

Battle of Edgehill

Not to be confused with the Battle of Edge Hill, another name for the American Revolutionary War **Battle of White Marsh**.

The **Battle of Edgehill** (or **Edge Hill**) was the first pitched battle of the First English Civil War. It was fought near Edge Hill and Kineton in southern Warwickshire on Sunday, 23 October 1642.

All attempts at constitutional compromise between King Charles and Parliament broke down early in 1642. Both King and Parliament raised large armies to gain their way by force of arms. In October, at his temporary base near Shrewsbury, King Charles decided to march on London in order to force a decisive confrontation with Parliament's main army, commanded by the Earl of Essex.

Late on 22 October, both armies unexpectedly found the enemy to be close by. The next day, the Royalist army descended from Edge Hill to force battle. After the Parliamentary artillery opened a cannonade, the Royalists attacked. Both armies consisted mostly of inexperienced and sometimes ill-equipped troops. Many men from both sides fled or fell out to loot enemy baggage, and neither army was able to gain a decisive advantage.

After the battle, King Charles resumed his march on London, but was not strong enough to overcome the defending militia before Essex's army could reinforce them. The inconclusive result of the Battle of Edgehill prevented either faction gaining a quick victory in the war, which eventually lasted four years.

1 Background

When it appeared to King Charles I that no agreement with Parliament over the government of the Kingdom was possible, he left London on 2 March 1642 and headed for the North of England. Both Parliament and King realised that armed conflict was inevitable, and prepared to raise forces. Parliament enacted a Militia Ordinance, by which it claimed authority over the country's trained bands, while from his temporary capital of York, Charles rejected Parliament's Nineteen Propositions and issued Commissions of Array, directing the Lord Lieutenant of each county to raise forces for the King.

Charles then attempted to seize the port of Kingston-upon-Hull where arms and equipment previously collected for the Bishops' Wars had been gathered. In the Siege of Hull, the Parliamentary garrison defied the

King's authority and drove his forces away from the city. In early August the King moved south, to Lincoln and Leicester, where he secured the contents of the local armouries. On 22 August, he took the decisive step by raising the royal standard in Nottingham, effectively declaring war on Parliament. The Midlands were generally Parliamentary in sympathy, and few people rallied to the king there, so having again secured the arms and equipment of the local trained bands, Charles moved to Chester and subsequently to Shrewsbury, where large numbers of recruits from Wales and the Welsh border were expected to join him. (By this point, there was conflict in almost every part of England, as local commanders attempted to seize the main cities, ports and castles for their respective factions).

Having learned of the King's actions in Nottingham, Parliament dispatched its own army northward under the Earl of Essex, to confront the King. Essex marched first to Northampton, where he mustered almost 20,000 men. Learning of the King's move westwards, Essex then marched north-westwards towards Worcester. On 23 September, in the first clash between the main Royalist and Parliamentary armies, Royalist cavalry under Prince Rupert of the Rhine routed the cavalry of Essex's vanguard at the Battle of Powick Bridge. Nevertheless, lacking infantry, the Royalists abandoned Worcester.

2 Prelude

By early October, the King's army was almost complete at Shrewsbury. He held a council of war, at which two courses of action were considered. The first was to attack Essex's army at Worcester, which had the drawback that the close country around the city would put the superior Royalist cavalry at a disadvantage.^[2] The second course, which was adopted, was to advance towards London. The intention was not to avoid battle with Essex, but to force one at an advantage. In the Earl of Clarendon's words: *"it was considered more counsellable to march towards London, it being morally sure that Essex would put himself in their way."* Accordingly, the army left Shrewsbury on 12 October, gaining two days start on the enemy, and moved southeast. Essex followed, but neither army had much information on the location of their enemy.

By 22 October, the Royalist army was quartered in the villages around Edgcote, and was threatening the Parliamentary post at Banbury. The garrison of Banbury sent messengers pleading for help to the Parliamentary gar-



Interpretation of Charles I holding a council of war prior to the Edgehill battle by Charles Landseer (1845)

risson at Warwick Castle. Essex, who had just reached there, ordered an immediate march to Kineton to bring relief to Banbury, even though his army had straggled and not all his troops were present. That evening, there were clashes between outposts and quartermasters' parties in Kineton and the villages nearby, and the Royalists had their first inkling that Essex's army was close by.^[3] The King issued orders for his army to muster for battle on top of the escarpment of Edgehill the following day.

Essex originally intended marching straight to the relief of Banbury, but at about 8 a.m. on 23 October, his outposts reported that the Cavaliers were massed on Edgehill, 4.5 miles (7.2 km) from Kineton. Essex deployed his army about halfway between Kineton and the Royalist army, where hedges formed a natural position.

3 The opposing forces

There were some significant differences between the opposing armies, which were to be important to the course of the battle and its outcome. Although both were composed of very raw soldiers, they both had several experienced officers who had previously fought in the Dutch or Swedish armies during the Thirty Years' War. (Several of these had been recruited to lead English forces which were intended to be sent to Ireland following the Irish Rebellion of 1641. Both King and Parliament had bid highly for the services of these officers.)

The Royalist cavalry was superior to Parliament's cavalry at this stage of the war. Oliver Cromwell, who arrived too late in the day to take part in the battle, later wrote disparagingly to John Hampden, "*Your troopers are most of them old decayed servingmen and tapsters; and their [the Royalists] troopers are gentlemen's sons, younger sons and persons of quality....*" Not only were the Parliamentary cavalry not so naturally accustomed to mounted action, but they were drilled in the Dutch tactic of firing pistols and carbines from the saddle, whereas under Rupert, the Royalist cavalry would charge sword in hand, relying on shock and weight.

The Parliamentary foot soldiers however, were better equipped than their Royalist counterparts. The Royalist pikemen were said to lack armour, and the musketeers lacked swords, making the Royalist infantry more vulnerable in hand-to-hand combat. Several hundred of them lacked any sort of weapon apart from clubs or improvised polearms.

The Royalist and Parliamentary artillery trains were roughly equally matched. Although Essex had more guns overall, many of them had lagged behind on the march.

4 Deployments

4.1 Royalists

The Royalist right wing of cavalry and dragoons was led by Prince Rupert, with Sir John Byron in support. The King's own Lifeguard of Horse insisted on joining Rupert's front line, leaving the King with no cavalry reserve under his own command.^[4]

The centre consisted of five "tercias" of infantry. There was a last-minute change of command when the colonel-general, Lord Lindsey, was overruled when he wished to deploy them in "Dutch" formation, simple phalanxes eight ranks deep. Affronted, he resigned his command and took his place at the head of his own regiment of foot. Instead, he was replaced by Lieutenant General Patrick Ruthven, who drew up the infantry in chequer-board "Swedish" formation, which was potentially more effective but also more difficult to control, particularly with inexperienced soldiers.^[5] The centre was led in battle by Sergeant Major General Jacob Astley.

The left wing consisted of horse under Sir Henry Wilmot, with Lord Digby, the King's secretary of state, in support and Colonel Arthur Aston's dragoons on his flank.

4.2 Parliamentarians

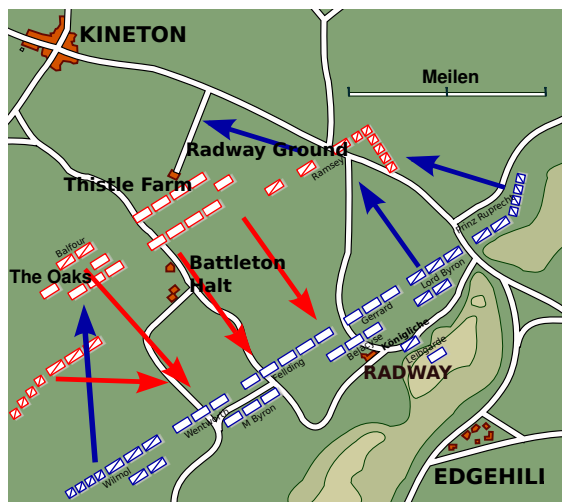
The Parliamentary left wing consisted of a loosely organised cavalry brigade of twenty unregimented troops under Sir James Ramsay, supported by 600 musketeers and several cannon, deployed behind a hedge.^[6]

In the centre, the infantry brigade of Sir John Meldrum was drawn up on the left of the front line and Colonel Charles Essex's brigade on the right. Sir Thomas Ballard's infantry brigade was deployed behind Meldrum and the cavalry regiments under Sir William Balfour and Sir Philip Stapleton behind Charles Essex.^[6] The presence of these two regiments was to be important in the coming battle.

A regiment of infantry under Colonel William Fairfax linked the centre to the right wing. The right wing consisted of the regiment of cavalry under Lord Feilding,

posted on some rising ground, with two regiments of dragoons in support.^[6]

5 Battle



Traditional 20th century interpretation and orientation of the Battle of Edgehill within the battlefield; but modern 21st century archaeological data fails to validate this conjecture

As Essex showed no signs of wishing to attack, the Royalists under Lieutenant General Ruthven began to descend the slope of Edgehill some time after midday. Even when they had completed this manoeuvre at about two o'clock, the battle did not begin until the sight of the King with his large entourage riding from regiment to regiment to encourage his soldiers, apparently goaded the Parliamentarians into opening fire.^[7]

The King's party withdrew out of range and an artillery duel took place. The Royalist guns were comparatively ineffective as most of them were deployed some way up the slope, and from this height most of their shot plunged harmlessly into the earth. While the bombardment continued however, the Royalist dragoons advanced on each flank and drove back the Parliamentary dragoons and musketeers covering their wings of horse.

In the flanks, Rupert gave the order to attack. As his charge gathered momentum, a troop of Parliamentary horse under Faithfull Fortescue abruptly defected. The rest of Ramsay's brigade gave an ineffectual volley of pistol fire from the saddle before turning to flee. Rupert's and Byron's troopers rapidly overran the enemy guns and musketeers on this flank and galloped jubilantly in pursuit of Ramsay's men to the detriment of the infantry.

Wilmot charged about the same time on the other flank. Feilding's outnumbered regiment quickly gave way, and Wilmot and Digby also chased them to Kineton where the Royalist horse fell out to loot the Parliamentary baggage. Sir Charles Lucas and Lord Grandison rallied about 200 men, but when they tried to charge the Parliamentar-

ian rear, they were distracted by fugitives from Charles Essex's routed brigade.^[8]

The Royalist infantry also advanced in the centre under Ruthven. Many of the Parliamentary foot had already run away as their cavalry disappeared, and others fled as the infantry came to close quarters. The brigades of Sir Thomas Ballard and Sir John Meldrum nevertheless stood their ground. The Parliamentary cavalry regiments of Stapleton and Balfour emerged through gaps in the line of Parliamentary foot soldiers, and charged the Royalist infantry. With no Royalist cavalry to oppose them, they put many units to flight.

The King had left himself without any proper reserve. As his centre gave way, he ordered one of his officers to conduct his sons Charles and James to safety while Ruthven rallied his infantry. Some of Balfour's men charged so far into the Royalist position that they menaced the princes' escort and briefly overran the Royalist artillery before withdrawing.^[9] In the front ranks, Lord Lindsey was killed, and Sir Edmund Verney died defending the Royal Standard, which was captured by Parliamentary Ensign Arthur Young.

By this time, some of the Royalist horse had rallied and were returning from Kineton. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Walsh (pronounced Welsh) of Wilmot's Horse recaptured the Royal Standard by a subterfuge as it was being taken to the Parliamentary rear as a trophy. Welsh also captured two Parliamentary cannon. As the light began to fade, the battle ended with a fire fight from either side of a dividing ditch, before nightfall eventually brought a natural close to hostilities. The Royalists had been forced back to the region they had originally advanced from, but had regrouped.

6 Outcome

During the evening Charles and most of his army had promptly returned to the Edgehill escarpment and the Warmington hills beyond. Similarly Parliaments' army also returned to the shelter of their camp at Little Kineton and Kineton, but both armies kept a significant number of men entrenched as a rearguard in the center of the battlefield who cautiously monitored each other's position throughout much of the night. By the early hours of the Monday the last of the King's men had crept away back to Edgehill, shortly followed by Parliaments' remaining men returning to Kineton. It was a bitterly cold night with a hard frost. This was suggested by contemporary reports as the reason many of the wounded survived, since the cold allowed many wounds to congeal, saving the wounded from bleeding to death or succumbing to infection.

The following day, both armies partially formed up again, but neither was willing to resume the battle. Charles sent a herald to Essex with a message of pardon if he would

agree to the King's terms, but the messenger was roughly handled and forced to return without delivering his message. Although Essex had been reinforced by some of his units which had lagged behind on the march, he withdrew during the evening and the majority of his army marched to Warwick Castle, abandoning seven guns on the battlefield.[≤]

In the early hours of Tuesday 25th, Prince Rupert led a strong detachment of Horse and Dragoons and launched a surprise attack upon what remained of the Parliamentary baggage train at Kineton and dispatched many of the battle's wounded survivors discovered within the village.

Essex's decision to return northwards to Warwick allowed the King to continue southwards in the direction of London. Rupert urged this course, and was prepared to undertake it with his cavalry alone. With Essex's army still intact, Charles chose to move more deliberately, with the whole army. After capturing Banbury on 27 October, Charles advanced via Oxford, Aylesbury and Reading. Essex meanwhile had moved directly to London. Reinforced by the London Trained Bands and many citizen volunteers, his army proved to be too strong for the King to contemplate another battle when the Royalists advanced to Turnham Green. The King withdrew to Oxford, which he made his capital for the rest of the war. With both sides almost evenly matched, it would drag on ruinously for years.

It is generally acknowledged that the Royalist cavalry's lack of discipline prevented a clear Royalist victory at Edgehill. Not for the last time in the war, they would gallop after fleeing enemy and then break ranks to plunder, rather than rally to attack the enemy infantry. Byron's and Digby's men in particular, were not involved in the first clashes and should have been kept in hand rather than allowed to gallop off the battlefield. In contrast, in the aftermath of the battle, Patrick Ruthven was elevated to the rank of Lord General of the King's Army, confirming his role as acting commander in the battle.^[10]

The last survivor of the battle, William Hiseland, fought also at Malplaquet sixty-seven years later.^[11]

7 Battlefield interpretations

While the location of Edgehill's battlefield has long been considered secure, the exact positions for the armies' initial deployment lines have regularly been debated, with several diagrammatical variations published by studies since the late 19th century. Typically, the wide battle arrays for both armies have been conjectured to run parallel to the Edgehill escarpment, running in a south westerly direction, either approximately covering the distance of the previously unenclosed open fields - between Radway and Kineton - starting from the Banbury road (B4086) to the north and reaching south west of Radway, or sometimes ranging as far south as the Sun Ris-

ing Hill road (A422). A recurring variation showing both armies running in a north to south orientation was first published in maps by George Miller in 1896.^[12] In 2003 a similar deployment interpretation was published, again showing both armies deployed halfway between Radway and Kineton.^[13] From around this same period the Battlefields Trust also began to produce materials illustrating a battlefield interpretation (attributed to Foard/Pannett) showing near north to south deployment patterns in printed leaflets and within their own information panels at the site.^[14]

7.1 A reorientation of the battlefield

In 2004–07 at Edgehill the Battlefields Trust, with grant aid from the local Heritage Initiative, conducted the first full battlefield systematic archaeological survey in the UK. The study of Edgehill's bullet scatters also represented the most extensive systematic archaeological investigation of a 17th-century battlefield undertaken in England.^[15] Directed by battle archaeologist Glenn Foard, the project involved modern battlefield archaeological methodologies, including a broad base survey to establish an overall pattern of finds which was used in conjunction with other data-sets provided by historic terrain research, revaluation of historic documents and experimental ballistics firing. 3250 artifacts, including 1096 lead bullets, were eventually recovered from the battlefield.^[16]

Glenn Foard published a revelatory reorientation and new interpretation of the battlefield, based largely on the battle archaeology, in the 2009 edition of the German annual 'Schlachtfeldarchäologie: Battlefield Archaeology'. The conjectural reorientation of the initial battle lines by 90 degrees from most previous interpretations - which had been based upon scholarly conjecture alone - places the Parliamentary army facing north eastwards. Determining the direction and spread of case shot (or hailshot), which was fired from artillery, proved pivotal in establishing the battlefield's orientation and the starting positions of the Parliamentary lines. Uniquely this interpretation shows the initial deployments to run in a south easterly direction commencing from north of the Banbury road, with the Parliamentary battle line reaching the Red road area and southern most corner of the modern MOD base (which now occupies much of the central battlefield). The initial Royalist positions are positioned parallel, to the north east, and west of Langdon Lane.

In the Edgehill survey all three elements of analysis have been employed: historic terrain reconstruction; re-analysis of the documentary accounts of the battle, enabling the deployments and events to be placed within the terrain reconstruction; and large-scale survey of the battle archaeology, leading to a revision of the overall interpretation. This

work suggests that the battle lines need to be re-orientated by 90 degrees compared with those shown by studies based principally on the written accounts. It also appears to locate securely various elements of the action in relation to the terrain.
— Glenn Foard.^[17]

8 The Welch medal

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Walsh, who had recaptured the royal standard, was knighted (Banneret) on the field by King Charles I next morning. The King also granted a Patent for a gold medal to be made (the first to be awarded to an individual for action on a battlefield) and to be known as the 'Welch Medal' commemorating the event in Welsh's honour. Captain John Smith later claimed a supporting part in the rescue of the royal standard and was accordingly knighted Banneret, but the medal was minted in Sir Robert Walsh's name and honour.^{[18][19][20]}

When in exile with Prince Charles, Walsh committed a grave error of etiquette defending Prince Rupert.^[21] Coupled with his friend Prince Rupert's political unpopularity among the Royalist exiles and the fact that Walsh was an Irishman, Walsh's part at Edgehill was afterwards denigrated to the benefit of Smith, an (Englishman) who was thus erroneously perpetuated as the hero in subsequent historical publications.

9 Notes

- [1] Battlefields Trust staff, Fletcher & Jones 2013, Battle of Edgehill: 23 October 1642
- [2] Young 1995, p. 71.
- [3] Young 1995, p. 75.
- [4] Young 1995, p. 79.
- [5] For the earl of Forth as commander on the day rather than Rupert or the king see Steve Murdoch and Alexia Grosjean, *Alexander Leslie and the Scottish Generals of the Thirty Years' War, 1618-1648* (Pickering & Chatto, London, 2014), pp.120-123
- [6] Young and Holmes (1974), p.74
- [7] Young 1995, p. 104.
- [8] Young and Holmes (1974), pp.78-79
- [9] Young 1995, pp. 114–115.
- [10] Murdoch and Grosjean, p.122
- [11] Winder 2006; The Scotsman staff 2006
- [12] Miller 1896.

- [13] Evans 2003, p. 85.
- [14] Battlefields Trust document(s) 371.pdf and Edgcote, Cro-predy Bridge, Edgehill - Battlefield Trail, leaflet.
- [15] Foard & Morris 2012, p. 121.
- [16] Foard 2009, pp. 117–125.
- [17] Foard & Morris 2012, p. 126.
- [18] The British Library, London. 'A true Narrative and Manifest' page 8 - by Sir Robert Walsh published 1679)
- [19] Carlton 1992, p. 193.
- [20] Roberts & Tincey 2001, p. 72.
- [21] The Great Rebellion by Sir Edward Hyde

10 References

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11 Further reading

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- Seymour, W (1997) [First published as Volume 2, 1642-1746, in 1975], *Battles in Britain, 1066-1746*, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, ISBN 1-85326-672-8
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12 External links

- BattleOfEdgehill.org - Dedicated website
- [British Civil Wars site](#)
- [Battle of Edgehill: 23 October 1642](#)
- [Photos of some of the areas involved in the Battle of Edgehill on geograph](#)
- BattleOfEdgehillExhibitionRadway.org.uk - Permanent Battle of Edgehill exhibition within Radway's church

Coordinates: 52°08′24″N 1°29′03″W﻿ / ﻿52.13997°N 1.48416°W﻿ /

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