

# English Heritage Battlefield Report: Rowton Heath (S) 1645

## Rowton Heath South (24 September 1645)

**Parish:** Waverton, Saughton, Hatton

**District:** Chester

**County:** Cheshire

**Grid Ref:** SJ 445629

### Historical Context

By September 1645 the tide of war was running swiftly against the Royalists. The previous June King Charles's Oxford Army had lost its infantry at the Battle of Naseby. In July, Lord Goring had been defeated at Langport in Somerset. Two months later Prince Rupert surrendered Bristol. King Charles himself, although he had rescued some 4,000 cavalry from the wreck of Naseby, had taken no decisive step in the interim. Only when his position in South Wales threatened to become untenable did he resolve to make a determined effort to link up with the Marquis of Montrose, who had been winning a string of victories in Scotland.

A previous attempt by Charles to reach Scotland via Yorkshire had failed in August, so this time he decided to try his luck west of the Pennines and proceed through Lancashire and Cumberland. On 18 September Charles and his accompanying army began their northward journey, eluding the forces of Colonel General Sydenham Poyntz which had been charged by Parliament with the task of shadowing the King's movements. By the 22nd of September Charles had progressed as far as Chirk Castle. Here, however, he received disturbing news from the Royalist garrison of Chester. On 19 September the Parliamentarians had launched a surprise assault, capturing the city's outworks and suburbs. Without assistance from the King, Chester was in imminent danger of falling to the enemy.

During the course of 23 September, Charles's army marched hard across the Welsh mountains. By evening the King approached Chester. The Welsh side of the city was not invested, so he could enter Chester by the Handbridge across the Dee. He brought with him an escort of around 500 horsemen, including his Lifeguard and Lord Gerard's cavalry. The vast majority of the King's little army, some 2,500 men under Sir Marmaduke Langdale, had already been detached. Earlier that day, in accordance with a plan devised by Royalist strategists, they had crossed the River Dee nine miles south of Chester at Holt Bridge. Langdale was to approach Chester from the south-east and, depending on whether the city's besiegers withdrew or not, either trap them in Chester's suburbs or intercept them as they retreated along Watling Street to their base at Tarvin.

The Parliamentarian besiegers were in a quandary when they learnt of the King's approach. If they withdrew they forfeited their gains. If they remained where they were, they risked destruction. Eventually they decided to hold fast, but messengers were sent to discover where General Poyntz was and to request him to hurry on to the besiegers' assistance.

The messengers from Chester chanced upon Poyntz during the evening of the 23rd at Whitchurch, 20 miles from the city. Although his men were tired after a day in the saddle, Poyntz undertook to resume his pursuit of the King and led his army back onto the road just before midnight. He sent a rider ahead to inform Chester's besiegers that he was marching through the night to reach them. Unfortunately for the Parliamentarians, Poyntz's messenger was intercepted by troops from the Royalist garrison at Holt Bridge.

The news of Poyntz's approach was passed on to Sir Marmaduke Langdale, who had encamped that night

southeast of Chester. It was obvious to Langdale that the onset of Poyntz changed everything: he decided to turn and deal with Poyntz first before setting upon the enemy in the city suburbs. Langdale selected an advantageous position astride the Whitchurch Road on Miller's Heath, four miles outside Chester, and awaited Poyntz's arrival.

### **Location and Description of the Battlefield**

The Battle of Rowton Heath was a sprawling affair including at least three distinct areas of conflict. The first clash occurred between Langdale and Poyntz on Miller's Heath, an area which remains open ground notwithstanding the presence of the Chester-Crewe railway and a worked-out quarry. It is this first clash that forms the subject of the Register entry. Later in the day Langdale again fought Poyntz - who by this time had been reinforced by Colonel Michael Jones and a thousand men from amongst Chester's besiegers - on Rowton Heath proper, a mile nearer the city. After Langdale's men had been broken on Rowton Heath the subsequent fighting was conducted over a wide area. Langdale's fleeing horsemen collided with a thousand men who had been led out of Chester's North Gate by Lord Gerard to support them. With the Parliamentarians in hot pursuit the scene became one of increasing confusion: charge and countercharge followed. Some of the Royalists were driven up against the outer walls of Chester's suburbs - now long since disappeared under modern bricks and mortar - and were fired upon by the besiegers. Others fled northwards across Hoole Heath. A defiant body of Royalists ranged itself upon a hill, most probably the eminence north of Littleton. Taken as a whole, much of this final area of fighting is now covered by the outskirts of modern Chester.

With regard to the Registered battlefield, the evidence of old maps, from Cheshire road maps of the early eighteenth century to Cary's map of Cheshire in the 1806 edition of Camden's *Britannia* and the first Ordnance Survey map of 1842, all indicate that the route of the Whitchurch road has remained the same. Accordingly, the initial positions of Poyntz and Langdale can be determined with some confidence. Between Ivy Cottages and the disused quarry a quarter mile further north on the Whitchurch road there is a stretch of low lying ground. This fits the description of the area between two moors (Hatton Heath and Miller's Heath) across which a lane passed, at either end of which Poyntz and Langdale were drawn up. Because of obstacles - either hedges or marshy ground (the low lying land can still be boggy) - the lane was the only way forward available to Poyntz and he chose it.

### **Landscape Evolution**

In the seventeenth century the countryside within a few miles of Chester remained largely heathland. South-east of the city a succession of heaths merged - Rowton Heath, Miller's Heath and Hatton Heath. By definition heathland is uncultivated, but one account of the battle mentions the deployment by Langdale of musketeers behind hedges, which suggests that a limited amount of enclosure had taken place. Certainly, there would have been fields around the outlying villages of Waverton and Saughton, with more intense cultivation of the ground around Rowton and Christleton, nearer Chester. North of Rowton, as the Parliamentarian Colonel Parsons observed, the pursuit was conducted 'through narrow dirty lanes and over ditches', a description which hints at a certain amount of local land management. Systematic enclosure, however, would have occurred much later: the common lands of Christleton were enclosed only in 1816<sup>1</sup>.

Crossing the expanse of heathland was the Whitchurch to Chester road, the route of which, as we discover from the earliest maps of Cheshire to be marked with highways, was similar to the route of the A41(T) today<sup>2</sup>. It is important to know the line of the road, as it helps locate the site of the first clash between Langdale and Poyntz.

The Shropshire Union Canal, which crosses the battlefield between Rowton and Christleton, was built during the eighteenth century. The Chester and Crewe railway, which runs through a cutting under the Whitchurch road at the point where Langdale's men were probably first positioned, had appeared by 1842.

Chester itself, as mentioned above, has grown greatly since the seventeenth century, swallowing nearby villages like Boughton and Hoole. The city ring roads of the past 25 years - first the A41(T)/A55(T) and then, in 1990-1, the M53 - have swung ever wider. While the original villages of Rowton and Waverton have remained small, there has, within the past two decades, been rapid growth in the housing estates situated between the two at Egg Bridge. Christleton, which was razed to the ground during the siege of Chester, has also grown extensively.

### **The Battle and the Sources**

Colonel General Sydenham Poyntz, the day after the battle, supplied the Speaker of the House of Commons, William Lenthall, with a brief summary of what had taken place:

Yesterday we discovered the enemy on Millers heath within three miles of Chester, whereupon I sent to Chester for some foot, which was very seasonably sent me, and in my advance towards them we unawares met a body of them in a narrow passe on the top of the heath, where we had a very violent encounter, wherein we cut off many of the King's Life-guard and routed the rest, then we retreated to our maine body, and toward foure of the clock in the afternoon we advanced toward them, and finding the enemy ready for battell we presently fell upon them, kild, tooke, wounded, and routed the whole army, and I am confident they never received a greater blow<sup>3</sup>.

The brevity of Poyntz's account renders it slightly obscure. Although Poyntz implies otherwise, different sources for the battle will make it clear that reinforcements from Chester only arrived in time to take part in the second clash at 4 pm. Having seen the enemy on Miller's Heath at the outset, Poyntz's assertion that his men were surprised 'in a narrow passe at the top of the heath' could only mean that his men were caught unawares in the strictest tactical sense: the 'narrow passe' was probably a point where the Whitchurch road was lined with hedges, concealing Langdale's musketeers.

Poyntz, however, makes reference to Miller's Heath and this is important. While the heath is not shown on the modern Ordnance Survey map it is represented on the first 1 inch Ordnance Survey map of 1842, situated alongside the Whitchurch road between Rowton and Waverton<sup>4</sup>. This is where one would expect Langdale to try and intercept Poyntz on his way to Chester, an impression strengthened by a view of the ground.

Poyntz's account of his victory at Rowton Heath was conveyed to Parliament by Colonel Parsons, his Quartermaster General. Parsons's own enlargement of events was published in conjunction with Poyntz's dispatch:

After a very hard march all night, on the 24th of this instant in the morning, his [Poyntz's] Van carriers discovered the enemy on a moore within two miles of Chester called Rowton-moore, whereupon immediately he drew into Order, and advanced upon them (though all his force were not then come up) for he supposed to take the enemy at unawares, it being probable they could have no intelligence of his being so neare, though it proved otherwise, for his Letters (written that night to the Commander within the out-Lines of Chester, giving notice of his advance) were intercepted and the enemy being possessed of the advantage of ground, and in order confronted our van led by Colonell Hugh Bethell in the midst of a Lane betwixt two Moores covered with the armed men of both Battaliaes, where was given a very sharp and gallant charge by bothe parties, for after Pistolls were discharged at halfe Pikes distance, they disputed the matter with their Swords a full quarter of an houre, neither yielding ground to the other, till at length the enemy were forced to retreat, whom, our men pursuing were re-encountred by a fresh reserve at the Lanes mouth, and they were likewise discomfited, and a third, but being over powred were in the end forced to retreat in the Lane, incapable of

receiving a Reserve to second them: here wee had some losse, the enemy pursuing to the Lanes end, but were beaten back, for there were space for our reserves to advance, Colonell Bethell and Colonell Graves were then sore wounded, after this the Generall perceiving the enemy lay upon his advantage, only skirmished him with some flying parties, while he held correspondency with his friends in Chester suburbs, whose signe was the discharge of two peeces of Ordnance when they would issue out with horse and foot to joyne with him, upon whose appearing the enemy quitted their station, and the Generall with a party advanced to take the most convenient ground giving command to Colonel Parsons Quartermaster generall of the Army, Col. Sandies who performed the duty of Commissary Generall of the horse, during the aforesaid march being then employed to the Committee of both Kingdomes to order up the rest, which was opportunely done, for they joyned with the Auxiliary force of horse and foote in the enemies ground, and was drawn into many small divisions and reserves, being much outnumbered by the enemy, who accompted themselves 5000 horse, and Gen. Poyntz not above 2500 horse, besides two small bodies of foote, who were disposed in the two outmost intervals of horse; upon the very instant of this juncture the enemy advanced with their whole body, and the General (leaving the charge of the reserves to Col. Parsons) tooke care of, and led up the van divisions, with which after a round volley of shot from the foot, he joyned battell, charging the enemy in Front and Flank, where his horse was deeply wounded on the head, being continually seconded with reserves as often as there was occasion, the rest being kept intire followed at a due distance; The prevailing Generall who put the Enemy to a totall rout, and although the pursuit was as hot as could be expected from such wearied horse, through narrow dirty lanes and over ditches, the enemy rallied in a great moore wide of Chester in two vast bodies a great distance asunder, the first (not without some dispute) were again routed, and the other likewise, who retreated upon the Warwick Regiment with such violence as bore them away confusedly, intermixed with the flying enemy up to the outworkes of the Suburbs, the Musketeers within were never the lesse liberall of their Gunshot, but the Divine Providence appeared much in the distribution of the impartiall Bullets, few or none lighting upon our men, though many of the Enemy were found there expiring.

A body of horse all the while of these last disputes appeared fixed on the top of a Hill, a little distant on that side [of] Chester, wherein the King was very confidently reputed to be, for confronting whereof a party of foot winged with Colonell Lidcot, and Colonell Bethells Regiments were drawn into a convenient Close in the bottome as a grand reserve; but the night by this time falling the body on the Hill appeared not, and those in the bottome returned to their comrades sated with slaughter, prisoners and booty of the vanquished Enemy; while these things were thus agitated in the field the remainder of foote left with Colonell Lowthian in the Suburbs were not idle, for the Enemy made a strong rally upon them out of the City, and were more strenuously repulsed, the number of the slaine of the prisoners and horse taken is not yet knowne, but is generally conjectured 800 slaine, 1500 men and 2000 horses taken...<sup>5</sup>

Parsons, in common with some others who reported upon the battle, failed to make a distinction between Rowton Heath and Miller's Heath. He does, however, refer to the initial combat taking place 'in the midst of a Lane betwixt two Moores' and, since we know from other accounts that the Parliamentarians launched their attack from Hatton Heath to the south, Parsons's testimony tends to confirm that the two sides first clashed at the southern edge of Miller's Heath.

Parsons's description of the initial combat between Poyntz and Langdale is the most detailed that we possess. He stresses the disadvantages under which the Parliamentarians fought, emphasising the fact that they were unable to deploy their reserves in the 'Lane'. It seems reasonably safe to assume that the 'Lane' was the Whitchurch road which, as Poyntz wrote, at this point took on the character of 'a narrow passe'. If the road

were lined with hedges between Miller's Heath and Hatton Heath, there might well have appeared to have been a 'Lanes mouth' at either end.

Poyntz's impending reinforcement by troops from Chester prompted Langdale to fall back northwards to Rowton Heath proper. Colonel Michael Jones probably approached the battlefield from the west, having followed the Saughton road from Chester: this would have threatened Langdale's flank, compelling him to abandon his position at the southern end of Miller's Heath. Poyntz then led an advance guard forward and occupied 'the most convenient ground', to be followed by the remainder of his force, which joined with the Chester troops 'in the enemies ground'. When the battle resumed, Parsons claims that the Parliamentarians were outnumbered, but their line was bolstered by the careful disposition of the only infantry present on either side. These were placed 'in the two outmost intervals of horse'.

Poyntz's army got the better of its return bout and pursued Langdale's men northwards. The Parliamentarians then encountered two large enemy formations 'in a great moore wide of Chester ... a great distance asunder', probably near Littleton. Parsons does not mention Lord Gerard's belated sortie from Chester, but one of the two Royalist formations broken during this third clash of the battle was no doubt made up of Gerard's men; the other probably included those of Langdale's men who had managed to reform.

Some of the fleeing Royalists got caught up with their opponents and finished under the outworks of the Chester suburbs, somewhere between present-day Boughton and Flookersbrooke. Here both sides were fired on indiscriminately by the city's besiegers. The Royalist Horse who occupied a hill, 'a little distant on that side [of] Chester', turned away when confronted by a mixed force of Parliamentary infantry and cavalry. The defeat of an attempt by Chester's garrison to recapture the suburbs set the seal on the Parliamentary victory.

The pamphlet *The Kings Forces totally Routed by the Parliament Army under Major Generall Poyntz on Routon Heath* supplies further details of the battle. The perspective is that of Chester's besiegers:

Our intelligence upon Monday September 21st, was, that the King was at Chirke Castle, intending for Chester: Upon Tuesday, two trusty men were sent to seek Major Gen. Poyntz, who was appointed to follow the King, but we heard nothing of him; they meeting with him at Whitchurch, and acquainting him with our present condition (who were like to be stormed that night) he hastned away, marched all night, though tired with long marches before: About six a clock Wednesday morning, he advanced within a mile of the Enemy, three miles from Chester, the one not knowing of the other; upon notice, both set themselves in a posture; Generall Poyntz upon Hatton Heath, divided from the Enemy on the Milne Heath by a Lane, they being betwixt him and the City: he first charged them though upon a disadvantage, because the Enemies whole body was not come up, but had a repulse, in which that gallant Gentleman Col. Graves was sore wounded, & Col. Bethell, but not so dangerously; about twenty men slain, many wounded; but we hear the Enemies losse was greater, however, upon the retreat, it was noised that Gen. Poyntz was utter Routed, which was sad news to our forces in Chester; who upon consultation, at first thought it fit to quit the Suburbs, least the Army miscarrying, all should be lost; but upon intelligence that Poyntz kept his ground and stood in a body, they resolved to keep what ground they had gotten for the gaining of Chester, and to assist Generall Poyntz with Horse and Foot, which he sent for, and they promised: The signall of their march from the Suburbs was the discharge of two piece of Ordnance, at which there was great shouting in Generall Poyntz campe, who without us could neither charge the Enemy, nor make good their Retreat if need should require ... Col. Jones, a dextrous and resolute Souldier, ... [had] command of [the] Horse and Foot, 350 and 500. The Foot were led by Col. John Booth, governor of Warrington, who was very forward in that Expedition: Adjutant Gen. Louthian, a man of known worth, was to keep the suburbs, a work of great trust and courage. 29. When these forces joyned with Gen. Poyntz there was a great joy in the camp, the Enemy formed themselves into a body upon Routon Heath, two miles from Chester,

and stood in Batalia, being about 5000 as their owne party confesse, having drained their Garrisons: We hastned towards them in the best posture we could, the Horse was the Battell, because many, the wings were Foot because few; they had the Wind and Sun; we had God with us, which was our Word, counterpoising all disadvantages, and countermanding all strength; a little before five a clock, we joyned in a terrible storm, firing in the faces of one another, hacking and slashing with swords neither party gain'd or lost a foot of ground, as if everyone was resolved there to breathe their last: Whilst the dispute was so hot and doubtfull, our Musquetiers so galled their horse, that their Rear fled, perceiving their losse by them, upon whom they made no Execution. Their Van perceiving that, faced about, and fled also: We had nothing then to do, but to pursue and make Execution, which we did to purpose, for though the ways were strewed with Arms, Portmantles, Cloakbags, and Horse, we left those to any that would pillage, and fell to Execution: Some part we chased to Holt bridge, the most towards Chester...

A memorable service was performed by the Shropshire Forces, at the appointment of Lieutenant Louthiane, who were part of them that kept the suburbs. When Collonel Jones was marcht out to joyne with Generall Poyntz, there issued out after him through the North-gate (with which party its affirmed the King went) about five hundred horse and three hundred foote of the Kings and Queens Regiments and General Gerrards Lifeguard. Adjutant Louthiane sent after them about two hundred of the Shropshire horse, commanded by Lieutenant-Collonel Coote in chiefe, the second division by Collonel Prince, the last by Ma[jor] Fenwick and two hundred foote commanded by Captain Daniell, these gallantly performed what they undertooke, routed and chased the enemy, slew the Earle of Leichfield and others, tooke divers principall officers and followed the execution foure miles.

After we thought the work was ended, the enemy made head againe, and they that escaped in the field and about Chester, joyned in another body, fell upon part of our forces with advantage (for they were desperate seeing they had lost the day) drave them to our mud walls, where the guards made execution on them, and some small measure upon ours in the reare, through mistake: so they fled towards Bridgetrafford being ignorant of the Foote, where they were driven into deepe ditches and boggy places. The Country men set on them there, tooke one hundred horse and sixty persons. Others fled into the forest where they are met with.

Whilst wee were thus engaged in the field the enemy taking advantage of the small number left in the suburbs attempted the regaining of them in many places; but were everywhere gallantly repulsed with losse by Adjutant Louthiane<sup>6</sup>.

The pamphlet is, of course, wrong to suppose that neither Poyntz nor Langdale knew of the other's whereabouts at the start of the day: Langdale was expecting the enemy. It does, however, place Poyntz on Hatton Heath and confirms that his army was separated from the enemy by a lane. The reference to the Royalists taking their initial position on Milne Heath introduces a complication; Milners Heath, according to the modern Ordnance Survey map, is south of Waverton, a mile away from Millers Heath, which lies to the north-west. If Langdale confronted Poyntz here, our assumptions about the first place of battle are altered. Yet, positioning Langdale on Millers Heath, as Poyntz himself did, remains the more likely solution. The pamphlet account claims that the Royalists were 'betwixt him [Poyntz] and the City'; but Milners Heath lies off the Whitchurch road: if Langdale stationed his army there he left the road to Chester open. Nor is there the same obviously defensible position on Milners Heath as there is at the southern edge of Millers Heath, where there is a slight crest.

After Poyntz's first clash with Langdale the Parliamentarian general requests support from the troops outside Chester and gets it. The next stage of the battle takes place on Rowton Heath. By skilful use of the small number of musketeers at their disposal, the Parliamentarians prompt the Royalists' cavalry reserve to flee: soon Langdale's entire army is in flight.

Because the pamphlet account of the battle is written from the point of view of Chester's besiegers, we are given details of the defeat of the Royalist force that rode out of Chester's North Gate to support Langdale. The pamphlet's account of the final stages of the battle echoes that provided by Colonel Parsons: some of the Royalists, having rallied, carry the fight to the outworks of Chester's suburbs, but they too are eventually dispersed.

The final Parliamentary account of the Battle of Rowton Heath was written by Nathaniel Lancaster, Chaplain to the Cheshire Forces, in a pamphlet published in March 1646 after the fall of Chester. It follows the earlier pamphlet *The Kings Forces totally Routed...* quite closely but supplies some additional information:

The City, apprehensive of their own danger, in that we followed the worke so close, sent to the King, who gave them assurance of reliefe drawing towards them with all speed, which caused us to send out some to seeke out Generall Pointz and to hasten him to our reliefe, which was seasonably effected, for he, quartering at Whitchurch on Tuesday night, marched thence before midnight. About six o'clock next morning [he] advanc'd within three miles of Chester, neare the King's armie, before they knew of one another. Poyntz was upon Hatton's Heath, divided from the enemy by a short lane, whom he charged with a Forlorne Hope. [He] was very active in his owne person, with many gallant Gentlemen with him, but being overpowered by the body of the Enemy, who were in a good posture upon the open field, they put him to a retreat though their losse was judged neere as great as his, but the wounding of Colonell Greaves, Colonell Bethel, and Captaine Cotton, gallant men, wrought no small distraction amongst them. Both Armies continuing facing one another after the skirmish (a lane betwixt them) till about foure a clocke; by which time Colonell Jones was sent from the Suburbs of Chester with five hundred Horse, and as many foot, commanded by Collonel John Boothe to the reliefe of Poyntz. The enemy in Chester, perceiving that, sent about one thousand horse and foot upon the reere of Collonel Jones, yet by two hundred Horse, and as many Foot, sent out of the Suburbs by Adjut. Louthaine, those were repelled and driven another way, so Collonel Jones arrived safe to the field.

Some of their scattered party united themselves neere Chester and made head again. These were composed of those who, following Collonel Jones in the reere, were driven towards bridge Trafford, and the[n] escaped in the field; who were partly twisted in the Parliament's Armie, whiles they pursued the victory, and part of them driven before us. Opportunity serving, they separated themselves, drew into a body, fell upon our pursuing Army, who suspected no danger, got ground of us, and put us to retreat, but more force coming up, we drove them under the Walls of the Suburbs, w[h]ere the guards from the Walls made execution on them...

When the Enemy perceived Generall Poyntz and the Cheshire Forces about to joyne, they quit their ground, drew in to a body, and set themselves in Batalia upon Rowton Moore. We martialled our selves likewise and joyned Battell betweene foure and five a clocke. The greatest burden lay upon the Cheshire Horse, because they were fresh for service, the rest much wearied with an incessant march and long fasting. Collonel Jones encouraged his souldiers with such language, that he drew teares from their eyes, and vowes from their mouths, that they would stick fast to him, whether in life or death, which they faithfully performed. The rest also buckled themselves to the service in hand, and to give both sides their due, they performed the work with as much valour and resolution as could be expected from men. But God owning his owne cause, made the Parliament partie victorious, who slew them with a great slaughter on the ground, and chased them over all the countrie.<sup>7</sup>

Lancaster's arrangement of his narrative is rather confusing. Having described the defeat of the Royalist forces

that issued out of Chester, he refers to some of the enemies' 'scattered party' regrouping and attacking once more. A number of them consisted of the Chester Royalists and '[some] who were partly twisted in the Parliament's Armie, whiles they pursued the victory' (i.e. Langdale's men defeated by Poyntz). Only in a later paragraph, however, does Lancaster relate the story of the Parliamentarians' earlier victory on Rowton Heath.

The most detailed Royalist account of the Battle of Rowton Heath was penned by the King's Secretary of State, Lord Digby, for the Marquis of Ormonde, in a letter dated 26 September. Digby had accompanied the King on his journey north and was with him in Chester.

Whereupon his Majesty drew in person with his guards, and General Gerrard's troop in the town of Chester, and sent three brigades of horse over at Holt, to get betwixt the rebels and their retreat to their next garrison of Tarvin. The rebels in the suburbs being about 1500 foot, and 500 horse, upon intelligence of our approach drew off their cannon, and were preparing to march away; when on the sudden they drew their cannon back again, and shewed that they were resolved to maintain the post which they had gotten; which we conjectured either to be despair of their retreat, our horse being got between, or that they had intelligence of approaching relief: the latter of which proved to be true, for that night Sir Marmaduke Langdale got intelligence, that Poyntz was come with all his horse to Whitchurch, and advanc'd all night to so fall upon him, that in the morning our horse found themselves engag'd. But we had so good success in the first encounter, that our men took three colours of horse, and Col. Greaves prisoner, and set a stop upon their further advance, till it seems 1000 foot coming to them in the nick of time from the Lancashire side, they again press'd upon us so far that our horse not being able to retreat to Chester there to join with our other forces, they were fain to charge; which Sir William Vaughan's and Gen. Gerrard's brigades, and Sir Marmaduke Langdale's troop of reformadoes did successfully enough, but the reserve of northern horse, (just as they did at Naseby) took a fright before any enemy was near them, and ran. Whereupon all our horse were put in great disorder and forc'd to disperse; some retreating towards Holt, others towards Chester. Whilst this was doing upon Rowter's-Heath, two miles and a half from Chester, our part there was to look to the forces of the suburbs, and to fall in their rear, in case any of them drew out towards the battle; which the Earl of Lichfield with the King's guards and General Gerrard with his troop did most gallantly, routing and beating them back into the works, at the same time that well nigh the whole body of Poyntz's horse in pursuit of ours that retreated towards Chester, came down upon them, against whom notwithstanding those noble Lords were so brave and successful, that they totally routed all those great bodies, and drove many of them into and under their works, and dispers'd the rest; insomuch as we cannot make any judgment whose was the victory. But upon calculation of our horse already drawn together, we find our loss to have been very little, save only in that most excellent person the Earl of Lichfield, such a loss as a victory would scarce repair<sup>8</sup>.

Initially Digby's version of events coincides well with Parliamentary accounts of the battle; his mistaken belief that Poyntz was reinforced by 1,000 infantry rather than a mixed force of Horse and Foot is not a significant discrepancy. Digby's attribution of the defeat of Langdale on Rowton Heath to the misconduct of the Royalist cavalry reserve is corroborated by the Parliamentary pamphlet *The Kings Forces totally Routed*: it too observed that the Royalist rear fled first. When it came to describing the fighting outside Chester, however, Digby - a perennial optimist - put a highly favourable gloss on the outcome. Not only did Gerard and the Earl of Lichfield defeat those forces under Adjutant General Louthian that attempted to intercept them as they left Chester, but they succeeded in repulsing Poyntz's men when they arrived on the scene. While it is clear from the Parliamentary accounts that a confused melee swept men from both sides under the walls of Chester's suburbs, the transience of any success achieved by the Royalists is evident: the next day, when King Charles left Chester, the city was still under siege.

One question remains to be answered about the Royalist conduct of the Battle of Rowton Heath: why were the troops garrisoning Chester unable to provide Langdale with the kind of support that Poyntz received from the Parliamentary forces besieging the city? At one time it was assumed that Langdale neglected to inform King Charles about the intercepted messenger bearing news that Poyntz was marching on Chester from Whitchurch overnight. But Lord John Byron, the Governor of Chester, makes it plain in his narrative of the siege that the council of war in Chester knew of Poyntz's imminent arrival before he clashed with Langdale on Miller's Heath at 6am<sup>9</sup>. However, neither Byron nor Digby explain why it took the Royalists in Chester until the middle of the afternoon to send Gerard and Lichfield on their mission. The failure to support Langdale is the more surprising because we know that after his partial success against Poyntz in the early morning, Langdale had sent Colonel Geoffrey Shakerley to Chester to request further orders.

The testimony of Colonel (later Sir Geoffrey) Shakerley would be of some importance in resolving the mystery of Chester's failure to provide Langdale with effective support; as the bearer of an important message he was in a position to know what miscarried. Fortunately, a record of Shakerley's services on the day of the battle has come down to us, albeit in an unusual fashion. His son, Peter Shakerley, committed a resume to a blank page of Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, doing so with the observation that since Clarendon had not mentioned his father's role in the Civil War as a whole, he felt that he must highlight Colonel Shakerley's contribution at Rowton Heath. What follows, Shakerley went on, was based on 'what my father ... hath often declared in my hearing':

The heath upon which Sir Marmaduke Langdale was drawn up carries the name of Rowton Heath; a mile beyond which, in the London Road from Chester, is another heath, called Hatton Heath. The order which Sir Marmaduke had received from the King was to beat Poyntz back. Sir Marmaduke performed the same effectually; for, having marched his men over Holt Bridge undiscovered by the enemy, who had taken the outworks and suburbs of the city, on the east side thereof, and Poyntz coming in a marching posture along the narrow lane between Hatton Heath and Rowton Heath, Sir Marmaduke having lined the hedges, fell upon him, and killed a great many of his men; and having done so, ordered Colonel Shakerley who was best acquainted with that country to get the next way he could to the King, and acquaint him that he had obeyed his orders in beating Poyntz back, and to know his Majesty's further pleasure. The Colonel executed his orders with better speed than could be expected for he galloped directly to the River Dee, under Huntington House, got a wooden tub and a batting staff for an oar, put a servant into the tub with him and in this desperate manner swam over the river, his horse swimming by him, ordered his servant to stay there with the tub for his return, and was with the King in little more than a quarter of an hour after he left Sir Marmaduke, and acquainted the King, that if his Majesty pleased to command further orders to Sir Marmaduke he would engage to deliver them in quarter of an hour, and told the King of the expeditious method he had taken which saved him the going nine or ten miles about by Holt Bridge; but such delays were used by some about the King that no orders were sent, nor any sally made out of the city by the King's party till past three o'clock in the afternoon, which was full six hours after Poyntz had been beaten back<sup>10</sup>.

Although the last reference is cryptic, it is obvious that court politics played a large part in hindering decisive action. Lord Gerard, a supporter of Prince Rupert, despised Lord Digby, who, following the fall of Bristol, had been busy turning the King against Rupert's friends. Lord Byron had been on bad terms with Sir Marmaduke Langdale since the Royalist defeat at Ormskirk the previous year. The Royalist grandees in Chester had various reasons for not seconding the efforts of their colleagues.

Also of importance in Shakerley's account is the reference to the Royalists lining a hedge during Langdale's first engagement with Poyntz. The presence of hedges by the road has been taken as evidence that a limited amount of enclosure had occurred between Hatton Heath and Rowton/Millers Heath. It is also the basis of the belief that the Whitchurch road would have constituted a 'narrow pass' or 'lane' at this point.

### Indication of Importance

The Battle of Naseby, three months earlier, is usually considered to have ended King Charles's hopes of winning the First Civil War, but Rowton Heath was one of the severest blows dealt to his prospects of continuing the struggle. While a sizeable body of Royalist cavalry remained in being Charles could always hope that fresh infantry would be raised in Wales or even Yorkshire to replace the men lost at Naseby. The mauling that the Royalist Horse received at Rowton Heath, however, left it incapable of acting as the nucleus of a new army. It was a dispirited remnant that was finally scattered at Sherburn in October 1645.

The written sources for the Battle of Rowton Heath are good and the events of a battle that was both protracted and confused are rendered remarkably clear. The only drawback is that the battle took place over a wide area, making it difficult, in using the sources, to be specific about where the later stages of the fighting occurred. In part, this is not so important, for much of the area where the third and most dispersed stage of the battle was fought is now covered by the outskirts of Chester or busy ring roads and could not be included in a battlefield area. Worthy of more careful consideration is the afternoon engagement on Rowton Heath proper. There seems little doubt that an engagement worthy of battle status took place, but the documentary sources are equivocal on the location of the fighting, excepting the simple reference to Rowton Heath. Local legend has the ruined building of the present main road used as a hospital after the battle, helping to locate it in the vicinity, but the drawing of a boundary here is problematical. Given the degree of development in the area, there is little to be gained by the placement of a tenuous boundary around this action.

It is more practical to restrict the battlefield area to the combat that was fought earlier in the day on Miller's Heath. The ground between Miller's Heath and Hatton Heath in particular is reasonably unspoilt and the possibilities of the position chosen by Langdale at the start of the battle can still be appreciated.

### Battlefield Area

The battlefield area boundary defines the outer reasonable limit of the battle, taking into account the positions of the combatants at the outset of fighting and the focal area of the battle itself. It does not include areas over which fighting took place subsequent to the main battle. Wherever possible, the boundary has been drawn so that it is easily appreciated on the ground.

The frontages of the 2,500 cavalry present on each side were narrow and this can be reflected in the battlefield area. Poyntz's forlorn hope would be in column on the road near Ivy Cottages; behind it, as Colonel Parsons explained, there was room for the reserve to deploy. The Royalists likewise could only deploy properly back from the lane's end and the bulk of them were probably stationed between the quarry - the highest point at the southern end of Miller's Heath - and Smithy Farm, a few hundred yards further up the road. Their musketeers, who were presumably dismounted dragoons, lined the hedges to the front.

A battlefield area extending up to 400 yards on either side of the Whitchurch road with ground up to 500 yards deep at both ends of the lane (over which each side charged and countercharged the other as their opponents emerged from the lane's mouth) is considered to accommodate the battle.

The second combat most likely took place a mile from the first, to the north of the small village of Rowton. This is where Rowton Heath is marked on the first Ordnance Survey map. The same location could reasonably be used to represent the site of the second action. The remainder of the battlefield is too dispersed and is covered to too great an extent by modern Chester for a battlefield area to be considered for the Register. Behind the Royalist lines is a ruined 17th-century building reputed to have been used as a field hospital.

## Notes

1. Ormerod, George *History of Cheshire* (London 1882) II 780.
2. Whitaker, Harold *A Descriptive List of the printed Maps of Cheshire 1577-1900*. Chetham Society 106 New Series (1942).
3. Printed in Morris, Rupert H & Lawson, P H *The Siege of Chester 1643-1646* (Chester 1924) p117.
4. *The Old Series Ordnance Survey Maps of England and Wales. Volume VII North Central England* (Harry Margery, Lympne Castle, Kent)
5. Morris & Lawson *op. cit.* pp118-20.
6. Printed in *ibid.* pp113-116 under the title *A true Relation of the great Fight and Routing the Kings forces on Routon Heath*.
7. Extracted from *A more Exact Declaration of Chester's Enlargement after three years Bondage, set forth by Nathaniel Lancaster, Chaplain to the Cheshire Forces*. See *Cheshire Sheaf* 38 (1943) pp50-52.
8. Printed in T Carte's *A Collection of Original Letters and Papers found among the Duke of Ormonde's Papers* (2 vols London 1739) I 91-3.
9. Barratt, John 'The Battle of Rowton Heath, 1645' *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* LIV (1976) pp213-4.
10. Printed in George Lee Fenwick's *A History of the Ancient City of Chester from the earliest times* (Chester 1896) pp211-2.