

Local History 3

Charles Stuart's escape from the battle of Worcester (1651) and his time in Shropshire.

Background

In about 1646 when the first English civil war was going badly for Charles I and the royalist cause, he sent his wife and children into exile in France. Henrietta Maria was from the French court and the family settled easily into their new life in France. So how did his eldest son, Charles Stuart, end up in Worcester, leading a Scottish army fighting Oliver Cromwell's new model army?

To understand this we need to go back to the end of the Tudor period and the death of Elizabeth I. Elizabeth died in 1603 without leaving an heir, creating a potentially dangerous situation which could have led to competing claims on the throne, civil war or even invasion as Catholic France and Spain sought to reverse the move towards Protestantism.

To avoid these dangers, it was agreed to offer the throne to James VI, the Stuart king of Scotland, who readily agreed and became James I of England.

In 1649 after the second civil war and the complete breakdown of relations between Charles I and parliament, Charles I was put on trial for treason. He was found guilty and executed. This angered the Scots who saw this as the English taking unilateral action to execute a Scottish king and a king from the Stuart dynasty. They immediately declared his son, Charles Stuart, in exile in France, the new king of Scotland and England. This didn't greatly concern Parliament as it had little effect because Charles was in exile in France. This was soon to change.

A Scots delegation met Charles and offered him the opportunity to reclaim his throne by force. The Scots agreed to raise an army to reclaim his throne in return for his support for religious reforms. Charles agreed and returned to Scotland in 1650, where he was crowned king. The Scots duly raised an army and prepared to invade England. Oliver Cromwell had already mobilised and took his army to Scotland, where he engaged and beat the Scots at Dunbar in 1650. Not deterred, the Scots raised a second army the following year and invaded England, reaching as far as Worcester, where they engaged Parliamentary forces in battle on 3rd September 1651.

Wednesday 3rd September

The battle lasted most of the day and it was only late in the afternoon when Charles and his closest supporters realised the battle was lost. Charles and a group of about 60 of his entourage escaped the city by the northern gate and fled north. After a few miles, Charles stopped and tried to get his men to go back and continue fighting, but was talked out of it and they continued on.

It is important to stress that at this point they did not have an escape plan. Although the ultimate plan was to get back to France, initially safety was a long way in any direction. The group meandered north through Kidderminster and Stourbridge, avoiding parliamentary forces. After 10 miles, Charles parted company with much of his entourage as it became clear that the group was too large to remain undetected.

Fortuitously, one of Charles group was Charles Giffard, the owner of Boscobel hall in Shropshire, who offered his home as a place of refuge to Charles. One of his staff, Francis Yates, was also present and was charged with navigating the party to Boscobel as he knew the area well. They arrived at Boscobel at 3am on the 4th September.

The party included the 38 year old Lord Henry Wilmot, a close confidant of Charles, who had given loyal and brave service to the crown and was to play a key role in the escape.

When they arrived at Boscobel, they thought it may be too dangerous to stay in the house as the family were known to be royalist sympathisers, so they decided to stay at Whiteladies Priory, a small hamlet half a mile away. On arrival at Whiteladies, they met George Pendrell, one of 6 brothers, who immediately recognised Yates and Giffard and offered his support. He informed them that parliamentary forces were close by at Codsall, and that they were right not to stay at Boscobel.

Charles was exhausted so rested and took refreshments. It was agreed that George Pendrell should go out and scout the local area, which he did and reported back that the parliamentary forces were no closer. When he returned he brought his brother Richard, who lived close by at Hoball Grange, who was also to play a key role later in the escape. Charles met with his close advisers, and George and Richard to discuss a plan for the following day.

Thomas Harrison

Although Charles had no plan as to what he would do after the battle, Oliver Cromwell did. He had already instructed one of his most senior and trusted generals, Thomas Harrison, to be in charge of capturing royalist escapees from the battle, particularly Charles Stuart. Harrison and 1500 of his men were kept back from the battle to be fresh for the task ahead.

Harrison was born in Newcastle under Lyme from a humble family, but quickly rose up through the ranks of the New Model Army on merit. He had a reputation for efficiency and being ruthless, proving himself many times on the battlefield. He could be very violent and was reported to have shot prisoners on several occasions.

To aid Harrison, a reward of £10,000 was offered for information leading to the capture of Charles Stuart.

Thursday 4th September

The first thing that was agreed on the morning of the 4th was that Charles needed a new identity. He was transformed into William Jones, a travelling woodcutter, by dressing him in peasants clothes, and walking with a stoop. This was necessary as Charles was 6'2" tall, and walked with an upright aristocratic gait. He also practiced local accents, cut his hair short and rubbed nut oil into his skin to make it darker, to reflect his new outdoor occupation.

Most of his remaining officers and men departed so that only a few remained. Richard Pendrell took Charles to hide in Spring Coppice, a wood near Whiteladies, where they remained for the whole of the day. This was safer than staying at the house which was

likely to be searched. In the distance they could see Parliamentary cavalry passing by but they were not detected.

It was while in a the wood that Charles devised the plan to escape to Wales. The road to London was now believed to be blocked and the road north back to Scotland would be too obvious. He had supporters in Wales from where he could make his way to the south coast and get a boat back to France. Richard Pendrell also knew of a supporter, Francis Wolfe, at Madeley who could help them cross the River Severn, the main obstacle in getting to Wales.

So late in the evening of the 4th, as it was getting dusk, Charles and Richard packed some provisions and money and set off for Madeley, about 9 miles away. The journey was largely uneventful apart from one incident half way at Evelith Mill, where they had to cross a narrow bridge next to the mill. The gate at the end of the bridge slammed shut making a loud noise, waking up the miller who came out in a state of high anxiety, and challenged them. They hid and later escaped unscathed and proceeded with their journey. It was only later that they discovered that the miller was anxious because he was hiding two royalist officers also on the run from the battle of Worcester.

Friday 5th September

Charles and Richard arrived at Madeley at about 1am. Charles hid in a barn near the house while Richard went to meet Francis Wolfe. Francis informed them that the house wasn't safe and had been searched only recently

It was agreed that Charles should remain at the barn while Richard and Francis should go out and scout along the river for suitable places to cross. They searched all day but all the crossings between Bridgenorth and Shrewsbury were guarded by Parliamentary forces. They returned to Madeley to give Charles the bad news. He was extremely disheartened by the news, but agreed that their only option was to return to Boscobel Hall, and devise a new plan. They left Madeley at 11pm and travelled under the cover of darkness, arriving at Boscobel at 3am on the 6th. The 9 miles had taken them 4 hours.

Saturday 6th September

Charles was exhausted when they arrived at Boscobel and his feet were cut and sore after the walk back from Madeley. After putting on dry clothes and eating, Charles's feet were treated.

At the house, Charles had an emotional reunion with Major William Carless, who had arrived at the house earlier, after fighting for the royalist cause at Worcester. Carless knew the local area well, so Charles asked his advice on what to do next. He advised that they should hide in the daytime on Saturday as there were parliamentary forces in the area and Boscobel was sure to be searched. Carless had identified an oak tree near to Boscobel that would make the perfect hiding place.

At 9am, William Pendrell took a ladder and helped Charles and Carless up into the tree, with provisions, where they stayed all day. The tree had been pollarded and had a very thick crown ideal for remaining undetected. Charles slept deeply, the first time in three days. Parliamentary troops did indeed search Boscobel and the ground around it, actually walking under the oak tree. At one point, Joan Pendrell, the wife of William Pendrell, was so concerned she went out near the tree to collect wood, to distract the searchers.

Charles's time in the Oak tree has come to symbolise his escape with Hundreds of pubs across the country now being called the Royal Oak.

They came down from the oak tree in the evening, when Charles was alarmed to hear about the reward for his capture. Carless assured him of everyone's loyalty. They stayed at Boscobel that night in the two priest holes, which had not yet been discovered, and all of the following day.

The Pendrell brothers went out on Saturday to scout the area, and make contact with George Mainwaring at Wolverhampton, a friend of Major Carless. He recommended that they move to Moseley old hall, owned by Thomas Whitgreave, a loyal royalist.

At the same time, Henry Wilmot had been travelling ahead of Charles, trying to find safe places to move onto, and to identify an escape plan. Wilmot had been staying at Bentley Hall, near Walsall, owned by Colonel Thomas Lane, who lived there with his sister Jane Lane. Fortuitously, Jane Lane was planning to travel to Bristol to help her cousin who was pregnant, and had secured a travel pass from the local parliamentary commander, both for her to travel, and a man servant. Wilmot immediately spotted the opportunity. His problem was that there was no real means of communicating with Charles and he didn't actually know where he was. He wasn't aware, for example, of the failed plan to escape to Wales.

Sunday 7th September

At 11pm, again under the cover of darkness, Charles travelled to Moseley. He rode on George Pendrell's mill horse, accompanied by the other brothers armed with pistols and pikes for protection. Charles walked the last two miles and arrived at 3am on the Monday. He was met by Thomas Whitgreave and Father Huddleston, a catholic priest, staying at Moseley. Charles would later remember a larger solid studded wooden door at the rear of the house, where he entered, which is still there today. Whitgreave gave the Pendrell brothers some food and they left after an emotional farewell with Charles.

Also luckily, Wilmot had recently arrived from Bentley Hall and was reunited with Charles.

Charles ate biscuits and drank wine on his bed and his feet were attended to, and he was given clean clothes. Whitgreave, Huddleston, Wilmot and Charles sat up talking until 4pm, after which Charles slept in the priest hole until Monday morning.

Monday 8th September.

To maintain security, all the staff were sent away on errands apart from the cook who was known to be a loyal royalist. Charles spent most of Monday in bed resting, while Whitgreave kept guard outside. Three boys who were being tutored at Moseley also kept lookout.

The move to Moseley was very fortuitous as Boscobel was searched by parliamentary forces the day after Charles left.

Later in the day, Whitgreave traveled to Wolverhampton to scout out an escape route. In discussion with Wilmot, they agreed the best plan was to travel with Jane Lane to Bristol, with Charles disguised as her manservant.

Tuesday 9th September

Charles rests on Tuesday either in bed or in Whitgreave's study. Later Charles would recount many of the conversations with Whitgreave and Huddleston.

Wednesday 10th September

Charles traveled to Bentley Hall, accompanied by Colonel Lane, and the journey to Bristol begins. Charles is given a new identity and disguise. He was now William Jackson, the son of one of Colonel Lane's tenants, trusted manservant, dressed in a plain grey suit.

Later on Wednesday, one week on from the battle, Charles sets off for Bristol and his eventual escape to France. This would take him another five weeks and in total he would travel 625 miles. His time in Shropshire and just over the border in Staffordshire was over.

Postscript

Charles was restored to the monarchy in 1660. He often recounted the story of his time on the run, describing it as the highlight of his career. The story was written up in 1660 by a lawyer, Thomas Blount, and again in 1680 by Samuel Pepys. His memory of events is generally regarded as accurate, and supported by other accounts and evidence.

He remembered those who helped him. He wrote to them, gave some of them pensions, others titles, and others positions at court. Jane Lane for example was made lady in waiting to Charles's sister and given a pension.

The King's birthday on 29th May 1660 was declared Oak Apple day and made a public holiday.

The route of his escape is now a long distance footpath, running 625 miles, called the Monarchs Way.

Boscobel House and Moseley Old Hall are open to the public and are well worth a visit.

Thomas Harrison was arrested after the restoration, charged as one of the regicides, found guilty and hung drawn and quartered.

The story of the escape is described in great detail in 'To catch a King', by Charles Spencer, who is actually descended from one of Charles many illegitimate children.

Steve Burrows
May 2022

