

## **Battle of Redmarley 1644**

“*Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*” - Horace “Odes” I,xi (23 BC)  
“Seize the chances offered today, do not rely on tomorrow”.

### **Principal dramatis personae :**

(1) John Corbet - author of “*An Historical Relation of the Military Government of Gloucester*” (1645). He devotes four pages to the *Battle of Redmarley* and is the best contemporary source. His account was later republished verbatim by John Washbourne in his “*Bibliotheca Gloucestrensis*” (1825). Corbet was “preacher of God’s word” at St. Mary de Crypt Church in Gloucester. Domestic chaplain and intimate of Colonel Massey, Governor during the siege of the city in 1643, he was well placed to present the Parliamentary view (with appropriate “spin”). A fiery preacher with extreme Puritan views, he fell from grace at the Restoration in 1660 and died in obscurity in the 1680’s. (vide Atkin/Wroughton - details of ‘sources’ are at the end.)

(2) Colonel Edward Massey (1605? - 1674). A brilliant soldier whose career ambitions far outweighed his politico-religious convictions. A highly skilled military engineer with Prince Rupert in Europe during the Thirty Years War (1618 - 1648), he considered he was unjustly denied promotion by the Royalists and changed sides to the Parliamentarians. After the siege of Gloucester he was promoted Major-General of the Western Association. He quarreled with his superiors and changed allegiance again to the Royalists, conveniently just before the Restoration, under which he thrived conspicuously until his death. “*He loves to be in action, and is trying experimentings every day. His soldiers do exceedingly rejoice in his actings and exposings*” (contemporary news-book quoted by Wroughton.)

(3) Colonel Nicholas Mynne (1616? - 1644). A dynamic leader who as commander of a regiment of Irish infantry arrived in the first ship to enter Bristol when it was captured by the Royalists in July 1643 (Atkin). His troops, raised by the Irish Catholic aristocracy in the South, were ruthless fighters, regarding the Royalist cause as having a “Catholic” dimension against the “Protestantism” of the Parliamentarians.

**Action!** Leaving Bristol for the surrounding Parliament-held territory, Mynne and his men plundered, burned and killed their way into Gloucestershire, creating general mayhem around Stroud and Painswick and sacking Thornbury (Wroughton). Mynne was (briefly) Governor of Tewkesbury and was captured when Massey retook the town on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1644. (Tewkesbury had the distinction of changing hands some twelve times during the war!). He was freed in a matter of weeks, probably in exchange for a Parliamentary officer of equal status (Bennett). In July he was again a serious “thorn in the side” of the Parliamentarians as he prepared to devastate the countryside round Gloucester “*with fire and plunder, (by) running cattle and burning the corn in the fields - it being near the time of harvest*” (Corbet quoted by Atkin and Wroughton). Corbet’s account (pp108/9) describes Mynne as “*a serious and active enemy; a perpetual terror to the countryside*”. (These many Royalist “*vigorous guerrilla activities*” clearly cast doubt on Niblett’s late-19<sup>th</sup> century anodyne assertion that the ‘event’ was only “*a rather feeble attack*”!). Both sides were guilty of appalling atrocities; about the same time Massey was away wrecking havoc among the Royalists in the Forest of Dean. Those who suffered most were, predictably, the non-combatants, the majority of whom had no violent views, religious or political. Equally, many “recruits” to both armies were not motivated by lofty “ideals” either - they were “in it” because they were pressed into service or were simply attracted by the prospects of theft and plunder (Haythornthwaite).

It was against this general “county” scene that the *Battle of Redmarley* took place.

Frustratingly, Corbet does not give the precise date of the “action”. Opinions are still divided, with equally reputable historians opting either for July 27<sup>th</sup> (Gaunt, Gethyn-Jones) or August 2<sup>nd</sup> (Wroughton, Atkin). Others such as Niblett avoid the issue. There is, however, no gainsaying the entries in Redmarley burial records of “Aug 3<sup>rd</sup> - soldiers slaine 7 was buried; Aug 4<sup>th</sup> - more 5 was buried; Aug 6<sup>th</sup> - and 1 was buried; Aug 8<sup>th</sup> - and 2 was buried.

There are two principal versions of the “grand Royalist plan”. According to Atkin, Mynne and his men, aided by a contingent from Worcester, were to join up in a pincer movement near Newent with a contingent from Hereford and cut off Massey (away in the Dean - as noted) from his base in Gloucester. Massey seems to have returned from his “*actings and exposings*” in the Forest and to have encountered Mynne, unsupported by the other two contingents. Corbet’s account begins slightly differently. According to him, the plan was for the Hereford and the Worcester contingents to meet up at Corse Lawn and then attack Gloucester. Throughout Corbet seems to suggest that the troops commanded by Mynne during the battle included the Hereford troops as well as those with whom he had arrived from Ireland. This is perfectly feasible if we remember that Mynne had already been promoted second-in-command of Prince Rupert’s troops and was senior to Sir William Vavasour, the previous Hereford commander, who in any case had recently been relieved of his command by the King for inefficiency. (Vavasour complained that his men were “mostly poor quality Welsh troops.” *They* maintained they were always given the most dangerous tasks and the worst equipment!). Whichever version of the battle is correct, the timing of the whole operation was chaotic. Mynne was certainly not ready to fight until the Worcester men arrived, and there was no sign of them!

Evening was drawing on and the Royalists withdrew across the river Leadon at Highleadon and tried to lie low (“lie close”) in “Hartpury Field”. Ten of their number were taken prisoner. A troop of Parliamentary cavalry (from Tewkesbury?) arrived from Corse Lawn and took other prisoners. By now it was pitch dark, and, incredible as it may seem, *Massey and his men lost their enemy!* (It doesn’t say much for their ‘fieldcraft’ and ‘battle communications’!). The Royalists in fact had “*with great speed marched that night to Redmarley, (via Upleadon and Payford). Massey and his men “after a tedious wandring (sic) to find them out, came to Eldersfield, two miles away,”* where they rested briefly till dawn. (The villages are more than two miles apart).

Both sides were astir early. Massey’s men could hear the Royalist drums beating orders for their troops to draw up in battle order ready to meet the enemy (Corbet’s “*rendezvous*”). According to Gaunt, the battle was to take place on open (“unenclosed”) land between the two villages. Niblett estimates that “between 2,000 and 3,000 men must have taken part in the fight”, but the incomplete statistics provided by both Niblett and Corbet leave many questions unanswered. Corbet, for instance, says that the Royalists had 160 cavalry, 640 musketeers and 210 pikemen, but his account of those on his own side is (curiously!) incomplete - and to these we must add a further mysterious “Tewkesbury” contingent, both musketeers and the “armed countrymen” who appeared later. The battle tactics of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were very clearly defined (Haythornthwaite). The use of cavalry and supporting troops required a breadth of front which could not be found in the relatively small “enclosures” immediately round the two villages. There is good reason to suppose from later maps that these enclosures of the Tudor period a century earlier had still left an untouched area of grazing large enough to accommodate the almost “ritualistic movements” of the battle formations - or at least, as it turned out, of the early stages of the conflict.

The battle started and Massey’s men pressed back the Royalists, who gradually withdrew towards the “enclosed” area round the village. Royalist musketeers had been concealed in the hedgerows and had to be flushed out of their positions. Corbet complains that the phalanx of

Parliamentarian cavalry flanked by infantry - the so-called "Swedish" battle formation - could not operate properly "because of the frequent inclosures (sic) which would not make room for a larger (wider) forme". They had to advance in file (along the narrow lanes?) under the fire of the (partly hidden) enemy. Details fall thick and fast in Corbet's account at this point; the initial "groupings" were broken up and the overall picture was one of utter confusion. Several individual incidents are recounted involving names known to Corbet's contemporaries, but mostly lost on us today. Captain Backhouse is perhaps the main exception, being famed for his dubious connection with Massey and double-dealing in the *Backhouse Plot* during the siege of Gloucester a year earlier. It is a pity that Corbet makes not a single reference to "features" such as the Church, the Inn House, Hazeldine or Innerstone fields which might give us a sense of direction. As it is, "associations" with these places, true or otherwise, were added only later. *Over two centuries later, in most cases*, when in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Rector, Rev. H.M. Niblett, conscientiously recorded in his "History" and in some inedited jottings, the "reminiscences" of some of his parishioners who seem to have had remarkably good memories (or good imaginations?) concerning the events of the day - John Pitt (the "old cowman"), Hannah Newman and Ann Hardman are three names which come to mind..

As the day went on the action seems to have moved to the centre of the "town" - (*town* and *village* were often used interchangeably at this time). The characteristics of the equipment in use suggest that most of the fighting was now inevitably hand-to-hand. Weapons were unbelievably cumbersome. A contemporary training manual lists fourteen stages of preparation before firing each single musket shot - two shots a minute would be "very good going". The range was about 200 yards - much less if you wished to be accurate! The weapon was often rested on a monopod stand, it was so heavy. Little wonder therefore that after the first shot the weapon was frequently "reversed" and its butt used as a club. The pikeman's weapon was a steel spike on an unwieldy ash shaft 15 to 18 feet long, designed to be used not singly but in platoon formations. The cavalryman generally had a brace of pistols - one was not much use, reloading on a fractious horse in battle was impossible. It was perhaps "a good thing" that each man had a second weapon in the form of a long sword. We note particularly that Corbet makes *not the slightest reference* to "cannons", "cannon balls" or any other "artillery". Such weapons would be quite unsuitable in this type of 'action' - see later. This inevitably casts doubt on several of the "19<sup>th</sup> century reminiscences" referred to above.

Corbet gives us no idea as to the whereabouts of the villagers at this time. One of Niblett's 19<sup>th</sup> century parishioners asserted that they 'fled to the woods'. (Redmarley Woods as we know them today did not exist, though there may have been a couple of coppices on the site). One man is reputed to have hidden in an oven!

After a while - (Corbet gives no idea either of the passage of time), it appears that the Parliamentarians "*gallantly and in good order*" organised a more systematic attack. (Corbet is suddenly mindful of his "duty" to "spin"). "*The horse and foot plaid (sic) their part with resolution and gallantry.... The enemy was left to our execution, their whole body broken and shattered, many wounded and slain, but more taken.....Major-General Min* (he was only a Colonel, as Corbet says later) *was slain on the place with an hundred and seventy*". He doesn't say which 'place', unfortunately. He then gives an impressive list of eighteen Royalist officers, twelve sergeants and three hundred "common soldiers" who were taken prisoner.

*The death of Colonel Mynne* was the turning point in the Battle. So far victory could have gone either way, but now the Royalists had lost their demonically charismatic leader and their fortunes went downhill, while the spirits of the Parliamentarians were correspondingly emboldened. Corbet still denies us any "landmarks", but it seems likely that the Royalists were forced back in bloody disarray down what we now think of as the Bromesberrow Road, past the (unenclosed)

village green and “Redhill Farm” in the general direction of Donnington. Showing rather better battle tactics than after Hartpury the previous day, Corbet tells us that some of Massey’s troops (cavalry?) tried to get ahead of the “broken” Royalists and cut off their retreat so that they could be annihilated. Unexpectedly they came across Lieutenant-Colonel Passey of the (belatedly approaching) Worcester Royalist contingent, who was riding out ahead of the main party to give the “Redmarley” Royalists the “good news” that help was at hand. Massey’s scouts wounded him and thus prevented him from completing his mission, “*so that neither enemy had the knowledge of each other’s condition*”. (A subsequent enquiry is said to have concluded that there had been a “mix up” of dates!)

Realizing that his battle-weary troops could not give a good account of themselves against the new enemy from Worcester, Massey decided to break off the engagement and return to Gloucester, (possibly via Dymock, if circumstantial evidence is correct in suggesting that he was somewhere near Donnington by now). “Statistics”, such as they are, are of no great value. As noted, Corbet speaks of over 170 Royalist dead and over 300 prisoners taken, but of the “casualties” on his own side (spin?) he says absolutely nothing. Certainly a lot of blood was spilt to achieve very little, and what happened to the majority of the corpses is unknown to this day, though numerous “investigations” have been made. It is usually accepted that they were probably buried where they fell. Parish records were notoriously ill-maintained during the war. “Redmarley” records stand out as an exception in this respect.

*Reflecting the code of honour to be found among “officers and gentlemen” in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, (and at other times), Corbet charitably concludes that “the body of Colonel Mynne was brought to Gloucester, and vouchsafed an honourable burial.” (where we do not know - the records of St. Mary de Crypt are “blank” during the whole period). A contemporary penned the following epitaph - “He was missed by his friends, ...honoured by his foes ...the shrewdest enemy in Christendom”.*

**“True or unlikely?” - some “legends” about the Battle** (In no particular order)

1) “A mound at Innerstone Farm may well contain the remains of soldiers in the Battle”. Could be true, though “nothing has been found”. Almost certainly there was fierce fighting in the area. “A ghostly Royalist cavalryman rides along Innerstone Lane at night”. - It all depends on whether you believe in ghosts.

2) “Colonel Mynne was shot as he came out of the Inn House”.

It is very tempting to believe that Mynne selected the Inn House, one of the principal buildings in the village, as his headquarters, but we simply do not know for certain. As noted already, Corbet doesn’t mention it. Niblett refers to it somewhat ambiguously when he talks about “the old cowman John Pitt”, who in 1884, more than two centuries after the *Battle*, seems to have been a veritable repository of gossip about the events of the day. It is Niblett (and Pitt) who suggest that “Mynne was shot at by a “countryman” who knew him”. This gives food for thought (and speculation!). Corbet tells us that the Tewkesbury Parliamentarians who arrived after the *Battle* had started were accompanied by some countrymen armed with muskets. These “civilians” sound rather like “Clubmen” - a sort of 17<sup>th</sup> century “Dad’s Army” - known to be emerging in the Bredon and Tewkesbury area at this time, who “clubbed together” to defend their property against the armies of *both* sides. *Mynne had been Governor of Tewkesbury* (see earlier). Did this particular “countryman” have a grudge against him - who knows?

3) *“Was Cromwell in the area at the time?”*

Highly unlikely. (This is another of the ‘John Pitt stories’). All the standard biographies tell us that Cromwell was 150 miles away near Doncaster. After the recent victory at Marston Moor (2<sup>nd</sup> July), he was busy “mopping up” pockets of Royalists in the area. More importantly, he was having trouble with his own army. The “common soldiery” were threatening mutiny (not without reason!), and certain officers were plotting against him. He would have been a fool “to have taken a short break in Wonderful Worcestershire” at this time.

4) *“The vertical grooves at waist-level on the Church Tower were made by soldiers sharpening their weapons?”*

Very unlikely. Can anyone really imagine sharpening a three foot long sword blade in a groove less than a foot in length? Corbet makes no mention of “arrows” - hardly surprisingly, since armies ceased using “arrows” soon after the Armada in 1588 - “muskets” were now the “latest technology” The present tower dates from 1738, the earlier tower having been demolished completely as far as the base (the plinth). Comparing the difference in colour of the stone, it seems safe to assume that the ‘grooves’ are in the *post-1738* stonework. Niblett draws an interesting comparison with a church in Yardley. He is presumably referring to *St Edburgha’s Parish Church* (see website). The present tower and spire of St Edburgha’s date from 1461, and the ‘grooves’ are said to have been made by villagers sharpening their *arrows* and *knives* before going hunting in the *Forest of Arden*. - but that would have been normal - 200 years *before* the *Battle of Redmarley!*

One final “legend” about the Tower. In 1902 parishioner Hannah Newman told the Rector that “*the Church Tower had been wrapped in wool to protect it during the Battle*”. The good Rector notes, (without comment!), that a similar “story” regarding Gloucester Cathedral during the siege of 1643 appeared eight years earlier - in 1894 - in Edna Lyall’s novel “*To right the wrong*”.

5) *“The road near Redhill Cottage and Redhill Farm was ankle-deep in blood during the Battle - hence the name?”*

( This is an Ann Hardman “story” reported by the Rector, - the same Ann Hardman referred to in Percy Young’s “*Alice Elgar*”). A lot of blood was doubtless spilt in the lane, but “ankle deep” is a bit strong! Elsewhere, how about Red Ditch Lane and Redthorne (cottage)? Presumably there could have been blood in the ditch, but the balance of probability suggests that the name is a good deal older.

6) *“Labourers working in the fields near Hazeldine suddenly found cannon balls flying over their heads”*

(Another ‘*legend*’ noted by Niblett). One wonders why they were working in the fields anyway, if the rest of the population had fled? The main question is, however, where did the “cannon balls” come from. As noted already, *Corbet makes no mention of “artillery”*. A cannon is essentially a static “siege” weapon, useful for battering holes in walls and demolishing barricades. “*It terrifies men more than it injures them*” - Vauban, French military engineer under Louis XIV. Above all “Redmarley” was a swift moving “action” (by the standards of the time!), back and forth, men against men, not men against buildings. It would have been pointless dragging a cumbersome cannon all the way from Gloucester. No, if anything was flying over their heads, it was probably “musket balls” which grew into “cannonballs” with the constant repetition of the tale. (There may also be a link with the following!)

7) *“Men killed in the Battle were buried at Donnington, where cannon balls have been found”*.

Both things are possible. A cannon ball may certainly be seen in a glass case in Donnington Church, though no “remains” are known to have been found. Parish records in Herefordshire Record Office for Donnington, Ledbury and the surrounding parishes are “blank” between May

1643 and September 1645 (not uncommon in the Civil War). It is, however known that cannon were used to destroy barricades in the Battle of Ledbury in April 1645, nine months after "Redmarley" (Gaunt). Several cannon balls have apparently been found south of the town over the years. Elements of both battles have presumably become confused with the passage of time.

*(Doubtless other "legends" about the Battle also exist).*

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(Eric Smith - November 2005)