

English Heritage Battlefield Report: Newburn Ford 1640

Newburn Ford (28 August 1640)

Parishes :Newcastle upon Tyne, Gateshead

County:Tyne and Wear

District:Newcastle Upon Tyne, Gateshead

Grid Ref: NZ 065651 (centred on the current Newburn Bridge)

Historical Context

Newburn Ford was the only battle of the second Bishops' War. The first Bishops' War, which had petered out the previous year, had originally been prompted by King Charles I's attempt to impose a new prayer book on the Scots. But the King's continuing difficulties with his Scottish subjects led to the outbreak of a fresh struggle in 1640. By August the Scots were threatening Newcastle-on-Tyne. To avoid assaulting the strong city defences on the north of the river, the Scots' commander, Alexander Leslie, decided to cross the Tyne upstream and attack Newcastle on its weaker, southern side. The first point at which the River Tyne could be forded upstream from Newcastle is at Newburn, four miles distant: it was to this crossing that Leslie marched his army of some 20,000 men.

To counter this move the English commander, Lord Conway, took approximately 2000 infantry and 1500 cavalry out of Newcastle and arrived on the south bank of the Tyne opposite Newburn early in the evening of 27 August. Sir Jacob Astley reinforced him with more troops the next day.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

The site of the Battle of Newburn Ford lies approximately four miles west of Newcastle in the flood plain of the River Tyne. The Tyne, by this stage in its journey to the sea, traces a leisurely course. At one time, before the river was straightened in the last century, its meanderings were more pronounced. It is easy to appreciate how the slow-moving Tyne, although wide, could once have proved fordable at Newburn.

Although the straightening of the Tyne has altered the shape of the floodplain, this does not materially affect the ground upon which the English army took position. John Rushworth, who arrived in time to take part in the later stages of the battle, described the English army as 'drawn forth into a plain Meadow ground which was near a mile in length, close on the South side of [the] Tyne, called Newborne-Haugh or Stella-Haugh'¹. . Not too much attention need be paid to the names - these tended to be employed rather indiscriminately - but the mile long meadow is still there, with the towns of Ryton and Stella on the heights above at either end. The enemy, meanwhile, were on the north bank of the Tyne. Rushworth again: 'The Scots, having the advantage of the rising ground above Newbourne, easily discerned the posture and motion of the English Army below in the Valley on the Southside [of] the River, but the posture of the Scots Army the English could not discern, by reason of the Houses, Hedges, and Inclosures in and about Newbourne'².

Above the flood plain steep bluffs rise on either side of the river. Upon them, to the north, stands Newburn, a small town in 1640 and a small town now. Newburn is an integral part of the battlefield: Rushworth makes clear the extent to which it was occupied by the Scots. The parish church of St Michael and All Angels, in the tower of which the Scots mounted cannon, remains in a prominent position (the church was partly rebuilt in the 1820s).

Beyond the bluffs to the south Ryton has grown mightily while Stella remains compact. The only area of open

ground between the two towns lies to the north of Bewes Hills. The bluffs themselves are precipitous and extensively wooded: it is of interest to speculate which routes up them the retreating English forces might have taken to escape.

Landscape Evolution

In 1640 Newburn was a small village grouped around its church at the first fording place west of Newcastle. Around it were small, probably hedged, enclosures and perhaps a series of small coal pits. The south bank of the Tyne had a broad area of low-lying flat land between it and the higher flood free land running between Stella and Ryton villages. This flood-prone land was called Ryton Haugh and to the west, Ryton Willows suggesting some woodland. Both would have been used then as meadow for summer grazing and would have been either open land or sparsely fenced.

South of this land lay a bluff (or river-cliff) behind which lay the small settlements of Ryton and Stella. A path led down the bluff along the present line of the footpath east of Ryton to the southern side of the ford opposite Newburn. South of this bluff lay an enclosed, hedged fieldscape through which ran a road running east-west connecting Ryton to Stella - this is the present Hexham Old Road. The fields on this area are more irregularly shaped and from field evidence could be older than those on the floodplain.

Although map and field evidence is scant, it is likely that another track led down from Stella to the floodplain of Ryton Haugh (called Stella Haugh on later maps) and that this is the present Stella Lane. The public footpath lying just west of Stella Lane's junction with the present day A695 is lined with a species rich hedge which could date from the 1600's.

It is the alteration in the course of the River Tyne that is most significant. On the eastern side of the battlefield the river's course used to follow what is now marked on the map as the 'European and Borough Constituency Boundary'. At national grid reference NZ172648 the boundary line curves slightly in mid-stream where there used to be a small island: this is the location of Kelshaw Ford³, one of the two fords the Scots used during the battle. The main ford site itself probably lay close to the present Newburn bridge. Another ford, called Kelshaw Ford, crossed further east from the Stanners island towards the southern bank opposite Hedgefield.

As regards buildings from the 1600s in the battlefield area, apart from Newburn Church, which still exists, Ryton Church and motte would have been present as would a medieval manor House at Stella (demolished 1955). Also there may have been a medieval pele tower just east of Newburn in the Stanners area and at least some of the houses in the village would have been stone-built as a 17th century stone-built house is recorded as having been demolished in Newburn in 1909.

The battlefield area has been substantially developed since 1640, though in parts it is returning to its pre-Industrial Revolution character. From the later 1600s the area north of the Tyne around Newburn has been developed by a series of industries based around local collieries, some of which are mentioned on maps from the 1760s. Industry stimulated the growth of originally rural communities such as Newburn and Ryton and these settlements expanded.

By the latter 1800s the River Tyne's channel was canalised east of Newburn, straightening its course. On the low lying land called the Stanners east of Newburn a series of industrial factories and steel works were built on what had been an island. Sand and gravel quarries were built on the hills to the east of Newburn and extensive coal mining occurred immediately west of the village but the Hallow Hill-Rye Hill area west of the town seems to have remained largely agricultural. On the south bank of the Tyne, Ryton and Stella grew as Newburn had done, with a railway being built across Ryton Haugh before 1839. Hexham Old Road by then had been replaced by a newer, straighter, probably turnpiked road which is the current A695 running to its north.

Part of the eastern floodplain was used for horse races - the famous Blaydon Races - but by the mid-twentieth

century most of Ryton and Stella Haughs were extensively built over by electricity power stations and power transmission lines. Only Ryton Willows on the south bank of the Tyne appears not to have been substantially built on. The ford at Newburn was replaced by a bridge in the mid-twentieth century.

The battlefield today outwardly reflects an industrial landscape, dominated by the power stations on Stella and Ryton Haughs. However, significant areas of the battlefield have escaped development such as Hallow and Rye Hills west of Newburn and the Ryton Willows area looks much as it would probably have done in the 1600s. Behind Ryton Haugh and its industry, the Ryton-Stella bluff is pleasantly wooded and the tracks up which the English foot retreated to Stella and Ryton still appear intact, as is Image Hill. Other areas, such as the north bank of the Tyne West of Newburn, have been reclaimed from industrial activity and now lie within Tyne Riverside Country Park.

The Sources

As the use already made of his testimony would suggest, the best account of the Battle of Newburn was penned by the historian John Rushworth, who was present during most of the action. According to Rushworth, it will be recalled, the English

... were drawn forth into a plain Meadow ground which was near a mile in length, close on the South side of [the] Tyne, called Newborne-Haugh or Stella-Haugh, to hinder the Scots from passing the River in the night time, where were two several Sconces or Breast-works raised by the English against the two Fords, which the Scots might pass over at Low water, for till then they could not pass the Tyne, and into each Sconce were put four hundred Musqueteers and four pieces of Ordinance.

The Horse were drawn into Squadrons in the said Haugh at some distance from the Foot, in this posture Horse and Foot guarded the River all that night and the next day, till the engagement.

The Scots all the forenoon watered their Horses at one side of the River, and the English on the other side, without affronting one another or giving any reproachful language.

The Scots, having the advantage of the rising ground above Newbourne, easily discerned the posture and motion of the English Army below in the Valley on the Southside [of] the River, but the posture of the Scots Army the English could not discern, by reason of the Houses, Hedges, and Inclosures in and about Newbourne. The Scots brought some Cannon into Newbourne Town, and planted some in the Church Steeple a small distance from the River Tyne, their Musqueteers were placed in the Church, Houses, Lanes, and Hedges in and about Newbourne.

Rushworth arrived at the battlefield at an interesting juncture. He had chosen to accompany a messenger sent from York with a dispatch for Lord Conway written by the Earl of Strafford. The two men, Rushworth wrote,

... found the Lord Conway and the Field Officers at a Council of War at Stella, half a mile distance from the Army, and delivered the Lord Conway the Pacquet, which being opened, it contained special Orders to prepare the Army for an Engagement with the Scots. Whilst they were in debate of this Matter, an Herald came in all haste from the Army to acquaint the Lord Conway and Council of War, that the Army was already engaged with the Scots; which seemed strange to them, because Orders were given not to fight but upon the Defence: but the Council of War suddenly broke up, and hastened to the Army⁴.

According to Conway, who later wrote a justification of his conduct at Newburn, he had been about to order a retreat:

The works [i.e. fortifications] that were made upon the passage were so weak that the Lord Conway would not have hazarded the troops in any such engagement, where they would be sure to have been beaten. And although Sir Jacob Astley came the next day with 2000 men more, and increased his strength, yet the Lord Conway, not to engage the troops further than he might fairly, had resolved to make a retreat to Newcastle if he had not at that instant received a letter from the Earl of Strafford, commanding him to fight⁵.

Strafford had not minced words: he wanted the Scots brought to battle, ending his dispatch with the rebuke: 'Dear my Lord, take the advice of the best Men, and do something worthy yourself'. Such orders and the opening of hostilities ended the possibility of a retreat.

The battle began, so Rushworth was informed, when a Scots officer, who was felt to be taking too great an interest in the English positions, was shot from his saddle whilst watering his horse in the Tyne. Rushworth continues:

The Scots played with their Cannon upon the English Breast-works and Sconce; the King's Army played with their Cannon to beat the Scots out of the Church-steeple; thus they continued firing on both sides, till it grew to be near low water, and by that time the Scots with their Cannon had made a breach in the greater Sconce which Colonel Lunsford commanded, wherein many of his men were killed and began to retire, yet the Colonel prevailed with them to stand to their Armes, but presently after, a Captain, a Lieutenant, and some other officers more were slain in that work. Then the Souldiers took occasion to complain that they put upon double duty, and had stood there all night and that day to that time, and that no Souldiers were sent from the Army at Newcastle to relieve them; but Colonel Lunsford again prevailed with them not to desert their Works, but another Cannon-shot hitting in the Works amongst the Souldiers, and killing some more of them, they threw down their Armes and would abide in the Fort no longer.

A Forlorn Hope of Scots cavalry advance across the river to reconnoitre the English position about their second, 'uppermost', redoubt.

The Scots playing at this time very hard upon the furthest Trench, forced the English Foot to retreat from that work also, which the Scots discerning on the rising ground at Newbourne, more Horse commanded by Sir Thomas Hope, and two Regiments of Foot commanded by the Lord Craford Lindsey and Lord Lowdon waded through the River, and General Lesly at this instant of time played hard with nine piece of Cannon from a new Sconce, which they had raised on a Hill to the East, and so galled the King's Horse drawn up in plain Meadow ground, that it much disordered them, and sending more Forces over the River, a retreat was sounded, and Colonel Lunsford drew off the Cannon. Immediately Commissary Wilmot, Sir John Digby a Romish Recusant, and Daniel O'Neal an Irish-man joyntly engaged the Enemy, and had a sharp Encounter with their Horse, they being commanded to bring up the Rear, whilst the Foot retreated up Riton and Stella Banks, but the Scots with their fresh Supply newly come over the River, environed these three Commanders, and took them and some others of their Troops Prisoners...⁶

Another account of the battle was given to Secretary Windebank by Captain Thomas Dymock. His letter was sent from Hull on 10 September⁷.

After many rumours of the Scots proceeding towards Berwick, our regiment, Sir Thos. Glemham's, was commanded to Newcastle, where we kept strict guard, but moved not, till the enemy marching within 4 miles of the town, 2000 foot and 1000 horse were sent in haste to stop them at the ford by Newburn. Their army appeared marching on the hills above the ford

when we were drawing into our miserable works in the valley, where we lay so exposed to their battery, that their great shot was bowled in amongst our men, to their great loss and such confusion as made them quit their works, which the enemy's horse immediately possessed, seconded by their foot in great numbers; but first the horse on both sides exchanged a most brave but bloody encounter, the enemy's cannon extremely afflicting ours, being within their range. There was another work reasonably strong but likewise abandoned to the enemy. Our horse retreated, and the flying foot were rallied by Sir Jacob Astley in a wood where an ambush was fitly placed, but their rashness prevented its success, which might have been good. Our foot advanced from the wood to a hill, where six troops of our horse made a stand, and the enemy's horse coming up fought with them the second time, but the issue was bad, Commissary Wilmott, Sir John Digby, and Capt. O'Neale were taken prisoners, and we understand sent into Scotland. The fight was sharp and short, the flight general, and the foot being over-run by the horse in a narrow lane fled for company, less than 300 of ours fell, and more of the enemy...If I may speak my opinion the first error was in sending out so few men, the next in placing those in a low valley exposed to the enemy's ordnance, which almost encompassed us on the hills; thirdly, our want of ordnance; fourthly the neglect of two high banks which, commanding the lane wherein our foot were marching, might very aptly have been lined with musketeers to destroy the enemy's horse.

The third and final account of the battle which is of use to us (because the writer makes reference to topography as well as the fighting) is the *Narrative* penned by Lord Conway⁸.

The Scots having made a battery and drawn down their army, our works were provided with men to defend them, and with others to second them. Six troops of horse were placed to charge the Scots where they came over, and six or seven more were placed to second them. When the Scots forces were in readiness, and their cannon placed, our works were not proof against them; the soldiers were new, unacquainted with the cannon, and therefore did not endure many shot; those that were to second them followed their example.

The horse charged the Scots and drove them back into the river; but the cannon beating through, some of our troops that were sent to second went off when they saw the place forsaken. They should have gone on the left hand, that they might have gone off with the foot: but mistaking their direction, went on the right hand; which carried them up the hill, where they found some troops. Whilst they consulted what was best to be done, the Scots Horse came up in two divisions, and with them ten thousand musketeers. The first charge was upon the regiment commanded by Lord Wilmot, who was there taken prisoner, his men forsaking him, and falling foul of some troops of the Lord Conway's regiment, disordered them; the rest being charged, did as they saw others do before them.

The Battle

Rushworth's narrative is best at establishing the vicinity of the battle. But once the English retreat starts in earnest Dymock and Conway's testimony is of greater value. According to Rushworth there were two fords to be guarded and, for this purpose, two earthworks were erected. Dymock confirms that there were two sets of fortifications. The fact that Rushworth referred to the second work as being 'uppermost' led S R Gardiner to determine that one 'sconce' was behind the other⁹. However, as C.S. Terry¹⁰ pointed out, the first or 'greater' earthwork was most probably opposite Newburn and the smaller one lower down the river to the east: 'The shifting of Leslie's batteries to the eastward, after the 'greater' earthwork had fallen, supports such a position'. The first fortification presumably guarded Newburn Ford and the second Kelshaw Ford, half a mile down river.

Once the Scottish cannonade had driven Colonel Lunsford's men from the greater sconce and the second earthwork had come under fire, the Scottish cavalry began to probe the crossing. The fact that the Tyne is still

tidal at Newburn meant that low water, which occurred in mid-afternoon, was approaching. The sequence of events is not entirely clear but it appears that a counterattack by the English cavalry, stationed near the Stella end of the plain, initially enjoyed some success. They were eventually forced back, however, and according to Conway instead of retreating to the left (the direction the foot had retired) rode away to the right 'which carried them up the hill'. This suggests that the majority of the infantry fell back to the west in the direction of Ryton while the cavalry recoiled towards Stella (Rushworth states that the Foot retreated up both Ryton and Stella Banks, which strengthens the impression that the English army fled in two different directions). Looking at the landscape and the map today one imagines that the troops heading for Ryton would have scaled the bluffs via Holburn Dene; those heading eastwards might well have tried to escape up Stella Lane, a sunken road which appears old enough to have belonged to the seventeenth century.

To discover what happened from this point we have to try and reconcile the stories of Conway and Dymock. It is difficult to make much of Dymock's claim that Sir Jacob Astley rallied the infantry in a wood and that an ambush might have been attempted; we have no way of knowing where this occurred. Matters are more hopeful when he goes on to say that the foot advanced from the wood to a hill where six troops of cavalry made a stand. This dovetails with Conway's relation of events, in which he states that the cavalry rode off the plain to the right 'which carried them up the hill, where they found some troops' (presumably the rallied infantry). Since it has been already argued that the cavalry retreated by the Stella end of the battlefield 'the hill' can be one of two places: The Bewes Hills south of the Hexham Old Road, onto which the cavalry would debouch if they retreated up Stella Old Lane; or, alternatively, Image Hill, hard by the Tyne to the south-east of Stella. Deciding between the two is not easy. The Bewes Hills have been extensively quarried in the past and the landscape is distorted by a number of large waste heaps. The Ryton-Crawcrook by-pass, which crosses the hills on the line of a dismantled railway, will shortly be opening as well. The terrain is probably greatly changed from what it was.

Image Hill would be a more attractive candidate: excellent views over Stella and across to Newburn are available from its crest. But where could the 'narrow lane' be located in which Dymock writes that the English infantry were overwhelmed following the second rebuff of the English cavalry? Whereas on the Bewes Hills Stella Lane could perhaps once again have come into play, on Image Hill one looks towards the old line of Beweshill Lane, skirting the southern slopes of Image hill.

As regards the position of the Scots on the north bank of the Tyne, it is clear that they congregated in the immediate vicinity of Newburn. Since we know that cannon were mounted in the tower of the parish church it would be surprising if the Scots did not avail themselves of the vantage point afforded by the hill immediately behind to do the same. Hallow Hill and Rye Hill would also have provided important vantage points. But where one might find the 'Hill to the East', upon which Lesley later unmasked a battery of nine cannon to gall the English cavalry, is not obvious. The slopes of the valley are built over and no one place suggests itself as the appropriate spot.

Indication of Importance

The events of 28 August 1640 at Newburn Ford have never been accorded great recognition. It was the only action of a decidedly low-key war. The Scots acted with great restraint throughout, doing the minimum necessary to achieve their political objective. The English Army was ill-paid and mutinous and by no means had its heart in the fight. The small number of casualties in the battle - a few hundred at most - indicates that the fighting was not severe.

This would appear to suggest that Newburn languishes in well-deserved obscurity, but in fact the battle was in one respect of the greatest importance. The cost of first trying to get an army together to conduct the war, and then the need to find £200,000 to buy the Scots off once they occupied Newcastle after their success at Newburn, meant that King Charles I was forced to recall Parliament in November and deal with it in earnest for the first time in eleven years. Newburn administered the *coup de grace* to Charles' famous attempt to rule

without Parliament. The Long Parliament, destined to sit until the Restoration, was installed.

As a classical example of how to conduct an opposed river crossing, Newburn should be of interest to the student of military history. There are few examples of this form of operation to be found amongst other English battles.

The written sources for the Battle of Newburn are reasonably good. John Rushworth's presence at the battle is a boon: he viewed events with the eye of a historian. It is possible to reconstruct the course of the battle with a certain accuracy.

The alteration in the course of the River Tyne and the expanse of electricity generating installations to the east have wrought changes to Newburn battlefield. The three towns in the area - Stella, Newburn and Ryton- have all grown since the seventeenth century, Ryton in particular. This might appear to justify John Kinross's verdict that Newburn, as 'an industrial suburb of Newcastle' is 'a disappointing battlefield to visit'¹¹. But in a post-industrial age Newburn battlefield is undergoing a measure of rehabilitation. Power stations are in the process of demolition. Country parks and wildlife areas are created from the most unpromising material. Newburn offers fresh possibilities, although, as regards the battlefield, these are as yet unrecognised. Whereas Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council have erected boards explaining what flora and fauna are to be found in Ryton Willows protected wildlife area, there is no mention of the fact that a battle was once fought nearby. Instead, the board informs the reader that it is proposed that the important area known as Parson's Haugh should become a car park and events field.

The 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 discussion of the sources above and how references contained in them relate to the terrain as it is today makes the drawing of a battlefield area relatively straightforward. Beginning in the west on the north bank the boundary line would start near Ryton Island and continue until it reached Blayney Row. Turning east the line follows the road through the Tyne Riverside Country Park until it reaches the track heading north to Hallow Hill, runs round the back of Hallow Hill, Rye Hill and towards the height behind Newburn parish church. The battlefield is overbuilt eastwards from Newburn but is shown for illustrative purposes by a dashed line. The battlefield area follows the edge of the housing and picks up the line of the railway in front of the Scots' left wing.

Crossing the site of one of the power stations, the boundary line picks up the Constituency boundary for convenience to cross the river. The line would then re-emerge from the Tyne to the north of Image Hill, following the path of the Hexham Old Road (which incorporates the relevant section of the old Beweshill Lane) until it reaches Crookhill, whereupon it skirts the old part of Ryton near the thirteenth century parish church of Holy Cross. The battlefield area is complete once the line is taken round the church and its motte down to the banks of the Tyne once more.

Excluded from the area are the Bewes Hills. The evidence is too equivocal to permit their inclusion and, as already remarked, they have been excessively quarried in the past and the feature would have changed since the seventeenth century almost beyond recognition.

Notes

1. Rushworth's Narrative, extract printed in Terry, C S *The Life and Campaigns of Alexander Leslie First Earl of Leven* (London 1899) pp132-5.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *The Old Series Ordnance Survey Maps of England and Wales. Volume VIII: Northern England and the Isle of Man* (Harry Margery, Lympe Castle, Kent 1991) p34.
4. Rushworth, John *Historical Collections* (1721) iii 1236.
5. *The Lord Conway's Narrative of his Conduct in the Action at Newburn* printed in *State Papers Collected by Edward, Earl of Clarendon* (Oxford 1773) ii 107.
6. Rushworth's Narrative, printed in Terry *op. cit.*
7. Letter of Captain Thomas Dymock, printed in *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of Charles I 1640-1641* (London 1882) pp38-9.
8. *The Lord Conway's Narrative of his Conduct in the Action at Newburn*, extract printed by Terry pp136-7.
9. Gardiner, S R *A History of England From the Accession of James I to the Outbreak of the Civil War 1603-1642* vol. ix (2nd edn., London 1899) p193.
10. Terry *op. cit.* p114.
11. Kinross, John *The Battlefields of Britain* (Newton Abbot, 1979) p59.