

The Siege of Newcastle



A full relation of the Scots besiedging Newcastle... (1644), Bradshaw Collection, Newcastle University Special Collections, GB 186.

The Siege of Newcastle (3 February – 19 October 1644)

Newcastle was Royalist. Parliament wanted to capture Newcastle because it produced enormous amounts of coal. Parliament got its chance in January 1644 when a large Scottish Covenanter army, led by Lord Leven joined the war on the side of the Roundheads. The army marched on Newcastle. Newcastle prepared for the siege by sinking ships in the River Tyne to stop Parliament supplying the Scots from the sea. Newcastle also burned down some of its own suburbs to stop the Scots using the buildings for cover or shelter.

On February 3rd the Scots ordered Newcastle to surrender. Newcastle refused. Lord Leven left six regiments of infantry and some cavalry to besiege Newcastle. He took the bulk of his army across the Tyne to try and conquer the rest of Northumberland. William Cavendish, the Royalist commander in the North of England fought Leven across Northumberland in series of small engagements and battles during the spring and summer. On July 2nd, in Yorkshire, William Cavendish joined forces with the King's nephew Prince Rupert and took on Leven's Scots and an English Roundhead army at the Battle of Marston Moor. The Royalists were utterly defeated. On 15th August, with no one to oppose them, the Scots returned to Newcastle determined to capture the city.

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Newcastle was now surrounded by the entire Scottish Covenanter army. Lord Leven built a bridge across the River Tyne made of boats that had been tied together. Leven had powerful cannons and smart engineers. He ordered four tunnels (or mines) to be dug to help bring down Newcastle's ten foot thick walls. Two of the mines were flooded by the defenders. Leven hurled letters over Newcastle's walls for the defenders to read, trying to persuade them to surrender. The letters failed. It was said that Leven threatened to destroy St Nicholas's Church Tower with his cannon if Newcastle didn't surrender. Sir John Marley, the Mayor of Newcastle was thought to have responded by putting Scottish prisoners in the church tower.

On 19th August, Lord Leven ordered an all-out attack on Newcastle. Leven's cannons and his two surviving mines destroyed Newcastle's western walls. Many defenders were killed trying to plug the holes in the walls as the Scots entered the city. In two hours of savage street-fighting the Scots captured the town, but not the castle. For the next twenty-four hours Scottish soldiers looted the city. The castle held out until October 27th. Sir John Marley negotiated with Lord Leven and Newcastle surrendered.

The Scots didn't leave Newcastle until January 30th, 1647. While the Scots were in Newcastle they controlled the sale of coal, much to the annoyance of Parliament.

Activity

Read the information above and then answer the following questions:

- 1) Which side did Newcastle support in the Civil War?
- 2) Why did both the Cavaliers and the Roundheads want to control Newcastle?
- 2) Who besieged Newcastle in 1644? Which side were they on?
- 3) How long did the siege last?
- 4) Was the siege successful and why?
- 5) How do we know so much about the siege of Newcastle?

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