

Salute 2019 – is it tomorrow or just the end of time?

By Jonathan Aird

It has long been my contention that a visit to Salute requires preparation ó a good survey of the show guide in advance, and the marking off of interesting games to be seen, and the position of the most important traders to visit. It's such a large show that this pre-planning pays off ó but this year I hadn't planned at all. This apparently cavalier attitude can be explained by my thinking, up until the Thursday night before Salute, that I wasn't going to be able to make it along this year. Why, then, torture myself by becoming acquainted with that which was going to be tantalisingly out of reach? Anyway ó it all turned around at the last minute, attendance became possible and wham-bam there I was at the Excel centre, my rapidly purchased £10 advance ticket ó and incidentally that means that Salute is actually getting cheaper, as it was £12 a few years back, and taking into account inflation a £10 ticket this year is cheaper than a £10 ticket last year ó in my hand having enjoyed an early rise and a trouble-free journey.

Intriguingly, an old friend was back ó the concourse queue ó although there was an entrance space through an adjoining hall, the whole 'holding pen' approach had been dropped this year. This didn't seem to be a big problem as the queue was rapidly processed into the hall. I was probably in by 10:30 having arrived a little after 10. Just inside the door were a group of pre-enactors: people dressed up as Imperial troops from Warhammer 40K, including a Space Marine (who has stomped around previous Salutes). I suppose it makes a change from the usual 'aren't you small for a Stormtrooper?' Star Wars re-enactors. They spent the day wandering around the show, and as far as I noticed were the only such representatives of cosplay/re-enactors. There were, however, far more important sights to take in ó the first demo and participation games and the first of the 150+ traders. First impressions were of a lively buzz, but as I ventured further into the hall there was a disquietingly large number of empty tables labelled up with who should have been there where various clubs hadn't made it along. Whilst there are always some of these -- and I may be wrong ó it seemed like more than usual. The other thing that a quick circuit of the show revealed was fewer 'wow' games ó and those that were there were generally smaller and less 'wow-ey' than in previous years. There were several ancient games which were being played on just a plain cloth with little, or even no, scenery. Historically accurate of battles fought on plains, but even plains are rarely quite so featureless, or quite so faded. One big exception to this was a huge Romans v Celts game with dozens of chariots, and the battle fought on a steep hillside. It was impressive ó but you'll have to take my word for it as it was so busy every time I passed by that I haven't any pictures of it!

Several clubs seem to have realised that if games are really going to impress then the use of combined land and naval forces is a guaranteed path to success. So the Tonkin 1885, by Gringo40s, was bound to get a good deal of attention ó land forces, a siege situation and lots of boats!





Another example of this combined arms approach was offered by Dalauppror, with another game based on Swedish history ó this time the battle of Danholm 1807. On a table somewhat smaller than last year's effort, they still managed to fit in field works, open troop movements and plenty of gunboats and pontoons. Impressive is the word ó the inn that stood on one side of the board even had flickering lights inside!





Salute is always a good place to try out new games ó there were several using Osprey Games' Burrows and Badgers skirmish rule set, and I had a go at this in a game run by (I think) Random Platypus Forum. Basically, this is a fantasy skirmish game using anthropomorphic animals in place of the usual elves and orcs ó and a little like Frostgrave the forces are organised into gangs who can progress in proficiency during a linked campaign of scenarios. The layout was very nice looking ó all the buildings were scratch-built and had a nice non-human rustic feel to them.



The system itself was pretty straightforward, the only thing that was a little odd was in part of the combat system which uses opposed rolls with combatants of different sizes and strengths using different dice types. In order to give smaller creatures some chance against powerful ones, a natural maximum roll gains a +7 bonus ó this can be pretty devastating in inflicting wounds. It also means that the tougher a combatant is the less likely they are to do a òcritical hitö ó a mouse with a D4 combat dice will do a critical 25% of the time ó but a badger with a D10 combat dice will do a critical hit only 10% of the time. I can see why it's necessary ó but it doesn't make sense ó weak and feeble fighters are always doing critical hits, whilst the big, bold and proficient warriors hardly ever do! Other than that, an enjoyable enough fantasy skirmish game, and a very pretty layout.

Wargames Illustrated was running the ultra-fast Stop the Pigeon game ó which has various groups trying to intercept and capture Lawrence of Arabia as he speeds across the plain on his motorcycle with vital information to deliver. Really fast, and really hard to do well at!



Turning back to exploring the hall showed that there were a number of very nice big battles on display. Lutzen always looks good, and the Friends of General Haig had done it proud with very nice scenery and beautifully painted troops.

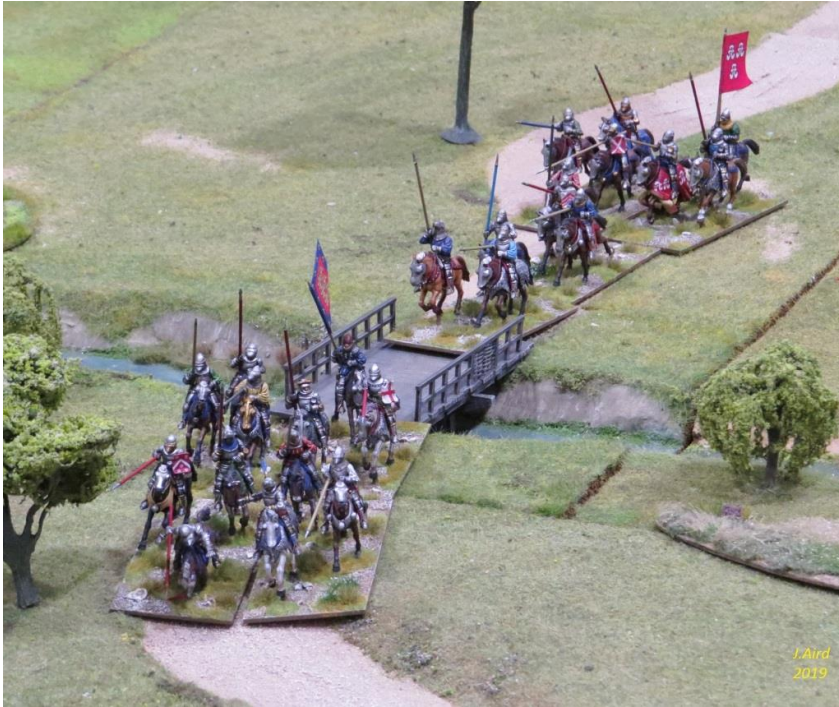


In a much smaller scale, Wyvern Games had the Battle of Mohi 1241, which looked superb on hex-terrain and featured hundreds of figures giving it a real eagles-eye view of the battle with significant combats occurring at multiple positions.



The Lance and Longbow game was also eye catching ó the Battle of Bauge 1421 where the Duke of Clarence foolishly attacks masses of French and allied infantry with mounted knights. Clearly, the lessons of Crecy and Agincourt hadn't fully sunken in!





Other games played were Peter Pig's Pieces of Eight pirate rules ó these are divided into two rule sets ó one for land raids and one for battles on the high seas. It was the sailing game that was being run, and this played very swiftly on the hex-gridded board, with some elegant mechanisms for representing taking advantage of the wind in a favourable quarter and also had a good and nail-biting combat system. If you were in the market for a set of rules to cope with half a dozen ships per side, then you could easily do worse!

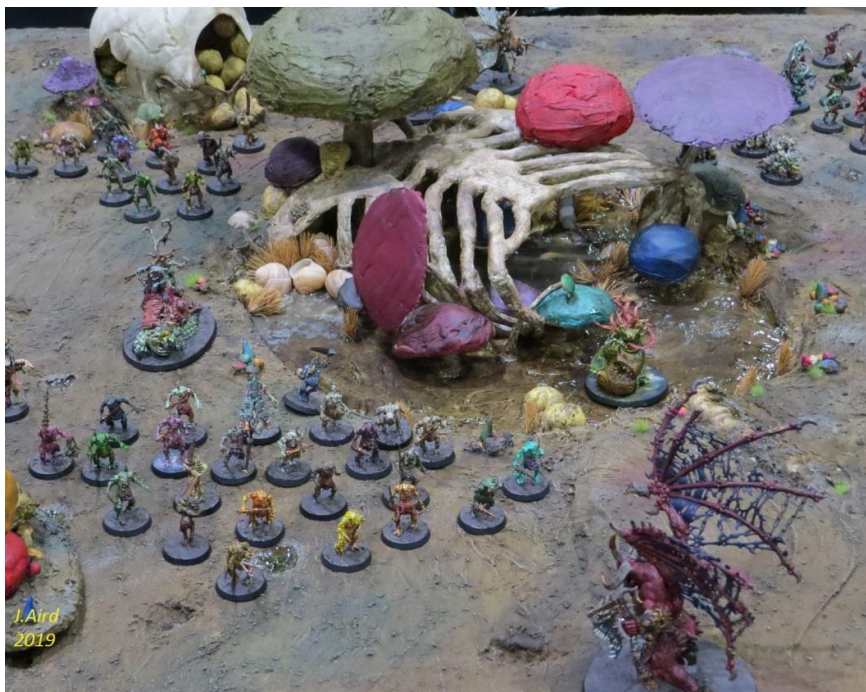
Not used for this game, but very impressive, is this generic ship of war from 4ground's extensive range of laser cut MDF scenery.



The Battle of Ligny by Loughton Strike Force had what was probably the best cityscape of the day ó the centrepiece of the battle was a treat for the eyes. The roads through the town were perfectly suited to the bases of the figures ó so whilst the fighting certainly got messy, it never looked messy!



Something which did look messy however was this fantasy game (which doesn't seem to be listed in the Show Guide so I'm not sure who ran it) which had tiny chaotic beasts fighting over a landscape defined by a decaying body. A very original and striking idea.



Somewhat more traditional ó but impressive its own right was this large skirmish in a caverns-type dungeon setting. Quite simple, but effective.



A couple of nice games with tanks are worth a mention ó firstly a WWII Japanese attack on a rubber plantation being gamely defended against the odds. And then a participation game of The Great War, with lots of clunky early tanks on an uncluttered playing surface.



Talking of uncluttered playing surfaces, Gravesend Gamers Guild showed off a large-scale skirmish game set in the British Civil Wars, with lots of scenery, little groups of animals and other eye catching items amongst the more warlike figures and yet it had a pleasingly clean look to it.



Another eye-catching ship was included in this small steampunk table which was being used to support a skirmish game at a trader's table. There really are a lot of games in this mode of typically 20 by 20 tables (or smaller) and usually with significant effort having been made to make them look impressive. On the one hand they are really good for showing off what a game could look like and emphasizing the visual appeal, but on the other hand the limited play area does make what are doubtless very different systems blend in to one another after a while (for the casual viewer at least).



There was time before the end for one last game and this was ArcWorld by Warploque Miniatures. What was a very simple scenario of halflings and Elves fight over various summoning stones which make an area more or less magical. The idea being that the Elves like the land to be infused with magic, whilst the halflings would like to make a more prosaic land suitable for farming.



I'd seen the game last year with a smaller setup and thought it looked interesting & the idea is something like a cross between a straight skirmish wargame and a story-telling style Role Playing Game. The Elves initially looked outnumbered, but they can summon (or try to summon) woodland spirits to fight for them, which evens things up rapidly. It was an interesting game, with a lot of emphasis of the players deciding amongst themselves how hard certain feats might be (climbing a tree to break out of combat for example) in order to set the difficulty. This means that win or lose the players should all be invested in the story of the game. It's an interesting idea, I'm not sure that all players will be up to the challenge of playing this way and it does make the game quite slow. It's a novel approach though.

The other big question at every Salute is: *what seems to be big in gaming these days?* Well, the post-Apocalypse theme of the show was well supported with numerous games, mostly on fairly small tables, for zombies, Mad Max-style car racing, the radiation ravaged worlds of the Strontium Dogs taken from the UK comics Starlord and 2000AD, as well as many Superhero games and various small gang combats which more or less were on theme. Strangely the Warlord's big game was off theme & a Space 1999 / UFO inspired SHADO Moon Base under attack, which was fought in (I think) 10mm. Scenery remains a big thing, and laser cut MDF seems to be hanging in there against the new possibilities of 3D printing, although surely the latter's greater utility for modelling curves will come into play at some point. Boutique fantasy skirmish games are very much in vogue, with lots of supporting material behind the, quite often, few dozen figures available. This background depth & the lovely but pricey sculpts & seems to have a real appeal to different niches of the fantasy market in particular. Twilight Miniatures, for example, have been very successful in growing their world & a few years ago they had a handful of figures but this has grown to many different races, scenery, rule sets and supplements and would appear to have a growing band of loyal adherents.

Talking of beautiful but expensive figures & the staggering detail on Mierce Miniatures' figures is only really matched by the jaw dropping prices (well, jaw dropping to someone who started off buying 9p metal 25mm foot figures!). Some of these models are undeniably superb, but with prices of £50-£100 or more for a large monster they are really for the dedicated painter/collector rather than the big battle fantasy games they really ought, to my old-fashioned mind, to be being used in. I looked at some and thought & a dozen of those

would look superb as a unit - but since that would be a £600 investment I should probably not do that!ö



Again this was a Salute that offered very little in the way of traders carrying traditional board wargames, 20mm plastic figures and 20mm scenery. Even PSC had a reduced range of tanks etc. on offer as they made more space for their expanding Game Box sets including Battle of Britain and Red Alert Space Battles, which were very tempting as was Warlord Games' Cruel Seas the new WWII naval game. However, unlike last year I did manage to actually buy something. Not much, but something. A few years ago I backed the Kickstarter for the Songs of Blades and Heroes variant Fighting Fungi, for which I have some scenery (Stone Mountain miniatures alien fungi mostly) but can always use a little more to add variety. The Square had a nice pack of 4 giant fungi in resin for just £5.60 so these got snapped up. And that, despite my best efforts to be tempted by the new games from PSC, was my lot this time. It really is still the time to make more an inroad into the already bought but not painted pile ö it comes to us all eventually, I suppose!

Overall a good Salute, but not the best of recent years. Perhaps having some time to do that preparation before going would have pushed things a little higher ö Salute really is a bit big to just hit and see what's on. In general though it felt like there were fewer historical games, and a lot more fantasy and SF. That would be ok, but a lot of the focus is still on skirmish games ö it would be great to see a new Fantasy Big Battle set come through and pick up a lot of players, but I'm not sure that will happen in what is becoming a much more diverse wargame scene. Where there were big games a lot of them were physically smaller than in the past ö both in table area and in the scale of the scenery ö which is not to say that the memorable games were not good looking, they were. It's just that in some years there are tables that need several visits and much time to fully appreciate.

It's hard to say but the numbers in attendance seemed much as they have been before ö although there didn't seem to be as large a continental-European presence in the hall in the form of attendees but also in the traders ö they may have possibly been influenced by the lack of clarity surrounding the UK's decision to leave the EU. Salute though is clearly still doing what it does best ö offering the largest trade opportunity under one roof of any UK wargame show, it gives the traders ample opportunity to show off new games and rule sets and it has clubs attending who want to put on impressive looking and fun games.