

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The impact of the British Civil Wars on the meanings and uses of the urban topography of Colchester in the long nineteenth century

Michael Sewell 

Institute of Place Management, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK
Email: M.Sewell@mmu.ac.uk

Abstract

Although many towns repaired, restored or destroyed the ruins of Civil War sieges, there are a number of towns, villages and hamlets which still clearly bear marks of the conflict. By focusing on Colchester, this article will highlight how sites affected by the wars remained and survived in the local consciousness throughout the following centuries. This article traces the uses of such sites in the urban landscape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to assess the long-term impact of the war on towns in the British Isles. By examining Colchester in 1648, the article will show how political parties, parishes, tourists and businesses all derived value from the sites of the siege centuries after it had ended.

The urban environment of Colchester was devastated during the Siege of 1648; residential areas were destroyed, and the remains of the town were scattered with ruins. Throughout the British Isles, the Civil Wars inflicted damage on the urban landscape, but Colchester presents a unique case-study. Unlike many places that suffered during the wars, the ruins of the conflict in Colchester endured, and continued to be used by locals for a variety of purposes.¹ Focusing on the long-term impact of the conflict, this article examines the long nineteenth century and its various interpretations of the Civil Wars in relation to the urban landscape. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which were imbued with a spirit of romanticism, emphasis was laid on the stories of martyrs and heroes from the wars. These were linked to the political repercussions of the conflict which were instrumental in the rise of the political parties, namely the Tories and the Whigs, who represented descendants of both factions.² Another consequence of the romanticizing of the wars

¹S. D'Cruze, *A Pleasing Prospect: Social Change and Urban Culture in Eighteenth-Century Colchester* (Hatfield, 2008), 26.

²For the importance of romanticism, see R. Strong, *And When Did You Last See Your Father* (London, 1978), 137; E. Morris, 'Nineteenth century paintings and sculptures of Cromwell', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 25

was the development of local pride and tourism; stories were used to entice visitors and to embed local history within a national framework.³ Colchester serves as a useful model with which to explore these tensions, as the landmarks and the siege stories remained active and were deployed in a variety of ways, politically and culturally. This article examines how the stories from the wars survived through the ruined landscape and how the legacy has been shaped over time to suit local and often political agendas. It also shows how the meanings found within the landscape were often contested or forgotten.

Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the interaction between people and the urban landscape across time, space, gender and culture.⁴ Pierre Nora has argued that sites of memory often hold strong political connotations.⁵ British Civil War sites became deeply politicized. The debates that raged before and during the conflict between Royalists and Parliamentarians continued after the Interregnum and the Restoration of Charles II in 1660.⁶ Subsequently, these tensions evolved into the emergence of the Tories and Whigs, later the Conservatives and Liberals. The debates were much in evidence throughout the nineteenth century, as has been shown by Philippa Levine's work on antiquarians in this period.⁷ Using Colchester as a local case-study highlights these important political dimensions, showing how antiquarians preserved, controlled and dominated the narratives of the British Civil Wars found within the urban environment.⁸

Studies have shown that the urban environment can tell multiple, often conflicting political narratives emerging from different local individuals and communities.⁹ Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone have argued that dominant narratives of the past are often contested because of changes within the contemporary climate and that meanings of the past change over time.¹⁰ Susannah Lloyd and Julie Moore have noted in their work on *Sedimented Histories* that sites contain various stories, meanings and uses throughout different time periods and generations.¹¹ Stories from

(1994), 173–92. For its political dimensions, see M. Stoye, 'Remembering the English Civil Wars', in P. Gray and K. Oliver (eds.), *The Memory of Catastrophe* (Manchester, 2004), 19–30.

³P. Readman, 'Walking, and knowing the past: antiquaries, pedestrianism and historical practice in modern Britain', *History*, 107 (2021), 2.

⁴R. Tittler, 'Reformation, civic culture and collective memory in English provincial towns', *Urban History*, 24 (1997), 283–300; A. Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England* (Martlesham, 2007).

⁵P. Nora, 'Between memory and history: *les lieux de mémoire*', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7–24.

⁶L.A.M. Stewart, *Urban Politics and the British Civil Wars: Edinburgh 1617–1653* (Leiden, 2006); E. Legon, *Revolution Remembered: Seditious Memories after the British Civil Wars* (Manchester, 2019); E. Vallance, *Loyalty, Memory and Public Opinion in England, 1658–1727* (Manchester, 2019).

⁷P. Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England 1838–1886* (Cambridge, 1986).

⁸L. Peltz and M. Myrone (eds.), *Producing the Past: Aspects of Antiquarian Culture and Practice 1700–1850* (London, 2018); R. Sweet, 'The production of urban histories in eighteenth-century England', *Urban History*, 23 (1996), 171–88.

⁹I. Robertson (ed.), *Heritage from Below* (London, 2016); A. Bartie, L. Fleming, M. Freeman, A. Hutton and P. Readman (eds.), *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain* (London, 2020); V. Apaydin (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage: Construction, Transformation and Destruction* (London, 2020).

¹⁰K. Hodgkin and S. Radstone (eds.), *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts* (London, 2005).

¹¹S. Lloyd and J. Moore, 'Sedimented histories: connections, collaborations and co-production in regional history', *History Workshop Journal*, 80 (2015), 234–48.

the past can also be forgotten or contested.¹² Malgorzata Pakier has described this process as an existential use of the past, where versions which are comfortable are promoted and those which are complex and difficult are forgotten.¹³ Rebecca Magdin has shown that different individuals and communities form their own emotional connections to the landscape which can lead to contested versions of the past.¹⁴ The past can be contested within heritage sites which can make it difficult to control memories of war. An important example is provided by the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Following the end of Franco's regime, the authorities in the 1970s and 1980s attempted to control the political narrative in the urban landscape to encourage social unity. However, war remained deeply embedded in localities and within political groups that contested established narratives, which are now being recognized and commemorated in modern Spain.¹⁵ This study builds on these discussions by showing how the histories told in the ruins of sieges at Colchester were superficially dominated by local antiquarians. However, various other stories were discovered and deployed within the ruins themselves.

The long-term effect of the Civil Wars on different places has largely been neglected in existing scholarship. In general, historians have concentrated on the impact of the immediate and national memory of the conflict.¹⁶ Memory studies of the conflict have focused on the landscape's relationship with historical memory by considering the interaction between sites and conflict within wider periods of history.¹⁷ Scholars have analysed how the landscape was used to store stories and memory of the Civil Wars during the Interregnum from 1649 to 1660.¹⁸ Alexandra Walsham has demonstrated how the Civil War impacted memories of the medieval and Reformation landscapes.¹⁹ However, the built environment has been treated as a passive backdrop to the momentous events of the wars and the active long-term impact on place has been overlooked. There are studies of the cultural significance of the war in the nineteenth century, but the preceding centuries and the urban environment have received little attention.²⁰ There has also been little research into the effect the war had on individual towns and cities throughout Britain. This article uncovers the previously unknown history of the long-term impact the wars had on localities such as Colchester in the long nineteenth century.

This article uses Colchester as a case-study to explore how the British Civil Wars shaped the urban landscape in the following centuries. It develops Stephen Porter's

¹²P. Connerton, 'Seven types of forgetting', *Memory Studies*, 1 (2008), 59–71.

¹³M. Pakier, *A European Memory?: Contested Histories and Politics* (Oxford, 2010).

¹⁴R. Magdin, *Why Do Historic Places Matter? Emotional Attachments to Urban Heritage* (Glasgow, 2021).

¹⁵M. Richards, *After the Civil War: Making Memory and Re-making Spain since 1936* (Cambridge, 2013).

¹⁶L. Bowen and M. Stoye (eds.), *Remembering the English Civil Wars* (London, 2022).

¹⁷N. Whyte, *Inhabiting the Landscape: Place, Custom and Memory 1500–1800* (Oxford, 2009); A. Wood, *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013); see also D. Lowenthal, 'Past time, present place: landscape and memory', *Geographical Review*, 65 (1975), 1–36; R. Magdin and J. Lesh (eds.), *People-Centred Methodologies for Heritage Conservation: Exploring Emotional Attachments to Historic Urban Places* (Abingdon, 2021).

¹⁸I. Peck, *Recollection in the Republics: Memories of the British Civil Wars in England, 1649–1660* (Oxford, 2021), 128–64; I. Atherton, 'Remembering (and forgetting) Fairfax's battlefields', in A. Hopper and P. Major (eds.), *England's Fortress: New Perspectives on Thomas, 3rd Lord Fairfax* (Farnham, 2014), 259–83.

¹⁹A. Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2011).

²⁰S. Bann, *Scenes and Traces from the English Civil War* (London, 2020).

work on the impact of the destruction caused by the Civil Wars on individual sites, demonstrating how they influenced and shaped the meaning of urban topography in Colchester.²¹ In particular, this analysis focuses on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because of the political and cultural developments that took place, which allows for a thorough analysis of the different uses of the siege. The deep interconnection between the urban landscape and the wars shows the way people used, controlled and experienced the built environment impacted by the conflict over a period of time. The urban landscape was used to shape, maintain and challenge identities.²² Heritage sites including those from the Civil Wars are now used to shape local 'pride in place', and understanding how people have interacted with the urban landscape in the past is pivotal to the ways in which we understand community and place in the present.²³ This article will help us understand the long-term influence of the siege on local identity by investigating the meaning of the historical landscape. It draws upon a rich array of source material including diaries, histories, memoirs, borough records, pictures, maps, as well as buildings, monuments and material objects. These materials afford insight into how historical memory was incorporated into spaces and places associated with the wars in Colchester and the different ways they were used by individuals and groups at different times during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The immediate impact of the siege

The Second Civil War and the Siege of 1648 led to the destruction of much of Colchester's urban topography. The town was originally a Parliamentary stronghold but was entered by the Royalists under the command of Lord Goring in July of 1648. Although the Royalist army only intended to stay until they were resupplied, the Parliamentary forces under the command of Sir Thomas Fairfax managed to reach the town and place it under siege for three months. This led to one of the most brutal events of the war, during which inhabitants were reported to have eaten cats and dogs to avoid starvation.²⁴ Eyewitnesses described 'many fair houses' and 'fair streets...of stately houses burnt to ashes'.²⁵ At least 193 houses of taxpayers were burned or demolished and many houses and cottages belonging to the poor were destroyed by both sides. Residences of the gentry were left in ruins, including St John's Abbey owned by Sir John Lucas, the Crouched Friars held by Sir Harbottle Grimston and Henry Barrington's house south-east of the town. The damage to the

²¹S. Porter, *The Blast of War: Destruction in the English Civil Wars* (Cheltenham, 2011).

²²D. Rollison, *The Local Origins of Modern Society: Gloucestershire 1500–1800* (London, 2005), 73; Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, 134; S. Radstone and B. Schwarz (eds.), *Memory, Histories, Theories, Debates* (New York, 2010).

²³M.L. Endere, M.G. Chaparro and M.E. Conforti, 'Making cultural heritage significant for the public. The role of researchers in encouraging public awareness and local pride', *Public Archaeology*, 17 (2018), 36–54; Conservation, Places and People, 'The Value of Heritage: First Report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Conservation, Places and People' (2023), <https://conservationplacespeople.appg.info/resources/CPP-APPF-First-Report---The-Value-of-Heritage-011222.pdf>, accessed 5 Jun. 2023.

²⁴P. Morant, *The History and Antiquities of the Most Ancient Town and Borough of Colchester, in the County of Essex, in Three Books. Collected Chiefly from Manuscripts. With an Appendix of Records and Original Papers. Adorned and Illustrated with Sculptures* (London, 1748), 63.

²⁵B. Donagan, *War in England 1642–1649* (Oxford, 2008), 314.

abbey divided it into separate entities: the abbey site, the gatehouse and the green.²⁶ The ancient Roman walls were also damaged by cannon fire or pulled down by Parliamentary forces. Many prominent buildings, including the Norman castle and several churches, were damaged or destroyed. Ann Taylor, who moved to Colchester as a young woman in 1796, noted, 'twelve churches, more or less dismantled, and with dilapidations dating from the rough work of the civil wars, especially of the siege by Thomas Fairfax'.²⁷ The churches of St Botolph's, St Giles's, St Mary-at-the-Walls, St Martin's, St Mary Magdalen's and St Runwald's were all damaged or ruined. St Nicholas's tower collapsed in around 1700, significantly scarring the building. Members of parishes such as St Botolph's could no longer meet in their own church buildings.²⁸ Residential houses which survived, such as the Old Siege House in East Street, retained marks from the volleys of gun fire.²⁹ Guy Miège remarked in 1701 that the ruins of Colchester were 'a sad monument to the day of the Civil War of those times'.³⁰

Amongst these ruins, the stories and myths of the Siege of Colchester were maintained. They provide a fascinating insight into the lasting impact of the Civil War and propaganda about the construction and representation of the past in Colchester in later centuries.³¹ Barbara Donagan has shown that during and after the Siege of Colchester, propaganda for both sides of the conflict was printed in the form of newsbooks and pamphlets, in which each side depicted the other as villains, which established the town in the national consciousness as a place of tragedy.³² Topographical 'siege views' of important landmarks and fortifications were accompanied by a journal of events that detailed the physical destruction and suffering inflicted on the town.³³ This was published by Fairfax to justify his actions during the siege.³⁴

The demise of the Republic in 1660 and the eventual Restoration ensured that stories embedded in the ruins of the siege were revisited from a Royalist perspective in the following centuries. For example, journals which were produced by Parliamentarians such as Fairfax's diary were reinterpreted using Royalist myths. Mathew Carter, in recounting the execution of two knights, Sir Charles Lucas and Sir George Lisle, on the orders of Thomas Fairfax, reported that the grass would not grow where

²⁶Essex Record Office (ERO), MAP/CM/25/1, map of Colchester 1740–54, possibly 1748. The green was also used for fairs and sermons, 'Wesley's advice to travelers', *Journal of John Wesley*, www.ccel.org/, accessed 13 Sep. 2018. See also ERO, D/Y 37/2/44, mortgage (demise for 1,000 years) for £50.

²⁷A. Taylor, *Autobiography and Other Memorials of Mrs. Gilbert* (London, 1888), 70–1.

²⁸ERO, D/P 200/8/1, All Saints churchwarden book from 1686 to 1753.

²⁹A.P. Baggs, B. Board, P. Crummy, C. Dove, S. Durgan, N.R. Goose, R.B. Pugh, P. Studd and C.C. Thornton, 'Tudor and Stuart Colchester: introduction', in J. Cooper and C.R. Elrington (eds.), *A History of the County of Essex*, vol. IX: *The Borough of Colchester* (London, 1994), 67–76.

³⁰G. Miège, *The New State of England* (London, 1701), 42.

³¹Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, 530.

³²Donagan, *War in England*, 385.

³³A. Fischer-Kattner, 'Colchester's plight in European perspective', in A. Fischer-Kattner and J. Ostwald (eds.), *The World of the Siege: Printed Representations of Seventeenth-Century Siege Warfare* (Leiden, 2019), 48–52. For a good example, see 'The Siege of Colchester by the Lord Fairfax', RCIN 723082 - Siege of Colchester, 1648 (Colchester, Essex) (rct.uk), accessed 30 Jan. 2024.

³⁴See also Fairfax's letter to parliament in 1648; T. Fairfax, *A Letter from His Excellency the Lord Fairfax Generall of the Parliaments Forces: Concerning the Surrender of Colchester...Read in the House of Peeres upon the 31 of Aug. 1648* (London, 1648).

they were shot, and that people regularly visited the site.³⁵ Carter's story depicted the knights as martyrs for the Royalist cause, similar to Charles I. The Restoration would cement this legacy; soon after Charles II came to the throne in 1660, a tomb was constructed, and a memorial was erected in St Giles church with an inscription which declared that Fairfax barbarously murdered the knights.³⁶ Civil War sites in Colchester became shrines to them and monuments to the supposed brutality of the Parliamentarians.

Throughout the long nineteenth century, these romantic but deeply political narratives of martyrdom intrigued national and local antiquarians and artists who were fascinated by ideas of romanticism and the English past.³⁷ The stories were also publicly championed in the eighteenth century to demonstrate loyalty in an uncertain time of revolution and uprising, and were transformed in the nineteenth century to promote political allegiances.³⁸ It was also during this period, when Colchester moved from economic stagnation, recession and deep political division to a period of economic growth and tourist development, that the siege stories began to promote a distinct identity, urban ambition and civic pride.³⁹ In Colchester, it was the urban landscape which determined how the conflict was used and how Royalist meaning and memory were communicated.

Tory and Royalist narratives in the urban landscape

The ruins of the Siege of Colchester were preserved for various reasons. It is likely that the town could not afford to restore the ruined buildings as other similarly affected towns had done. The catastrophic economic impact caused by the financial exactions imposed as punishment by parliament after the siege, the demand for the payment of a £14,000 fine, half of which was paid by the Dutch baymakers, had left Colchester in decline for decades afterwards.⁴⁰ Some sites were preserved by locals, such as the Hendrick family; it is possible that the continued existence of the site helped secure the graveyard alongside any land in the deeds.⁴¹ The sites grew increasingly attractive to national antiquarians who were fascinated with the romantic past. A notable example

³⁵M. Carter, *A True Relation of That Honourable, though Unfortunate Expedition of Kent, Essex, and Colchester* (1789).

³⁶'Archaeologists at Colchester', *Times*, 26 Jul. 1919, 14.

³⁷For examples of this romanticism, see ERO D/DU 3075/1, Strutt's *Siege of Colchester & The Civil War* 1648.

³⁸For loyalty, see the 1824 play J. Smith, *The Siege of Colchester; Or, the Year 1648, an Historical Drama, in Two Acts* (Colchester, 1824); for the political deployment of the siege, see ERO, D/Y 37/3/12, miscellaneous printed items, newscuttings and papers, some relating to Essex, including letters and reports on the 1820 election; for more detail on the political importance of the Civil Wars in the nineteenth century, see B. Worden, *Roundhead Reputations: The English Civil War and the Passions of Posterity* (London, 2001).

³⁹A.J. Brown, *Colchester 1815–1914* (Chelmsford, 1980), 162.

⁴⁰G.H. Martin, *A Guide to Colchester* (Colchester, 1959), 10; Porter, *The Blast of War*, 120; locals seemed keen to preserve the historic landscape, possibly because of local attachments and associations. Further economic decline occurred in the town as a result of national events such as the Anglo-Spanish wars which drastically impacted local trade, A.P. Baggs, B. Board, P. Crummy, C. Dove, S. Durgan, N.R. Goose, R.B. Pugh, P. Studd and C.C. Thornton, 'Georgian Colchester: economic history', in Cooper and Elrington (eds.), *A History of the County of Essex*, vol. IX, 135–47.

⁴¹ERO, D/DMb T55, includes abstracts of title of messuage in St Botolph's, reciting 1650–1851, and of site of St Botolph's Priory, reciting 1536–1743.

was William Stukeley, the first secretary of the re-established Society of Antiquaries (1717). He visited Colchester on several occasions so that he could publish detailed engravings of the siege ruins, St John's Abbey Gate, St Botolph's Priory and Colchester's Castle.⁴² Later, Richard Gough, director of the Society of Antiquaries from 1771 to 1791, included the story of the siege and its ruins in his topographical volume of 1780.⁴³ A variety of maps were produced which noted the most prestigious siege sites.⁴⁴ However, as the eighteenth century continued, it was the local antiquarians who came to exert a more important influence on the representation of the past in Colchester. They took it upon themselves to preserve the historic fabric of the town, and in doing so reimagined Colchester's identity as a historic location. Gentlemen and middle-class professionals, such as Charles Gray, dedicated time to the physical landscape. After attempts to demolish the castle failed in the late seventeenth century, Gray worked on preserving the site, although there was confusion over its genesis which led to a Roman style roof being installed despite the castle's Norman origin. The influence of antiquarians continued into the next century, and in 1850 a new antiquarian society was founded. Soon after, Colchester joined other antiquaries in the county to form the Essex Archaeological Society in 1852.⁴⁵ The society itself proved to be extremely popular, and records show numerous site visits, lectures, excavations, essays and detailed engravings that were promoted and delivered by its members. Alongside Colchester's Roman and Norman development, a great deal of attention was paid to the discovery, recording and preservation of the relics of 1648.⁴⁶

It was these local and Tory antiquarians, captivated by the romantic martyrdom of Lucas and Lisle, who promoted the Royalist narratives which shaped the ruined buildings from the siege.⁴⁷ Charles Gray commissioned Philip Morant, the

⁴²ERO, I/Mp 90/1/1/38, a 1724 map of Colchester drawn by William Stukeley.

⁴³R. Gough, *British Topography. Or an Historical Account of What Has Been Done for Illustrating the Topographical Antiquities of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. I (London, 1780), 350. For more details on Gough, see R. Sweet, 'Antiquaries and antiquities in eighteenth-century England', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34 (2001), 181–206.

⁴⁴ERO, MAP/CM/16/13, map of Essex by Morden and Pask; S. Buck, *Proposals for Publishing by Subscription, Twenty Four Perspective Views of the Present State of the Most Noted Abbies, Religious Foundations, Castles, and Other Remains of Antiquity, in Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex. By Samuel and Nathaniel Buck* (London, 1737); 'The east view of Naworth Castle, in the county of Cumberland: to the Right Honourable Henry Howard earl of Carlisle, Viscount Howard of Morpeth, Baron Dacres of Gilsland this prospect is humbly inscrib'd by his lordship's most obedient servants Saml: and Nathl: Buck. / Saml. and Nathl. Buck delin: et sculp', *Old Cumbria Gazetteer - Naworth Castle, Brampton* (lakesguides.co.uk), accessed 30 Jan. 2024.

⁴⁵A.P. Baggs, B. Board, P. Crummy, C. Dove, S. Durgan, N.R. Goose, R.B. Pugh, P. Studd and C.C. Thornton, 'Modern Colchester: political history', in Cooper and Elrington (eds.), *A History of the County of Essex*, vol. IX; and A.P. Baggs, B. Board, P. Crummy, C. Dove, S. Durgan, N.R. Goose, R.B. Pugh, P. Studd and C.C. Thornton, 'Social and cultural institutions', in Cooper and Elrington (eds.), *A History of the County of Essex*, vol. IX.

⁴⁶ERO, D/F 23/4/8, J. Britton, 'A history and description of Colchester Castle, Essex (printed 1807 with 2 engravings)'; 'The Priory Church of St. Botolph. At Colchester, Essex (printed 1805 with engraving)', in *The Architectural Antiquities of Great Britain* (London, 1807); Essex Society of Archaeology and History, 'Report of third general meeting, at Castle Hedingham, July 20, 1853', *Society Transactions*, 1 (1858), 139. www.esah1852.org.uk/publications/transactions, accessed 13 Dec. 2021; 'Drawing, by Parish, of the Gate-house of St. John's Abbey; Essex Archaeological Society', *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 4 Aug. 1882, 7.

⁴⁷There was little public opposition from Whigs, who publicly supported Royalist accounts, as seen in letters exchanged by Whig antiquarians, ERO, T./B 587/4, letters from 1793–95.

antiquarian historian and rector of St Mary-at-the-Walls in Colchester, to write his *History of Colchester* (1748). This work was intended to enhance the prestige of the town, which had suffered the loss of its charter a few years previously. Locals lamented what they regarded as the long-term economic and social decay of the town. The loss of the Borough Charter through Whig mismanagement and manipulation was humiliating. In response, local Tories enlisted Morant to write a history which celebrated Colchester's story and explained its present situation. He was aware of the political nature of the ruins and used descriptions and images of them to delineate his narrative of decline.⁴⁸ Despite Gibson's advice to 'steer clear of all party work', Morant was influenced by the seventeenth-century Royalist propaganda written by Matthew Carter, the quartermaster general of the Royalists, in 1648. He used the urban landscape to reinforce a historical memory of Colchester as a place of martyrdom and tragedy in the Civil War.⁴⁹ He unashamedly blamed the Parliamentary forces and Fairfax for the suffering and destruction of the town. Morant concluded correctly, for example, that the ruination of St Mary-at-the-Walls Church in Colchester was caused by returning fire from Parliamentary guns.⁵⁰

It is important to note that initially Morant's work reached only a small and elite readership when it was first published. However, his Tory interpretations were reproduced in a variety of ways during the nineteenth century. The political instability resulting from insurrectionary movements including the French Revolution and Chartism influenced the ways residents and visitors understood Colchester's historical urban environment. By this stage, antiquity and accuracy had become less of a priority than picturesque scenery designed to appeal to romantic tastes. For instance, the commercial writer Thomas Cromwell produced a history of the town in 1824 and included a map which noted the sites of damaged buildings. He also incorporated images of ruins.⁵¹ When the Reverend George Fyler Townsend published his history of Colchester in 1874, he included the 1648 siege map and images of ruins.⁵² But these histories and the meaning of the topography which they displayed were mainly influenced and mediated by Morant's narrative. One author in 1893 included illustrations, photographs and maps of historic sites, and formed the conclusion that the damage still visible in the fabric of the town was caused by 'the wanton brutality of the Cromwellian soldiers'.⁵³ The siege damage that was evident within the Roman wall was also used to present a Royalist narrative, as evidenced by A. Penn's book on the siege in 1888.⁵⁴ Little is known of the author, but he quoted a telling poem in his book:

The ancient walls now sounded loud
With Warlike strife and battle din

⁴⁸Morant, *The History and Antiquities*, 68.

⁴⁹Sweet, 'Antiquaries', p. 54.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 61, 69.

⁵¹T. Cromwell, *History and Description of the Ancient Town and Borough of Colchester in Essex*, vol. I (London, 1824), 224.

⁵²G.F. Townsend, *The Siege of Colchester or An Event of the Civil War A.D. 1648* (London, 1874); 'Literary notices', *Essex Standard*, 16 Oct. 1874, 7.

⁵³ERO, D/F 23/4/14, *A Descriptive Account of Colchester: Illustrated*, with Messrs Davey, Paxman & Co's compliments (1893).

⁵⁴A. Penn, *The Siege of Colchester* (Colchester, 1888).

Each Cavalier with fervour vowed,
For 'God and Charles' their cause to win.⁵⁵

The historian John Horace Round celebrated both the Royalist knights unashamedly. His condemnation of Fairfax and the conduct of his forces was clear in his chapter on the siege, *History of Colchester Castle* (1882), which was written from the perspective of a Royalist soldier standing guard high up on the castle walls.⁵⁶

The Royalist stories continued to influence how the public interacted with the material environment. The 1840s saw a boom in the tourist trade across the country and towns attempted to use their unique assets as a way of attracting visitors.⁵⁷ In Colchester, tourism flourished in the nineteenth century, and popular histories and guides were produced which included maps, plans and illustrations of the siege ruins. Railway guides used the ruins and relied on Morant's Tory, Anglican and Royalist interpretation of the siege to provide their meaning.⁵⁸ For example, an article in the *Illustrated London News* of 1869 was comprised of a narrative history of events in Colchester in 1648 accompanied by images of the ruins of St Botolph's, St John's and the castle. A Saturday edition of the *East London Observer* in December 1871 entitled 'A walk through Essex' included a history of St Botolph's and the damage inflicted on the building by 'Republicans'.⁵⁹ Local guides followed suit; Mary Benham's *Guide to Colchester*, published in 1874 and reprinted in 1890, was illustrated with maps, photographs and sketches of historic buildings, including the ruined abbey and gate.⁶⁰ In his history of Colchester, Thomas Allen wrote in the section on the castle that 'no very vivid imagination is needed...see the fierce Parliamentary soldiers battering at its walls'.⁶¹ All of these publications placed great emphasis on the destruction to the castle, the priory and the abbey that was still visible for visitors to see and laid the blame for damage at the door of Fairfax and his troops.⁶²

Local and Tory antiquarians also used walking tours to propagate topographical Royalist traditions as they led excursions to historic sites.⁶³ At first, they tended to cater for visiting antiquarians and local and visiting elites.⁶⁴ Later, tours were given to people from a wide range of social strata and locations. For example, in 1862, the Reverend Edward Lewis Cutts led a party of schoolmasters around the castle and

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁶J.H. Round, *The History and Antiquities of Colchester Castle* (Colchester, 1882), 120, 124–5.

⁵⁷C.T. Young, 'The railway guide's experiments in cartography: narrative, information, advertising', *Victorian Studies*, 57 (2015), 251–84.

⁵⁸For example, see the 1851 guide: ERO, Lib/385.094 SMY, the Eastern Counties Railway illustrated guide.

⁵⁹'The town and camp of Colchester', *Illustrated London News*, 19 Jun. 1869, 8; see also 'St. Botolph's Priory Church, Colchester, Essex (from the British Magazine 1834)', *Essex Standard*, 12 Dec. 1834, 4.

⁶⁰M. Benham, *A Guide to Colchester and Its Environs; With a Map of the Town and Notes on the Flora and Entomology of the District* (Colchester, 1890), 15.

⁶¹For Allen's view, see A. Berlyn, *Photo Pictures in East Anglia by Payne Jennings. With Descriptive Letterpress* (Ashted, 1897), 57.

⁶²Benham, *A Guide to Colchester*, 15; Anon., *The Eastern Counties Railway Illustrated Guide* (London, 1851), 56; Anon., *Guide to Colchester* (Colchester, 1907); 'A walk through Essex', *East London Observer*, 16 Dec. 1871, 2.

⁶³Readman, 'Walking, and knowing the past', 2.

⁶⁴See the visit of the British Archaeological Association in 1846 and 1851, 'The antiquities of Colchester', *Essex Standard*, 16 Oct. 1846, 2–3; 'The British Association', *Suffolk Chronicle*, 12 Jul. 1851, 4; for local trips, see 'Essex Archaeological Society', *Essex Standard*, 24 Aug. 1855, 3.

other sites, most notably St Giles where the two knights were memorialized.⁶⁵ The United First Day Adult Schools from Ipswich and Norwich visited the ruins in 1893.⁶⁶ St Ann's Blackfriars visited in 1891.⁶⁷ Scholars and citizens saw the educational and cultural value of embodied experience of the historical remains of the siege for children. However, the visit was intended to convey a conservative narrative of the siege and its legacy for Colchester.⁶⁸

As national political and social unrest increased during the nineteenth century, the local Tory and Anglican elites used the siege narrative in the landscape to consolidate their position locally. For example, they used the new church of St Botolph's to continue the siege narrative. Built in 1837 and funded by organizations like the Conservative Essex Standard since parishioners lacked sufficient capital, the building provided the parish with its first church since 1648.⁶⁹ The new development was probably a consequence of the fear of Chartism that had grown in this period. The local Tory Anglicans thought that more capacity for the Anglican church might suppress such a movement in the town.⁷⁰ The fact that St Botolph's lacked physical premises because of the siege was attributed to the growth of radical groups like the Chartists in the town. Newspapers peddling this narrative told readers that, 'In the large and populous parish of St. Botolph, in the town of Colchester, there has been no Church for the accommodation of the Inhabitants for nearly two hundred years. The evil has from time to time been seriously felt by the true Friends of Religion.'⁷¹ Explicit reference was made to the siege in the plaque that was attached to the new building, which explained that the area had been without a church since the 'venerable siege of 1648'.⁷² Local Tory Anglicans used the ruin and the siege story to combat non-conformity and Chartism in the town.

Conservatives throughout the nineteenth century remained equally vehement in their support for the Royalist cause and its contemporary legacy. At the opening of the Peckover School in 1900 an article was printed in the *Essex Standard* that vilified the founder's ancestor, who had served under Colonel Fleetwood, commander of the troop of cavalry in Cromwell's New Model Army. The piece ended with the comment that 'It is pleasing to think of the handsome way in which the generous descendant of

⁶⁵Cutts was the curate at Coggeshall, who later wrote a history of Colchester (1888), 'Essex Church School Masters Association', *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 25 Jul. 1862, 3. Laver also organized many walking tours of the siege sites in the town; his enthusiasm for the siege is evident in an article, 'The Chelmsford odd volumes at Colchester', *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 14 Sep. 1894, 6. In 1884, the local historian and Tory politician John Horace Round guided a London-based antiquarian society around sites of historic interest and entertained guests with the history of the siege: see 'The Cocked Hat Club at Copford and Colchester', *Essex Standard*, 12 Jul. 1884, 6.

⁶⁶'Friends Adult School demonstration: a visit of the Norwich and Ipswich Schools', *Essex Standard*, 1 Jul. 1893, 7.

⁶⁷'Colchester', *Essex Standard*, 25 Jul. 1891, 8. Local schools were keenly interested in the siege; for example, Drayton school gave a book on the Siege of Colchester as a prize: 'Central Board of Education – diocese of Norwich', *Norwich Mercury*, 4 Oct. 1876. One writer noted that he was taken to the sites when in school: 'A cyclist's trip to Colchester', *Essex Standard*, 5 Sep. 1896, 2.

⁶⁸'The Castle Bailey Stone', *Essex Standard*, 9 Dec. 1882, 8.

⁶⁹'St. Botolph's Colchester', *Essex Standard*, 27 Feb. 1835, 2.

⁷⁰For more details, see A. Brown, *Chartism in Essex and Suffolk* (Chelmsford, 1982), 106.

⁷¹'St. Botolph's Colchester', *Essex Standard*, 2 Jan. 1835, 1.

⁷²ERO, D/P203/8/4, minutes of meeting at St Botolph's Priory, about subscribers for the new church in 1835.

Edmund Peckover has compensated the town for any little damage which his ancestor may have unintentionally done to some of our local buildings.⁷³ At a gathering of the Tory affiliated Colchester Association for the Protection of Property, this partisan version of 1648 was reflected in the speaker's observation: 'there was no town which had so many disasters to contend with as Colchester. In 1648 there was the siege of Colchester, a most lamentable occurrence, when half the houses were destroyed, heavy fines levied, upon the inhabitants, and the people were practically ruined for many years.'⁷⁴ The Civil War therefore provided a common reference point for the narratives that surrounded the ruins and buildings in which the siege remained a focal point.

At the same time, the nineteenth century saw a national reinterpretation of the Civil Wars, influenced by the advance of liberalism and socio-political reform. The consequences of these developments can be seen in the debates over Thorneycroft's statue of the Lord Protector outside parliament.⁷⁵ We must not lose sight of the fact that Colchester saw a growing Liberal presence that opened up space for new rehabilitative interpretations of the Parliamentary commander, Lord Fairfax, that contrasted with the hitherto dominant Tory narrative of the siege. This development was particular evident in local parliamentary campaigning.⁷⁶ Some enthusiastic supporters were so confident in their hero that they went on the offensive.⁷⁷ Yet, in Colchester, it was the conservative narrative that continued to dominate, especially in contemporary constructed sites.⁷⁸ For example, in 1892, Henry Laver, a conservatively inclined curator of the Castle Museum, commissioned and paid for the erection of a memorial to the Royalist knights, Lucas and Lisle. The monument was installed by the castle where the two men were executed, which had been transformed into a public park in 1892. The memorial reflected contemporary feelings about heroes; memorials and statues proliferated in public spaces to celebrate 'great men' who were thought to have shown courage, honour and leadership in times of crisis.⁷⁹ Laver's intervention was probably a deliberate political strategy that used the memorial to counter Liberal interpretations and to preserve the Royalist mythology in material form. The local historian B.P. Lyndon writing in the 1960s thought that the monument had been erected in the seventeenth century following the Restoration. He wrote that 'At the Restoration an obelisk was erected to their memory on the spot where they died beneath the walls; it tells that for their conspicuous loyalty to their King in adversity

⁷³'Colchester jottings', *Essex Standard*, 9 Jun. 1900, 3.

⁷⁴'Colchester', *Essex Standard*, 7 May 1892, 6; the army's conservative leanings were tied to the siege, 'Colchester Oyster Feast', *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 25 Oct. 1895, 3.

⁷⁵Worden, *Roundhead Reputations*, 296–315; B. Worden, 'The Victorians and Oliver Cromwell', in S. Collini, R. Whatmore and B. Young (eds.), *History and Culture: Essays in British Intellectual History 1750–1950* (Cambridge, 2000), 112–13.

⁷⁶National Liberal interpretations are evident in Worden, *Roundhead Reputations*, 242; however, local debates are shown in newspapers such as 'Norwich notes and notion', *Eastern Evening News*, 5 Jul. 1907, 1.

⁷⁷'The Royal Archaeological Institute', *Morning Post*, 9 Aug. 1876, 3; the Liberal defence of Fairfax and the attack on Lucas and Lisle provoked a fierce backlash from the local Tory elite in the local papers.

⁷⁸Clear Royalist sympathies continued into the inter-war period; at King George V's Jubilee, songs were sung in the park praising Cavaliers and denouncing Roundhead Rogues, ERO, D/DU 888/38, diary and papers of E.J. Rudsdale.

⁷⁹P.A. Pickering and A. Tyrell (eds.), *Contested Sites: Commemoration, Memorial and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2017).

they were barbarously murdered in cold blood.⁸⁰ Lyndon had confused the St Giles memorial erected in the 1660s with the Laver obelisk. But his comments confirm that this monument succeeded in cementing a memory of martyrdom for future generations. However, the monument also bears witness to a period of political reconciliation, and the language of murder and martyrdom was avoided on the inscription. The moderate tone was strategic as Laver needed the permission of the council, which had become increasingly Liberal, to erect the monument, reflecting the need to work within a political culture of consensus that was championed in local politics. Laver also saw an opportunity to benefit the local economy. The obelisk appeared frequently in marketing literature after it was installed and soon became a popular attraction for tourists and locals alike.⁸¹ For example, when J.H. Round conducted a tour of the castle for a group of visitors in 1895, the obelisk was an important landmark on the trip.⁸² In line with Pierre Nora's characterization of places of memory, Laver's memorial can be seen as a deliberate effort to glorify the Royalist leaders and inscribe a profoundly conservative historical meaning on to public space that was intended to construct a highly political collective memory and identity.⁸³

Contested and forgotten meanings

We must not lose sight of the fact that the Tory antiquarian interpretation of the material landscape distorted the historical stories of the Civil War. Certain events from the past which had impacted the urban and rural landscape were forgotten or replaced. This is important because the construction of historical memory is an intertwined process of remembering and forgetting.⁸⁴ John Walter has already noted that this happened in Colchester, where the residents presented 'a collective amnesia' after the Restoration in 1660 about the conflict between John Lucas and the town that led to the sacking of the family seat at St John's Abbey in 1642. Walter has argued that, rather than have multiple stories overlaying each other, it was both profitable and politically expedient to focus on the Royalist myth of the martyrdom of John Lucas' relative Charles, in which Colchester featured as a place with Royalist sympathies rather than Parliamentary.⁸⁵ The lens of antiquarian assumptions in the long nineteenth century, distorted by religious and political affiliations, sometimes served to hide the layers of meaning existing in the material remains of the past.⁸⁶ Morant's account of the destruction of St John's Abbey overlooked elements of this history. Focusing on the accounts given in Royalist propaganda, he simply asserted that the building was 'blown up' by Parliamentary forces during the siege. But the reality of the abbey's destruction was more complicated and multi-layered.⁸⁷ The dilapidation

⁸⁰B.P. Lyndon, *The Siege of Colchester* (London, 1968), 53.

⁸¹C. Benham, *Benham's Castle and Museum Guide* (Colchester, 1900); the tradition continued into the late twentieth century: P. Berridge, *Colchester Castle Museum: Souvenir Guide* (Peterborough, 1997), 19.

⁸²'The British Association at Colchester', *Essex Standard*, 21 Sep. 1895, 5.

⁸³Nora, 'Between memory and history', 23.

⁸⁴S. Crane, *Museums and Memory* (Stanford, 2000), 1.

⁸⁵J. Walter, *Understanding Popular Violence in the English Revolution: The Colchester Plunderers* (Cambridge, 1999), 336.

⁸⁶D. Woolf, *Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture, 1500–1730* (Oxford, 2003), 187.

⁸⁷Walsham, *Reformation of the Landscape*, 530.

and destruction inflicted on the abbey began during the riots in 1642 and continued during the siege and subsequently in the Anglo-Dutch War of 1665 where Dutch prisoners of war were held.⁸⁸ Records from the treasury note that prisoners of war were kept at a 'house called St. Johns', when the then occupier, Mr Cockshutt, sought 'some remedy or recompense' from them.⁸⁹ The complaint suggests that although the abbey was in a state of disrepair after the siege, it was still standing when they first arrived there, and could provide some shelter to the captives. Visitors such as Daniel Defoe noted that the abbey had already been destroyed by the Restoration and, according to Morant, people only knew its location because of 'tradition'.⁹⁰ The narrative that followed in the centuries after only reiterated Morant's version of events. Laver, when providing a tour for the Middlesex Archaeological Association, stated that the site 'was eventually destroyed by the Parliamentarians'.⁹¹ Benjamin Clarke, writing a hundred years later, asserted that 'it was destroyed in the Parliamentary war'.⁹² The *Chelmsford Chronicle* reported that it 'was demolished by the Roundheads in 1648, during the siege and the very fine Abbey Gate-way built early in the 15th century only remains to testify to its former grandeur and to the horrors of war'.⁹³ As late as 1979, J.J. Maling contended that during the siege 'The Lucas mansion at St. John's Abbey had been utterly destroyed'.⁹⁴ However, the events surrounding the mansion's role as a prison after the Civil War and its origins in the sixteenth-century dissolution of the abbey disappeared from historical memory as local Tories made the mansion a convenient mnemonic for a polemical history constructed around their Royalist discourse of Parliamentary treachery.

However, these narratives did not go uncontested by those with different political perspectives. Most notable amongst them in Colchester was William Wire, clock-maker and Whig radical who was active in the Working Men's Association. His interest was in the experience of the residents of Colchester during the conflict, and in 1843 he arranged for the re-publication of the seventeenth-century pamphlet, *Colchester's Teares*, which challenged dominant conservative interpretations of the siege.⁹⁵ Written by a self-styled 'moderate man', the author of the pamphlet attributed blame for that 'mournfull city's' ruinous nature to the Royalists who held the town.⁹⁶

⁸⁸For more information on these wars and prisons, see G. Rommelse and R. Downing, 'State formation and the private economy: Dutch prisoners of war in England, 1652–1674', *The Mariner's Mirror*, 104, (2018), 153–71.

⁸⁹W. Shaw (ed.), *Calendar of Treasury Books*, vol. I: 1660–1667 (London, 1904), 676. Old buildings were requisitioned to hold prisoners during this war. See Winchester's medieval leprosy hospital (later an almshouse), 'Magdalen Hill Archaeological Research Project', University of Winchester, www.winchester.ac.uk/research/exploring-the-past-and-the-world-around-us/research-projects-exploring-the-past-and-the-world-around-us/mharp/, accessed 13 Sep. 2018.

⁹⁰D. Defoe, *A Tour through England and Wales: Tour through the Eastern Counties of England* (London, 1722); Morant, *The History and Antiquities*, 2.

⁹¹'The London and Middlesex Archeological Society', *Essex Standard*, 31 Aug. 1889, 5.

⁹²B. Clarke, *The British Gazetteer, Political, Commercial, Ecclesiastical, and Historical...Illustrated by a Full Set of County Maps, etc. with Plates*, vol. I (London, 1852), 699.

⁹³'Essex Field Club', *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 8 Aug. 1884, 2.

⁹⁴J.J. Maling, *Colchester through the Ages* (Ipswich, 1979), 39.

⁹⁵This document remained an important tool for Liberals and ended up as an important exhibit in the Castle Museum, 'Colchester teares', *Essex Standard*, 14 Mar. 1885, 7.

⁹⁶W. Wire, *Colchesters Teares; Affecting and Afflicting City and Country; Dropping from the Sad Face of a New Warr, Threatening to Bury in Her Own Ashes that Wofull Town* (Colchester, 1843).

Wire had begun a process by which ordinary people could interpret the siege narrative in the landscape and he ensured that there was now a clear and alternative narrative of the material legacy from the siege. From 1842 until his death in 1857, Wire kept a detailed record in diary form of all his archaeological findings in the town. Building developments in the period meant that artefacts were constantly being brought to his attention. If labourers found any object of interest, they were told to 'take that to Mr Wire'.⁹⁷ On one occasion, he was told that human remains had been found on East Hill and he noted that they were probably 'the remains of some poor fellows who lost their lives during the Siege of this Town'.⁹⁸ People also went to him for information regarding the historical landscape; he noted in May 1844 that people were enquiring of him concerning the traditions about a circular entrenchment with several people saying that 'Oliver Crumbel Cromwll had it made and that...the church of St. Mary at the Walls was knocked down by cannon planted there'.⁹⁹

At the turn of the century, the Royalist narrative began to loosen its hold; new sites contested the dominant Royalist stories. In 1902, a new town hall was constructed, which involved both the Liberals and Conservatives in the presentation of the town's history. Unsurprisingly, the siege was not used in the imagery because it was so divisive. Obvious and popular historical characters linked with Colchester were put on display on the outside.¹⁰⁰ Helena, mother of Constantine and patron saint of Colchester was displayed on the top of the tower, and the surrounding statues showed recognizable and non-controversial local historical figures of national importance including Boudicca. The arms of the legendary King Coel were also depicted in stained glass. The siege, on the other hand, was commemorated inside the building. Portraits of the leading protagonists on both sides of the conflict, Lucas, Lisle and Fairfax, were hung on the walls of a meeting room, alongside one another.¹⁰¹ The siege had been wrested away from the dominant Royalist control and had to be converted into a useable past. The inclusion of both sides of the conflict on the inside demonstrates that locals still valued the history, but favoured one in which different (and often conflicting) narratives of the war could surface.

There have always been multiple stories, versions of the past and understandings of place that were different from the dominant narrative.¹⁰² It is striking, for example, how histories of the siege continued in the landscape through the Restoration legends and myths despite efforts by conservative scholars to remove them. Accounts of the miracle of the martyrdom of Lucas and Lisle, over whose site of execution, according to the Royalist propagandist Carter in 1656, the grass would not grow, provides a good example. Morant dismissed the story as 'vulgar' and explained the absence of grass by the 'great resort of people to see the place'.¹⁰³ Others suggested, more cynically, that the grass was kept from growing deliberately 'by art...for the sake of

⁹⁷ A. Brown, *Essex People 1750–1900: From Their Diaries, Memoirs and Letters* (Chelmsford, 1972), 162–3; ERO, D/Y 37/1/3, William Wire's journal.

⁹⁸ Wire, *Colchesters Teares*,

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ D. Cannadine, 'The transformation of civic ritual in modern Britain: the Colchester Oyster Feast', *Past & Present*, 94 (1982), 117.

¹⁰¹ 'Colchester and county notes', *Essex Standard*, 19 May 1900, 2.

¹⁰² Lloyd and Moore, 'Sedimented histories'.

¹⁰³ Morant, *The History and Antiquities*, 68.

getting money by shewing people this lying wonder'.¹⁰⁴ Yet, some still seemed to believe the tradition; an anonymous author writing under the pseudonym of the Ghost of Philip Morant expressed concern that the site was 'now covered with grass equally with the rest of the Castle Bailey...Oh, Sir! Shall cattle pens desecrate this spot?'¹⁰⁵ Another report in 1893 noted the 'white stone at the back of Colchester Castle, which marks the spot where Sir Charles Lucas and Sir George Lisle fell, and around which, though it stands in a grass-field, no grass has, for hundreds of years, grown'.¹⁰⁶ As Peck has argued, the mystery is a testament to the enduring power of place in historical memory.¹⁰⁷ However, for some the site was not a historic monument to the past, but a place for children to play in. One reporter noted that 'the cause of the non-growth of the grass in modern times was attributed to the fact that children were constantly at play round the stone, which marked the scene of the execution. At the present time the place is marked by an obelisk.'¹⁰⁸ Evidently, the site was viewed and used by different generations in multiple ways.

Furthermore, as the distance in time from the siege grew, the landscape increasingly lost its historical meaning, and its value was reduced to an image of a bygone time that obstructed modernization or other contemporary uses. For those of a romantic inclination, the ancient buildings were simply picturesque scenery that provided a pleasant location for an enjoyable day out, as evidenced by novels of the time such as Matilda Houston's work, *A Heart on Fire*.¹⁰⁹ On occasion, the sites associated with the siege were treated with indifference, neglected, adapted, converted or simply pulled down. According to one observer of Colchester's topography, by 1900 the Roman walls had 'tumbled away' and St Botolph's Priory had 'all but succumbed to the devastations of time'.¹¹⁰ Further concern was expressed later in the century that the stone that was said to mark the spot where the two knights were executed had apparently been neglected.¹¹¹ The castle, such a powerful physical symbol of local historical identity, had been neglected for most of its history, but was important as a prison until 1835, and as an arms depot from 1819 until 1859.¹¹² It was not until it was acquired as a museum in 1860 that its significance as a historic site became firmly established.¹¹³ Similarly, St John's Abbey grounds were put to a variety of uses that were more practical than historical. A private house was built on part of the site in the 1830s. Another area of the grounds was known for a while in the early 1800s as the 'Pinnacle Garden' and used by local people. St John's Green was also the site of the annual fair. In the 1830s, the 'nurseryman' Edward Auston occupied a part of the grounds and turned it into a market garden, which continued to exist until the

¹⁰⁴ERO, LIB/PER 2/34/1/58, *Essex Review*, 58 (1949), 54.

¹⁰⁵'Castle Bailey', *Essex Standard*, 10 Nov. 1858, 4.

¹⁰⁶'Legends and stories of the north', *Newcastle Chronicle*, 28 Jan. 1893, 9.

¹⁰⁷Peck, *Recollections in the Republics*, 151.

¹⁰⁸'The Essex review', *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 28 Jan. 1910, 4.

¹⁰⁹M.C. Houston, *A Heart on Fire. A Novel*, vol. III (London, 1887).

¹¹⁰Brown, *Colchester*, 181.

¹¹¹'The Castle Bailey Stone', *Essex Standard*, 9 Dec. 1882, 8.

¹¹²'Colchester Castle House of Correction', *Prison History*, www.prisonhistory.org/prison/colchester-castle-house-of-correction/, accessed 3 Aug. 2021; ERO, Q/AGb 3, plans of House of Correction in Colchester Castle; ERO, Q/AMm 1/1, 1/2, 1/4, lease for 14 years by C.G. Round, esq., to clerk of the peace, of one room in Colchester Castle, for the Eastern Battalion of the Militia; in 1859, it appears the Militia Depot moved to Chelmsford; ERO, D/DR A2, rental book of Round Estates in Colchester and District 1796–1834.

¹¹³ERO, D/B/ 6 M3/1, special committee minute book, 1856–78.

War Office purchased the abbey precinct and abbey farm in 1860 for the building of Colchester Garrison.¹¹⁴ The military put the abbey site to a variety of uses, proposing at one point that a 'Crimean memento' should be erected in the grounds to take the form of 'a games house and concert hall for the use of the staff and officers of the garrison'.¹¹⁵ The historic meaning of the site had largely evaporated for many as circumstances and uses had changed during the nineteenth century.

The ruins of St Botolph's Priory remained important for local parish identity. Since the siege, the residents of the parish had been exiled to All Saints as the church was destroyed.¹¹⁶ However, the parish still functioned; in 1754, the overseer's book noted that 'It was agreed that a perambulation (perambulate) be made in our parish of St. Botolph, Colchester on Holy Thursday next, being May 23, in order to ascertain the Bounds of our said Parish'.¹¹⁷ The reason why the parish could not rebuild its own church is evident in the overseer's reports, which inform us of its poor financial situation.¹¹⁸ This does not mean that the ruins were completely neglected. Even though the parish could no longer meet in the ruins of its old church, there is evidence that the site and the grounds were still being maintained. The overseer's accounts show us that the churchyard was being looked after by the members of the parish: the gate was repaired in 1757, and the yard cleared in 1765.¹¹⁹

The connection which St Botolph's parish had to its original premises continued into the twentieth century, as is shown by the 1915 minute book.¹²⁰ The parish magazine of St Botolph's in February of 1914 used the ruined priory and not the 1837 church to illustrate the front cover of the magazine.¹²¹ In July 1915, the ruins were used to hold a service, which the bishop of the diocese conducted. The magazine noted that 'the sentimental interest that attaches to moldering ruins may be replaced by the religious attachment due to the place which God has chosen once and for ever'.¹²² In the magazine, the vicar later observed that the lawn between the priory and the ruins should be used to build a memorial to the war dead.¹²³ Although this never happened, probably because the town memorial had been built by 1920, the episode demonstrates the new and different attachments and meanings that were placed on the site.

St Botolph's Priory was also a popular place for people to meet and walk.¹²⁴ Francis Grose mentioned the indifference of the 'Idle Youths' who met at the site and, according to local reports, had damaged the ruin, which led to the parish fencing it off for its protection.¹²⁵ A hundred years later, this indifference continued. A report was made about vandalism inflicted on the priory ruins in 1873, when the churchwardens caught some local boys causing damage:

¹¹⁴ERO, MAP/CM/25/1, ichnography; ERO, D/P 178/27/2, tithe map 1848; 'St John's Abbey', *Colchester Archaeological Group*, 56 (2016), 6.

¹¹⁵'Today's gossip', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 3 Apr. 1902, 2.

¹¹⁶ERO, D/P 200/8/1, All Saints churchwarden book from 1686 to 1753.

¹¹⁷ERO, D/P 203/5/1, churchwarden accounts 1753–82.

¹¹⁸ERO, D/P 203/12/51, overseers' accounts of St Botolph 1750–1850.

¹¹⁹ERO, D/P 203/5/1, churchwarden accounts 1753–82.

¹²⁰ERO, D/P 203/8/5, minutes 1855–1985.

¹²¹ERO, D/P 203/28/11, bound copies of monthly parish magazine, Jan. 1914 – Dec. 1921.

¹²²*Ibid.*

¹²³*Ibid.*, no. 12, Dec. 1919, 35.

¹²⁴'Died', *Suffolk Chronicle; Or Weekly General Advertiser & County Express*, 8 May 1813, 3.

¹²⁵F. Grose, *The Antiquities of England and Wales by Francis Grose*, vol. II (London, 1783–97).

St. Botolph's Priory Damaged- Chas. Dunningham, 12, son of a painter, and Jas, Roule, an illegitimate child living with his grandmother, Mrs. Dunningham, were charged with doing damage to the ruins of St. Botolph's Priory, on Sunday, the 18th...The church clerk, Mr. Jos. White, hearing a noise in the ruins, left the church and went to the Priory, where he found the defendants in the act of throwing big stones at one of the pillars, in which a hole three feet by one foot had been made since the service commenced.

The wardens complained that they had had 'much trouble in getting voluntary subscriptions to protect the ruins as interesting relics of antiquity'.¹²⁶ Different generations and different social groups or individuals reinvented or neglected the historic traces left in physical sites.

Conclusion

The siege had a profound impact on how people experienced the urban environment in Colchester in the centuries that followed it. The material legacies of the siege intrigued local elites who were fascinated by urban history.¹²⁷ This article builds upon Levine's argument and shows that it was these antiquarians who preserved and maintained the ruins, and it was they who shaped the political narratives found within them.¹²⁸ In Colchester, the urban landscape was dominated by a distinct Royalist perspective which exploited the scars left on buildings, first by the Restoration government and later by the efforts of local Tory elites to establish a political history of place. This development led to the forgetting of history that complicated the distinct and shared narrative of Royalist tragedy promoted by the local elites. Furthermore, it was this political legacy within the landscape that was repurposed to attract people when the tourist industry blossomed during the nineteenth century and provided stories of tragedy, loyalty and heroism which could be exploited by locals to sell the town to visitors.

However, the elites could not prevent other stories or uses of these sites, such as the youth using St Botolph's Priory as a meeting place.¹²⁹ Building on Michael Richards' work on contested narratives and recent work by Rebecca Magdin on emotional connections to heritage, this article has shown that different groups and individuals found their own meanings and uses within the ruins created by the siege, whether that was recreational, emotional or political.¹³⁰ Lloyd and Moore have argued about where we see the creation of a 'sediment' of connected but not necessarily uniform histories.¹³¹ Although the meaning was deeply political, local people clearly interacted and found their own meanings in the ruins. By building on Hodgkin's and Radstone's work, this article has shown that as the centuries progressed the political histories in the urban environment could also be contested, challenged and reconciled, as is shown by the stories displayed in the town hall, which helped shift the narrative away from the Royalist story onto a shared message of suffering and

¹²⁶'Petty sessions', *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 30 May 1873, 2.

¹²⁷Sweet, 'The production of urban histories'.

¹²⁸Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional*.

¹²⁹Grose, *The Antiquities of England and Wales*.

¹³⁰Magdin, *Why Do Historic Places Matter?*; Richards, *After the Civil War*.

¹³¹Lloyd and Moore, 'Sedimented histories', 242.

tragedy.¹³² Finally, this article has built upon work by Legon and Vallance to demonstrate the longer-term impact and legacy of the wars.¹³³

The siege changed the way people interacted with Colchester's urban topography and with many of the landmarks still surviving today. The study of the continued legacy of the siege and its meaning requires attention. Although this article has only focused on Colchester it does suggest that the urban topography of some places in the United Kingdom were definitively shaped by the Civil Wars. Questions regarding the legacy of the conflict between parishes and local communities still need to be addressed, but it is hoped that this study will spur wider interest and research into the long-term impact of conflict on urban areas such as Aberdeen and Chester. Such investigations allow us to see the lasting impact of the Civil Wars as more than just political; the long-term cultural, social and environmental impact of the wars helps us understand how towns and cities in the British Isles have been shaped by their unique histories.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

¹³²Hodgkin and Radstone (eds.), *Memory, History, Nation*.

¹³³Legon, *Revolution Remembered*; Vallance, *Loyalty, Memory and Public Opinion*.

Cite this article: Sewell, M. (2025). The impact of the British Civil Wars on the meanings and uses of the urban topography of Colchester in the long nineteenth century. *Urban History*, 52: 246–263, doi:[10.1017/S0963926823000780](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926823000780)