

English Heritage Battlefield Report: Sedgemoor 1685

Sedgemoor (6 July 1685)

Parishes: Chedzoy, Westonzoyland

District: Sedgemoor

County: Somerset

Grid Ref: ST 352357 (centred on the battlefield monument)

Historical Context

The Monmouth Rebellion of June-July 1685 had its roots in the Exclusion Crisis of the late 1670s, when there had existed a popular movement to remove the Roman Catholic James, Duke of York, from the succession to the throne. A key figure in the agitation was James Scott, Duke of Monmouth. As King Charles II's eldest bastard son he stood to benefit if the Duke of York, the King's brother and legitimate heir, ceased to be next in line to the throne. Rumours began to circulate that King Charles had secretly married Monmouth's mother which, since Monmouth was a protestant and, following his victory against rebels in Scotland at Bothwell Bridge (June 1679), immensely popular, people were more than willing to believe. Substituting the Duke of Monmouth for the Duke of York as King Charles's heir appeared a simple solution to the difficulties currently besetting the state. Indeed, so seductive was the message that Charles, who had a profound respect for the natural succession, more than once, early in 1680, felt it necessary to deny that he had ever married Monmouth's mother.

In August 1680 Monmouth made a triumphal tour of the West, which at the time was likened to a Royal progress. The tour, however, was in many ways the high water mark of his success. During 1682 and 1683 he became involved in intrigues directed not only against the Duke of York but ultimately the King himself. This was dangerous. In 1684 Monmouth considered it prudent to spend the year in exile. He was still there in the Netherlands in February 1685 when Charles II died and the Duke of York succeeded to the throne as James II.

After Charles's death Monmouth began to fall in with others who, for a variety of reasons, had thought it safer in recent years to be outside Britain, including old republicans and Scottish rebels. Together the conspirators weighed the possibility of deposing the new king whose catholicism, they hoped, would weaken his support. After some deliberation Monmouth eventually decided to commit himself and, in May 1685, coordinating his actions with those of the Earl of Argyll, who sailed to raise the standard of rebellion in Scotland, he led a small expedition from Holland to Dorset, landing at Lyme Regis on 11 June. Remembering his triumph in the West in 1680, Monmouth hoped for a favourable reception.

Monmouth was able to gather a force 2-3,000 strong at Lyme and on 15 June he left for Somerset, reaching Taunton on the eighteenth. Here his army increased to 7,000 men and he had himself declared king. Monmouth's objective now was Bristol. But as he approached the city Monmouth's nerve failed him. He failed to order an attack, turning towards Bath instead. This city too refused to surrender and although Monmouth's army had the better of a skirmish at Norton St. Philip on 27 June the arrival of news the following day that Argyll had been defeated further deflated the spirits of the rebels. They retreated to Bridgwater, having heard reports that a large body of peasantry had gathered there to reinforce them. Upon arrival at the town on 3 July, however, the peasants' numbers were found to be small. Two days later the Royal army commanded by the Earl of Feversham camped outside Bridgwater at the village of Westonzoyland. By now the rebel army had been diminished by desertion and with the desperation of a gambler's last throw Monmouth decided to chance all upon a night attack. Darkness and surprise, he hoped, would make the greater discipline of the regular troops in the Royal army of less consequence.

Location and description of the Battlefield

The Battlefield of Sedgemoor lies just to the north of the village of Westonzoyland, three miles from Bridgwater. The landscape is very flat and the low-lying ground (only an average of 13 feet above sea level) requires a considerable number of dykes - or rhyes, as they are known locally - to keep it drained of water. To the east of the Battlefield is the King's Sedgemoor Drain, the chief rhyne in the district. The Chedzoy New Cut, which crosses the Battlefield from east to west, is another important element in the drainage system.

Westonzoyland itself stands on slightly higher and firmer ground. So too does the village of Chedzoy (approximately 25 feet above sea level), a mile and a half away to the north. On this higher ground near Chedzoy arable is grown successfully; the spongy low-lying land elsewhere is nearly all given over to pasture.

Landscape Evolution

We are fortunate in possessing a clear impression of the nature of the Battlefield of Sedgemoor in 1685 from a number of plans that were drawn of it soon afterwards. These confirm that the Battlefield has changed little over the past 300 years. The best were drawn by Andrew Paschall, the rector of Chedzoy from 1662 to 1696, who sketched more than one to accompany the separate accounts of the Battle of Sedgemoor written by him. Edward Dummer, who fought in the Royal army, supplied another to accompany his description of the Battle.

Pleasingly, both Paschall and Dummer's plans are similar. Both show Chedzoy with a large cornfield - the village's East Field - to the south. The shape of the cornfield matches that of the 'island' of raised ground picked out by the contours of the Ordnance Survey map today. Both also show the Royal army drawn up behind a ditch, the Bussex Rhyne. Although this particular rhyne has since been filled in the accuracy of Paschall and Dummer's representation of its course is confirmed by modern day infra red aerial photography: on the developed photograph the moister areas of the old drainage channel are visible as a dark band¹.

Paschall marks on his maps a watercourse called the Black Ditch to the east of the Battlefield, but this has been superseded by the King's Sedgemoor Drain, constructed in 1797-98. The end of the eighteenth century was when the landscape altered most. Chedzoy New Cut was dug and under Acts of Parliament of 1795 and 1797 the low-lying moor was enclosed. Chedzoy parish, which had previously terminated at the drove around the East field, had its boundary extended to its current position at the New Cut².

Features such as the Langmoor Stone or Langmoor stepping stones, mentioned in the different narratives of the Battle of Sedgemoor, at one time marked crossing points over watercourses, but with the improvement in drainage they have disappeared. Nevertheless, by studying Paschall's maps it is possible to determine where such important staging points of the Duke of Monmouth's audacious night march were once located.

Despite these changes to the appearance of the landscape, its character has been unchanging. The low-lying nature of the moors has meant that permanent pasture has been the land-use to the present day. Where the ground rises above the prehistoric peat moors, the land has been continuously under the plough.

Recent Ordnance Survey maps reveal that within the past thirty years the village of Westonzoyland has expanded at an increased pace. Housebuilding has been particularly marked by Broadstone Farm, between Monmouth House and the Westonzoyland to Bridgwater road. Although development has not impinged on the Battlefield as yet, it is getting nearer.

The Battle: its Sources and Interpretation

Amongst the Stopford-Sackville Manuscripts, with a series of other papers dealing with the Monmouth Rebellion held by the Earl of Sunderland (King James II's secretary of state), is a document which describes the

progress of the Royal army's commander, Lord Feversham, between his departure from London and victory at Sedgemoor. This is an authoritative official account of the campaign, written whilst events were still fresh. Its description of the Battle of Sedgemoor is as follows:

And on Sunday morning, being the 5th of July, marcht from Somerton along Sedgmoore towards Bridgwater, with a designe to encamp at Midlesey, but Collonell Ramsey who was sent before to set out the ground, found a more convenient place by Weston within 3 myles of Bridgwater, where my Lord Feversham, after he viewed the ground, ordered our foot to encamp, behind a convenient ditch that runs from Weston into the Moor, which they did in one lyne, leaving room between their tents and the ditch to draw up.

On the left of our foot were our canon, fronting the great road that comes from Bridgwater to Weston, and in the village which was covered by our Camp, were our Horse and Dragoons quartered.

My Lord Feversham ... having notice from stragling people that the Duke of Monmouth had drawne his forces out of Bridgwater into a meadow that joyned to the towne, my Lord sent away Collonell Oglethorpe with a party of horse to the top of a hill on the road from Bridgwater to Bristoll, fearing they would in the night pass that way, and in the evening gave orders for 100 horse and 50 Dragoones to be posted on the right of our camp against a way that goes round by Chedzy towards Bridgwater and that all the rest of the horse in the village should be ready saddled and bridled.

About 11 at night my Lord Feversham rid through our camp visiting the centrys together with the grand and out guards, which were posted as followeth -

On the great road that comes from Bridgwater to Weston was our grand-guard of 40 horse, under the command of Capt. Upcott, before him centryes, and in the Lane between them and them and Bridgwater, patrolls. To the right of our camp and against the way from Bridgwater round by Chedzy was a guard of 100 horse and 50 dragoons, commanded by Major Compton, before them an advanct party, from them centrys, and between them on the way towards Bridgwater, patrolls. Between those two guards came a middle but narrow way from Bridgwater into the Moor, which was guarded by 50 musqueteers, in Pitzy-pound, wal'd man high, to which our horse on the left were ordered to retreat in case of necessity.

... About a quarter after one came Sir Hugh Middleton with one of Collonell Oglethorpe's party to let my Lord know that he could not perceive the least motion of the enemy, and therefore resolved to march directly towards the towne of Bridgwater, untill he mett with some account of them. In the mean while the Rebels by the help of the night marcht undiscovered about a myle up Bristoll Road, turned off on their right hand and came round by Chedzy towards the Moor where we were encamped, so that Collonell Oglethorpe in his march towards Bridgwater fell behind them and got no intelligence of them, but from the centrys they had left in the towne, from whome they understood their army was marcht, which made Collonell Oglethorp take the next and middle way to the Moor.

Our patrols in the meanwhile apprehending the approach of the enemie's vanguard immediately gave notice to our advanct party, and they to our guard of 150 horse under the command of Sir Francis Compton, from whome both our foot that were encampt and the horse in the village took the allarum. My Lord Feversham himselfe hearing the first sound of the trumpet rid directly to the camp, where he found the foot at their armes in a lyne by the Ditch side over which he commanded not a man to stir without order.

By this time Sir Francis Compton and the Enemy's vanguard met, who chancelled one another, and upon a carbine of ours that went off by accident, the Rebels fired, who upon Sir Francis Compton's fire, returned immediatly to their main body. Sir Francis being shot in the breast, Capt. Sands commanded, who soon met with a body of the enemy's horse marching towards him, which Capt. Sands tooke at first for our militia, but finding his mistake immediatly charged and broke them, and then retreated with his hors towards our camp, himselfe and divers of his men being wounded.

How neare the main body of their horse, commanded by my Lord Grey (who passt first into the Moor) came to our camp we know not, nor can certainly learne, it being darke. But a party of their horse did come up, and one of them commanded Capt. Berkly to come over the Ditch to the Generall, whome he found after some discourse to belong to the enemy, and fired. This fire from our foot, we conclude, with the repulse given them by Sir Francis Compton and Capt. Sands, broak and disordered all their horse, because we perceived them afterwards on the left of their foot in great confusion, endeavouring to forme, but could not, while two Batalions of their foot (before whom they were designed to charge), came up within halfe musquet shot of our camp, but they having past through a defile where but few could go abreast, were forced to halt a considerable tyme, to draw up themselves and their other three batalions, with their three peces of canon in order.

My Lord Feversham upon the first approach of their foot immediatly drew Capt. Parker, Capt. Vaughan, Capt. Atherley, and Collonell Villers troops of horse and horse granadeers on the right of the eneemies flank, and returning to our camp met Collonell Oglethorp with his party and our out guards on that side that he had brought in.

These my Lord Feversham marcht behind our foot to the right of our camp, where he found Collonell Orp at the head of a party of our horse, where with Capt. Littleton's troop, Capt. Sande's, Colonell Windham's, and two more troops of my Lord Oxford's, commanded by Lieut. Selby and [Lieut. William] Winde, he drew upp in a body and marcht over the ditch on the left of the enemies forces. Collonell Oglethorp passing over the ditch a little more to the right, mett with a considerable number of the enemyes horse, whom he pusht into the mire and routed (they being in great disorder and confusion were never able to make any great resistance). My Lord Feversham then commanded Colonell Oglethorp to wheele and charge with the rest of our horse on the enemy's flank, giving directions to them all to charge what ere they found before them.

In the mean tyme my Lord Churchill having the command of the foot, seeing every man at his post doing his duty, commanded one troop of his dragoons to march over the ditch between our horse on the left, and our camp, the other two troops being drawne up on the right of the foot under the command of my Lord Cornbury.

On the right of the Scotch forces were 3 peeces of our cannon brought up and planted, which did great execution, the rest of our cannon firing through the intervalls of our own troops, our foot keeping their fire till they had received the enemyes, whose great and small shot flew thickest among my Lord Dumbarton's bataillon, and first Battaillon of Guards commanded by Lieut. Collonell Douglas and the Duke of Grafton, on whose left were the other two batailons of Guards, Colonel Kirk's batailon, and Capt. Trelany's men, commanded by Major Eaton, Collonell Sackvill, Colonell Kirk, and Lieut. Collonell Churchill.

My Lord Feversham returning to our foot ordered Collonell Sacvill to draw his men to the right of the Scotch forces, intending to bring Collonell Kirke's and Trelany's men in their roome. But seeing my Lord Churchill marching with Collonell Kirk's and Trelany's men towards him, he

made Collonell Sackvill halt, and returned to the horse, leaving my Lord Churchill to march them to the right.

The Rebels by this tyme being very uneasie, our foot and canon firing on their front while our horse charged them on both sides, my Lord Feversham commanded all the foot to march over the ditch directly to the enemy, upon which two of their batailons which had stood hitherto very well, gave ground in a body, and soon after fled, Capt. Littleton having beaten them from their cannon, which our foot perceiving ran eagerly to possesse themselves of it, while the Rebels run after the rest of their foot, that had been scowring away for some tyme in the rear in great disorder and confusion, which only our troops next them were sencible off, and durst not pursue them untill 'twas light for fear of being knockt on the head by our owne men, elce but few of them had escaped us, for most of them who did escape were within an hour so disperst that you could not se anywhere ten of their men living.

Some straglers there were which our militia pickt up, while my Lord Feversham and my Lord Churchill marcht into Bridgwater, with some horse and dragoons and 500 foot, whom my Lord left in Bridgwater under the command of Collonell Kirk after my Lord Feversham had sent away Collonell Oglethorp to give his Majesty an account of this happie and great victory, which did not consist in the number slain and taken, (though there were about 14 or 15 hundred kill'd, 200 prisoners, and 22 colours taken on the place) but in the total rout and defeate of above 7,000 rebells by the Kings forces which consisted but of 700 horse and 1,900 foot. The militia being quartered at Midlesey, 'twas impossible for them to come to our assistance, though they came in good order and made great hast³.

Next for consideration are the accounts of the Battlefield of Sedgemoor written by Andrew Paschall, Rector of Chedzoy. While not a participant in the fighting he resided close to the Battlefield and, realising the significance of the events that had unfolded on his doorstep, he attempted to discover what had taken place. His local knowledge and educated background make him an ideal witness.

Paschall's first narrative, contained in a letter written to Dr James, is in the British Library⁴. The second was discovered c.1940 in a box first deposited in Hoare's Bank in 1706⁵. To avoid repetition the two narratives have been combined: material drawn from the first narrative is rendered in plain text, information derived from the second is italicised.

Upon Sunday, July 5, the King's army, consisting of about 4000 men, marched from Somerton. About noon they encamped in Zog, in five regiments, lodge in the camp; 500 horse quarter in Weston; 1500 militia men took up their quarters in Middlesoy, Othery etc, a mile or two distant from Weston ... That evening, between nine and ten of the clock, the Duke leads his army out of Bridgwater with great silence. He did not take the nearest way to Weston, which was three miles in length, by which he went June 22, and returned July 2, but he took the long causey, and so made his march near three miles long before he could reach the King's camp. He left the way by that short causey though Chedsey, though that was nearer and much more commodious, probably to avoid the danger of being discovered ... Avoiding them [the inhabitants], therefore, who knew, generally, nothing of his march, he went by Bradney Lane; which lane he also soon left, probably that he might not come too near to a loyal man's house at the end of that lane, where it turns into the moor, so by Marsh Lane, which was further about, and less commodious, he led the army much incumbered, and retarded, by the narrowness of the lanes into the North Moor.

Paschall dwells upon the fact that the Royal army had numerous parties of cavalry patrolling the area and marvels how they missed the rebels. He also tells an amusing story about the eight men of the Chedzoy Watch who, although aware that Monmouth's army was marching to the attack, 'from country dullness and slowness'

failed to give the alarm.

.... About sunset, a party of the King's Horse came to Langmoor Stone from the Camp and taking with them the Guard there (about 12 or 16 horse) went by North Moor into Bawdrip and afterward up the hill towards [the] Bristol road. They passed by Long Cawsey to Bridgwater town's end and so round the next way to Weston. While they were about Bawdrip, the Duke's army marched into North Moor with great silence, standing still till the Guard party of horse was gone for they were within view of them. This party is supposed to be Col. Ogleshorpe's.

About midnight (probably while the Duke of Monmouth was in North Moor) another party of the King's horse came from Zog by Langmoor Stone and step stones to Parchey Gate, so they marched quite through Chedzoy and round, as is supposed, to the Camp again, yet though they were so near to the enemy marching towards the King's army, those horse made no discovery of them. Guards and sentinels were placed in all the avenues in and about the nearer way from Weston to Bridgwater and in the other and farther way about by which the enemy designed to come. But all were gone (particularly that most necessary Guard at Langmoor Stone and the sentinels that stood near it) before bedtime ... Countrymen, hearing that the Duke was moving, informed divers of the officers and of the King's soldiers of it. JW [John Whiting, a local Quaker] avers that he himself spoke of it to above 500 of them but none would believe it

Only Captain Mackintosh, in the Scots regiment, believed over night, and would have ventured wagers upon it, that the Duke would come. He, in that persuasion, marked out the ground between the tents and the ditch, where his men should stand in case of an attack, and gave directions that all should be in readiness; and it was well he did so; for his regiment being in the right wing was to receive the first assault and main shock...

To return to the Duke's army which we left in North Moor, they had placed 42 waggons in the ascent of Bulden Hill in Bristol road, with orders to drive on to Axbridge. They bring with them now three great guns, and march with great silence. The Lord Grey led the horse, supposed to be about 800. *[Of these Monmouth] committed 500 horse to the Lord Grey with this design, that they should march about quarter of an hour before the main body of the army directly to the Upper Plungeon [a crossing of the Bussex Rhyne] and, in going over, they should silently get behind the camp, seize the officers in their beds, as also the 18 guns and 160 wagons standing all together and, if occasion were, turn the guns, as they might have done easily, upon the King's Camp and this gave them a terrible alarm on that side. The known ways being very convenient for doing all this. While this was to be in doing, the Duke, with the body of his army, was to make the onset. These were commanded to march with all possible silence. Their first orders were to fire and run over the ditch within which the camp was, it being presumed that the Lord Grey with his 500 horse should have drawn the army in the camp into the town, by the alarm designed to be given from thence. When all this was just putting into execution and the Duke's army was marching after midnight into Langmoor with great silence, a pistol was discharged about step stones or Langmoor Stone. Captain Hucker is said to have owned it at his trial, as done by him to give the King's army notice of their danger near. Immediately a trooper rides from that place-ward full speed to the camp [and], standing on the outside of the ditch, calls with all imaginable earnestness, 20 times at least, 'Beat your drums, the enemy is come. For the Lord's sake, beat your drums'. He then rode back with the like speed the same way he came. Among some of the King's soldiers, particularly the Scots, there were expectations of the enemy before this, yet all continued quiet. Now the drums beat, the drummers running to it, even bare-foot for haste. All fly to arms. All are drawn out of their tents and in 5 battalions stand in the space between the tents and the ditch, [those] fronting the ditch not having their clothes or arms all on and ready.*

Then were they expecting the enemy.

The Lord Grey, with his 500 horse, missed the Upper Plungeon. Falling before it, they marched on by the outside of the ditch, seeking a way over, which was not to be found for the horse, though the ditch was then dry enough for the foot to have got over. When [the] horse were come so far as the Scots battalions, they were demanded who they were for. They pretend they are friends and from the Duke of Albemarle. They are believed by the Scots and let pass. At length they are discovered and fired at and so march off. Those wheeling toward the rear of the Duke's army are fired at by their own with some execution, they supposing them to be the enemy coming from the left wing of the King's army. Thus a consternation went into the hinder part of the Duke's army which, by the narrowness of the lanes retarding them, were not come up. The Front also being somewhat sooner engaged than was intended by reason of the Alarm given. Sir Francis Compton stood with a guard at the upper Plungeon. One Jones was commanded with a party of horse to beat him from that passage. He played his part with so much valour, that for the same he was thought not unworthy of a pardon from the General.

*But Sir Francis, though hard beset and wounded yet kept his post so well that the rebels horse behind, said to be 300, went backward on the outside of the ditch toward Sutton Mill, near which they took up their station to see the issue of the fight. When it appeared how things went, they shifted for themselves. Whether Sir Francis were there before the 500 horse missing their way went down toward the camp, or came to the Plungeon afterwards, and so had his encounter with Jones as belonging to the latter 300 horse we do not know. To be sure that worthy gentleman did great service, for had the horse gone over there, notwithstanding the alarm, all might have been lost. It was not above half a quarter of an hour, *the Duke having planted his three guns north of the King's Camp*, before the foot continuing their march appear to the Scots, first in three bodies, then the third lesser body joins with one of the other two. Of these there were 2000 of their prime, and principally Taunton men, led by Wade. By these the fight was managed. The King's soldiers gave them the commendation of stout men, 2000 more, among whom were 1000 scythe men, stood at a distance between Lang Moor Stone and them. These 2000 came not to fight. Many are said to have been behind them who, being hindered by the lanes through which they marched could not come up, before they met cause to run with their fellows. The fight continued not above half an hour. It is said that victory seemed to be inclined to the rebels, and that the King's army was almost in despair. We are next to give an account of the following happy alteration.*

*...the 2000 foot which made the assault were first commanded to run over the ditch. This was as is likely, upon a presumption that the horse, going over the Plungeon, and so into Weston, would have given the alarm behind the King's camp. Accordingly they marched in[to] the Moor with a persuasion that the King's army was running. So Wade is said to have told his men they were; silence they would have broken, though commanded silence, and shouted, had not he, doubting their circumstances, restrained them. But when these foot were come to the ditch, things were found to be otherwise than they hoped, and they were commanded [on] pain of death not to go over. And this might easily put them into some confusion and consternation. *The assault made was chiefly upon the Scots (of whom 'tis said that the Duke of Monmouth was made to believe that they were disposed to come over to him and this by a drummer who ran from them to him into Bridgwater the night before).**

...At length the Scots (who had but four officers in their regiment of 500 men that were [not] killed or wounded) were made to give ground. They are seasonably reinforced by three troops of horse of the King's ... Things being thus, the immediate cause of the rout was this. Upon the alarm the King's horse, said to be 500 quartered in Weston, get up, made ready their horses, and mounted as soon as they may, and get together, and as is said, designing to go to the camp

and fight, miss their way, and ride into Weston town, out of which they pass into the Moor by the road-way leading to Bridgewater, and now they are in the outside of the ditch. By this time three of the King's guns are drawn from the place where they stood altogether, and planted on the inside of the ditch, between it and the tents. These, being fired, made lanes among the rebels, and at the same time with great courage and fury the King's horse break in upon them. This was presently followed with a total rout of the rebels, running every way, and leaving to the King's army an intire victory.

We turn now to accounts of the battle written by eyewitnesses. Edward Dummer, who served with the Royal train of artillery, compiled *A Brief Journal of the Western Rebellion*. His entries for the fifth and sixth of July read as follows:

5th. We Marchd into ye Levell, and in the Evening Encampt at Weston in Sedgmore about 2 Miles from Bridgwater, with the Village on One side and beguirt wth a Dry (but in some places Miery) Ditch on the Other, Fronting ye Moore a Place copious and commodious for Fighting; In our March hither we understood that the Rebels had given out; They would fight in this Place; In ye Evening Coll Oglethorpe advanc'd with a strong Party of Horse to Bridgwater to discover ye motion of the Rebels who were said to be drawn out from thence, and in their March towards Bristoll (as They would have us believe) We securely went to Sleep, The Foot in Camp, and the Horse in Quarters at Weston and Midlesea, saving some Outguards of Horse upon Our Right and Left.

6th. At 2 a Clock this Morning (securely sleeping) Our Camp was Rouzd by the near approach of the Rebels; a darke Night and thick Fogg, covering the Moore, Supiness and a preposterous confidence of Our Selves, with an undervaluing of the Rebels, that many dayes before, had made us make such tedious Marches had put Us, into ye Worst circumstances of Surprize. Our Horse in Quarters, Some Near, Some Remote, Our Artillery distinct, & in a separate Post, to yt of the Camp, neither immediatly accomodable to a Generall Resistance; Thus we Recd ye Alarme from Sr Francis Compton upon the Right, whose Successfull Charging ye whole Body of the Rebels Horse, Command^d by the Ld Gray, with his Single Party of 150 Horse and Dragoons Broke their Body of near 1200 and Routed ym; From this Alarme, there seemes to be 2 Minuits distance, to a Volley of Small Shott from the Body of the Rebels Foot, consisting of abt 6000 (but All came not up to Battell) in, upon the Right of our Camp, followed by 2 or 3 Rounds from Three Pieces of Cannon brought up within 116 Paces of the Ditch Ranging Our Battallions. Our Artillery was near 500 Paces distant, and the Horses Drivers not easily found, through confusion and darkness; Yet Such, was the Extraordinary cheerfullness of our Army, that They were allmost as readily drawn up, to Receive them, as a Praeinform'd expectation could have Posted ym, tho: upon so Short & dangerous a Warning; Six of Our Nearest Gunns were, with ye greatest diligence imaginable advanced, Three upon the Right of the Scotts, and Three in the Front of the Kinges first Battalion; and did very considerable execution upon the Enemies; They Stood near an hour and halfe wth great Shouting and Courage, briskly firing; & then throwing down their Armes fell into Rout and Confusion; The Number of the Slaine wth about 300 Taken, according to ye most Modest computacon might make up 1000, We Losing but 27 on the Spott and having abt 200 Wounded. A Victory very considerable where Providence was absolutely a greater Friend, then Our Own Conduct - The Dead in the Moor we Buried, and the Country People tooke care for ye intermt of those, slain in the Corne fields⁶.

Nathaniel Wade, a Bristol lawyer, commanded the Red Regiment in Monmouth's army. He was captured in the wake of Sedgemoor and made a confession to save his life. Wade's narrative deals with the rebellion as a whole but his description of the battle is worth quoting in isolation.

About eleven o'clock that night, we marched out of the town. I had the vanguard of the foot, with the Duke's regiment; and we marched in great silence along the road that leads from Bridgwater to Bristol, until we came to the lane that passed into the moor where the King's army was. Then we made a halt for the horse to pass by, and received our orders; which were, that the horse should advance first, and push into the King's camp, and mixing with the King's foot, endeavour to keep them from coming together; that the cannon should follow the horse, and the foot the cannon, and draw all up in one line, and so finish what the horse had begun, before the King's horse or cannon could get in order. The horse advanced to the ditch, and never farther; but on the firing of some of the King's foot, ran out of the field. By that time our foot came up, we found our horse had gone, and the King's foot in order. I advanced within thirty or forty paces of the ditch, being opposite to the Scotch battalion of the King's, as I learnt since; and there was forced to make a full stop, to put the battalion in some order; the Duke having caused them to march exceeding swift after he saw his horse run, that they were all in confusion. By that time I had put them in some order, and was preparing to pass the ditch (not intending to fire till I had advanced close to our enemies) Colonel Matthews was come up, and began to fire at a distance; upon which the battalion I commanded fired likewise, and after that I could not get them to advance. We continued in that station firing for about an hour and a half, when it being pretty light, I perceived all the battalions on the left, running (who, as I since understood, were broken by the King's horse of the left wing), and finding my own men not inclinable to stand, I caused them to face about, and made a kind of disorderly retreat to a ditch a great way behind us, where we were charged by a party of horse and dragoons, and routed; above one hundred and fifty getting over the ditch. I marched with them on foot to Bridgwater...⁷

Wade's confession was one of the sources used by King James II when he wrote his own account of the Battle of Sedgemoor. Although the King was writing at second hand he was in a position to ask questions. He had also served as a soldier during the 1650s so he understood the military art.

[Monmouth] began to march as soon as it grew night, taking his way about, at the head of the moor, leaving Chedsy on his right hand; hoping by taking that compass, to surprise the King's troops; who, he believed, would not expect him that way, it being also the best way he could take to attack them, the strait way being a perpetual defile till they were very near Weston, the camp to which Lord Feversham had advanced with all the King's troops; which were about 1800 foot, in six small battalions, and some 700 horse and dragoons, leaving the Earl of Pembroke at Middlesea, and villages adjacent, with the militia, horse and foot. The post of Weston was a very well chosen one, for such a small body of men, and very secure, the foot being camped with their rear to the village, and had their front covered by a ditch, which serves for a drain to the moor; and though it was then a dry season, was not to be past by horse but in one or two places; and it was this drain deceived the Duke of Monmouth, for he not knowing of it, thought the foot lay open, and consequently the whole quarter.

...[Monmouth] had two defiles to pass after he was in the moor, the one presently after he came on it, and the other about a mile from the camp. He drew up in two columns after he had passed the first, the foot on the right, and the horse on the left, and so marched till he came to the second. There his horse passed over first, which were some eight squadrons; his cannon, which were but three small iron guns, marched over after them, at the head of the foot, which consisted of five great battalions, each of which had one company of at least one hundred scythemen, instead of grenadiers; the horse commanded by Lord Grey, with the title of Lieutenant General; the five regiments of foot, by Wade, Lieutenant Colonel to the Duke of Monmouth's own regiment; Matthews commanded the next, then Holmes, Buffet, and Foulks. As they

were passing the last defile, the advanced centries of the horse-guards discovered them, and galloped back to advertise Sir Francis Compton of it, who immediately gave the alarm to the camp, and staid in his post till he received a faint charge from an advanced party of some of the rebels horse; who, after having fired their carabines, and received some shot from his party, went off on their side, and he drew back to the camp on the right hand of our foot behind the ditch. Whilst this passed, the Duke of Monmouth hearing the alarm was taken in the King's camp, ordered Lord Grey to march fast on with the horse to fall in amongst the tents of the foot, and to take them by the flanks, not knowing any thing of the ditch which covered them, and told him he would march after him with the foot as fast as he could. And now in the camp, so soon as they had the alarm, the foot stood to arms, and were in a moment drawn up in battle at the head of their tents, in very good order, and the horse were drawing out of the village as fast as they could. The foot were in six battalions; the first on the right was composed of Dunbarton's, one company of which were grenadiers, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Douglas. Next to which were two battalions of the first regiment of guards, of six companies in each, besides one company of grenadiers of that regiment; at the head of the first of which was the Duke of Grafton their Colonel, and Eaton the Major of it, was at the head of the other. Next to them was a battalion of the second regiment of guards of six companies, and another company of grenadiers; at whose head was Lieutenant Colonel Sackville. Then five companies of Trelawny, one of which were grenadiers; commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Churchill. On the left of all was another small battalion, composed, as the former, commanded by Colonel Kirke. As for the horse, there were one hundred and fifty commanded out of the three troops of guards; sixty grenadiers on horseback, commanded by Villiers; seven troops of the King's regiment of horse; and four of dragoons; the horse commanded by Sir Francis Compton, and the dragoons by Lord Cornbury ... The train of artillery consisted of sixteen field-pieces, under the conduct of Mr Sheers. And now whilst the King's horse were getting in order, the rebels horse, in pursuance of the orders they had received, marched on to put them in execution, and meeting with the ditch, came along by it, and being challenged by Douglas, *who they were?* some one answered Albemarle; at least he understood it so, and let them pass without firing at them. Then coming up to the first battalion of the guards, Captain Berkley, who commanded the right wing of the musketeers of it, asked *who they were for?* They answered, *The King*. He called to them, *What King?* They answered, *Monmouth*, and *God with us*, which was their word. He then said, Take this with you; and made his wing fire at them: So did the other wing of that battalion; as also the next battalion of the same regiment, and half that of the two regiments of guards. Upon which, that party of the rebels horse ran away, leaving some of their men and horses on the ground, by the fire they had received; but to this day it was not known certainly, whether it was only part, or their whole horse that came so up to the ditch; or whether it was part of them, or a fresh party of them, which were charged some time after, by a party of our horse.

As this happened, Lord Feversham, who had been getting the horse in order, and sent for the cannon, came to the foot, and ordered them to keep their fire till the enemy came close up to them. Soon after this, the rebels foot came up, but not in good order; for the Duke of Monmouth would not stay after they had passed the last defile, to draw up in battle, but made them march on in their ordinary way of marching, battalion after battalion, guiding their march by the matches of Douglas (which were the only battalion of the King's foot that had matchlocks) as soon as they came in sight of the camp, and did not begin to form till they came within about eighty paces of the ditch, intending so soon as their whole line was drawn up, to have attacked the King's foot. But, according to the account Lieutenant Colonel Wade has given, before the three first battalions were quite got up upon a line, *his* being the right hand one, Matthews, which was the next to him, without order from their commander, began to fire; then his, and Holmes's, which was on Matthews left, did the like. After which they could never make their men advance one foot; but stood firing as they were, and though they thought that their right

was over against the King's left, they were mistaken; for their right reached no farther than the first battalion of the guards, and their three small guns were advanced as near as could be, just before the interval which was between Matthews and Holmes, and were very well plied, and did great execution on Douglas, and the first battalion of the guards; which two indeed bore all the brunt of the rebels fire, and lost many officers and soldiers, and most of them by the cannon. For though the rebels fired hard, their men being new, shot too high, and they continued firing at least three quarters of an hour; and except Douglas who fired a little, the rest never fired a shot, but bore the rebels shot both small and great with great order and steadiness, only the King's cannon which came soon up in the intervals of the battalions, plied the rebels very hard, and did good execution.

It is a hard matter to give a very exact account of such an action as this, which began in the night, and was ended by break of day; and to do right to all the general officers and other commanders, who behaved themselves with great steadiness and resolution in their several posts and stations, as appeared by the success they had. Whilst this was passing between the foot, Lord Feversham ordered Villiers with all the horse-guards and grenadiers on horseback (except that party of them which had been out with Oglethorpe), Captain Adderly's troop of horse, and one troop of dragoons, to pass over the ditch on the left of the foot, and to draw up on the enemy's right, but not to charge them; and meeting Oglethorpe who was but then come back with his party of guards and volunteers from towards Bridgwater, and Captain Upert with his small guard of fifty horse, brought them with him behind the foot, to the right, where finding the rest of the horse and dragoons drawn up, the last next the foot, and the horse on the right of all, ordered them to pass over the ditch; and Oglethorpe, who with his party passed over first, met with a body of the rebels horse. What their number was, the darkness of the night, and their running so soon, made it not to be known; so that instead of pursuing them, they were ordered to halt; and after they had stood some time fronting that way, Lord Feversham ordered them to wheel to the left, and to keep their ground, not knowing what was become of all the rebels horse; not judging it proper then to let them charge their foot; only Oglethorpe, with his party, tried one of their battalions, but was beaten back by them, though they were mingled amongst them, and had several of his men wounded and knocked off their horses, amongst which was Captain Sarsfield, who was knocked down by the butt end of a musket and left for dead upon the place. I forgot to give an account of one thing which happened before the horse and dragoons passed over the ditch; which was, that Holmes's battalion firing at the Lord Cornbury's troop of dragoons, his Lieutenant Warde, who was standing by him, called out to that battalion not to fire more at them, for that they were friends; which they thinking to be true, did not only that, but Holmes himself, taking them for friends, came up on horseback from the head of his battalion to the very ditch behind which they stood. The same Lieutenant calling to him, *Who are you for?* and being answered, *For who but Monmouth;* the Lieutenant and one of the serjeants fired at him, killed his horse under him, and broke his arm, and there he lay. Soon after which, Lord Churchill passing over the ditch there, when that wing passed, seeing him hold up his head as he lay, asked him, *Who art thou?* He answered, he was not in a condition to tell, and lay still, but afterwards got up, and was taken by some straggling men among the tents of the foot.

And now as things were in this condition, Lord Churchill went to the left of the foot, and ordered the two Tangier battalions to march from their post, there being no enemy against them, and to march behind the other battalion, to draw up on Douglas's right. But, as I take it, just as they got thither, the day beginning to break, Lord Feversham, who was with the horse on the right, seeing no appearance of any more of the rebels horse, and that the pikes of one of their battalions began to shake, and at last open, ordered the foot to pass over the ditch to charge them; which they did. Which the rebels seeing, ran before they came to handy blows, and the five companies of grenadiers were ordered to follow the pursuit, and some of the horse and

dragoons fell in with them, and did execution on them, till they got off the moor into the inclosures, which they soon did, the moor being but eight hundred yards broad in that place, from ditch to ditch. There was the greatest slaughter of the rebels in that ditch, which was deep and boggy, and in a corn field, which was on the other side of it; and there they took and gave quarter to about twelve hundred of them.

As for the Duke of Monmouth himself, he brought up the foot; and then went to his cannon to see them well plied, as indeed they were, by a Dutch gunner he had brought over with him; but some time after, his horse were all gone, and that Williams, a servant of his, told him he might see the King's horse on their flanks, going, as he believed, to encompass them, he put off his arms, and taking one hundred guineas from his servant, left his foot still fighting, and went away with Lord Grey (who came to him after his horse were all dispersed or gone), a Brandenburgher, and one or two more, and went up the hill which overlooks the moor as you go towards Bristol, and from thence looked about, and could see his foot still firing; and continued on his way ... But to return to his beaten troops, Buffet's battalion suffered the most, who were all of the town of Taunton, and were for the most part killed or taken. The rest were all dispersed, though they suffered not so much; only Wade with some two or three hundred foot of his battalion, got in a body into Bridgwater...⁸

Although there is another lengthy account of the battle by Robert Ferguson, the preacher and ardent rebel who was present in the field, his narrative is distorted by its bitter attack on the conduct of Monmouth's cavalry and, in particular, their commander, Lord Grey⁹. It is not worth repeating.

It is now time to try and piece together the different accounts of the Battle of Sedgemoor into a single narrative. Each have their particular strengths: Paschall's for the movements of the rebels; King James's, amongst others, for the dispositions of the Royal army. About the location of the Royal army, however, there is no doubt; no one disputes that it was encamped north of Westonzoyland behind a ditch. For the course followed by this ditch, the Bussex Rhyne, we have Dummer's and Paschall's plans. We also know the Royal army's order of battle: the approximately 1,900 Foot disposed, from left to right, between Kirke's Regiment, Trelawney's, the 2nd (Coldstream) Guards, two battalions of the 1st Foot Guards, and Dumbarton's Regiment (Royal Scots); 500 Horse - excluding the 200 or so out on patrol - quartered in Westonzoyland itself; and the 1,500 men of the Wiltshire militia left two miles behind in the rear at Middlezoy.

The Duke of Monmouth knew that the most direct path between himself and his opponents - the road between Bridgwater and Westonzoyland - would be well guarded, so he intended using a local, Benjamin Godfrey (who had already reconnoitred the enemy encampment on the Duke's behalf), to guide his army on a more circuitous route to its objective. Before 10 pm on Sunday 5 July, the rebel army marched out of Bridgwater on the old Bristol Road (now the A39 Bath Road). The army then turned into Bradney Lane but soon left it to avoid the house of a government sympathiser, moving down Marsh Lane instead. This meant that the rebels entered Northmoor somewhere near the present Peasey Farm. By good fortune they missed the Royal cavalry patrols, which passed close by on more than one occasion.

Eventually the rebel army's luck deserted it. A shot rang out and a horseman from the Royal army galloped back to warn his comrades of the enemy's approach. According to Paschall the discovery occurred near 'step stones or Langmoor Stone', a crossing point over the Langmoor Rhyne. The rhyne and its crossing have since disappeared but Paschall's sketch plan reveals the defile to have existed near the south-eastern tip of Chedzoy East Field, where, on the modern Ordnance Survey map, a slight mound is marked besides the King's Sedgemoor Drain. Lord Grey, who had been ordered to lead the assault with his cavalry, spurred his command forward; if he could fall upon the enemy camp quickly all might not be lost. But after travelling a little over a thousand yards Grey's men encountered the Bussex Rhyne. This could be crossed on foot but not by horsemen. Paschall's account suggests that Grey was forewarned of the obstacle and that he was directed to cross the

Bussex Rhyne by a cattle crossing, the Upper Plungeon, which Paschall marks on his plans. However Wade, in his confession, claimed that Godfrey, when he reported back after his reconnaissance, had taken 'no notice of the ditch that lay in the way of our march'. King James drew his own conclusion from this evidence, writing that Grey hurried forward 'not knowing any thing of the ditch which covered them' (i.e. the Royal troops).

Whether he knew what he was looking for or not, Grey turned the wrong way and his men rode along the ditch away from the Upper Plungeon and across the front of the Royal army. When the Royal troops eventually realised that the body of Horse riding past them was the enemy, they fired; whereupon the rebel horsemen's mounts, unused to gunfire, bolted. Paschall claims that a second contingent of 300 rebel cavalry, led by Captain John Jones, fought resolutely against Sir Francis Compton for control of the Upper Plungeon, but both James II and the account loosely styled 'Feversham's March' imply that Compton's combat with the rebels occurred earlier and was a lot less fiercely contested. Edward Dummer, indeed, believed that Compton and his 150 men routed a rebel body of near 1,200 cavalry all by themselves.

Shortly after Grey's debacle the rebel infantry reached the field. Monmouth had hurried them forward as well; consequently the rebel infantry came into action still in column of march and only gradually shook into line. Nathaniel Wade's testimony suggests that the crucial moment came when, just as he was preparing to lead his men across the ditch, Edward Matthews' Yellow Regiment arrived and began firing at a distance. His own men then followed suit and he was unable to get them to advance. In a firefight the greater discipline of the Royal troops was bound to tell although, for a time, the effectiveness at close quarters of Monmouth's three cannon and the fact that only two Royal regiments - Dumbarton's and a battalions of Guards - were initially engaged, evened the score. However, once Lord John Churchill had switched Kirke's and Trelawney's Regiment from the left of the line to the right and six cannon, which had originally been positioned to cover the Bridgwater Road, were redeployed, the Royal army's firepower became overwhelming. The three rebel artillery pieces were silenced and their infantry shaken. In the meantime Feversham had sent his Horse and dragoons across the ditch to threaten Monmouth's flanks and guard against a reappearance of his cavalry. With daybreak the Royal army's commander could assess the situation properly: he thought it safe to unleash his cavalry; his Foot were ordered to advance. At this Monmouth's men broke completely and only Wade's command was able to maintain a semblance of order.

The rout having begun, the most important obstacle to the fleeing men's escape was a ditch somewhere to the rear. While Wade claimed that it was 'a great way behind us' James II was more specific. He wrote that the distance between the Bussex Rhyne and this second ditch was 800 yards. The accuracy of the measurement would appear confirmed by the King's remark that it was at this point that the moor gave way to a cornfield: the distance between where modern techniques show the Bussex Rhyne to have been and the edge of the raised ground which was once Chedzoy East Field is almost exactly 800 yards. This being so it seems plain that Moor Drove Rhyne today follows a similar course to the ditch in which so much slaughter was enacted; at that time the ditch was probably connected to the Langmoor Rhyne, crossed by the rebels during their advance the previous night.

James II mentions that much of the killing during the pursuit took place in the cornfield, a butcher's total which it is left to Andrew Paschall to quantify. His plan informs us that 42 rebels died within Chedzoy East Field.

Indication of Importance

The Duke of Monmouth was captured three days after his defeat at Sedgemoor and on 15 July he was executed. Hundreds of his supporters suffered at the hands of Judge Jeffreys' Bloody Assizes. Yet although Monmouth's Rebellion had been spectacularly unsuccessful and was without lasting political consequences it retains its hold on the imagination to this day, principally because it gave rise to the last pitched battle to be fought on English soil. Sedgemoor's claim to this distinction is sometimes disputed by Preston 1715 and Clifton Moor 1745, but the former was primarily a street fight and the latter only a skirmish, so Sedgemoor's pretensions would appear safe.

Compared with some of the Civil War battles fought only forty years before, Sedgemoor was a small-scale affair. Nevertheless, it was a one off, and for this reason the battle generated a disproportionate amount of interest. The quantity of documentation relating to Sedgemoor and the contemporary sketch maps of the battlefield that have survived ensure that the course of the fighting can be reconstructed with a high degree of certainty, notwithstanding the fact that the battle was fought at night and in the half-light of dawn.

On a superficial level it could be argued that the battlefield has changed a great deal over the past 300 years. Improvements in drainage have led to the disappearance of many of the old rhyes and the arrival of new watercourses. Nevertheless, one need only compare Paschall's plans of the battlefield with the Ordnance Survey map today to appreciate how much the landscape has in reality remained the same.

By walking the extensive network of droves and footpaths that cover the moor the visitor can reach most points of the battlefield. Alongside Langmoor Drove, just in front of the position of the Royal army, a memorial was erected in 1930.

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.

To the north the battlefield area is bounded by Moor Drove Rhyne. There was undoubtedly a pursuit across the arable fields belonging to Chedzoy, but pursuits are not generally integral to the course of battles and the circumstances at Sedgemoor do not justify an exception to this generalisation. To the south-west the battlefield boundary follows the path of drains across the fields between Brentsfield Bridge and Westonzoyland Road. By drawing a line in this fashion room is provided for three things. First, the flight of Monmouth's men to the cornfield. Second, the manoeuvre of the Royal cavalry which saw them ride out from behind the Bussex Rhyne and take post on the rebels' right flank. Third, the Royal army's pickets and artillery covering the road from Bridgwater.

Between Hamrod Bridge and Bussex the battlefield boundary skirts the edge of Westonzoyland's existing housing, incorporating as much open ground as possible for the Royal army's encampment. From Bussex the boundary continues to Liney and then turns north across the Halsom Rhyne before proceeding towards King's Sedgemoor Drain. The ground here is included in the battlefield area because Paschall's plans show the Upper Plungeon, around which much of the interest of the battle revolves, as some way over to the east. Space must also be made for the Royal cavalry which Feversham, intent on both menacing the rebels' left wing and guarding against a reappearance of Grey's cavalry, transferred to this flank. Grey too ventured into this part of the moor when, in his attempt to surprise the Royal camp, he made his dash from Langmoor Stone.

Notes

1. Curran, Paul 'The Bussex Rhyne' *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History* 124(1980) pp167-9.
2. *A History of the County of Somerset* VI ed. R W Dunning. The Victoria County History (OUP 1992) pp244-6.
3. Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville vol. 1 (HMSO 1904) pp16-19.
4. Printed in S Heywood *A Vindication of Mr Fox's History of the Early Part of the Reign of James II* (1811), Appendix 4, pp xxix-xlv.
5. Printed in *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries* March 1961(Part 273) pp15-21.
6. Printed in J Davis *History of the Second Queen's Royal Regiment* (1895) pp48-9.
7. Printed in *Hardwicke State Papers* (1778) vol. II pp329-30.
8. *Ibid.* pp305-13.
9. Quoted in Laurence Echard *The History of England* III (London 1718) pp768-80.