

# Thomas Kelsey

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In some local history books Thomas Kelsey is given as a Lord Warden during the Interregnum, that is between 1649 and 1660 when England was not a monarchy. In other books he does not even get a mention. The reason for this is that during that period the office of Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports did not exist as such. However the role of the Captain of Dover Castle was created which in many respects emulated that of the Lord Warden.

Thomas Kelsey came from humble beginnings. It is said that he was the son of a poor button maker from Birchin Lane within the city of London. How he spent his early life is a mystery, possibly he was apprenticed to a trade at an early age. Nonetheless on 22 August 1642, when Charles I raised his standard at Nottingham initiating the Civil Wars, Thomas was to be seen on the Parliamentary side. In fact he had already attained the high office of major in the Foot Regiment of Col. Edward Montagu the 2nd Earl of Manchester. The Earl's Lieutenant-General was Oliver Cromwell.

Three years later Thomas's signature witnessed the articles for the surrender of Langford House to Oliver Cromwell. By this time the Parliamentary army was being reformed under Sir Thomas Fairfax and was to be called the New Model Army (NMA). The NMA was to be a highly efficient fighting machine, the first 'professional army' that England had ever known. This being so, regiments ceased to be recruited and therefore, aristocrats and also members of Parliament were excluded from command. This meant that the Earl of Manchester ceased to be in command and thus Thomas was transferred to Colonel Ingoldsby's regiment and very soon was promoted to lieutenant-colonel.

In the meantime, Charles I was defeated

at Marston Moor (2nd July 1644). It was expected that Thomas would be caught in Oxford and compelled to surrender. However the king and his cavaliers were wily and after providing for the defence of Oxford they eluded the NMA and reached Worcester where they were to hold their own in the ensuing battles.

In late November 1644 active warfare paused and Charles re-entered Oxford in triumph. By the spring of 1646 though, all armed resistance to the NMA was beaten down and on 25th June the royalist forces were forced to surrender the city. Thomas was appointed deputy Governor of Oxford and entered into the university life by enrolling as a student and gaining his MA in 1648. Moreover as a devout puritan he played a prominent part in supporting the authority of the puritan visitors to the university and puritan views expressed by the university academics.

In London Parliament, satisfied with the outcome of the Civil Wars, saw very little use for the NMA and sought to disband it. However, the soldiers' pay was in arrears and there was a fundamental difference in the military and religious ideology between Parliament and the leading officers of the NMA. This came to a head when in February 1647, Charles I, who had been captured by the Scots, was handed over to Parliament on condition that his safety was guaranteed. At the time many in Parliament hoped that Charles would be restored as king but with Parliamentary constraints. The officers of the NMA however, wished to put the king on trial.

On the whole the public supported the parliamentary view but it was evident that this might not prevail. Riots and revolts were becoming commonplace throughout the country and Kent was to see the most significant one of the whole period. Like

28 many such revolts, it was something relatively minor that started it off. The mayor of Canterbury announced that Christmas Day 1647 was to be treated as a working day. The citizens were angry and riots ensued with the ringleaders holding the reins of power for about a month. When Parliamentary rule was restored retribution quickly followed. The ringleaders were to be tried and the jury was to be drawn from Kent's squireocracy which, it was thought, would ensure that an example would be made of the ringleaders.

However, the jury ignored the charges and instead petitioned against the oppressive rule. Some twenty thousand people signed the petition so it was arranged that on May 29th 1648 the petitioners would assemble on Blackheath to carry the document to Parliament. Unfortunately, the County Committee, the administrative body accountable only to Parliament, ordered that the meeting should be cancelled.

This led to a county wide rebellion with Walmer, Deal and Sandown castles quickly being taken. The fleet, lying in the Downs, joined in and soon, only Dover Castle was in the hands of the Parliamentarians. One of the leaders of the rebellion, Sir Richard Hardres, marshalled some 2,000 men to mount an offensive. They quickly seized the Moat's Bulwark and with the ammunition they found started to bombard the castle. They levelled the artillery directly at the towers and the corners of the castle wall firing some 500 balls but *'without doing any material damage.'*

To deal with the insurrection, Parliament called in the NMA which, under General Fairfax, quickly brought it to an end. In the north, General Oliver Cromwell had routed a rebellion two weeks earlier and in Oxford Thomas Kelsey had successfully nipped a proposed rebellion in the bud. On 6th December that year, 1648, Colonel Thomas Pride purged the House of Commons of members unsympathetic to the NMA's views and Charles I was placed under arrest. On 2nd January 1649, a court

was set up to try the king, one of the judges being Dover's MP, Colonel John Dixwell. On the 30th day of that month Charles I was executed and Cromwell took up the reins of power.

Under the new regime Kent's strategic importance increased as the son of the executed king, Charles II, and his supporters had fled to the continent. At first the now quasi-office of Lord Wardenship was held by a succession of NMA officers. Although, and possibly because, they were repressive, royalist activities increased within the county. In 1650 Thomas Peyton of Knowlton Court, near Sandwich, Lord John Tufton, the Earl of Thanet and other county gentlemen such as Arnold Braemes of Dover met with other cavalier leaders in London. There they surreptitiously purchased and conveyed to various Kentish manor-houses, arms and ammunition. It was agreed that the neighbouring counties would stage a rising in March 1651 to draw the Army away from Kent, when they would seize Dover castle.

Although the rising never took place because the ringleaders were betrayed, the Council of State felt it necessary to bring in someone more capable. Thomas Kelsey was appointed Captain of Dover castle and he meticulously organised a search throughout the county for royalists. He also set guards along the Kentish coast and arrested anyone it was felt was suspicious arriving from the continent. So successful was Thomas at totally annihilating all opposition, he was promoted to the position of Governor of Kent and Sussex.

However, there were other threats to the safety of the country, mainly from Holland. This manifested itself when forty-four ships of the Dutch fleet in the Downs, under the command of Admiral Von Tromp, refused to dip their flag in courtesy. At the time Admiral Blake, with some fifteen vessels, was already in the Downs and ordered a shot to be fired across Von Tromp's bows. Instead of acknowledging England, the Dutchman retaliated with a broadside from all his ships and a fierce battle began. At the

outset the English were saved only by the bad gunnery on the part of the Dutch but they sent for reinforcements. These Thomas arranged which helped Blake to victory. In gratitude, the Council of State wrote to the people of Dover, thanking the Mayor and also promising finance to build a new pier.

For the next few years the county was relatively peaceful and in 1654 Thomas was elected to represent Sandwich in Parliament. However, a year later saw an uprising that nearly overthrew the protectorate regime and which involved a number of Kent Cavaliers. It was in early 1655 that Thomas was told by his informants that, 'the b' faces and carriages of the malignants' indicated that new storms were rising and that the Cavaliers were only waiting an opportunity to imbrue their hands with blood'. A date, 13th February, had already been fixed for the insurrection and to the cavaliers, it appeared that Thomas was oblivious to it. Then, at the eleventh hour, Thomas personally arrested, on the road to Davington Priory where he had been hiding ammunition in the cloisters of the old convent. John Tufton, the Earl of Thanet, who was also the Sheriff of Kent.

Immediately, Thomas issued warrants for the arrest of all the known county cavaliers. He already had increased the guards at Rochester, Queenborough, Deal, Walmer and Sandown castles and set guards along the Kentish coast. All who arrived from the continent were held and many were subsequently arrested. The Earl of Thanet was consigned to the Tower of London while other Kent cavaliers, who included Sir John Boys, Edward Hale, Col Thomas Culpeper and members of the Braemes family were also incarcerated. To pay both the militia and his informants Thomas levied a tax on the arrested cavalier's estates.

Although the rising was countrywide, by successfully stopping the Kent rebellion, Thomas had protected the most vulnerable of the English counties. As a reward Cromwell personally appointed Thomas

one of the Commissioners for the management of the navy. In 1656, Thomas represented Dover as member of Parliament. It was during this session that Thomas publicly proclaimed his undying loyalty to Cromwell.

Two years later, on 3rd September 1658, Oliver Cromwell died. In his last hours the Lord Protector nominated his eldest son, Richard, to succeed him. At first he was accepted by the Army but when Richard attempted to exercise authority he found that he did not have any. At the same time, the Army was beginning to fractionalise and many, including Thomas, put their signatures to a proclamation asking for the Rump Parliament, which had been dismissed in 1653, to be recalled.

This was seen as a sign of weakness by both others in the army and the cavaliers. The latter, in August 1659, attempted yet another uprising but Thomas ruthlessly put it down. Nonetheless, by Christmas General George Monck, declared himself to be reconciled with Parliament. In February, 1660, Parliament, having being recalled, Monck dissolved it but he immediately established a new one which included members excluded following 'Pride's Purge' of 1648. They declared Monck Commander-in-Chief of all forces and then dissolved Parliament again! Monck, satisfied that a free Parliament should be summoned and that such a Parliament would certainly recall Charles II, pulled his troops out, including Thomas.

In May 1660, Charles landed in his kingdom at Dover. An attractive commemoration of this event can be seen on the sea front, near the Prince of Wales Pier. For Thomas the return of the King meant that he was deprived of all his offices and put under house arrest on the grounds of treason. However, he managed to escape to Holland where he lived until 1672. In that year, through diplomatic measures, he was allowed to return to his homeland. This he did, setting up trade as a brewer in London. Eight years later he died, apparently '*in a mean condition*'.