

A Civil War Battery at Cornbury, Oxfordshire

By B. H. ST. J. O'NEIL

JUST under half a mile east of Cornbury House and close to the right bank of the river Evenlode there is an earthwork which the 6-in. O.S. map (Oxon. XXV, NE.) shows as having a rectangular space, enclosed on three sides only by a bank and ditch. The present writer was attracted to it by this peculiarity, and first visited it whilst inspecting the condition of the various barrows and earthworks within Cornbury Park, which was occupied by the army during the war. He found that the O.S. map is correct in its plotting of the outline of the earthwork. Plainly there never has been a bank or ditch along the north-western or fourth side of the rectangle. In due course a second visit was paid, and a new survey made (FIG. 11) with the help of Mr. and Mrs. E. M. Jope and Mrs. B. H. St. J. O'Neil.

Not only is there no trace of a bank or ditch along the north-western side, but it is also clear on the ground that the ditches have never extended farther than they are visible to-day. In fact the earthwork is to-day precisely as it was erected, save for natural wear and tear and for the wide gap through the south-eastern bank, which looks to be of comparatively recent date.

On the south-western side the rampart stands everywhere three feet above the interior, and in the centre is as much as four feet three inches high, but above the bottom of the ditch it is at most three feet high. The counterscarp bank is two feet four inches high above the ditch at its maximum. A surface section taken across the centre of the south-eastern rampart, ditch and counterscarp bank showed the rampart as one foot four inches above the interior and four feet above the ditch, and the counterscarp bank three feet above the ditch. In this rampart, close to the southern corner of the earthwork, there is a gap, six feet wide on the flat, but with no corresponding causeway across the ditch. On the north-eastern side there is no visible rampart, but the ditch is four feet deep at the northern end, and the counterscarp bank is here three feet high. The south-western and south-eastern ramparts are both 116 feet long.

Within the area enclosed by these ramparts there is a hollow, as marked on the plan, the average depth of which below the surrounding natural

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surface of the ground is four feet. This hollow is certainly not natural, and there seems no reason why it should be regarded as a 'modern' quarry for any purpose. As already mentioned, there is no visible north-eastern rampart. All the material from the ditch on this side must, therefore, have been placed outside it, to form the counterscarp bank. Similarly, no doubt all the material from the ditch on the other two sides was placed outside, to form the low,

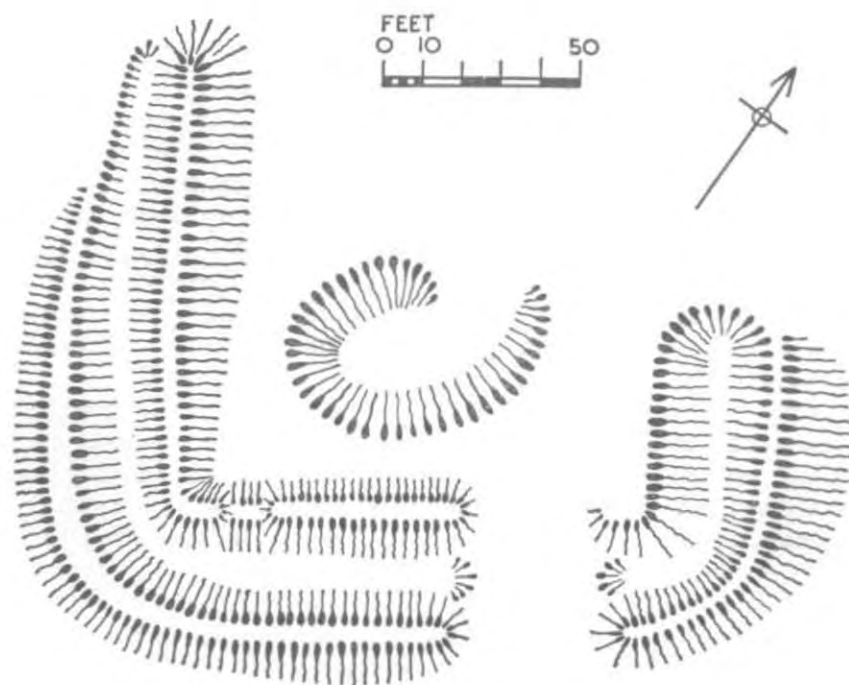


FIG. 11

PLAN OF A CIVIL WAR BATTERY AT CORNBURY, OXON.

but otherwise considerable, counterscarp bank. Unlike the north-eastern side, where the ground slopes to the river, on the other two sides a rampart was needed for protection from higher ground to the west and south. There is little doubt that the hollow was caused by the excavation of the material needed for the rampart on these sides.

The peculiarity of this earthwork, in having only three sides instead of four, i.e. in having a front and two sides but no back, has already been stressed.

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The narrow gap in the south-eastern rampart should also be noted. Both these features are characteristic of certain small batteries of the time of the Great Civil War. Structures of this kind, although somewhat more regular,

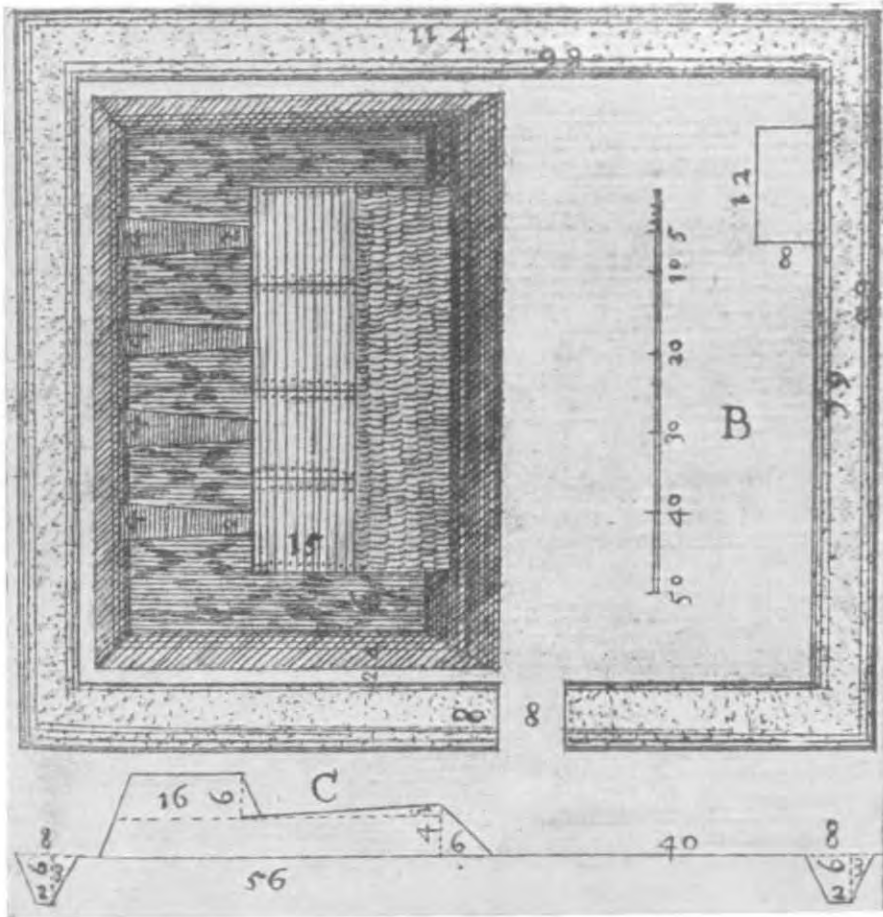


FIG. 12

CONTEMPORARY PLAN OF A CIVIL WAR BATTERY FOR FOUR GUNS

After N. Stone, *Enchiridion of Fortification* (1645), PL. II B.

as is the fashion of text-books, are described and figured in military handbooks of the period. One such for four guns is shown in FIG. 12, which is reproduced from N. Stone, *Enchiridion of Fortification* (1645), pl. II B.

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The explanation of this figure in the original is as follows: 'B. Plate II is the *Ichnographie*, or ground-description of a battery, which are commonly made when the trenches of Approach are begun, that under the favour thereof, your men may work forward with the more safety, and hinder the enemies falling out upon them, which would much for-slow your work. These batteries and plat-forms are made according to the greatnesse, and number of your Peeces; for a Demi-cannon being shorter then the whole, of necessity the plat-form of the one, must be longer, and deeper than that of the other: And seeing a whole Cannon mounted on its Carriage, is some 16 or 18 foot long; it is evident, that the batteries ought to be made for recoyling at least 10 or 12 foot longer, making together 28 or 30 foot; the first 12 or 14 foot must be planked, and the rest floored with hurdles. The dimensions on this figure placed, formeth a battery for 4 pieces of Cannon; the same form is to be proportioned to the necessity of the occasion. C. Plate II is the Profile of a Battery, showing how it is elevate from the Terra-plain, with the depth of the ditch, which encloseth it. Also showing that the hinder part of the Platform is elevated above the fore-part, both to resist the recoil of the Peece, and also that it may with greater ease be drawn forward again.'

The prominent front and breastwork for the guns and the rampart part way along the sides will be noted, but in FIG. 11 the ditch is complete along all four sides. It can have afforded but little defence by itself, and at Cornbury, as already noted, a quarry for material was otherwise devised. At Cornbury there is now only one embrasure for cannon—the narrow gap in the south-eastern rampart—but at least one other may have existed at the other end of this rampart, where now is the 'modern' gap.

At first sight it may seem a strange place to find such a battery, but when it is remembered that Cornbury was Fairfax's headquarters in October, 1646,¹ that the earthwork commands a good view down the valley of the Evenlode and that what appears to be an old approach road to Cornbury House passes only a few yards to the west, there need be no hesitation in accepting this interpretation of the earthwork. It is true that the Civil War was over in the district by October, 1646,² so that the use of the house as headquarters at that time can hardly have occasioned the erection of the battery, but the position is a good one, and there may well have been several occasions during the war when it was advantageous to hold it. Unfortunately it does not appear possible to pin it down to any one specific occasion, as will appear from the historical note which Miss Toynbee has kindly written to serve as an appendix to this paper.

¹ Vernon J. Watney, *Cornbury and the Forest of Wychwood* (1910), p. 118.

² *V.C.H. Oxon.*, I, 450.

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There are other extant batteries of this kind known to the present writer, but, so far as he is aware, this is the first one to appear with plan and explanation in an archaeological publication. There are examples on Barham Downs (Kent) and at Skipton (Yorks.), West Lavington (Wilts.), and Port Lewaigue (Isle of Man).

HISTORICAL NOTE

By MISS M. R. TOYNBEE

The most likely period for the erection of the battery would seem to be between the winter of 1642/3 and the death at Cornbury on 20 January, 1643/4, of Henry Danvers, Earl of Danby. Danby, who had long been ranger of the royal forest of Wychwood and keeper of Cornbury Park, who had built Cornbury House (or Lodge) in 1631, and had been given Cornbury Park 'for ever' at a yearly rent by Charles I in September, 1642, was a devoted Royalist. Although 'declining more active employments in his later time, by reason of his imperfect health', he sent the King £3,400 and would undoubtedly have welcomed the fortification of his house. He carefully provided that 'my estate in Cornbury Parke', as well as other lands, should pass for her lifetime to his sister Katherine, Lady Gargrave, and not to his Parliamentary brother, the future regicide Sir John Danvers. The history of Cornbury between January, 1643/4, and its occupation by Fairfax in October, 1646, is obscure. In April, 1646, the House of Commons passed a resolution referring the petition of Sir John Danvers (who had evidently disputed his brother's settlement) and of Lady Gargrave to the Committee for Sequestrations. Lady Gargrave had charged Danvers with having unfairly received rents of lands devised for the benefit of herself and others under Danby's will, and prayed that she might not be prevented by any former proceedings or delinquency from making good her title to the lands in question. Whether these included Cornbury (which she claimed by deed and not under the will) does not appear. In February, 1646/7, the Committee for Sequestrations decided that with reference to the lands claimed under the will the sequestration ought to stand, but that the matter of the Cornbury estate required further investigation. It seems clear, therefore, that Lady Gargrave did not obtain possession of Cornbury during the war. Nor does it seem probable that Danvers was in control of it either. He was not awarded Cornbury (which was retained for the use of the State) in June, 1649, when the House of Commons declared him to have been unjustly deprived of his inheritance under Danby's will. It may well be that the house and park remained unoccupied after Danby's death except by a Royalist force, which, following the collapse of the King's cause in 1646, would, by a natural transition, have been replaced by Fairfax's troops. It is also conceivable that Cornbury fell into Parliamentary hands at a date earlier than this, and that the battery is their work.

A glance at the sketch-map of garrisons and forts round Oxford in 1642 to 1646 contained in Mr. F. J. Varley's *Siege of Oxford* shows how obvious, not to say vital, it would be to make Cornbury a Royalist 'strong-point'. Not only does it command a portion of the valley of the Evenlode, but it lies between two important

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routes from Oxford (taken by Charles in 1644 and 1645) to the west and north-west. Oxford's outlying northern defences appear to have consisted of Woodstock Manor House in the centre and Bletchington Manor to the north-east : there is a surprising gap in the corresponding position to the north-west, which Cornbury would exactly fill. Control of the above-mentioned routes and the safeguarding of the by no means negligible supplies to be obtained from Wychwood would be at any rate partially secured by a fortified base at Cornbury. The fact that the battery faces in the direction of Oxford does not of itself militate against the theory of its Royalist origin. It is so placed as to protect a vulnerable point in the defences of the house : the chances of war might lay Cornbury open to attack from this quarter as well as from another. In the absence of documentary evidence, all we can say is that archaeology has proved that Cornbury was fortified during the war and that the balance of probabilities is in favour of its having been held, originally at any rate, for the King.