

Col. Martyn and the English Civil War

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The English Civil War began in 1642 and was a bitter conflict that divided the loyalties of families and communities between King Charles I's supporters, and the Parliamentarians who sought to end his autocratic rule. The intransigent King was executed in 1649, with the monarchy replaced by government under the Commonwealth of England and subsequent Cromwellian Protectorate, until the Restoration of a Stuart King in 1660.

How did Ewelme fare in the Civil War? There is no record of a 'Roundhead' or 'Cavalier' army being billeted in Ewelme village, although both sides were active in the area. Only a few miles away The Battle of Chalgrove was fought in 1643, where Parliamentarian John Hampden, an early opponent of the King's resented Ship Tax, was mortally wounded. There was a Royalist garrison in Oxford, and to guard the London-Oxford Road, Prince Rupert of the Rhine, King Charles I's nephew, for a time occupied Ewelme Park, (then the largest house in Oxfordshire, newly built by the Royalist Earl of Berkshire). The biggest house in Ewelme was West Court (sited to the right of the entrance to the present Chaucer Court) owned by a Parliamentarian, Colonel, Francis Martyn.

The Roundhead army wreaked much destruction, expected on military targets such as Wallingford Castle, which was reduced to a ruin, but also wantonly on priceless ancient religious works of art and notable memorial tombs, which they systematically damaged or destroyed. The puritanical religious zealots [iconoclasts] who followed the army, took advantage of the turbulent times to destroy what they perceived as Papist imagery. Ewelme church, containing mediaeval stained glass and the elaborate tombs of the Chaucer's and Duchess of Suffolk, made it a prime target for the iconoclasts.



Memorial to Colonel Martyn in Ewelme Church

Many local fables have passed down the generations surrounding the survival of these treasures, and it is difficult to establish the truth. We do know that during the Commonwealth and Protectorate, King James I's arrangement for the Oxford Regius Professor of Divinity to hold the Rectory was abandoned. Unsurprisingly, Ewelme's Rector Robert Sanderson was ejected from the Professorship in 1648, as he had been a chaplain to King Charles I! Undeterred by his dispossession, Mrs Prister Cruttwell, in her fanciful 'historical' village pageants of 1908 and 1951, has an aged Dr Sanderson bravely guarding the church door, church key in hand. The advancing soldiers, being urged on by a wild-eyed Puritanical preacher shouting "*Down with the house of Baal; drive ye forth the Popish priest and his idolatry!*" They threw him to the ground and wrested the key from his grasp. He was only saved by the intervention of Colonel Martyn who, dressed in armour with sword drawn, ordered them off to cower away like whipped dogs. Dr Sanderson received sustenance from Mistress Martyn at [the Manor], presumably West Court. All great entertainment for the villagers to perform, but not ratified by historical record.

(Further stories are that the Roundheads wanted to stable their horses in the church! Or a more moderate version - Colonel Martyn forbade his troops to sack the church on pain of death).

Rector Dodd's 1922 church guide holds the most likely explanation. "*During the great Civil War, the church escaped the ravages of the Puritans through the pious care of Col Francis Martyn, an officer of high standing in the Parliamentary forces, who lived in Ewelme. In the dangerous time of the Commonwealth, he is said to have kept the church carefully locked and to have allowed no one to enter it except on Sundays for divine service.*"

The continuance of Sunday services rings true. Although Dr Sanderson and the other academic high churchmen took the stipend for the benefice under James I's arrangement, they mainly stayed in their Oxford Colleges and rarely visited Ewelme, the parish being served by stipendiary chaplains or ministers. Three Puritan priests are named as holding office here after 1648 - Richard Seagar, John Conant in 1656 and Thomas Cole in 1659.

At the Restoration of the 'Merry Monarch' Charles II in 1660, (generally greeted with joy as the populace got Christmas back), Dr Sanderson was reinstated before being made Bishop of Lincoln in 1661. His successor was William Creed, followed in 1663 by Richard Allestree a Royalist stalwart who was also expelled from Oxford in 1648. He 'did his bit' in the war, carrying despatches between Prince Charles and other Royalists and fought as a common soldier at the Battle of Edgehill in 1642, with his musket in one hand and his bible in the other! Although taken prisoner, he was rescued by Royal forces. (One may well ponder the relationship that existed between Colonel Martyn and Dr Allestree after the war).

Colonel Martyn died in 1682 aged 74, and his marble monument is in the chancel. He deserves to be remembered, as it is to this fair-minded man that Ewelme's fine church and contents owes its preservation.

Ewelme Village Archive