

NEWSLETTER

THE FRIENDS OF

THE SOLDIERS OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE MUSEUM



The memorial at Barber's Bridge, Rudford, to Lord Herbert's Welsh infantry killed in the actions around Highnam, March 1643

SPRING 2023

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT



Welcome to our spring edition of the newsletter. The arrival of spring means summer cannot be far away and with that thoughts turn to our summer reception. This year it will be at Highnam Court, by kind permission of its owner Mr Roger Head. The venues for our summer reception often have historic and military associations, but this is the first occasion, I believe, when we will be at the site of an actual battle, in this case the battle of Highnam in March 1643. The battle was one of those innumerable engagements that characterised the manoeuvring between the sides in the interludes between the major battles, but in addition Highnam formed part of a chain of events ultimately leading to the siege of Gloucester which was a turning point in the Civil War. An account of the battle and its significant aftermath is one of the articles in this edition.

The other lead article is by Sir Henry Elwes and is the concluding story of his father's service in WWII with the Scots Guards. The article, amongst other things, reminds us that after Montgomery's great victory at El Alemain there was still much hard and deadly fighting before the final surrender of Axis forces in North Africa.

We were greatly saddened to learn of the loss of Carolyn, Lady Elwes, shortly before Christmas. She was a wonderful support to Sir Henry in his many roles, as well as a leading figure in her own right of many county organisations and causes. She was a great supporter of the Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum and the Friends, and she will be missed. Our condolences go to Sir Henry. During the winter we also lost Major General Paul Stevenson, a long standing member of the Friends. We send also our condolences to Mrs Stevenson and the family.

In this edition Matthew Holden, our Museum Director, brings us up to date with progress at the Museum with news of visitor numbers picking up, an energetic half term and the prospect of a summer of exciting talks and events.

This year the RGHA will unfortunately not be able to host lunch at the Badminton Horse Trials because there is too much uncertainty around staffing and conflicting events. We hope that this will not cause too much disappointment.

Looking further ahead, our Chavenage event this year will be given by historian and broadcaster Jonathan Dimbleby, who will be focusing on his recent study of Hitler's invasion of Russia, Operation Barbarossa. Please make a date in your diary.

Finally, we are seeking to extend the use of electronic communications, thereby reducing overheads and increasing our contributions to the Museum. Please see the letter forwarded with this edition.

Dr Tim Brain OBE QPM

MUSEUM DIRECTOR'S REPORT

I believe it has been well communicated now that I think the museum needs to change direction somewhat. We are looking to broaden our audience and really appeal to families and young children. Sharing the incredible history of our two storied Regiments with the youth is what will give the museum longevity into the far distant future.

The recent February half term was a real litmus test for the museum and I was incredibly nervous in the build up! Although it takes a good three years to see fruition from changing your audience it would have been nice to see some small success. Luckily, I am pleased to report that we had a fantastic week. We welcomed over 350 visitors throughout the week and each day we more than doubled the amount of money through the till that the museum requires to break even. If we can do this every school holiday the museum will be well on its way to securing its future.

On the same front it has been a good time for the museum concerning school visits. We welcomed more schools to the museum during the Autumn term than the entire last three years combined. Of course, one must take the pandemic into account but these are still very positive figures. Ultimately though I think there is still a huge amount more we can be doing on this front. WWI in particular will always be on the curriculum and what better place for schools to come and learn about this than our museum? So, if anyone reading this has connections to your local school please do give us a plug!

All museums across the sector continue to struggle post-pandemic. 11 per cent of micro museums (those with under 100,000 visitor per year) have yet to even open their doors again which is a tragedy. Visitor figures amongst micro museums remain 30 per cent down on pre-pandemic levels. So, I am pleased to report that at the time of writing we are currently at 102 per cent of our predicted visitor numbers for the year.

As always, I must mention our exceptional volunteer team. We could not operate the museum without them and they undertake a broad range of activities to contribute to our success. One thing I think we excel at is appealing to younger volunteers. By its very nature volunteering obviously appeals more to an older generation who might have more free time or want to give back to the community.

At the museum however just under 50 per cent of our volunteers are under the age of 21. Every other museum I have worked at would kill for statistics like this. It is not just young men with an interest in the military either. A majority of our younger volunteers are young women looking to pursue a career in heritage which is fantastic.

Finally, I would like to use this opportunity to thank all of the Friends for their support of the museum in my first year. In particular they have financially backed a much need new alarm system and funded picnic benches outside of the museum which has nearly tripled the café footprint. As always if anyone has any questions or concerns (or praise!) for what is happening at the museum please do not hesitate to get in contact with me. My email address is below.

Matthew Holden

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JOHN ELWES OF COLESBOURNE

Part 2: Back to Sand Again

Sir Henry Elwes KCVO KStJ JP DL



Figure 1: Major John Elwes MC 1906-43. H Elwes collection.

Much has already been written about the North Africa campaign and these notes mostly refer to the part played by John Elwes in 1942-43 when he joined the 2nd Battalion as Second in Command at the end of May.

Up until that time, the Allies had driven the Axis forces all the way back to western Cyrenaica three hundred miles west of the Egyptian border and to the south of Benghazi. There had been many battles on the way between the coast and the desert and Qattara Depression, an impassable quicksand area 60ft below sea level and only suitable for camels.

Finally, Rommel started to drive the Allies all the way back to Gazala in early 1942, to where the Allies had set up minefields running 200 miles west of Tobruk from the coast as far as Bir Hakeim and had formed strong defensive 'boxes' around Knightsbridge with Rigel Ridge about five miles to the north. There had then been a pause for a while and the Regiment was able to take a few days' rest on the coast and were visited by the Colonel, HRH The Duke of Gloucester, to celebrate their tercentenary since formation, and were joined by John Elwes and other new officers and guardsmen.

The Regiment then returned to take up position on Rigel Ridge with John Elwes as Second in Command to Col. M D Erskine and part of the 201st Brigade. It wasn't long before the Axis broke through on two fronts with the Italians breaching the minefields to the west and the Germans coming from the south around Bir Hakeim where 21st Panzer tanks headed straight for the Guards' positions on Rigel Ridge. Fighting was intensive for two weeks in the area called the Cauldron and then Rigel Ridge where the Scots Guards lost 11 officers and 240 men and the Coldstream 15 officers and 180 men. Prisoners being taken back through the enemy lines were shelled unknowingly by our own 25-pounders for a long period. For the battle, the Scots Guards had not been trained in the six-pounder antitank gun, which is not as easy as the older two-pounder.

The loss was described as 'the greatest loss ever suffered by the British Army against a European force'. Rommel in his diary described the two regiments as 'the living embodiment of the virtues of courage and tenacity of the Brigade'. The loss of Tobruk followed soon after, and he was then promoted to Field Marshal while the remains of the two regiments were formed into a composite battalion and withdrawn to Syria to reform and retrain a new intake. Meanwhile, Rommel took advantage of the disarray and took El Alamein for the first time before proper defensive positions could be created, even though our own air support had been good.

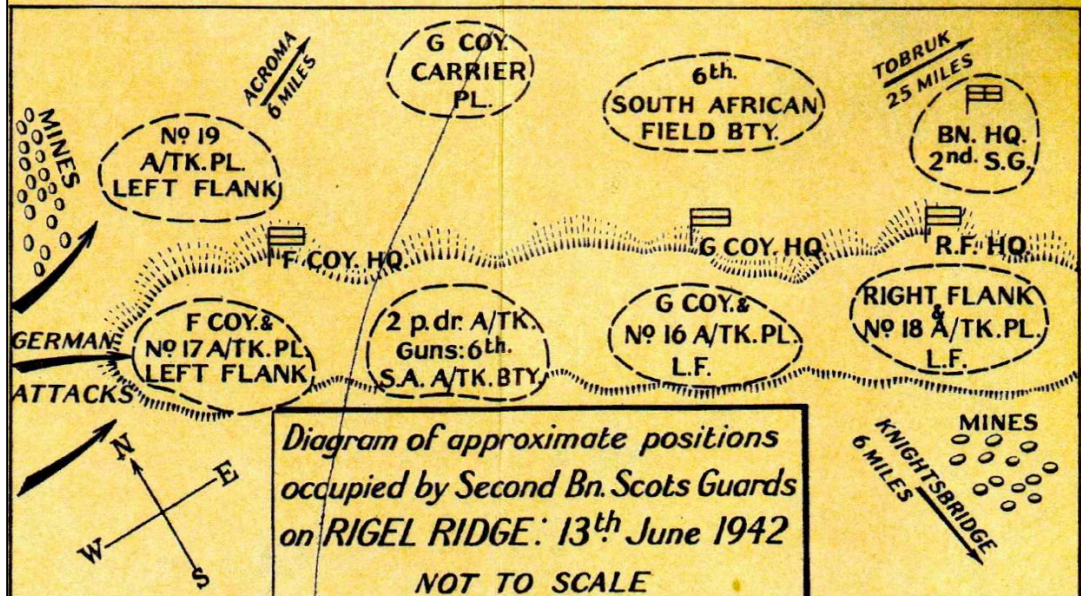
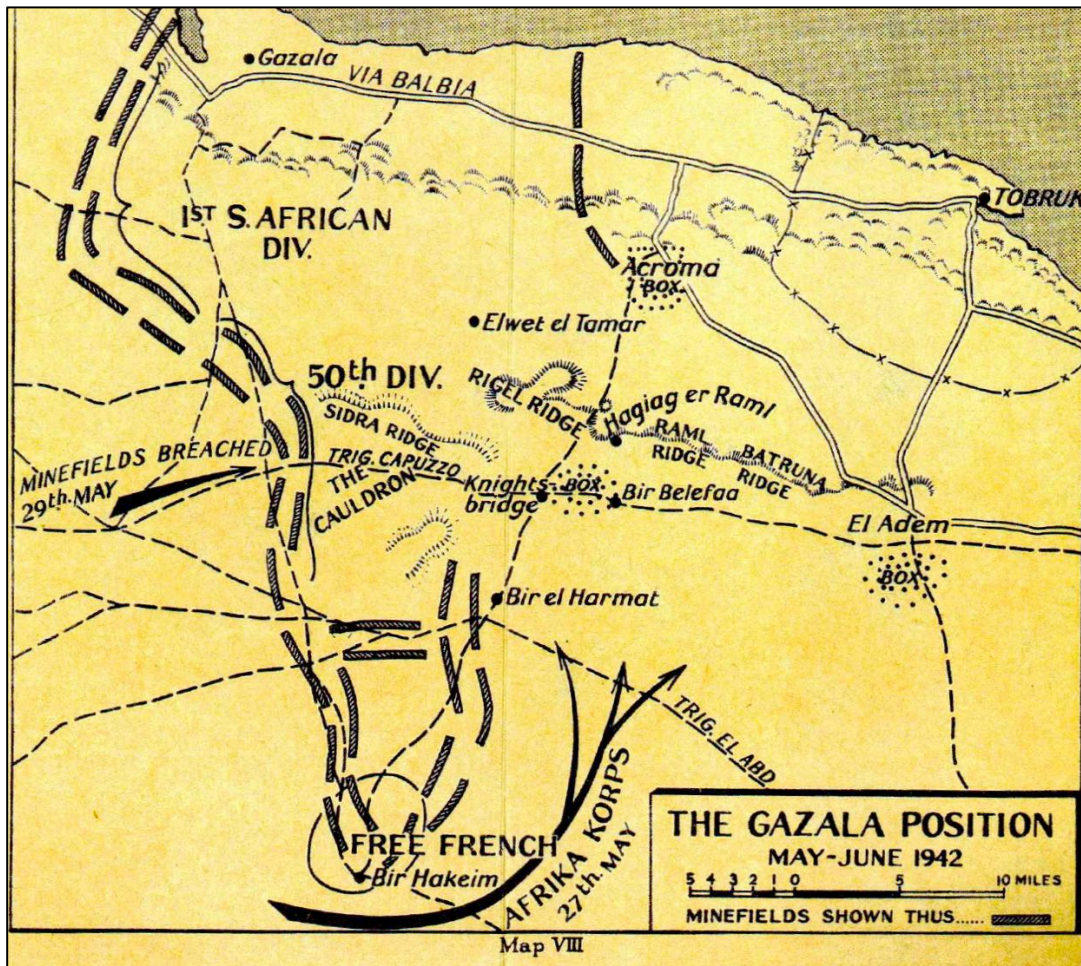


Figure 1: The battle for Rigel Ridge June 1942 (by kind permission of Scots Guards Headquarters).

Montgomery was then appointed to take control from Auchinleck and immediately called for no further withdrawal. He rearmed the British force and when ready, retook El Alamein in October, which became the turning point of the African Campaign. Rommel was gradually driven back over the next three months all the way to Tunisia, with many battles on the way, during which his troops suffered serious bad health (dysentery) and lack of fuel and supplies of

tanks as the British Navy destroyed supply vessels and harbours. On the other hand, British medical services were considered to be much better, but flies were a serious problem for all troops.

By the end of January 1943, the Scots Guards were retrained and ready for battle again, and an advance party was formed with vehicles loaded with many jerry cans of fuel and one of red wine. They set off from Damascus for the 2,200-mile journey to Tunisia with John Elwes in command, and with 2nd Lieutenant Peter Gibbs (who later married Audrey Wills of Miserden) as junior ensign. Anxious to show Peter the earlier battlefield at Rigel Ridge, they diverted on the way and found the litter of battle still in place, mess tins, weapons and cap badges etc. as well as used ammunition. They then mostly followed the coast roads and witnessed large numbers of destroyed tanks and vehicles and after 28 days reached Tunisia with the loss of only two or three vehicles on mines, and after allowing a day or two for rest and repairs. It must have been quite an adventure and they soon met up with the Battalion again.

By this time Montgomery had set his sight on the Mareth line, an old French fortified line across Tunisia. The American 1st Army had come in from the Atlantic but had a very bad battle at Kasserine and lost 150 tanks and a lot of prisoners. Rommel then set up another position on the lower ground to the west of Medenine in front of the dominant hill, Tajera Kbir, facing 501st Brigade once more. The Allies expected an attack on 4 or 5 March but nothing happened until early morning on the 6th when the rumble of distant tanks was heard. The 21st Panzer centred their attacks on the Scots Guards and John Elwes' job was to set up the anti-tank gun positions with the now more familiar six-pounders, and as the first tank came over the horizon, he took charge of one gun and scored a direct hit. This set the standard for all the others to follow. The Regiment itself knocked out eleven tanks and gained a wonderful revenge on the 21st Panzer after the Rigel Ridge disaster nine months earlier. No Allied tanks had been engaged and by lunchtime the battle was over and the Axis lost 42 tanks to the 501st Brigade, one third of Rommel's remaining stock of serviceable weapons. This was the biggest loss of tanks in a single day's battle in WWII.

The Scots Guards scored a major battle honour and the commanding officer wrote home that he had enjoyed it all and that it was his best day since his last day out with the Bicester Hunt. Soon after Kasserine, Rommel had been seen to be bandaged around his neck and was clearly not well. He had also asked Hitler for reinforcements if Tunisia was to be held but this was refused.

It has been said by some that Montgomery deliberately held General Patton back so that he could not claim the victory of the African Campaign which ended two months later.

On 9 March, Rommel was withdrawn and Von Arnim replaced him. Rommel had been a major force in Africa but suffered from a shortage of supplies. He was an accurate and truthful reporter of events and was considered to be a brilliant tactician, a national hero and loved by his troops. Late in 1944 he was alleged to have been involved in an assassination attempt on Hitler and forced by him to commit suicide. In order to cover this up he was given a state funeral with a particularly large wreath laid by Hitler himself.

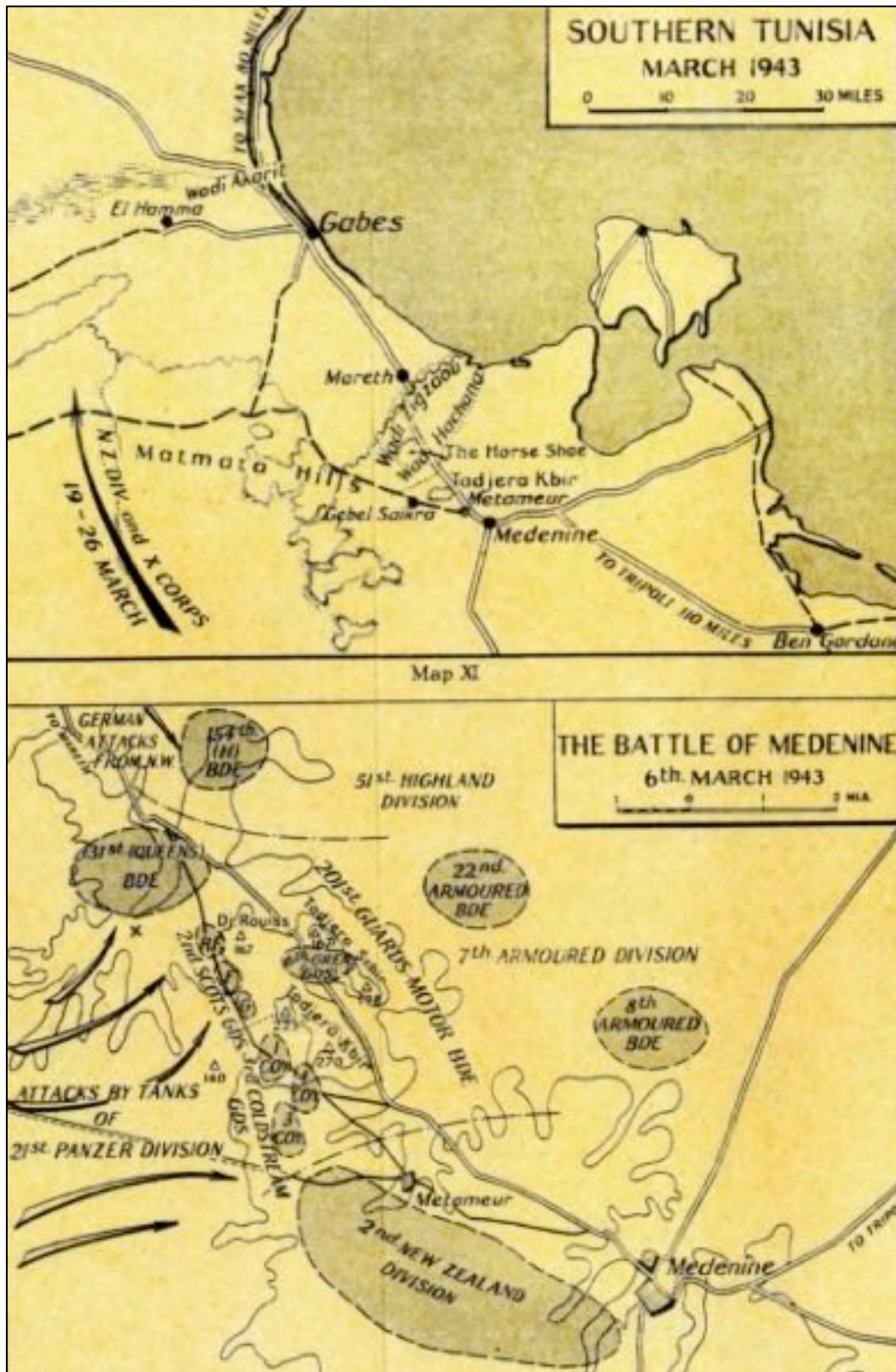


Figure 2: Southern Tunisia March 1943 and the Battle of Medenine, 6 March 1943 (by kind permission Scots Guards Headquarters).

After Arnim's appointment, 501st Brigade then moved north on the Maktoum Desert towards Mareth, with the Coldstream and Grenadiers in front and the Scots Guards in reserve behind,

where the Coldstream took a hammering and lost Michael Wills of Miserden. It had been decided to have a night attack because the position was in full sight of the enemy but the Mareth line was not easy for the Germans either because the gun positions, having been built by the French, were too small to give cover for the German artillery.

After the main battle and while still in reserve, a single shell landed on the Scots Guards Battalion headquarters by an olive grove at Bir Bsir, killing John Elwes instantly. He had been talking to John Braid, who was Battalion RSM when I joined the Regiment in 1955, twelve years later.

The two heirs to Gloucestershire properties were killed within two days of each other, and in the rush to push the Germans out of Africa, many graves were never lifted and moved to a cemetery. John Elwes remains where he was killed by the well at Bir Bsir in the Maktoum Desert. His name is inscribed on a wall at the cemetery at Medjez-el-Bab near Tunis. The Germans were driven out of Africa just two months later.

In 1972 I visited the area in a hired car with Carolyn and drove all over the desert with maps and a compass and was told later that they regularly lose a camel stepping on a mine in this area as they were never lifted properly in the hurry to get the Axis out of Africa.

Henry Elwes



Figure 3: The action of the anti-tank guns of the Left Flank 2nd Battalion Scots Guards at Medenine Ridge on 6 March 1943 by Terrance Cueno (by kind permission of Scots Guards Headquarters).

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THE BATTLE OF HIGHNAM

24-25 March 1643

Dr Timothy Brain

On 24 March 1643 over 5,000 men, English and Welsh, engaged in a battle in the normally peaceful grounds of Highnam house in Gloucestershire. Some twenty-four hours later over 100 of them, mostly Welsh, would be dead, some the casualties of battle, many others the probable victims of what, even by the standards of the time, would be classified as a war crime. What had brought this to pass?

Preliminaries

By March 1643 it had been seven months since King Charles I had raised his standard on a dismally wet day outside of Nottingham. From his perspective he was doing so to put down a rebellion; from that of his opponents he was effectively declaring war on his own kingdom, or at least the constitutional hub of it, the Parliament in Westminster.

Charles had taken this drastic step because he had lost political control in his own capital to a Parliamentary clique who sought to impose constitutional restraints on what he saw as his Royal Prerogatives. His opponents, led by John Pym, had used every Parliamentary procedure at their disposal to constitutionally restrain their king because they feared he would tax them without Parliament's consent and because they feared that unless so restrained he would undermine the Protestant Reformation of the last 100 years, possibly even returning England to Catholicism. Once Charles had raised his standard, Parliament countered by forming its own army under the command of the Earl of Essex with instructions 'to rescue his Majesties person and the persons of the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Yorke, out of the hands of those desperate persons who are now about them.'¹ Of course, the king did not seek rescue, but for Parliament it was necessary to adopt the fiction that the problem was not the king but his evil counsellors.

As Essex marched north with his army of around 15,000, Charles slipped away to Shrewsbury to gather his strength, drawing on loyal Wales and the Marches. Rather than tackle him head on, Essex made for Worcester, to cut off a source of manpower from south Wales. Royalist and Parliamentary advanced forces clashed at Powick Bridge on 23 September, the royalists getting the better of it but not sufficiently so to stop Essex occupying Worcester on 24 September. To consolidate his position, Essex sent word to London to provide artillery, munitions and a small fleet of about thirty flat bottomed boats.² These last might seem a strange accoutrement, but probably Essex sought their presence to enable him to build pontoon bridges should the king destroy the few crossing points of the Severn below

¹ *The Army Lists of the Roundheads and Cavaliers, Containing the Names of the Officers in the Royal and Parliamentary Armies of 1642* (edited Edward Peacock, London, 1863), p 55.

² DS Evans, 'The bridge of boats at Gloucester 1642-44', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Winter, 1993, vol 71, no 288, pp 232-242.

Shrewsbury. Meanwhile, he detached a small force of around 1,200 under Lord Stamford to occupy the Royalist city of Hereford.

The supply train, with the boats, left London on or around 10 October. However, before his additional munitions and materiel arrived, Essex had been forced to abandon Worcester and retreat eastwards, for the king had left Shrewsbury with his army of around 23,000 and was making for London. Leaving behind a small garrison of two regiments at Worcester, Essex withdrew south eastwards, catching up with the king's army in the nick of time at Edgehill in Warwickshire. The ensuing battle was tactically a draw, but strategically Essex came out on top, doing enough to prevent the king from regaining his capital.

Meanwhile, the boats, with around fifty crew of Thames watermen hired for service, relocated to Gloucester, a city loyal to Parliament. The chance presence of this strange inland fleet was to play a significant part in the outcome of events at Highnam the following spring.

Learning of Essex's withdraw, Stamford, who had been appointed by Parliament its commander in the whole of the lower Severn valley, decided his outpost at Hereford was untenable, and withdrew to pro-Parliament Gloucester, arriving on 3 December. He stayed only two days before moving, with most of his force, to Bristol, which he regarded as being under greater threat. He left behind a regiment of foot and a troop of horse, which augmented the city's own two locally raised companies of foot. He also left behind a deputy governor, the highly capable Lieutenant Colonel, Edward Massie.

Born around 1604 in Cheshire, Massie's early career and motives are clouded in mystery. The fourth son of a large minor gentry family, after a brief apprenticeship in London as a leatherworker he made his way to The Netherlands to fight for the Protestant Dutch in their revolt against Spain. Here he served as an engineer before returning to England to fight for the king against the Scots in the 'Bishops' Wars' of 1639 and 1640. Out of work following disbandment of the king's forces after their disastrous showing against the Scots, he found new employment with the king in the army he raised to tackle Parliament in 1642. However, shortly afterwards he changed sides and enlisted for Parliament as a lieutenant colonel in Lord Stamford's regiment. Massie would later claim this was because, being a moderate Puritan, he disagreed with king's religious policies. The Royalist Earl of Clarendon, who thoroughly disliked Massie, simply put him down as a 'soldier of fortune'. Whatever his initial motivation, by early 1643 Massie found himself in de facto independent command of Parliament's last outpost in the west.³ He would exercise his command with diligence and enterprise.

'The Godly City'

Gloucester by the early 1640s had a population of about 4,600 largely living within its medieval precincts. A thriving port, with sixteenth century stone bridges at Westgate and Over, it commanded the River Severn, and stood between Charles's support in south Wales and his temporary capital in Oxford. It was also 'the godly city', a solidly Puritan outlier in a county that was equivocal in its sympathies.⁴ With the Lord Chandos, the King's loyal lord lieutenant

³ It was previously thought that Massie was born in 1619, but his birth date is now thought to be between 1604 and 1606. D Evans, *The Civil War career of Major-General Edward Massey* (PhD Thesis, Kings College, London, 1993), pp 1-32. His surname sometimes appears as 'Massey,' but he signed his himself 'Massie'.

⁴ The Earl of Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* (Oxford, 1826), vol iv, p 179.



Figure 1: An imagined aerial view of Gloucester 1624 from the east looking west., The city with its wall is in the foreground, 'The Wineyard' in the mid-distance and Highnam with its grounds and park slightly beyond.

only a few miles away at Sudeley Castle, the city's aldermen had already taken the precautions of strengthening the city's defences and raising a company of foot to add to its existing trained band.⁵

Massie was not one to sit idle and wait for the enemy to come to him. Throughout the campaigns in and around Gloucester in 1643 Massie would adopt the principal of 'offensive defence'.⁶ In late January 1643 he sallied out and captured Sudeley Castle, although Chandos was not in residence at the time. Not neglecting his main charge, Massie quickly returned to Gloucester, leaving a garrison of 500 which promptly despoiled Sudeley's chapel, turning it into a slaughterhouse and stable, and desecrating the graves, including that of Henry VIII's last queen, Katherine Parr.⁷

Such a challenge to Royalist power could not go without a response, and one was not long in coming. Charles had placed command of his main force operating in the south west Midlands in the hands of his ebullient 24-year old nephew Prince Rupert of the Rhine. Young in years but not in military experience, which he had gained fighting for the Protestant powers in the Thirty Years War, he had placed

himself at his uncle's service when hostilities broke out, leading a dashing, if over exuberant cavalry charge at Edgehill.

Rupert of the Rhine

Now, with a force of about 4,000 Rupert marched on Sudeley. Finding it in enemy hands he turned south to Cirencester, defeating the Parliament garrison there.⁸ Faced now with a large force to his south west, Massie withdrew his Sudeley force to Gloucester, taking the opportunity to also withdraw a small force stationed at Tewkesbury. He now had a mixed force of horse and foot of about 1,200 to defend Gloucester. Only a small out-garrison at Berkeley Castle maintained communications with Bristol.

On 3 February Rupert turned up outside the city's walls and demanded its surrender. Massie told the prince that he and his officers 'were resolved with their lives and fortunes to defend the city for the use of the king and parliament, and would in no wise surrender at the demand of a foreign prince.' The civil authority, represented by mayor Dennis Wise, was equally

⁵ The medieval walls only extended from South Gate to the old North Gate, but marshy ground to the north and the River Sever to the west prohibited assaults from those directions, while the castle's keep inhibited assaults from the south west. Colonel Massie would add earthworks prior to the siege of 1643.

⁶ John Putley, *The Battle of Highnam House 1643* (Stroud Press, Bristol, 2002), p 8.

⁷ John Washbourn (ed), *Bibliotheca Gloucesterensis* (BG), Gloucester, 1825, p xxix; and Alison Weir, 'Queen Katherine's restless bones', <https://www.historiamag.com/queen-katharines-restless-bones/>. It was not until the 19th century that Queen Katherine was reburied in the restored chapel in a tomb designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott.

⁸ BG, p xxix.

defiant: 'he was resolved according to his oath and allegiance to keepe the city in his majestie's behoofe, and would not deliver the same according to this summons.'⁹

We can surmise that Rupert was affronted by the city's impudence, but good military sense prevailed over ire. His force outnumbered Massie's but not sufficiently so to be sure of overwhelming the garrison. Accordingly, he withdrew his force to Cirencester and then to Malmesbury.



Figure 2: The principal commanders involved at Highnam January-March 1643, left to right, Edward Massie (c1604-74), Sir William Waller (1598-1668), Prince Rupert (1619-82) and Lord Herbert (1603-67).

'The Mushroom-Army'

The next move was played by an unlikely military leader, the 40-year old Edward Somerset, known as Lord Herbert of Raglan, the son of the Earl of Worcester. The earl, from his secure seat of Raglan Castle, was the dominant feudal magnate in south Wales, duly delivered the allegiance of his conservative region to the King at the start of hostilities. This was, however, of little practical value as he was isolated beyond the Severn. This changed when Lord Herbert, despite possessing no military experience and hitherto better known for his scientific experiments (he has a good claim to having invented the steam engine), enthusiastically asked permission to raise a force for the purpose of seizing the recalcitrant Gloucester for the King.¹⁰ Messages were exchanged between Oxford and Raglan, and, after some hesitation (Worcester and his son were Catholics), Charles granted Lord Herbert his commission.

Herbert raised a force comprising 1,500 foot and 500 horse 'very well and sufficiently armed', with personnel drawn presumably from the local trained bands (militia) and equipped from their county stores. If the infantry conformed to contemporary military practice, it would have comprised approximately two-thirds musketeers and one-third pikemen. The force would also probably have been accompanied by at least four small (1-3 lb) calibre cannon, whose crew would have been drawn from the infantry.¹¹ Herbert placed Sir Richard Lawday in command of the foot, with Sir Jerome Brett as his second in command. Both had some previous military experience having commanded regiments in the Second Bishops' War against the Scots in

⁹ BG, p 22.

¹⁰ Clarendon, vol iii, p 463.

¹¹ The number and size of the accompanying artillery must be surmised. Infantry battalions would normally be accompanied by two 1-3lb cannons, so four is the likely total. Clarendon's comment that the force was 'very well and sufficiently armed' infers the presence of infantry-support artillery. Also, in his account of the subsequent battle Clarendon refers to 'cannon' being 'implanted' on the approaches to Highnam house. It is very unlikely that larger calibre cannon would have been present on the Royalist side. Clarendon, vol iii, p 465-7.

1640.¹² Herbert gave command of his horse, however, to his younger brother, Lord John Somerset, an officer as equally inexperienced as himself. The force concentrated at Raglan and marched for Gloucester around the middle of February.¹³ Herbert had raised his force with commendable speed, but the Earl of Clarendon (1609-74) in his history of the civil war, dubbed it ‘the mushroom-army’ because ‘it grew up and perished so soon’.¹⁴



Figure 3: Pikemen and musketeers of the Civil War period. Both sides would have been similarly accoutred.

The force crossed the Wye at Monmouth and then made for Coleford where there was a small Parliamentary garrison. In a sharp fight on 20 February the Parliamentary garrison was defeated but not before Lawday was killed. Herbert appointed Brett in Lawday’s place.¹⁵ At some point, either after the action at Coleford or during the initial occupation of Highnam, Herbert detached himself from his command and made for Oxford in an attempt to persuade the King to besiege Gloucester from the east. Rather than delivering Gloucester to the king, Herbert was now asking him for assistance.

Without further incident the force made for Highnam and there encamped on the higher ground surrounding the house. This was the old house, described as being ‘built of lathes and squared stonework’, and which included a ‘hall, parlour, great chamber, and two porches.’¹⁶ In occupying the house Brett was unencumbered by its parliamentarian owner, Sir Robert Cooke, who had recently led Parliament’s force at Tewkesbury and who was now part of Massie’s Gloucester garrison.

¹² Both Lawday and Brett are listed as members of the king’s army that mustered to face the Scots in the Second Bishops’ War, 1640. Historical Collections: 1640, August-September, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/rushworth-papers/vol3/pp1221-1286>, and English Foot Regiments, Second Bishops’ War 1640, <http://wiki.bcw-project.org/bishops-wars/english-foot-regiments/sir-jerome-brett.q>. Lawday was born in Exeter c1608 and was buried in Monmouth parish church on 12 February 1643. Sir Richard’s surname appears as ‘Lawley’, ‘Lawdey’ and ‘Lawdy’ in various accounts. Brett was born in Rotherby, Leicestershire, in 1602.

¹³ BG, pp xxiii and xxxiv.

¹⁴ Clarendon, vol iii, p 467.

¹⁵ Clarendon, vol iii, p 465.

¹⁶ ‘Churcham: Manors and other estates’, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/glos/vol10/pp17-21#fnn61>.

Brett's men dug entrenchments around Highnam's park, including an outwork ('redoubt') to the north east of the house probably for his cannons, and possibly built roadblocks on the Ross, Newent and Chepstow roads.¹⁷ The block on the Newent Road may have been located at the ford across the Red Brook at Rudford.¹⁸ With these dispositions, Brett's force controlled the intersection of three roads, from Chepstow, Ross and Newent, but only threatened the approach to Gloucester itself across the bridge and causeway at Over.

With some gall, Brett then demanded Gloucester's surrender, but Massie, having recently seen off Rupert's much larger force, unsurprisingly refused; besides, as John Corbett, the rector of St Mary de Lode, later reported, there was 'an inveterate hatred derived by fabulous tradition' between 'the Welch-men and the citizens of Gloucester.'¹⁹

The tactical situation from Massie's perspective was one with which he might have been familiar from his Dutch service. Here was a small city with medieval walls, situated on low-lying land crossed by a complex drainage pattern, and accessed only by a narrow and therefore defensible causeway. Massie certainly appreciated the necessity of occupying the west end of the Over causeway and sent a force to occupy 'The Vineyard', the bishop of Gloucester's ancient summer house at Over.²⁰ It was in a dilapidated state but its previous medieval owners, the abbots of Gloucester, had surrounded it with a moat and embankment. It was, therefore, eminently defensible, and from here his force could command the approach to Over Bridge. A more imaginative and aggressive commander than Brett would have got there first.

Over the next five weeks both sides engaged in aggressive patrolling, but Massie's men appeared to get the better of any encounters.²¹ Brett did not have confidence that his inexperienced men could successfully storm Massie's forward positions, so he remained entrenched at Highnam, like Mr Micawber, waiting for something to turn up. In the standoff it was Massie's men who fared better, with relatively comfortable billets at The Vineyard and in Gloucester itself. In contrast Brett's men necessarily bivouacked in the 'stinking nest' that the grounds of Highnam became.²²

However, Massie did not have it all going his way for by the beginning of March many of his force were complaining about pay arrears while many citizens, complaining of high corn prices, left the city. The aldermen fought back, selling the city plate, paying off the soldiers' arrears and buying food for the citizens.²³ Also Massie sent messages for help to Parliament's new commander in the west, Sir William Waller with his force at Malmsbury, and to the parliamentary garrison in Bristol. Bristol spared him a troop of horse, but Waller, another Englishman who had gained experience fighting in the continental wars, had something altogether bolder in mind.

¹⁷ Putley, p 6.

¹⁸ 'Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, at a Special Meeting for the Western Division of Gloucestershire, held at Newent, on Wednesday, 30th September, 1885', p 239.

¹⁹ John Corbett, 'An Historicall Relation of the Military Government of Gloucester', quoted in Putley, p 13.

²⁰ Shown on some maps as 'The Wineyard'. See Figure 1.

²¹ BG, p 27.

²² BG, p 27.

²³ Gloucester, 1640-60: The English Revolution, British History Online, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/glos/vol4/pp92-95>.

‘William the Conqueror’

By March 1643 Sir William Waller was riding high on a series of victories across southern England and had gained the sobriquet ‘William the Conqueror’. Learning from Massie of Brett’s dispositions he decided on an imaginative plan. He marched as if to seize Cirencester, drawing Rupert’s force towards him, but then headed north west towards the Severn sending a message to Massie ‘with directions instantly to draw forth both horse and foot before Highnam, and keepe them in continuall action, that they might not understand his approach.’²⁴ He also told him to send down river to Framilode the small fleet of flat bottomed boats held at Gloucester after Essex’s withdrawal from Worcester. Waller made good speed, marching through the night, arriving at Framilode at noon on 23 March. He crossed the Severn unopposed and undetected using the flat bottomed boats as a pontoon bridge. He then turned towards Huntley.

Battle is joined

Carrying out his instructions, on the morning of 23 March Massie sallied from Gloucester with a force of 500 foot and 500 horse and bringing his ‘ordnance neere the house’ attacked the Welsh entrenchments, and then ‘kept them in the heate of play till evening’. It was not a one way fight, however. The inexperienced but enthusiastic Welsh foot held their position until night fell. Massie’s pickets manoeuvred to the south and east to ensure there was no undetected attempt at breakout. The next morning Massie’s guns opened fire, but the Royalist horse sallied forth putting Massie’s horse ‘into a disorderly retreat’. The Royalist horse then put Massie’s foot under pressure, necessitating rushing in a scratch relief party drawn from the artillery crews. The guns themselves momentarily came under threat but the Royalist horse was ‘beaten backe by the gallantry of some few that kept their ground.’²⁵ The battle was in the balance.

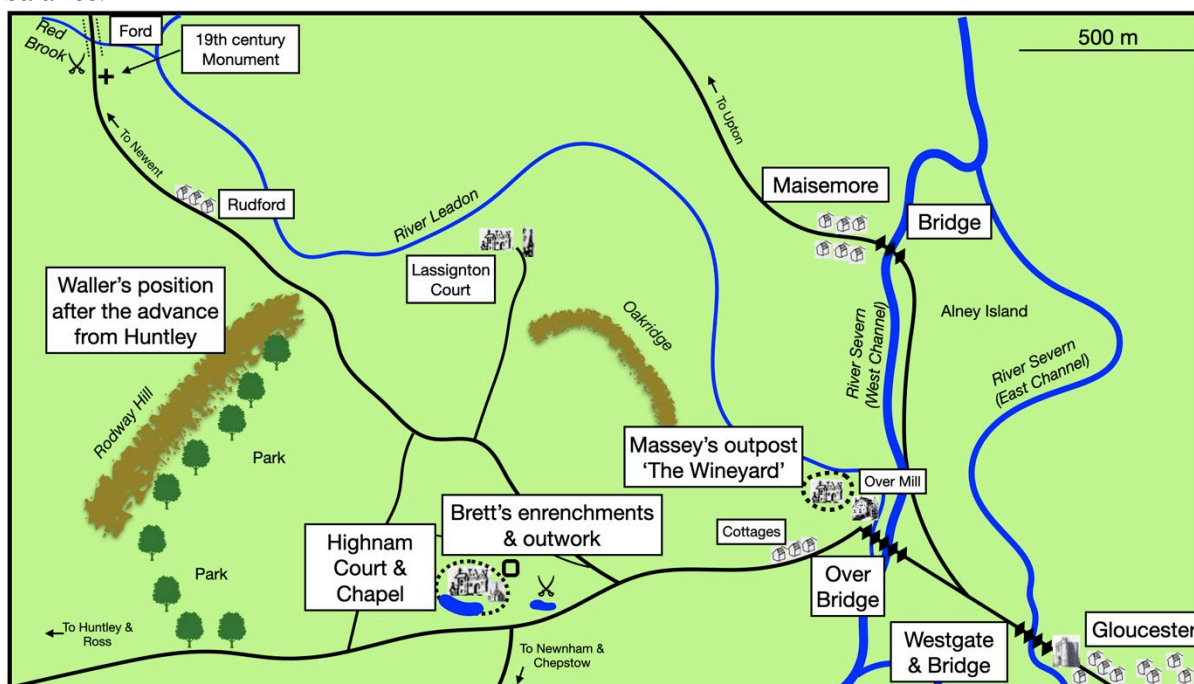


Figure 4: The Battle of Highnam, 24-25 March 1643.

²⁴ BG, p 28.

²⁵ BG, p 28.

It was at this point that the Royalist force received a nasty shock. A cannon shot was heard from their rear, drawing their attention to Waller's force drawn up in line across Rodway Hill. Reinvigorated, Massie's men stormed the Welsh entrenchments, capturing the outwork 'and tooke in it two captaines and above 30 private soldiers'. There was no formal surrender; the Welsh simply stopped fighting. Their commanders had no alternative but to negotiate.²⁶

Surrender

The Parliamentary terms were simple: surrender and the officers could keep their arms and be accommodated according to their station; the men had a choice of going home having taken an oath to not in the future bear arms against Parliament, re-enlisting for Parliament or being made prisoner. The Royalist officers sought to persuade their men to make a run for it. As Waller's and Massie's men were quite exhausted many of them might have got away, but the Welsh were equally spent and so the next day the force at Highnam surrendered. It is probable that many of Lord John's cavalry managed to escape, including their leader, but most of the men stayed put, choosing imprisonment over the opportunity to enlist for Parliament.

John Corbett, the vicar of St Mary de Lode, in his later report compiled for the city council, recorded 'neere fifteen hundred were led captive into Gloucester, as great a number as Sir William Waller's army with the garrison could rise into; thus the first fruites of Wales were blasted.'²⁷ The men were herded into St Mary de Lode and Holy Trinity churches. Ten days of overcrowding, bread and water rations, and, presumably, disgusting conditions, induced a change of mind to make their way back home, although some would rejoin the King's forces. A few remained in Gloucester to join Sir Robert Cooke's regiment of foot.

Contemporary Parliamentary newspaper accounts claimed that 300-500 Royalists were killed, but reports from those present do not give specific numbers, suggesting they were much lower. One historian of the battle, John Putley, estimates fatalities could be as low as 50.²⁸ These were buried in an unmarked pit near to the chapel to the south of the house.

The Mystery of Barber's Bridge

Those killed in the battle might have numbered around fifty, but total fatalities associated with the immediate aftermath may be much higher. In April 1868 workmen engaged by local landowner Major William Price to level a mound near Barber's Bridge at Rudford discovered 86 skeletons, one decapitated. No weapons or armour were recovered. Price initially speculated that these were the remains of some of Massie's men who fell in a Royalist ambush in 1645. However, after further consideration he concluded these were the remains of Welsh infantry seeking to avoid entrapment in the March 1643 action at Highnam, presumably under cover of night. Possibly they were caught by Waller's patrols and massacred while attempting to carry out the entreaties of their commanders to break out.²⁹

²⁶ BG, p 27.

²⁷ BG, p 29.

²⁸ Putley, p 11. The chapel was demolished in 1809.

²⁹ 'Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, at a Special Meeting for the Western Division of Gloucestershire, held at Newent, on Wednesday, 30th September, 1885,' *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society for 1885-86*, pp 238-41.

In 1871 the skeletons were reinterred by the side of the road, with Price paying for a tall cross on top of the new mound to mark the spot. When the B4215 road was later widened and straightened a portion of the burial mound was lost (see front cover).

That the remains were those of soldiers caught and slain attempting to escape capture is an entirely plausible hypothesis. It would explain the absence of armour and artefacts found with the skeletons. It would also explain the absence of any account of the deaths in Waller's official despatch of the battle to Parliament. He may not have known of them, but if he had he probably thought it wise not to mention it. Killing unarmed men trying to get home, no matter how technically justified under the rules of war as then understood, hardly reflected well on what was supposed to be a 'godly' army.

This was not the last fighting that the area was to see, the King's army returning in July to finish the job Herbert's men had failed to do. Even with a force of 15,000 Charles was, however, no more successful, his summons to surrender receiving the same rebuff as Rupert. The King was forced to raise the siege after only five weeks when a relief army appeared, sent by a Parliament determined to save its outpost in the west.

Legacy

Major Price's cross remains as the only memorial to those killed at the battle of Highnam. It was not, however, the only architectural legacy of the battle of Highnam. Highnam's owner Robert Cooke, who had previously declared for Parliament and who took no direct part in the battle, died later in 1643, leaving the house to his son William. Having first supported the crown, William now declared for Parliament. Prospering, in 1658 he pulled down the old house, damaged in the battle, and built a new one, essentially the one that stands today. Its elegant lines and proportions remain as a rare example of Interregnum architecture.

Timothy Brain

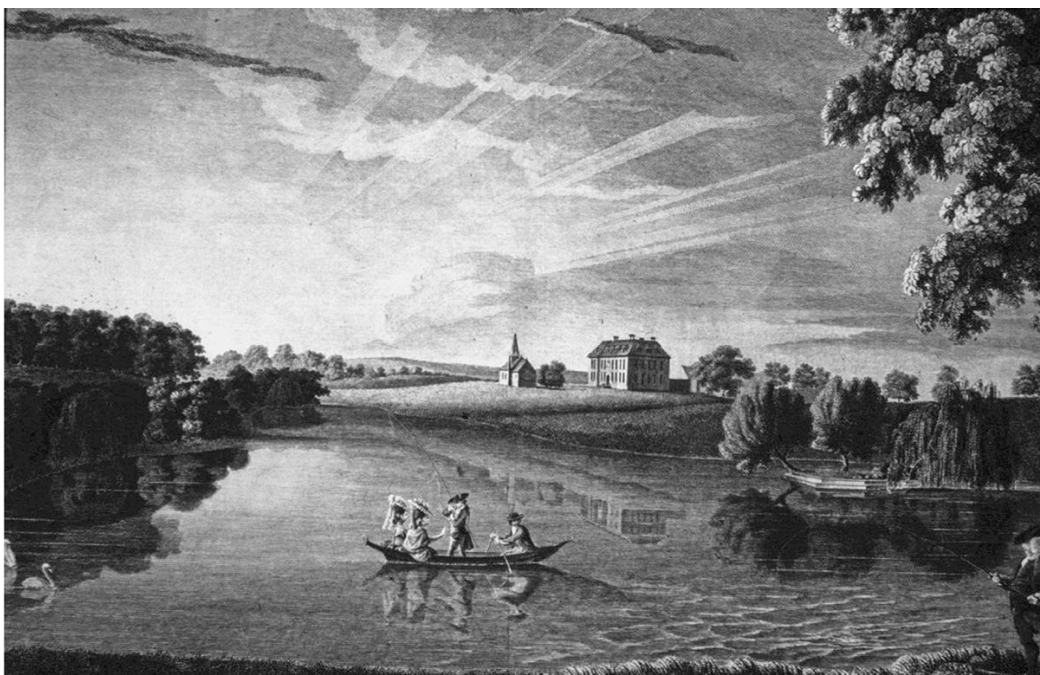


Figure 5: *Highnam Court and Great Pool 1779* by T Bonnor, showing the new house built 1658 and the old chapel, near to which is the burial pit of the Welsh infantry that fell in the battle on 24 March.

VISIT  SOLDIERS OF
GLOUCESTERSHIRE

EVENING TALKS

at the
Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum



1ST MARCH 7pm

**'Alexandria: Winning the Back
Badge'**

with Lt Col Robert Dixon

5TH APRIL 7pm

'From Soldier to Artist'

with Simon McCouaig

3RD MAY 7pm

**'The Glosters in Burma: The Story
of the 1st and 10th Battalions in
WWII'**

with Lt Col Robert Dixon

7TH JUNE 7pm

**'On Her Majesty's Service and at
Her Majesty's Pleasure'**

with Nick Welch

5TH JULY 7pm

**'Brigadier Patsy Pagan: A
Gloucestershire Hero'**

with Len Evans

4TH OCTOBER 7pm

**'The Poets of Gloucestershire in
War and Peace'**

with Lt Col Robert Dixon

1ST NOVEMBER 7pm

**'The Roads to the Armistice; The
Gloucestershire Regiment in the
Last Weeks of the First World War'**

with Michael Orr

Tickets are £2 for
members, £5 for non-
members and available
from the museum
reception desk or online
via this QR code:



www.soldiersofglos.com

FRIENDS OF THE SOLDIERS OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE MUSEUM
FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Summer Reception

Tuesday 20th June 2023 6.30-8.30 pm
Highnam Court, by kind permission of Mr Roger Head OBE DL

Chavenage Lecture

Friday 27th October 2023, 6.45 pm
Chavenage House, Tetbury
Jonathan Dimbleby in conversation

Annual General Meeting

Tuesday 7th November 2023, 7.00pm
The Highwayman, Elkstone, GL53 9PH

MUSEUM FORTHCOMING EVENTS

1st April-16th April. Easter School holidays. *We shall have a range of events for children including inflatables outside of the museum.*

12th May-30th June. Art Exhibition. An exhibition displaying the works of our in house artist, Simon McCouaig.

27th May-4th June. May half term holiday. *There will be activities for children.*

28th July-3rd September. Stroud Scarlet Exhibition. *Exploring the cloth that was used by the British Army for centuries. Revealing local and global links and its impact on the Empire.*

School summer holidays. *We shall have a fantastic six week long adventure trail plus a multitude of other events aimed at families.*

October-December (exact dates tbc). Jack Russell Exhibition. Former England wicketkeeper and prominent artist Jack Russell will be displaying his work of portraits of the surviving Imjin veterans.

For more information on all of our events stay tuned to our Facebook page (@soldiersofgloucestershire) and our website (www.soldiersofglos.com)

Calling all budding authors...

We welcome contributions from members and our associates on subjects related to the Museum, the military life of Gloucestershire, and more general aspects of military history. Please contact the Editor, Dr Tim Brain on timothy.brain@btinternet.com, who will be very pleased to offer advice.