

English Heritage Battlefield Report: Evesham 1265

Evesham (4 August 1265)

Parish: Evesham, Norton and Lenchwick

District: Wychavon

County: Hereford and Worcester

Grid ref: SP039452

Historical Context

The Battle of Evesham was part of that period of instability and civil conflict which characterised the years 1258-1267, and which later became known as the Barons' Wars. Simon de Montfort's victory over Henry III and his son Prince Edward at Lewes in May 1264 did not bring lasting peace. Simon's government was threatened by rebellion on the Welsh marches, by the defection of his own followers, and by the escape from captivity of Prince Edward.

After his escape from Hereford on 28 May 1265, Edward lost no time in coming to a military arrangement with Gilbert de Clare, de Montfort's erstwhile ally, and with William de Valence and John de Warenne. Assembling a considerable army, Edward and Clare moved against de Montfort at Hereford, seeking to block his passage eastwards across the River Severn. Edward first took Worcester and then advanced on Gloucester, capturing the town, but not at first the castle, in the second week of June. Thus denied his preferred route across the Severn, Simon struck south to Monmouth with the eventual hope of crossing the river at Bristol. Frustrated by the destruction of much of the shipping required for his army to cross the Severn, de Montfort returned to Hereford. There the strategic situation began to swing in his favour for his son, Simon, was advancing west from London with an army which threatened Edward and Clare's freedom of movement on the east bank of the Severn.

Although young Simon's progress was hesitant as he moved first to Winchester, then to Oxford and Northampton, he had reached Kenilworth by the end of July. His manoeuvres had succeeded in relieving the pressure on his father for Edward had been forced to look to the defence of Worcester. Edward was also now the potential victim of a pincer movement by young Simon advancing on Worcester from Kenilworth, and de Montfort advancing from Hereford. To forestall this possibility Edward feinted towards Shrewsbury with a mounted force, and then fell upon young Simon's army in its tents at Kenilworth at dawn on 2 August. Edward's victory was short and sharp and for the moment the ability of Simon's army to participate in the campaign was disrupted. Simon had part of his army safely within the castle and these troops survived the attack of Edward's lightly equipped force with little difficulty. We do not know, however, how large was Simon's remaining force. Returning in triumph to Worcester, Edward prepared to deal with de Montfort who was now once more on the east bank of the Severn and who, by the morning of 4 August, had reached Evesham.

Location and Description of the Battlefield.

There is no dispute as to the general location of the Battle of Evesham. While Simon rested his army in Evesham on the morning of 4 August 1265, the Marcher army, by now deployed in three divisions led by Earl Gilbert, Roger de Mortimer, and Edward, was mounting the northern slopes of Green Hill barely a mile to the north of the town. The point at which the Marchers probably climbed the hill was near to a place named 'Siveldeston'. The name was derived from an ancient stone ('Siflæd's stone') located by the eleventh century on the 'salt street' which delineated Evesham's northern boundary or that of the abbey lands. The stone was positioned¹ on what is now Blayneys Lane near to the point at which the lane becomes a path as it meets the course of the dismantled railway line close to the banks of the River Avon. The spot was some 800 yards to the east of the crossroads on the crest of Green Hill where, in the words of William Tindal:

'just on the northern edge of the old road leading down to the river, a stone of about six feet in height, and apparently squared by art, is fixed to the ground....The place and figure of this stone have occasioned many to suppose it a memorial of the battle, and it has even, as I have heard, been described and engraved as such.'²

The stone was removed at some date before Tindal's death in 1804.

While Siflæd's stone can be used as a general reference to the location of the Battlefield it does not pinpoint the scene of the clash between Simon's troops and those of Edward. For this many writers have turned to a site known as 'Battle well'. Very soon after the battle a cult of Simon and his dead supporters as miracle workers grew up and the scene of the Earl's death on the battlefield, together with his first tomb in the abbey church, became places of pilgrimage. In 1266, according to the monks of Evesham Abbey, a spring was discovered in miraculous circumstances by Piers of Saltmarsh close to the site of Simon's death. Earl Simon's well, as it became known, was soon the haunt of pilgrims seeking a cure from its waters and by 1448 Richard Fox, a monk of the Abbey of St Albans, could write that:

'where the battle and murther (of Simon) was is now a well, and grete elmes stande about the well; there is over the well an hovel of stone, and a crucifix and Mary and John'.³

By 1457 the site had become known, at least locally, as Battle well and it was marked as such on the first Ordnance Survey map of Evesham produced in 1828. The well as marked by the Ordnance Survey still exists to the west of the Evesham-Alcester road (A435) and south of the Worcester road (The Squires), and it is reasonable to accept that it is the same well as that to which Richard Fox referred. Equally there is little reason to doubt that the fifteenth-century well was the same one that was 'discovered' by Piers of Saltmarsh in 1266.

By the end of the eighteenth century the continuity of interest in Battle Well had led to the belief that its site marked the centre of the Battlefield and the spot on which Simon de Montfort was killed. This narrow interpretation was espoused by, amongst others, E.J. Rudge who argued that the Battle occurred: 'on the rising ground immediately adjacent'⁴ to the well. Rudge's father, the owner of Abbey Manor (built 1817), constructed an obelisk to commemorate the Battle in the grounds of his new home in 1821. Neither the obelisk nor the well should, however, be accepted as evidence that the armies fought the main engagement of the Battle of Evesham on the ground immediately to the south of the Worcester road and west of the Evesham road.

The Chronicle evidence, so far as it goes, suggests rather that after the Marcher army had deployed in three divisions, Prince Edward's column took up position in the centre close to the brow of Green Hill facing south. Roger de Mortimer's column was behind Edward and to his right, while the troops of Earl Gilbert were on the Prince's left and again to his rear. As Simon marched out of Evesham and ascended Green Hill he did not discover the full extent of the enemy's strength or deployment until he had gained the brow and was almost upon them. As Edward occupied the Barons in front, Gilbert swung his men round the right flank of Simon's force and attacked it from the rear. When Gilbert's men rushed forward they linked with either flank of

Edward's column, thus completing the encirclement of the Barons.

The Landscape Evolution

The town of Evesham and the substantial abbey lay next to the bridge at Bengeworth, the only bridge in the area. Beyond the town the only road running north was probably on the same line as the present A435T leading out of the loop in the River Avon. Documentary evidence refers to 'East and West Fields' here which would indicate medieval arable open fields in this area. No field evidence, such as ridge and furrow, has been identified to support this, but given the era and the town close by, open fields are to be expected. The ridge along which the A435 (T) runs drops down to the Avon to east and west and there was certainly meadowland by the river.

The open fields that lay to the north of Evesham had all been enclosed into regular hedged fields, probably by a Parliamentary Act, by 1827. Records show that adjacent open fields at Norton Lenchwick to the north had been enclosed by 1765 and Evesham's were probably enclosed around this time also. By 1885 the majority of the earlier hedged enclosed fields in the battlefield area had become orchards with the only orchard-free areas being around Abbey Manor Farm.

Green Hill retains its position of eminence above the town, but Evesham has spread northwards to encroach upon the hill with suburban dwellings. The area around Battle Well is surprisingly rural and quiet, with views south to the Abbey tower and west towards Charlton.

The old Salt Street running east to Offenham Ferry from the A435(T) is unfortunately cut by the new by-pass over which walkers must cross, (there is no bridge or traffic lights here) to the quiet oasis around the Offenham Ferry - Dead Mans Ait area.

The Battle: its sources and interpretation

When Prince Edward learnt that de Montfort was at Evesham he took steps, as the contemporary chronicler Mathew Paris recorded, to ensure that he would not reach Kenilworth.

Edward then returned from Kenilworth to Worcester, which is only three miles distant from the above-named manor; and Simon on hearing of his arrival there, went away with the king at nightfall, and took up his quarters in the town of Evesham where he awaited his unhappy destiny. For on the morrow, which was the day of the Finding of St Stephen, Edward moved from Worcester, crossed the river near the town of Claines, and cut off the approach of the earl to his son, who was in the castle of Kenilworth, and prevented all chance of the father and son meeting.⁵

De Montfort's position was grave for the morale of his men had been undermined by their weeks of short rations and fruitless marching in Wales, and the force he had recruited from Llywelyn ap Gruffydd was reluctant to fight. Moreover, de Montfort was now in a trap:

On the following day he drew near the town of Evesham on one side and the earl of Gloucester and Roger Mortimer came up with their respective forces in two other directions; and thus the earl of Leicester was hemmed in on all sides, and was under the necessity either or voluntarily surrendering, or of giving them battle.⁶

De Montfort's plan was still to attempt to unite his own force with that of his son Simon, and Edward's immediate task was to block the routes leading from Evesham to Kenilworth. The barons had a choice of

routes, but the two principal roads that would lead them towards Kenilworth were to the north on the road towards Alcester, and to the north-east on the road towards Cleeve Prior. The former was the most likely route for de Montfort to follow and it ran over Green Hill, where Edward deployed his troops. The prince had taken the precaution of detaching Roger Mortimore and his force to approach Evesham from the west, thereby blocking any attempt de Montfort might make to escape in that direction or to the south.

Simon's only chance was to attempt to fight his way out of the trap, and link up with his son, and it is possible that Edward exploited this fact by ordering the banners lately captured from young Simon's army at Kenilworth to be displayed ahead of his troops as they approached Evesham. This ruse may have convinced de Montfort that his son was close at hand and thus encouraged him to march north out of Evesham to join this friendly force.

De Montfort was heavily outnumbered and he deployed his troops as a single column or wedge aimed at the junction between Gloucester's and Edward's troops on the Alcester road. As his army mounted Green Hill de Montfort launched it forward at the charge as heavy rain began to fall. It was a desperate strategy executed by a veteran soldier and it might have succeeded had not the wings of Edward's army swung in to attack the flank of the Baronial force. As it was, the momentum of de Montfort's wedge carried his force well into Edward's position and caused some panic among the royal troops. Many of the Welsh spearmen and foot soldiers with de Montfort had already been killed or had left the battlefield when Simon, to maintain the cohesion of his army, ordered his remaining troops to form a circle for all-round defence. Gradually the Barons were pressed into an ever tighter formation by the sheer weight of numbers of their opponents. Although de Montfort's army continued to resist for some hours the battle became a progressively bloody and one-sided affair, and both de Montfort and his son Henry were cut down with nearly 4,000 of their followers. Mathew Paris recorded de Montfort's final battle with clarity and brevity:

both armies met in a large plain outside the town, where a most severe conflict ensued; till the partisans of the earl began to give way, and the whole weight of the battle falling upon him, he was slain on the field of battle. At the time of his death, a storm of thunder and lightning occurred and darkness prevailed to such an extent, that all were struck with amazement. Besides the earl, there fell, in that battle, twelve knights bannerets; namely, Henry, his son: Peter de Montfort: Hugh Despenser, justiciary of England; William de Mandeville; Ralph Basset; Walter de Crespigny: William York: Robert Tregor; Thomas Hostelea; John Beauchamp; Guy Balliol; Roger de Rouleo; and a great number of others of inferior rank, such as esquires and foot-soldiers; the greatest loss being amongst the Welsh.⁷

Estimates of the casualties at Evesham are unreliable, but the fact that upwards of thirty knights were killed when to ransom was the normal practice, convinced contemporaries that the closing stages of the battle had been akin to murder.

Indication of Importance

Although their field army was destroyed at Evesham, the surviving Barons still held their castles and the war dragged on until 1267. Complete reconciliation came only in 1275 when the best elements of the Provisions of Oxford were encapsulated in the Statute of Westminster. Evesham had, however, freed Henry, and later Edward, from the need to accept ministers or councillors imposed upon them by others. As such the battle secured a political victory for the King, and while De Montfort himself has remained a potent symbol of liberty through later English history, it was the monarch's need for revenue which was to increase the power, permanency and influence of the Commons.

The Evesham campaign was a personal triumph for Prince Edward and it did much to establish his prestige and power as heir to the throne. Militarily he had shown maturity and strategic skill, though some of the credit here

must also go to Gilbert de Clare.

Chronicles provide a basic record of the Battle and, although the deployment of the rival armies is still a matter of argument, the battlefield itself can be located with confidence. The growth of Evesham has covered much of the battlefield but the course of the fighting can still be appreciated on the ground.

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 battlefield area embraces primarily the fighting on Green Hill, allowing space for the manoeuvres carried out by de Montfort's mounted troops, and the flanking movements by the royal army. The battlefield boundary therefore follows the line of the disused railway line on the eastern side, allowing for Earl Gilbert's role in the battle, runs parallel with Blayney's Lane and The Squires allowing for the starting positions of the Royal army and returns southwards via the Worcester Road to allow for the migration of the battle westwards to end around the Battle Well. The Register boundary excludes the more intensively built-up area along the spine of Greenhill in recognition of the impracticality of including such areas on the Register. Since this central axis was a key part of the battle, the full extent of the fighting is shown for illustrative purposes with a dashed line.

Notes

1. See Cox, D.C. *The Battle of Evesham. A New Account*. The Vale of Evesham Historical Society (1988).
2. Tindal, William *History and Antiquities*
3. Blaauw, W.H. *The Barons' War including the Battles of Lewes and Evesham*. 2nd. Edition (1871) p277 fn.1.
4. Rudge, E.J. *A Short Account of the History and Antiquities of Evesham* (1820).
5. Paris, Matthew (Matthaei Parisiensis), *Monachi Sancti Albani, Chronica Majorca*. Ed. H R Luard, Rolls series 1872-83.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*