

The British Civil Wars and the Defence of Oxford

A talk given by David Parrott on 30 April 2019 to mark the installation of a plaque outside the Clore Music Studios, indicating the line of the Civil War fortifications of Oxford



Nine months of political uncertainty finally came to a climax in mid-1642. Since the outbreak of the Irish revolt in October 1641, the constitutional dispute between King Charles I and the radical opponents of his rule in both the Houses of Commons and Lords of the Long Parliament, had acquired a military dimension.¹ The urgent need to preserve English rule and the Protestant church in Ireland led both the King and Parliamentary factions to issue separate orders for the raising of the English armed bands, or militia. Confusingly for many, both of the ordinances spoke of raising troops ‘in the name of the King’.² But the leaders of the royalist and parliamentarian factions were not confused. They realized that whoever mobilized military force first would be able to consolidate, challenge or potentially wipe out, all the constitutional and religious changes that had been imposed on the King ever since the Long Parliament had first assembled in 1640.

Both factions were acquiring military resources and moving ever-further from any possibility of compromise. Yet there was no reason for the people of Oxford to suspect that the city would become central to the forthcoming civil war. Politically, the University had emerged in the recent constitutional disputes as strongly royalist. The citizens of Oxford, meanwhile, including the two Oxford MPs, showed Parliamentarian sympathies.³ Yet what both parties could agree upon was their desire it at all possible to avoid Oxford being drawn into any conflict, whether that meant

¹ C. Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies, 1637-1642* (Oxford, 1991); E. Darcy, *The Irish Rebellion of 1641 and the Wars of the Three Kingdoms* (London, 2013).

² A. Fletcher, *The Outbreak of the English Civil War* (London, 1981), pp. 347-368.

³ F. Varley, *The Siege of Oxford: An Account of Oxford during the Civil War, 1642-46* (Oxford, 1932), pp. 17-35; J. Barratt, *Cavalier Capital. Oxford in the English Civil War, 1642-46* (Solihull, 2015), pp. 21-38.

the devastating experience of siege, or the disorders, disruption and disease brought by garrisoning and the requisitioning of supplies and money.

Neither the King nor Parliament had Oxford in their sights. Charles I on leaving London, went first to Yorkshire, and then raised his standard in Nottingham. The royalist strategy was to exploit initial military advantage to march directly on London, which the Parliamentarians had to hold if they were to survive. There had been a few flurries of military activity in Oxford in the opening months of the war. Royalist cavalry squadrons under Sir John Byron had briefly halted in Oxford in the summer, and established themselves in garrison. Warden Robert Pinck of New College, Vice-Chancellor elect, had taken it upon himself to organize a pro-royalist militia made up of Oxford students and fellows, armed with weapons that he stored in the College muniment tower.⁴ But this militia proved ineffectual when the royalist cavalry were driven out of the city by a slightly larger force of Parliamentary troops. These were commanded by William Fiennes, first Viscount Saye and Sele, who in earlier life had been a student at New College, and since 1641 had been the High Steward of the University. Fiennes's troops garrisoned the city, disarmed the militia and the other inhabitants, and arrested Warden Pinck, sending him down to London where he was held in prison until January 1643. Yet a few weeks after their arrival Fiennes's troops in turn were to leave to join up with the main Parliamentary forces seeking to defend London against the advance of Charles' main army.

This military activity in Oxford had been small scale. Outside, much bigger forces were shaping events. On 23 October 1642 the main royalist and parliamentary armies clashed indecisively at Edgehill, in south Warwickshire. Charles nonetheless felt strong enough after the battle to push forward towards London, where the royalist advance was finally halted in mid-November at Turnham Green. Unable to reach London and with winter approaching, Charles and his high command took the decision to withdraw the army into the south Midlands. Oxford would become the base for his army, the court and—from late 1643—the Royalist Oxford Parliament.⁵

The arrival in the city of the King, his Court and government officials, several thousand troops, and many more soldiers spread out across Oxfordshire, was a brutal surprise. Oxford now experienced the full impact of seventeenth-century warfare, where local communities bore the brunt of paying, feeding and housing soldiers in the typical absence of adequate central resources. Heavy demands were made for financial support. To begin with, Charles required all of the silver plate from the Colleges as a loan to support his military mobilization.⁶ Yet paying these so-called 'contributions' to the war-effort was no guarantee that the local population would be spared from the arbitrary attentions of soldiers who expected to live by daily extortion, pillage and menace. It was a commonplace of the period that it did not much matter whether a population was occupied by a friendly or an enemy army, since the results in terms of looting and violence would be much the same. Moreover Charles, not without reason, suspected the loyalty and commitment of the Oxford citizens, and was not inclined to urge his troops to any special moderation in their treatment of the civilian population.

Meanwhile the University and the colleges became reluctant hosts to King and army. Christ Church and Merton were occupied by Charles and his Court; most of Brasenose was requisitioned as the royal arsenal; the deer park at Magdalen lodged the army's field artillery. New College's cloister and bell tower became the army's munitions store, and part of the cloister wall was broken down and gated to allow easier access for carts and waggons.⁷ The most significant structural change to Oxford was that the presence of the King and Government in the city led to the construction of new defence works. It is unnecessary to point out to anyone familiar with New College, that Oxford had retained its thirteenth-century city walls, a substantial part of which frame

⁴ Varley, *Siege*, p. 23.

⁵ Varley, *Siege*, pp. 47-51.

⁶ Roy, I, Reinhart, D, 'Oxford and the Civil War' in *The History of the University of Oxford: Vol IV Seventeenth-Century Oxford*, ed. N. Tyacke (Oxford, 1997), pp. 687-731.

⁷ Barratt, *Cavalier Capital*, pp. 45-50, 69.

the main college garden. In the seventeenth century these continued to bring a few benefits: some control over access; security from nocturnal bands of robbers; riot control. But in military terms they were obsolete. The slow development of effective and mobile artillery across Europe from the later fifteenth century turned high, thin, stone city walls into a liability for the defenders. A battery of guns firing eighteen or twenty-four pound shot would make short work of Oxford-style walls, meanwhile showering whoever was behind them with lethal combinations of stone splinters and ricocheting iron cannon balls.⁸

Across much of Europe the response to this ‘gunpowder revolution’ was the construction of a completely different style of fortification. Instead of high, relatively thin walls, military architects substituted low-lying walls, stone-faced but filled to a breadth of 20, 30 even 40 feet with packed earth. These walls were intended to absorb the impact of artillery shot: the stone facings would crumble and break up, but the shot would be buried in the packed earth behind.⁹ Such walls still posed a physical barrier to a besieging army, especially if there was a deep ditch or moat in front of them. But the second aspect of this new fortification system turned to the use of artillery, though in a defensive capacity. Breaking out from the line of earth-packed walls would be a series of projecting, triangular ‘bastions’. These were mounted with cannon, able to exchange fire at a distance against a besieging army. Crucially the cannon and infantry firearms would also be able to sweep the ground immediately in front of the walls if an enemy force tried to advance up to the defences.



Aerial view of historic centre of Lucca surrounded by walls, Tuscany, Italy

There was though a fundamental difference between 16th- and 17th-century England and those areas of Continental Europe where thousands of these new-style fortifications were built. Italy, Flanders, the Rhineland, the frontiers with the Ottoman Empire all experienced regular and lengthy periods of warfare. The massive expense and huge urban disruption of building these state-of-art defences was resented, and in some cases resisted; but ultimately military reality imposed itself across great areas of Europe, traditional walls were pulled down or became an inner line of

⁸ S. Pepper, N. Adams, *Firearms and Fortifications. Military Architecture and Siege Warfare* (Chicago, 1986); C. Duffy, *Siege Warfare: The Fortress in the Early Modern World, 1494-1660* (London, 1979); M. Pollack, *Cities at War in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2010); B. Hall, *Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe* (Baltimore, 1997).

⁹ J. R. Hale, *Renaissance Fortification: Art or Engineering* (London, 1977); Hale ‘The Early Development of the Bastion: An Italian Chronology’, in J. R. Hale, *Renaissance War Studies* (London, 1983), pp. 1-29.

defences, and the towns were fortified.¹⁰ In contrast, England faced no domestic military threats from the advent of the Tudors until the Civil War. The only places where the new fortifications were slowly developed were Ireland, and the Scottish borders. Without the military concern, English cities and towns avoided this burden with considerable relief.

So when civil war came, and large armies of 10-15,000 men with artillery trains started marching across England, none of the cities that they encountered had modern fortifications. But as European military engineers had long realized, this did not mean that these places were inevitably defenceless in the face of besieging armies and their cannon. Temporary fortification-systems, based on the same defensive principles, could be built relatively quickly and cheaply.¹¹ They lacked any of the imposing scale of the stone faced, permanent structures, but strenuous labour could produce low earth ramparts, thick enough to absorb cannon shot. These would be reinforced by a deep ditch opened in front of the positions to make scaling the low-lying ramparts more difficult. The ramparts were often faced with wooden stakes to retain the earth and make assault more perilous. The walls were broad enough both to absorb shot and to allow defensive artillery to be mounted on them, whether along the walls or in rudimentary projecting bastions, kept simple because they lacked the stone framework and facings to give them rigid structure.

After King Charles arrived in Oxford one of his first priorities was to construct such fortifications—or earthworks—that would allow the city to be defended against a Parliamentary attack or siege. By August 1643, the first line of fortifications had been constructed along a route running from Worcester College, through St Giles and on to Holywell.¹² The best surviving map of the fortifications available, drawn by the military engineer, Bernard de Gomme, shows this first set of earthworks and fortification running from Worcester college gardens across the north of Oxford and descending to cross present-day Mansfield Road to end in a line running across Magdalen deer park.¹³ It is this line of earthworks, built in 1643-44 that are commemorated by the recently installed plaque in front of the Clore Music Studios.

It was recognized by the Royalist commanders that the main threat to Oxford would come from an attack on the northern faces of the city, and hence the focus of these earthworks. From the South, the intersecting rivers Cherwell and Isis and the amount of waterlogged land obstructed any advance by an enemy army, and at this stage there was no attempt to dig fortifications along Christ Church Meadow. It was these fortifications that formed the defences of Oxford throughout 1643 and 1644 and the first half of 1645. They were formed by a relatively simple line of deep ditch and earthen rampart, probably reinforced with timber. De Gomme's plan also shows a handful of triangular projections and sharp-angled bends in the line, and both of these were intended to allow cross fire along the line of defences against any advancing enemy force that got close.

Behind these new earthworks lay the medieval city walls, which might serve as a last line of defences if an attacking army broke through. To reinforce this second line, the Fellows of New College were ordered to build up the mound in the Fellows Garden. The mound had been making lethargic progress as a garden feature since the 1610s. Its height was now increased by nearly 50% to provide an observation platform that was clear of the city walls, and some historians speculate, an artillery platform.¹⁴

¹⁰ J. R. Hale, 'To Fortify or Not to Fortify? Machiavelli's Contribution to a Renaissance Debate', in Hale, *War Studies*, pp. 189-209; J. Hook, 'Fortifications and the End of the Sieneese State', *History* 62 (1977), pp. 372-387; R. Tuttle, 'Against Fortifications: The Defence of Renaissance Bologna', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 41 (1982), pp. 180-201.

¹¹ Duffy, *Siege Warfare*, pp. 70-72.

¹² R. T. Lattey, E. Parsons, I. Philip, 'A Contemporary Map of the Defences of Oxford in 1644', *Oxoniensia*, 1 (1936), pp. 161-172; A. Kemp, 'The Fortifications of Oxford During the Civil War', *Oxoniensia* 42 (1977), pp. 237-246; Varley, *Siege*, pp. 106-121.

¹³ Lattey, 'A Contemporary Map', plate 22, facing p. 168.

¹⁴ K. Seeber, "'Ye Making of Ye Mount": Oxford New College's Mount Garden Revised', *Garden History* 40 (2012), 3-16; Kemp, 'Fortifications of Oxford', p. 243.

All this sounds makeshift, and indeed it was in comparison with the massive, permanent fortification projects undertaken, often over decades, in European towns and cities. But it worked in its own terms: it deterred two exploratory attempts at a siege by Parliamentary forces. After the first in 1644, which had been threatening enough to persuade Charles to slip out of Oxford, the Parliamentary commander, Sir William Waller, had commented: 'I find Oxford much stronger fortified than when I was here last; the new works being finished and the whole north side pallisadoed' (fronted with wooden stakes).¹⁵

And the second attempt to probe Oxford's defences in May 1645, this time with troops led by Thomas Fairfax, was no more successful.

Beyond Oxford however, the military situation was turning definitively against the Royalists. In June 1645 at Naseby in Northamptonshire a royalist army of 9,000 troops committed collective suicide against a combined Parliamentary force nearly twice their number commanded by Fairfax, Cromwell and Ireton.¹⁶ The crushing defeat at Naseby was followed by further setbacks as the royalists steadily lost control of the South-West of England, culminating in the surrender of Bristol. It became clear that a possible end-game to this string of disasters would be a full-scale Parliamentary siege of Oxford. Confronted with this likelihood, King, Council and army commanders ordered the construction of the second and much more elaborate set of field earthworks, well beyond the line of the first. As can be seen from de Gomme's plan, these are much more elaborate. In fact they are adopting a standard form of European military engineering, with a *tenaille* or 'saw-tooth' effect all along the line, where rudimentary bastions mark out the tips of the saw-teeth.¹⁷ The system is intended to maximize cross-fire and make approach to the line especially hazardous. This new, more substantial line of fortifications stretched out in an arc around the north of the city linking up to a substantial fort at Magdalen bridge, with further outworks stretching into St Clements. This time moreover the line of defences ran round the south of the city as well. Even the water-protected approaches across Christ Church Meadow were now secured with simpler defences dug along the side of the River Isis. Some of this second line of defensive works is clearly apparent in what would seem to be the one painting that survives of the 1646 siege of Oxford, a largely fictitious depiction by Jan de Wyck. Yet although the topography of Oxford has been invented, the painting shows very clearly the two lines of defences now in place, and the considerably more elaborate form of the second.

The concern to construct bigger and more elaborate fortifications proved justified. In April 1646, in what was to be one of the last acts of the First Civil War, Thomas Fairfax's main Parliamentary army received orders to besiege Oxford. Charles secretly left the city on 27 April, and the remaining Privy Council members were instructed that they should resist, but should also avoid 'further effusion of the blood of our subjects'.

The royalists in Oxford were reluctant to undergo a siege which might end in sack and massacre. Fairfax was equally hesitant to launch a full-scale siege against the new defences. He reckoned it would take a minimum of three months, and would: 'hazard how many honest, gallant men against earth and walls.'¹⁸

The city surrendered on terms on 25 June, and Fairfax entered Oxford without having tried his troops against the defences. In March 1647 Parliament ordered that the Oxford fortifications be demolished and rendered useless. They were certainly destroyed for military purposes over the following months, even though traces of ditch and earth parapet have survived in sections to this day. The presence of the newly-inset plaque allows us to commemorate the outlines and remnants of defences that still reveal something of the involvement of Oxford in the first Civil War.

¹⁵ Lattey, 'A Contemporary Map', p. 167.

¹⁶ J. S. Wheeler, *The Irish and British Civil Wars, 1637-1654* (London, 2002), pp. 135-142; R. Hutton, *The Royalist War Effort, 1642-46* (London, 1984), pp. 178-200, the notion of 'suicide' is Hutton's, p. 178.

¹⁷ Kemp, 'Fortifications of Oxford', p. 244; see the plan in Lattey, *op cit*, plate 22.

¹⁸ Barratt, *Royalist Oxford*, pp. 203-204; Varley, *Siege*, pp. 131-166



The Lord Mayor of Oxford and the Warden of New College, Oxford at the unveiling of the plaque

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