



THE BATTLE

By Tony Spicer

Cromwell wanted to start his offensive on 3rd September, which he regarded as his lucky day, being the anniversary of his victory at Dunbar. Accordingly about 5:30 AM, Fleetwood began his advance from Upton with perhaps a third of the parliamentary army. However, "by reason of some hindrances in their way" they did not get through to the River Teme until about 2:30 PM. The Parliamentary accounts do not say what these hindrances were but a local tradition tells of fighting at Carey's Brook about a mile south of Powick. Subsequent fighting at Powick itself is evidenced by musket ball marks in the church tower.

One can imagine Cromwell on the east side of the Severn, opposite its confluence with the Teme, worrying over what had happened to Fleetwood and with his patience wearing thin. As soon as he was satisfied that Fleetwood was nearing Powick, Cromwell decided to intervene. He floated his bridge of boats over the Severn below the confluence with the Teme and started moving regiments of both infantry and cavalry over the bridge of boats to attack the royalist left flank. This was too much for the Royalists. With Fleetwood attacking from Powick and Cromwell on their flank, they abandoned their position between Powick village and the River Teme and conducted an orderly retreat via the stone bridge at Powick to the north side of the Teme. This enabled Fleetwood to advance with his right wing and construct his bridge of boats over the Teme near to that of Cromwell over the Severn.

It was one thing for Fleetwood to construct his bridge of boats under covering fire from his musketeers but quite another to cross it in any strength and they were held there by the Royalists lining the hedgerows. Fleetwood also attacked Powick Bridge which had been partially broken down but was repulsed by royalist troops under Major General Robert Montgomery. Something of a stalemate ensued.

Fleetwood decided on two further attacks to help break the deadlock. He sent a regiment of dragoons west to Bransford to take the bridge there and begin an encircling movement. He also found a place about 200 yards to the east of Powick bridge where the Teme could be forded and sent half a regiment of foot to attempt a crossing there. In the meantime, Cromwell ordered Lambert, who was in command of the parliamentary centre in Battenhall, to send more troops from there to reinforce the attack over the Teme bridge of boats. Lambert was initially reluctant to do so as if the Royalists counter-attacked on the east side of the Severn, the parliamentary positions on Red Hill and Perry Wood would be unsupported and vulnerable. However with the attack over the Teme bridge of boats faltering, he did come over and took personal command. After about an hour he succeeded in breaking through there. In the west, the parliamentary dragoons took Bransford bridge and these developments, combined with the attack over the ford in the Teme resulted in the royalist position at Powick bridge becoming untenable. Montgomery was wounded and forced to fall back to St Johns where there were reinforcements under Major General Thomas Daliel. Daliel sent these forward but by this time the parliamentary troops on the north side of the Teme were numerically so superior that there was little that could be done. Although pockets of resistance remained, the battle on the west side of the Severn was effectively over and Fleetwood was able to advance to the west side of the Worcester town bridge while Lambert returned to the east side of the Severn to deal with a crisis there.

Royalist observers on the Cathedral tower had noticed Cromwell's troop movements and resultant weakness on the east side of the Severn. Charles decided to attack Red Hill and Perry Wood. If he could take these positions, then he could attack across Battenhall, roll up the parliamentary line from the side and attack the Severn bridge of boats. The chaos which that could have caused was probably a factor in Lambert's reluctance to move troops from Battenhall to the west of the Severn. Unfortunately for Charles, morale among the royalist leaders was low. In particular, Lieutenant-General David Leslie who commanded the Scottish cavalry was very pessimistic about the outcome of the battle. Accordingly it was something of a scratch force which accompanied Charles in his attempt on Red Hill and Perry Wood. This consisted of most of the garrison from Fort Royal under Sir Alexander Forbes, the Duke of Hamilton's regiment which was under strength, Charles' Lifeguards and some gentlemen volunteers.

Nevertheless the attack, which was launched at about 4 PM, met with initial success. Charles was able to establish himself on Red Hill putting the Parliamentary forces there, who were mostly inexperienced militia, to "a little retreat and disorder". Hamilton, who took charge of the attack on Perry Wood, had a tougher job. His troops captured some cannon but never really established themselves. If Charles's ploy was to succeed he badly needed reinforcements from Leslie who had some 3000 cavalry troops available. He sent orders of the Leslie to support him but although Leslie had moved up his cavalry from Pitchcroft to St Martin's Gate he advanced no further. The reason for this is not clear but, as a very experienced general, he may have thought the attack was doomed to fail and the priority was to keep his cavalry intact so as to be able to escort Charles back to Scotland.

In the meantime, Cromwell and Lambert were desperately trying to redeem the situation. It was nearly two miles from the bridges of boats to Red Hill and the parliamentary commanders had the task of getting their men back over the bottlenecks of the bridges of boats, through all the smoke and general confusion, to counter-attack against Red Hill. Had Leslie moved to support Charles, then this might well have been touch and go. However, without Leslie, there could only be one eventual outcome. Regiment after regiment advanced on Red Hill and Perry Wood. The Royalists there were forced back into retreat – a retreat which rapidly became a rout. Hamilton was mortally wounded and Forbes, shot in the legs, was left in Perry Wood, to be taken prisoner the next morning.

Charles tried to rally his forces at Fort Royal but to no avail and he then became caught up in the melee and confusion outside Sidbury gate with his own troops trying to get back into the city and the defenders afraid of opening the gates lest they let the parliamentary soldiers inside. Eventually some sort of discipline was restored by the royalist Earl of Cleveland who assembled some cavalry and mounted a charge through Sidbury gate. This drove back the Parliamentary soldiers and enabled Charles and some of his men to pass through into the city. Again Charles tried to rally his army but the situation was hopeless. Fort Royal was summoned to surrender but those of the garrison who remained there refused and were put to the sword. The Parliamentary soldiers then turned the royalist guns there and fired them at the city walls causing more confusion and carnage. It was not long before they succeeded in storming Sidbury Gate and entering the city. Fleetwood, from the west forced the city bridge and came in from that direction. St Martin's gate was the only one left in royalist hands and it was through it the Charles escaped from Worcester together with most of the Scottish cavalry who had not taken part in the battle.

By now it was early evening and beginning to get dark. Two pockets of royalist resistance remained; one at the Town Hall (now the Guildhall) and one at Castle Mound which was the raised site of the old mediaeval castle. The Town Hall succumbed fairly quickly but Castle Mound was skilfully defended by the Earl of Rothes who held out until 10 PM when Cromwell, realising that the position could not be taken without considerable loss of life, offered honourable terms which were accepted.

The result was a total Parliamentary victory vindicating Cromwell's decision to force battle on 3rd September, his lucky day, although not perhaps so lucky in the future as he was to die on 3rd September 1658 exactly seven years later prompting the legend that he had sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for victory at Worcester and seven years of life. The victory was also marred by the fact that Charles managed to escape to France, and with the rule of parliament unravelling after Cromwell's death, was restored to the throne in 1660.