



Source: The Illustrated London News, September 21, 1872 . Battle of Wishford

The Autumn Manoeuvres

The Battle of Wishford

A correspondent who accompanied the Southern army writes as follows, from Salisbury, on Saturday.

A great battle has been fought between the Northern and Southern forces, and whatever may be the decision of umpires, or however the vanquished may seek to palliate their disaster, the fact will remain patent that the defending army, under Sir Robert Walpole, has experienced a decided defeat. It will be remembered that the Southern force, under Sir John Michel, marched from Blandford, where they had so long been preparing for the campaign on Wednesday morning, in two divisions, going about eight or nine miles each; their cavalry, however, pushed on more than twenty miles, and getting into the valley of the Wiley met the outposts of the enemy, who had made a night march. On the following day the Northern force pushed their cavalry over the river, when they were met by the troops of Macmahon and Baker, and in a series of brilliant charges decidedly worsted. On Friday, the infantry of both armies having reached the front on the previous evening, a battle took place in the Wiley Valley, and from the village of that name up to Codford St. Mary.

The defending forces were supposed to hold the line of the river and the heights beyond, so that an attacking force would have to advance under considerable difficulty. This was ably met by the general of the southern force, who planned a turning movement, by which Sir Alfred Horsford, commanding his First Division, advancing westward, covered by a fringe of wood, crossed the river above the point held by the defenders, and attacked them in flank up the glacia-like slope of Codford Hill, where it sinks into the Chiltern Valley. At the same time General Brownrigg, with the Second Division, went straight at the river, and crossing at three different points, went along its banks in support of Horsford, and charging up the steep ridge, which runs parallel to its course, engaged the defenders in a combat, which effectually prevented them from giving succour to their menaced flanks. A furious fight was compressed into the space of an hour, after being fairly developed, but the result was doubtful. The invaders crossed the Wiley successfully, indeed, without any serious opposition, but their attack on Codford Hill, met as it was at the outset by a tolerably strong force, which was increased every minute by reinforcements, would not have been likely to succeed in the face of men armed with the breechloader, and the decision of the umpires practically made it a drawn battle. Today, however, the result of the fighting is altogether unequivocal, for the northern army has been outwitted, and defeated by a flank attack of the most successful kind, each side being relegated to its original position.



Source: The Illustrated London News, September 21, 1872. Turning Southern Flank, Wiley

The defending force hold the Valley of the Wiley on the north side as on the previous day, and the Southern army has the option of trying again the only partially successful experiment of the previous day, or of trying at any other point of a line little short of twelve miles in length, forming a long curve, of which the little village of Wishford forms a sort of salient angle. The invaders had a great advantage of working on a short interior line, and of being screened effectually, not by a supreme ridge which dominated all the valley on the southern side, but by a fringe of timber called Grovely Wood, which, from its western extremity of Dinton Beeches to a point just north of Wilton, is four miles and a half in length. So long as the northern front of this wood was well watched the invaders could do what they pleased in its rear without the possibility of the defence divining their purpose, and it was this advantage which shaped the capital plan hit upon by Sir John Michel. The general idea supposed that the invading force had received reinforcements from Maiden Bradley, and that other reinforcements from Ringwood had reached Downton, while more invaders at Cranbourne had pushed forward toward Wilton, thus connecting Sir John Michel's right with the Downton force. This additional strength gave the invaders theoretically the possession of an inner circle two miles inside of the Wiley from Codford round by Wishford to Wilton, and south of Salisbury, though practically they held their original camp positions – the First Division of Fonthill Down, and the Second a little north of its first night's camp on Teffont Down. To make the practical coincide as near as possible with the theoretical, Sir Alfred Horsford's first Division set out on a long march of 12½ miles to Wilton, with the intention of crossing the river at the point and taking the enemy, whose left wing rested just above Wishford, in flank, while Gen. Brownrigg's 1st Division made a direct attack at Wishford, and nailed the defenders to that position until the victory could be completed.



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From early morning cavalry vedettes held the heights along the south side of the Wiley, and fringed the front of Grovely Wood, and reported every movement of the invaders, prying so successfully into their arrangements as to leave it beyond a doubt that their force was pretty evenly divided among the space from the village of Wiley down to Wishford. A most successful ruse was therefore attempted. The cavalry, after an ostentatious display in front of Dinton Beeches, were withdrawn beyond the ridge from the view of the enemy, and quietly halted on Teffont Down. At the same time the first brigade of Brownrigg's Division were deployed in front of the wood where it overhangs Hanging Langford. The other two brigades (Major-General Harding's and Col. Bruce's) being withdrawn within the screen of wood, and hurried with all speed eastward to support the attacks of Sir Alfred Horsford's division, who were plodding steadily on their long tramp a little to the south. Greathead's brigade played their game of brag so successfully that part of the defenders' division, which held the opposite bank of the river, were kept stationary, and finally a portion of them crossed to attack their demonstrative antagonists. As soon as they were fairly over, the invader's cavalry appeared in imposing force on their right flank, and paralysed their advance, while Greathead's brigade, having fulfilled its task, withdrew behind the screen of the wood and then made a forced march, which gave them opportunity of taking an important part in the battle which ensued. Utterly in the dark as to the point where the attack would be developed, the defending force remained covering a wide space, when the whole of the opposing party concentrated on their left flank, debouching from the thick cover in the Grovely Wood, which projects by four distinct promontories over the devoted village. The brigade of Greathead arrived soon enough to make a second feint immediately in front of Wishford, while simultaneously the other two brigades of Brownrigg's army rushed at the river, two miles further south, at a point called South Newton, forded it without opposition, and advanced directly against the left flank of the invaders. Some time before Sir A. Horsford had crossed at Wilton, three or four miles lower down, and was hurrying up northward along the highroad to co-operate. So well timed was the conjunction, that though the brigades of the second division were hastening to their relief, and though the defenders made a good fight, especially for the village of Wishford, which was fiercely contested, they were borne back by an irresistible number, and rolled up in the direction of their right flank, until the order to cease firing enabled the Duke of Cambridge and the umpire staff to discuss the proceedings of the day, and award the merit which was undoubtedly due to the generals and officers who were responsible for the movements of the invading army.

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