



Two Great Events in Salcombe's History: The Spanish Armada off the South Hams Coast 1588



& The Siege of Fort Charles 1646



Part I: The Spanish Armada off the South Hams Coast 1588



King Philip II of Spain



Queen Elizabeth I

The Spanish Armada of 1588 was part of the epic struggle between Catholic Spain and Protestant England. The key protagonists were King Philip II of Spain and his former sister-in-law Queen Elizabeth. Philip's mission was to 1) end the attacks on Spanish shipping by Elizabeth's state sponsored 'pirates' such as Francis Drake, 2) punish Elizabeth for supporting Dutch protestant rebels in the Spanish Netherlands, 3) revenge the death of Mary Queen of Scots in 1587 and, with the blessing of the Pope, 4) restore Catholicism to England. His plan was to send an 'Invincible Armada' of 130 ships up the English Channel to 'join hands' with the Duke of Parma's 27,000 strong battle-hardened army in the Spanish Netherlands and then mount a joint invasion of the Kentish coast.



Duke of Medina Sidonia



Lord Howard



Sir Francis Drake

To carry out his plans Philip appointed the Duke of Medina Sidonia to lead the Armada. Lord Howard of Effingham, a cousin of Queen Elizabeth, commanded the English fleet. Both men were aristocrats with limited seagoing experience but both had competent deputies. Unlike Medina Sidonia, however, Howard was willing to be guided by his deputy, Sir Francis Drake.

The Fire Beacons Spread their Warning



The Armada sighted off the Lizard [National Maritime Museum]

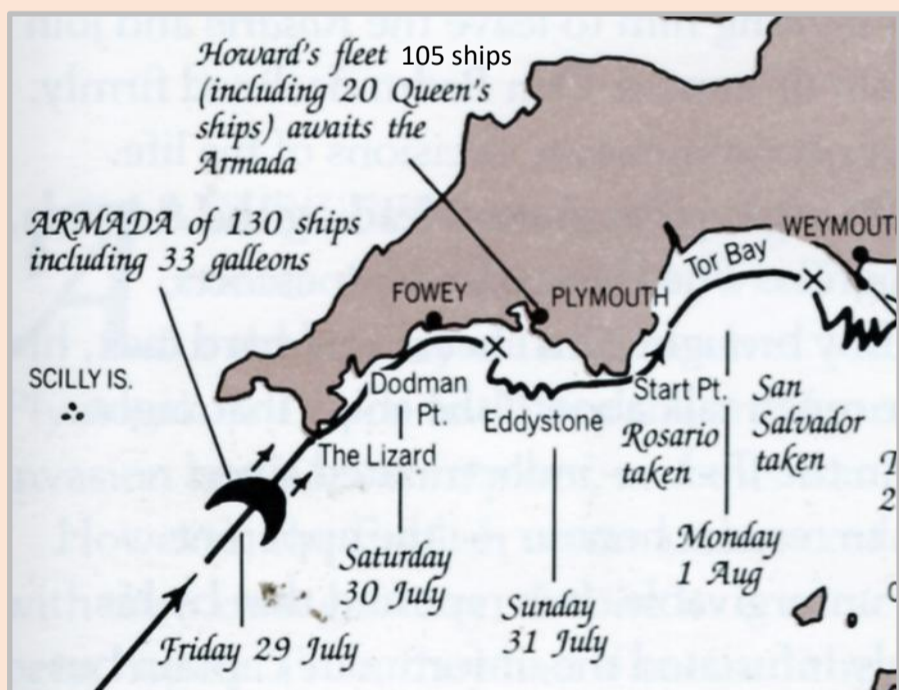


The Armada beacons in the South Hams, 30 July 1588

The armada set sail from Lisbon on 15 July and was first sighted off the Lizard in Cornwall at dawn on the 30th. The fire beacons immediately flashed their warning along the coast. Local militia were mustered and, in the South Hams, the beacon light passed in a chain through Thurlestone, Bolbery Dolts at Malborough, then across the estuary to South Pool, Chivelstone and Start Point. Their warning was then passed on to London via Dartmouth, Dittisham and Torbay.



The Militia called to arms



The Armada enters the English Channel [David A. Thomas]

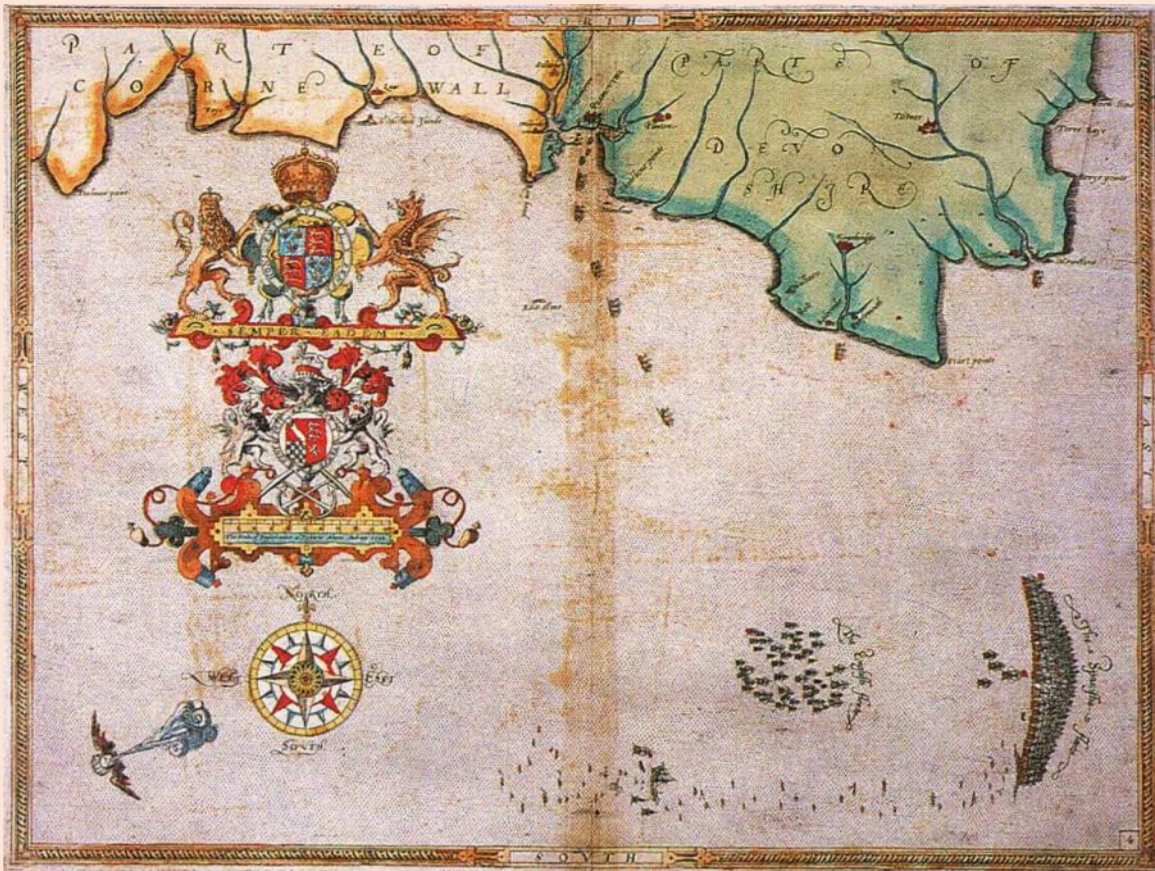
Lord Howard's fleet of 105 ships was stationed at Plymouth. A further 30 ships commanded by Lord Henry Seymour was waiting off the Kent coast. Only 20 of Howard's ships were 'Queen's ships' – purpose-built warships – the rest were requisitioned merchant ships from various ports – many of them only lightly armed. Eleven came from Dartmouth but it is not known if any were supplied from the small harbours of the Kingsbridge Estuary.

Howard's fleet was tide-bound in Plymouth when word reached him that the armada had been sighted. According to legend, Drake was playing bowls on Plymouth Hoe at the time and famously said 'there is plenty to time to finish this game and to thrash the Spaniards too'. When the tide turned the fleet set sail from Plymouth and got upwind of the armada to attack it from the rear.



Francis Drake playing bowls on Plymouth Hoe, as the armada is sighted. Painting by John Seymour Lucas

Sir Francis Drake's Guiding Light



The English pursue the Spanish fleet east of Plymouth
[National Maritime Museum]



Drake's guiding light



*The Surrender of Don Pedro De Valdes to Sir Francis Drake
on board The Revenge. Painting by John Seymour Lucas*
[National Trust]

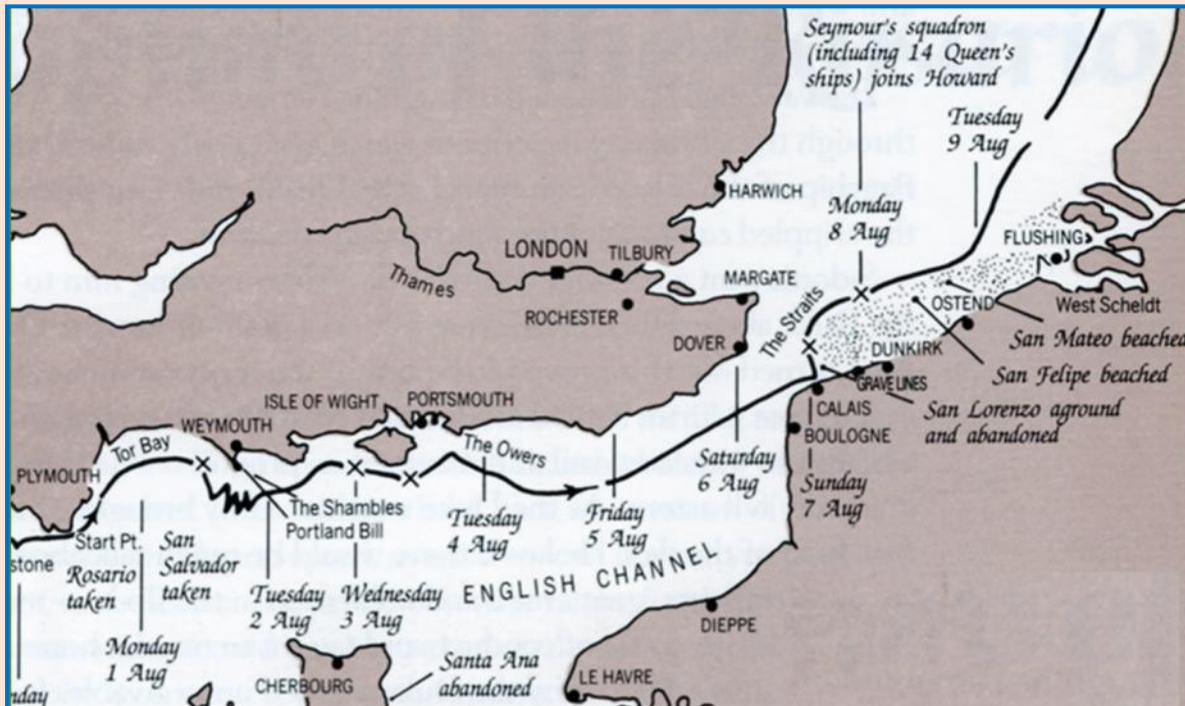
In the fading light of the following evening, local people gathered on Bolt Head, Prawle Point and Start Point witnessed a spectacle of unsurpassed magnitude as 'the *greatest navy that ever swam the sea*' sailed by in slow procession. 130 Spanish galleons and galleasses (powered by sail and oar) were to be seen spread over three miles of sea in a mighty crescent formation. The English fleet, was two miles astern and by the time it reached Start Point it was nearly dark.

Sir Francis Drake's ship, *Revenge*, led the pursuit with a guiding light showing at her stern for the 'blacked-out' fleet to follow. The watchers on the coast may have seen that light, but not for long, for after clearing Start Point, Drake extinguished it, an action which was to cause Martin Frobisher, one of the other great 'sea dogs' of the day, to call Drake 'a *coward and a cheat*' and to threaten that he would 'spend the best blood in Drake's belly'.

Drake's failing light caused consternation in the English fleet. Most captains shortened sail. A few, including Howard, held their course and at dawn found themselves, without support, within the crescent formation of the Spanish fleet. When Drake finally re-joined the fleet it was with the news that he had come across the *Nuestra Senora del Rosario*, the crippled flagship of Don Pedro de Valdes and had captured it, having first doused his stern light to avoid confusing the fleet.

'God blew and they were scattered':

The Armada blown north-about by a 'Protestant Wind'



The Channel Pursuit [David A. Thomas]

As the armada progressed up the Channel the English fleet continued to snap at its heels. The English ships were swifter and more nimble and their guns could be reloaded faster. Actions were fought off Portland Bill and the Isle of Wight to prevent the enemy securing an anchorage at Weymouth and in the Solent but no Spanish ships were sunk or captured.

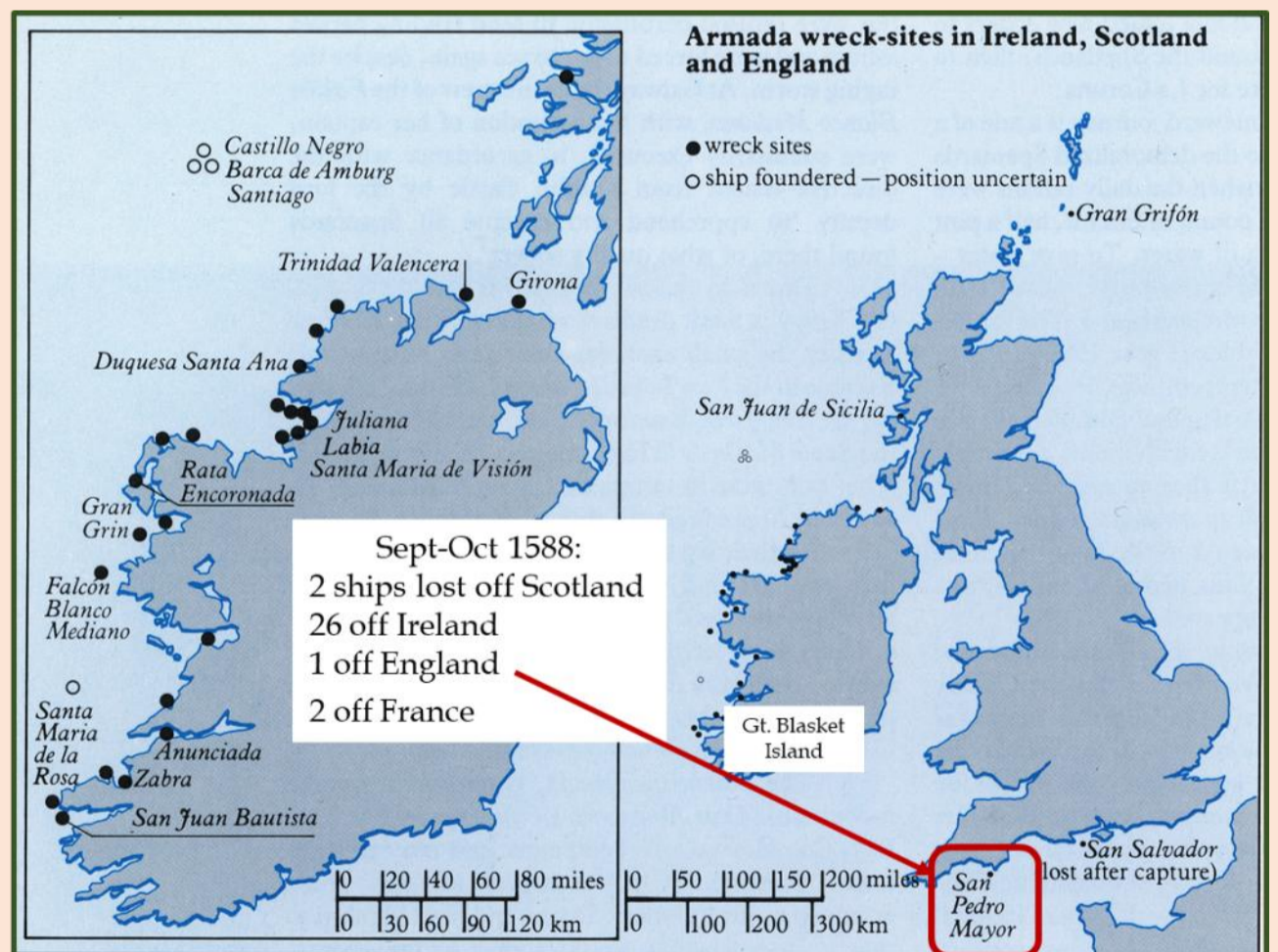
When the Spanish fleet finally anchored off Calais, Howard sent in 8 old ships as fireships causing panic in the Spanish fleet when they were seen approaching. In desperation the Spanish captains cut their cables and got clear but the fleet became scattered and in disarray.



Fireships off Calais



Track of the Armada around the British Isles



Armada wreck sites including the San Pedro el Mayor on the South Devon coast [National Maritime Museum]

The following day a battle was fought off Gravelines where the superior English gunnery inflicted much damage to the Spanish ships. A 'Protestant Wind' then blew the armada into the North Sea. Totally dispirited, Medina Sidonia decided to head for home going north around the British coast. Many of his ships were unseaworthy from the heavy battering they had received, sickness was rife and stormy weather took its toll. As many as 26 ships were wrecked on the Irish coast and only a shattered remnant – 67 ships out of 130 – of the 'Invincible Armada' returned to Spain. Only one ship was lost on the English Coast, the hospital ship *San Pedro el Mayor*.

'The Wreck of the *San Pedro el Mayor* at Hope Cove



Hope Cove with the Shippen in the middle ground

Short of provisions and leaking badly the Spanish hospital ship *San Pedro el Mayor* made for the French coast but was blown onto the rocks at Hope Cove - possibly onto the Shippen - just to the west of Salcombe.

Finds from the wreck include a Spanish helmet and armour now in the Cookworthy Museum in Kingsbridge and a small communion chalice and two silver coins in Salcombe Maritime Museum



The Wreck of the San Pedro el Mayor



Spanish helmet and armour in the Cookworthy Museum, Kingsbridge



Pewter communion chalice and Philip II silver coins in Salcombe Maritime Museum

The 140 survivors were taken prisoner and, of these, 12 of the 'best sought', including the captain, were taken to Sir William Courtenay's fortified mansion, Ilton Castle, and held to ransom. Sir William, a grasping and avaricious man, kept upping his demands from 5,000 ducats per head in 1589 to 25,000 ducats in 1592. The prisoners were held in great hardship and at one stage they escaped and appealed to Kingsbridge magistrates for redress but the local justices considered Sir William too powerful to meddle with and they were returned. It is believed that they were only set free when the Spaniards captured some English merchants as hostages for their release.



The site of Courtenay's fortified mansion Ilton Castle [Ordnance Survey]

Part 2: The Siege of Fort Charles 1646



Roundheads v Cavaliers



The ruins of Fort Charles

At the start of the English Civil War in 1642, the authorities in Devon supported Parliament but in the following year a Royalist army under Prince Maurice invaded and occupied all of the county except Plymouth, which, in spite of a long siege, was held by Parliamentary forces throughout the war.

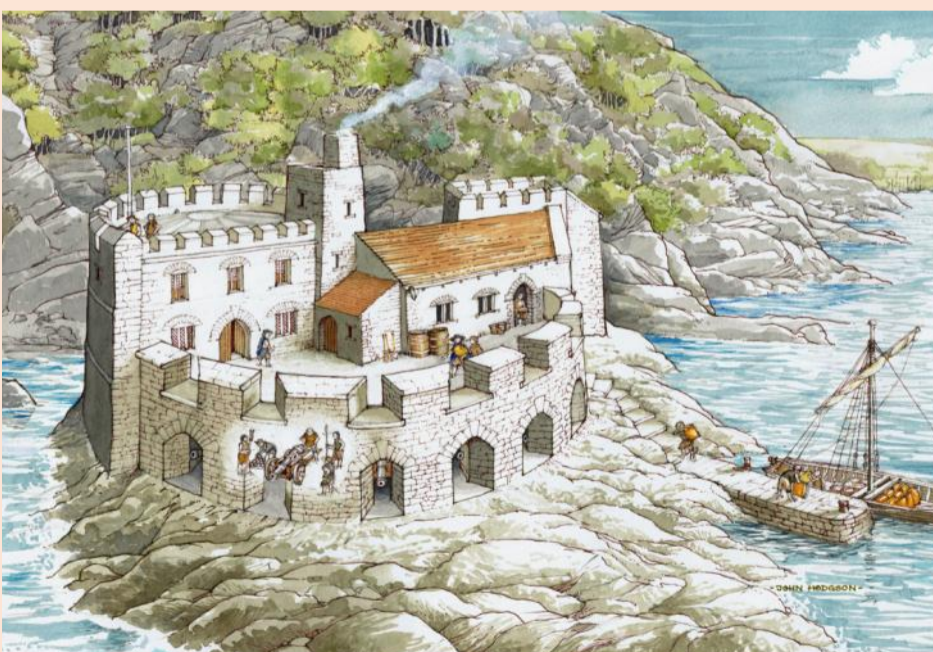


Prince Maurice

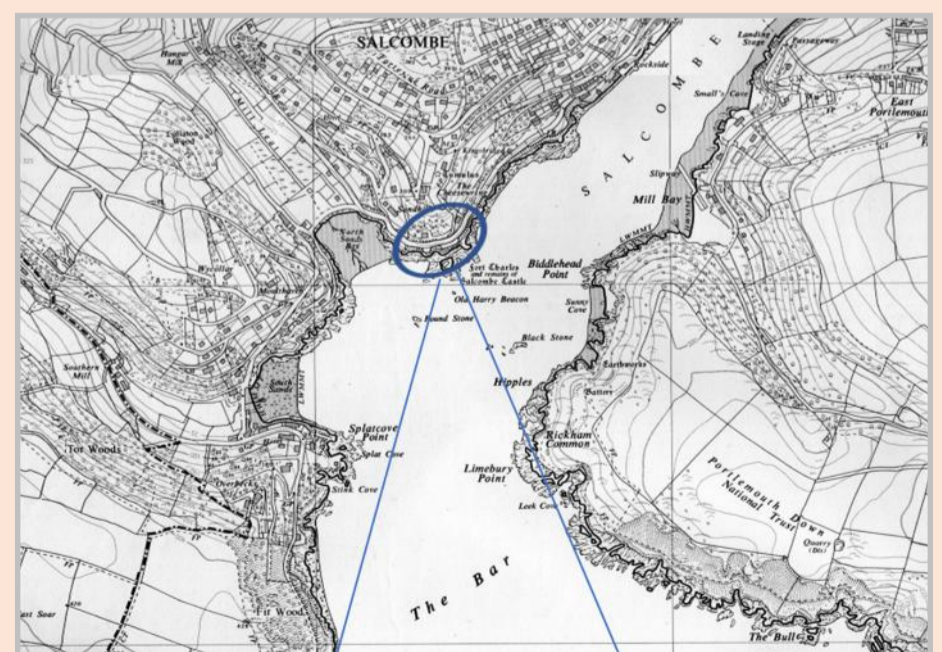
On 9 December 1643, Sir Edmund Fortescue, the eldest son of John Fortescue, of Fallapit, East Allington was commissioned by Prince Maurice to rebuild Salcombe Castle, – a coastal fort erected c1540 in the reign of Henry VIII – and hold it for the King. Fortescue spent over £4,000 rebuilding and re-arming the old work, which he re-named Fort Charles and by the end of 1645 his garrison of 65 was ready to withstand a moderate siege.



Sir Edmund Fortescue



*Fort Charles in 1645
A reconstruction drawing by John Hodgson*



*Fort Charles' commanding position
overlooking the harbour entrance*

With himself as governor, Sir Edmund's garrison comprised 2 gentlemen, 2 majors, 6 captains, 1 lieutenant, a chaplain, a surgeon, a master gunner and 2 mates, an armourer, 3 sergeants, 6 corporals and 39 other ranks – 66 men in all, together with two laundresses.

Fort Charles

A base for 'frigots that much infest the seas'

Under the fort's protection Salcombe became a convenient refuge for Royalist ships and a base for privateers, while the local fishing fleet provided an important source of revenue. The Navy had declared for Parliament in 1642 but its resources were stretched and Royalist frigates and privateers, operating from ports such as Salcombe, regularly evaded Parliamentary blockades in order to capture prizes, relieve beleaguered garrisons and carry Royalist agents and messengers across the Channel to France.

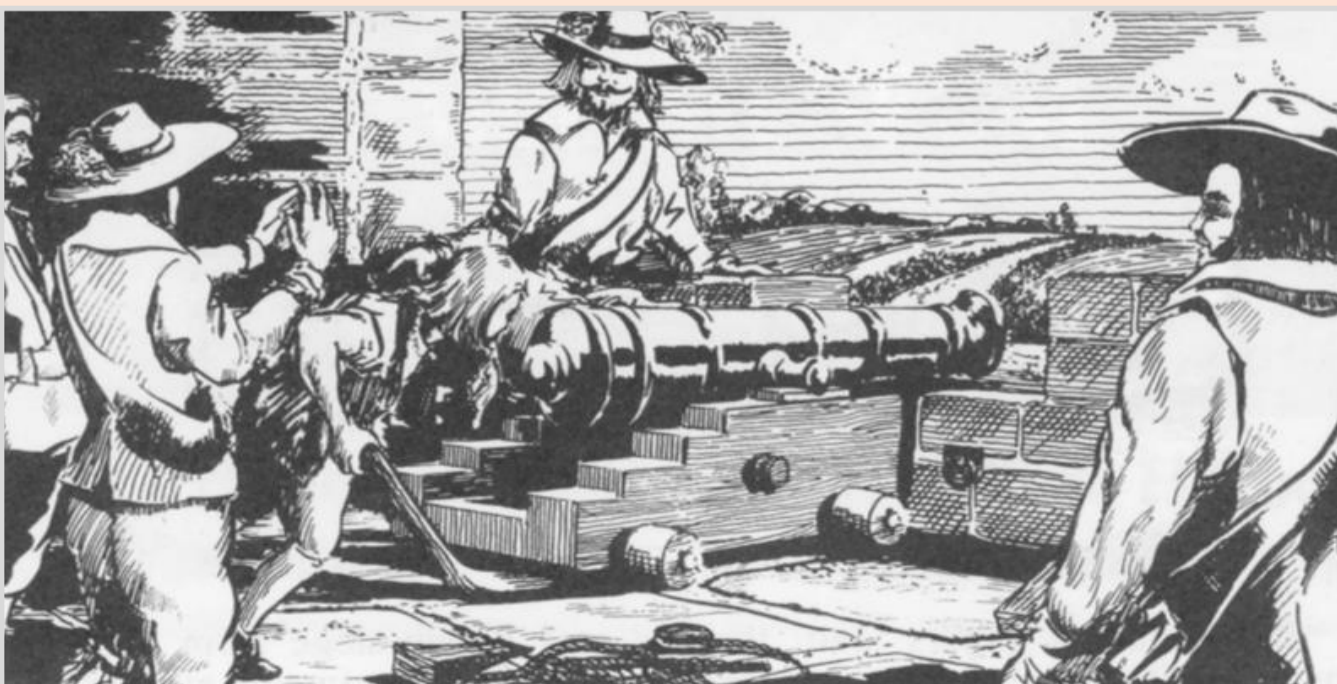


The Earl of Warwick



A Royalist Frigate

In June 1644, the Earl of Warwick, Lord High Admiral of the Parliamentary Navy, reported that he only had eight ships to patrol the South West. One, the *Providence*, was busy keeping enemy frigates bottled up in Salcombe. The town was obviously regarded as something of a 'hornet's nest' by the Roundheads and so, on 13 July, two hundred Parliamentarian troops were sent there by ship from Plymouth. Once disembarked, the soldiers marched into the town where they captured a ship and seventeen prisoners. Although Fort Charles was incomplete, the Royalist garrison felt confident enough to refuse a demand to surrender and so, lacking the means to conduct a siege, the roundhead soldiers returned to Plymouth on the 15th, leaving the hornets still buzzing.



Defending Fort Charles in 1646
[Norman Glason]



Cavalier defenders
[Reed International Books]

Fort Charles under siege

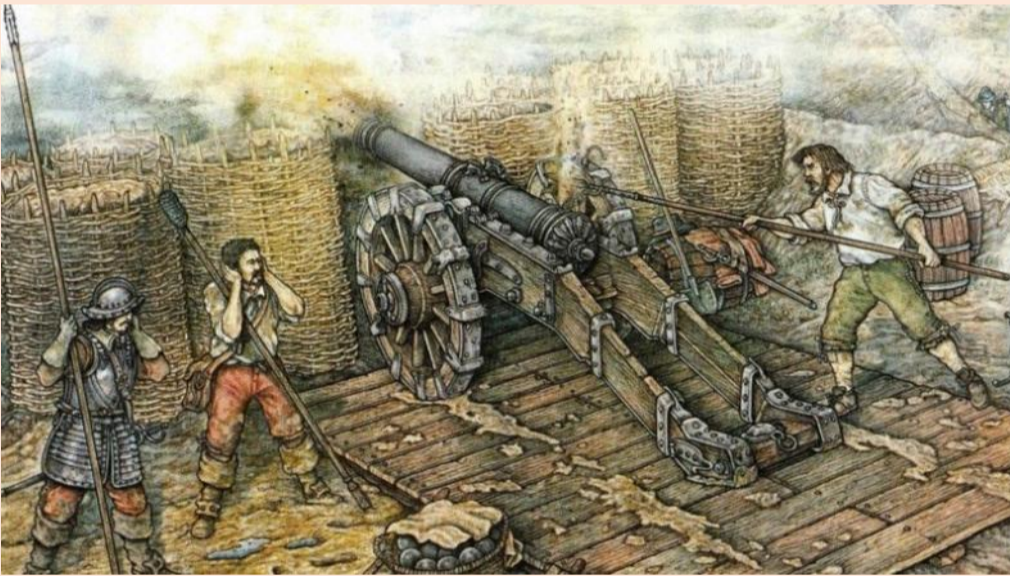
After the decisive defeat of the Royalists at Naseby in June 1645 the tide turned in favour of Parliament. Fairfax's New Model Army advanced into South Devon and, on a wintry night in January 1646, captured Dartmouth. At the same time a small force of roundheads, commanded by Colonel Richard Ingoldsby, was detached by Fairfax from the main army and sent 'to fall upon a fort in Salcombe, a harbour that lies between Dartmouth and Plimouth, and hath frigots in it that much infest the seas'. Bringing up heavy guns from Dartmouth, Ingoldsby established a battery on Rickham Common on the Portlemouth side of the estuary and, on 15 January 1646, commenced the siege of Fort Charles.



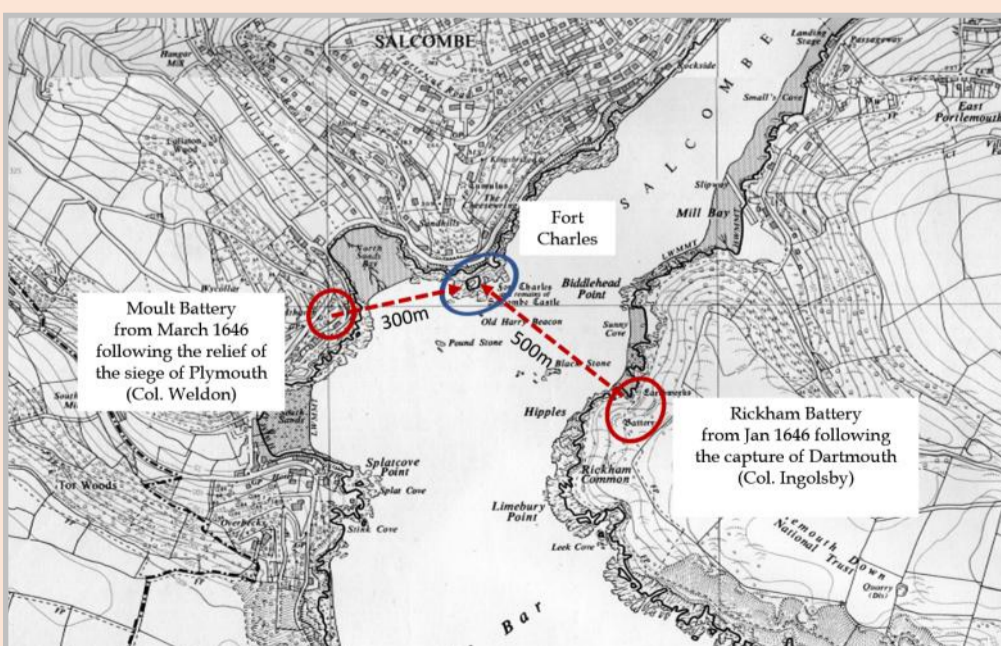
Sir Thomas Fairfax



Parliamentary troops storming Dartmouth [Reed International Books]



A Parliamentary Gun Battery [Reed International]



Sites of the Parliamentary Gun Batteries [Ordnance Survey]

At first the calibre of the artillery was insufficient to batter down the walls, but by March the Royalists had abandoned the siege of Plymouth and, its governor, Colonel Weldon, was able to bring up a number of heavier guns to bombard Fort Charles from a battery set up across North Sands at Moul Hill.

On 24 March, after nine weeks of long-distance artillery fire, Colonel Weldon sent in a demand for surrender, but Fortescue refused and the siege continued.

On 27 March Lieutenant John Ford deserted the fort and, four days later, Samuel Stodard was 'shot through the head'. Other Royalist casualties were Corporal John Hodge, 'shot and lame', and Thomas Philips 'shot thro' the left arm and side'. Thomas Quarme, 'being sick, went by leave' and two other men deserted. On the Parliamentary side, Malborough parish registers record the burial of 'Roger, son of Phillipp Hingston, slaine against the fort of Sale'.

The Surrender of Fort Charles, 9th May 1646



Sealed Knot re-enactment of the siege on North Sands, 1996



Re-enactment of the garrison's surrender

With no hope of relief and supplies running short, Sir Edmund and his officers finally agreed to articles of surrender on 7 May, two days after King Charles had surrendered to a Scottish army in Nottinghamshire. After nearly five months of siege, the Royalist flag was lowered at 10am on Saturday, 9 May, 1646. Shortly after, the garrison marched away to Fallapit with drums beating and colours flying.



The ruins of Fort Charles in 1794, watercolour by the Rev. John Swete

With the war in Devonshire now at an end, Parliament received the welcome news that '*Charles Fort, sometimes called Salcombe, is surrendered to us, to the obedience and use of the Parliament, which is the only considerable place that the enemy has lately held in all the west parts, except the strong garrison of Pendennis Castle*'.

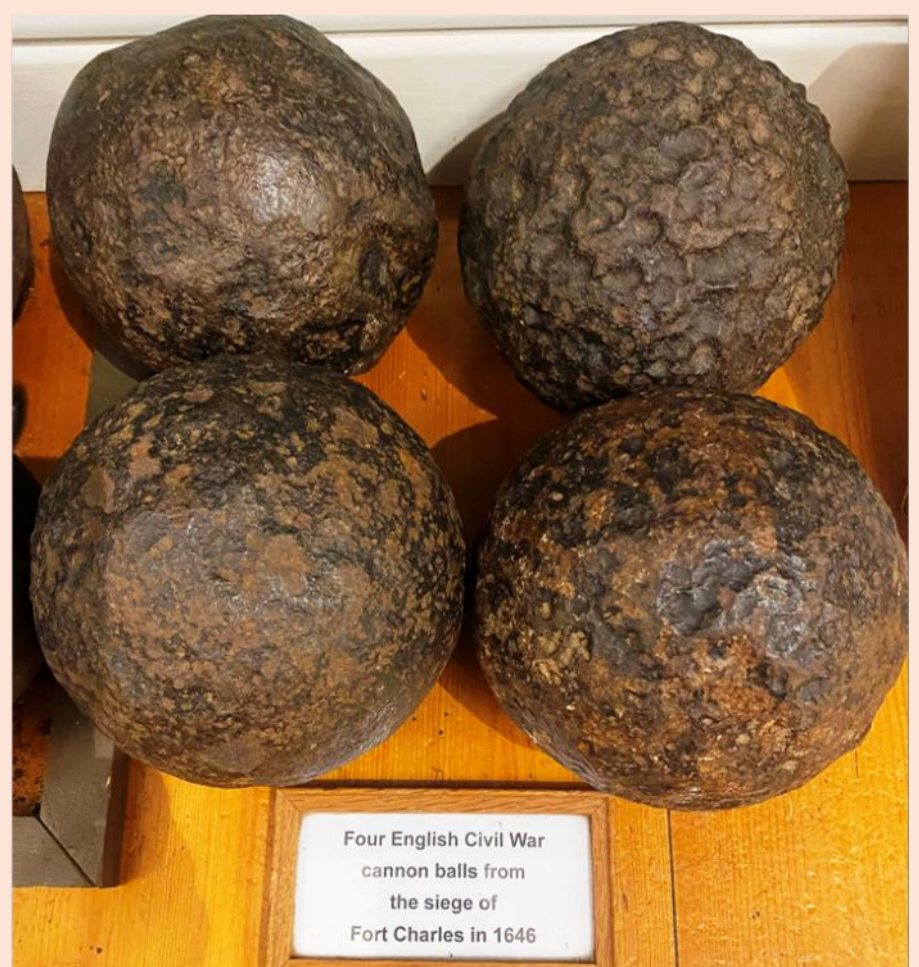
Objects from the Siege in Salcombe Maritime Museum



The key to Fort Charles



Sir Edmund Fortescue's spurs



Cannon balls from the siege