

## **The Battle of Chalgrove – 18<sup>th</sup> June 1643**

As one of the smaller actions of the Civil War, the battle of Chalgrove, fought on 18 June 1643, perhaps does not receive the attention it deserves. It is a dramatic story with a tragic ending that deserves to be told.

In April 1643 the parliamentary General, the Earl of Essex, laid siege to Reading, which had been captured by the royalists the previous autumn. The siege was successful, but typhoid broke out in the besieging army ranks, affecting it throughout the spring and summer. This and a lack of supply meant Essex's men were unable to move to their next objective – an attack on the royalist wartime capital of Oxford.

Essex eventually advanced to Thame, to the east of Oxford, in early June. But, probably shortly after the army's arrival there, one of his officers, John Hurry (or Urry), a Scottish professional soldier, defected to the royalists. Hurry's decision appears to have stemmed from a dispute between English and Scottish officers in Essex's army in March 1643 and was to have far reaching consequences.

Hurry rode into Oxford and, in the words of Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, informed the King of the 'manner of lying and keeping of [Essex's] guards'. Hurry persuaded the King's nephew and General of Horse, Prince Rupert, to mount a raid on Essex's quarters and, as a further inducement, may have been able to tell of the impending arrival in Thame of a parliamentary pay convoy containing £21,000.

On the afternoon of 17 June Rupert and Hurry left Oxford with around 1,100 cavalry 400-500 infantry and 400 dragoons. Crossing Chiselhampton bridge this force advanced to the Tetsworth area by one the following morning where they were fired upon by parliamentary dragoons. Shrugging this off, they continued to Postcombe and attacked Sir Herbert Morley's Sussex raised regiment of horse around 3am, taking some prisoners.

Before 5am Rupert and his men were at Chinnor, which was garrisoned by Sir Samuel Luke's Bedfordshire raised regiment of dragoons. These relatively inexperienced troops had been part of a parliamentary force which had tried to beat-up royalist quarters at Islip the preceding day but had been seen-off by a large royalist contingent. Possibly tired from their exertions, Luke's men failed to post guards and Rupert was able to enter the village before the alarm was raised. Tumbling out of bed some of Luke's men managed to retrieve their arms and retreated to a house on the edge of the village where they fired on the royalists. But Rupert ordered the house they were defending to be set ablaze and the dragoons were shot as they fled the flames. The royalist account of the action suggested 50 parliamentarians were killed and 120 captured alongside three of the regiment's guidons (flags).

With no sign of the pay convoy and with the sun climbing in the sky, Rupert turned for home. But the alarm had been raised in Thame and thirteen cavalry troops, mainly from the Earl of Essex's own regiment and that of Colonel John Dalbier, as well as a couple of dragoon companies were hastily gathered to give pursuit. Undoubtedly slowed a little with his prisoners, Rupert retreated back through Aston Rowant along the ancient Icknield Way and

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then headed toward South Weston. Somewhere between South Weston and Easington parliamentary cavalry troops caught-up with Rupert's rearguard and a skirmish ensued leaving 15 parliamentarians dead. Having forced-back their pursuers Rupert's men were able to continue their withdrawal.

As Rupert waited 'in a Chalgrove cornfield' (without doubt Solinger Field) for his men to catch-up, he could see the parliamentarians coming down Golder Hill in the distance. Spurring his men on, he headed to the bottom of Solinger Field and entered what is now Warpsgrove Lane before moving his cavalry forwards a little to cover a gap in the Great Hedge that marked the edge of Chalgrove and Lewknor parishes and through which the lane passed. He ordered his infantry away with the prisoners to Chiselhampton to gain safety on the other side of the river Thame and his dragoons to line the hedges on the road to Chiselhampton to ambush any pursuing parliamentarians.

Essex's men had, by then, deployed in the large close in which Warpsgrove House was located, across the Great Hedge from Rupert's position. Knowing that the parliamentarians would be reluctant to pass through the hedge via Warpsgrove Lane because only one troop at a time could go through the gap and these would be overwhelmed by his men, Rupert waited to give his infantry and dragoons time to get away. He then turned to retreat and was quickly followed by his pursuers. A little further down Warpsgrove Lane Rupert turned and deployed again behind another hedge. The parliamentarians came up with eight troops and another 100 commanded horse – around 600 men – and a couple of companies of dragoons – about 150 in total, leaving five troops in reserve on the other side of the Great Hedge.

The parliamentary dragoons dismounted, advanced to the hedge separating the two sides and began firing at the royalists. Impetuous to the last, Rupert jumped the hedge with some of his lifeguard, scattering the enemy dragoons as his other troops of horse came around the sides of the hedge to advance on the smaller parliamentary force. Essex's men were able to discharge their carbines and two pistols before the royalists made contact, but without much effect. After a hard and unequal fight the parliamentary cavalry broke and fled back to their reserves, which were unable to hold the pursuing royalists. After chasing the parliamentarians for a mile and a quarter Rupert's men broke off and resumed their withdrawal to Oxford.

The parliamentarians had lost about 30 men killed and some prisoners. Essex's major of horse, John Gunter was amongst the dead and another of his captains, Anthony Buller, had been seriously wounded when he was shot in the neck. Thomas Sheffield, a junior officer serving in his brother, James', regiment was also wounded and captured and a dragoon captain, George Dundass was similarly taken. But the greatest loss was the mortal wounding of John Hampden, a leading parliamentarian and one of the architects of the 'Great Rebellion'. Hampden had been shot in the shoulder and was taken to the army headquarters at Thame where he died six days later.

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Hampden's death and that of John Pym later in 1643 robbed the parliamentary cause of two of their most capable statesmen at a critical point in the war. Whilst this did not affect the ultimate outcome of the war, it is interesting to speculate how different the political settlement at its end may have been had Hampden and Pym survived.

This account of the battle is very much my own. In a recent article ('The Military and Political Significance of the Battle of Chalgrove' in *Oxoniensia*, Vol 80, Chippenham, 2015, pp.27-39) Battlefields Trust members Derek and Gill Lester, who have done a considerable amount of excellent research on the battle over a long number of years, argue for a different interpretation of how the battle developed. They also suggest a specific location where the battle was fought. This may well be correct, but, in my view, the primary sources and near contemporary map information is insufficient to place the fighting precisely and without doubt. An archaeological survey is required to settle the debate. Nevertheless, the Historic England registration of the battlefield covers the Lesters' interpretation and the other alternative location. A link to the Lesters' article is available on the news section of the Battlefields Trust website ([www.battlefieldstrust.com](http://www.battlefieldstrust.com))

### **Simon Marsh – August 2016**

#### *Captions*

*John Hampden Memorial: The John Hampden memorial erected some distance from the battlefield in 1843 by Lord Nugent.*

*Chalgrove Battlefield: Somewhere in this area the battle is likely to have been fought*

*Chiselhampton Bridge: The bridge at Chiselhampton which Rupert crossed at the start of his raid and across which he returned.*

*Chalgrove Information Board: The Information Board at Chalgrove installed by the Chalgrove Battlefield Group*