

The Siege of Colchester

Teacher Resource



Relevant modules:

GCSE

AQA GCSE AB Britain: Power and the people: c1170 to the present day

OCR GCSE History: War and British Society c.790 to c.2010

OCR GCSE History: Personal Rule to Restoration 1629–1660

KS3

British Civil Wars, Interregnum, Oliver Cromwell, Restoration

Background to the English Civil Wars

The Siege of Colchester happened over the summer of 1648, during what is known as the Second English Civil War. There were three English Civil Wars in total, the focus of each being on the power of the monarch versus the power of parliament.

In 1629 King Charles I of England dissolved parliament and ruled for 10 years without it. Up until this time in history, parliament had been more of an advisory group to the rulers of England, rather than having any established powers. However, parliament had been gaining more and more authority over the years and so this move by the king was seen as an attack on that.

In 1640, the king needed funds to fight a war against Scotland and called parliament back. Parliament took this as an opportunity to voice concerns around their lack of powers and declined financial support for the king.

After years of disagreement, conflict began in August 1642, starting the First English Civil War. Initially, it was hoped the conflict would be resolved quickly, but it lasted almost four years. The royalists were defeated and a vacuum in power was left between the various groups that had fought in the war. This period was known as the Interbellum, the Latin for 'between the wars'.

Unfortunately, no agreement could be made and in 1648, war broke out again. The conflict once again saw intense battles and long sieges across the country, including at Colchester.

It was after the Second English Civil that Charles I was executed for treason, on 30th January 1649. This led to the start of a new era in British politics known as



Figure 1: Portrait of King Charles I. By Daniel Mytens, 1632.

the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland. It was also known as the Protectorate, as it was ruled by the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell.



Figure 2: Painting of Oliver Cromwell dissolving the Rump parliament. Benjamin West, 1782.

During this period, the Third English Civil War occurred. This was once again between royalists and parliamentarians, this time over a predicted attempt by the exiled son of King Charles I returning to claim the throne. This war is more often known as the Anglo-Scottish war, as it was primarily between English parliamentary troops and Scottish royalist supporters who had been raising an army.

After this final conflict, Scottish troops were defeated and Scottish government was absorbed into that of England. Oliver Cromwell became Lord Protector of England, Scotland and Wales.

Recommended further reading and listening.

Books

The Blazing World – Jonathan Healey

The English Civil War: A People's History – Diane Purkiss

Podcast

Revolutions – Series 1

The events of the Siege of Colchester

June

- 12 The Essex Royalists enter Colchester in the hope of gaining further recruits. Sir Thomas Fairfax joins Whalley and Honeywood at Coggeshall then push on towards Colchester.
- 13 Sir Thomas Fairfax's attempt to storm Colchester repulsed by Sir Charles Lucas.
- 14 Sir Thomas Fairfax begins preparations for a long siege at Colchester.
- 19 Three Royalist ships attempting to sail up the River Colne to bring supplies into Colchester driven back by the Parliamentary garrison on Mersea Island. Three Parliamentary ships arrive from Harwich to blockade the mouth of the Colne.
- 24 The Suffolk Trained Bands secure the roads leading north out of Colchester.

July

- 2 Sir Thomas Fairfax completes the circumvallation (surrounding the town with trenches/ramparts) of Colchester.
- 5 Lucas with 400 cavalry troops and Lisle with 600 infantry, attacked the Suffolk Trained Band (parliamentary forces) guarding the East Gate. The royalists were eventually pushed back into the town.
- 14 Sir Thomas Fairfax's troops seize the Hythe, Colchester's harbour on the River Colne. St John's Abbey and the house of Charles Lucas were captured by Parliamentary forces.
- 15-18 The battle of Boxted Heath. Parliamentary victory.
- 16 Sir Thomas Fairfax sent a trumpeter offering surrender terms. Charles Lucas refused, saying that if another trumpeter were sent, they'd be hanged.
- 22 Bernard Gascoigne escapes Colchester with cavalry and makes it to Cambridgeshire.

August

- 16 Starving civilians at Colchester beg the Earl of Norwich to surrender.
- 20 The Earl of Norwich rejects new terms for surrender offered by Sir Thomas Fairfax.
- 21 500 starving women and children were sent by the royalists to the parliamentary line, but were driven back into Colchester by Sir Thomas Fairfax's soldiers.
- 27 Colchester surrenders to Sir Thomas Fairfax.
- 28 Colchester occupied by Sir Thomas Fairfax
- 29 Royalist commanders Sir Charles Lucas and Sir George Lisle executed by firing squad at Colchester.

Suggested Activity

Write a diary entry from the perspective of either a royalist soldier trapped in the town, a townspeople who supported parliament trapped in the town or a parliamentary soldier stationed outside the town.

The impact of the siege

How the Siege began

At the start of the Second English Civil War, there was conflict between royalist and parliamentary troops in Kent. With the Royalist troops on the verge of defeat, they fled north in the hopes of finding more troops to support them. They stopped in London, Chelmsford and eventually Colchester.

Their plan was to regroup at Colchester, where royalist commander Charles Lucas had a house and could gather supplies. However, Parliamentary troops were quick to follow and arrived outside Colchester town walls starting the siege of the town that would last 11 weeks.

During the siege

As the siege went on provisions became fewer and fewer. Almost all food ran out and parliamentary troops cut off all supplies. Eventually, people resorted to eating rats, cats and dogs. They even started eating the tallow, animal fat, that was used to make candles.

Thatch from the roofs of buildings was used to feed horses, which would have left some buildings open to the elements. With the addition of many buildings being damaged by cannon fire, such as the tower of St Marys at the Wall, the town was left with significant architectural damage by the end of the siege.



After the royalists surrendered on 27th August there were three conditions that the town had to meet:

- **The Lords and Gentlemen were all prisoners of mercy.** - A prisoner of mercy was someone who had an important role in the conflict and was taken prisoner, with their punishment left to the mercy of the leaders of the opposing forces. After the Siege of Colchester, all leaders were held as

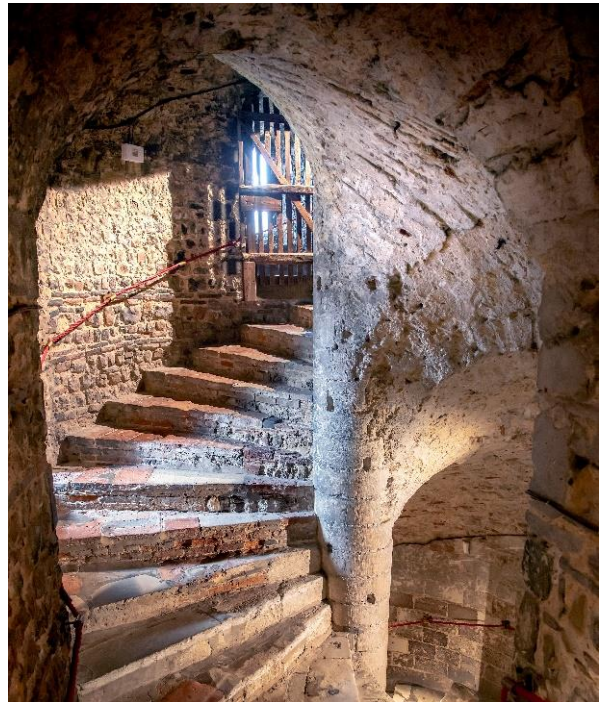
prisoners of mercy and three were condemned to execution. Charles Lucas and George Lisle were executed behind Colchester Castle. Lord Cappell was initially granted freedom, but executed the following year after having escaped his imprisonment at the Tower of London. Bernard Gascoigne, originally from Italy, was spared to avoid a diplomatic incident. George Goring, the Earl of Norwich, was sent into exile.

- **The common soldiers were disarmed and issued with passes to return to their homes after they had sworn an oath not to take up arms against Parliament again.** – Many royalist soldiers had already fled the town by the end of the siege, giving up their arms and agreeing never to raise them against parliament again. This ensured them safe passage home and away from the conflict. It is estimated that around 200 royalists fled before the siege ended.
- **The town was to be preserved from pillage upon paying £14,000 in cash.** - Although the people of Colchester had never supported the royalists, the fact they had given them shelter in the town meant they were charged for their involvement in the siege. The sum of £14,000 was a vast sum of money at the time. Throughout the 1600s, the average agricultural labourer earned just over 10p per day.

Suggested Activity - Choosing sides

Who suffered more during the siege, the citizens of the town or the royalist troops? This can either be in the form of a debate, where the class is split in half and each has to take a side. This could be in the form of an essay, where the student had to argue their point.

Source analysis



This painting of Charles Lucas and George Lisle being taken down the great stairs at Colchester Castle was painted by Harry Becker in the early 1900s. Compare to the location today.

Secondary Sources

How useful are these sources in understanding what happened to Charles Lucas and George Lisle after the Siege of Colchester? What features of the painting indicate their situation?

Consider when the painting and photo were made?



This painting was made by Peter Froste in 2004. Peter Froste was an artist who made historically accurate paintings of scenes from Colchester's past. This painting shows a scene on the Parliamentary ramparts outside the town walls.

What can you see in the painting that you recognise?

How accurate do you think this representation is of events during the siege?

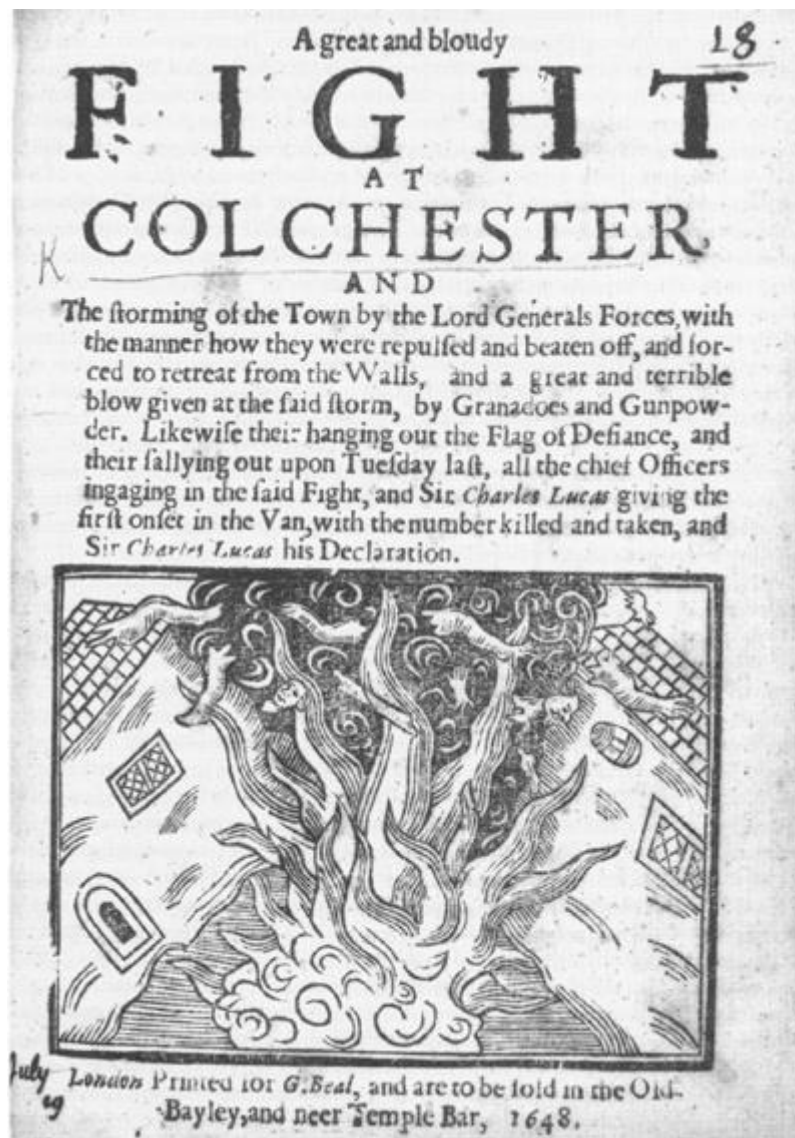




This detail of the Siege map shows the fortifications built by Parliamentary forces surrounding the town.

In addition to the physical defences, troops were stationed at all access points to the town, to ensure there could be no escape.

This map was made by parliamentarian supporters. Do you think a map made by royalists would look different?



Transcription: A great and bloody fight at Colchester and the storming of the town by the Lord Generals forces with the manner how they repulsed and beaten off and forced the retreat from the walls, and a great and terrible blow given at the said storm, by granadoes* and gunpowder. Likewise their hanging out the flag of defiance, and their sallying out upon Tuesday last, all the chief officers engaging in the said fight, and sir Charles Lucas giving the first onset in the van with the number killed and taken and sir Charles Lucas his declaration.

This was a pamphlet printed in London on 19th July 1648, over a month into the Siege of Colchester.

Discussion

*A granadoe is an early form of the word "grenade". Grenades were first developed over 1000 years ago in China. Gunpowder technology travelled to Europe through trade with Asia in the 1400s.

Propaganda

When looking at sources it is important to consider who is making them, when they made them and why they made them. It is common for people to produce writing or artworks that show what they want the reader or viewer to believe, even if it is not true. In war, one side might report fewer casualties to convince those that read the reports that they are winning. Similarly, they might report greater losses by the enemy for the same reasons.

Activity

Bring in several different newspapers that cover the same story and compare what information they include or leave out. Think about why they might have done this.

Objects in the museum collection



This is a gold siege token, made during the siege of Colchester. Towns under siege had little or no access to currency and so, in some instances, they were forced to produce their own out of desperation. These temporary tokens, acted as money in exchange for goods in the town. A gold siege token is quite rare and the only example of a siege token in Colchester Museums' collection.



This is a helmet, supposedly hung over the tomb of Sir Charles Lucas. Although this may not necessarily have been worn by him, it is an example of the sort of thing soldiers would have worn during the Siege of Colchester.



This is a painting of Lord and Lady Fairfax. Lord Thomas Fairfax led the parliamentary forces that besieged the town of Colchester. The artist is unknown but copies an original by William Dobson painted in the early 1600s.



This monument to Charles Lucas and George Lisle is outside Colchester Castle, on the site where they supposedly were executed by firing squad .



This spade was found during excavations to the west of Colchester. It is in the area where parliamentary troops built defences outside of the town, during the siege of Colchester. This may have been one of the spades used to build the large ramparts that surrounded the town.