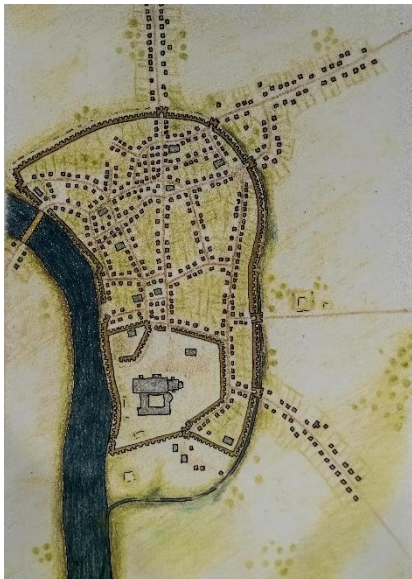


## Discover History – Oliver Cromwell and Christmas

Over 80 people turned up to hear Paul Harding talk about Oliver Cromwell and whether he banned Christmas. He started by asking whether we had heard about the banning of Christmas and if we thought Oliver Cromwell was responsible. There was a mixed response, but some had heard and thought that he was responsible for it.

Paul set out to show that Oliver Cromwell was a great man, from a humble background, but that most people only see him as bad. His military tactics are still studied at Sandhurst as good examples of strategy and tactics. In 1642 Worcester, see map below, was described as a *den of thieves*. There was a great period of collecting



funds for the Royalists at the start of the Civil War as the Parliamentarians had London with the Royal Mint and all the defensive weapons in the Tower of London. In 1646 there was a major siege where there was a lot of destruction of the City and in St Johns. Worcester was the last places to surrender to the New Model Army.

The Puritans wanted the purification of the church so that it could go back to its roots. They wore humble plain clothes. Cromwell was a member of the Puritan church but not as a leader of it. The Puritans handed out a lot of pamphlets during the Civil War targeting things that they did not like, such as horse racing, *sin to waste money*, and the theatre, *house of vice*, sports such as bull-baiting and cock-fighting, *gambling*. The Puritans said that the Civil War happened to cleanse the sins of the country. The world seemed to be ending to people then with lots of disease being rife and there was a mini Ice Age so

there was a lot of strife and unrest.

Mummers plays were often put on in the streets but by this time the plays were nothing more than a 'pub crawl with a script'. Originally these plays were about religious themes but by the time of the Civil War they were horrific plays with murders and lots of drinking. Here Paul has one of the Mummers masks.

One pamphlet, 'The Complaint of Christmas', was aimed at Christmas as it was sinful, because there were a lot of links to pagan rites. For example, the eagle on many church lecterns is a throwback to pagan times as it was the messenger of the Gods. Even the date of 25<sup>th</sup> December was of concern as Pope Julius the 1<sup>st</sup>, a human, created the date as the birth of Christ in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> Century as he wanted a Christian Festival to counteract the pagan winter festivals. The puritans also did not like the name as it was a catholic derivation from Christ Mass. They were against having to





buy expensive candles to celebrate Christmas, as this was a waste of money, people normally burnt cheap bulrushes dipped in animal fat. Holly, ivy and mistletoe are brought into the houses during Christmas, all of which have pagan origins. Christmas was also a time of great feasting and a medieval feast could have 26 courses, which again is very wasteful, and expensive, goose was the main celebratory bird. They also believed that people drank too much. All this was making those people who had little money to scrimp and save to celebrate Christmas and, of course, all the sins associated with Christmas.

Following these pamphlets in 1647 there was an Act of Parliament banning of Christmas, which was renewed each year until 1658. The Civil War was very important for relationship between Parliament and the Monarchy and we still have the effects of it now. For example, the Monarch must ask to enter Parliament and the Army is controlled by Parliament and not the Monarch.

By 1651 Cromwell was in charge of the New Model Army and therefore he got the blame for the banning of Christmas even though he was not in charge when the original Act of Parliament was enacted. Cromwell is known to celebrated Christmas at least twice during the period of the ban, this is known from the Cromwell family records. When Charles II was re-instated, he brought back all the good times and in 1660 the Act of Parliament banning Christmas was repealed.

As usual the ladies of the church provided a wonderful selection of cakes, and trifle, together with copious amounts of tea and coffee! This month there was a Christmas theme to the cake selection.

