

BATTLES AND BURIALS AT HOLMAN'S BRIDGE: FACT OR FICTION?

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A reference on early Ordnance Survey maps identifies a Civil War military engagement, the 'Battle of Aylesbury', and the discovery in 1818 of human skeletons near Holmans Bridge, Aylesbury. The engagement, of which there are several conflicting contemporary accounts, has since passed into local folklore: the skeletons, for which there are also different accounts of their discovery, are said to have been interred subsequently in Hardwick churchyard. This article examines the historical and archaeological evidence for the engagement, the discovery of the burials and their relationship to the engagement, and provides a possible interpretation of these events.

INTRODUCTION

The writer was originally prompted into preparing this article whilst carrying out an archaeological watching brief on a sewer pipeline between Aylesbury and Weedon in June 1994 on behalf of the County Museum. The southern end of the pipeline, which closely followed the A413 Aylesbury to Buckingham road, crossed the river Thame just to the west of Holman's Bridge, located at NGR SP 8175 1525. The river valley here is flat, rising slightly to the north to a ridge, at the west end of which lies the scheduled earthworks of Quarrendon. The underlying geology comprises Kimmeridge clay, overlain by alluvium. The river here meanders and the land around it was formerly marshy: Lipscomb (1847) recalls a journey by Leland from Buckingham to Aylesbury in the 16th century, where the latter mentions a 'stone causeway' leading from the bridge towards the town, across the marshy area. The river marks the boundary between Aylesbury and Weedon parishes.

On the First Edition 6" to the mile Ordnance Survey sheet of 1884 the area north-west of Holman's Bridge is marked as "Site of the Battle of Aylesbury, 1642. Human Remains found A.D. 1818" (Fig. 1). Background research carried out for the watching brief revealed inconsistencies in accounts of the aforementioned engagement and of the discovery of burials on the same site, prompting the writer to undertake a more detailed study of both events. In 1994 proposals were well under way for development of the area north-west of Holman's Bridge: the original text of this article was made

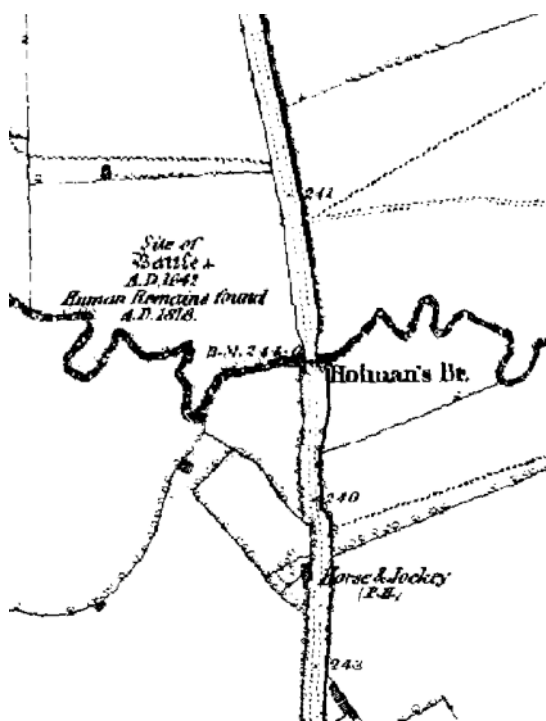


FIGURE 1 Extract from the Ordnance Survey First Edition 6" sheet, showing Holman's Bridge and the marked site of the battle and burials

freely available to those involved in the development process, and was also submitted to *Records*, though it was never published. In 1999 a metal detecting survey carried out in relation to that

development recovered artefactual evidence relevant to this discussion (Foard 2013), prompting revision of the article. This revised study examines the current evidence for military engagement and possibly associated discoveries at Holman's Bridge, and attempts to present a balanced view of what has hitherto been one of the more confusing events in the history of Aylesbury.

THE MILITARY ENGAGEMENT

The most detailed account of the "Battle of Aylesbury" appears in a tract dated 1642, entitled *Good and Joyful News out of Buckinghamshire* (GJN), printed for Francis Wright of London (reprinted in the *Bucks Chronicle*, 12th November 1825). The events it describes are summarised as follows:

On November 1st, following the battle of Edgehill on October 23rd, Prince Rupert's retreating forces "...sought to refresh themselves in the...County of Buckingham", and marched towards Aylesbury with the intention of capturing the town. The Royalist army, numbering some 10,000 cavalry and infantry, entered the town at 6.00am. Because of the suddenness of their coming they were unopposed, and no resistance was offered by the inhabitants, who were largely Parliament supporters. There they remained "in indifferent peaceable disposition" until Rupert's scouts reported the approach of a Parliamentary force 6,000 strong. This force in fact numbered only 1,500, and was commanded by Sir William Balfore, formerly Lieutenant of the Tower of London, now a Lieutenant-General serving with the Earl of Essex. It consisted of Colonel Hampden's regiment of foot, part of Colonel Grantham's regiment, and six cavalry troops. Rupert determined to intercept this force before they reached the town, and marched out to meet them, leaving a cavalry troop and two infantry companies in the town to "secure the inhabitants" who were aroused by the news of the approaching force. Battle was joined, and Rupert led a cavalry charge into the centre of the Parliamentary line, as a result of which he was surrounded, but managed to escape. The better-disciplined Parliamentary cavalry then routed the Royalist infantry. Meanwhile the townsfolk "charged ... upon the backs" of the Royalist rearguard, and expelled them from the town. 200 Royalists were killed in the battle, 600 more in the rout that followed, and a further

200 were taken prisoner, while 90 Parliamentarians died. The defeated Royalist army retreated towards Oxford, looting as they went.

Another account of a Civil War engagement at Aylesbury appears in the Parliamentary newspaper *Perfect Diurnal* (PD – quoted in full in Lee 1863, 100–101), dated 27th March 1643. It is based on dispatches from the Parliamentarian Colonel Goodwin, and states that a Royalist army 6,000 strong, commanded by General Ruthin, the Princes Rupert and Maurice, the Earl of Carnarvon, Lords Grandison and Wentworth and others, quartered on Monday 20th March a mile or two from Aylesbury, on the Chiltern side. That evening a cavalry force under the Earl of Carnarvon rode to Wendover and plundered it. The following day the Royalists advanced to "almost within cannon shot" of the town, but did not enter. A party of cavalry went out to meet them, but was driven back into the town. In the evening the Royalist army withdrew, a few hours before the arrival of reinforcements sent to the town by the Earl of Essex.

Despite the differences between these accounts, on the basis of the numbers of men said to be involved, these engagements should be classed as major Civil War battles, along with Edgehill, Naseby, Marston Moor etc, so it is surprising that the "Battle of Aylesbury" does not appear in any of the principal histories of the period. Clarendon (Hyde 1717) does not mention it: *Whitelocke's Memorials* (WM), written by the Parliamentarian Bulstrode Whitelocke, records only that

"Prince Rupert ranged abroad with great parties who committed strange insolencies and violence upon the county. At Ailsbury [sic] he failed of his design, by the care and stoutness of Colonel Bulstrode, governor there."

More recent accounts of the Civil War in Buckinghamshire and the South Midlands (e.g. Firth 1890, Tennant 1992) make no mention of a military engagement at Aylesbury.

One final piece of information relating to a possible engagement at Aylesbury is contained in a letter from Sir John Culpeper to Prince Rupert, dated March 19th 1643 (Lee 1863, 99). Culpeper relays information from spies he has sent into Aylesbury, suggesting that if Prince Rupert will only "looke upon the towne" (arrive on its outskirts with a Royalist force), the offer of a general pardon to "officers, soldiers and Burgers [sic]" within might well cause the inhabitants and troops there to

surrender without a fight. Lee suggests that this letter prompted Rupert's march on Aylesbury, resulting in the events described in *PD*, which he distinguishes from the *GJN* engagement, identifying the latter as the "Battle of Holman's Bridge". This seems unlikely, as Culpeper's letter is dated the day before the events described in *PD*, giving little time to deliver the letter, consider its content, and mount an attack.

There are several obvious factual differences in the first three accounts. The first is the date of the engagement: 1st November 1642 in *GJN*, and 20th March 1643 in *PD*. The second is the statistical information: *WM* describes a Royalist army of 10,000 (the odds being nearly 7:1 in favour of the Royalists), though *PD* states that only 6,000 were present. The third relates to the personalities said to be involved. Sir William Balfour is the architect of the town's deliverance in *GJN*; Colonel Goodwin, source of the despatch in *PD*, is presumably Parliamentary commander "on the spot", and Colonel Bulstrode, commander of the Parliamentary *Bucks Yeomanry* and Governor of Aylesbury from November 1642, is the "hero" of *WM*. In *GJN* and *WM* Prince Rupert is the sole Royalist commander mentioned, while in *PD* he is one of several. There is also the question of location: in the *GJN* account the Royalist force comes to Aylesbury from Edgehill, suggesting they probably approached from the north, though *GJN* does not mention where the engagement took place. *WM* is similarly uninformative as to location. In *PD* the Royalists approach the 'Chiltern side' (south-east) of the town, and attack Wendover as well as Aylesbury. Finally, *GJN* records a large-scale encounter in which the Royalists lost, *PD* describes a cavalry skirmish in which the Parliamentarians were routed, and *WM* also implies a small-scale engagement.

How can these inconsistencies be explained? Discussing the battle of Aylesbury in his history of Buckinghamshire, Sheahan (1862, 49) asserts that the writer of *GJN* "appears to have been much misinformed, or to have purposely exaggerated his account of the affair", and that *PD* is the correct account, as it derives from a military despatch addressed to the Speaker and read to the House of Commons. Although the greater numbers said to be involved, killed and captured in the *GJN* account are almost certainly the result of exaggeration for propaganda purposes, Sheahan's argument does not fully explain the differences between the three

sources, or the identification of Holman's Bridge as the battle site.

How do these accounts tally with current historical knowledge of the Civil War? At Edgehill, starting point of the *GJN* account, the battle ended in a stalemate. The Royalist infantry suffered heavy losses, but the Parliamentary army under Essex had to retreat towards Warwick, harried by Rupert's cavalry until they realised the road to London lay open, and raced south. The King then decided not to enter the capital by force, so Rupert's cavalry attacked Windsor, hoping to sever waterborne trade into London. This strategy failed, so they hunted for food and forage in the Vale of Aylesbury before rejoining the King's forces, which by then had reached Egham, Surrey. Oxford became the Royalist headquarters in late 1642, remaining in their hands until 1646. Meanwhile, Essex made his way to London through the eastern Chilterns and Markyate to avoid Rupert, arriving on 7th November 1642 and claiming victory at Edgehill (Wedgewood 1958).

Therefore it is quite possible that a Royalist force commanded by Rupert could have been in the vicinity of Aylesbury in late October or early November 1642. However, as the Royalist forces at Edgehill numbered 14-15,000 at the start of the battle, even allowing for casualties, desertions and the fact that most of the army was with the King, it is unlikely that Rupert had 10,000 men under his command at Aylesbury a week later. At Powick Bridge, before Edgehill, Rupert commanded a force of 1,000 cavalry: in June 1643 at Chalgrove he led a combined force of 1,000 cavalry, 500 infantry and 350 dragoons. Both forces are far smaller than those described in *PD* and *GJN*. Although it is difficult to be precise, it appears from accounts of Civil War battles that infantry regiments comprised 1200 men, Royalist cavalry regiments 500 and Parliamentary horse troops 60 (Smirthwaite 1984).

The *GJN* account infers that Rupert was an inept military commander. Despite being young and impulsive, Rupert was probably one of the best commanders in the Civil War on either side, not only of cavalry, as he demonstrated at Chalgrove. In this respect, one odd point in *GJN* is the description of Rupert's cavalry charge into the centre of the Parliamentary lines. This was not a contemporary military tactic: cavalry were always positioned on the flanks and attacked the opposing cavalry,

hoping to come upon the infantry's flanks or rear, the guns or the baggage train (Wanklyn & Jones 2005).

Another point that should be taken into account is the suitability of the area around Holman's Bridge for a military engagement. The Thame, though not a broad river, forms a natural barrier to the north of Aylesbury, with only two crossing points, Holman's Bridge on the Buckingham road and Stone Bridge on Akeman Street, to the north-west. A force approaching the town from the north would have to cross the former or risk the river valley, which was waterlogged and marshy; not an ideal location for a military engagement. The 17th-century Holman's Bridge appears to have been much narrower than the present structure, and probably hump-backed (Eveleigh 2101, 195).

Therefore, based on the dates and location details, it seems likely that *GJN* and *PD* refer to two wholly separate events. *GJN* takes place late in 1642, after Edgehill, and recounts the capture of Aylesbury by a large Royalist army, their battle with a much smaller Parliamentary force and the rout of the Royalist force by the Parliamentarians and the townsfolk. *PD* details a series of incidents on the south-east side of Aylesbury in 1643, involving a cavalry skirmish, a Royalist attack on Wendover and their subsequent strategic retreat prior to the arrival of Parliamentary reinforcements. Examined critically, *GJN* is almost certainly pure propaganda, arising from the tense opening months of the war: *PD* may be more accurate, though the numbers of Royalist troops still seem on the large side. The much briefer account provided by *WM* could relate to either of these events, or even to a third. None of the accounts refer to the Holman's Bridge locality. Royalist cavalry may have approached Aylesbury in late 1642 and early 1643, and even entered the town or been repulsed, but almost certainly in far smaller numbers than described in *GJN* or *PD*. Defeating Prince Rupert was a favourite pastime of the writers of Parliamentary tracts: the Royalists even had a song about it!

THE BURIALS

In 1818, workmen digging for gravel to the north of Aylesbury near the Thame found a number of human burials. These were collected together, and at some point between 1818 and 1825 they were re-

interred in a tomb in the churchyard at Hardwick, north of Aylesbury, at the instance of Lord Nugent, MP for Aylesbury from 1810–1850 and a major landowner in the parish. The tomb (Fig. 2) survives to this day, having been reconstructed in the 20th century. It consists of a plain stone box-tomb measuring about 1.8 × 1.0 × 0.9 metres, set on a rough limestone plinth. On the box-tomb is a plaque which reads:

“Within are deposited the bones of 247 Persons who were discovered A.D. 1818, buried in a field adjoining to Holman's Bridge, near Aylesbury.

From the History and appearances of the place where they were found, they were considered to be the bones of those officers and men who perished in an engagement fought A.D. 1642, between the troops of K. Charles I, under the command of Prince Rupert, and the Garrison who held Aylesbury for the Parliament.

Enemies, from their attachment to opposite leaders and to opposite Standards, in the sanguinary conflicts of that Civil War, they were together victims to its fury. United in one common slaughter, they were buried in one common grave, close to the spot where they had lately stood in arms against each other.

After the lapse of more than a century and a half, their bones were collected, and deposited still in consecrated ground.

May the memory of brave men be respected, and may our country never again be compelled to take part in a conflict such as that which this tablet records.”

Unfortunately, like the battle itself, the story of the burials is by no means simple. The earliest account of their discovery appears in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, dated October 12th 1819, and locates the find

“...in the northern part of the [Aylesbury] parish ... within a few yards of the course of a small brook which separates it from the neighbouring parish of Brieton [*sic*], and very near to the turnpike road leading from Aylesbury to Winslow”

The account goes on to describe the haphazard nature of the burials and their differing depths, between three and five feet from the surface. It

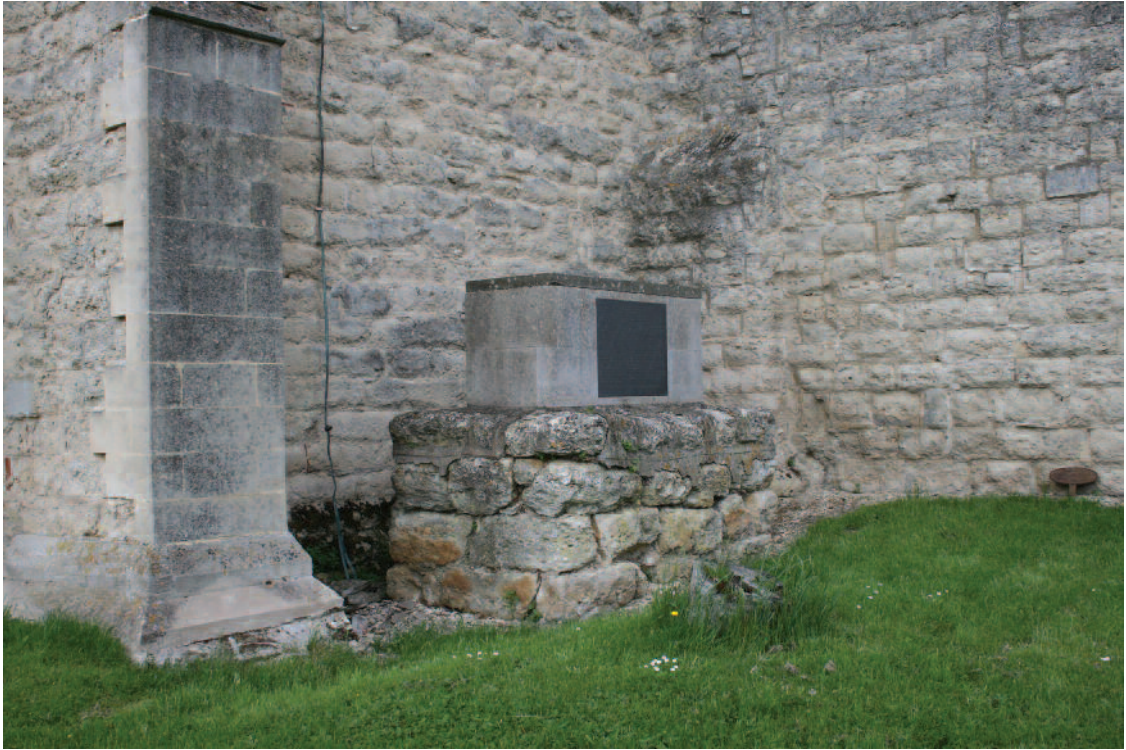


FIGURE 2 The tomb in Hardwick Churchyard

states categorically that there were *thirty-eight*, all adults, and all below middle age, with few exceptions. It comments on the differing preservation between those found in clay and those buried in gravel, and on the lack of associated artefacts. There is some speculation regarding the origin of the burials, and although the unnamed author (an “old correspondent”) suggests that these could be Saxon burials, he comes down in favour of their being of Civil War date, primarily because of their state of preservation. The “Battle of Aylesbury” is not mentioned: indeed, the writer does not appear to have heard of it.

The next account of the discovery appears in the *Bucks Herald* dated November 12th, 1825. It is evident that by this time the burials had been re-interred at Hardwick, and the *GJN* tract had come to light, as it is quoted in full, along with the inscription on the memorial. By this time the number of skeletons has increased to 247, not far short of the 290 that *GJN* records as having been killed in the battle. It is ironic that the *Herald*

article quotes Voltaire – “all gazettes of battles are liars” – in view of the inconsistencies in *GJN* discussed above.

There is yet another account of the burials. In an article entitled “Historical memoranda of Bierton” (*Records* 2, 1860, 160–65) the author (“C.P.A.”) describes in some detail the location of the burials found in 1818. He places them not in Aylesbury but in the west part of Bierton parish. Following the lane opposite Bierton church, he leads the reader to a field at the top of the lane called Breach Meadow, and from there south-west to “The Kings Furlong”. Between there and Holman’s Bridge is the field in which the burials were found, called “Goodson’s” after its former owners, a Bierton family. He states categorically that these were the burials interred at Hardwick, and describes the original monument and the inscription. “Breach Meadow” and “The King’s Furlong” are identified on the 1780 enclosure map of Bierton (CBS 1R/1A.R), and the location of “Goodson’s”, though not shown, can thus be inferred with some accuracy. It is interesting to

note that this field, though not named, is shown to have been quarried, most likely for gravel. Neighbouring fields on the Ordnance Survey First Edition 6" sheet contain symbols relating to quarrying, traces of which also appear on modern air photographs.

Following the general acceptance of the *GJN* tract, it seems that the meadow to the north of Holman's Bridge, in Weedon parish, was taken to be the original location of the burials and thus of the battle. It is identified as such on early Ordnance Survey maps, and has come to be accepted in local folklore. However, during the watching brief mentioned above and carried out in this field by the writer no trace of burials was found, and the subsoil proved to be clay, with none of the gravel deposits that brought about the discovery of the burials.

In summary there are three possible locations for the burials; in Aylesbury, Bierton and Weedon parishes respectively. The Aylesbury location is suggested in the earliest account of the burials and, though not precisely described, can be placed in fields to the west or east of the Buckingham Road, south of the Thame. Trial trenching during the 1994 watching brief in this area, west of the road, revealed mixed deposits of clay and gravel subsoil as described in the *Gentleman's Magazine* account, but no trace of burials. A Saxon spearhead recovered in the vicinity of Holman's Bridge suggests that any burials in this location could be of Saxon date. In contrast, the Bierton location is described precisely. However, it is nearer to Bierton than to Holman's Bridge or Aylesbury, and therefore does not fit readily with the Civil War scenarios already described. Of course, the Bierton burials need not be of Civil War date: their location, some distance from the centre of Bierton, would be appropriate for a pagan Saxon cemetery. There appears to be no evidence for the Weedon location other than its appearance on early Ordnance Survey maps, and for this reason alone it can be discounted.

The number of burials present in each of the accounts varies. The *Gentleman's Magazine* account states that there were thirty-eight, whereas *GJN* records 247, quite a variation. From the undisputed circumstances of the discovery, and the unavailability at that time of archaeological or osteo-archaeological techniques, it seems reasonable to assume that the skeletons found were relatively complete, and therefore could be counted accurately. The tomb in Hardwick churchyard is far

too small to hold 247 human skeletons. In any case, such a large number of fatalities could only have resulted from the battle described in *GJN*, which is most likely exaggerated.

RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

The 1999 metal detecting survey, carried out over an area of c.0.6 sq km bounded by the Buckingham road, the Thame, Quarrendon and the northern edge of the development area, recovered four lead powder box caps and 26 lead bullets, the locations of which were plotted. The report (Foard 2013, 39) concluded that the finds demonstrated that military activity, primarily cavalry action with some infantry involvement, had taken place on the survey area in the mid-17th century. However, the size of the assemblage was too small to draw definite conclusions regarding the nature of the action.

CONCLUSION

Given the differing accounts, both of the Civil War engagements and the discovery of the burials, it is difficult to piece together a convincing picture of either event. With regard to the former, from the available evidence it seems unlikely that there ever was a major Civil War battle at Aylesbury, as described in *GJN*, but that on more than one occasion the town was subject to Royalist reconnaissance and foraging, sometimes resulting in a small skirmish, more or less as described in *PD*, involving much smaller numbers of troops than either account suggests. One of these skirmishes appears on the evidence of the metal detector survey to have taken place north of Holman's Bridge, and may be the origin of the more exaggerated account of the 'Battle of Holman's Bridge' in *GJN*. Another appears on the historical evidence of the *PD* account to have taken place to the south-east of Aylesbury. There may well have been others.

Turning to the discovery of the burials, the clear description of the Bierton site suggests it to be the most likely location. It does not tally with any of the accounts of Civil War engagements, which may suggest that the burials are probably of Saxon date. The accounts placing the burials in Weedon or Aylesbury parishes, near Holman's Bridge, are at variance with the local geology, and the identifica-

tions of both these locations appear vague. With regard to the number of burials, the Hardwick monument is too small to accommodate 247 adult human skeletons, though 38 might fit. If the burials were of Saxon rather than Civil War date, the smaller number falls within the size range of other Saxon cemeteries excavated in Buckinghamshire (Farley 2010, 116–124).

Realistically, the date of the burials can only be resolved by radiocarbon dating the bones in the memorial. Since there is little chance of this avenue of enquiry being followed, it seems likely that the contents of the “Battle of Aylesbury” monument will remain an enigma and a source of local interest for many years to come.

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