English Heritage Battlefield Report: Stratton 1643

Stratton (16 May 1643)

Parish: Bude-Stratton

District: North Cornwall

County: Cornwall

Grid Ref: SS 226070

Historical Context

After the Royalist victory at Braddock Down on 19 January 1643 Sir Ralph Hopton and his Cornish army marched into Devon and blockaded the Parliamentary garrison of Plymouth. On 21 February, however, the growing Parliamentary strength proved too much for the Royalists who were forced out of Modbury during the course of a stubborn fight. Hopton retreated into Cornwall and the Parliamentary commanders, the Earl of Stamford and Colonel Ruthin, happy to be rid of the Royalist army, agreed to a truce on 28 February.

The truce expired on 22 April 1643 and Hopton was soon in action, successfully defending Launceston against a Parliamentarian attack but then courting disaster at Sourton Down on 25 April. From papers captured then, Stamford learnt that Hopton had been ordered to advance into Somerset to join forces with Prince Maurice. Stamford was determined to prevent this unwelcome combination and, drawing reinforcements from Parliamentary garrisons, he dispatched Sir George Chudleigh with 1,200 Horse to neutralise Royalist support at Bodmin, while he advanced to Stratton.

On 15 May 1643 Stamford deployed his army on the hill which thereafter bore his name and awaited the Royalists' arrival. Although outnumbered by 2:1 Hopton had little choice but to meet this invasion. His army was once again beset by logistical problems and even though Stamford's position had great natural strength, Hopton felt that his only chance was to attack while the majority of the Parliamentarian Horse were separated from their main body. By the evening of 15 May the Royalist outposts were in contact with Stamford's troops at Efford Mill.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

There is no dispute as to the location of the the Battle of Stratton. It was fought on Stamford Hill in north-east Cornwall close to the village of Stratton to the east of Bude. The site of the final stages of the battle around an earthwork on top of Stamford Hill is marked by a memorial and plaque. The Royalist assault on the Parliamentary positions on Stamford Hill was launched in four columns: one column attacking the south slopes, two the west, and one the northern slope. The eastern slopes of the Hill were considered too precipitous to assault. The Royalist reserve of Horse was positioned upon a sandy common which is now Bude Golf Course. The Royalist columns, although outnumbered by the 5,400 enemy troops, and short of powder, successfully fought their way to the top of Stamford Hill, joining forces at the earthwork, which had been used as the site for a Parliamentary battery.

Stamford Hill, some 200 feet in elevation, forms a long plateau running north to south parallel to the Cornish coast. Its western slope descends gently towards Bude but in the east it forms an escarpment falling to the valley floor. To this natural hazard of geology was added the impediment of dense woods which further

reduced the prospect of a successful assault from the east. As Hopton noted in his account of the battle the enemy were:

> all strongly encamped and barracadoed upon the flatt topp of a very high hill that had very steepe
> ascents to them every way.[1]

The earthwork on the summit of the hill may have been strengthened during Stamford's entrenchment on the eve of the battle, but is of more ancient origin, dating from the Iron Age. The advantage of the position for the Parliamentarians was that guns mounted here could command the more gentle western slope of the hill.

The Landscape Evolution

It is likely that the landscape appearance in 1643 was very similar to today's pattern of small fields, hedgerows and tracks. The hedgerows are very species rich and it is likely that they were associated with early enclosures around the old settlements of Poughill, Broomhill and Stratton. It is also likely that most of the tracks and roads (apart from the modern A39) were also in place.

Specific changes have included the development and subsequent abandonment of the 19th century Poughill corn mill on the River Strat, the new alignment of the A39 and the housing development on the southern part of Stamford Hill. The battlefield is still a rewarding one to visit though extensive woods on the eastern side of Stamford Hill have obscured much of the view. The memorial and the remains of the earthwork are on private land. In the centre of Stratton stands the Tree Inn which was used as the Royalist headquarters before the battle and which commemorates the events of 1643 with a portrait in the courtyard of Anthony Payne, the celebrated Cornish 'giant'.

The Battle: its sources and interpretation

The major eyewitness account of the fighting is provided by Sir Ralph Hopton who commanded the Royalist army on the day of the battle. Hopton's advance guard clashed with the enemy's pickets as the Royalists deployed on the evening of 15 May 1643:

> The next day by sunn sett they were advanced so far as Efford house being within the parish of
> Stratton about a mile from the Towne, and immediatly with their forlorne hope beate in a
> party of the Enymies, and recovered the passe over the River att Efford-Mill which lay
> between them and the Enymies Camp. Then the Commanders of the Cornish Army call'd a
> Councell of warr, where it was quickly resolv'd, notwithstanding the great visible
> disadvantage, that they must either force the Enymies Campe, while the most part of their
> horse and dragoones were from them, or unavoidably perish. And so in the beginning of that
> night a great part of the Army was drawen over that passe and placed in the Inclosures
> towards the Enemies Campe, and stoode all night at their armes ready to receive the Enemy,
> which was expected to fall upon them.[2]

Having stood to arms through the night the Royalists discovered at dawn that Parliamentarian musketeers had lined the hedges barely 40 yards away and a fire-fight immediately broke out:

> But nothing was acted till the next morning about the break of day, and then it was discerned that the
> Enymie had lyn'd hedges within halfe muskett shott of them, and then immediatly muskett
> shott began to bee exchanged between both parties....[3]

The Royalist Council of War on the night before the battle had given considerable thought to the tactics to be

employed in storming Stamford Hill, and Hopton carefully divided his assault force into four columns. The Royalists with barely 2,400 infantry were outnumbered by Stamford, who fielded approximately 5,600 men and 13 cannon, and Hopton's columns comprised no more than 600 troops apiece. He reinforced this slender assault by dividing his eight cannon equally between the columns:

> And within a while after the rest of the Cornish Army was drawn over likewise, and the foote being about two thousand fowre hundred, dyvided into fower parts, and the cannon being eight peices equallie distributed to every part. The first part commanded by the Lo: and Sir Ralph Hopton, undertooke to assault the Enemies Campe upon the south side, next Sir John Berkeley and Sir Bevile Grenvile upon the Avenue next to them upon the left hand, Sir Nicholas Slanning and Coll. Trevanion the next Avenue to that upon the left hand of [all] and Sir Thomas Bassett and Coll: Godolphin upon the left hand of all, Mr. John Digby with the horse and dragoones being then about five hundred, stoode upon a Sandy-Common where there was a way leading up to the Enemyes Campe, with order to charge anything that should come downe that way in a body, but els to stand firme in reserve.[4]

The Royalist columns attacked in an arc from south to north thereby forcing the Parliamentarians to fight with their backs to the escarpment in the east. The southern column was led by Hopton and Lord Mohun, the two columns assaulting from the west by Berkeley and Grenvile and Trevanion and Slanning respectively, and the northern column by Godolphin and Bassett. The Royalist reserve was formed by 500 Horse and Dragoons under Colonel John Digby. Hopton began his assault early:

> In this order on both sydes the fight began Tuesday the 16 day of May 1643. about 5 of the clock in the morning, The Cornish foote pressing those 4 wayes up the Hill towards the Enemy and the Enimy as obstinately endeavouring to keep them downe. The fight continued doubtfall with many countenances of various events till about three of the clock in the afternoone, by which tyme the ammunicion belonging to the Cornish Army was almost spent.[5]

Despite Hopton's skilful deployment some eight hours of fighting had failed to break the Parliamentarian defence and the Royalists were now desperately short of ammunition. It was the critical phase of the battle for at this moment James Chudleigh led a Parliamentarian counter-attack against Grenvile. As the ranks of pikemen clashed there was some confusion in the Royalist line and Grenvile was knocked down. Unfortunately for Chudleigh, Berkeley now intervened with his musketeers and the Parliamentarians were thrown back, Chudleigh himself being taken prisoner.

> It fortuned that on that Avenew where Sir Bevile Grenvile advanc'd in the head of his Pikes in the way, And Sir Jo: Berkeley ledd on the muskettiers on each syde of him, Major Generall Chudleigh with a stand of Pikes charg'd Sir Bevile Greenvile so smartliek, that there was some disorder, Sir Bevile Greenvile, in person overthrowen, but being presently relieved by Sir Jo: Berkely and some of his owne officers, hee reenforc'd the charge and there tooke Major Generall Chudleigh prisoner....[6]

Heartened by this success the Royalists renewed their assault. As their columns neared the summit of the hill they began to converge, increasing the danger that the Parliamentary line would be rolled up and the defenders taken in flank. As Stamford's men began to give ground Hopton's columns joined forces on the summit:

> In fine the endeavours of all the 4 parts of the foote succeeded so well, as growing nearer together as they ascended, the Enmy giving way, and leaving the possession of some of their dead and some of their cannon to them between 3 and 4 of the clock the Commanders happened to meete altogether in one ground neere the Topp of the Hill, where having joyfully embraced one another they prusued their victorie, and recovered the topp of the Hill, which the Enimy

had acquyted in a route.[7]

What role the Royalist Horse played in the final disintegration of the Parliamentarian defence is not clear, for Hopton does not mention any intervention on their part. An intercepted Parliamentarian letter from Exeter to London, which is printed at the end of a Royalist pamphlet on the battle, implies, however, that the failure of the Parliamentarian Horse to prevent the Royalist Horse charging Stamford's infantry was an important factor in Hopton's victory:

Our men went on resolutely at this last fight at Stratton, being assured that our Horse would
countenance them in the Reare; but when they were charged with the Horse of the enemy, and
ours did not what we expected, we were discouraged, and so the enemy by the help of their
Horse broke in upon our Foot and routed us, taking all our cannon, and most of our
Ammunition.[8]

Colonel Robert Bennett, who fought in the battle, attributed Stamford's defeat to the collapse of the left wing which allowed the Royalists to roll up the Parliamentarian line from the north:

...the enemy came in upon our reare by reason that the left hand winge fayled....[9]

Wilder Parliamentarian opinions claimed that the battle had been lost due to the planned treachery of James Chudleigh, who was taken prisoner in the fighting and who subsequently joined the Royalist cause.

The spoils of victory were both considerable and timely for the Royalists:

In that fight God blessed the Kings party so well that they lost not ... men in all, though they were the
assaylants, but kill'd about three hundred of the Enymie in that place, and took seventeen
hundred prisoners, whereof their Major Generall was one, and about thirty other officers.
They tooke likewise all their cannon, being (as is sayd before) 13 peices of brasse ordnance
and a brasse morter-peice, and all their ammunicion being seventy barrells of powder, and all
other sorts of ammunicion proportionable and a verie great magazine of bisquett and other
provisons.[10]

With casualties of 300 dead and 1,700 taken prisoner, Stamford's army had for the time being ceased to exist as a fighting force and the Royalists were able to camp on the battlefield and enjoy the ample supplies they had captured. Stamford retreated from Cornwall and sought refuge in Exeter, while Sir George Chudleigh and the detached Parliamentarian Horse retired in some disorder from Bodmin. Following up his victory Hopton advanced into Devon and summoned Exeter to surrender.

Indication of Importance

Hopton and his Cornishmen won a remarkable victory at Stratton. Outnumbered, short of ammunition and supplies and commanding men who had barely slept for four days, Hopton assaulted a formidable hill-top position. That the Royalists carried the day was due in no small measure to Hopton's tactics which embraced the unusual concept, for the time, of a converging attack by separate columns. The battle was also an example of the power of morale over material factors such as superiority in arms and numbers.

Stratton preserved Cornwall for the King, enabling the Royalists to continue to exploit the wealth of the Cornish tin mines and the warlike qualities of the Cornish infantry.

Battlefield Area

The battlefield area boundary defines the outer reasonable limit of the battle, taking into account the positions of the combatants at the outset of fighting and the focal area of the battle itself. It does not include areas over which fighting took place subsequent to the main battle. Wherever possible, the boundary has been drawn so that it is easily appreciated on the ground.

The battlefield area encompasses the hill-top position held by the Parliamentarians and embraces all the converging assaults of the Royalists. To the north-east, the River Neet forms a convenient as well as appropriate boundary. The battlefield boundary follows the road south-westwards into the northern part of Stratton itself to include the southern attack by Hopton. Beyond the playing field, the boundary turns north to skirt Broomhill and along Broomhill Lane behind the two western columns of Parliamentarians. Where Broomhill Lane crosses a stream the boundary turns east around Burshill and finally back to Poughill mill to complete the circuit, thus incorporating the northen column under Godolphin and Bassett.

The ground on which the Royalist reserve of Horse was deployed, which is now part of Bude golf course, has been included as a separate area.

Notes

1.   *Bellum Civile. Hopton's Narrative of his Campaign in the West 1642-1644*. ed. C E H Chadwyck Healey. Somerset Record Society 18 (1902)

2.   Hopton *Ibid*.

3.   Hopton *Ibid*.

4.   Hopton *Ibid*.

5.   Hopton *Ibid*.

6.   Hopton *Ibid*.

7.   Hopton *Ibid*.

8.   Letter printed with *The Round-Heads Remembrancer: or a true and particular Relation of the great defeat given to the Rebels by His Majesties good Subjects of the County of Cornwall, under the Command of Sr Ralph Hopton, on Tuesday May 16 1643*. E 105 (13)

9.   MS Diary of Colonel Robert Bennett quoted in Coate, M *Cornwall in the Great Civil War and Interregnum, 1642-60 (1963)*

10.   Hopton *Op cit.*