

The field of battle.¹

Considering the definition of a battlefield as the area where a battle is fought and where the contending armies are placed before they started it, the battlefield of Waterloo was roughly bounded in the north by the forest of Soignes, the forests of Ohain and Paris in the east, the Lasne stream and the forest of Callois in the south and the Hain stream in the west.

The huge forest of Soignes stretched out between Brussels and Waterloo on both sides of the great road which connects Charleroi and Brussels. To the west of this road it stretched up to Waterloo and the hamlet of Le Chenois, while to the east of the road it ran up to the hamlets of Joli Bois, Le Roussart, Verd Coucou and Ransbeeck; from there it fell back as far as the hamlet of Gallemart. The forest was very open having high trees without any significant undergrowth. Further, it had a lot of lanes and sandtracks. These were mostly in use for hunting, recreation and the exploitation of the forest.²

The battlefield was intersected by two high roads, one coming from Charleroi and the other from Nivelles, both converging in the hamlet Mont Saint Jean, whence their continuance, in one main road, was directed upon Brussels.

Both roads were about 5 to 6 meters wide and were rimmed by wide verges of loam, but - at least on the battlefield - without any trees. Depending on the adjoining fields, the roads were sometimes at the same level with these fields or cut deep in them.³⁻⁴

In June 1815, by far the largest part of the battlefield was covered with crops of wheat and rye. Although these were not quite ready for harvesting, they were ripening and had grown tall. Though the density was lower, the variety of these crops grew higher as the modern versions, so much of the battlefield was covered with grain that had grown as high as 1.5 meters or more.⁵

Other than that there were also fields with potatoes, clover, beans, peas, and grass, as well as fallow lands. Fields were here and there interspersed with thickets.⁶

In front of the hamlet of Mont Saint Jean, and offering, as it were, a natural military position for the defence of this approach to Brussels, was a gently elevated ridge of ground. It was intersected at right angles by the Charleroi road and followed a westerly direction until about midway between the two high roads, whence it took a south-westerly course and terminated abruptly at its point of intersection with the Nivelles road. On the east side, the ridge extended itself perpendicularly from the Charleroi road until it reached a point, distant about 650 meters, where, elevating itself into a mound or knoll and thence, taking a north-easterly course, expanded into an open plateau. This ridge of Mont Saint Jean constituted the position of the first line of Wellington's army.

To the south, where the French came from, the slope of the ridge varied locally. Near Goumont, it was about one centimeter per meter (⁷), while the one between this building and the farm of La Haye Sainte was more gentle. From La Haye Sainte, the slope increased again, to become abrupt near the Ohain-road; here the ascent was three centimeters per meter.⁸

The ascents have been described as: "the ground on each side of the valley was of easy access, and of such a moderate ascent as to allow of charges of cavalry up it, at all points, at full gallop, and that the ascent to reach the left of the line of battle of the allies was longer, and in parts somewhat steeper, than the ground opposite of their centre and left, although not so high."⁹

Due to the height of the ridge and the fact that the farm of La Haye Sainte was in a hollow, this

farm could barely be seen from the heart of Wellington's position.

To the east of the Brussels-road, the slope was sharp (about eight centimeters per meter), but descended slowly further east and to climb up again towards the farms of Papelotte and La Haye.

The first line of Wellington's army was more distinctly defined by a road which -while running along the summit of the ridge- entered on the east side from Wavre, and led through Ohain towards Braine l'Alleud.¹⁰

The crossing of the Charleroi-road and the Ohain-road was cut deep through the ridge.¹¹ From the middle, these hollow parts ran some 260 [¹²], 200, 60 and 100 meters to the west, south, east and north respectively. From a depth of about 3 to 4.5 meters, they gradually ran up to ground level.¹³ At some point, small corridors allowed from the fields access into the sunken road.¹⁴

Immediately east of the Charleroi road, the Ohain-road was lined on both sides with hedges and bushes for a distance of about 900 meters.¹⁵

Between the hamlet of Mont Saint Jean and the crossroads of the Ohain-road and the Charleroi road stood, to the east of the *chaussée* the large farm of Mont Saint Jean. Further south, near to the same crossroads, in its north-west-corner, stood a small cottage, the Maison Valette.¹⁶

Along the west-side of the Charleroi road, some 250 meters south of the Ohain-road, and in the low ground in front of the ridge, stood the large farm of La Haye Sainte. Like the one of Mont Saint Jean, the complex – consisting of a dwelling, barns, stables and other outbuildings - was constructed around a large courtyard. On its north and south side the farm was bounded by a small garden and an orchard respectively.

Immediately north-east of the farm and on the opposite side of the *chaussée* lay a large sandpit.¹⁷ On top of its northern side (some 100 meters in front of the Ohain-road) was a small earth bank which was crowned with a 150 meters long hedge and a few high willows.¹⁸

On the extreme left flank of Wellington's first line, some 900 meters in front of the Ohain-road, was the hamlet of Smohain.¹⁹ It derived its name from the small stream which ran in a low ground through it, in a west-east direction. The low ground of Smohain had three extensions in a western direction. The first one formed the low ground in front of the ridge of Mont Saint Jean and continued to some distance beyond the farm of La Haye Sainte.

The second turned round the plateau of La Belle Alliance (see below) to seek connection to the low ground of the village of Plancenoit. The third one extended towards the inn of La Belle Alliance, where it forked out in two. The presence of this third extension resulted in the presence of a high ground between the plateau of La Belle Alliance and the ridge of Mont Saint Jean. It came from Goumont and ran for about 900 meters in an eastern direction and was about 300 meters wide. Here, the *chaussée* which ran from Brussels to Charleroi was cut through it.

On the left bank of the Smohain stream, on the higher grounds, some 500 meters west of Smohain, stood the farms of La Haye and Papelotte. It was a broken area, interspersed with groups of trees, scattered houses and sand-tracks, converging from Ohain, Braine l'Alleud and the Bois de Paris.

On the road which led from Smohain to the Bois de Paris stood, at about 300 meters from Smohain, and surrounded by large gardens and a wood, the chateau of Fichermont.

On the right flank of Wellington's front-line, some 400 meters in front of both the Ohain-road and the Nivelles-road stood the vast complex of the chateau-farm of Goumont. It comprised the

buildings of the chateau and farm, adjoined by a formal garden to the east, an orchard and a small wood to the south.

The village Braine l'Alleud, at the Hain, was in the right rear of Wellington's front line, some 2200 meters from Goumont. Around it, at some hundred meters distance, stood the hamlets and farms of Pospoil, Bestrave and du Vieux Foriez.

Halfway between Braine l'Alleud and Mont Saint Jean was the hamlet of Merbraine, in which the farm of Cambray formed the main construction.²⁰ Merbraine was located in a low ground which was an extension of the one of the Hain. From Merbraine, it continued along the west side of the ridge of Mont Saint Jean and along Goumont, made a sharp angle to the east south of it and extended from there towards the extreme west side of the plateau of La Belle Alliance. From there it reached towards the farm of Rossomme, from where it branched out towards the village of Placenoit and the Bois de Callois. The area between this low ground and the Bois de Callois and the Bois de Neuve Cour was, in its turn, cut through by the extensions of the low ground of Braine l'Alleud, which resulted here in an undulating landscape.

The ridge of Mont Saint Jean gradually sloped down to the north and west into extensions towards the farm of Mont Saint Jean, to the area between between Merbraine and the Nivelles-road and between Merbraine and the hamlet of Mont Saint Jean. To the east of the Brussels road, the ridge descended towards the low ground which came from Haut Ransbeek and which was bounded at its northern side by the higher ground between Verd Coucou and Mont Saint Jean. This low ground ended in a hollow between the Ohain road and the orchard of the farm of Mont Saint Jean.

The French position was dominated by a plateau which was bounded by the low grounds of Smohain to the east, the low grounds coming from Merbraine to the west and those of Placenoit to the south.

The plateau, referred to as the one of La Belle Alliance, derived its name from the inn, which stood along the Brussels-road in the very heart of the French position. Also here, and further south along the same road, stood the farms of Trimotion [²¹], Decoster and Rossomme.²² Still further south, at the junction of the Brussels-road and the road to Placenoit, and in rear of the French position, was a group of buildings located on both sides of the Brussels road, called Maison du Roi.²³

In more romantic descriptions, the field between the plateau of La Belle Alliance and the ridge of Mont Saint Jean is depicted on the one hand as a plain and on the other as a very low ground, and sometimes as a deep valley. First of all, however, the plateau of La Belle Alliance did not have the same extension as the ridge of Mont Saint Jean, while this field in reality was an area with undulations and smaller or larger hollows and high grounds.

The area between the Bois de Paris and Placenoit was formed by a series of heights, which were bordered on their north- and south-side by the low grounds of Smohain and of the Lasne respectively.

These heights, as coming from the Bois de Paris, sloped gradually down towards Placenoit (though with a slight rise between the chateau of Fichermont and the Bois de Ranson), while in the same direction they became more and more narrow (from about 1000 to 250 meters).

The southern extension of these heights formed the northern slope against which the village of Placenoit was built. The opposite side of the low ground in which Placenoit was built, was

the slope of the height between Plancenot, the farm of Rossomme, the hamlet of Maison du Roi and the Lasne.

To the east of the Brussels road, between the abbey of Aywiers and the farm of Caillou, both banks of the Lasne were wooded by the Bois de Virère, de Hubermont and Chantelet. On the opposite side of the Brussels-road, between both high roads, were the large Bois de Callois and Bois de Neuve Cour, the last with the farm of the same name near the Nivelles-road.

In the north part of the Bois de Callois there was a strong rise in the ground which was used as a vantage point through the construction of a wooden, 20 meter high observatory. It was built there by Dutch engineers in 1814 for geodesical purposes.

Revised: 27th December 2010 - Copyright © Pierre de Wit

1. For the description of the battlefield the following maps have been used:

Carte de cabinet des Pays Bas Autrichiens (1777)

Capitaine (1796)

Craan, W.B. Plan du champ de bataille de Waterloo dit de la Belle Alliance etc. Bruxelles (1816)

Siborne, W. History of the war etc. (1844) atlas

Bas, F.de La campagne de 1815 Vol. (1906) plan nr.IX

Charras, La campagne de 1815 (1857) plan nr.4

Cotton, E. Une voix de Waterloo (1845)

Etablissements géographiques, Ph. van der Maelen (1846-1854)

2. Carmichael Smyth - Histoire abrégée des guerres dont les Pays Bas et principalement La Belgique ont été le theatre depuis le traité des Pyrénées en 1659 jusqu'à celui de Paris en 1815 p.324

Carte de cabinet des Pays Bas Autrichiens (1777)

Capitaine (1796).

3. Mudford, W. - An historical account of the campaign in the Netherlands, prints B, M, N and O

Lieutenant colonel Nicolay of the staff corps says about the roads: "all the principal roads are paved in the middle for use in bad weather, with another road at each side for dry weather, which answers therefore very well – and almost universally there are rows of trees on both sides of the roads." In a letter dated 17th of May 1815 to general Brown. In: NAM, nr.8903-48

Stanley describes the Brussels road as a narrow pavement in the middle with black mud on each side; this black colour was caused by the transport of coal over this road. Cf. E.Stanley. In: Before and after Waterloo p.261

Also see: Béraud (member of the imperial guard). Histoire de Napoleon p.273

Simpson mentions a width of the roads of 12 or 15 meters. In: A visit to Flanders 3^e ed. p.54

4. The fact that there were no trees along the high roads on the battlefield is confirmed by:

Craan, W.B. - Plan du champ de bataille de Waterloo dit de la Belle Alliance etc. Bruxelles

Siborne, W. History of the war etc. Atlas

Map of captain Schuler, lieutenant Brade and lieutenant Backer Soest from 1815. In: Navez, L. Le champ de bataille etc. p.88

Jacobus Scheltema indicates there were only trees north of the hamlet of Mont Saint Jean. In: Verhaal van etc. In: Vad.Letteroefeningen 1815.II p.584

The map of Capitaine (1796) does show trees all along the way though, as does the Carte de cabinet des Pays Bas Autrichiens, but this last one only for a distance of about 1100 meters south of Mont Saint Jean along the Nivelles road.

This situation matches the sketch as made by lady Gordon in May 1829. In: Waterloo 1815. L'Europe face à Napoleon p.68

In the famous panorama of the battle of Waterloo, trees are depicted along the Brussels road

south of the farm of La Haye Sainte.

In 1815, landmarks were most probably at Waterloo, Mont Saint Jean and Maison du Roi. These have probably been removed in the early 20th century. Cf. Navez, L. *Le champ de bataille et le pays etc.* p.139

Cf. Map of Capitaine (landmarks indicated as "barrière").

5. Cf. Mercer, captain (battery Mercer). *Journal of the Waterloo campaign Vol.I* p.145 He mentions a height of not less than 7 or 8 feet.

Lieutenant Wilson (battery Sinclair). In: BL, Add.mss.34.703 p.281-282

Major Llewellyn (28th regiment). In: BL, Add.mss.34.706 p.264-265

Captain Wallace (1st dragoon guards). In: BL, Add.mss.34.703 p.256-257

Lieutenant Gawler (52nd regiment). In: BL, Add.mss.34.704 p.88-97

Major Whinyates (battery Whinyates). In: BL, Add.mss.34.707 p.251-254

Major Rudyard (battery Lloyd). In: BL, Add.mss.34.704 p.167-170

Lieutenant Holmes (23rd regiment). In: BL, Add.mss.34.705 p.209-212

Ensign Standen (3rd Foot Guards). In: BL, Add.mss.34.705 p.19-22

Adkin, M. *The Waterloo companion* p.154

6. Captain Tomkinson (16th regiment of light dragoons). In: *The diary of a cavalry officer in the Peninsular and Waterloo campaigns* p.298

Captain Mercer (battery Mercer) In: *Journal of the Waterloo campaign Vol.I* p.299

For his Waterloo-model, in the 1830's while being on the battlefield, captain Siborne made a detailed research on the crops as they would have been on the battlefield in 1815.

After that, he asked in his subsequent questionnaire to participants of the battle the following: "Upon examining the plan you will find that I have marked with a pencil, on the different fiefs in and near which the [the unit of the respective participant] was general posted throughout the 18th of June, the nature of the crops which, it is presumed, from the information afforded me by the farmers residing on the spot, they respectively contained on that day. Have you any doubts as to the correctness of such information, and if so, in what particular ? Considering the extremely devastated and trodden-down appearance of all kinds of vegetation at the period of the crisis of the battle, it is more with reference to the existence of ploughed land that I ask this question." In: BL, Add.ms.34.703 p.209

7. Navez, L. *Le champ de bataille et le pays etc.* p.44

8. Navez, L. *Le champ de bataille et le pays etc.* p.44

⁹ Shaw Kennedy, J. – *Notes on the battle of Waterloo* p.59

Lieutenant colonel Gardiner characterizes the ridge as "open and gradual ascent from all sides, without any particular feature which could be considered as securing our flanks, and perfectly

open to our front.” In: www.1815.ltd.uk Original in: NLS MS 3615, letter dated July 1815 to lieutenant general sir Th.Graham.

¹⁰ Siborne, W. – History of the war etc. Vol.I p.327-328

From here on, this road will be referred to as the Ohain-road.

Except for the immediate of the great road Charleroi – Brussels, it ran immediately north of the summit of the ridge.

11. Craan, W.B. - Plan du champ de bataille de Waterloo dit de la Belle Alliance etc. Bruxelles Sketch of captain Ross (battery Ross). In: BL, Add.mss. 34.707 p.255-259

Mudford, W. An historical account of the campaign in the Netherlands - print I Waterloo.1815. Estampes etc. plate XIII.

Siborne gives a detailed description, both in writing and in a small sketch, of the banks of the Brussels road between the Maison Valette and the farm of La Haye Sainte. In: BL, Add.mss.34.707 p.540-542

12. Craan, W.B. - Plan du champ de bataille de Waterloo dit de la Belle Alliance etc. Bruxelles Navez mentions a distance of 200 meters. In: La campagne de 1815 Vol.II p.129

Lieutenant colonel Cathcart mentions almost 100 meters. In: BL, Add.mss.34.705 p.146-150

13. Cf. lieutenant colonel Cathcart. In: BL, Add.mss.34.705 p.146-150

Aerts mentions a depth of 4 to 5 meters. In: Etudes (manuscript) p.38

Houssaye mentions 1.5 to 2 meters. In: 1815.Waterloo p.

14. Lieutenant colonel Cathcart, however, mentions one entrance to the road in rear of La Haye Sainte, near the Wellington-tree, and being accessible for one or two horses at the time, in an angle of about 45 degrees. In: BL, Add.mss.705 p.146-150 and 34.707 p.399-401

¹⁵ Craan, W.B. - Plan du champ de bataille de Waterloo dit de la Belle Alliance etc. Bruxelles Colonel Van Zuylen van Nijvelt (staff 2nd Netherlands division). In: Bas, F.de & T'Serclaes de Wommersom. La campagne de 1815 Vol.III p.328

Ensign C.Mudie (1st Royal Scots). In: Operations of the 5th or Picton's division in the campaign of Waterloo. In: USJ, II, 1841 p.190

Aerts, W. Etudes (manuscript) p.38

Houssaye, H. 1815.Waterloo p.308

Mudford, W. - An historical account of the campaign in the Netherlands, prints I and L

The fact that the road did not lay any deeper is confirmed by W.M.Gomm. In: Gomm, W.M. Letters and journals etc. footnote p.352

Between both high roads, the Ohain-road had no hedges, except at a place about halfway, on its south-side only and for a length of approximately 200 meters.

W.Aerts mentions the presence of a tree and some bushes about 500 meters east of the crossroads, and directly on the south side of the road. This tree was called the "chêne St.Matthieu". They were the remains of a much older small group of trees. In the period 1815-1840 the bushes gradually disappeared, and finally the oak was cut down in 1865. In: Etudes (manuscript) p.100

The tree can be found on the map of van der Maelen (1846-1854).

16. Craan, W.B. - Plan du champ de bataille de Waterloo dit de la Belle Alliance etc. Bruxelles Siborne, W. – History of the war etc. Atlas

Mudford, W. - An historical account of the campaign in the Netherlands, print I

Maaskamp,

Waterloo.1815. Estampes etc. Plate 24

Lieutenant Waymouth (1st Life Guards). In: BL, Add.mss.34.703 p.244-247

Lieutenant Elliott (2nd Life Guards). In: BL, Add.mss.34.704 p.199-200

Lieutenant colonel Hartmann (Bataljon Hameln, brigade Vincke). In: BL, Add.mss.34.704 p.227-228

¹⁷ Its size was 30 x 15 meters, with a depth varying between 3.60 and 4.50 meters. Cf. Caldwell & Cooper. Rifle green at Waterloo p.46

18. Houssaye, H. 1815.Waterloo p.309

Mudford, W. - An historical account of the campaign in the Netherlands, prints K and L

Maaskamp

Captain Ross (battery Ross), sketch. In: BL, Add.mss.34.707 p.255-259

Waterloo 1815. Estampes etc. plate XIII

Anonymous sketch of La Haye Sainte. In: Gloucestershire Record office nr.D1833/Z5

19. Cf. maps of Ferraris and Capitaine. Both mention "Smouhen". Nowadays it is called "La Marache". This name comes from the Dutch word of "moeras", which means swamp, which in its turn is connected to the marshy ground of the site. Before 1815, the same name existed but not for the village itself, but for a part of it. Cf.Aerts, W. Etudes (manuscript) p.99

²⁰ Craan, W.B. - Plan du champ de bataille de Waterloo dit de la Belle Alliance etc. Bruxelles According to Aerts, the farm referred to in Craan's plan was the one of la Mousseline; a farm called de Cambrai would have stood about 200 meters further south-west. In: Promenades etymologiques etc. p.6

Cf. for the same conclusion Vandermaelen's map (1850).

According to Navez, the farm of Cambrai had burned down in the battle. In: Le champ de bataille etc. p.168

21. Other names of the farm are Badard, La Salière or la Salinne. This name is probably derived from a local saltpan near La belle Alliance or by the fact that its owner was a merchant of salted

supplies. Cf. Aerts, W. Promenades etymologiques etc. p.12

Cf. Mudford, W. - An historical account of the campaign in the Netherlands, print M

²² The farm of Rossomme (the cense de Rossomme at the Ferraris-map) , at about 1500 meters north of Le Caillou, took its name of Alexander van Rossum, the owner of the farm in the 18th century. The tablet of his gravestone can still be seen on the wall of the church at Plancenot. The farm is sometimes also called maison Derbais and maison Delpierre. Cf. Tarliers, J. & G.Wauters. La Belgique ancienne et moderne.Arrondissement de Nivelles Vol.1.p.78

The farm as it existed in 1815 dated from the 18th century, but the place where it stood was much older; in 1544 it was called Tulvent. In 1815, the farm itself was formed by a house with a few annexes.

In April 1895 the farm was destroyed by a fire; only the adjoining orchard, on the other side of the road, survived. Since long, this orchard has been cut down.

Cf. Morgan Crofton, W. A visit to Waterloo p.285

Cf. map of 1896. In: Navez, L. La campagne de 1815 Vol.II p.25 adm Le champ de bataille p.168

Barral, G. Itinéraire etc. p.132 Barral also depicts the farm in a small sketch, probably based on an old photograph.

23. Craan, W.B. - Plan du champ de bataille de Waterloo dit de la Belle Alliance etc. Bruxelles
In 1685 the site had the name of Monchar and when the Spanish king had decided to extend the road which came from Brussels up to Waterloo, as far as Genappe, it was there that a building was constructed for the intake of toll. The name of "Maison du Roi" was given to the houses of the farmers who lived here, as they were built on the expenses of the king. In 1709 the toll-building was sold to Antoine Ransquin, whose descendants still own it. Cf. Logie, J. Waterloo, l'évitable défaite p.

According to Barral there were in 1815 only three houses. Cf. Barral, G. Itinéraire etc. p.116

There is a sketch (of 1894) which shows at least several buildings. Cf. Sketch-book of A.H.Kennedy-Herbert. In: NAM, nr.7303-73

The Carte de cabinet des Pays Bas Autrichiens shows a large farm west of the road and one (with some houses) east of it, while Craan shows houses on both sides of the road with two farms east of the road.

The major building to the east of the road still holds a tiny chapel dated 1741, while a stone in the former barn of the farm about 250 meters north of Maison du Roi bears the date 1757.