

Fenland Fortress

Defending the Fens during the English Civil War

by David Flintham

On England's east coast, midway between the English Channel and the Scottish border, is a low-lying area of land which is essentially an inland extension of the Wash, England's largest bay. This area, the Fens, extends from Cambridge in the south to Lincoln in the north, and from the Cambridgeshire/Suffolk border to the east, to close to Stamford in the west, covering an area of nearly a million acres. The Fens are crossed by several substantial rivers, the Witham, Welland, Nene, and Great Ouse. Areas of higher ground poke through the peat or silt fen: town- and village- names ending in 'ey' or 'ea' are from the old English for 'island'.

In the years leading up to the English Civil War, the Fens was subject to drainage projects undertaken by capitalist prospectors, ranging from local landowners through to members of the aristocracy and even the King himself, intending to turn marshland into profitable farm land, which they could then enclose. Unsurprisingly, the drainage and enclosure of this common land was opposed by Fenlanders, and in Parliament they had a spokesman in a local M.P., Oliver Cromwell. Indeed, the drainage of the Fens, was one of the many causes of the Civil War.

Cromwell had his first taste of military success in August 1642 when he raised volunteers to prevent college plate being sent by Cambridge University to the King, and then seized the magazine of arms and ammunition held in Cambridge Castle. He was tasked to secure crossing on the rivers Cam and Great Ouse, and by January 1643, Cromwell was commissioned as the colonel of a regiment

of horse in the newly formed Army of the Eastern Association (the association would ultimately cover Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk).

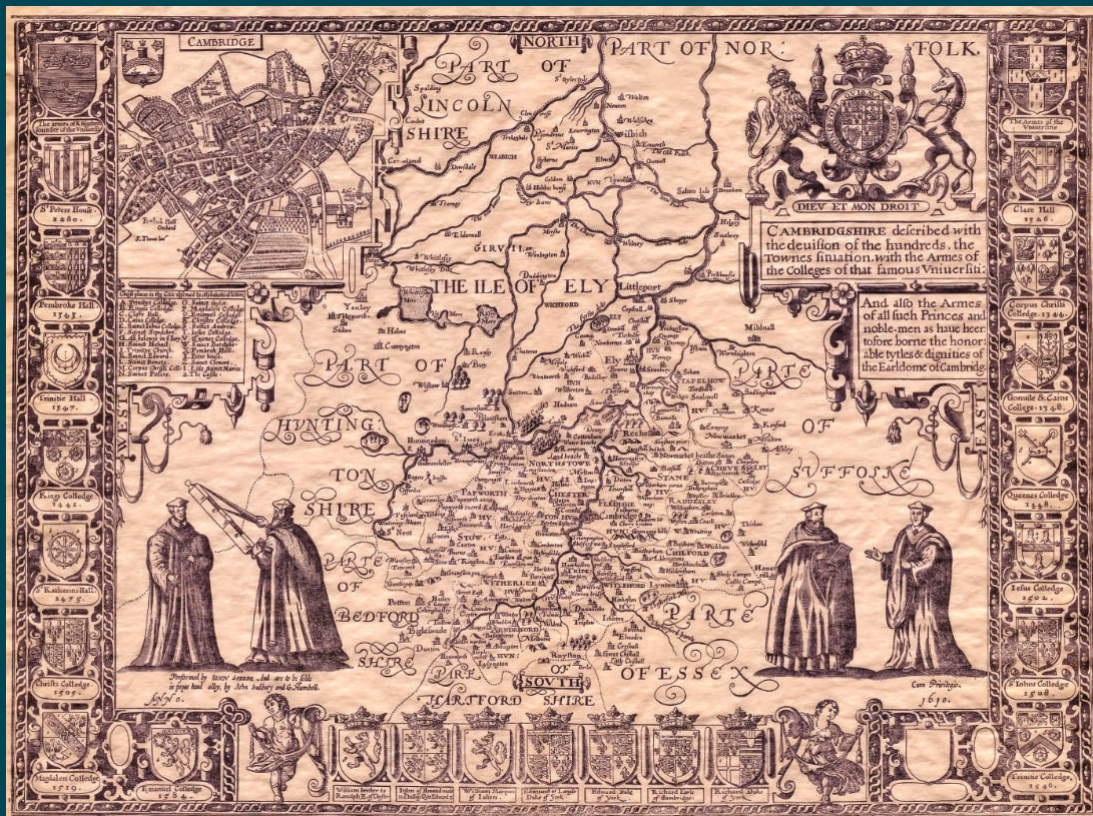
Yet this army was not destined to remain in East Anglia, and in spring, it was ordered to join the main parliamentary army preparing to besiege Reading, leaving Cromwell to look after East Anglia. In response to increasing royalist activity in Lincolnshire, a defensive line was established along the Great Ouse. Almost immediately, Cromwell secured Huntingdon and its important crossing of the river.

As the headquarters of the Eastern Association, Cambridge was the first place to be fortified, and in July 1643 its governor reported 'our town and castle are now very strongly fortified being encompassed with breastworks and bulwarks'. Cambridge Castle, an abandoned eleventh-century motte-and-bailey castle, was at the core of the defences: three bastions were added to the original curtain wall (the best preserved of these, the one to the north, stands to a height of 6m), whilst a ramp leading to the top of the motte might have been constructed, converting the motte into an artillery platform. Outside the castle, other earthwork defences were built, including a fort (known as 'Four Lamps Fort') which was constructed to the south-west of Midsomer Common.

In Huntingdon, the castle motte was converted into an artillery platform with the addition of an earth-built ramp. This overlooked the bridge over the Great Ouse, which itself had a span removed and replaced with a drawbridge. In addition, there was a fort on the area

Timeline

- 20 March**
Preston and Blackburn captured by the royalists
- 21 March**
Storm of Malmesbury
- 23 March**
Grantham taken by Lord Charles Cavendish and Sir John Henderson (R)
- 24 March**
Battle of Highnam House. Sir William Waller and Col. Edward Massie (P) capture Lord Herbert's (R) army
- 30 March**
Battle of Seacroft Moor. George Goring (R) defeats Sir Thomas Fairfax (P)
- 1 April**
Wigan taken by royalists
- 2 April**
Wakefield taken by the Earl of Newcastle (R).
- 3 April**
Storming of Birmingham (Battle of Camp Hill). Local parliamentarians defeated by Prince Rupert (R)
- 5 April**
Attack on Warrington by Brereton (P) repulsed
- 10 April**
Lichfield besieged by Prince Rupert (R). Surrenders 21 April.
- 11 April**
Skirmish at Littledean. Sir William Waller (P) holds off Prince Maurice (R)
- 11 April**
Battle of Ancaster Heath. Lord Cavendish (R) defeats Lord Willoughby (P)
- 13 April**
Battle of Ripple Field. Prince Maurice (R) defeats Waller (P)
- 15 April**
Siege of Reading (surrendered to parliamentarians 27 April)
- 20 April**
Skirmish at Whalley. Col. Shuttleworth (P) defeats the Earl of Derby (R)
- 23 April**
Battle of Launceston (Beacon Hill). Hopton (R) defeats Chudleigh and the Earl of Stamford (P)
- 25 April**
Battle of Sourton Down. Hopton (R) is ambushed by Chudleigh (P)
- 26 April**
Battle of Caversham Bridge. Royalist attempt to break into Reading fails
- 28 April**
Storm of Croyland Abbey by parliamentarians
- 2 May**
Siege of Old Wardour Castle (surrendered to parliamentarians 8 May by Lady Arundell)
- 6 May**
Battle of Middleton Cheney. Earl of Northampton (P) defeats a parliamentary force from Northampton attempting to capture Banbury.
- 13 May**
Skirmish at Grantham. Cromwell (P) defeats Lord Charles Cavendish (R)



John Speed's 1610 map of Cambridgeshire showing the location of many of the places mentioned in the text including Cambridge, Earith, Ely, Huntingdon, Stamford and Wisbech. The map clearly illustrates River Great Ouse as the dominant waterway, flowing northwards.
Image: Wikimedia Commons



Cambridge Castle was incorporated into the city's fortifications in 1643. This view shows the remains of the motte, and the edge of the east bastion to the left. Image by David Flintham



The bridge over the Great Ouse at Huntingdon. During the Civil War, a span was removed and replaced by a drawbridge. The span was later replaced but as this view shows, is different from the original (closest to the camera). Image by David Flintham

known as the Bowling Green, and possibly another to the northwest of the town. There were probably other earthworks as well, and the town's defences were completed by the town ditch, which surrounded the town on its northeast and northwest sides. West of the Great Ouse was the port of Wisbech on the river Nene, and this was duly seized in April 1643. Its eleventh-century castle was subsequently refortified, and its drawbridge was repaired.

Difficult to traverse, the Fens provided a natural barrier to anyone approaching East Anglia and its rich farmlands from the northwest and west. But the draining of the Fens made the land easier to traverse, thus leaving East Anglia exposed. Added to this, the royalist garrison at Newark-on-Trent was a constant thorn in the side of the Eastern Association and during the spring of 1643, these 'Newarkers' had occupied Stamford, Peterborough and Crowland. Whilst the first two were easily recaptured, Crowland, in southern Lincolnshire, endured a three-day 'siege'. During its initial period of royalist occupation under the governorship of Captain Thomas Stiles, Crowland (or Croyland), the remains of the abbey and the surrounding churchyard were enclosed by a system of ditch-fronted banks with bastions at each corner, built by a Mr Welby (or 'Captain Welbie') of Gedney and the King's tenants.

By July 1643, with most of Lincolnshire (save, most notably, Boston) in royalist hands, it looked as though East Anglia itself was about to be invaded, and in response, Parliament agreed to raise a new Eastern Association army under the Earl of Manchester. In early August 1643, Cromwell was made military governor of the Isle of Ely (several weeks later, Henry Ireton was appointed as the deputy governor). Ely was a natural fortress in the middle of the Fens, protecting the western approaches to Norfolk and Suffolk, as well as the route to Cambridge from the north. Given its position and importance, the approaches to Ely were defended by a system of forts. One of these, 16km to the southwest, was at Earith.

This sconce is probably the type of fortification most readily associated with the English Civil War,

even though it was a design that originated probably in the Netherlands. This is due, in part at least, to Newark's Queen's Sconce, which is probably the most well-known example of any Civil War fortification. In essence, the sconce is a square earthwork fort with an arrow-headed bastion at each corner.

As well as protecting Ely, Earith Bulwark (or the "fort of the Hermitage in the Isle of Ely" as one contemporary referred to it) also protected the Old Bedford River (this was part of the drainage of the Fens and was intended to improve navigation on part of the Great Ouse). It is likely that this sconce was designed by Captain John Hopes and Richard Clampe (the latter was a physician and mathematician from King's Lynn). Covering an area of 1.66ha (as a comparison, the Queen's Sconce covers an area of some 1.4ha), it is a square fort, each side being about 60m in length, with the corner bastions measuring 20m across. Outside, the rampart drops down some 2.5–2.75m to the bottom of the ditch, which is 5m wide at the bottom. The ditch (which is normally dry, but floods in wet weather) is surrounded by an outer bank which follows the line of the inner rampart. From the north-west side of the fort, a further earthwork projects for approximately 100m; this might be a type of outwork known as a hornwork, or alternatively some sort of covered way. During the 1650s, Scottish (then Dutch) prisoners of war were quartered in the fort whilst they laboured on the New Bedford River.

Around the same time, a fort was built at Horsey Hill. This was situated about midway between Peterborough and Whittlesey, protecting the ancient Fen Causeway, a narrow strip of land between Whittlesey Mere and the canalised River Nene. Horsey Hill is a rare example of a Civil War five-sided fort (it is one of just five examples in the British Isles built before 1650), and occupies an area of 2.3ha, with each of the curtain ramparts about 110m in length and rising to 4m about the base of the ditch. There was a further defensive work closer to Peterborough at Stanground, whilst Whittlesey itself was garrisoned for a time.

The road northwest from Ely to Chatteris (still known as 'Ireton's Way') was covered by a bulwark at Chatteris Ferry, and another at Thompson's Coate (Witcham). South of Ely, the approaches were secured by further earthworks at Aldreth High Bridge, Elford Closes, and Willingham (there is an Iron Age fort called Blesar's Hill just east of Willingham – this was occupied during Hereward's rebellion in the eleventh century and was quite possibly reused in 1643). Just north of Little Thetford, at Braham Farm, is another earthwork (also associated with Hereward) which was adapted in 1643.

From Chatteris, the road turns roughly north and heads to March. Just to the south-east of the town, is the site of a fort sometimes referred to as 'Battery Hills'. This is another sconce, measuring 60m (east to west) by 35m (north to south), covering an area of 0.23ha, and surrounded by a



LiDAR is a technology that uses laser light to create 3d maps of the landscape. Above are LiDAR images of Earith Bulwark (left) and Horsey Hill Fort (right). Images by ARCHI MAPS UK



Crowland (or Croyland) Abbey looking west. The remains of the eastern bastion are visible in the foreground in front of the retaining wall. Image by David Flintham



The Red Tower was used as a magazine by the Royalists during the 1643 siege of King's Lynn. It was subsequently incorporated with the new fortifications. The moat is clearly visible, whilst the remains of the bastion are just visible through the trees. Image by David Flintham



The motte of Huntingdon Castle was converted into an artillery platform during the Civil War. The top of the motte provides a clear view of the River Great Ouse and the bridge. Image by David Flintham



Timeline

16 May
Battle of Stratton. Hopton (R) defeats Chudleigh and Stamford (P) securing Cornwall for the King

21 May
Wakefield, attacked and taken by Sir Thomas Fairfax (P) who then withdrew to Leeds

27 May
Warrington, taken by parliamentarians

4 June
Battle of Cloghlea (Ireland). Earl of Castlehaven (IC) defeats Sir Charles Vavasour (IG)

Queen Henrietta Maria leaves York bound for Oxford, with royalist army and munitions. Arrives Newark (16 Jun)

11 June
Skirmish at Chewton Mendip. Inconclusive skirmish between Prince Maurice (R) and Sir William Waller (P)

13 June
Battle of Clones (Ireland). Laggan Army under Sir William Stewart (IG) defeats Owen Roe O'Neill's (IC) Ulster Army

18 June
Battle of Chalgrove Field. Major John Gunter (P) defeated by Prince Rupert (R). Col. John Hampden (P) is wounded at the battle and later dies

22 June
Howley House, near Batley (West Yorks) captured by the Earl of Newcastle (R)

23 June
1st Siege of Corfe Castle (siege abandoned 4 August)

28 June
Parliamentarian John Hotham arrested for High Treason against Parliament

30 June
Battle of Adwalton Moor. Earl of Newcastle (R) defeats the Fairfax's (P)

3 July
Bradford taken by the Earl of Newcastle (R)

4 July
Battle of Burton Bridge. Queen Henrietta Maria's royalist army, led by Tyldesley, forces the passage of the River Trent

5 July
Battle of Lansdown Hill. Sir Ralph Hopton (R) fights an inconclusive engagement with Sir William Waller (P)

9 July
Skirmish at Rowde. Hopton's army hold off the parliamentarians allowing the royalists to reach Devizes

10 July
Siege of Devizes (abandoned 13 July following the battle of Roundway Down)

13 July
Battle of Roundway Down. Lord Wilmot (R) defeats Sir William Waller (P)

20 July
Gainsborough, taken by Lord Willoughby (P)

26 July
Storm of Bristol. The city is taken by assault by the royalists after a short three-day siege (23-26 July)

1st Siege of Brampton Bryan (siege abandoned 9 September)

shallow ditch, averaging 8m wide. The bastions survive at the northeastern and southeastern corners, whilst there is a less defined bastion at the south-west corner, and even fainter traces of a fourth bastion to the north-west. The sconce gives the impression of having never been completed. There were further forts at Chesterton, west of Peterborough (possibly a flanked redoubt overlooking the River Nene), and Upware, between Cambridge and Ely (this was a bastioned square fort overlooking the River Cam).

East Anglia was certainly not solid in its support for Parliament: protests by the Fenlanders continued (one such outbreak, in Whittlesey in May 1643 required the intervention of the Wisbech garrison), and there was plenty of support for the King. This, and with a royalist army close by, culminated in a coup in King's Lynn in August 1643 which led to a siege which lasted a month. Given the urgency of the situation, Manchester had no option but to form his new army at the siege.

Once the town was back in parliamentarian hands, it was time to refortify King's Lynn and turn it into a logistical hub for the Eastern Association. At the outbreak of the Civil Wars, its defences comprised of a mixture of natural river defences, bolstered by some earthen ramparts, stone gates and a short stretch of masonry wall. These were strengthened, and a new line of earthworks built along the northern edge of the town.

Parliament had authorised the refortification of King's Lynn in July 1643, but plans were interrupted by the siege, with work on the defences only commencing in September. The town was ultimately encompassed by a circuit of fortifications designed by Clampe, more than four kilometres in length, and including seven bastions. Use was made of the existing fortifications, but entirely new lines were constructed to the north and southwest of the town, as well as a new fort outside the town's South Gate. Clampe's plan for the south-west bastion still exists, and this shows the scheme as comprising of multiple layers of ramparts, ditches and moats; in total more than 56m across, although archaeological investigations in 2021 and 2022 showed that this was as wide as 60m in places. It is likely that the fortifications were complete enough to be able to take artillery by January 1644, and were probably the most sophisticated system of fortifications to be found anywhere in Britain at the time.

To protect the western approaches to King's Lynn, and to defend the causeway crossing the Nene as it flows into the Wash, a further fort was constructed 10km to the west, near Walpole Crosskeys.

With Norfolk secure, it was time for the Army of the Eastern Association to go on the offensive and drive the royalists out of Lincolnshire. The war in Lincolnshire during 1643 and into 1644 was fluid to say the least. Armies crossed into the county from the north, the west, and the southwest, battlefield successes were often negated by events elsewhere, whilst fortresses were besieged, held, captured or abandoned.

Despite the earlier period of fortification, the borders of the Eastern Association were never completely assured, which meant that its army had to keep its lines of communication back to East Anglia secure, and in March 1644, it was shaken by a fresh crisis. Prince Rupert, having defeated a parliamentarian army outside Newark, now had East Anglia within his grasp: the fortresses that might have stood in his way – Gainsborough, Lincoln,

Bolingbroke Castle, and Crowland were abandoned or captured by the royalists, leaving the way open to Wisbech and Ely.

In response to this threat, several small earthwork forts were built west of Wisbech, including Dowsdale (north of Thorney), Cloughs Cross (just north of Parson Drive), and Guyhirn. The isolated locations of these is highlighted by the fact that they had to be supplied by boat. It is likely that Wisbech itself was further protected at this time: the approaches to the port from the north and northwest were protected by the construction of a redoubt at Horseshoe Sluice, and a small fort was built at Leverington. As it turned out, however, Rupert's attention was focused elsewhere, and he retired to Shrewsbury.

By the end of the summer of 1644, the threat to the Eastern Association had lessened considerably, and by the autumn, the east and north east of England was largely secure (although Crowland was retaken by the royalists in October: the surrounding marshes prevented an assault, so the garrison was starved out, surrendering at the end of the year). This allowed the Army of the Eastern Association to switch its sphere of operations to the Thames Valley, with Reading taking over from King's Lynn as the main logistical centre. Despite the continued threat from Newark, the Fens were not seriously threatened again.

In August 1645, following the disaster at Naseby, the royalists raided the Eastern Association. Led by the King himself, the royalists passed through Stamford. There was a brief skirmish at Stilton, and after passing Sawtry, where a gun platform had been built early in the war to protect the Great North Road, they approached Huntingdon from the north. On the 24th the Royalists attacked. Even though 'a large ditch encompassed it, lately scoured and cast up, and a breast worke and gate in the road', they had little trouble in overcoming the town's defences. They departed the next day. But this incident serves as a footnote, rather than a conclusion.

The late Professor Christopher Duffey once described the English Civil War as "a war of trenches, ramparts, palisades, bombardments and blockades." An appreciation of this is fundamental in understanding just how the Civil Wars were fought, and why, ultimately, there were perhaps as many as forty-two fortresses across the Fens. These included examples of virtually every fortress type: from fortified bridge to re-purposed castle, and from urban fortification to artillery fort. Parliament's ultimate victory in the Civil War was due in a large part to the successes of the Army of the Eastern Association. However, this army could not have operated successfully unless its East Anglian homelands were secure and, therefore, the strategy of turning the Fens into a fortified border was a success.

Further Reading

David Flintham, *The Town Well Fortified: The Fortresses of the Civil Wars in Britain 1639-1660*, (Warwick: Helion and Company Limited, 2023)

Mike Osborne: *Defending Lincolnshire*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2010), and *Defending Cambridgeshire*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2013)

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