

HILLESDEN HOUSE IN 1644.

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The civil wars of the seventeenth century are full of incidents connected with this County, and the difficulty is not so much to find a subject, as to make a selection from the abundant material. Sketches of the battle of Aylesbury, the attack and defence of Borstal House, the skirmish at Padbury, the burning of Swanbourne, the entrenched camp at Newport Pagnell with its unruly garrison and mess-room intrigues, the foray of the Earl of Cleveland on Fenny Stratford and Brickhill, might be readily exhumed from the forgotten depositories of the Mercuries, Intelligencers, and Chronicles of these wars. Some few of these events have found a place in Lord Clarendon's well-known History, while the affair at Hillesden House, which nevertheless affected to some extent the position of both armies in Buckinghamshire in 1644, is passed over without mention by this writer, owing, it has been stated, to a personal misunderstanding between himself and the Denton family, owners of Hillesden.

In the beginning of the year 164³₄ Charles I. was in garrison at Oxford, and occupied Abingdon, Woodstock, and Banbury, maintaining his line of defence upon the river Cherwell and fortifying Borstal House in Bucks as an advanced post. Opposite to this line, but at the safe distance of twenty miles and upwards, the forces of the Parliament held Newport Pagnell under Sir Samuel Luke with a direct communication with their camp at Aylesbury, thus securing the north road from London into Bedfordshire and the associated Counties. Both armies sent out their forage parties into the intermediate district, and Sir Alexander Denton, a staunch Royalist, conceived the plan of fortifying his house at Hillesden—lying about mid-way between Oxford and Newport—as a *point d'appui* from which the King's troops might act with effect upon the garrisons of Newport and Aylesbury. Having secured the support of the neighbouring town of Buckingham he established communications with Oxford by a chain of pickets of horse and foot stationed at Twy-

ford, Bicester, Chesterton, and Bletchington. Early in February Colonel Smith was sent from Oxford with a small force to Hillesden, where he assumed the chief command, and built additional barns and stables about the house for the accommodation of cavalry, and at the same time employed a large body of labourers to dig a trench half a mile in circumference, enclosing the mansion and the parish Church which adjoined it. The fortifications would probably have been completed without interruption had not a party of troopers under Col. Smith himself made a bold inroad towards Aylesbury, and carried off from the village of Dunton a drove of cattle, with money and other valuables, all of which were brought to Hillesden. But no sooner had they reached home than a furious dispute arose upon the partition of the spoil. The Major, described to be "an uncommon frenzy man," claimed for his troop all the horses taken, in addition to a share in the rest of the plunder; and he put under arrest every one who disputed his claim, a proceeding which soon caused a general mutiny, and the Major was ultimately obliged to release his prisoners, and recede from his claim. Nor did the consequences of the expedition end here. The next day the owner of the cattle—one William Burton, a tenant of Mr. Hampden's—arrived at Hillesden, and was only permitted to recover his stock at a ransom of eighty pounds. Indignant at his losses he complained loudly to the Commanders at Aylesbury and Newport, demanding a compensation of upwards of 160*l.*, and they were thus led to see the danger that threatened them from a strong garrison maintained at Hillesden. Within a week a force of three hundred horse and foot marched from Aylesbury with orders to demolish Hillesden, and bring back its inmates prisoners. They seem to have attempted a surprise, appearing before the house shortly after seven o'clock in the morning; but finding the garrison on the alert, they only exchanged shots with them without loss on either side, and, after staying about an hour before the house, during which time a barn and cottage were burnt down, and another cottage set on fire, his troops returned to Aylesbury.

Upon this failure a fresh plan of attack was instantly set on foot by Sir Samuel Luke. He carefully informed himself, by spies, of the progress of the fortifications at

Hillesden from day to day, and writing to the Committee of Northampton, the Earl of Manchester, and Colonel Ayliffe, collected a considerable body of men, and marched them under the command of Colonels Cromwell and Eldridge to the village of Claydon, distant two miles from Hillesden, where they were encamped on the night of the 3rd of March. A part of the force was posted at Padbury, and a strong detachment was sent to Chesterton, near Bicester, to intercept any retreat which the garrison might attempt to make during the night. The spot on the ridge of the hill at Claydon on which the main body of the troops rested, is marked by a barn, still standing, on the wall of which is a brass plate with this inscription—

The Camp Barn
Around this spot
The Army of the Parliament
under the command of Cromwell
was encamped March 1644
and on the 3d of that month
advanced from hence
to the attack on
Hillesdon House.

During the preceding fortnight the Royalists at Hillesden had not been idle. They had summoned the country people to come in and keep garrison under a penalty of 30s. each. They had manufactured a wooden cannon from a stout piece of elm, strongly bound together with iron. They obtained from Oxford five small pieces of ordnance with match and ammunition, which they placed in the Church. They employed nearly a thousand men to cast up a mound of earth in the centre of the works, on which this artillery was to be planted, and to hasten on the completion of the trenches. In another month Hillesden would have been impregnable to any sudden attack. So well however, had Sir Samuel Luke executed his plans that the first intelligence of his approach only reached the garrison at six o'clock in the evening of the 3rd, and before nine the next morning the Parliamentary army had surrounded Hillesden, and was so posted as to cut off all chance of retreat from the besieged. Colonel Smith was invited to send out a flag of truce with proposals for a capitulation, but his messenger finding that he could obtain no terms short of an unconditional surrender as prisoners of war, soon returned, and Colonel Smith

disposed his men to defend the works, encouraging them to fight to the last. But his numbers were insufficient to hold the extended line of entrenchment, the ditch being in some places not more than knee deep, against the overwhelming strength of the assailants, and on the first attack the enemy obtained a footing, and poured forward in such numbers, that the defenders were forced to retire, some within the Church, and others to the house. A second assault was instantly made and the Church speedily taken, when Colonel Smith seeing the hopelessness of any further defence, and moved by the entreaties of his men, surrendered upon promise of quarter—all the prisoners, and among them Sir Alexander and his brother, were marched on foot to Padbury, where they passed the night in great discomfort. The next day they were taken to Newport Pagnell, and remained there till ransomed or exchanged.

From the conflicting statements of this affair, published by the two parties, it is difficult to arrive at the real number and treatment of the prisoners. All accounts agree that some of the prisoners were put to death after the surrender. The Parliamentary Reporter in *Mercurius Civicus* of March 7th, 1647, while commending the clemency of the General in command, admits a massacre of thirty men, and claims the capture of great stores of arms, ammunition, and cattle, together with 450 prisoners; on the other hand, *Mercurius Aulicus*, the King's Journal, details a scene of great barbarity as following upon the surrender, in which Sir S. Luke is represented, but probably with injustice, as taking a prominent part, and this account states the number of soldiers taken at 100 only. But the truth may be ascertained from the official Report of the Governor of Newport, which shows that the garrison consisted of 263 men, viz.—“ Sir Alexander Denton and his brother, Col. Smith, Lieut.-Col. Hertley, Major Auinion, 5 Captains, 3 Lieutenants, 3 Cornets, 8 Quarter-Masters, 4 Ensignes, 7 Serjants, 5 Drumers, 173 Souldiers, 4 Corporalls of horse, 4 Corporalls of foote, 1 Trumpeter, 1 Preist, and 40 killed in the least.”*

The next morning after the surrender, one of the soldiers striking with his musket against the wainscoting of one of the rooms, discovered a considerable sum of money, and upon further search more treasure was found

* Egerton MSS. in Brit. Mus. No. 785. folio 7. b.

concealed in other parts of the house, and chiefly underneath the leads of the roof. Later in the day news came of the advance of a large body of the King's troops from Oxford towards Hillesden, and created a great panic among the men. Either a fear of attack, or some other military consideration, determined the officers in command to evacuate Hillesden, and the same afternoon, Tuesday, 5th of March, they withdrew their troops, Sir S. Luke to Newport, Col. Cromwell to Buckingham, having previously set on fire the house, which was reduced to ruins.

The dispatch-book of Sir S. Luke, already referred to, contains copies of the correspondence of several of the prisoners at Newport, and a letter of Sir Alexander Denton to his steward is worth extracting, as shewing the necessities to which he was reduced, and the temper of mind in which he met his misfortunes:—

“ Blagrove I woulde have you send mee by Tyler That bag of silter w^h Bersey left w^h you long since & Seale it upp & let him bring it to mee upon Saturday next to Newport Lucas will come along w^h him. Bid him also take a viewe of y^e house y^e was burned upon Tuesday & I may have some certayne informacion of w^t destruction is fallen upon mee or whether it bee possible to rebuild those walls that are standing if y^e distracions of y^e times should settle I thanke God I am yet in health not w^hstanding these many misfortunes are fallen upon mee & my comfort is I knowe myselfe not guilty of any fault.

“ ALEX. DENTON.

“ Newport, 6 March 1643.”

These wars brought heavy misfortunes on Sir Alexander. Just before their commencement he had lost his wife and mother both in the same month, and he had the pain of seeing his nearest relatives espouse opposite sides in the sanguinary struggle: his brother-in-law, the gallant Sir Edmund Verney, had fallen at Edge Hill; his own house was thus plundered and destroyed, and himself a prisoner. In August following, his eldest son John was killed in battle near Abingdon, having received no less than thirty wounds. Overpowered by these accumulated troubles, his own health gave way, and he was buried at Hillesden, 5th January 164½, in the 48th year of his age. Hillesden House was afterwards rebuilt on its original site, and became well known throughout the County as

the hospitable mansion of Mr. Justice Denton, a cotemporary and friend of Browne Willis, but on the extinction of the male line of the Dentons, it passed by female inheritance to Mr. Coke of Norfolk, afterwards Earl of Leicester, and being subsequently sold to another owner, the house was pulled down and the materials removed; but the foundations and garden terraces may still be traced; and in a field to the south-west of the Church a portion of the line of fortification is yet discernible.

