2472 Civil War history

From a variety of sources including an unpublished paper by Jayne Todd.

The first pitched battle of the war, at Edgehill on 23 October 1642, proved inconclusive, both Royalists and Parliamentarians claiming victory. After capturing Banbury on 27 October 1642, King Charles decided to move to Oxford and make it his base. The turning point came in the late summer and early autumn of 1643, when the Earl of Essex's army forced the King to raise the siege of Gloucester and then brushed the Royalists aside at the first Battle of Newbury (20 September 1643), to return triumphantly to London. In 1645, Parliament reorganized its main forces into the New Model Army, under the command of Sir Thomas Fairfax, with Oliver Cromwell as his second-in-command and Lieutenant-General of Horse. In two decisive engagements – the Battle of Naseby on 14 June and the Battle of Langport on 10 July – the Parliamentarians effectively destroyed Charles's armies.

Wheatley was on the front line in the Civil War. On 8th March 1643, Lord George Digby's regiment of horse, consisting of scholars from the University, arrived in Wheatley and 'a great gate was erected on Wheatley bridge, and none hardly suffered to passe without a ticket from Sir Jacob Astley'. Presumably this was an attempt by the Royalist garrison to control the passage of Parliamentarian sympathisers and spies. On 24th March 1643 Sir Samuel Luke, spymaster general to Cromwell, reported evidence of local dissent either to restriction of free passage, or perhaps against the Royalist occupation of the village – the gate had been thrown into the river. On several occasions, Luke was refused entry into Wheatley. The parish constable and other officers of the parish were instructed to make good the bridge on 26th March, but the gate was vandalised again on 28th March when a Parliamentarian soldier, Captain George Bulmore, was shot dead.

Also, in March 1643, a further 300 men and horses, a troop of the King's horse, battle hardened soldiers, arrived to reinforce the defence of the bridge crossing. Wheatley had suddenly become part of the English Civil War, and its inhabitants were thrust into a war zone. Wheatley was of strategic importance because it was on one of the most important roads out of London and was on a crossing over the river Thame. This location meant that there were usually around 400 Royalist (Cavalier) soldiers at the garrison controlling the bridge crossing.

With a population of about 260 villagers, the arrival of all these soldiers meant that there was at least a 100% increase in the number of people in the village with resultant chronic overcrowding, disruption and disease. There was compulsory boarding of these troops in villagers' homes – usually six, or even eight, complete strangers had to be found sleeping quarters in each house (regardless of the size and the wealth, or not, of the householder). As well as the men having to be fed, their horses had to be stabled and fed using precious animal food meant for villagers' own animals in winter time. If villagers could not provide enough food, or shelter, the soldiers simply plundered it. The village was over-run with 'strangers', soldiers who manned the bridge, travellers going to the court at Oxford, refugees from the rebellion in Ireland, maimed soldiers from the King's and Parliamentary armies, deserters, thieves and 'villains'. Wheatley, which until the war was a tightly knit community, became instead a place of confusion and threat.

From 1642, when the King arrived in Oxford until he surrendered in 1646, control of the land beyond Oxford's city walls was hotly contested between the Royalists and the

Parliamentarians. The King controlled Oxford city itself, and the area immediately around it. In June 1643, the Royalists beat the Parliamentarians at nearby Chalgrove, caused when the Royalists, who were seeking to renew their resources by an incursion into wealthy Buckinghamshire, were challenged. In the east, the King's army established an unofficial 'frontier line', running along what was then the London to Worcester road, which crossed the river Thame east of Wheatley. The land to the south and west of this was mainly controlled by the King. All the other areas, to the east of this road toward London, were controlled by the Parliamentarian armies under Cromwell. In consequence, most villages in the county, including Wheatley, experienced military action in the form of minor skirmishes.

Troop movements in the area reported thousands of men and horses, armaments and camp followers, criss-crossing Oxfordshire. In Wheatley there were 48 occasions between 1642 and 1644, when 2,000 to 3,000 men and horses marched down the High Street, on to Crown Road and then to Wheatley Bridge, a crucial river crossing which, by 1643, had reported fighting on 27 occasions. Cannons were set up to defend the main road toward Oxford that went over the Shotover Plain, and on several occasions between 1642 and 1645, Royalist soldiers, commanded by Prince Rupert, were reported to have waited in ambush for advancing Parliamentary troops. With heavy rainfall, river levels were very high over the winter of 1642/3 making any challenge to the Thame crossing at Wheatley impossible. However, in June 1643, the Parliamentarian army had forced entry into Wheatley and captured 80 Royalist defenders, only for this important bridge to be recaptured soon after. The defining challenge to Wheatley came on 24 April 1645 when Cromwell at the head of 1,500 'Ironside' troops successfully challenged this important access point.

In Wheatley the injured and sick troops were treated at the Bell Inn on Bell Lane. Typhus struck in the garrison between 1642 and 1644, when Wheatley village was overcrowded and insanitary with refugees. The death rate quadrupled between 1642 and 1643 across the villages of Oxfordshire as it did also inside the besieged city. The most visible symptom of typhus was known as the 'mulberry rash' and dysentery, known as 'the flux', was also a prevalent killer in village communities. In 1643, plague came to Wheatley and 53 people were buried including a soldier billeted at the Bell Inn. It was not the first time that there had been a plague outbreak but this time it was vicious. The source is unknown, but it may well have been brought in by the soldiers. There was a second outbreak in 1644 when seventy people died. The records do not differentiate between soldiers and villagers but we do know that six Wheatley families, parents, grandparents and all the children, were wiped out within days of each other. One glimpse of the effect of the war on the village is shown in a petition submitted (amongst many others) for redress for the suffering of wartime:

And the complainants showed that the said fields and lands in the town of Wheatley...in the time of the late wars, and by reason of the garrison, did for the most part lie uncultivated and fallow, and could not be husbanded to any profit...and the houses were much ruined and decayed, and trees cut down and employed for the use of the said garrison, and a great part of their meadows spoiled by the digging of the turfs for the making of bulwarks...and the complainants' cattle plundered and taken away by the King's soldiers.

This all came to an end in 1646 when the King left Oxford in disguise and the city and surrounding villages all surrendered. For the entire county the war's impact on everyday life was enormous. But there is little doubt that, for people in Wheatley, it was at levels which communities further afield in the county did not experience. This was due to the village's proximity to Oxford, its strategic importance, its exposure to fighting and to disease and its

reduction in prosperity. The war's effects upon family and community were significant. The war set father against son, neighbour against neighbour and friend against friend. Inevitably the fighting caused injury and death – and not just to the soldiers, but also to ordinary people who became 'collateral damage'. Billeted soldiers did not necessarily leave their billets and may have continued their local raids and attacks, but there is no evidence that Wheatley was sacked, like Banbury or Northampton, perhaps because of the 'gentlemanly' way in which Oxford was surrendered. Taxation records, petitions and parish registers illustrate the crisis which ordinary people faced every day. Applications for Poor Relief tripled after the Civil War. The inevitable insecurity, fear, loss of freedom to move around their 'country', loss of crops and livestock, breakdown of trust between neighbours and within families, looting by marauding soldiers, indiscriminate use of violence and the creeping dread of disease and death cannot be quantified.

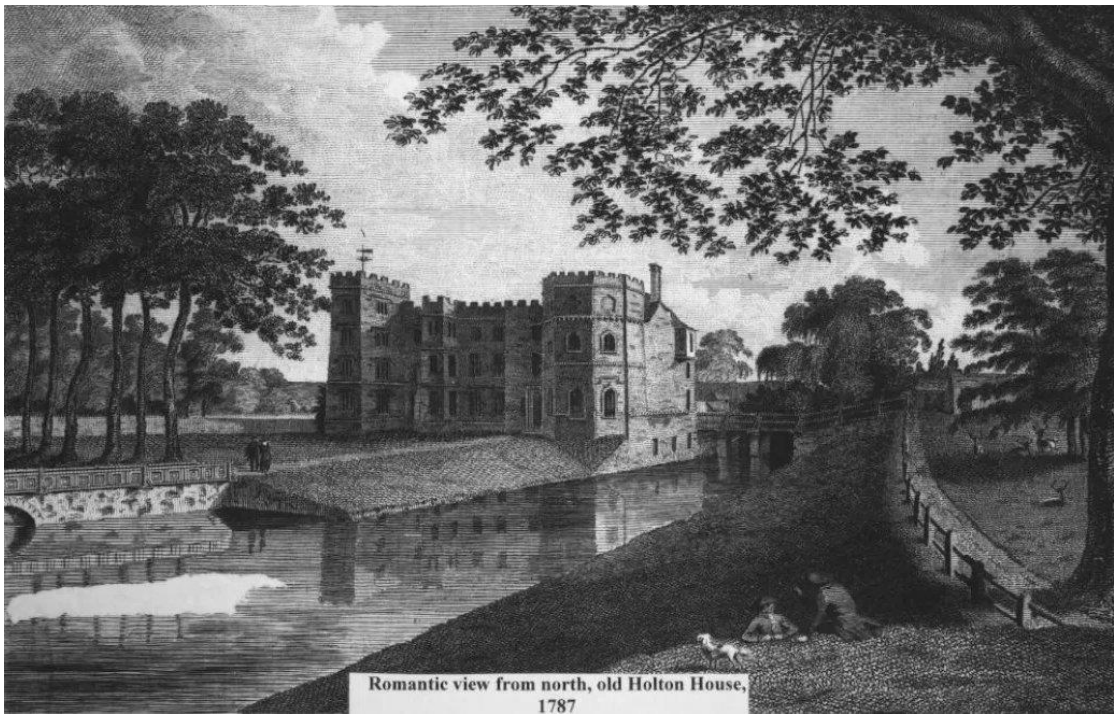
One of several Commonwealth half-groats found in Wheatley in shown in Figure 2.4. These were minted between 1649 and 1659, and were 2-penny pieces. At the Restoration of the monarchy, these were withdrawn, but many were kept and then worn as tokens, thus the punched hole.

Figure 2.4: Commonwealth half-groat found in Wheatley

The Civil War and Holton and Cromwell

In May 1643, Parliament had declared that supporting the King was an act of 'delinquency' and that any such landowner was subject to having their property 'compounded', which effectively was a tax levied on its value. These taxes were very substantial amounting, in today's terms, to many millions of pounds for a substantial estate. Holton House, shown in Figure 2.5, was, at the time, occupied by Lady Ursula Whorwood, a committed royalist. Probably in 1644, Lady Ursula vacated the house and moved into Oxford with Jane Whorwood, the wife of her eldest son Brome. He lived at Sandwell, the Whorwood seat near West Bromwich, but moved abroad in 1644 when 'compounding' was threatened. Jane became a very important ally to the King, raising money for him and also spying. It has recently been suggested that, having left her 'vile' husband, Jane Whorwood became the mistress to King Charles I.

Figure 2.5: Print of Holton House



Surprisingly, Holton House was not confiscated by Cromwell, nor was Lady Ursula fined. It seems that she decided that it was better to go with the flow and, effectively, made it open house to the Cromwell family in 1646. But the Whorwoods did pay a price with the family tombs and memorials in their chapel at West Bromwich being defaced. Cromwell's second-in-command, Henry Ireton, was engaged to Bridget, Cromwell's eldest daughter. The marriage contract was drawn up in April 1646 and, on 15 June 1646, the marriage took place in Holton House but not before there had been considerable discussion over which wedding service to use. The Book of Common Prayer had been replaced by the Directory of Public Worship.

Cromwell House in the High Street was so named because, it has been suggested, panelling from Holton House was used in it, but this refers to just one cupboard door. The building was originally thatched (part of the old roof structure remains) and its (much higher) roof space is alleged to have been used as a scarlet fever isolation hospital. Comments in the parish register reveal that there was scarlet fever in Wheatley in 1863, and smallpox in 1865.

The link to Cromwell Cottage in Church Road, long-since demolished, is said to have been originally built for one of Cromwell's servants.