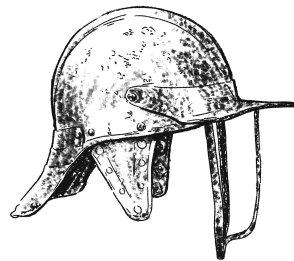


# The Last Day of August

## Great Budworth's Civil War Secret



The village of Great Budworth possesses one of the most remarkable churches in all of Cheshire, not just loved by locals but genuinely appreciated by history fans and enthusiasts of late medieval architecture right across the UK. One history they may not be aware of however is the visit paid to the village by Parliamentary forces on the last day of August in 1644; this is a hidden history of the English Civil War in Cheshire.

## Signs of War

Beyond its obvious role as a religious house and focal point for the local community, the English parish church is also a bastion of historical insight. In the absence of a castle - and sometimes even then - the parish church will likely be the oldest building in the village; and the primary witness to hundreds, and sometimes thousands of years of local life. As such, it will often find itself performing another role too; as a keeper of secrets.

From the shape of the tower, a visitor may deduce the origins of a more ancient building with relative ease, and from the churchyard, with its features and tracks, they may even learn more about the historical setting of the village surrounding it. Inside too, courtesy of the various pamphlets, effigies and mounted plaques to be found in a church of antiquity, an understanding may be gained as to the key players in the life of the building, be them local nobles or wealthy landowners. And for most, this will provide more than an ample return for a days historical enquiry. However, as one of the few stone constructions in the vicinity of the village, and of course the only place with a tower to provide a look out, the parish church has naturally bore witness to another, often under appreciated timeline of local history too.

From the Barons Wars of the Middle Ages, through the Wars of the Roses and to the English Civil Wars of the mid-seventeenth century, the parish church has repeatedly come to find itself at the centre of a more brutal and brazen military life. Occasionally, these chapters in its history will be known in the local area, but for the most part it is left to the researchers and amateur historians to piece together the puzzles hidden, not only in the depths of local historical record, but often in the very fabric of the building itself. The fall out of such civil conflicts was often highly political, and in times gone by that meant highly dangerous too. The need to side with the victors therefore, to ensure safety, often saw locals needing to get on with life under the new regime, religious or otherwise, as quickly and quietly as possible. As such, the details of the associated conflict often became purposefully forgotten. The memories left unspoken. All completely understandable. Yet the signs and the clues are often still there to be found, assuming you know where best to look for them.

There may go unreferenced in the guide book, but look closely at the stonework in the church and you may well spot deep score marks from the idle hours of billeted troops that found themselves with little to do but sharpen their weapons in readiness for battle. Outside the church too, around the doors and towers, circular depressions made from musket fire can sometimes be discovered. It is these shot marks that hold particular weight for this piece, as we look to uncover the details of a long since obscured Civil War shoot out in the heart of the Cheshire countryside.

## Great Budworth

The village of Great Budworth sits in the upper eastern quadrant of Cheshire, surrounded by rolling countryside, and makes for a perfect example of the classic English village of yore. Popular with TV crews, its cobbled lanes and cottages offer the visitor a tangible route back into the past; a route that, at every turn, finds itself in the shadow of the wonderful fourteenth century church of St.Marys and All Saints. A building described in *Buildings of England*, a foremost book on English architecture, as *one of the finest examples of ecclesiastical architecture remaining in Cheshire*, not only is the church an historical gem, but the church grounds also play home to the village's former school, a remarkably well persevered timber framed building built back in 1615.

A tour of the church itself brings with it a number of delights, not least the effigy of Sir John Warburton of Arley Hall, dressed in full dress armour. However, it was the stunning fifteenth century octagonal font that caught my attention most when I visited recently; re-discovered in 1868 having being hidden under the church floor during the English Civil War. There was nothing in the guide books regarding the church's connection to the conflict. The war was played out regionally in various spots across Cheshire, and several churches in the county make passing comment to it on their websites. Tarvin Church, around 16 miles to the south-east was a particular favourite of mine in this regard, displaying as it does dozens of musket shot holes around its tower and west wall from a skirmish that took place in the village during August 1644. The news that Great Budworth had been so affected by the war - for surely the requirement to hide a solid stone font beneath the church floor was concession to precisely that fact - was however something of an unknown quantity to me. Armed with this new information, I took it upon myself to examine the church exterior a little more closely.

Where contemporary buildings are found in close proximity to a church present during the Civil War it is not uncommon to discover evidence of a fire fight. Scars left from the muskets of Royalists and Parliamentary troops firing over close distances, closing in on one another as one side seeks to overthrow the other from what is, all sentimentality aside, a valuable strategic position.

At Great Budworth, many of the surrounding houses are likely contemporary, but better than that, the school house of 1615 is in the church grounds. I had missed it at first, but sure enough as I looked again, shot marks, perhaps more in keeping with a Flintlock pistol than a musket, were sunk into the stonework beside the school house door. Not only this, but there was what appeared to be a very deliberate "R" etched into the stonework too; a rather obvious reference to Royal allegiance. Turning 180 degrees to work out the angle of the gunfire

trajectory, I then too found what looked suspiciously like corresponding shot marks in the corner space of the walls between the Vestry and the Lady Chapel. It was the memory of a shoot out, it being easy to see how the corner space would provide cover for a soldier firing onto someone doing similarly from the doorway of the school. What happened here? I was relishing the challenge of trying to find out.

### **Civil War Cheshire**

The Civil War in Cheshire is, as you might expect, a complex history that contains as many rabbit holes of exception and contradiction as it does clear lines. Broadly speaking however, following initial attempts to preserve a state of neutrality during 1642, the year war broke out, 1643 brought some relatively well defined divisions of support. The west of the county, and the city of Chester in particular, spent most of the war as a Royalist base, well provisioned and defended - visited by King Charles in person twice - as it acted as a buffer between Parliamentary England and the Royalist loyalists of North Wales. Central and Eastern Cheshire however, soon found itself under Parliamentary control, with its primary HQ for the region in Nantwich and Sir William Brereton taking on the role as regional commander. It would be Brereton who would eventually take Chester itself following the battle of Rowton Moor in September 1645.

Most key conflicts in the county took place early in the war, with Brereton moving quickly to take key towns during the first few months of 1643, with notable battles in Nantwich and at Middlewich, the climax of which took place around the church of St. Michaels where 30 Royalists were killed and over 500 taken prisoner. Royalist incursions into Cheshire would occasionally still take place however, and it is in one such instance that our conflict at Great Budworth appears to have taken place. In winter of 1643, a force of some 3000 Royalist soldiers and 500 horse arrived in the Dee estuary from Ireland, which when meeting up with Lord Byron's army from Oxford, meant a significant Royalist force was available in Cheshire for the first time since the outbreak of hostilities. Spending several weeks at wild in the county, this local army caused significant disruption to Parliamentary plans as Lord Byron managed to galvanise his men into a fighting force that possessed a little bit more bite than the local Parliamentarians were used to. It was in this period that the Royalists took Beeston Castle, which had been under Lord Brereton's command for most of the year. It was a second, less well known incursion however, in August of 1644, in which we find our moment of action at Great Budworth.

### **Marrow's Men**

On Sunday 18th August, Colonel Marrow, a Royalist commander stationed in Chester, left the city with a small band of infantry and horse to advance towards Northwich. We don't know the precise reason for his journey, but it was as likely to be a simple scouting exercise of local Parliamentary strength as it was a dedicated mission. Parliamentary soldiers had been alerted to the presence of Marrow's men due to their stealing of livestock on route, and as Royalist scouts reached Hartford Green near Northwich, they were duly met with a party of Parliamentarians who had arrived in attempt to ward the Royalists off towards Chester. A fight broke out at Sandyway, and it was the Royalists who fared the better, taking a number of prisoners despite their leader Colonel Marrow himself being killed. It was the aftermath of this confrontation from which a number of local events remembered from the conflict took their genesis. Leaving Sandyway, the bulk of the Royalist force made for the village of Tarvin. We know this as just two days on, Parliamentary forces from the garrison at Nantwich attacked Tarvin Church, where they took more than 40 prisoners and killed 15 soldiers.

It is what happened next though that is so important for our quest regarding Great Budworth. From troop diaries attested to in Thomas Malbon's *Memorials of the Civil War in Cheshire and the Adjacent Counties*, compiled by Edward Burghall, Vicar of Acton in 1899, we learn that on Friday 30th August, in light of the recent trouble at Tarvin, a large number of Parliamentary troops marched out in order to reinforce defences in the village. However, having spent the night of the 30th at Middlewich, they made a deliberate detour north to Great Budworth on the 31st. Tarvin, as the crow flies, is around 15 miles east of Middlewich, so a journey to Great Budworth on route means that the Parliamentarians were actively choosing to make 20 mile round trip, off-track from their desired destination. Something in Great Budworth was clearly worth the effort of a force that consisted of the majority of the Nantwich Parliamentary Garrison paying the village a visit.

### **Sympathy for The King**

The Warburton family of Arley Hall has a long history with Great Budworth, a key feature of St Marys and All Saints Church is the known as the *Warburton Chapel* and the village itself was officially part of the Arley estate until as recently as 1948; and it is in the Warburton family that were the likely cause of the Nantwich garrison visiting the village on August 31st 1644.

History has come to recognise William Warburton of Arley Hall as a fierce Royalist. He would play a role in Sir George Booths rebellion of 1659, in which the Battle of Winnington Bridge in Northwich played an integral

part, as Booth led an uprising across the county in support of the pending restoration of the monarchy following the removal of Oliver Cromwell's son Richard as head of the state. We can somewhat safely assume therefore that such loyalties were already firmly established in Arley during 1644 by the Warburton family, and so then too in Great Budworth, regardless of how sensitively local circumstance required them to be nourished. When we place this alongside the Parliamentarians need to detour to Great Budworth in the immediate aftermath of the fighting at Tarvin, it may be a logical point to arrive at whereby we can suggest that the village was well known by Royalists as being sympathetic to their plight - and that in seeking refuge from swarming Parliamentary forces in August 1644, a detachment of Royalists had made their way to the village in search of sanctuary.

The issue of the font being hidden as it was would also make total sense as sympathetic villagers, all of which would be closely bound to and reliant on the Warburton family for their livelihood, would hurriedly look to hide away precious objects before the Parliamentarians arrived. This is a theory that is much more than conjecture. We know the Parliamentary army visited that day, and we know that means they must have had a reason to. Maybe they were tipped off, or perhaps more likely, it was an open secret that safe harbour for Royalists, no matter the colour of the county at large, could be found in the village of Great Budworth.

I am tempted to suspect that there were no great number of Royalists in the village, as the musket shot damage is comparatively small to that at Tarvin, but that rather a lone soldier of the King, or at most several, had found cause to shelter in the school house when the forces from Nantwich arrive before a short exchange of fire brought a swift end to their time hiding in the churchyard.

### **War's End**

There would be further clashes between Royalists and Parliamentarians in Cheshire, not least in June of 1645 when the King's men began their last great push in the county, again seeing armed action at Tarvin before a clash in Delamere Forrest saw the majority of the Royalist force killed or captured. The city of Chester, the last Royalist stronghold in the county and their last working port in the whole of England would come under Parliamentary artillery bombardment from 22 September 1645, and on the 24th, King Charles himself would watch from the city walls as his armies were defeated at Rowton Moor in the battle that brought an end to any sense of effective force in the county.

So it appears that Great Budworth does indeed have its own secret history when it comes to the English Civil War, but it is not one that should be hidden away or dressed in any sense of shame. Quite the opposite, the story of the shoot out in the churchyard should be seen as another fascinating piece of local history in the timeline of a village with a remarkable historical legacy. The civil war in general may be a story of division and brutality, claiming more lives per head of the population than the First World War, but in moments like that which seems to have taken place at Great Budworth, we can also glimpse the humanity that is so often lost across the period.

Those Royalist soldiers made their way to the village in search of refuge, and the villagers it seems, no matter the risk to their own lives, did their very best to provide it.