

Looking for the site of the Battle of Barnet

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Introduction

April 14th 2021 marked the 550th anniversary of the Battle of the Barnet, so it was very fitting that the results of the 2015–18 field survey had been published online shortly before this date. The aims of the survey¹ had been to try to locate the battlefield and to map the historic character of its environs.

The location of this battle has long been debated and various locations to the north of Monken Hadley have been postulated.² Trying to locate the battlefield site using contemporary

sources is problematic as none is first-hand and they contain conflicting information. However, what is clear from these accounts is that the battle was of a relatively short duration. It started around dawn, probably in semi-darkness, and was fought in dense fog resulting in a highly-confused deployment (Fig 1). The confusion was so bad that the Lancastrian forces ended up fighting each other by mistake.³

One important fact that is sometimes overlooked is that the Lancastrian army was led by the Earl of Warwick, an experienced commander,

who had arrived the day before the battle, and so he had had time to select a good position to block the northward advance of the Yorkist army led by Edward IV. Therefore, the main road from London to St Albans (now Kitt's End Road), seems a likely focus for military activity. The easiest way for the Lancastrian army to have blocked this road was by having an east–west deployment that straddled it (Fig 2).

Locating the battlefield

It is believed that St Blaise's Chapel or the hermitage at Kitt's End, reputed to



Fig 1: *The Battle of Barnet* by Graham Turner. The Yorkist army led by Edward IV (wearing a crown on top of his helmet) next to his standard are drawn up to the left with the Lancastrians to the right. (© Gordon Turner)

have been built next to the mass graves of the common soldiers, provides a promising clue to the site of the battle (Fig 2). The chapel was still functioning in 1519–20, but apparently closed soon after and was converted into a dwelling, which was rebuilt in 1651.

This property, depicted on the 1781 Enclosure map of South Mimms Common, was situated on a small rectangular island encircled by a moat.⁴ In 2017 and 2019, geophysical surveys successfully located the remains of the infilled portion of the moat, but no associated buildings.⁵ The failure of an intensive geophysical survey to locate any graves (either mass or individual) there suggests that this site should be interpreted as a rural hermitage chapel,⁶ rather than a purpose-built battlefield chantry.

One possibility is that because this chapel was the nearest place of worship to the mass graves, it was regarded as the battlefield chantry. As part of the survey, a series of 16 test pits were excavated to examine the infilled moat and to try to locate the remains of the chapel. No trace of the chapel was discovered, possibly due to the amount of later disturbance including rebuilding and cultivation on the site. The absence of any remains belonging to the medieval chapel could be explained by it being a timber-framed building founded on shallow rubble foundations. The 1651 replacement was brick-built and may have been larger and more substantial.

Metal-detecting finds

Finds from these test pits included 15th- to 19th-century pottery, implying that there had been a long sequence of activity there. Another series of test pits was dug in 2016 to try and locate the medieval settlement at Kitt's End, which is now occupied by the Wrotham Park Pinetum. This small-scale fieldwork was inconclusive, with topsoil deposits containing a small amount of abraded pottery of 11th- to 15th-century date.⁷

It was hoped that intensive metal-detecting of the farmland within and around Wrotham Park, would reveal the site of the fighting as it did at Bosworth.⁸ As the usage of artillery and hand-guns is documented at this battle, it was hoped that the precise (GIS) plotting of all finds of round shot and other projectiles would help

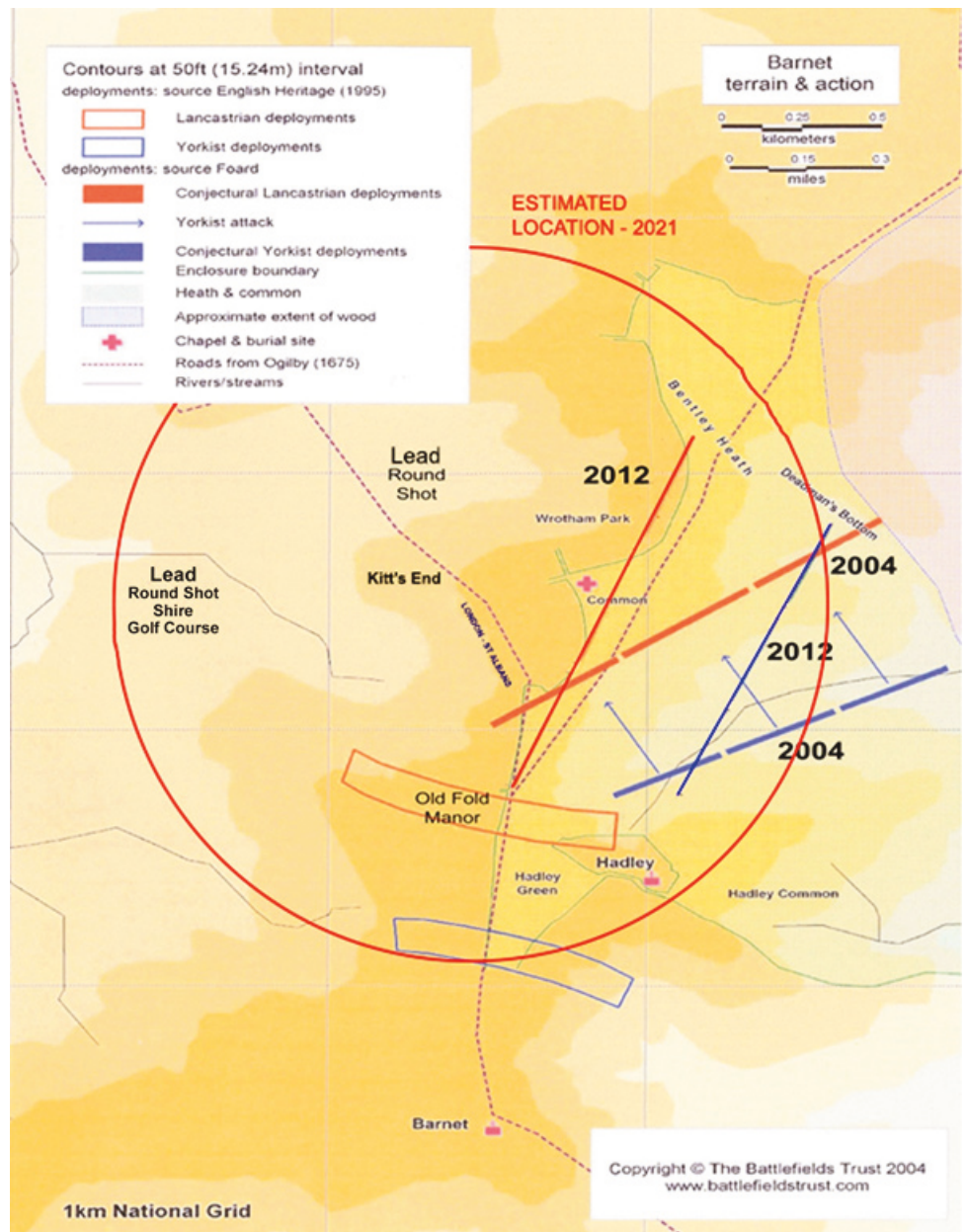


Fig 2: a revised version of Battlefields Trust's 2004 plan of the initial deployment of the armies at the Battle of Barnet, also showing their 2012 location and the located finds of round shot. The probable area within which the battle took place is indicated by the circle.

confirm the location of the fighting.

Sadly, this exercise was not particularly successful for a number of reasons. The soil conditions on some land was poor for metal-detecting and the corrosion or degeneration of ferrous metalwork due to adverse soil conditions is a real possibility. One farmer refused to allow access so coverage was incomplete; also several of the surveyed areas proved to be highly contaminated with modern metal debris and so it was impossible for metal-detecting to be conducted. Access to some other areas, like the Old Fold Manor Golf Club, were very restricted.⁹ As a result of these severe limitations, the survey was obliged to

concentrate on the Wrotham Park area.¹⁰

The main result of the metal-detecting was the retrieval of a large quantity of relatively modern metalwork.¹¹ However, the presence of a medieval purse bar, a Burgundian jetton (c. 1430–98),¹² a silver penny of Henry V and a silver groat of Edward IV (1467–8), plus two solid lead shot (one weighing 538g with a diameter of 46mm, and the other 362g in weight with a diameter of 40mm) from the Wrotham Park area offer a tantalizing glimpse of late medieval activity. A third example of a lead round shot (347g with a diameter of 38–41mm) was recovered from the Shire Golf



Fig 3: The Baker rifle, a muzzle-loading, flintlock rifled weapon was used by the British Army from 1800 until 1837. It had a much longer range and greater accuracy than 'smoothbore' muskets. (public domain)

Course in about 1990 (Fig 2). A fourth possible example of lead round shot (435g with a diameter of 48mm) was recovered from just to the north of Old Fold Manor Golf Course.¹³

In the survey, the authors suggest that the St Albans road was likely to have been the focal point for activity and they propose six potential deployments for the two armies within the Kitt's End, Monken Hadley and Wrotham Park area, four of which show the Lancastrian army straddling the road.¹⁴ Currently, the best guess concerning the location of the battlefield is a circular area (centred on Kitt's End) with a 1km radius (see Fig 2).

Lead bullets

Interestingly, more recent metal-detecting within the locality of the site of the battle has revealed 124 spherical lead bullets or projectiles dated on stylistic grounds as broadly post-medieval.¹⁵ It is likely that a considerable number of these bullets had been fired from muzzle-loading flintlock muskets dating from the mid-17th to mid-19th century (Fig 3).¹⁶ The heaviest bullet, weighing 36.5g, would have been fired from a 12-bore musket, a calibre which implies military activity during either the 18th or early 19th century.

The presence of a 17th-century powder box cap of lead from a musketeer's bandolier and a strap fitting for a sword hanger of 16th- to 18th-century date may represent evidence of English Civil War activity. The presence of a uniform button of the 49th Regiment of Foot (dated 1782–1816) is a clear indication of military activity during the Napoleonic period.¹⁷

There were a lot of lead bullets weighing about 29g, which are indicative of smaller calibre muskets.¹⁸ Some of these bullets may represent activity by the Victorian militia (see

below) and/or broadly contemporary sporting activity. Three of these lead bullets were fired from rifled barrels, so must presumably be of early 19th-century date (Fig 3).¹⁹ However, some of these lead bullets might be contemporary with the battle.

The problem seems to be that it is not certain what the exact types of metal or stone projectiles were being used in hand-guns (Fig 4) and larger pieces of artillery during the 1470s. As a consequence, the secure recognition of the full range of contemporary munitions is currently impossible.²⁰ In addition, the available spatial data for the distribution of round shot and projectiles, including lead, iron and composite examples, are too sparse to draw any meaningful conclusions about their distribution.

Accounts of the battle and its contemporary landscape

The survey included a comprehensive discussion of the various accounts of the battle, but, as all this material has already been published, there is nothing new to be discussed here.²¹

There was also a detailed topographical and historical study of the environs of the battlefield.²² It was surprising that a LIDAR survey of the area was not undertaken at the time, as this technique would have revealed any topographical anomalies within such inaccessible areas as woodland, for example. The historical study of the environs of the battlefield built on previous research.²³ It also confirmed that this locality in the 15th century was a part of a developed agrarian landscape with field boundaries delineated by linear earthworks, presumably hedge-banks.

At Kitt's End (see Fig 2), it is possible that there was an area of enclosed land by 1471. Any hedge-banks there could have provided some defence against attacks by cavalry and would have

made a defensible and sheltered campsite.²⁴ Existing fields would have been very useful to corral the riding horses and baggage animals.

One serious oversight in the historical landscape study was that it did not consider the impact of post-medieval land-use on the battlefield. For example, the use of the locality by the Victorian militia for training and the existence of a rifle range behind Hadley Manor before 1866 could partly explain the quantity of lead bullets recovered.²⁵ Likewise, the documentary evidence for military activity there during the English Civil War or the Napoleonic period could have been researched.

Conclusions

Sadly, every aspect of the fieldwork proved inconclusive. An ephemeral scatter of artefacts from the Wrotham Park area might be contemporary with the battle. However, it is not possible to produce a comprehensive distribution map of contemporary finds, lead projectiles and round shot for two reasons: firstly, some of the earlier finds are either lost or lack a precise provenance; secondly, many of the smaller calibre lead projectiles cannot be precisely dated.

The impression is that the area which was systematically metal-detected, was probably peripheral to most of the activity connected with the actual battle. This presumably included the camp sites of the two armies and the area of the actual battle. As the battle appears to have been very mobile, a very sparse artefact scatter covering a broad geographical area is a possibility that deserves serious consideration.

However, there are some important lessons to be learnt from this project. Firstly, the two test-pit excavation exercises achieved little and, instead, an excavation of linear trenches would

have been a much better way to evaluate the site of the moat and chapel. Secondly, there is no evidence of graves around St Blaise's Chapel, so it seems unlikely that it was established as a battlefield chantry.

Locating the mass graves where the thousand or more battlefield casualties were interred now seems the most promising way to try to locate the site of the battle.²⁶ The place-name 'Deadman's Bottom' is reputed to mark the site where many Lancastrians were slaughtered as Edward IV had ordered his troops to 'give no quarter' (see Fig 2).²⁷ It is possible that existing quarry pits within the locality of the battlefield were used as mass graves as a matter of expedience.

Locating the battlefield by systematic metal-detecting is clearly going to be problematic and any future project should be preceded by a methodological evaluation and a comprehensive access agreement. In addition, it is worrying that some previously metal-detected finds from the battlefield area are either missing or have not been systematically plotted and recorded. Lastly, the



Fig 4: 15th-century hand-gunners in action from a German woodcut in the *Rudicum Novitorium* of 1475 (public domain)

unregulated metal-detecting that has taken place within the locality may have removed crucial evidence concerning the location of the battlefield. The various areas for the potential site of the battlefield also face destruction from a variety of development threats including housing,

infrastructure, landscaping (mainly for golf courses) and quarrying. It is important that all sites to be developed within the posited area of the battlefield are archaeologically evaluated and systematically metal-detected.

Acknowledgements

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1. G Foard, T Partida & S Wilson, *The Barnet Battlefield Project 2015–18*; T Partida *The Landscape of Barnet Battlefield*; D Barker, K Strutt & S Wilson *Report on the Geophysical Survey at Wrotham Park, Potter's Bar, Barnet, Hertfordshire, August–September 2018*; *SREP 2/2019* Archaeological Prospection Services of Southampton; S Wilson *Battle of Barnet – Survey for Battle Archaeology*. Available from ADS at <https://tinyurl.com/wp578sbr> [accessed 28 October 2021].
 2. B Watson 'Barnet: the ongoing archaeological search for Greater London's only medieval battlefield' *London Archaeol* **14** (5) (2015), 132–9.
 3. *Ibid.*, 133.
 4. Partida *op cit* fn 1, fig 7.
 5. Barker *et al op cit* fn 1.
 6. Ground penetrating radar, earth resistance and magnetometer surveys were undertaken, see Barker *op cit* fn 1, 12–37.
 7. Foard *et al op cit* fn 1, 50–60; Wilson *op cit* fn 1, sections 7 and 8.
 8. G Foard and A Curry *Bosworth 1485: a battlefield rediscovered* (2013).
 9. In 2015, metal-detecting of part of this golf course was undertaken for a separate project, 73 post-medieval objects, including golf-related finds were recovered, see S Wilson *Old Fold Manor Golf Club Archaeological Metal Detector Survey* (2015).

Available online from Academia at <https://tinyurl.com/kp72wewu> [accessed 28 October 2021]; but please note you will have to sign up to Academia to view this.
 10. The 2016 fieldwork featured on the BBC *Digging for Britain* series presented by Alice Roberts.
 11. Of the 1007 recorded finds, only 16 or possibly 17 (1.7%) were definitely of medieval date; see Foard *et al op cit* fn 1, 94–5; Wilson *op cit* fn 1, section 4.
 12. The Yorkist army included Burgundian mercenaries and Flemish hand-gunners.
 13. Foard *et al op cit* fn 1, 80–6.
 14. *Ibid.*, fig 36.
 15. An additional 58 lead projectiles recovered from Hadley Wood before 1988–9 were examined, see Foard *et al op cit* fn 1, 78–85; Wilson *op cit* fn 1, section 4 and appendix 1.
 16. See Charles I (1640–5) pattern flintlock musket in the Royal Armouries. Available online at: <https://tinyurl.com/3xvwm63x> [accessed 28 October 2021]. By the 1690s, the doglock musket was extensively used by the British army.
 17. Foard *et al op cit* fn 1, 94–5; Wilson *op cit* fn 1, section 4.
 18. Wilson *op cit* fn 1, sections 7–8.
 19. See 1805 Baker Rifle in the Royal Armouries. Available online at: <https://tinyurl.com/jdu4j8nv> [accessed 28 October 2021].

20. It is possible that a variety of small projectiles including lead bullets, gravel pebbles or irregular fragments of iron, such as nails, were used as 'hailshot'; see Foard *et al op cit* fn 1, 79.
 21. *Ibid.*, 3–70.
 22. Partida *op cit* fn 1.
 23. B Warren *The Medieval Period in the Local Area, Potters Bar & District Historical Special Booklet 3* (2009); B Warren *Reappraisal of the Battle of Barnet 1471* Potters Bar & District Historical Special Booklet **4** (2009).
 24. Partida *op cit* fn 1.
 25. Watson *op cit* fn 2, 138; A P Baggs, D K Bolton, E P Scarff & G C Tyack 'Monken Hadley: manor and other estates' in T F T Baker & R B Pugh (eds) *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 5* (1976), 263–66. Available online from *British History Online* at: <https://tinyurl.com/rb2t3pfe> [accessed 28 October 2021].
 26. The highest estimate for the number of dead is 3,000; see Watson *op cit* fn 2, 133.
 27. D Clark *Barnet –1471: death of a kingmaker* (2007), 56. In 1996, a small portion of a mass-burial pit on the site of the Battle of Towton (29 March 1461) was excavated; see V Fiorato, A Boylston & C Knüsel *Blood Red Roses: the archaeology of a mass grave from the Battle of Towton AD 1461* (2007).