

BILLHOOKS FAQs AND AUTHOR'S MUSINGS

BY ANDY CALLAN

When Dan at WI first asked me to put together a list of FAQs for my "Never Mind the Billhooks" rules my first reaction was to think that there weren't that many Qs that have been A'd, let alone F-ly. The game seems to have gone down well as very much a "pick up and play" affair and most wargamers have got straight into it without too much bother. This is largely down to the simple mechanisms and the clear layout of the booklet (thanks to the WI team). But looking at the NMTBH Facebook page and some other online forums I think that now, coming up to four weeks after first publication, there is enough to justify this document. So, what follows is a run-through of the rules, page by page, clarifying some wordings and with some further notes which set out the thinking hidden "under the bonnet". These things and anything else that comes up in the meantime, will be included when a revised version of "Billhooks", incorporating an expansion into other areas of the late-medieval European world, is published (hopefully) in 2021.

(Page 6, Column 1) WHAT IS NEEDED TO PLAY Do I have to use 28mm figures?

No, feel free to use whatever figures you prefer on whatever size or shape bases suit you best. I hate rules that expect players to re-base their existing armies! I use individual figure casualty-removal only because I'm Old School like that and because you can see at a glance, by looking at its losses, what dice score a unit will need to pass a Morale Crisis test.

If you are going to use figures already on multiple bases you just need to give each unit a notional level of "Strength Points" which is the same as the number of figures specified in the rules – so Skirmisher Band = 6, Cavalry Squadron = 8, Infantry Company = 12. Then, as units take losses, record them by whatever method suits you best, such as dice or other markers next to the unit. Something visible to your opponent is best though, rather than some sort of written roster.

Try and keep the same relationship between unit frontages, moves and ranges as in the original rules. For example, my Infantry Companies are on individual 20mm Renedra bases on a sabot multi-base about 5 inches wide. So long range for bows is about three times a company frontage.

What are the game's scales, such as figure-to-man ratio, ground scale, minutes per turn?

There aren't any. This is very much a game, not a simulation. It used to be a fashion for "serious" wargames writers to aspire to a "Time & Motion" approach to game design, but, to be honest, none of their efforts were ever very successful and this sort of thing has now largely fallen out of favour. "Billhooks" is simply a toy soldiers wargame with a bit of Wars of the Roses historical flavour. So just enjoy it for what it is.

(Page 6, Column 2) INFANTRY - Skirmisher Bands

What do you mean by "a loose formation"?

Set them out with a gap between each figure – about a base-width or so.

(Page 7, Column 2) ARMY TROOP RESTRICTIONS

What am I restricted to? Can I have all Archers or all Billmen in the compulsory half of my army's troop points?

No, you should have the same number of companies of each, or as near to it as you can get (see page 24, column 2).

What about Artillery?

Note that while it says "Skirmishers should total no more than one-fifth" (of the troop points in an English army) I have always included artillery in this calculation since they are also activated when the Skirmisher card is drawn. I should have spelled that out, so read it as "Skirmishers and Artillery together totalling no more than one-fifth".

(Page 8) What is the difference between a Man-at-Arms and a Knight?

It's just game terminology. An infantry figure in heavy armour is a Man-at-Arms. If he is on horseback he is a Knight. Troops can't swap roles during a battle. I might consider changing this in the second edition. It happened at Blore Heath, for example.

(Page 9) LEADERS

How do I decide whether to have my leaders on Foot or Mounted?

As things stand, there is nothing to stop you having all your leaders mounted, to benefit from the longer move. This doesn't feel very true to what happened in the WOTR. So, pending revisions in Billhooks v2 I suggest you choose either a Mounted or a Foot figure for each leader in your army, at the start of the game. Then apply three new rules:

- (Page 12) Add a new Command action "*e* Mount-up or dismount (swap figures). He can do this only once during the battle. He can't swap back again."
- Leaders attached to units which are being shot at "roll 1D6 for each kill the unit took above three **ADD** "or above two if he is mounted". He makes a better target! It stays the same at kills above three in Melee, whether he is on foot or mounted.
- (Page 19, top of column 1, Melee Score Adjustments point 4). Add a new sentence at the end. "He must be mounted to add extra hits to a Cavalry unit".

(Page 10) Special Event Cards

That "Treachery" card is a bit nasty, isn't it?

Sure is – but those things really did happen in the WOTR. On reflection, though I should have been more precise about the circumstances in which troops might, realistically, change sides and attack their former friends. So, pending revision of the card, you should operate a "House Rule" that the "4,5,6 it changes sides etc" applies only to a full-strength Leaderless enemy unit (ie one without an attached leader) that has not already been involved in any shooting or Melee. Nobody is going to change sides once they have already taken any active part in the battle. The "1,2,3 turn around and march off" is a different matter, of course so you can play it on any unengaged and leaderless unit.

Always remember that you can never play more than TWO Special Event cards in a game. They are supposed to be Special and Eventful, not routine. And if you are playing a series of games I suggest you remove any such cards played during one game, from the Special Event deck you use in the next one. Else things might risk becoming a bit "samey".



(Page 11) TURN SEQUENCE

What exactly happens in the Manoeuvre Phase?

Players start by taking turns to move one Unit each. For these purposes a "unit" can be a single unit OR a formation (of two companies) OR a Leader OR a unit/formation with an attached Leader.

Units take single moves (one move action) in this phase.

If the Manoeuvre Phase is ended by a Company of Archers shooting "it will deplete their arrow supply by one" (see page 16).

(Page 13, Column 2) *How do I rally a Daunted unit?*

There is some ambiguity in the text here, so:

After "For each rally action taken this turn one Disarray token may be removed from the unit", add "It takes one Order Token and two rally actions to remove a Daunted token".

Then, two lines later, delete "Attaching to a unit and rallying off a Daunted Token requires two command actions".

(Page 14, Column 1) MOVEMENT

How far do Leaders move?

Column 1, end of first paragraph, add "8" on foot or 12" mounted"

Leader movement is given on page 9, first paragraph, but it would be good to repeat it here, for clarity.

(Page 14, Column 2) CHARGE!

How many times can Knights counter charge?

A counter charge is treated the same as a charge – so Knights can only charge and/or counter charge twice in a battle.

(Page 14, Column 2) MOVEMENT PENALTIES

How do hills affect Movement?

Units move their normal distance on hills, but get no re-rolls if they attack or charge uphill.

When they move up, down or across a steep hill, they get one Disarray token for each move action taken, up to a maximum of two.

Can troops cross stakes or field defences?

Any defences like these on a NMTBH battlefield are going to be only a bit of a rush job – we are not talking entrenched camps or wagenburgs here. Such man-made obstacles were principally anti-cavalry deterrent devices. So, with some difficulty, Cavalry can get across them or drag them out of the way, but they must halt and take two Disarray tokens when doing so. This will leave them very vulnerable in the next turn. Infantry halt and take one Disarray.

(Page 15) SHOOTING. ARC AND TARGETS.

Do I always measure range to the front centre of the target?

Only if you are shooting at the front of the target. It will be reworded to say "... to the front centre of the nearest face of the target".

(Page 15) SHOOTING

Only Skirmishers can shoot inside a wood. What about shooting out of woods or into woods?

Troops lining the edge of a wood shoot as normal and they get cover from the trees if the enemy shoots back at them with anything except artillery (so they go up one armour class).

(Page 15) Artillery misfires

Do I have to count the number of ones I roll from turn to turn?

No. A gun blows up only if you roll three or more 1s in the same hand of dice. The chances of this happening are only about 6/100 according to Professor Google. But Evil Dice Goddess may have other ideas...

(Page 16) SHOOTING SAVING THROWS

What is the saving throw for Artillerymen?

It is 5 or 6 (the same as for other Missile troops).

(Page 16) SHOOTING SAVING THROWS ADJUSTMENTS

Do hedges give cover against shooting?

No, they are just an obstacle. Troops should be behind solid cover and touching it to claim any protection.

(Page 18) MELEE

What happens if I move into contact with two enemy units at the same time?

Don't do it. You should only attack one enemy unit at a time. Only units in a formation (line or block) should ever be in base to base contact so if you attack a line you must go for just one of the units. If you attack a block you will only contact both units if it is a flank attack (see below).

I will introduce a "game convention" to this effect in v2. In the meantime, keep individual units at least 3" apart and you should avoid this problem. The odd overlap in a cavalry vs infantry melee doesn't matter.

Dodgy overlaps and two-on-one combats are some of the banes of the rule-writer's trade.

This little "fudge" might be a bit of a cop-out but it will save a lot of arguments!

How many Disarrayed or Daunted cavalymen do you count?

Just half of them, like infantry. This will be added in v2.

What happens when troops attack across a defended obstacle?

In v2 I will add a new point 1(f) to "The First Round of Melee" (page 18, column 2):

"When attacking across a defended obstacle Cavalry are Disarrayed (so count only half their numbers) and Infantry blocks count only their front Company".

Remember that in this situation attackers get no re-rolls for attacking or charging (Melee Score Adjustments, page 18) and Infantry go up one armour class when behind a wall or inside a building (Melee Saving Throw Adjustments, page 19). Note that this should read "Defending Infantry ...".

You should not allow fighting to take place across anything bigger than simple field enclosures (and these were probably not that common anyway in open-field pattern 15th century England). Troops simply cannot get at each other across such things as park walls and "Great Hedges".

(Page 18) EVADE

What happens if a Leader is attacked while on his own?

Like Skirmishers, he always tries to Evade the attackers.

Do archers Evade if they are behind cover?

It depends on the cover. I will add "Archers who are behind stakes or field defences" to the circumstance in which they can choose how to react if attacked.



Can evading troops evade again if the attackers catch up with them?

No, troops get only one Evade move per turn so they must fight (in Disarray, against a rear attack!!). If an evading Leader is caught by the enemy he is killed. If you are feeling chivalrous you can just capture him, but he still loses his card, which is all that matters in a one-off game.

Do evading troops always move directly back away from the enemy?

No, not if they can reach any nearby cover instead.

Do evading Skirmishers get Disarrayed

Yes, like all other evading troops.

(Page 18) FLANK ATTACKS ON BLOCKS

How many troops do you count in a block that is attacked in the flank?

This only came up for the first time when I was involved in shooting a video play-through at *Wi HQ* post-publication. I had to “wing-it” it at the time, but I will amend things in v2 to read “*A block attacked in the flank counts the end file (four figures) in contact with the enemy*”.

(Page 20) MELEE SAVING THROWS

How do you split the hits on a block?

You don't, they all fall on the front company, like in Shooting. This is designed to make Melees short and bloody. You never get a prolonged “push of pikes” in *Billhooks*, because pikes never clashed on the WOTR battlefield. Of course, this is something I will have to reconsider when I do the Italian Wars supplement!

What this means in practice is that a Pike block gets a powerful bonus in the first round of a Melee (since it counts all four ranks when attacking) which is usually going to be a good enough start to win in the end, except perhaps against Men-at-Arms. But the block is then going to be very vulnerable to a counter-attack until it has managed to replace its damaged front company with the untouched rear support - by making a “moving through friendly troops” action. If playing with a Burgundian army you may or may not wish to apply the optional “Brexit Rule” in the case of mixed blocks of English Archers and Flemish Pikemen!

Are Melee saving throws the same as for Shooting?

Yes, except that Cavalry are more vulnerable when shot at (see the Cribsheet).

(Page 22) MORALE CRISIS TESTS

What are “higher quality” troops when it comes to reacting to a rout?

Point c) should read “*When a Broken friendly Unit of equal or higher original points value routs through or past within 12” of the Unit.*”

So, Skirmishers are spooked by any routing troops, Archers, Billmen and Pikemen ignore Skirmishers and Artillery but are worried by anyone else. Men-at-Arms are only bothered by other Men-at-Arms or Knights. And Knights ignore everyone else apart from routing Knights.

(Page 22) BLOCKS AND MORALE

If I have a mixed block of Archers and Men-at-Arms do my Men-at-Arms also get Daunted or Broken if the Archers fail a Morale test?

Yes, but only if the Archer company is daunted or broken by losing a Melee. That would be your fault! You should have made sure they didn't get involved in the hand-to-hand stuff by keeping a Leader attached to the block – that way they could have chosen what to do when attacked.

Blocks have pros and cons. They make things easier for orders purposes, but this is one of the drawbacks I have deliberately built-in.

If Archers in a mixed block take and fail a Morale test because of losses from Shooting, the supporting Men-at-Arms are not affected in any way. This is because the Archers are of a lower points value – so they neither disarray the Men-at-Arms by retreating through them if Daunted nor provoke a Morale test by routing through them if Broken. This would not be the case if the supports were Billmen.

If a block or line formation has to test Morale because of local events - friends routing past or a killed or cowardly Commander - choose one of its companies to take the test (owner's choice) and apply the result to both of them.

(Page 23) ROUTS AND PURSUITS

What happens when troops go off the table?

The pursuers don't return to the battle. Put them back in their box. But you don't lose an army Morale token in this case. Any troops who retreat or rout off the table count as Broken, and cause a loss of the appropriate number of Army Morale points.

(Page 23) DAUNTED TROOPS

What happens if a Daunted unit passes a Morale test?

It stays Daunted but it stops retreating and now doesn't have to test again at the end of each turn, unless it is reduced to half strength or less.

(Page 24) MUSTERING THE FORCES

Randomised army building. Are there any restrictions?

The agreed troops total should not be divisible by 6 or 12 (so, for example, go for 115 or 125 points, rather than 120).

ADD “*Ignore the 20% rule for Skirmishers and Artillery for armies less than 130 points.*” Otherwise there would have to be rules about which cards you can or cannot draw - which would spoil the fun.

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AND FINALLY ...

What other rule sets influenced your writing of Never Mind the Billhooks?

The roots of the card-driven turn sequence are in *Sharp Practice* by the TooFat Lardies. The “dice to hit/dice to save” combat mechanism goes back to Tony Bath and Donald Featherstone in the 1960s. The coin toss for terrain layout and choice of end is straight from H.G. Wells. Reviewers have suggested similarities with *Warhammer Ancient Battles* and *To the Strongest*. That may well be true but as I haven't read or played either of them we must be drawing on similar traditions.

Then again, more or less all the main players in the Wars of the Roses could trace some sort of line back to Edward III ...

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