

CIVIL WAR COMES TO WEDMORE, 1643–1644

Hazel Hudson and Frances Neale

As far as the surviving historical record goes, the English Civil War (1642-1647) would seem to have passed by the Isle of Wedmore. Monmouth's Rebellion in 1685 was a different story; but in the 1640s there have appeared to be no references to any disturbances in Wedmore. This may be illusory; the churchwardens' accounts which are such a useful source of clues to Parliamentary and Royalist sympathies, and to the problems caused by passing troops in north Somerset, do not survive in Wedmore until 1701.¹ The military struggle 1642-1646 flowed to and fro between Bristol and Bath, around Wells, and southwest to Bridgwater, Taunton and Exeter.² Parishes on or near the main route from Bridgwater and Taunton to Bristol (the present-day A38) suffered from the depredations of

royalist troops in 1645.³ Wedmore and its associated villages, on higher ground cut off (or protected by) the moors of the rivers Axe and Brue, would seem to have been left alone. The survival of evidence is, however, often a matter of chance. A single, unexplained cannon ball, which could be 17th century, is kept in the church parvise. Clues to a different story can appear in unexpected places.

Among the records of Wells Almshouse is a single sheet of paper bearing a short account of expenses, hastily written with many blots and erasures.⁴

It is, by implication, a plea for a rent rebate. A tenant's farming and finances were disrupted by the demands of the Civil War, and by the unexpected arrival of the soldiery:

1643

Money that I have Discharged for balles Closses

Paid first unto the parliament Armie
for 3 moneths at vj^s a moneth xviii^s
and for pye[ni]rs to Bristoll ij^s
*[the above two entries have been crammed
into the list afterwards]*

Imprimis paid for the first six mountes for the
contribution for his Ma[ies]ties
service j^{li} xvj^s
Item for the next six mountes ij^{li} viii^s
Item for three mountes more j^{li} iiiij^s
Item for two mountes more xvj^s
Item paid to Bristoll for piners xvj^d
Item paid for bullets & powder viij^d
Item paid to posset piners xvj^d
Item paid for vauce money xij^d
*[entry crossed through: For his maiestie service
6^{li} 8^s 4^d]*

[entry heavily crossed through:
Somme is 6^{li} 8^s 4^d
the whole sum
for both is 7^{li} 8^s 4^d

paid unto William Smith in nov. 1643 at
Bridgwater 5 - 0 - 0
paid unto William Lewse the 12th October
1644 5 - 11 - 8



William Latcham's expenses, 1643–4.
Wells Cathedral Archives AH/AF 473

[written vertically in the margin alongside the above entries:]

so the Contribucion is paid unto 23th sept. 1644

[two deleted entries; these are the two items inserted at the top of the account instead, presumably because they were the first chronologically:]

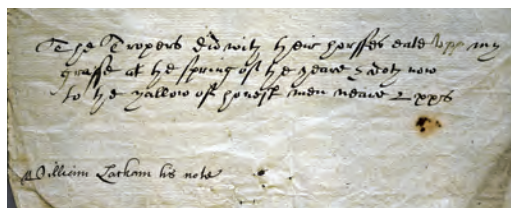
Paid to the parliament Armeij first
for three mountes xvij^s
paid to the piners to Bristoll ij^s]

[and separately, below the deleted entries:]

The Troopers did with their horses eate upp my
grasse at the spring of the yeare & doth now
to the yallow^s of honest men neare xx^s

[at the bottom, in a different and neater hand, is written :]

William Lacham his note.



Postscript to William Latcham's expenses, 1643–4.
Wells Cathedral Archives AH/AF 473 (detail)

This list of expenses, with its vernacular spelling, hasty writing and the urgent appeal of the note at the end conveys vividly the demands, confusion and unexpected consequences of the war for ordinary country people. It is the only documentary evidence so far discovered which shows that Civil War troops did in fact come to Wedmore in 1643–4. It is not made clear whether the “Troopers ... with their horses” were Royalist or Parliamentarian. They were probably Royalist, part of the force under Lord George Goring which moved through north Somerset in 1644 to secure the county before advancing on Taunton, firmly held by Parliamentary forces. The demands and behaviour of the royalist army caused outrage in villages not far away – at East Brent, Mark and Lympham.⁶ This farmer would have been one of many thrown into difficulties by the demands of the war. Whoever wrote ‘William Lacham his note’ at

the bottom has made it possible to set his troubles in their local context.

William Latcham (as the name is usually spelt) was a tenant farmer in Wedmore. The family took their name from the hamlet of Latcham, a mile outside Wedmore on the Wells road. They had been in the area since at least the 1400s.⁷ One branch lived at Stoughton in the 1600s, and appear to have been prominent yeomen farmers.⁸ William was born in 1599, married Susanna Davis in 1626 and was probably the father of Richard, baptised in 1635. He died in 1671.⁹ In 1675 a Richard Latcham, who may have been William's son but could also have been his nephew of the same name, was fined for attending an illegal religious meeting of dissenters at Stoughton.¹⁰ Richard Latcham is also one of twelve signatories to the lease, in 1680, of a property in the centre of Wedmore which is closely associated with the first purpose-built nonconformist chapel.¹¹ If it was Royalist troopers' horses who consumed William Latcham's grass crop, his indignation could have been heightened by the family's nonconformist inclinations.

William Latcham was the tenant of four fields which belonged to Llewellyn's Almshouse in Wells. A considerable amount of land around Wedmore was purchased in 1629–30 as part of the endowment of the proposed almshouse, which opened in 1636.¹² William Latcham's fields formed a neat block of approximately 20 acres at present-day Redhill, earlier called Redlinche, on the northern side of the village and on the east side of the road to Crickham and Clewer (see plan). They are called Ball's Closes in William Latcham's note, and are so named on the parish map of 1791.¹³ The fields were still called Ball's Closes and still belonged to Llewellyn's Almshouse in 1809.¹⁴ They can be identified as a unit as early as 1595, when Thomas Stone of Wedmore, gentleman, granted lands including 20 acres ‘lying uppon Redlinche which sometye were used for Meadowe nowe divided into severall Closes conteyninge Foure acres a pece’ to his illegitimate brother Edward Stone, who was ‘one of the Fotemen’ at the court of Queen Elizabeth I.¹⁵ They were early private enclosures on the edge of the village. The combined acreage of the Ball's Close fields on the 1/2500 O.S. map of 1904 is 21½ acres, remarkably close to the round figure of 20 acres given in 1595.

Thomas Stone died in 1606, and his brother Edward in 1607, so that the estate including Ball's Closes passed to Edward's young son, another Edward, then aged 19. In 1630 Edward Stone junior



Wedmore 1643–4

sold the estate, including the twenty acres described just as they had been in 1595, to the Llewellyn's Almshouse trustees.¹⁶ The Ball family appear in Wedmore parish registers in the 17th century, but had been tenants of these fields for a sufficiently long time before that to have given their name to the holding by 1595.

Of the two other names that appear in the note, William Smith was a mercer of Wells, and a member of the Corporation from 1628 until his death in 1663. His civic career can be traced rising from conduit-warden and rent-collector to general receiver, and he became mayor of Wells in 1657–8.¹⁷ He was a Justice of the Peace during the Commonwealth, and witnessed the marriages of a number of Wedmore couples between 1653 and 1656.¹⁸ He appears as a trustee of Llewellyn's Almshouse in 1655–1659.¹⁹ William Lewse, miller, was another member of Wells Corporation, and a trustee of Llewellyn's Almshouse. He was receiver of the income from the almshouse estates 1641–1644.²⁰ A William Lewse

lived in Wedmore from about 1620, but may not be the same person.²¹

The substantial payments to William Smith in November 1643 and to William Lewse in October 1644 are probably William Latcham's annual rent to Llewellyn's Almshouse, one element of normality in the note. Otherwise, most of the list records money which William Latcham had to pay out over twenty months in 1643 and 1644, in levies demanded by both sides in the war as their fortunes changed and as Royalist and Parliamentary troops moved through Somerset as their campaigns progressed or withdrew. In addition, there are payments to or for the 'piners' or 'pye[ni]rs – the 'pioneers' or foot-soldiers sent on ahead of the troops to make preparations for their arrival in the village on which they were billeted, sometimes for a night, sometimes for weeks.²² Often recruited locally, the pioneers would be used to dig latrines and drains, pitch tents, set up horse lines and secure temporary encampments with banks and fences. The term 'pioneers' was later used for the navvies of the turnpike, canal and railway era. The money paid on two occasions 'to

Bristol' for pioneers was a levy to pay them, while the 16d. 'to posset piners' suggests an element of protection money. Did William Latcham supply the pioneers with drink at the end of their work, to send them on their way speedily and without any malicious damage? The 'bullets & powder' costing 8d. were presumably for the defence of William himself and his household in these dangerous times.

The location of Ball's Closes is crucial to understanding the note. The compact block of enclosed meadows is situated on level ground just above the edge of Wedmore Lowgrounds, part of Wedmore Moor. These moor-edge meadows, all round the Isle of Wedmore, were highly valued for their early and successive crops of hay. The troops could have arrived along the road from Wells, or from the main road between Bristol and Bridgwater or Taunton (now the A38), either by Mark Causeway and Blackford, or from Lower Weare and Lascot Hill. There was no direct road from Cheddar at this time. Either route would bring them into the ancient

'Borough' in the centre of Wedmore, the northern end of which extended right up to Ball's Closes.²³ Ball's Closes would be the most convenient place for troops billeted in Wedmore to put their horses, wagons and equipment: level, compact, adjacent to the village centre where officers and most of the soldiers would be billeted, and with an ample water supply, either from field ponds (shown on all the later maps) or from the Lerburne stream bounding the southern end of the fields. Ball's Closes are in fact the only fields adjoining the village that have all these attributes. Stock normally grazed out on the open moors, but the enclosed meadows would provide grazing for the horses, while making it easier to keep animals and equipment secure.

It was a misfortune of war that the horses ate William Latcham's early hay crop, in the spring of 1644, and were it seems still there and still eating when he wrote the postscript to his list of expenses, presumably in September/October 1644 when he had paid his rent to William Lewse. The lost grass was worth 20s. to him, and he presumably had to buy in feed for his own animals. His total war-related outlay over the two years, including the 20s. for lost grass but less the two amounts that are probably his annual rent, came to £8 8s. 4d. If his normal rent payment was about £5 each year, it is clear that the demands of 1643–4 would have left him with considerable financial problems.

What this note is doing among the Wells Old Almshouse records must remain a matter of conjecture. Llewellyn's Almshouse, in Priest Row, was a completely separate establishment from the Old Almshouse (Bubwith and Still's Almshouses) in Chamberlain Street. A simple explanation could be that one of the Wells Corporation officials, probably William Lewse who in 1644 was receiver of the income from the almshouse estates, left this piece of paper behind at the wrong meeting. And the cannon ball? Perhaps it rolled off a pile unnoticed and was left behind when the troops moved on. Discovered later in a field or hedge, it was put in the church parvise with a miscellany of other local finds.

Acknowledgements

Photographs by Michael Blandford, reproduced with permission of the Chapter of Wells Cathedral.

Abbreviations

SHC – Somerset Archives at Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton.

References

- ¹ Surviving churchwardens' accounts were used to good effect by John Wroughton, *A Community at War: The Civil War in Bath and North Somerset 1642–1650* (1992).
- ² D. Underdown, *Somerset in the Civil War and Interregnum* (1973) chs.2–4; A. Nott, *Under God's Visitation* (2010) ch.6.
- ³ H. Symonds, ed., 'A By-Path of the Civil War', *Proc. S.A.N.H.S.* vol.65 (1919) ii, 48–75.
- ⁴ Wells Cathedral Archives AH/AF 473.
- ⁵ estimate, allowance.
- ⁶ H. Symonds, ed., *ibid.*, D.Underdown, *ibid.*
- ⁷ Hazel Hudson, *The New Wedmore Chronicles* (2002), 97–98.
- ⁸ Hazel Hudson, *ibid.*, 80, 186.
- ⁹ S. H. A. Hervey, *Wedmore Parish Registers: Baptisms* (1890), 50, 102; *Marriages* (1888), 26; *Burials* (1890), 128.
- ¹⁰ Hazel Hudson, *ibid.*, 186.
- ¹¹ Hazel Hudson, *ibid.*, 80.
- ¹² Tony Scrase, *Wells: A Small City* (2006), 90–91.
- ¹³ SHC, D\P\wed/13/10/17: 1791 parish map of Wedmore.
- ¹⁴ SHC, D\P\w.st.c./17/1/36: 1809 survey of Llewellyn's Almshouse estates.
- ¹⁵ Hazel Hudson, *ibid.*, 114; SHC, D\P\w.st.c./17/1/2.
- ¹⁶ Hazel Hudson, *ibid.*, 114; SHC, D\P\w.st.c./17/1/1, 2.
- ¹⁷ SRS vol. 91, Wells Convocation Act Books ed. A.Nott and J. Hasler (2004), 1008–9.
- ¹⁸ S. H. A. Hervey, *Wedmore Parish Registers: Marriages* (1888), 37–41.
- ¹⁹ Wells Cathedral Archives AH/E2/1412, 1414, 1423.
- ²⁰ SRS vol. 91, Wells Convocation Act Books ed. A.Nott and J. Hasler (2004), 986; Wells Cathedral Archives AH/AF 474.
- ²¹ S. H. A. Hervey, *Wedmore Parish Registers: Baptisms* (1890), 80, 83, 85; *Burials* (1890), 71, 75.
- ²² In use from 1523 onwards, from the French *pionnier*, Old French *paonier*. *Shorter O.E.D.* (1973 edn.)
- ²³ Hazel Hudson, *ibid.*, 70, 72.