

WEARE GIFFARD AND THE CIVIL WAR

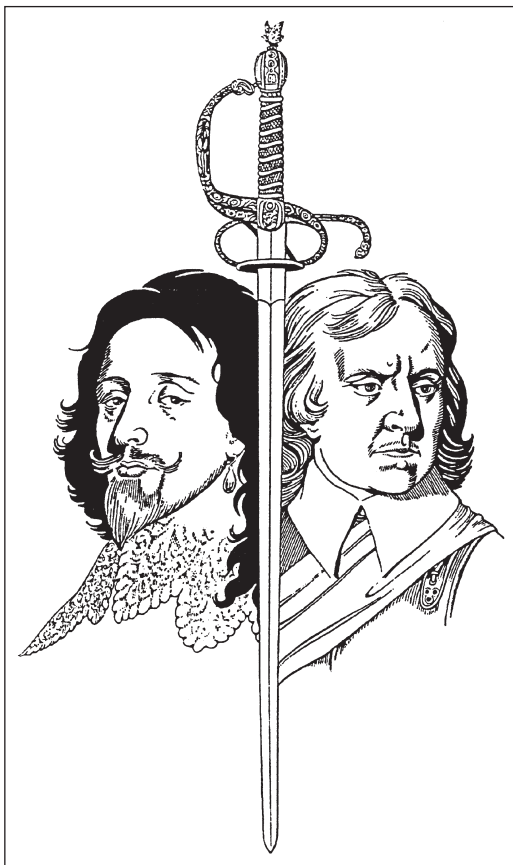
1642 - 1646

Peter Coad

"brother confronts brother in war's grim service"

(Propertius)

The Civil War followed a series of disputes between King Charles I and Parliament. The main issue was the sovereignty of Parliament and the abuse of power by the King who profoundly believed in his divine right to rule. The final clash resulted in the Grand Remonstrance of 1641 which was a statement drawn up and presented to The Commons, reviewing the illegal acts of the King. It marked a major crisis in the struggle between Charles and The Commons.



"By the Sword Divided"

(ACK: "1646 GREAT TORRINGTON")

In May 1641 Parliament sent the Protestant Oath to all Sheriffs for distribution to every city, town and parish to be signed by all men eighteen and over. It required signatories to *'live and die for the true Protestant religion, the liberties and rights of subjects and the privilege of Parliaments'*. The oaths were to be sworn by every member of the parish of Weare Giffard; none refused. The names were actually written by the Reverend John Attwill and witnessed by Henry Cleverdon, the local constable. (A modern transcript of the House of Lords protestation is included in the appendix). The only family who appears to have survived the passage of time is that of William Beare, later spelt 'Beer'.

The Civil War started late 1642. Those who fought for the King were called Royalists or Cavaliers; those supporting Parliament were known as Roundheads. The older aristocratic families tended to favour the King whereas the world that had evolved since the Reformation was predominately supportive of Parliament. Towns were generally Parliamentarian, especially those connected with the sea or the cloth trade. Most cathedral cities and some market towns were loyal to the King. Torrington, the nearest town to Weare Giffard, was said to be staunchly Royalist. All eligible men in Weare Giffard had sworn an oath of loyalty to

On the 16th February 1646 “The Forgotten and Last Great Battle” of the English Civil War was fought at Great Torrington, Weare Giffard’s nearest town and focal point for Weare Giffard’s law and order. During the week running up to this battle, and to that of Fairfax and Cromwell marching up from Exeter with their New Model Army, the roads and streets of North Devon - and Torrington specifically, rang to hoofs of the Royalist horse as they ranged across our area.

With over 2000 soldiers garrisoned in Great Torrington, space and supplies, were at a premium, and men, and horses, were quartered outside the town in the outlying villages - “20 to a house and 3 and 4 to a bed, and 10 in the hay mow” (Perfect Passages Wednesday February 11th -18th 1646).

It was for this reason that Weare Giffard saw battle! The Royalist Lord Thomas Wentworth, 1st Earl of Stafford, used Weare Giffard Hall for himself, and for the stabling of his cavalry.



Thomas Wentworth



Sir Thomas Fairfax

Although aristocratic families tended to support the King, often the wider family fought on both sides. This is particularly the case with the Fortescues. The wide variety of sources however produces conflicting information. It was Hugh Fortescue who, in 1641, signed the Protestation Oath in Weare Giffard, which suggested he supported Parliament. In the History of Great Torrington by Alexander and Hooper, published 1948, it quotes from a letter written by Parliamentarian Colonel Robert Bennett of Hexworthy dated July 1642 saying, ‘As I remember, Mr Fortescue of Ware Giffard, a Deputy Lieutenantsent me a kind letter inviting me to command a Company in Sir Samuell Rolles his Regiment and bade me choose my Company’. Sir Samuell Rolles was a Parliamentarian. A Colonel Fortescue (no Christian name mentioned) is referred to in ‘The Forgotten Battle’ by John Wardman, as being in command of one of six regiments led by Sir Thomas Fairfax, a Parliamentarian general. The same Colonel Fortescue is mentioned as having later occupied the Earl of Bath’s house at Tawstock. In John Wardman’s book, William

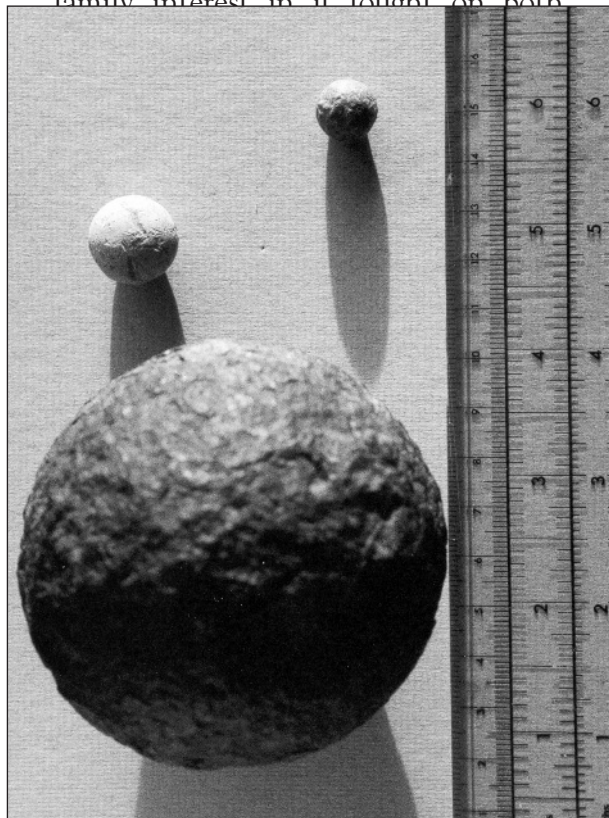
the same index he is described as 'Mr Fortescue of Weare Giffard, a Deputy Lieutenant of Devon; he recruits troops for the Parliamentarian regiment of Sir Samuell Rolles'. From his archives, the present owner of Weare Hall, Professor Dr. de Loecker, identifies a Colonel Robert Fortescue who defended Weare Hall under the command of Royalist Lord Wentworth who had quartered his cavalry there.

Weare Hall was one of the few medieval manors licensed to be fortified. There was a battle at Weare Hall simply because it was occupied by Royalists. Weare Giffard was the scene of much troop movement during the campaign by both sides and the Weare Giffard ford saw much activity. Heavy rains curtailed its use at the close of hostilities. The Battle of Torrington was fought in the darkness of a February night in 1646 and was the last major battle of the Civil War of 1642-1646. Torrington bore the brunt of this bloody battle. It was defended by the King's Army led by Lord Hopton against Parliaments' New Model Army under the command of Sir Thomas Fairfax and Lieutenant General Oliver Cromwell. The defeat of the Royalists there virtually brought the War to an end.

The battle at Weare Giffard resulted in the destruction of the outer defensive walls of the manor house; the main building escaped serious damage.

Cannon were used to defeat the defending Royalists; cannonballs are still occasionally found, one as recently as the 1960's at the entrance to Rocky Lane. Musket balls are also still to be found. While the Roundheads occupied the village they shot away the faces of the figures in the branches of

the Jesse Tree window in the parish church of The Holy Trinity. A portion of the glass is said to have been used in Weare Hall library. Following the surrender of the Royalists at Weare Hall, General Fairfax ordered it 'to be razed to the ground'. However the order was rescinded and only the outer defence walls were demolished; the Gatehouse was allowed to remain intact. I am convinced the Weare Hall survived because those who had a family interest in it fought on both



*Civil War shot found
in Weare Giffard*

This article has focused entirely on the minor Civil War battle at Weare Giffard. I am much in debt to Professor Dr. de Loecker of Weare Hall for his valuable assistance, and to John Wardman for his excellent account of 'The Forgotten Battle: Torrington