

Chris Penhall recounts the devastation inflicted on Essex's oldest town during England's Civil War in the 17th century

The beginnings of the English Civil Wars in 1642 brought to an end 150 years during which English soil had been free of armed conflict. Essex itself was predominantly Parliamentary but did not become directly involved in hostilities until 1648 when 4,000 Royalist soldiers arrived in Colchester for what was intended to be a temporary stopover. This heralded two months of incredible hardship and starvation for the citizens of this ancient town as they were besieged by 5000 Parliamentary troops led by Sir Thomas Fairfax, intent on stamping out the Royalists, whatever the costs to the populace trapped inside the town walls.

During the Civil War, Essex formed part of the Eastern Association – along with the other eastern counties, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire – and Colchester was thoroughly on the side of Parliament. However, as the Civil Wars continued the ever increasing burden of taxation needed to support the Parliamentary cause and the New Model Army caused increasing rumblings of discontent. Royalists were elected to the offices of Mayor and Justices of the Peace in 1647 but troops of the New Model Army arrived in the town and ordered a new election of candidates more acceptable to them. Although riots and disturbances ensued in the following months, Colchester remained Parliamentary.

The roots of the siege itself lay in the beginnings of what is known as the Second

Sir Thomas Fairfax led the Parliamentary army into Colchester. His tactical skill and personal courage helped bring about many Parliamentary victories throughout England



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The Siege of Colchester

Colchester Castle: The Siege of Colchester lasted for 76 days and had a devastating effect on the town



Four Lords and higher ranking officers were taken to Moot Hall for execution: Colonel Farr escaped through a window, Sir Charles Lucas and fellow Royalist Commander Sir George Lisle were executed by a firing squad outside the castle, and Sir Bernard Gascoigne was released for diplomatic purposes when it was realised he was an Italian soldier

Civil War. In May 1646, King Charles had surrendered and the War seemed over. The King, however, took advantage of growing dissension between the Long Parliament and the New Model Army and escaped from custody in Hampton Court to the Isle of Wight in November.

In the early summer of 1648, a series of risings for the King broke out around the country, one of which started in Kent, led by the Earl of Norwich.

Sir Thomas Fairfax led his troops into the county and defeated the Royalists at Maidstone in June, but the remnants marched towards London under Lord Goring. Realising they would find no support there, they headed for Essex. Joined at Brentwood by another force led by Sir Charles Lucas, they moved on to Chelmsford on June 8th where the Essex Committee for Parliament was meeting. Taking them hostage they forced them to send a message to the nearest Parliamentary forces ordering them not to advance against the Royalists. When they left for Colchester, they took ten of the Committee members with them.

Arriving at Colchester on June 12th, they were reluctantly allowed in by the Mayor, having promised only to stay for a few days before they travelled north where they believed more support was waiting. However, Fairfax and his Parliamentary troops were closer to them than they realised and arrived on the outskirts of the town the next day. Fairfax ordered the Royalists to surrender, they refused and Fairfax launched an attack on the Headgate hoping to storm the town. The Parliamentarians were beaten back and so Fairfax, basing himself at Lexden, ordered the building of fortifications and trenches from which to launch attacks and besiege the Royalist forces within the town walls.

Initially large stores of corn, wine, salt, fish and gunpowder were discovered by the Royalists at The Hythe but once Fairfax cut off the river route, they were driven to making raiding sorties at night when they stole cattle and sheep from local farmers: one night more than 100 cattle were taken into the town. This good luck was short lived, however, as when the army successfully pushed the Royalists from their stronghold on St Johns Green and improved patrols it became impossible to get any supplies in.

As the siege progressed the situation worsened, particularly for the townspeople. They had to find room to house the soldiers and let them take thatch from their roofs to feed the horses. In late July the Cavalry were ordered to hand over every third horse for meat to feed the army. The soldiers were reduced to eating dogs, while the ordinary citizens had to make do with cats, rats, mice and even candles made from mutton fat.

On June 24th Fairfax had received reinforcements of 2,500 and on July 1st had offered terms to the soldiers, which were refused by the Royalist commanders, as it was unusual to offer terms to the soldiery separately. He sent another demand to surrender on July 16th but the Royalists had been encouraged to hold on until the end of July, when troops around the country were supposed to rise to fight for the King when the Duke of Hamilton crossed into England from Scotland to battle Cromwell.



Photo: Hans Verkoost © The Journals

Bullet holes from the battle of the Siege of Colchester can still be seen in the Siege House



As the skirmishes between the two sides continued, the citizens of Colchester were trapped, and by the second week of August, they were starving. They began to gather each evening outside Lord Goring's house, begging him to surrender; eventually Sir Charles Lucas gave the order to give them some grain from the Royalist store.

Five days later some increasingly desperate women and children left the town and threw themselves at the mercy of the Parliamentarians but they were fired on and the soldiers were ordered to strip some of the women. They were forced back into the town; Fairfax was determined to starve the Royalists out and the more mouths to feed the easier that would be.

By this time it was not only the townsfolk who wished to escape – Royalist troops, encouraged by Fairfax's offer of free passes to go to

their homes, began to desert. And allegations of "dirty tricks" were rife: the Royalists were believed to have used poisoned and chewed bullets to inflict horrific wounds; meanwhile the Parliamentarians were blamed for murdering townspeople in their beds and Sir Charles Lucas was accused of rape. In fact, Lucas was regarded as so arrogant and unpleasant that it is rumoured that the inhabitants of Colchester said he was "more intolerable than the siege".

In the dying days of August the situation came to a head – Fairfax's final offer of mercy was refused, so to put more pressure on the Royalists' arrows were fired into the town informing them that the Duke of Hamilton had been beaten by Cromwell at Preston. The Royalists subsequent request to surrender for honourable terms was refused by Fairfax. On 24th August a kite was flown over the town telling of victories over the Scots and a volley was fired from the Parliamentary lines to make the Royalists believe that an attack was imminent.

In a last desperate attempt to save themselves, the Royalist leaders gathered their troops on August 25th near a section of the town wall that had been reduced to rubble, in order to attempt escape. Unfortunately, the ordinary soldiery now distrusted their leaders so much that they, convinced the officers only wanted to save themselves, mutinied; although they were eventually reassured as to their leaders' motives, any chance of surprise was lost and the attempt abandoned.

Eventually, starving and desperate, the Royalists surrendered on August 27th. The following day, Fairfax and his triumphant troops entered Colchester. His secretary wrote: "It was a sad spectacle to see so many fair Houses burned to Ashes, and so many Inhabitants made so sickly and weake, with living upon Horses and Dogs..."

The ordinary soldiers were to parade with baggage at Greyfriars and were to receive "fair quarter" – many were stripped and beaten and a high number were subsequently sent abroad to the West Indies as slaves. All Lords and higher ranking officers were to assemble at The Kings Head to await Parliamentary mercy, meaning their lives would be spared and they would eventually be able to buy their freedom.

Four, however were summoned to the Moot Hall: Colonel Farr escaped through a window, but Sir Charles Lucas and Sir George Lisle were executed by firing squad outside the castle, a spot now marked by an obelisk placed there in 1893. Sir Bernard Gascoigne was released when it was revealed he was an Italian soldier from Florence, as Parliament did not want to damage relations with the Duke of Tuscany.

The two other commanders were tried: Lord Goring was spared, Capel was sentenced to death. He escaped from the Tower of London but was recaptured and beheaded in 1649 shortly before the execution of King Charles.

As for the town: Fairfax ordered the inhabitants to pay him the huge fine of £14,000 subsequently reduced to £12,000, £2,000 of which was for the relief of the poor; the town walls were knocked down so nobody could fortify Colchester again. St Mary's Church had lost the top of its tower and St Botolph's Priory and approximately 400 houses had been destroyed during the fighting. Bullet holes from these far off days can still be seen in the Siege House.

The physical and economic scars lasted for many years. The diarist John Evelyn noted in 1656 as he passed through, "To Colchester, a fair town, but now wretchedly demolished by the late siege." It was left to the inhabitants to pick up the pieces and rebuild their fortunes long after those responsible for the destruction of the town and its prosperity had left. As someone once said, "History repeats itself. It has to. No one listens." □