

# Cropredy Bridge

**Stephen Roberts** visits the site of a little-known encounter of the English Civil War in the summer of 1644.

**T**he Battle of Cropredy Bridge, fought on 29 June 1644, was complex in its fighting, yet simple in its origin. If ever a battle was fought simply because there were two opposing armies close to one another and able and willing to fight, this was it.

The war had been going badly for the Royalists, and the King had been in great danger of coming under siege in Oxford, with Parliamentary armies under Sir William Waller and the Earl of Essex in the vicinity. Fortunately for the King, Waller and Essex, who did not see eye to eye, decided to split up, with Essex heading west to relieve the Siege of Lyme, leaving Waller to continue tracking Charles.

The King ignored the option of marching on London, which might have given him a better chance of winning the war, and headed instead towards Banbury.

A sequence of feints and marches eventually led the two forces to close on one another in rural Oxfordshire. Conflict was inevitable; both parties were simply trying to find the best

position. By the 27 June Waller had reached Hanwell Castle to the west of the River Cherwell, the King being about five miles away in Edgecote, scene of an earlier battle during the Wars of the Roses. On 28 June the King moved to Banbury, resolved on a fight, although Waller held the high ground.

## The approach to battle

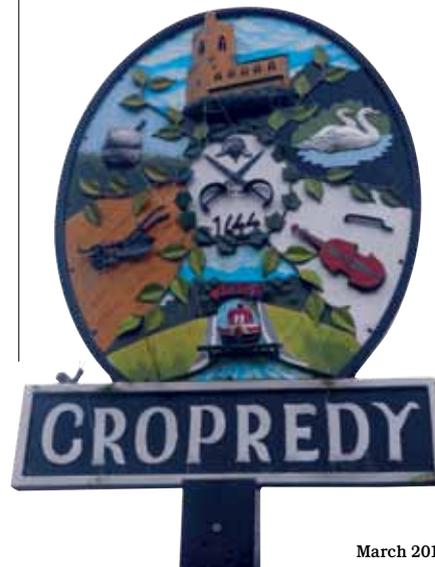
On Saturday 29 June the King began marching his force northwards along a ridge east of the River Cherwell. Waller, having halted at Great Bourton, had now taken closer order and was shadowing the King on a parallel ridge west of the river. The two armies were no more than a mile apart and could see one another, with the river in between. This must have been unnerving for both parties.

The Cherwell was to play a key role in the battle, as there were a number of crossing points – at Cropredy itself, at Hay's Bridge to the north-east, and at Slat Mill to the south. Waller was aware that these gave him chances to cross the river and attack the King's army

**Above** Cropredy Bridge – a 1930s replacement of the 14th-century original that featured so heavily in the battle. **Below** The village sign at Cropredy, showing crossed swords, the date of the battle, and a Civil War helmet.

in the flank. Thus might he bring on a battle that would extend across several miles of countryside.

Battle was joined at about 1pm and lasted until sunset. The Royalists probably had the larger army, between 9,000 and 10,000 troops, with Waller having around 6,000. Some sources, however, claim that the strength of



the opposing armies was more finely balanced than this.

The King is said to have eaten his 'dinner' under an ash tree on the day of the battle, so this presumably happened just prior to hostilities commencing, as 'dinner' at this time denoted the main meal of the day, usually being taken around 11.30am.

As he approached Cropredy, four miles north of Banbury, Charles ordered a small detachment of dragoons to capture the vital bridge over the river, which they did. At this crucial juncture, however, he also received intelligence that some 300 Parliamentary horse were two miles away, approaching from the north to reinforce Waller's army. The King spurred his troops on, intending to cut off this small force, but in the process stretched out his own battle line.

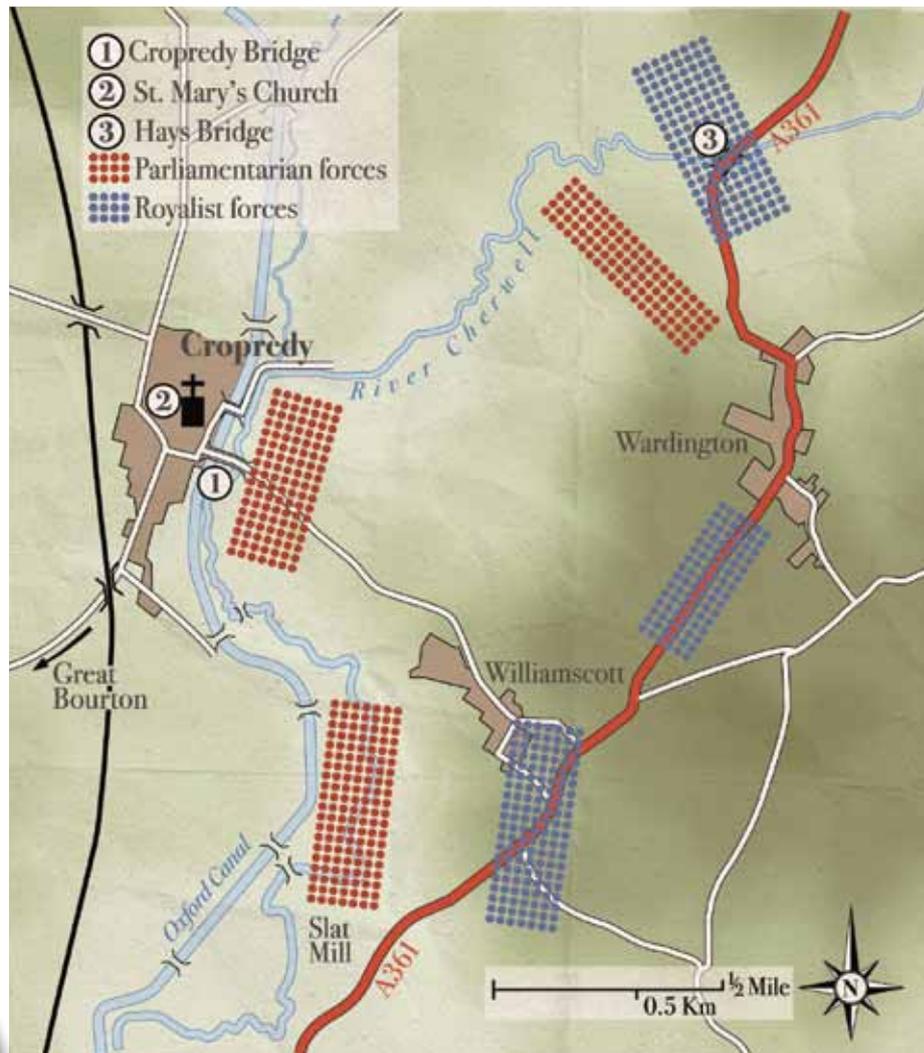
The Royalist vanguard and main body crossed at Hay's Bridge on the eastern side of the field, leaving the rearguard, of two cavalry brigades and some infantry under the Earls of Cleveland and Northampton, trailing a mile or more behind.

It is possible that the King had been lulled into a false sense of security, allowing his forces to be separated in the belief that the river afforded ample protection. This was probably a reasonable assumption at the time, as the river would have been much wider prior to the building of the Oxford Canal.

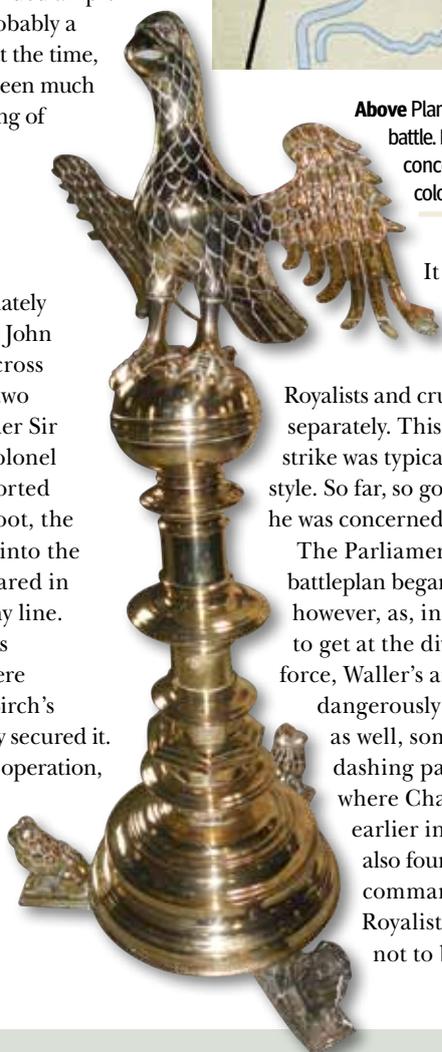
### Waller's attack

It was at this point that Waller sensed his opportunity. He immediately sent Lieutenant-General John Middleton clattering across Cropredy Bridge with two regiments of horse under Sir Arthur Haselrig and Colonel Jonas Vandruske, supported by nine companies of foot, the intention being to pile into the gap that had now appeared in the middle of the enemy line.

The Royalist dragoons defending the bridge were overpowered. Colonel Birch's Parliamentarians quickly secured it. In conjunction with this operation, Waller himself led a thousand men across Slat Mill Ford a mile to the south, intending to hit the Royalist rearguard from behind.



**Above** Plan of the Battle of Cropredy Bridge, showing the dispositions at the height of the battle. **Right** The lectern at St Mary's Church, Cropredy, allegedly recovered from deliberate concealment in the River Cherwell 50 years after the battle. Note the different colour of one of the lectern's lion feet, which was missing and had to be replaced.



It was a simple plan, conceived in haste, to divide the Royalists and crush the two halves separately. This opportunistic strike was typical of Waller's style. So far, so good, as far as he was concerned.

The Parliamentary battleplan began to unravel, however, as, in the rush to get at the divided Royalist force, Waller's army now became dangerously over-extended as well, some of them dashing past the ash tree where Charles had dined earlier in the day. Waller also found that the dual commanders of the Royalist rearguard were not to be messed with.

### Royalist counterattack

Fierce fighting broke out at Hay's Bridge, as Middleton's cavalry was held up by Royalist musketeers, who had overturned a carriage to block the bridge. The Earl of Cleveland took advantage of the Parliamentary discomfort by attacking their foot and the artillery, which was lumbering along behind and 'thought the devil had come upon them in a cloud of dust', as they began to retreat untidily towards Cropredy Bridge. Middleton's cavalry, having been repulsed at Hay's Bridge, would soon be caught up in this mêlée as well, contributing to the disorderly withdrawal.

In the southern part of the field meanwhile, the teenage (yet experienced) Earl of Northampton had taken decisive action, charging his cavalry downhill against Waller's force, surprising them and propelling them back across Slat ▸



**Above** Hay's Bridge, site of some of the heaviest fighting of the battle. **Inset** The commemorative stone built into the modern Cropredy Bridge.



Mill Ford, whence they had come. The Earl of Brentford's infantry was also in attendance to add to Waller's discomfort.

The King had been informed that his rear had been engaged, and having dealt with the 300 Parliamentarian horse promptly turned his own forces around. He also ordered his Lifeguard of Horse under Lord Bernard Stewart to assist Cleveland. The combined force then piled into Middleton, who was rapidly forced to retreat back across Cropredy Bridge, abandoning in the process 11 guns that had earlier been hauled over the river. Waller's Major-General of Ordnance, Sir James Wemyss, ended up in Royalist hands in the confusion.

When the King arrived at Williamscot at about 3pm, he ordered attacks on both Cropredy Bridge and the ford, and a bombardment of the Parliamentarian vantage-point to the west on Bourton Hill, with Charles allegedly doing some 'target spotting' using his 'perspective glasses'.

Thankfully for the Parliamentarian cause, Cropredy Bridge remained in

their hands, with two regiments of foot, Colonel Ralph Weldon's Kentish Regiment, together with the Tower Hamlets Regiment, resisting Royalist attempts to take the bridge.

Had the bridge fallen, a rout would inevitably have followed. Waller's remaining artillery continued to bombard the Royalists from Bourton Hill, forcing a withdrawal. Waller took the opportunity to pull back most of his own forces to the safety of Bourton Hill, while continuing to hold the bridge, although the Royalists did achieve a small bridgehead across the ford.

### Disengagement

As evening fell, the two armies faced one another from either side of the river, just as they had at the beginning of hostilities several hours before.

An attempt was made by Charles to negotiate with Waller, but his offer was rejected. Waller's mind was perhaps made less amenable by having a floor collapse during a meeting with senior officers, plummeting everyone into a cellar.

Believing that 4,500 Parliamentarian reinforcements were on their way from London, and also running short of food and supplies, Charles elected to slip away under cover of darkness, marching west for Evesham and taking the 11 pieces of captured ordnance with him. Charles's army had suffered few casualties in the fighting, but Waller's force needed to lick its wounds, having lost some 700 men, including deserters.

Waller's army was rendered ineffectual by what was undoubtedly a defeat, with those soldiers who remained, mutinous and demanding back-pay. This allowed the King to turn his attention to Essex's army, following it to Cornwall, where it was defeated two months later at Lostwithiel.

For the Parliamentarians, highly significant conclusions were drawn from Cropredy Bridge. First, the poor performance of their force during the battle led in no small part to the formation of the New Model Army. Second, Waller's performance at Cropredy Bridge determined that he would not be its commander.

### The battlefield today

This is one of Britain's least altered battlefields, with the

terrain either side of the river having changed little in the ensuing centuries. The canal and a railway line are the only significant additions to what remains a predominantly agricultural landscape.

'If the ghosts of King Charles and Waller were to attempt a recreation of the battle, they would be able to re-enact the same violence in the same places', reports one battlefield expert. It is also one of the most spread-out Civil War battlefields.

There are two bridges at Cropredy Bridge today, as there is also a bridge over the Oxford Canal; but the only bridge present in 1644 was the one over the Cherwell. The original 1312 bridge has long gone, but its 1930s replacement is in the same place.

To the east of the bridge are the fields where Middleton's cavalry charged impetuously towards Hay's Bridge. The recreation ground to the east of the bridge is the best place to get a decent view of the bridge and the parish church of St Mary the Virgin behind.

The church is interesting, as there is Civil War armour on display. Regrettably,



**Above** View over the battlefield from Wardington. Middleton's retreat would have been from right to left, heading back towards Cropredy. **Right** Peewit Farm, close to Slat Mill. It was here that Waller was thrown back.

this is only replica armour, as the original, dug up by the riverbank, was stolen. Some of the church valuables were allegedly hidden in the river prior to the battle and not recovered for 50 years. When the lectern was found, one of its brass lion feet was missing. Its replacement was mistakenly made in bronze, which is very obvious today because of its different colour.

There is a plaque on Cropredy Bridge itself commemorating the battle, which bears the simple epitaph 'Site of the Battle of Cropredy Bridge June 1644, From Civil War Good Lord Deliver Us'. There is also a modern interpretation panel, erected beside the bridge in 2005 by the Battlefields Trust.

A footbridge now crosses the river at Slat Mill Ford to the south, where Waller crossed the river and was then beaten back by Northampton. The ruins of Slat Mill can also be seen here next door to Peewit Farm.



The Wardington Ash, under which King Charles is alleged to have eaten his lunch, no longer stands, but a solitary ash tree can be found in a corn field on the left of the A361 as you drive from Williamscott to Wardington in the south-east corner of the battlefield. This could be its descendant. Enclosure of the

once-open fields around Wardington is the only other major change that Waller and the King would notice.

There is a bridge at Hay's Bridge, which marks the north-eastern corner of the battlefield. This is where some of the heaviest fighting took place as the Parliamentarian attack was firstly held up and then thrown back. 🏰