

= Sieges of Taunton =

The sieges of Taunton were a series of three blockades during the First English Civil War . The town of Taunton , in Somerset , was considered to be of strategic importance because it controlled the main road from Bristol to Devon and Cornwall . Robert Blake commanded the town 's Parliamentary defences during all three sieges , from September 1644 to July 1645 .

The first siege was laid by Edmund Wyndham on 23 September , and was primarily composed of Royalist troops from local Somerset garrisons . After initial assaults drove Blake and his troops back into Taunton Castle , the blockade was conducted from 1 ½ 2 miles (1 @. @ 6 ½ 3 @. @ 2 km) away , and concentrated more on starving the garrison than continued attacks . The town was relieved by a force under James Holborne on 14 December .

Over the next three months , Blake was able to establish a network of earthen defences in Taunton , including a basic perimeter and a number of forts . The Royalists began the second , and bloodiest , siege in late March 1645 , initially under Sir Richard Grenville . A series of disputes between the Royalist commanders allowed Taunton some respite at the start of the siege , but in May the attacks were fierce under the command of Sir Ralph Hopton . After five days of intense fighting , which had once again driven the defending army back to a small central perimeter including the castle , the Royalists retreated in the face of a Parliamentary relief army commanded by Ralph Weldon .

Lord Goring , who had proposed the second siege , renewed the blockade for a third time in mid @-@ May , after engaging Weldon 's departing army and forcing it back into Taunton . Goring 's siege was lax and allowed provisions into the town , diminishing its effectiveness . The Parliamentary defence tied up Goring and his 10 ½ 15 @, @ 000 troops , who would have otherwise been available to fight for the King at Naseby , where historians believe they could have tipped the battle in favour of the Royalists . Instead , after securing a Parliamentary victory at Naseby , Thomas Fairfax marched his army to relieve Taunton on 9 July 1645 .

= = Background = =

Loyalties in Somerset were divided at the start of the First English Civil War ; many of the prominent landowners and those living in the countryside favoured King Charles I , but most of the towns , including Taunton , were Parliamentary , predominantly due to their Puritan beliefs . By August 1642 , the town was held by a small Parliamentary force . In June the following year , Sir Ralph Hopton led his Royalist army , consisting of eighteen regiments equally split between foot and cavalry , out of Cornwall and into Somerset . He forced the surrender of Taunton to the King without engaging in battle , and established a garrison in Taunton Castle .

In mid @-@ 1644 , Robert Devereux , 3rd Earl of Essex , the Chief Commander of the Parliamentary army , decided to reclaim the West Country . He moved through Dorset , retaking Dorchester and Weymouth , and then left the coast and headed towards Chard . At the time , Taunton was held by a garrison of 800 men commanded by Colonel John Stawell , but the proximity of the Earl of Essex 's army led the town to be abandoned , leaving only 80 men to defend the castle . The historian Robert Morris , in *The Sieges of Taunton 1644 ? 1645* , suggests that Stawell and his men retreated to Bridgwater , but in *The History of the Rebellion* , the 17th @-@ century historian Edward Hyde claims that the troops were requisitioned by Prince Maurice during his retreat from Lyme Regis to Plymouth .

On 8 July 1644 , the Earl of Essex sent a Parliamentary force , led by Colonel Sir Robert Pye with Lieutenant Colonel Robert Blake as his second in command , to reclaim Taunton . They took the town without a fight , and surrounded the castle . The Royalist forces under Major William Reeve that were garrisoned at Taunton Castle surrendered and retreated to Bridgwater . Pye left Taunton shortly after the capture , leaving Blake to hold the town . Blake had an army of about 1 @, @ 000 men , and was charged with trying to blockade the roads to support the Earl of Essex 's campaign in Devon and Cornwall .

= = Sieges = =

== First siege ==

The Earl of Essex 's campaign failed , suffering a total defeat at the Battle of Lostwithiel in early September 1644 . His remaining forces retreated back to Dorset , leaving only Plymouth , Lyme Regis and Taunton under Parliamentary control in the South West . Blake was aware of the vulnerability of Taunton , which , unlike many towns and cities of the time , did not have any town walls . On the eastern side of the town , which was the most vulnerable , he dug trenches outside the Eastern gate and erected a barricade across the street within it . At least three earthen forts were also built in that end of town . King Charles I held council in Chard , and shortly after ordered a Royalist force numbering 3 @, @ 000 troops to set up the first siege of Taunton . Initially , Sir Francis Dodington was going to command the attack , but the only available men were those in Bridgwater under the command of Colonel Edmund Wyndham .

The siege began on 23 September 1644 . Wyndham was assisted in the attack by his brother , Francis Wyndham , who brought his garrison from Dunster Castle , and Edward Rodney , who commanded an infantry regiment . The Royalist forces initially set themselves up around the town , where they were able to use their artillery to bombard the castle from the west and the town from the east . In his record of the siege , Morris claims that the besieging forces were unable to establish a presence in the town , and set up a wide perimeter roughly 1 ½ miles (1 @. @ 6 ½ @. @ 2 km) away . However , almost all other sources agree that after initial skirmishes , the Royalists broke through the eastern defences and forced Blake 's troops back into the castle itself .

During the siege , Edmund Wyndham and Blake exchanged letters ; Wyndham initially wrote to explain that he felt the siege was a gentle method of attack , rather than using " fire and sword " . He offered generous terms for surrender , and signed the letter " Your well @- @ wishing Neighbour and Country @- @ man " ; the pair had served as members of parliament together for Bridgwater in 1640 . Blake was unmoved , and wrote back to unequivocally reject the offer . Blake sent skirmishing parties out against the attackers with some success , though food and ammunition began to run out for the defending troops . To further this , Wyndham heavily rationed the town 's population to prevent them smuggling food to the garrison . A petition to Parliament for help was answered when Sir William Waller , who commanded the Parliamentary army in Wiltshire , sent a force of 3 @, @ 000 men under the command of his deputy , Major General James Holborne , in support of the town .

Wyndham had initially planned to attack Holborne 's forces at Chard , but instead retreated back to his garrison at Bridgwater on 14 December . He recorded that during his retreat , " the enemy sallied upon me but they were so hungry that they could not follow me . " The day after the arrival of Holborne , a supply caravan containing food , 2 @, @ 000 muskets and 40 barrels of gunpowder restocked the town . Fearing further Royalist assaults , Holborne provided 1 @, @ 000 of his own men as reinforcements for the town 's defence .

== Second siege ==

In early 1645 , Blake sent raiding parties out from Taunton that , according to Hyde , controlled a large area and disrupted activities throughout Somerset . Around that time , Lord Goring , the lieutenant @- @ general of the south @- @ eastern counties in the Royalist army , requested troops from the King so that he could mount a " large @- @ scale southeastern campaign " . His request was rejected , and he was despatched to the South West instead . He duly changed his focus , electing to target first Weymouth , and then Taunton , both Parliamentary strongholds in the area . He took Weymouth , but was unable to hold it in the face of Parliamentary reinforcements . In a letter he received from the King shortly after that loss , he was ordered to gather the Royalist forces of the area together in order to " [clear] those parts of the rebels ' forces . "

The King sent orders for Sir Richard Grenville and John Berkeley to support Goring in the attack on Taunton . Goring arrived outside Taunton on 11 March , and a sizeable part of Berkeley 's garrison

from Exeter arrived soon after . Grenville did not leave his siege of Plymouth and , coupled with the threat from a Parliamentary force formed by Waller and Oliver Cromwell combining their armies in Hampshire , the attack on Taunton was postponed . After further urging from the King and the Prince of Wales , Grenville did eventually travel up towards Taunton and was ordered to follow Goring to support the King in the north , as Grenville 's force of 3 @, @ 000 men was considered too small to assault Taunton . He refused , claiming that " he had promised the commissioners of Devon and Cornwall , that he would not advance beyond Taunton " , while also boasting that he could claim the town in ten days . He was delegated command of the siege , and arrived outside Taunton on 2 April . Only a day after his arrival , Grenville was injured while attacking Wellington House , and as the wound was serious , he was carried to Exeter .

The blockade set by Grenville was initially some distance from the town , and did not prevent Blake from sending and receiving messages . The besieging army was reinforced soon after with Goring 's infantry and artillery units , and so , with a large force , the attackers closed in on the town , establishing entrenchments within musket @-@ shot of Taunton 's defences . Command of the siege passed to Berkeley , though Grenville 's troops often failed to follow the new commander 's orders , and some of them deserted . Despite Grenville 's retirement from the battle due to injury , he and Berkeley clashed ; Grenville complained to the Prince of Wales that Berkeley was conducting the siege badly , while Berkeley claimed that Grenville had given his men orders to desert . These disagreements led Hopton , by now the commander of the Royalist forces in the West Country , to be given command of the siege .

As the siege continued , supplies once again began to run out for the defending army , and Parliament identified the relief of Taunton as being a priority . On 28 April , they ordered Thomas Fairfax , the Commander in Chief of the recently established New Model Army , to relieve the town . Fairfax marched with the whole of his army towards Taunton ; the Royalists considered sending their own army to meet him before he could reach London , but Prince Rupert convinced them instead to focus on conquering the north of England . In response to the Royalist movement north , Fairfax split his own army in two , sending a force of between 6 @, @ 000 and 7 @, @ 000 on to Taunton under Colonel Ralph Weldon , while Fairfax led the rest north .

Aware that the Parliamentarians under Fairfax were on their way , Hopton increased the attacks on the town on 6 May . Further attacks the following day focused on the east side of the town , first bombarding it with cannon shot , and then storming the earthen redoubt that Blake had established . After some early success in which they captured one of the earthen forts , the attackers were forced back by a combination of musket shot , stones and boiling water . The next day , after yet more attacks made little impact , Hopton staged a battle on the south side of the town between two parties of his own army in an attempt to make Blake believe the Parliamentary army had arrived . Hopton hoped that Blake would send out some of his own men to support the relieving force , but the feint failed . That evening , at around 7 pm , the Royalist force , which consisted of around 4 @, @ 200 infantry and 2 @, @ 000 cavalry , launched an all @-@ out assault against the town . In heavy fighting , the attackers captured two of the earthen forts on the eastern side of town , and broke through the defences . Once inside Blake 's outer perimeter , the besieging army discovered that there were Parliamentary musketeers within every house , which prevented them advancing any further , though they did set fire to a number of buildings , hoping to force the defenders to retreat . The tactic failed when the wind blew the flames back towards the Royalists , halting their attack .

The attack was renewed around 11 am on 9 May , and over the next seven hours , Hopton 's army advanced slowly through the town . His forces pushed the Parliamentary troops back one building at a time , until they were left with only a small area of land in the middle of the town . Within the perimeter was the castle , an entrenchment in the market square , St Mary Magdalene Church and an earthen defence known as " Maiden 's fort " . By this time , a combination of artillery and arson attacks had set most of the east side of town on fire . An attempt by three people ? two men and a woman ? to set fires inside the remaining defences was quashed , and the culprits lynched .

Further assaults were made on 10 May , along with a demand for Blake and his men to surrender , to which Blake responded that he " had four pairs of boots left and would eat three of them before he yielded . " Weldon 's relieving force had met with small parties of the Royalist army around Chard

and Pitminster , and they sent an advance party ahead of them , which reached Orchard Portman , roughly 2 miles (3 @. @ 2 km) south of Taunton , on 10 May . Fearing that they were facing the entirety of Fairfax 's army , Hopton ordered his forces to abandon their attacks and retreat to Bridgwater . As they left , they felled trees across roads to slow the Parliamentary advance . Weldon 's army arrived in Taunton on 11 May , relieving and restocking the town . Accounts of Taunton 's losses vary between 50 and 200 killed , with 200 or more casualties on top of that , while two thirds of the houses in the town had been razed . Having relieved Taunton , Weldon and his army left the following day and marched eastwards .

= = = Third siege = = =

Over the course of the siege , Lord Goring had been with the King in Oxford , and on 10 May he returned to Bristol with a royal warrant pronouncing him the Commander of the Royalist Army in the West Country , replacing Hopton . Goring began his operations by harrying Weldon 's army , and forcing them to retreat back to Taunton . Goring , commanding about 10 @, @ 000 men , established a third siege of the town in under a year . He ignored orders from the King for him to support the Royalist efforts in the Midlands , claiming that " Taunton would be taken in a few days . " Despite his promises , he soon discovered that his army was too small to enact a rapid takeover of the town , and he established a loose blockade . Hyde , who is frequently scathing of Goring in his description of the Civil War , recalls that " Goring was so far from making any advance upon Taunton , that he grew much more negligent in it than he had been ; suffered provisions , in great quantities , to be carried into the town . " As well as being lax in his siege , Goring was often drunk and ? reminiscent of the earlier siege ? was deserted by many of his troops .

The regional commander of the Parliamentary forces , Colonel Edward Massey , was ordered to relieve Taunton in June , but he could only raise 3 @, @ 000 men ; far less than was needed to dispel Goring 's army . The New Model Army , with Fairfax at their head , were busy in the Midlands defeating the bulk of the Royalist army at the Battle of Naseby , described by modern sources as " the decisive clash of the English Civil War " . Goring had been ordered by the King to abandon his siege and join the Royalist forces at Naseby , and it has been suggested by modern historians that with his forces , and his leadership , the Royalists might have won the battle . Immediately after securing that victory , Fairfax led his army down towards Taunton once again . Aware of the approaching army , Lord Goring mounted a final assault on the town , hoping to catch Blake unaware by sending his cavalry towards the town on 9 July . The attack was neutralised by a section of Fairfax 's army in Ilminster , and Goring withdrew from Taunton to meet Fairfax at the Battle of Langport , relieving the third and final siege of Taunton during the English Civil War .

= = Aftermath = =

In his history of Taunton , H. J. Wickenden suggests that over half of the town was burned or destroyed during the three sieges , while Diane Purkiss claims that it was as high as two thirds of the town . Several compensation payouts were made to the town and some of its residents , funded by fines against those who had fought for the Royalists , such as Sir William Portman , who had been the Member of Parliament for Taunton at the outbreak of the war and was fined £ 7 @, @ 000 . Although the Parliamentarians destroyed many of the castles that had featured in the Civil War , Taunton Castle was considered a Parliamentary stronghold , and remained intact . In 1647 , only two years after the end of the sieges , the castle was sold as part of the estate of Taunton Manor . In 1660 , shortly after taking the throne , Charles II stripped Taunton of its town charter for its part in the Civil War , and had the castle 's outer walls removed .

After commanding the defence of Taunton , Blake was ordered to capture Dunster Castle , which he achieved after a nine @- @ month siege . After the war , he was honoured by Parliament for his efforts and rewarded with £ 500 , while a further £ 2 @, @ 000 was split amongst his men . He took no side during the Second Civil War and , three years later , under the Commonwealth of England , he became a general at sea , as one of the three commissioners of the navy , and spent the rest of

his life as a naval commander , for which he remains best known .