

## **The Civil War in Cornwall, 1642-1646**

### **A talk by Tony Mansell to Perranarworthal Local History Group, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

It seemed, at the start of the evening, to be a widely held view that Cornwall's role in the 'English' civil war was marginal, and fairly minimal, that 'not much happened here' between 1642 and 1646 apart perhaps from the siege of Pendennis Castle, and the surrender on Tresillian Bridge. Tony Mansel's talk to the PLHG showed that this assessment was, in fact, far from an accurate assessment of the events in the Duchy during those four momentous years.

He first outlined some of the economic, political and religious problems facing the country at the start of the 1640s. The failed wars, financial mismanagement of the country and the levying of taxes to support the king's extravagant lifestyle were a recipe for unrest. On a wider stage, the occupation and exploitation of Ireland, and the independence movement in Wales were destabilising factors. The power of the Bishops in government, the imposition of the English prayer book, and the persecution of protestants were causing divisions among the population. These and many other factors contributed to the breakdown of the established order and led to the outbreak of 'hostilities'

Matters came to a head in 1642, and in October of that year the local Royalist gentry declared for the king, and assembled an army under the command of Sir Ralph Hopton. It seems, however, that their tenants and labourers weren't afforded the same luxury of acting in accordance with their own interests.

Mr Mansell went on to give us an account of the campaigns and the battles which took place during the conflict, particularly as they affected Cornwall. It was said to be the bloodiest war in English history (and we have had a few!) when considering the number of deaths against the size of the population. The story of events in these four years is a complex and bloodstained one.

Unlike Cornwall, the rest of the South-West of England in general largely supported the parliamentary side, and so the tide of battles, invasions and counter invasions, sieges and skirmishes swept back and forth across the peninsula. Hopton's invasion of Devon in December '42 ended in failure, but the defeat of the counter attacking Parliamentary army, at Stratton in May '43, provided the impetus for further Royalist campaigns into Devon and Somerset. This time they met with more success, taking Bristol and Exeter, and laying siege to Plymouth. A counter attack led by the Earl of Essex, at the head a Roundhead army of 8000 men forced the besieging army to retreat to Cornwall across the River Tamar, but this escapade ended with the Parliamentarians defeated at the battle of Lostwithiel.

And so it went on for a further two years. Goodness knows how the fields continued to be ploughed and harvests gathered in when so many of the able bodied men were drafted into the opposing armies. Likewise it is a mystery how these huge armies-on-the-move managed to find food and shelter when they were marching up and down, particularly in winter. It is also difficult to imagine what it would have been like to be one of the straggling remnants of a defeated army, on the run in enemy territory.

The formation of the Parliamentary New Model Army in 1645 under the command of Sir Thomas Fairfax was a turning point in the conflict. Its soldiers were full-time professionals, rather than part-time militia, and were liable for service anywhere in the country, rather than being tied to a single area or garrison. The soldiers were recruited partly from among veteran soldiers with deeply held Puritan religious beliefs, and partly from conscripts who often held dissenting or radical views. They were, it seems, fighting for something they believed in.

The royalists suffered a series of losses, and were driven back into Cornwall. After a series of defeats Hopton's army was in disarray, and though he was unwilling to surrender, Fairfax offered terms, and the surrender took place at Tresillian Bridge on 15 March 1646 ( though things didn't really settle down for several more years).

In an extremely entertaining talk, the history of Cornwall during the civil war was presented clearly and succinctly, and was well illustrated, compete with sound effects. I'm sure that I am not the only one who was stimulated to find out more about this relatively neglected aspect of our past\*. There is clearly a wealth of

detail out there about the Princes, the Barons, the Lords and Earls, but what interests me is the impact that these events had on the lives of the everyday Cornish men and women caught up the conflict.

Steve Hartgroves

03/08/18

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\* The Oxford historian Christopher Hill wrote:

The orthodox attitude to the seventeenth-century revolution is misleading because it does not try to penetrate below the surface, because it takes the actors in the revolution at their face value, and assumes that the best way to find out what people were fighting about is to consider what the leaders *said* they were fighting about. We all know that during the seventeenth century England underwent a profound political revolution. Everyone has heard of Oliver Cromwell and his Roundheads, King Charles and his Cavaliers, and we all know that a King of England had his head cut off. But why did this happen? What was it all about? Has it any significance for us at the present day?

You can download or read the full text of this informative essay online at:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/hill-christopher/english-revolution/>

or click on this link; [Christopher Hill; The English Revolution](#)