

English Heritage Battlefield Report: Langport 1645

Langport (10 July 1645)

Parishes: Pitney; Huish Episcopi, Long Sutton, High Ham

District: South Somerset

County: Somerset

Grid Ref: ST 441275

Historical Context

At the Battle of Naseby (14 June 1645) the New Model Army had proved itself. The crushing defeat administered to the main Royalist army opened the prospect of Parliament achieving complete victory in its war against the King. It was now left to the commander of the New Model, Sir Thomas Fairfax, to decide how best he could exploit his success at Naseby to hasten the conclusion of hostilities.

Rather than pursue King Charles and the remnants of his beaten army, Fairfax decided to carry the war into the Royalist heartland in the West Country. Taunton, one of the few Parliamentarian strongholds in the region, was being closely besieged by General George Goring, and its relief was widely called for. Fairfax marched rapidly from the Midlands, proceeding towards Somerset via Dorset (so shortening his communications, which could now be traced from the seaports at Weymouth and Lyme). On 5 July, having joined two days earlier with the small Parliamentary Army of the West commanded by Major-General Massey, Fairfax reached Crewkerne. He now mustered 14,000 men. Goring meanwhile had raised the siege of Taunton. The Royalist priority now was to protect the Bristol Channel ports, through which they drew reinforcements and supplies from South Wales. To this end Goring took up a defensive position along the line of the River Yeo between Langport and Sherbourne. The Royalists numbered only half as many men as their opponents.

On 7 July Fairfax outmanoeuvred Goring and succeeded in crossing the river at Yeovil. This forced the Royalists to abandon the bridges at Ilchester and Long Load and fall back to Langport. Goring's response the next day was to send General Charles Porter and a force of cavalry towards Taunton, either with the intention of surprising the Parliamentarian garrison there or simply to create a diversion. Although Porter's command was mauled by Major-General Massey, who had been despatched by Fairfax with 4,000 men to intercept him, the thrust had the effect of reducing the number of troops at Fairfax's disposal. This would make it easier for Goring to conduct the retreat from Langport to Bridgwater which he had now determined upon. During the night of 9-10th July the Royalists sent away their heavy guns and baggage. The next morning Goring led his army a short distance eastwards out of Langport and occupied the high ground behind the Wagg Rhyne. Here he intended to fight a delaying action and hold back Fairfax's army, which was even then preparing to advance on Langport from Long Sutton.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

The town of Langport, which gave its name to the battle, is situated just below the confluence of the Rivers Parrett and Yeo on a spur of high ground. Its elevation saves most of the town from flooding, to which the river plain is prone. Bow Street, Langport's main thoroughfare, runs downhill to the bridge across the River Parrett. The fact that Langport commanded an important river crossing gave the town its strategic importance and was the reason the Royalists maintained a garrison there.

The battlefield itself lies in the opposite direction, about a mile to the east of Langport. To the south of the battlefield is the River Yeo, before it merges with the Parrett; the Wagg Rhyne, which divided the opposing

armies at the start of the fighting, drains into it. At its lower end the rhyne flows through a shallow valley with the village of Huish Episcopi on the western slopes. Further north, over the next mile, the ground rises steadily as it leaves the floodplain of the Yeo behind and the slopes to either side of the rhyne steepen. To the west, on the Royalist side of the Wagg Rhyne, is Ham Down and Pict's Hill; to the east, where the Parliamentarians stood, the rising ground reaches its summit at Pitney Hill.

Towards the northern end of this mile long extent of the rhyne is the Wagg Bridge, which carries the B3153 from Somerton to Langport. At the southern end is the A372, running between Langport and Long Sutton. Between the two and running parallel to each is a railway line; it crosses the rhyne (and Wagg Drove, a minor road that runs alongside, connecting the B3153 and A372), with the help of an embankment and bridge.

The general vicinity of the battlefield of Langport has been described, but the precise point where the Parliamentarians fought their way across the Wagg Rhyne has long been a matter of debate. No fewer than three different sites have been suggested, all within one mile of each other. Colonel Burne, writing on Langport in *More Battlefields of England* (1952), favoured the crossing at Huish Episcopi. Samuel Gardiner, the eminent historian who visited the battlefield in 1887, situated it near Wagg Bridge¹. Two other writers who, independently of each other, contributed important articles on the battle in 1894-95, believed the battle to have taken place at the foot of Ham Down, midway between Wagg Bridge and Huish Episcopi². The merits of these different interpretations will be examined later.

Landscape Evolution

The battlefield in 1645 was a farmed landscape based on the open field system of Pibsbury, Pitney and Huish, with some old and some relatively recent enclosure on the commons and down - a Parliamentary survey of Church estates in Huish and Langport of May 1650 gives an indication of land use at the time of the battle. In particular, it refers to arable in the three common fields of Pibsbury and pasture nearer the Yeo by Watery Lane.

Although piecemeal enclosure in the area had already taken place by agreement prior to the widespread Parliamentary enclosure phase (for example on part of Wagg Common by 1779³), it is clear from the comments of eyewitnesses at the Battle of Langport that the process had begun earlier still: one described the battlefield as a small valley with 'the sides of the valley being enclosed grounds by hedges and a small brooke running in the bottome between us'⁴. The Old English root of 'Full Pitts' (f_1 - foul, boggy) and Middle English of 'Wagg Close', which fieldnames flank the Langport to Somerton Road on the 1779 map, suggests strongly that they pre-date the battle.

The contemporary road network is also of great significance. Watery Lane, which was once part of the low road between Long Sutton and Langport, has now disappeared but its historic route can be ascertained from the Day and Masters map of Somerset of 1782. It passed close to the River Yeo by Pibsbury ford: the public footpath which today hugs the riverbank and then runs into Langport past Pound Farm follows almost the same course. The same map shows that the modern line of the road by Duck's Hill is more recent: it first appears on 19th century maps, such as Greenwood's of 1822.

The historical route between Long Sutton and Langport was along Tengore Lane, through the former open fields to the west of Upton and on to Wagg Bridge⁺. The modern line of the B3153 over Wagg Bridge is the result of turnpiking in around 1750, but the earlier line of the road, much the same, is probably preserved east of Wagg Bridge in the boundaries which parallel the modern road some 50m to the south.

In more recent years, the multitude of small fields north of Wagg Bridge have been rationalised into fewer, larger fields. Perhaps the biggest change in the landscape was the building of the railway with its massive

⁺ Dr Robert Dunning, pers. comm.

embankment earlier this century. Fortunately this lies just to the south of the battlefield area.

Today the landscape can best be described as rural fringe, a patchwork of pasture, meadow, small holdings and private houses and dominated by the large railway embankment. It is not a particularly attractive landscape as acknowledged by the Local Authority who have designated large parts of it as an Area for Landscape Improvement.

The Battle: its Sources and Interpretation

The vast majority of contemporary accounts of the Battle of Langport come from the Parliamentary side; the Royalists remained largely silent. Lord Goring's report to Lord Digby, for instance, is laconic. He had wanted to retire from Langport to Burrow:

But the enemy drew up so fast against us that we were forced to face them and endeavour to keep a pass through which they were to come towards us. This gentleman [*the messenger*] will tell your Lordship the particulars. Upon the whole matter they forced the pass and routed our Horse which only made one reasonable charge till our foot got into Lamport which way my Lord Wentworth retired with some of our Horse and he and Sir Thomas Wagstaffe brought off all the foot to Bridgwater without the loss of 200. There was only two pieces of cannon lost. The rest of the Horse run another way towards Bridgwater; they could never be brought to rally but in small and disorderly bodies⁵.

Fortunately, a rather more satisfying description of the battle was written by Sir Richard Bulstrode, one of Goring's officers, in his memoirs:

After the beating up of Lieutenant General Porter's Quarters, Fairfax, with his Army, marched directly to us from Evil [*Yeovil*], where, being in a plain and rising Ground, the Enemy's Army was drawn up upon it, with a great Marsh and Bogg between both Armies, which hindred the Enemy from attacking up, except by one Passage in the Bottom of the Hill, between both Armies, which Passage was narrow, and our General had placed there two Regiments of Foot to guard that Passage; which were Collonel Slaughter's and Collonel Wise's Regiments, lately raised in South Wales. General Goring himself, with all his Horse, was drawn up upon the Hill, at the mouth of the Passage, with the Infantry upon his right Hand, near Langport, to succour those two Regiments, in case of Attack upon the Pass, which the General hoped to make good, at least till night, that then we might retire with less Loss, being unseen. In the mean time, General Goring commanded me to send away all the Baggage and Cannon, except two Field Pieces, which he commanded should be drawn to the top of the Hill, at the Head of the Pass, and bid me to order Sir Joseph Wagstaffe from him, who commanded the Foot near to Langport, that in case the Enemy should force the Pass upon him, that then Sir Joseph Wagstaffe should retire with all his Foot to Langport, and there pass the River towards Bridgwater and burn down the Bridge behind him, which was a Draw-bridge over the River; and, in the Morning, when I had Orders to send away the baggage and Cannon, I sent them that Way, for their greater Security, otherwise they had been all lost; for we were in Hopes to keep that Pass till Night: Yet so soon as the Enemy had put their Army in Order of Battle, upon the Top of the Hill, on the other Side the Bogg, which we thought was their whole Army, they opened and drew to their Right and Left, advancing towards the Pass, whilst another great Body came up in their Place, by which their Army was more than double our Number. However, our General neither lost his Courage nor Conduct, but still remained at the Head of the Pass, with his own Guards of Horse, commanded by Collonel Charles Goring, his Excellency's Brother, who was also seconded by Sir Arthur Slingsby, with his Regiment of Horse, and the rest of the Horse Army behind him; but the Enemy advancing very fast

down the Hill, with Horse, Foot, Dragoons and Cannon, much overpowered us in Number; and our Foot that were drawn to guard the Pass not doing their Duty, many of them deserting, and shooting against us, the Enemy thereupon gained the Pass. The General charged the Enemy twice, but being much overpowered in Number, we were at last beaten off, and obliged to a very disorderly Retreat. The Foot, commanded by Major General Wagstaffe, retired to Langport; as did likewise the Lord Wentworth, and retreated over the Bridge that way to Bridgwater, having broken and burnt down the Draw-bridge behind them: But our Horse were obliged to retreat the ordinary Way, which being a moorish Ground, full of several narrow Passes, where several Officers were obliged to stay, to make good the Retreat for others; so that divers of Distinction were taken, too many to be reckoned up ... our General, with his Brother, Mr Barnwell, Sir Bernard Gascoigne, and myself, with some of our Retinue, were obliged to leave the Army upon our Left, to get over several difficult Places. However, we came at last safe to Bridgwater...⁶

According to Bulstrode both armies were drawn up on hills and faced each other across a bog. There was only one passage between them, 'the Pass'. Notwithstanding the strength of the position, however, the numbers of the enemy, and the misconduct of some of the Royalist troops, enabled the Parliamentarians to prevail.

Heading the list of the many Parliamentarian accounts of the Battle of Langport is the dispatch written by Sir Thomas Fairfax for the House of Lords. His report is almost as terse as Goring's letter to Lord Digby:

It pleased God on Thursday last, by this Army, to give General Goring a Defeat. After he retired from Taunton, he lay with his Army at Lamport, where, with the Advantage of the Rivers and several Garrisons that lay upon it, he put us to great Streights to find a way how to engage with him; though he had great Advantages of Passes, yet his Over-confidence in them proved rather ours than his. Whilst he sent away his Ordnance and Carriages to Bridgwater, he fronted us with his Army. He had passed a narrow Valley that was betwixt us, with a Thousand Musketeers. We forced them to retreat by ours. The Horse seconded them, and put the Army into Rout, pursuing them almost into Bridgwater. Two thousand are taken Prisoners, few slain, good Store of Arms, Two Pieces of Ordnance, with many Colours of both Horse and Foot taken⁷.

These are very much the bare bones of what took place and would clearly have been insufficient to satisfy the hunger for news of the public at large. The need was met by a variety of accounts of the battle published in pamphlets and newsletters. One such was *An Exact and Perfect Relation of the Proceedings of the Army under the Command of Sir Thomas Fairfax ... Dated at Sir Thomas Fairfax' Quarters at Middlesey July 11*. According to this pamphlet the Parliamentarian Council of War was deciding what to do next:

...but it pleased God to end the businesse by an Alarm given us, that the Enemy had possessed the Passe we formerly skirmished at in Pissebury-Bottom, and some of their Foot appeared on the Hill; whereupon, the Forces we had on this side the River [*Yeo*], were drawn forth: Of Foot, Weldens, Herbarts, Inglesbies, Fortescues, Maj. Generals, Russels, Hammands, and Rainsbroughes Regiments, with Sir Hardre Wallers, & the Pikes of the Generals, Mountagues and Pickerings Regiments. The Muskettiers of those three Regiments together, with Col. Iretons Regiment of Horse, being sent on Wednesday night to the affair of Massey. All our Horse, but the three Regiments of Sir Robert Pye, Col. Sheffeild and Col. Ireton, and Okeys Dragoons, who were all with Col. Massey, but one Troop. With these, we drew into the Field, about 10 of the Clock on Thursday, and about 12 or near one, we began to dispute the Passe with them; the Enemy had a Hill, and the Winde, we another Hill, they had the Passe and the Hedges lined before we came; we drew up our Canon, which did us very good service, and made the other side of the Hill so hot, that they could not come down to relieve their men; presently, the Forlorn-Hope were commanded down to cleer the Hedges, which

they did, seconded with Weldens Regiment, which was next them ...

The enemy had but two Pieces of Ordnance, small ones, having sent the rest, with most of their Carriages, to Bridgewater. The Passe being gained, the Horse went on. Major Bethel had the honour of the first Charge of Horse, who did it very gallantly, charging a Body of the enemy with a Troop, disordered them; and being over-born with a fresh Body, retreated slowly a little way, to Major Disbrough, who commands the Generals Regiment of Horse, where he rallied, and charged again, and they with him, and put the enemy to a foul Retreat, which they never recovered. Part of their Foot, with some Horse, and their two Pieces of Ordnance, retreated into Langport, of which you shall have a further Account presently. The rest Horse and Foot, as fast as they could, ran towards Bridgewater, except some who scattered themselves into Corn and Woods for their shelter. Those that went towards Bridgewater, were earnestly pursued by our Horse, so that none of their Foot recovered Bridgewater, and very many of their Horse, and divers Colours. The General and Lieutenant General staying with the Foot near Langport, perceived the enemy drawing over at Langport, and going toward Bridgewater on the other side of the River. Whereupon, we found the enemy had quitted it, because, as they say, the Governour refused to hold it without 800 men, which they could not spare: and for a farewell, they fired the Town, to run away by the light. Hereupon, we marched into the Town with Horse, and some Foot, who throw fire and water, pursued on that side the River. With those Horse went Lieutenant-General Cromwell and Colonel Greaves, who overtook their Foot-Colours, and Ordnance, and three loads of Ammunition, which they brought back to Langport⁸.

This account of the battle is valuable. As before we are told about the pass and the hedges, with each side drawn up upon a hill. But we are also informed that the pass was in Pibsbury Bottom, which is promisingly specific.

Another description of the Battle of Langport is contained in the pamphlet *A More Exact Relation of the Great Defeat given to Gorings Army in the West; By the victorious Sir Thomas Fairfax. Sent in a Letter from Captain Blackwell, to his father in London*. Blackwell provides useful topographical information, mentioning the brook that flowed through the bottom of the pass:

The next morning the enemy were all drawne out of Langport, on that side of the river where our Quarters were, wee marched forthwith towards them: with 7 Regiments of horse and one Company of Dragoons, and 8 Regiments of foote, and drew up against them in a Compania within a mile of Langport upon one hill, they being upon another, and there was betwixt us a smal valley, and only a road way to passe through, the sides of the valley being enclosed grounds by hedges and a small brooke running in the bottome betweene us. Here we had some skirmishing with our horse, till at last the enemy finding it would be much to their disadvantage to lose, or to suffer us to march up that way, they endeavoured to make it good by lining the hedges with Musquetters, but we resolved about 10 of the clocke in the morning to force our way (although they had also placed 2 peeces of Ordnance on the top of the hill in the roade way). When they perceived what we intended by our drawing towards them, they sent Dragoones to make good the passe, and as we thought, intended to draw off their Musquetters, but before they could draw them off, we had engaged them by forlorne hopes of Musquetters, drawn downe to the hedges, both on the right hand and the left of that passe, which they withstood a while stoutly; but having drawne up our great Guns, and given them about 50 or 60 great shot, their horse began to retreat, and their foote could not abide so much heat, as they found in our Musquetters, of both forlorne hopes; whereupon our horse began to advance up the way: then their foote ran from the hedges. The Regiments late Lieut. Generalis own Regiment (for it is now devided into two) being in the Van, advanced up the hill, and Major Bethell of one of those Regiments gave the horse such a gallant charge up the

hill, that they after a long dispute with him quitted the ground, and gave liberty for the rest of our Horse to come up; who found them not resolved for a long dispute, and therefore charging them desparately the enemy all faced about, and ran away both horse and foote most shamefully: The foot most of them into Langport which was within half a mile of them, but for hast threw downe all their armes by the way, and the Horse, all that were on this side the River, towards Bridgewater...⁹

Greater detail about the nature of Major Bethel's success against the massed ranks of Goring's horsemen is supplied in *A More full Relation of the great Battell fought betweene Sir Tho. Fairfax, and Goring, on Thursday last. Made in the House of Commons by Lieut. Col. Lilbourne, the last Messenger that came from the Army*. Lilburne began by explaining how the Parliamentarians first learnt that the enemy had advanced out of Langport. Countrymen informed Fairfax that Goring was sending his guns and baggage back to Bridgwater.

Upon which the Gen: caused all things to be set in order for the Battell, and ordered Colonell Rainsborow to draw out about 1500 musketers for commanded partees to dispossesse the Enemy of the hedges which they had lined very thicke, that so the Passe might be gained which was but very narrow betwixt us and the Enemy, the Cannoners ordered their Guns, the muskets and Cannon playing very hot, the Cannoniers playing their parts as gallently as ever I saw Gunners in my life, who made the ground very hot for the Enemy to stand upon: It coming to Major Bethels turne to charge with his forlorne of horse, which consisted of 3 Troops of Col. Wales Regiment, Viz. Major Bethels, Captaine Evinsons, and Capt. Groves: Major Desborow with 3 Troops of the Generalls own Regiment being to second them, Bethell upon command given, led on his own troop through the water which was deepe and dirty and very narrow, the Enemy having a very large body at the tope of the lane, many times over his number, charged them with as much gallantry as ever I saw men in my life, forcing them with the sword to give ground, which made way for Capt. Evinsons Troope to draw out of the lane, and front with him, driving the enemies great body and their reserve up the hill, but a very great fresh body of the Enemies horse coming upon them, forced them to retreat to Capt. Grove who was their reserve, who drawing his men close, received the enemy with much bravery & resolution, and gave liberty to his friends to rally and front with him who all three charged the enemies numerous bodies very furiously and routed them quite, which made way for our musketers to run up the hedges and gaule the enemy; and for Major Desborow to draw his 3 Troops out of the lane and front with Bethell, upon which 6 Troops, divers mighty bodies of the enemies came, and haveing disputed it soundly with their swords, the foot marching up furiously, and the other Troops carered up; God tooke away the enemies Courage, and away they run: Of which charge of Major Bethell, I heard the Generall, Lieutenant general, and all the chiefe Officers that saw it, say, it was one of the bravest that ever their eies beheld...¹⁰

Of the other instant accounts of the Battle of Langport many, such as those that appeared in *The Kingdomes Weekly Intelligencer*¹¹ and *The Parliaments Post*¹², are derivative, repeating what had been printed elsewhere. The information contained in the pamphlet *The Coppie of A Letter from Sir Thomas Fairfax his Quarters to the Parliament, concerning the great Battell betweene Sir Thomas Fairfax and Goring at Langport on Thursday the 10 of July 1645*, is representative of what appears in them:

...the last night wee quartered at Sutton, and this morning by three of the clock, drew out into Sutton field, having with us but seven Regiments of horse ... which were not in all 2000 horse. Of foot we had all, but the Muskettiers of three Regiments ... Early in the morning the enemies appeared in the field, and about 7 a clock they had made themselves masters of of a passe which lay in the midst between our body and theirs, had lined the hedges between us and them, with at least 2000 muskettiers; so that the passage to them was extream dangerous, being so streight, that four horse could hardly passe abreast, and that up to the belly in water;

they lying so in flanks and fronts to receive us. In that posture they stood till nigh eleven of the clock, having in the interim sent away most of their Traine, and Baggage, led horse and other lumber, to Bridgwater; being resolved to make good their retreat thither, which they conceived they could, having such an advantageous passe thither; we understanding their intentions by some Scouts, and other countrymen, resolved to charge them; and accordingly drew down a commanded party of muskettiers to beat them from the hedges, which was done with a gallant resolution advancing the same time with two Regiments of horse into the lane, all that we could draw up in the front was but a single troop, and that commanded by Bethell, the enemy standing ready with 3 bodies of horse, of about a 1000 to charge him, he with a single troop charged and broke two of their divisions, of about 400, received the charge of the third division both on front and flank, was somewhat overborne at last, and forced to retire to the Generalls Regiment, which was about 100 yards behind. Desborough, with the Generals troop, sheltered him by his flank to rally, and charge up himselfe with about 200 horse of the Generals Regiment, disposeth the enemy and set them all a running, gained freedome by it for all our horse and foot, to draw into bodies, sent the enemy running, not being able to endure another charge...¹³

The pamphlet included, as a postscript, the report of the scout who brought the letter; his description of the approaches to the battlefield is worth citing: 'Sir Tho. Fairfax marched towards the enemy, discovered them when hee was with his body by the windmills, between Lamport and Summerton, the enemy were then on the Hills in Lamport field about two mile and a half off, the water being between them'. This evidence should be borne in mind.

Among other accounts of the Battle of Langport that of Richard Baxter, chaplain to Whalley's Regiment, is well known¹⁴. However, it was written after the Restoration and adds little. Nor does Oliver Cromwell's brief account, sent to a Member of Parliament and subsequently published, shed new light: it is chiefly memorable for his enthusiastic verdict on events: 'Thus you have Long-Sutton added to Naesby mercy: And to see this, is it not to see the face of God?'¹⁵ But one final account of Langport that is worth quoting at length is contained in Joshua Sprigge's *Anglia Rediviva*. Sprigge was another chaplain who served with the New Model Army. He published his considered history of its campaigns in 1647.

Whilst the counsell of War were in debate ... Intelligence came that the enemy was advanced with his foot from Langport to the pass, and had lined the hedges thick with musquetiers, and drawne up his Ordnance; this resolved the question at the councell of War, without putting it, whereupon the Generall and Lieutenant-Generall Cromwell, and all the Officers instantly mounted, rode up to the field, perceived the enemy to put himselfe in a posture for an engagement; instantly the Army was ordered to be put in Battalia, the forlorne hope of horse and foot drew out, Ordnance were drawne downe to places of advantage, messengers were sent to recall most of the horse and foot, lately sent to assist Major-Gen. Massey, but before they could come up, our Ordnance began to play (a good while before the foot engaged) doing great execution upon the body of the enemies Army, both horse and foot, who stood in good order upon the hill (about musquet shot from the passe) and forcing them to draw off their Ordnance, and their horse to remove their ground; Our foot advanced down the hill to the pass, and with admirable resolution charged the enemy from hedge to hedge till they got the pass; the enemies horse upon this drew downe towards us, whereupon our horse advanced over the passe up the hill to the enemy; the Forlorne-hope of horse commanded by Major Bethell, gave a valiant and brave charge indeed, broke that body that charged him, and the next reserve: our reserve of horse that was commanded by Major Desborough, very resolutely charged the next standing bodies of the enemy so home, that instantly they put them to a disorderly retreat, & our musquetiers came close up to our horse, firing upon the enemy, whereupon their Regiments of white Colours, and black Colours of foot, before ever they engaged, marched away apace; the Forlorne under Major Bethell, and those under Major

Desborough, were going in pursuit of the chase, but receiving orders to stay till more bodies of horse were come up, that the pursuit might be orderly, and with good reserves, in case the enemy should face about, and charge againe, (which was not impossible) they obeyed their orders, as good souldiers will, though it check their sweetest pleasure (as to pursuing a flying enemy was no less:) when the enemy had fled about two miles they made a stand in a plaine green field, (where the passage out was narrow) called Aller Drove, but received only a piece of a charge, and seeing our bodies comeing on orderly and fast, faced about, and never stood after ... We pursued the Enemy within two miles of Bridgewater, (whither the enemy fled,) doing execution upon them all the way (being eight miles in length) took about 1400 prisoners, about 1200 horse, and divers Officers of quality ... on the other hand, it was a victory as cheap to us, as dear to them; we lost no Officer, not twenty common soldiers; some fourteen or sixteen of Major Bethels troop were hurt, and himself shot in the right hand¹⁶.

Once the New Model Army's Forlorn Hope had cleared the two regiments of Royalist infantry guarding the pass, the Parliamentarian cavalry could advance. Goring's Horse at the head of the pass was unable to withstand them and the Royalists had to withdraw. As instructed, the Royalist Foot on the right flank withdrew through Langport. They were relatively unmolested; pursuit on that wing was belated. The Royalist cavalry on Ham Down, however, were more roughly handled as they fled north-westwards in the direction of Bridgewater. Their attempt to regroup on Aller Drove, two miles away, was quickly defeated.

Since the unanimity of the sources leave us in little doubt about the course taken by the Battle of Langport it is not proposed to rehearse the facts. However, as indicated earlier in the report, there has been, in the past, disagreement about the precise location of the battlefield, and this issue must be addressed.

Because we know that the New Model Army advanced on Langport from Long Sutton, at first sight it seems fair to assume that the battle was fought at a point on a direct line between the two. This assumption would place the battlefield between Pibsbury and Huish Episcopi on the site of the modern road. In as far as early historians like Clements Markham, author of *The Life of the Great Lord Fairfax* (1870), thought about the issue, this is where they imagined the fight to have taken place¹⁷.

However, as Samuel Gardiner first pointed out, there is at the Huish Episcopi crossing no hill, and the presence of hills on the battlefield is attested to by all who witnessed the fighting. Gardiner therefore relocated the battlefield at Wagg Bridge¹⁸, nearly a mile further north on the Somerton to Langport road: the proximity of Pict's Hill to the west of the bridge and the Pitney Hills to the east provided both armies with elevated ground on which to position themselves.

Hugh Norris, whose article 'The Battle of Langport' appeared in the *Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society Proceedings* in 1894, was aware of Gardiner's belief. Nonetheless he felt that the battle occurred elsewhere. After close examination of the ground he opted for a site at the foot of Ham Down, the hill occupied by the Royalists, where the footpath running north-west from Windmill Lane crosses the Wagg Rhyne. This, he believed, was the location of the ford (or pass) forced by the Parliamentarians. He detected evidence of an old right of way¹⁹. Norris's argument was then expanded in conclusions arrived at - apparently independently - by Major G F Browne, writing in the *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* the following year. He too believed the battle to have been fought midway between the Pibsbury and Wagg bridges. Browne repeated Gardiner's objection that lower down the Wagg Rhyne, between Pibsbury and Huish, there is no hill. He had also seen an eighteenth century map of Somerset and noticed that the modern road between Huish and Pibsbury did not then exist: he considered this another reason against placing the battle on the flattish ground to the south. Browne argued too against siting the battle at Wagg Bridge, mainly on the grounds that it was too far away from Pibsbury to be referred to by participants in the battle as Pibsbury Bottom.

When Colonel Burne wrote a chapter on Langport in *More Battlefields of England* (1952) he restored the

battlefield to a position between Huish and Pibsbury. He took issue with Browne, arguing that there existed a perceptible slope, albeit a gentle one, running down to the Wagg Rhyne. He thought it 'only natural' that there should always have been a road between Pibsbury and Huish, and he believed the modern line of the road the obvious route for it to take²¹.

Burne's arguments, however, do not convince. He dismisses the notion that there were fully-fledged hills at Langport because 'ancient chroniclers and writers were prone to exaggerate physical features, partly because they had only a limited vocabulary ... and partly because features become enlarged in the memory in the course of time'. But we are not dealing here with medieval chroniclers; moreover, the majority of accounts of the battle appeared within days of it taking place, not years afterwards. Burne too persists in ignoring the evidence that the Duck's Hill road between Pibsbury and Huish did not exist at the time of the battle, a fact confirmed by Langport's historian²². The Royalist dispositions are themselves good evidence that the pass could not have been at Huish: the presence of the River Yeo immediately to the south would have left insufficient room for the Foot to deploy. Neither, for that matter, could the Parliamentarians have advanced to a pass at Huish having drawn out, as Bulstrode averred, to left and right: Watery Lane, the original road between Huish and Pibsbury, is hard against the river.

This leaves either the pass mid-way along Wagg Drove or Wagg Bridge as the potential locations of the battle. In either case, Ham Down provides the hill on the west side. In favour of the former location are that the valley of the Wagg Rhyne at the foot of the hill is sufficiently contiguous to Pibsbury for its designation as 'Pissebury' [Pibsbury] Bottom to be acceptable. On the south-east side of the Rhyne there is a slightly elevated track to provide the 'pass', with ground to either side that even today requires draining to prevent it reverting to marshland. Indeed, the County Sites and Monuments Record contains evidence of a trackway continuing from the pass north-westwards, but the absence of such a route on the 1779 map and the fact that it would cross the axis of the furlongs in the open field both suggest that such a route is of much greater antiquity and was already redundant by the time the fields were laid out in the medieval period.

True, not all Norris and Browne's arguments in favour of the site carry conviction. They draw attention to the reference to windmills in one widely circulated account of the battle, believing this embraces the windmill that used to stand north of Pibsbury near Windmill Lane. But they forget that the Scout, whose report they adduce as evidence, was referring to windmills 'between Lamport and Summerton', with the enemy 'then on the Hills in Lamport field about two mile and a half off'. This places Sir Thomas Fairfax, when he first discovered the whereabouts of the Royalists, rather further away from Langport than Pibsbury. The windmill after which the Lane was named was in fact first built in 1797. Against this location, too, is the evidence from early maps that the only enclosures certainly at this location in 1645 were contained within the dog-leg of Wagg Rhyne; across the rhyne was unenclosed moorland until 1799, giving way on the drier ground directly onto the open fields of Ham Down.

We have seen, on the other hand, that the land at Wagg Bridge fits well the descriptions of the eye-witnesses. Here, the Somerton to Langport Road descends steeply into the valley with its small enclosed fields. Wagg Rhyne was fordable here by armoured troops and cavalry. Ascending the hill on the Langport side, the roadway would emerge from the enclosed land into the open fields. Tengore Lane is the likely approach route for the Parliamentary army, which was ordered forward after Fairfax had observed the situation 'when hee was with his body [*bodyguard?*] by the windmills, between Lamport and Summerton', probably at the crest of Somerton Hill from where the necessary view is possible. Also in favour of the Wagg Bridge location is Goring's military imperative to protect his three escape routes northwards via Wearne and Aller back to Bridgwater, escape routes which would have been vulnerable to an outflanking manoeuvre had the Wagg Bridge crossing not been blocked⁺. In the end, the evidence in favour of the Wagg Bridge location outweighs the evidence of the ambiguous reference to Pibsbury Bottom and the trackway at the more south-westerly location.

⁺ The contribution on this point and others of Col. G.H. Edwards (Retd.) is gratefully acknowledged.

Indication of Importance

Coming hard on the heels of its success at Naseby, Langport was another important victory for the New Model Army. The largest remaining Royalist field army had been heavily defeated, not so much in terms of casualties suffered (although the number of men taken prisoner was high) but in terms of the damage inflicted on morale. Goring admitted as much: 'the consequences of this blow is very much for there is so great terror and dejection amongst our men that I am confident at this present they could not be brought to fight against half their number'²³. Bridgwater fell soon after the battle, leaving the Parliamentarians in control of an unbroken chain of strongpoints from the south coast to the Bristol Channel. This acted as a *cordon sanitaire* for Royalist Devon and Cornwall, freeing the New Model Army for offensive operations elsewhere.

There is a large amount of written material for the Battle of Langport, principally pamphlet and newsletter accounts. The course of the battle is therefore easy to reconstruct. It proves slightly more problematic to identify precisely the heart of the battlefield, 'the pass', but in the end it is possible to feel that even this has been accomplished successfully.

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.

Beginning in the south, the boundary of the battlefield area follows the railway embankment for convenience, on the line of which coincidentally was positioned the Parliamentary left. Field boundaries and the lines of Hamdown Road and Furpits Lane form the western boundary behind the line of Goring's Horse and reserve. To the east, the boundary picks up Tengore Lane and the Parish boundary, only beyond which could Fairfax's army have deployed with freedom of movement, before crossing the B3153 and following the lane towards Pitney behind the Parliamentary right wing. The battlefield is closed by following field boundaries across the valley on the north side.

Notes

1. Gardiner, Samuel R, *History of the Great Civil War 1642-1649* (reprint, New York 1965) II 270-271.
2. Norris, Hugh 'The Battle of Langport'. *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society* XL (1894) pp123-40; Browne, Major G F 'From Leicester to Langport, 1645'. *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* XXXIX (1895) p253-267.
3. The information in this section is derived from the following sources: *A History of the County of Somerset* III ed. R W Dunning (OUP 1974) in the Victoria County History series; Somerset Record Office DD/MKG 27, an estate map of 1779; David Melville Ross *Langport and its Church* (Langport 1911); and 'Somerset Maps' *Somerset Record Society* 76 (1981), which reproduces the Day & Masters and Greenwood maps.
4. Captain Blackwell, *infra*.
5. Goring to Lord Digby, 12 July 1645. British Library Add. MSS 18982 f.70.
6. *Memoirs and Reflections upon the Reign and Government of King Charles the First and King Charles the Second* by Sir Richard Bulstrode (London 1721) pp137-140.
7. *Journals of the House of Lords* VII 496.
8. Thomason Tract E.292(28) in the British Library.
9. Thomason Tract E.293(8) in the British Library.
10. Thomason Tract E.293(3) in the British Library.
11. Thomason Tract E.293(1) in the British Library.
12. Thomason Tract E.293(2) in the British Library.
13. Thomason Tract E.261(24) in the British Library.
14. *Reliquiae Baxterianae: or, Mr Richard Baxter's Narrative of the most Memorable Passages of His Life and Times* (London 1696) pp54-5.
15. *Good Newes Out of the West, Declared in a Letter sent from Lieutenant Generall Cromwell, To a Worthy Member of the House of Commons*. Thomason Tract E.293(18) in the British Library.
16. Sprigge, Joshua *Anglia Rediviva; England's Recovery: being the history of the motions, actions, and successes of the army under ... Sir Thomas Fairfax* (London 1647) pp64-6.
17. Markham, Clements *Life of the Great Lord Fairfax* (London 1870) p236.
18. Gardiner *op. cit.*
19. Norris *op. cit.*
20. Browne *op. cit.*

21. Burne, Lt.-Col. A H *More Battlefields of England* (London 1952) p201.
22. Ross, *Langport and its Church* p296.
23. Goring to Lord Digby, 12 July 1645. British Library Add MSS 18982 f.70.