

CROMWELL'S VICTORY AT BOVEY HEATH, 9 JANUARY 1646

# TOSS A COIN TO A ROUNDHEAD

After the defeat of King Charles' army at Naseby in 1645, the Royalists were for the most part a shattered and spent force. Most veteran regiments had been destroyed and much of their arms and ammunition had been lost. The Parliamentarians' New Model Army had proven to be more than a match for the Royalist forces. Short on trained men and finances, recruiting and reequipping a royal army to the standard of the forces lost at Naseby would be next to impossible. However, hope held out as some regions were still loyal to the Crown.

By Guy Bowers

**F**airfax started to mop up the remaining loyalist areas. The West Country in particular remained a Royalist hotspot; they held control over most of the region with the notable exceptions of Plymouth, Lyme Regis, and Taunton (captured in 1644). These three had

all remained staunchly Parliamentarian despite being besieged.

The New Model Army under Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell (who remained an MP due to a loophole in the Self-Denying Ordinance) moved to attack the Royalist forces at Langport in July 1645. The Royalists gathered all the troops they could, break-

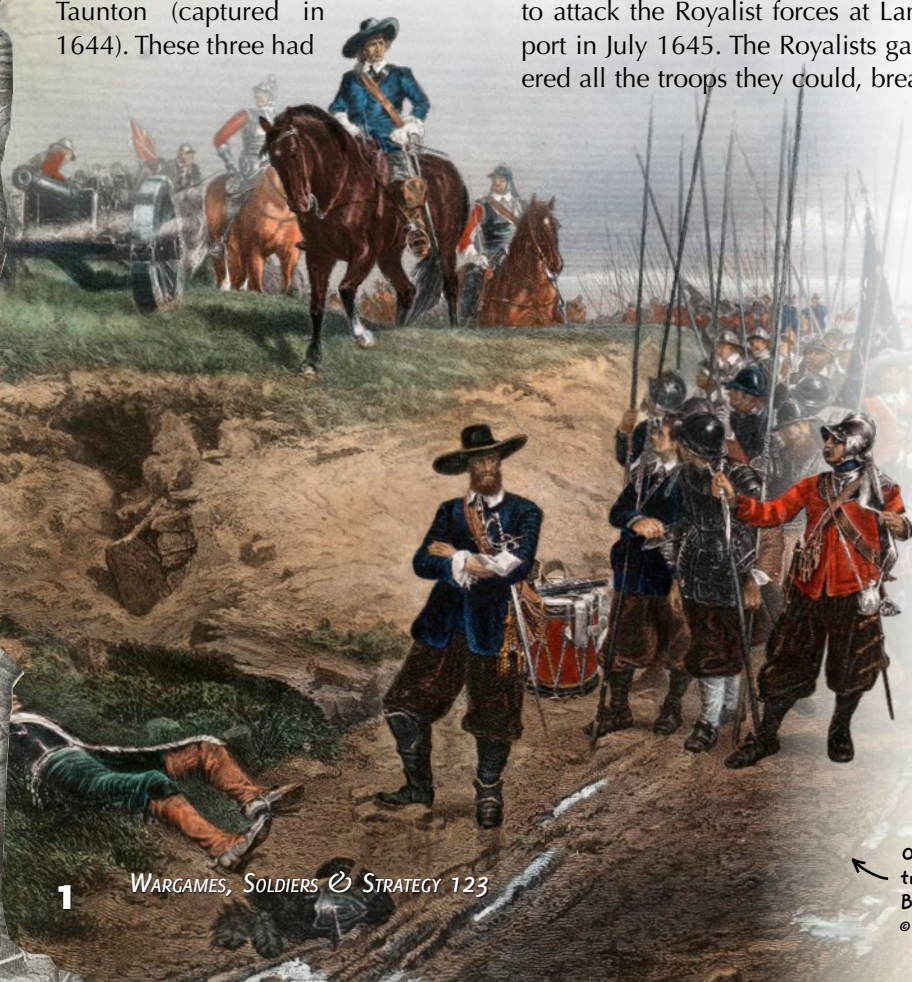
ing the siege of Taunton. However, after the Parliamentarian guns neutralized the Royalist artillery, Parliamentarian cavalry charged, throwing the Royalists into confusion and retreat.

What remained of the Royalist force retreated to Exeter, while the Parliamentarian army concentrated on taking Sherbourne and Bristol (the key manufacturing hub for the Royalist cause). Once Bristol had fallen in August, Fairfax reorganized his forces and moved them to besiege Exeter late in 1645.

Most of the remaining Royalist infantry had retreated into Exeter, but there wasn't sufficient space for the cavalry, nor was it wise to lose the cavalry's mobility by having them garrison a city. Instead, the three regiments of horse under the command of Lord Wentworth made a camp on Bovey Heath to the south of Bovey Tracey. A small garrison was kept guarding the bridge in the town to prevent an enemy force from crossing there. Fortifications were built on the heath facing mainly north and east, covering the crossing of the lower Bovey. Little remains of these earthworks now, as only a small part of the heath battlefield has been preserved.

Oliver Cromwell leads his troops at the 2 July 1644 Battle of Marston Moor.

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**NOTE**

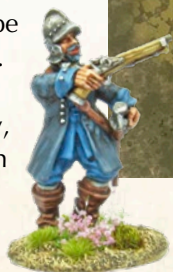
All the Royalists have poor morale, so have a higher morale score than normal (remember, a lower morale is better in *The Pikeman's Lament*). While it was tempting to put a regimental gun in this scenario, there is no evidence that either side had artillery.

Cromwell's New Model Cavalry make a daring charge into the unprepared side of the Royalist encampment.

The Parliamentarians learnt of the Royalists' force and Fairfax dispatched Cromwell with a small cavalry force. The Royalists were expecting an attack from the east directly from Exeter. However, in early January, Cromwell headed for Moretonhampstead and approached Bovey Tracey from the north, crossing the River Bovey probably at Hisley Bridge. The weather would have likely been cold, but not freezing. The River Bovey would have been swollen by the rain and therefore quite an obstacle to cross.

The garrison holding the bridge at Bovey Tracey was attacked first; the Royalists were caught off guard and from behind their defences. They were expecting an attack from the east, not from behind. There is a, probably apocryphal, story that the Royalist garrison's officers were playing cards when the Roundheads stormed in. The officers threw down their winnings and, while the Parliamentarians scrambled for the money, made their escape through the back door of the inn.

After capturing Bovey Tracey, Cromwell made his way down



to the camp on Bovey Heath on 7 January. Seeing the camp was fortified, Cromwell took his forces and attacked from the west, the side that lacked fortifications.

**GAMING THE BATTLE**

Bovey Heath makes for a very interesting battle, as it pitches a smaller well-led force against a larger unprepared force. Cromwell is described as having "a small cavalry force", so



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this was probably outnumbered by the Royalists. Numbers for the battle are hard to give; an English Civil War cavalry regiment at full strength was theoretically up to 500 men, but I doubt the three Royalist regiments had anything like this number. I'd estimate they were 200 per regiment and their total strength at some 600. Cromwell's New Model Army was probably half that at 300. The Parliamentary attack is likely to have occurred at first light.

The scenario is designed for *Pikeman's Lament*, although it could be adapted for other rulesets and larger battles by using the forces here as a rough guide.

**Parliamentarian forces**

The New Model cavalry would have been well led, and they were probably veterans from Cromwell's Ironsides.

The New Model soldiers have dismounted and are proceeding on foot.

- 3x elite aggressive gallopers (6 galloper models in each unit)
- 2x veteran dragoons (6 models in each unit) – these may alternately be dismounted as two units of forlorn hope.

Cromwell has the 'Natural Leader' and 'Commanding' officer traits and joins one of the units. History grants Cromwell the 'Blessed' trait, although Royalists and Irish players will strongly disagree with this!







The small Royalist garrison left behind in Bovey Tracey is attacked. Obviously the officers were playing cards...

All Parliamentarian units start at the west end of the battlefield.

### Royalist forces

The Royalists are in camp and not expecting an attack. A small guard has been left awake but the rest of the forces are in their tents. All the Royalist forces initially count as commanded shot, except that the Cavaliers cannot skirmish or evade. Once roused, they may attempt to mount their horses. The mounts should be corralled in two separate areas of the compound.

- Guards – 3x commanded shot initially manning the defences (one north, one east, and one south). The fortifications give no cover from the inside.
- Sleeping Cavaliers – 6x commanded shot (starting the game inactive).

Wentworth was described as “a very lazy and unactive man” and thus has the ‘Ineffectual’ officer trait. He will join one of the Cavalier units.

### Special rules

**Let Sleeping Cavaliers lie:** Each Sleeping Cavalier unit needs to pass an attack order to wake up and become active; they can take no action until then. Once awake, it counts as a unit of commanded shot, with the limitations as outlined above. If the unit moves into contact with the horses, in the following turn the men may attempt a second attack order to mount up – exchange their models for either a galloper or



a dragoon cavalry unit. They retain their morale of 5+ once mounted, however.

**The din of battle:** In the interest of fairness, once combat has been initiated (casualties removed by either side), each Sleeping Cavalier unit may attempt to activate to wake up each turn. A failed attack activation by a Sleeping Cavalier unit does not cause the turn to end.

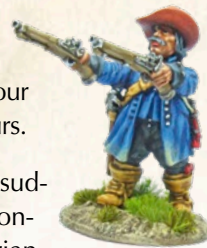
**The king’s colours:** An activated Cavalier unit may move to take the king’s colours, granting the unit a morale bonus (reducing its leadership from 5+ to 3+).

### Victory conditions

The New Model cavalry must disperse the Royalist forces. They gain one honour for every Royalist unit routed or

destroyed, one for capturing Wentworth, and three honour for capturing the king’s colours.

The Royalists must repel the sudden attack. They gain one honour for every Parliamentarian unit routed or destroyed and three honour if they hold onto the king’s colours. If they manage to make Cromwell a casualty (only possible by destroying his unit or in a duel), they may gain two honour.



### CONCLUSION

Cromwell’s surprise attack completely took the encamped Royalists by surprise. While the senior Royalist officers including Lord Wentworth escaped, the Roundheads captured four hundred horses and seven standards, including the king’s colours. With the garrison at Bovey gone, the New Model Army was clear to besiege Dartmouth, building a redoubt at Gallant’s Bower. Once Dartmouth fell (on 17 January), the Royalists lost one of their only ports and the fate of Exeter was sealed. The Battle of Torrington (February 1646) broke the Royalists’ powerbase, and Exeter fell in April. With the West Country gone, the Royalist capital at Oxford surrendered in June 1646. The English Civil War was over ... for now ... **WS&S**

*You can visit the battle site at Bovey Heath but little remains, and the battlefield is sadly in very poor repair.*



The dismounted Royalist cavalry attempt to quickly muster and ready their resting horses for battle.