

Cornwall in the Civil War

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In the summer of 1642, with civil war looming, Cornwall was still undecided on its loyalties. Indeed, it seemed quite possible that rival factions would be so evenly matched that the first battle on Cornish soil would be to decide its support. It was not until October, six weeks after the conflict had begun, that the situation became clear – Cornwall would fight as a single army, for the King.

While religion featured heavily in the conflict it would be wrong to suggest that it was the only, or even the major, reason that war broke out. It was certainly the cause of unrest in Scotland where the Bishops' Wars had been brought about by the King's insistence that his form of Service should be adopted. Even in England there were those who feared that Charles was attempting to move the Church back to Catholicism. After all, he had married an overtly French Catholic and he and his archbishop were staunchly in favour of church ritual and opposed to the Puritans. But, while the armies would more or less divide along religious lines, there were other more secular reasons that led men to take up arms against their neighbours.

"Thou wouldst think it strange if I should tell thee there was a time in England when brothers killed brothers, cousins cousins, and friends their friends"

Sir John Oglander 1642

It is difficult to imagine a more diverse range of reasons to start a war and it has been said that each man had his own but when King Charles raised his standard at Nottingham Castle on the 22nd August 1642 it was because he had no options left. His views were so at odds with his Parliament that there was no chance of compromise.

Like his father, King Charles believed that God had appointed him and given him a divine right to rule. He considered that Parliament's role was to support him, if it did not then he would simply dismiss it – and he did. He thought their demands and criticisms of his fiscal and foreign policies both unreasonable and obstructive and he had little time for their claims of rights and privileges.

Parliament, of course, held a contrary view: they saw their role as exerting restraint over a profligate monarch who considered himself above the law. They demanded regular elections, a curb on his abuse of power and acceptance that they should have control of taxation.

There were many other factors including some which applied specifically to the Cornish. The Bishops' Wars in far off Scotland were of little interest in Cornwall and, when men were seconded to take part, it reduced its capability to protect its sailors and coastal villages from the Barbary Pirates. Even before this, the King and his advisers had done little to combat these attacks. The demand on manpower also raised the fear that there would be insufficient men to harvest the crops and to keep the mines free of water.

Another grievance was the King's harsh and vindictive treatment of one of its own – Sir John Eliot. He had been a local Member of Parliament and one of the King's leading opponents. His stand on taxation and forced loans had landed him in the Tower and when he died there Charles refused to give up his body for burial in Cornwall. This hardened public opinion and even influenced some Cornish Royalists to withdraw their support.

The various issues would have been debated in the grand dining halls and taverns across Cornwall with the result that the King's Party, if it could be called that, lost much of its support with Duchy political candidates taking a beating at the hustings.

For some of the privileged few who were entitled to vote, however, this was just a protest and when it came to choosing sides they feared that Parliamentary rule would be even harsher than the King and his advisers. With 44 MPs, Cornwall exerted influence out of all proportion to its size and population and it was almost certain that Parliament would address this with no regard to ancient privileges. It would seek to make it just another English county.

The arguments raged but when it came to taking sides many ignored them; whatever the rights and wrongs of the situation they could not raise their sword against their King. Whether this was to do with support for the monarchy in general or love for the current incumbent we will never know. King Charles was not popular, a result of the conflicts that had been a feature of his reign. Perhaps, because of his execution, history has been kinder to him than he deserved.

Both sides now set out to gain support. The boroughs were reluctant to show their hands at first, preferring to play a waiting game rather than commit their military Trained Bands to the losing side. The Royalists were quicker off the mark and recruited many leading families in mid and west Cornwall. The Parliamentarians, too, were gaining numbers, particularly in the east where it was clear that the King had made many enemies during his 17-year reign. At one point it seemed likely that the influence exerted by Truronian Lord Robartes, the town's two MPs, its Vicar and the outgoing mayor would persuade Truro to follow Plymouth and Exeter and declare for Parliament. However, a visit by Royalists Sir Ralph Hopton of Somerset and Sir Bevil Grenville of Stowe in late September, and an impassioned speech by Sir Richard Vyvyan from the market in Middle Row, finally swung the balance and Truro declared for the King.

The Royalist muster at Bodmin in the first few days of October 1642 was decisive and when its leader, Sir Ralph Hopton, led his new army towards Launceston to confront Sir Richard Buller's smaller Parliamentary force, the town leaders took fright and implored Buller not to give battle there. Perhaps the size of the Royalist force convinced him to comply with their wishes but, whatever his reasons, he moved across the border into Devon. His departure handed Cornwall to the Royalists. The King's enemies had either left or would keep quiet.

It seems likely that some saw the coming conflict as yet another rebellion but however it was viewed, Cornwall would again fight as a nation.

As soon as Cornwall's situation became clear the Parliamentary pamphleteers began to denigrate its people. They called them barbarous commoners and poverty stricken ignorants who left their lurking holes in the tin mines to pillage and plunder. Cornwall was portrayed as a different nation and its people as aliens or foreigners

like the French, Irish and Welsh. Cornwall, they said, was a corner where ignorants drained from the mines. The Cornish were without the power of the presses and would do their talking on the battlefield.

For the next three and a half years the Cornish played a major role in many battles both on their own soil and further afield. They were tenacious in defence of their own land and in their ventures across the Southwest. There is no better or clearer way to show their contribution than to quote Mary Coates, author of "Cornwall in the Great Civil War and Interregnum".

"The period of the Civil Wars and Interregnum is the most important in the history of Cornwall, for never before or since has she contributed so largely to the general course of events"

Mary Coates

As I have said, both sides occupied Launceston in the first few weeks of the war and before the conflict was over Saltash would change hands seven times; there would be five invasions of Cornwall and four major battles on its soil. The minor battles and skirmishes are too numerous to list here but it would be good if every Cornish school child was taught of the five-month siege at Pendennis Castle and of the exploits of the Cornish Army which took it all the way to Bristol with the loss of a huge number of its soldiers and inspirational leaders.

*"Gone, the four wheels of Charles' Wain,
Grenville, Godolphin, Trevanion, Slanning slain."*

John Prince 1701

The Cornish Army crossed into Devon on many occasions to try and capture both Exeter and Plymouth and it wasn't until Parliamentary help arrived from the east that it was forced to withdraw behind its ancient border: the line of the Tamar. The first threat came in January 1643 when a proposed two-pronged attack by Scotsman Colonel Ruthin and The Earl of Stamford threatened to overwhelm it. As Ruthin waited at Braddock Down for Stamford to arrive, Hopton attacked and, with a combination of cunning and extreme good fortune, he managed to destroy Ruthin's army and drive the survivors back across the Tamar.

Not for the first time Plymouth came under attack but it stood firm against Royalist pressure and, despite numerous attempts during the remainder of the war, it remained steadfast in defence.

Following a Cornwall/Devon truce the Parliamentarians prepared to attempt another invasion of Cornwall and on the 23rd April 1643 they gathered at Lifton, ready to cross Polson Bridge and attack Launceston. Hopton's men were spread out along the line of the Tamar but as the point of attack became clear he sent

messengers ordering his commanders to head for Beacon Hill (Windmill Hill) near Launceston. Major General James Chudleigh commanded the Parliamentary army; he entered Cornwall and led it towards Hopton's small force on the hill. The Royalists were heavily outnumbered and it was doubtful that they would be able to hold out until reinforcements arrived.

Parliamentary artillery pounded the Royalist positions and Hopton's men had no choice but to move back up the hill, certain that they would soon be overwhelmed. An hour passed and the prospect of surrender or defeat must have weighed heavily on Hopton's mind: it would soon be time to decide. But then, when all seemed lost, a shout went up as the relief infantry and cavalry regiments swept in. As they joined the action the enemy faltered. The tide had turned and although Chudleigh's army held on it was eventually forced to give way and driven back across the Tamar and into Devon.

Perhaps, if Hopton had pursued the enemy right away he might have destroyed it but the delay proved costly and when he did give chase his large force was ambushed and crushed at Sourton Down. A ferocious storm convinced the Royalists that it was not to be their day and Hopton's shattered and demoralised army limped back into Cornwall.

Boosted by this success, the Parliamentarians now planned a fresh invasion and on the 16th May 1643 the stage was set for a major battle – at Stratton. The Earl of Stamford assembled his force of nearly 6,000 at the summit of what was to become known as Stamford Hill. Hopton headed towards him with a far weaker army of about 3,000 men and a few light guns. Unlike the Royalists, the Parliamentarians had no lack of food or ammunition but even more important than this was that they held the superior position. Despite the disadvantages Hopton decided to attack and at 5.00am his army began to move up the steep slopes towards the enemy. Each time heavy musket and artillery fire drove them back. It seemed hopeless and by 3.00pm they were exhausted and almost out of ammunition. Hopton knew that this was not just another battle; failure here would mean the loss of Cornwall. He told his officers not to mention the shortage of ammunition to the men, they would make one more attack but this time they would move forward without firing their muskets. The order was received with disbelief but he had their trust and it was followed. The Cornish pikemen charged up the slope, threats and curses their only ammunition. The advantage swung from side to side but the speed and ferocity was like nothing the Parliamentarians had faced before and eventually they gave way. The Cornish reached the top and the remaining enemy soldiers took to their heels. Against all the odds the Cornish had won and driven the enemy from their land.

The victory established the Cornish infantry as one of the best fighting forces in the country and its march across Devon to join up with the Marquis of Hertford and Prince Maurice signalled the start of a truly remarkable run of victories that culminated in the fall of mighty Bristol. The Royalists looked invincible and it seemed that nothing could now stop the King winning the war but the success was bought at some cost. The Cornish Army, so magnificent in battle, had been all but destroyed – at Lansdown Hill, where their headlong charge had brought about hundreds of casualties and the loss of their great leader and Cornish patriot, Sir Bevil Grenville,

and at Bristol where their futile attack on the difficult southern face had proved so costly.

It was with a deep sense of loss that the surviving Cornish soldiers marched away from Bristol. There were too few to form a totally Cornish regiment but as they headed back to the west the success continued. Town after town fell to them until, finally, Exeter was in Royalist hands. Now, only Lyme and Plymouth continued to hold out.

Our story now jumps forward to July 1644, to the attempt by Robert Devereux, the third Earl of Essex, to capture Cornwall for Parliament. Accompanied by Lord Robartes of Lanhydrock, he moved his army of 10,000 men down through the Southwest, relieved Plymouth and crossed into Cornwall. He paused in Bodmin for a few days but news that the King and Prince Maurice were chasing hard and had reached Launceston forced him to move on. He headed for Lostwithiel and Fowey. In Penryn, Sir Richard Grenville, the brother of the late Sir Bevil, was building up his army and would soon march to join the King.

The 450 or so inhabitants of the little town of Lostwithiel now found themselves with about 10,000 enemy soldiers either in their midst or occupying the surrounding hills. Over the next month they were to suffer dreadfully, ill treated by Essex's army and bombarded by Royalist guns.

As food stocks became low the Royalists gradually tightened the net. They captured Boconnoc House, Restormel Castle, Lanhydrock House, the hills around Lostwithiel and the east bank of the Fowey River – all the way down to Polruan.

A Parliamentary marksman at Fowey must have cursed his luck as he failed in a chance to deliver a crushing blow and, perhaps, end the war. His musket shot screamed across the river just missing the King and killing a fisherman. The outcome of many historical events has hung on such acts of fate.

After a month of being penned in and with food almost gone, the Parliamentary cavalry managed to escape through enemy lines. At the same time, Essex led his infantry and artillery towards Fowey where he hoped to be rescued by the Navy. With the Royalists in pursuit and torrential rain turning the paths to mud it was a futile attempt and many were cut down in their desperate race for freedom. Those that could still run made it to Castle Dore where only failing light prevented their total annihilation. Still Essex would not surrender and as they waited for daylight and certain defeat, he did something that must have forever haunted him. Without a word to anyone, the Earl of Essex, Lord Robartes and Sir John Merrick made for the coast where they escaped by fishing boat. The treachery was discovered the following morning and within hours the remaining officers surrendered to the King.

The following day, the defeated Parliamentary army was allowed to leave Castle Dore. The King ordered that there should be no reprisals but the Cornish civilians were not ready to forgive their cruelty and as the dejected soldiers trudged through Lostwithiel and the countryside they took their revenge. Of the 6,000 that left Castle Dore only 1,000 made it back to Poole in Dorset. Sickness killed some but the Cornish civilians had taken a terrible revenge on their oppressors. It had been a month long battle involving about 25,000 soldiers and had resulted in the biggest Parliamentary defeat of the entire Civil War.

We now fast-forward once again to February 1646 when Sir Thomas Fairfax and Sir Oliver Cromwell entered Cornwall to act out the final scenes of the First Civil War. Prince Charles, the future Charles II, had been sent by his father to Cornwall to command the Western Army but now, in a clear indication that the war was all but lost, he set sail for Scilly. From there, he headed for Jersey and finally for France. Sir Richard Grenville was arrested by his own side and imprisoned at St Michael's Mount for refusing to obey orders, an action perhaps influenced by his proposal to arrange a separate treaty between Parliament and Cornwall. An action which would have secured the boundary and seen Cornwall exist as an autonomous state (sounds familiar).

The end for Cornwall, apart from Pendennis Castle and St Michael's Mount, came on the 12th March 1646 when Sir Ralph Hopton (by then Lord Hopton) surrendered to Sir Thomas Fairfax at Tresillian.

The conflict is remembered as the first English Civil War or the War of the Three Nations but that ignores the actions and achievements of Wales and, of course, Cornwall. It was truly a War of the Five Nations and involved the whole of these islands. Indeed, a great number of foreigners fought either as mercenaries or soldiers of conscience. The King's nephews, the princes Rupert and Maurice, were probably the best known but we should not forget the foreign gentleman who announced, "I care not for your cause, I come to fight for your half-crown and your handsome women."

The surrender at Tresillian virtually marked the end of Cornwall's participation in the "English Civil Wars." Pendennis Castle held out until August 1646 and a revolt on the Lizard two years later was quickly and brutally suppressed.

This article has only touched on the events that brought so much pain to the little nation of Cornwall but I hope that it has shown that far from being a conflict that happened elsewhere, much of the action was right here with the Cornish Army playing a major role.