

English Heritage Battlefield Report: Edgehill 1642

Edgehill (23 October 1642)

Parishes: Tysoe, Oxhill, Kineton, Chadshunt, Burton Dassett, Radway

District: Stratford on Avon

County: Warwickshire

Grid Ref: SP357490

Historical Context

By the Spring of 1642 it was increasingly clear that the argument between Charles I and his Parliament would only be settled by force or surrender. The King thus began recruiting in earnest and on 22 August he raised his standard at Nottingham, before marching in the second half of September to Shrewsbury, there to assemble men from the Welsh Marches. Parliament, supported by the financial and material resources of the City of London, were able to take the field considerably sooner than the King. This advantage was promptly surrendered by Parliament's Captain-General, the Earl of Essex, who was noted for a lack of urgency in all that he did and who allowed the King to steal the initiative.

Essex followed the Royal army westwards, leaving garrisons in Banbury, Coventry, Hereford, and Worcester, but although his troops clashed briefly with Prince Rupert at Powick Bridge, he failed to deter Charles from turning east and marching on London. If the Royalists could occupy the capital they would probably win the War at a stroke, and it had been Essex's principal duty to prevent this from happening. As both armies meandered eastwards through the Midlands with only a vague grasp of where the other might be, the opportunity of a clear run to London presented itself to the King who had reached Edgecote by 22 October.

In the absence of any reports that Essex was nearby, and after Charles had summoned Banbury to surrender, it was decided that the army would remain in quarters the next day. Those quarters were widely dispersed and the Royalist troops were distributed across the countryside between Edgecote and Cropredy. As Prince Rupert made his way to his quarters in Wormleighton, the Parliamentary quartermasters were also entering the village. They were taken prisoner and Rupert sent out patrols which located the main Parliamentary force in Kineton, not more than seven miles away from the Royalist main body. Rupert was all for an immediate attack on the enemy, but he was eventually persuaded that it would be appropriate to inform the King first. It appears that Rupert also suggested that the Royalist army should concentrate at Edgehill early on 23 October.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

There is no controversy surrounding the location of the Battle of Edgehill though there are disagreements as to the exact deployment of some individual units, particularly in relation to the Parliamentary army. The ridge of Edgehill, which rises some 300 feet above the plain extending north-west towards Kineton, is some seven miles north-west of Banbury. News of the Royalist deployment on Edgehill reached the Parliamentary army while it was quartered in around Kineton, and Essex drew his force out to face south-east towards the enemy:

In the morning when we were going to Church, we had Newes brought us, That the Enemy was two miles from us upon a high Hill, called Edge-Hill: Whereupon we presently marched forth into a great broad field under that Hill, called the Vale of the Red-Horse, and made a stand some half a mile from the foot of the Hill, and there drew into Battalio, where we saw their Forces

come downe the Hill, and draw likewise into Battell in the bottome....¹

The Royalists, forming on Edgehill could plainly see the Parliamentary force on the plain below:

....he (Charles) order'd his whole Army to meet him the next day at Edgehill. He was no sooner arrived there with his first troop, than he saw the van of the Rebell's Army down in the bottom by Keynton, which soon after began to draw up in battell in the plain before that village, but advanced no further.²

It became clear that Essex would not attempt to attack the King while he was ensconced on such a favourable position, and that for an engagement to take place Charles would have to lead his army down to the plain:

...it was resolved, that we should go down the Hill and attack them. Whereupon great preparations were made and precautions taken, for descending the Hill, which was very steep and long, and had been impracticable, if the enemy had drawn nearer to the Bottom of it; but we saw by the Ranging their Army, that they intended to stay there for us, having a good Market Town by them, and not far from Warwick.³

When this descent to the plain had been accomplished, not without some difficulty in the case of the artillery, the armies were drawn up facing each other, perhaps almost a mile apart, at a point between Kineton and Radway. There are a number of factors which reinforce the identification of this area as the main position of the opposing armies. The area is redolent with names suggesting conflict: 'Bullet Hill', 'Battle Holt', 'Battle Farm', and Graveyard Coppice. Two principal grave pits have also been located in the area traditionally seen as the location of the main fighting, together with finds of musket and cannon balls.

Details of the geographical limits of the Parliamentary deployment are sparse, but Sir James Ramsey, commanding a cavalry brigade of the Parliamentary army, remarked that a hedge 'did Flanke the whole Front of the left Wing'. Lord Bernard Stuart stated that the Parliamentarians received the charge of the Royalist Horse 'all the while upon the hill....so that we were fain to charge them uphill and leap over some 5 or 6 hedges and ditches.' The rise upon which the Parliamentarians deployed is still visible running down gradually to the brook which stretches from Kineton to Radway.

The Royalist engineer, Bernard de Gomme, drew a plan of the Royalist deployment at Edgehill, possibly based on a rough sketch executed by Prince Rupert. Unfortunately it provides no information concerning the arrangement of the Parliamentary army, nor of the relative positions of the contending forces.

The Landscape Evolution

In 1642 the battlefield landscape was one of former open field agriculture recently turned over to pasture for grazing - the ridge and furrow topography indicative of strip ploughing survives extensively. Between Radway and Kineton was common land. The plain in which the battle took place was dominated by the scarp slope of Edgehill itself, which was lightly wooded rather than the continuous woodland of today. The villages of Radway and Kineton clustered around their churches, and a network of lanes connected them with their fields and the surrounding settlements. A hedge ran across the right centre of the Parliamentary line, extending approximately between the present Battle and Thistle Farms. There were other hedges, perhaps numbering five or six, which crossed the battlefield on the Royalist right and which appear to have had associated ditches.

The main change in the appearance of the battlefield was brought about by 18th century enclosure, particularly on the flatter ground north of the settlement of Radway. In the late 18th century, parkland trees were planted in the area between Radway and Edgehill and the area was retained as pasture. This conserved the superb remnants of earlier ridge and furrow. By the 20th century, plantations had been established on the poorer ground around Battle Farm and the wood was well developed on the steeper slopes of Edgehill. It is thought

that the plantations were intended to represent Parliamentary units.

The Battle: its sources and interpretation

The pen favoured the Royalist cause at Edgehill, with a far greater number of contemporary reports of the battle originating from the King's supporters than from those of Parliament. Both sides produced what could be termed official accounts, with the Parliamentary⁴, although full and useful, suffering from the fact that it had six authors: Denzil Hollis, Sir Phillip Stapleton, Thomas Ballard, Sir William Balfour, John Meldrum, and Charles Pym. The Royalist official account⁵ was possibly written by William Dugdale who had the reputation of being assiduous in the collection of information on the battle. It is the best of the Royalist sources, though a number of eyewitnesses such as Sir Richard Bulstrode⁶, Lord Bernard Stuart⁷, and James, Duke of York⁸, have left helpful accounts. James was only nine years old when he witnessed the events at Edgehill but thereafter he had ample opportunity to reinforce his own memory through conversations with other veterans of the battle. Essex does not appear to have recorded his thoughts on the events at Edgehill, though the chaplain to Essex's Regiment of Foot, Steven Marshall, did pen a letter to a Member of Parliament which was published⁹. It is not particularly informative and a more helpful account by a cleric is to be found in Adoniram Bifield's letter to the Lord Mayor of London¹⁰.

Until the surprise of his quartermasters at Wormleighton, Essex had been in equal ignorance of the enemy's movements, and the Parliamentary Army had also been planning to spend Sunday 23 October at rest awaiting the arrival of those units that were still on the march:

Wee could advance no further than to a little Market-Towne called Kyneton in Warwickshire, six miles from Warwicke, whether we came the Saturday night with 11 Regiments of Foot, 42 Troops of Horse, and about 700 Dragoons, in all about Ten thousand men; there we intended to rest the Sabbath day, and the rather, that our Artillery, and the Forces left with it, might come up to us.¹¹

Charles decision to offer battle at Edgehill and to settle with Essex before resuming the march on London, meant that the army must first be concentrated on Edgehill Ridge. Although Rupert was reportedly there at dawn on 23 October the rest of the Royalist army had to march from their respective quarters, the nearest of which was some four miles away. The Horse did not arrive before 1100 hours and the Foot and artillery were not finally assembled until 1400.

Prince Rupert led the Horse on the right of the Royalist line with approximately 1700 men under command, and Lord Wilmot the cavalry on the left totalling possibly 1,000 men. As is clearly shown on De Gomme's plan of the Royalist deployment, the five brigades of Royalist Foot were arranged with three brigades forward and two in support. Each brigade was drawn up on the Swedish pattern with musketeers on the flanks and the majority of the pikemen deployed in the centre. The adoption of the Swedish method and the rejection of the Dutch, against the advice of the King's Lord General, Robert Lindsay, led to the first Royalist command clash of the day. The brigades varied in strength and they may have fielded equal numbers of musketeers and pikemen instead of the preferred ratio of 2:1. Initially at least each brigade would be accompanied by a pair of light guns. The brigade commanders were Colonels John Belasyse, Sir Nicolas Byron, Richard Fielding, Charles Gerard and Henry Wentworth, and they probably fielded between them some 11,000 men. The three regiments of dragoons, amounting to no more than 1000 horsemen, were deployed on either wing, with two regiments on the left and one on the right. The fourteen light guns of the Royalist artillery were distributed amongst the infantry, while the six heavier pieces were formed as a battery on the lower slopes of Edgehill.

Essex, whose army almost equalled that of the Royalists in strength, had several hours in to which to perfect the deployment of his battalions between the Kineton-Knowle End road and the Little Kineton-Lower Tysoe road.

His front line stood approximately one and a half miles beyond the centre of Kineton. *An Exact and True Relation* briefly summarised the composition of the Parliamentary line:

In our right Wing were three Regiments of Horse, the Lord Generalls commanded by Sir Philip Stapleton, Sir William Balfores, and the Lord Fieldings, Sir John Meldrums Brigado had the Van, Colonell Effax was in the middle, and Colonell Ballards with the Lord Generalls Regiment, his owne, the Lord Brooks, and Colonell Hollis in the Rear: In the left Wing were 24 Troops of Horse, commanded by Sir James Ramsey, their Commissary Generall.¹²

With the Parliamentary regiments deployed in eight ranks, according to the Dutch method, a regimental frontage would occupy approximately 150 yards, and a brigade front over 600 yards. The left of the Parliamentary line was occupied by Sir James Ramsey with 24 troops of horse, 600 musketeers and perhaps three guns. Ramsey deployed 300 musketeers between his first-line squadrons and 300 along the hedges to his left. The Parliamentary centre was arranged in two lines with the infantry brigades of Colonel Charles Essex and Sir John Meldrum in the first line, Colonel Thomas Ballard's Brigade in the second and Sir Philip Stapleton's and Sir William Balfour's Horse in support. The Parliamentary right was formed by Lord Fielding's Horse who were supported by some 700 dragoons in two regiments. In all, the army totalled approximately 12,000 Foot and 2850 Horse. Essex had sixteen light artillery pieces at Edgehill at the start of the battle, and they appear to have been mainly deployed in a battery on the right of the army with possibly a number distributed in pairs between the infantry.

There was little reason for Essex to open the battle. The Royalists were occupying a formidable defensive position and a protracted delay served both the political and tactical interests of the Parliamentary cause. The coming engagement would be the first major battle of a civil war and it would be politic for it to be seen that the King had initiated hostilities. Moreover, Essex could expect reinforcements, in the form of 11 troops of horse, 3 regiments of foot and possibly up to 7 guns, during the next twenty four hours. It thus became obvious that for there to be a battle the Royalists would have to descend the slopes of Edgehill and approach Essex's position. The artillery of both armies had begun an ineffective fire against the opposing positions and a Royalist council of war decided that the army would advance. Prince Rupert, with virtually an independent command, was the first into action for once the Royalist dragoons had cleared the musketeers on the Parliamentary left, Rupert led his right wing forward. This was an alarming prospect for the troopers of the Parliamentary left since it was clear that not only were they facing the best of the Royalist Horse, but also the preponderance of its strength:

In this posture wee found, when the other Army advanced towards us, the strength of their Horse were on their right Wing opposit to our left; In their left Wing they had but ten Troopes....¹³

The Parliamentarians opened fire as Rupert's men drew close, but, as Lord Bernard Stuart recorded, to little effect:

Upon our approach they gave fire with their cannon lined amongst their horse, dragoneers, carabines and pistols, but finding that did nothing dismay the King's horse and that they came more roundly to them with all their fire reserved, just when our men charged they all began to turn head and we followed an execution upon them for 4 miles together.... A great many of them saved their lives by getting our word for God and King Charles.¹⁴

Rupert's Horse took Ramsey's stationary squadrons at the gallop and the Parliamentarians quickly put spur to horse and fled. Colonel Charles Essex's infantry were engulfed in the rout but Ballard's Brigade, though roughly disordered by the fleeing Horse, managed to stand and keep the field:

...stood our left Wing of Horse, advanced a little forward to the top of a Hill, where they stood in a

Battalio lined with commanded Musquetiers, 400 out of Colonel Hollis Regiment, and 200, Out Colonell Ballards; but upon the first charge of the Enemy they wheeled about, abandoned their Musquetiers, and came running downe with the Enemies Horse at their heeles, and amongst them pell mell, just upon Colonell Hollis his Regiment, and brake through it, though Colonell Hollis himself, when he saw them come running towards him, went and planted himself just in the way, and did what possibly he could do to make them stand, and at last prevailed with three Troops to wheel a little about and rally; but the rest of our Horse of that Wing, and the Enemies Horse with them, brake through, and ran to Kinton, where most of the Enemy left pursuing them, and fell to plundering of our Waggon, by which many of us have received very great losse, and by name, Your Servants that now write to you....¹⁵

Prince Rupert was able to rally a proportion of the Royalist horse, but the majority of the King's right wing joined the pursuit. On the Royalist left Lord Wilmot's Horse swept away Lord Fielding's Regiment, and both Essex and the King, powerless to intervene, watched the wings of their armies disappear beyond Kinton. Only 200 Royalist troopers on the left had regrouped under Sir Charles Lucas.

The Royalist Foot began a general advance in the wake of their Horse and the opposing infantry rapidly came to push of pike. Neither side surrendered ground readily:

When the Royal Army was advanced within musket shot of the Enemy, the foot on both sides began to fire, the King's still coming on, and the Rebell's continuing only to keep their ground; so that they came so near to one another that some of the batalions were at push of pike, particularly the regiment of Guards commanded by the Lord Willoughby and the Generall's regiment, with some others....The foot being thus engaged in such warm and close service it were reasonable to imagine that one side should run and be disorder'd; but it happen'd otherwise, for each as if by mutual consent retired some few paces, and they stuck down their colours, continuing to fire at one another even till night....tho the rawnes and unexperience of both partys had not furnished them with skill to make the best use of their advantages.¹⁶

Essex seized this moment to take the now exposed Royalist infantry in flank and he ordered the remaining Parliamentary cavalry to attack. Balfour and Stapleton sortied from behind Meldrum's Brigade and charged the Royalist Foot:

...for the Earle of Essex observing that all the King's horse were gone off in pursuit of his left wing, commanded that part of his cavallery which was behind his foot, to charge the King's and the general's regiments in the flank, just at the time when they were so warmly engaged at push of pike with his men. Tis true they were not broken with this charge, yet they were put into some disorder, which the Enemy's foot observing, advanced upon them, and drove them back as far as to their cannon....¹⁷

Sir Nicolas Byron's Brigade turned Stapleton's charge but Balfour's troopers cut through Fielding's Brigade and assaulted a Royalist battery. On the way back to the Parliamentary line Balfour's squadron's came under fire by their own artillery:

We fired at them with case-shot, but did no other mischief save only wounding one man through the hand, our gun being overloaded, and planted on high ground; which fell out very happily, this body of horse being of our own army, and commanded by Sir Wiliam Balfour, who with great resolution had charged into the enemy's quarters, where he had nailed several pieces of their cannon, and was then retreating to his own party, of which the man who was shot in the hand was giving us notice by holding it up; but we did not discern it.¹⁸

Parliamentarian attacks now centred on Byron's men who were forced back with heavy loss. Sir Charles Lucas

with the last 200 Royalist horse had attempted to break through into the rear of the Parliamentary Foot, but his troopers were baulked by the fugitives from Charles Essex's Brigade. The Royalist infantry preserved its cohesion only with difficulty and with the assistance of its artillery and a ditch interposed between themselves and the Parliamentary Foot and Horse:

But the King's cannon playd upon them with such execution that it stopt their further progress, and gave leisure to those regiments on the left hand which had given ground, to put themselves once more in good order, which the enemy finding advanced no further. At the same time the remnant of their foot were pressing vigourously on the King's, and had not the right hand Brigade commanded by Coll. Charles Gerard kept their order, and plyd those regiments which advanced upon them, with so great courage that they put the Enemy to a stand, the whole body of the King's foot had run great hazard of an absolute defeat; for had his Majesty's two wings given way, those in the main-battell could have made no long resistance.¹⁹

Gradually Rupert's troopers returned to the battlefield almost as weary as their blown horses. Although a number reformed in a recognisable body, Rupert realised that their exhaustion, together with the approach of night, ruled out any further cavalry action. The battle had subsided into a general confusion brought about by inexperience, poor leadership, panic, fatigue and a shortage of ammunition. As darkness fell many of the Horse and Foot of both sides withdrew from the field, and with the loss of 3000 dead and wounded to be counted with the desertions of the day, neither the King nor Essex was eager to continue the battle:

And by this time it grew so dark, and our Powder and Bulletts so spent, that it was not held fit we should advance upon them.²⁰

The armies spent the night within shot of each other and during the next day both Royalist and Parliamentary withdrew from the field:

...and so stood all the night upon that place where the Enemy before the fight had drawn into Battalio, till toward morning that the Enemy was gone, and retired up the Hill: And then wee returned also to a warmer place neere Kinton, where we had quartered the night before, for wee were almost starved with cold in that bitter night, our Army being in extreme want of Victualls: And about nine or ten of the clock drew out again into Battalio, and so stood three or foure hourse, till the Enemy was clean gone from the Hill, and then wee drew againe into our quarter, and there have laine this night, and purposes this day, God willing, after wee have buried our dead, to march to Warwick to refresh our Army, which is exceedingly wearied with so many nights watching, and so long a fight which held from noone till dark night.²¹

Essex and the Parliamentary army retreated on Warwick while the Royalists considered the open route to London.

Indication of Importance

Edgehill was the first full-scale military encounter between the forces that would prosecute the King's and Parliament's causes during the English Civil Wars. The campaign as a whole was inconclusive with neither side possessing the strength or confidence to risk all in a truly decisive battle. Yet Edgehill represented the vitally important opening commitment to resolve matters by force. The armies that took part in the battle were composed predominantly of volunteers fighting out of belief or enthusiasm. Edgehill administered a crude and cautionary shock to all who contemplated civil war lightly. Therafter men might still talk of peace and negotiation, but the critical and central question facing both sides was how best to martial their resources for a long war.

Colonel Alfred Burne described Edgehill as 'one of the best known of English battles, though it does not deserve to be.' From a military historical viewpoint Edgehill certainly has little to commend it. The battle was a chaotic and muddled affair which was marred for the Royalists by divided council and splintered command, and for the Parliamentarians by the signal failure of Essex to achieve his object.

At present it is difficult for the visitor to view and appreciate the battlefield from anywhere but the heights of Edgehill itself, since much of its area lies concealed by a Ministry of Defence installation. Given the current and foreseeable climate of defence expenditure, however, this condition may now have a time limit upon it. There may thus exist an opportunity in the future for the interpretation of the battlefield to be carried out on land which is free of the usual commercial and domestic constraints.

Battlefield Area

The battlefield area boundary defines the outer reasonable limit of the battle, taking into account the positions of the combatants at the outset of fighting and the focal area of the battle itself. It does not include areas over which fighting took place subsequent to the main battle. Wherever possible, the boundary has been drawn so that it is easily appreciated on the ground.

The Battle of Edgehill was a dispersed and fluctuating affair which saw a major cavalry pursuit that extended at least as far as the village of Kineton. The battlefield area reflects the ebb and flow of the fighting and also incorporates the deployments of both armies immediately before the main action of the battle began. It does not at present extend across Radway to include the King's initial position on Edge Hill itself, since the hillcrest formed a preliminary position rather than the position at the start of the action.

Notes

1. *An Exact and True Relation of the Dangerous and Bloody Fight Between His Majesties Army, and the Parliaments Forces, neere Kyneton in the County of Warwick, the 23.,of this instant October. Sent in a Letter to John Pym EsquireLondon October 28 1642.*
2. Clarke T S. Ed. *Life of James II....collected out of memoirs writ of his own hand.* 2 vols. (1816).
3. Bulstrode, Richard. *Memoirs and Reflections.* Part III (1721).
4. *An Exact and True Relation of the Dangerous and Bloody Fight.... Op. Cit.*
5. *A Relation of the Battel fought between Keynton and Edgehill, by His Majesty's Army and that of the Rebels....at Oxford1642.*
6. Bulstrode, Richard. *Op. Cit.*
7. Stuart, Bernard. *A brief relation of the battle at Red Horse field under Edgehill.* 28 October 1642.
8. Clarke T.S. *Op. Cit.*
9. Marshall, Steven. *A most true and succinct Relation of the late Battell neere Kineton in Warwick-Shire.*
10. Bifield, Adoniram. *A Letter Sent from a Worthy Divine to the Right Honourable The Lord Mayor of the City of London Being a true Relation of the battaile.* Written on 24 October; printed 27 October 1642.
11. *An Exact and True Relation of the Dangerous and Bloody Fight.... Op. Cit.* p3.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Stuart, Bernard. *Op. Cit.*
15. *An Exact and True Relation of the Dangerous and Bloody Fight.... Op. Cit.*
16. Clarke T.S. ed. *Life of James II Op. Cit.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *The Memoirs of Edmund Ludlow, 1625-1672.* C.H.Firth ed. (1894).
19. Clarke T S. Ed. *Life of James II Op. Cit.*
20. *An Exact and True Relation of the Dangerous and Bloody Fight.... Op. Cit.*
21. *Ibid.*