



Historic England

# Battlefields

Registration Selection Guide



# Summary

The *Register of Historic Battlefields* was established in 1995 and is administered by Historic England. The National Planning Policy Framework sets out that registered battlefields are designated heritage assets of the highest significance.

This selection guide discusses first the definition of a battle, and outlines the changing nature of warfare in England between the late Saxon period and the seventeenth century – the compass of sites included.

The second half of the guide sets out the principal designation criteria – notably historic significance and the necessity of being able to locate securely a battlefield – before moving on to discuss other designation criteria such as archaeological potential, documentation, and biographical associations. A select bibliography gives suggestions for further reading.

It is one of several guidance documents that can be accessed [HistoricEngland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/listing-selection/](https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/listing-selection/)

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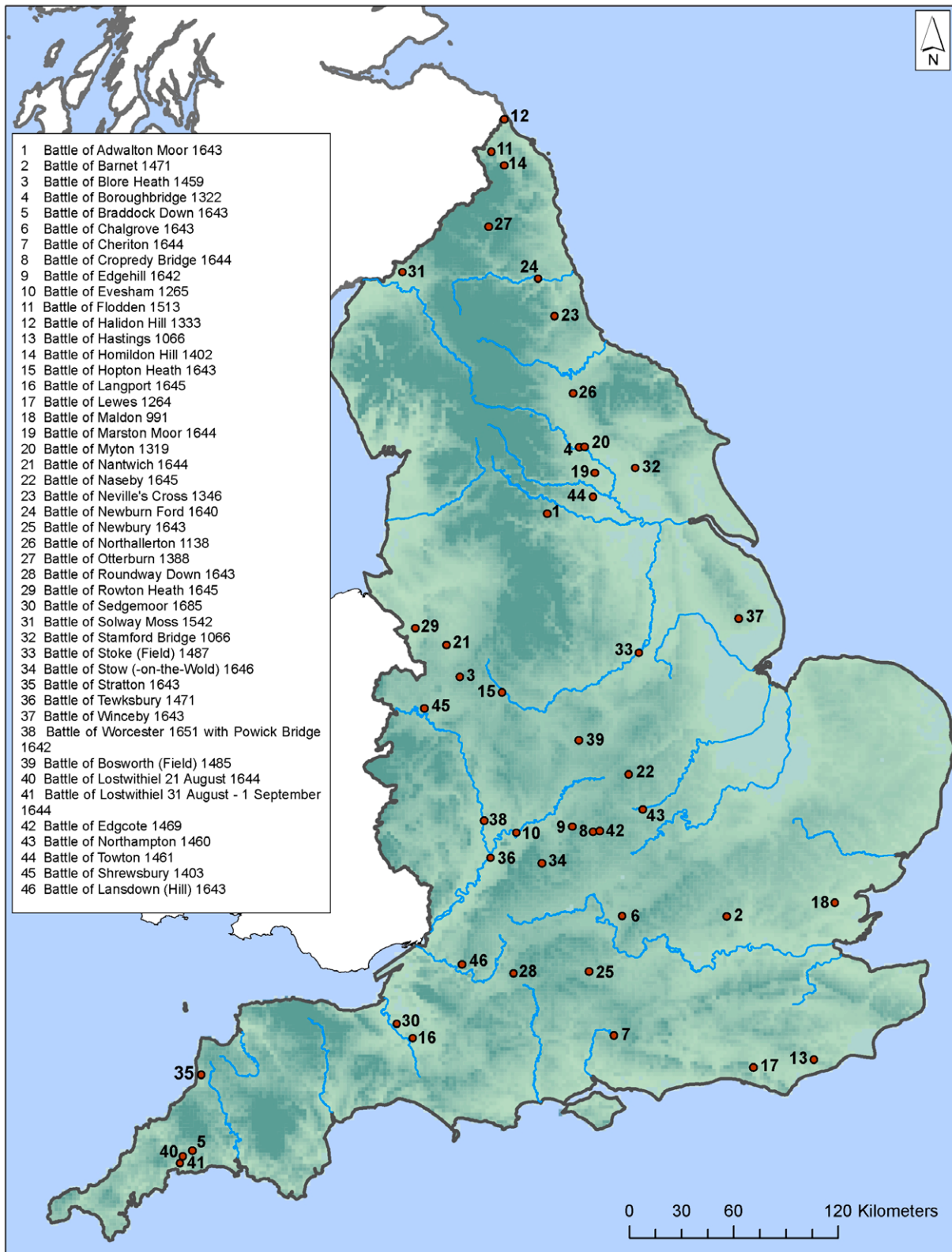
## Front cover

The Grade II-listed monument on the Naseby (Northamptonshire) battlefield, erected in 1936. It was

from near here that Oliver Cromwell led the charge of the Parliamentary cavalry on 14 June 1645.

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Figure 1  
 Map of designated sites on Historic England's Register of Historic Battlefields.



# Introduction

Battles are among the most dramatic events in our history: the coming together of many thousands of people to risk their lives fighting for a cause. They are moments in time when England's story stood at a junction. Events of this scale and importance have left their imprint not just on the battlefield itself but on the memories and thoughts of subsequent generations. Careful study of a battlefield, its topography, structures, history and archaeology can tell us much about

the course of the battle, about the world in which it was fought and the people who took part. For many these bloody events have left the landscape with a resonance which fires the imagination with thoughts of the high passions and terrible human losses of battle (Fig 2). We are fortunate that it is now over three centuries since a pitched battle was fought on English soil, but nevertheless these places still hold a fascination for us.



**Figure 2**  
Troops deployed in battle array at Naseby (Northamptonshire) on 14 June 1645, as depicted on an engraving of 1647. About 27,000 men fought on the

village's open fields as Parliament's New Model Army destroyed the royalists in the decisive battle of the Civil Wars.

Since the later 1990s the study of battlefields has become recognised within archaeology and heritage management as a specific topic. English Heritage's *Register of Historic Battlefields* was, in 1995, one of the first formal recognitions anywhere of a growing appreciation of the significance of battlefields. The criteria set out in 1995 defined what battlefields were, and those factors which might lead to specific battlefields being deemed to be securely located and of special historic interest. Initially 43 English battlefields were designated, having met those criteria; and sites are added and amended in response to new research (Fig 1).

This selection guide represents a refinement of those original criteria. It should be stressed that the threshold for registration has not changed: what this selection guide gives is greater clarity, and an acknowledgement of the insights which battlefield archaeology is now affording us.

## Battlefield Archaeology

This is the study of the physical context and remains of a battle in order to shed light on the battle and the time in which it took place. This branch of archaeology shares with general archaeology the use of methodical research, survey and analysis. However, its key distinction in terms of techniques is an emphasis on interdisciplinary study and a particular use of detailed, systematic metal-detecting to identify the precise location of individual items in order to form an understanding of patterns of distribution which can shed light on the events of the battle.

# 1 Scope and Definitions

From the outset, the scope of the *Register* has been limited to battles fought on land involving wholly or largely formed bodies of armed men, deployed and engaged on the field under formal command. This distinction has stood the test of time and remains in current use.

## 1.1 Conflict beyond the scope of the *Register of Historic Battlefields*

The *Register* does not include all sites of conflict. Skirmishes (engagements between military forces not in battle array), and also some smaller engagements, are typically excluded unless they form part of the course of a larger engagement. Siege sites – actions against fixed positions, often with both defensive, and offensive, works constructed – are often already designated through listing and scheduling.

England was fortunate in the twentieth century in being spared pitched land battles on its own soil. However, sites of aerial or naval bombardment and places such as aerodromes or bomb sites are potent markers of the impact of war. While these places are beyond the scope of the *Register* they can be recognised through other designations, in particular listing (at local and national levels). Furthermore, the mobile character of naval battles and often the issues of securely identifying their location means that they are beyond the scope of the *Register*.

Events of civil unrest or rioting, even though they may possess acknowledged cultural and historical significance and may have involved troops to enforce control, are of a different, less definable, nature to pitched military battles, and are not covered in the *Register* either. There may be a case for adding some of these additional sites of conflict to local Historic Environment Records, and to local lists of heritage assets, compiled and curated by local planning authorities.

# 2 Historical Summary

The nature of battlefields varies depending on the character of the armies involved (their organisation, training and the nature of the society from which they arise) and the resources and technology available. Our understanding of military practice and the details of particular battles tends to be less the older the battle is.

Other than some prehistoric weaponry, secure and substantial archaeological evidence has yet to be retrieved from any English battlefield before the fifteenth century, and thus we have to rely on other sources, such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle or contemporary illustrations, to gain a picture of warfare in earlier periods. This comparative scarcity of knowledge of earlier periods of conflict is reflected in the *Register* entries, most of which deal with engagements in the later Middle Ages and during the Civil Wars of the mid seventeenth century.

## 2.1 From Prehistory to the Norman Conquest

The earliest battles recorded in England are those which followed the Roman invasion, although evidence of warfare extends back into prehistory. However, for prehistoric, Roman and pre-Norman Conquest battles the quantity and character of evidence are seldom sufficient to locate sites securely. As a result it has not been possible to designate important battles such as the site of Boudicca's final defeat (AD 60 or 61) or the battle of *Mons Badonicus* (about AD 500) between the British and invading Saxons.

The earliest site on the *Register* is Maldon (Essex) in 991, the scene of a major defeat of the English by Vikings (Fig 3). Good written evidence about this survives in the form of a poem *The Battle of Maldon*,

which contains topographical allusion; perhaps the poet knew the site personally, or was even present during the battle.

The evidence provided by the construction of Battle Abbey combines with detailed documentation to provide a clear location for the site of the Battle of Hastings (East Sussex) in 1066 (Fig 4). Of the other great battles in that year, the site of Stamford Bridge (East Yorkshire) is designated but the precise location of the third, Fulford (North Yorkshire), remains open to debate.



**Figure 3** General view of Maldon, Essex (991). The site of an heroic Saxon defeat by a large Viking force, this is the earliest battlefield on the *Register*.





**Figure 4**  
Hastings (1066) with Battle Abbey (East Sussex), which stands on the high ground along which the Saxon

shield-wall was arrayed. The Normans attacked uphill from the camera position.

Warfare in England during this period was characterised by the use of massed infantry, deployed in solid bodies. Norse influence can be seen by the Anglo-Saxon adoption of the battle axe as a combat weapon. Some cavalry and archers were present, in particular in the Norman army.

## 2.2 From Hastings to 1500

Registered battles from this period can be divided into three main groups: Scottish incursions along the eastern corridor, penetrating as far south as Myton (North Yorkshire, 1319); various earlier civil wars, including those of Simon de Montfort (Lewes, East Sussex, 1264, and Evesham, Worcester, 1265); and the Wars of the Roses (1455-1487), a generation of discontinuous warfare dominated by brief periods of intense action.

Following the Norman Conquest, cavalry warfare became more significant, and over the following centuries the tactical deployment of forces became highly sophisticated. The dominant battlefield weapon of this period became the English longbow, whose effectiveness stemmed from the technology of manufacture which gave the bow great power, the steel-tipped arrows it fired, its tactical deployment and the legal and social directives which saw large numbers of archers trained in its use. Its lethal threat can be seen in the development of armour through the period, which gradually gained in strength and coverage in response to the longbow's power. Heavier armour meant knights increasingly fought on foot alongside similarly well-armoured men-at-arms and less protected foot soldiers. Battles of this period could be very large affairs, and Towton (North Yorkshire, 1461) supposedly saw some 45,000 men take to the field. It was during the Wars of the Roses (1455-87) that artillery



**Figure 5**

Looking from the flat, fenny, land, newly-established as where the Battle of Bosworth (Leicestershire) was fought in 1485, to Crown Hill where Henry VII was crowned.

was first deployed on the English battlefield – archaeological evidence for this has been discovered at Bosworth (Leicestershire, 1485; Fig 5) in the form of lead cannonballs – although hand ‘cannons’ had appeared earlier.

### **2.3 From 1500 to 1750**

The sixteenth century saw little intensive warfare on English soil, the registered battlefields of this period being related to hostilities with Scotland. Nevertheless, it was a period of conspicuous change in the technology and conduct of warfare and defence. It was the sixteenth century which saw the transformation of military practice as artillery and associated fieldworks developed rapidly.

The wearing of armour steadily declined as new methods of fighting placed greater emphasis on agility, and there was a resurgence in cavalry deployment. The adoption of the musket was accompanied by increased use of the pike for direct fighting, but underlying all these changes was an increasing focus on discipline through drilling troops.

In England, such changes were particularly seen in the Civil Wars of the mid seventeenth century (1639-60); these witnessed the most widespread and hard-fought period of conflict ever known in the British Isles. Approximately half of the sites on the *Register*, 23 securely located major engagements, date from this period. Our understanding of these engagements is generally much better than it is of earlier ones, for three reasons.



Firstly, many more detailed written accounts and visual records were made, although many were produced with a propagandist slant and should not be taken, necessarily, at face value. Secondly, our understanding of the nature of the historic landscape of this period is generally far better than for earlier periods, allowing greater topographical precision in the interpretation of what happened where (Figs 6 and 7). Thirdly, recoverable battlefield debris – above all, lead musket balls and other projectiles – becomes relatively commonplace. Taken together, these things mean that it is possible to begin to chart the detailed course of many individual battles. That is so, for instance, for Sedgemoor (Somerset, 1685), the last pitched battle to occur on English soil. While there were clashes in England during the later Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745, none fulfil the criteria for inclusion on the *Register*.



**Figure 6 (top right)**

The central area of Edgehill, Warwickshire (1642) battlefield (north is to the top), is still clearly legible despite the munitions depot clearly shown in this late 1940s air photo, with shadows defining its structures.

**Figure 7 (above)**

The Northampton battlefield (1460) is today largely a golf course. However, it retains considerable integrity, with ridge and furrow a reminder that the chosen battlefield was (as so often) open-field land, here of Hardingstone, a village on Northampton's southern fringe.

# 3 Principal Considerations

If the site of a battle is to merit registration it has, notwithstanding any other claims, to have been an engagement of national historic significance, and to be capable of secure location on the ground.

## 3.1 Historical significance

The most important factor will be the battle's historic significance. Battlefields have frequently been the setting for crucial turning-points in English history, for example the Battle of Hastings in 1066 led to the Norman Conquest, while the Civil Wars in the mid-seventeenth century changed the roles of monarchy and Parliament. A battle's historical significance will frequently be defined by its political impact.

## 3.2 Location

To be registered, a battle's location must be securely identified; the place where the troops drew up, deployed and fought while in battle formation must be established beyond reasonable doubt. It is generally the case that the earlier a battle, the less the certainty that can be offered in terms of where fighting took place; this is reflected in the *Register* which contains comparatively few early battles as a consequence.

Events taking place beyond this area of engagement often had a dramatic influence on the outcome and significance of a battle. It was typically in the pursuit and 'execution', after battle formations had collapsed, that the

greatest numbers of troops were killed, captured or executed. Similarly, the location of camps, formal acts of surrender, related actions such as the attack on baggage trains or mass graves, can all be significant elements in the understanding and appreciation of the battle. Locations such as these, if demonstrably of special interest, can be included in the designated area where they can be securely located, even if their position is separate from the battlefield itself.

The nature of warfare is such that boundaries to an area of conflict are rarely precise although designation requires that a reasonable boundary to this area must be defined. For the purposes of clarity, *Register* entries will generally use existing land boundaries to provide a clear definition of the extent of the battlefield area, which seeks to include all areas of special interest. When such boundaries (such as fields or roads) change, then there may need to be adjustment of the registered area in order to keep this definition clear.

Battlefields which fail to meet these two criteria of significance and secure location, as well as sites of other types of conflict, may still warrant recognition. Appropriate protection can be secured through identification on Historic Environment Records, local lists, and in planning policies.



# 4 Other Considerations

Other factors may add to the likelihood that a battlefield merits registration, or lend enhanced significance to particular parts of a battlefield.

## 4.1 Topographic integrity

The topography of a battlefield typically played a critical role in military tactics. Physical features present at the time of the battle, whether terrain or structural elements like houses or bridges, can explain why events unfolded as they did. A clear landscape context helps the battle events to be understood (Fig 8). Integrity relates to the survival of the character of the landscape at the

time of the battle. Contours, woodland, rivers, roads, field boundaries, buildings and settlements will all contribute to this character; its degree of survival or alteration is a further consideration in deciding upon registration. Although it is accepted that the landscapes in which battles were fought will frequently have evolved since the battle - for instance, the draining of Bosworth Field or the enclosure of the Civil War battlefields of Edgehill (Warwickshire, 1642) and Naseby



**Figure 8**  
Despite enclosure and drainage, the Sedgemoor battlefield (Somerset), retains its topographical integrity and sense of place. It is seen here from Chedzoy church tower, from where spectators watched the battle in 1685. In the rout at its end there was heavy killing in the village's fields, just beyond the houses.



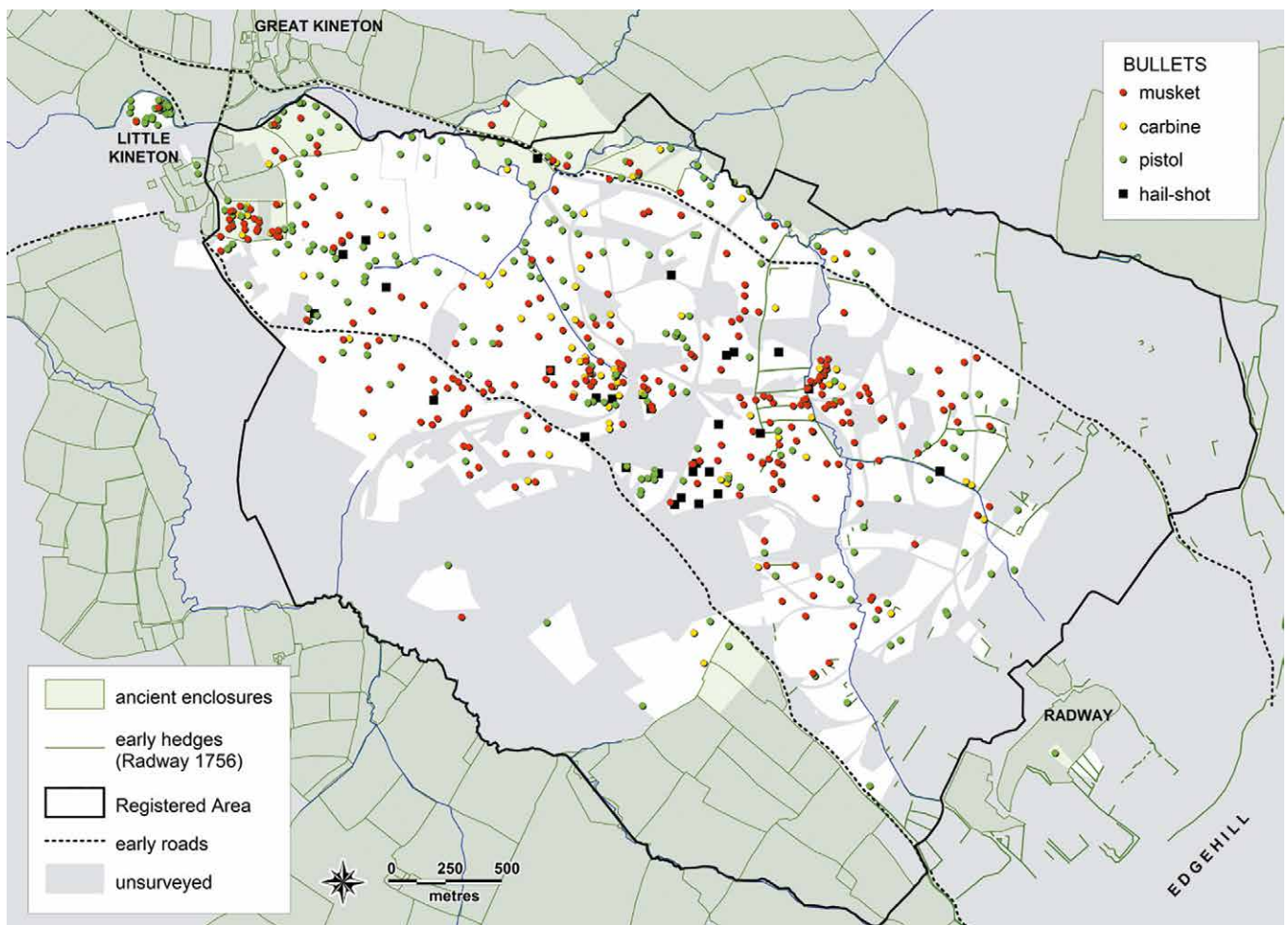
**Figure 9**  
Stamford Bridge (1066), in the East Riding of Yorkshire. While the growth of the town has encroached onto the battlefield, enough survives to merit its inclusion in the *Register*.

(Northamptonshire, 1645) – the visibility and legibility of the wider landscape will enhance the potential for appreciating the context and course of the battle.

The greater its integrity, the more suitable the site will be for registration. Some battlefields have been encroached upon by housing or other development. In some instances these later changes will have seriously compromised the overall interest of the site. In others, the register boundary will be drawn to exclude the built-up areas as, for example, at Stamford Bridge (1066), and Worcester (1651) (Fig 9).

## 4.2 Archaeological potential

The potential presence of features such as graves, structures, projectile scars on buildings, or assemblages of bullets, arrowheads and personal effects, creates archaeological significance as it may allow deployments and events to be reconstructed. It is now clear that the application of systematic survey techniques executed to professional standards offers the potential for major advances in the understanding of battle sites. In the 1990s, Towton was the first multi-disciplinary archaeological survey of its type in England, and the first successfully to locate physical evidence for a medieval battle, in the form of burial pits. From the later fifteenth century

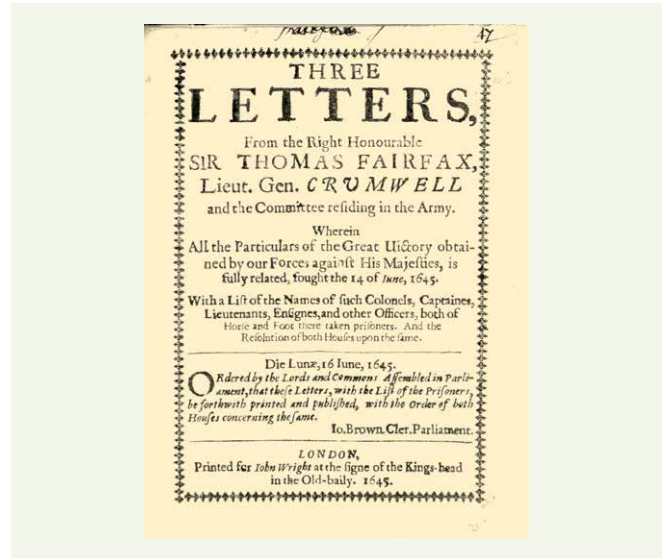


**Figure 10**  
Map of Edgehill (Warwickshire) showing the distribution of the main classes of bullet recovered by systematic metal detecting survey. The underlying

plot of the historic terrain clearly shows how the battle was fought on open field land, the commanders avoiding the surrounding hedged fields.



**Figure 11**  
A silver-gilt Boar Badge, probably worn by one of Richard III's supporters, recovered during archaeological survey of Bosworth Battlefield (Leicestershire) in 2009. The precise location of finds can reveal much about the course of a battle.



**Figure 12**  
An account of Naseby (1645), produced two days after the battle. While celebratory rather than objective, it still provides valuable information.

the use of lead (which does not rust) for the projectiles fired from cannon and early handguns greatly enhances the likelihood of survival and, as in 2010 at Bosworth, can give new insights both into individual engagements and to the technological development of conflict. During individual Civil War battles tens of thousands of shot were discharged; expertly locating and plotting these can locate precisely not only battlefields, but also deployments and phases of action within them (Fig 10). Other finds, such as badges and accoutrements, help to extend our understanding of the events, by potentially denoting areas of hand-to-hand fighting or where particular units fought (Fig 11). Recent work at Flodden (Northumberland, 1513) has tentatively identified remains of field defences; generally, such features are very rare. If securely identified, and confirmed as of national importance, scheduling may be appropriate alongside registration.

### 4.3 Documentation

Documentation is crucial both to locating battles and to understanding their significance. The Bayeux Tapestry, for instance, adds greatly to our appreciation of the Battle of Hastings, while the Battle of Maldon (Essex, 991) would be another poorly-understood early medieval engagement, were it not for the rare epic poem which describes it. With more recent battles, letters, memoirs and accounts can greatly enhance our interpretation of the battlefield and shed light on contemporaries' reactions (Fig 12). Similarly, modern documentation, in the form of archaeological reports or other academic studies, can greatly enhance our appreciation of a site.



## 4.4 Military innovations

Some battles saw significant military innovations in terms of tactics or technology; one example is the battle of Stoke Field (Nottinghamshire, 1487) where German mercenaries displayed a different style of fighting employing the new pike tactics. This can add to the significance of the engagement.

## 4.5 Biographic associations

The reputations of kings and great political leaders were frequently built on battlefield success, and a battle may have seen the crowning glory of a military career or (as at Hastings or Bosworth) the death of a great figure (Fig 13).

## 4.6 Commemoration

Battlefields have a particular significance as places which witnessed conflict and death, sometimes on a massive scale. Some battles resulted in the deaths of many thousands of people, fighting for a cause: these places may

become regarded as sanctified by the blood spilt. In terms of the dead themselves, while local traditions and antiquarian accounts often speak of burial sites, few mass graves are securely located: exceptions have been identified at Towton and at Roundway Down (Wiltshire, 1643). More often the human cost of battle will be reflected in memorials and monuments (generally separately listed) erected on or near the site of the engagement: Battle Abbey at Hastings and Battlefield church near Shrewsbury were religious houses founded by the victors in remembrance of the engagement. Especially in later centuries, monuments were erected to honour commanders: an example is the early eighteenth-century memorial (listed Grade II\* and a scheduled monument) to Sir Bevil Grenville, who fell at Lansdown Hill, near Bath, in 1643. Intervening generations have shown their respect for the dead in a variety of ways, and in some places activities such as annual ceremonies may have become part of local tradition (Fig 14). Place-names – Slash Hollow at Winceby (Lincolnshire, 1643) – are another way in which particular episodes in a battle may have come to be remembered.



**Figure 13**  
The monument at Chalgrove, Oxfordshire (1643; listed Grade II) erected in on the 200th anniversary of the battle in 1843. It remembers the Parliamentarian commander John Hampden, mortally injured when his pistol exploded in his hand.



**Figure 14**  
Commemoration: a wreath left at Lansdown Hill, Somerset (1643). While some battlefields have built monuments, many stimulate commemorative activities such as religious services or private contemplation.



# 5 Revision of the Register

When the original *Register* was set up it was recognised there were further candidates for designation but for which there was insufficient evidence to allow the battlefield boundary to be drawn with any certainty. Five such engagements were included on a list of 'Battle Sites' appended to the original *Register*.

- Carham (Northumberland) 1018
- Mortimer's Cross (Herefordshire) 1461
- Hexham (Northumberland) 1464
- Empingham (Leicestershire) 1470
- Sherburn (North Yorkshire) 1645.

A further eight sites were identified where there had been significant engagements but where the battlefields no longer survived sufficiently intact to warrant designation or conservation measures, although there could be the potential for interpretation and presentation.

- St Albans 1 (Hertfordshire) 1455
- Wakefield (West Yorkshire) 1460
- St Albans 2 (Hertfordshire) 1461
- Newark (Nottinghamshire) 1644
- Newbury II (Berkshire) 1644
- Torrington (Devon) 1646
- Preston (Lancashire) 1648
- Preston (Lancashire) 1715

Subsequently, Turnham Green, near Chiswick (1642), was added as a ninth example.

Where new evidence emerges for the location of a battle, or a case is made to reconsider the significance of an engagement, Historic England may reassess the case for designation, guided by the criteria set out in this document. The battlefields at Edgcote, Northamptonshire (1469; Fig 15) and Lostwithiel, Cornwall (1644) were added to the *Register* in 2013 following this process. Furthermore, ongoing research can challenge the accepted understanding of particular battles and their battlefields. A review of the designation of any particular registered battlefield will be taken forward where demanded by significant new understanding, or when development proposals call for greater clarity. *Register* entries are updated as part of our ongoing work to maintain and enhance the National Heritage List for England.

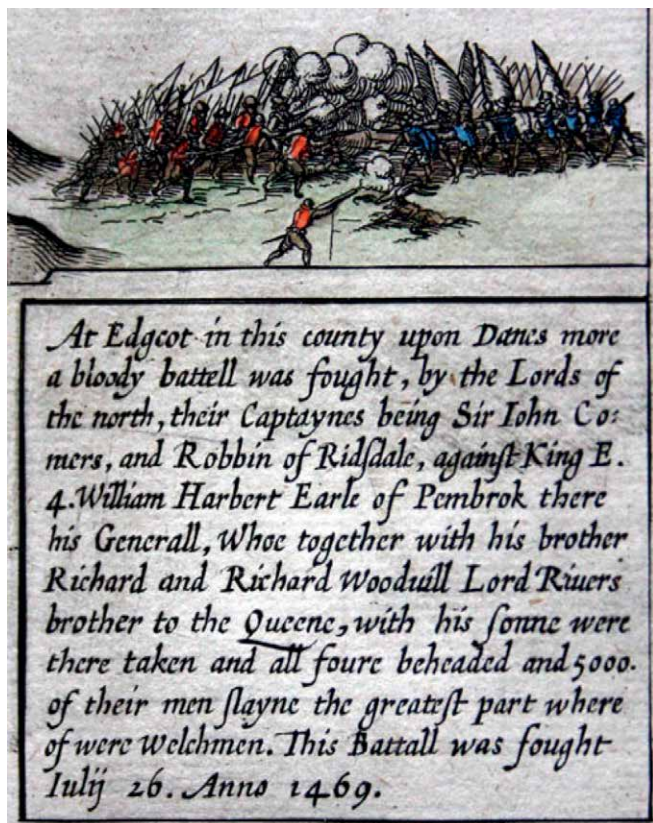


Figure 15  
The battle of Edgcote, as imagined on Speed's county map of Northamptonshire (1610).

## 5.1 Planning protection for registered battlefields

Wider recognition of the importance of registered battlefields, and the need for planning authorities and others to take them into account when considering development proposals, is provided by government's guidance on planning, the National Planning Policy Framework ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/740441/National\\_Planning\\_Policy\\_Framework\\_web\\_accessible\\_version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/740441/National_Planning_Policy_Framework_web_accessible_version.pdf)), which sets out that registered battlefields are designated heritage assets of the highest significance. They, and their setting, should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, and the granting of permission for developments causing substantial harm should be wholly exceptional. Historic England has produced a series of Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning notes which cover matters such as local plans, managing significance and setting (<https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/planning/planning-system/>). Local authorities will normally be the first port of call for advice in such cases.

# 6 Where to Get Advice

The Historic England *Register of Historic Battlefields* can be found as part of the National Heritage List for England on the Historic England website (<https://HistoricEngland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>). Its purpose is to offer them protection through the planning system, and to promote a better understanding of their significance, and public enjoyment. The 43 battlefields which formed part of the original *Register* in 1995 are supported by longer reports, accessible through links from the NHLE entry. These reports, which include assessment of contemporary accounts of the battle, are based on the available evidence and describe the position of the armies and the features which were part of the original battleground. In more recent *Register* entries this information is found in the entries themselves.

The UK Battlefields Resource Centre <http://www.battlefieldstrust.com/resource-centre>, created by the Battlefields Trust, includes resources including contemporary accounts of battles through to modern analyses, together with suggestions for further reading. It is an essential resource for anyone visiting a battlefield, with maps, images, air photos, walking and driving tours, resources for teachers and much more.

## 6.1 Contact Historic England

If you would like to contact the Listing Team in one of our regional offices, please email: [customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk) noting the subject of your query, or call or write to the local team at:

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# Acknowledgements

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