

= Battle of Alton =

The Battle of Alton (also Storm of Alton) , of the First English Civil War , took place on 13 December 1643 in the town of Alton , Hampshire , England . There , Parliamentary forces serving under Sir William Waller led a successful surprise attack on a winter garrison of Royalist infantry and cavalry serving under the Earl of Crawford . In the context of the First English Civil War , the Battle of Alton was the first decisive defeat of Sir Ralph Hopton , leader of Royalist forces in the south , and the event had a significant psychological effect on him as commander . More important to Hopton was the loss of men , however , as he was already short @-@ handed in much @-@ needed infantry . The successful Parliamentarians were able , after their victory , to attack and successfully besiege Arundel , a larger and more formidable Royalist outpost in the south of England .

At dawn on the 13th , as Waller 's army approached Alton , Crawford fled with the cavalry to Winchester , leaving Colonel Richardus Boles to defend Alton with only the infantry . Outnumbered and overpowered , Boles 's men were soon forced to seek refuge in the Church of St Lawrence , where they made a desperate last stand . Boles was killed , along with most of his remaining men . The Parliamentarians won a clear victory , losing only a few men and taking many prisoners .

Boles 's fight is also notable for its demonstrated drama and heroism . Stories boast of Boles , who is said to have killed a number of his enemies before falling himself . The battle of Alton is known as one of the " most savage encounters " of the English Civil War . Indeed , musket holes from this fierce fight can still be seen in the south door to the church and inside , where so many cornered men were killed and captured . The Battle of Alton was notably the first battle in the English Civil War to use leather guns , employed effectively by Waller before and during the battle proper .

= = Background = =

On 13 September 1643 , English Parliament ordered Major General William Waller to muster forces for the " protection " of Hampshire County . In November , he was given control of forces stationed in Farnham , a major Parliamentary staging ground , in order to take control of Kent , Surrey , Sussex and Hampshire . These forces were supplemented by the Red Regiment (from Westminster) and the Green and Yellow regiments (from London) . Also at Waller 's disposal were a personal regiment of foot soldiers and surviving cavalry from the Battle of Roundway Down .

Waller marched from Farnham for Odiham and Alton , intending to occupy these towns while gradually approaching his objective , Basing . While not of great strategic importance , Basing 's proximity to the main road between London , Salisbury , and Winchester made it worthy of attention . Marching toward Alton , Waller halted at Bentley Green on 3 November , where he determined his capabilities . He marched further that day , but later retreated to Farnham . On 2 November , Waller attacked one hundred men of Bennett 's at Alton . From 7 ? 9 November , Waller laid siege to Basing House , but withdrew to Basingstoke in failure , with his soldiers near mutiny from poor weather conditions . He tried again on the night of 11 November , but retreated to Farnham to await Hopton 's army .

Hopton arrived on 27 November , given by King Charles 1 @,@ 580 horse , but only around 2 @,@ 000 conscripted infantry and 500 troops recently returned from fighting in Munster , Ireland . Hopton had been ordered in late September to make secure Dorset , Wiltshire and Hampshire , and to push as far as possible toward London . Toward this end , Hopton spread his men across Hampshire County , quartering them for the winter at Winchester , Alresford , Petersfield and Alton . He did so to alleviate the burden on any one town , and because winter was approaching quickly . However , this left his army vulnerable . Hopton placed Crawford in charge of Alton , and on 1 December Crawford began to fortify the small town as quickly as he could . Crawford had at his disposal one cavalry regiment and one infantry regiment , though his exact number of men is unknown ; it was likely around 1 @,@ 000 .

= = Prelude = =

During the week prior to the Battle of Alton , Waller scouted the town and planned his attack . He confided his intent to only a few of his senior men , maintaining secrecy . Waller did make another raid on the evening of 9 December , where a small party of his forces struck at Crawford 's lodging but fell back after the minor attack . During the morning hours of 12 December , Crawford sent a missive to Farnham , requesting of Waller that he be sent a " runlet of sack " , promising an ox in exchange . When the wine was sent , Crawford refused to send the ox , challenging Waller to fetch it himself .

Reverend G.N. Godwin 's Civil War in Hampshire (1882)

During this exchange , Waller , eager to repair his reputation after Roundway Down , promptly decided to attack Alton , the nearest Royalist outpost to Farnham and only ten miles away . According to the Mercurius Aulicus , a contemporary publication , Crawford was watching only the main road from Farnham at this time .

= = Battle = =

Waller mustered his men in Farnham Park near 10 : 30 p.m. , on 12 December . At around midnight , 5 @,@ 000 of Waller 's men marched west from Farnham toward Basing House . The Parliamentarians marched about two miles in this direction (in order to confuse Royalist scouts) , until around 1 : 00 a.m. , before abruptly turning south toward Alton . The march was quick and quiet , owing to a long frost which had hardened the roads and Waller 's judicious use of wooded areas . Also helpful in Waller 's advance was his use of leather guns , here employed for the first time in the English Civil War . Unlike heavier artillery , a leather gun could be led by a single horse , transported efficiently over difficult terrain , and still be an effective tool for bombardment .

Waller 's forces reached the western side of Alton at around 9 : 00 a.m. , capturing six of Crawford 's sentries posted in the north . One Royalist sentry , however , managed to raise the alarm just before dawn , leading Crawford and his horse to quit Alton and head for Winchester at a gallop , as Waller approached the town . It is reported that they had promised the remaining infantry men that they would return soon with reinforcements . Initially , Crawford and his cavalry attempted to flee from the eastern border of Alton , but were routed back into town and to the south (heading directly for Winchester) by Parliamentary horse . The fleeing Royalists were chased for a half @-@ mile by Waller 's heavy cavalry (these under Sir Arthur Haslerig and nicknamed the " Lobsters ") , losing a few men and some number of horses . Haslerig , forfeiting pursuit , guarded the entrances to the town .

Meanwhile , Boles 's men concentrated to the north @-@ west corner of town , before the Church of St Lawrence . A regiment of Waller 's infantry , five companies of Haslerig 's , and five companies of Kentish Men attacked Alton from the north and north @-@ west . The Royalist infantry , however , took effective cover inside buildings , out of which they fired quickly ; they particularly favoured a large brick house near the church . This house , however , was soon abandoned as Waller 's artillery , positioned at the foot of the hill to the west , fired upon it , forcing these defenders to retreat to the church . The Parliamentary regiments from London and four companies from Farnham Castle descended the hill : Waller 's Red Regiment attacked a lunette and breastwork which the Royalists had built and which they were using as an effective fortification . The Green Regiment flanked the Royalists which were behind these fortifications forcing them out , while marching through town under the cover of smoke from a thatch house which they had set on fire . Soon after , the rest of Waller 's men entered the town en masse , flying their colours and pushing Boles 's men back to the Church of St Lawrence . From the church and nearby fortifications (including a large earthwork on its north side) , the Royalists held their ground for two hours . The Royalists fired from the windows of the church , and employed a scaffolding inside the church proper to fire from greater heights .

Eventually , the Parliamentarians forced the Royalists to abandon the south @-@ east part of the wall around the church . However , since the retreating men had left their muskets sticking up , the Parliamentarians were temporarily unaware that the Royalists had left . After some time it was concluded that the defenders had gone , and the Parliamentary army promptly attacked the

churchyard , driving the last of Boles 's men into the church itself . Waller 's forces threw hand grenades into the windows while working to enter the church themselves . Inside the building , Boles declared he would , " run his sword through him which first called for quarter . " There had been no time for the Royalists to barricade the church doors , and the Parliamentarians soon managed to gain entry . Inside , the Royalists shot from behind a jury @-@ rigged breastwork of dead horses . Some of Boles 's men were killed ; other surrendered . Boles did not give up , and he killed as many as seven men before being killed himself . With Boles killed , all but a few of the Royalists requested quarter .

Inscribed in Boles 's honour was this epitaph :

Alton will tell you of that famous Fight

Which ys man made , and bade this world good @-@ night .

His Vertious Life fear 'd not Mortality ,

His body must , his Vertues cannot die ,

Because his Bloud was there so nobly spent ,

This is his Tombe ; that Church his Monument .

Ricardus Boles , Wiltoniensis in Art . Mag .

Composuit Posuitque Dolens . An . Domi 1679 .

= = Aftermath = =

During and after the battle , Waller captured at least 500 men , around 100 of these re @-@ enlisting with him . Additionally , more than 100 Royalist soldiers were killed . Together , the men lost represented nearly half of Hopton 's infantry forces in the south . Waller , on the other hand , lost around ten men and gained much reputation for his success . Waller put his prisoners to work dragging the horse carcasses from the church , dismantling the scaffoldings inside , and burying their fallen comrades near the northern wall of the building . All of the captured men were then marched to Farnham tied together in pairs .

Waller ordered his men to demolish the town 's fortifications , and had survivors that did not re @-@ enlist paraded through the streets of London to mark his victory . Crawford 's hat , cloak and gifted wine were all left behind in Alton . From then on , it was said that Crawford , in fleeing , " left his sack at Alton " . King Charles , upon hearing of Boles 's death , called for a mourning scarf , lamenting at the loss of what he considered to be one of " the best Commanders in this Kingdome " . In the following weeks , letters were sent from Crawford and Hopton to Waller :

Sir , your servant , Crawford

Winton , 16 December . Ralf Hopton .

Hopton was severely depressed by his defeat at Alton , more than seemed appropriate given its military import . On the Parliamentary side , the morale boost enjoyed by Waller was significant , and on 15 December , the House of Commons of England ordered Sir Arthur Haslerig and Sir Gilbert Gerard to draft a letter to Waller commending him for his success . The Parliamentary victory at the Battle of Alton allowed Waller to advance south @-@ east , and upon Arundel where he began a successful siege on the Royalists garrisoned there . Hopton was unable to break the siege with his few remaining foot soldiers , and the 1 @,@ 000 horse he received from Oxford were unhelpful . After the Siege of Arundel , both armies were forced to retire for the winter due to the harsh weather .