

King's Lynn under siege

How a small field in North Lynn illuminated Civil War fortress engineering

This year marks the 380th anniversary of the Siege of King's Lynn, an important but often overlooked engagement during the Civil War. David Flintham presents the latest findings of a community archaeology project exploring the town's fortifications.

Conflict Archaeology is a relatively new area of archaeology; in Britain, at least, it is more commonly known as Battlefield Archaeology, reflecting what is often

its main focus. Yet with a few notable exceptions, British battles were relatively short affairs, most lasting just hours. Sieges, on the other hand, could last for days, weeks, or even months, meaning that they leave a potentially

BELOW Excavations exploring the remains of King's Lynn's Civil War defences in July 2022. While 40°C temperatures restricted activity during the early part of week one, work continued with enthusiasm undimmed.



ALL IMAGES: KLuS unless otherwise stated.



IMAGE: The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto

ABOVE Wenceslaus Hollar's *The Groundplat of Kings Lyn*. Despite several histories still claiming to the contrary, it does not portray the town at the time of the siege in August/September 1643, but rather depicts King's Lynn c.1645 when its re-fortification was complete.

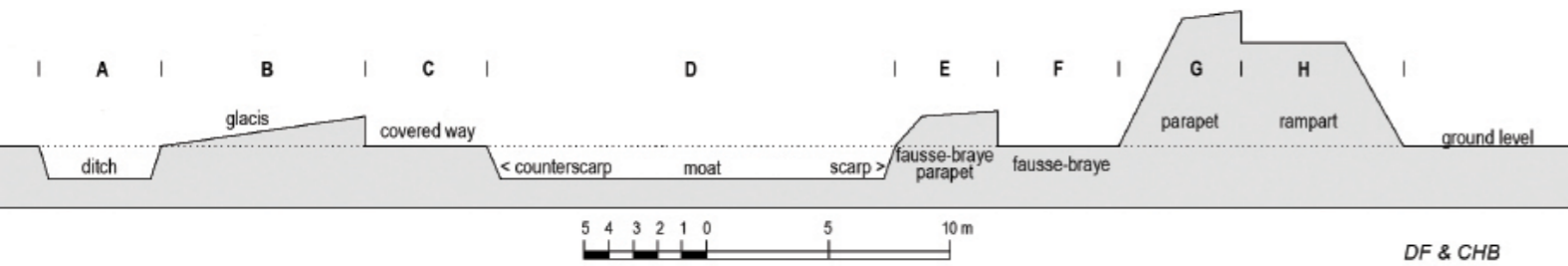
greater archaeological 'footprint'. Sieges were also the most prominent type of action during the so-called 'English' Civil Wars (so-called because this series of conflicts started in Scotland in 1639 and ended in Ireland some 14 years later); in England, for example, for every major battle there were eight sieges. Investigating a Civil War siege site had long been the ambition of a group of archaeologists and historians that I belong to, and ultimately good fortune brought us to one such location: the Norfolk town of King's Lynn. There, in January 2018, the late Neil Faulkner and I founded a community-based archaeological research project called King's Lynn

under Siege (KLuS).

Situated near the mouth of the Great River Ouse as it enters the Wash, King's Lynn was not one of England's great walled medieval towns. Instead, its fortifications evolved organically. To the west, it was protected by the river, whilst several streams and smaller rivers were diverted to help shield the settlement to the east and south. Where there were gaps, earth banks topped with wooden palisades were erected, and finally, to control passage in and out of the town, a number of gateways were built, most notably on the London and Norwich roads. During the latter years of the Middle Ages, these gates were rebuilt in brick and stone (the South Gate remains a local landmark), and a short stretch of masonry wall was constructed on either side of the East Gate (itself demolished in 1800). In summary, we can envisage the defences as being D-shaped, with the Great Ouse

forming the straight side of the letter.

As Kings Lynn entered the post-medieval period, it was no longer one of England's chief ports (it had declined since its Hanseatic League heyday), but it was nevertheless still important to river and coastal shipping. Nine counties could be reached by boat from King's Lynn, whilst its further-ranging vessels sailed up and down the east coast of England, and the town also traded across the North Sea. Its defences also evolved to reflect this importance; while the town was not included in Henry VIII's coastal defence programme of the 1540s, two additional forts were constructed nearby during the 1580s and 1620s. Then at the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642, like so many other towns, King's Lynn's defences were repaired and improved – although even these proved insufficient to withstand what followed. In the summer of 1643, a bloodless coup saw



ABOVE Richard Clampe's plan of King's Lynn's southern defences, commissioned after the 1643 siege of the town, pictured on display in the local archives. **LEFT** is a profile of the fortifications drawn by Charles Blackwood, based on David Flintham's analysis of Clampe's plan.

DEFENSIVE ACTION

Parliament had actually authorised the re-fortification of King's Lynn in July 1643 – a scheme that was interrupted by the siege – but with control of the town re-established, local physician and mathematician Richard Clampe was commissioned to design the new defences. Wenceslas Hollar's well-known map *The Groundplat of Kings Lyn* (c.1645) depicts the town following the completion of these works. To explain the thinking behind them: until the advent of long-range artillery during the 19th century, the principle of artillery fortification was to keep the enemy cannon as far away as possible and to make targets difficult to aim at (basically, if you couldn't see it, then you couldn't shoot it). By the time of the Civil Wars, these ideas had been evolving across the Continent for 150 years: the new concept was of defence in depth, employing multiple layers of ditches, moats, and ramparts (rather like the proverbial onion), both to make it difficult for hostile forces to attack, and also to enable the defenders to move to-and-fro under cover.

In Britain, earthwork fortifications were popular as they were easier and quicker to construct than masonry walls (and, generally speaking, better at resisting artillery fire); one contemporary commented that clay was the 'grave to cannon balls'. Although, typically, the norm for a Civil War fortification was no more

IMAGE: Kevin Effleet



sophisticated than a simple earthwork rampart fronted by a ditch, Clampe planned something very different for King's Lynn. His solution was an earthwork bastioned enceinte (the 17th-century equivalent of a town wall punctuated with towers) which would completely enclose the town on its north, east, and southern sides. Measuring some 4.36 km in length, his design was based on the latest Continental methods, with multiple layers of earthworks (occupying a total width of 56.16m). It would transform the town into the strongest fortress in East Anglia.

Early on in our research, we came across Clampe's wonderfully detailed plan for the south-west bastion. It is measured in perches (easily converted into metres), whilst his terminology is standard for the time (the Fausse-Braye is a lower rampart intended to defend the moat). From this plan we were able to draw a scale profile of the fortifications – but the physical remains of the south-west bastion itself proved elusive, and our first piece of fieldwork, a magnetometry survey looking for it in May 2019, was inconclusive. As for the north-east bastion, the onset

of the COVID-19 pandemic restricted our initial investigations to desktop research, but in early 2021 new plans for a non-invasive exploration of the site were drawn up and submitted to the Norfolk Historic Environment Record. Not long afterwards I was contacted by Solstice Heritage, the archaeological consultants for Channel 4's *The Great British Dig*, and during the spring and summer



LEFT David Flintham with the presenters of the Great British Dig during their excavation on the bastion site in September 2021: (L-R) Dr Chloe Duckworth, Richard Taylor, David, Hugh Dennis, and Natasha Billson.

BELOW The main Great British Dig trench showing the 'cuts' from the various components of the fortifications. These proved to be very close to the profile developed from Clampe's plan.

of 2021 we worked closely with them, culminating in a five-day dig in September of that year. At last we had the chance to excavate some of King's Lynn's Civil War-era defences. So, what did we find?

AMBITIOUS EARTHWORKS

Although short in duration, our dig had the potential to uncover significant remains; if Clampe's plan was proved to be accurate, then these fortifications would be the most sophisticated Civil War defences built anywhere in the British Isles, with only Oxford and Newport Pagnell coming close. As work began, we

opened a long 30m by 1.8m trench running roughly east-west, and this revealed that the moat in this part of the fortifications was wider than what the plan indicated for the south-western bastion (20m compared with 16m). Its creation would have been a major undertaking – based on my analysis of 30 defensive ditches at Bristol, Carmarthen, Exeter, Gloucester, Leicester, Newark, Northampton, Oxford, Plymouth, Reading, Taunton, and Worcester, the average width of a defensive ditch/moat of this period was 6.91m. I have identified just one other example of a 20m-wide ditch, at St Michael's Square in Gloucester – so far, such imposing constructions seem to have been something of an anomaly (though it should be remembered that all

King's Lynn become the only openly Royalist town in East Anglia, but in September 'Roundhead' forces laid siege to its walls, and the town soon fell once more to the Earl of Manchester and the Parliamentarian Army of the Eastern Association.

The speed of Parliament's efforts to re-take King's Lynn should come as no surprise, given the value of the town as a logistical hub. Raw materials (including Peak District lead, and local

linseed) were brought in and then shipped to London, while weapons and munitions were imported from abroad. This was a vital centre through which all manner of supplies could be sent on to the Army of the Eastern Association as it advanced through Lincolnshire and Yorkshire in 1643-1644; the siege of York in 1644 was supplied through King's Lynn, as was Cromwell's invasion of Scotland in 1650.

IMAGE: Charles Blackwood, Fortress Study Group

RIGHT A view of the 2022 trench looking roughly northwards. This excavation added a second 'rampart post' to known evidence; their respective positions are shown here, 3.35m (11ft) apart – roughly the length of a ramrod for a larger cannon of the time.



dimensions include the effects of 380 years of erosion.

There were similarities with the plan, however: the 'cuts' shown for the *fausse-braye* and main rampart matched what we found in the ground almost exactly. Another insight came from the discovery of a wooden post and cross-piece at the (outer) base of the rampart, which suggested that this earthwork had been constructed around some sort of wooden framework. Thanks to the success of the 2021 excavation, the landowners generously invited us to return the following year. We were not short of help for these new excavations; just a few miles to the north of King's Lynn lies Sedgeford, home of SHARP (the Sedegford Historical and Archaeological Research Project, which for over 25 years has been investigating an Anglo-Saxon settlement and cemetery – see CA xxx and xxx). Several members of the team had previous experience digging there, and thanks to Neil's involvement with both projects, it was decided to run our 2022 'season' under the SHARP umbrella. Sadly, Neil died at the beginning of 2022 and so was unable to see his dream of a Civil War siege project come to fruition – but in the spring we pushed on to help realise this vision.

The first step, in March, was a geophysical survey of the whole site, which informed our plans for the summer (importantly, showing us where not to dig). Whilst the

RIGHT Overlooking 2022's trench at the end of week one. The dotted line indicates the alignment of the rampart posts.

2021 investigation had focused on establishing the width of the fortifications, 2022 would concentrate on the line of the rampart, both in terms of finding more clues as to how it had been constructed, and what happened to the fortifications after the Civil Wars. Due to the unprecedented high temperatures of July 2022, though, our plans had to be radically altered, and any thoughts of digging trenches by hand were quickly abandoned. A mini-digger was employed to get things going, and even



IMAGE: Gary Rossin

this overheated. Nonetheless, work continued. We located our main trench was alongside the one we had opened in 2021, uncovering not only the 'rampart post' discovered the previous year, but a second one some 3.35m away. Both rampart posts were carefully examined in situ, and three test-pits were dug to look for more examples. While this exercise proved unsuccessful, it did provide some useful information about the overall site which will be valuable for future investigation.

What can we learn from the posts? Their presence, in alignment at the foot of the rampart, is instructive, hinting at a possible construction method for a Civil War rampart – a subject curiously absent from contemporary accounts. Simply digging a ditch and piling the excavated soil behind it to form a rampart is insufficient to form a structure that would be strong enough for defensive purposes, or weather-proof. In the absence of further evidence of internal frameworks or revetments, my theory is that the rampart was constructed as a series



ABOVE The most notable find from KLuS' dig were two pieces from a 17th-century onion bottle, probable evidence of both the site's occupation after the Civil Wars, and the town's wine trade. Similar bottles have been recovered from the 1682 wreck of The Gloucester (see p.47).

of 'steps' with the posts instead supporting planking which in turn would support a level of hammered clay. The next level would then be added on top of the previous one, albeit staggered, so to form a slope. This process would be repeated until the steps had reached the required height, and then a parapet would be constructed on top, and the structure covered with the turf which had been removed prior to construction. Sometime in the future, we would like to test this theory through some experimental archaeology.

As for artefacts, while this isn't a site that is rich in finds, 71 were recorded, including pottery, clay-pipe stems, some ironwork, and cockle and oyster shells. The star find of the fortnight were two sizeable pieces of a late 17th-century onion bottle, demonstrating occupation of the site during the post-Restoration period, and also a link with the town's role as a wine-importer.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND FUTURE PLANS

Above all, our research has demonstrated the consistency between Clampe's plan and subsequent maps

of the town, and that his design for the south-west bastion was indeed repeated around the circuit; any suspicions that his plan was little more than a theory, invented from the comfort of his town house have been firmly laid to rest. But we now have a further question: given the width of the fortifications that we have exposed, the 90o turn where their south-north course turns to run east-west would have occupied a large area. Unfortunately, there simply was not the time to explore this in 2022, so this is something for future work to look into.

Our investigations also helped to shed more light on the fortifications post-Civil War afterlife. More than 70 years later, Daniel Defoe visited the town during his Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain, and noted how strong the fortifications were – indicating that the defences, albeit overgrown and weathered, lasted well into the 18th century. Then, with local people realising that the fortifications represented a huge and conveniently located amount of standing mature clay (which makes better bricks than new clay), this material was harvested to fuel just such an industry. A 1797 map (William Faden's Plan of the Town of Lynn) shows the existence of a brick kiln inside the bastion, and indeed the 2022 dig found clear evidence of brick-making taking place on the site. Most of the finds that we uncovered (particularly from the western half of the trench) do not actually reflect the Civil War period but this later phase of activity, including several misfired bricks, charcoal, and clinker.

Unsurprisingly, the project has generated a great deal of interest. During the 2022 season we welcomed visits from a number of local groups and societies, and from the town's two excellent museums. We were also involved in a project run by the County Council involving local

young historians who devised a Top Trumps-style card games based on the siege of King's Lynn. Nationally, events in King's Lynn should now be seen as a turning point of the Civil War, and the design and construction of its fortifications after the siege, presented at a nation-wide symposium last year, are very much 'of national importance'. Planning for the next couple of years is underway – watch this space for further updates on the King's Lynn defences.

BELOW KLuS is very much part of the town's heritage community. During 2022 the project supported a team of young historians who devised a card game based on the siege of King's Lynn.



Further information

August this year marks the 380th anniversary of the Siege of King's Lynn, and discussion is currently underway as to how best to mark this event – it is likely to involve some form of living history or re-enactment. And while we haven't yet finished with the northeast bastion site, there is much to be discovered elsewhere in and around King's Lynn. The success of KLuS is due to the interest, keenness, commitment, generosity, knowledge, and experience of a group of fantastic people. Thank you to all involved. For more information, you can contact the project at kingslynnundersiege@outlook.com

Source

David Flintham is co-founder and project director of the King's Lynn under Siege community archaeology project.