

The Siege of Colchester in 1648 was one of the most dramatic and significant events in the history of the town. It took place during the English Civil War, which was fought between the king, Charles I, and Parliament. The war had broken out in 1642 and its first phase ended four years later with the defeat and capture of Charles.

For a time there was an uneasy peace as Parliament attempted to negotiate with Charles. The king meanwhile was secretly plotting a return to power with the support of a Scottish army.

Fighting began again in May 1648, when a Royalist army led by George Goring, Earl of Norwich, marched on London. The Royalists were defeated at Maidstone in Kent by Parliamentary forces under the command of Sir Thomas Fairfax. Goring then retreated to Essex and was joined by several other Royalist leaders including Sir Charles Lucas from Colchester. This Royalist army, already numbering between four and six thousand soldiers, hoped to recruit more men in the East of England. Marching north, the Royalists arrived at Colchester on 12th June and occupied the town despite fierce protests from the inhabitants who were supporters of Parliament.

The Royalist forces immediately found themselves trapped by Fairfax who had followed them. He encircled Colchester with forts and trenches, and used artillery to bombard the town, causing great damage which grew worse as his men advanced closer to the walls.

Initially the defenders remained hopeful that they could hold out until fresh Royalist troops arrived to end the siege. In July, the Royalist officers refused honourable conditions of surrender offered by Fairfax. However, as the weeks went on food and ammunition grew desperately short and conditions became intolerable. Horses, cats and dogs were killed and eaten. Thatch was stripped from roofs as hay for the soldiers' horses.

August 1648 was particularly cold and wet, and the desperate townspeople begged the Royalist leaders to surrender. News of a Royalist uprising at Kingston in Surrey provided hope to the defenders, but the revolt there was quickly crushed. A Scottish army marching south to help King Charles was defeated at Preston in Lancashire and all hope of relief or rescue was gone. On 28th August, the Royalists finally surrendered and about 3500 men laid down their arms. Two officers were executed by firing squad and many soldiers subsequently died from wounds, disease and the effects of imprisonment. In January 1649, King Charles himself was executed.

As a result of the Siege, the people of Colchester suffered death, starvation, the destruction of their homes and poverty caused by the collapse of the prosperous cloth trade. It took more than a generation for the town to recover and some of the scars are still visible today.

The Siege of Colchester

An historic walk around Colchester reliving the English Civil War Siege



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Britain's First City

2 THE OBELISK

Here, Sir Charles Lucas and Sir George Lisle were executed on the evening of 28th August 1648. Both officers had been captured earlier in the war and then freed on the condition that they promised never to fight against Parliament again. Fairfax argued that they had broken their word and could not expect mercy a second time. These executions caused outrage amongst the Royalists.

Lucas and Lisle were buried privately in St Giles's Church, but received a grand public funeral in 1661. Royalist anger, still strong, recorded that the two men were 'by the command of Sir Thomas Fairfax, then general of the Parliament army in cold blood barbarously murdered'.

From the Obelisk head towards the western edge of the park, where you will find an exit leading into the Dutch Quarter.

1 THE TOMBSTONES OF SIR THOMAS HONYWOOD AND HIS WIFE

Begin the walk at Hollytrees Museum and the Visitor Information Centre. At the side of the building in the Wetzlar Garden you will find the tombstones of Sir Thomas Honeywood and his wife, relocated from their original position at Marks Hall, west of Colchester. Honeywood, a Parliamentarian officer, was ordered to demolish the town walls after the Siege, but according to tradition he followed the wishes of his wife, a local woman proud of her town, and kept the destruction to a minimum.

From the tombstones walk through the park towards Colchester Castle. At the back of the Castle, on its northern side, you will find the Obelisk.

3 THE DUTCH QUARTER

As you leave the park, you will see a short footpath cutting through the row of houses directly in front of you. Take this path and then continue straight on, walking along St Helen's Lane.

Dutch weavers, fleeing from religious persecution in Holland, settled in Colchester in the 1560s and grew rich. After the surrender, however, the Dutch community was required to pay half of the enormous fine of £14,000 demanded by Fairfax. Although the fine was later reduced by £2,000, it still took the town many years to recover.

At the end of St Helen's Lane, turn left to walk up East Stockwell Street. After a short distance you will see Quakers Alley on your right which runs alongside St Martin's Church. Walk through the alley emerging onto West Stockwell Street where you can get a clear view of the front of the church.

4 ST. MARTIN'S CHURCH

The tower of St Martin's was blown down during the Parliamentary bombardment which also destroyed 186 houses and damaged many more.

From the front of the church walk up the hill towards High Street, where you emerge beside the Town Hall. Turn right and walk down High Street in the direction of the Jumbo Water Tower which you will see dominating the skyline. At the end of High Street, cross North Hill and turn left to walk in a southerly direction down Head Street. The first right turn off Head Street will take you down Church Street. Continue following this road, keeping straight as the road splits, and it will lead you to St Mary's Church - now the Colchester Arts Centre.

5 ST. MARY'S CHURCH

From the top of this church tower, a one-eyed Royalist gunner used a small cannon to inflict heavy casualties amongst the advancing Parliamentary troops. In mid-July, the Parliamentarians were close enough to return effective fire, destroying half the tower and killing the gunner. You can clearly see where the top half of the tower has been rebuilt.

You may be able to access the churchyard where, at the end of the Siege, the Royalists had to hand over their horses and equipment.

From St Mary's Church, retrace your steps down Church Street. Take a right turn and continue your walk south along Head Street. As you walk down the street, on your right, tucked behind the main shopfronts you will find the former King's Head Inn, now a solicitors' office.

6 THE FORMER KING'S HEAD INN

Here the senior Royalist officers surrendered to General Fairfax on Monday, 28th August. By now only a barrel and a half of gunpowder remained and the townspeople were starving. Today, a plaque above the door commemorating the event can be seen.

Walk back out to Head Street and take a right turn continuing your walk south along the street. You will reach a crossroads which is roughly the site of what was once Headgate. A plaque on the ground marks the location.

7 HEADGATE

Nothing can be seen of Headgate now, but this was the scene of fierce fighting at the beginning of the Siege as the Parliamentarians tried to break into the town.

Cross Head Street and continue your journey in an easterly direction down St John's Street. After a few minutes you will see Abbeygate Street on your right. Walk down this street and through the subway at the bottom. As you emerge from the subway continue up the hill towards St John's Green School on your right and the green itself on the left. Keep your eyes looking over the green and the Abbey Gateway will come into view.

8 ST. JOHN'S ABBEY GATEWAY

The Gatehouse is all that remains of the medieval St John's Abbey. The site of the former monastery was owned by the Lucas family in 1648 and was a Royalist stronghold. Ammunition was stored in the Gatehouse.

During the Siege, the Gatehouse was attacked by the Parliamentary army. A hand grenade caused an explosion which blew off the roof and killed many of the Royalist soldiers. The capture of the Gatehouse enabled Fairfax to position his cannon on the nearby St John's Green allowing him to fire at the town at close range.

The Gatehouse was restored to its present appearance in 1863. Nearby is the church of St Giles where Lucas and Lisle are buried which can be identified by its wooden tower.

Retrace your steps, back through the subway and up Abbeygate Street until you return to St John's Street. Cross the road and take a right turn, where you will see the Brewer's Arms pub in the middle of a fork in the path. Follow the path to the left of the pub through Vineyard Street Car Park. You will be able to see the Roman Wall to your left.

Walk all the way through the car park until it eventually turns into Vineyard Street itself. Continue walking until you emerge onto St Botolph's Street where you will see Priory Street almost opposite you. Cross the road and continue down Priory Street where you will find St Botolph's Priory on your right-hand side.

12 THE SIEGE HOUSE

In early July, Lucas and Lisle with a large number of soldiers, some on horseback, led a night attack to recapture the mill at East Bridge. At first, the Royalists met with success but the Parliamentarians rallied and, after fierce fighting, drove them back to the safety of the town. A number of bullet holes, now ringed in red, can be seen in the timbers of the Siege House.

This is the end of the Walk. You can walk back up East Hill to return to your starting point at Hollytrees Museum.

11 ST. JAMES' CHURCH

After the surrender, the Royalist infantry were ordered to hand over their weapons, flags and drums in the churchyard. These troops had remained loyal despite being given many opportunities by the Parliamentarians to desert. Many lost almost all their clothing and, later, died of the effects of disease and imprisonment. Some were exiled to the West Indies.

Walk back down the hill, crossing over the road at an appropriate point. The hill flattens out and becomes East Street, crossing a bridge over the river Colne, after which you will find the Siege House on your left.

10 BERRYFIELD BREACH

By late August 1648, the Parliamentary forces were so close to the town that the two sides could throw stones at each other over the Roman Wall at this point. On 25th August, Fairfax ordered four cannons to fire at the Roman Wall creating a breach or gap. This has now been filled with bricks but the extent of the damage is clearly visible.

Continue walking along Priory Street until you reach the junction with East Hill. Turn left and walk a short distance up the hill to St James' Church.

9 ST. BOTOLPH'S PRIORY

St Botolph's Priory was very badly damaged during the Siege. The former priory church was almost entirely destroyed, with both sides blaming the other. It was almost two hundred years before the present St Botolph's Church was built in 1837.

Return to Priory Street and continue to walk along it. You will be able to see the Roman Wall running for a long stretch next to the car park. Continue until you reach a second interpretation panel from where you will be able to see modern bricks filling in the Berryfield Breach.

MODERN COLCHESTER

Get your bearings with our map of modern-day Colchester.

