

The West Lynn ‘Cannon’

by David Flintham – Project Director, King’s Lynn under Siege

On Sunday, 3 September 1643, ‘in the middle of the sermon, came a shot of 18lbs. weight in at the window over the west door of St Margaret’s church, and took the middle pillar a great part off and broke it in many hundred pieces’, so stated an unidentified letter quoted in *The Siege of King’s Lynn 1643*. This is one of the most famous episodes from the English Civil War siege of King’s Lynn, a siege that has been the focus of a community archaeology project since 2018 – King’s Lynn under Siege (KLuS).

The position of the west window of St. Margaret’s church is such that the cannon ball must have been fired from a position on the other side of the river Great Ouse, in the vicinity of St Peter’s church in what is now West Lynn. During the siege, the church’s fourteenth-century west tower would have been an excellent location for an observation position.

Local tradition has it that Oliver Cromwell himself was responsible for establishing a battery here during the siege. This is very unlikely since Cromwell was no artilleryman, and his talents were far more effectively employed establishing a cavalry screen in Lincolnshire to guard against the southward advance of the earl of Newcastle’s royalist army.

Whilst no traces of the battery have been identified so far, a discovery in 1967 might provide some evidence for its existence. The Norfolk Historic Environment Record has the following listing under NHER Number 63494:

Fragment of large cannon found in churchyard 1967.

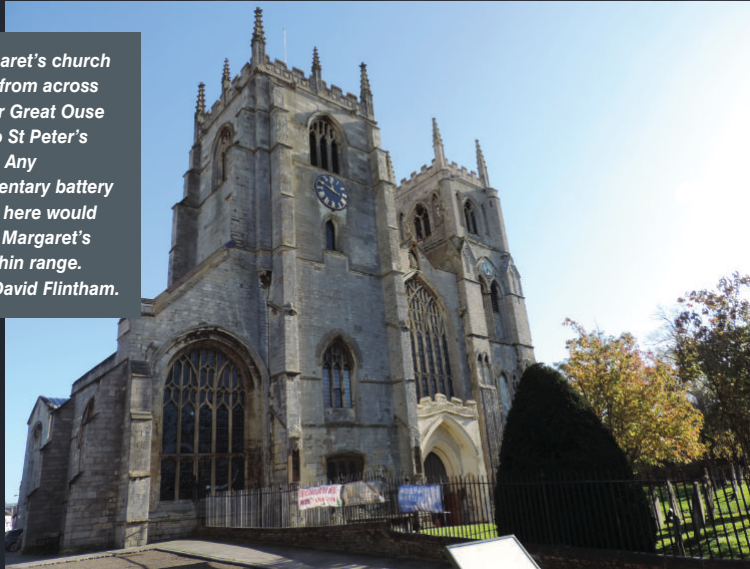
88cm (2’ 11”) long, apparent bore of 7.6cm (3”). Possibly indicates church was used as platform to bombard Lynn. Colonel Oliver Cromwell is known to have used artillery at West Lynn (then known as Old Lynn) during the siege of Lynn in 1643. It is possible that

St Peter’s churchyard was the site of Cromwell’s battery.

Ignoring the dubious reference to Cromwell, this is intriguing, and last year the fragment was located in the off-site storeroom of the Lynn Museum. The museum generously granted me access to view, measure and photograph it. What follows is based on this inspection which took place in November 2023. There is a caveat: the fragment is located at the back of the store, beneath a table, and its weight – it is solid iron – made it impossible to move during the inspection, so it has not been possible to measure or photograph it completely accurately.

The fragment measures approximately 88.9cm in length, with a width of 31.1cm at one end tapering to 22.86cm at the other. Running through the fragment is a bore of approximately 8.1cm which means that the

St Margaret’s church viewed from across the river Great Ouse close to St Peter’s church. Any parliamentary battery located here would have St Margaret’s well within range. Photo David Flintham.



It was somewhere in the churchyard of St Peter’s church that the fragment of what was thought to be a cannon from the siege was discovered in 1967. Photo David Flintham.



On 3 September 1643, a cannon ball struck the west window of St Margaret’s church in what was perhaps the most famous episode from the siege. Photo David Flintham.



St Peter’s church, West Lynn, as viewed from the north tower of St Margaret’s church (now Lynn Minster). It is thought that during the siege of August–September 1643, a parliamentary artillery battery was located in the vicinity of St Peter’s. The church tower would have been an ideal observation post. Photo David Flintham.



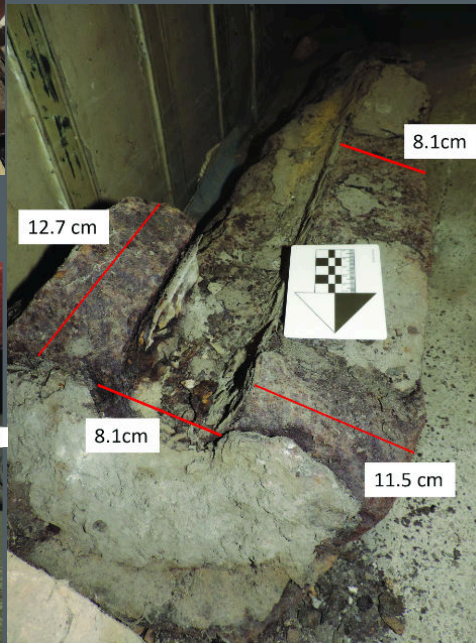
The 'cannon' lies beneath a table in the storage facility of the Lynn Museum. Photo David Flintham.



Looking towards the breech-end. The reinforce – likely to be the first reinforce – is clearly visible. Photo David Flintham.



An overhead view of the 'cannon', indicating its length and width. Due to access limitations, the measurements should not be considered exact. Photo David Flintham.



Looking from the breech-end of the 'cannon'. Could the relative straight end be the result of the cascabel having been cut off? Photo David Flintham

sides at the widest end of the fragment are 11.5cm wide.

If it was a fragment of a cannon, then it looks as though it has been cut off at the cascabel (the subassembly at the breech end). In Civil War terminology, the bore fits somewhere between a large minion and a small saker, and would take a shot weighing in the region of 4 lb. So, if it does prove to be a cannon, and if the contemporary account of events on 3 September 1643 are accurate, this wasn't the weapon which fired the cannonball through the west window.

The findings have been shared with experts at the Royal Armouries who, because of the absence of features associated with a cannon – such as trunnions or dolphins, although if this were part of the breech-end of a cannon, such features may not be present behind the first reinforce – are sceptical about it being a cannon. They point out that if it had exploded during use it would have burst or shattered, rather than splitting along its axis. And if the fragment isn't the result of a failure in use, sectioning a gun barrel in this manner would be difficult, so why do it?

The obvious alternative is that it is a fragment of iron pipe. Yet one of the arguments against it being a cannon equally apply against it being a piece of iron pipe: sectioning a pipe along its axis would be equally difficult. Added to this, given the size of the bore compared to its surrounds would make it a very hefty piece of pipe – would any pipe need sides of this thickness?

Instead of it being split, it could have been cast in two halves, only one half of which remains. Understanding the pressures created when a cannon is fired, it's hardly fathomable that it would be cast in two halves. But is there anything else that might be manufactured this way?

Whilst the Royal Armouries' conclusion is that this isn't a fragment of a cannon, it is still somewhat inconclusive. Others, however, are not quite as sceptical. An expert in seventeenth-century French artillery at the University of St. Andrews thinks its current state is not the result of a catastrophic failure, but the barrel might have cracked sufficiently that it was prised apart for some other purpose, or even for re-smelting – which ultimately didn't happen. There is some irregularity in the inner tube cavity which could have been as

a result of poor casting or an explosion. Added to this, the fact that it is tapered towards the breech end, and there seems to be the slightest sense of concavity where the powder 'chamber' would have been, suggests that this might well be the remains of a cannon.

It should be stressed that neither of the two experts have seen the cannon for real and both have been reliant on my photographs, several of which accompany this article.

It has been decided to share the findings to date with a wider audience to see if anyone could offer an opinion or share expertise as to what this fragment actually is. If it is not part of a cannon, then what is it? But if it is a fragment from a cannon, can it be dated to the mid-seventeenth century?

The results will help inform the investigation of this site, as well as informing both the Lynn Museum – who would be keen to put the fragment on display if it proved to be a fragment of Civil War cannon – and the Norfolk Historic Environment Record.

KLuS can be contacted via its webpage at www.vauban.co.uk/kings-lynn-under-siege or by e-mailing kingslynnundersiege@outlook.com.

The author is grateful for the opinions and contributions of Richard Noyce, curator of artillery, Royal Armouries, and Professor Guy Rowlands, University of St. Andrews. Thanks also to Dayna Woolbright and Oliver Bone of the Lynn Museum for allowing the author access to the item.

David Flintham is a military historian specialising in the fortifications of the 'English' Civil Wars. He is co-founder and project director of the King's Lynn under Siege community archaeology project, and he also serves on the committee of the Fortress Study Group. In 2022 he co-organised the first ever ECW Fortress symposium, and subsequently co-edited its proceedings. His latest book, *The Town Well Fortified*, was published by Helion in 2023.

Further Reading

Susan Yaxley (Editor), *The Siege of King's Lynn 1643*, (Dereham: Larks Press, 1993)

Norfolk Heritage Explorer at www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk.