

The Great Civil War, 1642-1646

Hook Norton did not play a conspicuous part in the Great Civil War of the 1640s, but it was deeply affected by the strife, bloodshed, turmoil and destruction of those years.

Origins

By the end of the 1630s Hook Norton and its Puritan surroundings supported the growing opposition to Charles I's experiment in ruling without Parliament.



*William Fiennes,
Lord Saye and Sele*

Among the most notable defenders of Parliament ranked William Fiennes, Lord Saye and Sele, known as “Old Subtlety”, who hosted several secret meetings of the opposition leaders at Broughton Castle and bravely opposed arbitrary royal authority in public. When financial need and a Scottish invasion finally forced the King to summon Parliament in 1640, his opponents used the opportunity to pass far-reaching reforms that the King reluctantly approved.

Early in 1641 the opposition feared that Charles might attempt to overthrow Parliament by force. In May the Commons passed a bill requiring all Englishmen over the age of 18 to take an oath to protect the King's person, the rights of Parliament, and the Protestant religion. The House of Lords rejected it, but the following January, as relations with the King deteriorated further, the Commons passed a resolution calling for the vow to be taken. A key purpose was to discover the number and location of Roman Catholics, who were thought especially likely to support a Royalist military coup. In February 1642, all the men in Hook Norton over the age of eighteen - all 197 of them - signed the Protestation Vow, ostensibly revealing their religious if not political sympathies.

Parliament's heightening demands on the King alienated many moderate supporters of the opposition, and men like Lucius Cary (Viscount Falkland) of Great



Lucius Cary, Lord Falkland

In the 1630s he rebuilt Great Tew much as it now is.

In 1639-1640 he opposed the King's Personal Rule, but by 1642 had changed to his support.

He was killed at the first battle of Newbury, in 1643.

Tew turned to the Crown's side. With this growing support, the King broke off relations with Parliament and raised his standard at Nottingham in August 1642. Armed Royalists threatened Parliament's control of the Banbury region, and petty skirmishes and manoeuvrings finally led to the first great showdown at Edgehill in October, where some 30,000 men engaged (and 1,500 died) in a battle that proved indecisive. Some say the sounds of the artillery could be heard in Hook Norton, twelve miles away.

Royalist Control

After Edgehill the Royalist forces moved to Oxford, seizing strongholds in north Oxfordshire and capturing both Broughton Castle and Banbury Castle. The Royalist commander was the Earl of Northampton, the owner of Compton Wynyates, who imposed far heavier taxes on Chadlington Hundred (in which Hook Norton then lay) than he did on Banbury. On occasions he was deputized by Gerard Croker, the lessee of the Manor of Hook Norton, who was one of the first to be equipped with a regiment of armoured horse by the King. Promoted to Colonel, Croker was given the job of raising money and supplies from a largely unsympathetic local population in Hook Norton and neighbouring parts of Gloucestershire and Warwickshire.¹

Croker came from a distinguished and well-connected family, but he was highly abrasive and deeply disliked by locals who had dealings with him. The Earl of Northampton himself on several occasions wrote to Prince Rupert asking him to check Croker's "hard usage" of even well-inclined locals. In June 1643 the King

¹ See "Avoiding a Squire: The Lord Farmer Crokers and their Foes, 1530-1670", in this section.



*Map of the locality, 1644,
From Jan Jansson, Atlas Novus, vol. 4, "English County Maps" (Amsterdam, 1646).*

himself backed up "our trusty and well-beloved Colonel Gerrard Croker", and insisted that the towns under Croker's control, specifically including Hook Norton, must pay the costs of quartering Croker's regiment of 400 horse. At the same time the King authorised the impressment of local men to serve in his army. Croker became the local symbol of Royalist oppression organized by the so-called "Den of Theeves" at Banbury, but he was captured in July 1644 as the fortunes of war swung to the Roundheads.²

Relief of Gloucester

Hook Norton's most direct involvement in the fighting came in the late summer of 1643. At that point the war was going badly for Parliament: it was losing the West Midlands and the Severn Valley, opening the way for Welsh Royalist troops to enter England, and had lost control of all the seaports except London and Gloucester, which was under siege. The Parliamentary commander, the Earl of Essex, decided

² P.R. Newman, *The Old Service: Royalist Regimental Colonels and the Civil War, 1642-1646* (Manchester University Press, 1993), page 297.

that Gloucester must be relieved and led forces out from London, including the London Trained Bands, made up primarily of apprentices. Moving on a broad front between the Royalist strongholds of Oxford and Banbury, Essex's 15,000 men passed through Aynho, Deddington, Chipping Norton and Stow, demanding supplies from the "poor little villages" they marched through.

The Trained Bands camped at Souldern on September 1st, and "were very much scantied of Victualls in this place." The next day they marched from Souldern to Hook Norton, while the whole army was being harassed from the south by Royalist cavalry. Overnight the whole brigade of 5,000 men – including the Red regiment commanded by Colonel Manwaring - was billeted on the village, which had about 600 residents at that time. As Ralph Mann wrote, "every room, outhouse, barn, hovel and stable must have been crowded, and all the larders and ale-barrels emptied overnight." They undoubtedly found insufficient food or shelter here too, amid exceptionally cold weather, and suffered great privation.³

Two days later they confronted Prince Rupert's cavalry at the so-called battle of Oddington (nine miles west of here, approaching Stow), where the desultory action dragged on all day but the Royalists were unable to halt the march. As Essex's army drew close to Gloucester, the King decided to raise the siege and withdrew to the north. The relief of Gloucester was later regarded as a turning point of the war, but it was a close-run thing: the garrison had only three barrels of gunpowder left when the Royalists marched away.

Contentious Ground

The region around Hook Norton remained the scene of continuing military activity in 1644. Parliamentary forces threatened the King's headquarters at Oxford and the garrison at Banbury. Royalist raids from Compton Wynnyates attacked enemy forces at both Burford and Chipping Norton. The King led an army out from Oxford and, closely followed by a parliamentary army under Sir William Waller,

³ Henry Foster, *A true and exact Relation of the Marchings of the Two Regiments of the Trained Bands of the City of London, Being the Red & blew Regiments, ... who marched forth for the relief of the City of Gloscester, from August 13 to Sept. 28* (London, 1643). For an imaginative re-creation of this occasion, see the first item in "Passages in Village Life, 1640-1820", in this section of the website.

marched through places within twenty miles of Hook Norton, with both armies spreading havoc by their demands and depredations.

Finally, in June, the two armies met at Cropredy, north of Banbury, in a series of scattered engagements, in which the Royalists repelled Waller's attacks, inflicting heavy loss. The King marched away through Adderbury, Great Tew, Chipping Norton and Long Compton, again apparently skipping Hook Norton. Meantime, the war at large shifted against the King with Oliver Cromwell's victory over Prince Rupert at Marston Moor in Yorkshire.

Encouraged by retaking Broughton Castle, the Roundheads began a long siege of Banbury Castle in August 1644. Fighting reached into the Market Place, resulting in much death and destruction, and breaches were blasted in the castle walls. Villages within ten miles were compelled to provide not only food and materials for the besiegers but also labourers and pioneers. The incredibly strong fortress was nearly starved into submission, but in October the siege was broken when a large Royalist force marched up from Oxford, causing the parliamentarians to retreat in a rout, with heavy loss of life. But this second success for the King near Banbury had its knock-on effects elsewhere, for his main army, weakened to relieve Banbury, suffered a shambolic defeat at Newbury in October.⁴

Roundhead Dominance

Despite their two military disasters near Banbury, the Parliamentary position west of the town strengthened in these months. In June 1644 Compton Wynyates fell to the Roundheads and for the next two years would be occupied by a strong parliamentary force. As a result, the area round about, including Hook Norton, ceased to be at the mercy of local Royalist forces, and instead came under the control of an unscrupulous Puritan officer, Major George Purefoy. In theory the advantage of being under the control of one side was that it reduced the chances of being called upon to provide money and supplies for both sides, but the north Oxfordshire villages would complain long and hard about Purefoy's exactions. As

⁴ David Eddershaw, *The Civil War in Oxfordshire* (Stroud: Alan Sutton and Oxfordshire County Council, 1995), pages 124-31.

Philip Tennant has demonstrated, the war bore heavily on ordinary people in the South Midlands, even when not the scene of fighting or on the path of armies.

In 1645 Parliament's failure to coordinate its military operations and the excessive caution of its aristocratic generals finally resulted in the creation of the New Model Army, a professional and disciplined body such as England had never seen before. As future second-in-command, Cromwell led part of the Army north through Woodstock, passing Banbury to the west as he shadowed the King's army; Cromwell quartered in Tadmarton on May 12th. The new army finally converged on the King's forces in Northamptonshire in June and inflicted the decisive defeat at the battle of Naseby. Thereafter it concentrated on mopping-up operations, mainly outside the Midlands, but they included a successful second siege of Banbury Castle, which lasted eleven weeks and left the town half destroyed. In March 1646 Welsh levies marching to reinforce the King were decisively defeated at Stow, and in May the King at last surrendered.

Consequences

A major consequence of the political crisis and war was the breakdown of traditional ecclesiastical controls and the spread of radical dissenting religious ideas. By 1643 the London Trained Bands had been radicalised, both politically and religiously, and their presence in Hook Norton, though brief, probably had some impact on the villagers. Then Major Purefoy appointed as his chaplain the fiery Anabaptist preacher Abiezer Coppe, who by 1646 had visited Hook Norton as part of a great evangelising crusade. In this context arose the Baptist community in Hook Norton, one of the earliest in the country.⁵

By this time, bishops had been abolished and in 1645 the Elizabethan Prayer Book made illegal. The established church had to follow Presbyterian forms of worship and government, despite the protests of radical Puritans "of tender conscience" who wanted greater congregational input and self-determination. Not until the establishment of the republican Commonwealth in 1649 could Baptists

⁵ As suggested by Ralph Mann, "The Beginnings of Hook Norton Baptist Church", in John Taylor, comp., *A History of Hook Norton Baptist Church* (Hook Norton, 2010), pp. 9-10. See also "Baptists in Hook Norton", in this section of the website.

legally meet publicly and evangelise in surrounding villages - nly to lose those privileges after the Restoration in 1660.

In secular life, residents suffered the destruction inflicted by war and the burdens resulting from continuing political uncertainty. Banbury had been half destroyed by the two sieges, and the Puritan inhabitants were permitted to dismantle



Trial of a Royalist by Parliamentarians in the Globe Room, Reindeer Inn, Banbury

Etching in the possession of the Village Museum.

the castle and use the materials to rebuild the town and their homes. Ironically, the castle technically belonged to Lord Saye, who received compensation of £8,000, raised by sequestrating Royalist estates in the region. Hook Norton's Gerard Croker had his lands sequestrated by Parliament, suffered imprisonment in Gloucester Gaol, and died in March 1647. His brother and heir Henry Croker managed to get their lands back by paying a heavy fine to the County Committee established by Parliament, but they continued to be troubled by law cases that dragged into the 1650s. The family survived in Hook Norton until after the Restoration, but then

disappear from view. Thus death and wild swings in fortune caused by the civil war could affect the local landowning class.⁶

Otherwise, local life depended on the outcome of the national political situation. The King refused to come to a settlement with the victors, and encouraged a new Royalist uprising that became the brief but bloody second civil war in 1648, which largely passed this area by. Then the Army seized power, expelled conservatives from Parliament, executed the king, and began a frustrating search to find an acceptable political settlement. Cromwell's successful five-year protectorate (1653-58) promised much, but was ruined by his early death, leading to a year of political uncertainty and instability that ended with the return of Charles II. For the people of Hook Norton, the final disbanding of the New Model Army, the consequent reduction in taxation, and the reestablishment of a full and free Parliament promised the restoration of some sort of normality.

Nowadays, more than 350 years later, important emblems of the struggle survive. Broughton Castle is an impressive moated manor house occupied by the 21st Lord Saye and Sele; it is regularly open to the public. Compton Wynates, near Tysoe, remains a wonderful early Tudor courtyard house, and is one of the seats of the Marquis of Northampton; public access is now rarely permitted. Castle Quay shopping mall by the canal in the centre of Banbury occupies part of the site of Banbury Castle.

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For Further Reading:

Philip Tennant: *Edgehill and Beyond: the People's War in the South Midlands, 1642-1645* (Stroud: Alan Sutton and the Banbury Historical Society, 1992).

David Eddershaw: *The Civil War in Oxfordshire* (Stroud: Alan Sutton and Oxfordshire County Council, 1995).

⁶ See "Avoiding a Squire: The Lord Farmer Crokers and their Foes, 1530-1670", in this section.