

WRITINGS AND SOURCES XVII:  
Minor Operations in the English Civil War

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*by Peter Gaunt*

Modern histories of the English civil war of the 1640s tend to focus upon set-piece battles and major sieges. This is understandable, as they were not only the biggest war-time military operations but also those which are most fully recorded in surviving sources and so most accessible to historians. However, they were not the commonest form of fighting, certainly not in England and Wales during the main civil war of 1642-46. Far more typical were much smaller and more limited engagements, ranging from skirmishes and raids to beating-up quarters and opportunist strikes. Each involved modest numbers of soldiers and resulted in equally modest casualties, although cumulatively they probably accounted for the majority of those killed and seriously wounded in action in England and Wales. Historians can never recover a complete picture of such small-scale operations, for they were only occasionally recorded in the weekly newspapers of the war years and in other contemporary accounts. Evidently, very many minor clashes of this ilk passed by entirely unrecorded. But where surviving sources do provide reasonably detailed accounts of this level of fighting, they can give an insight into the war at a local level and a flavour of the sort of operations which were typical of the local experience of the fighting.

The classic surviving account of a skirmish is that recalled and recorded many years later by the Shropshire antiquarian Richard Gough as the only significant fighting to have occurred during the war in his home village of Myddle in northern Shropshire. 'There was one Cornet Collins, an Irishman, who was a garrison soldier for the king at Shrawardine Castle. This Collins made his excursions very often into this parish, and took away cattle, provision and bedding and what he pleased. On the day before this conflict, he had been at Myddle taking away bedding and when Margaret, the wife of the Allen Chaloner, the smith, had brought out and showed him her best bed, he thinking it too coarse, cast it into the lake before the door and trod it under his horse[s] feet'. Collins and seven royalist colleagues from Shrawardine halted in the village the next day, so that Collins could have his horse reshod at the smithy, but they stumbled into a party of eight parliamentary troops from Morton Corbet garrison, commanded by Richard Maning. They had come to the village not in the hope of finding royalists but rather to search for and to pursue a grudge against a particular individual. 'This Maning and his companions...came into Myddle at the gate by Mr Gittin's house, at what time the cornet's horse was a-shoeing. The cornet hearing the gate clap looked by the end of the shop and saw the soldiers coming and thereupon he and his men mounted their horses; and as the cornet came at the end of the shop, a brisk young fellow shot him through the body with a carbine shot, and he fell down in the lake at Allen Chaloner's door. His men fled, two were taken, and as Maning was pursuing them in Myddle Wood Field,...Maning having the best horse overtook them while his partners were far behind, but one of the cornet's men shot Maning's horse which fell down dead under him, and Maning had been taken prisoner had not some of his men came to rescue him...The horse was killed on a bank near the further side of Myddle Field, where the widow Mansell has now a piece enclosed. The cornet was carried into Allen Chaloner's house and laid on the floor; he desired to have a bed laid under him, but Margaret told him she had none but that which he saw yesterday; he prayed her to forgive him and lay that under him, which she did'. Gough certainly recalled the aftermath, despite the passage of the years. 'Mr Roderick [the minister] was sent to pray with him [Collins]. I went with him and saw the cornet lying on the bed and much blood running along the floor. In the night following a troop of horses came from Shrawardine and pressed a team in

Myddle and so took the cornet to Shrawardine, where he died the next day'.<sup>1</sup> This had been an accidental, unplanned and wholly unexpected encounter between two small groups of eight or so mounted troops based in rival garrisons in Shropshire occurring in the no-man's land between them, a clash in a village which otherwise saw no fighting but which nonetheless left a man shot and slowly bleeding to death, a horse killed and two men prisoners, who were executed by hanging shortly afterwards.

Another example of a limited and opportunist operation was related by the secretary of the parliamentarian John Birch in his later biography of his master. He provided a colourful account of how one evening at the end of October 1644, shortly after the indecisive second battle of Newbury in Berkshire, they had been riding outside the town when they quickly drew aside on hearing the approach of coaches. Shielding their faces so as not to be identified in the moonlight as enemies, they were able to watch unmolested as a royalist mounted party comprising nearly 100 troopers, three coaches, waggons and unmounted horses, rattled past through the night. Holding up a straggler at pistol point, they discovered that it was the royalist lord general, Lord Forth, together with his wife and female relatives, his goods and a mounted guard, travelling through the night from Donnington Castle, where he had remained after being wounded in the battle, in order to rejoin the king and the main royalist army. Determined to capture such a rich prize, Birch returned to the parliamentarian HQ in Newbury, but he was unable to interest a sleepy Earl of Manchester in the operation. Nonetheless, rousing some soldiers, Birch quickly managed to gather together a party of around 50 parliamentarian cavalymen who were interested in the venture and the potential prize. They pursued Forth's party through the dark night, Birch several times feeling for the fresh coach tracks to guide them. Having travelled sixteen miles and with dawn approaching, they bumped into a small royalist party by a gate which Forth had cautiously left behind as a rear-guard. Birch approached a sentry pretending to be a traveller who had lost his way and was seeking directions, and not until too late did the man realise what was happening; he attempted to draw his sword, but Birch had his at the ready under his cloak and 'made such a hole in his skin as brought a groan from him'. Birch's colleagues then helped him overcome the remainder of the twelve-strong royalist rear-guard, who 'were quickly dispatched'. But the main royalist party, who had halted in the village beyond, saw or heard what was afoot and attempted quickly to turn out, whereupon Birch's party immediately attacked, as they did so attempting to unnerve their opponents by pretending that they were merely the advanced unit of a much bigger force, arranging for several trumpets to sound behind them and crying 'aloud "Gentlemen, let's not stay for the body of horse but fall on them instantly"', which at a high trot was done and they presently routed'. Two bodies of royalist horse were attacked and put to flight, though this gave Forth and his party sufficient time to move off, some on horseback, others in the coaches. Birch and his men pursued the coaches for a further four or five miles, until they entered another village, where a substantial body of royalist lifeguards were stationed. Again, Birch bluffed that he had a much larger parliamentarian army just behind him by shouting out as if giving orders, 'Gentlemen, lay out quarters in this town presently for my Lord Manchester's regiment of horse' and 'in the next village let Sir William Waller's regiment quarter', accompanied by some of his party sounding trumpets behind him. Even though Birch's men were in fact outnumbered by three to one, the royalist lifeguards fell back and without further opposition Birch captured the coaches and waggons, including female members of Forth's family, horses and various prisoners, though Forth himself had escaped on horseback. Although now a good twenty miles from their base and deep in royalist territory, Birch and his party managed to get their prizes safely back to Newbury.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. Gough, *The History of Myddle*, ed. D. Hey (London, 1981), pp. 73-74.

<sup>2</sup> J. and T.W. Webb, *Military Memoir of Colonel John Birch...Written by Roe, his Secretary* (Camden Society, new series 7, 1873), pp. 17-21.

However, fascinating and colourful as they are, historians need to exercise caution in using largely uncorroborated sources of this sort. The story of the clash in Myddle related by Richard Gough is part of his much broader local history, an antiquarian account which appears to have no particular bias or slant beyond a keen ear for gossip and scandal. Moreover, the broader context is plausible, for Shropshire was a divided county for much of the civil war, Shrawardine and Morton Corbet did respectively house a royalist and a parliamentary garrison during the war years and we know of a few other raids, counter-raids and minor clashes between rival garrisons in northern Shropshire. The only significant doubt is about how well Gough, who was born in 1635 and so would probably have been under ten years of age when these events occurred, could accurately recall them when he wrote this account in his old age during the opening years of the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

The pursuit of and attack upon Lord Forth and his entourage, as recounted by John Birch's secretary, presents more difficulties. Again, the context is accurate, as we know from several other sources that Forth was wounded in the battle of Newbury, remained at Donnington Castle for a short while and then rode away to rejoin the king and his main southern army. On this occasion, we also have other contemporary accounts which partly corroborate the story of a daring parliamentary pursuit, as it is briefly mentioned or alluded to in some of the newspapers of early November 1644. For instance, *The Parliament Scout* reported under the date 2 November that Forth, his wife and others, not wishing to find themselves besieged within Donnington Castle, had 'adventured out...in the fog, but were pursued, and had not his spare horse been nimble, he as well as the females and coach had been taken, but he escaped'.<sup>4</sup> More importantly and revealingly, a few months later, in spring 1645, one of the parliamentary newspapers printed a fuller version of events by Lieutenant-Colonel Thorpe, who was commanding the parliamentary guard on the north side of Newbury after the battle and who was ordered by Birch to provide forty mounted men for the venture. Birch, Thorpe and these forty troopers pursued Forth and his party for eight miles, whereupon they captured Forth's wife, other distinguished prisoners, around fifty royalist troops, three coaches and a waggon full of supplies, all without the loss of a single parliamentarian. Thorpe claimed that he and just two other men rode after Forth for a further nine miles, having him in their sight much of the way, but eventually they gave up the chase and returned to Newbury, Thorpe 'having but some two men with him, and his horse being weary'.<sup>5</sup> Thus Thorpe's account points to a somewhat more limited and less colourful operation than that recounted by Birch's secretary and, while acknowledging that the successful operation was triggered by Birch, ascribes to him a smaller role in subsequent events. This is what we might expect, for the account of Birch's war-time

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<sup>3</sup> As Gough is our only source for this and his account gives few firm dates, we cannot even be certain when these events occurred. The two captured royalist soldiers were executed as so-called Irishmen, that is men who had crossed from Ireland to mainland England and Wales to fight for the king, so this places the clash at Myddle after the first significant landing of royalist reinforcements during the closing weeks of 1643 and probably after parliament had passed an ordinance in October 1644 authorising and ordering such summary executions. Shrawardine was probably not garrisoned for the king until summer 1644 and it surrendered to parliament in June 1645, while Morton Corbet seems to have been garrisoned by parliament from autumn 1644. A decent if far from exhaustive search of the weekly newspapers of autumn and winter 1644-45, the most likely period for the raid on and clash at Myddle, and of other pamphlets of those months which give accounts of military activity in and around Shropshire, has so far failed to find any other reference to these events in Myddle.

<sup>4</sup> *The Parliament Scout*, no. 72, 31 Oct.-7 Nov. 1644, p. 565. *Perfect Passages of Each Dayes Proceedings in Parliament*, no. 3, 30 Oct.-6 Nov. 1644, p. 22, in a report appearing under the date Friday 1 November, noted that Forth and a few others had got away from Donnington the previous Monday night, but made no mention of them being pursued.

<sup>5</sup> *The Kingdoms Weekly Intelligencer*, no. 95, 8-15 April 1645, pp. 760-61.

activities written by his secretary, reviewed and selectively corrected by Birch himself, repeatedly magnifies and at times probably exaggerates his role in the conflict, throughout stressing his courage and military success, in places emphasising his ability to fight against great odds or in positions of great danger, as well as his skill and ingenuity in deceiving and outwitting his enemies, at one point also claiming very implausibly that he fought on for a good while despite suffering grievous and life-threatening wounds.<sup>6</sup> While Gough's account may be coloured by the passage of time, that of Birch's secretary is certainly designed to exalt its subject. Historians of the civil war must keep in mind not only how the non-survival of source material sometimes limits or skews our knowledge of the war but also how the slanted or selective nature of some of the extant contemporary sources often necessitates careful handling and cautious interpretation.

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<sup>6</sup> J. and T.W. Webb, *Military Memoir of Colonel John Birch*, pp. 2-37 *passim*.