

## **Cromwell and the Forest of Dean**

**by Alex Knight**



**Painting of Oliver Cromwell**

## Introduction

On the 29<sup>th</sup> November 1654, the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, sent a letter to the Gloucestershire Justices (Appendix one) regarding the management of the Forest of Dean.<sup>1</sup> In the letter, Cromwell expresses his concern of the ‘very great Waste, and Spoyles’ that had been committed with the Forest of Dean over the years, and calls upon the Justices to prevent further damage to the woods of Dean, and preserve the woods, and timber for ‘the publique use, and Service of the Commonwealth’. The possible reasons surrounding why Cromwell sent this letter to the Gloucestershire Justices will be the focus of the following study. The first section will analyse what was taking place in the Republic during the period when the letter was sent, to see if there was anything taking place to denote a concern for the timber within the Forest of Dean. The second section will then move on to examine what was happening within Dean during the same period, to uncover why Cromwell would need to send the letter. The final section will then analyse the importance of the ironworks in Dean, to see if they could have had any connection with the letter sent by Cromwell, as in the past ironworks had proved very destructive to Dean’s woods.<sup>2</sup> By analysing these three areas it will become clear why Cromwell sent this letter.

## The Navy

The need for a strong and large navy to enable the survival of the Republic was seen as key from the moment King Charles I was beheaded on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1649, and the Republic came into existence in England. Roger Hainsworth argues that in 1649:

The Commonwealth faced an array of enemies. Scotland and Ireland had proclaimed Charles II. A descent on England by an Irish army, probably led by Charles himself, appeared a real possibility. The Scots had changed from doubtful friends to enemies. Moreover, the authority of the Commonwealth must be asserted in the North American colonies, especially Royalist Maryland, Virginia and Barbados...Both the Channel Islands and the Scilly Isles were nests of the Royalist privateers, as to a lesser degree was the Isle of Man. Finally there was Rupert’s substantial flotilla at Kinsale, which was already preying on commerce bound for London or the western outports. Only a fleet that was both efficient and also larger than any England had possessed since the Armada campaign could tackle these widely spread problems.<sup>3</sup>

Barnard Capp adds to the Republic’s list of problems by arguing that not one government in Europe was ready to recognise the Republic, which posed an immediate threat to English overseas trade, and raised the alarming possibility of foreign intervention to help the Stuarts recover their throne.<sup>4</sup> It would have to fall to the navy to defend the Republic from foreign intervention, whilst maintaining English trade as well. As early as March 1649, the Republic began ordering new warships, and during the following three years twenty were built, and twenty-five were purchased or taken as prizes, almost doubling the size of the navy.<sup>5</sup> Table below shows the total amount of ships either built or captured between the years 1646-1659.

Table 1

	Ships Built	Ships Captured and Commissioned	Grand Total
1 <sup>st</sup> Rate (96-100 guns)	0	0	0
2 <sup>nd</sup> Rate (80-90 guns)	1	0	1
3 <sup>rd</sup> Rate (60-74 guns)	7*	0	7
4 <sup>th</sup> Rate (40-54 guns)	35	3	38
5 <sup>th</sup> Rate (28-38 guns)	20	32	52
6 <sup>th</sup> Rate (16-26 guns)	20	31	51
Others	23	45	68
Totals	106	111	217

\* includes one 56-gun ship.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear to see from this table that the size of the navy increased dramatically during the Republic; and from the arguments put forward by both Hainsworth and Capp it is easy to understand why, the Republic faced an array of enemies spread all across the globe, a problem which only a powerful navy could overcome.

### **Rupert and the Royalist Privateers**

The first task the navy embarked upon was the removal of Prince Rupert and the Royalist privateers operating against the Channel approaches, numbering about thirty ships, and removal of Royalist privateers operating in the Channel out of Dunkirk and the Flemish ports.<sup>7</sup> Rupert had left England on the 21<sup>st</sup> January 1649, sailing for Kinsale in Ireland to establish his base there, but he was forced to leave Kinsale and sail for Lisbon in the autumn of 1649, due to the actions of the English forces in Ireland and the navy in the waters off the coast.<sup>8</sup> Whilst in Lisbon Rupert had the hospitality of the King of Portugal, John IV, but the actions of the English navy blockading Rupert's forces in Lisbon, and harassing Portuguese shipping going to and from Brazil, forced Rupert to leave Lisbon, with King John IV being glad to see him leave.<sup>9</sup> After being forced to leave Lisbon, the majority of Rupert's forces were soon destroyed, and Rupert was left to sail harmlessly around the seas until returning to France in early 1653 with his one remaining ship.<sup>10</sup> The conquest of Ireland, greatly helped by the navy blockading the flow of arms to the Royalist forces from the Continent, also prohibited Royalist privateers using Ireland as a base against English Shipping.<sup>11</sup> On the 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1651 the Scilly Isles surrendered to the Republic, whilst the Channel Islands had all surrendered by the end of the year, and the size of the navy had now dismayed many privateers operating out of Dunkirk and the Flemish ports against English trade, bringing the number down to a manageable amount.<sup>12</sup> By the close of 1651, the navy had removed all serious Royalist threats, but soon the Republic became embroiled in a naval war with the Dutch, who would prove a much more serious opponent than the Royalist privateers ever could have.

### **The Anglo-Dutch War**

When the Dutch and Spanish signed the treaty of Munster, peace was restored between the two nations, and the Dutch could once again trade with the Spanish, which seriously affected England's trade that had expanded during the absence of the Dutch in Spanish ports.<sup>13</sup> Following the loss in trade the Republic passed the Navigation Act in October 1651, which stipulated that all goods imported into Britain from Africa, Asia or the Americas were to be carried only on British Vessels; and that all exports from Europe into Britain had to be carried on British vessels or those of the exporting nation.<sup>14</sup> This act seriously affected Dutch trade, as their vessels carried vast amounts of goods for many other nations, and it ruined her trade with England. The problems that arose between England and the United Provinces broke out into open warfare in the summer of 1652, and it would finally come to an end in April 1654.<sup>15</sup> During the Anglo-Dutch War there was still a massive programme of shipbuilding taking place in the Republic, and throughout the war the English won many of the battles, yet the Dutch managed to keep rebuilding and repairing their ships, and so continued the fight.<sup>16</sup> When the war came to an end it was an English victory, and the treaty signed by the two nations stipulated that the Dutch were to salute English warships, refuse any help to Charles II, and to exclude from the power the Dutch House of Orange, which had formerly aided the Stuarts.<sup>17</sup> Figure 2 below depicts the Battle of Scheveningen, the final battle between the Dutch and English forces on the 10<sup>th</sup> August, 1653.



Painting of the Battle of Scheveningen between the Dutch and English Fleets, by Jan Abrahamsz Beerstraeten 18

The Dutch Admiral de Ruijter and the Vice-Admiral of Holland, Witte Corneliszoon de With, noted that the English artillery made her fleet far more powerful than the number of vessels implied.<sup>19</sup> Yet the war had been a very costly affair for the Republic, with the Admiralty's debts reaching over £500,000 by the autumn of 1653.<sup>20</sup> Another serious problem caused by the Anglo-Dutch War was the barring of English shipping from the Baltic throughout the war, cutting off a vital source of naval supplies, since England, like many other European powers, was largely dependent on the Baltic for both ship timber and naval stores.<sup>21</sup> It appears that hemp, tar, pitch and timber for the ship masts and planking, all came from the Baltic region.<sup>22</sup> Within four months of the end of the Anglo-Dutch War, the Republic embarked upon an unprovoked war against Spain.

### **The Spanish Conflict**

Cromwell wished to capture Hispaniola from the Spanish, and take their treasure to enrich England whilst impoverishing Spain; a fleet was sent from England with instructions to capture the island in late December 1654 but failed, instead taking Jamaica, and the campaign was seen as a failure.<sup>23</sup> However, Cromwell did not give up on the war with Spain, instead the English navy continued to harass Spanish shipping, until in March 1656, Spain formally declared war against England.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately for the Republic, Ronald Hutton argues, Spain's nimble warships ran rings around the English Navy, capturing merchantmen and making off home, leaving the Republic to eventually settle for trying to intercept Spain's treasure fleets.<sup>25</sup> In September 1656 a Spanish Plate fleet was attacked, and two galleons were captured, whilst two more were sunk, and three made it through; then again in April 1657, a Spanish Plate fleet was destroyed in Santa Cruz, preventing the bullion reaching Spain, stopping her from invading Portugal that year.<sup>26</sup> Peace between Spain and England would not come until the restoration of Charles II.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that from the very beginning of the Republic, the navy was an important tool in maintaining it from potential foreign invasion, and protecting English trade, makes it clear why ship timber would have been important. The importance of ship timber to not only provide for construction, but also for maintenance of the existing ships, would have obviously been of some concern to Cromwell. When we look at the date the letter was sent by Cromwell to the Gloucestershire Justices, we can see that it was just before the Republic entered into war against Spain, indicating that it could be concern over the ship timber in Dean that led Cromwell to send the letter. The letter was also sent shortly after the end of the Anglo-Dutch War, a period when there would have still been ships needing repairs from that conflict. An unofficial naval war between the Republic and France lasting from 1649 until October 1655 would have

also created a need for ship timber. One last point concerning the navy, was the fact it was used as a diplomatic tool to show the Republic's power; such as when it was used in the Mediterranean worrying the Duke of Tuscany, the Pope and the Venetians, or in the case of King John IV of Portugal, who was persuaded by the presence of an English fleet of Lisbon, to ratify an earlier treaty from 1654.<sup>28</sup> Exactly what role, if any, Dean was playing in supplying the navy, along with the situation there, will need to be examined next to understand why Cromwell sent the letter.

## The Forest of Dean

Cyril Hart argues that the Forest of Dean was considered the greatest storehouse of timber in all of England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>29</sup> If this is true, then it becomes much clearer as to why Cromwell would send a letter concerning the timber in Dean; especially when at that time the Republic had just concluded a naval war with the Dutch, and was fast approaching a naval war with the Spanish. As stressed above, timber for the use of the navy would have been important throughout the Republic, as it was continuously involved in naval wars. The fact that Dean woods were considered important because of its apparent vast supplies of timber, can be confirmed through a myth that began during the Republic. Samuel Hartlib wrote in the 1650s:

The Common-people did use to say, that in Queen *Elizabeth's* dayes the Spaniard sent an *Ambassadour* purposely to get this *wood* destroyed: how true this is I know not.<sup>30</sup>

As it would turn out this notion has no basis in fact, as no evidence yet has been found to support it.<sup>31</sup> However, this rumour does indicate that the timber in the Forest of Dean was seen to be of great importance to the nation.

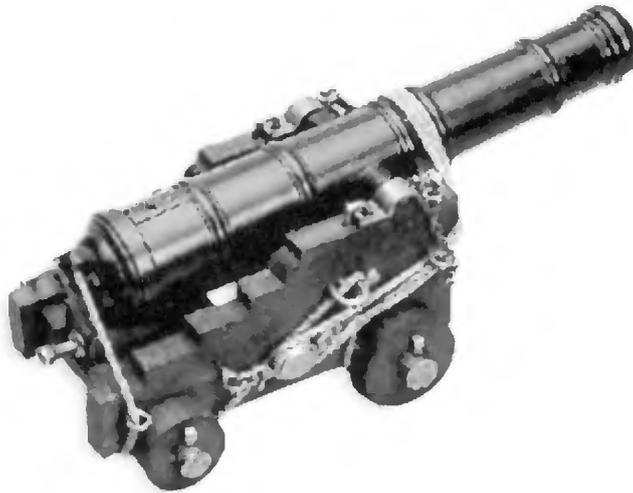
## Situation in Dean

An examination of the state of Dean prior to Cromwell's letter mainly reveals a dismal picture. During the Civil War administration in Dean had been very poor and large quantities of timber had been destroyed. George Bishop, who had been ordered to look into the state of Dean at the beginning of the Republic, wrote that more than fifty thousand timber trees had been destroyed during the Civil War.<sup>32</sup> Much of this destruction had been down to the ironworks operating in Dean, which consumed vast amounts of wood for fuel, a point brought up by the Preservators of Dean in their report to the Commons in early 1650.<sup>33</sup> The ironworks in the Dean were suppressed in early 1650, and orders were given for preservation of timber trees in Dean, yet after this Hart argues that there was very little interest in the Forest, and the local inhabitants continued to claim their rights of common and pannage to the detriment of the timber.<sup>34</sup> On the 27<sup>th</sup> August 1653, Major John Wade was appointed as chief administrator in Dean, and under his supervision the situation in Dean slowly began to improve, and from 1654 onwards Dean began slowly providing timber for the navy, but Wade was still having serious problems with the locals.<sup>35</sup> The fact that Cromwell's letter was written, just as improvements were getting underway in the Forest, indicates his desire to insure that the improvements were undertaken, as great abuses had been committed in Dean over the previous years to the detriment of the timber, now a vital commodity for Cromwell's foreign policy. In 1656 a fifth rate ship, the aptly named *Forester*, was constructed in Dean at Lydney Pill, and again in 1658 a fourth or fifth rate frigate, the *Princess*, was constructed there; showing that Dean did in fact begin to provide more timber for the navy, with ships even constructed and repaired there, following Cromwell's letter.

## Ironworks

There is one final area that needs to be examined, and that is the ironworks that Wade was instructed to build in Dean, which, according to Hart, was to supply the admiralty with iron shot, ordnance, hoops, spikes, bars and bolts.<sup>36</sup> Shot and ordnance would have been of great importance, just like the timber, since the navy needed cannons and a constant flow of shot to fire out of them. Michael Duffy argues that the

navy was the major market for the iron industry, due to its demand for both cannon and fittings for ship construction.<sup>37</sup> As we have seen above, the Republic was constantly embroiled in naval wars, and, as such, iron products would have been in constant demand for repairing and building vessels, as well as providing the armaments, similar perhaps to the model depicted below.



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Image of a model replica cannon from the seventeenth century

The ironworks in the past however had proved highly destructive to the timber, so it would have been very important that the works were managed correctly.<sup>39</sup> This could be another reason why Cromwell sent the letter, to make sure that the ironworks were managed correctly, so as to not lead to destruction of the timber again. The fact that Cromwell mentions ‘encapsing’ could also show his desire to have the woods managed correctly, so as to provide the necessary coppice for the cordwood, which would be turned into charcoal to fuel the furnaces. It appears that Dean could not only provide timber, but also iron for the navy, and as such, it is easily understandable why Cromwell would send a letter to make sure the Forest was properly managed, especially after the destruction in the past.

## Conclusion

The reasons for Cromwell sending a letter to the Gloucestershire Justices concerning the resources of Dean, are quite obvious after examining the foreign affairs of the Republic, the situation in Dean before 1654, and the reestablishment of several ironworks in Dean to provide for materials for the admiralty. From the fall of King Charles I, to the restoration of his son, Charles II, in 1660, the Republic was embroiled in a war against at least one foe at sea. Capp argues that the Republic’s new powerful fleet did much to enhance its reputation abroad, especially with Spain and Portugal.<sup>40</sup> So it is clear that there was a constant need of both timber and iron to construct, maintain, and supply the vessels, both of which Dean had supplied in the past to the navy, but as of late Dean had fallen into decay. The need for Dean to be administered correctly, so as its products could be put to the best possible ‘public use’, is clear from the above examination of the state of Dean before 1654. Cromwell was also Lord Protector by 1654, and as such would have been in the position to send out such commands, to make sure that the needs of state were met. Dean supplied timber and shot for the navy throughout the remainder of the Republic, ships were also built and repaired there, indicating that Cromwell’s letter, with the administration of Wade, made an impact. So, with the fact that the Republic needed timber and iron, coupled with the fact Dean could supply both if its woods were reorganized and correctly managed, makes it clear why Cromwell sent the letter in November 1654.

## Appendix 1

Oliver P

Trustie, and welbeloved We greet you well, Forasmuch as wee are given to understand That there hath been very great Waste, and Spoyles comitted upon the Forrest of Deane, to the prejudice of the Commonwealth, and that noe provision hath of late yeares been made for the preservation, and growth, of the timber, and Trees within the said Forrest, The due Care whereof hath been ever esteemed of special Concernment to the publique interest of the Nation. Now for the preventing the like Spoyles, and inconvenience for the future, and that there may be a timely provision made for the growth, and preservation of the Woods, and Timber for the publique use, and Service of the Commonwealth, Wee have thought fit to authorize, and impower, and accordingly doe herby authorize and empower you, or any three, or more of You to put in execution the Lawes in force made for encorsing the common Woods within the said Forest, and doe make such procedure therein as that the present Season may be improved for the present taking in of soe much of the said Forrest for the uses aforementioned as the Lawes in that behalfe doe allow, and permit, and as may be most for the behoofe, and benefit of the publique Service. And so wee bid you heartily farewell. From Whitehall the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 1654.<sup>41</sup>

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- <sup>11</sup> Capp, *Cromwell's Navy*, pp.66-67.
- <sup>12</sup> Gardiner, *Commonwealth and Protectorate Vol 1*, p.326; Capp, *Cromwell's Navy*, p.67.
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- <sup>20</sup> Hutton, *British Republic*, p.57.
- <sup>21</sup> Capp, *Cromwell's Navy*, p.79; Duffy, *British Naval Power*, p.60.
- <sup>22</sup> Duffy, *British Naval Power*, p.60.
- <sup>23</sup> Capp, *Cromwell's Navy*, pp.87-89.
- <sup>24</sup> Capp, *Cromwell's Navy*, p.91.
- <sup>25</sup> Hutton, *British Republic*, p.110.
- <sup>26</sup> Capp, *Cromwell's Navy*, p.91.
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