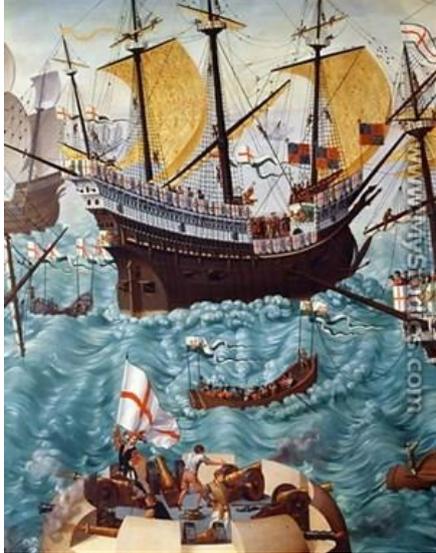


Battle of Bonchurch

The Battle of Bonchurch 1545.



The most famous incident that occurred during the French invasion in July 1545 was the sinking of the Mary Rose during the Battle of the Solent which was witnessed by King Henry VIII from Southsea Castle. At the end of his long reign, King Henry VIII was at war with France and in 1544 the English Army had captured Boulogne. The French planned a counter-attack hoping to occupy Portsmouth or Southampton. Failing that, they would seize and fortify a part of the Isle of Wight.

The French collected a large fleet of over 200 ships plus 26 galleys. This fleet probably carried more than 6,000 soldiers.

When the French fleet appeared off the Isle of Wight, the English fleet came out of Portsmouth and for two days there was sea fighting in the Spithead and St. Helens area, but the result was inconclusive. The English fleet remained in narrow waters, where the superior numbers of the French were of no avail and the French admiral realised that unless he could draw the English fleet out into the open sea and there destroy it, he would achieve little. He then decided to land part of his army in the Isle of Wight and, by burning the houses and slaying the inhabitants, the Admiral hoped to force the English fleet to intervene.

King Henry commanded his sea and land forces in person from a headquarters on Southsea Common. He had already reinforced the small Isle of Wight garrison by bringing over from the mainland the whole of the Hampshire Militia numbering about 2,800 men. The English soldiers were men of the Isle of Wight, Hampshire and Wiltshire Militia, non-professional soldiers called out by the King for the war. The French are believed to have landed a total force of about 2,000 men in the Island.

The Island army was commanded by Sir Richard Worsley, Captain of the Isle of Wight. His army was outnumbered by the French soldiers in the fleet, and the French could come ashore at any suitable beach in the South of the Island. The most serious threat to the Isle of Wight would have come from Brading Harbour or from Sandown Bay, and by keeping a force at Brading, he could quickly meet such threats and could move South West towards the Bonchurch area.

As part of his general plan of defence Sir Richard also had soldiers in outposts. A substantial outpost must have been at the Sandown Bay fort and there were small forces on the tops of the hills, including St. Boniface Down (above Hillside Hotel). The Isle of Wight garrison at this time must have been stretched to the limit in holding such a large area.

The first French landing was at Seaview, where they destroyed a small fort that had been firing at their galleys during the sea battle. The second landing was near Sandown where there was heavy fighting and the French were repulsed. The third landing was at Bonchurch, just north of Ventnor.

The Bonchurch Landings

The French met with no opposition so they pressed on to reconnoitre, but they had not gone far before they came across some companies of English footmen who had assembled in the most advantageous spots to take on the French. A skirmish resulted in many casualties.

Sir Edward Bellingham, Commander of the Field army under Sir Richard Worsley, felt that the Bonchurch area needed special measures of defence. He knew that there were no good harbours in the South of the Island and no good roads leading out of the Undercliff, except for the Newport Road which passed the location of Hillside Hotel. He must also have known that the French needed fresh water supplies that were available at Luccombe, Bonchurch and Ventnor. Possession of St. Boniface Down, above Hillside, would give an enemy observation and control over a great tract of the Island and he probably concluded that Bonchurch was a likely point for a landing.

He then placed a small force at the top of St. Boniface Down, with orders to hold the high ground and to block the Newport Road, but apart from this to leave the French alone.

It is evident that the French General de Tais regarded the Bonchurch landing as the most important, because he led it himself. Perhaps he hoped to seize St. Boniface Down, and from there to burn Wroxall and Shanklin. More important would be the burning of Appuldurcombe House, the family estate of Sir Richard Worsley. De Tais may have hoped also to burn Godshill and if he were lucky to threaten towards Carisbrooke and Newport, using his horsemen, which he might have landed in Sandown Bay. De Tais must have felt sure that such painful blows would provoke King Henry to send out the English fleet.

The French fleet was at St. Helens and Bembridge and the French landing force travelled to Bonchurch in some of the galleys. There had been a Westerly gale the night before and only the galleys could reach Bonchurch against the wind. About 300 soldiers landed and another 300 or 400 remained in reserve in the galleys off shore. After searching the village of Bonchurch the French set off up the Newport Road, this being the obvious route to the top of St. Boniface Down from where the movements of the English fleet could be seen.

From the contemporary accounts it is possible to identify the scene of the battle with some certainty. The English defence position was from the downs above Hillside Hotel to the Newport Road. After the initial skirmish at Bonchurch the English outpost retreated to the Newport Road as the French advanced. What may have happened was that the French landing was seen from the Downs and the English Commander at once descended with a party of men into the Newport Road and along to the "Hillside Hotel" position, his outpost joining him there from Bonchurch following the skirmish. Waggon may have been used to block the Newport Road or it may have been closed by a timber palisade. The "Hillside Hotel" position was quite a strong one, at the top of a steep hill, and flanked on each side by cliffs. It was almost beyond the reach of even the biggest guns on the French ships, which would have an extreme range of one mile.

From a contemporary account, it seems that the English were able to halt the French advance guard, but that the main body of the French eventually burst through. Fighting must have gone on over the area extending back past the Hillside Hotel and up the Newport Road where the French pursuit died away in face of the remaining English defenders of St. Boniface Down.

There is no further mention of the Bonchurch fighting and the inference is that the French did not go any further up the Newport Road. This seems very strange seeing that they had up to then achieved little and the Newport Road was their main line of advance.

One explanation could be that the French General had by this time learned of the danger that the French fleet was in at their Bembridge landing and hurried back to his galley in order to assist them.

Hillside has letters from former guests that report the sighting of a ghost dressed in military uniform and this might be related to the battle.

When the French General arrived at Bembridge he must have realised that his whole plan was in ruins and that the French army and fleet was in danger. French soldiers had landed on the Bembridge Peninsula, had been ambushed, and were involved in confused, large scale, fighting in the very face of the main English army. It took the General the rest of the day to withdraw his men, and by then he must have known that his plans at Bonchurch had miscarried and that all hope of a rapid march inland was over.

Meanwhile, the English Commander at St. Boniface Down must have felt satisfied that he had carried out his orders. The French had still not reached the top of the Down and the Newport Road remained blocked. This turned out to be the end of the French attacks but they did return the following day to take on water from Luccombe, Bonchurch and Ventnor. This operation would have required a covering force inland and the French may well have continued to hold the line at Newport Road.

The English on top of the downs must have seen the galleys all moving towards Bonchurch, then men landing and finally must have seen the French party slowly climbing towards the summit of the hill. To the defenders this must have seemed a clear indication of another French attack, but from a new direction. At once, all available men were collected to drive the French off the summit.

As soon as the French neared the summit, they were greeted by a shower of arrows and suddenly saw Englishmen rushing down towards them. The French commander was slain but the chase continued down the hill towards Bonchurch and the French soldiers were swept away.

The French Admiral had seen the English attack from his ship at Bonchurch. General de Tais was sent hastily ashore to collect up the soldiers that had formed the escort of the water party. They then ran up past the Church to take up position against the English who were coming down Bonchurch Shute. The French managed to stop the English and eventually advanced up the hill again, perhaps as far as the Old Shanklin Road.

This was almost the end of the Bonchurch fighting. By this time the French may have gone from the rest of the Island and Sir Edward Bellingham was marching hard along the coast route Sandown-Shanklin-Luccombe, and was probably bringing cannon via Newchurch and Appuldurcombe. There was another fight at the end when thirty Englishmen were killed. This may have been during the re-embarkation at Bembridge, but more probably was at Luccombe or during the final withdrawal down the Newport Road.



Battle of the Solent 19th July 1545

This edited and reduced version of The Battle of Bonchurch by C.T. Witherby (1962) was compiled by Richard Downing 2014.

