The Battle of Crewkerne.

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IF the Battle of Crewkerne is unknown to fame, it is only another proof that the importance of our town is systematically overlooked. It is quite as much a fact that there was a Battle of Crewkerne in 1645, as that there was a Battle of Waterloo in 1815. All the fighting was not done either at Waterloo or in our own parish; but each was the centre of interesting and important movements.

The events I have to speak of took place within a week. They begin on Friday, the 4th of July, 1645, when Fairfax, after a fine march from Dorchester, looked down on the ruins of Beaminster from the hill between that town and Crewkerne:—the hill probably through which the tunnel now admits the peaceful traveller into the Happy Valley. It was, we are told, the pitifullest spectacle that eye could behold. Prince Maurice had been there before. A riot occurred between his French and Cornish troops, and almost every house had been burned to the ground. I may be excused from entering at length into the subsequent details, they are very carefully given in the *Book of the Axe*, and Mr. Pulman has relied in great measure on the graphic account of Joshua Sprigge, M.A., a zealous Puritan, but one would suppose a clear sightseer and not very unfair partizan. His book is called *Anglia Rediviva* or England's recovery, published in 1647; and the author chooses for his motto a Greek text from the Revelation, "The leaves of the trees were for the healing of the nations." A great admirer of Cromwell, he gives him the sincere flattery

of imitation in the incredible intricacy of parenthesis in the fine passages of his introduction and dedication; but like his hero, he is sharp, short, and decisive in matters of action. Mr. Pulman seems to despise him, and Mr. Frederick Harrison goes so far as to call him the "worthy Puritan Sprigge." However, he is the author for our battle, and has an accurate acquaintance with the localities, and it will save time if for a few minutes we look at things mainly through his spectacles.

On that Friday afternoon then, the 4th of July, the whole of Somersetshire was held by the King, with the single exception of Taunton, now hard pressed by Lord Goring, very short in supplies both of food and ammunition. The people on the whole were rather Royalist than Roundhead and a very strong chain of garrisons along the line of the Yeo was supposed to make Bridgwater and Bristol, now held by Prince Rupert, secure. Amongst the noticeable Royalists is Lord Paulett, who had greatly distinguished himself for the King, and held a command in the Royal army. He does not seem to have been on very good terms with his neighbours at Crewkerne. A speech is attributed to him, made at Sherborne in 1642, in which, classing together as Puritanical places, Taunton, Crewkerne, Bristol, Dorchester, and Exeter, he tells his soldiers at Sherborne to "let their swords be cruel on them without difference of age, sex, or degree." The speech was probably never spoken, but it was said to have been, and the report throws a light on the bitterness which distracted the neighbourhood.

In the opinion of Clarendon, had the King retreated to the West after the disaster of Naseby he might at all events have protracted the struggle. Instead of doing this, he sent the Prince of Wales, and surrounded him with a divided Council and Generals who were probably as little fit to hold their own against Cromwell as any that even the Cavaliers could have furnished. Of the men of influence, Greenvill and Goring were the most noticeable. The former

was the most rapacious, the latter the most profligate of the Royalist chiefs. Both were more than half disaffected to the King, and there seems to have been evidence that Greenvill at least was willing to bring about the abdication of the King and the substitution of Prince Rupert for the Prince of Wales as his successor. Goring had already twice betrayed his party —first the King, and then the Parliament; he drank hard, gave the reins to his passions, and shocked the most profligate by his shamelessness. He was however a brave and dashing officer, yet almost more formidable to his friends than his foes.

"Lord Goring's forces," says Clarendon, "infested the borders of Dorset, Somerset, and Devon by unheard of rapine, without applying themselves to any enterprises upon the rebels."

It was in consequence of this terrible state of things that Fairfax had another very difficult task in dealing with the Clubmen of these counties. The "farming men," as Sprigge calls them, organised themselves under the leading gentlemen of Dorset, Somerset, and Devon, to protect their own property and check the depredations on both sides. The neutrality of the leaders, at all events, was strongly inclined to be more friendly to the King than to the Parliament, and some of them had received considerable encouragement from Rupert and the Council of the Prince of Wales. The mass of the men however were more independent, wearing white ribbons in their hats, and chanting in somewhat of a Jingo strain their doggrel—

> If ye offer to plunder or take our cattle,
> Be you assured we'll give you battle.

They seem to have held their own pretty firmly.

All sorts and conditions of men were at all events true to the doctrine that they themselves had a certain right to plunder, and were always ready to fall upon either party when it got into difficulties. We meet with the names of Hoskins, Paulett, and Hussey amongst the leaders. Fairfax had dealt

wisely and firmly with them, and Cromwell, we are told, with a mixture of sound argument, vigorous handling, and kindly good sense, was a model of moderation, firmness, and tact. He got quit of the trouble speedily, and sent those whom he called poor silly creatures, to their homes.

The Puritan army then had got to Beaminster. A lieutenant of the Royal army fell into the hands of the enemy at Crookhorn, and was brought to Fairfax. From him it was ascer tained that Goring, after one last attack, had abandoned the siege of Taunton, and was marching on Ilminster, to check Fairfax, if possible. On Saturday, the 5th, his army started; the weather was very hot, the road ill and narrow, being all enclosed. The men, therefore, who had had a fortnight of forced marches, were glad enough to get to Crewkerne, and looked for a rest on the Lord's day. On their arrival, however, they received news which, in the words of Sprigge, "made them stirr their stumps." The advance of the Royalists on Ilminster had been, it was thought, abandoned; they were now in full force at South Petherton, an attack might be looked for that night. Three regiments of Puritan horse, and with them two of foot, were ordered to advance. Notwithstanding their weary march, we are assured that their hearts leapt for joy that they were like to be engaged, and they pushed on to the front. Before them the enemy retreated, recrossed the bridge over the Parrett to South Petherton, and made a stand there behind breastworks. The Puritans, however, immediately rebuilt the bridge, and Saturday closed by a further retreat of the Royalists on the "pass" to Ilchester and Lode Bridge on the line of the Yeo.

Sunday, the 6th, was not a day of perfect rest at Crewkerne. As the day wore on, messengers hurried in with fresh tidings. At four and six in the evening, at midnight, and again at two in the morning, news came. The head-quarters of the enemy were at Long Sutton; Lode Bridge and Langport were held in strength; the two passes of the Yeo at Ilchester and

Langport had been made good, and the bridge toward Yeovil, higher up the river, had been broken down.

At four o'clock on the morning of Monday, the 7th, the drums beat, and by six the foot were drawn out of the town to a rendezvous in a field about a mile from Crewkerne, and a general movement was made towards Petherton. The whole of the ground near and between the two streams was very marshy, and probably spanned by only two or three passes, while the garrisons of Ilchester, Langport, and Lode Bridge, seemed too strong to allow the river to be crossed. Fairfax called a council of war. At one time the opinion prevailed that they must go round quite as far as Sherborne to turn the enemy's flank. In the result however a passage was effected at Yeovil, or perhaps at a little further down by Yeovilton, so that on Tuesday, the 8th, both armies were on the same side of the river. The Royalists retreated to Ilchester, and then hastily abandoned their position there, not having time to demolish the works or to set fire to anything but the Bridewell, which they had fortified; and even this was quickly quenched by the inhabitants.

Next day a new danger declared itself. Goring, either with a view of attacking Crewkerne, or in hopes of after all getting into Taunton by a surprise, had made a rapid countermarch on Ilminster; General Massey, however, was despatched to overtake him, and on Wednesday morning came to Ilminster; where, finding the horses in one field, and the soldiers taking their amusement in another, he made short work of the matter. On the same day Fairfax and Cromwell pushed on to Long Sutton. The resistance was poor, and before night the Royalists had been forced back to a position a little to the right of Langport, between High and Low Ham. On Thursday, the 10th, the final struggle took place. Goring is much blamed for not having made his way westward and attempted a junction with his friends in Devonshire. He stood upon his advantage, having the passes of the river, and

might fight or fly at his own pleasure. He would have been safe if he could have got to Bridgwater. A different resolution however was adopted. The Royalist foot lined the hedges, and the horse were drawn up on the steep of the Higher Ham. Cromwell was not long in accepting battle. The troops under Massey had not yet got back from Ilminster, and the narrow lanes, made more difficult by some recent heavy storms, were for a time gallantly maintained by the foe. The Roundhead advance was for the moment checked, but the Ironsides were not easily daunted. Soon the King's troops wavered, and finally abandoning their position, fell back on Langport. Langport had the reputation of being stronger than it really was, and for a short time Cromwell hesitated about an immediate attack. The discipline of the Puritans is praised, because they obeyed orders as good soldiers with the sweetest pleasure. The Royalists made no stand in Langport; the usual tactics were pursued, and what they could not keep they did their best to destroy. The town was set on fire; then Cromwell, riding hard through streets over-arched by flames, came up with the fugitives. The last stand was made about two miles beyond the town, at Aller Moor. Thence the remnant of Goring's forces were driven back over the plains of Sedgmoor,—so soon to be the scene of the reverse of Protestantism,—and were allowed to pause within two miles of Bridgwater. Soon after, that town also was captured. Goring gave himself up to a debauch; the Clubmen gathered like vultures on their unfortunate countrymen. On September 11th Bristol was, as the King put it, "meanly" surrendered by Prince Rupert, and there was no hope left for the Crown in England. And yet, had not the battle of Crewkerne been fought, Prince Rupert might have been King of England.