

## Great Torrington

An article by **Bob Stevens**

Some times even the smallest and unlikeliest British towns and villages have tales to tell of past disasters, battles and other events that helped shape the course of our history.

One such is Great Torrington in Devon, a small town that will not immediately spring to the minds of the masses en-route to the seaside.

Sadly, 1646 was the year many mothers, widows and orphans from other parts learnt of Great Torrington.

In the early part of that year Cromwell had fielded his New Model Army and things had started to go downhill for the Royalist cause in the west of England. In October, under Sir Thomas Fairfax, the Parliament Western Army had entered Devon. Tiverton Castle was taken with little resistance. They now looked to take Exeter, a major royalist stronghold. At that time Exeter was already under siege by a part of the Parliamentary army.

Then the news came that a substantial force of Royalist's under the command of Lord Hopton had occupied and taken up a defensive position in the town of Great Torrington.

Fairfax felt that this should be dealt with before proceeding to Exeter to join forces with his other group there engaged and accordingly set off for Great Torrington with some ten thousand men, greatly outnumbering Hopton's smaller force

Despite bad weather Fairfax's great force was in position to enter Gt. Torrington on the night of the 16<sup>th</sup> of February. In so doing they encountered great resistance from Lord Hopton's considerably smaller force and very fierce hand to hand fighting ensued.

After taking a large number of prisoners Fairfax ordered that some 200 of them be imprisoned in the church. It was said that Fairfax was unaware of the fact that the Royalists had used the crypt as a gunpowder magazine and stored some eighty barrels of gunpowder therein.

During the battle still raging outside something ignited this powder which immediately exploded taking out the ceiling of the crypt and thus the floor of the church, at the same time blowing off the complete roof and substantially damaging the rest of the structure. Needless to say, also killing the 200 Royalist prisoners inside and many parliamentary soldiers close by.

Contemporary accounts vary but more than one suggests that Fairfax himself was narrowly missed by a mass of molten lead from the roof landing in the Market Square some distance from the church.

Several theories were advanced by those who were there – and many who weren't – as to the cause of the ignition but like so many of these incidents the actual cause was never identified.

Lord Hopton and his remaining men managed to withdraw from Gt. Torrington during the ensuing panic and chaos and headed west into Cornwall. They remained there until final surrender to Fairfax's Army. Sir Thomas Fairfax, being the man he was, allowed Lord Hopton sanctuary on the condition that he disbanded the Royalist Western Army.

Footnote:

Great Torrington Church, all but destroyed in the explosion, was almost completely rebuilt in 1661 and again in 1884. Following this latter rebuild, and like many of its time, it sadly bears little or no resemblance to its early predecessor. However, the remains of some of the prisoners are said to be buried in the churchyard.

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