

Sutton in the Civil War

By Roger Lea

The English Civil War broke out in 1642, between the supporters of King Charles I, known as Cavaliers, and supporters of Parliament, known as Roundheads. It appeared to be over in 1646 after the Parliamentary victory at the Battle of Naseby, but it flared up again in 1648 (the second Civil War, and after the execution of Charles I in 1649, there was a third Civil War which ended in the defeat of King Charles II at the Battle of Worcester in 1651. England was then a Commonwealth until the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. Sutton was mostly on the side of the Roundheads; and two of our prominent townsmen played important roles: one of them, Anthony Burges the Rector, figures near the beginning, of this article and Thomas Willoughby the soldier rounds it off.

Sutton in 1640

Although Sutton had been a self-governing Royal Town for over 100 years, it was still a quiet rural place mainly concerned with agriculture. It covered 20 square miles with roughly the same boundaries as the modern constituency, but the population was only about 1300. There were about 300 households, a quarter of them living in Sutton Town, most of the rest of the houses being in Hill Village, Little Sutton and the separate hamlet of Maney. Only half of the land in Sutton was in cultivation, the park and the very extensive commons accounting for the rest. About 100 of the householders were cottagers, partly dependent on poor relief for their livelihood, 35 of them were gentlemen of independent means, the remainder ranging from poor craftsmen and smallholders up to rich tradesmen and wealthy farmers¹.

Sutton people could learn about national politics and form opinions through the local institutions. Sutton was governed by a corporation known as the Warden and Society, made up of 25 inhabitants – effectively, each representing 12 households, so local politicians were in close touch with the people. In addition, a minor court was held every three weeks, and a court leet twice a year - this latter court made ordinances or by-laws for the ensuing six months, so it was relevant to the lives of every inhabitant. The church was not only a place of worship for the whole of Sutton, but also the preferred site for public notices. Then there were the informal meeting places, the weekly Monday market and the two annual fairs, the numerous alehouses, the co-operative activities of ploughing, hay-making, sheep-shearing and harvest, and the local hunt. Plenty of opportunities for news and rumour to circulate, and for issues to be discussed.

Religion

Religion was a hot topic – wars of religion had been rumbling on in Europe for thirty years, and there was a widespread sense that Protestantism was under threat from the

¹ Lea, R.M. *The Quarters of Sutton*. 1981

Roman Catholic Church. The King James Bible of 1611 gave everyone who could read access to the scriptures, and in turn stimulated the desire to read in the population at large. Puritan ministers, such as Anthony Burges, Rector of Sutton Coldfield, were concerned that the church hierarchy – King, archbishops, bishops – was imposing more and more ceremonial rules which smacked of popery, and everyone had a view on the issue.



Sutton from the Cup Inn, by Miss Bracken, 1838, showing the rural character of Sutton, dominated by the Church.

Antony Burges

He was a preacher at a time when preachers could attract large crowds and when preaching was seen as tending to be subversive. Thomas Hall records that he was a diligent frequenter of the learned lectures of sundry orthodox divines at Birmingham, and it was at Birmingham that Dugard heard the eminent preacher Antony Burgess of SC on his way to Staffordshire. When the Civil War began in earnest in 1642, Burgess feared he would be a target for the Royalist forces, and moved to Coventry, a parliamentary stronghold, and then to London. He preached to Parliament on several occasions, urging the defence of the reformed church and the iniquity of the high church royalists. He was a chaplain in the New Model Army, and although he returned to Sutton Coldfield when Parliament was victorious, his sermons were in still in demand - he preached before the Lord Mayor of London in 1656. In 1657 his funeral discourse on the death of a Staffordshire minister 'obtained a popularity which is reported to have been unprecedented even in that sermon-hearing era'. Hundreds of his sermons were published, a typical passage being:-

Fifthly, As the Devil in a Church corrupted, and defiled with idolatry and superstition, doth there prevail by humane Traditions, and Forms of Will-worship, whereby all spiritual worshipping of God is wholly neglected:

so in times of reformation, then he seduceth men in another Temptation, under the pretence of setting up the spirit, and its revelations, it crieth down the word of God, and all the ordinary Ministerial Officers Christ hath appointed. The first worthy Reformers, and glorious instruments of God, found a bitter conflict herein; so that they were exercised not onely with Formalists, and Traditionary Superstitious Papists on one side, but men that pretended themselves to be more enlightened, then the Reformers were, on the other side: hence they did call those that did adhere to the scripture and would try revelations by it, *Vocalistas et Literistas – Letterists and Vowallists*, as men acquainted with the words and vowels of the scripture, having nothing of the spirit of God. And wheresoever in any Town the true Doctrine of the Gospel brake forth to the displacing of Popery, presently such opinions, like Tares, came up among the good Wheat, whereby great divisions were raised, and the Reformation made abominable, and odious to the world; as if that had been the Sun to give heat and warmth to those Worms and Serpents to crawl out of the ground. Hence they inveighed against *Luther*, and said, *He had onely promulged Carnale Evangelium*, . And that the Protestant Doctors did onely *carnali sapere*, by them indeed *aliquot frondes de Antichristianismo succisae, sed aborem et radices adhuc superesse*, They burnt all books but the Bible, and said, *That happy time was come when all should be taught of God*. Many remarkable passages I might further relate but this may suffice to shew, That as the Diuel in one time of the Church in the deformation of it, deceiveth by superstitious, pompous and visible worship: so at another time, in the reformation of it, doth he delude by revelations, and pretended high Teachings of the spirit of God, even above the Scripture.

(Spiritual Refining or a Treatise of Grace and Assurance wherein are handled...many chief questions (occasionally) controvertial between the orthodox and the Arminian, being CXX sermons...by Anthony Burges etc. 1652,Section 3 – False signes of Grace, sermon XXIII, Declaring what deceipts men lye open to in judging those things to be works of the Spirit, which indeed are not.)

Politics

Welcome news in Sutton in 1640 would have been King Charles I's decision to call a parliament (he had been governing by personal rule for the previous twelve years). Parliament was dismissed after 15 days, but the king could not manage without it, and a new parliament was called in 1641. In Warwickshire. there is ample evidence of the hunger for news from London, and opinion in the county was divided between those who wanted Parliament to have more power and the royalists who thought the King must be followed by divine right. Warwickshire was a county of 80,000 population, with Coventry its biggest town, while the population of Birmingham was about 3,000 and Sutton about 1250.

In 1642 relations between the King and Parliament were such that civil war seemed inevitable. The relative quiet of Warwickshire in the pre-civil-war years was rudely shattered in the summer of 1642 as Brooke and Northampton led the struggle for control of the local militias, and of the county as a whole. Parliament had put Lord Brooke, the Roundhead Earl of Warwick, in charge of raising an army from Warwickshire and Staffordshire, and he held a muster at Coleshill on the 4th July

1642. This and other musters in the county attracted 2,850 volunteers, but not many top families were among them. Brooke relied more on his network of puritan contacts to attract volunteers and to be officers in his army, and this included many lesser gentry, some from Sutton Coldfield.

Parliament raised its army under the Militia Ordinance of March 5th, but the King found an ancient law enabling him to raise troops by a Commission of Array, and the Cavalier Earl of Northampton duly mustered troops in Warwickshire for the King's army, including a muster at Coleshill on 30th July – 78 gentry and 2 peers attended these musters, but there were not so many volunteers from the lower ranks of society; whether any Suttonians joined up is not clear. The king moved into Warwickshire with his small army with a view to taking over the walled town of Coventry, but the Mayor would not let him in, and he retired to Nottingham when Lord Brooke came up with reinforcements from London. This effectively secured Warwickshire for Parliament, and so it remained for the rest of the Civil War, which officially started on 22nd August 1642.

Local events

As to any action in Sutton, no blood was spilt within the boundaries of the Parish. In February 1643 Lord Brooke's Roundhead army passed close by en route from Coleshill to Lichfield, and in April Prince Rupert's Cavalier troops passed through to Lichfield after sacking Birmingham. In 1645 the Scots army (supporting Parliament) passed through on the way from Tamworth to Birmingham, and there may have been other bands of troops passing through from time to time. The most notable event of the Civil War usually mentioned in histories of Sutton is Oliver Cromwell's stay at the Three Tuns; however, this is based on a letter preserved in the William Salt Library at Stafford, which has been proved to be a forgery, so he certainly was not there in 1643; the alternative suggestion is that he stayed there in 1651 after the battle of Worcester (while Charles II was hiding up an oak tree at Boscobel), but Cromwell returned to his HQ at Evesham after Worcester (which he referred to as a 'crowning mercy') and then to London.

With hindsight, Riland Bedford could say 'there is nothing to show a disturbed state of the ordinary life of this part of the country – Sutton throve throughout this period' – but that is not how it seemed at the time. There was always the fear of attacks and raids from the strong royalist garrisons at Lichfield and Dudley, and there were a number of families in Sutton who were either neutral or Royalist sympathisers. With the county under parliamentary control, and the church staunchly puritan, local government in Sutton was dominated by roundheads, so presumably the wardens from 1640-1660 must have been acceptable to the authorities.

Wardens

In 1640 Richard Scott, gentleman, of Ashfurlong, was warden, and he was followed by William Hawkesford gentleman of Beyond the Wood – Moor and Ashfurlong Quarter extended from Moor Hall to Penns, while Beyond the Wood included Langley, Walmley, Wigginshill and Minworth Greaves. These two were probably gentleman farmers, and may have had income from additional estates outside Sutton, as did the next warden, Thomas Addyes gentleman, of Maney. In 1643 Mr. John

Priest of Hill was Warden, followed by Mr. Richard Turner, also of Hill; Priest died in 1657, while also in 1657 Turner's daughter was married to a Leicestershire man. All these men lived in substantial houses, but in 1645 a humbler man, John Heath, an elderly man living in Maney was Warden. He was followed by Mr. John Yardley of Ashfurlong (or possibly Little Sutton) – the executor of his will in 1661 was Richard Scott (warden in 1640), and the will refers to Sir Francis Willoughby of Middleton. Next was Edward Yardley of Little Sutton, who died in 1652 – his eldest son Francis is described as a yeoman, living in Little Sutton. In 1648 it was Richard Summerland of Wishaw, yeoman (also described as of Beyond the Wood, gentleman); he was followed by William Hill, but I can find no trace of him except that in 1661 he was a kinsman of John Yardley in the service of Sir Francis Willoughby of Middleton. In 1650 George Pudsey Esquire of Langley Hall, head of Sutton's top family, was Warden. He had extensive family connections in the east Midlands – his daughter-in-law was a Thornhaigh, sister of an outstanding Colonel in Cromwell's army, and his cousin a captain. However, he was Warden again in 1667 and 1668, and was alleged to have sent horses to the royalists at the start of the war; he was Sheriff of the County in 1657 (described as 'neutral'). Anne Hughes comments – *one is tempted to conclude that (appointments as sheriff), the most expensive and least prestigious of the senior county offices, were made as punitive measures.* The sheriff the following year was Sir Robert Holte, of the royalist Aston Hall family.

The Warden in 1652 was Mr. Francis Wasse of Great Sutton, died 1658; in 1653 John Alport of Maney and the Wylde, an obscure man who was Warden again in 1670 – he died in 1687, followed in 1654 by Mr. Robert Freeman of Great Sutton and in 1655 by Thomas Veasey gent of Maney. Next was Mr. John Powell, who lived in a big house somewhere in Moor and Ashfurlong; when he made his will in 1685 he described himself as only a yeoman – the inventory of his goods and chattels is wonderfully detailed, but their total value was only £98. In 1657 Mr. Abraham Pemberton of Beyond the Wood was warden, followed by Richard Swinfen Esquire of whom I know nothing, and in 1659 it was Mr. John Rastell of Moor and Ashfurlong, whose inventory of 1689 was valued at £208. Thus the office of Warden was held mostly by minor gentry from 16 different families, only two of them from the town centre.

Daily Life

Hardly any court or corporation records survive for our period, so it is difficult to discover whether the normal processes continued. However, the Parish Registers, recording Baptisms, marriages and burials, continued in use, but there are large gaps – no entries in any of the registers for the years 1643,4 and 5. John Heath's accounts as Warden in 1646 are in Birmingham City Archives, and show almost the same income and expenditure as 1622. The election dinner (to mark his election as Warden) cost only £2.4s.4d, compared with £3.17s.0. in 1622; the sergeants wages were the same at £1.6s.8d., but only £2.3s.0d was spent on uniforms compared with £3. The fairs seem to have done well, the fees payable by horse dealers bringing in £1.15s.0d compared with 5s.5d. in 1622. The only odd item is the eightpence paid for iron clippes to mend the coffer in the hall which was broken by soldiers.

1622. Edward Willoughby, Warden (Sutton Borough Records 41)

Income.

Rents	£52-13-04
Herbage of the Park	23-03-03½
Herbage of the coppices	3- 05-04
Amerciaments at the two leets	16-06
Amerciaments of the clark of the market	5-05
Relief	4-11
A stray mare a colt 6 cheeses 1 pommel and one wallet	2-08-00
Sum	£81-16-09½

Expenditure

FeeFarn	£54-00-00
Taking it to Coventry	1-02-04
Steward's fee	4-00-00
Sir Richard Grevy's fee	3-00-00
Rent for Moot Hall	1-04
Park layer	8-00
Sergeant's wages	1-06-08
Liveries	3-00-00
Election dinner	3-17-00
Ringers on August 5 th	2-06
Obligation	1-00
Martinmas drift of the Park	7-09
Candlemas drift of park and coppices	10-02
Holyrood drift of " "	15-00
Lammas [August 1] "	18-09
Michaelmas [Sept. 29] "	15-00
29 th April Leet	18-00
21 October leet	1-08-06
Trinity Fair	17-08
Simon and Jude Fair	18-00
17 courts	2-02-06
Hedging Hillwood Coppice	1-03-00
Hedging Eachelhurst	19-11
Thomas Vale for keeping Eachelhurst Coppice	5-06
Park Layer for attendance at Holyrood Drift	1-01
Ringers for November 5 th	2-06
2 inquisitions at Warwick	1-01
For sitting clark of the market	7-00
Given to the Keeper that brought venison from the stewards	1-06
Lock and keys to park gate	1-00
Writing of the rental	3-00
Given to the Bailiffs of the Hundred	2-00
Casting this account	9-06
Wine allowance	1-00-00
Engrossing and perfecting this account	2-00
Sum	89-12-10

John Heath 1646 (Sutton Borough Records 42)

Income	
Herbage	12-05-06
Coppice ground	16-00
Death of Thomas Hollingsworth	1-10-00
Mr. R. Turner	1-17-04
Lords Meadow	1-06-00
Fee Farm Rent	56-05-02½
Record of horses at 2 fairs	1-15-00
Three stray sheep	3-00
From John Greasebrook above what was expended in the suit	4-00 76-02-00½
Election dinner	2-04-04
My bond	1-00
Ringers 5 th November	2-06
My gowne	1-00-00
Sergeant's cloaks	2-03-00
Mending Moot Hall walls	1-10
2 rent days paid to Lady Greaves	3-10-00
Schoolmaster for the Moot Hall	1-04
Parke laying	8-00
Writing the rent roll	4-00
4 court days dinners	10-00
Dinner at Michaelmas leet	1-02-00
Jury at Michaelmas for verdict	4-00
Lammas drift dinner	13-00
Trinity Fair dinner	17-00
Simon and Jude Fair dinner	1-03-00
Sergeant's wages	1-16-08
Carriage of trouse to fence the park – 6 days with my team at 3s. a day	18-00
Workmen fencing the park 37 days work	1-04-08
Hooks and thimble for the park gates and mending the gates	1-10
Clippes of iron to mend the coffer in the Hall which was broken by soldiars	08
Abated of the chief rent due from Robert Freeman and Robert Taylor	2-17-06
Paid to Baily Hill	2-00
Chief rent	58-00-00
	78-07-02

Puritan clergy encouraged people to learn to read and write; often elementary education was available from the curate, and there was probably an unlicensed school in the populous district of Hill Village. At Bishop Vesey's School, the Headmaster, John Elly, must have been providing some general education as well as the Grammar

School learning, to judge from the large number of stools in his house and eight pounds worth of teaching materials listed in the probate inventory compiled after his death in 1659.

But a reminder of the uncertainty of the times is that when Parliamentary elections were held in Autumn 1645 – the Recruiter elections for two additional MPs for Warwickshire – they began polling at Warwick on the 27th October, but there was trouble because of the unpopularity of the army candidates, so polling was moved to Coleshill where the army could keep order; but the people of those parts “were so awed by his Majesty’s garrisons at Lichfield and Dudley that they durst not come in”.

Sutton’s contribution

When Lord Brooke was raising the Warwickshire militia in 1642, he chose men he could rely on to fight. In the north of the county, volunteers were swiftly raised. Captain Thomas Willoughby, a minor gentleman from Sutton Coldfield, was commissioned on 13th June 1642 to raise men in his own town and Tamworth and the surrounding areas. In August 105 men were in pay and 90 continued in his company in December. It should be possible to identify any Sutton men among these recruits, because the muster rolls still exist in the Public Record Office; however, it seems reasonable to suppose that Willoughby would have recruited a considerable number of men from his native town.

Sutton provided other officers for the Parliamentary army. Thomas Layfield was given command of a troop of horse raised in 1644, based at Tamworth, and then became Governor of the garrison at Maxstoke. Although a gentleman, he was not rich, he raised a mortgage of £50 on his High Street house in 1646, and his probate inventory in 1648 was £70.; his son was a London Goldsmith. Another Sutton Captain was William Hannam, a more substantial gentleman from Moor and Ashfurlong Quarter. As he was married to Thomas Willoughby’s daughter, it seems reasonable to assume he was his Roundhead colleague in the New Model Army

Thomas Willoughby

The most prominent figure in Sutton Coldfield in the civil war was Thomas Willoughby, who lived in the house known as Vesey House in High Street. His father, Edward Willoughby, was Warden of Sutton on four occasions in the 1620s. This Edward Willoughby and his Brother Percival Willoughby of Park Hall, Castle Bromwich, were minor gentry descended from the Willoughbys of Ersley. Nearby, at Middleton, lived a much greater Willoughby family, the two of the daughters being Bridget and Winifred. Bridget married Percival in about 1580, and through her he inherited the Middleton estate, and Winifred married Edward, so Thomas Willoughby of Sutton was doubly the cousin of Sir Francis Willoughby of Middleton.

Thomas Willoughby must have been an ally of Lord Brooke’s before the civil war, as he was entrusted with raising troops. He seems to have been a good soldier – at the battle of Hopton Heath (near Stafford) in 1643, all Lord Brooke’s forces ran away except for the reformadoe horse and Willoughby’s foot.

Willoughby was based in Coventry, and was a member of the County Committee, which not only controlled the militia, but also ran the whole administration of the county, raising all the taxes and resolving all the disputes. In 1643, after the death of Lord Brooke at Lichfield in March, the committee was facing ruin and defeat, but 'the great achievement of the Coventry Committee was that it managed, out of this chaos, to create a military and financial organisation that was, by Civil War standards, efficient' Contingents of the militia were assigned to groups of parishes, and this gave security to the people at the same time as ensuring that the taxes were paid. The Coventry foot was half countrymen and half townsmen; ("country" being Birmingham, Sutton Coldfield, Tamworth, Rugby and Nuneaton). The troops needed to be paid, and the committee saw to it that this was done – each soldier getting 4s.8d. per week. The worst arrears were 11 weeks claimed by Captain Willoughby's men up to January 1645, but they were paid in full up to June 1646, when they were disbanded. "An example of a well-paid, stable company, was that commanded by Captain, later Colonel Willoughby" – 92 soldiers in 1645, of whom 59 continued in his enlarged company in 1646 – this was part of the New Model Army, and some of these men would have been from Sutton.

Because they were charged with raising money for Parliament, the committee men had to put up with a lot of abuse, much of it in the innumerable pamphlets and broadsides issued as propaganda by both sides in the civil war; for example (from *The character of a county committeeman* by John Cleveland, 1649):-

Now enter his Taxing and deglubing face, a squeezing look like that of *Vespasians* as if he were breeding over a close stool. Take him thus, and he is the Inquisition of the purse, an Authentick Gypsie, that Nips your bung with a canting Ordinance, not a murdered fortune in all the Country but bleeds at the touch of this malefactor, he is the spleen of the body politick that swells it self to the consumption of the whole, at first indeed he ferretted for the Parliament, but since he hath got off his Cope, he set up for himself, he lives upon the sins of the people, and that's a good standing dish too, he verifies the Axiom *Eiusdem nutritur ex quibus componitur*, his dyet is suitable to his constitution, I have wondred often why the plundred Country-men should repaire to him for succor, certainly it is under the same notion as one whose pockets are pickt goes to *Mol Cutpurse* as the predominant in that faculty.

No doubt some committeemen abused their position, but Willoughby seems to have been a conscientious, hard-working and efficient legislator, and was poorer in 1659 than he had been in 1640. The opportunities for graft were there – royalists who refused to submit to the Parliament's terms had their estates confiscated and sold to raise funds for the army. They were known as delinquents (malignant were those actively campaigning against Parliament) – one such delinquent was Fulke Grosvenor of Moor Hall, Sutton Coldfield, but special allowances were made for him because of his large family. The other top gentry family in Sutton, Sacheverell of New Hall, may also have been delinquents, in spite of sharing a pew in the Parish Church with Bridget Hannam, Willoughby's daughter. Other local royalists were Sir Charles Adderley of Hams Hall – a personal servant of the King, and Sir William Dugdale of Shustoke, who had fought in the Cavalier army.

Thomas Willoughby became a Colonel in the New Model Army and a Justice of the Peace for the county. He was not active as a JP in 1650 presumably because he was involved in the campaigns of the third Civil War which led up to the Battle of Worcester, the final defeat of the royalists, in 1651. He had been Governor of Coventry in 1645 and was Sheriff of the county in 1655. As a JP he conducted civil marriages at his house in Sutton, as recorded in the Parish Register. He served as a Member of Parliament under the Protectorate in 1654.

But he lived to see all his political ideals in tatters with the failure of the Commonwealth and the Restoration of the King in 1660; at first King Charles II looked to be genuine in his agreement to work closely with parliament and to seek reconciliation with all who had opposed the Crown, and Willoughby died towards the end of this honeymoon period. His friend Anthony Burgess, the Rector of Sutton, recorded in the Parish Register 'There was buried Thomas Willoughby Esquire – he was buried in the vault in the chancell'. The next year Burgess refused to agree to the Act of Uniformity and was deprived of his the Rectorship – he retired to Tamworth where he died in 1671. So ended Sutton's two great fighters for democracy.

References

This article draws heavily on Ann Hughes *Politics, Society and Civil War in Warwickshire, 1620-1660*, Cambridge University Press 1987.