

# The English Civil War in West Yorkshire

Michael Crowley





# Summary of Magnitude

- The English Civil Wars comprised three wars, which were fought between Charles I and Parliament between 1642 and 1651. The wars were part of a wider conflict involving Wales, Scotland and Ireland, known as the Wars of the Three Kingdoms.
- Up to 200,000 people lost their lives, or 4.5% of the population. This was a greater proportionally, than during the First World War.
- In 1649, the victorious Parliamentarians sentenced Charles I to death. His execution resulted in the only period of republican rule in British history, during which military leader Oliver Cromwell ruled as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth. This period is known as the Interregnum, and lasted for 11 years until 1660 when Charles's son, Charles II, was restored to the throne.
- The Civil Wars saw the beginning of the modern British Army tradition with the creation of the New Model Army – the country's first national army, comprised of trained, professional soldiers.



# Causes of the War: personal rule and religious divide

- ▶ The fundamental cause of the English Civil War was the collision between king and parliament. Charles I had an unshakeable belief in his divine mission as a king. As Charles himself put it: *A King must rule his people like a father, his authority is founded on the immutable decrees of Almighty God. I must alone answer to God for our exercise of the authority he has vested in me.*
- ▶ During the 1630's many Protestants in England followed the teaching of Geneva theologian John Calvin. They wanted a church that adhered more rigorously to the word of the Bible. Many wanted rid of man-made artifices in church such as stained-glass windows, above all Puritans believed in an individual direct relationship with God. They did not believe the clergy should act as an intermediary to God and they could see little difference between the high church ceremony that Charles favoured and the Roman Catholic Church.

# Heptonstall at the time of the Civil War

- At the beginning of the Civil War, Heptonstall was a well-established community of clothiers and small farmers. It had a cloth hall and a grammar school. There was no settlement in what is now Hebden Bridge, but there was a former stone bridge on the existing site. Whole families were involved in the production of woollen cloth: children carding, women spinning at large walking wheels, and men weaving at a handloom. Puritanism was strong among clothiers in the West Riding and the people would have been sympathetic to parliament.



Heptonstall Cloth Hall was built sometime around 1545 to take advantage of cloth woven in the upper valley and neighbouring east Lancashire. In contrast to the wealth of southern clothiers, northern folk were noted for their frugal living and ceaseless toil which provided them "the necessities of life without its superfluities". In the language of the day, they were "clothiers of the meanest sort"

### **Plague and Population**

On October 1631 a clerk at the manorial court of Wakefield recorded the election of two new constables for Heptonstall, adding: 'Est pestis': there is plague. The burial register records 80 plague victims in Heptonstall. We can barely imagine the effects on small communities of death rates of 5-10% of the population in just five months. Whole families died, including the curate, his wife and child. The population of Heptonstall dropped from 900 to 750. The outbreak was not isolated: there was plague in the parish in the 1580s, 1590s, 1640-1 and most severely in 1645 when the deaths in Halifax town ran into the hundreds.

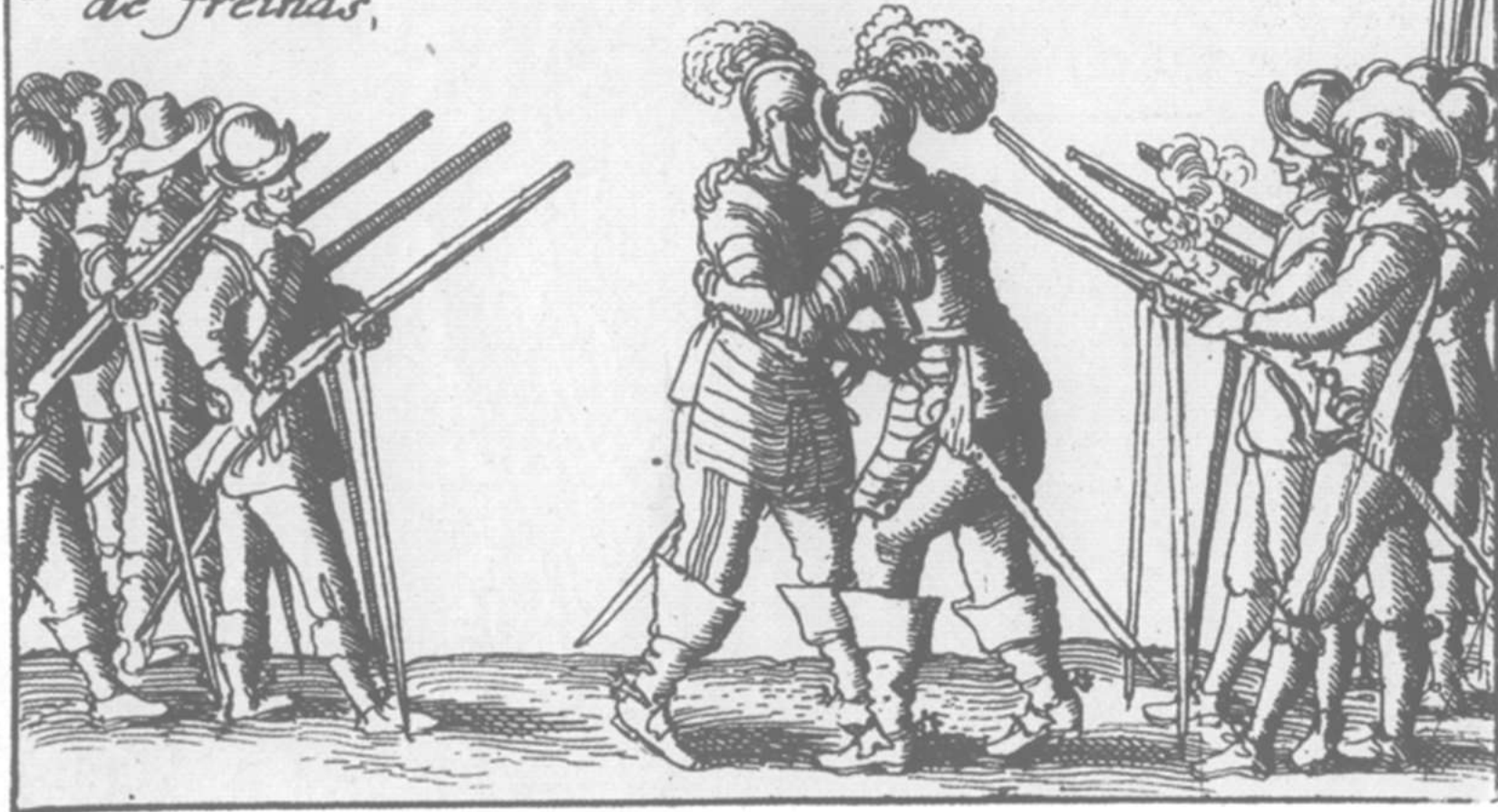




# King and Parliament: The Descent to War

- An irony of the English Civil War was that it was precipitated by events in Scotland. Charles I resented the independence of the Church of Scotland and wanted to bring it more into line with the **Laudian** Church of England. Charles introduced an **Act of Revocation** which returned to the established Church, land and money taken by the nobility.
- In 1638 the king's opponents came together at Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh to sign a National Covenant. This urged the king to stop any further religious innovation and instead adhere to the principles of Calvinist worship. The Covenant was taken across Scotland gaining signatures and support.
- In response Charles ordered an army to be raised. But England's nobility did not support his invasion plans. In June 1639 the dispirited troops faced a far superior force. *Our army is weak, our purse weaker and if we fight with these forces, we shall have our throats cut.* (Sir Edmund Verney) Charles was forced to postpone his military plans.

*the English and Scotts Armies at first ready to  
fight, lovingly embrace each other, & part Kin-  
de freinds,*



# First English Civil War Commences

- The King left London on January 10<sup>th</sup> 1642 and established his court in York. York became the de facto capital of England. Both Parliament and King raised armies. The Earl of Newcastle was the King's general in chief in Yorkshire. The Commander of the Yorkshire forces for Parliament was Ferdinando Fairfax, his son Thomas Fairfax was second in command.
- After Hull was occupied by Parliament's forces Charles raised his standard in Nottingham in August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1642.



Right, Sir Thomas Fairfax

Left, the Earl of Newcastle 'A gentleman of an irrational and brutish valour.' Spent much of his time surrounded by poets and musicians known as the Cavendish Circle.





# The Civil War in Yorkshire: Overview I

- ▶ While parliament had London and its arsenal, royalists set about acquiring strongholds in the north.
- ▶ Royalist **Sir William Savile** seized Leeds and Wakefield.
- ▶ Weapons and munitions had been stockpiled at Hull in 1638 for the Second Bishops' War, it was also a port and the king set about occupying the city. Parliament ordered the governor of Hull to seize the city and deny Charles access. Charles declared the governor a traitor and unsuccessfully besieged Hull. The Earl of Newcastle began a second siege in 1643.
- ▶ **Sir William Savile** seized the West Riding towns of Leeds and Wakefield he marched to Bradford in December 1642 but was beaten back, not only by roundhead soldiers but by bands of clubmen; local men who armed themselves with whatever came to hand.





## The Civil War in Yorkshire: Overview II

- ▶ After Royalist Sir William Savile seized the West Riding towns of Leeds and Wakefield he marched to Bradford in December 1642, but was beaten back, not only by roundhead soldiers but by bands of clubmen; local men who armed themselves with whatever came to hand.
- ▶ From July 1643 onwards Halifax, a Puritan stronghold, suffered a royalist occupation. The troops that marched into the town were known as whitecoats because of their rough undyed woollen jackets. Paid eight pennies a day mostly in arrears, they were ill-disciplined and feared.
- ▶ Puritans in Halifax who sympathised with parliament would have gathered what possessions they had and walked west. Phoebe Lister of Shibden Hall buried the deeds of her house and headed for Manchester.
- ▶ The town of Beverley was abandoned on by Fairfax 28 August in 1643 and occupied by the Royalist army, where, *...the men (Royalist soldiers) that stayed in the town fell to their old trade of plundering, spoiling and stripping all ages and sexes ... they plundered the whole town consisting of above a thousand families and sent their booty of cattel and goods to Yorke. .... Thus they have done also to all the towns adjoining.*

Areas controlled by Royalists

Areas controlled by Parliamentarians

Major battles

0 200 Miles  
0 200 Kilometers





# West Yorks Clothing Towns

- Citizens of the West Yorks clothing town were largely Puritan and natural supporters of Parliament.
- Puritanism was associated with educational progress taking place in industrialised areas.
- Cloth areas were vulnerable to trade cycles and to increases in taxes.
- None of the towns (Bradford, Leeds, Halifax, Wakefield) were represented in Parliament.
- The Fairfax's, a family that lived near Bradford, were seen as natural leaders of the town. Ferdinando was appointed Governor of Hull, his son Thomas set his HQ in Bradford.
- Though only 8 miles east, Leeds was the garrison for Royalist Sir William Savile.
- Having cut Lord Fairfax's army off from its main recruiting area, Newcastle despatched a sizeable force into the West Riding under Sir William Saville, with orders to take Wakefield, Leeds, Bradford and Halifax.
- October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1642, 800 Royalists from Leeds attacked Bradford.



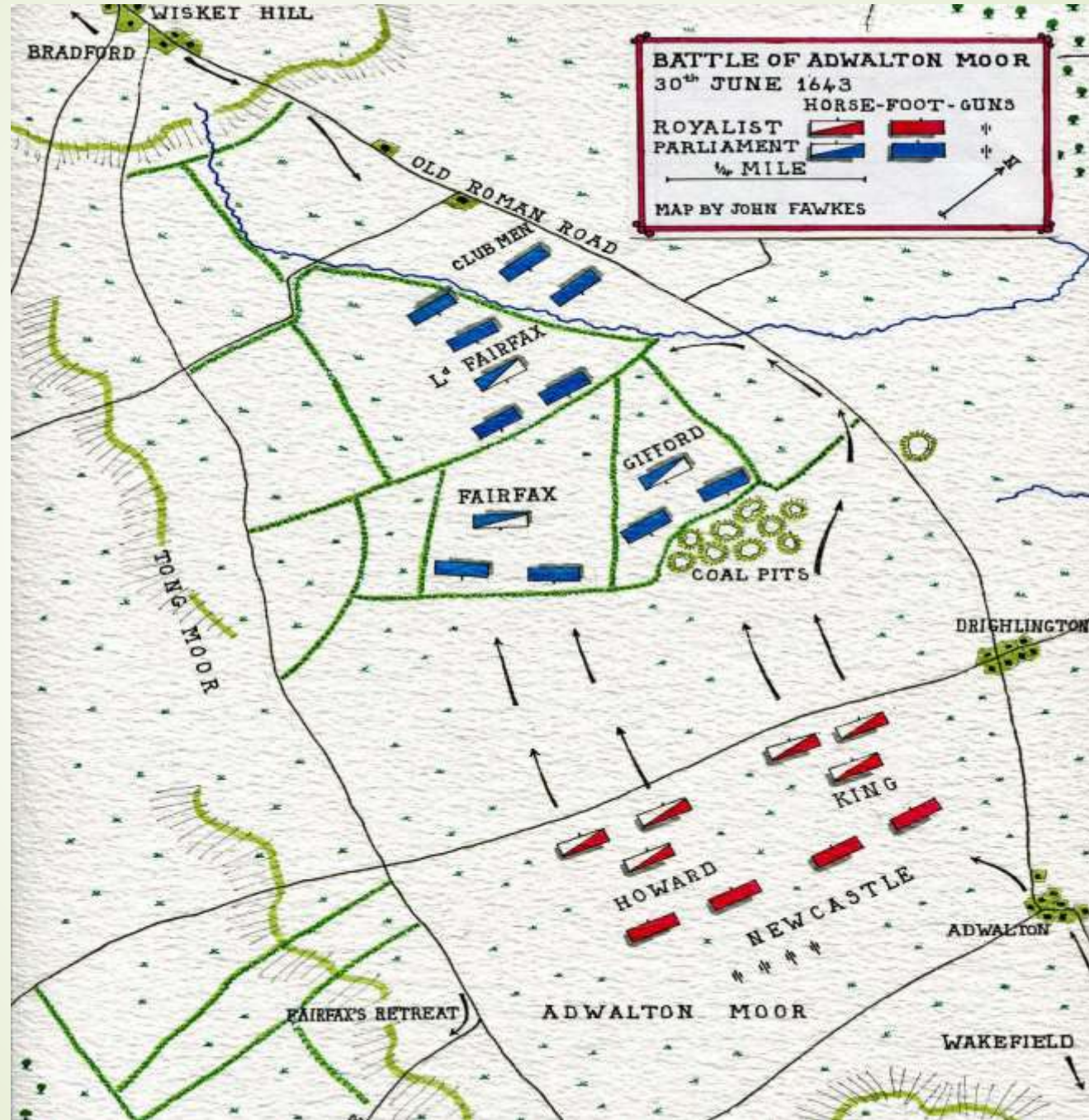
# First Siege of Bradford

- ▶ Whilst the Fairfaxes had their hands full Sir William Savile made his move in the West Riding. He occupied first Wakefield and then Leeds. From there he marched on Bradford which was expected to put up a fight. **October 1642.**
- ▶ Whilst the Fairfax's were engaged in north Yorkshire, Sir Francis Howard attempted to storm Bradford on The attack was expected and defences had been erected around the town. Though low on Parliamentary troops, clubmen were recruited in considerable numbers. Even so, at 800 men the Royalists had double their number.
- ▶ The defending forces garrisoned themselves around the church and hung woollen bales from the church to limit the damage from cannon fire.
- ▶ The propaganda element of the story, ordinary men pitted against professional soldiers and winning, was seen to encourage those towards the Parliamentary cause, and by some, as having God on their side.
- ▶ "Bradford Quarter"



# The Battle of Adwalton Moor

- ▶ Sir Thomas Fairfax was in Bradford during the summer of 1643, but he was convinced the town could not withstand a siege by the estimated 10,000 Royalists lead by the Earl of Newcastle approaching from the east. He rode out to meet them with his 3,000–4,000 men. Fairfax had hoped to have been sent the 6,000 men who were at Nottingham waiting. However, he was denied these forces.
- ▶ The armies met on **30<sup>th</sup> June 1643**. The Battle was a close-run thing. The Royalists seemed on the verge of conceding the battle when a contingent of Royalist pikemen drove back the Parliamentarian's left wing. The Royalist cavalry then swung around to the north and attacked the Parliamentarian's left flank.
- ▶ The Royalists had superior number of cavalry which proved decisive.
- ▶ Parliamentary forces retreated to Bradford. 1,500 were captured enroute. 500 had been killed in the Battle, Royalist fatalities were circa 200.



Courtesy  
Britishbattles.com



# Second Siege of Bradford July 1643

- The Earl of Newcastle ordered his army to march on Bradford. Some Parliamentarians who had retreated to Bradford managed to escape on horse, those on foot, could not get out. During the escape, the wife of Sir Thomas Fairfax was captured. The Earl of Newcastle returned her to Fairfax the next day.
- A surrender was suggested by Sir Thomas Fairfax to his opponents, but both sides were distrustful of each other and so nothing came of it. Further skirmishes over the night led to the Parliamentarian side running out of lead and shot; Fairfax and his officers left the town to its fate in the early hours of 2 July 1643.
- Royalist troops occupied the town largely peacefully.
- Due to the sacking and loss of food, a pestilence affected Bradford immediately after the second siege.



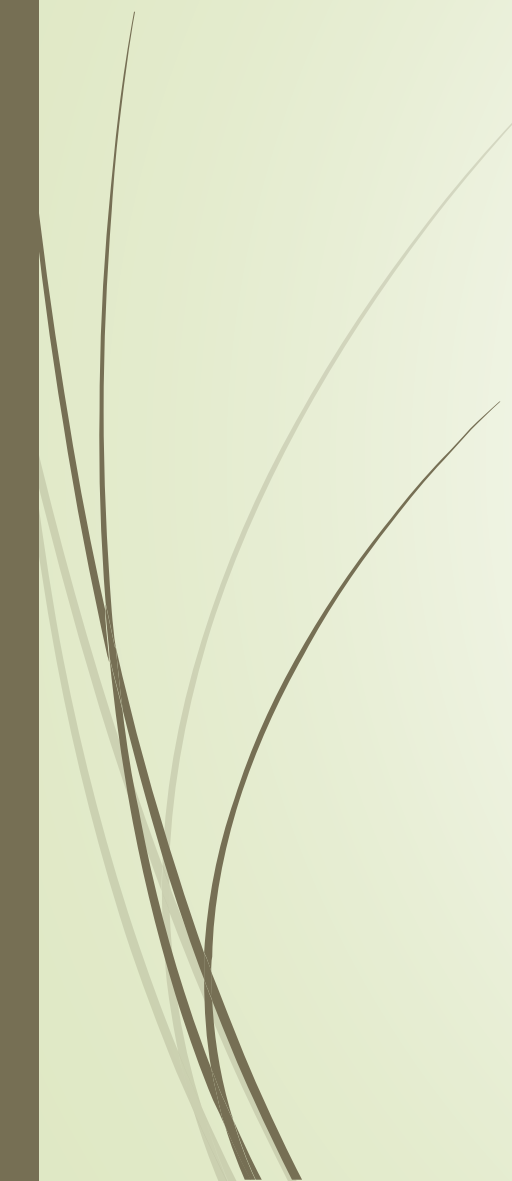



# The Battle of Leeds, 23 January 1643

- ▶ Savile, who had command of around 2,000 men in Leeds, built a trench on the western edge of Leeds, destroyed one bridge on the approach to the town and heavily fortified another. Leeds was not walled.
- ▶ Fairfax armed as many of Bradford's residents as he could, and had a force of around 3,600 men. He attacked during a heavy snowstorm, attacking Leeds in three places.
- ▶ The Battle lasted around two hours before the Parliamentarians secured the town, and captured about 500 prisoners.
- ▶ Fairfax lost around 20 men during the attack, while the Royalists suffered roughly double as many fatalities.
- ▶ The survivors of the Leeds garrison arrived at Wakefield at about six o'clock in the evening, and their arrival seems to have spread panic among the garrison of that town. Wakefield was abandoned during the night, and the garrison withdrew to Pontefract.



# The Battle of Heptonstall, Nov. 1643

- There was around a thousand Royalist troops garrisoned in Halifax under Sir Francis Mackworth.
  - Royalist troops pillaged the countryside for food, money, cattle arms and recruits.
  - Colonel Robert Bradshaw led 850 men to Heptonstall and the villagers found themselves in the front line.
  - Bradshaw launched a series of raids east against the Royalists. Mackworth was forced to retaliate.
  - During the early hours of the morning Mackworth marched cavalry and Pikemen towards Heptonstall. The river was swollen by driving rain.
  - Bradshaw's soldiers and local volunteers defended the buttress with boulders and barricades. The rain meant matchlock muskets were soaked.
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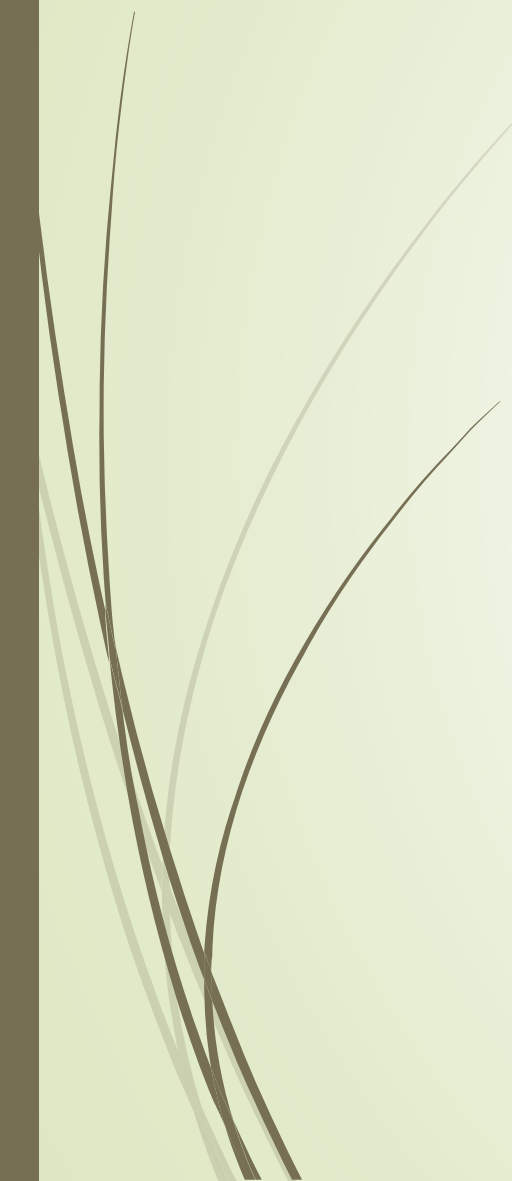


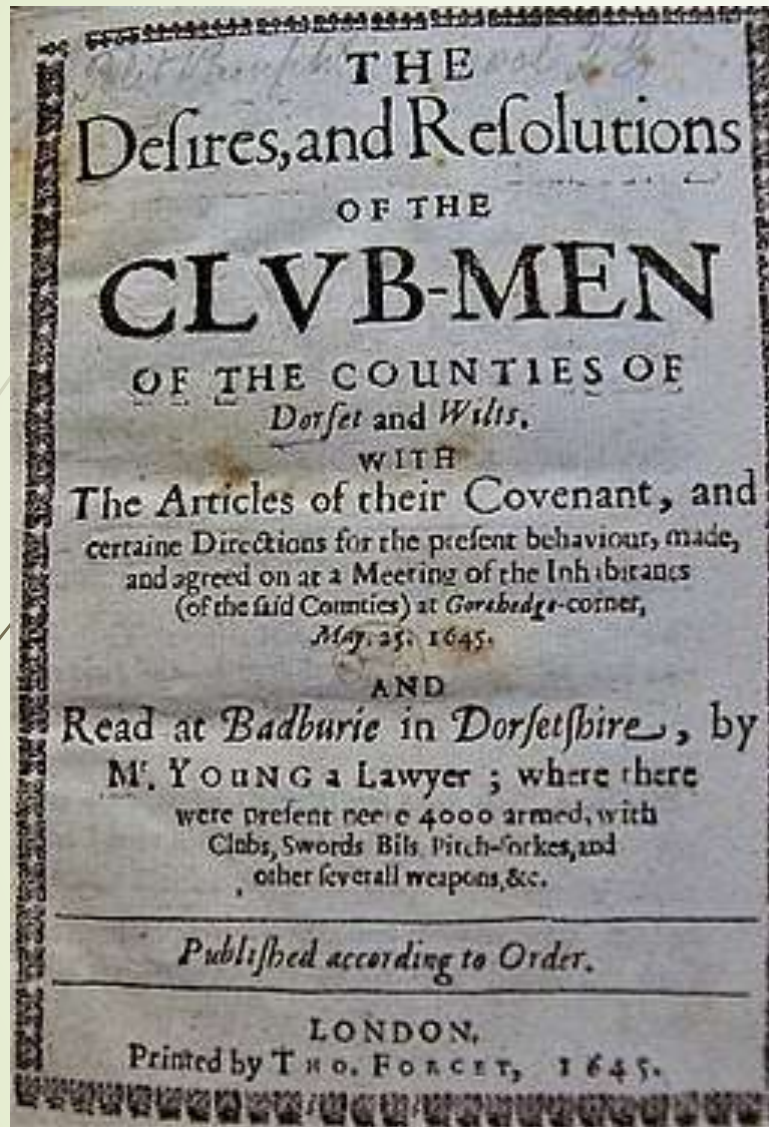
The defenders suffered few losses, though Bradshaw died of his wounds six weeks later. Royalist casualties may have reached a few hundred.

On January 9<sup>th</sup> 1644 Mackworth returned to the village. The Parliamentarians and villagers fled. The Royalists sacked the village burning 14 houses and barns and seizing livestock.



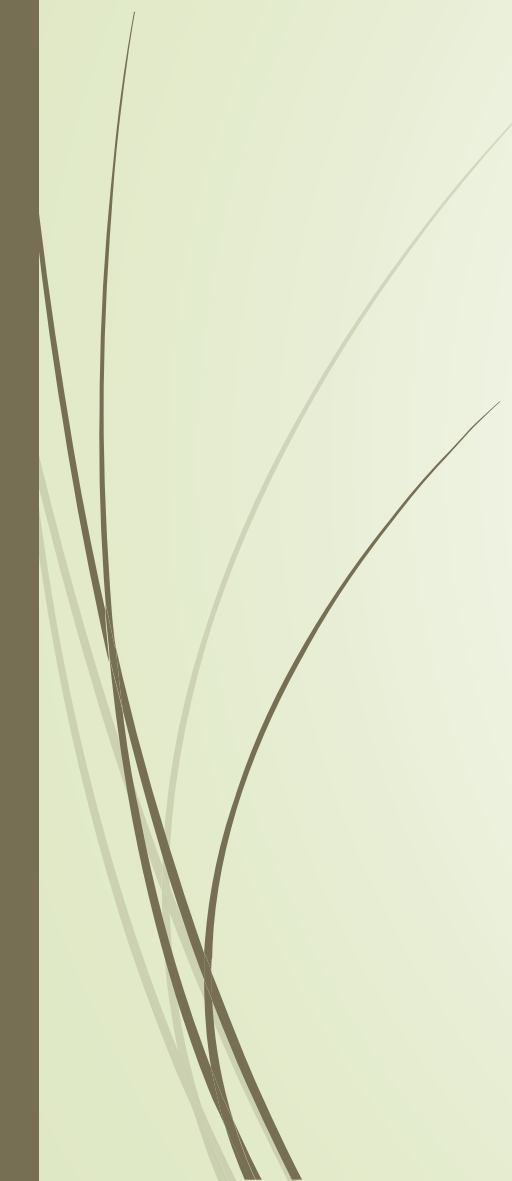
# Clubmen of the English Civil War


- ▶ Clubmen were bands of local defence vigilantes who tried to protect their localities against the excesses of the armies of both sides.
  - ▶ They were effectively a third force in the war.
  - ▶ Why were the bands formed? They sought to prevent their wives and daughters being raped by soldiers of both sides, themselves being forcibly conscripted their crops and property being damaged or seized by the armies.
  - ▶ They were a radical development and arguably shared the spirit of the popular rebellions of Tudor England.
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# Iconoclasm

- ▶ For some the war was about Iconoclasm. Obeying the second commandment. Papists were the enemy.
  - ▶ Amongst those there was a debate about where to draw the line.
  - ▶ Crosses became controversial, even market crosses.
  - ▶ Activists wanted a bare church; no stained glass, no altar, no font, no hangings or paintings, no colour.
  - ▶ Text was everything. A church must be a blank space in which to listen and receive.
  - ▶ Iconoclasm became a cult. The undoing of Laudian reforms, the completion of the Reformation.
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► An antient Cross liv'd in our Fathers time,  
With as much Fame, as did the Worthy's nine;  
No harm it did, nor injury to none,  
But dwelt in peace, and quietly alone;  
(. . .)  
Yet peacefull Nature, nor yet humble Minde,  
Shall not avoyd rude Ignorance that's blinde,  
That superstitiously beats down all things  
Which smell but of Antiquity, or springs  
From Noble Deeds, nor love, nor take delight,  
In Laws, or Justice, hating Truth and Right;  
But Innovations love, for that seems fine,  
And what is new, adore they as divine;  
(. . .)  
And so this Cross, poor Cross, all in a rage  
They pull'd down quite, the fault was onely Age.

► Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, laments the excesses of Puritan iconoclasm in her poem 'An antient Cross', first published in 1656 in *Natures Pictures*.



# Michael Crowley, author and dramatist

## **Fiction**

*Baghlan Boy* (2020) pub. The Book Guild

*The Stony Ground* (2018) pub. Waterside Press.

## **Poetry**

*First Fleet* (2016) pub. Smokestack Books

*The Battle of Heptonstall* (2012) Smokestack Books

*Life's Spinning Song* (2024) A series of poems on the Cragg Vale Coiners put to music. Pub Bandcamp.

## **Non-Fiction**

*Comrades Come Rally, Manchester Communists in the 1930s and 40s.* (2022) pub. Bookmarks

*Behind the Lines: creative writing with offenders and those at risk.* (2012) pub. Waterside Press.

## **Drama**

*The Man They Couldn't Hang* (2010) pub. Waterside Press.

Michael is the artistic director of the **British Multitude Theatre Company**. He has written drama for BBC Radio.