

AYLESBURY IN THE CIVIL WAR

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The part played by Aylesbury during the Civil War is re-examined and an account given of military events in the neighbourhood. The strategic position of the town and the importance that Parliament placed on the maintenance of its garrison and defences are explained. The discovery of the remains of the earthworks during development at Green End House and The Prebendal, and the likely extent of the fortifications, are discussed.

In 1985 Michael Farley directed excavations for the Buckinghamshire County Museum in the grounds of The Prebendal in Aylesbury in advance of construction of the Prebendal Court offices. The site was east of St Mary's Church, on the crest of the limestone escarpment. The complex features which were revealed included a substantial ditch of seventeenth-century date, which crossed the site and turned a right angle down the slope of the hill. This was interpreted as almost certainly part of the Civil War defences of Aylesbury, constructed when the town was garrisoned by Parliamentary forces. This glimpse of the town's military past, along with recurrent local speculation about battles in the neighbourhood, makes a reassessment of Aylesbury during the Civil War desirable. It is more than a hundred years since Robert Gibbs's *History of Aylesbury* gave an account of the events of that period¹ but since then sources that were not available to him have been published and these encourage us to re-examine the position of the town during the conflict.

Only with hindsight does Aylesbury seem an obvious choice as the major bastion of Parliament's defence against the Royalist threats from Oxford. Thame, Wycombe or even Buckingham could well have been selected as the main barrier against attacks from the west. However, Aylesbury's status as the town where the Parliamentary County Committees met, and its site on a limestone outcrop, led to its development as the principal garrison facing the King's forces, particularly after the Earl of Essex abandoned his quarters at Thame in June 1643. It lay on a major route through the Chilterns to London, and could block the way into the Eastern Counties which were strong supporters of Parliament. Aylesbury could be made one of the keys to the access and security

of Parliament's heartlands and it needed to be strongly defended.

In late June 1642 Parliament replaced the unreliable Lord Paget as Lord Lieutenant for Buckinghamshire with Lord Wharton and then named a commission of 32 'reliable' local gentry² who set about recruiting local forces for Parliament, using Aylesbury as their focal point. The unfortunate Dr Pinck, pro-Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, travelled to Aylesbury to negotiate with Lord Saye and Sele to try to avoid an attack on Oxford by the forces his lordship was gathering: he was promptly seized and sent as a prisoner to London. In August, when London regiments marched through Bucks on their way to Northamptonshire, they found the towns of Amersham, Wendover and Aylesbury strongly sympathetic to their cause.³ Any Buckinghamshire gentry who dared to side openly with Charles I (such as Sir John Pakington of Aylesbury or the Dentons of Hillesden) suffered heavy losses of property.

Royalist forces from Oxfordshire were soon actively foraging for supplies and money in Buckinghamshire, and Aylesbury suffered a number of scares from them. On 16 September there was a skirmish near the town before the Royalists fell back beyond Oxford.⁴ On 1 November Royalist horsemen occupied the town and after an overnight stay (presumably with vigorous pillaging) they rode out of the town to face Sir William Balfour's Parliamentary cavalry. The Parliamentary pamphlet printed at the time describes a brief but bloody engagement that left 600 dead and Prince Rupert fleeing back to Oxfordshire⁵ and this has gained a place in local mythology as 'the Battle of Aylesbury'. However, it is significant that the journal of Prince Rupert's

marches records him as being at Abingdon on this date and makes no mention of any severe setback in Bucks:⁶ uncorroborated accounts by partisan writers make unreliable sources for the events of small-scale localised warfare. Later in November another Royalist cavalry force briefly occupied Aylesbury but was expelled by armed townsmen and forces from neighbouring villages.⁷

To counter the threat of further raids and to restrict the area available to the Royalists for foraging, Parliament decided that a permanent garrison must be established in Aylesbury.⁸ Henry Bulstrode's regiment was already based in the town but garrisoning a town required more than just a body of troops and physical defences. Above all a garrison meant the long-term quartering of soldiers and exercising control over an area sufficiently extensive for foraging and taxation to support hundreds of horses and men. Almost at once, paying and feeding this permanent force created problems: the Committee for Bucks had to set aside £200 out of the County's total weekly assessment of £425 to pay for this new Aylesbury garrison and its fortifications.⁹ At first the money seemed a wise investment. In early December Lord Wentworth led a large party of Royalist cavalry, with artillery support, through Thame to attack Aylesbury. Deciding that it looked too strong (there were batteries on the north and west and a redoubt on the rising ground towards Berton), he abandoned this objective, swung south through the Chilterns and rode into Wycombe where heavy fighting ensued.¹⁰ In January 1643 *A Perfect Diurnall of the Passages in Parliament* was reporting, 'From Aylesbury in Bucks it is informed that the town is very strongly fortified, and that there is six pieces of ordinance and a strong garrison of men, Col. Bulstrode, his regiment and some other forces being there'.¹¹ These forces were sufficiently confident to begin to probe towards the Royalist outposts of Oxford: on 27 January there was a unsuccessful attack on Brill¹² and in the same month Goodwin led a night attack on Piddington and captured three troops of enemy horse.¹³ Nevertheless, all was not well. The Earl of Essex, the Parliamentary Commander-in-Chief, wrote to Goodwin on 9 February, 'I have received letters from Aylesbury ... importing Prince Rupert's arrival at Brill the last night which I much doubt, but that which most troubles me is that they write that they are not able to defend the garrison alone one day'.¹⁴

On 13 March a major Royalist force reached Stone and for two days was poised to attack Aylesbury: a deserting Parliamentary officer informed the King's commander that the town was held by only seven or eight hundred men.¹⁵ Parliamentary troops from as far away as Wycombe and Beaconsfield were rushed to support Bulstrode's garrison but the Royalists avoided confrontation and preferred to raid Wendover and Chesham, and then fell back to Brill, pillaging as they went.¹⁶ Later that same month another Royalist column, equipped with six heavy guns, reached Thame and all Parliamentary troops hurriedly withdrew inside Aylesbury's defences.¹⁷ Sir John Culpepper's spies within the town were reporting to the Royalists the weak state of the garrison¹⁸ but because Essex's advancing troops threatened to cut them off from Oxford, the King's men once more withdrew.¹⁹

These frequent alarms and excursions made the maintenance of Aylesbury's defences even more essential, especially when Essex abandoned Thame, fell back to Aylesbury, and then withdrew his headquarters to Great Brickhill,²⁰ leaving Aylesbury as the front-line fortress. On 16 April the House of Lords' Journal recorded an order for a weekly sum of £200 to pay the garrison.²¹ That summer was a period of insecurity and despondency for Parliament's forces in Buckinghamshire. In May Lord Cleveland led a Royalist raid which culminated in the burning of Swanbourne;²² in June the Royalists caught a supply train near Chalgrove and mortally wounded John Hampden in the ensuing engagement;²³ in early July Essex's troops abandoned Thame and were harassed by the Royalists as they fell back;²⁴ later in the same month a skirmish at Padbury drove the Parliamentary horse back into Aylesbury.²⁵ Holding on to Aylesbury must have become even more important to Parliament but morale seems to have been very low. On 10 August the Royalists were actually recruiting dragoons and seizing horses within four miles of Aylesbury, as well as sending the minister of Waddesdon as a prisoner to Oxford.²⁶

Probably as a result of these alarms, on 13 September the Lords' Journal recorded an order for a larger weekly payment, £600, out of the Bucks-Herts-Beds assessment for the maintenance of the Aylesbury garrison,²⁷ and £1,000 was advanced out of sequestration revenues to pay the troops.²⁸

Clearly the problems of upkeep became no easier, for in November six MPs were appointed to go to Aylesbury to 'consider the garrison and arrangements for paying them regularly'.²⁹ Orders for the financing of Aylesbury became increasingly frequent and covered ever larger sums: £1,200 to the governor on 9 December,³⁰ followed by a draft order for £1,200 weekly,³¹ and then at Christmas a payment by the Bedfordshire Committee of £1,600.³² Sir Samuel Luke, the governor of Newport Pagnell, complained bitterly that not only was his garrison in as bad a state, but their suffering was made worse because Aylesbury troops were seizing all available supplies.³³ Work appears to have continued on strengthening the town fortifications: on 7 October 'James Carey reported that they are digging trenches to lett the water about the towne and they nether heare nor feare the comming of the King's forces thither'.³⁴

The importance with which both sides regarded Aylesbury is underlined by curious plots that went on in the winter of 1643-44 to betray the town to the King's forces. One of these was fully recounted by B. M. Gardiner: Colonel Thomas Ogle endeavoured to suborn Colonel Mosely of the Aylesbury garrison to betray the town, but the latter kept his superiors informed, and the scheme came to naught, though a mysterious delayed-action explosive 'engine' was passed to Mosely to blow up the powder magazine.³⁵ At the same time the new governor of Aylesbury, Colonel Aldrich, reported to Parliament that he had been secretly approached by Sir John Byron to surrender the town to the King.³⁶ In a January snowstorm Royalist forces made a surprise advance and only at the last minute abandoned their plan to seize Aylesbury when they learned that their intentions were no longer secret. This fresh reminder of the garrison's vulnerability led to the governor being financially rewarded and his troops' arrears being paid.³⁷ It also led the Lord Admiral to order five cannon, 20 barrels of powder and 300 shot to be delivered to Aylesbury from the Tower stores (paid for out of the import duty on currants!).³⁸ Nevertheless, shortages of money continued to plague the garrison. In March 1644 £300 came from the Court of Wards, while a Committee of four MPs discussed how to raise a further £1,000.³⁹ In late April Sir Henry Mildmay was ordered to arrange enough cash to enable the garrison to march out to join Essex's expedition to the west.⁴⁰ Despite these efforts, in early May Sir

Walter Erle was informing the Earl of Essex that the garrison troops were deserting and that he ought to take urgent steps to secure the town.⁴¹ In response to this fresh emergency £1,250 from Customs was ordered to be applied to the garrison and on 6 May the Bedfordshire Treasurer was instructed to advance £1,500 to the Aylesbury forces.⁴² Notwithstanding these constant financial difficulties the garrison could still be effective when threatened, for in June 100 men from Aylesbury routed 300 Royalists 'in the neighbourhood'.⁴³

On 19 June the Lieutenant of Ordnance was ordered to despatch 30 barrels of powder to Aylesbury and the following day it was ordered that Colonel Martin should receive £300 to pay his troops and gunners at Aylesbury.⁴⁴ Within the week they were earning their pay, for the Royalists with some 20 pieces of artillery⁴⁵ 'sat before Aylesbury and played their guns upon it', but then abruptly retired towards Oxford.⁴⁶ At the end of the month Colonel Martin was once again asking the Commons for arms and ammunition.⁴⁷

By now the eventual outcome of the war was being settled by events elsewhere, but still Aylesbury had its excitements. In January 1645 60 of Colonel Crawford's horsemen routed 120 cavaliers from Wallingford, killing or capturing all but 14 (if the Parliamentary report is to be trusted).⁴⁸ It had been decided to deploy the garrison troops elsewhere because the Royalist presence seemed diminished but on 4 April Sir Samuel Luke, governor of Newport Pagnell, was writing to Major Ennis, 'I hear the enemy is abroad and fell into Aylesbury horsequarters yesterday with 200 horse...'⁴⁹

The Aylesbury troops refused to leave the town to join Colonel Massey for the Irish campaign until they had been paid their arrears. It seems that they also required extensive new supplies of arms, for on 6 June the Commons ordered 20 barrels of powder, 200 pikes, 400 muskets and 400 swords to be sent to Aylesbury from the public stores.⁵⁰ It is clear that the removal of the active Royalist threat did little to improve the troops' behaviour because Colonel Martin's soldiers were accused of indiscipline⁵¹ and he was replaced first by Colonel Fleetwood, and then by Colonel Bulstrode. In late January 1646 martial law had to be proclaimed to try to bring them under control.⁵² On 11 June the Commons received a petition from the inhabitants

of Aylesbury complaining about the soldiers' unruly behaviour.⁵³ In July, following a report by a Parliamentary Committee, the order was given to slight the garrison, dismantle the fortifications and disband the troops.⁵⁴ Nevertheless on 11 August the problem still existed, as another order was passed that those garrison troops who were not willing to go to Ireland should be disbanded.⁵⁵

Despite the numerous documentary references to the Aylesbury garrison's activities and finances during its four-year occupation of the town there are frustratingly few sources which reveal the actual positions of the fortifications, apart from those very cursory mentions already quoted above. In the 1650s a petition to the Commons signed by 87 Aylesbury inhabitants complained, 'your petitioners having suffered great losses by quartering of soldiers and pulling down their houses, digging up their orchards and fences to make away for the fortifications, to the value of near £5000 ...'⁵⁶ This leads one to conclude that the circuit of the defences was very close to the centre of the town, perhaps only barely enclosing the majority of existing houses. The sections of ditch revealed at Green End House⁵⁷ and by the Prebendal excavations are tantalising glimpses of earthworks which are probably those of which the townsmen complained. Of the batteries and redoubt mentioned in the Parliamentary newspaper and of the water defences of which Sir Samuel Luke's agent spoke no archaeological evidence has yet been found, and we can only guess whether they really existed. For the defences of Newport Pagnell rather more detailed information survives, in particular Captain Cornelius Vandenboome's plan in the Bodleian Library. It is clear that the earthworks dug there required a constant struggle to prevent them from collapsing under the effects of the English climate. It is probable that in Aylesbury also the ditches, even though cut in limestone, were a never-ending headache for the garrison commander, but the tighter the circuit the less the maintenance problem would have been. It seems probable that the ditch uncovered by the Prebendal excavations was part of the perimeter earthwork. The picture which emerges is of defences very different from the textbook creations of the war-torn Low Countries. If the works at Aylesbury had been as complex or as well constructed, they would surely have left more traces, not only on the ground but also in the account books. The large sums of money required

to pay and feed the troops do not seem to be paralleled by similar sums paid to engineers and labourers, and there is no sign in the surviving public records of the equipment and materials which would have been needed to construct elaborate defences at Aylesbury. It seems more likely that a combination of forced or voluntary labour from the civilians and some work by the troops was sufficient to create fairly simple defences which were reasonably effective but which were not particularly durable or permanent. Once peace came, the townsmen would have neglected them or even been eager to level these obstructions to their daily lives. The full extent and quality of the fortifications will only be discovered by vigilant monitoring of all future building developments in the centre of Aylesbury.

Compared to the great events that occurred elsewhere in England, the part played by Aylesbury's fortifications in the Civil War may seem quite minor. However, if Aylesbury had not blocked the way towards London, if it had not threatened the Royalist flank, and if it had not restricted the foraging activities of the royal forces, then the outcome of the conflict in the Home Counties might have been very different.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ADDENDUM

I am indebted to Roger Bettridge, who, as soon as he read the foregoing article, produced from his encyclopaedic knowledge a reference to a sheet of seventeenth-century fortification accounts. The original is in the Commonwealth Exchequer Papers at the Public Record Office (Ref: SP 28/221). A facsimile can be found at page 310 of *Delafield: The Family History* by John R. Delafield (privately printed, 1945).

The following transcription, based upon one made by the late L. F. Barker, has retained original

spellings, though use of capital letters has been modernised. A few abbreviated words, though not Christian names, have been silently extended. Modern spellings of a few words, and one correction, have been supplied in square brackets. For easy comprehension one should understand the following:

Battery: fortified earthwork for artillery
 Graff: ditch or trench
 Parapet: breast-high wall or rampart
 Pole: 5½ yards or approximately 5 metres.
 Turnpike: moveable spiked barrier across a road as a defence, mainly against attacks by horsemen

Due for worke don about the fortifications of the garison of Alsbyry [Aylesbury] from June the 11th to June the 03th [30th] 1646

		<u>l.</u>	<u>s.</u>	<u>d.</u>
Imprimis	Due for carts and teemes [teams] that wrought at the fortifications; 19 daies at 4 shillings a day cometh to	03	16	00
Item	Due to Henry North for making of 11 pole and a halfe of the parapit [parapet] in the new battry [battery] at tenn shillings a pole cometh to	05	15	00
Item	Due to Tho. Alinson for making of 4 polle and a halfe of the parapit next to the Friridg [Friarage] battrie and finding carts himselfe is to have 15 shillings a pole which cometh to	03	07	06
Item	Due to Will. Rutland for enlarginge the graft [graff] round the Friridg battrie, 17 pole and a halfe at 7 shillings and sixpence a pole cometh to	06	10	09
Item	Due to Frances Parnes the younger for 3 daies worke at 10 pence a daye and for 5 dayes that his men wrought with him for 10 pence a day cometh to	00	06	08
Item	Due to Tho. Whitacker for intrenching of seven pole and a halfe in the graft next to Oxford Gate at fourteen shillings the pole cometh to	05	05	00
Item	Due unto two men for filling of cart twentie daies at eightpence a day cometh to	00	15	08
Item	Due to Tho. Alinson for making up of a breach at Walton turnepicke [turnpike]	00	04	00
Item	Due to John Swaine for worke don in the graft and uppon the parapit nex to Bearton [Bierton] battry nine pole at a eleven shillings the pole and nine pole and a halfe at three shillings the pole cometh to	05	17	06
Item	Due to Will. Delafeild for twentie daies worke at twelvecence a day cometh to	0	00	00
Witnes my hand		<u>l.</u>	<u>s.</u>	<u>d.</u>
Will. Delafeild oversear of the fortification of this garison		32	18	01

2 July 1646.
 Lett this bill be paied
 Tho. Fountayne.

(This transcript is published by kind permission of the Public Record Office.)

William Delafield was a native of Waddesdon, where he was for a number of years the Parish Clerk. Aged 41 at the time of these accounts, he was 'overseer of the fortifications', and elsewhere is described as 'gunner'. His services to the Parliamentary cause do not seem to have affected his post-war standing in Waddesdon and he died there in 1675.

These accounts total about 190 yards of parapet and 135 yards of ditch and it is extraordinary that such extensive work was done to the Aylesbury defences at a time when the war seemed virtually over, and the garrison was within a month of being disbanded. Clearly these must have been repairs, not new works. The reference to actual named sections of the works is tantalising and one hopes that it may be possible in the future to discover further details of the locations and lay-out.

The various contractors obtained different rates of payment but the basis for these is not revealed, and there is no explanation of costings. Delafield's arithmetic appears very unreliable and one can detect three incorrect calculations. This does not appear to be a deliberate attempt to inflate the bill, for he undercharges by 18 shillings and 2 pence.

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