

Re-enactment battle on 19/20 July 2008, and The Sealed Knot

The Sealed Knot will be re-enacting the battle of January 1646 when Cromwell's Red Coats, seen above, advanced on Faringdon from Radcot. The garrison in Faringdon beat off numerous attacks by General Cromwell, but as a result the town was very badly damaged. The church lost its steeple, many houses were burnt down and over 330 families were made homeless. The last Royalist commander, Sir Marmaduke Rawdon, is buried in All Saints Church.

The Sealed Knot Society will be re-enacting in full scale on 19th and 20th July 2008 an important skirmish at Faringdon's Church Path Farm, at the top of the Market Place. A Living History site will be displayed, together with numerous sideshows, slides, jousting apparatus, stalls and refreshments. Below the farmhouse is the actual historic battlefield, with cameo performances during the morning and military activity in the Market Place culminating in a full size re-enactment on the actual battle site starting soon after 2.30pm. There will also be a cameo performance outside the Old Town Hall at 6pm on Saturday. Wreaths will be laid on Rawdon's grave during Morning Prayer on Sunday at 1030am at All Saints Church.

The Sealed Knot Society was founded by a distinguished Soldier and the Country's foremost Military Authority on the Civil Wars Brigadier Peter Young D.S.O., M.C., F.H., and a group of friends following a party in Cavalier costume held in the summer of 1968. The idea of forming an "army" of the period was floated and quickly gained wide interest so much so that within two years the membership had topped the one thousand mark and a second, Parliamentarian, Army was formed within the Society.

In June 1971 the Society was incorporated as a Limited Company and in 1974 was granted official recognition as a registered Charity. Over the years the Society has performed re-enactments throughout the country, including participation in the Silver Jubilee celebrations at Windsor Castle in 1977 and has evolved into a national organisation of some considerable prestige, a fact recognised by the grant to the Society of its own Coat of Arms in 1983. Today, the Sealed Knot Society is the largest re-enactment organisation in Europe and, as a non-profit making charity it is helping bring history alive in towns such as Faringdon which was so badly damaged during the English Civil War.

History Relating to the Event

At the beginning of the Civil War between the forces of Parliament and King Charles, the King attempted to retake London, then had to base himself on Oxford, surrounding the city with a circle of fortified towns which included Faringdon. The market town of Faringdon was an important five way road junction with Radcot Bridge over the Thames to the north, the main London coach road to the east via Abingdon, Southampton Street to the south and then going west the main London coach roads to Gloucester via Lechlade and to St Annes via Highworth. Blessed with a plentiful supply of clean running spring water throughout the year, Faringdon was a vibrant market town, strategically vital for the western defences for the King at Oxford.

This annexation of Faringdon by Royalist forces was rather embarrassing for Sir Robert Pye, the owner of Faringdon House. He was the Member of Parliament for Woodstock and spent almost the entire Civil War period in Westminster. His son was married to the daughter of John Hampden who had been one of the main instigators of events which lead up to Civil War. It was John Hampden who had refused on principal to pay Ship Money to the King from inland towns without the consent of Parliament, so bringing to a head the differences between Crown and Parliament. Sir Robert Pye the younger raised a troop of horse for Parliament and rose to the rank of colonel, taking part in 1646 in the numerous skirmishes around Faringdon in which he was attempting to recapture his own house.

On August 1st 1643 King Charles stopped in Faringdon for dinner while travelling from Oxford to Bristol. In May 1644 Abingdon was captured by Parliamentary forces, so increasing the importance for Royalist forces in Oxford to maintain strong garrisons in outlying Wallingford and Faringdon. Following this setback King Charles again visited and stayed overnight in Faringdon in November 1644 while trying to plan where he could quarter his cavalry horses, which were essential for the defence of Oxford.

Throughout the Civil War both armies crossed the Thames at Radcot Bridge on numerous occasions, leaving the local population to have to endure a miniature civil war of their own as both warring factions took control of the main

part of the town in succession. Following the Royalist defeat at Marston Moor in July 1644 and the formation of the well trained New Model Army, with their distinctive red coats, Parliamentary forces tightened their noose around the King's headquarters in Oxford. In April 1645 Cromwell defeated Royalist cavalry at Islip Bridge, captured Bletchington House then moved south through Witney to Bampton, Radcot Bridge and then attacked Faringdon.

Cromwell quartered himself on the slopes of Folly Hill on 29th April 1645. He called upon the Royalist's Commander Colonel Lisle, who had a strong defended position at Faringdon House and All Saints Church, to surrender, but to no avail. Having refused to surrender to such a slight Parliamentary force, Colonel Lisle then had to contend with the arrival at Cromwell's request of about 500 infantry from Abingdon and some heavy artillery. Cromwell ordered the storming of Faringdon House. It was an assault at night with scaling ladders - a "noisy" attack without pretence at surprise to gain entry. Cromwell's infantry lost heavily and were repulsed, losing 14 men killed, ten captured and many wounded. After a few more days Cromwell left Faringdon and moved via Newbridge to garrison Bletchington.

Command of the Garrison at Faringdon then changed to Sir Marmaduke Rawdon, who had previously commanded the successful defence of Basing House. He was a rich, successful merchant from London who had fully supported the King in helping improve the local militia forces in London before the Civil War. He helped form "Trained Bands" in London, the forerunners of today's Territorial Army Volunteers. Even today at the Headquarters of the Honourable Artillery Company in London there is a plaque on the wall stating thanks to Rawdon for essentially building the barracks at his own expense. When Civil War broke out he took his force of Trained Band soldiers, mainly Protestant, out of London to fight for his Catholic King, garrisoning Basing House. However religious problems with the other Catholic defenders prompted a move to march with 50 horse and 450 infantry to defend Faringdon, about 6 days march to the north, arriving in May 1645.

Parliamentary forces quickly captured Radcot House then attacked the garrison at Faringdon and, with the guidance from Colonel Pye the Squire, soon began infiltrating the town. Cannon fire from a battery based near Folly Hill and Church Path Farm threatened to topple the church's spire, so the defending engineers in Rawdon's Regiment deliberately toppled the spire so that it fell at an angle suitable for the defenders. All Saints Church remains without its steeple to this day.

The Parliamentary forces erected an earthworked bastion near Gloucester House in Gloucester Street which was soon attacked by Rawdon's Regiment, but later re-garrisoned by Parliament's Pickering's Regiment, who had taken part the previous year in the siege of Warwick Castle. In 2005, while the Market Place's surface was being relaid, a shilling coin from the 1643 Siege of Warwick Castle was unearthed, as if thrown from the entrance of the Crown Hotel. It probably was thrown there by an angry publican in the Crown, as it had the normal cross on one side but the Bear of Warwick Castle with its staff on the other, rather than the King's head - counterfeit siege currency brought to Faringdon from Warwick by the besieging forces. Recent Civil War finds include iron 6 pounder cannon balls fired from the Royalist position, landing to the north east near Stanford Road's Mill House. A display in All Saints Church includes a steel 6 pounder Royalist cannon ball, a stone 4 inch incoming cannon ball which hit the tower and one of numerous 28 bore musket balls.

Rawdon's Regiment was rather unusual in specialising in siege defence, an art honed to perfection at Basing House. Most infantry regiments of the time used 42 inch long barrelled matchlock muskets, firing 10 or 12 bore 3/4 inch diameter lead balls. These were accurate from a smooth bored musket to about 30 yards. But Rawdon needed snipers and lots of them, so recruited females as soldiers to act as snipers with smaller calibre 28 bore muskets, retaining the long 42 inch barrel length. These muskets were accurate to about 120 yards, a range sorely needed for siege defence in an urban enclave like Faringdon. The status of these female snipers was of interest as they represented a third sex: the Regiment employed men (rate of pay 4 times the agricultural wage for front row of the pike block, three times for the rest), women in support at the agricultural wage and then the sniping "Posemen" (Position of Man) at 3 times the agricultural wage. Relationships between Men and Posemen were restrained, as any sexual relations were deemed to be a hanging offence as both parties wore trousers.... The late 1644 Muster Role for Rawdon's Regiment still exists in a museum in St Albans and shows that 10% of the fighting force were women, 48% were men and 42% Posemen, so the majority of 52% of the combat strength of this successful siege defence Regiment were female.

Early in 1646 Sir Marmaduke Rawdon died at an old age and his body was buried in the choir of All Saints Church. At the end of the funeral service Pickering's Regiment, based in Gloucester Street, fired a large 200 pound mortar shell which exploded in the nave of the church, killing three soldiers. Luckily the grave was deep enough for the three mourners to be buried on top of Sir Marmaduke, whose grave is still marked at the front left of the choir stalls in All Saints Church.

The siege of Faringdon continued relentlessly until the King surrendered, prompting the defending Royalist forces to march out of Faringdon undefeated, carrying their arms but having lost the War on 24th June 1646. They left behind a very badly damaged town which Parliament considered in 1690 equal to Torrington in Devon as the worst damaged in England. Over 330 families continued to live in tented and temporary accommodation a generation after the Civil War had ended.

Modern Historical Sites

Faringdon continues to show the scars of wartime damage.

The Church still lacks its original steeple and has obvious shot damage around the top of its tower. Almost all the houses in London Street had their roofs burnt off, so many were rebuilt with original low height ground floors but much higher ceilinged bedroom floors.

The main hotels such as the Crown and Bell seem to have survived , as they were of use to both of the warring factions.

The earthworks surrounding the Church's graveyard are still very evident, albeit now having graves added - the grave diggers probably blessing Rawdon's Regiment for preparing the soil. In the field beside the Market Place the Sealed Knot are planning to attack again the stone walled outpost bastion position manned by Rawdon's Regiment back in 1645 and 1646.

Dominating the road from Radcot into Faringdon, this bastion outpost was attacked by Cromwell in 1646 and battle was halted when Rawdon's sallied forth with 500 infantry to support the position.