

THE BITTERLEY HOARD – PART FIVE – SHROPSHIRE IN THE CIVIL WAR

June 29, 2012 Peter Reavill Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2012, Finds, Historical Archaeology, Military, Periods, Post Medieval Apley Castle, Bitterley, Brampton Bryan, Brampton Bryan Castle, Bristol, Bristol garrison, careful administrator, Cavalier colonel, Charles, Cheshire, Colonel, deputy, England, English Civil War, famous general, First English Civil War, food, garrison of Bristol, General, Hereford, Hopton Castle, Ireland, John Byron, jonathon worton, king, King's Shropshire Light Infantry, London, Ludlow, Major, March Hopton Castle, Marshall Prospect, Mytton, New Year's Day, officer, Oxford, Parliamentarian, Parliamentarian garrison, Peter Reavill, Prince, Relief of Newark, Richard Herbert, Roundhead garrison, Roundheads, Royal army, Royalist garrison, Royalist officer, Royalists' headquarters, Rupert, Rupert's deputy, Shropshire, Shropshire Archives/ Shropshire Council, Sir William Waller's Parliamentarian army, Thomas Mytton, University of Chester, Wellington, Welsh regiment, Wem, Will Legg, William Waller



This section has been written by Jonathon Worton who is a studying for a PhD student at the University of Chester looking at the English Civil War in Shropshire.

Shropshire at War: July 1643 – March 1644



Speeds Map of Shropshire – Copyright and permission of Shropshire Archives/ Shropshire Council

Between July 1643 and March 1644, during the First English Civil War, the military situation in Shropshire changed radically as the war became increasingly hard-fought on Shropshire soil.

Since the beginning of the conflict between King Charles I and his political opponents, the king's supporters in Shropshire had been active and by September had effectively neutralised parliament's following in the county. On 20 September King Charles, his court and elements of his army entered Shrewsbury. Considerably reinforced, the Royal army marched from the county in mid-October – to fight the first major battle of the Civil Wars at Edgehill in Warwickshire on the 23rd – leaving Shropshire under Royalist control.

When in March 1643 the Royalist general Lord Capel took command in Shropshire, there were still no Parliamentary forces or garrisons in the county. Whilst skirmishing and raids by both sides took place along the Cheshire border – with fierce fighting occurring at Whitchurch and Market Drayton – most of Shropshire was at relative peace. The county was, however, being increasingly exploited to provide money, resources and recruits for the Royalist war effort. In May, Sir William Waller's Parliamentary army captured Hereford, and Shropshire's Royalists feared a Roundhead thrust into the south of the county. Whilst the London press reported the fall of Royalist Ludlow, in reality Waller's expeditionary force soon withdrew back into Gloucestershire without having ventured onto Shropshire soil.

Royalist control in Shropshire was seriously threatened for the first time in September 1643, when a group of local Parliamentary activists who had been driven into exile in 1642 returned to the county with military support from Cheshire and London. This county committee established a garrison at Wem and fortified the minor market town with earthworks and artillery. The threat to the Royalists' headquarters at Shrewsbury some eight miles to the south was clear, and on 17-18 October Capel's army repeatedly attacked Wem. Although greatly outnumbered, the Roundheads beat off the Cavaliers, who withdrew to Shrewsbury having suffered heavy casualties. Defeated in battle, Capel had also become unpopular with Shropshire's populace – Royalists and neutrals alike – for whom wartime taxation, conscription and other military demands had become an unacceptable burden; after the defeat at Wem, one London news book (the equivalent of the modern newspaper) reported that Capel feared to leave Shrewsbury in case the townsmen barred the gates behind him!



Panorama View of Shrewsbury 1630 – 1650 – Copyright and permission Shropshire Museums

Whilst the situation of the Parliamentarians at Wem remained precarious – they complained they were isolated, short of arms and ammunition and had few local recruits – psychologically they held the upper hand. Lord Capel was recalled to the king's headquarters at Oxford in December 1643, and there is evidence that without effective local leadership, Royalist support, morale and administration in Shropshire began to crumble. One Cavalier colonel described how the defences of Shrewsbury were in 'great neglect'. By January 1644, the Parliamentarians were strongly fortified at Wem and had established lesser garrisons in north Shropshire. On the 12th, led by Colonel Mytton, they inflicted a significant defeat on the Royalists at Ellesmere, capturing a munitions convoy, routing the escorting cavalry regiments and capturing a number of high-ranking Cavaliers. To the south of the county, just over the Herefordshire border, was the small Parliamentary garrison at Brampton Bryan Castle. Having successfully withstood a siege the previous summer, in the New Year the Roundheads at Brampton Bryan raided and plundered

Royalist territory and succeeded in establishing an outpost in southwest Shropshire at Hopton Castle.

The Royalist high command at Oxford now turned to their most famous general, King Charles's half-German soldier-nephew Prince Rupert, to restore the military situation in Shropshire. The prince is largely remembered as the most dashing of Cavaliers, famous for his good looks and hell for leather cavalry charges. In reality, Rupert was sober in his habits and suffered fools not at all; a careful administrator as well as a skilled tactician, Rupert was a professional soldier and a charismatic leader who attracted a following of like-minded energetic and ruthless young officers. Appointed by King Charles in January to the regional command that included Shropshire, Prince Rupert arrived in Shrewsbury on 19 February leading at least 700 experienced cavalymen. Other Royalist reinforcements, from as far afield as Bristol and Ireland, were not far behind. The arrival of the charismatic prince no doubt heartened loyalists and swayed others to the Royalist cause. At Wem, Colonel Mytton feared the power of the prince's persona, as much as his reinforcements, 'in regard of the reputation of the man, whose name shouts loud in the ears of the country people'.

The influence of the prince was soon felt, with a series of Royalist successes. On 23 February he despatched one of his protégés, Major Will Legg, with a task force of cavalry and infantry to seize supplies of food and fodder from the countryside around Wem, thereby denying it to the Parliamentarians. On 4 March a Roundhead supply convoy was captured near Tong, and the next day Rupert led a raid on Market Drayton, taking by surprise and routing a Roundhead cavalry force encamped there, including a regiment from Yorkshire. Around 18 March the Parliamentarians had established a garrison at Apley Castle near Wellington, but on the 24th a Royalist force, including a Welsh regiment, occupied the town and captured the castle. The following day at Longford, near Lilleshall, 600 Parliamentarians under Mytton were defeated by a similar number of Royalists. With their last mobile force defeated, the Parliamentarians were pinned down in their garrisons. On 24 March Hopton Castle was surrendered after a hard-fought siege, and the Roundhead garrison massacred. In co-operation with Royalists from Cheshire led by Rupert's deputy, Lord John Byron, the prince's forces took the minor enemy garrisons in north Shropshire; and by 30 March at Ellesmere, 600 Royalist soldiers from Shrewsbury had joined forces with Byron's men to threaten Wem. The same day another Royalist officer wrote from Shrewsbury, with obvious enthusiasm, that 'we shall not be long troubled by our neighbours of Wem'.

By the end of March 1644, Royalist supremacy in Shropshire had been largely restored, and the Parliamentarians were contained in their garrisons at Wem, Tong and Longford, and over the Herefordshire border at Brampton Bryan. These remaining outposts soon came under Royalist

pressure, and by the end of April, Wem remained once again as parliament's sole stronghold in Shropshire.



*Marshall Prospect of Shrewsbury – a view of the town in the restoration?
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Reflections on the Bitterley Hoard – from a County perspective

From the above, it is difficult to attribute the deposition of the Bitterley hoard to a specific military event during this period. Whilst the Parliamentary garrison at Brampton Bryan was stubborn and determined, it lacked the manpower and resources to range widely into south Shropshire, and would have been checked by the Royalist garrison at Ludlow. For this period of the Civil War in the county most of the fighting occurred in the northern half. Thus, with the exception of the perceived influence of the Parliamentary garrison at Brampton Bryan – and that of the lesser, short-lived outpost at Hopton Castle – and the ‘scare’ engendered by the brief Parliamentary occupation of Hereford in May 1643, for much of the period July 1643 to March 1644 south Shropshire must be considered to have been relatively safe for Royalist supporters, with the direct threat of Parliamentary military action fairly minimal – although of course it is easy to state this with the hindsight of history!

There may have been Royalist soldiers from Shropshire who had served in the garrison of Bristol since its capture in July 1643, and later returned to serve in the county. A locally recruited regiment – Colonel Richard Herbert's – had fought at the capture of Bristol, and may have been part of the garrison for a while. After fighting at Newbury in September, it returned to Shropshire and was, at least in part, in garrison at Ludlow from October. Prince Rupert's own regiment of foot had been part of the Bristol garrison, and marched from there to Shropshire when the prince assumed command at Shrewsbury. Rupert's ‘Bluecoats’ may have been in action at Hopton Castle, but were more likely at Brampton Bryan. An officer of the regiment who having been

quartered at Bitterley and had hidden his monies there, before leaving to be killed or fatally wounded at Brampton Bryan? – tenuous, perhaps! Bristol was also a source of Royalist war materiel that found its way to Shropshire via Monmouthshire and Herefordshire.

As mentioned, Royalist military taxation became increasingly oppressive. Although in March 1644 Rupert reformed the system set up by Capel, if anything the demands became greater; and doubtless Rupert's tax collectors were not adverse to seizing what they thought was due and considered had not been paid under the formal collection process. Parliamentarian sympathisers would of course have been under closest scrutiny for concealed wealth, but neutrals and Royalist supporters would not have been immune from these demands, the grinding financial severity of which should not be underestimated. Perhaps the Bitterley hoard is a classic case of wartime tax avoidance?

A summary of Jonathon's current research can also be seen here:

<http://finds.org.uk/research/projects/project/id/322>

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