

Siege of Bridgwater, July, 1645

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Editorial note: This has been carefully checked against the original publication, but a number of place-names are very obscure, and the end-references are in the obsolete short-title format.

On the 3rd July, 1645, Sir Thomas Fairfax, General and Commander-in-Chief for the Parliament, entered Somerset with his forces, and quartered in the neighbourhood of Crewkerne. On the 10th he fought and utterly defeated, at Langport, the King's army under Lord Goring. Following up in sharp pursuit the routed Royalists, he made his headquarters that night at Audry, within a mile of Chedzoy, a house belonging to the Dean of Wells; his Lieutenant-General, Cromwell, General of the Horse, quartering at Aller, where he was joined by Major-General Massey. These events and passages being known in London, public attention was earnestly directed to the next evident movement, an attack on Bridgwater; as, if that strong garrison fell, the King's chance of any success in the West would be very small.

To settle and order the troops, after their work of the day before, the army was reviewed on the 11th, on Weston Moor, near Pensey Pound, about two miles from Bridgwater after which, being intolerably weary, the men were allowed to rest in their quarters on the 12th and 13th, to refresh themselves. They had also to gather in provisions as well as they could without money, a daily-expected supply of that useful article not having arrived. On the 12th the fortifications and defences were "viewed," the two generals being in the field all day, making their plans. Whilst so doing, and getting too close to the works, Cromwell was near being shot, an officer to whom he was speaking being killed by his side.[1] The bullet was picked up, still warm. It had been fired by Mrs. Windham, the Governor's wife, as her token, as she called it; and she afterwards sent a trumpet to tell the General that if he were a courtier, he would return the compliment, and do as much for her.

The examination of the works being completed, Cromwell made a speech to his men, and pointed out how the passage by water could be blocked up. Fifteen hundred horse and dragoons were then sent to the western side for that purpose.[2] Three thousand others were sent to the northern side, whilst Major-General Massey, having his head-quarters at Ham House, camped on the south-west and Petherton side, and placed batteries on the adjacent rising-ground, with which to annoy the town. It was thus so completely surrounded that no relief could be got in. Next, the country round was cleared of the foe. One party was sent to watch the borders of Devon, whither Lord Goring had fled, and another to block up Bruntonrust; whilst Colonel Holborn went to Sydenham House, and had it surrendered to him on summons, with a hundred prisoners.[3] Burrough was besieged by Colonel Okey, with his dragoons, and soon surrendered, on conditions.[4]

The men being refreshed, the General became impatient to be in action. On Monday, the 14th, accompanied by Lieutenant-General Cromwell, he again went round the works. Whilst crossing the river at Dunweir an accident nearly happened, which might have cost them their lives, their boat being almost capsized by the sudden violence of the tide, called the Eager. Afterwards a Council was held to consider their plans, but its opinion being divided, no decision was arrived at. This hesitation was not to the liking of either Fairfax or Cromwell, and was not to be endured. Considering that old soldiers were good for long marches, young ones for hot service; and that his army, now flushed with victory, was surrounded by a friendly population, and backed by Taunton, the General wished, and resolved, to gain the town by storm. Preparations accordingly commenced. The great guns were advanced, and scaling ladders prepared and brought in, with other necessaries, by the country people. Colonel Floyd's and Colonel Fortescue's regiments were sent to strengthen Major-General Massey, and three other regiments were told off for the assault on the north side. These marched about midnight, every man with a brush faggot, either in his hand or on his musket or pike, to throw into the ditches to aid in making a firm footing.[5] All being ready, the scaling ladders were brought up, but the water in the trenches when fathomed was found unexpectedly to be ten feet deep. Orders were thus so far obeyed on the north side, when, about one o'clock, the two Generals came over from Massey's quarters, and stopped further action. This change in plan was induced partly by the depth of water discovered in the trenches, and in part from information received by Fairfax, that his intentions were known to the garrison within. On further consideration, too, it was

seen that their knowledge of the strength of the works was imperfect, and that the preparations generally were too hurried to meet possible difficulties. It had been learned, also, that they within the town were much "saddled," and divided amongst themselves. It was therefore suggested that the place might be gained on easier terms, and the lives of the precious soldiers saved. So, although the men were willing enough, and rejoiced much at the chance of storming, Sir Thomas Fairfax, always careful of the lives of those "whom God had hitherto so preserved," allowed his discretion to check his valour, and was persuaded, rather to surround the town and reduce it by blockade.[6]

On the 15th, at a Council, this plan was confirmed, and the army began to make works and lines, with approaches very nearly to the town. It was determined to make these lines defensive from within as well as without, and six thousand horse and foot, out of the fifteen thousand available, were put at the work. The remaining nine thousand were held ready to alarm if necessary, or, when the works were completed, to be drawn off for any other service. On Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, the 16th, 17th, and 18th July, these preparations continued.

On Wednesday, the 16th, there was another Council, at which this question of blockade was re-considered, when it was shown that to continue it would be too tedious; that the trenches or approaches when made, would in case of rain be soon filled with water, and thereby, with fair certainty, be either damaged or made useless. A further objection started was the difficulty, on account of the strong current, of laying a bridge over the river, by which communication could be kept up all round the town. Sir Thomas Fairfax seized the opportunity to again urge the storming, as although undoubtedly a dangerous work, it would, if successful, free his army for duty elsewhere. On Friday, the 18th, the Council met in the field, when the plan of storming was further discussed. Most of the Council singly, were still opposed to it, but it happened that, in debate, it was carried otherwise. The consequences of failure were not unforeseen, but trusting to their "uncontrollable fortune," they determined to make the attempt.

Besides his own impatience, Fairfax possibly had other reasons for wishing to attack at once. Trying "all ways to do all things wisely," he had used the country people to learn the condition of the town, and by this means knew that the inhabitants were "fearful and distracted," and were mostly a "godly people," guided by a worthy minister, Mr. Devenish, their vicar,[7] and that they would at any moment rise and assist him. He had learned also from some two hundred horse, taken whilst endeavouring to leave the town, as well as from others, prisoners escaped, that the soldiers were on constant duty, but that provisions were plentiful, mills only being wanted wherewith to grind the corn. It was determined therefore to allow the garrison no rest, to keep up continual alarms by day and by night, but that any delay in the attack, if only with the hope of shortening provisions, would be perfectly useless.

The circuit of Bridgwater was not large, but it was well defended, being surrounded by a deep ditch, six yards wide, which was filled to the brim at every tide; whilst on the north side was the Castle, very high, with walls fifteen feet thick, and the moat deep. For ordnance there were mounted forty pieces, besides a demi-cannon and a thirty-two pounder. Further, the fortifications raised without were strong and regular, and rendered all approach difficult, especially on Eastover side. There was also a work at the east end of St. John's field; another between it and Dunweir; and between the north gate and the west gate was a battery which well defended both. Lord Goring in his retreat, when going for Devon, left in the garrison two hundred and sixty oxen, besides Prince Rupert's regiment of horse and a thousand men with ammunition.[8] Thus, with its own stores, it was well provisioned and very full of soldiers; and being in a perfectly level country, with a river passing through it, dividing it into almost equal parts, was exceedingly strong, both by nature and art.

On Saturday, the 19th, Sir Thomas Fairfax rode through the river, and after again viewing the works, placed his batteries. The constant activity of the General was the subject of public remark at this time. Never idle, always deep in some design, it was wondered how he could watch, act, take so little rest, and yet hold out against so much fatigue. Difficulties never daunted him. Simply saying, "Come, let us trust God," he took means to overcome them, and when the storming was determined on, he said to a minister in his army, "Commend us all to Christ, the Lord teach us all." And so, quietly and confidently, he carried on his work from first to last.[9]

Sunday, the 20th, was spent in religious exercises by all who could be spared. In the forenoon Mr. Hugh Peters, and in the afternoon Mr. Bowles, applied themselves to the encouragement of the soldiers, urging them, on every design they went about, to "look upon Christ in all their actions, and to be valiant in His cause." [10] After sermon the army was drawn up in the fields about Horsey and Bower. Cromwell with five regiments now lay in St. John's and Castle fields, and six other regiments at this time lay at Chedzoy. From these latter were taken by lot six hundred foot for the attack; four hundred to act under Col. Hewson and two hundred under Major Dove. The arrangement was that Major-Gen. Massey should give a great alarm on the south side, whilst these men stormed on the north. In the evening, about seven o'clock, they were drawn into the field, and Mr. Peters again preached to them, exhorting them "after his manner, tam marte quam mercurio" valiantly to do their duty. In this work Mr. Baxter assisted him. All volunteered readily, and in their impatient eagerness for the fray, could hardly wait for orders.

The preparations being completed, as soon as it was dark they drew to their posts, and guided by the state of the tide, about two o'clock in the morning of Monday, the 21st July, marched up to the works, freely, cheerfully, and with great joy, not doubting but the "Lord would perfect the work he had begun by them."

Both Generals had approved of some bridges designed by Col. Hammond, planned either to span the moat, or to float if required. Eight of these had been made thirty feet long, and were now brought up on waggons to St. John's field and Castle field, and, with the assistance of some firelock men, were smartly laid, although not without difficulty, by the officers of the "train." The signal, three guns, was then given for both sides to attack together, and the forlorn hope began with great courage to pass over the bridges. Unfortunately, some of these failed to answer their intended purpose, and many of the men were obliged to wade through the water. All, however, stood boldly to their work, and not regarding the shower of bullets sent amongst them, nor the firing of the guns from the Castle, fighting like lions, they succeeded in forcing an entry, and drove the defenders into the Market Place and into the church, which was very strong. A footing thus gained, the "fort royal" was next taken, and its cannon quickly turned upon the men in the Market Place.

By the bridge stood Mr. Harvey's house, and being in a position prejudicial for the defence, its destruction had been ordered; but having been built only eight years, Mr. Harvey, who was Lord of the Manor, by "much strong influence," got leave for it to stand. This was next secured, and some guns got into it, which were also turned on the Market Place. [11] A party now let down the drawbridge at St. John's and forced the east gate, when Captain Reynolds entered Eastover with some of Cromwell's regiment, and having with him pikemen, who kept well up with the horse, he scoured the streets, driving the defenders, who were principally Sir John Stowell's regiment, to the bridge, and over the river dividing the town. The gate there was instantly closed, the drawbridge raised, and the side works strongly manned, and so all further success was checked.

The one part of the town being cleared, five hundred foot surrendered themselves prisoners, and were plundered. They were found to belong to a regiment from Pembroke, and being well disposed to the Parliament, three hundred of them took the Covenant and joined Sir Thomas Fairfax, saying they were proud to be taken by such an enemy.

About a week afterwards Captain Swanley reported that he had taken twenty ships off the Welsh coast, which had been destined to carry Royalist troops to Uphill, and he asked that the garrisons in Pembroke might be strengthened. Fairfax, in reply, sent over these men to protect their own country. [12] Besides these prisoners, there were taken five pieces of ordnance, sixty horses, and much good booty. Twenty men only were killed, and about a hundred wounded; though in the general judgment at the time, from the fierceness of the fight, it was thought that not fewer than a thousand might have been slain. It happened that in the twilight the defenders fired high, and the shot passed over.

Colonel Hewson, to whose lot it had fallen to lead this attack, had been a shoemaker. To the many congratulations he received, he simply replied, with outward humility, "we are unprofitable servants, we can do nothing." [13] The soldiers, however, did not conceal their feelings, and were greatly inspirited, hoping eagerly, now the north side was thus secured, soon to get the whole. A report of this good fortune was sent to London by Major Butler, who was voted a reward of thirty pounds.

The Governor, Colonel Windham, was much enraged at his unexpected loss, and determined to use every means to dislodge the victors. To this end, after a lapse of about two hours, he commenced firing hot shot into Eastover, and that part of the town was soon in flames, and continued burning fiercely until the evening of the next day. Hardly three houses escaped untouched,[14] but Major Cowell, with the flames raging on all sides around him, kept his ground with the guard entrusted to him, ready to check any sally from the other quarter. This destruction sadly troubled Sir Thomas Fairfax, and when the Royalists rang their bells for joy his anger increased. At five o'clock in the morning he sent a trumpeter with a summons to surrender, but the Governor replied haughtily that he would listen to no such proposal, and at once commenced strengthening his position.

Nothing further was done this day, but a second storm was ordered for the morrow, Tuesday, the 22nd, with, this time, Major-General Massey, an active, bold man, on the south side without, to act simultaneously with those on the north side within. This plan was, however, changed to one for a general alarm only, which produced no result, and failed to work on the defenders. Another trumpet was then sent with a second summons, but was again defiantly answered, that the fight should be continued whilst there was a man left. Mrs. Windham, laying her hand on her bosom, said to the messenger, " These breasts gave suck to Prince Charles, they shall never be at your mercy. We will hold it to the last." [15]

The Governor being thus obstinate, the original plan of storming was resumed, with the determination to carry it out with all vigour and severity. But first, " lest the innocent should suffer with the nocent," at two o'clock in the afternoon Sir Thomas Fairfax, whose character was a composition of courage and courtesy, sent in a trumpeter, offering leave for all the women and children to come out before four. For this unexpected gallantry Colonel Windham returned his best thanks, and accordingly Mrs. Windham, the Lady Governess, as she liked to be called, "one too guilty of the misery of the place"; Lady Stowell, Lady Hawley, Mrs. Warre, and others, about eight hundred altogether, left the garrison.

At five o'clock the attack was commenced with the great guns and the mortar pieces taken from the King at Naseby, and these playing on the town with fireballs [16] and hot iron, and aided by a shower of red-hot " hoggets" from the musketeers, fired it in three places. The wind being strong, the fire quickly increased, so that it was soon burning in twenty places on all sides, especially about Cornhill, St. Mary Street, and High Street.[17] To be rid of the garrison, the townsmen also set fire to several houses in Silver Street, Friar Street, and Pigs' Cross, reporting, that by Mrs. Windham's orders the soldiers were to do so, as soon as there was no longer hope of holding them.[18] The state of things for the inhabitants now became terrible, and "wrought such a terror," that they began to wish they were with their wives. Presently Tom Eliot, one of the King's pages, " he that ran away with the great seal, Nurse Windham's darling," came "running" out to ask for a treaty or terms.[19] The General fiercely replied, that as the Governor had refused previous offers, and had brought the misery on himself, he could not listen to him, but if he would submit to mercy he should have it. With this Eliot departed, on the understanding that he was to return in a quarter of an hour with a positive answer. He soon came back with the following propositions:

1. That the Governor and officers should march away with their horses and pistols, and the common soldiers with their arms, and have a safe convoy to Exeter.
2. That the inhabitants of the town might either stay or have liberty to go with them.
3. That the like liberty should be given to the clergy.[20]

To this Sir Thomas Fairfax produced his terms:

- 1 That all should have quarter for their lives.
2. That the soldiers should march out without being stripped of their clothes.
3. That the townsmen should enjoy their habitations without plunder.

4. That the gentlemen and others should be left to the disposal of the Parliament.

5. That six hostages should be sent out to him.[21]

With this Eliot returned, and soon came again, now accompanied by Sir John Heale, with a reply that the Governor and gentlemen could not agree to it. Fairfax at once "drew off," as if all conference were at an end, and gave orders for the soldiers to stand to their duty. Upon this, Eliot went to him, and begged him to wait yet a little, until he could go and return once more, offering to leave Sir John Heale as hostage. To this Fairfax agreed. As Eliot passed the camp the soldiers cried out to him, that if any within took off a slate, or endeavoured in the least to stop the fire, the cessation should be void, and they would fall on and take all advantage.[22] In the end the fire "melted" the resolution of the Governor; and the townsmen, wearied with saving their goods, and finding the fire could not be quenched before a surrender would be imperative, cried, "Mercy, for the Lord's sake." [23] Being thus pressed, at nine o'clock Eliot went out again, agreed to the terms, and asked who should be sent out as hostages. Sir John Heale, Sir Hugh Windham (a son of the Governor), Major Sydenham, Mr. Speke, Mr. Waldron, and Mr. Warre, were named, and in exchange for them other hostages were sent into the town.[24]

Next morning, the 23rd July, the garrison surrendered, and the conquerors entered. For almost, if not quite, the first time during the war, the articles agreed to were honestly and fully kept, the soldiers refraining from all violence or injury, and behaving themselves "very gallantly," both to the prisoners and the townsmen. A little later in the day, as the General and his officers were standing in the town, about a hundred muskets which lay together near them "took fire," but most fortunately no harm was done, and all escaped.

Colonel Montague, who, in the absence of General Skippon, had been placed to act in the attack as a Major-General, was only twenty-one years of age, but he well performed the duties allotted to him.[25]

Besides a hundred and twenty officers, about fifty gentle-men of note, and "a good store of fat priests," two bishops being reported at the time amongst them, there were also taken a thousand prisoners, eight hundred horses, five thousand stands of arms, and thirty-six cannon, including the Lord General's "warning piece," and the "twisted piece" from Exeter, known as Prince Rupert's Pocket Pistol; ten loads of ammunition, forty-four barrels of gunpowder, and fourteen hundred weight of match; Colonel Windham's and all Goring's bag and baggage; and much other good booty in the shape of household goods and furniture, stored there for safety. Further, there were secured six hundred oxen, provisions for four months, and a hundred thousand pounds in money, plate and jewels.[26] The colours and standards were mostly destroyed by the fire.

Colonel Windham, taking his quarter, went the same night to Weston, having only the horse that carried him,[27] and those who accompanied him were in a similar plight, having only the clothes they wore. Two thousand two hundred soldiers marched off under convoy, also to Weston; others were sent to London, whilst many enlisted for the Parliament, and went to Ireland. Amongst those taken, besides the Governor and the hostages already mentioned, were Colonel Robert Phillips, Captain John Byam, Captain Phillips of Wells, Cornet James Clerk, Ensign Shepherd, Ensign Robert Shore, Mr. Waldron, Mr. Henry Sydenham of Donyat, Mr. Thomas Slater of Mallet, Philip Sydenham, Will Sydenham, John Rawley, Henry Rawley, Joseph Greenvil of Stanton, Mr. Star or Sterry of Yeovil, Mr. Sletman of Bruton, Francis Smith of Nicholas, Henry Rogers, Mr. Bamfylde, Mr. Sandford, and Mr. Harvey, Lord of the Manor; also, Dr. Rawley, Dean of Wells, and Rector of Chedzoy, Walton, and Shrell; Mr. William Sydenham, curate; William Dean, chaplain to the Governor; and ten other clergymen. Colonel Humphrey Waldron and Captain Byam accepted a sum of money to go beyond sea, and retired to Barbadoes.[28]

On the 22nd, at midnight, being just after the conclusion of the treaty, Sir Thomas Fairfax sent off to the Parliament, by letter, a report of his success, which was printed on the 24th.[29] The House voted a reward of twenty pounds to the messenger, and ordered all ministers in their several churches throughout the city, on the next Lord's day, to return hearty thanks to God for this great mercy, and blessing upon the Parliament forces.[30] On Friday, the 25th, two other letters arrived,

one from Major-General Massey, and one from Mr. Secretary Rushworth; and on the 26th came Mr. Hugh Peters, sent by Sir Thomas Fairfax, with other letters, and to give a full personal narrative from his own knowledge. His presence at the door being known, he was at once called in, and made his statement. For his services he was voted a hundred pounds. At the same time a letter of thanks was ordered for the General, and another for his officers.

Sir Thomas Fairfax, in his report, had expressed a wish that some encouragement should be given to the soldiers for their honest and sober demeanour towards the prisoners and the town, and for restraining themselves from the violence which had hitherto been usual in similar cases. Accordingly, in addition to a sum of three thousand pounds, which had been sent from London to Portsmouth on the 24th, wherewith to pay the men, five thousand pounds more were raised and sent to him, to be disposed of entirely as he should think fit.[31]

The Commissioners with the army next collected the many good things dispersed through the town, all fair spoil; sold a part of them in the Market Place on the 25th, and from the proceeds distributed amongst the soldiers three shillings per man.[32]

Mr. Harvey's property suffered greatly. During the two years that the Royalists held the town, his estate had been sequestered, without any allowance to his wife and children, and he now had not a bed left to lie upon. He afterwards endeavoured to get repaid for his many losses, amounting, as he stated, including cattle, horses, and sheep, to four thousand pounds.

So fell Bridgwater, that strong, well-manned, well-provisioned town, whose capture was expected to have cost many a gallant life, and a tedious siege of many months.

The news amazed, astonished, and heavily depressed the King, especially as he had been repeatedly, and always, assured that the place was impregnable, and would never be taken. He would listen to no explanations, and refused to consider it excusable, that resistance was not prolonged even for one week. It also broke the spirits of his party, and made all despair.

Names of persons captured at the Siege of Bridgwater Jul 1645

Proc. Somerset Archaeological and Nat Hist Soc 1877 by Emanuel Green

Bamfylde Mr Byam Capt - retired to Barbados

Byam Capt John Clerk cornet

James Dean William - chaplain to governor

Greenvil Joseph - of Stanton

Harvey Mr - lord of manor

Phillips Capt Robert

Phillips Capt - of Wells

Rawley Dr - dean of Wells

Rawley Henry

Rawley John

Rogers Henry Sandford

Mr Shepherd ensign

Shore ensign

Robert Slater Thomas - of Malet

Sletman Mr - of Bruton

Smith Francis - of Nicholas

Star Mr - or Sterry of Yeovil

Sydenham Henry - of Donyat

Sydenham Philip

Sydenham Will

Sydenham William - curate

Waldron Col Humphrey - retired to Barbados

Waldron Mr

Walrond Mr

Wyndham Sir Hugh

[1] A Diary, ? No. 61.

[2] A Coppie of a Letter, etc etc

[3] Oldmixon.

[4] Parliament Post, No. 11.

[5] Three Great Victories, etc Sir Thomas Fairfax taking Bridgwater, etc

[6] Perfect Occurrences, No. 30.

[7] Oldmixon.

[8] Clarendon MSS., No. 1903.

[9] Mercurius Civicus, No. 114.

[10] A fuller relation from Bridgwater since the last fight, etc, etc

[11] Sir T. Fairfax entering Bridgwater.

[12] The Proceedings of Sir Thomas Fairfax, No. 5.

[13] Kingdom's Weekly.

[14] Symond's Diary. A Diary, etc, No 63.

[15] Rushworth. This lady, who was the daughter of Hugh Pyne, of Lincoln's Inn, had been nurse to the Prince.

[16] A Brief Relation of the Taking of Bridgwater, etc etc

[17] Mr. Peter's Report from the Army to the Parliament, etc

[18] A continuation of the Proceedings of Sir Thomas Fairfax, No. 4.

[19] In May, 1642, from York, the King sent Mr. Thos. Eliot to the Lord Keeper Littleton in London, who up to that time had rather acted with the Parliament, requesting him to come off at once to York with the Great Seal. As he would probably be pursued, and was a sufferer from stone or gravel, the King's letter suggested that he should give the Seal to the bearer, and himself come on leisurely to avoid the otherwise painful fatigue. At first the Keeper refused, declaring he would deliver the Seal to the King only, but after two hours delay, Eliot demanding it with rude importunity, he gave it up. Eliot at once mounted his horse and rode off to the King. For his expedition and good success he was promised a reward, but as this did not come from the King so quickly as he expected, he determined to receive it only through the Queen, with whom he was already a favourite. Accordingly he wrote to Lord Digby, to ask her Majesty to get him made a Groom of the Chamber, promising that for such a favour, neither her Majesty nor his Lordship should " ever find a more real servant."

[20] Perfect Account, No. 30.

[21] Weekly Account, No. 30.

[22] Perfect Diurnal, No. 104.

[23] Mercurius Britannicus, No. 91.

[24] Sir Thomas Fairfax Letter to the Hon. Wm. Lenthall, Esq.

[25] Kingdom's Weekly.

[26] The True Informer, No. 14.

[27] Parliament Post.

[28] The Byam Memoirs.

[29] Sir Thomas Fairfax's Letter to the Speaker, etc

[30] State Papers, 1645, No. 24. A Perfect Diurnal.

[31] Mercurius Civicus, No. 114.

[32] Mercurius Civicus, No. 116.