

# The Battle of Aylesbury

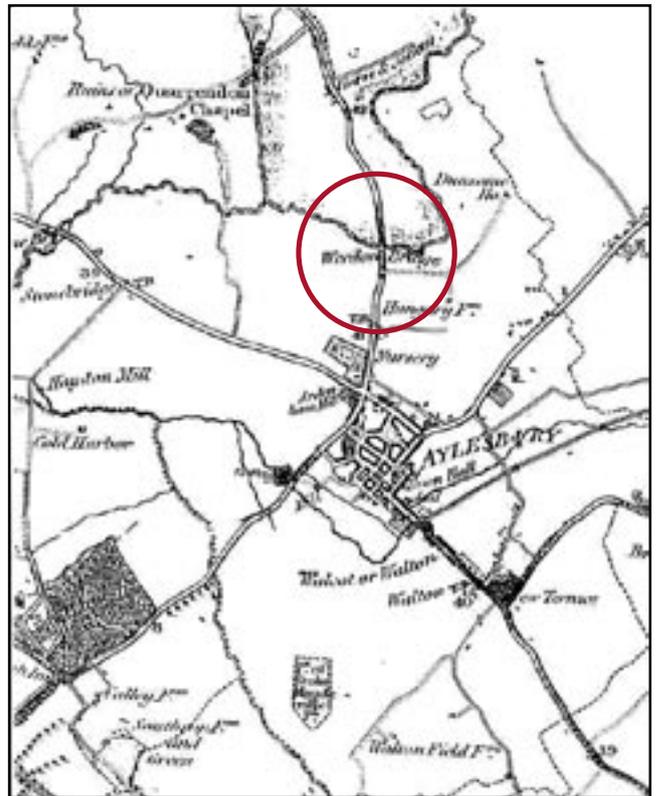
## Was Oliver Cromwell really there?

On the 1st November 1642 the Royalist garrison stationed in Aylesbury went out to meet the forces of Parliament. Holman's Bridge, which crosses the river Thames on the modern A413 road north of Aylesbury, is said to be the site of the battle. Aylesbury was at the time firmly for Parliament and against King Charles I. It is perhaps for this reason that Prince Rupert's forces chose to ride out, away from the hostile townfolk, rather than defend Aylesbury in a siege. Also, since Rupert was a cavalryman of renown, the temptation must have been strong to fight in open country rather than from behind walls. The Royalists were numerically superior to Parliamentary commander Sir William Balfore's detachment of around 1,500 men. Sir William's force had been deployed to contain the threat posed by Prince Rupert.

Containment of the Royalists was particularly urgent as Prince Rupert was implementing a 'scorched earth' policy in Buckinghamshire. One contemporary chronicler put it *"Thither Prince Rupert marched with a force of some thousands of horse and foot, and, after some days past in securing for the King's use much of the produce of the Vale and despoiling and laying waste much more than he secured, entered and possessed himself of the town"*. Incidentally many a cellar in the old part of town may well be a remnant of the tunnel network built at this time which supposedly had something to do with the town's defences.

Having received intelligence of a Parliamentary force approaching from Stony Stratford, Prince Rupert left a troop of horse and a couple of companies of foot to hold down the unruly town while he rode out with his army to meet Sir William Balfore. Just beyond Holman's Bridge, near the swollen river that had been fed by recent rains, the two forces met. Prince Rupert was first checked by a combination of horse and infantry. After receiving two volleys of musket shot he then charged and broke through the initial first two ranks of Parliamentarian infantry. The musket of the day could take several minutes to reload so pikemen were essential in keeping cavalry at a distance.

A rugby scrum is perhaps the closest modern equivalent to the pike bloc, where one formation of men come crashing into one another, except that rugby players of today do not have fifteen foot pikestaves with lethal axes on their ends being thrust



into the melee. This close quarter butchery was something that the King's forces had no stomach for, and they began to retreat across the ford, where the Prince tried to rally his forces, but to no avail.

This was by no means the end of the battle. The townfolk, perhaps goaded by outrages committed by Rupert's men during their stay, sought revenge on the fleeing King's men, and attacked the broken force as it came away from the battle. After this mauling Prince Rupert made his way to Thames. On the King's side, 200 hundred lay dead; whereas on Parliament's side, a mere 90. In 1818 the bones of 247 men were discovered in a mass grave close to Holman's Bridge. These were moved to St Mary's Churchyard at Hardwick at the request of Lord Nugent of Lilies. A tablet marks their common grave.

Now as to the intriguing mystery as to whether Oliver Cromwell was present at this battle. There are tantalising references in a number of works but could these be mistakes? Cromwell was a Cambridgeshire man, but he did have relatives in Buckinghamshire. According to research done by Robert Hammond of the Cromwell Association, Cromwell was in Chalfont St



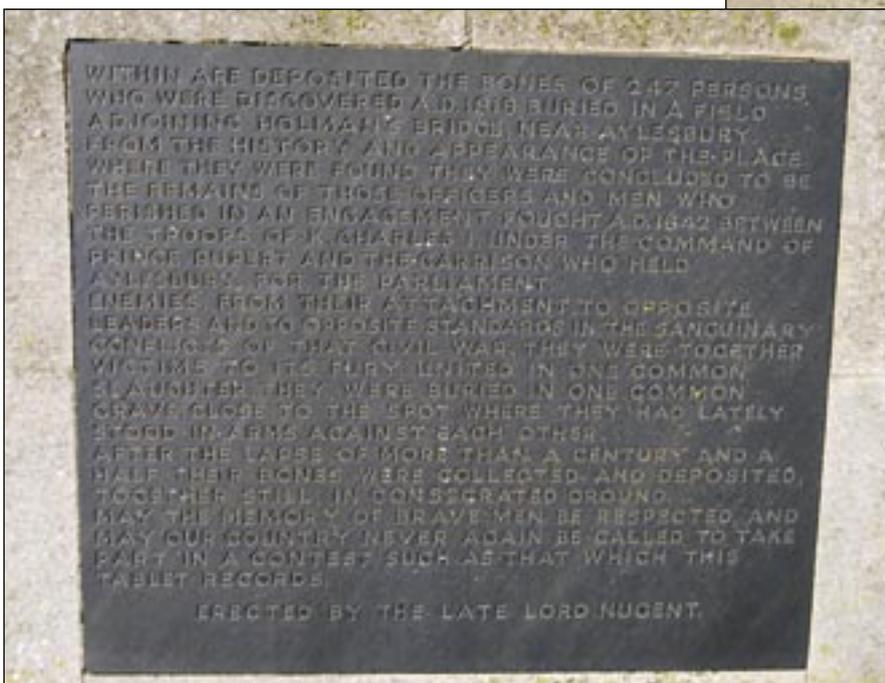
*Holman's Bridge on Buckingham Road which is situated before the entrance to Watermead. All photos by Keith Turner.*

Giles with the Ratcliffe family shortly after the Battle. Here the matter gets tied up with John Hampden who was a kinsman of Cromwell. Hampden did not take part in the Battle, as his eldest son had just been killed. A young man of eighteen, he died defending Chenies from a Royalist raiding party which may have been part of Prince Rupert's Aylesbury force. The main Royalist army was travelling south to London in the aftermath of Edgehill. Cromwell could just have been scouting out any Royalist stragglers.

What is beyond doubt is that Oliver Cromwell came back to Aylesbury after the Battle of Worcester, and that he stayed in the King's Head. On arrival he received a Vote of Thanks from Parliament, in the

King's Head. The National Trust has a number of artefacts dating from the Civil War. These include anti-monarchy tokens given out by the then landlord which could be exchanged for ale, and the chair said to have been used by Cromwell during his stay. We shall probably never know for certain whether Oliver Cromwell was at the battle of Holman's Bridge, but his association with the town has echoes that reverberate even today. For example Rutland Boughton's No 1 Symphony 'Oliver Cromwell' can still be obtained on the Dutton Epoch label. Boughton, born and raised in Aylesbury, where his father had a grocers shop, was inspired by the history of the war to celebrate Cromwell's rise.

**Kevin Peters**



*St Mary's Church, Hardwick  
Monument to the dead of the Civil War.*

