

Richard Bolle of Louth, the Hero of the Battle of Alton

The Battle of Alton in the English Civil War took place on 13 December 1643 in the town of Alton, Hampshire. Parliamentary forces serving under Sir William Waller led a successful surprise attack on a winter garrison of Royalist infantry and cavalry serving under the Earl of Crawford. At dawn on the 13th, as Waller's army approached Alton, Crawford fled with the cavalry to Winchester, leaving Colonel Richard Bolle to defend Alton with only the infantry. Outnumbered and overpowered, Bolle's men were soon forced to seek refuge in the Church of St Lawrence, where they made a desperate last stand. Bolle was killed, along with most of his remaining men.

Illingworth said that this unfortunate event was of the greatest consequence in deciding the fate of the city of Winchester. The King himself was so affected at the particular loss of Colonel Bolle, that when the news of it was communicated to him, he passionately expressed his sorrow with this exclamation, "Bring me a mourning scarf, I have lost one of the best commanders in this kingdom."

His eccentric Memorial in Winchester Cathedral was composed in 1689 by an unrelated Richard Boles, Rector of Whitnash, from a Wiltshire family. There has been much confusion over the identity of this hero, tied to the extensive Lincolnshire family of Bolle by the epitaph, not helped by various errors being perpetuated. The power of the internet now permits these to be resolved.

Rev. Cayley Illingworth's History of Scampton (1810) included many details on the Bolle family, who were previous owners of the Manor he was about to inherit. He maintained the hero was Col. John Bolle of Louth, saying the matter was too well known in the family to need discussion. There is more than enough evidence proving that this Colonel died in 1654.

The Rev. Maddison's compilation of Lincolnshire Pedigrees (1902) claimed that the hero was the son of John Bolle and Margaret Mussenden, about whom little was known. The Pedigree ascribed him the name, marriage and children of another Richard Bolle, a cousin with estates at Theddlethorpe. This cousin cannot be the hero, as his Will was proved after his death in a duel in 1631, so the claim appeared impossible.

W.H.Bowles, in his Records of the Bowles Family (1918), examined all the candidates, decided that none worked, and wondered if the hero came from Wiltshire, despite the epitaph.

The truth is as simple as Richard Bolle of Louth, the son of John Bolle and Margaret Mussenden, born c. 1595. He was unmarried and a career soldier, first found on record in 1624 when he served as Ensign to Sir Peregrine Bertie in the Netherlands, then he served in the disastrous Attack on Cadiz in 1625,

in action against rebels in Ireland in 1626, in the failed Ile de Rhe expedition in 1627 and then in the Netherlands again until he was wounded and returned to England in 1630. Newman describes him as a “fifty-year-old veteran of Europe and the Scots wars when he assumed command of the infantry regiment raised by Lord Pagett, late in 1642. He fought at the storm of Bristol, where so many officers fell, but survived to end his days in a sacrificial gesture of defiance to the rebels.”

His Will is dated 31st January 1641/2, anticipating his departure to fight in Ireland, and he describes himself as Richard Bolle of Louth. He defines many relations, all tying him firmly to the wider Mussenden and Bolle families, and to the exact spot in the Pedigree. This is not the will of a married man with children. His will was proved in 1647, a delay explained by the circumstances. Every detail is entirely consistent with the hero of Alton.

What is impossible is for Richard Bolle of Theddlethorpe, a married man with two children born in 1627 and 1629, and a widow who died in 1654, to have made such a Will ten years after his death. The 1631 duel was well documented, as Richard’s opponent was convicted of manslaughter. It turned on an accusation that Richard’s father, known as Richard Bolle of Gayton (the elder brother of John Bolle), had left a debt unsatisfied on his death. It would be improbable to risk fatal injury if the father were alive to settle the matter.

Several unlikely explanations have been put forward in support of the Theddlethorpe claim. Perhaps Richard of Gayton was still alive after all, although having a father born in 1507 suggests he would have been in no state to fight a savage battle in 1643. Perhaps Richard of Theddlethorpe had a much earlier unrecorded son. Perhaps there’s another Richard entirely, one who didn’t die in a duel. Perhaps this is merely a simple mistake, conflating the details of two cousins, both named after their shared grandfather, living a few miles apart, of roughly the same age, but with different careers. Both died a violent death; only Richard of Louth deserves to be recorded in Winchester Cathedral.

Alton will tell you of that famous Fight
Which ye man made and bade this world good night,
His virtuous life cared not Mortality
His body might, his virtues cannot die
Because his blood was there so nobly spent
This is his Tomb, that Church his Monument

References

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Rev. Arthur Roland Maddison, Lincolnshire pedigrees, Harleian Society, 1902. p. 150

Will of Richard Bollis, Gent. of Theddlethorpe St Helen's, 1631: The Calendars of Administrations in the Consistory Court of Lincoln AD 1540-1659 (Act Book xii p. 59; Admin Bond and Inventory, 20)

William Henry Bowles; 'Records of the Bowles Family' (privately published) Appendix I, Note 12

Will of Richard Bolle of Louth, dated 31st Jan 1641/2, proved December 1647, Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB11/202

P. R. Newman; The Old Service: Royalist Regimental Colonels and the Civil War, 1642-46 (Manchester University Press, 1993) p. 163

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