

The Strongest Fortress in East Anglia

King's Lynn

by David Flinham



Situated close to the Wash in north-west Norfolk, the port of King's Lynn today doesn't even register in the list of the UK's major ports, but during the later middle ages, Bishop's Lynn was one of the most important ports in England – two of its Hanseatic League warehouses still exist. By the seventeenth century, King's Lynn's – it was renamed during the reign of King Henry VIII – role as an international port was declining, although it was still important to both coastal and river traffic. Strategically, it controlled the route into East Anglia from the north-west.

Defensively, King's Lynn was well appointed, protected by rivers to the west, south and north. Even to the east, natural water courses could be diverted to provide protection, and during the middle ages, these were supplemented by simple ramparts. They were later strengthened by some stone walls, with substantial gateways – including the fifteenth-century South Gate – protecting routes in and out of the town. Additions to the defences during the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were limited to a separate battery and a blockhouse to protect the town from the sea.

At the outbreak of the English Civil War, and contrary to popular belief, East Anglia was not solidly behind Parliament; in some places support for Parliament was distinctly lukewarm. Such were the concerns about King's Lynn's loyalties that in March 1643, Oliver Cromwell was sent to the town to investigate rumours of a royalist conspiracy. Whilst these rumours were unfounded at the time, just five months later, with the marquess of Newcastle's royalist army advancing through Lincolnshire, a coup installed the royalist Sir Hamon L'Estrange as governor, and arrested the town's MPs – although they subsequently escaped by boat.

During the previous autumn, the town's drawbridges and gates had been repaired, and additional defences added, including a new line of fortifications (designed by an engineer named 'Christian') to the north of the Fisherfleet, then the northern edge of the town. But having shut the town's gates to Parliament, work was stepped up, and any houses that might obstruct the



Robert Rich, earl of Warwick and Lord High Admiral by Sir Anthony van Dyck.



Edward Montagu, earl of Manchester by Sir Peter Lely.

defences were demolished. In August 1643, the town was garrisoned by 1,500 soldiers and three or four troops of horse, with forty pieces of ordnance – including guns commandeered from ships – 1,200 muskets and 500 barrels of gunpowder 'with bullet answerable'.

Parliament's reaction was measured. A fleet commanded by Robert Rich, earl of Warwick, was sent into the Wash to cut the town off from the sea, although one royalist ship did successfully run the blockade. But rather than besieging the town, Edward Montagu, earl of Manchester, commander of the Army of the Eastern Association, at first decided on a blockade. On 19 August, he sent a small force under the command of Captain William Poe to King's Lynn. But the parliamentarians had seriously underestimated the strength of the defenders and their resolution, and whilst reconnoitring the town, they were attacked by a royalist sally. As a consequence, Poe wrote to the Essex Committee to request reinforcements.

Soon afterwards, Manchester arrived with his army. Establishing his headquarters seven kilometres to the south of King's Lynn at Setchly, the siege commenced on 28 August. It is difficult to accurately determine the initial size of Manchester's

army as it included Trained Bands from Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk who may in fact have ignored the orders to muster, whilst some of those who did would have been of questionable value. One unit that did perform well was a company of the Norfolk Trained Bands commanded by Captain Sir Thomas Gaudy and for their role in the capture of the town his men would receive 10 shillings.

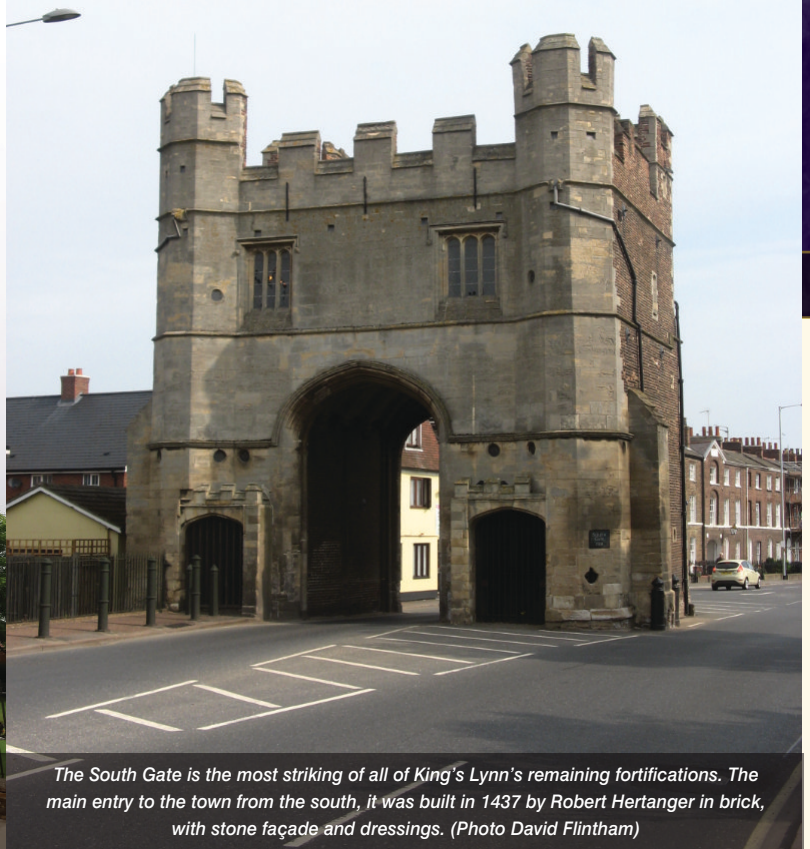
Manchester occupied Old Lyn – now West Lynn – on the opposite side of the Great Ouse, and here established a battery, probably close to St Peter's church. This battery:
Kept the Towne in continual Alarmes, and did so terrifie the people with their shot and Granadoes, that they durst hardly abide in their houses that were towards that side.

On 3 September, a cannon ball fired from the battery across the river in Old Lyn went through the west window of St Margaret's church – now Lynn Minster – whilst a service was in progress, causing the congregation to flee in terror.

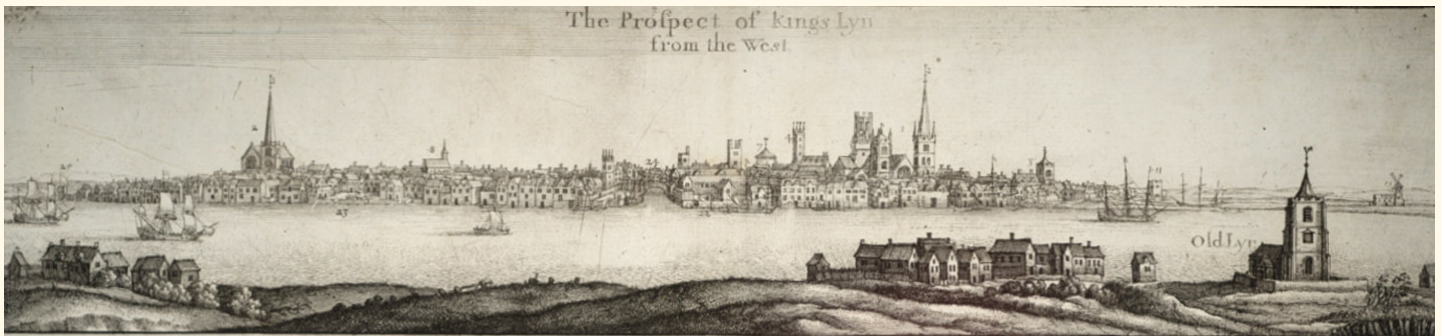
In addition to the battery in Old Lyn, the parliamentary siege works included an earthwork to guard against a sally by the garrison through the East Gate, and likely something similar in front of the South Gate as well. To the north of the town,



Lynn Minster – formerly St. Margaret's church, and burial place of Richard Clampe, whose tomb was lost in the eighteenth century. (Photo David Flintham)



The South Gate is the most striking of all of King's Lynn's remaining fortifications. The main entry to the town from the south, it was built in 1437 by Robert Hertanger in brick, with stone façade and dressings. (Photo David Flintham)



Wenceslas Hollar's Groundplat of Kings Lynn (P987b), c1645, depicts the town following the completion of Richard Clampe's post-siege fortifications. (With thanks to The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto)

The various sites mentioned in the text are identified:
 a-a-a: Post-siege (c1644) fortifications
 b: 1642-43 'siege' fortifications
 c: North-eastern Bastion
 d: East Gate

e: Medieval masonry town wall
 f: Red Chapel
 g: South Gate and Fort
 h: South-western Bastion
 i: St Margaret's Church
 j: Old Lyn/West Lynn



The most well-known remnant of King's Lynn's Civil War fortifications is the bastion by the sixteenth-century Red Mount Chapel. The earthwork and – now water-filled – ditch are visible to the right of the tower in this photograph. (Photo David Flintham)



The project is investigating six further sites. It is hoped that some fieldwork at one of these, the site of the North-eastern Bastion, might be possible later in 2021. (Photo David Flintham)



In May 2019, the project undertook a magnetometry survey of the site of the South-western Bastion – featured in Richard Clampe's original plan. Unfortunately, the results were inclusive. (Photo David Flintham)



Remains of ECW bastion in the middle distance – viewed from Red Mount Chapel. (Photo David Flinham)

Manchester established a battery on ‘a hill of firme ground’, although with limited effect as the inhabitants were ‘making up as fast as we should have beaten downe’.

By 7 September, the parliamentarians were within musket-shot of the town, and had blocked off its eastern and southern approaches. They also diverted the Gayward River, cutting off the town’s fresh water supply. Having had his summons to surrender rejected three times, and with his army now numbering perhaps as many as 8,000, Manchester decided to take King’s Lynn by storm. His plan was to attack the town simultaneously from three places: the south and east gates would both be attacked, whilst an amphibious assault would be launched from across the river. He let it be known that an assault was imminent, and that the royalists should remove the women and children to a place of safety, or suffer the consequences.

In the event, Manchester’s threat worked, and with no relief coming from the marquess of Newcastle, on 16 September 1643, L’Estrange surrendered and Manchester’s army entered the town.

For a short time following the surrender, the earl of Manchester was acting governor of King’s Lynn, but once he left with the army, Colonel Valentine Walton (or Wauden), Cromwell’s brother-in-law, succeeded him, with his regiment forming part of the town’s garrison. Walton immediately set about inspecting the existing fortifications, attending to damaged or weak-spots.

King’s Lynn now took on a role which would be critical to the parliamentary war-effort: it became the chief logistical base for the Army of the Eastern Association as it campaigned through Lincolnshire and Yorkshire.

Its location close to the coast and also at the head of an extensive river system meant that it could receive goods from

London and from abroad, and could then quickly redistribute them inland, or around the coast – apparently, during the seventeenth century it was easier for Cambridge students to send their trunks downstream to King’s Lynn and then by sea to London than it was to send them overland to the capital directly. Keelboats from King’s Lynn supplied the magazine at Cambridge. Whilst in the early summer of 1644 ships took arms and munitions to the parliamentary armies besieging York: coasters took the munitions from King’s Lynn to Hull, where the cargo was transferred to keelboats for the final stage of the journey.

The Eastern Association obtained its arms from the region’s provincial merchants, but also sourced them from abroad: for example, in early 1644, Bartholomew Wormald, a King’s Lynn merchant, bought nearly £8,000 worth of arms over from the Netherlands. King’s Lynn’s merchants supplied other materiel, sourcing both locally and further afield. Peak District lead, for instance, was sent overland to Stamford from where it was transported in keelboats to King’s Lynn and then shipped to London. Locally grown linseed (its oil was important for weather-proofing gun carriages and wagons) was also shipped south.

But these merchants didn’t always have things their own way, and royalist privateers operating from Scarborough preyed on traders; such was this nuisance that King’s Lynn actually part-funded the parliamentary force sent to besiege Scarborough in 1645. There was a threat of a further royalist uprising at the end of 1644, when Sir Hamon L’Estrange’s youngest son, Roger, received a Royal commission to lead a coup in King’s Lynn. But this went the way of so much royalist intrigue and ended in a humiliating fiasco.

Because of its logistical importance, and its potential vulnerability to attack from the north-west, Parliament took steps to also improve the town’s defences. These were

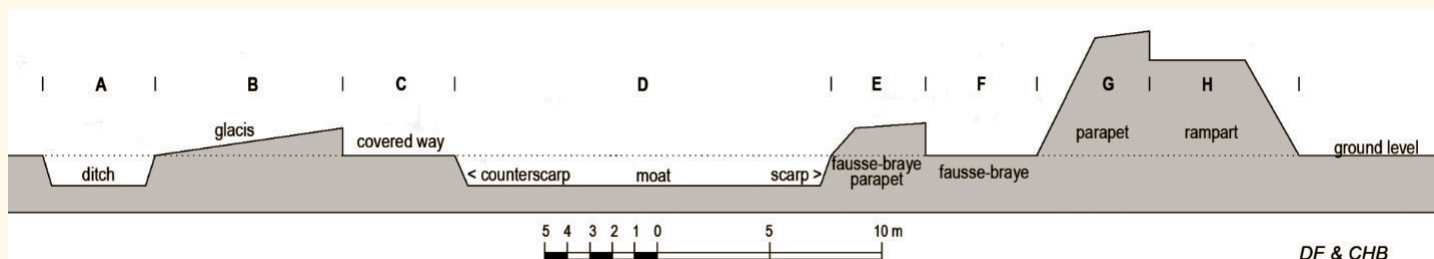
designed by local physician and mathematician Richard Clampe. His design was a sophisticated one – his plan for the southern fortifications still exists in the town’s archive – and based on the latest Dutch methods. They included a new line of fortifications to the south of the town, a fort in front of the South Gate, a new line of fortifications to the north of the town, and to the east, new bastions were constructed in front of the existing ramparts. These new fortifications transformed the town into the strongest fortress in East Anglia. Clampe would later go on to design the parliamentary siege works at Newark-upon-Trent in 1645–6.

Later in the war, King’s Lynn may have supplied cannon to the New Model Army for the siege of Oxford in May 1645 (records are unclear whether cannon came from Cambridge or from King’s Lynn via Cambridge), and King’s Lynn was again used as a military supply base in 1650 when, along with Newcastle and Berwick, it was one of three established for Cromwell’s conquest of Scotland.

Despite never being put to the test, the strength of the fortifications were still noteworthy more than seventy years later, and in the early 1720s, Daniel Defoe observed:

The situation of this town renders it capable of being made very strong, and in the late wars it was so; a line of fortification being drawn round it at a distance from the walls; the ruins, or rather remains of which works appear very fair to this day; nor would it be a hard matter to restore the bastions, with the ravelins and counterscarp, upon any sudden emergency, to a good state of defence; and that in a little time, a sufficient number of workmen being employed, especially because they are able to fill all their ditches with water from the sea, in such a manner as that it cannot be drawn off.

In 1745, the outbreak of the Jacobite Rebellion spread panic throughout



Following the siege in 1643, King’s Lynn was transformed into one of the strongest fortresses in England. This is the profile of the fortifications constructed after the siege and is based on Richard Clampe’s plan of the South-western Bastion. (With thanks to Charles Blackwood, Fortress Study Group)



KLuS has been involved in the project to re-interpret the South Gate and participated in the town's heritage weekend. The project has also prompted other research, including the life of Richard Clampe.

In the spring of 2019, the geophysical survey of the South-western Bastion site was undertaken. Disappointingly, this did not provide any positive results, so the project has moved on to other positions, and currently has six sites across King's Lynn undergoing desktop evaluation.

Although activity was severely restricted during 2020, investigation of the town's northern defences is underway and it is hoped that some fieldwork may be possible later in 2021, perhaps in conjunction with the town's Heritage Open Day in September.

To find out more, including how to get involved, visit the project's website at www.militaryhistorylive.co.uk/mhl-kings-lynn-under-siege or e-mail kingslynnundersiege@outlook.com.

David Flintham, FRGS, is a military historian specialising in seventeenth-century fortress warfare, and is project manager of the King's Lynn under Siege ECW archaeological project. A Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, his research has taken him throughout the British Isles, across Western Europe, and as far afield as North America and South Africa. A member of the Battlefields Trust, he is also on the committee of the Fortress Study Group, writing regularly for its publications. Regarded as an expert on London's Civil War fortifications, he is the author of three books (with three more in preparation) and more than fifty other essays and articles.

For further information see David's website: www.vauban.co.uk.

Further reading:

Peter Kent, *Fortifications of East Anglia*, (Lavenham: Terence Dalton Limited, 1988)

Michael Osborne, *Defending Norfolk*, (Stroud: Fonthill Media Limited, 2015)

Robert Wyndham Ketton-Cremer, *Norfolk in the Civil War*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1969)

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



The centre-piece of the project's participation in the 2018 Heritage Open Day was this model of a section of the fortifications made by one of 'the team' (thanks, Dan!). Not surprisingly, the model generated a lot of interest, particular from younger visitors. (Photo David Flintham)



Cannon ball on display in Marriott's Warehouse – found in a field near King's Lynn. (Photo David Flintham)



Cannon ball on display in Hampton Court – thought to be from the siege of King's Lynn. (Photo David Flintham)

England, and in Kings Lynn – its defences limited to St Ann's Fort to the north of the town – measures were taken to strengthen the South Gate, as the Civil War fort had long disappeared. Led by the Mayor and Corporation, the gentry of the town began to dig a parapet and trench, their sweating much to the amusement of the other townfolk. This new fortification was unfinished when news reached the town of the Jacobite retreat from Derby, and the work was abandoned. St Ann's Fort, to the north of the town and originally constructed around 1570, remained in use until after the Napoleonic Wars. But, like the defences of so many towns, King's Lynn's fortifications were gradually erased – the East Gate, damaged during the siege, was pulled down in 1800 – but traces remain to this day.

Knowing that sieges typically leave a larger archaeological footprint than a battle led a group of archaeologists and military historians to look for a suitable siege-site to investigate. Having

considered sites in Newark, Bristol and Shropshire, 378 years after the siege, there are enough traces of the King's Lynn's fortifications to warrant investigation as a long-term archaeological and historical research project. And so, the *King's Lynn under Siege* (KLuS) project was born. Set up in January 2018, it is a community-based project investigating the impact of the English Civil War on King's Lynn, its environment and its citizens.

Since its formation, KLuS has firmly established itself in the local and wider, 'landscape', and has established strong links with the local heritage community, including the town's excellent museums, and with both the town and county councils. The project has attracted attention from the local press and radio, and has appeared in national magazines. It has been featured by internationally-renowned organisations including the Battlefields Trust.