

The Battle of Worcester

what could have happened?

The Battle of Worcester Society Papers – Spring 2024.

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Aim: To complement the other papers in this volume by considering alternate outcomes of the Battle of Worcester. Analysis based on two table top map exercises conducted by BOWS committee members.

Structure:

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5. What if King Charles had done this on the day?
 - a. Used the cavalry in his assault on Perry Hill.
 - b. Withdrawn his army into Wales.
 - c. Managed to break through towards London.
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Battle of Worcester Society Members taking part
BOWS Map Exercises (Mar 2020 & Oct 2023)

Section Drafts.

Introduction/Outline of the Battle.

1. The Battle of Worcester, fought on 3 September 1651, drew to an end the long and bloody conflict between opposing ideas about how the British Islands should be governed. At stake were the

vested interests of the Stuart royal family, the landed gentry that controlled much of rural England, the growing commercial guilds and a wide variety of influential towns and cities. Underpinning all of this were powerful religious dogmas that increasingly allowed little room for compromise or understanding.

2. One of the first skirmishes of the Civil War which resulted from all of these frictions was fought to the south of Worcester in September 1642 in an atmosphere of excitement and optimism, as recounted by Howard Robinson within this volume. By September 1651 the atmosphere was markedly different, with weariness across the nation from relentless casualties, deprivation and there seemed to be no end to the disruption and destruction of normal life. Any hope that Charles and his followers may have had when they marched south from Scotland must have long since evaporated as the surge of volunteers and community support that they had been hoping for failed to materialise. The reception at Worcester had been lukewarm at best, and the appearance of large parliamentary armies to block the routes onward to Gloucester or Oxford heralded the end of a slow and painful progress down the Severn Valley.
3. Opinions vary on whether Cromwell had deliberately shepherded the King so far from his base in Scotland to an area accessible to the militias and supplies from London and the Midlands. But there was no undue haste in the way the parliamentarians assembled their forces, whether for an expected siege or to try and storm the antiquated medieval defences of Worcester.
4. The battle fought in the fields and hedgerows around Worcester on 3 September 1651 does not have the glamour and popular acclaim of the large set piece battles of Edgehill, Naseby or Marston Moor. Perhaps because the disrupted, sporadic nature of the days fighting across many miles of countryside makes it harder to pin down on simple map boards, perhaps because there was no follow up manoeuvre, with instead the King skulking away into exile and his Scottish army herded in captivity and in many case permanent exile. It is also seen by some that the battle was a foregone conclusion, with the numbers, training, ground and most importantly morale all favouring Parliament. Whatever the reason, despite its critical outcome as the final battle of the Civil Wars the battle of Worcester is in need of further analysis.
5. This chapter will aim to build on the established narrative of the battle as laid out within this volume by other authors. It is based on two map exercises conducted by members of the Battle of Worcester Society (BOWS) that addressed why things happened the way they did in 1651, and if other, alternative, histories would have been possible. This was done using the sort of wargames used by generations of military staff college students and operational planning teams to examine plans in order to identify shortfalls, critical points in time and geography as well as force structures and mission assignments. After explaining how these wargames were conducted, a selection of counterfactual “what ifs” will be examined to see if the King ever had a realistic chance of beating Cromwell’s forces, or breaking out to gather support in Oxford or London. Finally, a number of recommended areas for further action will be identified.

BOWS Map Exercises (Mar 2020 & Oct 2023)

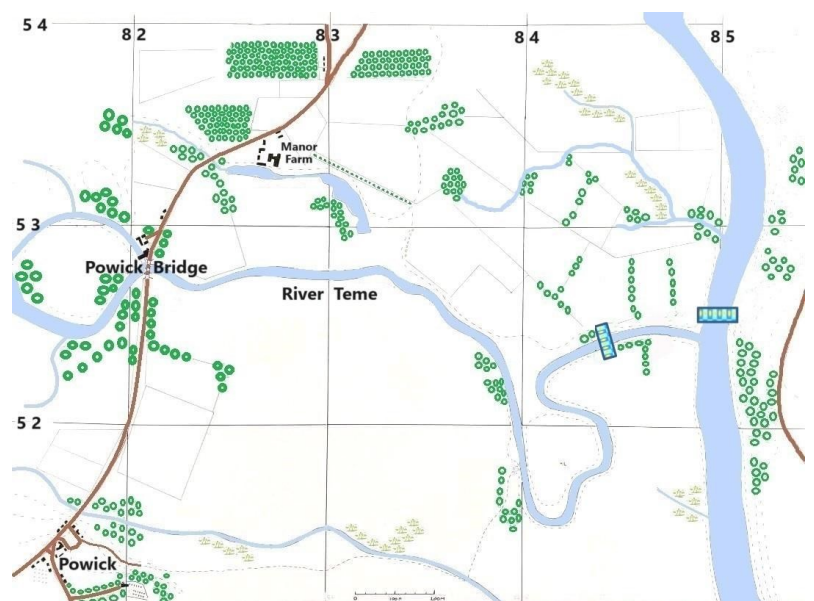
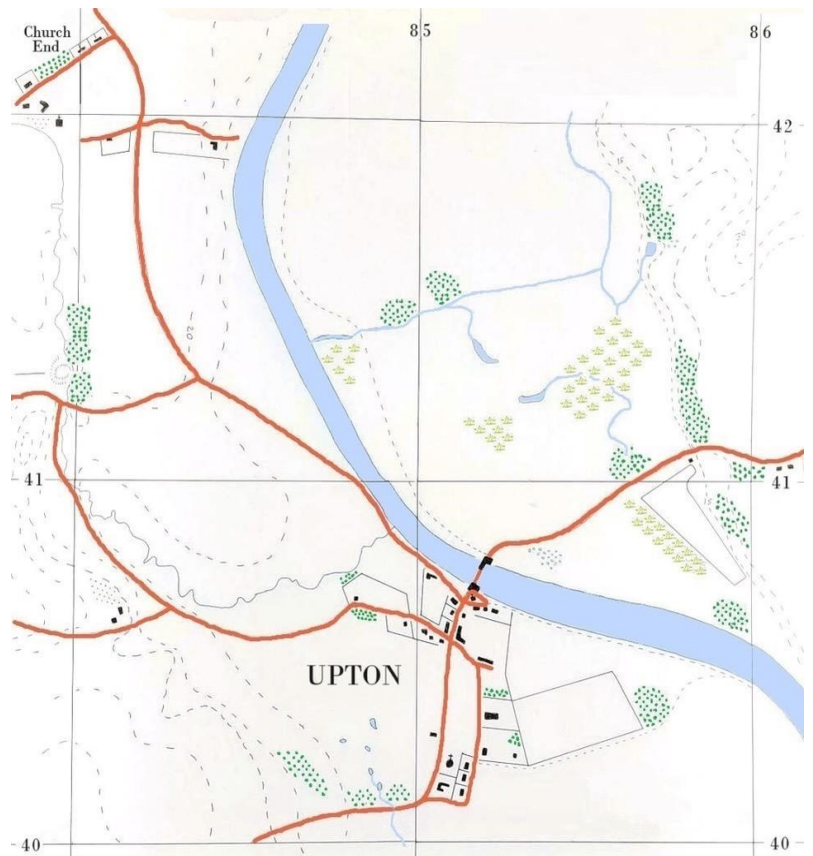
1. The first BOWS Map Exercise was held at the Commandery Museum in Worcester in March 2020 immediately prior to the first COVID lockdown. Two teams of committee members with varying knowledge of the Battle represented the Royalist and Parliamentary sides; both teams included experienced re-enactors who brought a wealth of knowledge on weaponry, tactics and orders of

battle. The game was umpired by the author of this paper, who has extensive experience of military operational planning with NATO as well as 6 years teaching at international staff colleges leading large multinational wargames.

1. The exercise was run over a series of 5 key timeslots, each consisting of an action phase by the side with the initiative, followed by a reaction from the opposition and finally a counteraction by the initiating team. This followed as far as possible the historical conduct of the battle, but tried to understand and explain how actions were constrained by time, geography and the limited knowledge of the participants on the day. Each timeslot ended with a discussion of the importance on the overall battle of the actions taken, and also how alternative actions at this stage could have played out.

2. The first timeslot examined the river crossing at Upton, followed by the contact engagement 6 days later at Powick Bridge. Particular emphasis was placed on the parliamentarian delay in following up the river crossing, and the value on sealing Worcester off from the Welsh hills to the West. Various views on Cromwell's intentions at this stage were discussed, but whether the plan was to gain ground for a close siege, install a remote cordon to isolate and contain Worcester, or to draw out the garrison into an open battle to the south-west of the city the effect was to focus attention on the early fighting well away from the city's defences.

3. The second main phase of the battle was played out on the water meadows between Powick and the river Severn.



This was where the famous bridge of boats came into play, and alternative ideas about how the bridge was established and what Cromwell was trying to achieve were explored.



4. Later timeslots looked at the King's sorties out of the city to attack the siege works east of Worcester, and how the two critical events of the battle played out. The first was the King's inability to follow up his initial success due to lack of reserves, and the failure of the Royalist cavalry to engage. The King's intentions at this point were examined, and alternative approaches to achieve those aims explored. Cromwell's ability to engage the Royalists as they were retiring back within the city walls rested on well placed, fresh reserves, who on the day managed to break into the city from the east and precipitate a Royalist collapse and the flight of the King. Some authors attribute this Parliament reserve to good planning (see Peter Gaunt in this volume), others to the delay imposed by trying to cross the bridge of boats, but whatever the cause this lack of reserves for the King, and the agile leadership and rapid deployment by Cromwell won the day.
5. The Map Exercise concluded with a lessons identified session as well as planning for follow on work (derailed by the COVID lockdowns).
6. A second exercise was conducted in October 2023 with some of the original players, but also many new BOWS committee members who brought fresh perspective and new ideas. The intention is to run similar events in the future with a focus on the wider BOWS membership who may not have the depth of knowledge of the battle, so the focus in future events will move from exploration to education.

Value of Counterfactual history?

1. Real historians don't do counterfactuals. Well maybe not, but everybody else does. At the personal level hardly a day passes without each of us thinking "what if I had said that" or "I wonder what would have happened if I had not done that". Larger, more important turning points in history also intrigue "what if President Kennedy had survived that bullet in Dallas?" or "how would history have evolved if the Romans had invented the steam engine?" Often these flights of fantasy are harmless distractions, but they can also be important learning vehicles for many professions from international footballers to police forensic investigators. There is also no need to reach a definitive agreement; usually the debate is more important than the conclusion. As Fredrick Lodgevall said when speculating about American actions in Vietnam "Consensus is usually elusive in counterfactual exercises".
2. In the military education mentioned earlier, designing and war gaming multiple courses of action is an essential part of building a plan. Only by comparing the strengths and weaknesses of alternate

approaches can the optimum plan be constructed. In everyday life we make similar comparisons when we buy a new house, car or even a pair of shoes. So in order to understand why something actually happened it is often useful to consider alternatives to draw out if the result of, for example the Battle of Worcester, was indeed a foregone conclusion.

3. The main problem with a counterfactual study is in limiting the possible courses of action to those that were viable at the time, and are sufficiently different to illuminate new thoughts. Once again drawing on NATO planning doctrine each course of action to be considered must meet all of the following tests:
 - a. Suitability – will it accomplish the task?
 - b. Acceptability – do the benefits outweigh the costs?
 - c. Feasibility – is it possible in this situation?
 - d. Exclusivity – it is sufficiently different from the other COA?
 - e. Completeness – does it address the who, what, when, where, why and how?
 - f. Compliance – does it comply with doctrine? (i.e. is this the way Charles or Cromwell operated in 1651?)
4. In military planning the aim is to devise a plan that meets the objective in the shortest time, at the lowest cost. It also allows shortcomings in capabilities, actions or manoeuvre to be seen early enough for correction. And critically it harmonises the thinking of the staff from the commander downwards, so that when things go wrong later everybody is at least working from the same start point. Think of sports teams discussing options on a white board before a match.
5. So when the Battle of Worcester Society committee spent a day in examining the actions of both sides on 3rd September 1651, perhaps the most important part was not consideration of what did happen, but talking through the alternatives that were either missed or rejected on the day, and what might have been the outcome if those actions had been taken.

What if Cromwell had done this on the day:

1. Failed in the crossing of the River Severn at Upton.

The first action examined was the crossing of the river Severn at dawn on the 28th of September by a small party of dismounted dragoons who managed to cross a narrow plank which had been left for locals to cross where the main bridge had been dismantled. Upton is 10 miles south of Worcester and the only crossing on this stretch of the river. By nightfall on the 28th a sizable Parliamentarian force was across the river and the Royalist defenders under Massey had been pushed back towards Worcester. The obvious outcome of this crossing was that it forced Charles to divide his attention and forces between the main siege lines to the east of Worcester, but also to the threat of an assault up the west bank of the Severn. But from Cromwell's perspective this crossing also allowed him to secure both banks of the river for his bridge of boats and deny the Scottish under Montgomerie the ability to concentrate force against this crossing as they had to contend with severe pressure from Fleetwood against the Powick bridge over the Teme, one mile upstream to the west. The other significant advantage to Cromwell opened by the Upton crossing was the ability to dispatch mounted patrols out towards Wales and detect, and if possible prevent, any Royalist reinforcements closing from this direction. The long delay between the Upton crossing and the final Parliamentarian attacks on 3rd September could be for any number of

tactical or logistic reasons, but the idea that Cromwell was waiting for the anniversary of his victory at Dunbar a year earlier is indeed compelling.

3. Siege rather than assault.

It appears from his actions that Cromwell had intended to surround Worcester, isolate it from supply and reinforcement and then bombard it with the limited artillery available to him. With no prospect of reinforcement or relief it is unlikely if the Royalist Scottish army could have held out for long under these circumstances and Charles would have had to try to either break out, probably into the Welsh marches to the West, or attempt to negotiate a settlement. There was little incentive for Cromwell to accept anything other than total capitulation of the Scottish army, and custody of Charles, so an attempted breakout was the most likely outcome, probably before the siege lines could be closed. This accounts for the tenacity of the Royalist defence of Powick bridge, the importance of the Upton crossing and the early identification by Cromwell of the need for his bridging train. Throughout his campaigns in England, Scotland and later in Ireland Cromwell showed an aversion to pursuing an enemy into broken mountainous terrain (see Peter Gaunt in this volume), therefore in closing the ring around Worcester the critical ground would be the open west bank of the Severn near St John's. The stream of reinforcements coming up over the Cotswolds could have filled the siege lines on the hills to the east of Worcester, so the force closing up from Upton, and the reinforcements crossing the bridge of boats were probably all intended to secure and hold this western river line. An assault on the city over the bridge from the west would have been a very high risk venture, but merely holding this line, anchored on St John's but probably with distant concentric lines further away from the river would have been sufficient. Cromwell's dispositions were already strong to the south and east, but the main routes north towards Shrewsbury were thinly picketed, and this was the route along which the King, and many of his troops, eventually escaped after the battle. It is a sound military principle to allow your enemy an escape route to discourage a fight to the death, and Cromwell may have been trying to force Charles out of Worcester and onto the open road where he could be defeated in detail, as indeed happened to almost all the Royalist rabble that tried to escape north. So, in summary, both sides would have seen that the King's cause was lost if a close investment of Worcester was established, and the King could not afford to be locked up within the city walls. For that reason it was critical for Cromwell to prevent Charles escaping into Wales, and an invitation to break out to the north or north-east may have been a deliberate ploy.

3. Committed more force across onto the Powick meadows.

Late in the afternoon of the battle King Charles led an attack out of the city directly into the defence lines along the low, wooded hills to the east of the city. His reasons for doing this have been debated ever since. Some claim he was trying to break out and escape with a small part of his force towards Oxford and London. But these roads were swarming with Parliament militias and reserves still marching towards Worcester, and the experience of almost universal hostility shown to Charles by the English population on his long march south from Scotland could not have inspired hope that he could gather significant forces from the rural counties towards London. Others assert that with ever increasing numbers of Cromwell's troops crossing onto the Powick meadows there was an opportunity to break into the siege lines, and seize or spike the Royalist artillery. Indeed this nearly happened, and only the lack of tactical reserves failed Charles at this point. But as his attack culminated, and he started to withdraw back into the city through the Sidbury gate a Parliamentary force struck the disordered Royalists in their southern

flank, broke up their formations, captured Fort Royal and its guns, and eventually forced their way through the open gates into the city. What was this force that appeared from the south at the critical moment? Some claim that Cromwell had positioned a mixed force of infantry and cavalry hidden in the woods and folds of land specifically to exploit such a situation. Others have written that troops were withdrawn back from Powick meadows for this purpose, while others think that the inevitable delay caused by crossing over a narrow, fragile bridge of boats left many troops queued up on the heights above the crossing. From there it is less than a two mile (40 minute) march up the main Gloucester road to Sidbury Gate. What is certain is that by this stage the lower level commanders in Cromwell's army were trained and expected to use their initiative in what modern armies call mission command. So when reports of the King's sortie out of Worcester were received at about 4pm, it is likely that those forces either in reserve to the SE or previously assigned to cross the bridge of boats all turned and started moving towards the city. Without this timely intervention it is likely that the King's force would have re-entered the city largely intact. However, by this stage the battle towards St John's was breaking into a rout, and the overall outcome may have been delayed, but not changed. If the fall of the city could have been delayed until darkness had fallen more Royalists may have escaped, but the fate of those who did actually get away does not give much hope that many others could have reached safety or home.

What if King Charles had done this on the day:

1. Used Leslie's cavalry reserve in his assault on Perry Wood.

The late afternoon assault by the King on the siege lines to the east of Worcester was described above, and for a while it looked as if the Royalist gamble may have paid off. But the relatively small force available for offensive action, and the lack of reserves meant that when the attack stalled there was no second echelon to sustain the momentum. The most common question asked about this battle is "why did Leslie's cavalry not engage". The positioning of this force on the Pitchcroft open ground north of the city, where the present day race course is located, looked like the ideal place to station a potent mobile strike force. Naturally it would have had trouble transiting through the narrow streets of the medieval city, but given sufficient warning time it could have deployed out over the Severn Bridge and supported the Scots on the Powick meadows, it could also have swung around the city and attacked a Parliament assault from the east, and of course it could, and perhaps should, have been an integral part of the King's sortie in the late afternoon. Finally it was ideally placed to cover a fighting withdrawal to the north if that became necessary. However, it was not as simple as that, the terrain between Pitchcroft and Fort Royal was low lying, swampy ground with small market gardens and orchards. Roads and tracks, probably edged by thick hedgerows and tree lines, radiated out from Worcester crossing Leslie's line of advance. But this could all have been foreseen several days in advance, and a competent commander would have planned around these restrictions. There has also been much discussion about Leslie's state of mind by this stage in the battle – did he lack commitment to the cause, especially with discouraging reports coming in across the river, and presumably at least vague intelligence of sizeable Parliament reserves to the south of Sidbury Gate? But would Leslie's force have been decisive if he had been given sufficient warning of the King's sortie, and been in position to burst into the wavering siege lines at the right moment? Quite possibly it would, and a simple time/space/force analysis showed that it would have allowed the King to either reorient his troops to meet the threat from the south, or if his intention had indeed been to break out this mobile cavalry force would have been the ideal formation to take with him.

2. Managed to break out towards London.

We have already noted that the King did not have a clear run to Oxford and London because of streams of enemy militia moving up the few main roads towards him. Similarly the roads south towards Gloucester and Bristol would be blocked due to the proximity to the bulk of Cromwell's army. To the north-east the Cotswold escarpment and the broken difficult ground towards Stratford would not be impassible, but with the sun setting would have invited a dispersion of the troops as they tried to make their way across unfamiliar country in the dark pursued by Cromwell's disciplined and motivated troopers. Realistically this only left an escape to the north into the unfriendly counties already raised against Charles after his transit south over the past weeks.

3. Withdrawn his army into Wales.

Perhaps Charles's best option would have been to conduct an ordered withdrawal away from Cromwell into the Welsh hills. This may have preserved some semblance of a coherent army, but the force that arrived in Worcester on the 23rd of August was already tired, hungry and dispirited. A further march away from sources of supply pursued by Cromwell's ever growing hoard would not have helped the poor morale of Charles's army, and would probably have led to further angry debate among the already disjointed Royalist commanders. Some sources do talk about small parties of Royalist reinforcements descending out of Wales to join the King, so it is possible that he may have met some welcoming communities, but the further he moved from the fertile Severn Valley the harder it would have been to feed and support the army. Probably the best that could have been hoped from this course of action would have been for the king to escape to the Continent, and some, but not many of his Scottish allies to have made it home.

Is there any way the Royalists could have won the day?

1. The advantage in numbers that Parliament enjoyed at Worcester is compounded by the quality hidden in those raw figures. The images of the untrained, poorly equipped militias of 1642 were not reflected in the units that marched across the Cotswolds in 1651. Many, if not most of their number would now be made up of seasoned veterans of the hard fought previous campaigns. The leadership at all levels would have been confident of their own tactical skills and that of their comrades and commanders. While this would also be true of the Scottish army, the major difference is in the intangibles: the belief in their cause, their resolve to defend their own lands rather than the Scottish doubt in why they were supporting an untrustworthy King so far from home, and in the logistic and psychological support of the local communities. In a fair fight with even numbers the advantage would seem to always lie with Cromwell. With Cromwell's additional advantage of numbers, the initiative to direct the fight and the support of competent, loyal but independent commanders it is hard to see how Charles could prevail. He did have some significant advantages in operating on internal lines, with a secure base in the middle of the day's operations and the ability to shift forces from one action to another. Leslie's cavalry reserve at Pitchcroft was a potentially decisive factor, and during the morning at least Charles had the option of a fighting withdrawal to the west. However, to make use of all of these advantages needed experienced, coordinated and motivated leadership. Most reports speak highly of Charles behavior, and the Scots on Powick meadows put up a creditable fight. But the dynamic, imaginative maneuver on a confused and congested battlefield was beyond the young King and his squabbling subordinates. Maybe a Wellington or Marlborough with a coherent, balanced force could have won this day, but

it is hard to see how Charles could prevail with the tools he had available to him.

- The following is a list of the current NATO principles of operations from Allied Joint Doctrine in AJP-5. After the previous discussion I will let the reader fill in the score cards for both sides on 3rd September 1651:

Principle	King Charles	Cromwell	Advantage
unity of effort			
concentration of force			
economy of effort			
freedom of action			
definition of objectives			
flexibility			
initiative			
offensive spirit			
surprise			
security			
simplicity			
maintenance of morale			

If King Charles had won on the day would it have made any difference?

- Even a resounding win for the King on 3 September 1651 would have left him deep in hostile territory with a depleted force that could only expect, at best, small reinforcement, while the Parliamentarians could expect a steady flow of fresh units coming up the Oxford road and down from the Midlands. In addition to troops, Parliament also had a deep pool of seasoned, competent field commanders. So even if Cromwell had been wounded and unable to lead a pursuit of Charles, or an almost inevitable follow on battle, it is likely that this would have proved as stiff a challenge as Worcester proved.
- However, time and again in history we see a major battlefield victory swinging the initiative to the victor by convincing uncommitted players to show their hand. How many of the commanders and troops who had supported Charles's father would have rallied to the colours again following a Royalist victory at Worcester is pure conjecture. The loyalty of the Scots had also been badly shaken following a series of events over the previous month where Charles had shown his commitment to the religious promises he had made back in Scotland was in serious doubt. The command struggles that had simmered before Worcester where English generals had tried to replace Leslie and Hamilton would also have undermined the resolve of the Scots. Again how much this would have balanced or outweighed the boost of a Royalist victory at Worcester is uncertain.
- The final word goes to Roger Fairman, long standing BOWS committee member and Civil War re-enactor, who answered the question of "at what point was the Battle of Worcester lost to the Crown". He answered that "the Battle of Worcester was lost at Dunbar on 3 September 1650".

Future Battle of Worcester Society Map Exercises

1. It is hoped to continue running these map exercises into the future, but for the benefit of different audiences. Firstly it is hoped that, given sufficient interest, half day events could be run for the wider membership of the Battle of Worcester Society, to enhance the understanding of the battle, and also benefit from wider perspectives. Another possibility is to run events for other local societies, schools etc. to improve knowledge of this key event in the local area. Both of these options would need careful thought about how to cater for the inevitable limited technical and historical background of the players. A combined wargame/presentation format is under consideration, and the option of a series of smaller events looking at only one part of the battle may be more palatable? And finally, the BOWS committee is also interested in examining other battles or campaigns, but would need support from sister societies in an exchange of ideas, materials and expertise.