

English Heritage Battlefield Report: Chalgrove 1643

Chalgrove Field (18 June 1643)

Parish: Chalgrove

District: South Oxfordshire

County: Oxfordshire

Grid Ref: SU 646978

Historical Context

The campaigning of 1642 had produced stalemate in the central theatre of war between the Royalists and Parliamentarians. Neither army, based on Oxford and London respectively, had gained a significant advantage. By the beginning of the 1643 campaign, however, matters appeared set to change. The Earl of Essex, the Parliamentary commander, now enjoyed a distinct numerical advantage over the King's forces. In April, Essex captured Reading and the way was clear for an advance on Oxford. However, before the slow-moving Essex could exploit the opportunity a convoy of munitions arrived for the Royalists from the north, greatly improving their defensive capability. By the middle of June the Earl of Essex had advanced no further than Thame. Given such uninspiring leadership it is perhaps not surprising that one soldier in the Parliamentary ranks, Colonel John Urry, a Scotsman, decided that his talents might be better employed by the Royalists. He deserted and took with him the information that a convoy, bearing £21,000 with which to pay Essex's army, was shortly expected in the Parliamentary camp.

The opportunity was too good to miss. On the afternoon of 17 June Prince Rupert led a mixed force of almost 2,000 horse, foot and dragoons out of Oxford to try and intercept the convoy and generally harry the Parliamentary outposts to the east of Oxford. In the early hours of the next morning Rupert surprised enemy quarters in Postcombe and Chinnor but failed to discover the convoy. He decided to withdraw to Oxford; by now his rearguard was under pressure from pursuing Parliamentary cavalry. Rupert sent his infantry on ahead to secure the river crossing at Chiselhampton and, four miles to the east, drew up his cavalry in Chalgrove Field to face his pursuers and give time for his Foot to get clear. Rupert's dragoons lined the route back to Chiselhampton to maintain communications and to lie in ambush should the opportunity present itself.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

The field on which, on Sunday 18 June 1643, Prince Rupert administered a severe rebuff to a body of Parliamentary cavalry, lies between the hamlet of Warpsgrove and the village of Chalgrove, about ten miles south-east of Oxford. The bulk of the battlefield remains under cultivation, although in the past few years parts of the surrounding area have undergone development. To the north-east of the crossroads at which stands the monument to John Hampden an industrial estate has grown up: this is known, suitably enough, as the 'Monument Industrial Park'. A second business park, the 'Tower Estate', is situated beyond it. The Martin Baker Chalgrove Airfield, which impinges on the battlefield's western edge, is of longer standing. To the east of the battlefield are a number of low hills, over which the Parliamentarians approached the waiting Royalists.

Landscape Evolution

An estate map of 1679, just 36 years after the battle, provides useful evidence of the landscape of the battlefield in the seventeenth century⁺. A long and curving hedge defines the edge of the open field known as Sand Field. The same hedge is prominent in another estate map, this dating from 1822, when Sand Field remained unenclosed while to the north was shown a series of small hedged enclosures. It seems reasonable to infer that the land-use had remained stable in the intervening period, and therefore that the battlefield comprised pasture amongst hedged fields to the north-east and probably a fallow open field to the south-west.

The first 1:2,500 Ordnance Survey map of the battlefield, dating from 1881, shows the area largely unchanged from what it had been nearly 240 years before. True, Warpsgrove Manor House, an important landmark during the battle, had by then burned down and been only partially rebuilt. The hedge system, of equal importance during the battle, proves relatively straightforward to reconstruct even on a map of this date.

It is only during the last fifty years or so that major change to the landscape has occurred. Chalgrove Airfield was constructed in the Second World War. This necessitated the diversion of the old B480 from the route that took it past the Hampden Monument. A new road, a quarter of a mile further south, was built. Part of the long, curving hedge was removed. After 1970 two farms - Hitchcox Poultry Farm and Monument Farm - grew up alongside the Chalgrove-Warpsgrove road. These have been followed more recently by the industrial estate and business park, referred to above, which occupy ground to the east of the Warpsgrove road.

The Sources

Our knowledge of what occurred at the Battle of Chalgrove Field is derived from a limited number of sources. As was usual during the Civil War both sides attempted to either minimise a setback or trumpet a success by publishing its account of a recent action in a newsletter or pamphlet. Thus when Parliamentary sources endeavoured to disguise the extent of their reverse at Chalgrove in the pamphlet¹ *A True Relation of a Gret Fight Between the Kings Forces and the Parliaments, at Chinner neer Tame on Saturday last*, and were only a little more candid when *Two Letters from his Excellencie Robert Earl of Essex* was published on 23rd June², the Royalists at Oxford felt that their own version of events should be aired. This led to the fullest account of the action at Chalgrove in the pamphlet³ *His Highnesse Prince Ruperts Late Beating up the Rebels Quarters At Post-comb & Chinner in Oxford shire And his Victory in Chalgrove Feild [sic], on Sunday morning June 18 1643*.

The *True Relation* actually tells us little that is worthwhile about the Parliamentary reaction to the raid. Lord Essex's letter from Thame dated 19 June to the Speaker of the House of Commons is more enlightening. The raid on Chinnor having taken place:

⁺ Map held in Magdalen College, Oxford: the assistance of the Chalgrove Battle Group in obtaining map evidence is gratefully acknowledged.

...the Alarm came where Major Gunter lay with three troopes (viz.) his own, Captain Sheffields, and Captain Crosses, whom he presently drew out and marched towards the Enemy; Colonell Hampden being abroad with Sir Samuel Luke and onely one man, and seeing Major Gunter's Forces, they did go along with them, Colonel Dubeir the Quarter-master Generall did likewise come to them: with these they drew neare the Enemy, and finding them marching away, kept still upon the Reare for almost five miles. In this time there joyned with them Captain Sanders Troop, and Captain Buller, with fifty commanded men, which were sent to Chinner by Sir Philip Stapleton, who had the Watch here that night at Thame, when hee discovered the fire there, to know the occasion of it, he likewise sent one Troope of Dragoones under the command of Captain Dundasse, who came up to them. There were likewise some few of Colonell Melves Dragoons that came up to them: at length our men pressed them so neer, that being in a large pasture ground they drew up, and not withstanding the inequality of the numbers, we not having above 300 Horse, our men charged them very gallantly, and slew divers of them; but while they were in fight, the Enemy being so very strong, kept a Body of horse for his reserve, and with that Body wheel'd about and charg'd our men in the Reare, so that being encompassed and overborne with multitude, they broke and fled, though it was not very far; For when I heard that our men marched in the Reare of the Enemy, I sent to Sir Philip Stapleton, who presently Marched toward them with his Regiment; & though he came somewhat short of the Skirmish, yet seeing our men Retreat in that disorder, he stopt them, caused them to draw into a Body with him, where they stood about an hour: Whereupon the Enemy marched away. In this skirmish there were slain forty and five on both sides, whereof the greater part were theirs.

The Royalist account of what happened is rather fuller:

His Highnesse was now making halt in Chalgrove cornefeild: about a mile & half [*sic*] short of Chesel-hampton bridge. Just at this time (being now about 9 o'clock) we discerned severall great Bodyes of the Rebells Horse and Dragooners, coming down Golder-hill towards us: from Esington and Tame: who (together with those that had before skirmished with our Reere) drew down to the bottom of a great Close, or Pasture: ordering themselves there among the trees beyond a great hedge, which parted that Close from our Feild ... The better to intice them on, the Prince with his Horse made show of a Retreat: whereupon the Rebells advanc't cheerfully: doubling their march for eagernesse, and coming up close to us. Then we discern'd them to be eight Cornets of Horse, besides about 100 commanded Horse, and as many Dragooners of Colonell Mills (Melves, my Lords Relation writes him) his Regiment, now led by Captaine Middleton. We were now parted by a hedge, close to the midst whereof the Rebells brought on their Dragooners; and to the end of it came their Forlorne hope of horse. Their whole Body of 8 Cornets faced the Princes Regiment and Troop of Lifeguards, and made a Front so much too large for the Princes Regiment that two Troops were faine to be drawn out of the Prince of Wales Regiment, to make our Front even with them. And this was their Order. Besides which, they had left a Reserve of 3 Cornets in the Close aforesaid among the trees, by Wapsgrove house, and two Troops more higher up the hill, they were in sight of one another by 9 a clock in the morning.

The Princes battaglions were thus ordered. His Highnesses own Regiment, with the Lifeguards on the right hand of it, had the middle-ward: the Prince of Wales his Regiment making the Left-wing, and Mr Percyes having the Right. Both these Regiments were at first intended for Reserves: though presently they engaged themselves on the encounter. 'Twas diverse of the commanders counsells, that the Prince should continue on the retreat, and so draw the Rebels into the Ambush, but his Highnesse judgment overway'd that; for that (saith he) the Rebels being so neere us, may bring our Reere into confusion, before we can recover to our ambush. Yea (saith he) their insolency is not to be endured. This said, His Highnesse facing all about, set spurrs to His Horse, and first of all (in the very face of the Dragoons) leapt the hedge that parted us from the Rebels. The Captaine, and rest of His Troop of Life-guards (every man as they could) jumbled over after him: and as about 15 were gotten over, the Prince presently drew them up into a Front, till the rest could recover up to him. At this the Rebels Dragoons that lyned the hedg fledd having hurt and slaine some of ours with their first vollie. Meantime Lieutenant-Colonell O'Neale having passed with the Princes Regiment beyond the end of the hedge on the left hand, had begunne the encounter with 8 Troops of Rebels. These having before seene ours facing about, took themselves of their speed presently, and made a faire stand till ours advanc't up to Charg them. So that they being first in order, gave us their first Vollie of Carbins and Pistolls at a distance, as ours were advancing: yea they had time for their second Pistols ere ours could charg them. The hottest of their charg fell upon Captain Martins, and Captain Gardiners Troops, in Prince Ruperts Regiment: and indeed the whole regiment indured the chief shock of it. To say the truth; they stood our first charg of Pistols and Swords, better than the Rebels have ever yet done, since their first beating at Worcester; especially those of their Right-wing: for their Left gave it over sooner: for that the Prince with his Lifeguards, with Sword and Pistoll charging them home upon the Flanck (not wheeling about upon their Reere, as the *London Relation* tells it) put them in rowte at the first encounter. By this time also was Generall Percy with some Troops of his Regiment fallen in upon that Flanck, and followed upon the execution. As on the other wing did Major Daniel with the Prince of Wales his Regiment: so that now were the Rebels wholly rowted. Some of ours affirme, how they over heard Dulbire (who brought up some of the Rebels first Horse) upon sight of the Princes order and dividing of his Wings, to call out to his People to retreat, least they were hemb'd in by us.

The Rebels now flying to their Reserve of three Colours in the Close by Wapsgrove House, were pursued by ours in execution all the way thither: who now (as they could) there rallying, gave occasion to the defeat of those three Troopes also. So that all now being in confusion, were pursued by ours a full mile and quarter (as the neighbours say) from the place of the first encounter. These all fled back again over Golder hill to Esington: and so farre Sir Philip Stapleton with his Regiment was not yet come. And if he stopt and drew the Retreaters up into a body, and made a stand for an hower with them (as the *London Relation* tells us) 'twas surely behind and beyond the great hill where ours could not discern them. Yea plainly our two Prisoners since their returne affirm, that 'twas two miles from the place of fight ere he met them, nor yet could he stay the Parliamentiers from running. Before this, and in time of the fight, some three Cornets of them were observed to wheele about; as if they intended either to get betwixt us and Chesel Hampton bridge, or to charge us upon the reere, which being observed by Lieutenant Colonell O'Neale, he borrowed two Troopes of Generall Percyes Regiment, and made out after them: which they perceiving, turn'd bridles about, and made hast back again to their fellowes.

The Battle

It was nine o'clock on Sunday morning when the Royalists, drawn up in Chalgrove cornfield, saw additional bodies of Parliamentary Horse and Dragoons ride down Golder Hill and join the three troops of cavalry under Major Gunter which, for the past five miles, had shadowed their retreat from Chinnor. The enemy rode forward to the bottom of an enclosed pastureland and ordered themselves, according to the Royalist account of the battle, 'among the trees beyond a great hedge, which parted that Close from our Feild'.

This last comment is very useful in helping to place the action that follows. When, shortly afterwards, the Parliamentarians - emboldened by Prince Rupert's feigned retreat - advanced, they 'left a Reserve of 3 Cornets [*i.e. three troops*] in the Close aforesaid among the trees, by Wapsgrove house'. This establishes that the trees around the close, amongst which the Parliamentarians first dressed their lines and where they subsequently left their reserve, were by Warpsgrove House (where Warpsgrove Manor House Farm now stands).

When the Parliamentarians advanced towards the Royalists from the vicinity of Warpsgrove House, in which direction did they move? Where were Prince Rupert's men drawn up? Where was the 'great hedge', which not only parted the 'Close' from Chalgrove cornfield, but lay between the opposing bodies of horsemen? The prevailing belief amongst historians appears to be that, in closing with the Royalists, the Parliamentarians headed south-westwards. The plan of the Battle of Chalgrove Field amongst the Peter Young papers in the National Army Museum shows the two sides facing each other south-west of Warpsgrove⁴. A bird's-eye view of the battle reproduced in John Adair's biography of John Hampden also depicts the clash occurring in this area⁵, as do the sketch plans in an article on Chalgrove Field by John Stevenson and Andrew Carter published in *Oxoniensia* in 1973⁶.

Topographical and map evidence supports this consensus. West of Warpsgrove there is a depression in the ground created by a small tributary of Haseley Brook. It would have been in both sides' interest to avoid this. The 1822 map represents Sand Field - still a large open space at that time - lying to the south-west of Warpsgrove, where the airfield is now situated, with a hedge at its margin and numerous hedges beyond. The only alternative orientation would have the Royalists south-east of Wapsgrove rather than south-west, but here the hedgerow evidence fits less well and the military logic is implausible because Rupert would risk being cut off from Oxford. If the battle had been any further west the three troops of Parliamentary Horse left amongst the trees near Warpsgrove House would no longer have been within supporting distance of their colleagues.

Further conclusions about the dimensions of the battlefield can be reached from a consideration of the numbers engaged at Chalgrove Field. Brigadier Peter Young, in unpublished work on the battle amongst his papers, calculated Prince Rupert's cavalry as numbering between 1040 and 1280. The infantry and dragoons, who had been sent ahead and were not involved in the fighting, totalled another 750 men. Young believed that the Earl of Essex, in putting the Parliamentary forces engaged at Chalgrove at only 300 men, underestimated their number⁷. The Royalists reported seeing eleven cornets of horse (*i.e. troops*), plus dragoons, by Warpsgrove and the hedge. Essex's own despatch mentions the names of seven unit commanders, both cavalry and dragoons. Since a Parliamentary troop had an establishment of 70, and Essex's army had as yet seen little fighting, the number of units present suggest that the Parliamentarians could have fielded perhaps 600 men.

The Royalist cavalry, schooled by Prince Rupert to rely on shock action, deployed three deep. Allowing five feet per man, the 1,000 plus Royalist cavalry would have had a frontage of at least 600 yards. The intervals between sub-units and the probable excess in their number suggest that 800 yards would fairly represent their front.

In contrast, at this stage of the war, the Parliamentary cavalry tended to adhere to older tactics, ranging themselves up to six deep and relying on firepower to disrupt the enemy's charge. The Royalist account of the battle mentions the fusillade that they encountered: the Parliamentarians 'gave us their first Vollie of Carbins and Pistolls at a distance, as ours were advancing: yea they had time for their second Pistols ere ours could charge them'. Nevertheless, the Royalist account also states that the eight troops of Parliamentary Horse behind the hedge 'made a Front so much too large for the Princes [*Rupert's*] Regiment that two Troops were faine to be drawn out of the Prince of Wales Regiment, to make our Front even with them'. This implies that the Parliamentarians did not array themselves six deep on this occasion. Perhaps, realising that they were outnumbered, the Parliamentarians spread themselves as thinly as they dared. If so, the 400 Parliamentary Horse at the hedge might have managed a front of 300-400 yards.

Despite the flexibility of their tactics and the spirit that they showed, the overmatched Parliamentarians could not resist the Royalists' charge. They fled. The fight had been short and sharp. According to the Earl of Essex, 45 were killed on both sides, the majority Royalists. Naturally the Royalists disputed the figure. They put the Parliamentary dead at 45 and admitted the loss of ten or twelve of their own men.

Indication of Importance

To call Chalgrove Field a battle in the same sense as, say, Marston Moor or Lansdown Hill would be something of a misnomer. On the Parliamentary side around six hundred men were engaged. The Royalists numbered something over a thousand. In strict terms of scale, Chalgrove Field was a skirmish. Innumerable engagements of similar size were fought during the English Civil War and these have almost invariably been long forgotten. Why should Chalgrove be any different?

The explanation is, for the most part, a simple one. John Hampden might not have been a soldier of distinction but he had been an immensely important politician. Hampden was one of the Five Members; he had a long record of defiance towards King Charles I. The fact that he was mortally wounded during the fight at Chalgrove may therefore be sufficient in itself to elevate the events at Chalgrove to a different plane. To writers whose interest in the Civil War is primarily political, Chalgrove is quite as significant as many of the larger battles. Nineteenth-century political reformers had no doubt about the place of John Hampden in the pantheon of dissenting heroes: the impressive monument to Hampden unveiled two hundred years after the battle by parliamentary luminaries of a different generation is testament to that.

It is largely on this basis that Chalgrove Field continues to claim its place in the majority of books published on English battlefields. But there are other reasons for which Chalgrove can be seen in a different light from other, relatively small-scale actions. The tactics of Rupert, for example, are at the same time indicative of more forethought than is usual for a skirmish and yet characteristically impulsive. As testimony to the differing tactics of the two sides at this stage of the Civil War, the battle is also instructive. Although on a smaller scale than some Civil War battles, therefore, Chalgrove Field warrants inclusion on the Register of Historic Battlefields.

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 line of the 'Great Hedge' which separated the two forces having been identified, and with Warpsgrove Close anchoring the battlefield to the north-east, the placement of the battlefield boundary becomes a matter of finding practical reference points in the modern landscape. The boundary therefore follows the lane south from Warpsgrove to the later Hampden monument on the eastern side. On the western side, the line of the airfield perimeter track provides just sufficient space for the Royalist deployment. To the north and south, the boundary makes use of what few markers exist to join these points into a circuit.

Notes

1. Thomason Tract E.55(11) in the British Library.
2. Thomason Tract E.55(19) in the British Library.
3. Copies of this pamphlet are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.
4. Papers of Brigadier Peter Young DSO, National Army Museum 9010-31-287.
5. Adair, J *A Life of John Hampden The Patriot (1594-1643)* (London 1976) pp238-9.
6. Stevenson, John and Carter, Andrew 'The Raid on Chinnor and the Fight at Chalgrove Field, June 17th and 18th, 1643'. *Oxoniensia* 38 (1973) p351.
7. Papers of Brigadier Peter Young DSO, National Army Museum 9010-31-174; 9010-31-286.