

# **Bovey Tracey in the English Civil War: the Battle of Heathfield 1646**

## **Frances Billinge 2024**

### **INTRODUCTION**

There are many local legends about Bovey Tracey and the Battle of Heathfield in the English Civil War 1646. What really happened?

We know that there was a battle recorded as taking place on Heathfield in the parish of Bovey Tracey on the 8/9 January 1646 and we know it was a fight between Royalist and Parliamentarian troops.

### **BACKGROUND**

There had been civil war in England from 1642 until 1651. Royalists under Charles I fought Parliamentarians under Oliver Cromwell and Thomas Fairfax. The people had become alienated by the King's high church religious policies and there was suspicion that he planned to restore Catholicism. King Charles I had also ruled without parliament over several years which caused discontent. Initially Devon had been mainly Royalist but as the war progressed parts of Devon including the North and West and South Hams favoured the Parliamentarians. However the eastern fringes of Dartmoor, which included Bovey Tracey, were Royalist.<sup>1</sup>

### **BRIEF BACKGROUND TO THE CIVIL WAR**

#### **1642**

Exeter saw considerable fighting.<sup>2</sup> It was deeply divided along religious lines. Although Bovey Tracey was fourteen miles away there were trading and family links so locals would have heard all about the military engagements there. In late 1642 Sir Ralph Hopton was given command to raise a Royalist cavalry regiment in Somerset, and he went through Devon to Cornwall where he routed the Parliamentarians.<sup>3</sup> Thomas Wentworth, 5<sup>th</sup> Baron Wentworth, was the major general of horse under Lord Hopton's western armies.<sup>4</sup> Devon volunteers became involved in the fighting but we have no record of any from Bovey Tracey.<sup>5</sup>

#### **1643**

By 1643 the number of parliamentarian troops in Devon was between 12,000 – 14,000, with the Royalists having a smaller force.<sup>6</sup> There was fighting in both Exeter and Plymouth. At the start of the year fortifications were increased in Exeter with more, and deeper, ditches requiring the removal of houses and gardens.<sup>7</sup> In August three thousand Cornish soldiers came to help the Royalists and soon afterwards Exeter was won by them. Meanwhile the Royalists

abandoned their siege of Plymouth leaving behind 660 of their cavaliers who were sick or injured.<sup>8</sup>

### **1644-45**

The Royalists were defeated at Marston Moor near York in 1644 and at Naseby in 1645 which were turning points in the civil war. Fighting continued in Exeter and Plymouth. For the next two-and-a-half years Exeter was held for the Royalists. The Queen stayed there in 1644 and gave birth to a daughter, Henrietta. After their success at Naseby Cromwell and Fairfax headed to the west country and in July 1645 beat the Royalist cavalry under Lord Goring at Langport.<sup>9</sup>

Because of the Parliamentarians successes Exeter was strengthened further by the Royalists with massive earth mounds for artillery, and this was all recorded. Four new forts were built which needed a field of fire around and this led to more demolition of property. Huge volumes of soil and turf were required and this ruined local farmland.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time there was further fighting in Plymouth which the Parliamentarians held. The Royalists had forts outside Plymouth but did not manage to take it.<sup>11</sup>

Fighting continued in Exeter but Parliamentary help was on its way under the leadership of Fairfax who arrived in October 1645. Fairfax's aim was to take Exeter and drive the Royalists back into Cornwall but as it was winter his forces stayed in East Devon and rested.<sup>12</sup>

Bovey Tracey residents would have been aware of the continuing and considerable upheaval in Exeter and would have heard of Fairfax's arrival.

### **1646 – JANUARY : THE ‘BATTLE OF BOVEY TRACEY’**

It is known that at the start of 1646 (under the new Gregorian Calendar) the Royalists mainly occupied the district around Ashburton between the rivers Teign and Dart.<sup>13</sup> Fairfax and Cromwell started marching Parliamentary forces from Crediton and Moretonhampstead to seek out Royalists and take strategic strongholds such as Ashburton, Totnes and Dartmouth. Their route westwards was through Bovey Tracey where the Royalists were once again defeated.

After the Bovey Tracey encounter Cromwell's troops marched to Ashburton, Totnes and then Dartmouth and we know some marched through Ilsington. It is important to note where Cromwell was heading when he passed through Bovey Tracey- he was marching westwards.

### **WHAT IS REMEMBERED TODAY ABOUT THE BATTLE OF HEATHFIELD?**

No one local has ever recorded any memories of the battle. No-one has a story passed down that their ancestors were involved, or that a particular person volunteered or was injured. There is no record of any war dead buried in the church cemetery, or of any widows seeking help from the parish but this might be because the records have not survived. The nearest records we have are the Borough presentments from 1654 then 1667 and they make no reference to the civil war.

However in Bovey Tracey today there are several reminders of this historic event, but most are legends rather than fact. This has not stopped local historians from reporting them as if they were true.

### **Cromwell slept at The Old Meeting House**

Halle, a Chudleigh schoolmaster, writing as late as 1851 went so far as to state that Cromwell after receiving intelligence that the Royalists were in Bovey Tracey, ‘...is said to have passed the night [before the battle] in the old meeting house, then a private dwelling’.<sup>14</sup>

There is no record of there being a non-conformist meeting house in Bovey Tracey at the time. The earliest reference to a Baptist/non-conformist church in Hind Street was 1710. The Gulielmus map of 1641 showed no houses built on Hind Street (Fig. 1). It would have been unwise for someone as famous as Cromwell to stay in the middle of a town sympathetic to royalists and where the enemy were billeted. How could he have been protected, how could he have been sure to keep the element of surprise for his attack? He was unlikely to have separated himself from his troops.



Figure 1. Gulielmus Map 1641, Hind Street marked with arrow. Devon Heritage Centre 2802Z, with their kind permission.

Locally born William Ellis emigrated to America and made money by writing romantic stories about Bovey Tracey for his local newspaper between 1883-1887. These were reprinted in south Devon newspapers in the 1890s. Ellis repeated the story of Cromwell staying overnight at the Presbyterian meeting house on Hind Street. He embellished the story with ‘psalm singing’ luring Cromwell into the church. This story has continued to be repeated with even more embellishments.

Mildred Hole, owner of the prestigious Parke estate decided to reprint them in 1930, so they had a repeated circulation.<sup>15</sup> Hole warned that the historical accuracy could not be substantiated, but as she was a woman of stature in the town her book was believed by many.

### **Cavaliers Were Surprised in a House and Threw Money Out of the Window so They Could Escape**

The Cavaliers were taken by surprise by the arrival of Cromwell and his troops. If their officers were in a house in Bovey Tracey and escaped over the River Bovey the most likely site was the house by the river later called *Riverside* and now the *Co-op*. Some have assumed it was *Front House* on East Street but for Royalists to escape all the way down Fore Street and over the river would have been difficult if Parliamentarians were so close to them (Fig. 2). There is no historical evidence to prove this either way but it is most likely just a story to told over a pint.



Figure 2. *Front House*, David Lewis Collection and *Riverside*. By kind permission of Bovey Tracey Heritage Trust

### **Battle on the Heath**

Halle who we know had already made up the story of Cromwell sleeping in a non-conformist meeting house wrote that, ‘where the principal conflict took place history does not say, ...Tradition still points to the Heathfield as the place of the engagement’. *Vicars Parliamentary Chronicle* 1646, discussed below, supports this.

### **Drum Bridges**

In 1983 local historian Lance Tregonning stated that Drumbridges was so named having been the drums or headquarters or meeting point for the Royalists on Heathfield.<sup>16</sup> Drumbridges is the intersection between the A38 Exeter to Plymouth road, and the A 382 Bovey Tracey. However the A382 Newton Road did not exist at the time and furthermore this location was already named ‘Thrombridges’ on the Norden survey of 1613 decades before the Civil War

(Fig. 3).<sup>17</sup> This survey frequently recorded the Devon dialect where ‘th’ was used for the sound ‘dr’. The word ‘drum’ in military terms refers to the drummers who were used to pace the marching step and convey commands. The Oxford Dictionary defines ‘Throm’ as a bundle of the ends of threads, small tufts, shaggy. Maybe this refers to how the Heath looked? Or it could be the Gaelic for ‘drum’ meaning a ridge, or it could derive from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning thorn, or perhaps gorse? Drumbridges marks a point on the boundary of the manor of Bovey Tracey where there was a watercourse. It certainly was not named for the Civil War as it was named well before that date.

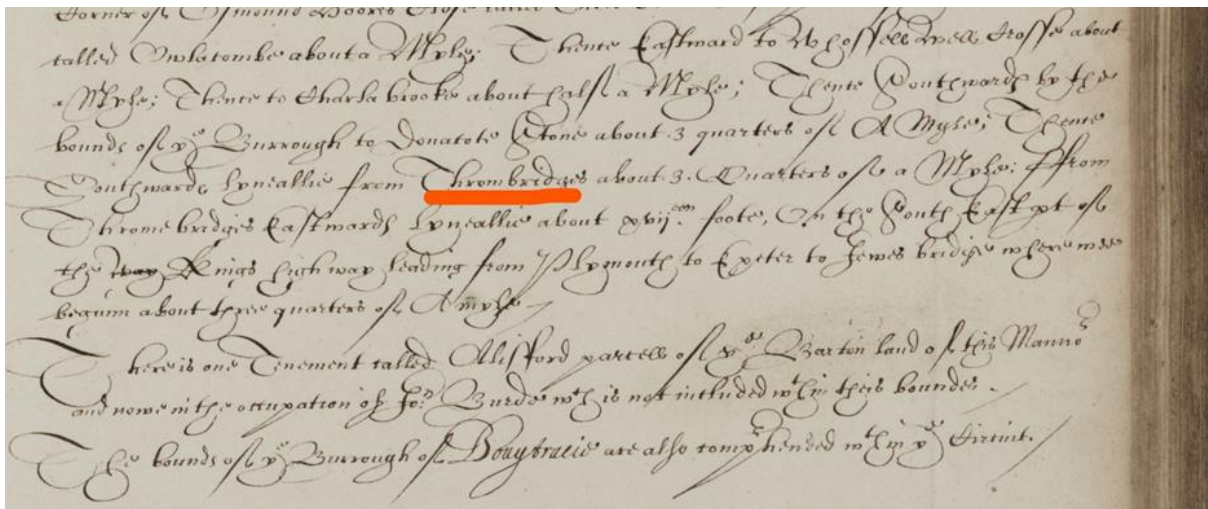


Figure 3. Norden Survey of Bovey Tracey 1613 p.133. By kind permission of London Metropolitan Archives.

### Civil War defensive embankment

Halle, whom we have already encountered with his fanciful descriptions, referred to civil war defences on Bovey Tracey Heathfield. He based this on information he had gleaned from the earlier unpublished manuscript of Rev. John Pike Jones the curate of North Bovey. Jones had stated that in connection with the civil war, ‘a mile from the town were the remains of a considerable breast work thrown across the narrow part of the Heathfield the road to Newton passes through it, and at some places it is nearly 15 feet high’ (Fig. 4).<sup>18</sup> This siting was not accurate as the old Newton Road was due east of the earthworks and did not pass through them, but the modern road does.



Figure 4. The earthwork on Bovey Heath viewed from the ditch and being crossed by the Newton Road. Frances Billinge 2021.

The various archaeological investigations of earthworks on the Heath have not confirmed any link with the civil war. Heritage Gateway lists an earthwork on Bovey Heath but only thought to have been erected in the civil war.<sup>19</sup> By 1981 the archaeologist Norman Quinnell had cast some doubt on this interpretation, and suggested that the dates and functions did not seem wholly persuasive.<sup>20</sup> An English Heritage survey in 2004 noted that the earthwork was ‘traditionally interpreted as a breastwork constructed during the ‘Civil War’ and associated with the battle of ‘Bovey Heath’ fought in 1645.’ However this survey, ‘found no trace of a firing step or emplacements’ as would be expected in a defensive earthwork of this era.<sup>21</sup> In 2015 Historic England listed the

earthwork as a scheduled monument but noted it was only ‘possibly’ of civil war origin.<sup>22</sup>

The most recent survey was undertaken in 2018-2019 and interpreted the earthworks as a ‘possible northeast to southwest aligned breastwork constructed during the Civil War’ and also, ‘possibly intercutting with earthworks associated with medieval or post-medieval tin workings’.<sup>23</sup>

Earthworks were constructed in Devon during the civil war but mainly to defend significant centres such as Barnstaple, Dartmouth, Exeter and Plymouth. The only other smaller place known to have erected earthworks was Modbury and this was because it was a centre for the Royalist high command. Modbury had been attacked by Parliamentarians in December 1642 and as a further attack was expected the Royalists erected defences at the south eastern entrance to the town which was the most likely route the Parliamentarians would take. This was recorded at the time.<sup>24</sup> There was no similar imperative to erect such a defence for Bovey Tracey.

Bovey Tracey was not of strategic importance, the Parliamentarians were merely passing through on their way westwards, and they were not expected. They had no strategic interest in capturing the town of Bovey Tracey, and the Royalists had no interest in defending it. There were no earthworks erected in nearby Ashburton which the Parliamentarians also attacked after their skirmish in Bovey Tracey.

In conclusion we cannot be certain about the raising of the earthwork as there were no historical records of it from the time of the civil war, but the lack of contemporary evidence would suggest that no earthwork was erected then. The Newton Road previously went nearer to Indio and towards Teigngrace along what is now called Old Newton Road so this alleged civil war earthwork would have been in the middle of the Heath (Fig. 5). Why raise an earthwork in the middle of nowhere? The Royalists would not have been able to predict exactly which way Cromwell and Fairfax might march westwards. We know that some of Cromwell’s troops then passed through Ilsington which would have been the direct route from Bovey Tracey to Ashburton via higher, unwaterlogged ground. Others would most likely have marched westwards either through Lower and Higher Brimley or along the route of the old A38 through Harford and Bickington and would not have wasted time and energy going in a south easterly direction away from where they were headed. Also as will be explained below the Royalists were caught by surprise. They were not expecting Cromwell. He came overnight and went the next morning so there was no time to erect any defensive earthworks.



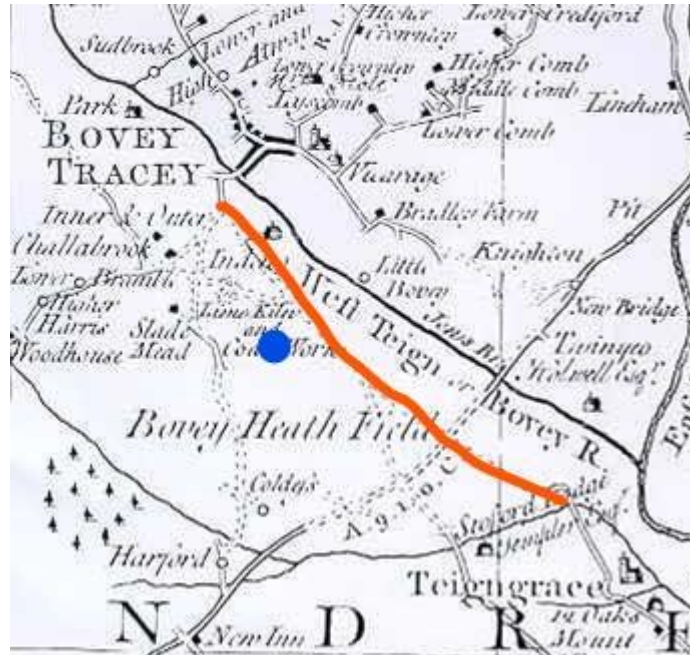


Figure 5. Red line showing the 'Old' Newton Road and blue circle the site of the earthworks drawn onto Donne's Map of 1765. The route to Ilington was due west, nowhere near the earthworks.

### **A Cannon Ball Found on the Heath**

A cannon ball found locally is on display in the Heritage Centre and is said to have been found on Heathfield. the Civil War. There is no record of who found it and exactly where. One cannon ball does not provide evidence of a fierce battle, and a cannon ball could easily fall from a cart anywhere. Both armies had cannons and cannon balls which would have been moved along with the troops. There was no record of canons being fired in Bovey Tracey. There was no time for this sort of warfare. If cannons were used what would they have been used for? They were not firing at strategic buildings or massed troops. If cannons were used there would have been far more evidence found over the years than just one cannon ball.

### **A Royalist Officer's Resting Place**

If you walk along the Challabrook footpath you will see an ancient cross which is a Grade II listed monument (Fig. 6).<sup>25</sup> Halle, the story teller, noted that, 'a granite gate post called *Longstone* on Challabrook was said to mark the spot where one of the officers from the civil war died. It was said to have been a cross shape originally'. In 1923 this gate post was moved to a place beside the Challabrook stream. The local press reported that Miss Tracy of The Manor House paid for the inscription and it was agreed that the stone should be erected on public land.<sup>26</sup> Apparently the vicar Rev. Hyde had initially suggested that there was a stone civil war memorial at Challabrook and Albert John Wyatt, the local corn

merchant, set about finding it. As Miss Tracy had grown up in *Pitt House* on East Street and renamed it *The Manor House* when she inherited, she was not averse to re-writing history.

The historic listing describes the cross as medieval and states that the metal plaque attached to the shaft carries the ‘wholly fanciful’ inscription ‘This old cross once marked the grave of a royalist officer who fell near here 1645 when Cromwell’s troops defeated the Royalists. A.J.W. 1923.’ It has become even more fanciful than that. The stone was moved when the new estate was built and a new plaque dated 2024 even states that the officer was named Longston, what a coincidence. This is the story of local folk with good imaginations making up history and it then becoming so called fact.



Figure 6. Stone Cross on Footpath at Challabrook. Frances Billinge 2021.

### **Commemorative Cross on Bovey Heath**

This is a modern cross. It is on the highest point of Bovey Heath and was erected by the King’s Army civil war society as recently as 1977.<sup>27</sup> This society later became the English Civil War Society. The cross gives the date of the engagement as 1645 under the previous Julian calendar.



Figure 7. Members of The Kings Army Celebrating the Erection of the Civil War Memorial Cross on Heathfield July 197. By kind permission of The English Civil War Society.

### **Cromwell's Arch**

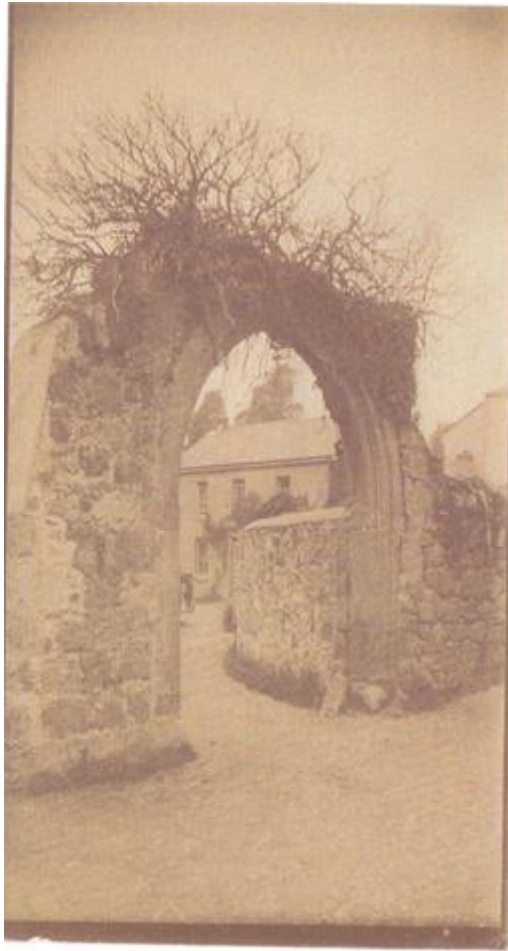


Figure 8. Cromwell's Arch. David Lewis Collection

Cromwell's arch is on Abbey Road (Fig. 8). The first reference to the name 'Cromwell's Arch' was in the *South Devon Gazette* in 1894.<sup>28</sup> This was William Ellis' description as part of his romantic tales. He linked it to a priory which never existed. Its listed building status is Grade II and described by Historic England as, 'Medieval. Believed locally to be the remnant of a monastery, but no such institution is known to have existed in the town.'<sup>29</sup>

### **Cromwell's Way, Cromwell House, Roads on Heathfield**

These were all named in the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup>

#### ***Cromwell Arms***

*Cromwell Arms* is on Abbey Road next to Cromwell's Arch. It was originally called *The Lamb* but by 1779 it was named the *Union Inn/Hotel* which continues in the current name of the area as Union Square.<sup>31</sup> It became the *Cromwell Arms* in the 1960s.<sup>32</sup> The renaming was likely to be linked to the nearby arch and it may also have been a tourist trade promotion. The frontage proudly shows Cromwell's coat of arm with the family motto, *Pax quaeritur bello*, If you seek peace, prepare for war (Fig. 9).



Figure 9. Coat of Arms on the *Cromwell Arms*. Frances Billinge 2021.

### **Bovey Tracey's 1960 Septcentenary Celebrations**

The 1960 newspaper report of Bovey Tracey's septcentenary celebrations of the town obtaining its charter in 1260 charter covered aspects of local history. An enactment the *Battle of The Heath* was one of the entertainments showing how important this memory was for local people (Fig. 10).<sup>33</sup>

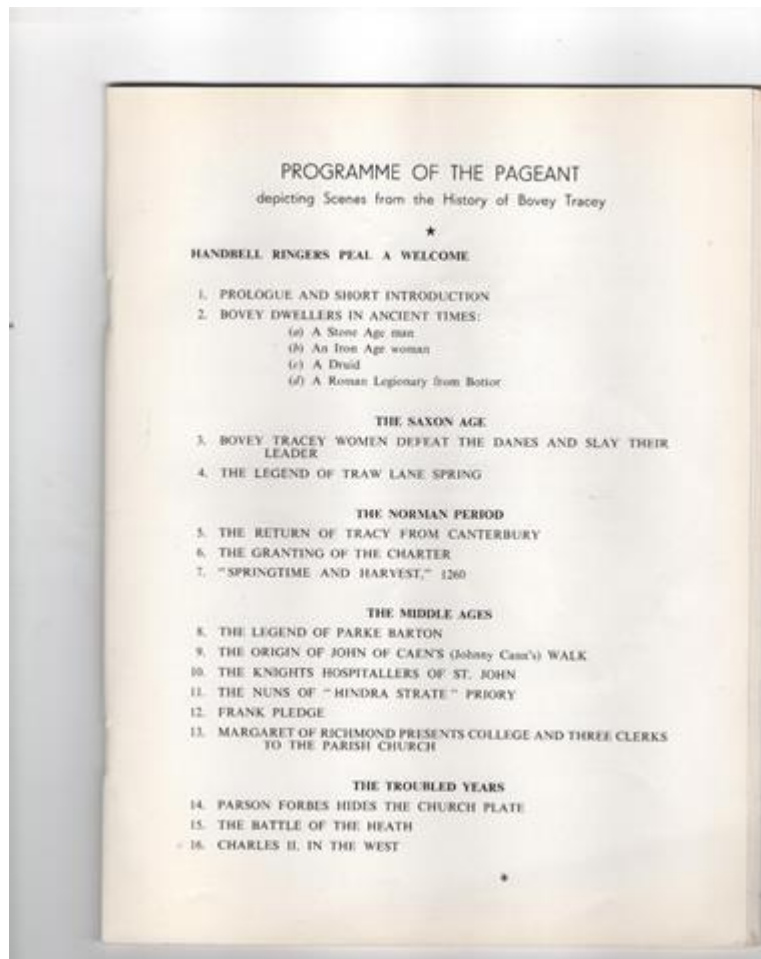


Figure 19. Bovey Tracey Charter 1260-1960 Souvenir Programme

## **SUMMARY OF LOCAL EVIDENCE AND MEMORIES**

Cromwell sleeping in a chapel, officers throwing money out of a window, the drums of the army having a meeting point, the burial place of a Royalist officer, the erection of an embankment defence, naming of buildings and roads and a public house have all been found to be fanciful, modern stories with no historic evidence. There was a battle somewhere on Heathfield and the 1975 memorial cross is the only accurate memory.

## **HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE 'BATTLE OF BOVEY TRACEY'**

What really happened in Bovey Tracey on 8/9<sup>th</sup> January 1646? Neither the House of Commons nor the House of Lords Journals of the time made reference to the encounter at Bovey Tracey which suggests it was not that significant. However there were seven accounts of varying reliability. Written at the time were three accounts from or near the field, and a further two based on letters and pamphlets. Fifty years later two more accounts were written based on manuscripts and personal letters from the time.

At the beginning of 1646 Royalists were quartered in the vicinity of Bovey Tracey which would have been unlikely had the town been hostile to them. The Crown held the advowson of the parish church which also suggest that Bovey Tracey favoured the Royalist cause. Furthermore, the vicar at the time was James Forbes. He was also Chaplain to Prince Charles from 1628-1668.

Popular allegiance in the civil war has been the subject of modern research which described how tenants would be likely to support the allegiance of their lord.<sup>34</sup> Many Devon landowners were Royalists but according to Mark Stoyle who has published a lot of work on the history of the civil war in Devon (see below) it did not follow that their tenants supported them in this. At the time of the encounter in Bovey Tracey the M. P. for the area was Sir John Northcote, a known parliamentary supporter. This reinforces the complex nature of loyalties during the Civil War.

Immediately after the encounter in Bovey Tracey Fairfax and Cromwell advanced to Ashburton on 10 January with some Parliamentary troops going via Ilsington as Royalist troops had escaped there. Fairfax then went to Totnes as he prepared to attack Dartmouth which he took on 18 January.<sup>35</sup>

On 25 March 1646 Cromwell led a triumphant march through Plymouth. In April Exeter and Salcombe Castle surrendered and the Royalists were also defeated at Truro, and so the first civil war ended.<sup>36</sup>

### **1. Letters of Thomas Fairfax, Commander of the Parliamentary Forces To the Speaker of the House of Commons**

Fairfax's letters from the field to the Speaker of the House of Commons are the most important contemporary source.<sup>37</sup> Of events 8/9 of January 1646 Fairfax wrote from Ashburton, '*...two Regiments of foot, and one of horse marched from Crediton to Bovy-Tracy about fourteen miles, and about six at night fell on three Regiments of the Enemies horse at Bovy-Tracy, took near four hundred horse and five colours, some prisoners, many escaping in the dark. The Rendezvouz for the rest of the army is this morning near Bovy-Tracy, from whence they march on a further Design, of which shortly you will hear more.*' This was a concise report showing the clever tactics of the parliamentarians with a night-time attack and the slackness of the Royalist lookouts. The capture of horse and colours by an army lesser in number would have been an important victory.<sup>38</sup>

### **To Edmund Prideaux M.P.**

Fairfax also wrote a more colourful description to Edmund Prideaux M. P. which was written for publication as a propaganda pamphlet.

*'We took at Bovy four hundred horse at least, and seven horse Colours, whereof one is the Kings, having the crown and C.R. upon it, a Major and some officers and Souldiers were taken prisoners; We lost but one man, divers of the Enemy sore wounded, some slain; some of their chief officers being in a house, shut the door, and threw out at the window about ten pounds in silver, which the foot Souldiers were so busie about the getting their shares, that the officers escaped in the meantime over the River, through the darknesse of the night; about six score of those that escaped a foot got into Ellington church that night, and sent to the Lo: Wentworth for relief; we drew out a party of horse and foot next morning to surprise them but they footed it away to their other quarters, and so escaped. The Army advanced the next day being Saturday to Ashburton...'*

No indication was given as to the geographical location of the fighting in Bovey Tracey. All of Bovey Tracey south of the river was the 'Heathfield', and the Parliamentary rendezvous the next morning was likely to have been further south on what is now known as Bovey Heath before the march to Ashburton.

## **2. Joshua Sprigge's Account, Chaplain and Secretary to Fairfax**

Another account written from the area at the time was that of Joshua Sprigge. He was a preacher, chaplain and secretary to Thomas Fairfax who travelled with the army. Sprigge wrote *Anglia Rediviva* or *England's Recovery* in 1648 being a history of the English Civil Wars 1642- 1649.<sup>39</sup> He wrote details of the days' marches and distances covered. His journal gave an account of the fighting near and at Bovey Tracey.<sup>40</sup> He too gave a colourful account under the heading '*The defeat of the enemy at Bovey Tracy* [sic]' which, like Fairfax's, was for publishing as a Parliamentary propaganda pamphlet. It read so similarly to Fairfax's more elaborate account that it could have been written by the same hand.<sup>41</sup>

At the start of the 1854 edition of *Anglia Rediviva* Bishop Warburton gave a warning about its accuracy, '*If you would know the facts of Fairfax and his independent army ... you will find them in Sprigge's Anglia rediviva. But you must not expect to find in the Parliament-Historian the moderation, sense and composition of May.*' (Thomas May had been a historian of parliament from 1595-1650).<sup>42</sup>

More recently Ian Gentles, has warned that Sprigge was a romantic writer who in his 1647 document provided an unabashedly providential interpretation of the army's string of victories, for example a 'miraculous draught of fishes near Dartmouth' when it was won. The implication is that Sprigge was making up stories to suit his narrative.<sup>43</sup>

## **3. Nehemiah Wallington's Notebooks of the Civil War**

Another source for the events was the notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington of London (1598-1658).<sup>44</sup> He was a devout Puritan who wrote many thousands of words on his religious state and on the progress of Cromwell's army. He based



his works on pamphlets and published letters available at the time. Wallington cannot be considered an unbiased source as he, like Sprigge, romanticised the Civil War and interpreted the army's successes as divine providence.<sup>45</sup>

Wallington transcribed two letters written by John Rushworth. The first was to the leader of the House of commons written from Moretonhampstead on 10 January 1645. Moretonhampstead, where Rushworth was staying, is seven miles north of Bovey Tracey so Rushworth must have received his information from a messenger. It was a short letter with a concise description of the fighting similar to that of Fairfax.

The second letter dated 11 January 1645, was written in Ashburton where Rushworth and Fairfax had travelled after the encounter in Bovey Tracey. This letter was to Honoured Edmund Prideaux at the House of Commons and was a vivid, colourful letter with entertaining descriptions and the card game story

#### **4. John Vicars' Parliamentary Chronicle**

John Vicars, writer, poet and homilist, lived in London and his chronicle of the civil war written at the time was said to be based on eye-witness accounts and letters sent from the field to parliament.<sup>46</sup> Vicars was a strongly Puritan writer and poet.<sup>47</sup> His account of events of 8-10 January was also colourful and included one detail which had not been said before indicating that the fighting was in the countryside, '... a party was drawn up farther *West* which fell upon them in their quarters at *Tracie*, and beat them out of them, **and out of the field also...**'<sup>48</sup>

Vicars was a writer rather than an historian and his chronicle described the success of the parliamentarians. He is not considered to be a reliable source. This was said as early as 1817 by Anthony Wood who noted that critics of Vicars said he was, 'inspired with ale or viler liquors'.<sup>49</sup> Doubts about the reliability of Vicars and other authors who based their work on pamphlets written at the time this will be discussed more fully below.

#### **5. John Rushworth, Secretary to Fairfax, Account of the Civil War**

We have already come across Rushworth as Wallington reproduced his letters at the time. John Rushworth was a lawyer and historian and secretary to Thomas Fairfax. As messenger, intelligence gatherer and reporter near the action at the time, Rushworth wrote accounts of the battles which Fairfax then sent to Parliament.<sup>50</sup> Rushworth also wrote news pamphlets and fifty years after the Civil War he wrote his own account of the events based partly on what he saw but also on published pamphlets which were less reliable.<sup>51</sup> His description of the encounter was similar to that of Fairfax but made the point that the Royalists were not expecting them.

‘On *Jan. the 8th*, ...Brigade of Horse and Foot Commanded by *Cromwell*, advanced that Night to *Crediton*, and the next Day (tho’ very cold and much Snow on the Ground) came to Bovey-Tracy, where Part of the Lord *Wentworth*’s Brigade then lay, whom they surprizing thus unexpectedly, took between three and four hundred Horses, but most of the Men through the Darkness of the Night got away, except one Major, and some few other Officers, and about fifty Common Troopers, who were taken Prisoners, and seven Colours left behind.’

Rushworth’s account was similar to Fairfax’s formal letter and made no mention of the card playing, unlike the account attributed to him by Wallington which would suggest it was just a story.

## **6. Edward Hyde Earl of Clarendon’s account of the Civil War**

Clarendon was a lawyer and Chancellor of the Exchequer who wrote an account of the civil war before he died in 1674, which was published in 1707. For many years this has been used as a major source for the history of the civil wars. Clarendon referred to Royalist troops being encamped in south Devon but made no mention of the Battle of Bovey Heath.<sup>52</sup> Clarendon was a statesman who served the Prince of Wales when he was in command of the Royalist troops in the west country so he would have knowledge from the field.<sup>53</sup> He went with the Prince into exile so perhaps Clarendon did not wish to allude to all defeats the Royalists encountered.

### **SUMMARY OF THE REPORTS WRITTEN BETWEEN 1646 and 1701**

Some Royalist troops would have been billeted in Bovey Tracey and others would have been encamped on Bovey Heath somewhere quite near to the town.<sup>54</sup> As it was winter, camping was less likely due to the snow on the ground and the waterlogged soil on the Heath. Cromwell and his Parliamentary troops marched from Crediton via Moretonhampstead and surprised the Royalists at about 6pm on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1646 (Gregorian calendar).

The Parliamentarians attacked some of the Royalist officers and accounts include the somewhat fanciful assertion that the Royalists were playing cards in an upstairs room in Bovey Tracey and made good their escape by throwing a large amount of money (£1,175 in today’s reckoning) out of the window to distract the enemy. This was most probably an embroidered propaganda story. On 8/9 of January 400 Horse and were taken. The encounter read more like a skirmish than a pitched battle. No cannon was mentioned or length of fighting or the existence of defensive earthworks. It was all over quickly.

The accounts agreed that this was a surprise attack which resulted in the taking of prisoners.

## **EVALUATING THE ACCOUNTS**

Modern researchers warn us to beware of considering pamphlets written at the time to be fact. Joad Raymond in 2004 described that the pamphlets on which some of the above authors based their chronicles should be viewed as literary texts which can provide historical information, and advised us to beware of the seductiveness of narrative and, ‘the freedom of the publisher to transmit the text as they will.’<sup>55</sup>

Raymond went on to say that Rushworth and Sprigge were not worried about impeachment so you could not rely on them because they were not concerned as to whether their reports were accurate. The problem is nothing was corroborated so it might be romance. Although Sprigge was an eye-witness he also relied on Newsbooks. Rushworth was a collector and communicator of information. At the time others were critical of Rushworth for not being impartial and one commentator talked of his picking up material to make a page to make it full of adventure.<sup>56</sup> Rushworth certainly liked to make up narrative to embellish his work.

More recently Rivett has warned that we should beware of reports written by authors such as Sprigge and Vicars. He described how these authors were motivated to help Parliament – they created usable pasts so that Parliament could claim legitimacy.<sup>57</sup> Another point made by Hutton and Reeves was that Royalists wrote propaganda stories in their pamphlets to emphasise their aristocratic cause and the defence of castles and manor houses, and Parliamentarians wrote them to show how they were with fighting with and for the ordinary people in towns. The Bovey Tracey story fits in with the latter as Cromwell would have needed local help to find the Royalists.<sup>58</sup>

Newman in his study of the English civil wars summarised the events as known factually, ‘On 9 January 1646 Cromwell caught Wentworth’s cavalry at Bovey Tracey to the south west of the Royalist garrison at Exeter and inflicted heavy losses on it’.<sup>59</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Royalists were quartered in Bovey Tracey parish in 1646. It is most likely that they were mainly billeted in the town. On the evening of 8 January 1646 Cromwell surprised some officers in a house and the next morning four hundred horse were taken together with some prisoners and several colours. The exact position of the later encounter was not recorded but it is most likely to have been on Bovey Heath which extended from Townsend near Bovey Bridge. There is an extant ‘breastwork’ on the Heath which might have been from medieval tin working, but could have been used for defence by the Royalists. A breastwork was not mentioned in reports of the fighting in Bovey Tracey and no archaeological evidence supports the Civil War story.

There is a legend that the Royalists escaped by throwing their card playing stakes out of a window. The only reference for this story is from one transcription source which cannot be relied on. Those who repeated the story at the time were supporters of Cromwell suggesting that the Royalist officers were not keeping a wise look-out, this might have pleased their audience. It is an amusing and colourful tale. This card playing story and the battle being on Bovey Heath are the memories which have persisted in the parish.

How important was the battle? It was an encounter between opposing forces and so it was a battle albeit on a very small scale. It helped the Parliamentary cause as the first phase of the civil war drew to a close.

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