

THE BATTLE OF CHERITON

by

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The battle of Cheriton, or "Cheriton Fight", is our most important local battle. It took place on 29th March 1644 during the English Civil war between Charles I and Parliament. Although not as well known as the important Civil War battles of Naseby and Marston Moor, some historians regard it as the turning point in the Civil War. Before Cheriton the Royalists were generally on the offensive; after Cheriton they had adopted a defensive posture.

Hampshire occupied an important strategic position between the rival forces. Generally speaking the west and north of England supported the Royalists whilst the east and most of the Midlands supported Parliament. In the south the counties to the west of Hampshire were largely Royalist and Sussex, Kent and Surrey were largely for Parliament. Some isolated towns, including ports, held out in hostile territory. The King's headquarters were at Oxford, and those of Parliament were based in London.

The town commanders who were to face each other at Cheriton were Lord Hopton for the King and Sir William Waller for Parliament. Friends as young men they had taken different sides in the Civil War. Hopton had beaten Waller at Roundway Down near Devizes and at Lansdown near Bath, whilst Waller had been victorious at Alton. Both were anxious to "tangle" again.

In September 1643 Lord Hopton was directed by the king to take a new army from the west of England to secure Dorset, Wiltshire and Hampshire and then to advance on London. The main Royalist army would move from Oxford to London and Parliament would be trapped in what we would now call a pincer movement. To contain this threat Parliament appointed Sir William Waller to command the force of the Southern Association of Kent, Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire. In December 1643 Waller's army entered Sussex taking Arundel and Chichester, and moved towards Winchester via Petersfield. Meanwhile Hopton had arrived at Winchester which became his base. His army, consisting largely of raw soldiers, many of whom were young impressed men, was to be opposed by Waller's generally more highly trained forces.

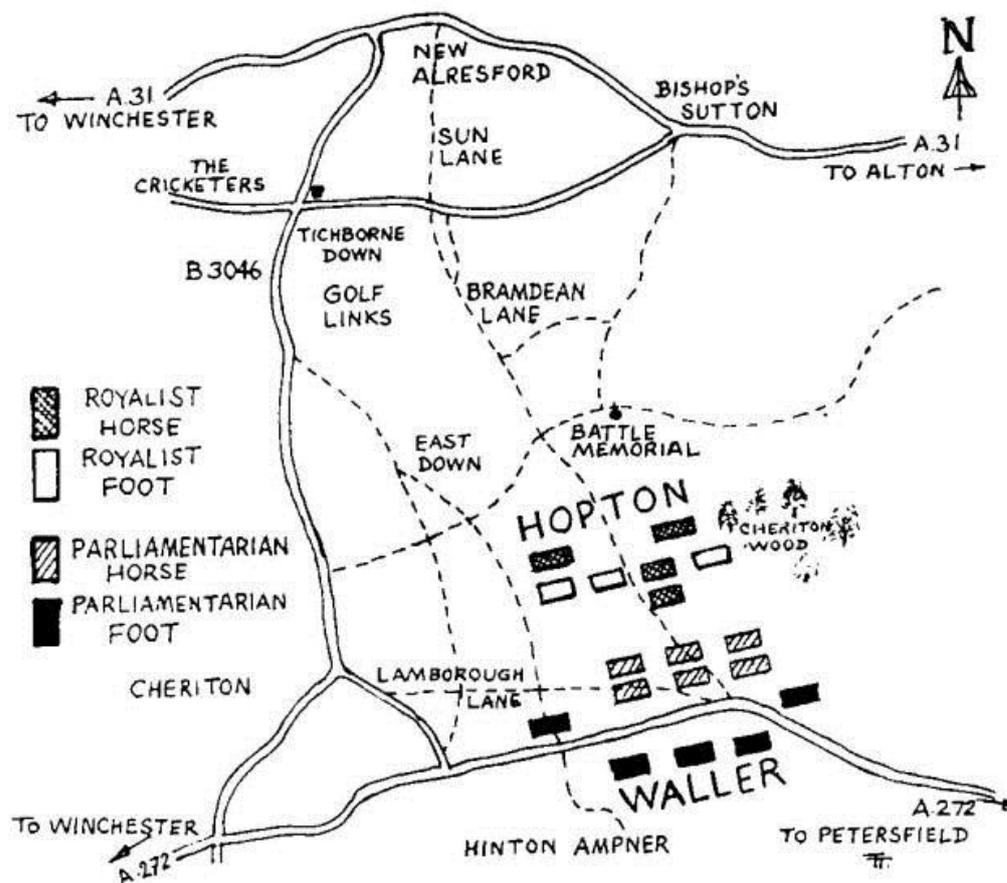
On March 26th the two armies arrived at an area between East and West Meon where their patrols clashed. The following day Waller attempted to cut Hopton off from his base at Winchester by moving towards Alresford. Hopton, sensing the danger, also moved towards Alresford and both armies marched to Alresford, often in full view of each other.

Hopton won the race, his cavalry occupying Broad Street and his foot forming a defence screen on Tichborne Down. Waller's forces settled near Cheriton at Lamborough Fields and along the valley to Bramdean. Waller himself lodged at Hinton Ampner House, the home of Lady Stukesly, a Parliamentary sympathiser.

On March 28th there was skirmishing between the two forces. That night Waller and his officers conferred to decide whether to fight or withdraw to the Parliamentary base at Famham. The Royalists at Alresford had the advantage of commanding the main road to Famham and London, whilst the Parliamentarians would have a more circuitous route should they have to fall back to Famham.

If Waller were defeated the road to Famham and London would be open to Hopton and Parliament would be in peril. However Waller and his officers decided to stay and fight it out.

March 29th was the day of the battle. The Royalists under the joint command of Lord Hopton and the Earl of Forth held a line from East Down to Cheriton Wood facing the Parliamentarians between Lamborough Fields and Bramdean (see map).



Before dawn the London Brigade, consisting mainly of inexperienced recruits occupied Cheriton Wood on the Royalists left. This threatened a flank attack if the Royalists advanced. The danger was immediately recognised and a determined attack by Royalist musketeers drove the Londoners out in confusion. Soon after this a reckless and unsupported advance by Sir Henry Bard's foot regiment against Parliament's left wing led to the regiment being cut off and destroyed with the loss of the commander. This was a serious blow to Hopton.

At midday the Royalist cavalry attacked with great gallantry but poor tactics. One advance was down Bramdean Lane. Here the Cavalry moved one troop at a time which prevented them from concentrating their forces for the attack. They suffered heavy losses from musketeers lining the hedgerows and gunners firing down the lane. A fierce melee ensued and several prominent Royalist officers were lost with a most adverse effect on Royalist morale. Waller was involved in the struggle and was fortunate to survive unharmed. This was the turning point of the battle. Poor tactics and lack of discipline by Royalist Officers contributed to the failure of Royalist attacks. Other Royalist attacks by foot and horse failed to dislodge Waller's forces.

Later in the afternoon the two Parliamentary wings began to close and the Royalists were forced back from hedgerow to hedgerow. Cheriton Wood was re-occupied. Panic affected some of the Royalists who fled, throwing their arms away. Some of the impressed soldiers indeed were able to return quietly to their own homes. Hopton withdrew his forces to Alresford in as orderly a manner as possible leaving a rearguard at Tichborne Down to delay Waller.

Alresford was set on fire by the retreating Royalists but the flames were soon extinguished by the pursuing Parliamentarians. Most of the Royalist forces reached Basing House that night, the rearguard being courageously commanded by the elderly Earl of Forth.

On the following day Waller entered Winchester but the Royalists held out in the Castle, not surrendering until 1645.

Estimates as to the numbers involved and casualties suffered vary tremendously, but probably 10,000 Parliamentarians faced 7,000 Royalists. One authority gives 900 Parliamentarians and 1400 Royalists killed, although these estimates may be on the high side.

Some local notables were involved in the battle. Colonel Richard Norton, who owned the Manor House in Old Alresford and was a friend of Cromwell's, commanded a regiment of horse. Although nicknamed "Idle Dick", he was far from idle in the battlefield, successfully leading cavalry attacks on the Royalists. Sir Richard Tichborne of Tichborne House and his brother Benjamin of West Tisted fought on the Royalists side. Sir Benjamin is said to have hidden in the chimney of a cottage after the battle. Another Tichborne, Robert, supported Parliament, although he was not at the battle. His signature, with others, is on the death warrant of Charles I (1649). He was not, however, arraigned for treason at the Restoration in 1660.

The King's cause never recovered from the defeat at Cheriton. It threw the whole of his strategy in the South of England out of balance. His best army in the south had been decisively beaten with heavy losses of men, horses and material. All hope of occupying Sussex and Kent and moving on London vanished. The House of Commons ordered that April 9th should be celebrated as a day of public thanksgiving in London.

Today there is a plaque on the site of the battle [see map] at the far end of Scrubbs Lane. Relics have been dug up over the years. Cannon balls have been found in Cheriton gardens. Indeed long ago it seems that villagers played bowls with them. Various mounds in the countryside were thought to be mass graves.

It would not be right to end this brief account of the Battle of Cheriton without some reference to what civilians suffered as well as soldiers in the Civil War. A heavy burden fell on the civilian population, especially in operational areas. Plunder, lawlessness, heavy taxation, seizure of cattle and horses and the decline of trade hit many people, but especially the poor. The attempted burning of Alresford after the battle illustrates the perils of the times and Peter Heylin the Royalist Rector of Old Alresford had his goods and chattels, including a fine library, plundered by the Parliamentarians. The Rector was forced to flee his home and go into hiding.

Generals on both sides attempted, not always successfully, to curb the worst excesses committed by their troops. For example in 1644 there were twenty-two Court Martials in Waller's army and some of those found guilty were hanged.

Today the battlefield is at peace and sheep graze on its slopes. It is difficult to imagine the scene three and a half centuries ago when the area was filled with fighting men and horses. We cannot relive the fears and passions of that day. The most apt comment was made by my mother who, when I drove her across the old battlefield murmured "the poor things!".

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