CHAPTER 6

HOUGOUMONT AND LA HAYE SAINTE

Points d'appui or Pivotal Bastions?

NICK LIPSCOMBE

PREVIOUS
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Defence of the Chateau de Hougoumont by the flank Company, Coldstream Guards, 1815. Watercolour by Denis Dighton, 1815. (National Army Museum)

Wellington's decision to make a stand against Napoleon's forces south of the village of Waterloo is unchallenged but whether he personally selected the actual position at Mont Saint Jean is interestingly the subject of debate. Two modern histories both suggest that the Mont Saint Jean position was in fact selected by the quartermaster general, Colonel Sir William Howe de Lancey, when sent back by Wellington on 17 June to reconnoitre the exact position for the Allied defence.[1] This challenge to the theatrical tracing of the duke's thumbnail across the map 'behind Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte' in the Duke of Richmond's study in the early hours of 16 June is not, however, supported by other historical interpretations.[2] The suggestion that de Lancey had the latitude to reject the idea of deploying astride the ridge of La Belle Alliance should not be discounted but an examination of the advantages and disadvantages of both positions, from a defensive perspective, quickly reveals that Mont Saint Jean is the stronger of the two. Sergeant Major Edward Cotton of the 7th Hussars, a participant at the battle and a subsequent resident of Mont Saint Jean for 34 years until his death in 1849, perhaps knew the ground better than anyone.

> The juncture of the two high-roads immediately in rear of our centre … added to the facility of communication, and enabled us to move ammunition, guns, troops, the wounded etc, to or from any part of our main front line as the circumstances demanded … the continuous ridge from flank to flank towards which no hostile force could advance undiscovered, within range of our artillery upon the crest. Behind this ridge our troops could manoeuvre, or lie concealed from the enemy's view, while they were in great measure protected from the fire of hostile batteries…[3]

A perfunctory glance at a map, period or modern, of the Waterloo battlefield reveals three sets of farm buildings, to the south of the Mont Saint Jean ridge, astride the main road running south to north from Charleroi to Brussels. To the east of the Nivelle–Mont Saint Jean road was the chateau and farm complex of Hougoumont; just to the west of the Brussels road was the smaller farm of La Haye Sainte and on the left of the Allied positions were the farms of Papelotte, La Haye, Frischermont and the small hamlet of Smohain. These farms were of a typical Central European construction, designed to keep out thieves and intruders. Built with high brick or stone walls around an inner courtyard they provided a veritable strong point against attack by infantry but would not have lasted overly long if those infantry were supported by artillery. It was quite clear that these farm complexes would have to be held as part of the Allied static defences but until Napoleon revealed his hand, it was difficult for Wellington to

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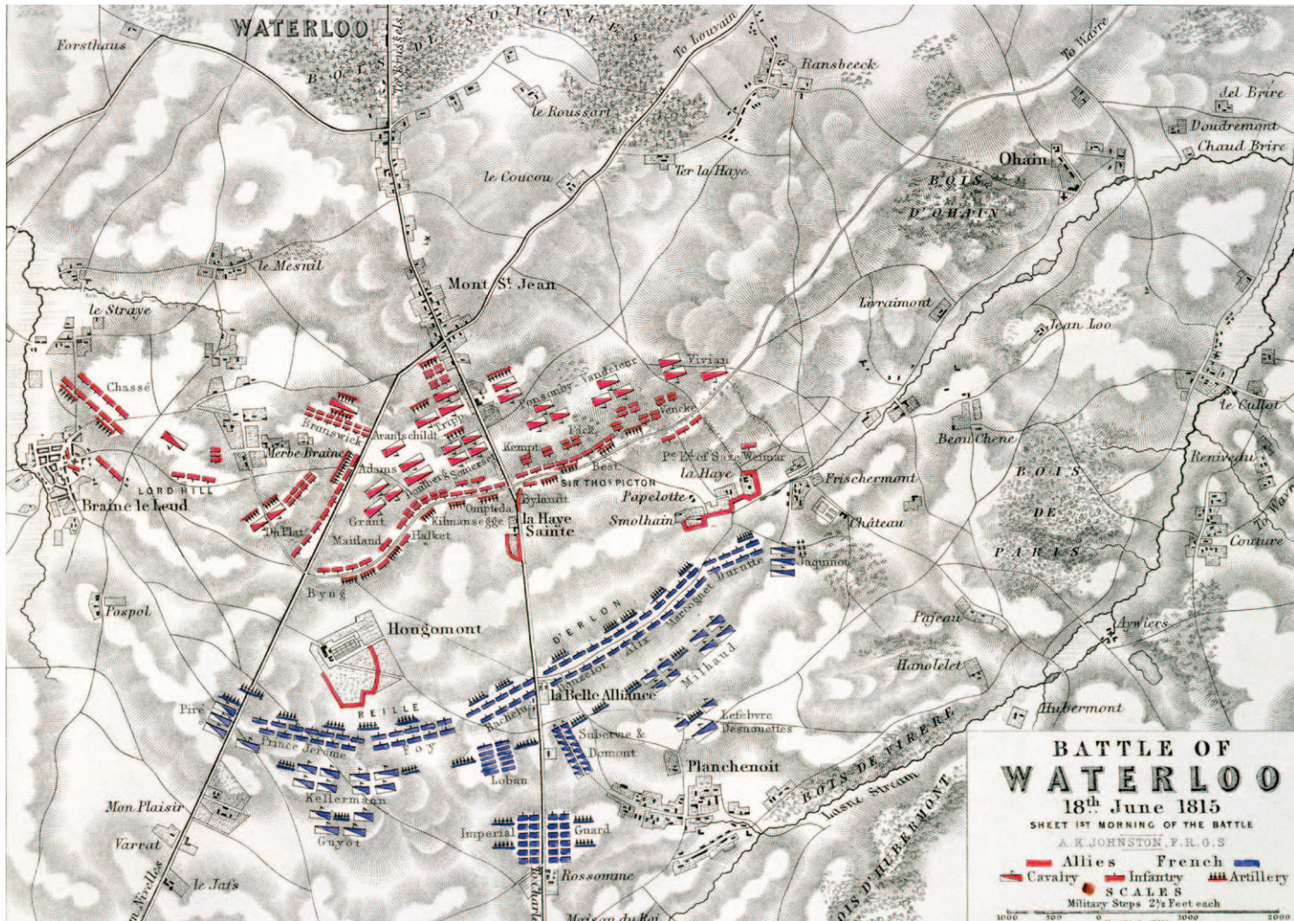
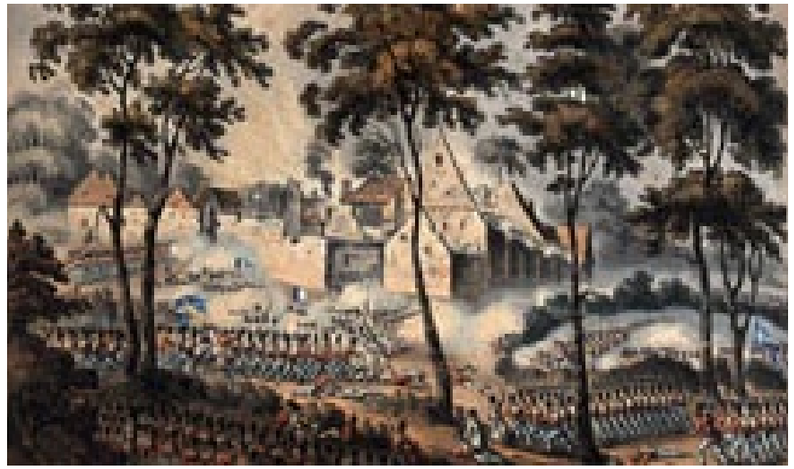
determine the comparative importance of these strong points. Was their retention and/or capture essential for victory or, put another way, were they simply *points d'appui* or pivotal bastions?

Wellington's defensive position was undeniably strong but General Thomas Picton, commanding the Allied 5th Division, did not see it that way; commenting to the commanding officer of the 52nd Light Infantry that he 'never saw a worse position taken up by any army'.[4] Few Allied officers shared Picton's opinion but Napoleon was most certainly of the same mind. In the fading light on 17 June he made a reconnaissance of the Allied positions and concluded that 'if the English army remains there tomorrow, it is mine'.[5] This strident judgement was based entirely on the fact that Wellington's back, and therefore his line of retreat, was through the Forest of Soignes. By deploying forward of such an obstacle Wellington had reduced his tactical mobility and, following defeat, rendered any successful extraction a virtual impossibility. This was perhaps a rather hasty conclusion for there were several good roads through what was



A glance at a map of the Waterloo battlefield reveals three sets of farm buildings, to the south of the Mont Saint Jean ridge, astride the main road running south to north from Charleroi to Brussels. (Topfoto)



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The exterior of Hougoumont at the commencement of battle. Coloured aquatint by Thomas Sutherland. (National Army Museum)

essentially an 'open' forest; Baron Antoine-Henri de Jomini in his *Art of War* even considered the cover of the forest an asset not a liability.[6]

Following the battle at the crossroads around Quatre Bras on 16 June, Wellington spent the following day readjusting to a new defensive position from where he hoped to hold Napoleon and then defeat him with the arrival of Prussian support. Assisted by a particularly lethargic follow-up by Napoleon's Army, and by some appalling weather, Wellington was able to execute his defensive deployment virtually unhindered. Leaving aside the physical mix of his force, Wellington based the geographical dispersion on three factors: the difficult terrain on the left from which direction he was relying on Prussian reinforcement; the need to block the centre and the road to Brussels and hold this in depth from the Napoleonic sledgehammer; and finally the need to cover the more open right flank, protect his lines of communication (to Ostend) and counter the expected flanking manoeuvre. The likelihood of a Napoleonic manoeuvre on the Allied right was well-judged and Wellington retained 18,000 Dutch, Hanoverian and British troops at Hal and Tubize, and guarding the Mons–Brussels road, to counter such an eventuality.[7] As events transpired there was to be no such manoeuvre and Hougoumont which, to all intents and purposes started the day at the centre of the Allied position, became the Allied right.

Napoleon's decision not to manoeuvre resulted in a battlefield of 5,000 metres wide and 4,000 metres deep into which 200,000 men (including subsequently 40,000 Prussians), 60,000 horses and 537 guns were committed to action.[8] Between Hougoumont and Papelotte the balance of 73,000 Allied troops had been deployed, described by Clausewitz as follows:

> In general the duke's deployment was such that the front was about 5,000 paces long, with 30 battalions of infantry in the first line, some 13 battalions in the second line, sixty squadrons of cavalry in the third and fourth lines. In addition another 38 battalions and 33 squadrons were placed at other points, either farther to the rear or on the flanks [not including Hal-Tubize], and could be considered as reserves. Thus one could say the deployment was exceptionally deep.
>
> In front of the lines lay three strong points: the farmhouse of Hougoumont 1,000 paces in front of the right wing, La-Haye-Sainte 500 paces in front of the centre on the main road, and La Haye 1,000 paces in front of the left wing. All three were occupied by infantry and more or less prepared for defence.[9]

In 1815 Hougoumont was a small chateau and working farm. The complex of buildings was about 100 metres long and 50 metres wide onto which, on the east side, abutted the ornamental gardens laid out in Flemish style. It was

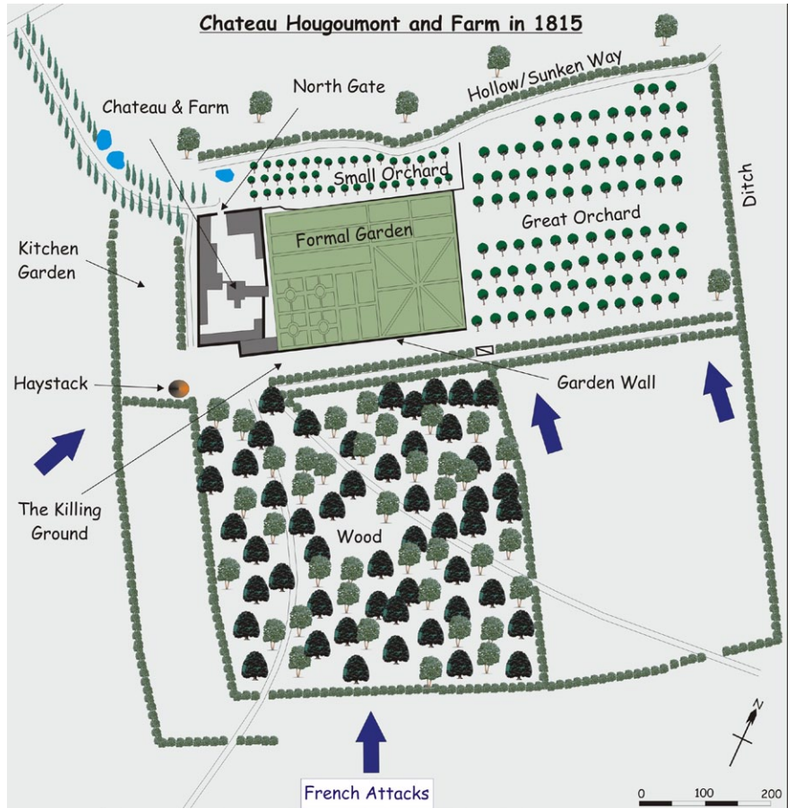

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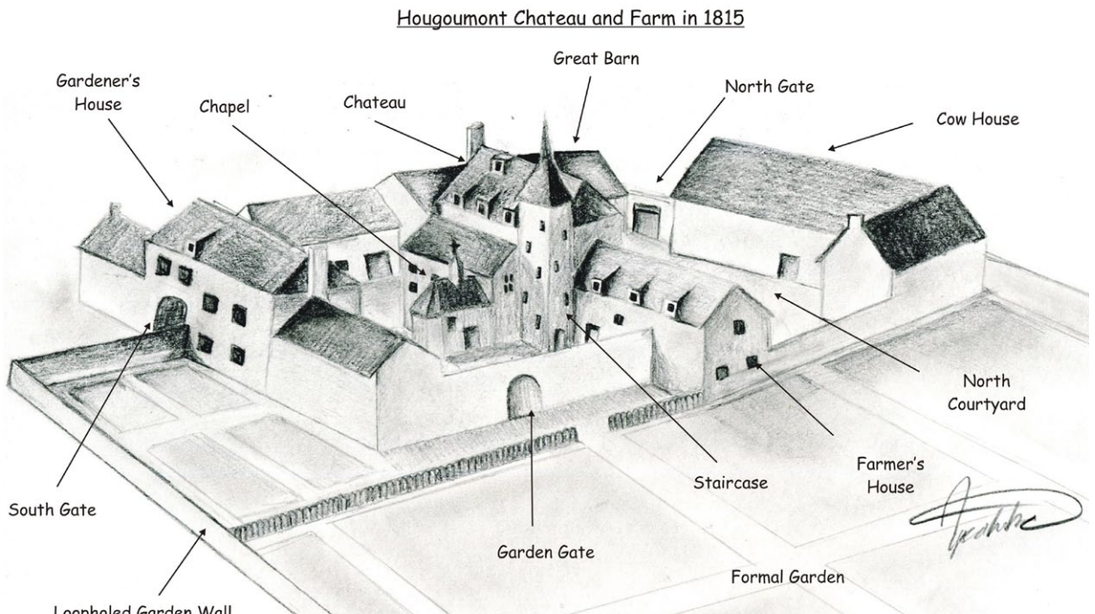
Diagram of Hougoumont chateau and farm in 1815. (© Osprey Publishing)



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Drawing of Hougoumont chateau and farm in 1815. (Courtesy of Nick Lipscombe)

enclosed to the south and east by a 2-metre-high brick wall and to the north by a hedge. At the eastern end of the walled garden was the Great Orchard. To the south of the buildings and the walled garden was a wood, which extended south for about 400 metres. The tactical advantages of holding the farm and outlying grounds were obvious enough and as darkness fell on the 17th Wellington ordered four light companies of the 1st and 2nd Guards Brigades to take possession of the farm.[10] They had a brief firefight with a French patrol before occupying the position and preparing it for defence. The two light companies of the 1st Guards, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Lord Saltoun, occupied the Great Orchard and part of the woods to the south of the farm, while the other two light companies, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel James Macdonell, occupied the buildings and walled garden. They worked through the night barricading the numerous gates, loopholing the south wall and constructing rudimentary firing platforms along the inner edge of the wall. At some stage during the night Wellington ordered 200 (or 300) Hanoverian *Jägers* (from Colonel Friedrich, Count von Kielmansegge's Brigade) to the area and these green-jacketed infantry moved to the south end of the wood.[11] Soon after first light on 18 June, following an inspection of the Hougoumont defences, Wellington decided to further reinforce the defenders and ordered the Prince

of Weimar to dispatch one of his Nassau battalions from Papelotte to the area. The 1st/2nd Nassau deployed into the orchard and it appears that the two light companies under Lord Saltoun then withdrew back to the main position on Mont Saint Jean ridge. Consequently, by 11 a.m. there were 1,300 Allied soldiers in and around the Hougoumont complex and, contrary to popular perceptions, only 200 were British (1,600 British reinforcements arrived at varying times during the battle).[12]

La Haye Sainte was more of a typical Belgian farm, enclosed on four sides with an inner courtyard. Cotton described it as 'a post far from being so commodious as Hougoumont, but considerably nearer our position, consequently easier of access, although more exposed to the enemy's attacks and cannonade'.[13] On the south, or French side of the farm was an orchard about 250 metres long and 75 metres wide and on the north side was a garden adjoining the main farmhouse. There were two gates to the courtyard, the main gate off the Brussels road and another virtually opposite this structure opening out towards the fields. The 2nd Light Battalion of the King's German Legion (KGL) had been allocated the defence of the farm. When the 400 men arrived late on the 17th, wet, cold and exhausted, they broke down the inner gate and smashed it up to make firewood. Some time later they received orders to fortify the structure. Their endeavours were severely hampered by a lack of building materials and, to make matters worse, at some stage that evening their integral battalion pioneers were sent to Hougoumont leaving the hapless defenders 'without so much as a hatchet'. Lieutenant Graeme was with the 2nd Battalion and recalled:

> I saw no sapeurs [sic]. We had no loopholes excepting three great apertures, which we made with difficulty when we were told in the morning that we were to defend the farm. Our pioneers had been sent to Hougoumont the evening before. We had no scaffolding, nor means of making any, having burnt the carts etc. Our loopholes, if they may be thus termed, were on a level with the road on the outside…[14]

Major George Baring was in charge of the six KGL companies and he posted three in the orchard, two in the buildings and one in the rear garden. The loss of the large gate presented 'an insurmountable difficulty' and they could find nothing with which to barricade this opening.[15] An abattis was constructed on the main road at the south end of the boundary wall and Captain Kincaid of the 95th Rifles recalled that further along the road, towards the Allied positions, 'was a small knoll, with a sand-hole in its farthest side, which we occupied as an advanced post, with three companies'.[16]

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The farm of La Haye Sainte in 1815. (National Army Museum)

On the Allied far left were the two farms of Papelotte and La Haye, the small hamlet of Smohain and furthest east, the farm and chateau of Frischermont.[17] Papelotte and La Haye were enclosed farms about the same size as La Haye Sainte; the former was a more substantial structure constructed of brick, while the latter had walls constructed of cob (clay, sand and straw) and was crowned with a thatched roof.[18] The small village of Smohain was further down the lane and consisted of 12 separate buildings, some quite substantial. On the far left was the chateau and farm of Frischermont, which was similar in size to Hougoumont and had been used by the Duke of Marlborough as his Headquarters in 1705. The remaining four battalions of Prince Saxe-Weimar's 2nd Netherlands Brigade had the responsibility to man and defend the three farms.[19] Skirmishers from these battalions were sent to the top of the hill to the south; while six companies of the 3rd/2nd Nassau defended Papelotte, one company was detached to La Haye and four companies of the 1st/28th Orange Nassau held Frischermont. The balance of the infantry was held to the north of the buildings on the forward slope.

On a two-dimensional map this cluster of farms and buildings seems as dominant and potentially significant as those of Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte. However, closer examination reveals this not to be the case. Due to the

lie of the land on the Allied left the importance of these strong points is markedly different. The terrain falls off sharply in this area and a branch of the Ohain road runs east past Papelotte, La Haye and Smohain and then follows a stream towards Ohain. This sunken road, the defile, the stream and marshy banks, made worse by the very heavy rain, were considerable military obstacles to the movement of large formed bodies of infantry and cavalry. Jomini recognised this:

> We must endeavour in a defensive position not only to cover the flanks, but it often happens that there are obstacles on other points of the front, of such a character as to compel and attack upon the centre. Such a position will always be one of the advantageous for defence, – as was shown at Malplaquet and Waterloo. Great obstacles are not essential for this purpose, as the smallest accident of the ground is sometimes sufficient: thus, the insignificant rivulet of Papelotte forced Ney to attack Wellington's centre, instead of the left as he had been ordered.[20]

It would be wrong to disregard the tactical value of these buildings but it is clear from a detailed examination of the terrain and from the way this area was defended and attacked that these buildings were not vital to either side, or to the outcome of the battle. As such they cannot be considered in the same light as those of Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte.

From Wellington's orders to Macdonell to 'defend the post to the last extremity', his intentions to retain Hougoumont were clear. It was a determination which grew as the battle progressed; he took a considerable

La Haye Sainte (from the south) on the left of the Charleroi to Brussels road. (Courtesy of Nick Lipscombe)

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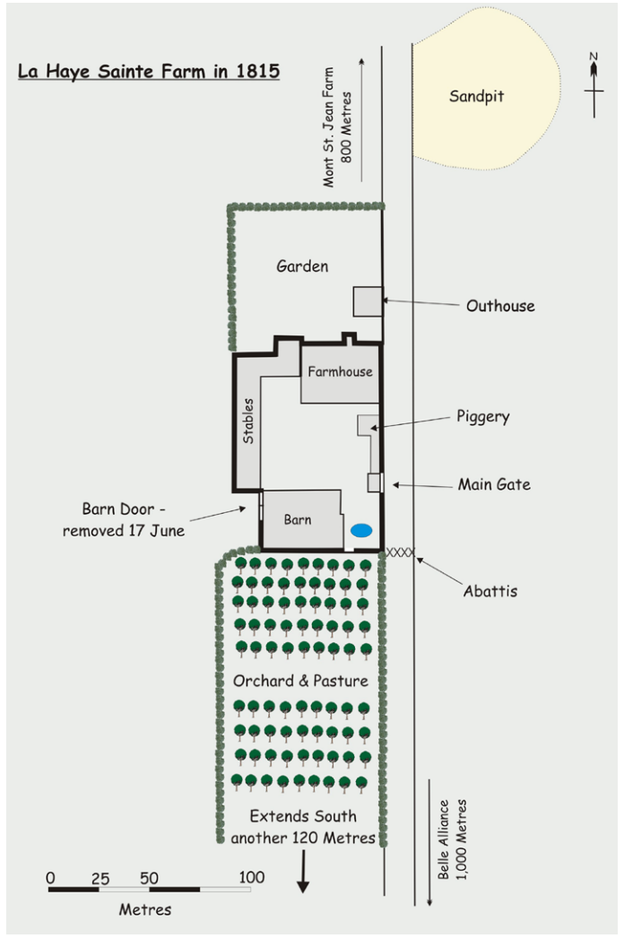

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Diagram of La Haye Sainte farm in 1815. (© Osprey Publishing)

interest in the defence of the farm throughout the day. It is curious that he did not appear to have the same resolve with regard to La Haye Sainte, either at the start or during the battle itself. Yet the advantages in holding the farms individually were undeniably increased by the advantage of holding them both, for they funnelled the attacking forces into what General Foy described as 'a hail of death' and what is known in modern terms as a killing ground.[21] Nevertheless, of the two strong points, La Haye Sainte was evidently the more important; it was, to all intents and purposes (given Napoleon's plan of attack), the key to the battle. According to Professor Jeremy Black, La Haye Sainte was more important than Hougoumont 'with regard to the flow of the battle, and also in terms of a symbolism of success'.[22] Andrew Field notes that, 'if the French were able to seize it then it could be fairly said that they held a dagger to the heart of Wellington's line'.[23] Both observations encapsulate why Wellington had to retain and Napoleon had to capture this small farm complex located centre stage.

Napoleon's decision-making ability appears to have been curtailed by his ill health. He was almost certainly tormented by a bad bout of prolapsed haemorrhoids, may also have been afflicted by an attack of cystitis and, it has also been suggested, was suffering from acromegaly, a glandular disorder.[24] These maladies surely affected his physical performance but it is unclear as to whether and to what extent they may also have affected his mental ability. His lack of urgency on 17 June betrayed his maxim that 'when once the offensive has been assumed, it must be sustained to the last extremity'.[25] There is some mitigation for this tardiness but a similar lack of urgency on the morning of the battle is less easily dismissed. Napoleon was certainly aware, late on the 17th or early on the 18th, that elements of Field Marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher's Prussian Army might elude Marshal Emmanuel de Grouchy and move west in support of

Wellington's force. Many of Napoleon's lieutenants, in particular his chief of staff Marshal Nicolas Soult, had urged concentration of force and the recalling of all or a large part of Grouchy's 30,000 troops (and 96 guns). That Napoleon failed to do this betrayed a second of his maxims, 'when you have resolved to fight a battle, collect your whole force. Dispense with nothing. A single battalion sometimes decides the day.'[26]

It was, however, Napoleon's failure to comply with one of his principal maxims on the day of the battle which is most difficult to understand. 'It is an approved maxim in war, never to do what the enemy wishes you to do … never attack a position in front which you can gain by turning.'[27] Napoleon's actual plan and tactical intentions are unclear; Clausewitz summed it up as follows:

> Whether Bonaparte was intending to attack all along the line, break through the centre, or push in one of the wings, is something that cannot be clearly discerned, either from the measures that were actually taken or from the direction that the fighting took, and even less from what Bonaparte himself says regarding his plan.
>
> Judging by the distribution of forces and the initial advance, it was purely an attack all along the line; judging by the main efforts made during the latter course of the action, the intent was to break through the centre. But the latter seems to have been inspired more by the needs of the moment than by a clear plan…[28]

It certainly appears that Napoleon's plan was to break Wellington's centre by a heavy preliminary artillery bombardment followed by a concentrated and sustained infantry assault, which would then be exploited by massed cavalry. Everything else seems secondary to this intention and Clausewitz goes on to conclude that:

> it seems that the attacks on the advance post of Hougoumont and the village of La Haye had so little energy, and the attack in the centre was so large, that Bonaparte's intention must have been to break through the Allied centre, while merely keeping it occupied on the flanks.[29]

While there are some inaccuracies with this statement it does seem strange that Napoleon, having decided to break through the centre in strength, does not seem to have paid sufficient attention to the capture or masking of the strong points of Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte.

Napoleon was certainly concerned about fortifications; perhaps with his experience from Borodino in mind, very early on the 18th he had sent his chief engineer General François Haxo to reconnoitre the Allied centre.

The assault on Hougoumont by the French infantry of the 6th division. (Hougoumont © MarkChurms.com 1991)

> I mounted my horse at once and went to the skirmishers opposite la Haie-Sainte; reconnoitred the enemy line again; and told the engineer General Haxo, a reliable officer, to get nearer to it, in order to satisfy himself as to whether they had erected some redoubts or entrenchments. This general returned promptly to report that he had seen no trace of fortifications.[30]

Leaving aside the rather flimsy abattis on the road adjacent to La Haye Sainte – which Kincaid described as little more than scattered branches – it seems strange that Haxo did not report on the defendable qualities of Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte as part of his engineer assessment. Andrew Field advocates that Haxo did not want to insult Napoleon's intelligence for after all Napoleon could see both Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte for himself. It is worth pointing out, however, that La Haye Sainte sits in a small depression while Hougoumont was (it is no longer the case) shielded by a large wood, so the full extent of these complexes on that dull and cloudy Sunday morning may not have been easily discernible. Once battle had commenced visibility would have decreased to a few yards; so thick would have been the dense white clouds of smoke from the concentration of infantry and artillery weapons in such a small field.[31] Consequently it would have been extremely difficult for Napoleon to

have seen for himself the impact these strong points were having as the battle unfolded and he would have relied entirely on reports from his field commanders.

Napoleon's decision not to manoeuvre was, with the benefit of hindsight, a mistake. He had, in principle, four flanking options: a wide manoeuvre left or right and a shallow manoeuvre left or right. However, manoeuvre operations take time and that was one factor that Napoleon did not have in his favour. Furthermore, a wide flanking manoeuvre to the French right would have exposed a flank to the Prussians; although Napoleon was not aware that Grouchy had failed to fix Blücher's Army until a little while later. A similar manoeuvre on the French left would have become embroiled in the town of Braine-l'Alleud, which was covered by the 3rd Netherlands Infantry Division and vulnerable to a flank attack by the large force at Tubize and Hal under Prince Frederick of Orange. A shallow manoeuvre on the French right was constrained, as already examined, by the ground around the Papelotte, La Haye and Frischermont farms. That, in effect, left a shallow manoeuvre on the French left between Hougoumont and Braine-l'Alleud as the only viable option and Napoleon seems to have discounted this for fear of driving the Allies east towards the Prussians. Be that as it may, Napoleon's line of battle did not constrain him to any particular course of action; the

The French infantry assault the Great North Gates of Hougoumont. (Chris Collingwood)

whereabouts of the Prussians, and for that matter Grouchy, coupled with Wellington's rather 'confounding' reverse slope deployment, necessitated symmetrical deployment and resolute flexibility. 'Execution was everything' to Napoleon but on 18 June his execution was anything but.

Napoleon's explanation for a slow start to proceedings was that he allowed the troops to leave their bivouacs slightly later to allow the rain-soaked ground to dry out but then he lost another two hours forming his men up along the ridge at Belle Alliance. Clausewitz commented that:

> There was something strange about this parade formation, the image of which seems to be one of Bonaparte's most pleasing memories. It was extremely uncharacteristic, and nothing like it happens in any of Bonaparte's other battles. It was also completely unnecessary, for afterwards the corps had to form into columns again in order to attack.[32]

It is apparent that Napoleon was in no hurry and his initial orders, when they were finally disseminated at 11 a.m., appear to confirm his intention to bludgeon and disregard manoeuvre.

> Directly the army has formed up, and soon after 1 p.m., the Emperor will give the order to Marshal Ney and the attack will be delivered on Mt. S. Jean village in order to seize the crossroads at that place. To this end the 12-pdr. Batteries of the II and VI Corps will mass with that of the I Corps. These 24 guns will bombard the troops holding Mont S. Jean, and Count d'Erlon will commence the attack first by launching the left division [Quiot's], and, when necessary, supporting it by the other divisions of the I Corps [d'Erlon's]. The II Corps [Reille's] will advance keeping abreast of the I Corps.[33]

There is no mention of Hougoumont or, more surprisingly, of La Haye Sainte, although there has been a suggestion that Napoleon was confused and dictated Mont Saint Jean when he meant La Haye Sainte.[34] However, we know from his memoirs that in fact Napoleon's intentions for this first attack were to support General Joachim-Jérôme Quiot's attack on La Haye Sainte with the artillery fire from the Great Battery and to use the other two divisions of the I Corps to move on La Haye and get around the Allied left flank.

> They [the guns] were intended to support the attack on la Haie-Sainte, which two divisions of the I Corps and two divisions of the VI were to make, at the same time as the two other divisions of the I Corps were moving on La Haye… I had

> preferred to turn the enemy's left, rather than his right, first, in order to cut it off from the Prussians who were at Wavre … secondly, because the left appeared to be much weaker; thirdly and finally, because I was expecting every moment the arrival of a detachment from Marshal Grouchy.[35]

This is wholly unsatisfactory for Napoleon's intent is certainly not implied in the orders issued at 11 a.m. and it is complicated further by the fact that, at some stage soon after issuing the order, Napoleon gave a verbal order (no written record exists) for proceedings to open earlier and not on the left or centre but on the Allied right at the Hougoumont complex. Marshal Michel Ney, who had been given a written copy of the (11 a.m.) orders, had written on the back in pencil, 'Count d'Erlon is to understand that it is by the left [i.e. Reille], instead of the right, that the attack is to start. You are to communicate this new disposition to General Reille.'[36]

No real explanation has ever been provided for this radical deviation. It has been suggested that having issued his orders, Napoleon received reports of a large Prussian force only 5 kilometres to the north-east, which convinced him to commence with proceedings at Hougoumont and then dispense with a shallow right flanking manoeuvre and concentrate everything on a frontal assault against Mont Saint Jean ridge. As no written orders detailing this major adjustment have surfaced it is difficult to be certain of Napoleon's intent.[37] Ney's rather unsatisfactory scribbled note was the only confirmation of an attack being initiated by Lieutenant General Honoré Reille and even this does not specify Hougoumont as the principal or sole objective.

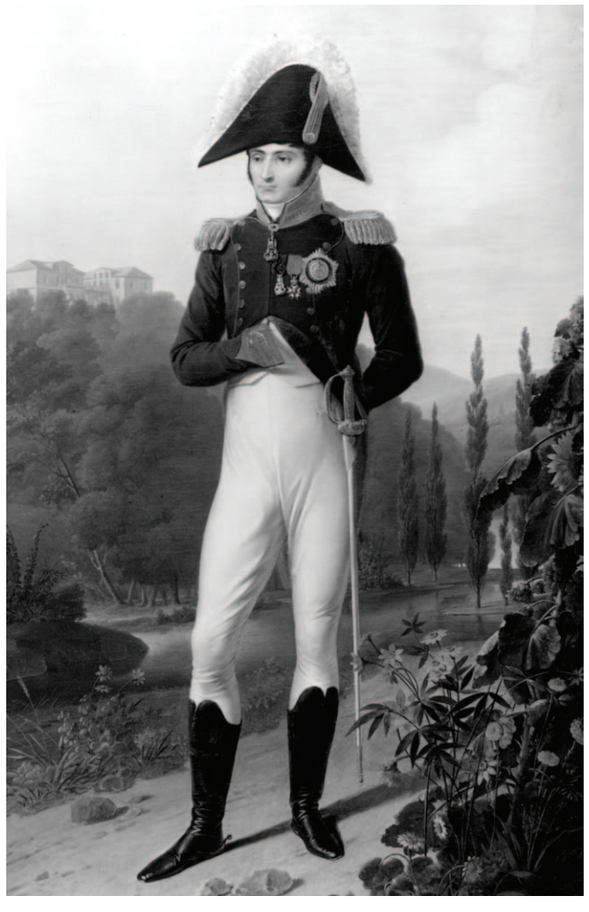
Of the five generally accepted phases of the battle covering the attacks on the ridge at Mont Saint Jean (leaving aside the attacks by and against the Prussians), Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte are central to events, individually or collectively, in every phase.[38] The exact start time of the first of these phases, the attack on Hougoumont and therefore the start of the battle, is surprisingly uncertain although it is generally accepted to have been between 11.30 a.m. and noon. It ended at about 1.30 p.m. with the opening of the main attack in the centre. There is little, if any, contention that Napoleon's intentions with regard to Hougoumont were diversionary in nature. He intended to deny the wood to the Allied infantry, but not necessarily the farm complex; his intention was that this diversion would encourage Wellington to weaken his centre by moving reserves to reinforce Hougoumont. This succeeded to a lesser degree. Perhaps he was also buying time. Some historians have suggested that this attack was in fact linked, by way of pre-cursor, to the main attack by the I and II Corps, but there is more evidence to disprove than prove this hypothesis.[39]

PREVIOUS
French Sous Lieutenant Legros, nicknamed 'l'Enfonceur', gained entry to the courtyard via the north gate. (Keith Rocco)

Reille, having received his verbal orders, selected Prince Jérôme Bonaparte, Napoleon's youngest brother, to lead the diversionary attack with his (6th) Division. It signalled the start of a struggle that was to ensue for the next seven hours with huge loss of life and immense bravery on both sides. As such it was a diversionary attack which ran out of control. It elevated the struggle for Hougoumont to embody, with justification, British military courage and resolve, while, with far less justification, it promoted Hougoumont to a level of tactical significance which it simply did not merit. Fortescue summed it up succinctly:

> A fortified post, when strenuously defended, frequently assumes in the eyes of the assailants an importance out of all proportion to its true tactical value. If the centre of the Allied line were pierced, pursuant to Napoleon's design, Hougoumont would become untenable on the spot.[40]

Prince Jérôme Bonaparte, Napoleon's youngest brother, led the diversionary attack on the complex at Hougoumont with his (6th) Division. (Topfoto)



There is little contention on this point from participants and/or historians but it is worth adding Andrew Roberts's enlightening observation that many of the more sophisticated war-gaming techniques 'regularly demonstrate that it was nigh on impossible for Napoleon to have won Waterloo without first capturing Hougoumont'.[41] This extraordinary conclusion perhaps says more about the value of war-gaming than it does about Hougoumont and the outcome of the battle. Adding to the confusion, there remains disagreement over the number of attacks the French actually executed and which French troops were actually committed and when during the seven-hour 'battle within a battle'. Julian Paget in his excellent small book records seven separate attacks, three of which occurred in this first phase of the battle between 11.30 a.m. and 12.45 p.m.[42] However, Andrew Field has conducted a detailed assessment in his comprehensive work and can only dovetail five of these assaults but, more significantly perhaps, decidedly less involvement in these latter attacks by Reille's other two divisions.[43]

Prince Jérôme selected Baron Pierre-François Bauduin's Brigade to lead the assault on Hougoumont. Adolphe Thiers, although not a participant, provides confirmation of the artillery support to this opening phase.

> On our left general Reille had united the batteries of his divisions, those of the cavalry of Piré, and they fired on the wood and the chateau of Gomont [original name of Hougoumont]; Napoleon, to sustain the fire of this wing, had ordered [the timing is unclear] the artillery of Kellermann to join these batteries, which was moved behind the main body of Reille's troops, providing at least 40 guns to engage the right of the duke of Wellington. A lot of cannonballs were ineffective, but others carried the death to the thickest of the hostile masses, and produced deep openings there in spite of the care that the enemy had taken to deploy on the reverse side of the hill.[44]

This rather confusing observation does at least confirm that elements of the Grand Battery, which was still forming up at this stage and was one of the principal reasons for delay, opened at much the same time as Reille's divisional batteries. The artillery fire continued for about 15 minutes before Bauduin's Brigade began their advance to the (southern) edge of Hougoumont wood, preceded by a strong line of tirailleurs, and was immediately engaged by three Allied batteries firing from the ridge north of Hougoumont. In the wood the Nassauers and Hanoverians made best use of their cover, and the extended range of their hunting fusils, to inflict heavy casualties on the advancing French infantry. Bauduin was among the early casualties and command now fell to Lieutenant Colonel Amédée-Louis Despans, the commander of the *1e Léger* (1st Light Infantry) who had been leading the assault. After about an hour Jérôme's infantry had control of most of the woodland and had come up against a thick hedge running along the northern edge of the wood, which was 'formed of very big trees and greatly intertwined, presenting a kind of impenetrable wall … which they cut their way through with axes'.[45] On the far side was a strip of open ground and then the walled garden prepared for defence and manned by a company of the Coldstream Guards. Their heavy, sustained and accurate fire brought an immediate halt to the French advance. According to Reille, Jérôme had achieved his mission and should have been content with holding the wood; an order which, according to his corps commander, had been given (verbally) a number of times but which the headstrong young prince of the blood chose to ignore.[46]

Wellington sent a steady trickle of reinforcements to the garrison from the two British guards brigades positioned immediately to the north. He also ordered Major Robert Bull's horse artillery troop to the forward slope position

GNMX1043_154 [REFERENCE PROVIDED, BUT HI RES IS SENT TO SCAN]
The interior of the courtyard during the height of the fighting; a captured French soldier in the foreground. (Print after Robert Hillingford)

in front of the Guards. This troop, equipped with six heavy 5½-inch howitzers, began to fire shrapnel shells into the wood with devastating effect. This anti-personnel artillery round was unique to the British artillery and it provided a force multiplication effect, the significance of which has never been fully recognised or properly recorded. Bull could not actually see if the shells were air-bursting at the right height and had to be assisted with indirect fire orders by the commander of the adjacent battery who had a better view. However, the effect of these shells, each containing well in excess of a hundred musket balls, which the French dubbed 'black rain', was devastating. Colonel George Wood, commanding the Allied artillery, wrote to Major Henry Shrapnel after the battle:

> Then the Duke ordered your (shrapnel) shells to be fired in and about the farm house, and this succeeded in dislodging them from this formidable position, to which, if Buonaparte had once been able to bring his artillery, the Duke must have lost the battle; that had it not been for these shells, it is very doubtful whether any effort of the British could have recovered the farm house, and hence on this simple circumstance hinges entirely the turn of the battle.[47]

This letter highlights the often-overlooked contribution made by Shrapnel's shell during the war in the Peninsula and at Waterloo. It also makes a very valid general observation about Hougoumont and the use of artillery in its defence

but most significantly it provides another vital clue as to why the attacks at Hougoumont may have continued. Most of Bauduin's infantry were driven back as a result of this 'black rain' and then driven out of the woods by a spirited Allied counter-attack by the Guards and Germans. Jérôme, his reputation at stake, was under increasing pressure from his subordinates to support his first brigade. Having effectively failed in his mission to *capture and hold* the wood, he deployed his second brigade to the fight; thereby elevating the contest beyond the original diversion. Soye's Brigade wasted little time in driving back the few Allied infantrymen and were soon back at the hedge facing the walls of the farm complex. Bull was called upon for a repeat performance but the woods still contained some friendly forces that had not yet been extracted from the area; Bull would have been forced to fire at the southern end of the wood to avoid friendly casualties.[48] Soye's and (the remnants of) Bauduin's Brigades caught these exposed retreating infantry in the open, at the south-west corner of the complex, and a fierce firefight ensued. At the same time, French infantry began to make their way around the west side of the farm and it was at this point that a French *Sous-Lieutenant* Legros, nicknamed '*l'Enfonceur*' (literally 'the Smasher'),

An inaccurate depiction of the infantry struggle for Hougoumont. The chateau was set on fire with incendiary carcasses at about 3 p.m. (Anne S. K. Brown)

gained entry to the courtyard via the north gate only to be denied by the courage and inspired leadership of Macdonell and his guardsmen. This gallant action prompted Wellington to declare some while later that 'the success of the Battle of Waterloo turned on the closing of the gates'. As significant as this action certainly was, there is, nevertheless some evidence that this was not the only time the perimeter of the complex was penetrated by the attackers.[49]

During this period French higher command had been completely focused on preparations for the main attack in the centre and appears to have been unaware that events at Hougoumont were already running out of control. This command and control failure within the French II Corps is puzzling. Reille, as we have seen, was adamant that he had ordered his subordinates not to concern themselves with taking the buildings and Thiers supports that claim but adds that Reille did not stay close enough to the action and 'allowed his generals of division and brigade, driven by their ardour and that of their troops, to persist in trying [to] capture the farm and chateau'.[50] In fact Captain Pierre Robinaux of the 2nd *de ligne* (Soye's Brigade) states quite clearly that it was Reille who ordered the attack and stipulated the need to capture the strong point:

> Count Reille, who commanded the 2nd Corps, came to give us the order to take the position held by the English and to take the farm as a *point d'appui* and to maintain ourselves in this position during the battle, without losing or seizing terrain.[51]

This in itself is far from conclusive but what of the balance of the II Corps and their commitment to the struggle? It is inconceivable that Colonel Tissot, commanding Gauthier's Brigade (the latter officer having been killed at Quatre Bras), part of General Foy's Division, would have been committed without the corps commander's awareness and accord. Unfortunately Foy's account provides no clue as to who ordered what, but he is meticulously clear as to who supported the attacks and when. It is here that there appears to be a major discrepancy with British accounts. Foy plainly states that only Tissot's Brigade attacked Hougoumont and that the first attack by this brigade took place at 2 p.m. (not shortly before 1 p.m. as is widely recorded).[52] Furthermore, the commitment of Bachelu's Division is also challenged, with the brigade chief of staff stating that the brigade was committed only at 6 p.m. and not at 2.30 p.m. and 4 p.m. as indicated in many British accounts.[53] An examination of the relative strengths of this contest using the often cited '13,500 Frenchmen were occupied by 2,000 British' is of little help, and somewhat myopic. These figures assume that the whole of the II Corps was embroiled, which was not the case, and do not take

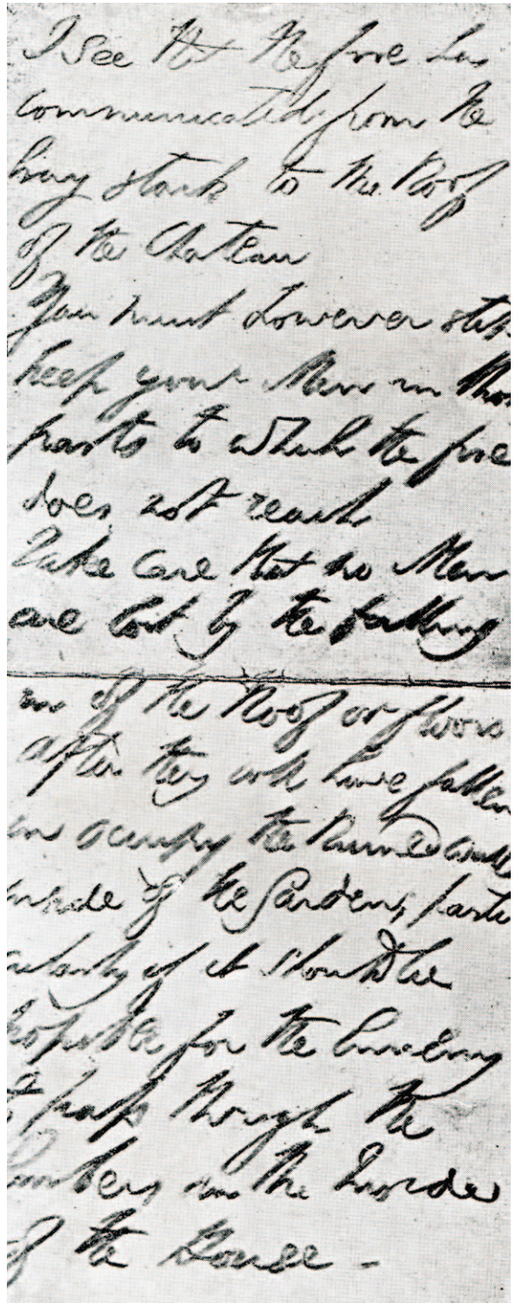
OPPOSITE
The order, in Wellington's hand, written in the heat of battle to Lieutenant Colonel Macdonell inside Hougoumont, instructing him to keep his 'men in those parts to where the fire does not reach – Take care that no men are lost by the falling of the roof or floors after they will have fallen in…'. (Courtesy of Nick Lipscombe)

into account the large numbers of Germans who were integral to the defending force. Nevertheless, this finer detail does not detract from the fact that the greater part of the II Corps was locked in a struggle for Hougoumont for most of the day. It was a struggle which evolved from a minor irritant into a major aggravation and consequently elevated the importance of Hougoumont from a *point d'appui* to a pivotal bastion.

The first attack on La Haye Sainte commenced a few minutes before 2 p.m. Within a few minutes the farm was surrounded by Quiot's infantry and Baring, who had directed his men to lie down and hold their fire until the French had closed, was soon forced to abandon the orchard and fall back to the courtyard and buildings.[54] Baring's men were armed with the Baker rifle, a longer range and more accurate weapon than the Brown Bess musket but with a correspondingly slower rate of fire: one round per minute in contrast to two to three rounds for the musket. When attacked in overwhelming force this reduced weight of fire was a serious disadvantage to the defenders. In an attempt to redress this disadvantage, and capitalise on the longer range of the Baker rifle, some companies were pushed out to the right (west) of the farm into the open ground.

> The companies of captain Christian Wynecken and captain von Goeben … as well as a company of Hanoverian riflemen under major von Sporken – the whole of whom had been placed in skirmishing order to the right of the farm, poured a severe fire upon the assailants as they advanced; suddenly however, some squadrons of cavalry appeared on their right flank, and the detached troops hastily attempted to collect together.[55]

Count Kielmansegge, commanding the 1st Hanoverian Brigade positioned immediately to the north of the farm, detached one of his light battalions to move forward and support the isolated riflemen in the open. At the same time Baring seized the opportunity to



The attack through the orchard at Hougoumont, led by Foy. (Courtesy of Patrice Courcelle)

counter-attack and recapture the orchard. Brigade General Étienne Jacques Travers had been ordered to cover General Jean-Baptiste Drouet, Count d'Erlon's far left, with his brigade of heavy cuirassiers and had been toying with the idea of engaging the few riflemen in the open. The enticement of an unsupported light infantry battalion moving to join them was too great a temptation and Baron Travers wasted no time in ordering the charge; throwing the exposed troops into confusion and breaking the counter-attack on the orchard. The cuirassiers swept around the farm, captured the gardens to the north and drove out Kincaid's three companies of Rifles positioned in the sandpit to the east of the road. La Haye Sainte was completely isolated. The French infantry were quick to exploit this success but they had not come forward with ladders and therefore concentrated their efforts on breaking down the gate; like Legros at Hougoumont, Lieutenant Vieux, a sapper 'of great stature, [and] of Herculean strength … could be seen, armed with an axe striking the gate ever harder'.[56] He gave up when he received a second wound and the gates and the garrison stood firm.

Less resilient, however, were Bijlandt's Netherlanders, who broke leaving a gap in the Allied lines to the rear left of the farm. General Thomas Picton manoeuvred his division and plugged the breach but was killed in the process. The arrival of Major General Sir James Kempt's and Major General Sir Denis Pack's Brigades was enough to stem the French tide and Lord Uxbridge, commanding the Allied cavalry, sensed d'Erlon's infantry wavering and ordered a mass cavalry attack with the Union and Household Brigades. The French were driven back across the frontage and the noose around La Haye Sainte was loosened. Precious time had been gained and the Prussians were drawing closer. Wellington took the opportunity of a lull to, *inter alia*, reinforce the garrison at La Haye Sainte with two light companies (1st Battalion KGL) and part of the Nassau battalion, while the 95th reoccupied the sandpit. Baring had decided not to hold the orchard and ordered the reinforcements to hold the garden while the balance of his defensive force concentrated on holding the buildings.

GNMX1043_158 [LOW RES FOR PLACEMENT, HI RES TO COME]
Cavalry and infantry of the King's German Legion. The defence of La Haye Sainte was undertaken by the green-jacketed, rifle-armed, infantry of the 2nd Battalion KGL under the command of Major George Baring. (National Army Museum)

GNMX1043_159 [LOW RES FOR PLACEMENT, HI RES TO COME]
The centre of the British Army at La Haye Sainte. This engraving depicts the importance of the small farm complex right in the centre of the Allied line. (National Army Museum)

CONVERT TO MONO

During the lull the Grand Battery continued to ply trade in round shot and shell but surprisingly no concerted effort was made to batter the walls of the farm with the heavier 12-pounder guns. Nevertheless, Baring's men did not have to wait long for the second attack. Weighing up the reasons for d'Erlon's failure, Napoleon appears to have grasped the vital importance of La Haye Sainte and ordered Ney to capture the farm without delay. At about 3 p.m. the remnants of Quiot's Division, about 3,000 men (preceded by engineers), surrounded the farm and attacked the walls and gates with great determination. Baring takes up the story:

> About half an hour's respite was now given us by the enemy, and we employed the time in preparing ourselves against a new attack; this followed in the same force as before, namely, from two sides by two close columns, which, with the greatest rapidity, nearly surrounded us, and, despising danger, fought with a degree of courage which I had never before witnessed in Frenchmen. Favoured by their advancing in masses, every bullet of ours hurt, and seldom were the effects limited to one assailant; this did not, however, prevent them from throwing themselves against the walls, and endeavouring to wrest the arms from the hands of my men, through the loop-holes; many lives were sacrificed to the defence of the doors and gates; the most obstinate contest was carried on where the gate was wanting, and

> where the enemy seemed determined to enter. On this spot seventeen Frenchmen already lay dead, and their bodies served as protection to those who pressed after them to the same spot.[57]

While this second attack was being executed the massed French artillery continued to engage the Allied right and left centre, prompting Wellington to order the front line to fall back behind the slope to afford them some protection. Ney misread the manoeuvre, believing it to be the prelude to a general retreat, and in the confusion nearly 5,000 French cavalry began to advance through the gap between Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte. The British infantry quickly transformed their lines into 20 squares, in front of which stood 60 Allied guns, many of which could enfilade the magnificent lines of advancing horsemen, creating the perfect killing ground against unsupported cavalry. Debate still rages as to the basis and detail of the order which set the French cavalry in motion a few minutes before 4 p.m. but as David Chandler wrote, 'the cavalry should not have been launched prior to the capture of La Haie Sainte' and I doubt there is anyone who would disagree with this statement.[58] John Keegan added that the ratio of men to space in the 'funnel', created by Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte, denied the French artillery room to accompany the cavalry. That is almost certainly the case but it does not explain why the opportunity was not taken to move artillery up in support of the attacks on La Haye Sainte during the time that the flower of the French cavalry was wasted engaging the Allied squares.

This second attack on La Haye Sainte abated sometime after 5 p.m. when the Prussians began to arrive on the field and the French cavalry had exhausted themselves, although their attacks on the Allied squares were to continue for another hour. Baring used the respite to care for the wounded but his greatest anxiety was his lack of ammunition and he immediately dispatched an officer to request urgent resupply. Meanwhile Napoleon, incredulous at the spectacle of the unco-ordinated and unsupported French cavalry attacks and deeply preoccupied with the fight for Plancenoit against General Friedrich Wilhelm Graf von Bülow's and Major General George von Pirch's Corps, rode up and down the line examining Wellington's positions and considering his options. Breaking Wellington's centre was still his best opportunity and capturing La Haye Sainte remained the key. He ordered Ney to renew the attack upon it. For the first time that day preparations were made for co-ordinated all-arms attacks upon both Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte by way of preliminary operations to puncturing the Allied centre. Against La Haye Sainte Ney directed part of Major General François Donzelot's Division, some cavalry and a battery of guns.

Prior to the commencement of this attack, Baring had received reinforcement in the form of three additional companies of the Nassau battalion but crucially no rifle ammunition. Donzelot's infantry made a desperate attempt to force entry but having failed set the barn on fire. Baring recalled that:

> Luckily the Nassau troops carried large field cooking kettles; I tore a kettle from the back of one of these men; several officers followed my example, and filled the kettles with water, they carried them, facing almost certain death to the fire. The men did the same, and soon not one of the Nassauers was left with his kettle, and the fire was thus luckily extinguished – but alas with the blood of many brave men.[59]

Baring recalled that this attack lasted an hour and a half, although in reality it was probably a much shorter duration. He also recalled a distinct break before the next assault was delivered with the same fury. With the rifle ammunition almost exhausted he sent out, for the third time, an urgent appeal for immediate resupply. However, a short time after the attack was renewed the last of the rifle ammunition was expended and the loss of the farm was inevitable. The Prince of Orange, sensing defeat, had somewhat rashly ordered Colonel Christian von Ompteda to take the balance of his brigade and advance in support of the farm. Ompteda was killed and the 8th Line KGL virtually

This magnificent painting by Adolf Northern depicts the epic struggle for the defence of the small farm of La Haye Sainte by the King's German Legion. (akg-images)

destroyed. Shortly after 6 p.m. Baring and 42 men managed to extract themselves through the garden under the cover of fire from the riflemen in the sandpit.[60] La Haye Sainte was in French hands and Wellington's position had been dangerously weakened.

The French tried to exploit their first major success of the day by launching a large body of French infantry against the British centre. They made some headway and Ney requested support. There was none forthcoming for Napoleon was now preoccupied with his right flank, the arrival of the Prussians and the almost unthinkable possibility of having to protect his lines of retreat. The opportunity passed and with it the most dangerous moment of the battle for Wellington and his men. Wellington was, according to Colonel George Cathcart, one of his aide de camps, 'much vexed' at the loss of La Haye Sainte.[61] He had every reason to be, for La Haye Sainte was much more than a *point d'appui*, it was without doubt a pivotal bastion and the key to the Allied defensive line along the Mont Saint Jean ridge. It is curious that Wellington, an undoubted master of the importance of ground particularly in defence, should have failed to grasp the importance of retaining La Haye Sainte at all

Quiot's Brigade (54th and 55th *de ligne*), having captured the orchard, fail to capitalise on their success and penetrate the La Haye Sainte farm complex. (akg-images)

Chateau de Hougoumont after the Battle of Waterloo. (Courtesy of Mick Crumplin)

CONVERT TO MONO

costs. Only 800 men, a strong battalion, had been allocated or trickle-fed to its direct defence. Only three-quarters were armed with rifles and abandoned to their inevitable fate when their ammunition was expended, Baring's repeated requests for resupply apparently ignored.[62] It is a subject of considerable controversy. Regardless of the reasons the fact that Wellington's staff allowed the garrison to run out of ammunition was an indefensible blunder which could have lost the battle.

Equally indefensible is the French failure to make best use of their fighting components throughout the day. Cavalry was of little use against structures like Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte but artillery could and should have been brought to bear far earlier in proceedings, particularly against La Haye Sainte where the terrain presented no tangible problems for the deployment and employment of guns. Had some of 'Napoleon's daughters', as his heavy field guns were known, been used to batter the walls and gates of La Haye Sainte sometime after 2 p.m. during the first attack, it is implausible to suggest, given the resources allocated to its defence, that the structure would not have fallen at that time.[63] The consequences of losing such a pivotal mainstay so early in

proceedings can only be speculated upon. While at Hougoumont, the ability to bring artillery to bear during the initial attacks was restricted to an extent by the woods. Lieutenant Colonel Lord Saltoun recorded that 'we suffered very little from artillery on the post' although he concedes that it was artillery that set fire to the house and farmyard.[64] Conversely, Wellington's use of artillery in defence of the structure demonstrated a far greater understanding of the need to weave the fighting components on the field of battle.

> Such was Hougoumont – a decidedly important point in the Field of Battle, from its prominent position in the immediate front Right of the British line; and rendered ever memorable by the truly heroic and successful stand maintained throughout the day by the troops allocated for its defence.[65]

Siborne's description of Hougoumont is accurate in every sense. It was without doubt a 'decidedly important point' but it was not a pivotal bastion in the same way as La Haye Sainte. However, it was turned into a pivotal bastion by a failure, ultimately by Napoleon himself, to control Jérôme's obsession of turning a feint into a major effort. Hougoumont should never have become 'a battle within a battle'. Napoleon needed a bold stroke to achieve spectacular results and his decision to conduct a wedge-shaped thrust against the ridge at Mont Saint Jean was certainly not a mistake, and came close to succeeding, but Napoleonic tactics required space. The failure to mask Hougoumont and concentrate on capturing La Haye Sainte denied the French Army that space and funnelled their attacks into what General Foy described as 'a hail of death'. Adkin sums it up well: 'unlike Hougoumont whose possession was not critical to either side, La Haie Saint was vital to both'.[66]