

Axminster in the Civil War, and the Great Fire of 1644

Context

Axminster's involvement in the Civil War occurred relatively early in the First Civil War, when it was far from certain which side would prevail.

It was clear by the Spring of 1642 that war between King Charles I and Parliament was almost inevitable. By May the King had set up his headquarters at York, while Parliament continued to meet in London, asserting its primacy. In July the Earl of Essex was appointed general of a Parliamentary army, and when, on 22 August, the Royal standard was raised at Nottingham, the First Civil War effectively began.

There was much manoeuvring of troops, and some skirmishing, but the only set-piece battle to be fought during 1642 was at Edgehill in Warwickshire. The Royalists were the victors, but it was not a crushing victory, and such advantage as the Royalists gained was not pressed home. In 1643 there was plenty of fighting, spread over a wide area, but no pitched battles, and the Parliamentary forces looked anything but all-conquering.

It is in this light that the following account should be read. With the exception of the closing evidence about the post-War reconstruction period, it is based on James Davidson's pamphlet entitled 'Axminster During the Civil War in the Seventeenth Century'¹.

The text that follows paraphrases and summarises Davidson's original, which also provides more information about the sources that he used, and is recommended to anyone interested in the events which are described here.

Axminster and Lyme

At the start of the Civil War most of the gentry in Devon sympathised with the King even if they did not actively support him, whereas the people, and in particular those who lived in the coastal towns and cloth making centres which had suffered most from what they perceived as the arbitrary demands of the Crown, were more likely to support Parliament. Given the choice, the majority would have stayed out of the war altogether, but neutrality was not an option, since the warring parties both wanted to control the western ports, and to recruit the population to their opposing causes.

Parliament demanded a certain quantity of fighting men and supplies, and East Devon was required to provide 500 men to serve in a militia under the command of John Drake of Ashe House, Musbury. Whatever their inclinations as regards the warring factions, the rest of the population of towns such as Axminster avoided getting drawn into hostilities.

Lyme Regis, by contrast, was strongly supportive of the Parliamentary cause, and any Royalists there were actively intimidated. By 1643 Lyme was clearly identifiable as one of the few active centres of Parliamentary support in the South West. Whereas both armies passed through the countryside and took what they required by way of supplies, there were no significant military engagements in East Devon in 1643. The local Royalist commanders

¹ This was published by E Wills of Axminster in 1851. The pamphlet itself can be found in Exeter City Library (or more probably now at the Devon Heritage Centre), but a typescript copy is held at Axminster library.

included Lord Poulett, Sir John Berkeley and Sir Richard Cholmley (who was also Lord Poulett's son-in-law): the main focus of their activity was West Dorset and South Somerset.

In 1644 the centre of gravity of the war moved more decisively towards the South West, and Axminster was almost continuously harassed by the occupation of troops. Ashe House, where Lady Drake acted as a local focus for the Parliamentary cause, was garrisoned by supporters from Lyme. However, before they could install serious defences, Lord Poulett's forces drove them out, and burned the House down.

Early in March 1644 Royalists troops ambushed a raiding party from Lyme which was led by Captain Weare, killing some of them and taking the others prisoner to Colyton. The following night the tables were turned when Captain Pyne and another party from Lyme surprised the Royalists in Colyton, and took 60 of them prisoner, including their colonel, their horses and their arms.

Prince Maurice, a leading Royalist commander who was at that time based at Beaminster, then occupied Colcombe Castle at Colyton, a property belonging to the Courtenay family. From there he advanced to attack Stedcombe House near Axmouth, which had been garrisoned for Parliament by its owner, Sir Walter Erle. After a fight lasting 3 hours, Prince Maurice and the Royalists gained possession and burned the house down. One Royalist source stated that they had taken prisoner 5 captains, 16 other officers and 114 soldiers, with all of their arms and a puritan minister. Another source only talked of 35 prisoners, but both sources agree that the Royalists were comfortably victorious.

Axminster is drawn into the War

At the beginning of April 1644 the King decided that his forces should lay siege to Lyme Regis, and Prince Maurice, by then back at Beaminster, was ordered to march to Lyme with a significant force of men and artillery. Following a major fire which on 19 April affected most of the houses in Beaminster, Prince Maurice decided to base his force in Axminster and the surrounding countryside. From here they marched over Uplyme Hill and advanced to within a quarter of a mile of Lyme. After a skirmish, he captured a house called Hays, where he established his headquarters.

From mid-April until 15 June Prince Maurice, supported by Lord Poulett, besieged Lyme. The garrison and the people of Lyme suffered great privations, but managed to defend the town. Parliament was able to keep the town re-supplied by sea, and when the leading Parliamentary commander the Earl of Essex advanced towards Lyme from Dorchester with a significant body of men, the siege was raised, and the Royalists withdrew to Exeter. On learning this, the Earl of Essex did not go to Lyme itself, but marched through Bridport, Crewkerne and Chard, and on 30 June occupied Axminster before marching on through Honiton, Cullompton and Tiverton into Cornwall, where at the end of August they were beaten at the battle of Lostwithiel by a Royalist force led by the King himself.

While this was going on another Royalist regiment under the command of Lord Henry Percy threatened Lyme (but did not attack it). The garrison at Lyme, however, decided to attack Lord Percy's force, and was successful in defeating and dispersing it.

As the King made his way back towards London from Lostwithiel he was determined to consolidate his control over the South West by recapturing the remaining Parliamentary strongholds of Plymouth, Lyme Regis and Taunton, as well as securing recruits and supplies for his own army. On 30 September 1644 he held Court at Chard before departing for Lord Poulett's headquarters at Hinton St George, about 8 miles to the east. However, no sooner had the main body of the King's forces left Chard than a raiding party from Lyme entered the

town and captured some of the remaining men and booty, including some of the King's own possessions.

It was against this background that those inhabitants of Axminster whose sympathies lay with the Royalist cause, and who had had enough of the aggressive harassment from the Parliamentary troops, petitioned the King for a permanent Royalist force to be based in the town. The King sent Sir Richard Cholmley to take possession of the town and to remain there until Sir John Berkeley could get there with a larger force which could then install proper fortifications. Comparable forces were sent to Bridport and Chideock in an attempt to dissuade the Parliamentary forces based at Lyme from attacking them.

Sir Richard Cholmley duly occupied Axminster and the surrounding villages with a force of 300 men. Some initial defensive works were thrown up, and the process was strongly supported by Henry Hutchings, a gentleman from Axminster who was appointed Governor of the garrison and 'receiver' of the money to be raised from the surrounding area.

Axminster attacked and destroyed

Colonel Ceeley, the commander of the garrison at Lyme, was a local man with local knowledge. He was aware of the Royalist movements, and the threat which they posed to Lyme itself, and decided that he would attack Sir Richard's position at Axminster before the fortifications could be completed, and before any reinforcements could get there. He duly attacked on 25 October. Some details of the encounter are unclear, but the Parliamentarians definitely got the better of the encounter: 12 officers and 56 men were captured, along with horse and arms; the Royalist force was routed and dispersed; and their commander, Sir Richard Cholmley, received a wound to his shoulder by a musket ball from which he died a few days later. Colonel Ceeley's immediate objective, of relieving the pressure on Lyme, had therefore been achieved.

The Royalists did not give up, however. In November a further force of 300 men under the command of Major Walker arrived in Axminster, and immediately started to fortify the town. Despite this, and despite the fact that an attack from Lyme was at least half-expected, history repeated itself. A force from Lyme attacked Axminster again, routed the Royalists, took prisoners, and killed their commander. They also freed 50 Parliamentary sympathisers who had been held as hostages specifically to discourage such hostilities.

The surviving Royalists did not abandon the town on this occasion, but set to work to establish a defensible base. For this purpose they chose the Church, which was probably the only stone building in the town at that time.

In his pamphlet Davidson reproduces in full the text of a letter written by a Parliamentary soldier in Lyme to his father (in London) on 21 November 1644, recounting the recent events at Axminster. This letter was found amongst papers in the Library of the British Museum. The extract below is partial: it only covers the events of particular interest to Axminster and its surrounds.

"Hot newes in these parts: viz. the 15 of this present November wee fell upon Axminster with our horse and foote, and through God's mercie beat them off their works, insomuch that wee were possessed of the towne, and they betooke them to the church, which they had fortified, on which we were loath to cast our men, being wee had a garrison to look on. My brother and myselfe were both there. We fired part of the towne, what successe we had you may reade by the particulars here enclosed."

The enclosed note states that 56 prisoners had been taken at Axminster on 15 November. It also states that among the 30 men who were killed were Sir Richard Cholmley (who had actually been killed in the earlier encounter), 2 majors and other unidentified officers, with Baronet Bret being dangerously wounded. The arms captured included "... four great pieces of ordnance, 150 armes, 50 horses, 3 drums, 105 halberts, 3 barrells of gunpowder."

The letter continues: "*Wee lost onely one man in the taking of the towne, and had five wounded. The Monday following wee marched to Axminster againe, Major Sydenham having joined with us that Lord's day at night before, thinking to have seized on the church, and those forces that were in it, but finding them so strong, as that it might indanger the losse of many of our men, wee thought it not fit to fall upon the church, but rather to set the houses on fire that were not burnt in the first firing, which accordingly we did, and burnt doune the whole towne, unlesse it were some few houses, but yet they would not come forth of the church.*"

The next day the Parliamentary forces marched to Chideock where they attacked and stormed a Royalist house, but lost nine men killed with seven wounded in the process. The letter bemoans the lack of 500 horses, which the writer felt would have been enough to enable the Parliamentary forces to clear all of the Royalists from the area. At that time there were 500 Royalist cavalymen at Chard, and Taunton was entering its eighth week of a siege.

Later skirmishes

Over the next year or so the Parliamentary forces from Lyme did indeed drive many Royalists away from the area, and in 1645 Sir Thomas Fairfax, the Parliamentary general, relieved Taunton, beat Lord Goring at Langport, and secured Bridgwater, Bath and Bristol for Parliament.

Despite the destruction which had been wrought on Axminster the previous November a detachment of Parliamentary forces was sent to occupy the town and the surrounding villages, which they did on 13 October 1645. However, Lord Goring, with Lords Wentworth and Miller, led a troop of Royalist cavalry from Exeter through Honiton and into the Blackdown hills, where they surprised the Parliamentary forces and took a considerable number of prisoners. This skirmish almost certainly took place at Membury, whose Parish register recorded the burial of a soldier on 14 October, who had been killed near the church.

The main body of the Parliamentary army marched from Chard to Axminster, and on to Honiton, pushing the Royalist forces in front of them.

Axminster does not receive any further mention in the accounts of the Civil War, but there was a further skirmish at Membury on 13 February 1646 (modern calendar), in which Sir Shilston Calmady was killed in the gateway of Ford House. He was buried at Membury.

As the Parliamentary forces took control of Devon their allies turned their attention to the fines and penalties which could be levied on those civilians who had supported the King. At Axminster the chief victim of this process was Henry Hutchings, who in 1644 had acted as Governor of the Royalist garrison at Axminster, but there were others, including Robert Turner, Thomas Parish and John Lucas, all of whom were fined much smaller amounts.

Post-War reconstruction

In his 1998 book 'A History of Axminster to 1910' Geoffrey Chapman cites² documents found in the Essex County Archives (Essex being the home county of the Petre family, which owned the Manor of Axminster at that time). These show that the losses sustained at Axminster by Lord Petre as a consequence of the Civil War amounted to around £10,000 (probably at least £2 million at today's prices). These losses were accounted for by 200 buildings lost when Axminster was burned to the ground, and an unspecified quantity of timber felled by order of the Parliamentary authorities to assist in the re-building of Lyme Regis' houses and ships. This was considerably more than the total purchase price paid by the first Lord Petre in 1603 when he had purchased the Manor of Axminster.

This raises the question of how quickly the town was re-built, and in addressing this question we have some direct evidence from tax rolls and some indirect evidence from the Parish Registers.

Dr Todd Gray's book 'Devon Parish Taxpayers 1500-1650, Vol 1'³ provides evidence from the Church Rates which were levied in 1629, well before the Civil War, and in 1648, a few months before the execution of Charles I, and 3 years before the end of the Third Civil War, in 1651. Although some care needs to be exercised in interpreting the information provided (in that the records are organised roughly by place, but where residents were responsible for several properties these are generally grouped together, and it is not possible as a consequence to tell how many houses there were in each street, or even in the town, as opposed to the parish as a whole) the general picture is clear.

Once records linked to properties which are clearly located in the remote tithings of Beerhall and Shapwick, or outside the town itself (at Weycroft, Smallridge, Tolcis, Westwater, Hunthay, Abbey, Wyke, Trill, Woodbury, Furzeleigh, Bevor and other such rural clusters⁴) it appears that there were about 140 taxable houses in the town in both 1629 and 1648, but that in 1648 slightly over 60 of these were exempt from paying the Rate because they were still described as burned. This suggests that by 1648 around 55-60% of the houses had been re-built, largely in the same locations where they had previously stood⁵.

The implication of this, combined with the estimate of 200 buildings repaired by Lord Petre, is that up to 60 other buildings (workshops and similar) had also been destroyed by the 1644 fire.

Unfortunately the Parish Register for Axminster covering the period immediately before and after the town's destruction by fire has been lost (or possibly was not completed at the time), so we do not have a 'count' of the number of baptisms, marriages and burials each year prior to and immediately after that extraordinary event. Had the Register survived it would have provided further evidence for any changes to the population count of the parish (which was, of course, much greater than that of the town alone).

² See page 64.

³ Devon & Cornwall Record Society, New Series, Vol.58 issued to members 2015, offered for sale 2016. Vol 1 covers 18 parishes arranged alphabetically from Abbotskerswell to Beer & Seaton. Local parishes include Axmouth as well as Axminster and Beer & Seaton.

⁴ For the record, none of the houses linked to locations which are clearly outside the town were described in 1648 as burned.

⁵ The street names are broadly consistent between 1629 and 1648. Some street names such as South Street, Chard Street, Castle Hill, Market Place still survive. Other names including Our Lady Street, Cross Street and Eastborrow have since been lost.

The surviving post-fire Register starts in October 1648. A digital copy of this Register is accessible via the members' area of the Devon Family History Society, which shows that not all entries are legible. Using transcription data from the familysearch.org website (which while not perfect is still very helpful) we can see that there were at least 163 baptisms over the 4-year period from 1649 to 1652 (an average of about 40 a year). There were hardly any baptisms over the period from 1653 to 1660 inclusive (i.e. over the period of the Commonwealth, when religious disputes were rife, and many churches hardly functioned). Following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, however, there were, on average, between 30 and 35 baptisms at Axminster each year until 1700.

This evidence supports the conclusion based on the Church Rates of 1629 and 1648, namely that by 1648 much of the town had been re-built and re-occupied. Furthermore, several of the surnames in evidence on the Register at that time are among those that are regularly encountered in Axminster throughout the 18th century. The above-average baptismal rate could be accounted for either by an element of catch-up as families returned to their re-built homes and had young children (as opposed to infants) baptised, or by a small 'baby boom' as life returned to something more akin to normal, despite the Civil War continuing elsewhere in the country.