

English Heritage Battlefield Report: Cropredy Bridge 1644

Cropredy Bridge (29 June 1644)

Parishes:Cropredy; Wardington, Prescote, Bourton

District: Cherwell

County:Oxfordshire

Grid Ref: SP 478460

Historical Context

The defeat of the Royalist army under Ralph, Lord Hopton at Cheriton in March 1644, at the very start of the campaigning season, forced Charles I to halt his plans for a strategic offensive and to look instead to the safety of the Royalist capital, Oxford. Although Royalist armies would still inflict humiliating defeats on Parliamentary commanders, the King had effectively lost the initiative. The foray from Oxford in June 1644 was a response to pressure exerted by the Parliamentary armies of Sir William Waller and the Earl of Essex, and it was purely defensive in conception as the skilful manoeuvring of the King's army across four counties was to demonstrate.

In its recovery from the extreme danger in which it found itself in Spring 1644, the Royalist Oxford Army was ably assisted by Waller and Essex. As the King marched from Oxford to Worcester to draw the Parliamentary armies away from his capital, Waller and Essex duly followed. When the Royal army successfully evaded their pursuit the Parliamentary armies separated, with Waller continuing to follow the King while Essex marched south to the relief of Lyme Regis. By the actions of his enemies the King's chief asset, the Oxford Army, escaped almost certain destruction, and once Waller and Essex had gone their different ways Charles was presented with the opportunity of concentrating his own forces against Waller.

Charles lost little time in reinforcing his field army with troops and artillery from the Oxford and Abingdon garrisons. By 22 June 1644 he had some 5,500 foot, 4,000 horse, and 10 cannon under command at Buckingham where he resolved to await Waller's next move and, given a fair prospect of victory, to attack the Parliamentary army. Meanwhile Waller was still retracing the steps of his futile pursuit of the King to Worcester and by 24 June, his eastwards progress slowed by extremely hot weather, he had only reached Stow. From there Waller struck north-east, gathering reinforcements from Parliamentary garrisons as he advanced, and by 27 June his Army had reached Hanwell near Banbury.

The next day the Royalist army was also approaching Banbury and at one point the rival forces were within one mile of each other with only the River Cherwell separating them. There followed a period of hectic manoeuvring as each side sought an advantageous position from which to offer battle. Waller won the race for possession of Crouch Hill and early on 29 June Charles was forced to draw away north-eastwards towards Daventry, following the Banbury-Daventry road along the east bank of the Cherwell. Waller conformed to the movement of the Royal army and advanced northwards along the Banbury-Southam road on the west bank of the river. Just over a mile apart, each army was fully aware of the others movements and at Great Burton, to the south-west of the village of Cropredy, Waller stopped to survey the ground and the enemy.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

The village of Cropredy lies in Oxfordshire some four miles north of Banbury and is adjacent to the River Cherwell in a small valley. On either side of the river high ground forms ridges running north-south with the highest point at 547 feet and the lowest at about 325 feet.

Cropredy Bridge was in many respects an encounter battle and, as a result, the conflict was geographically scattered and episodic in nature. For the Royalists at least it was predominantly a cavalry battle and the fighting tended to ebb away whenever it reached ground unsuited to mounted action. Although the deployment of the opposing forces stretched from Bourton Hill to Hays Bridge, the two key areas of the battle lay at Cropredy Bridge and the rising ground immediately to the east, and by Slat Mill Ford and the rising ground to the north.

The geographical extent of the battle, though not the detail of individual fields or hedges, is well recorded in the letters, diaries and official reports of eyewitnesses ranging from Sir William Waller on the Parliamentary side to the secretary-extraordinary to the Privy Council, Sir Edward Walker, on the Royalist. There is no controversy as to where the battle of Cropredy occurred.

The Landscape Evolution

The crossing of the Cherwell at Cropredy is an ancient thoroughfare linking the major routes to the west and east of the village, and the first recorded mention of a bridge occurs in 1312. The bridge has been rebuilt since the seventeenth century, with restoration taking place in the 1690s and 1780s and the widening of the bridge being undertaken in 1886. The bridge was widened on its southern side and the work revealed wooden piles a little downstream from the existing structure. A complete reconstruction of the bridge in 1937 found the remains of an earlier bridge incorporated within it. The present bridge bears on its south side a fading memorial plate which reads: 'The site of the Battle of Cropredy Bridge, June 1644. From Civil War Good Lord deliver us'.

Cropredy was enclosed between 1762-98 but Waller and the King would still recognise today the ground over which their armies fought. Seventeenth century probate records show that the rearing of sheep was widespread in the area and that cereals were sown. In 1644, therefore, the battlefield landscape would have been largely one of cultivated open fields interspersed with enclosed grazing land. The prominent landscape features would have been the River Cherwell (probably wider than today), the valley floor, medieval settlements at Cropredy, Williamscot and Wardington, the Banbury-Daventry road on the east bank of the Cherwell and the Banbury-Southam road.

The Cherwell itself is no longer a formidable barrier at Cropredy for it is not wide and flows sedately through comparatively gentle countryside. Modern drainage methods have reduced the risk of flooding, but in the seventeenth century wet fields, as their names testify - Marsh furlong, Bog Meadow, and Rushford - could be a hazard for troops. Indeed there is a suggestion in the Royalist news sheet *Mercurius Aulicus* that Waller's position at Bourton was made more defensible by wet ground, even in June:

... having the advantage of springs and boggs before his front, and both on his flankes and back strong hedges....¹

Immediately to the west of the bridge lies an obstacle, the Coventry-Oxford canal, which was not present in 1644. Extended to Cropredy in 1778, the canal is fed principally by water from specially constructed reservoirs at Clattercote and Byfield. A nineteenth-century intrusion is the Banbury to Leamington railway line opened in 1852. The line runs from north to south through Cropredy but is mostly hidden in a cutting and, although heard, is not seen from the battlefield.

In the twentieth century, with the exception of orchards in Cropredy village and plantations at Williamscot, the landscape is primarily pasture and many fields are still bounded by thick hedges. Although new housing has been built at Cropredy to accommodate people working in Banbury, urbanisation has not intruded to any great extent upon the battlefield.

The Battle: its sources and interpretation

A reconstruction of the military events that took place at Cropredy at the end of June 1644 can be confidently based upon the written evidence provided by participants in the battle. For the Parliamentary army the eyewitnesses include its commander, Sir William Waller, who wrote frequently to the Committee of Both Kingdoms, and who, on 30 June 1644, dispatched a concise and admirably clear report² on the battle to the Committee. An equally straightforward account, although from a radically different viewpoint, was penned by Richard Coe³, an infantryman serving with the Tower Hamlets Regiment in Waller's army. The experience of the Parliamentary cavalry during the battle was recorded by a young officer in Heselrige's Horse, Thomas Ellis⁴, and by the secretary to Lieutenant Colonel John Birch⁵ of the same Regiment.

On the Royalist side the most senior figure to record his impressions of the battle was Sir Edward Walker, secretary-extraordinary to the Privy Council, and a trusted servant of the King. Walker's narrative⁶ was produced at the behest of Charles I who wished to have a single record of the 1644 campaign. Walker completed his text in April 1645 and this was then amended in detail by the King, as the original manuscript bears witness. Its account of Cropredy is thus to all intents and purposes a version authorised by Charles I, and it was used extensively by Clarendon who received a copy in 1647. Richard Symonds, a gentleman serving under Lord Bernard Stuart in the King's Troop of Horse provides a short, rather disjointed summary of the fighting⁷, while the report published in *Mercurius Aulicus*⁸ was possibly the eyewitness account of its editor Sir John Berkenhead. An interesting feature of these sources is the extreme speed with which several were published, with the personal accounts by Coe and Ellis appearing in print within three weeks of the battle.

On the morning of Saturday 29 June 1644 Sir William Waller watched the Royal Army as it advanced slowly along the Banbury-Daventry road above Cropredy on the east bank of the Cherwell:

I would have written to you last night but that I was utterly tired out with the labour of the day. In the morning early lying upon the hill before Banbury, we might perceive the enemy going with bag and baggage towards Northampton, whereupon with all possible haste I rose and marched to Burton, which brought me full in upon the flank of the enemy and gave me a very great advantage.⁹

From his vantage point on Bourton Hill, Waller could see the glimmer of an opportunity of coming to grips with the enemy. On the western flank of the Royalist Army were two crossing points over the Cherwell. Should the King make the slightest mistake in handling his army the crossings at Cropredy Bridge and Slat Mill Ford (approximately a mile to the south of the bridge) offered the chance of taking the Royalists in flank and rear. Charles had already appreciated this danger and a party of dragoons was sent to hold the bridge until the army had passed.

To the north, beyond the main body of the King's army, Royalist cavalry scouting ahead had detected the approach of 300 Parliamentary horse on the west bank of the river. The strength of the rival armies was finely balanced with approximately 9,000 men on either side, and a reinforcement of even 300 cavalry might prove significant in a general engagement. As Walker records Charles took swift action:

Our Army marching in this order, certaine intelligence was brought that a boddy of three hundred Rebelles horse were within two Myles of our Van, intending to joyne with Waler, by which it was judged that they might be easily cut off by our quick aduancing; whereupon, our foremost horse, upon order, hastened their March (our Van & Battell having the same directions) without any apprehension of the Rebells intentions....¹⁰

While the advanced guard and main body of the Royalists hastened forward to intercept the enemy horse by crossing the Cherwell at Hays Bridge some two miles north-east of Cropredy, the rear of the army remained

blissfully ignorant of this new development. Continuing at its normal pace the rearguard fell dangerously behind the rest of the army. A gap of over 1.5 miles quickly opened between the Royalist's centre and rear divisions.

This was the chance for which Waller had been waiting and he gave orders that the Royalist rearguard should be surrounded and destroyed. Just before one o'clock, Lieutenant General John Middleton with two regiments of horse (Hesilrige's and Vandriske's), 900 foot and 11 guns was sent to intercept the advance of the rearguard from Cropredy Bridge, while Waller with 1,000 men crossed the Cherwell at Slat Mill to attack from behind:

Whereupon I and Lieut. Genl. Middleton, with some regiments of horse, advancing seized upon the bridge at Copredy, and the other passes near it, and gave order to have them secured with foot and artillery. The Lieut.-Genl. fell in with some few troops and dragoons by a mill, next beneath Copredy, and I advanced with the remainder of those regiments over a passage next beneath him; I had a steep hill to mount, not far from the top whereof the enemy was drawn up in a strong body.

At first all had gone well with Middleton's attack and as Thomas Ellis, advancing with Heselrige's Regiment, records the Parliamentary cavalry swept the outnumbered Royalists before them:

According to the order, our Regiment of Horse and Collonell Vandrosses, advanced under the Comande of Lievtenant General Middleton, and Captain Butler, Adjutant Generall, and foure Companies of Farnham foote, and five Companies of Sir Williams owne Regiment, under the Command of Lievtenant Collonell Baines, (sometime a Brewer in London) Quarter-Master Generall to the foote. They had placed a Guard to secure Copready-bridge which wee readily beat off, and made the bridge our owne by a partie of Dragoons, and past over the River between us and Banbury, (for till then we were on the one side of the River, and they on the other)....

Unfortunately, the Parliamentary cavalry pursued the fleeing Royalists along the ridge, rapidly out-distancing their own infantry which was still deploying on the east bank. As the Royalist cavalry and scattered foot fell back towards Hays Bridge they turned, as Thomas Ellis relates, to face their pursuers:

Through mis-information, wee too speedily pursued the enemy, being enformed that their whole bodie was marched away, when as a third part of them were left behinde unknowne to us. Wee pursued them above a mile, till we came to a bridge, where their Foot made a stand, drew up and fac'd us; wee being within Musket shot of them, onely our foure eldest Troops, (viz.) Sir Arthurs, Captaine Okees; Captaine Foleyes, and Captain Gardners: They overthrew a Carriage to barricado the bridge, and planted it with Muskettiers. This occasioned our retreat back againe, being unwilling too farre to engage our selves, having no Foot within above halfe a mile of us, and discovering their Army behind us ...

While Middleton's cavalry disappeared in the direction of Hay's Bridge, the Earl of Cleveland, leading the Royalist rearguard, prepared to deal with the now isolated Parliamentary foot and artillery slowly deploying from Cropredy Bridge. Cleveland launched his brigade of horse down the hill towards the bridge in a charge which the Parliamentarians were unable to withstand. In Walker's words:

... timely notice beeing given to the Earle of Cleueland ... of the Rebels Passage at Croprady (which was instantly Confirmed by the Chasing all our ffoote & scattered Horse towards the Bridge [i.e. Hays] ... by 2 Bodyes of their Horse where they stood & faced the Kings Army) hee presently drew up his Bragade (Consisting of his owne, his sonne the Lord Wentworths, Colonell Richard Neuills, Sir William Botelers, & Sir William Clerkes Regiments of Horse) to a rising ground facing that passe, where understanding by Colonel Neuill that he stood

too neere a Hedge where the Rebells might place some ffoote hee wheeled towards the right hand & tooke more ground, there hee perceived a great Body of the Rebells Horse drawn vp ready to have fallen on his Reare Wherevpon (not having tyme to expect either word or Orders from the Lord Willmot Lieutenant Generall of the Horse) hee gave his owne word (Hand & Sword) & presently advanceing that Body of the Rebells rann ...

The King, realising that a major battle was developing to his rear, halted the van and main body of the Royalist army, and ordered Lord Bernard Stewart to:

... make hast to the assistance of the Reare & by the way to attempt those 2 Bodyes of the Rebells Horse that faced his Majestie, his Lordship attended by above 100 Gentlemen of the Kings Troope (which is ever fullest in tyme of action) returned instantly over the Bridge (Hays), & made haste towards those Two Bodyes, who, by this tyme, seing their felowes Routed by the Earle of Cleuland wer aduancing to Charge him in the flanke, as he was following the execution, but upon the advance of this Troope turned their intended Charge into a flight which much facilitated the defeate of the Rebells, the Earle of Cleuland after his first encounter made a little stand neere a great Ash (vnder which his Majestie had not above halfe an hower before, beene invited to stay & Dine) there hee perceived a great Body of the Rebells Horse of 16 Collors (& as many Collors of ffoote placed within Hedges) all within Musquett shott of him, this caused him suddainly to advance, the Rebells doeing the like & haveing stoutly stood out their Musquett and Carbine shott, hee gave Comand to charge, & by his singular valour & Resolution (seconded by the Officers of his Bragade) hee routed all those Horse & ffoote & chased them beyond their Cannon all which (being Eleaven peeces) were then taken, & 2 Barricadoes of wood drawn with wheeles in each 7 smalle brasse & Leather Gunns charged with case shott; most of the Cannoniers were then slayn & Weymes Generall of the Ordinance to Sir William Waler taken.... with many more Lieutenants, Cornetts, Ensignes, & Quartermasters, about 100 Comon Souldiers, as many more beeing then slayne, besides some ffoote Collors & Cornets taken, the pursuite was as farre as the Bridge (*Cropredy*) over which the Rebells were forced in spite of their Dragoones they had placed there to make good their retreat, which being donne the Earle of Cleuland returned ...¹¹

The second charge by Cleveland's Brigade, which carried the Royalist horse into the Parliamentary artillery position at Cropredy Bridge, was the decisive moment of the battle and Thomas Ellis, having returned from the abortive attack at Hays Bridge, found himself in the middle of it:

... upon our retreat wee discovered the party of Foote (drawne over with us) by an unresistable body of the enemies Horse, of some thirty Troops, and two regiments of Foot put to disorderly retreat, which hastened our march back againe, and coming back we found the way to the bridge within a quarter of a mile, stopt with the enemies Horse and Foot, who were got between our Foot and the bridge: For whose reliefe (although our way backe lay on the right hand, we advanced up to their body on the left hand of the hill, and with out foure Troops charged the Kings owne Regiment, and put them to a retreat; but the other Troop comming downe upon us, (there being of them in all some three Regiments) with whome we were in no case able to deale, we were necessitated to retreat very disorderly ...

Walker was less than accurate when he reported that, his work done, Cleveland 'returned'. As Richard Coe recorded, Cleveland was forced to break off his attack by stout resistance at the bridge from Parliamentary infantry:

... our Forces following them were overmatcht and so lost some men and some Dratkes, with 3.

Colours, the rest were forced to retreat, and came over a Bridge called Crapridden, crying the fields lost, the fields lost: but by Gods providence and the courage of the Kentish Regiment and that of the Hamlets, we got downe two Drakes to the Bridge and staved them off bravely, and gave them so good play all day, that ere night they could not brag of their winning ...

Thereafter, skirmishing became the order of the day at Cropredy Bridge as both sides concentrated upon holding their positions.

Further to the south, Waller's attack across Slat Mill Ford had been roughly handled by the Royalist cavalry brigade commanded by the Earl of Northampton. Waller's troops attempted to ascend the ridge past Williamscot, but as Walker noted the Parliamentarians were thrown back rather quicker than they came:

Before this the Earle of Northampton with no lesse Courage finding the Rebels that were come over the passe below to follow him in the reare presently faced about with his owne, the Lord Willmotts, Percies, & Colonell Westons Regiments of Horse, & forced the Rebels to a speedy flight over the passe but with little losse they beeing not willing to abide a Second charge.

Although cut to the quick by the loss of his artillery at Cropredy Bridge, Waller decided against any fresh advance:

Whereupon the whole army of the enemy being rallied, I thought it best to make an orderly retreat to our foot, which we did without any loss, and drew up upon the hill on the right hand of Burton, where we faced the enemy's army which was drawn up on the other side of the passage. There was hot service at Cropredy bridge, which we made good against them, and we continued in skirmish with them all the day. The enemy, setting aside our unlucky pieces, has nothing to brag of, having lost three cols., including Sir. W. Butler, and lieut.-colonel, a major, and diverse other officers. The Lieutenenat-General [Middleton] took Lord Wilmot prisoner and wounded him sorely, but he as afterwards rescued from the soldiers to whom the Lieutenant- General had committed him; he is said to be dangerously ill.

Waller withdrew the bulk of his force to the relative security of Bourton Hill, but he retained control of the crossings at Cropredy Bridge and Slat Mill Ford. Charles saw little advantage in attempting to storm the crossings with a view to what would undoubtedly be a costly assault on Bourton Hill. Instead he offered Waller terms:

A little before sunset there came a trumpet from the King, with a paper signed by the King-at-arms, expressing that if I would grant him a safe conduct, he was commanded to deliver a message of grace and favour to the army. I returned answer that I had no commission to entertain any messages from His Majesty without the permission of Parliament, and therefore the address must be made there. All that night and hitherto this day the enemy was lain still. What they will do next I known not. So soon as anything more is done, you shall hear more from me.¹²

A tense stalemate had settled on the battlefield and it was to last until the evening of 30 June (Sunday) when the King received news that Parliamentary reinforcements of some 4,500 foot and horse were at Buckingham. Charles decided that it was time to withdraw and during the night his army slipped away, making good their escape to Deddington. Colonel Birch recorded his surprise at the sudden retreat of the Royalists:

... but the second night they made many great fires, by the light of which they marched towards Oxford; soe that in the morneing, when we expected an ingagement, there was noe enimy

within eight miles of vs. So they marcht to Oxford [*sic*], and thence after the Lord Generall into the West wee to Northampton, and thence to Abbingdon ...¹³

Royalist casualties in the battle had been light but Waller lost some 700 men, including deserters.

Indication of Importance

The Battle of Cropredy Bridge took place only three days before the dramatic Parliamentary victory over Prince Rupert at Marston Moor. As a result the King's highly successful Oxford campaign and Cropredy itself has seldom received the popular or professional attention it deserves. For the Royalists, Cropredy meant that for the moment at least Oxford would survive and that the Oxford Army was available for service elsewhere. It was a small counterbalance to the disaster in the North.

As Waller pondered on the whereabouts of the King, his own army disintegrated in mutiny and chaos. By 26 July Waller was back in London while the remains of his broken army rested at Abingdon. All prospect of pursuing Charles had gone, and the Oxford Army was free to advance westwards to humiliate Essex at Lostwithiel. For Parliament the campaign of June 1644 failed to achieve any of its goals; the King had not been defeated nor Oxford captured. It had dented Waller's reputation and rendered his army ineffective. Yet Cropredy was part of that essential growth of strategic awareness that was to lead Parliament to final victory. On 2 July 1644 Waller, fresh from dealing with the mutinies of the City Brigade, wrote to the Committee of Both Kingdoms:

My Lords, I write these particulars to let you know an army compounded of these men will never go through with their service and till you have an army merely your own that you may command it is in a manner impossible to do anything of importance ...

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.

Stretching from Bourton Hill to Hays Bridge, the battle extended over several miles and it would be unrealistic to include all the ground over which the armies marched in the battlefield area. The key phases of the battle took place between Cropredy Bridge and Wardington, and Bourton Hill and Williamscot, and the definition of two battlefield areas reflects this fact.

The southern battlefield area extends from the ford at Slat Mill to Williamscot Hill Farm so as to incorporate Waller's attack on the rear of the Royalist column, as well as his occupation of Slat Mill Ford during the night of 29 June and throughout 30 June.

The northern and larger battlefield area extends to Hays Bridge to encompass the fighting at the barricade hastily thrown up by the Royalists. On the east the Banbury to Daventry road has been used as the boundary and although this excludes Astley's initial position, his infantry moved rapidly south and west into the battlefield area once fighting began. The Cherwell at Cropredy provides a western boundary and, although some Parliamentary troops were undoubtedly positioned further west still, little would be gained by extending the boundary into Cropredy itself.

Notes

1. *Mercurius Aulicus The 26 Weeke, ending June 29 1644.* p1055.
2. *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of Charles I. 1644*, ed. W D Hamilton (HMSO London, 1888) pp293-4.
3. *AN EXACT DYARIE. or a breife RELATION Of the progresse of Sir WILLIAM WALLERS Army....By Richard Coe under Cap. Gore of the Tower Hamlets who was present in the whole expedition.* London July 19 1644.
4. *An Exact and full RELATION OF THE LAST FIGHT, Between the KINGS Forces and Sir WILLIAM WALLER. Sent in a Letter from an Officer in the Army to his Friend in London....*London July 5 1644.
5. *Military Memoir of Colonel John Birch, written by Roe, his secretary*, ed. J and T W Webb (Camden Society, New Series, vol. 7, 1873).
6. *His MAIESTIES Happy Progesse and Successe from the 30th of March to the 23th (sic) of November 1644.* (Oxford: Christ Church MS 164).
7. *Diary of the Marches and Moovings of his Ma^{ties} Royal Army, Himselpe being personally present.* Published as 'Diary of the Marches of the Royal Army during the Great Civil War kept by Richard Symonds', ed. C E Long (Camden Society vol 74, 1859).
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *His MAIESTIES Happy Progesse and Successe* op. cit.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Military Memoirs of Colonel John Birch* op. cit.