

# The Siege of Colchester

## Teacher Resource



### KS1 and KS2

This resource is designed to tie-in with the local history study element of the KS2 curriculum. It might also be adapted to KS1 looking at lives beyond living memory and historical events within the locality.

## What was the Siege of Colchester?

The First English Civil War 1642 and 1646 was between royalists, who supported the king, and parliamentarians, who supported parliament. The war ended in the defeat of King Charles I and his supporters. After the war ended some people still believed the king should remain in charge of the country, while others wanted to give more power to parliament. These differing views led to the Second Civil War which broke out in 1648, just two years after the end of the first war.



*Figure 1: A silver pendant showing the bust of Charles I. The CR on the back stands for the Latin Carolus Rex, meaning King Charles.*

On 12<sup>th</sup> June 1648 royalist soldiers arrived in Colchester looking for food and shelter on their way to Norfolk to recruit new troops. However, parliamentarian soldiers arrived soon afterwards and surrounded the town walls, trapping everyone inside. The siege lasted 11 weeks, during which time there were many failed attempts to escape by both the royalists and people of the town.

The people living in Colchester were actually supporters of parliament too, meaning they were trapped inside the town with their enemies. In August 1648, the parliamentarians won an important victory at the battle of Preston. When news of this arrived at Colchester, the Royalists leaders surrendered and the siege ended.



Figure 2: Painting of the Siege of Colchester by Peter Froste, 2004. It shows an imagined scene on the Parliamentary defences outside the town walls.

## Questions

What familiar objects can you spot in this painting? What objects don't you recognise?

What are these people doing and why?

What are they wearing? Is this similar to anything you wear? Do you think they would wear these clothes all the time/in day to day life?

What are they looking at on the table?

Can you spot the castle?

## Answers

Items in the painting include:

**Cannon**– Cannons were important in the siege of Colchester. Parliamentary troops had them stationed all around the town and royalists had them pointing out. It is believed that a cannon once sat on top of St Mary at the Wall church, but was destroyed when a parliamentary cannon blew up the church tower.

**Laundry** – Parliamentary troops lived in temporary accommodation for many weeks at a time. Things like laundry would need to have been done whilst in these temporary camps.

**Cups** – Unlike cups today that are mostly made of plastic or glass, cups at this time were either ceramic or made of pewter (a metal which includes tin and other elements).

**Hats** – The hats worn by the men in the painting indicate they were fairly high-ranking individuals. Women had to wear special hats called ‘coifs’ to cover their heads at all times.

**Barrel** – There would have been very little furniture in these camps as they were intended to be temporary. Therefore some objects had to be used in different ways.

**Boots** – The large boots worn by the men in the painting were made of leather.

**Helmet** – The infantry soldiers are wearing helmets in the painting. This particular style of helmet was worn by the parliamentary troops.



## Town defences

Many towns built walls and other features to defend themselves during the English Civil War. Walking around Colchester today, you can still see parts of the town walls, although they are not as tall as they used to be.

Buildings within the town could also help defend or attack, by having high roofs from which people could fire arrows or cannons, as well as buildings for storing supplies in the event of a siege.

**Why do you think the following things would be useful during a siege?**



The Town Wall near Colchester Art Centre

Strong walls



Colchester Castle

A Castle



The old Siege House on East Hill

An inn/hotel



St John's Abbey Gate

A Gatehouse



Crates of fruit and vegetables

Fresh supplies



Image of a cannon by Peter Froste

Cannons

## Answers

- Strong town walls stop the enemy from getting into the town and provide defence for buildings against cannon fire.
- A castle provides a strong defended building if the enemy get into the town.
- An inn or hotel would provide accommodations for the new soldiers who arrived in the town, or for people whose houses had been destroyed by cannons.
- A gatehouse would prevent the enemy getting into the town along the roads.
- Fresh supplies ensure everyone has enough food throughout the siege.
- Cannons could be used to fire back at the enemy outside the town.

## Activity Suggestion

Design and/or build a town with good siege defences. Split pupils into groups with each responsible for a different element: Walls, castle, gatehouses etc.

When the town is built you could have a go at attacking the town using toy cannons or catapults. You could even just throw bean bags at the buildings to see which ones survive the best.

## Siege Diary

Several people recorded their account of the events of the siege. Some of these were published in the form of pamphlets, little books, that people outside the town could buy.

Unfortunately, each side seems to have exaggerated the accounts of what happened, to make it look like their own side was winning. A royalist pamphlet would say that they had won a battle, when a parliamentary pamphlet would say that they had won. How are we to decide what the truth was?

At the end of the siege, it was clear that the parliamentary troops had won the war. This fact was recorded by both the royalists and parliamentarians.

### Activity suggestion

Write your own diary for a week. Record the most important things that happen each day - your favourite lesson or what you eat for lunch. After a week, compare with other class members and see what you have in common.

Do children have different emotional responses to the same event? Different favourite/least favourite activities?

LO: We experience the same events in different ways.



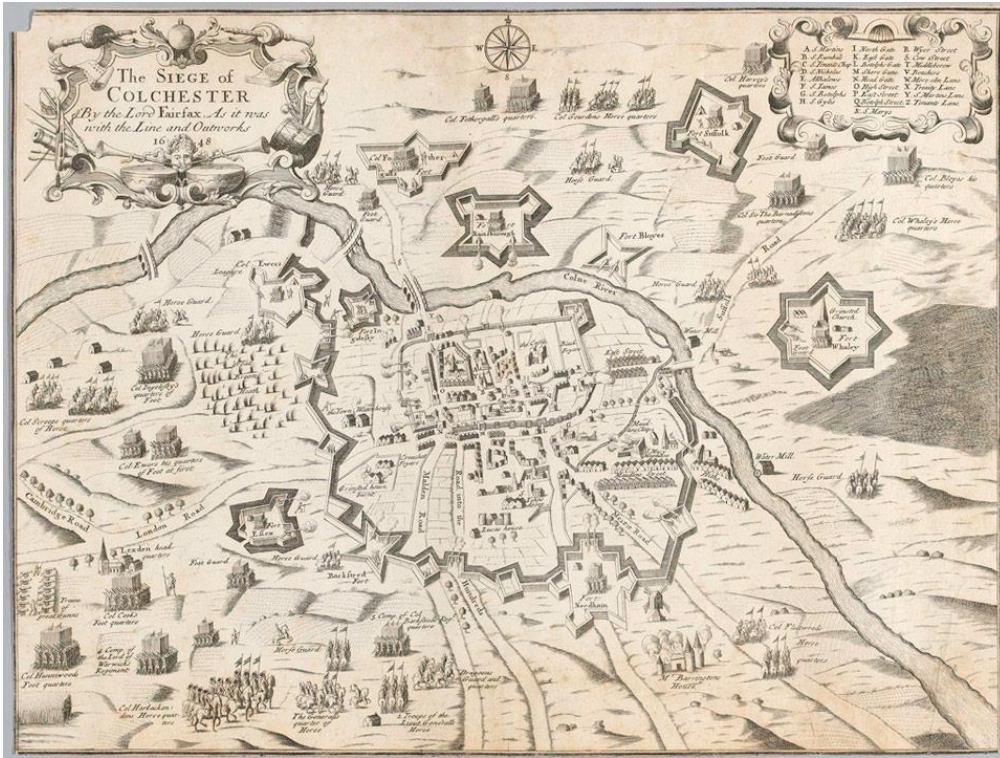


Figure 3: A map of Colchester during the siege, made by parliamentary commander Lord Thomas Fairfax.

## Events of the Siege

At first the people trapped in the town, both citizens and the royalist forces, thought the siege wouldn't last long. They thought that they had plenty of supplies and as they weren't completely surrounded, troops could leave to get food and other supplies from the surrounding area.

However, as the siege went on, parliamentary troops built physical defences around the town and set troops at all entrances/exits. This meant any attempt to escape, even temporarily to look for food, became impossible. Eventually supplies ran very low and attempts to beg for food from the parliamentary commanders were rejected.

The people of the town ended up feeding their horses with straw from the rooves of their houses. They had to eat rats, dogs and cats, as these were the only sources of food. They eventually had to eat the animal fat, known as tallow, used to make candles.

### Activity suggestion

Before discussing some of the events that happened maybe show pupils pictures of foods that people normally eat alongside a candle. When the pupils suggest the people wouldn't have eaten a candle, you can explain that during the siege they were so desperate for food they had to.