

# PROPERTY DESTRUCTION IN CIVIL-WAR LONDON

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At the outset of the Civil War the only English towns with defences which could resist an effective artillery train were the ports of Berwick, Hull and Portsmouth. Fifty or so others still retained their medieval fortifications, in varying stages of repair, but their tall and thin masonry walls could not withstand a bombardment by cannon and were easily breached. The Civil War led, therefore, to the adaptation and modification of existing town walls and the construction in many places of entirely new defences. The bastion trace had been developed in continental warfare during the sixteenth century and consisted of earthwork fortifications of some complexity, faced with stone or turf, with squat, thick walls, designed to offer the greatest possible resistance to an attacker's guns. Such works covered a greater area of land than did upright masonry walls and their construction necessitated the demolition of buildings at a number of towns. Moreover, it was a common practice to remove property from beyond the defences in order to provide the defenders with an uninterrupted field of fire and to deprive a besieging force of cover—which they could use to approach and perhaps undermine the defences—accommodation and materials. London was subjected to the processes which caused considerable damage in many other towns and cities, for it was a fortified place on the edge of the war zone and was threatened by a hostile army on one occasion.

London was not easy to fortify because of its size. The extensive suburbs, together with Southwark and Westminster, contained a greater population than did the intra-mural area and made it difficult to defend the line of the medieval city wall. It was inconceivable that the bulk of the extra-mural property could be removed in order to make the defences effective, for that would have created the enormous problem of accommodating the homeless. There was, moreover, the danger of alienating those who would be displaced. The city government had only come to power as a result of the elections to the Common Council in December 1641—which had displaced the pro-royalist regime at Guildhall—and may not have felt secure enough to take such a risk. Nevertheless, on 16 November 1642, a few days after the royalists had been repulsed at Turnham Green, Parliament thought it necessary to issue an order 'that all and every the Sheds, on the Outside of the Walls . . . be speedily pulled down and demolished'<sup>1</sup>. This implies that the medieval defences were being renovated. Perhaps it was thought that the city walls and the Tower could be held in the event of a successful royalist attack on the outer parts of the capital, which were then inadequately defended. Alternatively, it may be that the primary purpose was to make the city defensible if there was an insurrection in the suburbs. In the uncertain climate of the time there was, almost inevitably, a fear of 'tumults' and popular unrest<sup>2</sup>. The city was still the wealthiest part of the

metropolis and contained the homes of the majority of the urban elite. The suburbs, in contrast, housed the poorest sections of the community<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps the city wall was seen as a potential *cordon sanitaire*, providing some protection for the inner area. Whatever the purpose of the order, it seems that it was not fully observed, for three months later the corporation issued a similar directive and authorised a committee to supervise the demolition of the sheds and other structures on the outside of the wall<sup>4</sup>.

New fortifications enclosing almost the whole of the urban area were erected in a number of stages from the autumn of 1642 onwards, culminating in the extensive bastion trace, commonly called the 'lines of communication' which was constructed in the following spring. To minimise the risk of buildings being set alight by red-hot shot and explosive mortar grenades—the most potent siege weapons of the period—the lines were placed well out of range of the built-up area<sup>5</sup>. There was, therefore, no need to demolish buildings to clear a site for the works for most of their length. In the north and east, however, the defences cut through the suburbs at Bloomsbury, Shoreditch and Whitechapel and some property there was destroyed. Clear evidence of this comes from the petition of Miles Brand that before the Civil War he had taken a lease of a mill and some adjoining land at Whitechapel, where he had built several houses at his own expense. When the land was used for the building of a fort and other earthworks these houses 'were pulled down'. He estimated his losses at more than £400 and so was outraged when his landlord subsequently sued him for the arrears of rent for the property during the years when the fort had stood upon it<sup>6</sup>. The fort referred to was the 'hornwork near the windmill in White-Chapple road' which Lithgow described as 'a nine-

angled fort, only pallasaded and single ditched'. It was a substantial earthwork construction and its remains were still visible at the end of the eighteenth century<sup>7</sup>. In Bloomsbury, too, the construction of a fort caused the demolition of a number of houses belonging to the Earl of Southampton. The loss was later valued at £1,600<sup>8</sup>. Similar destruction of property may have occurred in the Mile End Road where 'two pettie Forts or Redoubts . . . within an intrenched closure' were constructed<sup>9</sup>. A considerable part of the suburbs on the eastern side of the capital lay outside the defences and they would probably have been burnt or demolished if it had been besieged. The royalists, however, were never able to approach London after 1642 and no resistance was offered to the New Model Army when it marched in five years later. The capital escaped extensive destruction for defensive purposes, although the corporation had taken care to obtain the authority to remove hedges and trees and to demolish houses outside the fortifications if the need arose<sup>10</sup>.

The new defences obviously prevented the owners or tenants of the ground which they occupied from using it and this also applied to buildings which stood close to them. For example, a miller named Robert Key was the tenant of the Mount Mill at Islington which was enclosed by fortifications described as 'a battery and breastwork'. The windmill apparently remained intact, but Key was unable to use it or to hold the markets for meal there twice weekly as he had done before the works were built. Compensation of £200 was promised, but this had apparently not been paid by 1649 when he complained that his landlord was attempting to recover full arrears of rent<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, Miles Brand reported that his mill at Whitechapel had been 'made useless' because of the fort there<sup>12</sup>. The for-

tifications damaged more land than that which they actually covered, for turf was used for layering in their construction to give strength to the banks and for facing them to prevent erosion. A comparatively large amount was required and it was taken from a much greater area than that occupied by the works. The removal of turf ruined the ground as pasture for several years, until there was again a sufficient thickness of sward to allow it to be grazed. The Earl of Salisbury's pastures in Bermondsey, ruined by the erection of a fort and deliberate flooding, could not be leased out again until 1649<sup>13</sup>. The complaints of occupiers such as Elizabeth Wiseman, who held land at Shoreditch, and Thomas Prisell of St George's Fields in Southwark—who was deprived of the use of fifteen of his thirty acres there—were justified, for the loss of income from land affected in this way was likely to have been considerable<sup>14</sup>.

Fire was an ever-present danger in early-modern London. The widespread use of timber in buildings, inadequate flues and chimnies, the practice of trades with a high fire risk in unsuitable premises, the sheer congestion of properties in some districts and the stocks of hay, corn and fuel that were kept within the built-up area all contributed to the hazard. The corporation took steps to reduce the risks by issuing regulations, relating especially to building materials and the provision of fire-fighting equipment<sup>15</sup>. The disaster in 1666 showed how ineffective these had been. Arson was regarded as an additional risk during the Civil War. In the early months of the conflict there was a near hysterical fear of arson, for it was widely thought that royalist agents intended to set fire to the capital and seize control of it in the subsequent confusion. Even minor outbreaks, which were not uncommon, were regarded as having been started delib-

erately. A number of fires in April 1644—when the citizens' fears were running particularly high—were attributed to royalist sympathisers, for example<sup>16</sup>. It may have been such anxieties which prompted the Lord Mayor's 'Seasonable Advice for preventing the Mischief of Fire' dealing with potential hazards and also the dangers of deliberate firing 'by villainy or treason'<sup>17</sup>. Instructions for putting out the flames included recommendations for dealing with wild-fire. This was a highly inflammable mixture of sulphur, saltpetre, camphor and spirits, with resins added as thickeners, commonly used during the Civil War in fire-balls and grenades. It was not easily extinguished with water and the advice given was to use 'milk, urine, sand, earth, or dirt' to smother it<sup>18</sup>. Despite the additional hazards—real or imagined—the city did not experience a major conflagration during the war years. The fires which were recorded were comparatively minor ones, such as that which destroyed three houses in Aldermanbury in May 1643, one which caused damage valued at £2,880 in Christ Church parish in the following April and a more serious blaze which burnt down 'many houses' at Sabs Key, off Thames Street, in October 1646<sup>19</sup>. These were unexceptional fires for the period, however, and were far less destructive than those which caused extensive damage in Oxford—where almost 300 houses were burnt—Beam-inster and Wrexham during the Civil War<sup>20</sup>.

To a certain extent the parliamentary leaders were forced to erect the extensive defences around London by the success of their own propaganda. The public had been made familiar with the conduct of the Thirty Years War through the news-books and corantos of the 1620s and 1630s, which gave prominent coverage to such spectacular events as the sack and burning of Magdeburg by Imperialist

troops<sup>21</sup>. This event had made a profound impression upon the public consciousness of protestant Europe and, as it had occurred only nine years before the outbreak of the Civil War, was still a fairly fresh memory. It was not difficult for the parliamentary pamphleteers of the early 1640s to equate the royalist armies—under Prince Rupert and other senior officers who had served in Germany—with the plundering and burning soldiers familiar from the Thirty Years War and they warned that disasters such as that at Magdeburg could be repeated in England<sup>22</sup>. The construction of the lines of communication was necessary to reassure the volatile London populace that it was being safeguarded from an attack, particularly after the royalist successes in the first winter of the war. In the event, the royalists were unable to approach the capital after November 1642 and so the efficacy of its defences was not put to the test. Because the military threat failed to materialise and there was no major conflagration, little property in London was destroyed during the Civil War. Towns in East Anglia, such as Norwich, Ipswich and Cambridge, that were similarly fortified but not assaulted, also escaped largely unscathed; but York, Newcastle, Bristol and Exeter among the larger cities, and perhaps as many as 140

other towns in England and Wales did suffer considerable physical damage during the conflict<sup>23</sup>.

## NOTES

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5. *Mercurius Aulicus*, 26 March-2 April 1643, 162.
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