

THE CIVIL WAR DESTRUCTION OF BOARSTALL

STEPHEN PORTER

Boarstall is unusual among Deserted Medieval Villages in that a precise date, the end of the first week of June 1645, can be assigned to its destruction. The events that led up to this, and the reasons for it, are here described for the first time.

The garrison system was a characteristic feature of the English Civil War. Fortified houses and renovated castles were manned by troops who levied taxation, supplies and perhaps recruits from the areas under their control. Equally importantly, they deprived the enemy of such resources. The frontier regions between the two sides were especially closely controlled by such strongholds, while the larger towns were ringed by satellite garrisons which protected them from incursions by raiding parties and maintained the area upon which they drew for provisions. Mid Buckinghamshire was a frontier region for most of the conflict and Boarstall House one of several fortified houses in the area. It was well suited for adaptation as a garrison. The Jacobean manor house stood within a moated enclosure and was approached across a drawbridge leading to the fourteenth-century stone gatehouse tower. A visitor to Boarstall in the early eighteenth century thought that the site was still 'every way fit for a strong Garrison'¹. The construction of earthwork ramparts around the perimeter strengthened the defences and protected the buildings from artillery fire.

One problem which presented itself to the commander of the garrison was the proximity of other buildings to the defences. Indeed, the church stood very close to the moat; the tower at its western end was no more than thirty feet from it and must have overlooked the entire enceinte. Similarly, the village of Boarstall lay immediately beyond the southern side of the fortifications². It was a generally accepted feature of contemporary warfare that any

structures close to a fortress should be removed to prevent a hostile force from using them for accommodation and as cover and protection as they approached the defences. One military authority, for example, recommended the commanders of such garrisons to 'ruine all without which might endamage you; laying flat houses, woods, barns, mills, hollow wayes, gardens, fountains, and whatsoever might batter you and command your defences'³. Such advice was widely followed during the Civil War, with the suburbs of defended towns burnt down and demolished and property close to garrisons in the countryside also cleared away. At Boarstall the church and the village remained largely intact until comparatively late in the war.

Boarstall was one of the garrisons manned by the royalists to protect their headquarters at Oxford. It was fortified in late 1643, but in the following spring the royalists decided to abandon Reading and other outer garrisons, although Reading is twenty-six miles from Oxford and Boarstall only nine⁴. The parliamentarians promptly put in a garrison. Realising their mistake, the royalists sent a detachment under Sir Henry Gage to recapture the house. His troops quickly occupied the church and nearby buildings and so were able to direct artillery fire at the house itself. The garrison's position was now untenable and it sued for parley, surrendering on articles on 12 June⁵. A month later Boarstall was briefly besieged by Sir William Waller's army. He summoned the garrison to surrender, but the morale of his army was very low in the after-

math of its defeat at Cropredy Bridge at the end of June, and he probably thought it wise not to risk an assault when his summons was rejected⁶. The house then remained in royalist hands, with Colonel Dutton Fleetwood as governor until his death in October 1644. Fleetwood was succeeded by his lieutenant-colonel, William Campion, who was also knighted and promoted to colonel⁷.

Towards the end of May 1645 the New Model Army invested Oxford and a detachment was sent to blockade Boarstall, chiefly so that communications between London and the army, via Aylesbury, could continue uninterrupted⁸. The blockade subsequently became a regular siege by a force of 1,200 men under Philip Skippon. Although the house had already been besieged twice and the royalists' success in capturing it a year earlier had been primarily due to their occupation of the church and village, it is clear that they had not removed all of the buildings close to its defences when the New Model began its blockade. Sir William Campion had earlier realised that this was something that should be done, for soon after his appointment he had obtained an authorisation from the king to 'take downe the . . . Church, & all such Houses as . . . may prove prejudiciall . . .'⁹. Moreover, despite this authority, the defences had been renovated in the following spring without such demolition being carried out¹⁰. After an unsuccessful night assault, Skippon's force withdrew on 6 June on instructions from the Committee of Both Kingdoms at Westminster, which was agitated that the army was spending its time besieging such a small garrison while the royalist field army was successfully campaigning in the Midlands¹¹. Only after this attack did Campion set about clearing away all the buildings around the house. The village was reported to have been burnt down within two days of the parliamentary withdrawal and the church was demolished sometime before 26 July¹². In addition 'all the trees, gardens, and other places of pleasure were cut downe and demolished' at some stage before the end of the war¹³. As a result of Campion's overhaul of the defences, Boarstall House was very strongly fortified by the summer of 1645. It was surrounded by a

deep moat which had a palisade of vertical timbers on its outer side. Behind the moat was an advanced defensive work and to its rear—and rising six or seven feet higher—was the main rampart. Both of these works had rows of horizontal storm poles just below their parapets¹⁴. One observer's account was of 'high bulworkes . . ., deep trenches and pallosadoes'¹⁵. The garrison was able to resist a fourth siege of almost ten weeks before capitulating on 10 June 1646, watched by a crowd of several hundred interested spectators.¹⁶ Articles for the surrender of Oxford were agreed ten days later and for Wallingford on 22 July, bringing the war in the region to a close, and so the parliamentarians did not need either to garrison Boarstall themselves or to demolish the house to prevent the royalists from reoccupying it, as they had done at Hillesdon two years earlier.

The chronology of the removal of property at Boarstall was not especially unusual, as most Civil War destruction occurred during the later stages of the conflict. Yet there can have been few other garrisons where property so close to the defences, and so clearly a threat to them, was allowed to remain intact until three sieges had demonstrated just how dangerous it was. Why was the clearance of nearby property delayed for so long, when its necessity was clearly recognised? It can hardly have been in deference to the wishes of the owner of the manor, Lady Penelope Denham, for her sympathies lay with the parliamentarians. Nor was it because Fleetwood and Campion were local men anxious to minimise damage in their own area, for they were from Hampshire and Essex respectively¹⁷. Other than the apparent illogicality of human affairs in general, and of Civil War operations in particular, two reasons can be suggested.

Firstly, the extent of the quarters and stabling required by the soldiers and their horses. The size of the garrison no doubt fluctuated a great deal, but seems typically to have consisted of approximately one hundred men¹⁸. The house and its ancillary buildings were probably not large enough to accommodate all of the troops and their mounts, and the soldiers would not, in any case, choose to

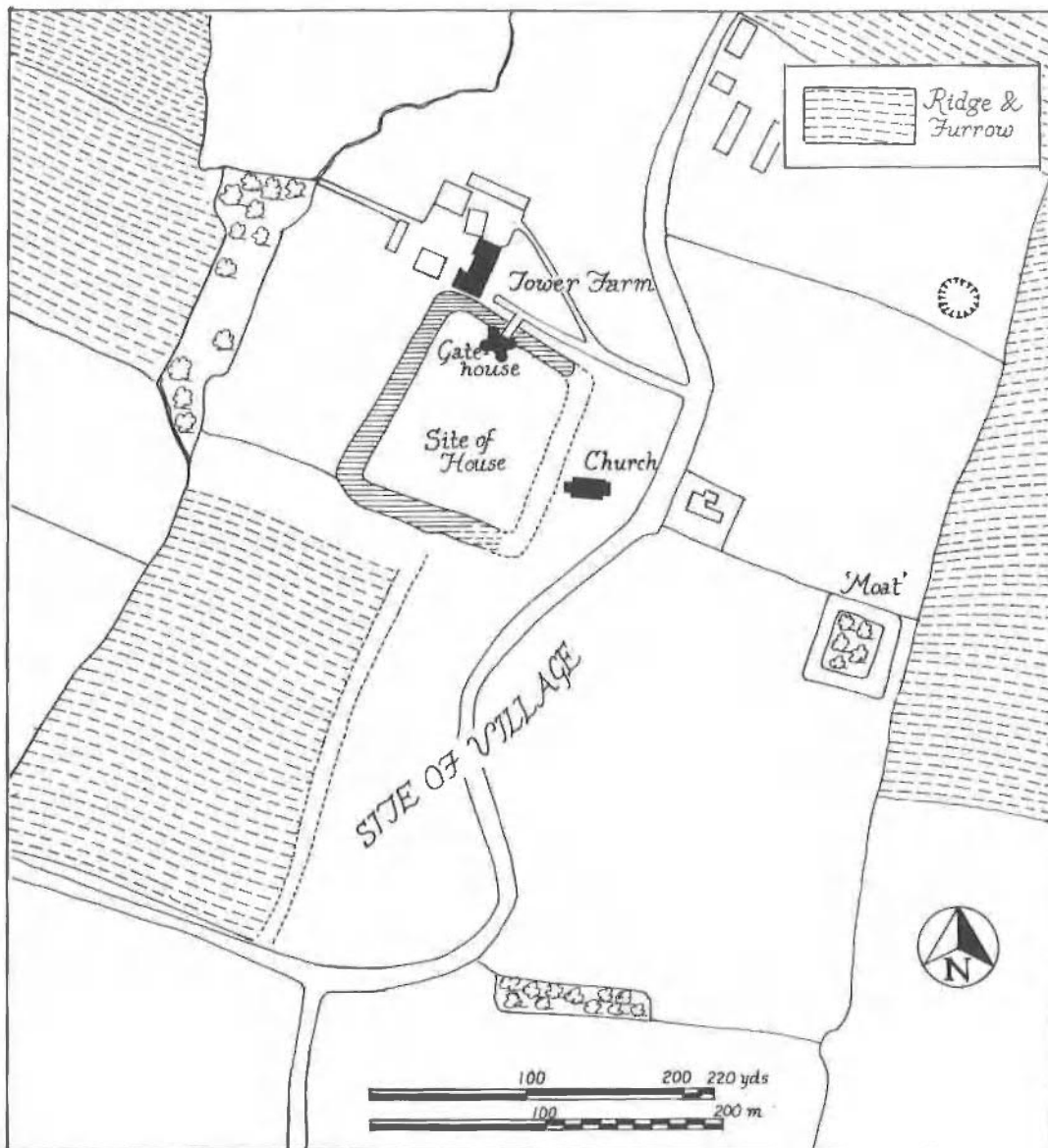


Fig. 1. Boarstall: the site of the village in relation to the moated house. (Although the extent of the former village can to some extent be deduced from air photographs, from the 1444 map, and from fieldwork, the presence of an extensive medieval pottery industry complicates the archaeological picture. Work on the elucidation of this problem is in progress. *Ed.*)

pass all of their time within the defences. At Aynho, in Northamptonshire, where the situation was similar, the garrison occupied the house only at night and in emergencies,

spending much of the daytime in operations or in the village¹⁹. Space was also needed for other royalist forces that had to be quartered there from time to time. For example, on the return

of the royalist field army to Oxford at the end of October 1644 many of the units had to be accommodated away from the city because of the extensive losses of property in the fire there on 6 October, and two foot regiments were sent to Boarstall²⁰. Overcrowding was potentially damaging to morale. The houses and the church outside the defences provided extra accommodation, a facility that the governor was presumably reluctant to destroy. This may also be the explanation for the survival of Tower Farm, a sixteenth-century brick house only fifty to sixty feet from the north-western corner of the gatehouse. Its northern wing has been destroyed at some time—there is no evidence to suggest that this occurred during the Civil War—but the remainder of the building has survived intact²¹. The accommodation that it provided may have made it worth the governor's while to man it rather than to destroy it.

Secondly, the delay may reflect an unwillingness on the part of the military to alienate the civilian population. The operations and exactions of any garrison were likely to make it unpopular, and it was prudent not to exacerbate such dislike more than was necessary. The civilians provided the supplies and taxes that enabled the soldiers to operate, and their complete hostility, perhaps even co-operation with the enemy, could make a garrison's task very difficult. The wholesale destruction of a village was likely to provoke such a reaction, providing visible evidence of the military's autocratic actions and spreading resentment over a considerable area, as those displaced sought refuge in the surrounding communities. This interdependence between civilians and soldiers limited Champion's freedom of action. To strengthen his authority, and perhaps to safeguard himself against possible legal reprisals, he found it prudent to obtain a sanction from his superiors before destroying the property. Even so, the buildings were removed only when the risk that they posed to the safety of the garrison had been clearly demonstrated. He adopted the same policy towards Chilton House, only four miles from Boarstall and a potential threat to the garrison there. He rode over with a party of horse and

after inspecting the house decided that it would indeed be dangerous if occupied by enemy cavalry, and that it should be burned. Nevertheless, before giving the necessary orders, he wrote to Prince Rupert asking for guidance and authorisation. Rupert's initial reaction was that the house should be destroyed, but on the following day he sent orders that only 'the out Walles, and Doores' should be pulled down, making it difficult to garrison and fortify²².

In fact, Champion seems to have been unusually popular as a garrison commander. Sir Thomas Fairfax wrote that 'the country gives [him] . . . the report of a very faire ennemye, and that he had often protected them from plunder and violence'²³. This statement is difficult to reconcile with reports—admittedly in parliamentary sources—of the exactions of the Boarstall garrison as it levied taxation, drove off horses, requisitioned farm vehicles and household goods, destroyed bridges and impressed men over a considerable area in western Buckinghamshire and eastern Oxfordshire²⁴. The parliamentarians were certainly exasperated by the garrison, which 'although it be but a very small thing, hath yet much infested the country, both by levying contribution and by plunder, wherein they have been more than ordinarily active'²⁵. It does seem to have been effective at harassing the enemy, and it was also called upon to provide the army at Oxford with supplies from time to time. Clarendon regarded it as a successful garrison in both respects, for it 'did very near support itself by the contribution it drew from Buckinghamshire, besides the prey it frequently took from the very neighbourhood of Aylesbury'²⁶. These were not activities that were likely to endear the troops to the local population. Moreover, the very presence of the garrison not only caused intermittent clashes with parties of parliamentarians but also drew larger forces into the neighbourhood when it was besieged. Brill was occupied and fortified by the parliamentarians and its inhabitants claimed that when Skippon's forces had quartered there for three days the cost had been at least £300. After the siege of 1646 the villagers of Ickford, Oakley and Worminghall reported that they had sustained considerable

losses through free quartering, plundering and the 'great somes of provisions' taken away by the New Model's soldiers²⁷. It would hardly be surprising if these activities made Campion unpopular with the civilian population; that this was not the case does suggest that he was not entirely inconsiderate, hence the delayed destruction of Boarstall village.

The impact of the destruction upon the inhabitants is revealed in their replies to a series of questions circulated by the county committee which were designed to assess the cost of the parliamentary war effort and related chiefly to taxation and quartering. Their response was that parliamentary troops had burnt two houses—one in each of the first two sieges—and that the remainder of the village had been destroyed by the royalists. No account could be given of the taxes that had been paid 'by reason our houses with writings have been consumed with fyre we dispearsed soe that we are alltogether in a confusion. Therefore we shall desyer you to think of our distracted estate and not to bind us to that which is unpossible to be answered . . .'²⁸. By September 1646 eight householders were able to specify the payments that they had made on parliamentary assessments, but no returns were made by the others. Indeed, because the village was 'quite depopulated they were not Abell to pay any Dues to king nor parlyment & soe the inhabytants are ded and gone foorth of the toune . . .'²⁹. These replies may have been veiled requests for help in rebuilding and to emphasise the community's inability to pay further taxes at a time of economic dislocation, high taxes and the disruption of the normal methods of disaster relief. Nevertheless, they also demonstrate the plight of those displaced by the apparently complete destruction of the village.

The restoration of the environs of the house was obviously going to be an expensive and time-consuming task. The parliamentary committee for Buckinghamshire granted Lady Denham £240 in October 1646 towards the cost of removing the earthworks, but the money was slow to come in and three years later she had still received only a half of it³⁰. Nevertheless, the work was gradually completed and by 1668

the house was again surrounded by gardens and the landscape was evidently well matured, as there were by then 'several sets of trees well growne'³¹. Lady Denham also saw to the rebuilding of the church. The new structure was completed by 1663 and incorporated some fittings from the pre-war building that had presumably been removed before it was destroyed³². The Restoration church was a smaller and simpler structure than its predecessor, consisting only of a nave and chancel, without side aisles and tower³³. Indeed, the bells taken by the royalists for use as gunmetal were not replaced, and so the new building lacked even a bellcote. This church was itself replaced in 1818 by another one of similar design³⁴.

During the seventeenth century the landscape of Boarstall was transformed as a result of the disafforestation of the royal forest of Bernwood in 1633. Much of the remaining woodland was cleared away and the open fields were enclosed and divided into smaller parcels³⁵. The site of the former nucleated village to the south of the manor house was a pasture field by the 1690s and the settlement pattern of the parish had become one of dispersed farms and cottages, with only the manor house, gatehouse, Tower Farm and church remaining as a group in that part of the parish which had previously contained the bulk of the population³⁶. The process was accompanied by a decline in the number of inhabitants in the parish, from a little over two hundred in 1586 to approximately one hundred and thirty in 1676, although national population had risen by almost fifty per cent during that period³⁷. This demographic change was reflected in the size of the church erected after the Restoration. Another alteration to the landscape was the diversion of the road from its former course between the garden of the house and the church to a new alignment that took it to the east of the churchyard, providing the Denham family with a separate access to the church. It also gave the manor house greater privacy, as did the removal of the village: the prospect southwards from the house and garden had been of the buildings of the village, and their replacement by a pasture field was, to contemporary taste, a great improvement.³⁸

It seems likely that Sir John Denham's intentions in negotiating the disafforestation of Bernwood were to clear the woodland and enclose the open fields of Boarstall, and that these processes would have caused the contraction, if not abandonment, of the medieval village. Nevertheless, in the event it was the Civil War that was the catalyst which brought about the changes in the landscape in the vicinity of the house and church. There is

no evidence to suggest that the village was rebuilt on its former site after the Civil War and then destroyed for a second time later in the century. The destruction of the deserted medieval village site at Boarstall can, therefore, be securely dated to early June 1645. Although military activity in the Civil War caused much destruction of property, there are few other places where it led to such a marked change in the pattern of settlement.

REFERENCES

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2. The village is depicted on a plan of c.1444, perhaps the earliest plan of an English village. It is reproduced in a number of works including: *VCH Buckinghamshire* IV (1927) 10; George Lipscomb, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Buckingham* I (1847) 76.
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4. Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, ed. W. D. Macray iii (Oxford, 1888) 360. The garrisons around Oxford are shown in M. Falkus and J. Gillingham, *Historical Atlas of Britain* (1981) 95.
5. Clarendon, *op. cit.*, 361.
6. J. Adair, *Roundhead General* (1969) 164.
7. H. G. Tibbutt (ed.), *The Letter Books 1644-5 of Sir Samuel Luke*, Historical Manuscripts Commission, 1963) 50, 71. Campion's commission was dated 28 October: Lipscomb, *op. cit.*, 76.
8. British Library (BL), Thomason Tracts, E 262(1) *A Perfect Diurnall* . . . , 26 May-2 June 1645, 761.
9. Lipscomb, *op. cit.*, 77. The original is in East Sussex RO, Danny MSS, 42.
10. Tibbutt, *op. cit.*, 687-8, 691.
11. Joshua Sprigge, *Anglia Rediviva* (1647) 22, 27; John Rushworth, *Historical Collections* VI (1722) 36; *Cal. State Papers, Domestic 1644-5*, 567. The royalist account of the siege is in *Mercurius Aulicus*, 25 May-8 June 1645, 1617-19.
12. BL, Thomason Tracts, E 262(7) *Perfect Occurrences of Parliament*, 6-13 June 1645, unpag.; Lipscomb, *op. cit.*, 80.
13. A. Clark (ed.), *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood, antiquary of Oxford, 1639-1695, described by himself* ii (Oxfordshire Hist. Soc., 1892) 135.
14. The defences are described in *Diary of the Marches of the Royal Army during the Great Civil War; kept by Richard Symonds*, ed. C. E. Long (Camden Soc., LXXIV, 1859) 231. His sketch is not reproduced in this edition; the original is in the BL, Harleian MS 944.
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17. P. R. Newman, *Royalist Officers in England and Wales, 1642-1660* (New York, 1981) 57, 133.
18. I. G. Philip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke* (Oxfordshire Record Soc., XXXIII, 1953), 218, 258; Tibbutt, *op. cit.*, 81, 630, 677, 691.
19. *Ibid.*, 686, 691.
20. *Ibid.*, 50.
21. RCHM *Bucks* I, 59.
22. BL, Add. MS 18,982, fo. 25; Lipscomb, *op. cit.*, 137.
23. *Ibid.*, 86.
24. Tibbutt, *op. cit.*, 36, 57, 95, 97, 101, 253, 294, 437-8, 541, 672, 677.
25. *Cal. State Papers, Domestic 1645-7*, 432.
26. Clarendon, *op. cit.*, 361.
27. PRO, SP 28/39, fos. 462v, 591v; /42, fo. 762v; /149, fo. 6.
28. PRO, SP 28/35, fo. 732.
29. PRO, SP 28/42, fo. 530.
30. PRO, SP 28/221, unfol.
31. Clark, *op. cit.* II, 134.
32. *Ibid.*, 135; RCHM *Bucks* I, 57. A new parish register was begun in 1665, BRO, PR 20/1/2.
33. The church is shown in a print of 1695, Lipscomb, *op. cit.*, 87.
34. This is the church standing today; it is described in RCHM *Bucks* I, 57 and *VCH Bucks* IV, 10-11.
35. M. Reed, *The Buckinghamshire Landscape* (1979) 194-7.
36. Shown in the print of 1695, Lipscomb, *op. cit.*, 87 and on a map of 1697, BRO, D/AF/266.
37. Reed, *op. cit.*, 127, 195, 197; E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871* (1981) 208-9, 528-9. Population change at Boarstall cannot be traced from the parish registers. The earliest extant register begins in 1640, but because of disruption of the Civil War and destruction of the church it has only a few intermittent entries after 1643. BRO, PR 20/1/1.
38. The present landscape is shown, opposite the plan of c.1444, in M. W. Beresford and J. K. S. St Joseph, *Medieval England: An Aerial Survey* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1979) 110-11.