

‘A Place Strongly Fortified’ – Reading, its Abbey and the Civil War

It is difficult to imagine Reading today being in the midst of conflict, but during the war fought between King and Parliament between 1642-1646 it was a place of vital importance.

The town sat astride the Great West Road, controlling the way to the west of the country, and the Thames, a vital artery for the transport of military equipment and material from London to Parliament's armies, flowed by it. Captured by the royalists in November 1642, Reading became an important garrison once King Charles I had decided to make Oxford his war-time capital. For Parliament, the retaking of the town was necessary before operations against Oxford could be mounted.

This set the scene for one of the most important, but less well known, events in Reading's history; the siege of April 1643. After taking the town the royalists had set about building defensive works to protect their garrison, which at the time of the siege consisted of about 3,000 infantry and 300 cavalry. This followed seventeenth century practice of making a circuit of earthen walls around the town protected by bastions, with forts positioned outside the defensive line. Such fortifications were designed to protect against cannon fire and make assault dangerous and difficult. Figure 1 shows a map of the defences from a copy of an original in the British Library held by Reading Archives. This is likely to depict the 1643 defences as the fort at Forbury (see below) is not included.

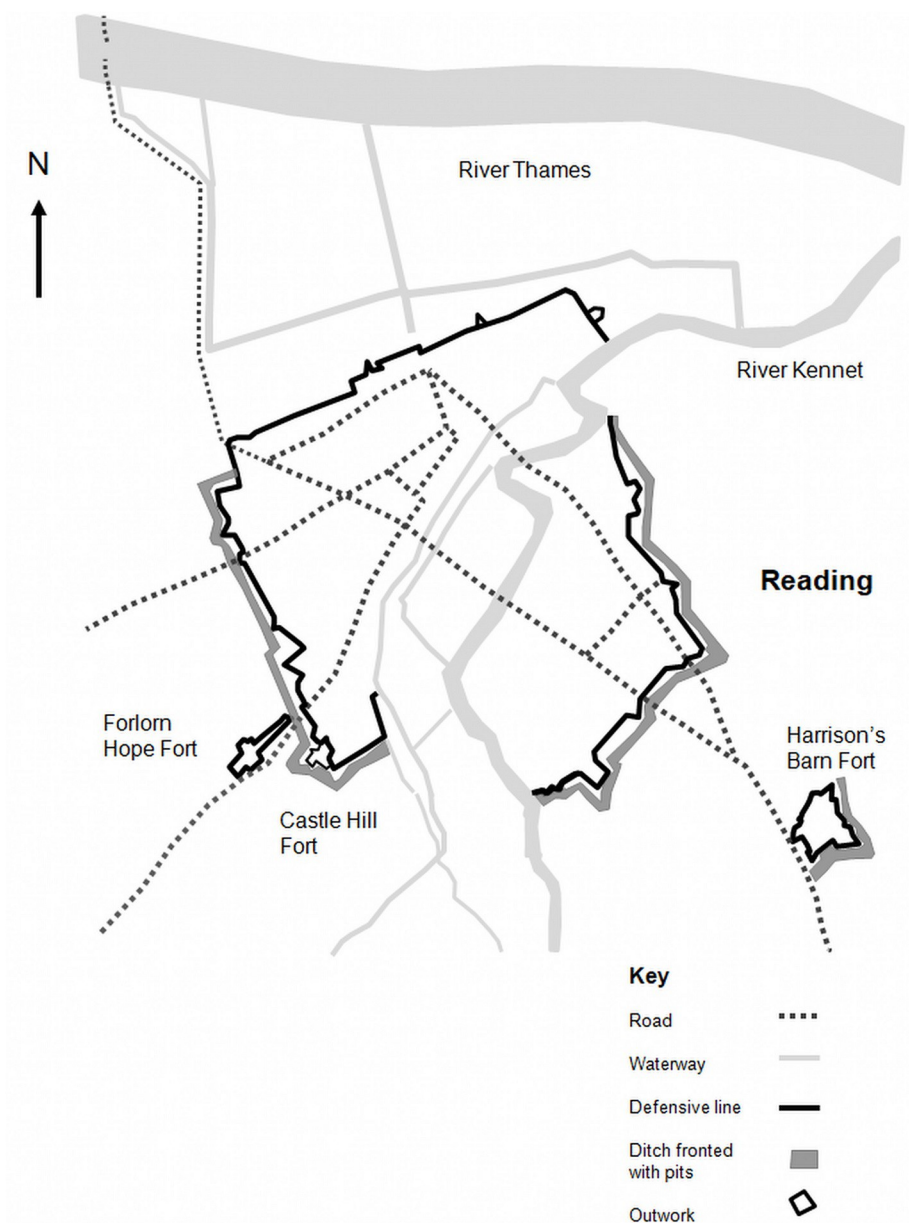


Figure 1: A sketch map of the defences of Reading in 1643

Parliament's army of 7,800 infantry, 1,800 cavalry and 400 dragoons under the command of the Earl of Essex left Windsor on 12 April 1643. It advanced south of Reading and swung around to the west of the town to begin the siege on 15 April. Essex made Southcote House his headquarters, began positioning his gun batteries and advancing trenches toward the town. The parliamentarians had almost 30 cannons, more than the defenders. But they had only five pieces of artillery designed for siege operations. When the royalists tried to mount a light gun in the steeple of

St Giles' church it was soon silenced by Essex's cannon fire and a raid from the town to disrupt the siege lines was forced back.



Figure 2: The Earl of Essex

By 19 April the parliamentarians had advanced their guns within 400 metres of the town despite further attacks against them by the garrison. The royalist governor, Sir Arthur Aston was knocked unconscious by falling masonry dislodged by cannon fire and was replaced by Colonel Richard Feilding. On the same day Essex's men were joined by 3,000 more infantry, 480 cavalry and 150 dragoons raised in the eastern counties of England and these occupied the area to the east of Reading, encircling the town.

By 21 April the parliamentary trenches were within 50m of the town, but the royalists in Oxford had begun making efforts to relieve the garrison. Soldiers and barrels of gunpowder were barged into Reading overnight of 18 April and a further relief effort involving a force of cavalry was planned for 23 April. This failed, in part, because the messenger sent to swim the Thames to inform the garrison was captured and divulged the plan.

With gunpowder supplies low, Colonel Feilding decided to open surrender negotiations with the besiegers on 25 April. But the King had set out from Oxford with a relief force of 6,000 men which appeared on Caversham Hill that afternoon.

They moved to attack the parliamentary regiments which had been quickly sent across the Thames to prevent their advance. A battle soon developed with Essex's men holding a barn and lining the hedgerows to prevent the royalist reaching the town. Feilding was urged to assault the parliamentarians by a messenger sent into Reading. But he refused as he had given his word not to attack whilst talking about surrender. More parliamentarians joined the battle and eventually the King was forced to withdraw. Surrender terms were agreed on 26 April and these allowed the garrison to march out *with flying colours, armes, four peeces of ordnance, with lighted matches and balls in their [soldiers'] mouth* the day after.



Figure 3: Reading and Caversham from John Rocques Map of Berkshire 1761 (TNA, MR1/677)

Feilding was subsequently court martialled in Oxford for surrendering the town so easily. A parliamentary officer, Sir Samuel Luke, who was at the surrender suggested that if a garrison commander on his side had given up a town so well provisioned he would have 'deserved noe better than a halter'. Feilding was

fortunately spared on the scaffold, but he never held senior command in the royalist forces again.

Parliament held Reading until evacuating it again October 1643, but did little to improve the defences. The royalists immediately retook the town and set about strengthening the fortifications, though apparently not those on the north side. In May 1644 with the approach of two parliamentary armies, the royalists withdrew and over the summer the town's defences were improved by Parliament.

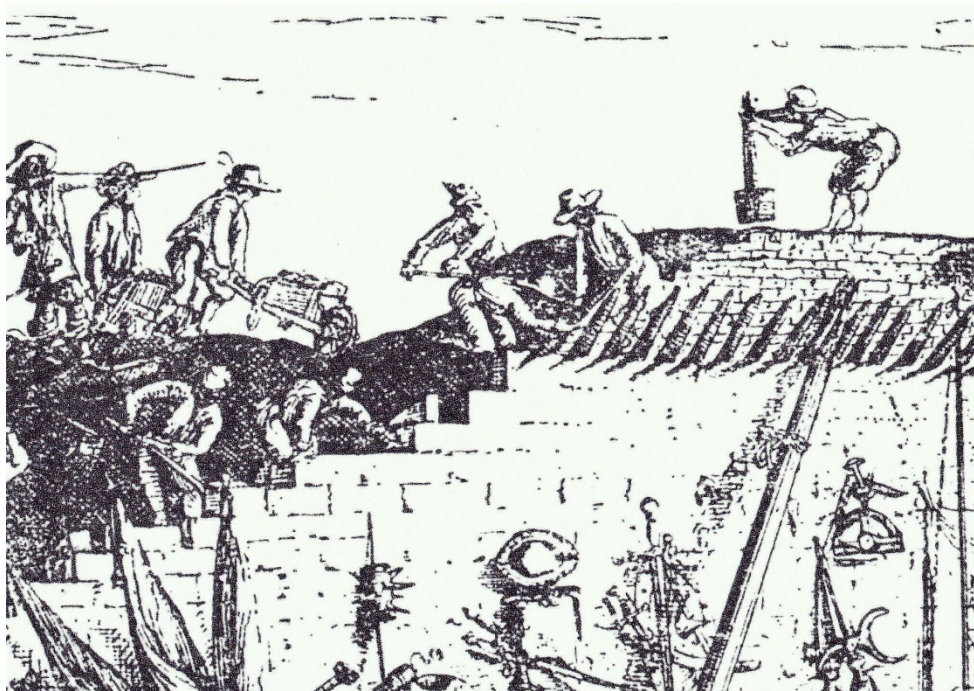


Figure 4: Building Fortifications (detail from H Ruse, *Versterckte Vesting* (The Strengthening of Strong-holds), 1654

This included the building of forts around the Abbey and it seems likely that the Forbury fortification, the remnants of which can be seen today in Forbury Gardens, was built at this time. This work is portrayed on Tomkin's 1802 map of Reading (see Figure 5) and possibly used the royalist bastion built on that side of the defences in 1643 within its construction.

Much archaeology has been undertaken around the Abbey and some of this has revealed glimpses of the Civil War defences. Work in the 1970s found a ditch, which seemed to run south-east to north-west, tentatively interpreted as being from the Civil War around 50m east of St James' church. This could be the line of the royalist defences. Other investigations in the late 1970s and early 1980s revealed the ditch of the fortification shown on Tomkins' map ending at the north wall of the refectory. Another 7.5 metre wide ditch running east-west to the south of the refectory was also found. Finally core sampling by Reading University of the Forbury mound in 2017

found it was partly made up of late medieval building debris, probably from the Abbey, suggesting it was of Civil War origin.

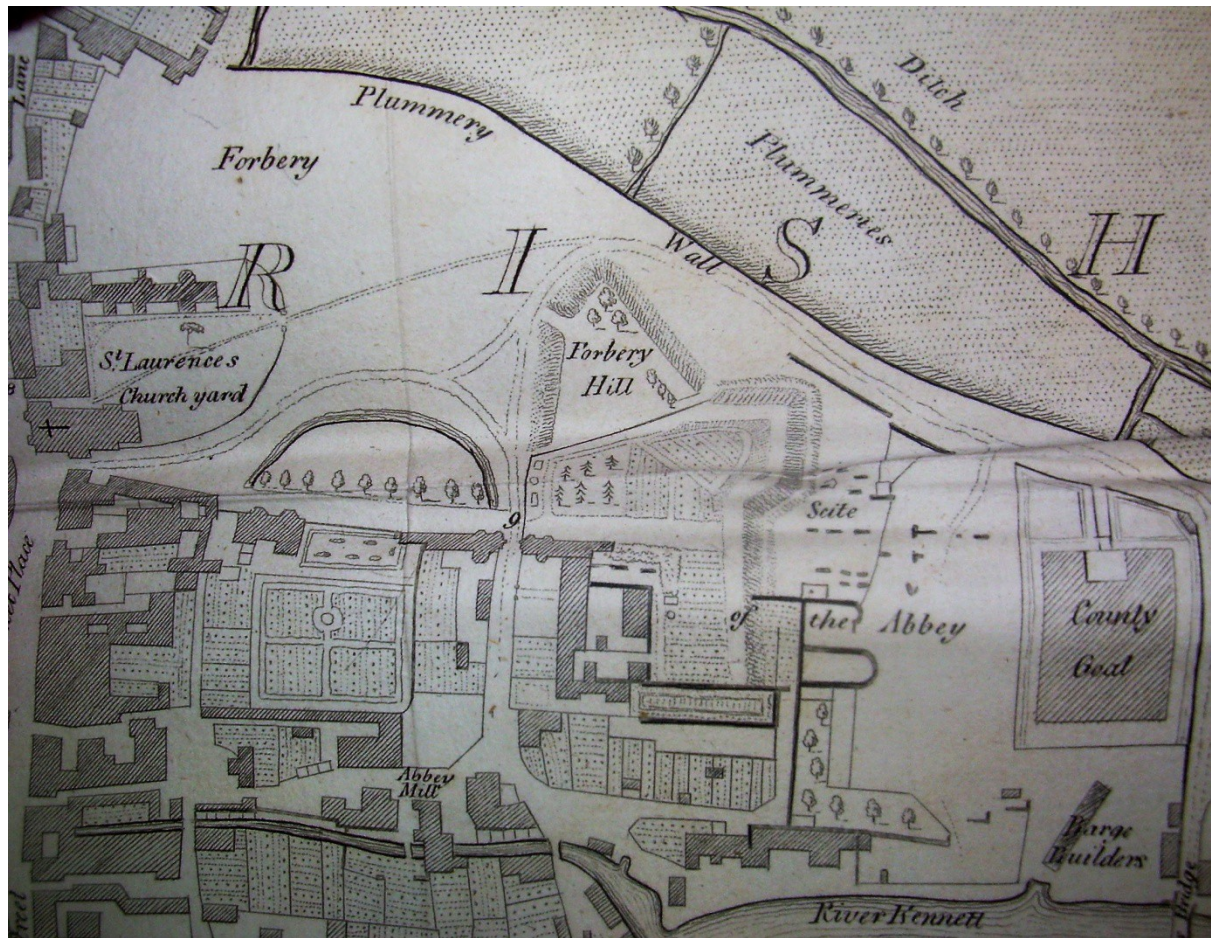


Figure 5: Tomkins map of Reading 1802 showing the Forbury Fort (from Charles Coates, *The History and Antiquities of Reading*, 1802)

The Forbury fort is unusual as it is built around the remnants of the Abbey. Seventeenth century military theory and practice would have suggested the Abbey walls around the fort be pulled down to give the defenders a clearer line of fire and it is uncertain why this did not happen. Whilst Reading might lament the Abbey's destruction, the survival of what remains is remarkable as the building of the defences and the 1643 siege could have caused much greater damage than they did.