

The Impact of the Civil War on Reading

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This article examines the impact of the first English Civil War, of 1642–46, on the town of Reading, Berkshire. This is a subject of particular interest because of the sheer amount of suffering which was inflicted upon Reading and its inhabitants during the Civil War. The town suffered chiefly as a result of its location: it was a very desirable place from the point of view of both sides as main roads and both the Kennet and Thames rivers ran through the town, allowing for trade, communication and transport with Wallingford, Abingdon, Hungerford, Newbury, Oxford, Southampton and London.¹ Furthermore, Reading's location in-between the parliamentary forces in London and the royalist forces in Oxford enabled either army to create a defensive garrison to protect their headquarters. Clarendon, King Charles I's Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1643 and perhaps the most famous of all Civil War historians, acknowledged that 'Reading itself was so good a post that, if the King should find it necessary to make his own residence in Oxford, it would be much ... better by having a garrison at Reading'.² Reading's desirability led to it changing hands continually throughout the war, resulting in immense hardships being inflicted by both armies, essentially doubling the townspeople's suffering.

- 1 D. Phillips, *The Story of Reading: including Caversham, Tilehurst, Calcot, Earley and Woodley* (Newbury, 1980), p. 58; J. Dils, 'Epidemics, Mortality and the Civil War in Berkshire, 1642–46', *Southern History* 11 (1989), 40; N.R. Goose, 'Decay and Regeneration in Seventeenth Century Reading: A Study in a Changing Economy', *Southern History* 6 (1984), 53.
- 2 P. Seaward, 'Hyde, Edward, first earl of Clarendon (1609–1674)', in H.C.G. Matthew, B. Harrison et al (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004–) [hereafter ODNB] XXIX, pp. 120–38; online edition, Oct 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14328>, accessed 23 April 2013]; Edward [Hyde] Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England, Begun in the Year 1641, Volume II*, edited by W.D. Macray (Oxford, 1888), p. 389.

In recent years, scholars have become more interested in the effects that the civil conflicts of the mid-seventeenth century had upon local communities. This new historical focus followed the publication of Ian Roy's seminal article 'England Turned Germany' in 1978, which drew attention to the importance of the impact of the war upon ordinary citizens.³ In just over a decade, John Morrill's *The Impact of the English Civil War* (1991) illustrated the importance of research into the consequences of the Civil War for local communities. This historiographical trend has been continued by other historians, such as Mark Stoyle and Malcolm Atkin.⁴ Their research on Exeter and Gloucester, respectively, demonstrates that these two cities suffered significantly during the course of the Civil War, ranging from the construction of fortifications to the destruction of houses.⁵ Following their approach, this article will consider the impact on the county town of Reading and the extent to which its experience of the Civil War was similar. In particular, it will focus on the economic impact of the financial exactions imposed on the town as well as the extent to which commerce was disrupted by the conflict. Secondly, it will examine the consequences for the urban landscape of the military engineering works that were undertaken. Finally, the essay will assess the broader consequences for urban society of a military presence, in particular with regard to violence and disorder, as well as the spread of disease.

I Reading before the Civil War

Even before the disruption of the Civil War, Reading was experiencing serious economic difficulties. The town was principally dependent on the cloth-making industry, with an estimated half of the adult population reliant upon it for their employment in the 1620s and 1630s.⁶ Increasing commercial competition as well as the disruption caused by continental conflict, resulted in the industry becoming depressed between 1620 and 1635.⁷ The demand for cloth rapidly

3 I. Roy, 'England Turned Germany? The Aftermath of the Civil War in its European Context', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* [hereafter TRHS], 5th Series, 28 (1978), 134; M. Stoyle, *From Deliverance to Destruction: Rebellion and Civil War in an English City* (Exeter, 1996), p. 3.

4 J. Morrill, *The Impact of the English Civil War* (London, 1991), p. 12.

5 Stoyle, *From Deliverance to Destruction*, pp. 136–37; M. Atkin and W. Laughlin, *Gloucester and the Civil War: A City Under Siege* (Stroud, 1992), p. 143.

6 C. Jackson, 'A Town "Governed by a Company of Geese in Furred Gowns": Political and Social Conflict in Reading c.1620–40', *Southern History* 29 (2007), 31.

7 Ibid., 31; Goose, 'Decay and Regeneration', 57.

decreased – for example in March 1622, 30 Reading cloths lay unsold in Blackwell Hall – and resulted in a sharp rise in unemployment.⁸ The mayor of Reading reported in 1623 that ‘... many poore families, men, weomen and children whoe had their meanes and livelehood from the work of the Clothier ... are nowe for want of worke exposed to greate miserye’.⁹ By 1631 production had fallen from 100 cloths to 40 per week, causing townspeople to diversify into other trades, such as malting and brewing.¹⁰ The Privy Council was less enthusiastic about the development of malting in a letter dated March 1635, which bewailed ‘the excessive number of malsters nowe growne throughout the realme’.¹¹ Brewing could also provide a profitable income for some townsmen; one Reading brewer, Thomas Gibbons, enjoyed possessions worth £1113 in 1635.¹² Although some individuals were able to adapt to these straitened circumstances, for others the decline in the cloth trade resulted in impoverishment.

These economic problems were exacerbated by the increasing poverty, which was associated with the increase in the town’s population from an estimated 5,500 in 1610, to 7000 by the 1630s.¹³ This rapid growth was largely due to migration into the town, particularly of impoverished newcomers seeking work.¹⁴ By 1676 around 61 per cent of Reading’s population were migrants, compared to 24 per cent who had been born in Reading, and 15 per cent whose origins are unknown.¹⁵ The authorities responded by ordering that clothiers should only use borough craftsmen; strangers admitted to apprenticeships were heavily fined, in an attempt to deter further migration.¹⁶ During the 1630s, the corporation received numerous complaints against newcomers to the town, principally against tradesmen whose activities threatened the local economy.¹⁷

Although it is hard to calculate the scale of the poverty, in the county town of Salisbury over half the population were in severe poverty by

8 Ibid., 57.

9 Berkshire Record Office [hereafter BRO], R/Z 3/24

10 Goose, ‘Decay and Regeneration’, 58.

11 Ibid., 63; BRO, R/Z 3/20.

12 J. Dils, *Redding 1540–1640: A Portrait of a Community* (Reading, 1980), p. 17.

13 Goose, ‘Decay and Regeneration’, 58.

14 Ibid, 58.

15 J. Dils (ed.), *An Historical Atlas of Berkshire* (Berkshire Record Society, 1, 1998), p. 51.

16 Dils, *Redding*, pp. 12, 52.

17 J.M. Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records: Diary of the Corporation*, 4 vols (London, 1892–96) III, pp. 206, 300, 323.

the 1630s and the situation in Reading may have been comparable.¹⁸ In 1623, the mayor travelled to London to petition the Lords about the plight of Reading's poor and in 1625 two relief taxes were raised, one for poor children.¹⁹ The situation was exacerbated by the poor harvests in 1621–2 and 1629–30, which caused severe food shortages. As a consequence, Sir Gabriel Dowse reported on 6 December 1630 that carts of corn travelling to Reading had been attacked by '... poor ragged women, many of them very aged'.²⁰ Further hardship was caused by outbreaks of plague in 1625 and 1638, as well as smallpox and fire in 1634.²¹ Christine Jackson records that there were 31 deaths from smallpox in St Mary's parish between September–December 1634; poverty caused from these devastating events also led to petty crime, thus worsening the situation in Reading.²² Despite its economic difficulties, Reading was still considered to be the foremost town in Berkshire, as indicated by its £220 Ship Money assessment in 1636, while that of Newbury, another important cloth-making centre, was only £120.²³ Such financial burdens added to the economic difficulties faced by the town on the eve of the Civil War, as it attempted to address the problems of urban poverty and the depression in the cloth trade.²⁴

The town's parlous state was exacerbated by socio-political tensions within the town during the 1620s and 1630s. In 1626, one townswoman claimed 'she did not care a fart for Mr. Mayour', and in May 1631 the mayor told the privy council that he feared for his own safety.²⁵ Elizabeth I's charter of 1560 had established the town corporation, with the authority to oversee its affairs, but this did not necessarily benefit the entire urban population.²⁶ The majority of the burgesses and at least thirteen of the mayors between 1540 and 1640 were clothiers, reflecting the dominance of a wealthy elite in the town's affairs.²⁷ The

18 Jackson, 'A Town "Governed by a Company of Geese"', 32.

19 Goose, 'Decay and Regeneration', 58.

20 J. Bruce and W.D. Hamilton (eds), *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, Charles I*, 23 vols (London, 1858–97) [hereafter CSPD] IV, p. 403.

21 Jackson, 'A Town "Governed by a Company of Geese"', p. 32.

22 C. Jackson, 'The Berkshire Woollen Industry: 1500–1650' (University of Reading; September 1993), p. 190.

23 CSPD, X, p. 251; C. Durston, *Berkshire and its County Gentry, 1625–1649* (Reading, 1977), p. 3.

24 Dils, *Redding*, p. 54.

25 Jackson, 'A Town "Governed by a Company of Geese"', 44–45.

26 C.F. Pritchard (ed.), *Reading Charters, Acts and Orders, 1253–1911* (London, 1913), pp. 16–17; S. Griffin, *The Siege of Redding: April 1643* (Bristol, 1996), p. 20.

27 Dils, *Redding*, p. 5.

common townspeople were excluded from politics, leaving them unable to protect their interests.²⁸ By 1632, this political disillusionment was evident when a certain Stephen Langley condemned the council as 'a Company of geese in furred gownes'.²⁹ This situation was exacerbated by the council's lack of political cohesion and frequent inability to reach majority decisions.³⁰ In August 1631, there had been extensive debate over the mayor's proposal to spend £160 on wool 'for the good of the poore'.³¹ This could be interpreted as the mayor intended to give the wool to the poor to turn it into cloth which they could sell on, thereby setting them to work. However, it was noted in the corporation diary that 'all those matters were much questioned but not fully agreed by all the Company'.³² The council faced further struggles in employing townspeople to serve on the council. The corporation diary contains numerous records of citizens refusing to become aldermen or requesting to leave their current positions, despite the heavy fines which were imposed for this offence,³³ suggesting that many wished to avoid these jobs, perhaps due to the expense or amount of work required. Reading could therefore be seen as a relatively prosperous town; but, there were many underlying problems which were simply waiting to erupt should the pressure on the townsfolk increase.³⁴

On the eve of the Civil Wars, although Reading had in the past enjoyed relative prosperity, the economic depression associated with the collapse of the cloth trade caused particular difficulties for the authorities. Combined with the effect of the disease and fire, the council had to grapple with the rising poverty associated with these economic difficulties as well as the influx of migrants into the town. The situation was made more complex by the tensions between the townspeople and the ruling oligarchy which was often ineffective in its response to the particular urban problems that they faced.

II The Financial Impact

One of the most significant consequences of the Civil War was the financial strain that was placed upon the town, which was occupied

28 Jackson, 'A Town "Governed by a Company of Geese"', 30, 43.

29 Ibid, 41; Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, III, p. 99.

30 Jackson, 'A Town "Governed by a Company of Geese"', 48.

31 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, III, pp. 80–81.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., pp. 447, 487.

34 Durston, *Berkshire and its County Gentry*, p. 42.

by both royalist and parliamentary forces during the conflict. They both imposed levies and other financial demands on the town, which financially exhausted the local population.³⁵ Sir Samuel Luke, the parliamentary intelligencer or 'scout-master', recorded in his journal in February 1643 that Reading's townsmen had to pay 'doble both in mony ... [and] ... plate'.³⁶ Besides these financial exactions, the town was also obliged to provide food and other necessities for the occupying forces. Furthermore, the Civil War and the restrictions on communications imposed by the military occupation of Reading, disrupted the town's commercial activities and contributed to the impoverishment of the urban population.³⁷

Within days of the Royalist troops arriving in Reading on 3 November 1642, taxes were levied on the townspeople. By 17 November the corporation had been instructed to raise money for 'those greate charges which are now layed upon the Borough concerning cloth, apparell, victualls and other thinges for his Majestie's armye'.³⁸ A petition from the townspeople to the king, dated November 1642, indicates that Reading had already provided soldiers' clothing worth £1000, in addition to £102 for horse fodder.³⁹ These examples illustrate the amount the townsfolk were obliged to contribute within just the first month of being garrisoned by royalist troops. Clarendon claimed that the royalist governor of Reading, Arthur Aston was 'so given up to an immoderate love of money that he cared not by what unrighteous ways he exacted it', suggesting that he had no scruples when it came to raising money from the townspeople.⁴⁰ Aston also demanded a list of those who refused to pay these taxes, so Reading's citizens could not escape this burden.⁴¹ These high levels of financial exactions became the hallmark of the Royalist occupation of Reading.

The king's financial demands rapidly increased and three loans, in particular, had an extremely detrimental impact on the town's finances. The first two were loans of £2000, which were levied on 2 and 6 January

35 M. Hinton, *A History of the Town of Reading* (London, 1954), p. 103.

36 S. Kelsey, 'Luke, Sir Samuel (bap. 1603, d. 1670)', ODNB XXXIV, pp. 735–37 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17167>, accessed 26 March 2013]; I.G. Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke* 3 vols (Oxford Record Society, 29, 31, 33, 1950–53), I, p. 7.

37 Griffin, *The Siege of Redding*, p. 14.

38 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 61.

39 BRO, R/Z 3/38/1; M.C. Barrès-Baker, *The Siege of Reading: the Failure of the Earl of Essex's 1643 Spring Offensive* (Ottawa, 2004), p. 35; Phillips, *Story of Reading*, p. 59.

40 Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars*, III, p. 407.

41 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 67.

1643. A document dated 13 January 1642 details how much individuals were required to contribute towards the second loan, highlighting that it was the townspeople rather than the corporation who were obliged to furnish these funds.⁴² In view of the financial difficulties facing the town, only four months into the conflict, the corporation responded to the second loan by petitioning Charles 'praying thereby to be herein excused ... by reason of their greate paymentes, burthenes and losses'.⁴³ The king did not rescind his request and the corporation diary recorded on 6 February that, 'severall men ... were double taxed towards the payment of the second 2000*li*. loaned to the King's Majestie'.⁴⁴

A third large loan of £4000 was levied in March 1643, which prompted the corporation to petition the king again, not requesting that they be excused from the loan but rather than they should be provided with security for its future repayment. That they dared to question the king's intention was a risky strategy but indicates their growing desperation at their financial plight. The petition, dated 18 March 1643, requested 'such security for this money as times of peace and your Majesties prosperity may lett us expect [that] this sum wee have loaned ... [will be] returned to us againe'.⁴⁵ The town received a vague reply from Edward Nicholas, the Secretary of State, stating that the king was 'graciously pleased to refer their desire expressed in this Petition to their consideracion of the Lords and other Commissioners of the Treasury'.⁴⁶ This reply gives no date for when security would be granted, and instead attempted to satisfy the petitioners without giving any firm promises. Another petition, written around 1643–44, reveals that this security was never received as it mentions the, '4000*li* loan, for which his Majestie promised securitie, But at yett half not given any', while at a corporation meeting on 8 May 1644, over a year since the loan was levied, claimed that the £4000 still had not been repaid.⁴⁷ In total, Charles's loans amounted to £8000 over a two month period, it was therefore not surprising that the corporation claimed on 15 May 1644 that these financial burdens were impoverishing the town.⁴⁸

42 BRO, R/FT 3/19/2.

43 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 71.

44 Hinton, *A History*, p. 79; Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 76.

45 BRO, R/Z 3/33.

46 S.A. Baron, 'Nicholas, Sir Edward (1593–1669)', ODNB, XL, pp. 758–62 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20097>, accessed 3 March 2013]; BRO, R/Z 3/33.

47 BRO, R/Z 3/39; Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 110.

48 Ibid., p. 111.

Smaller taxes were also levied upon Reading and due to their frequency these, too, amounted to a significant sum. For example, Reading's inhabitants had to provide an allowance of £7 a week for the royalist governor, Jacob Astley, from 6 October 1643.⁴⁹ In addition, it was declared on the same day that 'every housholder shall forfeit xijd. for every day he failes to worke att the Bulworkes'.⁵⁰ Even when under parliamentary control in August 1643 Reading still endured royalist taxation; Colonel Blagge, Wallingford's royalist governor, demanded that Reading pay 'for fortifyeing of the Towne and Castle of Wallingford'.⁵¹ To raise this money the town's farms at Coley and Battle were taxed £20 and £10 respectively, while the townspeople had to pay 30 weeks' worth of tax.⁵² Furthermore, a petition dated between 1643–44, protested against a demand for £700 from Prince Rupert, Charles's nephew and a senior royalist officer.⁵³ These financial demands combined with the levies imposed by the king himself, served to undermine further the financial stability of the town.

'A particular noate of all such charges as have been disbursed since the Kinges Majesties came first to Readinge', dated around 1643–44, also provides details of the exactions for maintaining the royalist forces.⁵⁴ Reading was required to provide money to send foodstuffs to other royalist-held towns, presumably to supply soldiers: for example, £37 was required to send bread and cheese to Henley.⁵⁵ In addition, it records, 'horsemeat and manmeate from the inhabitantes of the Towne unpaid for at the least', costing the town £1000.⁵⁶ Significant sums for the goods supplied to royalist forces were therefore not being repaid to the townspeople, this was in spite of £430 supplied 'at his Majesties first comminge', which may have been a vain attempt to avoid further taxation.⁵⁷ This is by no means a complete list of the charges which Reading endured under the royalists, as the documentary evidence is incomplete but it does provide an indication of the scale of the financial exactions being imposed.

49 Ibid., p. 91.

50 Ibid., p. 90.

51 Ibid., p. 84.

52 Ibid., p. 85.

53 I. Roy, 'Rupert, prince and count palatine of the Rhine and duke of Cumberland (1619–1682)', ODNB, XLVIII, pp. 141–54 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/24281>, accessed 23 April 2013]; BRO R/Z 3/44/1.

54 BRO, R/Z 3/28.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

11 Certain townsmen suffered particularly badly during the royalist occupation, such as Alderman Thomas Harrison who had lent £600 for six months.⁵⁸ Amongst his papers, dated 1645–50, one document requests repayment claiming ‘it is now almost 7 yeares ago’ since the money had been lent.⁵⁹ Likewise, a certain Thomas Dewell contributed £25 towards the first £2000 loan levied by Charles, on 2 January 1643, but ten months later this loan still had not been repaid.⁶⁰ The corporation’s records include a number of similar demands from individuals trying to recover the financial losses that they had incurred at the hands of the king.

Such failures pale when compared with the kidnapping of the town’s mayor, William Brackston, in 1644 as an attempt to extort more money. Wallingford’s royalist governor, Lieutenant-Colonel Lower, decided that Reading, which at that time did not have a royalist garrison, should contribute towards that at Wallingford.⁶¹ On 22 June, Lower kidnapped Brackston and held him to ransom.⁶² Three days later, the corporation recorded the orders received from the ‘Govenor of Wallingford, for the collecting within this Towne, 150*li.* for 3 weekes’ contribution, due this day, and 50*li.* a weeke henceforth, for the maintenance of the Garrison of Wallingford’.⁶³ The distress caused to Brackston is evident in his letter to the aldermen of Reading, which begs: ‘I desire you will consider of the condition I am in and release mee as soone as you can being I am a freind to you all’.⁶⁴ The corporation decided on 27 June to petition the council of war at Oxford for Brackston’s freedom and to release Reading from the contribution.⁶⁵ The petition began ‘The humble petition of the Mayor ...’, but the mayor’s name was then crossed out, to reflect his noticeable absence.⁶⁶ Brackston was freed by 10 July, and evidence suggests that Reading paid at least £20 to Wallingford.⁶⁷ As the corporation noted in their register that ‘the

58 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 78; Phillips, *Story of Reading*, p. 60.

59 BRO, R/Z 7/3/2.

60 Guilding, (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, pp. 70, 96.

61 Hinton, *History of the Town of Reading*, p. 115.

62 Ibid.

63 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 115.

64 BRO, R/Z 5/2/3.

65 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 115; Hinton, *A History of the Town of Reading*, p. 115.

66 BRO, R/Z 5/2/8.

67 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, pp. 116–17; Hinton, *History of the Town of Reading*, pp. 115–16.

Towne is utterly unable to pay', indicating the parlous state of their finances after three years of conflict.⁶⁸

After July 1644 Reading only paid taxes to Parliament and the sums demanded were considerably lower.⁶⁹ This apparently lower rate of taxation may reflect Parliament's ability to obtain huge sums of money through their control of London, whereas the king could only tax smaller, royalist-held towns. Nevertheless, after the siege of Reading, on 27 April 1643, the earl of Essex, Parliament's Lord General, immediately requested money from the townspeople.⁷⁰ According to the corporation's registers the townspeople were subject to 'the weekly payment of 37*li.* 10*s*' by April 1645.⁷¹ The purpose of this tax is not specifically stated, but it indicates that even after the crippling effect of the king's financial demands, the town was still required to make a significant weekly contribution to the Parliamentary forces.

Although Parliament's taxes may not have been quite as exorbitant as the king's, they were still very heavy. On 9 July 1645, the corporation discussed taxing the inhabitants '220*li.* 6*s.* 6*d.*, for the present releife of the Brittishe Armye in Ireland'.⁷² Soon afterwards, Reading's financial weaknesses were again emphasised by the townsfolk, who petitioned the Parliamentary Committee for Berkshire, who oversaw local affairs from Reading, 'for respiting of the said tax untill the Towne shalbe better able to pay the same'.⁷³ Unlike on previous occasions, Reading did not ask to be excused from payment, but to extend the deadline, probably reflecting their realisation that they would not be able to evade this request.⁷⁴ Unsurprisingly, on 15 September 1645, the petition was rejected and on 1 October the corporation began assessing for contributions.⁷⁵ Furthermore on 22 August 1645 the Parliamentary Committee demanded £240, but 'most parte of ... [the townsmen] ... answered that they had noe money and could not lend'.⁷⁶ It is likely that, by this stage of the war, these were not just attempts to cling onto wealth, but rather the pleas of men who truly had no more money.

68 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 115.

69 Barrès-Baker, *Siege of Reading*, p. 116.

70 J. Morrill, 'Devereux, Robert, third earl of Essex (1591-1646)', *ODNB*, XV, pp. 960-69 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7566>, accessed 23 April 2013]; Hinton, *History of the Town of Reading*, p. 112.

71 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 143.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

73 Phillips, *Story of Reading*, p. 69; Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 162.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

75 *Ibid.*, pp. 163-65.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

The town was also liable for the costs of soldiers in the town, which according to a document of 1642–43 amounted ‘at the first muster’ to 906 officers and 3,123 soldiers, a total of 4,029 men.⁷⁷ These were probably Aston’s Royalist troops as a news-book of 17 April 1643 reported that he had stationed ‘in the town about 3,000 of the Kings Forces’.⁷⁸ The townspeople were liable for providing the troops with free quarter, food and clothing.⁷⁹ Furthermore, when soldiers deserted due to lack of pay, the townspeople were forced to pay £102 to the remaining soldiers.⁸⁰ Moreover, the significant number of officers indicated here would have further increased the financial burden on Reading, as they required much more expensive lodgings and food than the average soldier did.

An indication of some of these costs to the town itself comes from the corporation’s records, which on 15 May 1644 stated that ‘40li. of bread, [was] required to be provided by the Towne for the Armye, and that the said 40li. shalbe levyed upon the inhabitantes by way of taxe’.⁸¹ Furthermore, there were numerous records of the town being taxed £40 a week, from October 1643 to May 1644, as contribution for the governor’s food.⁸² Between December 1642 and January 1643, there are at least four different entries regarding the levying of taxes for the courts of guard (stations where soldiers would convene before commencing guard duty).⁸³ These costs obviously had a severe impact on the town’s finances as on 8 May 1644, the corporation decided to speak to the governor ‘... aboute the taking of the allowances to the severall Courtes of Guard’.⁸⁴ In 1643–44, there were further significant outlays such as £1,500 for the dying of soldiers’ coats and £2,000 towards soldiers’ maintenance.⁸⁵ Unsurprisingly many of these costs were never repaid. On 6 August 1645, two prominent townsmen William Smith and Michael Reading were still owed for dying clothes for Charles’s army.⁸⁶ Parliamentary soldiers also cost the townspeople dearly; receipts for billeting costs reveal that on 26 November 1646 Mayor Richard

77 BRO, R/Z 10/7.

78 Thomason Tracts E.247[30], *A perfect diurnall of the passages in Parliament*, (London, 17–24 April 1643), p. 2.

79 Goose, ‘Decay and Regeneration’, 58.

80 Griffin, *Siege of Redding*, p. 20.

81 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 111.

82 Ibid., pp. 95–110.

83 Ibid., pp. 64–72.

84 Ibid., p. 111.

85 BRO, R/Z 3/28.

86 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 158.

Holloway was charged £10 4s. 6d. for the wages of 60 soldiers and 10 officers.⁸⁷ These extremely high costs for which the corporation was liable were in addition to the expenses faced by individual households through the billeting of soldiers.

The ability of the town to respond to these financial exactions was seriously impaired by the commercial difficulties that it faced as a consequence of the conflict. This compounded the earlier economic problems that the town had experienced and diminished the incomes earned by the people of Reading. The town's cloth-making trade was already in sharp decline, but the situation deteriorated further with the outbreak of the conflict. Charles prohibited towns from trading with London early in the war and this commercial loss had massive implications for Reading's income.⁸⁸ As a result, the corporation petitioned the king on 16 February 1643 seeking permission to trade freely with London.⁸⁹ They complained about the 'generall decay of trade in Reading and especially of clothing [which] half soo impoverished the said Towne ... [that they are] ... altogether unable to support ... their severall families'.⁹⁰ Despite Charles's withdrawal of this prohibition later that month, the corporation drafted another petition in April 1644, requesting that Londoners be allowed to visit Reading to purchase clothes, revealing that trade restrictions were ongoing throughout the war.⁹¹ The corporation described 'the deadnesse of trade' in a letter to Lower in June 1644, emphasising how significantly the town's trade had diminished.⁹² An indication of the effect that this had upon individual finances comes from the attempt made by the corporation to recover the 40s. owed to them by a certain Thomas Browne's mother. He responded by claiming 'that tradinge was soe bad he could not yett pay itt'.⁹³ Browne was clearly not alone in experiencing severe financial difficulties as a consequence of the disruption of trade caused by the on-going conflict.

The extent and range of the repeated exactions imposed on Reading combined with the obligations that resulted from the presence of

87 BRO, R/Z 5/7/1-3.

88 Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, III, p. 290.

89 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 104.

90 BRO, R/Z 3/39.

91 BRO, R/Z 3/46; 'The Borough of Reading: The Borough', in P.H. Ditchfield, William Page and Emma Elizabeth Thoyts, (eds), *A Victoria History of the County of Berkshire* 4 vols (London, 1906-27), III, pp. 342-364. [<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=43226> Date accessed: 25 April 2013].

92 BRO, R/Z 5/2/6.

93 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 176.

troops in the town severely undermined the financial stability of the town. Although the corporation attempted to mitigate these demands, they and individual townspeople repeatedly found themselves left with unpaid bills and loans. Although the demands made by the parliamentary forces were less than those of the royalists, they were nonetheless imposed upon a town that was already experiencing financial hardship. The ability of the townspeople to respond to these demands was further diminished by the economic difficulties that Reading had already experienced which were made worse by the disruption and limitations on trade that resulted directly from the conflict.

III The Impact on Reading's Physical Environment

While the financial impact upon Reading was utterly relentless, the Civil War also affected the town's physical environment. Its strategic location meant that there was a constant need to build, maintain and extend fortifications, which affected existing buildings and the urban landscape. Further damage was caused by enemy bombardment as well as by the presence of military garrison in the town.

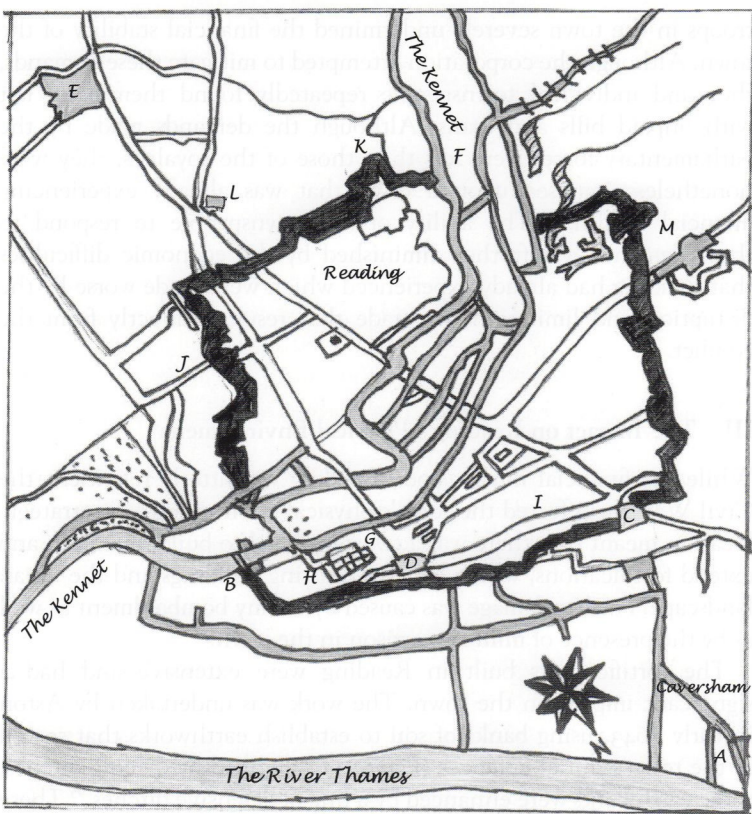
The fortifications built in Reading were extensive and had a significant impact on the town. The work was undertaken by Aston in early 1643, using banks of soil to establish earthworks that served as the town's initial defences (Figure 1).⁹⁴ Formed by digging ditches, these earthworks were enhanced by a line of defensive ditches.⁹⁵ These earthworks, claimed to be as tall as the houses, ran from present-day Castle Hill to Greyfriars Church, turning east along Friar Street, passing St Laurence's Church and Forbury Gardens until it reached the Abbey, ending at Blake's Bridge, which was called the Abbey Bridge in the seventeenth century.⁹⁶ Luke recorded in his journal, on 15 March 1643 that: 'they are very strongly fortifyeing parte of the towne which lyes from Fryers Corner to the Abby'.⁹⁷ From there, the earthworks continued down seventeenth-century Sunning Avenue, present-day London Road, turning west to present-day Katesgrove Hill and back to

94 Hinton, *History of the Town of Reading*, p. 106.

95 Barrès-Baker, *Siege of Reading*, p. 43; S. Porter, *Destruction in the English Civil Wars* (Stroud, 1994), pp. 18–19.

96 Hinton, *History of the Town of Reading*, p. 106.

97 Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke*, I, p. 30.



Key		
	Earthworks	
A - Caversham Bridge	F - Drowned Meadows	J - Sunninge Avenue
B - Abbey Bridge	G - Forbury Gardens	K - Katesgrove Hill
C - Greyfriars Church	H - Reading Abbey	L - Silver Street fort
D - St Laurence's Church	I - Friar Street	M - Castle Hill
E - Harrison's Barn fort		

Figure 1: A Reconstruction of Reading's defences, c. 1643: Based on M.C. Barrès-Baker, *The Siege of Reading*, April 1643 (2004), p. 42. Artist: Liam Smalley

Castle Hill, thereby enclosing the town.⁹⁸ Forts, which were detached strongholds, were also constructed on Friar Street, one on either side of Abbey Bridge, on Silver Street and at the top of Castle Hill.⁹⁹ There was a fortified outpost to the north of Caversham Bridge and Harrison's Barn on Whitley Hill became an outpost, called the Invincible Fort.¹⁰⁰ Aston utilised existing defences, such as the 'drowned meadows', so called because the impassable area was prone to flooding from the Kennet.¹⁰¹ According to Clarendon, the fortifications before the siege were only designed for a winter quarter, but parliamentary evidence suggests that they were more substantial.¹⁰² A London news-book observed in April 1643 that 'the Trenches round about the Towne are ... deepe and wide, the works ... substantially made, and the Pallisadoes round about the works ... firmly fixed'.¹⁰³ Clarendon may have downplayed the fortifications in order to belittle Parliament's capture of Reading, whereas the news-book may have exaggerated their importance for the opposite effect. Archaeological evidence has confirmed the circuit of the earthworks as revealed in the Victorian copy of an earlier drawing of the defences and has shown that in some places these ditches could be almost 5 metres in width and nearly one and a half metres in depth.

In spite of the scale of these earthworks, these defences were relatively short-lived. On 13 May 1644 an order was made that 'His Majesty wishes you to send to the towns and country about Reading to bring in all their spades, pickaxes, &c. for the workmen to slight the works there'.¹⁰⁴ The departing royalist army wanted to level these defences so that they would be rendered 'unserviceable for the enemy', which was relatively common practice during the Civil War.¹⁰⁵ Although the construction of these earthworks had taken five-months of hard labour and had placed a significant strain on the town,

98 Hinton, *History of the Town of Reading*, pp. 104–106; Porter, *Destruction in the English Civil Wars*, p. 74.

99 P. Harrington, *English Civil War Fortifications, 1642–51* (Oxford, 2003), p. 63; Phillips, *Story of Reading*, p. 61.

100 Ibid., p. 61; Thomason Tracts E.100[19], *The kingdome vweekly intelligencer*, (25 April–2 May 1643), p. 5.

101 Barrès-Baker, *Siege of Reading*, p. 43.

102 Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, III, p. 13.

103 Thomason Tracts E.100[19], *The kingdome vweekly intelligencer*, (25 April–2 May 1643), p. 5.

104 CSPD, XIX, p. 161.

105 Ibid., p. 163; Harrington, *English Civil War Fortifications*, p. 18.

they were destroyed in just three days.¹⁰⁶ As a result of the royalists action, the parliamentarians had to erect new fortifications when they regained Reading on 18 May 1644. The Committee of Both Kingdoms, responsible for the overall direction of the parliamentary war effort, ordered in September 1644 that Mr Culembourg, an engineer, should be sent to assess where fortifications in Reading should be erected.¹⁰⁷ Culembourg reported on 14 October that 'he has found two fit places for two small forts'.¹⁰⁸ The committee also ordered on the same day that Reading be thanked 'for their care and pains in fortifying the town'.¹⁰⁹

It was not only the town itself that was fortified, the surrounding area also became a military zone. Luke observed on 11 March 1643 the disruption to 'the high ways from Twiford to Reading and from Pangborne to Reading there are very deepe trenches cast'.¹¹⁰ During the day, these trenches were bridgeable so that carts could pass but these materials were removed at night and also the town gates were locked.¹¹¹ The townspeople could therefore only leave during the day and by 5 November Luke noted that there was 'noe passage eyther in or out but by water'.¹¹² Check-points were erected around the town, with a strict watch kept at Caversham Bridge, further restricting access around the town and its hinterland.¹¹³

The construction of these fortifications resulted in damage to the existing urban fabric; the nave of the abbey, for example, was blown up to provide building stone.¹¹⁴ The tactical destruction of other buildings within the town by both forces were intended to obstruct the enemy. Caversham Bridge was initially damaged at the start of the war to deny the royalists easy passage into Reading. This was presumably on the orders of Henry Marten, Reading's parliamentary governor from August to November 1642.¹¹⁵ His actions caused the king to write to

¹⁰⁶ Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion*, III, p. 347.

¹⁰⁷ J. Morrill, 'Cromwell, Oliver (1599–1658)', ODNB, XIV, pp. 321–53 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6765>, accessed 23 April 2013]; CSPD, XIX, p. 531.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹¹⁰ Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke*, I, p. 25.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹¹² Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke*, III, p. 189.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, I, p. 13.

¹¹⁴ Phillips, *Story of Reading*, p. 61.

¹¹⁵ A.L. Humphreys, *Caversham Bridge, 1231–1926* (Reading, 1926), p. 19; S. Barber, 'Marten, Henry (1601/2–1680)', ODNB, XXXVI, pp. 908–12 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18168>, accessed 23 April 2013]; Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion*, II, pp. 388–89.

Reading's mayor on 3 November 1642, commanding that the town 'cause the said Bridge imediately to bee rebuilt and made stronge and fitt for the passage of our Army and Artillery'.¹¹⁶ Further damage was caused the following year when according to Luke on 11 March 1643 that 'the bridge called Cawsam Bridge ... is quite taken downe and flung into the river', to prevent the Parliamentarians from entering the town.¹¹⁷ In the short term, the townspeople 'make shift with planks to goe over' but the importance of the bridge required more than a temporary solution and so corporation resolved to repair the bridge in May 1644.¹¹⁸ A parliamentary warrant ordered, on 18 July 1644, that the inhabitants should be taxed for the speedy fixing of Caversham Bridge.¹¹⁹ The reconstruction was nonetheless a protracted process and three years later in February 1647, one John Hancocke agreed to repair the bridge for £5.¹²⁰

Caversham Bridge was by no means the only part of the urban environment which was damaged by tactical destruction. Luke records, on 16 March 1643, how shovels were brought from Newbury in order to 'digg great holes in the streets within the towne to spoile horses' of the parliamentarians.¹²¹ In addition the Royalists attempted to prevent the parliamentarians from viewing the ground in preparation for the siege of April 1643, by setting 'some Barns on fire, that by the smoake ... so they might hinder them'.¹²²

Further destruction to the urban environment was caused through bombardment of the town, especially during the siege of April 1643. One news-book recorded how the parliamentary forces 'beate downe part of the steeple of ... [St Giles's] Church'.¹²³ Considered the poorest parish in Reading, it could not afford to rebuild the spire which was only eventually restored in the late nineteenth century.¹²⁴ It was also reported that during the siege, cannon were fired upon the town all

¹¹⁶ BRO, R/Z 6/1/1.

¹¹⁷ Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke*, I, p. 25.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 25; Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 112; Humphreys, *Caversham Bridge*, p. 21.

¹¹⁹ Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 117; Humphreys, *Caversham Bridge*, p. 21.

¹²⁰ Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 237; Humphreys, *Caversham Bridge*, p. 21.

¹²¹ Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke*, I, p. 33.

¹²² *Good and true newes from Redding, being an exact relation of the proceedings of his excellence the earl of Essex* (London, 1643), p. 4.

¹²³ Thomason Tracts E.247(27), *A continuation of certaine speciall and remarkable passages from both houses of Parliament* (London, 13–20 April 1643), p. 6.

¹²⁴ Dils, 'Epidemics, Mortality and the Civil War', 46; S. Hylton, *Reading Places, Reading People* (Stroud, 1992), p. 21.

day 'which shattered the houses exceedingly'.¹²⁵ The royalist *Mercurius Aulicus* recorded that Aston received 'a blow on his head by the fall of a tyle from the top of a house', which according to Clarendon was caused by 'cannon shot'.¹²⁶ Many years later, the Berkshire Archaeological Society noted that a certain Mr Ravenscroft had 'exhibited a cannon ball ... which was found in the Abbey wall ... supposed to have been lodged there on the occasion of the siege of Reading'.¹²⁷ These anecdotal accounts and observations provide some indication into the destruction caused by the bombardment of the town during the conflict.

Unruly soldiers were responsible for causing further damage to the town's buildings. The accounts for the house of correction in Friar Street detail the cost of repairs due to the damage by soldiers between 1641 and 1651.¹²⁸ During the winter of 1642–43, it was claimed that the king's forces 'did ruinate and pull downe a great parte' of the house of correction; the wage bills for the repairs amounted to £35 4s. 6d.¹²⁹ Other buildings were damaged in the town, such as the house near Silver Street, which according to the deeds of 1650, was 'in times of warr ... destroyed and burned downe'.¹³⁰ The corporation petitioned Parliament in December 1644, complaining that soldiers 'break downe our howses and burne them' and had threatened to 'burne downe all the howses in the towne' if they did not receive their wages and a bed.¹³¹ Such intimidation combined with the actual destruction of public buildings and private houses illustrates the damaging impact of the garrisons on the urban fabric of the town.

Reading's strategic location perhaps meant that it was inevitable that the town should suffer at the hands of both sides during the Civil War. But the construction and destruction of fortifications as well as the attempts to thwart the advance of the enemy had wider implications for the built environment and the townspeople. Not only were their daily lives disrupted but their property was threatened or damaged as a consequence of military initiatives or through destruction perpetrated

125 Thomason Tracts E.99[15], *Certaine informations from severall parts of the kingdome*, (London, 17–24 April 1643), p. 2.

126 Thomason Tracts E.100(18), *Mercurius aulicus*, (Oxford, 22 April 1643), p. 14; Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion*, III, p. 17.

127 'Proceedings of Societies', *The Berks, Bucks and Oxon Archaeological Journal* 6 (1900–1), 37.

128 BRO, R/Z 8/4/1–2.

129 Ibid.

130 BRO, D/QR 12/11/1–12.

131 BRO, R/Z 3/51.

by troops billeted in the town. Some of the scars on the physical fabric of the town due to this conflict were long-lasting. In the 1720s, Daniel Defoe observed that 'the Remains of the Bastions, and other Works are still to be seen', while a hillock built in Forbury Gardens remains to the present-day.¹³²

IV The Impact on Reading's Social Environment

The Civil War also had an impact on urban society, the townspeople complaining in a petition to Parliament in December 1644 that 'since the tyme the two Armyes came into this towne, your petitioners have had their suffering so multiplied upon them'.¹³³ This assault started with the appointment of Aston as governor of Reading in October 1642; a man described by Clarendon as having 'the fortune to be very much esteemed where he was not known, and very much detested where he was'.¹³⁴ He had no scruples with regard to extracting money from the townspeople and during the siege of 1643, he refused to let the women and children leave the town. According to one news-book, Aston 'forceth women and children to make up the breach, to stand in the mouth of the cannon'. This could either be implying that the royalist governor forced them to repair damaged fortifications, thus putting them at risk from parliamentary fire, or even worse, used them as a human shield, forcing them to stand where the wall had been damaged and thus directly in the line of parliamentary fire.¹³⁵ Another news-book claimed that Aston declared the women and children should all die with him.¹³⁶ Most commanders would have sent vulnerable citizens out of their besieged town as that meant fewer mouths to feed, but Aston's actions reflect his more brutal approach towards the townspeople of Reading. A parliamentary pamphlet asserted that he was 'guilty of divers murders'.¹³⁷ Even allowing for the partisan nature

¹³² Daniel Defoe, *A tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain*, 2 vols, (London, 1927), I, p. 293; Barrès-Baker, *Siege of Reading*, p. 45; Griffin, *Siege of Redding*, p. 18.

¹³³ BRO, R/Z 3/51.

¹³⁴ B. Morgan, 'Aston, Sir Arthur (1590x93-1649)', ODNB, II, pp. 781-83 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/823, accessed 7 April 2013]; Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, III, p. 406.

¹³⁵ Thomason Tracts E.247[30], *A perfect diurnall of the passages in Parliament*, (London, 17-24 April 1643), pp. 7, 8.

¹³⁶ Thomason Tracts E.99[15], *Certaine informations from severall parts of the kingdome*, (London, 17-24 April 1643), p. 1.

¹³⁷ Thomason Tracts E.99[2], *Good and true newes from Redding*, (London, 17 April 1643), p. 3.

of the pamphlet, according to the Journal of the House of Commons, Aston was accused of 'putting to Death, by Martial Law, Two of his Majesty's Subjects; One at Reading' on 15 December 1642.¹³⁸ Aston's ruthlessness and use of martial law are an indication of the extent to which the local population suffered during his five months as governor of the town.¹³⁹

With the military occupation of the town, there were also changes to local government with the dismissal of some office-holders who may have been regarded as being unsympathetic to a particular side in the conflict. According to the corporation's registers, Aston ordered on 18 January 1643 'that Mr. Henry Bradley should noe longer contynue an attorney in the court of Reading ...'.¹⁴⁰ No reason was recorded for Bradley's dismissal and Aston selected the new member to replace him, who the governor presumably personally considered more suitable. On 22 August 1644 the Parliamentary Committee for Berkshire dismissed several members of the council – Brackston, Harrison, Turnour, Manwaringe, and Gandy – claiming they were 'persons notoriously disaffected to the State'.¹⁴¹ Even though two of these men were former mayors of the town, their status did not protect them from dismissal. Arguably like other members of the ruling oligarchy, they were more vulnerable to the political climate as possession of Reading changed between the two armed forces.

Apart from political disruption, the community was affected more indirectly by the military presence at Reading, which encouraged the spread of disease and ultimately an increase in the number of deaths in the town. Although the burial register from the Reading parish of St Marys is missing, the burial rates from St Giles and St Laurence are sufficient to illustrate this increase in mortality rate during the Civil War.¹⁴² Their registers show that from November 1642 until August 1644 there were 578 burials, compared to only 216 burials for the period from November 1632 until August 1634.¹⁴³ The majority of deaths in the town occurred as a result of disease, as opposed to being military

138 'House of Commons Journal Volume 2: 15 December 1642', *Journal of the House of Commons: Volume II, 1640–1643* (1802), pp. 889–891. [<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=8792>, accessed 09 April 2013]; Barrès-Baker, *Siege of Reading*, p. 36.

139 Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke*, I, p. 12; Barrès-Baker, *Siege of Reading*, p. 36.

140 Guilding (ed), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 73.

141 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

142 *Ibid.*, p. 200.

143 BRO, D/P 96/1/2–3, D/P 97/1/5–6.

casualties, leading many contemporaries to view Reading as the source of an epidemic, particularly in 1643.¹⁴⁴ One contemporary, Lucy Hutchinson, wrote that 'there was a greate mortallity, occasioned by the infected ayre in the towne of Reading'.¹⁴⁵ Only 20 soldiers are listed as buried in St Giles's parish from November 1642 until August 1644, compared to a total of 357 burials of the men, women and children.¹⁴⁶

The close contacts between the local population and the troops increased the spread of disease within the community.¹⁴⁷ Disease seems to have been endemic in the military camps during the conflict. When Aston surrendered to the parliamentarians in 1643, the terms of his surrender permitted the defeated royalists to have fifty carriages for conveying the sick.¹⁴⁸ Prince Rupert reported that after the arrival of the parliamentary troops 'a direful fever spread rapidly through the now crowded town'.¹⁴⁹ Following his capture of Reading, the earl of Essex was unable to capitalise on his success, according to Clarendon due to 'the great decay and sickness of his army, [he] was not in near six weeks able to remove from Reading'.¹⁵⁰ In such circumstances, it was easy for disease to spread from the troops to the townspeople as is indicated by the number of burials. Two months after the arrival of Essex's troops, St Laurence's parish records 51 burials in June 1643, compared to 4 burials in June 1633; St Giles's, 46 burials in June 1643 compared to 9 burials a decade earlier.¹⁵¹ Thomas Willis, a royalist doctor, recorded the disease as a fever that lasted six days, followed 'by the eruption of Whelks and Spots'. He considered the disease as 'so grievous that in a short time after, either side left off, and from that time, for many months, fought not with the Enemy but with the Disease'.¹⁵² The grave situation continued into the autumn. The mayor, Thomas Thackham,

144 Dils, 'Epidemics, Mortality and the Civil War', 49; Barrès-Baker, *Siege of Reading*, p. 199.

145 L. Hutchinson, *Memoirs of the life of Colonel Hutchinson* (London, 1806), p. 123.

146 BRO, D/P 96/1/3; Dils, 'Epidemics, Mortality and the Civil War', 49–50.

147 *Ibid.*, 44, 46.

148 Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, III, p. 24.

149 E. Warburton (ed.), *Memoirs of Prince Rupert, and the Cavaliers*, 3 vols (London, 1849), II, p. 181.

150 Dils, 'Epidemics, Mortality and the Civil War', 44; Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, III, p. 53.

151 BRO, D/P 96/1/2–3, D/P 97/1/5.

152 Thomas Willis, *The Remaining Medical Works of that Famous and Renowned Physician Dr Thomas Willis*, edited by Samuel Pordage (London, 1681), pp. 134–35; Dils, 'Epidemics, Mortality and the Civil War', 50; C. Creighton, *A History of Epidemics in Britain*, 2 vols (London, 1894), I, p. 549.

wrote to the crown on 1 September 1643 concerning 'the greate sicknes in our Towne', while the following month the Parliamentary spy Joseph Clunn reported to Luke that 'there was a howse yesterday shutt upp in the markt place of the sicknes'.¹⁵³ Towards the end of the war, the town was infected again with disease with the arrival of plague in July 1646.¹⁵⁴

Soldiers were associated not only with the spread of disease but also for inflicting physical violence and harm on the inhabitants. The corporation petitioned Parliament on 2 December 1644 'for the reliefe of the Towne against the insolencies and violences of the Souldyers'.¹⁵⁵ After the conclusion of the conflict, one Mr Saunders complained in 1648 that he had been 'threatned by some Officers'.¹⁵⁶ It is unclear whether Reading women were sexually threatened by the troops, although there is evidence that this did occur in other places.¹⁵⁷ It was claimed in a court case on 18 September 1644 that a soldier had beaten Lidia Mace, a servant in Reading, and 'broake her back', 'for comminge over the works' but this was apparently for attempting to enter or leave the town without permission.¹⁵⁸ The actual extent of physical violence meted out by the soldiers on the local population is therefore inconclusive.

There is more evidence regarding their plundering of property, which was often difficult for their commanders to control. The king had issued a proclamation on 25 November 1642 prohibiting the plundering of goods but it continued to be a problem during the Civil War.¹⁵⁹ When Reading surrendered to the parliamentary forces, it was agreed the town should not be plundered but this was not honoured, possibly because the soldiers had not received the twelve shillings promised to them.¹⁶⁰ According to one news-book 'after our Souldiers

153 BRO, R/Z 3/42; Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke*, II, p. 172; Dils, 'Epidemics, Mortality and the Civil War', 46.

154 *Ibid.*, 49.

155 Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 129.

156 BRO, R/Z 5/8.

157 A. Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution* (London, 2012), p. 35.

158 BRO, R/JQ1/26.

159 John Rushworth (ed.), *Historical Collections of Private Passages of State, Weighty Matters in Law, Remarkable Proceedings in Five Parliaments*, 8 vols (London, 1721), V, pp. 52–77. [<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=80730>, accessed 10 April 2013].

160 Thomason Tracts E.101[10], *Mercvrius avlicvs*, (Oxford, 29 April 1643), p. 7; Rushworth (ed.), *Historical Collections*, V, pp. 263–309. [<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=80737>, accessed 23 April 2013].

entred the Towne, they plundred foure houses', while another alluded to the inability to control the soldiers, as Essex was forced to ride into town three times in one evening to stop plundering.¹⁶¹ The seizure of property was not confined to the surrender of the town to the enemy forces, it also occurred on other occasions. Luke recorded on 21 July 1643 that a party of soldiers went to Reading 'onely to pillage and plunder the contry'.¹⁶² The assault on the townspeople's property led the corporation to petition the king that year to 'take them into your Royall protection, that this Towne may be saved from violence ... [and] kept in safety from the plundering'.¹⁶³ Nevertheless plundering remained a problem, the corporation claiming in June 1644 that some men's houses had been plundered and their gates broken.¹⁶⁴ It is evident that plunder from both armies became commonplace during the war, but was exacerbated by the difficulty that some commanders faced in attempting to control their forces.

It was not always unruly soldiers who were guilty of stealing property, according to one news-book Prince Rupert seized the mayor of Reading's plate after being invited for a meal there in November 1642, saying 'this plate is mine and so accordingly he tooke it all away'.¹⁶⁵ While this could be propaganda, it is likely to contain an element of truth as Rupert did have a reputation for plunder.¹⁶⁶ A possibly partisan parliamentary pamphlet, also claimed that Aston 'had made very great gain of Plunders'.¹⁶⁷ The threat of permitting the plunder of the town was also used against the inhabitants. On 7 November 1642 a notice was issued on Charles's behalf proclaiming that the townspeople would be 'immediately given unto the Souldyers to Plunder' if they did not bring their arms to the town hall.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, John Web, a parliamentary spy, reported to Luke, on 28 March 1644, that the Governor of Reading had ordered that seven days worth of provisions be given to the soldiers, 'or else he would plunder them'.¹⁶⁹ This created a climate of anxiety amongst the local population, Luke recorded on 30

161 Thomason Tracts E.100[19], *The kingdomes vveekly intelligencer*, (25 April–2 May 1643), pp. 4–5; E.100[7], *The fourth intelligence from Reading*, (1 May 1643), pp. 2–3.

162 Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke*, II, p. 123.

163 BRO, R/Z 3/38/3.

164 BRO, R/Z 5/2/8.

165 Thomason Tract E.242[23], *A continuation of certaine speciall and remarkable passages from both Houses of Parliament*, 17–24 November 1642, pp. 3–4.

166 Roy, 'England Turned Germany?', 128.

167 Thomason Tract E.100[7], *The fourth intelligence from Reading*, 1 May 1643, p. 2.

168 BRO, R/Z 6/1/19.

169 Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke*, III, p. 271.

May 1643 that Reading was 'in great feare of the Cauallyers comming to plunder them'.¹⁷⁰

Other townsmen were threatened by conscription, being pressed into military service to make up for the soldiers who had deserted the Reading garrison or were sent to serve elsewhere.¹⁷¹ Luke noted on 7 October 1643 that 'they presse men dayly in the towne'.¹⁷² The sheer number of men conscripted is evident from Charles's warrant ordering Reading to provide '500 able and strong bodyed men of your County to be brought to Abingdon' in June 1643.¹⁷³ Parliamentary spy, William Blewett, reported to Luke on 14 February 1644 that 'they compell all the townesmen from 16 yeares of age to 60 to take upp armes to keepe the towne'.¹⁷⁴ While able-bodied men would have been expected to take up arms and respond to the mustering of troops for the defence of their community, this enforced conscription inevitably affected the town's population as they were pressed into service and taken away from their families and usual employment.

The town was also affected by food shortages during the conflict. A document attributed to 1643 claimed that there was not enough food in the store to sustain Reading for more than 14 days, while soldiers complained that they could get 'noe foode in the towne' on 18 February 1643.¹⁷⁵ Attacks on food-carts prevented supplies from reaching the town, while supplies were further diminished by the orders to provide food for the occupying forces.¹⁷⁶ However, a parliamentary news-book reported after the 1643 siege that 'when our forces entred the Towne, the Butchers stalls where full of meat', thus challenging this notion.¹⁷⁷ While the claim of an abundance of food could be a propaganda ploy, Reading did not appear to be near starvation during the siege, possibly due to the town's ability to obtain food by river.¹⁷⁸ The price of food did rise during sieges and so while there might have been enough to sustain the wealthy, there may well have been a severe lack of food for the poorer citizens.

170 Ibid., I, p. 83.

171 Ibid., III, p. 252.

172 Ibid., II, p. 165.

173 BRO, R/Z 6/1/23.

174 Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke*, III, p. 252.

175 BRO, R/Z 10/7; Phillip (ed.), *Journal of Sir Samuel Luke*, I, p. 10.

176 Ibid., p. 83; Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, p. 117.

177 Thomason Tract E.100[19], *The kingdomes vveekly intelligencer*, 25 April–2 May 1643, p. 5.

178 Clarendon, *History of the Rebellion*, III, p. 15.

Reading was therefore severely affected not only by the particularly harsh regime and political changes that were a hallmark of the military occupation but also due to the wider impact on the community of large numbers of soldiers in the town. The plight of the citizens led them to petition Parliament in December 1644 declaring that they would have to 'for the preservation of our lives ... forsake our goods and habitations and leave the towne'.¹⁷⁹

V Conclusion

The townspeople of Reading, in an undated petition drawn up at some time between 1643 and 1644, expressed their conviction that 'this County hath been more infested, than other parts'.¹⁸⁰ To assess the accuracy of this claim, it is instructive to compare Reading's experiences with those of Exeter and Gloucester: both larger towns than Reading, of course, but both towns whose wartime histories have been studied in considerable depth. Gloucester was of great strategic and economic importance throughout the Civil War, as it sat astride the main road between royalist Wales and the king's headquarters in Oxford as well as controlling many of the key trade routes from the south of England into Wales.¹⁸¹ Determined to wrest control of Gloucester from the parliamentarians, the royalists besieged the city during the summer of 1643, causing the inhabitants to suffer considerable hardship as their water and fuel supplies were cut off, and a number of properties were destroyed.¹⁸² Gloucester's experience was, at least in one respect, very different from Reading's, however, as many of the townsfolk clearly sided with Parliament. This deep sense of commitment may perhaps help to explain why Gloucester was able to withstand a full-scale siege in 1643, while Reading and Exeter were not.¹⁸³ Exeter, like Reading, changed hands several times during the conflict. Its inhabitants were forced to lay out huge sums of money to pay for the construction of the fortifications around the city and for the upkeep of the soldiers who manned them. So, while all three of these urban communities were besieged during 1643, their experiences throughout the conflict as a whole were very different and it is interesting to compare the relative

¹⁷⁹ BRO, R/Z 3/51.

¹⁸⁰ BRO, R/Z 3/44/1.

¹⁸¹ Atkin, *Gloucester and the Civil War*, p. 13.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

degrees to which they suffered in terms of financial exactions and destruction of property.

Exeter, like Reading, was very hard-hit by financial demands during the Civil War. Just as Charles had demanded £4000 from Reading in March 1643, so he demanded £1000 from Exeter in September of the same year.¹⁸⁴ Soon afterwards, the royalist commander Prince Maurice extracted another loan of £500 from the citizens and, in Exeter, just as in Reading, none of this money was ever repaid.¹⁸⁵ Gloucester faced equally crippling demands: it was later estimated that over £4000 had been spent by the townsfolk on maintaining the garrison there during March to August 1643 alone.¹⁸⁶ Indeed, the garrisons in Gloucester, Exeter and Reading all cost the local townsfolk huge sums of money. Weekly rates of £40 a week were levied on Exeter's inhabitants from November 1643 and on Reading's inhabitants from October 1643 to support their respective garrisons, while Gloucester was taxed at the even higher rate of £100 a week in August 1644 for the same purpose.¹⁸⁷ High taxation continued in all three communities throughout the war. In March 1644, for example, Exeter was ordered to contribute to a loan of £100,000 for the king.¹⁸⁸ Meanwhile, further money was constantly being exacted for the upkeep of the town defences. Thus almost £400 was spent on repairing the city walls of Exeter in 1644: a hitherto unprecedented sum.¹⁸⁹

The inhabitants of Exeter, like the inhabitants of Reading, were also forced to help clothe the royalist army. On 30 July 1644, Exeter's town governors agreed to purchase '3000 pairs of shoes' for royalist soldiers quartered in Bristol, at a cost of £200, just as the town governors of Reading had previously agreed to provide £1000 worth of clothing for the king's troops in late 1642.¹⁹⁰ One Exeter citizen, a merchant named Christopher Broadridge, later claimed that the taxes, billeting and fortifications had cost him at least £300 over a period of four years.¹⁹¹ Broadridge's experiences may be usefully compared with those of the

184 Stoye, *From Deliverance to Destruction*, p. 91.

185 Ibid.

186 Atkin, *Gloucester and the Civil War*, p. 36.

187 Stoye, *From Deliverance to Destruction*, pp. 91-92; Guilding (ed.), *Reading Records*, IV, pp. 94-95, 111; Atkin, *Gloucester and the Civil War*, p. 146.

188 Stoye, *From Deliverance to Destruction*, p. 92.

189 Ibid., pp. 92-93.

190 BRO, R/Z 3/38/1; M.C. Barrès-Baker, *The Siege of Reading: the Failure of the Earl of Essex's 1643 Spring Offensive* (Ottawa, 2004), p. 35; Phillips, *Story of Reading*, p. 59; Stoye, *From Deliverance to Destruction*, p. 99.

191 Ibid., p. 102.

Reading alderman, Thomas Harrison, who lent the royalists £600 during the Civil War, but who was never repaid, and with the collective experience of those inhabitants of Gloucester who had laid out some £34,000 towards the maintenance of the parliamentary garrison by 1645, but who, once again, were not paid back.¹⁹² The inhabitants of all three towns were stripped of enormous sums of money, then, but it would appear that the townsfolk of Gloucester received more financial assistance to compensate them for their losses than the people of Reading or Exeter did; in 1645, Parliament allocated them one-third of the profits from currant imports.¹⁹³ Gloucester also became the chief supply centre for Parliament's forces in the west of England, bringing considerable employment to local artisans and manufacturers. Reading's cloth trade, by contrast, was irreversibly damaged by the war, thus making the financial exactions which were imposed upon the town even harder to bear.¹⁹⁴ In addition to this, many of the loans or contributions which were levied upon Reading appear to have been higher than those levied upon Exeter, suggesting that, while both places suffered heavy financial exactions, Reading may have suffered worst of all, especially when one takes the town's loss of trade into account.

On the other hand, Exeter and Gloucester suffered greater losses than Reading did through damage to housing. Every house in one Exeter parish, St Sidwells, had been demolished by the war's end, while a survey of 1649–50 revealed that no fewer than 241 houses had been lost in Gloucester's suburbs.¹⁹⁵ While some buildings in Reading were damaged as a result of enemy bombardment and vandalism by unruly soldiers, the town's extensive fortifications seems to have protected it from destruction on the sort of massive scale that was witnessed at Exeter and Gloucester. It is worth noting, too, that while the inhabitants of both Gloucester and Exeter burned down many of their own houses in the suburbs in order to strengthen their defences against the king's forces, the inhabitants of Reading apparently did not: once again, this highlights different levels of partisan commitment at Gloucester and Exeter on the one hand and at Reading on the other.¹⁹⁶ Overall, it seems fair to suggest that, while all three urban communities

192 BRO, R/Z 7/3/2; Atkin, *Gloucester and the Civil War*, p. 146.

193 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

194 *Ibid.*

195 Stoye, *From Deliverance to Destruction*, pp. 136–37; Atkin, *Gloucester and the Civil War*, p. 143.

196 *Ibid.*, pp. 106–8.

were devastated by the Civil War, and while Exeter and Gloucester both lost scores of houses, Reading – the smallest of the three urban communities under consideration here – may well have been stripped of larger sums of money, in proportional terms, and have suffered more long-term damage to its economic base.

Throughout this article, we have seen again and again how severely Reading suffered as a result of the Civil War, both during and after the hostilities. These events must have left terrible mental scars behind them, and indeed Wykes suggests that memories of the injuries which had been inflicted on the townsfolk during the Civil War may have resurfaced during the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, when – terrified by rumours that James II's soldiers were going 'to burn and plunder the Town' – the townsfolk fired upon the royal troops.¹⁹⁷ However this may be, the evidence which has been presented in the preceding pages makes it hard to doubt that the impact of the Civil War on Reading and its inhabitants was extremely severe. Perhaps the last word may be left to a Reading man, George Varney, who, in a letter written in around 1644, despairingly reported that 'some of the best men in our towne have left their land and gone away because of these troubles'.¹⁹⁸ There could be no better illustration of just how devastating the war's effects on Reading had been: rather than endure their sufferings any longer, those who could afford to do so had abandoned their town to its fate.

197 Defoe, *A tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain*, I, p. 291; Wykes, *Reading*, p. 104.

198 BRO, R/Z 3/52.