

The defeat of Boudicca's Rebellion

A blue-toned illustration of a hand in armor holding a spear, positioned horizontally across the top of the page behind the title.

Boudicca, Queen of the Iceni and leader of the rebellion against Roman domination, was defeated in battle in 61 A.D. Fact. But where was that battle fought and how did the outnumbered Romans manage to win?

In this brief book local military historian Martin Marix Evans explains his theory that the fight took place just south of Towcester in Northamptonshire. His version of the story informed the August 2004 BBC *Battlefield Britain* programme on the rebellion, and this book includes a guide to the public footpaths visitors can use to see the site for themselves.

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Cover illustration: A British chariot warrior of the 1st century.

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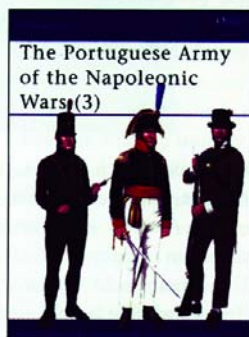
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Martin Marix Evans

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The Defeat of Boudicca's Rebellion

Introduction

Local tradition has it that a battle was fought in ancient times at Toothole or Toothill, south of Towcester. This name happens also to be that of a field to the left of the stream that flows through Cuttle Mill, three kilometres (two miles) south-east of the town, towards the River Tove. The legends go as far as claiming it as the site of Boudicca's defeat by the Romans in AD61. Given that the site is close to the Roman road we know as Watling Street, added to which Towcester itself was a Roman town, the story might not be untrue; at least the possibility of its being true seemed to me worth investigating.

A number of questions had to be answered: What were the opposing forces like? What were their fighting methods and usual tactics? What reports survive of these events? What clues do we have about the physical characteristics of the location in which the battle took place? Is there a way in which we can home in on the likely location, either by examining the landscape or by considering military strategy or, best of all, both of these? These questions are in no particular order because all of them matter. The best thing of all would be to find archeological evidence like that discovered in Germany indicating the location of the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, also known as the Battle of Varus, of AD9, but such a find is remote both in time and probability. The outcome of my research is a story open to considerable doubt, but as a theory, still to be tested scientifically, it appears to be convincing enough to set out here. To help understanding, I have used modern place names as long as they are close to the locations of the settlements of the time. I have left out the 'perhaps' and 'maybe' in this account and written as if the conjecture is the truth. I trust the reader to remember that there is no proof; I may very well be wrong.

Martin Marix Evans

The Roman Colonization of Britain

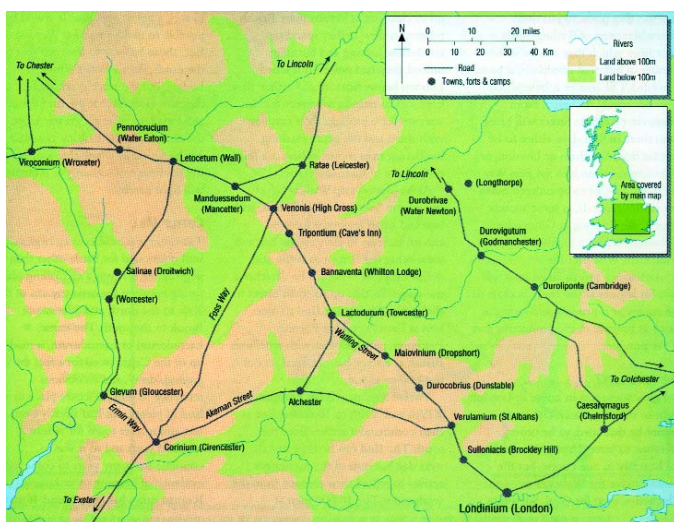
In AD43 the Romans came to Britain in force and seventeen years later they controlled the south and east of England. Their capital was at Colchester, where retired soldiers settled, and they had advanced as far as Lincoln in the north, Cirencester and maybe Gloucester in the west and Exeter in the south-west. The frontier of the settled, prosperous land was along the Fosse Way from Cirencester to Lincoln and beyond that, in Wales and in the north, the native tribes were the enemy.

To control the land and to expand their domains the Romans had four legions allocated to sectors supported by military roads. In the south-west was the 2nd Legion, in Exeter and Cirencester. In the north-east was the 9th Legion in Lincoln and Longthorpe, near Peterborough. The 20th Legion was partly given to security duties in the settled regions and partly, together with the 14th Legion, engaged in the conquest of the tribes in Wales. The roads extended rather like the fingers of a hand from the river crossing at London which, at the time, was a trading centre and seaport rather than a military centre. To the south and west went Stane Street, to the north and Lincoln went Ermine Street and the north-west was served by Watling Street. Exeter was probably supplied by sea. Cirencester was connected to London by two roads, one curling south through Silchester, but the other striking north-east to Alchester, near modern Bicester. There it forked. The southern branch went to St Albans (Verulamium) while the northern one ran to Towcester.

Rebellion

When the chief of the Norfolk-based Iceni, Prasutagus, died in AD60, the Romans did not accept women as his successors. His widow, Boudicca was flogged and his daughters raped while the province was taken over by the foreigners. Come the spring of AD61, the Iceni rose in rebellion and were joined by the Trinovantes. They fell on the virtually defenceless Colchester and sacked the town, killing everyone they could lay hands on. Then they turned in the direction of London with revenge and the destruction of the Romans in mind.

The governor of Britain, Gaius Suetonius Paulinus, had



The principal Roman roads in central England, with modern road names. © Osprey Publishing Ltd

started his fighting season by attacking his enemies in Anglesey and as he began to rejoice in his success the news came of the rebellion in what was thought to be the secure and peaceful East Anglia. It was vital to suppress it at once, both for fear of its spreading and to protect a source of wealth to be sent back to Rome. As a first step he ordered the 9th Legion to engage the rebels, but their detachment was ambushed somewhere north-west of Colchester, only the cavalry escaping.

Suetonius had to act, but his knowledge of what was happening so far away was slim. There was no time to waste sending scouts up and down the length of the country, so he decided to look for himself while his troops gathered in a strategically advantageous place. But, lacking information, he could not know exactly where to send them. An interim plan was needed. He ordered the 14th and the half of the 20th Legion that were with him in Wales to march towards London. The only available route was Watling Street. To reinforce them he sent a messenger to order the 2nd Legion to take position on the western flank of that road. The logical place was Alchester, where Akeman Street forks, so they could, when needed, head either to St Albans or to Towcester.



An infantryman (legionary) of the 2nd Legion in full combat dress.
© Osprey Publishing Ltd

The fact that Roman forts along their roads were roughly fifteen miles apart was no accident. It is a sensible day's march. In training legions did twenty miles and were capable of twenty-five if needful, but for now Suetonius had no fixed destination and had to keep his men fresh for fighting. They were about three week's march from London, two from Towcester. Riding, without stirrups, with his cavalry bodyguard, Suetonius himself could make thirty miles, in other words two forts, a day.

London and St Albans abandoned

After a journey of eight or nine days, Suetonius arrived in London before the British. He found a commercial settlement that was not planned for defence by a small garrison, and so he told everyone to leave. The wise obeyed. The Roman general then started back up Watling Street and gave similar advice to the inhabitants of Verulamium (St Albans) before continuing his journey north-west to meet his army. It was clear that the southern fork of Akeman Street would soon be blocked by advancing British so he sent a messenger to Bicester to order the 2nd Legion to Towcester.

Meanwhile the great mass of British were plundering and looting their way to London, avoiding military centres where there was little to steal. With families, children and wagons accompanying the warriors, it was more a tribal migration than a military advance, a lava flow of hate and revenge that slowly enveloped Roman colonization. They burnt London down, torturing and slaughtering those stupid enough to have stayed there. Then they moved astride Watling Street to do the same at St Albans. In both places the ashes of destruction have been found and dated by archaeologists.

Finding a battleground

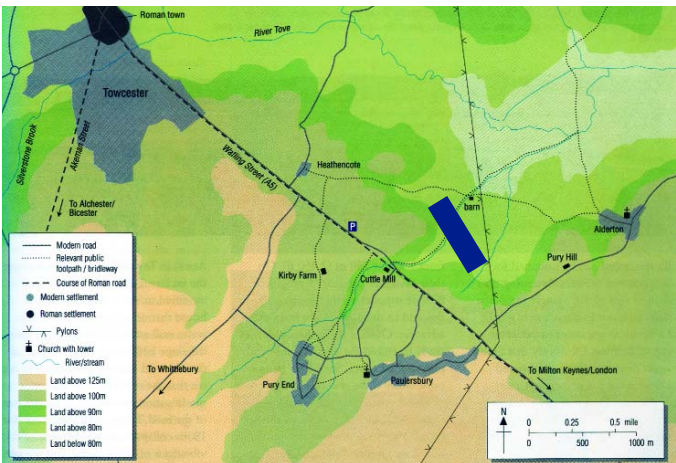
The Romans were outnumbered. By how many it is hard to say. The one and a half legions from Wales would have been made up of 7,200 men at full strength (1 legion = 10 cohorts of 480 men each), but they had fought in Anglesey and now marched for two weeks, so perhaps 6,000 were fit for action. With the cavalry and auxiliary troops gathered up from forts along the way another 4,000 could be added to the force, and the same again from the 2nd Legion, but even then some 20 to 30,000 ferocious warriors and 40 to 50,000 followers capable of helping them were on their way. Military science, discipline and professionalism would have to win the battle.

Then the bad news. The messenger had found no one at Bicester. The 2nd Legion had not come. Suetonius would have to fight with the 6,000 infantry and 4,000 auxiliaries and cavalry he had at Towcester. The choice of battleground would be crucial.

The four front-line cohorts of a legion's battle formation have sixty men each in the front rank standing at intervals of 1.8m (6ft). This gives room for throwing javelins and wielding swords while protected with the large shields the men carried. The style of fighting was, after disrupting the enemy charge with one or two waves of thrown javelins, to use the shield as a blunt instrument to halt or fell the enemy before the sword killed him. After six or seven minutes of fighting like this a man was exhausted and his comrade from the second rank took his place. The legion was a terrible, machine-like adversary. But if the enemy could get round its flank the system would falter as the attack came from the sides and rear. So Suetonius, with one and a half legions, had to find a secure frontage of the correct width, about 700 to 750m.

The Roman historian Tacitus, whose father-in-law was in Britain at the time, described the place and how it was used.

Selecting a position in a defile closed in behind by a wood, and having made sure that there was no enemy but in front, where there was open flat ground unsuited for ambushes, he drew up his legions in close order, with the light-armed troops on the flanks, while the cavalry was massed at the extremities of the wings.



The battlesite, east of Cuttle Mill, today, with a frontage of about 720m north-east of the Roman road, secured on the flanks by higher ground. © Osprey Publishing Ltd

Just south of Towcester, Watling Street plunges into a steep-sided little valley at what is now called Cuttle Mill. Marching men slogging up from the south, with rest and refreshment at Towcester in mind, must have cursed the sharp climb that kept them from their goal. Even today, with the modern road curling east to soften the incline, it is a tough slope at the end of a long march. Off to the north-east the valley opens to the water-meadows of the River Tove and to the south, along the road, the higher ground is well suited to the thin woodland, sparsely settled, in which pigs could roam and ambushes be laid amongst the scrub and coppice. Between the higher



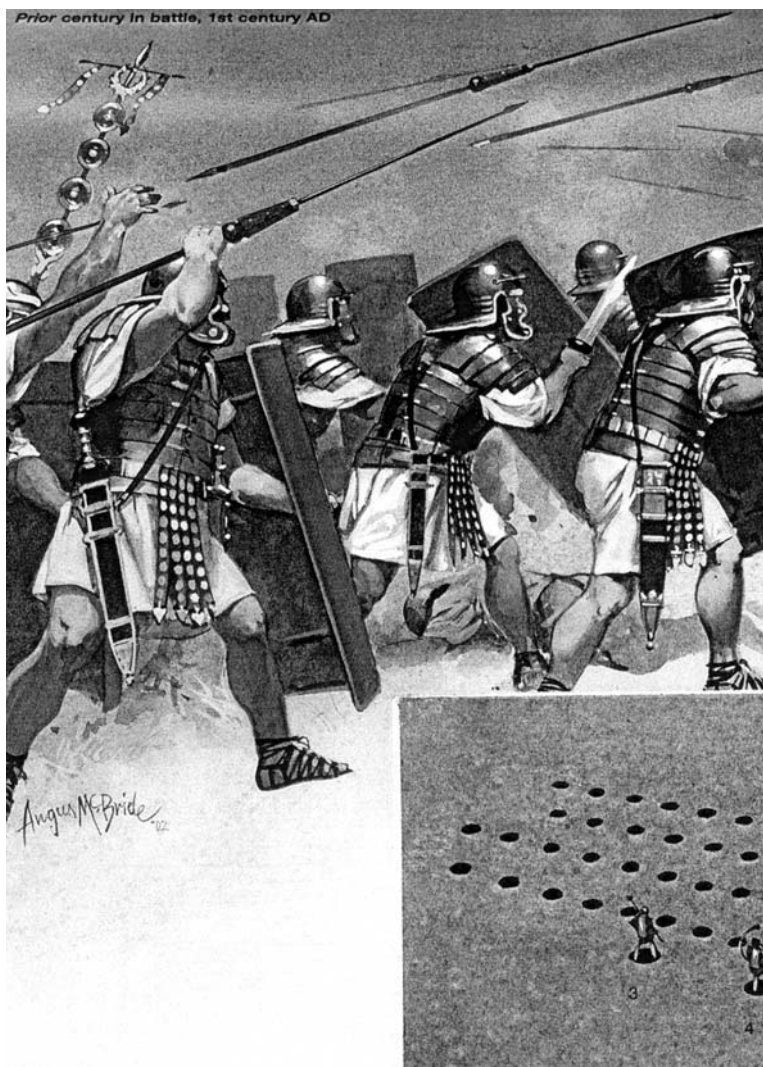
The view along the line of the Roman front, seen from the minor road between the A5, Watling Street, and Alderton. The infantry occupied the flat land between this ridge and the Heathencote ridge, marked by the round wood near the horizon on the left

ground of the Alderton ridge on the southern flank and the Heathencote spur in the north, on which the Towcester racecourse grandstand sits, the valley bottom is flat and slopes gently to the Tove. Some 500m from Watling Street the valley bottom measures 720m wide between the hillsides. The flanking slopes are steep, but not too steep for cavalry and mounted auxiliaries. To the rear the Roman road gives access for supplies and for the evacuation of wounded, as well as a route for reinforcements should the 2nd Legion make a late appearance. It fits.

Boudicca approaches

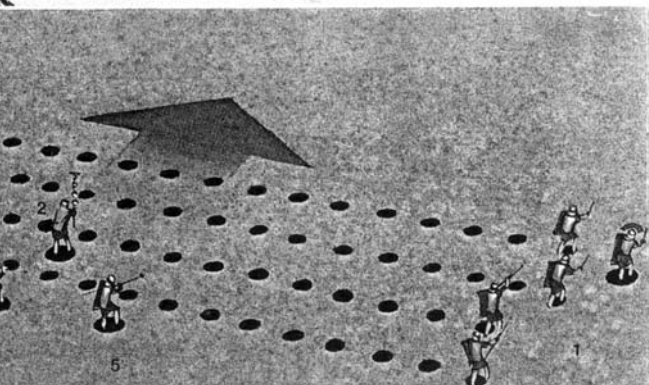
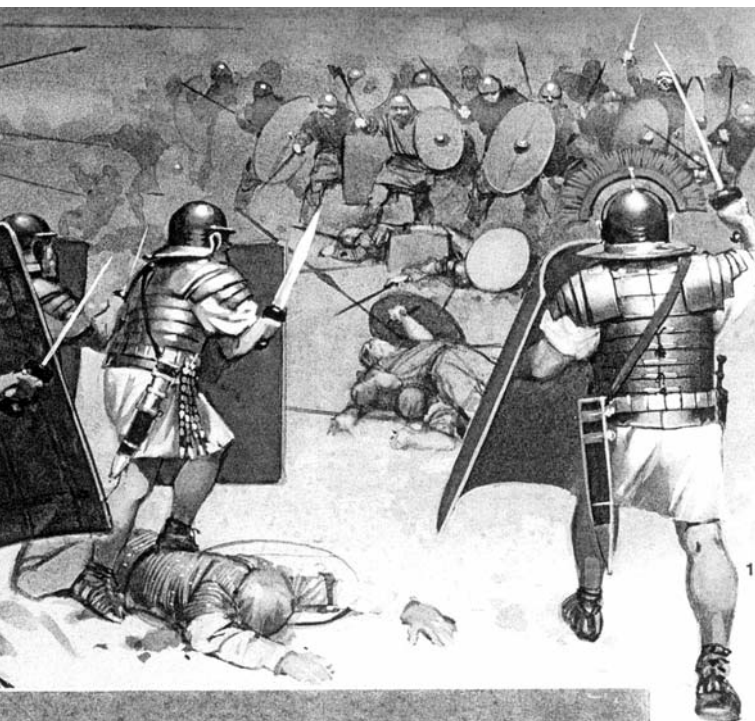
The great crowd of British men, chariots, wagons, families and herds made its slow progress from St Albans, halting

Prior century in battle, 1st century AD



Roman troops in battle. First javelins are thrown, then shields are used to batter the enemy off balance before the sword kills them.

repeatedly for water and grazing. Both sides are likely to have had scouting parties seeking their enemies and both were aware of the imminence of a clash. North of Stoney Stratford the road lifts onto the higher ground, passing through the woods that became the Wittlewood Forest of medieval times, while the broad green valley of the Tove sweeps around to the



The wedge formation is adopted for attack. © Osprey Publishing Ltd

east. In winter that was water-logged, but now, in high summer, it offered flat, open ground, ambush-free and perfect for the British advance.

At what time of day the advance party of the British rounded the Alderton spur and saw the Romans snuggled into their

tree-backed defile we do not know. Neither side was in a hurry now. The British thought they had avoided a Roman trap and now had their enemy trapped instead. The Romans knew they had to provoke the British to attack their carefully chosen position. And so the great train of wagons made a vast camp along the banks of the river, a huge, curved barrier closing in the low land, not for military purposes, but to give access to water for their people and their beasts. To the Romans it looked like the side of an amphitheatre in which gladiators were to fight.

Battle is joined

Even the tough, seasoned legionaries must have felt some misgivings, for Suetonius felt it necessary to address them. Tacitus reports that he told them:

... keep close order. Throw your javelins and then carry on: use shield bosses to fell them, swords to kill them. Do not think of plunder. When you have won, you will have everything.

The charge of the British warriors must have been a terrifying sight. Their custom was to work themselves into a frenzy, shouting insults at their enemies, before hurling themselves forward. They threw spears as soon as they were in throwing distance and then fell to hand-to-hand combat. The aristocracy were carried forward by chariot and then dismounted to fight on foot. If the enemy did not break, the British fell back to rest before charging again. The Romans had learned that victory would come through absorbing the energy of the charges and then, when the zest could be judged to be draining from their adversaries, adopting their well-drilled wedge formations and pushing forward. (See figure on previous page)

And so it was here. How long the battle lasted we do not know. Eventually the moment came for Suetonius to order his men to advance. The wedges struck into the British and from the flanks the auxiliaries hurled sling-shot and showered arrows into the mob. As the British fell back the cavalry entered the fray and the mass of fighters was driven back into the embrace of their camp. The Romans made no distinction

between warrior and follower; men, women and children were put to the sword. Tacitus claims the incredible number of 80,000 slain. Whatever the true cost, the British defeat was complete. What became of Boudicca is not known. It is said she survived the battle only to take poison later.

The Roman casualties are reported to have been about 400 killed, which, if the usual ratio applied, means that at least 1,200 more were wounded, giving a butcher's bill of 16%; seriously heavy losses for any army. It had been no walk-over.

Suetonius's revenge was extreme. He laid waste the lands of the Iceni and their allies to such an extent that he was recalled to Rome before the colony itself was destroyed by the very man who had fought with such skill to prevent the British doing the self-same thing. His successor, Publius Petronius Turpilianus, gave the defeated British peace with honour and his Emperor a province of renewed prosperity.

Walking the land (See the map on page XVI)

The suggested battleground is crossed by public footpaths over private, agricultural land. Visitors should remember that this land yields farmers their living – crops should be left alone and gates should be left as found, either to keep livestock safe or permit movement of farm machinery. Fire is an ever-present threat to plant and animal life and great care must be exercised by smokers. Collecting artefacts located by sight or machine is theft if you have not obtained specific permission to search and it also destroys any opportunity to find out if the story told here is true. Parking on narrow roads and in gateways not only interferes with movement by others, it also puts your car in danger of damage by the huge, modern machines used by farmers. Considerate visitors are welcome.

It is possible to park cars on Watling Street in the lay-by south of the Shutlanger turning and also, with due care, on public roads in Alderton. A public footpath runs from Cuttle Mill towards the Tove as shown on the map, but it is hard to find and involves climbing over the crash-barrier on the A5 and down a bank. Close to the electricity pylons

the path forks, one branch heading for Alderton and its church, the other continuing to the river where a right turn leads to Alderton by Spring Lane. In Spring Lane the two paths meet, allowing a circular walk from either starting point.

Viewpoints

Four viewpoints are suggested to walkers who wish to see the ground for themselves. They are shown on the map and can be visited in any order convenient, but are described here as if starting from, and returning to, Spring Lane, Alderton, a circuit of about 3.6km (2.25 miles). Landmarks are shown on the map.



The stile leading to the footpath from Spring Lane, Alderton.

Walking north on Spring Lane from the edge of the village, a finger-post stands next to the stile to the path on the left. It crosses a small enclosure and continues over a large field before dropping down towards a private farm road. Before descending the slope, pause at **Point A**.



From Viewpoint A on the southern side of the defile described by Tacitus, traffic reveals the descent of the Roman road to Cuttle Mill.

A: With your back to Alderton church, and depending on the tree foliage, it is usually possible to pick out, from right to left: the race-course grandstand; the houses on Cuttle Mill Bank; Kirby Farm. These indicate the higher ground on the northern side and rear of the defile occupied by Suetonius's troops. You are standing on the northern slope of the southern side of the defile. The Roman front line was close to the line of pylons. Traffic makes it easy to identify Watling Street and appreciate the way it dips down to Cuttle Mill.



The footpath goes directly across the farm track and through the little plantation beyond.

The footpath crosses the farm road and through a small plantation of trees, leaving an enclosure on its right. It then goes directly ahead to the far hedge, near a tall tree, where it crosses a little stream on an old plank bridge – take care! The footing is insecure and vegetation can trip you up as well! Once across, pause at **Point B**.

B: The view towards Paulerspury church, south-west, is also towards the centre of the Roman front line which lies just beyond the hedge on the far side of the field. A Briton's eye view of the enemy.



The path runs to the tree on the right

The path continues to the western corner of the field, passing to the right of the foundations of a former barn beyond the line of pylons and over a small wooden bridge crossing the stream beyond the hedge. This is footpaths' cross-roads. Turning left, south along the stream towards Watling Street and Cuttle Mill, takes you to **Point C** at the edge of the first field.



Viewpoint B: On the left the pylons run towards Ashton's Farm and the A5/Paulerspury cross-roads. To the right the remains of the stone barn stand close to the hedge that approximates to the Roman line.

C: You are heading into the defile and just about on the northern end of the Roman infantry's front line. To the north the hill rises steeply and to the south, near Ashton's Farm close to the intersection of the pylons and the Alderton road, is the matching slope beyond the other end

of the infantry position. Auxiliary troops and cavalry were on these slopes.



Over the stream, Point C, looking towards Cuttle Mill and Watling Street along the footpath; the northern end of the infantry position.

Go back to the paths' crossroads and walk straight on, take the right and left that crosses back over the stream, and go to the junction with the bridleway at the bridge over the river, **Point D**.

D: The exact position of the river in AD61 is uncertain, but the British wagons would have been drawn up along it to give people and animals access to the water. From this line of Boudicca's wagons the warriors charged, their right flank on the path along which you have just come. And, after they had broken against the enemy lines, the Roman cavalry cut off the fleeing Britons here to be slaughtered by the advancing infantry. Return to Alderton, first along the farm road and then bearing left on the bridleway leading back to Spring Lane.



The Alderton ridge from a point close to the brick bridge over the River Tove (Point D). Spring Lane bears left near the tree on the right of the picture.

