

The first Battle of Alton, in February 1643, was a minor skirmish. A party of about 200 Parliamentarians stopped in the town. Soon afterwards, they were surprised by the arrival of 1,500 Royalists, who refused their pleas for mercy. The two sides fought each other from opposite ends of the street. Surprisingly, the Parliamentary troops inflicted severe casualties and survived to escape at night.



watercolour after R Stanton

St Lawrence Church in the 18th century, probably similar to 17th C

The second Battle interests us because it involved the church building. The Parliamentary forces, under Sir William Waller, were encamped at Farnham, a base for attacks on Basing House. A Royalist force, under Sir Ralph Hopton, had withdrawn to Odiham in November 1643, but, short of provisions and with winter approaching, they spread themselves throughout the area. 900 Royalist foot soldiers under Colonel Boles¹ and Lord Crawford's regiment of horse arrived in Alton on 1st December and fortified the town, particularly St Lawrence churchyard

¹ Different sources give Bole, Boles, Bolle, and Bolles; Waller's despatch gives his name as Richard but most other sources say John.

and the surrounding houses. Warned that Waller's Parliamentarians had been reinforced, Crawford sent out scouts along the Farnham road to see if they were approaching.

But, late on the evening of 12th December, Waller and his men set off from Farnham, in the dark and away from the main roads, so evading the Royalist scouts. Near Crondall, he turned to the south west, marching through lanes and woods. The frosty ground eased the Parliamentary progress and enabled them to bring some light (leather) cannon. By nine o'clock on the morning of the 13th December, about 3,000 of Waller's troops had marched to within half a mile of Alton without being discovered.



Re-enactment in 2000 JAR Willis

Their attack from the north and west took the Royalists completely by surprise. Crawford's cavalry withdrew into the town but they realised that they could do little there, confined in the narrow streets, and that they would be of more value to the King if alive to fight another day. So they broke out and fled, leaving 200 or so behind to join the remaining Royalists, led by Col Boles.

These men were now heavily outnumbered, perhaps three to one, and were gradually pushed back to the churchyard. After two hours, more Parliamentarians arrived and the Royalists abandoned the churchyard, leaving a few muskets pointing over the top of the wall to look as if they were still there. They took refuge inside the church. Although they piled dead horses up to barricade the doors, the Parliamentarians burst into the church and, in fierce fighting, Col Boles was killed, reputedly in the pulpit. Later, when the King heard of Boles' death, he is recorded as saying, "Bring me my mourning scarf; I have lost one of the best commanders in this Kingdom."



R Handley

Mid 17th century pulpit; perhaps where Col Boles died but no bullet holes survive.

Between 100 and 200 hundred men had been killed and many horses. 900 men were taken prisoner; their first job was to clear away the dead bodies of men and horses, and bury them - the Royalists in a communal grave probably on the north side of the church. As many as 500 men

might have changed sides, joining the Parliamentary army by 'taking the covenant'. The rest were led off to Farnham and then London.

In the following years, between 1644 and 1646, the church accounts show the churchwardens trying to clear up the damage. Amongst other things, they paid out 12s 10d for mending glass; 1s 4d for lathes; £3 19s 4d for lime, sand and work; 1s 6d for mending the church book; 4s 6d for hooks and gates; 5s for cleaning the roof; 14s for a new wheel for the great bell; 6s for a ladder; and 1s 1d for mending the pulpit windows. When part of the churchyard was dug up about 100 years ago, buttons from the uniforms of both sides were found. During the restoration of the roof in the 19th century, bullets were uncovered. The church door still has bullet holes in it and a bigger loophole cut, through which muskets could have been fired.



E J M Hepper

Church doors, showing bullet holes

In addition, there was extensive damage in the town from the house- to- house fighting when the Royalists were pushed back to the churchyard and thatched roofs were lit, either by accident, or intentionally to give smoke cover to the troops.

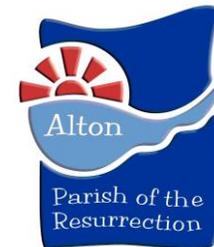
The Battle was perhaps the most significant event in Alton's history. It reduced Royalist influence in the area, put more pressure on the defenders of Basing House (which withstood siege for over two years) and prevented the Royalist troops from advancing on London, thus changing the course of the war and the history of our country.

Col Boles is remembered on a brass plate beside his burial place in Winchester Cathedral and a replica of it can be found in St Lawrence Church on the nave pillar nearest the entrance.

Note by Edward and Judith Hepper.
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References:

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The Battle of Alton, 1643 and St Lawrence Church

St Lawrence Church in
The Parish of The Resurrection,
Alton

