

# **A Teacher's Introduction to The British Civil Wars**

**Adapted from Professor Andrew Hopper's introduction to a forthcoming publication**

**'A History of the British Civil Wars in 100 Objects'**

## **The Seventeenth Century World**

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### **England**

Around 5 million people lived in England in the 1640s, most of them in the countryside. The largest cities were London (where 400,000 people lived), Bristol and Norwich (each with populations of around 20,000). Population growth put pressure on land and food resources leading to the enclosure of common land and the drainage of marshland. This took away the ancient rights of ordinary people to graze their livestock and forage for food and fuel. The wealthiest parts of England were the farming areas close to London and in the south-east and East Anglia. The North and West tended to be poorer and more likely to suffer from food shortages.

### **Religion**

Religion was central to life in the seventeenth century and involved more than just compulsory attendance at church each Sunday. For many it represented a real battle between good and evil, God and the Devil, and some were prepared to kill over the details of its practice. During the English Reformation, the Catholic Church had been outlawed and England was now a Protestant country. However, some felt that The Reformation had not gone far enough in its transformation of the Church of England.

**Scotland** was a much poorer country with under a million inhabitants. It shared the Stuart Kings with England but had its own Parliament and Church. The Presbyterian Kirk was a more fully reformed Protestant church than the Church of England.

**Ireland** had been ruled by the Kings of England since the Norman invasion. Most Irish people were Roman Catholic. Protestant settlers were 'planted' in Ireland by James I, who removed native Irish Catholic Landowners and replaced them with thousands of English and Scots families, causing widespread resentment.

### **Government**

England was a monarchy. Parliament was called by the King to pass necessary laws and raise funds. Unlike today, Parliament in the seventeenth century was an *event*, summoned to assist with royal government, rather than an *institution*, meeting continually to debate ideas. People at all social levels participated in local government in unpaid roles. In every parish there were, for instance, churchwardens (who reported people for not attending church, swearing or telling lies about their neighbours), constables (who collected taxes, broke up fights and sent vagrants packing) or overseers of the poor (who distributed aid to the most needy). This system meant that there was a widespread understanding of the common law among the middling and poorer sorts. This made the people of England and Wales largely law abiding but also remarkably able to insist upon their rights and freedoms.

### **The Army**

There was no standing professional army in England at this time. Instead, each county had a local part-time militia called The Trained Bands who varied in their military skills and experience and were reluctant to leave their home territories.

# The Road to Civil War

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## **Divine Right**

James I and his son Charles believed that they ruled by divine right. Both believed that they had been appointed by God and answered to no earthly authority. Both believed in one king, one law and one faith but their methods for achieving this differed wildly. James had been pragmatic. He was unafraid of debate and allowed a variety of Protestant points of view. Charles felt that this acceptance of differences of opinion had been dangerous and was more confrontational in his approach. He believed that Protestant extremists (nicknamed 'Puritans') were a danger to his authority.

## **Religion**

He appointed William Laud as archbishop of Canterbury and together they set about restoring a more ceremonial and visually beautiful form of worship. Communion tables were transformed into altars and railed off as sacred spaces, elevating the role of the clergy. Preaching and sermons were brought under stricter control and critics of royal religious policy were punished in royal courts such as the Star Chamber. Many saw these policies as leading England back towards Roman Catholicism.

## **Personal Rule**

In 1629, after Parliament had refused him the funds to go to war with France and Spain, Charles decided to rule without Parliament. He wanted to build his monarchy on ritual and subordination and a questioning, non-compliant and even interfering Parliament was the

last thing he needed. Without Parliament, he needed to find different ways to finance government and turned to ancient taxes, like Ship Money, and old feudal dues like Knighthood fines as well as forced loans. For much of the 1630s these unpopular economic policies helped Charles to get by, but only because his three kingdoms were not at war.

**These events in England paved the road to conflict, but it was events in Scotland and Ireland that sent the country hurtling towards it.**

### **The Bishops Wars in Scotland and the recalling of Parliament**

It was Charles I's decision to impose the Church of England Prayer Book on Scotland in 1637 that ultimately led to his downfall. Riots followed the new church service. In St Giles's Kirk in Edinburgh, a tradesman's wife, Jenny Geddes, threw her stool at the Dean of Edinburgh as he read from the new Prayer Book, calling out 'Devil cause you colic in your stomach, false thief: dare you say the Mass in my ear?' In February 1638, a National Covenant was drawn up, with subscribers swearing to defend the Protestant Reformation in Scotland from what many Scots saw as Charles I's 'popish' or Catholic changes.

In 1639 Charles managed to raise an army to impose his will on Scotland. So began the first 'Bishops' War'. The English expected to crush the Scots but things did not go to plan. The Royal Army were out manoeuvred by the Scottish Army of the Covenant and Charles was forced to sign a temporary truce.

### ***The Short Parliament***

In April 1640 Charles recalled Parliament to ask for funds to continue the war. Instead, the MPs wanted to discuss political grievances that had accumulated over the past eleven years of Charles' Personal Rule, so Charles hurriedly dissolved Parliament again after only three weeks. Without Parliament, the King found again that he did not have the money or means to

wage an effective war and to make matters worse, the Scots took the initiative, invading England in the Second Bishops' War. They defeated an English force at Newburn, just west of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, on 28 August 1640. They marched south, unopposed, as far as Ripon, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, where a deal was struck to pay the Scots £850 per day to advance no further.

### ***The Long Parliament***

Not only was this an enormous humiliation for Charles I but it created the need to raise enormous sums of money. Charles was forced to recall Parliament in November 1640 a Parliament that was not dissolved until 1653.

### **Riot and Rebellion**

Scotland's success in defying royal power inspired the Catholics in Ireland to rise up against the Protestant settlers there. Thousands were slaughtered by hanging, stabbing, slitting of throats, being thrown into rivers, and being stripped and turned out of doors to die of exposure. Stories of these atrocities were embellished and published in printed pamphlets that carried terrifying pictures of dismembered babies on pikes and pregnant women with their bellies ripped open. Stories of the rebellion fed fears of a popish plot to destroy Protestantism and even an invasion of knife wielding Irishmen determined to slit English throats.

It is hard to imagine how a civil war could have happened without this event. An English army was raised to put down this rebellion and Parliament challenged Charles' right to control it.

In London crowds rioted. Some of these were angry apprentices, whose short hair prompted what would become the famous nickname of the Parliamentarians, 'Roundhead,' an insult that referred to youth and low status. 'Cavalier' the famous nickname of the supporters of the King was derived from the Spanish word 'caballeros' that described high born, feckless and rather dilettante (and Catholic) horsemen. Stereotyped images of these opposing sides, serious Puritan 'Roundheads' and lavishly attired 'Cavaliers,' have a grain of truth in them. However these should be seen as caricatures rather than accurate descriptions since people tended to dress according to their social rank rather than their political allegiance.

Pressed on by his Queen to show strength, Charles moved to arrest the leaders of the parliamentary opposition. With a guard of soldiers, he famously entered the House of Commons on 4 January 1642 (an act never repeated since) and tried to arrest one peer and five MPs. They had been warned of his plan and fled to sanctuary in the City of London only minutes before his arrival, leaving the King to lament, 'All the birds have flown!' When asked for their whereabouts, the Speaker of the House of Commons pointed out that his eyes and ears worked only for Parliament.

The King left London under Parliamentarian control, establishing his court first at York and then at Oxford, but war did not begin straight away. Futile negotiations followed and it was a mark of England's reluctance to fight a civil war that it took until the summer for armed hostilities to begin.

# Civil War

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## **Parliamentarian advantage**

Parliament benefitted from its control of London, with its rich merchants and stores of arms. It also controlled many of the richer parts of the country, the South-East and East Anglia. In September 1642 the King lacked an army large enough to fight Parliament and win. He attempted to take control of the large northern arms magazine at Hull, besieging the town but failing to talk his way in. He raised his standard at Nottingham on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1642 and then rode towards Shrewsbury gathering recruits from Wales and the nearby counties. He raised forces by Commissions of Array, an old-fashioned device that relied upon the nobility to use their local power and reputation to inspire volunteers to enlist. His best hope of victory was to bring the war to a swift conclusion.

## **No end in sight**

The first major battle took place at Edgehill on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1642 and it resulted in no clear winner. The following month, the King marched on London but was turned back by the Earl of Essex's army at Turnham Green on the 13<sup>th</sup> November. Both sides made ready for a lengthy conflict.

Every place in the country was forced to choose a side. Networks of garrisons (military bases) were established in castles, towns and country houses across most of England and Wales. These were used as bases for recruitment, tax collection, gathering provisions, raiding

enemy forces, intelligence networks and holding prisoners of war. Local civilians were forced to feed and house soldiers and assist in the building of defensive earthworks.

### **Royalist Victories**

The King was victorious throughout 1643. The northern royalist army under William Cavendish, Marquis of Newcastle, captured most of northern England except Manchester and Hull. There were spectacular battlefield victories for the Royalists throughout the west and Exeter and Bristol fell to the King. Some Parliamentarian Peers, MPs and military officers changed sides and crowds petitioned for peace at Westminster. Parliament held Plymouth, Gloucester and Hull and turned to the Scots for help. It looked as though a Royalist victory was possible. But Parliament was to make a powerful alliance.

### **Enter the Scots..**

Parliament made a treaty with the Scots on 25 September 1643 entitled The Solemn League and Covenant, inviting a mighty force of 20,000 soldiers lead by Alexander Leslie, the Earl of Leven over the border to fight.

In July 1644 the Scots joined with Parliament's northern army under Ferdinando, Lord Fairfax (Sir Thomas Fairfax's father), and their Eastern Association army under Edward Montagu, Earl of Manchester. They faced the combined armies of the King's nephew, Prince Rupert, and the Marquis of Newcastle at Marston Moor, just outside York, in the largest and bloodiest battle ever fought on English soil. The Royalists were defeated and the Scots intervention enabled Parliament to seize control of the north in the following months. With no prospect of relief, royalist garrisons started to surrender.



## **A New Model Army**

The King was able to offset his loss of the north with the surrender of the Earl of Essex's parliamentary army at Lostwithiel in Cornwall on 2 September 1644. This inflicted a major humiliation upon Parliament, whose combined southern armies also failed to defeat the King at the Second Battle of Newbury on 27 October 1644. Recriminations followed at Westminster and Parliament decided to sack its aristocratic army commanders and ban MPs from continuing to hold their military commands with the 'Self-Denying Ordinance'.

Parliament replaced regional armies led by aristocratic commanders with a national, standing army. This 'New Model Army' was made up of well trained, adequately supplied and regularly paid soldiers who were therefore not forced to resort to plunder as the Royalists increasingly did, and so benefitted from better relations with the civilians whose territory they marched through. Its commander-in-chief was Sir Thomas Fairfax with Philip Skippon commanding its infantry. An exception was made to the Self-Denying Ordinance to enable the appointment of MP Oliver Cromwell as its cavalry commander. These men were capable and energetic generals and they won a decisive battle against the King at Naseby on 14 June 1645.

With his garrisons toppling one by one and the defeat of his last two armies at Torrington and Stow-on-the-Wold in February and March 1646, the King surrendered himself at Southwell in Nottinghamshire to the Scots army (who were besieging Newark) in May 1646. Charles had hoped to take advantage of divisions between the English Parliamentarians and their Scots allies, but, rather than assisting him, the Scots imprisoned him at Newcastle-upon-Tyne and then sold him to his English parliamentary enemies for £200,000.

## **A Second Civil War!**

Charles was imprisoned at Hampton Court and then Carisbrooke Castle. He feigned peace negotiations whilst secretly seeking help from some of the Scots nobility to renew fighting. In 1648 The Second Civil war was quelled by Fairfax and Cromwell. As Parliament attempted to reopen negotiations with Charles I at Newport on the Isle of Wight, there were calls for an end to negotiations and justice against Charles, now seen by some as a man of blood, responsible for waging war against his people, not once but twice.

## **Pride's Purge and the Trial of Charles I**

In a military coup on 6 December 1648, soldiers under Colonel Thomas Pride stopped the MPs who were in favour of continuing negotiations with the King from entering the House of Commons, arresting 41 of them and only permitting 56 to sit. This made the trial of Charles I possible and on 20–27 January the King was put on trial for High Treason. He was found guilty and executed outside his own Banqueting House at Whitehall on 30 January 1649.

## **Why Did Parliament Win the British Civil Wars?**

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Parliament's victory can be explained by a number of factors.

1. **Superior Resources:** A longer war favoured Parliament because they were able to bring superior manpower and resources to bear. Parliament controlled most of England's port towns, along with the more populous and wealthier parts of England, including Westminster and the City of London. This gave them the power to raise money quickly. This was so important because the ability to equip, clothe, feed and

pay soldiers became increasingly critical once the initial wave of voluntary enthusiasm wore out. Parliament also controlled nearly all the pre-war navy, whose admiral was the influential aristocrat, Robert Rich, Earl of Warwick. This enabled Parliament to develop superior logistics and supply, and sustain disruptive garrisons deep within royalist-held territory such as Plymouth, Hull and Lyme Regis.

2. **Propaganda** Parliament were skilful in the use of print to bolster their cause. Printed propaganda channelled the anti-Catholic prejudices of many English subjects into supporting war against their King. Charles became widely regarded as untrustworthy after his letters were captured at Naseby and then published. The Royalists also recognised the power of printed propaganda but the few royalist printing presses in Oxford and York could never match the sheer volume of parliamentary output from London.
3. **The Plunder of Civilians** As the royalist cause declined, their commanders made more demands on local people for food, money and shelter, turning many people against the cause. A collapse of active support for the Royalists in their own heartlands therefore accelerated their demise.
4. **Internal Divisions** The royalist cause was also negatively affected by the cult of honour among royalist commanders, who often responded badly to setbacks. Many were prone to vindictiveness, even duelling and violence, against former comrades, following a defeat. Unlike Parliamentarians, who had many different figureheads, committees and institutions to which they could appeal, when royalist commanders were discredited, they often had little reason to continue their efforts, as disfavour with Charles I often proved final. Prince Rupert discovered this for himself after his surrender of Bristol in September 1645, falling out with his uncle at Newark,

demanding a court martial as an opportunity to clear his name and eventually leaving his uncle's service.

5. **The 'New Model' Army:** Parliament's replacement of regional armies with a centralised, well-resourced, and professional fighting force was a powerful innovation. The remodelled army won a string of decisive victories on the battlefield. The political support from the New Model Army was pivotal in enabling Parliament to execute the King and establish a republic for eleven years.