The English Civil War

A beginners guide

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To understand the English Civil Wars, we need to look back a little before the fighting actually commenced. The origins of this conflict lay in tensions that had been building for several decades, primarily concerning the nature of governance in England.

The Early 17th Century: Seeds of Conflict

The Stuart Monarchs and the Divine Right (Early 1600s): We begin with **King James the First (r. 1603-1625)** and his son**, King Charles the First (r. 1625-1649)**. Both held a firm belief in the **Divine Right of Kings** – the doctrine that their authority to rule was granted directly by God, and therefore they were not accountable to any earthly power, including Parliament.

This directly contradicted the English tradition of Parliament having a significant role in governance, particularly regarding the raising of revenue.

While James the First was relatively adept at managing Parliament, Charles was considerably more autocratic and less inclined to compromise.

James the First, despite his conviction in royal prerogative, famously stated, "No bishop, no king," recognising the crucial support the Church of England provided to the monarchy.

Growing Religious Tensions (Early to Mid-1600s): The Church of England was the established religion, but a significant number of individuals, known as Puritans, believed that the Reformation had not gone far enough and that the Church retained too many similarities to Catholic practices.

They advocated for a simpler, more scripture-based form of worship. However, Charles the First favoured a more ceremonial, "High Church" style and appointed **William Laud** as Archbishop of Canterbury.

Laud's policies, which included enforcing specific rituals and persecuting those who dissented, were deeply unpopular with the Puritans and viewed as a move towards Catholicism.

Some of the more radical Puritans emigrated to establish colonies in North America, seeking the religious freedoms they were denied in England.

Financial Disputes and Parliamentary Authority (1620s-1630s): The monarch required funds to govern, and traditionally, these were granted through taxes approved by Parliament.

Charles the First frequently faced financial difficulties and resorted to various means of raising money without parliamentary consent, actions deemed unlawful by many. One particularly resented levy was **Ship Money**, historically a tax on coastal regions for naval defence, which Charles extended to inland counties. This provoked considerable opposition from landowners and merchants who felt their property rights were being violated.

The Petition of Right (1628): Parliament compelled Charles the First to agree to this statute, which limited his powers in areas such as taxation and imprisonment without due cause. However, Charles largely disregarded its provisions.

Charles the First's Personal Rule (1629-1640): For an eleven-year period, Charles governed without summoning Parliament. This era, known as the Personal Rule or, by his detractors, the "Eleven Years' Tyranny," further exacerbated political tensions. He relied on controversial advisors such as **Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford**, to implement his policies and extract revenue.

During this time, those who opposed Charles's religious policies faced severe punishments, including the mutilation of their ears.

The Escalation Towards War (1637-1642)

The Scottish Conflicts (1637-1640): Charles the First attempted to impose a new prayer book on the Presbyterian Scots, who fiercely resisted this imposition. This led to the Bishops' Wars, which Charles ultimately lost, and crucially, he required funds to finance these conflicts. Consequently, he was compelled to recall Parliament in 1640.

The Short Parliament (April-May 1640): This Parliament convened for only a few weeks, as it refused to grant Charles funds until their grievances were addressed. In response, Charles dissolved it in anger.

The Long Parliament (November 1640-1660): Faced with ongoing Scottish resistance and dire financial straits, Charles was forced to summon another Parliament, which became known as the Long Parliament. Its name derived from the exceptionally long duration of its

existence, persisting until the Restoration in 1660. This Parliament was determined to curtail the King's authority and hold his advisors accountable.

The Grand Remonstrance (1641):
Parliament presented Charles with a comprehensive list of their grievances, underscoring the deep divisions within the realm.

The Long Parliament impeached and executed Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, and later Archbishop William Laud. They also enacted legislation to prevent the King from governing without Parliament in the future.

The Irish Rebellion (October 1641):
A significant Catholic uprising in Ireland generated fears in England of a Catholic conspiracy, further eroding trust in Charles, who was perceived by some as being too sympathetic to Catholic interests.

Charles the First's Attempted Arrest of the Five Members (January 1642): In a critical miscalculation, Charles entered Parliament with armed guards to arrest five leading Members of Parliament, including **John Pym**. This was a pivotal event that significantly escalated tensions and hastened the move towards war.

This action was widely regarded as a grave breach of parliamentary privilege and proved to be the catalyst that made armed conflict virtually unavoidable. It demonstrated Charles's willingness to employ force against Parliament itself.

Pym was arguably the central political leader of the Parliamentarian cause in the early months of the war. He spearheaded the political opposition to King Charles I in the House of Commons. He consistently pushed for reforms and a greater balance of power between the Crown and Parliament.

His political philosophy was that the King should reign but not rule alone, with power balanced by Parliament. Once the war began, Pym was crucial in establishing the Parliamentarian war effort. He developed administrative and fiscal measures to fund the war, notably the excise tax. He was instrumental in negotiating the alliance with the Scottish Covenanters for military support, a key factor in Parliament's eventual victory.

The First Civil War (1642-1646): The Outbreak of Hostilities

22 August 1642: The Battle of Edgehill: The first major engagement of the war. Royalist forces, commanded by **Prince Rupert**, clashed with Parliamentarian forces under the **Earl of Essex**. The battle concluded inconclusively, but it underscored the determination of both sides to engage in protracted conflict.

Prince Rupert was the nephew of King Charles I of England. His mother, Elizabeth Stuart, was Charles I's sister. Shortly before the outbreak of the First Civil War in August 1642, Rupert joined his uncle in England. Due to his prior military experience, Charles I quickly appointed him General of the Horse, giving him command of the Royalist cavalry. He was only 23 years old at the time.

1643: The war continued with various sieges and smaller engagements. **Oliver Cromwell** began to emerge as a distinguished Parliamentarian cavalry commander, renowned for the discipline and effectiveness of his "Ironsides" – his rigorously trained troops.

Cromwell's soldiers were often driven by strong religious convictions, believing they were fighting for a righteous cause.

2 July 1644: The Battle of Marston Moor: A decisive victory for the Parliamentarian and Scottish Covenanter alliance in the north of England. **Oliver Cromwell**'s cavalry played a pivotal role in the rout of the Royalist forces led by **Prince Rupert**. This significantly weakened the King's control in the northern regions.

14 June 1645: The Battle of Naseby: A pivotal battle that effectively destroyed the Royalist military capacity. **The New Model Army**, a professional army established by Parliament and led by **Sir Thomas Fairfax**, with **Oliver Cromwell** as his Lieutenant-General of cavalry, decisively defeated the King's forces.

1646: Following the defeat at Naseby, the Royalist cause steadily collapsed. Charles the First eventually surrendered to the Scottish army.

The New Model Army was revolutionary in its structure, with promotions based on merit rather than social standing.

The Interregnum and the Second Civil War (1646-1649): A Precarious Peace

1647-1648: Parliament and the army engaged in protracted negotiations regarding the future of the King and the nation. Charles, held captive, attempted to exploit divisions among his captors.

1648: The Second Civil War: Royalist uprisings erupted in various parts of England, and the Scots, now in disagreement with Parliament, invaded in support of the King. However, these were swiftly suppressed by the Parliamentarian army under **Oliver Cromwell** and **Sir Thomas Fairfax**.

The Second Civil War was shorter and less extensive than the first, indicating the Parliamentarians' increasing dominance.

December 1648: Pride's Purge: Growing impatient with Parliament's continued attempts to negotiate with the King, the New Model Army, under the command of **Colonel Thomas Pride**, forcibly excluded Members of Parliament who favoured a settlement with Charles. This left behind the "Rump Parliament," a smaller, more radical assembly.

The Republic and the Third Civil War (1649-1651): The End of the Monarchy

January 1649: The Trial and Execution of Charles the First: The Rump Parliament established a special High Court of Justice that tried Charles the First for treason. He was found guilty and executed by beheading on 30 January 1649. This was an unprecedented act – the execution of a reigning monarch by his own subjects.

Charles the First faced his execution with considerable composure and courage.

March 1649: The Abolition of the Monarchy and the House of Lords: England was declared a Commonwealth, a republic governed by Parliament.

1649-1651: The Third Civil War: Charles the First's son, **Charles the Second**, with the support of Royalists in England and the Scots, attempted to regain the throne.

3 September 1650: The Battle of Dunbar: Oliver Cromwell led the Parliamentarian forces to a significant victory against a larger Scottish army that had proclaimed Charles the Second as their king.

3 September 1651: The Battle of Worcester: The final major battle of the English Civil Wars. Cromwell decisively defeated Charles the Second's Royalist and Scottish forces in England, effectively ending his bid for the throne. Charles the Second was forced to flee into exile.

The Protectorate and the Restoration (1653-1660): A New Form of Rule and the Return of the King

1653: The Protectorate: Following further political instability, **Oliver Cromwell** dissolved the Rump Parliament and established himself as Lord Protector, effectively ruling England, Scotland, and Ireland. This period saw a more stable, albeit authoritarian, form of government.

Cromwell's rule included some progressive reforms but also the imposition of strict Puritanical laws that were unpopular with many.

1658: The Death of Oliver Cromwell: His son, **Richard Cromwell**, succeeded him as Lord Protector but lacked his father's authority and was eventually compelled to resign, leading to renewed political turmoil.

1659-1660: The Path to Restoration: A period of significant political disorder ensued after Richard Cromwell's resignation. General George Monck, a prominent military figure, ultimately marched his army to London and played a crucial role in orchestrating the return of the monarchy.

1660: The Restoration: Charles the Second returned from exile and was crowned King, marking the end of the Interregnum (the period without a monarch) and the re-establishment of the monarchy.

The English Civil Wars were a transformative period in British history, driven by deep-seated tensions concerning political power, religious belief, and economic control. The events involved a diverse array of compelling individuals and ultimately led to a fundamental shift in the relationship between the monarch and Parliament, laying the groundwork for the constitutional monarchy that exists today.

How do the Civil Wars affect us today?
The English Civil Wars, despite taking place in the 17th century, had a profound and lasting impact that continues to shape the United Kingdom and even aspects of the wider world today. Here are some of the key areas of impact:

1. The Diminishing of Monarchical Power and the Rise of Parliament:

Parliamentary Sovereignty: The most significant long-term consequence was the decisive shift in the balance of power from the monarch to Parliament. The wars challenged the concept of the Divine Right of Kings and ultimately established the principle of parliamentary sovereignty – the idea that Parliament is the supreme legal authority in the UK.

Constitutional Monarchy: While the monarchy was restored in 1660, it was a monarchy with significantly curtailed powers. The events of the Civil War and the subsequent Glorious Revolution of 1688 cemented the idea of a constitutional monarchy, where the monarch reigns according to laws made by Parliament and with the consent of the people (represented by Parliament). This is the system that continues in the UK today.

2. The Development of Political Ideologies and Parties:

Seeds of Political Division: The stark divisions during the Civil War laid some of the groundwork for the development of political parties in England. The opposing sides, though not formal parties in the modern sense, represented different political and religious ideologies that would evolve over time into the Whig and Tory factions, the forerunners of today's major political parties (Liberal Democrats and Conservatives respectively).

Ideas of Liberty and Rights: The debates and pamphlets produced during the Interregnum explored radical ideas about liberty, individual rights, and the role of the government. Groups like the Levellers advocated for broader suffrage and social reforms, ideas that, while not immediately adopted, contributed to the long-term development of democratic thought.

3. The Formation of the Modern British Army:

The New Model Army: The Parliamentarian New Model Army, a professional and meritocratic fighting force, is considered the precursor to the modern British Army. Its organisation, discipline, and effectiveness were revolutionary for its time. The idea of a standing national army, accountable to Parliament rather than directly to the monarch, has been a lasting legacy.

4. Religious Toleration (though a slow process):

Challenges to Religious Uniformity: While the Civil War itself was partly fuelled by religious conflict, the Interregnum saw a greater (though sometimes unstable) degree of religious experimentation and the rise of various nonconformist sects. Although the Restoration saw the re-establishment of the Church of England, the seeds of religious toleration had been sown, eventually leading to greater religious freedom over the following centuries.

5. Impact on the Landscape and Infrastructure:

Damage and Destruction: Many towns, cities, and castles suffered significant damage during the sieges and battles of the Civil Wars. The ruins of some of these structures can still be seen today, serving as a physical reminder of the conflict.

Fortifications and Defences: The war led to the construction and modification of fortifications, some of which have left a lasting mark on the urban landscape.

6. Ideas of Republicanism (though ultimately rejected in the long term):

The Experiment of the Commonwealth: The brief period of the Commonwealth, without a monarch, was a unique experiment in English history. While it ultimately failed to take permanent root, it demonstrated the possibility of governance without a king and contributed to future debates about the nature of the state.

7. Influence on Colonial Development:

Migration and Ideals: The religious and political turmoil of the Civil War era contributed to migration to North America, with individuals and groups seeking greater freedoms. The ideals of self-governance and individual rights debated during this period also influenced the development of political thought in the colonies.

Essex and the English Civil War

The English Civil Wars certainly left their mark on Essex, though the county wasn't the site of any of the major pitched battles that decided the overall course of the conflict (like Edgehill, Marston Moor, or Naseby). However, Essex played a significant role in supporting Parliament and experienced its own share of upheaval and consequences:

Support for Parliament:

Strong Parliamentarian Sentiment: Essex, particularly the urban and more economically developed areas in the south and east, generally held strong Parliamentarian sympathies. Puritanism was also quite prevalent in the county, contributing to this support.

Robert Devereux, 3rd Earl of Essex: A prominent Essex nobleman became the first Captain-General and Chief Commander of the Parliamentarian army at the start of the war.

Although his military leadership was sometimes questioned, his position meant Essex was firmly aligned with the Parliamentarian cause from the outset.
Military Activity and Sieges:

Royalist Uprisings and Skirmishes: While largely Parliamentarian, Essex did experience some Royalist activity, particularly during the Second Civil War in 1648.

The Siege of Colchester (1648): This was the most significant military event in Essex during the Civil Wars. Following Royalist defeats in Kent, a Royalist force under the Earl of Norwich and Sir Charles Lucas retreated into the walled town of Colchester. Parliamentarian forces, led by Lord-General Thomas Fairfax, besieged the town for eleven weeks.

The church of St. Mary-at-the-Walls was badly damaged during the siege.

Impact of the Siege: The siege had a devastating impact on Colchester. Provisions ran out, leading to starvation and the consumption of animals like cats and dogs. Many buildings were damaged by cannon fire, including St Mary's-at-the-Walls church. It's estimated that around 2,000 people may have died due to the siege.

Aftermath: After the Royalists surrendered, Fairfax showed little mercy. Sir Charles Lucas and another Royalist officer, Sir George Lisle, were executed by firing squad outside Colchester Castle. The town also had to pay a substantial fine to avoid pillage. Colchester took decades to recover from the damage and loss of life.

Local Garrisons and Military Presence: Parliamentarian forces were likely garrisoned in various strategic locations across Essex to secure the county and prevent Royalist incursions. This would have meant a military presence impacting local communities through quartering of soldiers and the demand for supplies.

Royalist Movements Through Essex: As seen with the events leading to the Siege of Colchester, Royalist forces did move through Essex, sometimes leading to confrontations and the requisitioning of resources.

Political and Social Impact:

Local Administration: The war led to changes in local governance, with Parliamentarian committees gaining influence and overseeing the war effort in Essex. Royalist sympathisers would have faced suspicion and potential penalties.

Religious Changes: The rise of Puritanism, already strong in Essex, would have been further encouraged during Parliament's ascendancy. The war challenged the authority of the established Church of England and fostered a climate where nonconformist ideas could flourish, at least for a time.

Economic Strain: Like much of the country, Essex would have experienced economic disruption due to the war. Trade routes could have been affected, and the demands of supplying the Parliamentarian war effort would have placed a burden on the local economy.

Personal Experiences: Individuals and families in Essex would have been directly affected by the war. Many men would have joined the Parliamentarian army, and communities would have had to cope with their absence, potential casualties, and the economic hardship of war. The sieges and military presence would have brought the conflict directly to people's doorsteps in some areas.

Long-Term Legacy:

Memory of the Siege of Colchester: The brutal Siege of Colchester became a significant event in the local memory of Essex, highlighting the harsh realities of the Civil Wars.

Reinforcement of Parliamentarian Principles: The strong support for Parliament in Essex likely contributed to the long-term establishment of parliamentary sovereignty and a more limited role for the monarchy after the Restoration.

In conclusion, while Essex wasn't the central stage for the major battles of the English Civil Wars, the county played a crucial role in supporting Parliament, experienced significant military action (most notably the devastating Siege of Colchester), and felt the broader political, social, and economic impacts of the conflict. The memory of these events, particularly the siege, would have been a lasting part of Essex's local history.

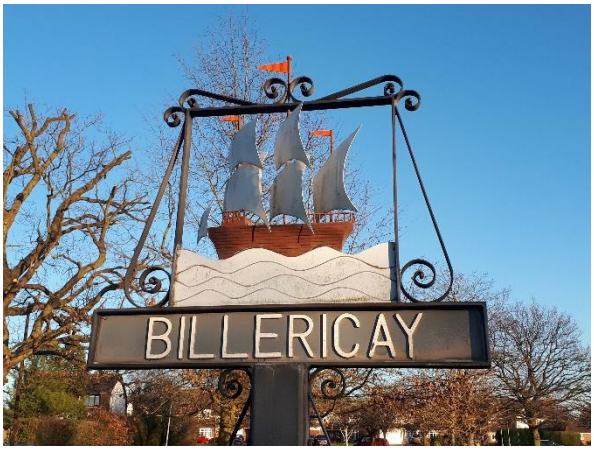
Basildon and the English Civil War

While the major battles of the English Civil Wars largely bypassed the immediate Basildon area, including Laindon, Wickford, and Pitsea, there are still records and connections indicating activity and impact:

General Context for the Area:
Parliamentarian Support: Essex generally had strong Parliamentarian leanings. This would have meant that even without major battles, the local populace in the Basildon area likely supported Parliament, contributing resources and potentially manpower to their cause.

Proximity to Events: The area is not far from Colchester, which endured a significant siege in 1648 during the Second Civil War. This event would have undoubtedly had repercussions and been a major concern for people living in the surrounding areas.
Specific Locations:

Billericay:
Billericay had a strong Puritan influence, which generally aligned with the Parliamentarian cause.



While not a site of major fighting, individuals from Billericay likely would have been involved in the broader conflict, potentially joining the Parliamentarian forces.
The strong Parliamentarian sentiment in the region might have led to local support networks for the Parliamentarian war effort.

The Mayflower is a familiar symbol in Billericay as a number of local residents were amongst the passengers that sailed to North America in search of religious freedoms.

Wickford:
Wickford was the birthplace of Elizabeth Reade (1615–1672), the second wife of John Winthrop the Younger, the Governor of Connecticut. Importantly, Elizabeth Reade was the step-daughter of Hugh Peter (1598–1660), a prominent and active supporter of the Parliamentarian cause during the English Civil War. Peter was a chaplain in the New Model Army and a key figure in the Interregnum. This family connection directly links Wickford to the heart of the Parliamentarian movement.

The presence of someone so closely connected to a leading Parliamentarian figure suggests that the prevailing sympathies in Wickford, or at least within certain influential circles, likely favoured Parliament.

Great Burstead:
The early history of Basildon notes that "Many Essex men joined the Ironsides during the Civil War," suggesting that individuals from the villages that later formed Basildon (like Great Burstead) would have participated in the Parliamentarian army.

Overall:
While the Basildon area wasn't a primary battleground, it was undoubtedly influenced by the English Civil Wars.

The strong Parliamentarian sentiment in Essex, the significant events in nearby Colchester, and the presence of individuals with direct links to the Parliamentarian leadership (like the step-daughter of Hugh Peter in Wickford) all indicate that the conflict had a tangible impact on the local communities, even if specific dramatic events aren't widely recorded for each individual town within the Basildon area.

Local people would have made choices, taken sides, and lived with the consequences of this tumultuous period in English history.

The English Civil War

A beginners guide

The English Civil War was actually three wars, fought between 1642 and 1651.

- Many of the names of those involved may be familiar to us today, but what part did they play?
- How do the Civil Wars affect us today?
- What part did Essex and the Basildon area play?

Some explanations to all of these questions can be found in side this booklet, created to teach myself about the subject and to share it with others.

As heard on…