



Sieges

of

The British Civil Wars

Siege warfare had a huge impact on civilian life during the British Civil Wars. Hundreds of towns, cities and large houses all over the country were besieged, a brutal process that involved being surrounded by an enemy army, cut off from supplies and assistance and bombarded by artillery fire. The prolonged discomfort, disruption and danger caused by food shortages, overcrowding, disease and day and night bombardment deeply affected civilians. One Chester woman summed up the inevitable dangers to civilian bystanders when she wrote to her husband that 'here is more killed in looking than those that are on service.'

The process of besieging a garrison was expensive, dangerous and time consuming and so only high-value locations were targeted. Newark-on-Trent in Nottinghamshire, for instance, with its strategic position commanding a key route to the north, was besieged three times.

Defence

The now widespread use of cannon made it necessary to construct more robust defences than medieval stone walls. Mud walls, or 'earthworks', could more effectively withstand cannon fire and these were built around towns and used in the construction of 'sconces,' (Dutch, star-shaped forts). These fortifications were built collaboratively by the people of the town, often involving women and children, and were paid for by local contributions. John Twentyman, who wrote an account of the sieges of Newark, described how the inhabitants of Newark 'began to make new works very high and strong and set up a great sconce'.

However, this height and strength could not protect the inhabitants of besieged towns from terrifying flying bombs or 'grenadoes', that were fired over defences by mortars (squat cannon), exploding on impact and burning down houses.

Attack

At first, the besieging army would send out a summons to surrender. After this was rejected, the army would draw up its own defensive walls around those of the besieged garrison, known as 'lines of circumvallation'. Trenches would be dug to enable soldiers to approach, and eventually assault, siege defences. The besieged garrison would attempt to hold out for as long as possible in the hope of being relieved. After a prolonged bombardment, the besieging army might achieve a breach, or breaking down of the siege defences. After this, the siege ended in either surrender or storm. An early surrender might result in safety for the besieged population. If a final summons to surrender was rejected and the garrison was stormed, both the soldiers and civilians inside could be treated without mercy.

Life Under Siege

The intermingling of civilian and military life brought overcrowding and strains on resources.

But, despite the dangers and challenges of life under siege, there is evidence of the continuation of everyday routines. In Newark, effective local government was maintained. Relief was given to the poor and orderly measures were put in place to curb the spread of disease.

Isolation meant an end to trade, with its usual influx of coins. To continue to pay for soldiers and goods, special siege coins were minted in a few places (Carlisle, Beeston Castle, Scarborough, Lathom House, Newark, Colchester, and Pontefract Castle). These were cut from recycled silver plates and cups, usually with straight sides to reduce waste, and bear the rims and hallmarks of the original objects.

Further Reading

John Barratt, *Sieges of the English Civil Wars* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2009)

Jessie Childs, *The Siege of Loyalty House: A Civil War Story* (London: Bodley Head, 2022)

Barbara Donagan, *War in England 1642-1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Stuart Jennings, *'These Uncertain Times': Newark and the Civilian Experience of Civil Wars* (Nottingham: Nottinghamshire County Council, 2009)

Peter Young and Wilfrid Emberton, *Sieges of the Great Civil War* (London: Bell & Hyman, 1978)

Learning Links:

- Find out about sieges nearest you with the National Civil War Centre's Civil War Siege Database
<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Shortlist/index.html?appid=b135f0f0b8334d4180166bee1ecf6d97>
- Experience life under siege with a virtual or in person visit to The National Civil War Centre and bring to life some of the people who lived in Newark during its third and longest siege. Find out more here
<http://www.nationalcivilwarcentre.com/learn/primaryschools/>
- Visit Basing House
<https://www.hampshireculture.org.uk/basing-house>

