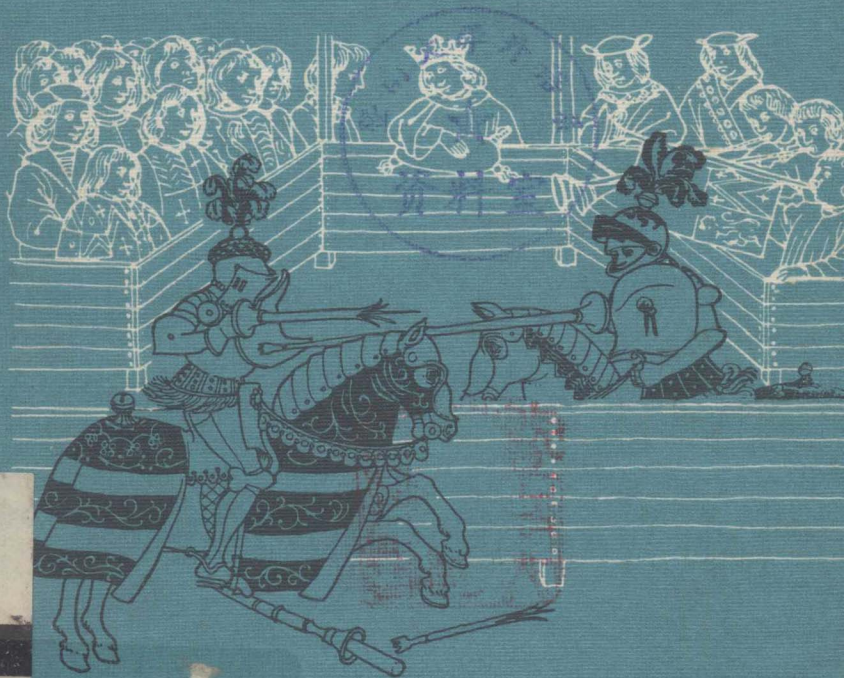


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THEN AND THERE SERIES

# The Medieval Tournament



R. J. MITCHELL

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GENERAL EDITOR  
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# The Medieval Tournament

*The Story of the Tournament at Smithfield  
on 11th June, 1467*

R. J. MITCHELL

*Illustrated from contemporary sources by*

H. SCHWARZ



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## TO THE READER

DID you ever hear of a portrait 'drawn from life'? All the things described in this book are drawn from life, and the people as well. Nothing has been made up just for the sake of telling a story, everything happened exactly at the time and in the way that I have described. How do I know? Well, I found out by reading accounts written at the time, in chronicles, or official records, or in private letters, and those who were actually there at the time and who wrote down what they saw and heard are the best people to consult. They may have made mistakes in small things, just as you sometimes find misprints in books or newspapers, but I am showing you, as well as I possibly can, just how things seemed to the people who were there, and I would like you to feel that this is a book that you can really trust.

The pictures, too, are taken from those drawn at the time, and you can see some of them in museums or in libraries. These help you to imagine for yourselves what people looked like as well as how they felt. Perhaps it will surprise you to find that the people 'then and there'—though they looked rather different from ourselves—behaved in very much the same way as you and I would if we were dressed like that.

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## THE PROCLAMATION

IT WAS a very lucky thing that Thursday, 11th June, 1467, was a fine day, for if it had been wet and windy a very large number of people would have been disappointed.

The Town Crier of London had gone through all the streets ringing his bell and shouting at the top of his voice that the eleventh day of June was to be a public holiday, by the King's special order. There were no daily (or even weekly) newspapers to tell people of this treat, nor any radio, and it was not much good to write out and pin up a notice, for few people could read. So, when they heard his bell, everyone ran out of doors to listen to what the Town Crier had to say.

In some places, generally in very old towns that are not so important now as they were five hundred years ago, you can still hear the Town Crier ring his bell and 'cry' some announcement. This is not likely to be a holiday ordered by the Queen; you would probably hear that the water supply was going to be turned off, or that someone had dropped a brooch, or found a watch, or that a Youth Club dance was going to be held. None of these things, except perhaps the second, would have made sense to a townsman living in the fifteenth century, but the Town Crier was a very important person and everyone listened most carefully to what he had to say.

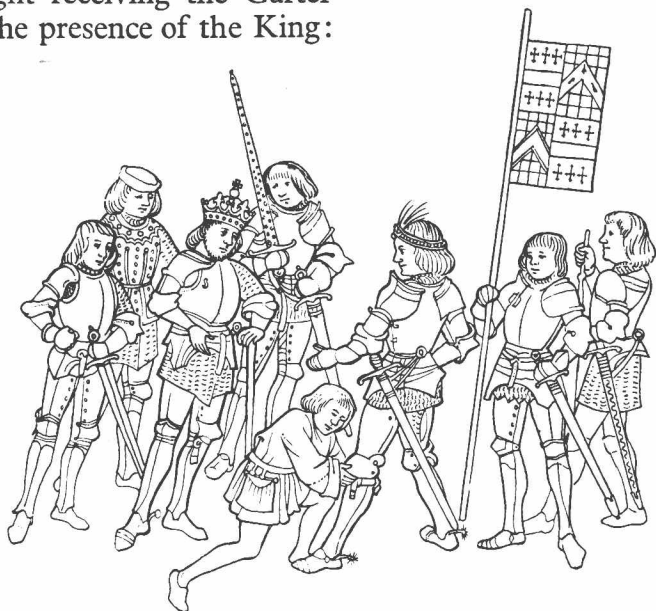
The reason for this extra holiday was soon explained. King Edward IV was married to a beautiful wife who loved to show off her jewels and rich clothes. Both she and King Edward enjoyed parties of all kinds, and the King wished also to show favour to his *ally*<sup>1</sup> the Duke of *Burgundy*. The excitement and colour and *pageantry* of a grand *tournament* would be just the thing to give pleasure all round, and so it was decided that the whole day of 11th June—and part of the next day—should be given up to this sport.

The Duke of Burgundy could not leave his own country just then, but his half-brother would come instead of the Duke and would himself fight with the King's own brother-in-law in the chief fight of the day. The name of both these knights was Anthony, so, to avoid muddle, we will describe them by their titles. The Englishman was Lord Scales and the other the Comte de la Roche.

You will want to know what sort of fighters these knights were, before you decide which of them you want to win. No doubt you will want to back the Englishman, but something happened during the fight that might make you change your mind. The Comte—we will write his name in English and call him the Count—was a very famous sportsman, skilful with both *lance* (on horseback) and with sword (on foot). He was noted not only for his politeness and his knowledge of all the rules of behaviour in these contests, but also for his generous conduct, whether he lost or won. We should call him a 'good sportsman'. Usually he won, and the Duke had made him a *Knight of the Golden Fleece*—the highest honour the Duke could give.

<sup>1</sup> You will find the meanings of words printed like *this* in the Glossary on page 42.

Lord Scales, too, had been honoured. The King had quite lately made him a *Knight of the Garter*. Here is a knight receiving the Garter in the presence of the King:



The Queen still gives this order to people who have served their country well. The Order has a very famous Latin motto which means "The shame be his who thinks ill of it". Do you think this is a good motto for a knight?

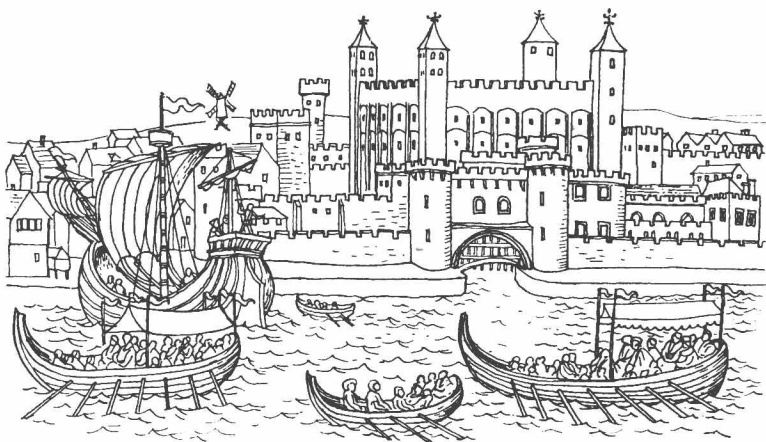
Lord Scales was several years younger than the Count and had not so much experience of real fighting. He was the kind of person who is very particular about his dress and the weapons he uses. This sort of thing seemed very important to Lord Scales, more important perhaps than the actual fighting. He was like a cricketer who takes three bats to the match with him, and lovely white pads, and then does not make many runs.



A tournament needed very careful planning. In this one the challenges to fight had been sent out long before the date was fixed. Several weeks before the Count was to arrive, orders had been given to collect the materials that would be needed and the labourers to do the work.

When the Count arrived on the last day of May, the *Lord Constable* of England went to meet him, with many lords and ladies and a host of London citizens, all in their best and brightest clothes. They rowed up the river Thames in *barges* decorated with bright hangings of blue and scarlet, and *awnings* laced with gold. The gay colours were reflected in the river, and the bands played lively music.

The Count's ship brought him up the Thames as far as Blackwall, and there the Londoners met him. There were greetings and speeches, and then the Count stepped on board one of the barges and the whole company turned about. With flags and streamers fluttering in the breeze and the sun shining on the brilliant colours, they came to Billingsgate. Here is the procession of barges sailing past the Tower of London:



At Billingsgate there were horses ready for them, with fine saddle-cloths and red leather bridles. The Constable rode with the Count to show him the rooms that had been prepared for him in Fleet Street. Here you can see some of the fine clothes that the lords and ladies wore for this special occasion:



The Bishop of Salisbury owned a grand house in Fleet Street that he had lent for the occasion. Even the bed-hangings were of cloth of gold, and food and wines and furniture were all of the very best that could be found. The Count stayed here several days and saw the sights of London—including the State Opening of Parliament by King Edward IV. He had never visited London before.

Lord Scales, too, was at the opening of Parliament, when he carried the Sword of State, but it was not correct for him to call and visit the Count before he had taken up the challenge. Now, at last, the great day of the tournament was at hand.

## PREPARING THE FIELD

EVEN before the Town Crier had been sent out to make his proclamation, other people were hard at work preparing the ground where the tournament was to be. All sorts of things had to be considered before the field was chosen. First of all, the time of year. This would nearly always be in the summer. You know what a football ground is like after heavy winter rain, and you could not have horses and men in armour slipping about in mud.

The King had a number of palaces, shooting-lodges (for hunting), and manor houses in all parts of the country, but the most important tournaments were generally held in or close to London. At Eltham there was a famous ground where many exciting shows were held. For the greatest performances, however, when big crowds were expected, the large open space known as Smithfield was almost certain to be chosen, as it was in this year, 1467.

Smithfield, which means the 'smooth field' and not, as you may have thought, 'the field of smiths', had several advantages. There was enough space for the fighters to have plenty of room and for hundreds of spectators to have a good view, and extra ground behind the crowd for the *esquires* and *grooms*, the *harness* and the horses.

Smithfield had another advantage: it was so close to the city of London that it was easy for the crowds to assemble and to return home afterwards.

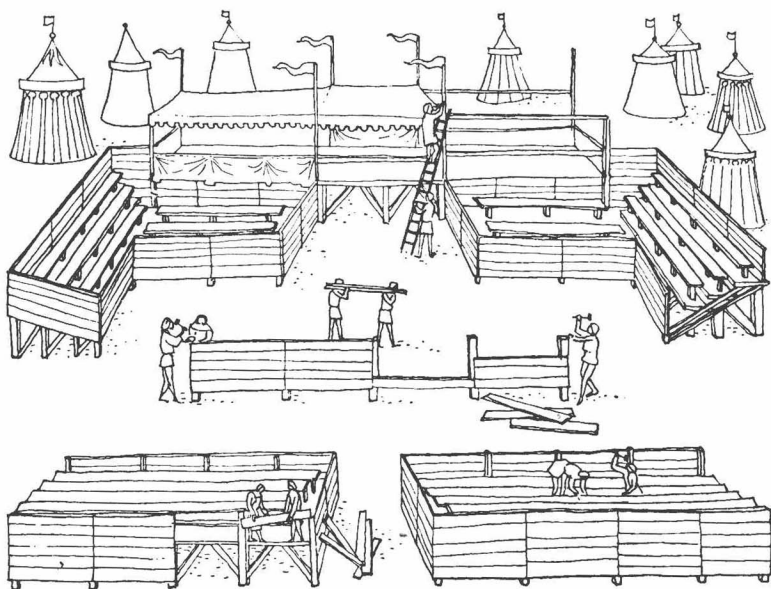
As the name tells us, it was a smooth field, with good grass and not too many bumps or hummocks. Even so, it had to be rolled and flattened as well as could be managed with a wooden roller, and any stones that had worked up to the surface had to be carried away. Stumbling against a stone might make a horse fall, and then his rider would come down too. This might make him lose the fight and he would certainly be very angry with the 'Steward of the Field', whose job it was to see that the ground was fit for a tournament.

In cold weather, and sometimes even in summer, the ground was covered thickly with straw for a day or two before it would be used. This is sometimes done to football grounds today, when frost is expected, but in the fifteenth century the straw was used more to keep it dry.

All through Wednesday, June 10th, until night fell, the groundsmen moved about their work. Carriers' carts came lumbering along, their wheels creaking, with loads of gravel to make the surface. Some of this gravel had to be brought from a distance, but the sand from the banks of the Thames was quite near at hand. The sand and the gravel were thumped and rolled into the ground, on top of the turf, until there was a really firm surface, gritty enough to stop the horses from sliding or falling when they were stopped quickly. Then came the dull thud of *mallets* striking wood, and the clang of hammers driving home iron nails, as the stands and the *barrier* were being set up.

Everyone knows what stands are; even today we are content to sit on wooden benches—only occasionally under cover—or huddle close together on the ground, to watch football or cricket. Nowadays, too, you have to pay extra money, just as you did in 1467, if you want a roof over your head or a cushion to sit on.

What was the purpose of the barrier when fighting in single *combat*? Each mounted knight had to stay on his own side of the canvas-and-wood barrier or division, looking like a fence, that ran from end to end of the pitch. In earlier times, before this barrier was invented, tournaments had been very rough and violent and a number of people and horses had been killed. Indeed, the fights had been forbidden by churchmen, and sometimes by the King as well, before the barrier made tournament-fighting safer and more skilful. This sketch may give you some idea of how the barriers and the stands were set up:



The barrier was easy to make—you could quite well make a model of one and stage fights between mounted knights cut out of plywood or cardboard and

suitably painted. It is rather fun to do, and you could stage this tournament of 1467, or any others that you happen to read about. At the time we are describing, canvas painted in bright colours was used, stretched on a wooden frame about four feet high. A few years later it would be made of solid wooden planks and raised to six feet high. This made the fighting, or *jousting*, safer but less exciting.

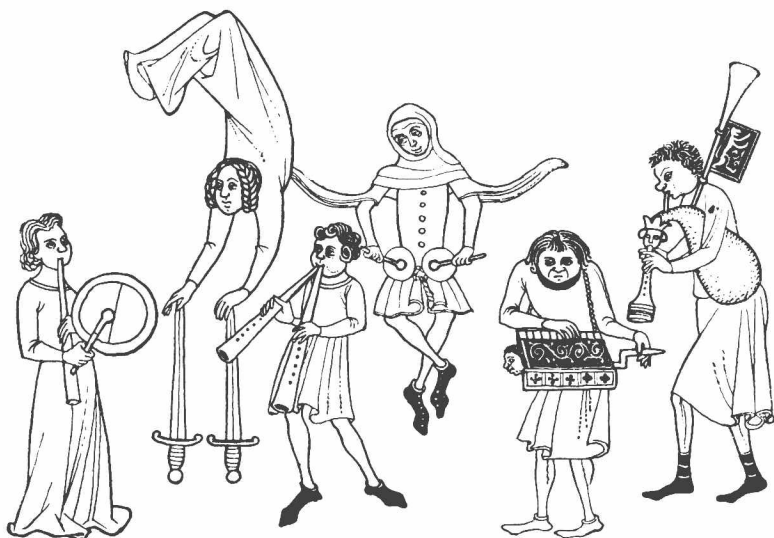
If you live near Worcester, you can go to the cathedral there and look for a tournament scene carved on the underside of one of the little wooden seats in the choir. If you live too far away you will have to make do with the picture of it drawn here for you:



Two knights are fighting fiercely. As this tournament took place before the barrier had been invented, the horses have collided and one of them is falling over backwards. The musician who was trying to amuse the onlookers has been knocked over and looks very much annoyed. I expect this made the crowd laugh a great deal.

Musicians, singers, and acrobats, though they did not as a rule find themselves mixed up with the fighters, were certainly on the ground. As soon as they heard the news

that there would be a tournament at Smithfield, they would hurry to get there, and would begin to tune their instruments and rehearse their acts. The crowd might get impatient while waiting and be glad to spare a few half-pennies for some of these *minstrels* and *tumblers* who amused them during the pauses between the combats.

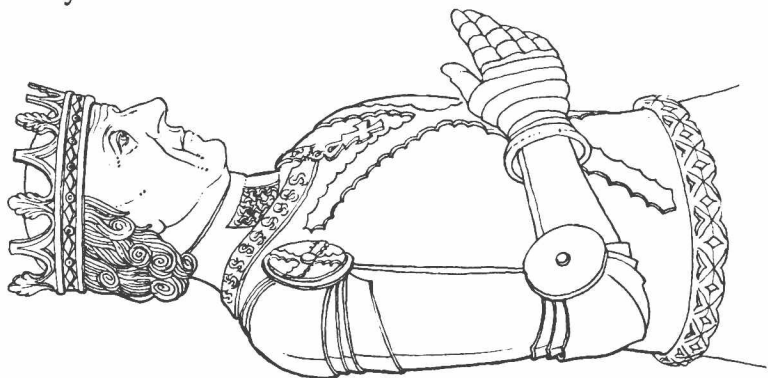


All these people were preparing for the great day, and at home mothers of families were planning meals and getting ready for the day's outing, but there were others even busier—those who had to see to the horses and the armour of the fighters. There were the *heralds*, too, and the stewards, and the Lord Constable who had to draw up the rules for the fighting: it is now time to look at the plans they, too, were making, for it is no good to have a perfect field if there is no one to sport upon it, and the sport itself is ruined if no one knows or keeps the rules.

## THE ESQUIRES AND THE HERALDS

THE Lord Constable, who was a very careful man and very good at writing *ordinances*, or rules for special occasions, drew up a new set of rules specially made for this tournament. He would not trust such important work to his secretary, but really composed them himself, though they may have been written out by the secretary's hand.

This picture of the Lord Constable was drawn from his stone *effigy* in Ely Cathedral. His name was John Tiptoft, and he was earl of Worcester, so if you ever visit Ely, be sure to go into the cathedral to see him for yourself.



There is a copy of the rules for this tournament in the British Museum, and another at Oxford, so we are able to know exactly what the Constable said should happen. He said that if one fighter *unhorsed* the other by striking him to the ground he would win outright. If they both fell off the fight would be started again.



One thing the Constable made quite clear. The fighting was to be between the two men, and it would not be fair to try to bump or damage your opponent's horse so that he would fall or rear up and throw his rider. To make quite certain that everyone knew the rules, they were read in a loud voice by the herald just before the fight began.

The number of servants and pages and esquires that each knight might have to wait upon him was also laid down in the rules. A page was a young boy who was training to become an esquire, and the esquires were young men who were learning the rules of *chivalry*, and how to fight, and how to serve their masters. They hoped that they too would one day be knighted.

On either side of the tournament ground a large *pavilion* or tent had been set up for each knight and his esquires. It was decorated in his own special colours, with hanging folds of silk or satin, and his own badge was set up over the entrance. Here are some smaller tents of the same sort:

