were high. Eddie's graphic descriptions of how to remove the various types of arrowhead were fascinating but not for the squeamish. He had brought with him examples of both weapons and surgical tools. Various devices were invented to assist the surgeon such as the one illustrated which is used to remove a pointed arrowhead (as opposed to a barbed head) that has become detached from the shaft of the arrow.



It was also the early days of cannon and other weapons that fired objects using explosives. Small cannon balls aimed at advancing infantry caused great damage and horrific wounds. A key skill of the surgeon was the ability to amputate a limb in a very short space of time. Eddie's lurid description took far longer than the real thing which could be done in as little as 18 seconds.

Eddie had also brought along several hand-held weapons which were really agricultural implements that were attached to a pole, for example a billhook and axe (poleaxe).

It was also the early days of germ warfare. Archers would often dip their arrows in animal dung and other sources of bacteria leading to infection of wounds and in many cases death followed quickly. To combat this, the surgeons had various medicinal herbs and materials for cleaning wounds. Fibre matting from the Yarrow plant could be used to staunch wounds. Honey was in common use being long associated with cleansing and healing. A comfrey poultice might be used on broken bones. Maggots could clean out wounds as they only eat flesh.

Bloodletting was regarded as a cure for many illnesses over the centuries and the barber surgeon would include this as part of their list of treatments. This association between blood and barbers was what led to the typical red and white barber's pole.

Eddie was an entertaining speaker and the full house listening enjoyed the talk enormously. Many questions were asked and Eddie answered them effortlessly and with enthusiasm.

Richard Mollart