

on Leicester at the end of May 1645. The siege of Leicester had national and local connotations. Nationally it caused sufficient panic in Westminster to prompt the Committee of Both Kingdoms to cut the New Model Army free of the shackles of executive control. The result was Fairfax's abandonment of the siege of Oxford and his subsequent defeat of the king's army at Naseby. Locally, the entry of the king's army into the region led to a renaissance in royalist fortunes. Lord Loughborough's command had been in decline since the middle of the previous year, and particularly since the defeat at the Battle of Denton at the end of October 1644. The capture of Leicester offered the chance to rebuild and redevelop the royalist war effort in the region. Defeat at Naseby cast them into a greater despair.

Richards's book opens with an examination of Leicester and its part in the war, in two chapters; the book looks at the town and its position in seventeenth-century England and the way in which the town became a parliamentary garrison early in the war. This is by no means a clear process and the book is unable to take us much further towards a full understanding of how Lord Grey took control of the county town, whilst the royalists became confined to the county fringes. This is a problem caused by the scant source material that is available rather than the fault of the book.

The central section of the book deals with the siege. Leicester was never a major strategic goal for the king's field army. Even locally the county town was not a higher priority. Lord Loughborough had been able to dominate the county in the first half of the war without possessing the town, and mounting a full-scale siege would severely, and perhaps uselessly, diminish precious resources. Leicester was chosen as a soft target, after the king's army found itself deprived of a primary purpose. Charles's advance towards beleaguered Chester had resulted in Sir William Brereton abandoning the siege. Leicester was known to be weakly defended and Loughborough had long tried to get the extra help he needed to capture it. By May 1645 the defences of Leicester had been redeveloped, but they were, as Richards shows, a combination of a series of limited improvements, made since the war began and rushed demolitions of suburban developments in Spring 1645. Moreover, the town garrison was too small to man the lengthy walls. The result was probably predictable, despite

The siege and storming of Leicester May 1645

Jeff Richards

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This is Jeff Richard's second book on the civil war in the East Midlands and it deals with the attack

the bravery of the men and women of Leicester who strove to keep the royalists from pouring through the breaches made in the walls. A chapter titled 'The Fall' opens with an examination of the press coverage of the siege and the alleged massacres of soldiers and civilians, after the royalists stormed the town, before moving on to cover Lord Loughborough's rebuilding of the town. After the king's army marched southwards Loughborough and Sir Matthew Appleyard began a redevelopment of the town defences. Work had hardly begun when the king's army rushed up hill into the larger New Model Army at Naseby. Crushing defeat brought about the second, very brief, siege of Leicester, which ended the local royalist renaissance and returned a parliamentary garrison to Leicester.

The final third of the text takes the story through until the return of Charles II, quickly looking at the rest of the first civil war, the second civil war and the establishment of the republic in one chapter and the Restoration in another. The final chapter looks at the physical remains of the siege largely from the perspective of the archaeological work of the Leicester and Leicestershire Museums Service, but also from the eye of a shrewd observer.

Richards intends that the book be read by a wide audience, making a serious contribution to our understanding of the civil war in the region, Leicester and Leicestershire in particular, but also to local people. To support this the book is crammed with illustrations, although the reproduction of some could be improved. One of the aims of the final chapter is to link the siege with the Leicester the readers know. In the end, it may be to this market that the book appeals most. In common with Professor Richards's biography of Lord Grey of Groby, this book contains extensive quotations from contemporary texts. These have value because they expose readers to the experience and impressions of eyewitnesses and propagandists, but they may be off-putting to some. In some cases Richards does not always follow an argument to a conclusion and cut a clear way through the contrasting impressions where it is not only legitimate but imperative to do so. This is particularly noticeable in the section on the aftermath and casualty figures, where the analysis does not quite reach a conclusion. In terms of a contribution to understanding the war in the midlands, this is undoubtedly the most comprehensive modern account of the siege of

Leicester, which makes use of the vast majority, if not all, of the available primary source material. Moreover, despite the long quotations the chapters on the siege are fast paced and carry the reader through the dramatic events with verve. The book is well-priced at £12.95 for a 400 page illustrated paperback.

Martyn Bennett
Nottingham Trent University