**‘Such Times were never before seen in England’:**

**The Impact of the Civil War**

By Professor Mark Stoyle

In January 1642 King Charles I abandoned his palace at Whitehall and fled to Hampton Court, leaving London in the hands of his political opponents in parliament. The king’s decision to relinquish his capital was a momentous one, for, by dividing himself physically from the men who sat in parliament, Charles forced Englishmen and women to confront the fact that there were now two rival sources of authority in the kingdom, rather than just one - and that what had long been a political crisis was fast transforming itself into an incipient Civil War. Over the ensuing weeks, the king travelled first to Dover - from where his beloved wife, Henrietta Maria, set sail for the Continent and safety - and then to York, where he set about rallying support for his cause. Charles’s sorrowful parting from Henrietta Maria may be said to have foreshadowed the hundreds of thousands of similarly sorrowful partings - of husbands from wives, of sons from parents, of brothers from sisters - which would shortly take place across the entire country, as men of every age, rank and calling left their homes and families far behind them to serve in the rival armies of king and parliament.

During the spring and early summer of 1642, angry confrontations broke out in communities up and down the land, as the king’s partisans - many of whom were religious conservatives - clashed with the parliament’s partisans - many of whom were zealous protestants, or, as their enemies termed them, ‘puritans’. One of the clearest signs of this hardening ideological divide was the way in which the hostile nicknames which had recently been coined in London to describe the supporters of king and parliament respectively - ‘Cavaliers and Roundheads’ – rapidly spread into the provinces. In July 1642, for example two Norwich men went to see an acquaintance, a certain Robert Riches, and were told that he was in the Angel Inn. Stepping inside, they met Riches and sat down together to drink ‘a jug of beer’. Their conversation soon took an alarming turn, for - as one of the men later testified to the local magistrates - ‘the said Riches pulled out a knife … which he said he had bought to defend himself and, if occasion did serve, to cut the Puritans and the Roundheads’ bollocks off’. Not content with this, Riches then went on to speak ‘ill terms’ of the king’s opponents and to declare that ‘he did hope to see them hanged’. Having assured his auditors that two prominent Parliamentarian noblemen ‘were both bastards, and their mother was a whore’, Riches finally concluded his verbal assault on the parliament and all its works by ‘pull[ing] out and read[ing] diverse scandalous verses’ against a number of MPs.

This anecdote nicely illustrates the way in which the supporters of both sides drew on ‘the infinite [number of] base, abusive ballads and trifling pamphlets’, which - in the words of one indignant clergyman - ‘came forth daily, very rude [and] uncivil’ in the lead-up to the Civil War, and which undoubtedly did much to persuade many individuals of the justice of their own cause and of the iniquity of their opponents. Indeed, some contemporaries lamented that it was the outbreak of these ‘paper wars’ which had paved the way for the physical conflict which so rapidly succeeded them.

In August Charles I raised his standard at Nottingham and summoned in his loyal subjects to assist him against those whom he denounced as the ‘rebels’ in parliament. Within weeks, thousands of men were flocking in to the king’s camp, just as thousands had already flocked in to the parliament’s, and in October the two rival armies clashed in the first great battle of the war, fought at Edgehill in Warwickshire. In a letter which he wrote to his mother in the wake of that engagement, one Northern Royalist revealed the depth of the religious motivation which had prompted him - like so many of the most committed combatants on either side - to embrace his chosen cause. ‘Dear Mother’, he began, ‘I am very thankful to God to receive the glad news of your health’. ‘It did much trouble me to depart from you’, the young man went on, ‘but I thought it better to do so … [than] to alter my resolution … [to join the king’s army] … which my conscience wonderfully tells me, is the most noble, just and Christian cause that can be defended, and such as I hope God will bless with an happy success: being for the defence of his own truth and [of] his own anointed’ [i.e. Charles I himself]. Many on the parliamentary side were equally convinced that they were fighting a holy war, but, needless to say, both armies also contained plenty of far less principled individuals, like the Croatian mercenary, Captain Carlo Fantom, who, upon being asked why he had come to fight in England’s wars, frankly replied, ‘I care not for your Cause; I come to fight for your half-crowns and your handsome women’.

Almost everyone had expected that the quarrel would be decided in one decisive battle - that the war would be over by Christmas - but Edgehill proved a draw. As a result, the conflict spread to every corner of the kingdom during late 1642: as Charles established his headquarters in Oxford, his opponents tightened their grip on London and Royalists and Parliamentarians everywhere else battled it out for control. This was a catastrophe for the ordinary people of England and Wales, because, as the fighting spread and intensified, so the human suffering which it caused grew steadily, remorselessly, worse.

‘Thou wouldst think it strange if I should tell thee there was a time in England when brothers killed brothers, cousins cousins and friends their friends’, the Hampshire gentleman Sir John Oglander, who lived through the war, was later to write grimly, in a book of ‘observations’ intended for his descendants, ‘nay, when … to murder a man [was] held less offence than to kill a dog’. ‘I believe such times were never before seen in England’, Sir John continued, ‘[with] no law and government, no assize [courts], no [quarter] sessions, [and] no justices [of the peace] that would be obeyed’. The general break-down of law and order which Oglander described was one of the most terrifying aspects of the conflict for ordinary people, because it meant that, even as they were exposed to the depredations of the hordes of unruly soldiers who were by now criss-crossing the countryside, they were also deprived of access to legal redress. In every corner of England, the soldiers looted and plundered; they ‘swaggered and roared’; they drank and swore. They fathered illegitimate children, they broke up the homes of the unfortunate civilians with whom they were ‘billeted’ (or lodged), and, in the worst cases, they assaulted men, raped women and murdered anyone brave or foolish enough to stand in their way. Nor should we be surprised that so many of the soldiers behaved as outrageously as they did - because they themselves were generally wretchedly-clothed, wretchedly-fed and wretchedly underpaid.

While the armies raised in 1642 had largely been composed of volunteers, as time went on - and as martial ardour faded in all but the most zealous hearts - both sides were increasingly compelled to resort to ‘impressment’ instead: that is to say, to the conscription of men by force. For all too many of those who were ‘forced in’ like this, and marched away from their homes under armed guard, impressment proved the first step on a miserable journey which would eventually lead to their own untimely deaths: sometimes on the battlefield, more commonly, perhaps, in a squalid temporary siege-camp, or in a disease-ridden garrison town. Nor should we forget that conscription could often prove almost as traumatic for the impressed soldiers’ families as it did for the soldiers themselves.

In 1646, for example, Robert Culley of Owslebury, near Winchester, was impressed as a soldier ‘for the Parliament’s service’, leaving his wife, Dorothy, ‘in a poor condition … [with] two children to maintain, and nothing to relieve them, but some small goods’. In the wake of Robert’s departure, Dorothy managed to support herself and her children for a while by selling off most of her possessions - but she was unable to pay the rent of the house in which her husband had left them. At length, therefore, she was forced ‘to quit the house, and seek habitation elsewhere’. Selling what few goods she still possessed, Dorothy now ‘bought some small timber’ and used it to ‘set up a cottage’ on some waste ground in Owslebury. No sooner had she finished building this rudimentary shelter, however, than the leading parishioners - probably fearing that responsibility for maintaining the family would soon devolve upon them - began to agitate for the cottage to be demolished. In despair, Dorothy appealed to the local magistrates: doubtless hoping that, because they themselves professed to support the Parliamentarian cause, they would be swift to help a Parliamentarian soldier’s wife in distress. Alas, the JPs’ response was distinctly underwhelming, for while they asked the lord of the manor to look into the matter, they weakly concluded that, ‘if he should not … consent that the said cottage be continued, then it is though fit … that the said Dorothy shall have liberty to carry away the timber and materials’. This judgement can have been small comfort to Dorothy - and the sad story of the Culleys makes it easy to understand why family men were usually even more desperate to avoid impressment than were their single fellows.

By the time that Dorothy Culley set to work to build a new house for herself and her children out of ‘small timber’, the English Civil War was almost over. The Royalists had been on the defensive ever since Charles I’s main field army had been shattered at the Battle of Naseby in June 1645, and, a year later, the king finally gave up the fight and surrendered himself to his enemies. The guns now fell silent - for the time being, at least - but the terrible legacy of the conflict which had been waged across England and Wales over the past three and a half years would remain all too visible for decades to come: in the ruins of the scores of bridges which had been pulled down, for example; in the burnt-out shells of the thousands of houses which had been ‘fired’; and, most pitiful of all, in the scars of the tens of thousands of ‘maimed soldiers’ who had been hurt during the fighting and who were now quite unable to support themselves and their families. The mental scars which the struggle left behind it are far harder to trace, of course - but it seems fair to suggest that there can scarcely have been a man, woman or child who lived through the English Civil War who did not subsequently remember that conflict as one of the defining experiences of their time upon this earth.