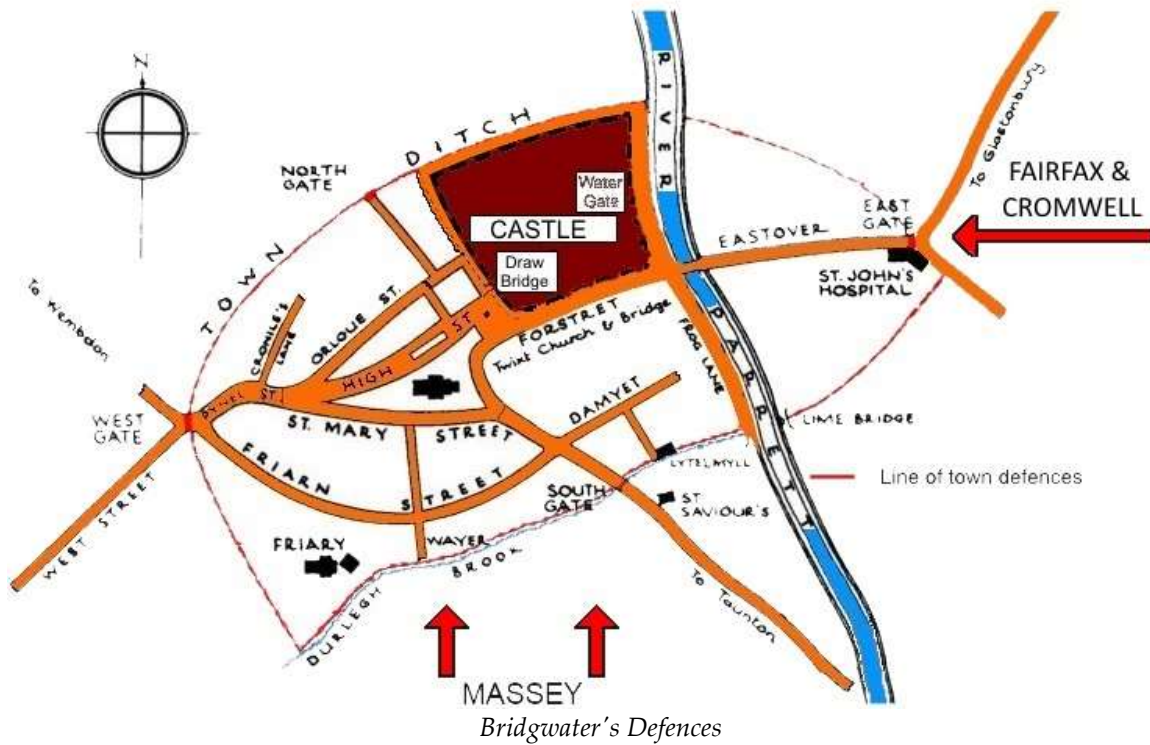


BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL BLAKE MUSEUM



THE SIEGE OF BRIDGWATER, JULY 1645

Bridgewater was naturally strong. It is true that its position was low, but so was the surrounding country. No high ground commanded it, and the ground immediately outside the fortifications was easily swept by its guns.

The river Parrett cut the town in two, but this was rather to the advantage of the defence. The stone bridge gave communication to the garrison, and the river was not easily crossed either immediately above or below the town. Further, the flatness of the terrain and the plentiful supply of water enabled the ditches to be flooded. At high tide Bridgewater could be made almost an island fortress.

The castle, the walls of which were 15 feet thick, not only served as a citadel, but also commanded the bridge, while its northern face formed part of the enclosure of the town. The Hospital of St. John in Eastover, was a solid building which might serve as a bastion to flank the East Gate. Its extent and condition at this time is a matter of some uncertainty. It appears to have had a gateway and drawbridge of its own, which would serve as a kind of postern or sally-port. It may fairly be assumed that the four gates were guarded by fortified gatehouses.

The Town ditch ran along the northern face of the Castle. The steep slope from King Square to Northgate still marks the fall of it. It ran along the south side of Mount Street, and through what is known as the Cattle Market to West Gate. From there Moat Lane

(now under the Broadway) probably indicates its line till it joined the Durleigh Brook which formed the principal water defence on the south side. Ditches also ran from the Parrett to East Gate both on the north-east and on the south-east sides of Eastover.

It is not very clear to what extent any of the ancient town walls, never extending further than from North Gate to West Gate, formed part of the defences at this time. The defenders relied chiefly upon earthworks or redoubts described as "mounts." A chain of these ran from St. John's Hospital to Dunwear, while another line covered the north west face of the town. Here also there was an outwork on the further side of the ditch, (probably in the form of a horn-work, – two demi-bastions joined by a curtain) which enabled enfilade fire to be brought to bear towards Northgate or Westgate. The site of this work is doubtful, but it probably was opposite the site of the Splash leisure centre, and has given its name, "The Mount" to the present street.

The Siege

Following the defeat of the Royalists at Langport on 10th July, Cromwell and Fairfax pushed on towards Bridgwater. They reached Middlezoy on the 10th and Chedzoy on the 11th. Sydenham House, dating from the 16th century and located on the Bath Road, about a mile from East Gate, probably fell on the 12th. The Royalist garrison at Burrowbridge surrendered on 13 July, clearing the way for the assault on Bridgwater.

Councils of war were held at Chedzoy on the 14th and 16th, and detailed preparations were made. Sunday July 20th was devoted to prayer, and at 2 am, as dawn was breaking, on Monday July 21st the assault began

The 16th century house at Hamp was the headquarters of Col Massey. Located to the south of the town and on rising ground,

here were located the guns and six regiments of foot.



Hamp House

When the siege began on 21 July, Massey fired into the town and attacked with his troops at the same time as Fairfax and Cromwell attacked from the East, at the East Gate.

In the fire-storm that followed many of the buildings in the town were burnt down. Blake House, (the museum), the Mill, Saint Mary's church and the old Vicarage in St Mary Street are among the few survivors.



Sydenham House, Bath Road

The defenders, behind earthworks at the east end of St. John's field and between there and Dunwear, were equipped with 40 guns, and mounted a battery between the west and north gates, at what was later called the Mount. Sir Thomas Fairfax, in command of the parliamentary forces, placed troops in the fields of Horsey and Bower, and five regiments of the New Model Army under Cromwell were drawn up in St. John's and Castle fields.

The town was stormed on 21 July 1645. Fairfax took Eastover with 600 prisoners, finding that most of the suburb had been fired. He then crossed the Parrett, forcing the royalists to yield the town. A total of 2,000 prisoners, 800 horse, and 36 guns were taken.

Estimates of the damage varied. Henry Harvey, lord of the Castle manor, claimed to have lost £4,000 including a house by the bridge, and the mayor in 1656 asked help to repair 120 houses destroyed in the town including the almshouses. Many of the inhabitants had removed themselves for safety to Wembdon. Between 8 January and 17 July 1645, before the siege, 68 soldiers were buried in the town; thereafter no burials were registered until 1 December.

Troops remained in the town, which was used as a base for the expedition to Ireland.



Sir Edward Massey



Sir Thomas Fairfax



Sir Edmund Wyndham, Royalist governor



Oliver Cromwell

Historical narrative derived from *The siege of Bridgwater*, by C. Trenchard. Bridgwater 1929.

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