

THE SIEGE OF GLOUCESTER

INTRODUCTION

The siege is a small but important element of the English Civil Wars that lasted from 1642 to 1651. The siege properly belongs to the period of The First Civil War 1642-1647. It lasted from 10th August to 5th September 1643. However, these events are informed by and should be viewed within, the wider perspective of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms that spanned the period 1638 -1660

The backdrop is that, for a variety of reasons, mostly commercial but also pervaded by a profound belief among many, that the King had exceeded what was right and proper in constitutional terms, in his demands and behaviour. To quote P W Thomas in his work 'Two cultures? Court and Country under Charles I, ' The Civil War was about the whole condition of a society threatened by a failure of the ruling caste both to uphold traditional national aims and values, and to adapt itself to a rapidly changing world'¹

When it came down to the divisions within the country that pitted people against one another, Gloucester declared support for the Parliamentarian cause against King Charles I. It is not clear how widely supported within the city the declaration for Cromwell was, and reports of Royalist supporters' dissent are easily found in the reporting of events at the time and after the Restoration.

THE WIDER PERSPECTIVE

The siege took place after a run of Royalist successes often referred to as the 'Royalist Summer' Things were going well for the King and he held the upper hand in the North and West. He had won a series of battles which, although not decisive, had seriously undermined the morale of the parliamentarian army. Lack of pay and provisions were other important factors.

If the balance was being tipped in Charles' favour, not everything was going his way. Two obstacles stood in his way that prevented him from combining his forces for an attack on London. These were the strategically important fortified towns of Gloucester and Hull: both needed to be taken before concentrating on the wider picture. Hull and its protected port were the key to Yorkshire while Gloucester controlled the upper Severn valley. Bristol and Gloucester together presented a formidable axis of power that kept Royalist forces in the South West and Wales from taking a more active role². The fate of Hull falls outside the scope of this tour.

CIRENCESTER AND BRISTOL

Cirencester stood in the way of Queen Henrietta's convoy of arms and other vital supplies that she was attempting to deliver to the Royalist garrison in Oxford on behalf of her husband the King, so the place had to be taken. The job of doing so was given to Prince Rupert of the Rhine who was the King's nephew and

¹ Seventeenth-century England, A changing Culture Ch 21. Open University press 1980 ISBN 0 7062 4089 8

² Civil War, The Wars of the Three Kingdoms 1638-1660, Ch 4 Hearts and Cities, The War to Win the Centre. Trevor Royle Abacus Press 2009 ISBN 978-0-349-11564-1

commander of the Royalist cavalry. He was a quick-thinking, energetic professional soldier and became the archetypal Cavalier. He used speed, surprise, and aggression to achieve victory. On February 2nd, 1643 Rupert's forces stormed Cirencester's main entrance and fierce street to street fighting followed; 300 defenders were killed, 1500 taken prisoner and the town was plundered³. By laying waste to the town and setting many buildings alight, Rupert's forces handed a propaganda coup to the Parliamentarians. The news terrified the merchants of Gloucester who were rumoured to have offered the Royalists payments of money to leave them alone should Gloucester suffer the same fate. Prince Rupert and a modest force of cavalry and foot-soldiers marched to Gloucester the following day to see if they could capitalize on their victory and cow the people of Gloucester into surrender⁴. Rupert came, presumably, to the Eastgate and demanded the city surrender but the military governor Lt Col Edward Massie told him that 'we would never surrender to a foreign prince' and with no real strength to mount a siege, Rupert retired. The citizens were understandably frightened by the event, but Massie rallied them. He was fully supported by the city council, particularly the inner council of some fifteen aldermen most of whom performed dual roles as officers in the garrison, as well as the Member of Parliament for Gloucester, Thomas Pury who held the rank of Captain in the regiment of Sir Henry Stephens.

During the Spring of 1643 wins and losses on both sides were either enjoyed or suffered as the action moved from Lichfield to Reading to Upton Bridge, Hereford, and Worcester. Gloucester itself was the focal point for reinforcements and redeployments in response to these events.

At a war council on 25th July, the King and his council including Prince Rupert, decided that the time had come to force the issue and attack the port of Bristol, England's second city. It was stoutly defended, and the rivers Frome and Avon provided a natural boundary; these were augmented by defensive earthworks and ditches. However, the garrison had been weakened by the withdrawal of some 1200 men to fight elsewhere. It proved to be a hard fought and costly battle, in terms of men lost and large swathes of the city destroyed, Prince Rupert himself had a lucky escape when his charger was shot dead from under him. In the end the defenders ran short of ammunition and suffered heavy losses so the governor Nathaniel Fiennes had no option but to surrender. As he and his men marched out of the city they were badly treated by the Royalist soldiers and the inhabitants that remained suffered maltreatment as the townsfolk of Cirencester had experienced earlier on. Fiennes returned to London where he was court-martialled and sentenced to death for cowardice and traitorous behaviour. This was later seen to be unfair by the Commander, The Earl of Essex who granted Fiennes clemency.

The Royalists profited hugely from the capture of Bristol, they gained Fiennes' war chest of £100,000, arms and ammunition aplenty, 18 merchant ships and four warships. All that stood in the way of total success and win control of the entire Severn Valley was Gloucester.

³ Ibid Ch 5 The war in the West Country.

⁴ Gloucester Besieged, JRS Whiting, Published by The City Museum, Gloucester, Second Edition, 1984

THE SIEGE OF GLOUCESTER-THE PRELUDE

King Charles pinned his hopes on two key elements, first that the subjugation of Bristol would strike fear into the hearts of the civic leaders and citizens of Gloucester and, secondly, that the Governor Edward Massie, would simply surrender the city to the superior forces that Charles had assembled. The odds were stacked in the king's favour, he had between 20 to 30,000 troops comprised of cavalry, artillerymen, and foot soldiers at his disposal and some of the best commanders to direct them including Prince Rupert, and the force commander Lord Forth supported by Sir Jacob Astley and Sir William Vavasour. The defenders, led by Massie, on the other hand, had far fewer forces comprised of two regiments of foot with some supporting cavalry, dragoons and 'clubmen' that amounting to about 1500 men⁵. The city walls were barely adequate to withstand a siege and the defenders had little in the way of artillery and gunpowder. So, it should have been a foregone conclusion, but events proved otherwise. The King was anxious to avoid another bloodbath like Cirencester and Bristol so restrained Prince Rupert and his cavalry from an early onset against the town supported by engineers and infantrymen. After a few preliminary skirmishes, the battle settled down to be a siege. This tactic suited Massie with the limited means at his disposal.

Massie became governor of Gloucester early in 1643 and initially conducted minor operation against numerous small bodies of Royalists and while doing so probably formulated plans for the defence of Gloucester should that become a future need. He was a professional soldier first serving in the Dutch army against the Spaniards and then appearing in 1639 as a captain of pioneers under King Charles against the Scots. Although he was with the King at York at the outset of the war, he was not favoured with a commission and soon joined the Parliamentary army.

As an engineer he realised what had to be done: he ordered the construction of an elaborate double ditch and walled defence system which was probably not fully complete at the time of the siege⁶. The outer suburbs were razed to deny cover to the attackers and the low-lying land of Little Meadows and Meanham were flooded. The south and east gate areas were filled with earth and wet mud to withstand artillery fire. As a commander he proved to be the man of the hour, always visibly encouraging both soldiers and civilians and engendering a spirit of defiance.

THE SIEGE BEGINS

On 6th August, a small Roundhead party under Captain Blunt went out of the Northgate and at Wotton took 10 Cavaliers prisoner before going on to Painswick where they spotted enemy cavalry. Sensing that an attack was on the way, feverish activity went on all day to repair as much of the defences as was possible. The next day Tuffley was plundered and on the 10th August the King's 6000 horse and foot faced the city from Tredworth field and some 2000 horse were drawn up to the north. Forces taken from Worcester were deployed at Longford while Welsh forces were

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Defensive improvements were proposed by David Papillon, 1581-1659, a French military engineer resident in England (a Huguenot refugee) and advisor to the Parliamentarians.

stationed at Kingsholm and Lord Forth's division was encamped at Llanthony Priory. The city was effectively surrounded.

THE WALKING TOUR

The Tolsey at the High Cross is the logical place to start the tour. Using the notes above explain how Gloucester came to be in this situation. In the past, especially when schoolchildren are involved, I have asked them to read the Kings message and the city's reply.

Once his forces were in place, the King issued a proclamation and at 2pm on 10th August the Somerset and York heralds were admitted to the city and rode up to the Tolsey to read it out:

'Out of our tender compassion to our City of Gloucester, and that it may not perceive prejudice by our army, which we cannot prevent, if We be compelled to assault it; we are personally come before it to require the same, and are graciously pleased to let all the inhabitants of and all other persons within that city, as well as souldiers as others, know that if they shall immediately submit themselves and deliver this city to us, we are contented freely and absolutely to pardon every one of them, without exception; And doe assure them in the word of a king, that they nor any of them shall receive the least damage or prejudice by our army in their persons or estates: but that We will appoint such a governour and a moderate garrison to reside there, as shall be both for the ease and security of that city, and the whole county. But if they shall neglect this offer of grace and favour, and compel us by the power of our army to reduce that place (which by the helpe of God, we doubt not, we shall easily and shortly be able to doe) they must thanke themselves for all the calamities and miseries that must befall them. To this message we expect a cleere and positive answer within two hours after the publishing hereof, and by these presents doe give leave to any person, safely to repaire to and returne from us, whom that city shall desire to imploy unto us in that business. And doe require all the officers and souldiers of our army quietly to suffer them passage accordingly'

Walk your party down to the Eastgate, if possible, go into the viewing chamber where you can generate the atmosphere of the times a little and look at the sally port etc.

The defenders took four hours to give their response. The Mayor had scruples over his oath to the King, but they were overcome, and the answer prepared. Tobias Jordan, a councillor, and Sgt Major Pudsey under escort from the heralds took the answer to the king. It read as follows:

'We the inhabitants, magistrates, officers and souldiers within this garrison of Gloucester, unto hill (his) majesties' gracious message, returne this humble answer. That we doe keepe this city according to our oaths and allegiances, to and for the use of his majesty and his royal posterity, and doe accordingly conceive ourselves wholly bound to obey the commands of his majesty, signified by both houses of parliament, and are resolved by God's helpe to keep this city accordingly'

No conference followed and the messengers left at once. 'Their backs turned scarce thirty yards, on clap they their caps in the Kings presence with orange ribbons⁷ in them'.

There was a new sense of urgency on both sides now that hostilities were to begin in earnest. The Royalists advanced up Barton Street, although it was still smouldering and occupied a house to use as a forward base of operations, they also started to drain the city moat and other water defences and cut off the water supply so the inhabitants had to drink water from wells and the river Severn. The defenders managed to dislodge the cavaliers from Barton street with an artillery barrage and women and girls worked hard to repair the defensive walls. A lot of mining and countermining began at various locations and the Royalists started to entrench themselves in Gaudy Green (Brunswick Square) prior to setting up their artillery battery there. Later, they deployed two culverins⁸ to bombard the east side of the city but with limited effect although a cannon ball was found at the Eastgate during a dig there in the early 1970s. The mining operation at the Eastgate was thwarted as the siege progressed, by countermining, the high-water table, and a grenade attack from within the walls.

The siege was unusual in that the defenders seem to have been able to sally forth often with large numbers of troops to attack Royalist positions, capture weapons and equipment. For example, on 18th August a raid by 450 defenders succeeded in disabling four canons, three at Kingsholm and one at Alvin gate and killing about 100 Royalists⁹. Whereas the Royalists relied on more passive measures e.g. mining and cannonades to reduce the city. It must be stressed that the King had constrained Prince Rupert and he and his horsemen were dismounted and effectively fought as dragoons. The King also tried the use of siege engines designed by a Dr Chillingworth that would allow the besiegers to close on the city walls under cover, but these were ineffective. They were the alternative subject for the rhyme 'Humpty Dumpty', see below. Prince Rupert also sent to the continent for a large calibre canon but when it arrived and was installed it reportedly blew up when the first round was fired from it. This gave rise to the popular rhyme 'Humpty Dumpty Sat on a Wall'

Prince Rupert was often to be spotted on reconnaissance missions close to the Eastgate and narrowly escaped a grenade attack, people were very curious about him and often peeped over the walls to see this legendary figure, one young lad paid with his life for his curiosity.

Move on down Brunswick Road, which was moated at the time and pause at the Via Sacra (city library corner). This was where the walls were most vulnerable and were

⁷ Ospreys 'Soldiers of the English Civil War 1, Infantry, page 55, author Keith Roberts 1989 ISBN 8601417312643 'He wears an orange sash which indicates allegiance to the earl of Essex as his general'

⁸ A culverin was a long-barrelled gun adapted from naval use and mounted on wheels with a high muzzle velocity and relatively long range of about 450 mtrs, it fired solid shot but only had limited effect on solid objects.

⁹ Gloucester and Newbury, The turning Point of the Civil War, Jon Day (2007) ISBN 978-1-84415-591-01-0

constantly being attacked by the Gaudy Green battery and constantly repaired with mud etc by women and children many of whom were killed.

Take your party along the Via Sacra to Greyfriars which was damaged quite badly during the siege. The distance between here and the Gaudy Green battery was about 300 mtrs but targeting by the artillerymen was not that good and there was little in the way of direct line of sight. Some of the guns resembled trench mortars, so they fired shot up into the sky and let physics do the rest as the rounds fell to earth. A lot of the fire was directed at St Mary de Crypt which was a gunpowder magazine. Go into the churchyard and look at the bullet and small calibre rounds marks on the north wall as well as the sundial on the left-hand side buttress which marked where a hot shot strike was recorded. A few mtrs either side and the church would have blown up. Enter the church and look at the tiles on the high altar floor; they show the city crest and the number of cannon balls the defenders had left at the end of the siege. The rector of the church at the time was the Reverend J Corbet, he was also usher of the Crypt School, Massie's chaplain, and an outspoken preacher during the siege.

Enter Southgate street, walk down to Blackfriars, give brief history as you pass and proceed along Longsmith street, point out Ladybellgate house, the home of the Wagstaffe's, a family of Royalist sympathisers who prospered after the interregnum.

This area was the centre of the old iron industry and could have still been active at this time. Many of the old skills were still in use, for example, repairing muskets and producing bullets. Turn left at the old Fire Station and show the visitors the old prison. Although much damaged it still afforded protection and was well placed at a bend in the river as a point of defence. That said, the Royalists successfully used the river to bring in supplies and reinforcement.

Retrace your steps to Westgate street, relate the story about Mr Commeline's house, number 30 Westgate street, that was hit by a hot shot on the 25th August. He was an apothecary and the family were Huguenot refugees from persecution on the continent but found themselves back in troubled waters here in Gloucester. The shot went through three houses before falling in one of the bedchambers where it was 'caste into a cowle of water, where after a good space it cooled'¹⁰ Further up Westgate street was St Mary de Grace which was also used as an ammunition store.

Walk down towards the Crown Inn, as you go, tell the visitors about St Nicholas church with its leaning tower, minus the pinnacle of the steeple which was struck by canon fire during the siege. It was used as an observation post by the defenders. Massie used the Crown as his headquarters, which would have included a force of infantry ready for immediate action. He also established a guardroom in the Wheatmarket in Southgate street for 120 men, so he had two sides of the city protected by 'quick reaction forces'

Turn left into Three Cocks Lane and then St Mary's Square. The statue of King Charles II was erected in 1662 in the Wheatmarket after the Restoration of the

¹⁰ J Dorney, Gloucester Town Clerk 1640-1662, his daily record of the siege is usually known as Dorney's account.

Monarchy and following Gloucester's affirmation of loyalty. Charles graciously accepted Gloucester's grovelling declaration and proclamation of him as monarch but he had not forgotten what went before and ordered the city wall to be razed.

The statue disappeared during reconstruction work in the 18th century and was rediscovered in a garden in Chaxhill in 1945 and re-erected here in the 1960s.

Walk past St Mary de Lode which was used as a prison for Royalist POWs. Into the cathedral precinct which was used to accommodate Parliamentarian troops and their horses and go out into St Lucy's passage onto Northgate street. The area to the north was flooded by damming the river thus making an attack here unlikely.

Walk along St Aldgate's street to the old bus station area which was heavily fortified. The River Twyver, now under Market Parade, was a good barrier and the Whitefriars buildings opposite were dismantled as they could offer shelter and lookout facilities for the attacking forces. There is some evidence that well-formed revetments were built here by Massie as this was considered a likely place of attack.

Return to the Eastgate via Kingswalk; the old Roman wall here was heavily reinforced and the moat was widened to increase the dangers to the attacking forces. If possible, visit the Bastion if not, end the tour at the Eastgate by describing the raising of the siege by Essex's forces.

THE END OF THE SIEGE

Massie was always convinced that a relief party would be sent to aid the city and his conviction was well judged. The Earl of Essex, the army commander, was encouraged by Parliament to mount a rescue operation and on 24th August he reviewed his forces which had been augmented by five regiments of London's Trained Bands¹¹. They left next day for the west, marching in a wide sweep north of Oxford by way of Brackley, Stow on the Wold and Cheltenham. Wet weather and delaying operations by Prince Rupert and most of the King's cavalry around Stow, delayed his forces and progress was made worse by a severe storm as they approached Prestbury Hill on 5th September. By then they were in sight of Gloucester which lay 10 miles away and Essex ordered his artillerymen to fire their guns as a, much needed, encouragement to Massie's garrison. The gunfire alerted King Charles to the approaching danger and he ordered the immediate lifting of the siege and a withdrawal of his army southwards to Painswick. Three days later Essex entered Gloucester his mission successfully accomplished.¹²

Essex was told by the inhabitants that between 30 and 40 had been killed during the siege, mostly shot while peeping at the enemy, whereas the Royalists lost about 1000 troops according to the Reverend Corbet. About 400 'great shot' by heavy artillery and about 40 'grenadoes' by mortars were discharged against the city so casualties were indeed light.

¹¹ Trained Bands were local militia generally of poor quality, but the London Trained Bands were far superior and proved their worth on many occasions including this operation. Source: British Civil Wars Glossary.co.uk

¹² See Fn2.