Faringdon at War

Introduction

It is 20th April 1646, and Faringdon is one of the last bastions to hold out against the relentless onslaught of the Parliamentary forces. Let us imagine the sound of gunfire in the Market Square - the boom of cannon and the cries of advancing soldiers. I suspect we would be cowering by the window!

A detachment of Parliamentary forces have infiltrated the town. Advancing down Church St they are h alted by Royalist marksmen on the church tower. Most of the marksmen are Posemen who are women dressed as soldiers armed with long barrelled muskets.

Undaunted the attackers raise an earthwork on the Gloucester Rd and take Gloucester House. Royalist commander Col. Rawdon orders a counter-attack - with a wild charge and despite heavy casualties they manage to drive back the attackers. But that

night the attackers again occupy Gloucester House but once again are driven back.

The Parliamentarians are now under the command of Sir Robert Pye, who has recently arrived with reinforcements. He establishes a battery of guns on Folly Hill and orders a heavy bombardment of the church which kills some of sharpshooters but fails to topple the tower.

Next day the garrison mine the tower so that the steeple falls towards the town. The bombardment continues starting a fire that sweeps through the many wooden buildings.

In the midst of the fighting Col. Rawdon dies and is buried in the church with full military honours. As the ceremony ended the besiegers lob a 200lb mortar through the church porch roof.

Two days later the last major assault is made but fails to dislodge the defenders in Faringdon House.

On 20th June Oxford capitulates and Faringdon is included in the Articles of Surrender.

On the 24th June the remains of the garrison march out of the town together with their side arms - fife and drums playing and colours flying. They leave a devastated town – most of its wooden buildings destroyed, its stone buildings no more than shells.

Or so the story goes...

Faringdon

Faringdon – as we all know, is a small west Berkshire market town which has been involved in not one but three civil wars.

Standing at the end of Corallian limestone ridge between the Vale of the White Horse and Thames Valley, it was important as a five way road junction: with the Thames crossing to the north, the main London coach road to the east, Southampton Street to the south and then going

Map 1. Faringdon: location
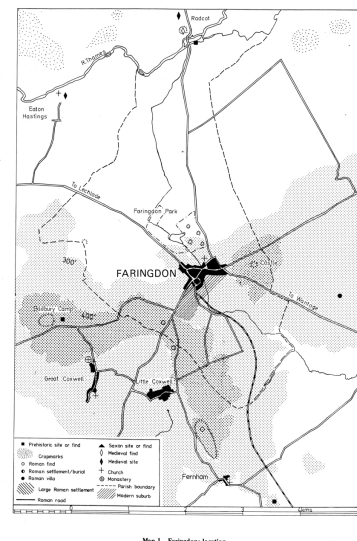
west the main coach road to Gloucester via Lechlade. By the 1640's the town had a thriving corn market and cattle fair. It was a meeting place & transit town for the "wains" of clothiers & wool merchants from Cirencester & Gloucester.

The Folly at Faringdon. Photo Neil B. Maw

Militarily it commanded one of the few crossings of the Thames at Radcot as well as the strategic junction between East-West London-Gloucester road via Abingdon and "cross-post" road from Oxford to Bristol.

Despite meagre early archaeological record there was a probable Iron Age fort on Faringdon Hill as well as a Saxon settlement fortified by Alfred as a borough with earth ramparts.

There was also a "Probable" Royal palace where as recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Edward the Elder "died among the Mercians at Farndon" in 924.

Faringdon is recorded in the Doomsday Book as in the Wyfold Hundred valued at £21.6.8d. Incidentally, Shrivenham was valued at £45! There was also a possible Minster church mentioned in 1086 and a Royal Manor where King Harold held 30 hides.

During the Anarchy, the civil war between Matilda, daughter of Henry I and his nephew, Stephen – a castle was built on Folly Hill in 1144 by Matilda's half brother Robert of Gloucester but destroyed the following year by Stephen's forces.

In 1387, Battle of Radcot Bridge was fought during the turbulent reign of Richard II when the rebellious Lords Appellant lead by Henry Bolingbroke, Earl of Derby - the future usurper king Henry IV, defeated the king's favourite Robert De Vere, Earl of Oxford.

Radcot Bridge – strategically very important. Photo by Neil B Maw

The Civil War

Then comes the Civil War, or more accurately the first of three Civil Wars. It was a dispute between an obdurate parliament and a stubborn and foolish monarch which caused some of the most cataclysmic events in our history. More people died proportionally in the Civil wars than in WWI. It was a process that was ultimately hijacked by the army and which saw a nascent republic snuffed out in a wave of populism.
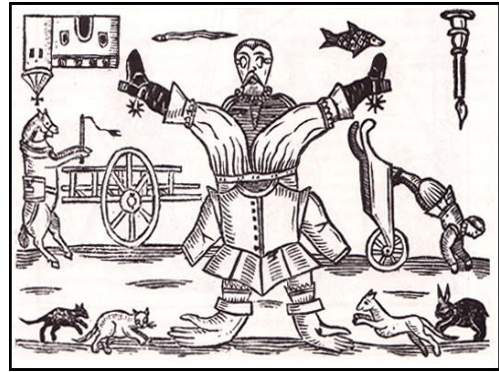
It involved not just one but three revolutions – constitutional, religious and military. And truly for those who lived through it – it was the world turned upside down and nowhere was this more true than in the fertile lands of the Vale of the White Horse which were torn apart by the rival armies.

In 1642 the dispute spilled over into war. The Battle of Edgehill has ended in stalemate and, after the brief engagement at Turnham Green outside London, the king withdraws to Oxford never to threaten the capital again. At least a third o f MP's join him there. He fortifies the city and his idea is surround the city with a circle of fortified towns including Faringdon. Blessed with a plentiful supply of clean running spring water throughout the year, Faringdon was strategically vital for his south western defences.

In April 1643, the King stops to dine at the Crown in Faringdon on his way to Bristol.

On September 18th 1643 he passes through again pursuing the Earl of Essex's forces two days before the first Battle of Newbury.

The Vale now becomes an arena as competing armies march hither and thither. Bodies of troops rampage through towns causing damage and outrage. The poorly paid Royalists pillaging and stealing, the godly

The Crown Inn, Faringdon Market Place. Photo by Neil B Maw

Roundheads desecrating churches. Crops are burnt, farms are laid waste, renegade bands stalk the highways.

The unfortunate citizens of Faringdon and in the surrounding villages were subjected to constant local warfare characterised by constant skirmishing by parties from rival garrisons who patrolled the highways to disrupt supplies to say nothing of renegade bands involved in indiscriminate lawlessness.

In May 1644 Faringdon garrisoned by Royalists to protect Thames crossing at Radcot.

Cromwell move in

By early 1644 the Parliamentarians are tightening their grip on Oxford and Cromwell is assigned to the task. He defeats Royalist cavalry at Islip Bridge and forces the surrender of Bletchington House. The unfortunate Royalist commander Col. Windebank escapes but, on reaching Oxford, is shot for cowardice in front of his weeping wife.

In November 1644 the king decides to quarter part of his cavalry at Faringdon and appoints Sir George Lisle who has distinguished himself at second Battle of Newbury as Governor.

Lisle soon finds that the town is only a third fortified and completely without supplies. Undaunted he immediately sets about stepping up the attacks on parliamentary Abingdon. Unfortunately his first sortie was utterly routed and the Faringdon Horse were chased almost all the way back home.

Cromwell now moves south to attack Faringdon and encounters at force of 300 or so Royalist troops under Sir Robert Vaughan at Bampton who barricade themselves into the well fortified

Faringdon House built on the site of the old house badly damaged in the Civil War. Photo by Neil B Maw

Manor house but under threat of no quarter 200 survivors surrender which includes a group of high ranking Royalist officers.

He then takes Radcot Bridge and on 28th April 1645 he quarters himself probably on the slopes of Folly Hill. He calls upon Colonel Lisle, who has a strongly defended position at Faringdon House and All Saints Church, to surrender but to no avail.

Cromwell has no infantry needed to storm Faringdon House so he sends an urgent message to Abingdon for foot soldiers and the following day 600 foot march into the town.

They then attempt to storm Faringdon House under cover of darkness.

The soldiers advance with ladders lead by Capt. Canon on the first ladder. However the first 10 men are captured, 14 are killed and several wounded.

Cromwell abandons the attack as too costly when he learns that Lord Goring with a strong force of Royalist cavalry is approaching from the north to relieve the town. Goring retakes Radcot Bridge and Cromwell withdraws to Bletchington once again.
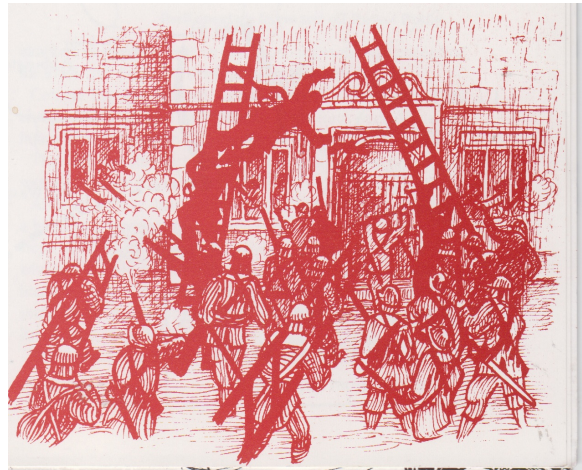
The screw tightens

June 1645 saw Lord General Fairfax investing Oxford with the newly formed New Model Army while the king with an army of 7,000 is at Daventry 35 miles to the north.

On 5th June Fairfax moves north while the king dithers. On 8th June Fairfax's council of war resolves to engage the king's army. On the 9th Parliament gives the Lord General a completely free hand to direct operations. On 10th Cromwell arrives and is appointed lieutenant- general – Fairfax's second in command. From this moment the Parliamentary forces consistently out-manoeuvre the Royalists.

Fairfax catches up with the retreating Royalist forces outside Naseby where the king decides to turn and fight.

Naseby is the decisive battle of the first Civil war and the king is comprehensively defeated. The New Model Army captured all the king's guns and an enormous amount of arms and ammunition. Most importantly the king's coach is taken containing his correspondence which was published under the title of "*the king's cabinet opened*". This seemed to confirm that he had been "treating with papists" as his enemies had always suspected.

After Naseby Royalist resistance begins to crumble. Fairfax with the New Model Army march south.

Heading for Wanborough he decides to reduce Highworth on the way. The church is fortified and protected by trenches but after a brief exchange when a cannonball blasted a hole in the wall above the door, the garrison surrenders.

Meanwhile Faringdon continues to be an irritant to the Parliamentary forces at Abingdon and Newbury.

So in April 1646 Fairfax sets about tightening the ring round Oxford. He orders Radcot House to be stormed. A grenade drops through the roof into the cellar and bursts all the beer barrels. Faced with this disaster the garrison surrenders but Faringdon still holds out.

Hostilities drag on until June when Oxford finally surrenders. Article 24 of the Articles of Surrender states "...*that the garrison of Faringdon shall be rendered to His Excellency Sir Thomas Fairfax ...accordingly as Oxford*".

The Siege

Faringdon has the distinction of being one of the last Royalist towns to hold out against the relentless onslaught of the Parliamentary forces.

There seem to be many conflicting accounts of the famous siege but the most convincing one by C. H. Hartman, who is most condescending about the town, maintains that the colourful accounts in "the Civil War at Faringdon" by Christopher Hayhurst-France appear to be conjecture.

It is unlikely that the Sir Robert Pye commanding the Parliamentary forces would want to bombard his own house.

Even the widely held belief that Sir Marmaduke Rawdon, the famous defender of Basing House commanded the garrison is rubbished. The fact that he is buried in the church is rejected. And as for a burial under fire during the siege ..!

Posemen?

Equally unlikely is the story that the House was defended by Rawdon's Regiment of women.

Intriguingly the muster roles for the Regiment still exist and they show that 48% of the combat strength was men with 10% women in support and 42% "Posemen". A Poseman was a woman dressed as a soldier and they were normally used as snipers.

The Posemen in Rawdon's regiment were armed with long 28 bore muskets which were accurate to about 120 yards, compared with the men's 10 bore muskets which fired a heavier ball, but were only accurately to about 40 yards. Rawdon appreciated from his experience at Basing House that for siege defence he needed long range snipers to defend the ramparts so recruited a large number of female Posemen.

So was Faringdon was defended by a force made up of 52% women - the deadly majority who, to quote "saw off Cromwell with heavy casualties".

Well, if not, how to explain the musket ball on display in All Saints' Church which is of 28 bore calibre and, if so, could it have been fired by a female Poseman?

The church steeple

The story that the defenders mined the steeple is equally scorned. Certainly it was brought down by cannon fire at sometime during the conflict and the tower was substantially damaged. But it certainly wasn't Cromwell as he had no artillery. It is possible that it was brought down by fire from Faringdon House because it is known that when they surrendered they had a number of artillery pieces.

The town

Certainly most of Faringdon's medieval timber buildings went up in smoke and only the stone built tenements survived.

Reports that the piteously poor inhabitants – homeless and hungry - were

forced to depend on the charity of the surrounding country may have been exaggerated. A traveller later during the Restoration, Thomas Baskerville, reported that the town had been pretty well rebuilt – the Crown being the best Inn in the town.

What is known is that In the Lords' Journals for September 2, 1648, over two years after the capitulation, there is the draft of an order for a collection to be made for the assistance of the inhabitants of Faringdon and Westbrook
"*in repairing the ruin caused to their habitat ions, goods, and church, which were demolished and burnt by the enemy's garrison; the damage has been assessed by able and substantial workmen at £56,976.4s. Od*."

Sir Robert Pye

Sir Robert Pye inherited Faringdon House on his father's death and was elected a member of the Convention Parliament that voted to bring back the monarchy but after the Restoration he took no further part in politics.

He and Lady Pye lived happily together "*in great reputation*" for the next 40 years and both died in 1701. On his tomb is inscribed "... *an esteemed fine gentleman by all who knew him*".

In 2008 the Sealed Knot re-enacted the siege in the town to great excitement but I'm not sure what narrative they followed!

Epilogue

So ends the story of Faringdon at war but at nearby Burford a drama took place that is commemorated every year on the 17th May.

In May 1649 two regiments infected with Leveller sentiments mutinied rather than serve in Ireland. Cromwell and Fairfax caught up with them at Burford, surrounded them and quickly forced them to surrender.

The rebellious troopers were confined in Burford church and the three ringleaders, Cornet Thompson, Corporal Perkins and Private Church were taken out, stood up against the wall and shot. Thus they became among the very first martyrs to the Leveller cause of democracy, equality and religious freedom.

John Wildman, the Leveller leader and notorious plotter is buried in St Andrew's Church Shrivenham but that, as they say, is another story.... ....

Wildman Memorial
in Shrivenham Church