

During and After the Civil War

The middle of the seventeenth century was of course dominated by the Civil War. Central Berkshire lay in a somewhat precarious position between the Parliamentary strongholds of Windsor and London to the East, and the West country which was largely Royalist. Two of the main royalist fortresses close to Mortimer were Donnington Castle near Newbury, and Basing House. It is likely that the inhabitants of Mortimer favoured the Royalist cause, for the Lord of the Manor at this time, the fifth Marquis of Winchester, was a staunch supporter of King Charles. As the hero of the long siege at Basing House, he came to be called 'The Great Loyalist'. Another prominent local landowner, John Lucas, whose family had since the Dissolution occupied the land formerly owned by Reading Abbey, was also imprisoned for his Royalist beliefs, but he escaped and fought at the first Battle of Newbury. As a reward for his efforts he was later created Lord Lucas.

At the beginning of the war, Reading was under the control of the Parliamentarians, but the town changed hands several times during the next few years: it was occupied by the Royalist army in November 1642, captured by Parliament after a siege in April 1643, re-occupied by the Royalists in June, abandoned by them in May 1644, and finally held for the remainder of the war by Parliament. Although there is no record of Mortimer itself being the site of any incident, the continual movement of armies throughout the county must have had some impact on the village. The constant demand for men, supplies and money from the two armies resulted in many villages facing great hardship and even starvation.

Parliamentary armies, including one led by Oliver Cromwell, were camped at Aldermaston and at Swallowfield before the second battle of Newbury in October 1644, and they crossed the Kennet at Padworth. The war had also come close to Mortimer in September 1643, when Prince Rupert launched an abortive attack on the Parliamentary army on the road between Aldermaston and Padworth; 300 men were killed on that occasion.

In September 1644, some 700 Royalist troops, both cavalry and infantry, disguised themselves as Parliamentary soldiers and set out from Oxford to relieve the siege of Basing House. While crossing the Kennet at Aldermaston, their advance party surprised a troop of Parliamentary cavalry and killed six of the men, thereby alerting the enemy to their presence. On their return journey, they tried to cross the river at Burghfield instead, but Burghfield Bridge was broken, so the foot-soldiers had to be transported across the river on the backs of the cavalry horses. After this, the Parliamentary commanders concentrated their troops in the area on Aldermaston, and even considered sending some to Mortimer, but despite its Royalist sympathies, the village received no retributive measures when the Civil War ended with a victory for the Parliamentarians.

When, in October 1645, Basing House was finally stormed by Cromwell at the end of the two-year siege, the Marquis of Winchester was taken prisoner and sent to the Tower of London. His estates were confiscated, but after the war he was able to regain them, and he moved to Englefield House.

In 1662 the Hearth Tax was imposed, and everyone paying church and poor rates was charged two shillings for each hearth in their house. There is a roll for Mortimer taken in 1664-5, which includes the names of those not charged as well as those who were, giving a complete list of the householders at that time. Alexander Staples was charged for seven hearths, three other householders for six hearths each, and ten householders for five, giving some clue as to the size of house they lived in. There were one hundred and two householders in Mortimer at this time.

Recusants (those refusing to attend Church of England services), mentioned for the first time in 1640, were charged tax at a special rate, though there is nothing to show whether they were Roman Catholics or Nonconformists. A document of February 1641 gives 90 names of Mortimer residents who had "*made Protestations*." In 1676 the vicar stated that there were "*2 Popish and 5 Separatists*" in Mortimer, and gave the population of the village as 450.

For some reason, the population declined towards the end of the seventeenth century: in 1690 there were no marriages in the village, and only twenty in the course of the next ten years, five of these in 1700. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, there were 23 marriages, in the second decade twenty, but then there was a marked increase for three years, although it was not until 1746 that any continued rise can be seen, with sometimes as many as 20 marriages in a single year. By 1800, there were 132 houses in Mortimer and Wokefield, some of them empty. There were 342 males and 352 females, with 253 of them being employed in agriculture and 44 in trade, the remainder made up of gentry with their servants, married women, widows and old people past work.