

CIVIL WAR IN DORNEY

Major crises have a habit of recurring. Living through Covid-19, we are experiencing similar fears and privations to our forebears during previous pandemics – the Black Death, the outbreaks of plague during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spanish flu in 1918-9. We are not the first people in Dorney to face climate change; the Little Ice Age from 1300 to 1850 brought low temperatures and unpredictable rainfall. England lived through two world wars, and our armed forces continue to be involved in international conflicts as they have for centuries. But the last time Englishmen fought other Englishmen on battlefields in England in a major war was nearly four hundred years ago. What kind of impact did this have on our village, when all over the country families, friends and neighbours were pitted against each other?

The divergent views which gave rise to the conflict we can perhaps appreciate. Brexit certainly caused strong differences of opinion, and a recent survey has found even greater polarisation over such issues as social distancing. But the English Civil War of 1642-9, in which it is estimated that 3% of the population lost their lives, was a dramatic escalation of divergent views.

Buckinghamshire was predominantly Parliamentarian. No major battles took place in the county, but the armies of both sides passed through on their way to somewhere else. This



could be very disruptive; soldiers and their officers tended to cause damage and seize supplies. Colnbrook was plundered when Prince Rupert's cavalry was staying in South Bucks. Luckily Dorney, not on a main route, seems to have avoided this particular problem.

The first significant event for Dorney was the departure of Sir James Palmer and his family in the summer of 1642 for Montgomeryshire where his second wife came from. Sir James was a close friend of King Charles I and a loyal

Royalist. When he refused to pay the heavy taxes imposed on him by Parliament, his tenants in Dorney were ordered to pay their rents directly to the Parliamentary authorities. Reportedly they suffered badly for the allegiance of their landlord. A range of taxes were levied by Parliament to pay for the war, including "voluntary loans" paid monthly by wealthier people, and excise duty imposed on beer, meat and bread in July 1643 which affected rich and poor alike. The Palmer family, originally from Kent, staunchly supported the king, with the exception of Sir James' nephew Herbert, a Puritan preacher.

Dorney was also affected by events on the other side of the river. Much of Berkshire was Royalist, and when popular support for Parliament in London forced the king to leave the capital, he spent several weeks in Windsor Castle during the winter of 1642. After he had left, the Parliamentarians seized the castle without resistance and held it for the rest of the war. They had a garrison there of varying size; nearly 20,000 troops gathered in Windsor in preparation for the siege of Reading in April 1643. Later the New Model Army of the Parliamentarians trained in Windsor Home Park. As well as the soldiers, Royalist prisoners were brought to live in the castle.

This close presence of a garrison had a major impact on Dorney folk. Local historian Elias Kupfermann has written a detailed account of the effect of the garrison on Windsor and the surrounding area. While the residents of Dorney may not have had to give up their beds to the castle, like the townspeople of Windsor did, our part of South Bucks did form part of

what Elias calls the hinterland of the garrison. This meant that we were within an area roughly 15 miles distant from Windsor, the outer edge of which was patrolled by dragoons to deter raids by Royalist forces and generally keep the peace. The garrison looked to the hinterland for at least some of its supplies – wheat to bake bread, cattle to provide meat, horses to replace ones killed in battle and hay to feed them. In theory these provisions were paid for, though demands from armed men could hardly be refused. There wasn't enough room in the castle to accommodate all the soldiers, so some were billeted in private households, including in Dorney. In 1647 people living in South Bucks complained about the burden incurred by quartering 30 to 40 soldiers, free of charge. Soldiers staying in Burnham were too busy “typping” to pursue a party of Royalists who had taken horses and men in a raid on Cippenham in December 1645.

As well as requisitioning supplies and accommodation, the Windsor garrison collected money from its unfortunate hinterland. Some of this took the form of local taxes collected by parishes. Other sources of revenue were taken by force. In the spring of 1645, troops from Windsor rode over to Dorney looking for valuables believed to be hidden away in Dorney Court. They carried off five loads of chairs, pictures, bedding and other household goods, but it's not clear if they found the money and silver plate they hoped for. When Sir James Palmer finally returned to Dorney Court in 1646, he found the soldiers had torn down most of the panelling in their search.

Even if the fighting was not on our doorstep, there was plenty going on to remind Dorney that these were not normal times. In the autumn of 1642, the Royalist army bombarded Windsor from the Eton side, having occupied the college, but fled after failing to recapture the castle. Both Windsor and Maidenhead bridges were made of wood, and armed guards were commonplace. Windsor bridge included a drawbridge which could be pulled up to prevent the opposition from crossing the Thames. Maidenhead bridge was generally in a poor state of repair which rendered it impassable in September 1644, when it had to be mended before a force of 3,000 Parliamentary troops could cross. The current closure of Marsh Lane reminds us how inconvenient the bridge closures must have been for locals. The Thames was a safer transport route than the roads, and Dorney residents would have seen horse drawn barges and rowing boats taking ammunition from Windsor Castle upriver to Reading. Barges were used to bring supplies, soldiers and arms from London to Windsor, and some barges were armed like mini-gunships.

Meanwhile life went on in Dorney. The fields still needed to be ploughed and sown, the crops harvested, the cows milked. Babies were still being born; at least 13 families had children baptised in Dorney church during the war. Sadly, records of marriages and burials have been lost, but no doubt these events took place. Like many parishes, Dorney also lost its vicar, William Flood, usurped and replaced by a minister of more Puritan persuasion.

Eventually, King Charles I was taken prisoner. In July 1647, he was allowed to meet his three youngest children for the last time, in Maidenhead, before imprisonment in Caversham. On 23 December 1648 he was brought to Windsor Castle. As they had the previous year in Maidenhead, people in Windsor came out into the streets to see him pass by and wish him well. From Windsor he was taken to London on 19 January 1649 for trial and executed on 30 January. A week later his body was brought back to Windsor where he was buried secretly on 9 February, as the snow fell thickly.

Let's hope we have learnt our lessons from the past and will never again take up arms against our fellow citizens. Maybe social media is the new battleground. Instead of pikes and swords, our disagreements can be played out bloodlessly on Nextdoor Dorney!

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