

Civil War



Re-enactment of a Civil War battle at Pendennis Castle. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

During the English Civil War and ensuing hostilities Cornwall was held by Royalist forces and there a number of battlefield sites in east Cornwall. During the conflict many fortifications were re-used, including medieval castles, Tudor forts, even Iron Age hillforts.

Compared to most other places in England substantial defences built during the Civil Wars survive in Cornwall and particularly in Scilly; most were earthworks, and there is a good example of a fort with outlying earthworks at Little Dennis in the Helford Estuary and on The Garrison on St Mary's as well as on Tresco in the Isles of Scilly. Following the surrender of Charles I there were further outbreaks of hostilities in 1648. Scilly was retaken by the Royalists who were not finally defeated until the spring of 1651.

Charles I ascended the throne in 1625. From the outset he refused to accept direction from Parliament. Early in his reign he dissolved Parliament three times until from 1629 he governed by personal rule. Without Parliament there was no money; Charles got around this by the sale of monopolies and by levying unpopular taxes on seaports – so-called 'ship money'. During the 1630s there was a growing resistance to his autocratic rule among both the aristocracy and also the increasingly influential middle classes.

The leaders of Parliament feared that with the backing of a powerful royal army the King would disband them permanently. Troubles came to a head in 1642 when Charles, attended by soldiers, tried to arrest five members of the House of Commons for treason. Civil war became inevitable. Charles raised his standard at Nottingham; Parliament took control of the government's armed forces. The English Civil War began in August and lasted four years.

Very broadly the middle classes and tradesmen supported Parliament and the nobility and peasant population took the side of the King. Cornwall was predominantly Royalist. The Parliamentarian Sir Richard Buller held Launceston in October of 1642, but the approach of Sir Ralph Hopton and 3000 Royalists persuaded him to retreat.



Site of the battlefield at Braddock Down, St Pinnock. In January 1643 two Parliamentary armies advanced into Cornwall from Devon. Before the two forces could join up, Royalist troops attacked and defeated one of the Parliamentary forces which was deployed on the high ground at Braddock Downs. The victory was decisive and was followed by the Royalist army marching into Devon and blockading Plymouth. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

In the first year of the conflict various sorties were made by the Parliamentarians into the north of the county. There were skirmishes and battles; the little-known battle of Windmill Hill on the southern edge of Launceston and the battle of Stamford Hill near Stratton, but the Parliamentarians were seen off and Cornwall was secured for the King in 1643. Negotiations for a truce were attempted but these quickly broke down and both sides sought to consolidate positions and reinforce their armies.

During the hostilities many fortifications from earlier times, including the Iron Age hillfort at Castle Dore, were re-used. The medieval castles at Restormel, Trematon and Launceston and the Tudor fortifications at Pendennis, St Mawes and the Garrison were all held by Royalist troops. New works were also put up. At first these were hastily built in response to forays by the Parliamentarians such as the outworks at Windmill Hill, of which a small section of earthwork bank survives. There were substantial hornworks built at Pendennis and later, during the great siege of the fortress, Parliamentary siegeworks constructed. Batteries were also put up at Inswick, St Antony, Mount Edgcumbe and Thanckes to attempt to control Parliamentary Plymouth.

Many of the earthworks thrown up during the English Civil War were, by their nature, temporary structures and there is now little trace of them in the landscape. One location where they can still be seen is on the Garrison on the Isles of Scilly. The Islands were a Royalist stronghold; the garrison at Star Castle was strengthened, new gun batteries and breastworks were built around the coast of St Mary's and some of the other islands. A breastwork was essentially an earthen bank to provide cover for the soldiers behind it. A few lengths of breastwork still survive on the Garrison headland.



Part of the breastwork on the Garrison, St Mary's. The earthwork bank, which was stone-faced, is accompanied by an inner ditch. Towards the centre right of the photo is a protruding battery. This cliff-top defence is a remarkable survival from the English Civil War. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

More substantial earthworks survive at Little Dennis in the Helford Estuary. Dennis Fort was a Royalist stronghold built between 1643 and 1644. This fort is said to have sustained a siege for several weeks and only surrendered in 1646 through lack of ammunition. Another substantial fortification survives at King Charles' Castle on Castle Down, Tresco on the Isles of Scilly.



King Charles Castle, Tresco. The stone castle was built in the sixteenth century as part of Henry VIII's programme of coastal defences, and was held by Royalist forces during the Civil War. The earthwork to its north is a bastion fortification protecting the castle from landward attack. Cornwall County Council Licence 2007. © Geosense 2005.

The decisive battle of the English Civil War took place in June 1645 at Naseby in Leicestershire where the Royalist army was annihilated.

By February 1646 the Parliamentarians had reached Cornwall and occupied Launceston. A month later, the Prince of Wales sailed from Falmouth to the Isles of Scilly, and from there he escaped to Jersey; the garrisons at Restormel, Falmouth, Little Dennis and St Michaels Mount fell in the following months.

In May Charles surrendered to the Scots who handed him over to England. Pendennis Castle, on the 17th August 1646, was the last Royalist stronghold on the English mainland to fall. In late 1648 Charles was tried before a tribunal of 135 judges who voted by one vote that he be executed.

The political situation remained volatile; there were insurrections and further outbreaks of hostilities. Prince Charles tried to claim the throne with the help of the Scots, leading to war between Scotland and Cromwell's New Model Army.

Against this background of instability the story on the Isles of Scilly took an unlikely twist. Parliament had appointed Colonel Buller as governor of Scilly after its surrender in September 1646. Two years later, while he was at church, his soldiers revolted and the islands were once again in Royalist hands. With Sir John Grenville as governor, privateering became piracy and passing ships were plundered, regardless of nationality. Exasperated by this the Dutch declared war on Scilly and sailed to capture the islands, arriving at the same time as a Parliamentary fleet led by Admiral Blake. Blake captured Tresco and forced the surrender of St Mary's in May 1651. Oliver's Battery on Carn Near Point at the southern tip of Tresco survives as evidence of the struggle to recapture Scilly for Parliament. After the war Cromwell's Castle, a circular artillery tower, was constructed at New Grimsby to replace the redundant King Charles's Castle. As an interesting footnote to history, no formal peace treaty was signed with the Dutch until 1986, making the war between Holland and Scilly the longest in history.