

Was Cromwell present at the Battle of Aylesbury?

by

Robert Hammond - Vice-Chairman

Members of the Cromwell Association must be quite used to the great man being attributed with influences and achievements well before he became a significant figure on the national stage. For instance I have recently read two books which are erroneous in that way.

The first, an excellent read in the County Book Series, 'Bedfordshire' by Lawrence Meynell, states '*when the Civil War came the county was on the whole Parliamentary. The great families were fairly evenly divided, in fact, William fifth Earl of Bedford, carried his own impartiality to the extent of fighting for Cromwell at Edgehill and for the King at Newbury*'. The penultimate fact would no doubt have surprised the Earl as much as Captain O. Cromwell!

The second quote might at first seem even more mistaken. It is taken from a small book of old photographs 'Chalfont St Giles in Camera'. Under one picture is the statement, '*just a few steps from the main road (A413) and the crossroads; Stone Meadow remains today perhaps more tranquil than in 1642, when Cromwell's Ironsides bivouacked here after their hard won victory at Aylesbury. While the good General was cosseted at the Stone, his men slept in the open*'. Not wishing to decry what is a delightful book of photographs, let me support what is still eminently true in that statement. The stone meadows are still there and surprisingly tranquil, even though only a cannon's throw from the Amersham Road. They lead down to the meandering Misbourne stream, the village pond, a ducks' upmarket residential quarter and the semi circular green, plus 17th century houses, and a 12th century church. The Pheasant Inn on the meadow ridge is still there but has changed its name and become a fish restaurant. There is still a house called the Stone opposite the meadows, although a later building.

An earlier reference is in the 'History of the Parish Church of Chalfont St Giles' by H.Adams Clarke, publ. 1961. On page 7 is the following paragraph, '*when the church was repaired in 1861, some small iron cannon balls were found, embedded in the stone surround of the east window. They had no doubt, been fired from the Silsden and Stone meadows, where Cromwell's troops were encamped after the Battle of Aylesbury on the 1st November 1642. Three of the cannon balls can be seen in Milton's cottage.*'

Now to the inconsistencies. What is definitely wrong, although understandable, is Cromwell's rank, the description Ironsides and also the reference to the Battle of Aylesbury. It should of course be the Battle of Edgehill - or should it?

In Autumn 2003 issue of '*The Patriot*', I wrote an article on the Battle of Aylesbury at a time when it was thought the battlefield site was under threat and there had been a rather pejorative article written about it in a prestigious archaeology periodical.

The date of 1st November appears to be correct. A sizeable force of 1,500 men under Sir William Balfour had detached from the main army heading for London. The purpose was to counter the threat posed by the Royalists under Prince Rupert in Buckinghamshire and the immediate task to support the Aylesbury Garrison. However Rupert's numerically superior army was already in possession of Aylesbury when Balfour's force were seen to be approaching. Not wishing to defend a hostile town Rupert drew his forces down to the lower rather fenlike area to the NNE of the town to face Balfour. It is not my intention to give a blow by blow account of the battle in which according to Balfour's letter to Parliament and subsequent archaeological evidence the Royalists were soundly beaten and sent flying, with 500 Royalists and 90 Parliamentary 'martyrs', killed. Rather I will consider what is known of the composition of the Parliamentary forces involved to get any clues to the possibility of Cromwell being present.

Balfour would have been an obvious choice as commander. An experienced soldier and a Presbyterian, he had proved his loyalty to Parliament, and by his actions at Edgehill had prevented the King from winning the day. It is more than likely that John Hampden, who many thought would take over from the Lord General in time, would have strongly endorsed Balfour's appointment. Hampden's absence from this force defending his beloved 'country' of Buckinghamshire is an enigma that will be considered later. It should be noted however, that the foot part of his Greencoats was one of the regiments present, the other being Col. Grantham's. Besides the two regiments of foot, there were 6 troops of cavalry in the force. Unfortunately

only the Captains of two of these is mentioned in the report. However that may be significant. To support that let me take an extract from the report at the time when Sir Lewis Dyves has mounted a musketeer behind his troopers to come to Prince Rupert's aid. It is as follows... ' *who being, at a competent distance, alighted and diffus'd their dreadful and death-bearing bullets through our squadrons, which then began to totter from their order, Some ten or fourteen falling in that furious charge till Captain Henry Blanchard of the Earl of Petterborrowe's troop came in with much courage to the aid of Sir William Balfour's troop....*' Now in respect to this extract as well as other known facts, I have consulted the very comprehensive Cromwellian Gazetteer by Peter Gaunt. Because this is another East Anglian troop and since 'Peterborough was one of Cromwell's bases during the early stages of the war,' could it be possible that they would have been chosen as fellow countrymen to fight alongside one another. The only other Troop Captain named was Ascough whom I believe was a Bucks man.

The excellent Gazetteer which also records many of the facts I have mentioned, namely that Cromwell stayed with the Ratcliffe family at Chalfont St. Giles in Nov 1642 and that his troop quartered in the meadows opposite. They were resting after the Battle of Edgehill before the return to London. The Gazetteer also records that Cromwell stayed at Dinton in Bucks with Simon Mayne in Oct/Nov 1642 after Edgehill, discounting that it could have been after Naseby.

Let us assume (and an assumption is all that it is) that after the Battle at Aylesbury on 1st Nov Cromwell rode south westward through Aylesbury Vale the 7 miles to Dinton, partly to make sure that the fleeing Royalists were not causing trouble. Then after staying at Dinton he passed eastwards to the Chilterns through Askett, skirting his cousin's house at Great Hampden, maybe checking all was well with them, and then going along the Misbourne Valley through Great and Little Missenden, to Amersham until finally coming to Chalfont St Giles. The whole of that journey would probably be about 8 hours riding excluding the rest periods. That would have had some purpose militarily to assure the countryside that Parliament was in control. Was Cromwell also doing a service for his kinsman Hampden who had urgent business elsewhere? If so, what might that urgent business have been?. We have recently become aware that his eldest son had been killed at that time at Chenies, about 5 miles from the Chalfonts. A young man of 18 years, he was one of the garrison who defended Chenies from a Royalist raiding party. So was Hampden doing the final duties for his son? The Royalist colonel of the attacking force could well have been Sir Lewis Dyves who was also at the Battle of Aylesbury, '*that malignant*' as the Battle report calls him. We know that Hampden was concerned about Royalist forces in the area. He wrote from Northampton on the 31st Oct 1642 urging the troop captains at Amersham not to disband and make the country a '*prey to the court*'.

Another fact that gives some support to the Battle of Aylesbury speculation is Cromwell having stayed at Chalfont St. Giles. This was on the natural return journey from Aylesbury to meet up with the main army en route to London as well as passing through the garrison town of Amersham. Naturally I don't discount that it would also have been easy for cavalry to ride ahead of the main army to find a welcoming place to feed, forage and rest, as well as scout the area.

There I will leave it. A possibility only but an interesting one at that. I hope the known facts, although nothing new, have proved of interest. Maybe it is time to look afresh at the Battle of Aylesbury. This was a battle which denied to the Royalists any significant influence in Bucks; but because it was squeezed between the two great confrontations of Edgehill and the attempt on London it has not been accorded its due weight in the early part of the Civil War.

Bibliography:

'Bedfordshire' by Laurence Meynell publ. 1950

'Chalfont St. Giles in Camera'

'Chalfont St. Giles Church' by H. Adams Clarke publ. 1961

'The Cromwellian Gazetteer' by Peter Gaunt. Publ.1987.

'Ye Battell of Alisbury', 1642. London, Printed for Francis Wright, 1642.

Postscript. I also visited the small but very informative museum in Milton's Cottage. The three canon balls are there although I was surprised that the largest was not as big as a tennis ball. The museum has some delightful prints of Parliamentary supporters of the Civil War period. It is easy to imagine Milton being there and all is complemented by a picturesque country garden. Open Tue-Sun & Bank Holidays 10 am - 1pm & 2 pm - 6 pm. Tel: 01494 872313