

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2020

Berkshire during the Civil War

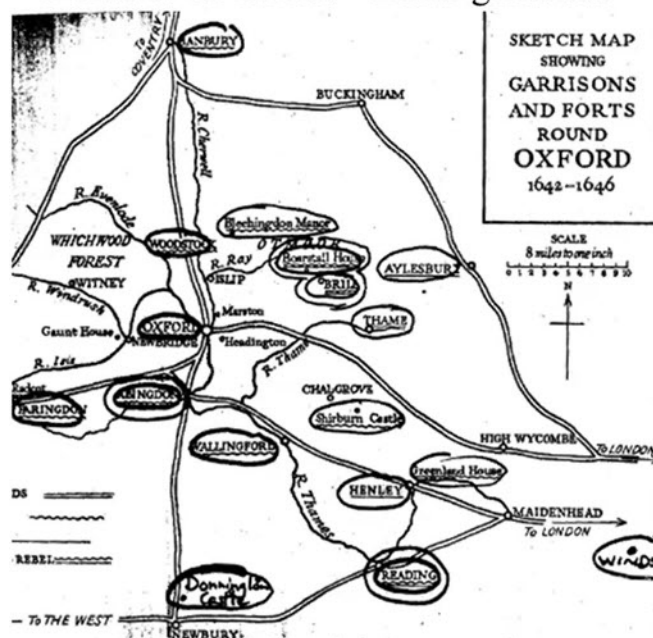
It is not possible, under the present covid-19 restrictions, to hold Wargrave Local History Society meetings in the normal way. However, as an experiment, September's planned presentation was given using the Zoom internet program. The speaker was Joan Dils, respected local historian and President of the Berkshire Local History Association, who told members about Berkshire in the Civil War from 1642 to 1648 - how the county was affected, how the people reacted, and coped, during the period of conflict (rather than an account of battles and so on).

The Civil War was one resulting from the conflicting principles of two political views. Most people did not want to fight at all. One county MP, Henry Marten, for example was very much a republican, and extreme Parliamentarian, who said to a Royalist supporter "I do not think one man wise enough to govern us all". On the other hand, another Berkshire MP, Sir Benjamin Rudyard, said in Parliament that "It is now high time to set up the King, in such a way as he shall never want love nor money, a plain English, homespun way, without foreign inventions. It behoves us to be more sensible, the more forward, the more affectionate in supplying him with a speedy, seasonable, bountiful support". These opposing views gave rise to many cartoons during the war - some hostile to one side, some to the other, and in some cases, against both.

A cartoon view of the opposing sides



Defences of Oxford – Berks garrisons



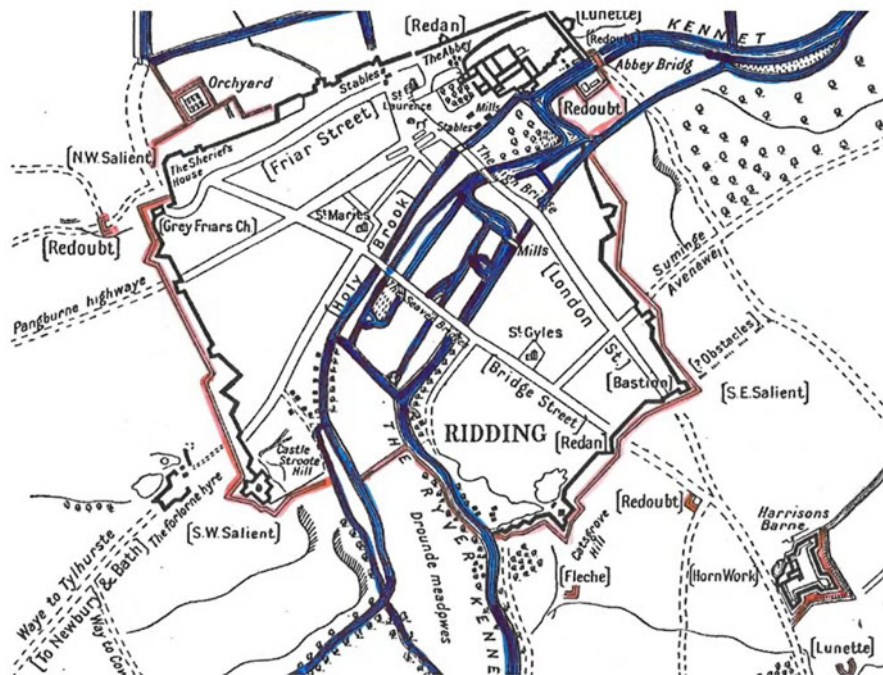
In Berkshire, the gentry had a divided allegiance, with some, such as both Sir Francis Knollys senior and junior, Tanfield Vachell, Peregrine Hoby, Henry Marten, and Edmund Dunch being for Parliament, whereas Thomas Dolman, Sir George Stonehouse, William Hyde, Sir Richard Harrison, Lawrence Halstead and a Mr Yate were for the King. In some cases, such as the Blagraves, and Vachells the family was divided. Locally, Henry Neville was for Parliament whilst Richard Neville was a Royalist. A few of the gentry remained neutral, and both sides were represented at sites across the county.

One of the problems for the people of Berkshire arose from its geographical location. The Parliamentarians had a headquarters at Windsor, the Royalists at Oxford. (the King having failed to take possession of either London or Reading. The area was wealthy – being rich in agricultural terms, and especially in providing horses.

The population of Berkshire did not wish to fight, but many felt compelled to do so as tenants of landlords who favoured one side or the other – although most of those involved in the local battles and skirmishes came from elsewhere. All parties in the conflict had a need to travel between Windsor and Hungerford – ie east - west across the county, and from Oxford to Southampton (ie north – south across Berkshire. In addition, several of the major towns governed important river crossing points, so were important strategically. The towns were as divided as the gentry – Windsor was mainly Parliamentary, Abingdon mainly Royalist, whilst Reading was divided in its loyalties.

There were few pitched battles in the county. There were 2 at Newbury in 643 and 1644, each time aiming to give a clear route through Berkshire, but both were indecisive. Reading was subject to several incidents Henry Marten took the town for Parliament in 1642, but in November it was taken for King Charles. However, a siege in April 1643 saw it return to Parliamentary control., but an outbreak of typhoid weakened the troops, and the Royalists regained it in the September.

Reading's defences 1643



The following May, however, Charles was in need of more troops to defend Oxford, and so his army was withdrawn from Reading, and the town remained under Parliamentary control for the rest of the war. Various other large houses and castles were also besieged, and by July 1646 all the castles and towns in the county were held by the Parliamentarians

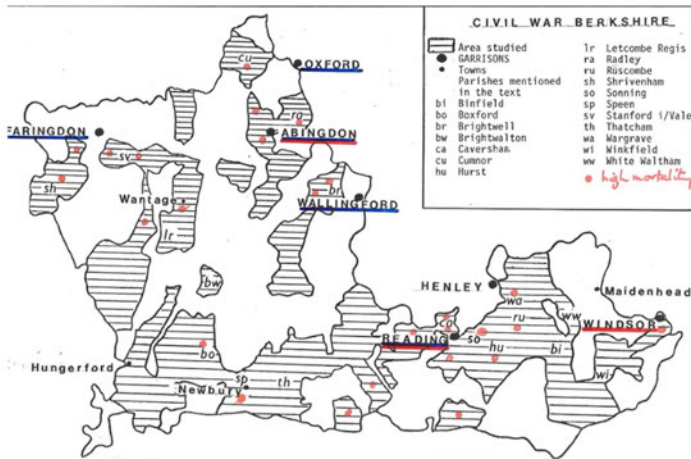
Both sides needed to raise funds. The Royalists from Wallingford captured the Mayor of Reading as way to get support for their garrison, whilst in other places soldiers would take goods from the large houses or churches, and the soldiers would then demand money from the owner in order to redeem them. Another ploy was to ask for "loans" – which were never repaid.

In one instance, a man had 11 horses taken. He managed to retrieve 9 of them, and then went to find the remaining 2 – only to find on his return that the 9 had been taken again.

The major effect on the ordinary people of Berkshire was the loss of life. There were many more burials recorded during this period – especially in 1643. The majority were not soldiers, however, but the local people who died from disease.

The coming of either army was not welcome. Reading sent a petition to Parliament to say that both armies were as bad as each other – they broke down houses, robbed markets and threatened the magistrates. In Windsor, the New Model Army was formed – trained professional soldiers who were a little better disciplined. At Abingdon, the burial register notes the death of 9 Irish soldiers. The Irish were considered as savages, and universally badly treated – the grave was discovered during archaeological work in 1980,

Parishes with high burial rates in Civil War



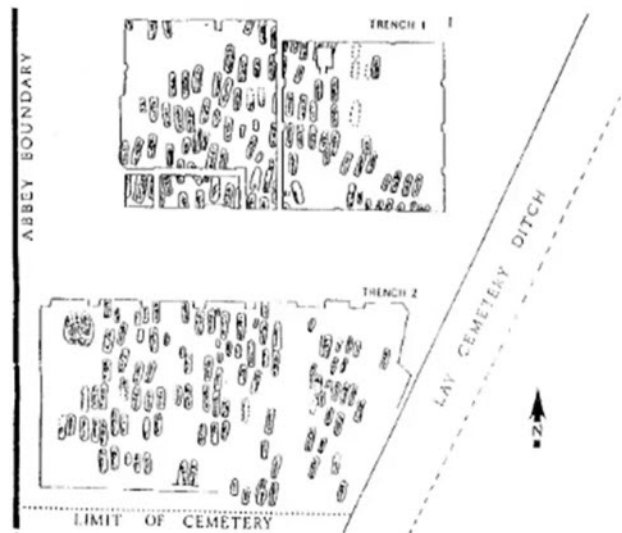
when it became apparent that they had been murdered – in effect a 'war crime'. The Civil War cemetery there is unusual in that the burials are arranged north - south rather than the more normal east - west.

In the 17th century, there was a move amongst some of the Church of England clergy to move towards Roman practice, such as greater use of candles or incense. The Puritans did not approve of such, and had what they considered 'Popish' items removed from churches whilst the use of the Prayer Book was banned for a time. Despite that, it would continue in use, with clergy using a mixture of old and new practices. Some clergy were ejected from their parishes at this time, but the vast majority were reinstated at the end of the war.

Abingdon Civil War cemetery 1644

Probably the greatest effect on the ordinary people of the area was the many minor skirmishes that took place. A report of one near Reading in January 1643 for example records that Captain Langley had been "pillaging the County of Berkshire, and had taken 150 sheep, 5 cart loads of hay and 100 quarters of wheat and barley, which were taken to Henley (a Parliamentarian stronghold) for the soldiers, and the Royalists carried out similar raids on the local people.

Berkshire, had been a wealthy county before the war, being the 6th highest rated in England for example. The impact of the war was that during the 1640s this dropped to 21st, The death rate doubled, and business – particularly the cloth trade – had suffered. However, by the end of the century, the county had recovered to again be the 6th richest for tax purposes in the country. Almost all the gentry regained their wealth and positions in Government in the post-war era – the 2 notable exceptions being Henry Marten and Daniel Blagrave (the former imprisoned for life, the latter fled to France – they had signed the death warrant for King Charles). During the Civil War era, many festivities had been curtailed, but they and the Prayer Book returned to common use soon after, although, but a number of churches - and country houses - had been damaged or plundered.



Iconoclasm by parliamentary soldiers



Festivals including Christmas abolished 1644-

CHRISTMAS

O. R.
His Twelve Yeares Observations upon the Times, concerning the lamentable Game called Sweep-stake; acted by General Plunder, and Major General Tax; With his Exhortation to the people; a description of that oppressing Ringworm called Excise; and the manner how our high and mighty Christmas-Ale that formerly would knock down Hercules, & trip up the heels of a Giant, strook into a deep Consumption with a blow from Westminster.



Whilst the current restrictions on holding meetings remain in place, the Society plans to have some further meetings using the Zoom on-line system. The next one is planned to take place on Tuesday, October 13th, when Joy Pibworth will give a presentation on “Heroes of Woodley Airfield” – an area of pioneering aviation, and Joy will talk about some of the people associated with it. The dedicated link to access the meeting will be sent a few days before the meeting to those who specifically request it.
