

# “A VERY FIERCE AND HOT DISPUTE”



## THE BATTLE OF MAIDSTONE, 1648 - PART ONE

The man behind Bloody Miniatures, Richard Lloyd, presents the first part of a two-part article about a little known English Civil War battle. Having extensively researched the battle - which gets very little attention in any history books - Richard provides the compelling history and (next month) the wargaming angle on this battle that was “a fierce and hot dispute”. All the figures seen in the photos are from the expanding Bloody Miniatures English Civil War range.

### INTRODUCTION

I've lived within 25 miles of Maidstone for most of my life, but until recently had only visited on a couple of occasions. The 'county town', or administrative headquarters of Kent, Maidstone sits in the lee of the North Downs, on the beautiful River Medway in the centre of the Garden of England.

The town itself, alas, is at first sight an unlovely place. Like many large English towns, Maidstone's historic core has been smothered under unforgiving layers of modern development. Expanding rapidly after World War Two, Maidstone is now a fully-fledged urban sprawl - surrounding villages swallowed up, and encircled by a creeping effusion of industrial estates, retail parks, and housing developments. Traffic roars along a multi-lane highway

right through the town centre and along the beautiful riverside. There's tremendous history here, but you have to look hard to find it.

On a rare visit a while back, I spotted an unobtrusive plaque on a wall in Bank Street in the lower part of the town. It commemorates the Battle of Maidstone, 1648 as 'one of the hardest fought battles of the English Civil War'. I was surprised. I've been a military history nut for 40 years, I own a shelf full of books on the English Civil War, and I'd never even heard of the Battle of Maidstone. Curiosity piqued, I started digging and unearthed a dramatic story that barely gets a mention in the history books.

We can probably all name some major battles of the English Civil War, from Edgehill to Worcester and various

encounters in between. But it's always been my sense that the big pike and shot battles that wargamers love to play, with their neatly ranked up firing lines, massed pike blocks, and regiments of



Above: The commemorative plaque in Bank Street, Maidstone.



cavalry wheeling in drillbook formations, are probably not representative of most of the fighting that took place during this long conflict.

Naseby, Marston Moor, and a dozen other fields may have hosted the big set piece battles which provided the key turning points in the war, but they're not typical of much of the fighting, which took place on a smaller, localised scale and rarely on open battlefields. Historian Brian Lyndon states that "The quarrel of the King and Parliament in London was used to indulge local passions and personal feuds. Numerous small wars were waged with fierce intensity, remote from the operations of the major marching armies".

Encounters involving a few hundred men disputing control of a village, great house, or river crossing were the bread and butter engagements of the Civil Wars, along with (often lengthy) sieges, great and small. The succession of actions at Maidstone on 1 June 1648, is much more typical of the desperate, gritty, day-to-day warfare that took place the length and breadth of the country during ten years of on-off civil war.

This fits with my own range of figures, Bloody Miniatures, which are designed not for big set piece battles, but for down and dirty skirmishes, sallies, sieges, ambushes, and escalades.

So, I set out to recreate the Battle of Maidstone as a wargame. Timely too, since 2023 is the 375th anniversary of the battle.

The Battle of Maidstone, long forgotten, encapsulates why the English Civil War is so irresistibly fascinating. It's local history, but seething with incredible drama, fire, and fury, yet all so peculiarly British and parochial. These are our not-so-distant ancestors in the early modern period, waging murderous war against their fellow countrymen in the improbable surroundings of our very own chocolate box villages, pastoral landscapes, and pleasant county towns. It's all too incongruous. Yet it really happened here - and not that long ago in the great span of time. You can still discern the scars on our countryside and high streets: the buried outlines of defensive earthworks; the bullet marks around church doorways, on stone bridges, and on venerable buildings that still stand in bustling English market towns. It's just deeply weird - horribly unfamiliar, yet so familiar.

This article is a summary of the battle itself, and the wargaming details are to come in part two. I hope these will offer enough information that you can play it yourself if you want to.



Above: Parliamentarian shot attack across Mill Street Bridge.

### BACKGROUND TO THE BATTLE

The so-called 'First Civil War' (the main phase of which saw all the well-known big battles of the conflict) began in 1642 and ended in 1646 with Charles I held captive, first by Parliament's Scottish allies, the Covenanters, and later by the Parliamentarians.

In the ensuing two years, Parliament tightened its grip over England and Wales. But significant pockets of Royalist sympathisers remained, and hostilities re-ignited in early Summer 1648 (the 'Second Civil War'), with Royalist risings in South Wales, Cornwall, Essex, Kent, and parts of the North. The Scots switched sides and came out for the King, who promised to impose their preferred form of Presbyterianism on both Kingdoms in return for their help in restoring him to his English throne.

The South-East had generally been for Parliament during the First Civil War, but Kent had always harboured a strong Royalist minority, and fresh grievances had been building since late 1647. In part, these were in reaction to puritan structures imposed by Parliament (the banning of traditional Christmas festivities in Canterbury, for instance, which led to rioting), but also in opposition to Parliament's oppressive military rule. War taxation was still in force, and so was the hated policy of free quarter for unpaid soldiers. Petitions by the Kent gentry for the disbandment of Parliament's feared New Model Army, and for the return of the King to power, were dismissed or ignored.

On 21 May 1648, with Wales in revolt, the Scots marching south, and insurrections breaking out across



Above: Fairfax watches his cavalry attack over Little Bridge.



England, Kent rose and declared for the King. Within days, 20,000 men were in arms across the county. The Second Civil War had begun.

Rochester, Faversham, and Sittingbourne on the north Kent coast fell to the rebels immediately, and the Parliamentary fleet mutinied and went over to the Royalists. Threatened by its guns, the Tudor artillery forts of Walmer, Deal, and Sandown on the Channel coast promptly came out for the King, and the Parliamentary stronghold of Dover Castle was put to siege.

On 26 May, Dartford and Deptford, Kent towns on the Thames, lying perilously close to Parliament's London power base, fell to the rebels.

Oliver Cromwell had taken the greater part of the New Model Army to South Wales to deal with the rebellion there. Now Parliament's other pre-eminent commander, Sir Thomas Fairfax, faced a sudden threat to London itself, and the imminent reinforcement of the Kentish rebels by their fellow Royalists in Essex. Fairfax had been readying his 8,000 men to march north to suppress the Lancashire risings. Now, with characteristic decisiveness, on Wednesday 27 May, Fairfax turned south.

An extract from the record of Parliamentary proceedings for 1 June, 1648, notes: "On Wednesday in May last, His Excellency (Fairfax) with four regiments of horse and three of foot, with some loose companies of Colonel Ingoldsby's regiment, marched from Eltham."

### PRELUDE TO BATTLE

Leaving Eltham near Greenwich, and bypassing the fortified Royalist towns of Rochester and Aylesford, Fairfax headed straight for Maidstone, some 35 miles south-east of London.



Above: Sir William Brockman, by Cornelius Johnson, 1642.

To defend the approaches to the north Kent shore and the Medway ports, George Goring, Earl of Norwich, had mustered a Royalist army of 7,000 men on Penenden Heath, between Maidstone and Rochester.

A further detached force (variously given as between 1,800 and 3,000 men) was billeted within Maidstone itself. Fairfax reported afterwards that "the choicest of their forces (as we understand it) were appointed for this service."

Maidstone's civilian population at the time numbered some 3,000 inhabitants. With 2,000 or more Royalist troops also in the town, it must have been bursting at the seams. Overall command was vested in the town's military governor, the splendidly named Sir Gamaliel Dudley - a veteran cavalry colonel who had fought with his own regiment of horse across the north of England throughout the First Civil War, including at Marston Moor and Naseby.

Dudley's small army included Sir William Brockman's Regiment of Foot and Sir John Maney's Regiment of Horse - although quite how well formed, equipped, and experienced these 'regiments' were, we don't know.



Above: Sir Thomas Fairfax, by Edward Bower, 1646.





Mayney (sometimes 'Maney'), a Kentish baronet, had originally raised his regiment in Yorkshire in 1643. It too had fought with some distinction across much of the north throughout the First Civil War, so Mayney and Dudley would have known each other well. Whether Mayney's regiment at Maidstone bore any resemblance to this earlier formation is not known, although Fairfax reported after the battle that 'some 400 horse' had been taken, which would suggest a Royalist cavalry arm of around regimental strength. Brockman meanwhile, reportedly brought 800 men to the defence of the town.

The defenders included large numbers of volunteers: seamen, London apprentices, 'cavaliers', and watermen. These men may have constituted Brockman's hastily assembled 'regiment of foot'.

Most of this ragbag army was deployed within the town, with a small force sent to guard the next crossing point on the Medway - at East Farleigh, three miles upstream towards Tonbridge.

The Royalists also had eight heavy guns which they sited at the top of Gabriel's Hill, near the market cross in the town centre. These were positioned facing west down the High Street to cover the Great Bridge across the Medway. To fortify the southern approaches to the town, earthworks were thrown up along the River Len - a tributary of the Medway enlarged by a string of millponds serving several watermills.

During the afternoon of 1 June, after a march of several days, Fairfax's leading cavalry arrived on Barming Heath west of Maidstone. They found the town's Great Bridge across the Medway well defended and covered by the daunting battery of guns, sited on Gabriel's Hill in the town centre.

Rather than attempting to carry the bridge in a costly head-on assault, Fairfax decided on a flanking manoeuvre. He diverted the greater part of his force south, to cross the Medway by the lightly defended bridge at East Farleigh, south-west of Maidstone - a march of several miles.



### BATTLE JOINED

The narrow 14th Century stone bridge at East Farleigh is still in use today, often described as the finest surviving medieval bridge in the south of England. Barely wide enough for two horsemen to ride abreast, the bridge lies in the bottom of a deep valley. Fighting their way across that long, narrow, and eminently defensible bridge, then uphill past the church, must have seemed a daunting prospect to Fairfax's troops. And yet in the first encounter of the day, his veteran New Model horse swept the Royalist defenders before them, carried the bridge, and swung east to advance along the lane (now the B2010) towards Maidstone. But some way along this road they were met by Mayney's Royalist horse, who had sallied out of Maidstone to repel them. A short but furious cavalry battle saw the surprised Parliamentary horse driven back onto East Farleigh by Mayney's charge.

After a brief pause, and with his infantry coming up, Fairfax counter-attacked with his cavalry. This time, the New Model's troopers drove off Mayney's Horse, who fell back on Maidstone through the village of Tovil, where another bridge (over the Loose stream, another tributary of the Medway) was defended by a further party of Royalist foot.

At around 7pm, having marshalled his forces, Fairfax ordered his Dragoons forward to clear the bridge at Tovil. The Dragoons drove off the Royalist defenders and the Parliamentary army crossed the Loose stream to reach the old Roman



Above: East Farleigh bridge looking north - the direction from which Fairfax's troops crossed.



road, Stone Street. Here, they swung north to approach Maidstone from the south, fighting running skirmishes through the enclosed fields and hop gardens south of the River Len.

While the fights for the bridges at East Farleigh and Tovil are recorded, the crossing of the bridges over the Len is not remarked on in any report that I've found. Attacking from the south provided Fairfax with a much wider front to assault along than an attack across the Great Bridge from the west. Crossing the Len by the Mill Street bridge, the 'Little Bridge' from Lower Stone Street, and possibly other footbridges, his troops could attack in several places at once. But we have no details of how this crucial part of the battle unfolded, nor how the Royalists' earthworks north of the Len were overcome.

In any event, finally crossing the Len with his forlorn hope, Fairfax entered the outskirts of the town proper at around 9pm. Daylight was fading and it had begun to pour with rain. The Royalists had thrown up a succession of barricades through the streets, and turned some of their guns on Gabriel's Hill to face the new threat from the south.

#### STORM AND ASSAULT

With night coming on, a thunderstorm breaking, and his own train of artillery several miles behind him, Fairfax decided to hold off his assault until first light. But his forlorn hope were already skirmishing with the defenders in the lower part of the town, and as darkness fell and more Parliamentary units came up, the action took on a



*Above: Royalist defences along the River Len at Little Bridge.*

momentum of its own. More and more attackers were sucked into the fighting until it turned into a full-blown night assault - at which point Fairfax decided to push on and try to settle the matter there and then.

It's not difficult to imagine the intensity and horror of the hours of vicious house-to-house fighting that ensued - the darkness illuminated with hellish firelight from timber-framed buildings, set alight by close quarters gunnery despite the driving rain of a violent summer thunderstorm. With large numbers of men and horses struggling for their lives in the downpour, disputing every darkened street, alleyway and building, it must have been confusing and terrifying. We know it was bloody.

Colonel George Thompson, member of Parliament for Southwark and a veteran of the First Civil War (in which he lost a leg), was an observer with the Parliamentary forces that night:

"This Army struggled with so much difficulty to overcome a strong and resolute enemy. The fight began at seven at night about a mile from Maidstone, and before we could beat them from hedge to hedge and get at the barracadoes it was past 9 o'clock. After we had entered the town we disputed every street and turning. The enemy had eight



*Above: Parliamentary Dragoons advance on the Royalist last stand at St Faith's Chapel.*



pieces of ordinance which they discharged about 20 times when our men came into the streets. And by God's mighty help and assistance we overcame them between twelve and one, being every minute of the time firing upon them, and they upon us, it being extreme wet weather during all that time.

"Captain Price, a gallant honest man, and Colonel Hewson's Captain-Lieutenant, was also slain, and of ours, about 30 men, most of them fell at the cannon's mouth with case shot. We took eight pieces of ordinance, six iron and two brass."

The detail that the Royalist guns were firing case shot (explosive canisters of shrapnel) at close range, adds a brutal dimension to the tale of the night's fighting. It's surprising Parliamentary casualties were so (relatively) light - although we may suppose that in addition to the reported dead (around 80 in the final tally), hundreds more must have been maimed or wounded.

Another eyewitness, thought to be Captain John Topping, an officer in Hewson's Regiment of Foot, which led the charges up the streets towards the barricades, writes with masterly understatement of the guns' terrifying case shot, laconically observing: "They did us some mischief before we could get under their shot." In other words, too close for the artillery fire to be effective.

The same writer reported, "I cannot but observe unto you the gallantry of a party of about sixty of our horse, which charged."

Another report claimed both sides "disputed the loss of every foot of ground, from street to street, porch to porch, often falling upon the enemy's horse with only their swords, in such a gallant manner."

It's intriguing to note from these reports that mounted troops on both sides were in the thick of this desperate street fighting - presumably making cavalry charges in attempts to clear particular streets. If you've ever seen mounted police clattering into action at an inner city riot, you perhaps start to get some sense of what this may have been like.

The defenders put up a heroic resistance, but eventually sheer weight of numbers and the New Model's experience began to tell. Barricade by barricade, the Royalists were gradually forced back up Gabriel's Hill and then along Week Street.



Above: Royalist Kentish gentry defend a barricade in the High Street with Parliamentarians attacking up Mill Street.

From the crossroads at the top of Gabriel's Hill, it's 300 yards along Week Street to where the Royalist defenders made their last stand in the churchyard of St Faith's Chapel. Even with the remodelling inflicted on large parts of the town centre over recent decades, you can still see many of the narrow alleys, yards, and passageways that spill off this main thoroughfare. Small wonder it took the Parliamentarians several hours to gradually drive the defenders back through this warren. It must have been hard-fought indeed.

The Royalists kept up their resistance until the early hours of the morning before conceding that the night was lost. Fairfax was said to be astonished when around a thousand Royalists emerged from inside St Faith's to offer their surrender. He later reported that the Royalists lost "neare 300 slaine, and about 1,300 prisoners, many being taken the next morning early in the woods, hop-yards, and fields whither they fled."

When the butcher's bill was reckoned, Fairfax had lost just 80 killed - testament perhaps to the experience and fighting prowess of the New Model Army. Their final assault, according to local legend (perhaps based on Topping's observation about 'getting under their shot') was an expertly timed charge, made immediately after the Royalist guns had fired - storming the position before another cannonade could be made.

Fairfax's subsequent report to Parliament confirms many of the details:

"The engagement with them began the last night, about seven of the clock, near Maidstone, and continued a very fierce and hot dispute until after twelve, before we could be masters of the town. The enemy, by reason of the continued supplies which they received from their forces by the passage over Aylesford, were enabled to dispute every street and passage."



Above: Royalist defences at Mill Street Bridge.

The defeated Royalists were disarmed, marched back down through the town they had so resolutely defended, and imprisoned in All Saints College Church. That remains today much as it would have been in 1648 - part of an imposing and well-preserved medieval riverside complex, comprising ecclesiastical college, Archbishop's palace, college church, tithe barn, and a number of other houses and towers.

Deemed to have acquitted themselves with some credit in their obdurate defence of the town against a much greater force of battle-hardened troops, Fairfax allowed most of his rank and file prisoners to swear their parole and return home over the following days.



## REFLECTIONS

Although we have a reasonably detailed account of the way the battle unfolded, drawn from several contemporary or near-contemporary eyewitnesses and reports, there are also some 'known unknowns' which we should take into account when considering the events of that bloody day.

For instance, when Fairfax decided to make his flanking sweep to assault Maidstone from the south, what part of his force did he leave on Barming Heath, facing east across the Medway? It seems inconceivable that he wouldn't have left some part of his army there, both to screen his march south, and to keep the defenders bottled up. But we also know that

on his march from Eltham, Fairfax had detached various companies and troops for specific missions along the way. So it seems unlikely that he had anything like his full starting strength of 8,000 men with him by the time he reached Maidstone.

Once the battle for the town proper was underway, with Parliamentary troops fighting their way up through the streets from the River Len (and the Royalist guns on Gabriel's Hill turned to face them), it also seems probable that whatever troops Fairfax had left on Barming Heath would surely have joined the fight, crossing the Great Bridge over the Medway to simultaneously attack from the west, up High Street and Bank Street. But how the Parliamentary forces were divided, we don't know.

A reasonable assumption would be that from his overall force of some 8,000 troops - or perhaps 6,000 by the time he reached Maidstone - Fairfax would have taken at least 4,000 men to make his main assault from the south, giving him likely odds of at least two to one over the defenders. But we can't say for sure. He may have taken a much smaller force with him, relying on the superior training, morale, and experience of his soldiers.

## AFTERMATH

Having taken Maidstone, Fairfax despatched Colonel Nathaniel Rich to subdue East Kent, lift the siege of Dover Castle, and retake the forts of Walmer, Deal and Sandown. Fairfax himself marched north in pursuit of the retreating Earl of Norwich, clearing Royalist rebels from the Medway towns along the way,



Above: Cavalry meet in the High Street.

before crossing the Thames at Gravesend on 11th June to put down the burgeoning rebellion in Essex.

The Essex Royalists, led by Sir Charles Lucas and Sir George Lisle, were swiftly driven back by Fairfax onto Colchester. Buoyed by his success at Maidstone, Fairfax attempted to storm it. But Colchester, a much larger town, proved an altogether tougher nut to crack, and after a bloody, costly, and unsuccessful assault, Fairfax settled in to besiege and starve out the defenders.

Meanwhile, having crushed the rebellion in Wales, Cromwell turned north. On 18 August he defeated a combined army of Royalists and Scots at the battle of

Preston. When the news reached the besieged Royalists at Colchester, this death-blow to Royalist hopes helped precipitate a collapse in morale. After an eleven week siege, with supplies exhausted and Royalist hopes crumbling around the country, Colchester surrendered on 28 August.

Fairfax was less forgiving in victory here. The men of the defeated garrison were taken to Bristol and sold en-masse into slavery in Barbados. Lucas and Lisle, having broken their parole to never again raise arms against Parliament, were summarily shot. Other Royalist ringleaders were later tried and hanged. Norwich only narrowly escaped the death penalty thanks to the casting vote of the Speaker in Parliament.

His last throw of the dice having failed, Charles I was tried by Parliament and beheaded in January 1649.

Sir John Mayney was left amongst the dead at Maidstone, but somehow managed to revive and slip away to London with the aim of joining the Essex rebels. He spent the period of the Commonwealth in and out of trouble - and in and out of the country raising money for Charles II. He was imprisoned several times for involvement in various plots and minor risings, but a lifetime of devotion to the Royalist cause seems to have brought scant reward despite the Restoration in 1660. Sir John died in poverty in 1676, aged 68.

Sir William Brockman was amongst the captives held in All Saints, and remained



Above: Fairfax's doublet, worn at Maidstone, in the Leeds Castle museum.



a prisoner until 1651. He was eventually released after being heavily fined as a 'delinquent', and returned to his manor at Beachborough, near Folkestone, where he died in 1654, aged 59.

Sir Gamaliel Dudley was also amongst the prisoners, but I've been unable to find what became of him afterwards.

Thomas, Lord Fairfax, refused to have anything to do with the trial of Charles I, and resigned his command of the army shortly afterwards - leaving the field clear for Cromwell to establish the government of the new Commonwealth, and pursue wars against the Scots and Irish.

Following Cromwell's death, Fairfax returned briefly to military command, helping put down the uprising of his former protégé, John Lambert, against the restoration of Charles II.

For this, along with what was seen as his honourable conduct during the civil war, Fairfax was spared the retribution meted out to many other leading Parliamentarians. Fairfax even provided Charles II with the horse he rode at his coronation.

Perhaps the greatest soldier of his day, 'Black Tom', died at home in Yorkshire in 1671, aged 59.

The buff coat worn by Fairfax at the battle is on display at Leeds Castle near Maidstone.

According to George Thompson, writing from the battlefield in the early hours of the next morning, Fairfax had been in the thick of the action throughout:

"His Excellency, from the first minute to the last, could not be drawn off from his personal and hazardous attendance in this service, and is much in his health."

### MAIDSTONE TODAY

Despite the grisly depredations of town planners and developers between the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, plenty of buildings that would have witnessed the battle, survive in Maidstone. Examples include those on Bank Street (No. 78 for instance, is dated 1611), and on St Faith's Street, where the timber-framed, jettied shops at Nos. 12-16 are 16th Century in origin, if not earlier.

The original Huguenot Chapel of St Faith's, in which the Royalists took refuge, was replaced in the 19th Century by a Victorian church. A stone's throw away, just to the west of St Faith's church, stands Chillington Manor - a great Elizabethan mansion built in 1562, now housing the excellent Maidstone Museum.



*Above: The tower of All Saints church, where the Royalist prisoners were held, rising behind the medieval Archbishop's palace on the Medway*

While the magnificent medieval bridge at East Farleigh still stands proudly, the contested bridge at Tovil is no more - the Loose Stream, where it joins the Medway, having been long since culverted, driven underground and built over.

At the bottom of the town, the River Len has also largely been driven underground where it joins the Medway. But it's well worth seeking out the original medieval Mill Street bridge over the Len. This is one of the bridges across which Fairfax must have attacked. Now overlaid by a modern steel and concrete bridge, the intact C14th medieval stone bridge can be found, lurking like a reproachful ghost in the darkness of its man-made cavern, by descending the stair beside the ruined gatehouse in the Archbishop's Palace gardens. It's an incredibly evocative spot.



*Above: The 14th Century stone Mill Street bridge over the River Len, now hidden beneath a modern road bridge*



*Above: The medieval Archbishop's palace on the Medway, just south of where the River Len (now underground) joins the Medway.*



Can't wait for part two? Fret not, **WiPrime Members** can head over to the *Wargames Illustrated* website, search for 'A fierce and hot dispute' and read or download the second-wargaming part of this article right now.