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## THE SIEGE OF COLCHESTER.

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The authorities for the history of the memorable Siege of Colchester, in the summer of 1648, are not, on the whole, so complete as those for some of the other great events during the Parliamentary War. The only eyewitness who has told the story in anything like satisfactory detail is Matthew Carter, the Quarter-Master-General of the insurgent forces, under the command of the Earl of Norwich. He, of course, gives an account of the siege from the point of view of his own side. The people of Colchester have a very different story to tell, which is condensed into the curious tract entitled "Colchester's Teares." This tract, with its quaint title, was re-printed in 1843 by Mr. W. Wire, of this town. Three tracts, describing separate events in the siege, will be found among the King's Pamphlets in the British Museum. The particulars of the siege, from the Parliamentary point of view, may be gathered from the pages of Rushworth, and some additional facts of importance from the Tanner MSS., from letters in the Fairfax Correspondence, and from Lord Fairfax's own short memorial. The real searcher after truth will confine himself to these contemporaneous sources of information. I fear that it is too frequently the case that Goldsmith or Hume are the authorities of those who form and express opinions on events of the Civil War. If we desire to do justice to both sides—to the besiegers as well as to the besieged—we must banish from our minds all political bias; the two sides must be to us, not Royalists and Roundheads, but the forces of Lord

Norwich and Lord Fairfax, both ruled by the practices of civilized warfare—both enjoying the privileges, and subject to the recognised penalties, of martial law.

In order to understand the posture of affairs when the siege commenced, it will be well to cast a glance at events which immediately preceded it. Essex had, with the other associated counties, escaped almost entirely from the misery of being the theatre of war. The mass of the people and many of the chief men, such as Sir Thomas Honeywood, Sir Harbottle Grimston, and others, had taken the side of the Parliament, and the King's party had never succeeded in making any head in the county. The citizens of Colchester were staunch Parliament men, and made short work of the Royalist leanings of the Lucas family, which had hitherto possessed considerable influence in the town. In 1644 the zealous townsmen seized upon Lord Lucas, destroyed his house on St. John's Green, and even broke open the family vault. This family of Lucas had been much connected with Colchester for nearly a century. John Lucas, the Town Clerk, bought the site of St. John's Abbey after the dissolution, and his son, Sir Thomas Lucas, was Recorder of Colchester in 1575. The grandson of John Lucas, also Sir Thomas, had four children, the eldest born before marriage. The rest were, John, created Baron Lucas by Charles I in 1644, whose heiress, Mary, married the Earl of Kent, and is the ancestress of the present Countess Cowper and Baroness Lucas; Sir Charles Lucas, whose name is indissolubly connected with the siege of Colchester; and Margaret, the literary and eccentric Duchess of Newcastle. With the exception of the Lucas family and a few others, Colchester and the county generally were for the Parliament; and, before the insurrection broke out in Kent, in the spring of 1641, it was supposed that the arbitrament of battle had been decided, and that peace had been restored to the country. The question had been fully fought out and settled.

In calling the men who disturbed this settlement, and renewed the disturbances, *insurgents*, I use the word in no disparaging sense. I simply wish to express a fact, and to make a clear distinction between them and the belligerents of the war that had come to an end. This

was a new insurrection. The outbreak in Kent was promptly suppressed by Lord Fairfax, but there were plots in other parts of the country, and the time of Colchester's suffering had arrived. Hitherto the war clouds had kept clear of Essex, but now, at the last moment, they burst suddenly and fiercely over its chief city. There was little warning. It was not until the middle of May, 1648, that the tumults broke out in Kent, and in the beginning of June the Earl of Norwich, beaten and baffled, fled across the Thames and made his way into Essex. At Chelmsford he was joined by Lord Capel, Lord Loughborough, Sir Charles Lucas, Sir George Lisle, and Col. Farre, with reinforcements, collected in Hertfordshire and Essex; and here ten Parliamentary Commissioners were seized as hostages. On the 10th of June, 1648, Lord Norwich marched from Chelmsford at the head of 4,000 men. This was on a Saturday. Late in the afternoon of the following Monday they approached this city by the Lexden road, and found the gate closed, and a body of armed citizens drawn up across the road. Sir Charles Lucas, with the advanced guard, galloped forward, followed by the main body, forced his way through the obstructing citizens, killed one of them, and then the gates were thrown open. The intention of the insurgent leaders was only to remain at Colchester a day or two, and then to march into the Midland Counties, where they hoped to receive reinforcements. But the rapid approach of Fairfax made them alter their plans. They conceived it would be impossible to continue their march with so active an enemy in their rear, and resolved to stand a siege. This decision was fatal to their cause. All the leaders of the insurrection were thus entrapped, and the prolongation of the siege only added to the sufferings of the people, without in any way rendering the prospects of the insurgent leaders more hopeful. In a military point of view, the decision to await the result of a siege was a gross blunder. A retreat to the Midland Counties, even if ending in a hurried flight, would have been wiser.

George Goring, the old Earl of Norwich, was a man of wit, and was excellent company. But he was no general; had been abroad with the Queen during the greater part

of the civil war, and had little military experience. Nor were his officers able to supply the deficiencies of their chief. Capel was an honourable and chivalrous nobleman, who had joined the insurrection at the urgent request of the King. He had seen some service in the West Country; and Lord Loughborough headed a regiment of "blue coats" at Naseby. But neither had ever shown any capacity for command. Sir Charles Lucas had served for a short time in the Low Countries, and was at the sack of Breda. "Though brave and a gallant man to follow in battle, he was at all other times of a nature not to be lived with, rough and proud, and of an ill understanding. He was a mere soldier, unfit for any society but that of the guard room." At least so says Clarendon, and we gather much the same account from his sister. Yet as a soldier he had always failed. Beaten and taken prisoner at Marston Moor, he made a weak and unintelligent defence of Berkeley Castle; and was again beaten and taken prisoner at Stow-in-the-Wold, on the 23rd of March, 1646. He then gave his parole of honour never again to take arms against the Parliament until regularly exchanged. Sir George Lisle, judging from his antecedents, was the best officer in Colchester. He was knighted for his gallantry at Newbury, and led a brigade at Naseby with some ability, where he was wounded, being afterwards taken prisoner at Leicester. Clarendon says of him that to his fierceness and courage he added the softest and most gentle nature imaginable. Subsequently he was Governor of Farringdon, and surrendered that town on the same terms as Oxford, on June 24th, 1646, the officers undertaking never again to serve against the Parliament.

With reference to the events after the surrender of Colchester, it must be borne in mind that Sir Chas. Lucas and Sir George Lisle had given their words of honour, the former at Stow-in-the-Wold on the 23rd of March, and the latter at Farringdon on the 24th of June, 1646, not again to take up arms against the Parliament. They had deliberately broken faith, and received the punishment which, by the laws of civilized warfare, now, as then, was due to such an offence. Moreover they were acting in this way, with their eyes open to the consequences. Early in June, when Lord Fairfax was at Canterbury,

he distinctly excepted men who had broken their parole of honour from any amnesty. Later in the same month he directly warned Lucas, by letter, that he had forfeited his honour, being a prisoner on parole, and, therefore, was not capable of trust in martial affairs. Lucas could not deny the fact. The excuse he made was, that he had compounded for his estates *since* he gave his parole. But this act was merely to enable him, by payment of a fine, to retain his possessions, on condition that he lived peaceably under the new order of things. It was an agreement with the civil power, and in no way released him from his military obligations.

Another leader was Colonel Farre, who was a deserter from the Parliamentary army. The other leading officers of insurgents were Bernardo Guasconi, a foreign adventurer; Sir William Compton with the remains of the Kentish fugitives; and Colonels Slingsly, Culpepper, Tilly, Tuke, and Bard. Matthew Carter was the quartermaster-general and historian of the siege. The garrison, thus assembled, numbered 3,400 foot and 600 cavalry, in all, 4,000 fighting men. The ten Parliamentary Commissioners captured at Chelmsford were retained as prisoners, to be made use of as occasion might suggest.

At the outset, Lord Norwich had the advantage of a large superiority in numbers, and a very strong position. Standing on the summit and side of a steep hill, looking to the north and east, with the river Colne making a circuit round its northern and eastern side, Colchester is a place of considerable natural strength. The walls were then complete, forming a parallelogram which enclosed 118 acres. They were, and what remains of them are, seven to eight feet thick, of large flints imbedded in lime, with several courses of Roman bricks, the whole having become, in the course of centuries, one solid mass. In the centre of the western wall there was, and still is, a semi-circular bastion, called the *balkon*; in which was the principal inn of Colchester in those days, with the sign of the "King's Head." The north wall, running along the base of the hill, and facing the Colne, was of the same massive character; and the eastern wall had small semi-circular flanking towers, intended for musketeer or for light ordnance. The south wall also appears, from the

plan in Cromwell's "History of Colchester," to have had flanking towers. A ditch was carried along the swampy meadows at the foot of the north wall, and up the western hill side.

There were four gates and three posterns in the walls of Colchester. Near the western corner of the south wall, at the end of Head street, was the *Head Gate*, whence a lane turning sharp to the west, called Crouch street, leads to the London road over Lexden common. In about the centre of the south wall was the *Scherde Gate Postern*, whence a lane led to St. John's Gate House. Near the east end of the south wall was *St. Botolph's Gate*, which opened on to Magdalen street, and the road to the Hythe. In the centre of the east wall, at the end of High street, was *East Gate*, whence the road, crossing the river by a bridge, led to Ipswich. In the north wall were the *North Gate* at the foot of the steep North Hill, and the *Rye Gate Postern*, leading to a ford over the Colne, near a water mill called King's or Middle Mill. There was also a postern in the west wall, opening on St. Mary's Churchyard. On the highest part of the town, overhanging the west wall, is the Church of St. Mary's *ad muros*, with a strong square tower of the same materials as the town walls themselves, having massive buttresses at its angles. The old castle is some distance within the walls, and therefore did not come within the plan of the defences.

The defenders were strong enough to occupy the extensive ruins of the Benedictine Abbey of St. John's, outside the Scherde Gate Postern, and the ruined house of Lord Lucas. They also held the Hythe, the port of Colchester, and fortified St. Leonard's Church there. They had time to scour the surrounding country, and bring in stores of provisions; besides securing large supplies at the Hythe. But Fairfax was not a man to let the grass grow under his feet. He was close at their heels. On Sunday, the 11th of June, the day after they left Chelmsford, he crossed the Thames at Gravesend, and advanced to Brentwood. Leaving the main body to follow, he then galloped across the county to Coggeshall with an escort of ten men, where he found Sir Thomas Honynwood at the head of 2000 Essex Volunteers. He was reinforced by Colonel Whalley's regiment, and on the 13th, only a day after the

arrival of Lord Norwich in Colchester, Lord Fairfax marched across Lexden Common, and summoned the besieged to surrender.

A large body of Suffolk Volunteers had occupied Neyland bridge, and the other passes over the river Stour, to oppose any attempt of the besieged to escape northwards. For the siege Lord Fairfax eventually had four troops of horse, under Major Desborough, six troops under Colonel Whalley, five troops under Major Coleman, three troops under Commissary General Ireton, and two troops of dragoons, in all about 1,200 cavalry. His foot consisted of a complete regiment of ten companies, commanded by Colonel Barkstead, seven companies under Colonel Needham, some companies of Ingoldsby's regiment, and half a regiment led by Admiral Rainsborough. On the 18th, Colonel Eure arrived from Chepstow with four companies, This brought up the number of regular infantry to nearly 3,000 men, besides the Essex and Suffolk Volunteers.

Thus commenced the siege of Colchester, which lasted from the 13th of June to the 28th of August, an interval of 75 days. It may conveniently be divided into three periods:—

1st, the period during which Fairfax was taking up his positions from June 13th, when he summoned the town, to July 6th, when the besieged made their great sortie by the East Gate.

2nd, from July 6th to July 20th, when all the outposts of the besieged were driven in.

3rd, the period of the close blockade, from July 20th to August 28th.

#### *1st Period. Taking up Positions.*

##### *June 13th to July 10th.*

On the 13th of June, after Lord Norwich had refused to surrender, the advanced brigade consisting of the regiments of Needham and Barkstead, with Whalley's horse, and some Essex Volunteers, assaulted the Head Gate with great fury. The defenders, gallantly led by Colonel Farre, the deserter, came down Crouch Street to defend the approaches, and there was a fierce hand-to-hand fight which lasted several hours. The besieged had occupied ground called *Sholand* and *Boroughfield*, but at last they

were driven back, and retreated within the Scherde Gate Postern, and the Head Gate, closely followed by Barkstead's men. There was a desperate struggle to close the Head Gate, Lord Capel bravely leading on his men on foot, pike in hand, and he fastened the gate for the moment with his own cane. It was late at night before the action was over, when several hundred slain were left under the walls. Among those who fell was that gallant Yorkshireman, Colonel Needham, the companion of Fairfax at Selby and Marston Moor, and in many a hard fought skirmish beyond Trent.

After a careful reconnoissance, and taking into consideration the formidable defences and the great numerical strength of the besieged, Lord Fairfax resolved to take the place by a regular siege. He, therefore, fixed his head-quarters at Lexden, and commenced the besieging works by throwing up an earthwork in the Sholand, facing St. Mary's Church, which was named Essex Fort. His plan was first to open ground along the west side of the town, from Essex Fort to the River Colne near the North Bridge, and then to occupy points along the left bank of the River, and on the south side of the town, finally closing in on all sides. After completing Essex Fort, Lord Fairfax steadily continued his siege operations, breaking fresh ground every night, and running his trenches from one small sconce or redoubt to another, until he had completely closed up all approaches to the town on the west side, between the Lexden Road and the river.

The besieged certainly showed great want of enterprise in not coming out and giving battle to the besiegers before the arrival of Colonel Eure and other reinforcements. After the General had been ten days before the town, the Colony of Flemish *bay* and *say* makers, which had been established at Colchester in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, petitioned to have free trade with London during the siege. Fairfax, always anxious to mitigate the evils of war, considerably agreed to allow these industrious cloth workers to hold a market on Lexden Heath, with freedom to sell or take their goods back, as the case might be.

On the 20th June the works on the west side were

completed, and operations were commenced against the north and south walls. Colonel Eure crossed the Colne near a hamlet called *The Shepen*, and threw up a work in front of the North Bridge, called *Fort Ingoldsby*. *Fort Rainsborough* was next thrown up, opposite the ford at Middle Mill. The besiegers thus gained a footing on the left bank of the river, where they were joined by 2,500 Suffolk Volunteers, who encamped on Mile End Heath. At the same time Colonel Barkstead was ordered to throw up a redoubt across the road to Maldon, facing the Head Gate; and here the defenders made desperate attempts to hinder the works. On the 26th they sallied out in force, but were driven back beyond their own guard house, where the hour glass for setting their watches was captured, and carried off in triumph. By the end of the month Lord Fairfax was strong enough to extend his operations and occupy the chief positions on the left bank of the Colne; and on the 1st of July Colonel Whalley took Greenstead Church, opposite the Hythe, and erected a battery in the churchyard. The Suffolk volunteers also seized a water mill at East Bridge.

*2nd Period. Driving in of the Outposts.  
July 6th to July 20th.*

Lord Norwich now found himself nearly surrounded, and, in consultation with his officers, a great sally was resolved upon from the East Gate. Accordingly, on the 6th of July, Sir George Lisle and Sir Charles Lucas, with 200 foot and 500 horse, marched out of the East Gate and down the long hill to the bridge. The Suffolk men fired upon them from behind a breastwork at the bridge head as they advanced, but their position was carried by a rush, and Lucas led his men across the river, some running over the bridge, and others wading through the water. Flushed with success, instead of securing the important ground they had gained, they then charged up the hill towards the windmills, where they were met by Whalley's horse, and thrown into confusion. They fled back into the town, losing many killed and wounded, and the position at East Bridge was recovered by the besiegers. On the 14th of July some Suffolk Volunteers took the Hythe with little

opposition, and made prisoners of the garrison, consisting of 80 Kentish fugitives.

On the 15th of July, Lucas and Lisle, knowing that the consequences of having broken their parole would be serious to them, made an attempt to escape in the night. They forded the river at Middle Mill, intending to make for Neyland Bridge, and so get away into Suffolk, but their guides failed them, and they were obliged to go back into the town by the Rye Gate Postern. On the 18th they made another attempt to get away, and repeated the experiment on several succeeding nights, until the discontent of their own followers was aroused.

After the occupation of the Hythe and the East Bridge the General determined to complete the leaguer by driving the besieged out of St. John's Gate, and their other advanced posts beyond the south wall. The first step was to silence a *saker*, which was planted on a platform in the frame of the bells in St. Mary's Tower, and which caused considerable annoyance by enfilading the trenches near Barkstead's fort. Two *demi-culverins* were brought to bear on the Tower, and, after about 60 rounds, one side was breached. Lord Fairfax then opened fire on the position occupied by the besieged among the ruins of St. John's, and having opened a breach with two *culverins*, he led Barkstead's regiment to the assault, and drove the defenders into the old Gate House. Here they made an obstinate stand, and repulsed several assaults. At last, eight guns were brought into position, under cover of which a storming party advanced, placed ladders and effected an entrance. There was then a sharp hand-to-hand fight, which ended in the retreat of the surviving defenders into the town through the Scherde Gate Postern. The besieged were now closely confined within the walls of the town.

### *3rd Period. The Close Blockade.*

*July 20th to August 28th.*

We now come to the period of the close blockade. After the water mills on the river were captured, the besieged set to work with horse and hand mills, and constructed a rude wind-mill on the top of the Castle, which was, however, knocked over by a shot from Rainsborough's Fort. Scarcity now began to be felt, and on the 20th of July

the garrison commenced the eating of horse flesh. The trenches were advanced close up to the south wall, and a redoubt was thrown up in Berry Fields, between Magdalen street and the East Hill, when a determined sally of the besieged from St. Botolph's Gate was repulsed. On this occasion Lord Fairfax, who was always somewhat too reckless in exposing his person in action, had a very narrow escape. He now removed head-quarters from Lexden to the Hythe. As August set in, the sufferings of the besieged became very severe. They had nothing but horse flesh, and cats and dogs. The wretched townspeople were worse off than the soldiers, and the cruel treatment they were exposed to from Sir Charles Lucas and his followers is recorded by the citizens in their tract, entitled "Colchester's Teares." Relief was now absolutely impossible, and the prolongation of the misery of these people was utterly indefensible conduct, from a military point of view, on the part of the leaders of the defence. On the 11th of August the stores were nearly empty, the magazine would not maintain two hours' fight, and the clamours of the townspeople for a surrender began to be echoed by the soldiers. Negotiations were attempted, but Lord Fairfax steadily adhered to his original terms—quarter for the soldiers and subordinate officers, but the leaders must surrender at discretion. Lucas, Lisle, and other officers, then determined to make another attempt at escape, intending to break through on the night of the 25th of August and leave the men to shift for themselves. But the soldiers became mutinous when they discovered the intention of the officers to desert, and agreed to kill them if they attempted to stir. Then the clamour for a surrender increased, and the men swore that if conditions were not agreed to, they would make them for themselves.

At last Commissioners were sent out to accept such conditions as Lord Fairfax would offer. Before he would treat, he insisted upon the liberation of the unfortunate Parliamentary Commissioners. Articles were then agreed to and signed at the Hythe on the 27th of August, at about ten o'clock at night. All horses, with saddles and bridles, were to be collected at St. Mary's Church and delivered over at 9 a.m. All arms and colours were to be deposited in St. James's Church. All soldiers and officers under

the rank of captain were to have fair quarter, surrendering in *Friar's Yard*, by the East Gate, at 10 a.m. All superior officers were to assemble at the King's Head Inn by 11 a.m., and surrender to mercy. The total number that surrendered was 3,471, of whom 3,067 were common soldiers, 324 subordinate officers, 65 servants, and 75 superior officers. In reply to enquiries it was clearly explained in writing, that *fair quarter* ensured to the soldiers their lives, clothing, and food while prisoners; and that *surrendering to mercy* signified surrender without assurance of quarter, the general being free to put some to the sword at once and to leave others to be dealt with by Parliament. The town was to have paid £14,000, but Lord Fairfax remitted £4,000, and £5,000 was levied on Royalists throughout Essex, so that Colchester got off with £5,000, of which £2,000 was given to the Essex volunteers who had left their homes at great inconvenience, and £1,000 to the poor of the town. The rest (£2,000) was the prize money of the besiegers. At about two in the afternoon of the 28th of August, Lord Fairfax entered the town of Colchester, and rode round it. He then returned to his quarters at the Hythe, and a court-martial assembled at the Moot Hall to try Sir Charles Lucas, Sir George Lisle, Colonel Farre, and the Italian Guasconi—the two first for having broken their parole of honour, Farre as a deserter, and the foreigner for piracy. Farre managed to escape, and Guasconi was pardoned. Lucas and Lisle were found guilty, the facts being notorious and incontestable, and they were condemned to be shot. They were executed on the green on the north side of the castle at about seven p.m. Their bodies were interred under the north aisle of St. Giles's church. The reasons which induced Lord Fairfax to confirm the sentence of the court-martial are stated in an official despatch dated from the Hythe on the 29th of August. They are: 1st, "the satisfaction of military justice;" and 2nd, "avenge for the innocent blood they have caused to be spilt, and the trouble they have brought upon the town, this country, and the kingdom."

Commiseration may be felt for the fate of these brave soldiers. Sir George Lisle appears to have been a gallant and amiable officer: but there is nothing either to respect

or admire in what is recorded of Sir Charles Lucas. Their private characters are, however, quite beside the question. An officer who accepts his freedom on parole, on condition that he does not serve again, and who is afterwards taken in arms, deserves death. This is the military law of all civilised nations, as much in the 19th as in the 17th century. It is a law which is observed, and which must be observed, for without it all honourable intercourse between hostile forces would be impossible. Lord Fairfax could not have indulged in any desire he doubtless felt to show mercy; for an example had become absolutely necessary, owing to other Royalist officers having broken their paroles, among them so well-known a veteran as Sir Thomas Glemham. It is high time to protest against the injustice of accusing Lord Fairfax of cruelty, or even of undue harshness in sanctioning these executions. He always proved himself, on scores of similar occasions, to be the most generous and lenient of victors, and he undoubtedly felt the confirmation of the sentence of the court-martial to be a most painful, though a most necessary, duty. It is no light matter that, in order to furbish up the sullied reputations of mere guard-room soldiers, an accusation of cruelty should be brought against a great and good man, whose only thought through life was to do his duty to his country without one thought for himself. The accusation is utterly untenable, and historical truth demands that it should cease to be repeated. After the executions, the other officers were assured of fair quarter as prisoners of war. Lords Norwich, Capel, and Loughborough were sent to Windsor Castle, the latter escaping on the road, and reaching Holland in safety. In February, 1649, the two Lords were tried for their lives. The casting vote of the Speaker saved the old Earl of Norwich, but Capel was condemned by a majority of three in the House of Commons. His execution was cruel and unnecessary, and in my opinion, that majority was guilty of a judicial murder.

As soon as the prisoners had been dismissed, a grand review of the besieging army was held on the 29th of August. Unluckily it was a very rainy day, but the soldiers shook hands with each other, salutes were fired, and the Volunteers returned to their homes. Lord Fairfax

then devoted some days to his favourite pursuit—archæology, carefully examining the Roman remains here and in this neighbourhood. Eventually, with his troops, he marched north from Colchester, arriving at Ipswich on the 7th of September.

Thus ended this famous siege, and Colchester, bleeding at every pore, ruined, impoverished, and half destroyed, was left to recover gradually, and with the sure aid of time. But it was many years before the old city was restored to the prosperity it enjoyed before the fiery Lucas broke through the weak line of opposing citizens and entered the Head Gate. The calamity came upon her suddenly, and almost by accident. The war was over, and a month before that fateful 12th of June, or even a week before, the horrors of a siege seemed almost an impossible contingency. When they did come the people of Colchester seem to have borne the extremities of suffering as became brave English men and women. Their descendants may look back on the conduct of the inhabitants of Colchester, ever staunchly faithful to the cause of the Parliament, with feelings of pride; and the memorable siege will for ever give a special historical interest to the old city. The general outlines are but little altered. Nearly every spot mentioned by the narrators of the events of the siege can easily be identified and in many instances even the appearance of the localities is little altered. So that a detailed examination of the positions of the besieged and of the lines occupied by the besiegers will long continue to be a very interesting, as well as a profitable, historical study.