

## THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR IN OXFORDSHIRE by Edith Ditmas

In Oxfordshire political opinions were deeply divided. Sympathy for the Parliamentarians was strong in the north and in the south, but Woodstock and Bletchington were centres of Royalist influence. In Oxford itself the city, on the whole, supported the rebels while the university was enthusiastic for the king. Since London was strongly for Parliament, it was natural that the possession of Oxford, which had so often played the part of an alternative capital, should become an important objective for both sides.

Actual hostilities began in 1642 and Benson lay in the path of marching armies. In August while Charles was preparing to raise the royal standard at Nottingham, John Hampden, who had levied a regiment of Buckinghamshire men for the Parliamentary cause, captured Sir George Curzon at Watlington and the Earl of Berkshire. There was no significant royalist force at Oxford at the time and Colonel Goodwin and Lord Saye and Sele, also Parliamentarians, moved in to occupy the city.

King Charles moved south towards London but found his way blocked at Edgehill by the Parliament forces under Essex. The result of the battle was indecisive, for though the king was able to proceed to Oxford, Essex was not defeated. The king occupied Oxford but the delay was costly and by the time the advance towards London via Reading was resumed, the enemy was in a position to outflank the royalists and Charles had to return to Oxford.

It is in this opening phase of the Great Civil War that we have clear evidence that Benson was directly involved. Amongst the Reading archives, there still exists an order from Charles I to the Mayor and Aldermen of Reading commanding the immediate repair of the bridge of the Thames at Caversham . It was to be ready

*“for the passage of our army and artillerie by tomorrow eight of the clocke in the morning.... of this you may not fayle at your utmost peril!. Given at our court at Benson this 3rd of November 1642. “*

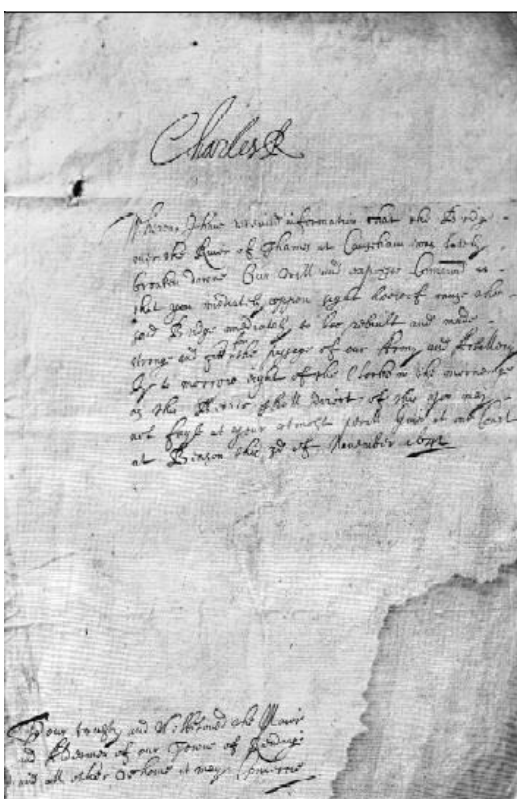
It is thought that Charles may have held his court in the first-floor room of the Red Lion Inn, which seems to have been the largest inn at that time. The building, on the corner of Mill Lane and High Street, formerly extended down Mill Lane and must have been an imposing hostelry. The incident is also of interest in proving that the contracted form of the name of the village was already in use, although Bensington continues to be the formal designation and is used in legal documents even at the present day.

Letter from Charles I to the Mayor and Aldermen of Reading on the subject of repairs to Caversham Bridge. It reads:

*Charles R.*

*Whereas I have received information that the bridge over the River of Thames at Causham was lately broaken down, Our will and express Command is that you immediately upon sight hereof cause the said Bridge immediately to bee rebuilt and made stronge and fit for the passage of our Army and Artillery by tomorrow eight of the Clocke in the morning as thee Bearer shall direct of this you may not fayle at your utmost perall. Given at our Court at Benson this 3d of November 1642.*

*To Our trusty and welbeloved the Maior And Aldermen of our Towne of Reading and all other whome it may concerne.*



Letter written by King Charles I from Benson

Charles reached Reading on November 4<sup>th</sup> but, as already mentioned, he was thwarted in his advances on London and returned to spend the winter in Oxford where he was joined by Queen Henrietta Maria.

Meanwhile Essex moved up to threaten the city and Reading was captured. By early June 1643 Essex was established at Thame and an outpost was occupied by Parliamentary troops at Wheatley. There was an abortive attack on Islip and for a time the enemy forces were scattered. Prince Rupert seized the opportunity for a raid on Chinnor in an unsuccessful attempt to capture a convoy guarding a sum of £12,000 which was being sent to Essex. On the return to Oxford, Rupert's forces circled south along the base of the Chilterns before turning north. If local tradition is to be believed, they fell in with a body of enemy troops near Rokemarsh, on the outskirts of Benson, and pursued them to Chalgrove Field, where in a sharp fight, the Parliamentary leader John Hampden was wounded.

He was taken to Thame but died six days later, on 24th June 1643. His monument still looks down on the scene of his last fight to remind us of a man respected for his integrity by both sides in the political quarrel.

The war dragged on with fluctuating gains and losses by both sides and with Oxford still held as King Charles' capital city, Reading was retaken by the royalists after the battle of Newbury but by the middle of 1644 it was realised that the king could no longer afford to hold such far-flung outposts. The garrison was withdrawn and its fortifications were demolished to save them from falling into Cromwell's hands.

Even Abingdon was abandoned and Essex, marching along the Berkshire side of the river, occupied the town, constituting an ever-present threat to Oxford. Eventually the situation became too dangerous for the king and he left the city for the last time in 1646. Oxford held out till June and then capitulated, leaving Cromwell free to concentrate all his strength against Wallingford Castle.

Once again there was bitter fighting on the Crowmarsh meadows and the grand old fortress was under strong attack. Inevitably the bridge was a main objective and the royalists destroyed four of the arches, replacing them with wooden drawbridges. (These wooden replacements remained in use until the arches were rebuilt in 1751). The castle surrendered in July, the last fortress to capitulate in the area. Cromwell, bitterly resenting its prolonged resistance, gave orders that it was to be demolished and its surrounding fortifications reduced to the grassy mounds which are all that mark the site today.