

## **The Kentish Rebellion 1648**

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When the Grand Jury at the trial of those involved in the insurrection in Canterbury in December 1647 failed to give a verdict, they immediately put together a petition to Parliament. The petition contained four particular requests. The first was that the King should be released and returned to London in order to make peace with both Houses of Parliament. The second being a request that the New Model Army under Lord Fairfax be disbanded. The third asking that the citizens of the country be treated under the established laws of the country (presumably not by the new rules the Commonwealth Parliament were coming up with). And finally that they be released from the burden of taxes enforced on all necessities of life including clothing.

To begin with the petition was signed by 200 gentlemen of Kent, but within a few days the number of signatories had grown to 20,000. The petitioners planned to come together in Rochester on the birthday of the Prince of Wales, which was 29<sup>th</sup> May. They would then march on to Blackheath where they were to be joined by more from other counties.

Parliament pronounced the petition ‘feigned’, ‘scandalous’, and ‘seditious’. They ordered the Committee of Kent to take action against it. The Deputy Lieutenants of Kent produced the following order:

*By the Deputy Lieutenants of the County of Kent, and County of Canterbury, at their general meeting at Maidstone the 16. May 1648.*

*Whereas we understand that divers persons have given out that they intend to assemble themselves towards the latter end of this month, or the beginning of the next, at several days and places, upon pretence of carrying a petition to the Parliament, which doth concern matter against the authority of both Houses, and tendeth to the raising of seditions and tumults within this County. We having lately received a special command from the House to use our special endeavours for the preserving of the peace of that County, do hereby in order thereunto advise all whom it may concern to forbear all occasions of public disturbance, by any such pretence whatsoever. And if any well-affected persons have been abused and misled so as to sign or procure hands to any such seditious paper under the name of a petition, and upon any false giving out that the Deputy Lieutenants of this County do approve thereof, to the end that all such well-meaning persons may be undeceived we, having seen a copy of the said pretended petition, do hereby signify our utter detestation of such seditious practices. And do advise all well-wishers to their country's peace to take heed thereof, and to counsel and persuade their neighbours accordingly. And if any pretended copies of such pretended petition come unto, or be, in their hands to deliver up the same unto the next Deputy Lieutenant. And we do hereby require all the ministers of several parishes publicly to read this signification in their parish churches upon the next Lord's Day after the receipt hereof, immediately before they begin their morning sermon. And the churchwardens of the several parishes are hereby required the next day after the time appointed for the said publication, to certify what hath been done therein under their hands unto the next Deputy Lieutenants, who is hereby directed forthwith to transmit the*

*said certificate to the standing committee at Maidstone, that so notice may be taken what ministers and churchwardens, or other persons, do their duty therein. And such as shall be found wilfully faulty may be proceeded against accordingly.*

This drew an angry reaction from the Kentish men who were determined to march to Westminster with the petition in one hand and a sword in the other. This was their reply to the order from the Deputy Lieutenants:

*The petitioners' vindication and answer to the Deputy Lieutenants declaration against the said petition.*

*We the knights, gentry, clergy, and commonality of the County of Kent who have subscribed and do intend to present the real petition (which is absolutely called a pretended one, and a seditious paper) to the Honourable Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament at Westminster according to the just rights and privileges of the subjects of England, in pursuance of the subscriptions of the Grand Jury of our County the 11. May 1648 (who are and ought to be representers of the sense of our County) have taken notice of late Order, or Declaration of the Deputy Lieutenants of our County, of the 16. May 1648, tending to the discountenancing and suppression of our said petition. And truly charging the same to contain matter against the authority of both Houses (to whom it is addressed) and the petitioners to be raisers of sedition and tumult. In a deep sense whereof, and indignation of such false scandals imposed upon us, we do declare to the world that the matter of the petition contains in it nothing but what is just and fit for freeborn subjects to demand, and tends to the preserving of the peace, not only of our County, but of the whole Kingdom.*

*And the manner of our intentions to prosecute the same shall be so peaceable (on our parts) as shall not give occasion to tumults or public disturbance.*

*We do protest against raising of any factious against the Parliament, to whom we address ourselves for a just relief of our grievances. In pursuance of the right of subjects, and their own ordinances, and our intentions so peaceable, we must declare that (notwithstanding all threats published to our discouragement) we shall go on to prosecute our just rights and desires in such a way as shall neither render us guilty of sedition or public disturbance, nor of betraying ourselves to the violence of such who shall unjustly endeavour to oppose us.*

*And we do desire all persons of our County well-affected to the said petition not to be discouraged from the just prosecution thereof upon any threats or Orders, whatsoever. Our intention being (if it shall please God to so dispose us) to sacrifice our fortunes in the prosecution of these our just rights and desires.*

*We have not a desire to deceive any persons with pretending. Nor do we desire any to join with us but those whose reason and conscience dictate to themselves the sense of our petition.*

The Royalists called forth loyal troops to join them in their march to London. A force of about 1,000 horse soldiers and five or six thousand foot soldiers was mustered by the Royalists. The General chosen to be in charge was Edward Hales esq., and the Lieutenant General was Sir Thomas Peyton. They seized Canterbury, Rochester, Sittingbourne, Faversham and Sandwich on 21<sup>st</sup> may 1648. On 22<sup>nd</sup> May a meeting of local gentry proposed an armed gathering of Royalist troops at Blackheath

on 30<sup>th</sup> May. Dartford and Deptford were seized by the Royalists on 26<sup>th</sup> May. The next day a naval revolt broke out with the fleet on the Downs declaring for the King. The Vice Admiral and most of the officers were put off from the ships. With the naval fleet in the Downs now a threat from sea, the forts at Deal, Sandown and Walmer surrendered to the Royalists. Dover Castle was besieged by Royalist troops.

Parliament decided to send General Fairfax and his troops into Kent to sort out the insurrection. When some thousands of Kentish men reached Blackheath on 29<sup>th</sup> May they found themselves confronted by Lord General Fairfax with 7,000 troops. The Royalists asked that just ten of their number be allowed to go on and present their petition to Parliament. Fairfax, no doubt, replied in forceful language written in a letter to Sir Thomas Peyton to the effect that their request was in no way going to be allowed. The response in a letter from the Royalist side declared: 'We have taken up arms to defend ourselves; we invade not your right, but stand firm to secure our own.'

With the threat of Lord Fairfax approaching, the Royalists abandoned Dartford and Deptford. At Burham Heath they assembled and proclaimed the Earl of Norwich as their leader. The Earl decided to concentrate most of his forces at Maidstone, where around 3,000 troops were to defend the town.

Lord Fairfax had 8,000 New Model Army veterans at his command, and he attacked the outpost at Fairleigh Bridge, crossing the River Medway and approaching to the south west of the town of Maidstone. He was not going to attack the town until the following day. However, during the evening of 29<sup>th</sup>

May, a skirmish broke out between the defenders and the Parliamentary troops. So Fairfax decided to launch a general assault on the town. A series of furious street battles broke out with the defenders driven back to assemble in a churchyard. Late in the evening the Royalists fled, leaving 300 men killed and 1,000 taken prisoner.

The Earl of Norwich had remained outside of Maidstone with his other troops. As a result of the fall of Maidstone he decided to head for London, but found that London was strongly defended by Major General Skippon. Finding that Parliamentary troops were in hot pursuit, most of Norwich's troops deserted. The Earl of Norwich then crossed the Thames with those remaining loyal with the intention of joining Sir Charles Lucas and his Essex Royalist troops at Chelmsford.

Fairfax retook the forts that had fallen to the Royalists, and he lifted the siege of Dover Castle.