

The Military and Political Importance of the Battle of Chalgrove (1643)

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SUMMARY

This article provides a revised view of the significance of the Battle of Chalgrove which took place on 18 June 1643. It is argued that the battle's military and political importance to the early years of the Civil War has been underestimated in standard accounts, partly because it is often confused with a separate skirmish near Chinnor. Many other details about the battle require clarification, including the site of the battlefield, which hitherto has not been properly established. The Royalist and Parliamentary armies' manoeuvres preceding the battle are investigated, including the circular route taken by Prince Rupert and his army from Oxford via Chinnor to Chalgrove. The times and places noted en route are plotted in the Oxfordshire landscape with the aid of old maps and documents. The most likely site of the battle is made clear, as well as the reasons why it has been confused with the action at Chinnor. The significance of the victory by a numerically inferior Royalist force is discussed.

The traditional view is that Chalgrove was a skirmish and not a battle. English Heritage recorded in its Battlefields Register that, 'in strict terms of scale, Chalgrove Field was a skirmish.'¹ The Battlefields Trust characterise it as 'one of a number of small scale actions.'² They concur that Chalgrove was only important because Col. John Hampden was mortally wounded during the battle. Indeed, Chalgrove was not included on the original proposals for the Battlefields Register in 1994. After representations to the assessing panel, it was added to the Register in 1995 purely because of Hampden's involvement. These traditional views rest ultimately on the earl of Clarendon's 'History of the Great Rebellion.'³ Clarendon used 'Essex's Letters'⁴ and the 'True Relation of a Great Fight'⁵ for his interpretation of the battle. Both of his sources are in some way inaccurate and so consequentially is his account of Chalgrove. Subsequent historians who have used Clarendon as their source have perpetuated this myth of Chalgrove being a minor skirmish. This article sets out to explain that the action at Chalgrove was in fact large enough in scale to be considered a battle. It also argues that its importance was in debilitating Essex's Parliamentary army, rather than simply in the death of John Hampden.

The idea of Chalgrove as a minor skirmish results from confusion with a separate action at nearby South Weston. New understanding and analysis of contemporary documents clearly shows that after the raid on Chinnor a skirmish involving 300 parliamentarians took place

¹ 'English Heritage Battlefield Report: Chalgrove 1643' (1995).

² <http://www.battlefieldstrust.com/resource-centre/civil-war/battleview.asp?BattleFieldId=10>.

³ E. Hyde, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, vol. 7 (1717), pp. 77–80.

⁴ BL, Thomasons Tracts, E55 19 (*Two Letters from his Excellencie Robert Earl of Essex. The one unto the Speaker of the House of Commons; Relating the true of the skirmish at Chinnor, between a party of King's and Parliament's Forces on the Sabbath day 19 June, 1643 with the number of such persons as was taken and slain on both sides*).

⁵ *Ibid.* E55 11 (*A True Relation of a Gret Fight Between the King's Forces and the Parliaments, at Chinner neer Tame on Saturday last. With the manner how the King's Forces made the assault, and by what meanes they were forced to retreat. Also in what manner Colonell Hampden is wounded, with the names of the chiefe Commanders that were killed and taken prisoners on both sides: As also the firing and burning of the Towne of Chinner, by the King's Forces, and many other remarkable passages concerning the said fight*).

around South Weston at about 8.15 am. This is the encounter that Essex, by accident or design, confused with the Battle of Chalgrove. As a result, the usual figure given for the number of Parliamentarian combatants in the action at Chalgrove is inaccurate. Essex stated that only 300 Parliamentarians were engaged at the battle, yet a Royalist account states there were 13 troops of 70 men plus 100 dragoons, which equals about a 1,000 men. This account has been cited by Brigadier Peter Young in an unpublished paper,⁶ but even he only estimates a force of 600–800 men. The accepted view of the duration of the battle also has to be queried. English Heritage relates that, ‘The fight had been short and sharp’, but this statement probably relates to the skirmish at South Weston.

The site of the battle likewise requires further analysis. According to a contemporary Royalist account (‘The Late Beating Up’), Prince Rupert paused in a Chalgrove corn field (or open field) to see the rebels coming down Golder Hill towards him, noted their disorder and feigned his retreat.⁷ Lord Nugent cites the battlefield as being in a cornfield by a hedgerow that formed the boundary of Chalgrove.⁸ Nugent had approached potential subscribers with the promise that a monument would be raised where John Hampden was mortally wounded. Renn Dickson Hampden DD made a generous offer of a prestigious plot at the crossroads of the Watlington to Oxford Road, nowhere near the parish boundary. In the full knowledge that the area around the crossroads was not the site of Hampden’s mortal wounding Lord Nugent accepted Renn’s generous offer. Lord Nugent placed an advert in *The Aylesbury News*, 27 May 1843 which had as a headline, ‘HAMPDEN COMMEMORATION ON CHALGROVE FIELD’. The area around the monument was not known as Chalgrove Field in 1843 and it is still not recognised as such. However, in 1880 Ordnance Survey’s cartographers assumed this to be the battle site and marked their map ‘Site of Battle (AD 1643)’ and with a broad brush the area was renamed Chalgrove Field. It is from this confusion that twentieth-century historians placed the battle near the monument and named it the Battle of Chalgrove Field.

Other major features in the landscape are important to the battle and are misplaced in the received view, including the siting of hedges. It is known that the protagonists faced each other over a hedge and that this hedge was thin enough for Prince Rupert to jump over and his lifeguard to ‘jumble over after him’. The received view has the protagonists facing each other over a hedge near the monument, north of the Watlington to Oxford Road. The Ordnance Survey’s 1881 map placed the battle on false evidence south of the Watlington to Oxford Road. The absurdity of this location for the battle became apparent when English Heritage drew up their Battlefield Register. Early maps depict hedges lining the Watlington to Oxford road, features that would have prevented Rupert from facing the rebels in one leap. With military logic the battle site was moved 500 yards northwards, but its placement still used the flawed evidence of Nugent and the Ordnance Survey.

Another hedge of significance is the ‘great hedge’ which helped to define the movement of troops before the battle. Great hedges, since medieval times, defined and marked the boundaries of parishes. The Parliamentarians coming down Golder Hill were in the parish of Pyrton and ordered themselves among the trees on the edge of Lewknor Meadow. Looking across the meadow beyond the ‘great hedge’ into Chalgrove field they saw the Royalist cavalry in battle formation. A remnant of this hedge has a double line of stock proof hedges with sufficient space between to ride horses side by side. Rupert could not and did not jump this hedge as it was too wide and he would have left Chalgrove to fight the battle in the parish of Pyrton.

The location of Warpsgrove House is significant too, since the ‘Late Beating Up’ names Warpsgrove House as the place where the Parliamentary reserves were assembled. Warpsgrove

⁶ National Army Museum (London), 9010-31-286 and 9010-31-287 (papers of Brigadier Peter Young).

⁷ *His highnesse prince Ruperts late beating up the rebels quarters at Post-comb & Chinner in Oxfordshire. Also his victory in Chalgrove Field. Whereunto is added sr. John Urries expedition to West-Wickham* (1643).

⁸ George, Lord Nugent, *Some Memorials of John Hampden his Party and his Times*, 2 vols. (1832), vol. 2, part 10, pp. 422–36.

House is a vital landmark in the siting of the battle as the reserves would not have been far from their troops. There has been much controversy about the location of the house because it does not survive, but research by the *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire* has provided a better indication of its site.⁹

Finally, the received view does not take into account the armies' manoeuvrings on the wider canvas prior to and after Chalgrove. Pay warrants reveal that Essex's principal officers were at their Thame headquarters collecting their regiments' pay when the alarm came from Chinnor,¹⁰ so they joined in the trailing of Rupert en masse. It was the loss of many of these senior officers, compounded with the widespread fever amongst the army, which caused disintegration and Essex removing the Army of the South from contention.

RECEIVED VIEW CHALLENGED

Not a Skirmish – Confusion with South Weston

The earl of Essex reported in his letter to the House of Commons of 19 June 1643 events of the previous day.¹¹ His report shadows that of the Royalists' account in the 'Late Beating Up' as far as the skirmish at South Weston.¹² Essex relates that Sir Philip Stapleton, who had the watch at Thame, controlled operations and sent out troops to gain intelligence. Essex added, probably referring to Dundasse's detachment's report from Gunter when at South Weston, that when he heard that his men marched in the rear of the enemy he sent a message to Sir Philip Stapleton to march towards them. It is shown that Stapleton was in Thame until after 9.30 am, which confirms that Essex was being evasive when referring to only one encounter.

Number of Troops

The 'Late Beating Up' records that over 2,000 men left Oxford,¹³ which Young listed as between 1,040–1,280 horse, 350 dragoons and 400–500 foot.¹⁴ Essex also referred to 1,200 horse and a great body of dragoons that fell upon Postcombe. Parliamentary troop numbers were recorded in the 'Late Beating Up' as eight cornets, about 560 men, who faced Prince Rupert.¹⁵ 'The Late Beating Up' referred to 5 troops, 350 men, in reserve by Warpsgrove House and about 100 commanded horse and Col. Mills (Morley's) dragoons, about 50 men. In total this would have been a force of 1,060 Parliamentarians.

Timings

The 'Late Beating Up' gives timings and placement of key figures for the whole campaign. The Parliamentarians came down Golder Hill and faced the Royalists in a Chalgrove field beyond a great hedge. This marked the commencement of the battle at approximately 8.45 am. Rupert feigned a retreat in the footsteps of his dragoons and foot. Opposite Warpsgrove House, which was over 1,000 yards from Golder Hill, the 8 cornets burst through the 'great hedge' to confront the Royalists. Parliament left their reserve by Warpsgrove House. The 'Late Beating Up' states that 'they were in sight of one another, by 9. a clock in the morning' when the armies clashed swords.¹⁶ The analysis of the contemporary documents in relation to the 'Late Beating Up' reveals that Sir Philip Stapleton, who drew the troops fleeing from the battle into a body,

⁹ VCH Oxon. 18, draft text (online).

¹⁰ TNA: PRO, SP28/7, f. 395; SP28/7 f. 440; SP28/143, unfol.

¹¹ *Two Letters from his Excellencie Robert Earl of Essex.*

¹² *His highnesse prince Ruperts late beating up the rebels quarters.*

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 2.

¹⁴ Peter Young's papers.

¹⁵ *His highnesse prince Ruperts late beating up the rebels quarters*, pp. 6–7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 7.

was still in Thame at 9.30 am. Galloping with all speed Chalgrove is over thirty-five minutes from Thame. Therefore the routed troops met Stapleton sometime after 10 am, which sets the duration of the engagement that began at around 8.45 am as one and a quarter hours.

The Site of the Battle

Previous writers on the Battle of Chalgrove have not reconstructed the landscape in the seventeenth century in any depth. As the main document on the battle is the 'Late Beating Up' and this chronicles travel on a circular route around the area, it was obvious that the landscape at the time should be explored. English Heritage in their preliminary report on the battle only alluded to the 1881 Ordnance Survey map, but this was extended in their actual Register report to include knowledge of earlier maps of 1679 and 1822.¹⁷ The present authors have used these maps alongside other sources to confirm the landscape in the 1640s. Of paramount importance were the locations of the track over Golder Hill to Easington, the great boundary hedge between Chalgrove and Warpsgrove, Warpsgrove House, and the hedge that Rupert famously jumped. The piecing together of the seventeenth-century landscape commenced with the overlaying of the 1679 map of Chalgrove's field system onto the present 1:5000 OS map. As this did not reach the boundary with Warpsgrove, Warpsgrove's 1849 tithe map was also used.¹⁸ To the north of Warpsgrove a 1612 map of Golder confirmed the outlines of Golder, Lewknor Meadow and Easington.¹⁹ Other maps consulted were an auction catalogue map of Warpsgrove in 1874,²⁰ the Burgess map of Clare in 1735,²¹ and the Badcock map of Pyrton in 1835.²² All of these proved that the parish boundaries had not changed since the seventeenth century and that most field shapes were easily recognisable.

The route that the Royalists took from Chinnor 'under the ledge of hills to the South and South westward' was deduced from the 'Late Beating Up' as taking the Lower Icknield Way past Aston Rowant, near Beacon Hill and along the 'Highway to Weston' shown on the 1716 map of Clare.²³ The old road down from the top of Clare Hill to Easington was also on the 1716 map, as was the 'Highway to Thame' that would allow the Parliamentarian troops from Thame to arrive at the eventual battlefield. The 1612 map also included the continuation of the route from South Weston for Rupert and the Parliamentary forces to take from the Clare to Cutt Mill road down to Warpsgrove and Chalgrove. It descended in a fold of Golder Hill to the hamlet of Easington and continued across the field to the 'great hedge' and Solinger Field, which must have been the 'Chalgrove cornfield' quoted in the 'Late Beating Up'.²⁴

The 1612 Golder estate map was the *piece de resistance* with regard to the placing of Warpsgrove House, a landmark of the battlefield named in the 'Late Beating Up'. Previous researchers have thought that the site of Warpsgrove House was synonymous with that of Manor (or Manor House) Farm a number of fields away. This map, however, clearly shows Warpsgrove House with a (probably fanciful) sketch of the building, the only one known at this present time. The legend around the house reads 'in times past a parish church'. Neither the house nor the church exist today, but the OS map of 1881 gives the reputed position of the church, which is supported by the nineteenth-century field-name 'Chapel Heath' and by occasional finds of fragments of tile and dressed stone.²⁵ Careful measurement of the accurate 1612 map confirms that the house and church were probably contiguous, and it seems likely

¹⁷ OHC, MPC 569 and 764.

¹⁸ Ibid. MPC 408/A.

¹⁹ Ibid. MPC 782.

²⁰ Ibid. Paxton papers 112.

²¹ Bodl. MS C17:49 180.

²² Ibid. (R) MS C17:49 60.

²³ Ibid. (R) MS C17:49 179.

²⁴ *His highnesse prince Ruperts late beating up the rebels quarters*, p. 5.

²⁵ OS Oxfordshire sheet XLVI.4 (1881); OHC, Warpsgrove tithe award; local information.

that Warpsgrove House can be identified with former manorial buildings mentioned in 1519.²⁶ By contrast, recent VCH research has shown that Manor Farm was probably established only in the eighteenth century.²⁷

The so-called 'great hedge', the boundary between Warpsgrove and Chalgrove, can also be traced down the centuries and survives in a shortened form today. The 1822 map produced for Magdalen College shows Prince Rupert's likely route from Easington, and the hedge which he 'jumped' is shown along a lane beside pasture land. The enclosure award of 1845 confirms the parish boundaries, Prince Rupert's hedge and the path to Easington.²⁸ Aerial photographs dated 1944 and 1961 still show the 'great hedge' intact and the above hedges can be clearly identified.²⁹

Modern Writers – Young/Stevenson and Carter/Adair

Young's schematic sketch map of Warpsgrove and Chalgrove depicting the battle is just a modest representation of the local OS map. The map has misled some historians into believing it is an exact representation of the area of the battle, but parts of the terrain are clearly out of place in relation to one another. The exact location of Warpsgrove House, a key feature of the battle, was unknown when Young sketched his map. Within the limitations of the sketch, he drew the line of the 'great hedge' with its distinctive kink and placed Warpsgrove House, labelled Manor, to the north. He also drew the armies facing each other over the first hedge to the south of the 'great hedge' but did not define exactly where this was in the text.

John Stevenson and Andrew Carter,³⁰ following Nugent's flawed interpretation of events leading up to the battle, have John Hampden being roused from his bed in Watlington. If Hampden had come from Watlington he would have brought his regiment with him, but it is known that he 'was abroad with Sir Samuel Luke and only one man'.³¹ Stevenson and Carter did not know the true position of Warpsgrove House and used Manor Farm to incorrectly position Parliament's reserves. Siting Parliament's reserves by Manor Farm, 600 yards from Warpsgrove Lane and the gap in the 'great hedge', would have left Parliament's reserves out of contention to join in the battle when required.

John Adair drew heavily on Young's paper, embellishing it lightly with his profound knowledge to make it an enjoyable read.³² On his sketch map he makes Manor Farm, believing it to be Warpsgrove House, into a grand abode with ornamental gardens.

In fact, the location of the battlefield can only be properly appreciated when the movements of the participants before the battle are traced. This exercise also demonstrates that there was a separate, more minor, action at South Weston.

THE BUILD-UP TO THE BATTLE

What follows is an examination of Prince Rupert's expedition mainly taken from the 'Late Beating Up the Rebels' Quarters', an eye witness account. It compares and cross references details of times and places given in contemporary documents as both armies progressed from point to point. The actions were plotted onto a modern map to reveal the line of the Royalists' retreat. Features in the terrain and the names of villages en route were identified from the text and the topography described. This allowed the sequence of events and of troops arriving at a

²⁶ VCH Oxon. 18, draft text.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ OHC, QS/D/A/book 18.

²⁹ Aerial photographs of the battlefield area dated 1944 and 1961 (private collection).

³⁰ J. Stevenson and A. Carter, 'The Raid on Chinnor and the Fight at Chalgrove Field, June 17th and 18th, 1643', *Oxoniensia*, 38 (1973), pp. 346–56.

³¹ *Two Letters from his Excellencie Robert Earl of Essex.*

³² J. Adair, *A Life of John Hampden the Patriot, 1594–1643* (1976), pp. 208–24.

given location at a particular time to be logically plotted so that both armies' men or named individuals could be correctly located. From this analysis various myths are demolished, including that Chalgrove was a skirmish, that Hampden came to the battle from Watlington, and that the battlefield was by the monument.

Essex left his winter quarters at Windsor in early April 1643 to retake Reading.³³ He raised an army of 16,000 foot, 3,000 cavalry and a siege train of 16 heavy guns. The 5,000 residents of Reading were not pleased to be hosting a Royalist garrison of 3,000; another factor in Essex's favour. With such overwhelming force Reading was there for the taking. Once Reading fell, a poorly supplied Oxford would be at Essex's mercy.

Queen Henrietta Maria had landed a huge shipment of arms from the continent at Bridlington on 13 February 1643. She was desperate, as was the king, to get this arms shipment to Oxford. Sir Ferdinando Fairfax leading the Army of the North was a constant threat and too strong for the Royalists to attempt moving the convoy to Oxford, however much the king desired to be re-united with his queen. With Essex threatening from the south and Fairfax from the north the king was concerned about his own position in Oxford.

Prince Rupert in early April 1643 headed north through Banbury. He razed Birmingham to the ground on 3 April and rode to Lichfield to retake the town. On 20 April a huge mine was detonated under Lichfield Cathedral which caused Parliament's men to surrender. Before Rupert could consolidate his position he received a desperate message asking him to return to Oxford.³⁴

After the Royalist surrender at Reading, Essex's army was thought to be ready to march on Oxford. The Royalists, certain that Essex would be on them in two days, frantically threw up earthworks. Essex stayed at Reading keeping his men in camp until 6 June.³⁵ The reason for Essex's reluctance to press home his advantage was that his troops were riddled with disease and the gunpowder had most probably been ruined by the persistent rain.

After five weeks of inaction Essex had to leave Reading for fresh quarters. He also had to counter the Royalist threat on the capital by placing his army between Oxford and London. On 10 June Essex set up his headquarters at Thame, but scattered his sick and ailing men in the nearby villages. On their march to Thame some senior officers, notably Col. John Urry, defected to the king in Oxford. Urry's knowledge of Essex's quartering arrangements and awareness that a pay convoy was due in Thame was important intelligence that enabled Prince Rupert to plan his assault on Chinnor.

On the 17 June Essex sent out 2,500 men to Islip on receiving the Scout Master General Sir Samuel Luke's intelligence that it was unguarded and offered a way into Oxford. The 3,000 Royalist horse, stabled at Bletchingdon three miles away, were soon lining the ridge which deterred the Parliamentarians from advancing. Without a shot being fired, Essex's men returned to camp very weary, especially those out of Chinnor who had marched forty miles.

To repay the affront of the Parliamentary foray to Islip, Prince Rupert commanded that his men be ready to march from Magdalen Bridge at 4 pm. The little army comprised of three crack horse regiments and Prince Rupert's lifeguard with a vanguard of 100 commanded horse and fifty dragoons. Lord Wentworth had 350 dragoons and Col. Lunsford 400-500 foot. Over 2,000 troops set out at a slow march for Chiselhampton bridge arriving at around 7 pm. At dusk the refreshed and rested troops prepared to march into No Man's Land. At 1 am they came under musket fire at a distance from the grounds of Tetsworth church. Rupert quietly marched on to Postcombe. Here they flushed out a horse quarter of Col. Morley's, capturing nine prisoners, some horses and arms and Morley's cornet.

Before 5 am Rupert's men had surrounded Chinnor. Sergeant-Major Legge's vanguard entered the town catching those who had marched from Islip asleep in their beds. The unequal

³³ E. Warburton, *Memoirs of Prince Rupert and the Cavaliers*, 3 vols. (1849), vol. 2, pp. 160–237.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 168.

³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 202–4.

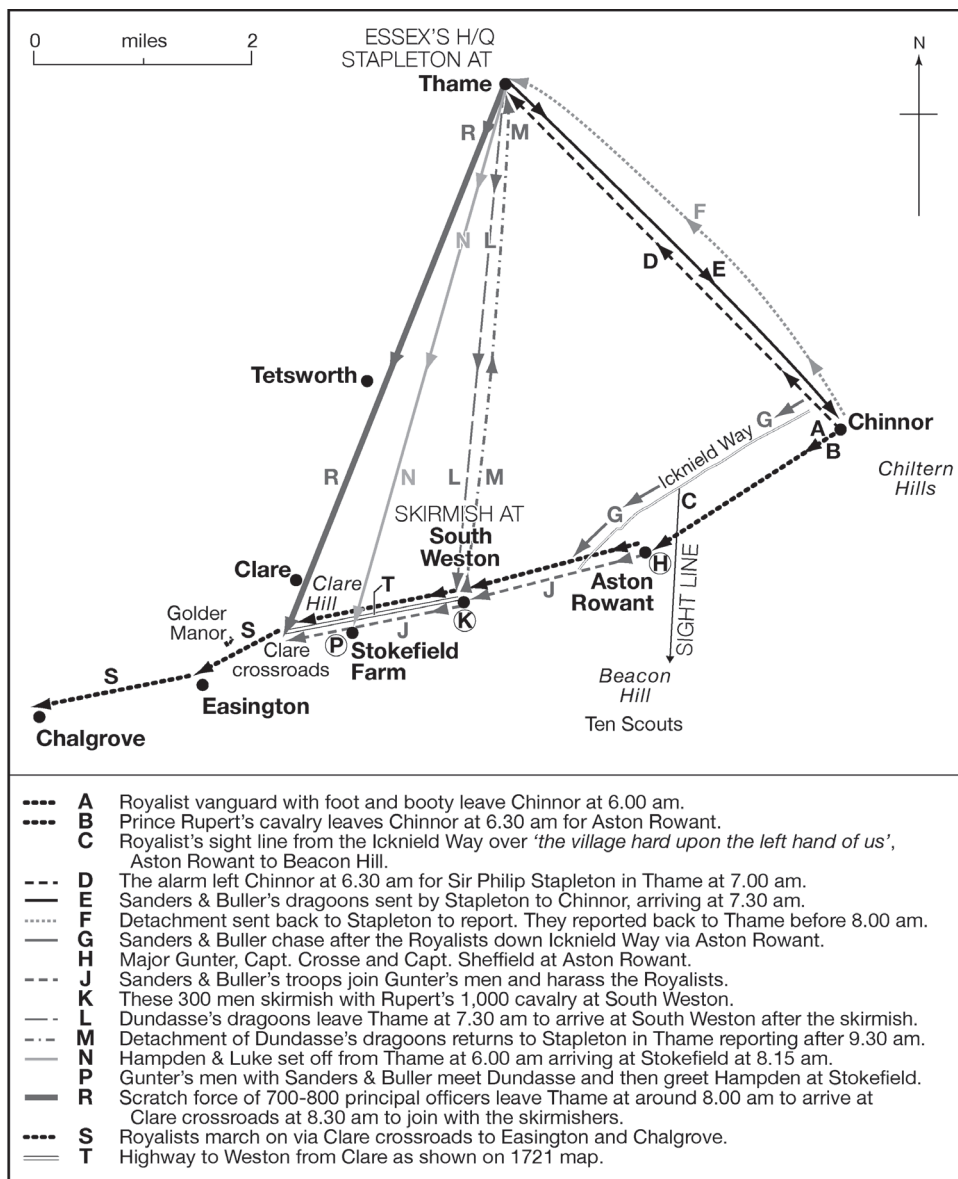


Fig.1. Troop movements to Chalgrove.

fight left fifty dead, the village in flames and stripped of arms and equipment. They captured 120 prisoners, 3 colours of Sir Samuel Luke's regiment and as much booty as they could carry. The foot with the prisoners set off around 6 am back down the Icknield Way (Fig. 1). Prince Rupert with the cavalry left Chinnor at 6.30 am to follow the foot. Around 7.30 am, 'in the village hard upon the left hand of us' some rebels were discovered. These rebels, it is learned from Essex's Letters, were Major John Gunter, Captain James Sheffield and Captain Richard Crosse's troops, about 200 men. They could also see ten scouts on Beacon Hill when looking beyond the village from the Icknield Way. These facts confirm that around 7.30 am Prince Rupert was passing

Aston Rowant.³⁶ It had taken the prince one hour to reach Aston Rowant and the fact that this was two miles from Chinnor gives the pace of the troops. From the precise timing of this event the time and place of later actions all the way to Chalgrove can be calculated.

There were some Parliamentary survivors at Chinnor who, once the Royalists left, made their way to Parliament's headquarters at Thame four miles distant. Arriving in Thame at around 7 am the alarm was raised with Sir Philip Stapleton who had the night watch. Sir Philip immediately sent Captains Sanders and Buller's dragoon companies, 100 men, to Chinnor to gain intelligence. By 7.30 am a detachment was on its way back to Stapleton to tell him a very large body of Royalists had devastated Chinnor with much loss. The main body of dragoons rode off in pursuit of the Royalists, who by 7.30 am were two miles away at Aston Rowant. At a canter it took fifteen minutes for the dragoons to get to Aston Rowant and half a mile ahead were Gunter's men harassing General Percy's regiment.

Since Wheatley bridge, that crosses the River Thame, was held for Parliament it was obvious that the Royalists, who held Chiselhampton bridge, were heading that way. After sending the dragoons to Chinnor, Stapleton sent out Captain Dundasse's dragoons towards Chalgrove in the hope of them crossing the Royalists' path. Sanders' dragoon detachment returned to Thame around 8 am to give Stapleton the news that a large number of Royalists had devastated Chinnor and left it in flames. He also learnt that the Chinnor billet had been wiped out and their horses and the prisoners made to carry away the booty.

The pay convoy from London had arrived in Thame very early that morning.³⁷ When the alarm came from Chinnor, Essex's principal officers were in Thame, fully kitted out, waiting for their regiments' money. When the magnitude of the attack became known and it was revealed to Essex that hundreds of Royalists were out on the rampage, prompt action had to be taken. There was no time to lose. Sending out messages to the cavalry regiments in the outlying villages would have taken too long. The 700–800 principal officers who were collecting their regiments' pay from Essex were probably ordered by him to ride out to intercept the Royalists. A little time before 8 am these officers were dashing towards Tetsworth and onward.

By 8.15 am the Royalists were one mile and a half on from Aston Rowant in the direction of Chalgrove, near the village of South Weston. The highway to Weston is a track shown on the 1721 Clare map and is depicted beginning at South Weston. The track continues through Stokefield and up to Clare crossroads at the junction of the Stoke Talmage lane. This lane joins the ancient track to Easington and Chalgrove and is also the direct route from Thame. The principal officers who had left Thame before 8 am would get to Clare Crossroads, a distance of six miles, on their fine steeds, in around thirty-five minutes.

Meanwhile Captains Sanders and Buller, galloping in from Chinnor, joined forces with Gunter, Crosse and Sheffield at around 8 am. At about 8.15 am these 300 men skirmished with the Royalists at South Weston, trying desperately to slow them in the hope of reinforcements from Thame. Parliament's men were ferociously attacked by General Percy's and Lt.-Col. O'Neale's regiments, 600 men, causing the Parliamentarians to be so 'overborne with multitude, they broke and fled', as related by Essex in his letter. After beating up their enemy the Royalist troopers galloped off to catch up with their Foot, leaving their adversaries licking their wounds. This is the skirmish that is confused with the Battle of Chalgrove and outlined in Essex's letter as the battle. Captain Dundasse's dragoons, who had left Thame at approximately 7.30 am, probably heard the gunfire from the skirmish. They may have seen the Royalist infantry passing through Clare Crossroads and their cavalry galloping away to join them. Dundasse greeted Gunter with the news that reinforcements were on their way from Thame.

Colonel John Hampden with Sir Samuel Luke and Col. John Dalbier, who had probably left Thame en route to Watlington at around 6 am and before the alarm came from Chinnor,

³⁶ Aston Rowant and Beacon Hill were identified by cross referencing the text in contemporary sources with the topography.

³⁷ TNA: PRO, SP28/7, f. 395.

would have reached the farmstead of Wheatfield by 8.15 am. This little group would have been able to see from Wheatfield the Royalist infantry climbing the hill towards Clare Crossroads. On hearing the gunfire and making their way to Stokefield they too would have seen the Royalists galloping away. Around Stokefield, Hampden met with Gunter's men and agreed to join them. Col. John Hampden, Essex's second in command, could have taken command, but recognising his own limitations as a cavalry commander he put himself in Captain Crosse's troop.³⁸ Gunter, who commanded the group of skirmishers, gave Dundasse's detachment his orders to relay to Stapleton in Thame. Leaving the area of Stokefield at just before 8.30 am the dragoon detachment on their tired, inferior horses would not pass on Gunter's message to Stapleton in Thame until around 9.30 am.

The 700–800 principal officers thundering down Stoke Talmage lane could be seen by Gunter from Stokefield. The 350 skirmishers joined forces with this scratch force from Thame of which Gunter took overall command. These officers were more used to giving orders and with honour at stake were not prepared to be demoted to trooper. In just a few minutes Gunter had to assert his authority and appoint who would lead each cornet of horse. Training a troop of horse to understand an officer's orders could take weeks. Here disgruntled and principled men with honour at stake were under no obligation to obey an officer of equal or lower rank. This scratch force was about to take the field against Prince Rupert, the brilliant strategist, with his lifeguard. On the field with him were three crack regiments all of whom knew exactly where they were in the Chalgrove countryside. The Parliamentary regiments were mainly from Yorkshire and lost in the area. The Royalist vanguard was already entering Chalgrove so honour had to be discarded. Gunter hurriedly made a plan of action. Gunter, Crosse and Sheffield's troops were to harass the Royalists' rear while the others were to do an outflanking manoeuvre as the Royalists turned west towards Chiselhampton.

The Royalists described the action as follows:

'His Highness was now making halt in Chalgrove cornfield: about a mile & half short of Chiselhampton bridge. Just at this time (being now about 9.a clock we discerned severall great Bodyes of the Rebels horse and Dragooners, coming down Golder-hill towards us; from Esington and Tame: who (together with those that had before skirmished with our reere) drew down to the bottom of a great Close, or Pasture ordering themselves there among the trees beyond a great hedge, which parted that Close from our field.'³⁹

The features described are mostly still in the landscape and are clearly shown on the 1612 map.

Through the description given above, all the participants who were involved with the battle have been followed step by step, in a logical manner, to arrive at the Chalgrove cornfield, or coming down Golder Hill, at around 8.45 am (Fig. 2). Every troop movement to get the protagonists facing each over a 'great hedge' is accounted for in a time frame so that each individual or troop's whereabouts concur. The skirmish involving 300 Parliamentarians occurred before Chalgrove and before John Hampden was to be wounded in battle. Sir Philip Stapleton, who was waiting in Thame for intelligence, received Dundasse's detachment after 9.30 am so arrived too late to save the situation at Chalgrove. The routed Parliamentary troopers, fleeing for their lives over Golder Hill after the battle, met with Stapleton beyond the hill a little after 10 am, which marked the end of the battle.

Prince Rupert turned the column of cavalry into line to face the enemy that were beyond a 'great hedge'. The remnant of the 'great hedge' at Chalgrove is sufficiently wide to ride two horses side by side within it. For Gunter's men to be separated from their main force by this 'great hedge' would have been tactically naïve. Gunter retook his place leading and ordering the scratch force into cornets of 70 men. Honour of who would lead a cornet and who had the right or left wing ensured much shouting and confusion.

³⁸ *Two Letters from his Excellencie Robert Earl of Essex.*

³⁹ *His highnesse prince Ruperts late beating up the rebels quarters*, p. 5.

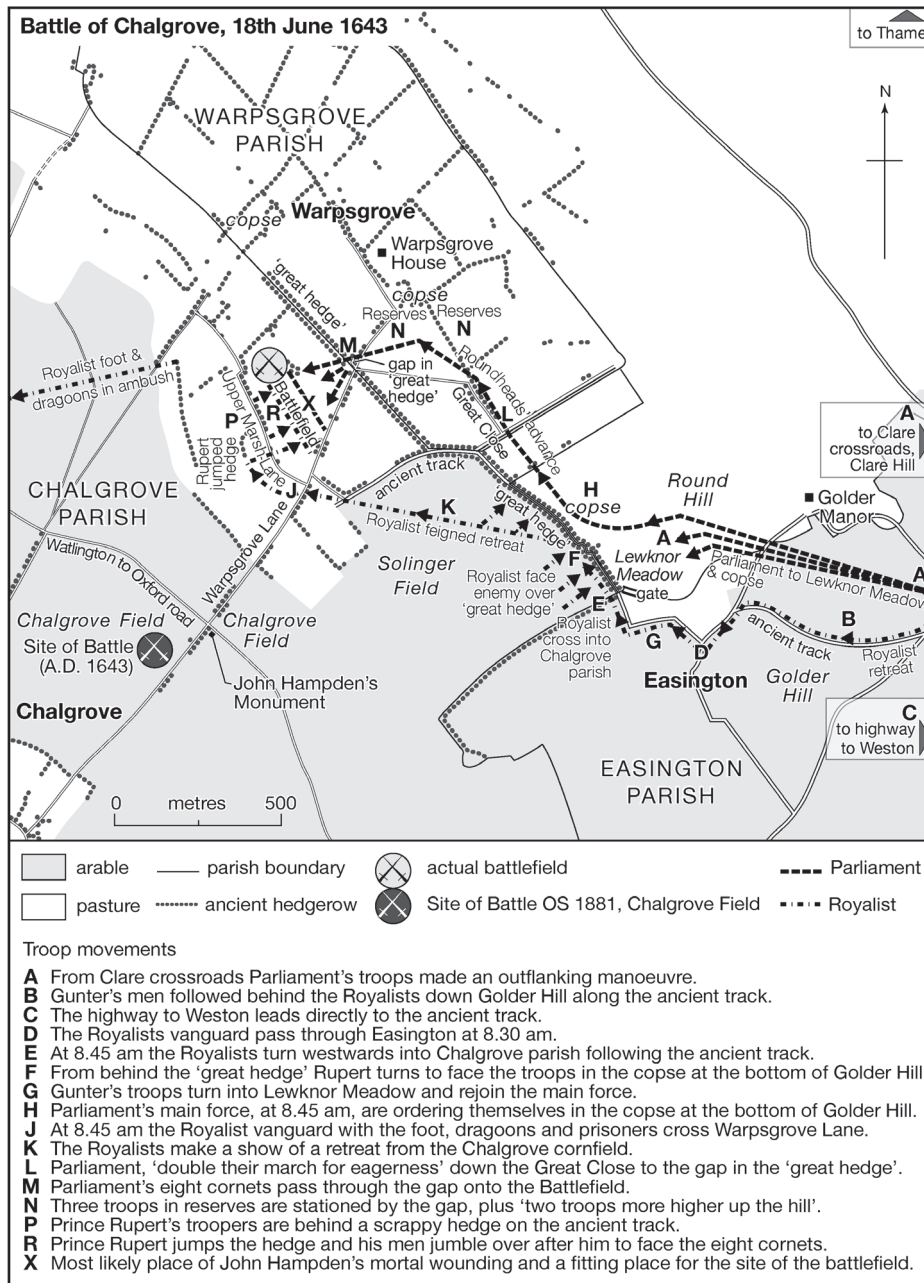


Fig. 2. The battlefield landscape.

The Royalists' vanguard was nearly a mile ahead of their cavalry, well on the way to Chiselhampton bridge. The dragoons with them were able to execute a rolling retreat by lining the hedges and waiting in ambush. Parliament's troops wanted to free the prisoners and regain some credibility for Essex but Rupert had set a trap. The 'great hedge' was a formidable and

continuous barrier with few gaps. The lane from Chalgrove up to Warpsgrove House was one such gap and was 1,000 yards from where they faced Rupert. The rear of the infantry column had crossed Warpsgrove Lane by 8.45 am and was effectively out of danger. If Parliament's men tried to attack the infantry they would first have to gallop 1,000 yards to the gap, squeeze through it into Warpsgrove Lane and chase through the lanes in pursuit only to find the ambush set by the dragoons. This action would have left over 1,000 of the finest Royalist troopers at their rear to press them further into the ambush and absolute annihilation. The question for Gunter, in the frustration of ordering his army, was how he could attack without risking everything. Gunter was aware that reinforcements would be coming from Thame and maybe hoped that Stapleton had sent a large detachment directly to Chiselhampton. Gunter's only option was to delay the Royalist's retreat, but before he could finalise his plans Rupert added to his predicament.

Rupert ordered his troopers from line into column and calmly left the Chalgrove cornfield to follow in his infantry's footsteps, his right flank covered by the 'great hedge'.⁴⁰ The ancient track bends away from the 'great hedge' at the end of Solinger field to avoid marshy land. He crossed Warpsgrove Lane into Upper Marsh Lane, this being 400 yards south from where the lane passes through the 'great hedge'. Gunter saw his quarry nonchalantly walking away. In panic he sorted Parliament's men into thirteen troops and a Forlorn of Horse. Unable to get through the 'great hedge' they galloped the 1,000 yards down the great Close towards Warpsgrove House and the gap. At Warpsgrove Lane eight cornets stormed through this gap and formed a front. Three troops of reserves were left in the trees by Warpsgrove House near the gap and two other troops were placed a little further away.⁴¹

Col. John Dalbier led the Forlorn Hope of Horse into action with a dash to the hedge line where the Royalists had their troopers ordered ready for battle. Dalbier ordered the dragoons to fire a volley at close range upon General Percy's regiment. Dalbier, it is reported, called out to Gunter to retreat because they were being hemmed in and caught in a trap.⁴² Prince Rupert jumped the 'great hedge' followed by his lifeguard and regiment. The dragoons that lined the hedge fled.

Rupert called out two troops from the Prince of Wales' regiment to make his front even with the enemy. Captains Martin and Gardiner of the Prince's own regiment led the first charge. They received a volley of pistol shot at a distance and another at close range. Swords drawn, Prince Rupert charged with his lifeguard and in the *mêlée* they used their pistols to deadly effect. It is likely that John Hampden was mortally wounded in this first charge and in the confusion was able to leave the battlefield. A troop from General Percy's regiment probably held the gap in the 'great hedge' and prevented Parliament's reserve from joining the fray. The Royalist reserve joined the fight, which allowed other troops to withdraw, reload their pistols and come back into the struggle. Parliament had put up a gallant fight, but was wholly routed, a term meaning that each troop had stopped fighting as a unit and it was every man for himself.

It can only be conjectured how Rupert routed his enemy through the gap, defeated the reserve and chased them back over Golder Hill. At around 10.15 am Sir Philip Stapleton drew up the fleeing men into a body near Clare crossroads.⁴³ Prince Rupert was master of the battlefield, but after thirty minutes left Chalgrove to return to Oxford. At around 2 pm, at the head of his valiant men and displaying the spoils of war, he marched into Oxford to a triumphal welcome.

⁴⁰ *His highnesse prince Ruperts late beating up the rebels quarters*, pp. 6–7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² This gives the location of the battle as the south side of the 'great hedge' and an area of containment.

⁴³ *His highnesse prince Ruperts late beating up the rebels quarters*, pp. 8–9.

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

The importance of the Battle of Chalgrove, according to the accepted view by English Heritage, is the significance of losing such a prominent political figure as Colonel John Hampden. He, as Essex's second in command and member of the Committee of Safety, was the liaison between the army and the House of Commons. With Hampden's death there was no one to speak for Essex in Parliament. This loss and Prince Rupert's tactics, in their opinion, elevated the said skirmish to the status of a battle. This view does not take into account the armies' manoeuvrings on the wider canvas prior to and after Chalgrove. Essex was a major threat to the king's army in Oxford which was desperately short of supplies. The queen was unable to bring arms from Bridlington to Oxford for fear of attack or for finding when she arrived in Oxford that it had been taken by Parliament. The garrison to guard this shipment in Bridlington was necessarily large, which allowed Fairfax's army free rein of the North. At the time when Essex took Reading he could not advance on Oxford because disease had weakened his army.

Essex did not just lose the Battle of Chalgrove, he lost his principal officers and therefore the command of his whole army. His letter refers only to ten commanders, including Hampden, being involved in a skirmish and does not mention Chalgrove by name. 'Mercurius Aulicus' reports that one hundred Parliamentarians were killed at Chalgrove and two hundred prisoners were paraded through Oxford that day.⁴⁴ It is accepted by both sides that 120 prisoners were taken at Chinnor, which by deduction eighty men were captured at Chalgrove. Essex stated that, 'no prisoners of quality were taken by the Enemy', yet the *Parliament Scout* quotes that thirteen captains and eighteen more men of note were murdered in Oxford gaol as a consequence of the battle.⁴⁵ The other forty-nine prisoners may have been freed later in a general exchange brokered between Forth and Essex. The capture and murder of Essex's principal officers coupled with the sickly state of his men left his army leaderless and defenceless. Nine days after the battle he removed his army from Thame. Directly after Chalgrove, it was obvious to the Royalists that Essex had to take his army out of Oxfordshire. Essex, under the harassment of Prince Rupert, took his beleaguered army back towards London. Prince Rupert rode north to escort the queen for the final part of her journey.

The news of the collapse of Essex's army was taken the 300 miles to Queen Henrietta at Newark with all speed. Just three or four days after the Battle of Chalgrove and before Essex had left Thame, Queen Henrietta set off for Oxford with the arms convoy. She was confident that Essex could do nothing to stop her progress. The date of Rob Goodwin's letter,⁴⁶ 26 June 1643, confirmed that Essex's loss of his army at Chalgrove was the direct reason for the convoy being able to leave Bridlington. He wrote that Lord Fairfax was 'in great want of horse' and that 'the Queen advanceth'. He also relayed the news that on the evening after John Hampden's funeral the Royalists plundered High Wycombe. This is only six miles from Great Hampden church where John Hampden's freshly interred body lay. The 'Late Beating Up' recorded that 500 newly levied Kentish and Sussex men and a troop of horse were beaten out of West Wickham.⁴⁷ Goodwin also wrote, 'we had this day an intimation (sent) us by Mr Pym that he (Essex) would go forward upon some design tomorrow'. Essex left Thame for Bierton arriving 4 July 1643 and by 20 July was at Great Brickhill (Bucks.). The Royalists remained in control of Oxfordshire plundering the villages for supplies and exacting taxes until 1645.

News of Essex's defeat was taken to the queen in Newark Castle on or around 21 June 1643. Orders were given that day for the shipment of arms that had been in Bridlington since

⁴⁴ 'Mercurius Aulicus', *Communicating His Intelligence and affaires of the Court, to the rest of KINGDOM. The five and twentieth Weeke* (1643), pp. 311–22.

⁴⁵ BL, *Thomason Tracts*, E96 (*THE PARLIAMENT SCOUT Communicating His Intelligence TO THE KINGDOME from Tuesday the 20. June, to Tuesday the 27. of June 1643*).

⁴⁶ BL, Egerton MS 2646, f. 293.

⁴⁷ *His highnesse prince Ruperts late beating up the rebels quarters*, p. 15.

the 13 February to leave for Newark. The queen at the head of a convoy of 150 waggons was welcomed by her favourite Charles Cavendish at Newark Castle on 27 June. She left him with 2,000 foot and twenty companies of horse in order to protect Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. On 30 June 1643 the earl of Newcastle destroyed Parliament's Army of the North at the Battle of Adwalton Moor, taking the important towns of Leeds, Bradford and Halifax. The queen continued her journey unopposed and with Parliament's north and south armies both vanquished the Royalists concentrated their force on the West Country.⁴⁸ The queen's convoy entered Oxford 15 July to a triumphal welcome, the supplies being safely delivered and much of England under Royalist command. In the west Waller was beaten at Lansdown on 5 July and again at Devizes on 13 July. On the 26 July Prince Rupert accepted Nathaniel Fiennes's surrender of Bristol. These defeats Waller blamed on Essex for, 'reposing complacently at Thame'. Later in the year Exeter, Barnstaple and Bideford were all taken for the king. The final humiliating defeat for Essex was losing another army at the Battle of Lostwithiel. These Royalist gains in all parts of the country, except the Eastern Counties, gave Oliver Cromwell political influence over the House of Commons. Cromwell's Act of 'Self Denying Ordinance' and the formation of the New Model Army saw the collapse of the old order.

CONCLUSION

Historians have in general underestimated the significance of the Battle of Chalgrove. Peter Young, for example, described the battle as 'A type of minor operation very common during the first Civil War was the beating up of the enemy's quarters.' Even where it has been given greater weight, the revision has been limited: English Heritage's Battlefield Report of 1995 states, 'The tactics of Rupert, for example are at the same time indicative of more forethought than is usual for a skirmish and yet characteristically impulsive. As testimony to differing tactics of the two sides at this stage of the Civil War, the battle is also instructive.' C.V. Wedgwood, writing in 1961, took a rather more positive view, but this has not been very influential. According to Wedgwood: 'from a military point of view it (Chalgrove) was a shrewd blow at the already declining morale of the army of Essex, and one which did great harm to his reputation. There was no further question of his threatening the king's headquarters at Oxford that summer.'⁴⁹ The events described in this article confirm and extend Wedgwood's assessment. The Battle of Chalgrove can no longer be labelled a skirmish, but can stand as a battle of considerable importance both militarily and politically.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Dr Simon Townley of VCH Oxfordshire, who listened to our interpretation of the Chalgrove campaign whilst walking the trail and encouraged us to publish our findings.

The Society would like to express its gratitude to the Greening Lamborn Trust for a grant towards publication of this article.

⁴⁸ Warburton, *Memoirs of Prince Rupert and the Cavaliers*, vol. 2, pp. 225–7.

⁴⁹ C.V. Wedgwood, *Civil War Battlefields 1642–46*, BBC London pamphlet 3950 (1961), p. 10.