Women and the English Civil Wars

How did these conflicts affect their lives?
Contents

Background .................................................................................................................. 3
Teacher’s notes ........................................................................................................ 5
Tasks ......................................................................................................................... 8
Source 1 ................................................................................................................. 9
Source 2 ................................................................................................................. 10
Source 3 ................................................................................................................. 11
Source 4a ................................................................................................................ 12
Source 4b ................................................................................................................ 13
Source 5 ................................................................................................................... 14
Source 6 ................................................................................................................... 15
Source 7 ................................................................................................................... 16

This resource was produced using documents from the collections of The National Archives. It can be freely modified and reproduced for use in the classroom only.
In 1642 war broke out between King and Parliament. Both sides called up men to fight for them as a result of a series of disagreements about religion and the way that the country should be ruled. During the 1630s King Charles I ruled without calling a Parliament. Many changes and events during this period caused distrust between the King and the people.

In the 1630s the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, endeavoured to reform the church by ensuring that church buildings were made beautiful again and services made more elaborate. William Laud wanted to raise the Church of England to its former glory, but many people thought that he was returning it to the ways of the Roman Catholic Church and how it had been before the Reformation. Puritans, groups of radical Protestants, in particular disliked these changes.

Parliament was one of the main ways that monarchs raised money, by asking for taxes to be raised. As King Charles did not summon a Parliament during this time he had to use alternative ways of finding money. Some of these made him unpopular. For example, he raised money from people across the country via a tax known as Ship Money. However, because this was traditionally raised from coastal counties and only in times when the coastline was threatened, many resented it.

Finally, when rebellion broke out in Scotland in 1637 against Laud’s unpopular prayer book reforms, Charles I was forced to call a Parliament. Relationships between Charles and the MPs were now so strained that they struggled to agree on matters of religion and finance. Some people had also begun to question whether the King ruled by 'Divine Right' (meaning that his power came directly from God and not from any earthly power). When war broke out in Ireland in 1641 an army was needed to subdue it, but the mistrust had grown so great that neither trusted the other in charge of armed forces. In August 1642 the country descended into civil war.

War was fought between King and Parliament in a series of prolonged campaigns between 1642 and 1651. In 1649 Charles I was executed and rule without a King was established until 1660 when Charles II, his son, returned to England. Historians have estimated that during these wars perhaps as many as 7% of the population died as a result of the fighting and from diseases spread by moving armies. People from all parts of society were impacted by these wars, and this included women. Many women were the wives and mothers of soldiers, some of whom never returned from war, as well as carrying out other wartime activities such as nursing.

These sources tell us something about the lives of these women during the English Civil Wars and focus on the different roles that they played. Each source is an original document, or an extract from one, that was created or received by Parliament at the time. Some of the documents contain the words of women themselves, others are about women, but all contain interesting stories about how women participated in the events of this period.
This lesson could be used as part of a teaching programme for any of the thematic studies for the GCSE history courses relating to the study of Warfare and British society or Power and Authority. It explores the stories of some of those women whose lives were changed by the English Civil Wars. The documents reveal that they played a variety of roles, a few of which may surprise us. Throughout history, wartime has impacted on all different types of people. The lives and experiences of women are sometimes harder to gauge, particularly further back in time. However, it is possible to discover more about the important roles that women had in these wars and in others. It is also important to include different types of people: men and women, young and old, rich and poor, when we study history. The lives and experiences of ordinary people help us to understand what it might have been like to live through war then as well as now.

We hope that these documents will offer students a chance to develop their powers of evaluation and analysis. Alternatively, teachers may wish to use the sources to develop their own lesson in a different way or combine with other sources available from our Civil War website.

All sources in this lesson have been provided with a transcript and more difficult language has been explained in square brackets to support students. Obvious differences in the spelling have not been altered. Each source is captioned and dated to provide a sense of what the document is about. All document images and can be downloaded as a pdf file for educational purposes.

Connections to the curriculum

Key stage 3

The development of Church, state and society in Britain 1509-1745

Key stage 4


OCR GCSE, History A, Explaining the Modern World (J410). This lesson provides support for the unit: War and British Society c.790-2010: The Civil Wars of 1642-1651 in England, Scotland and Ireland: the nature of these wars; their impact on the people of England, Scotland and Ireland.

AQA GCSE History (8145). Thematic study 2B Britain: Power and the People c1170 to the present day, part two: Challenging royal authority: the short and long term impact of the English Revolution.

Sources

Source 1: Petition from Mary Robinson to the Committee for Compounding [a Parliamentary Committee that dealt with confiscated lands], July 1646 (SP 23/184 f.916)
Source 2: The mark of Mary Robinson (SP 23/184 f.921)

Source 3: Petition from ‘many hundreds of widows of Liverpool’ to the Committee for Compounding, April 1648 (SP 23/188 f.939)

Source 4a: Letter from Elizabeth Alkin to the Admiralty Commissioners [a Parliamentary committee that dealt with the navy], July 1655 (SP 18/38 f.9r)

Source 4b: Reverse side of letter showing the note ‘Parliament Joan’s Letter’.

Source 5: Information of Constance Stringer to Parliament, February 1651 (SP 23/120 f.33)

Source 6: Report of the Parliamentary Committee in Shropshire on Mary Crompton, November 1645 (SP 23/77 f.587)

Source 7: ‘The Resolution of the Women of London to the Parliament’ (1642) and ‘The Parliament of Women’ (1646) © British Library

**External links**

Use our [Civil War website](https://www.englishcivildisorder.co.uk) to find out about archival sources and investigate the conflict involving King Charles I, Parliament, the people and Oliver Cromwell.

**Related resources**

[Civil War News Stories](https://www.englishcivildisorder.co.uk), a British Library learning activity using original newspaper sources from the English Civil Wars.

[BCW Project](https://www.englishcivildisorder.co.uk), a useful content website on the English Civil Wars.

[Civil War and Revolution](https://www.englishcivildisorder.co.uk), a themed collection of articles by leading historians.
Tasks

Source 1, wives and mothers: Questions
1. Which side did Mary support?
2. Why is she making this petition or request?
3. How might the Civil Wars have put families in a difficult situation?

Source 2, wives and mothers: Questions
1. How has Mary signed her name in this document? Do you think that she was able to write her own petitions?

Source 3, widows: Questions
1. What does this source tell us about what happened when a city came under attack during the civil wars?
2. What might it have been like to live through a civil war siege as a civilian?
3. What could have been the reason for these widows and children joining together with Colonel John Moore in order to send their petition?

Source 4a, nurses: Questions
1. During the seventeenth century there was no National Health Service and medical advances such as anaesthetics and antibiotics did not exist. What do you think this would have meant for soldiers who were wounded in battle?
2. What does this source also tell us about the type of care that Elizabeth Alkin provided to wounded soldiers?

Source 4b, nurses: Questions
1. Can you see the lines where the letter would have been folded?

Source 5, spies and informers: Questions
1. What might have motivated Constance Stringer to spy for Parliament?
2. Could this have been a dangerous thing to do?
3. In what ways might it have been easier for women to act as spies rather than men?

Source 6, fighters?: Questions
1. What is Parliament accusing Mary Crompton of doing in this source?
2. Does it surprise you that a woman might have been accused of this?
3. This is a Parliamentary report and does not give us a chance to hear Mary’s side of the story. If she was able to defend herself, what do you think she could have said?

Source 7, women in pictures: Questions
1. Look at both pictures. The first source contains a speech bubble to show what the woman was saying to the man. If there were similar speech bubbles on the second image what do you think the women might be saying?
2. Take another look at the first picture. Woodcuts were used to produce images such as this in this period and they were often reused because they were expensive. Do you think that this image was originally intended for this pamphlet? What makes you think this?
3. Which image do you think depicts women in a more positive way? Explain your reasons why.
This is a petition from Mary Robinson to a Parliamentary Committee that dealt with confiscated lands, July 1646.

Transcript

That your petitioner [Mary Robinson] is a very aged woman, and hath for this two yeares or thereabouts bin bedrid [bedridden, unable to walk] but haveinge sent her sonne with a horse and armes into the Kings Armye, and maintaineing him in that service, her estate is therefore sequestred [confiscated], and being hartily sorry for this her offence. Shee humbly prayes this honourable Committee to take her distressed condition into consideration
Source 2: wives and mothers

This is an extract from a copy of a petition from Mary Robinson.
A petition from ‘many hundreds of widows of Liverpool’ to a Parliamentary Committee that dealt with confiscated lands.

Transcript
The humble petition of Collonell John Moore a Member of the honourable house [house] of Commons and the well affected Inabitants of the Nine adjacent [neighbouring] parrishes unto Liverpoole together with many hundred of widdows and fatherlesse Children, whose husbands and fathers lost their lives, and estates when Prince Rupert [the nephew of Charles I], with his barborous popish [Catholic] Army. Sheweth, That your petit [ioners to their utmost abilities resisted the great Army of Prince Rupert when hee beleagared [attacked] Liverpoole where they lost their estates, and many of your Petitioners howses [houses] were burned and others dispoyled [plundered] and much ruined, and many of your petitioners husbands were barborously massacred and the rest imprisoned and all dispoyled and robbed of their estates to the value of 30000li [30,000 pounds] and upwards...
This is a letter from Elizabeth Alkin to a Parliamentary committee that dealt with the navy, July 1655.

Transcript
Mr Blackbourne [the secretary of the Admiralty Commissioners],
I intreate [beg] you presenting humble service to all my Masters, and to your selfe, Sir you have sent mee
downe to Harwich [port town in Essex] with five pounds, but believe mee it hath cost mee three times soe
much, since my cominge hither, I have laid out my moneys for divers [various] necessaries about the sicke &
wounded men here, it pitties mee, to see poore people in distresse, I cannot see them want if I have it, a
great deale of moneys I have given to haue them delaued, in their bodies, -
and their haird Cutt, mending their Cloth, reparacions [repairs], and
severall things else...
This is the reverse of source 4a. A note saying ‘Parliament Joan’s Letter’ was added when it was filed.

The back of a letter often gave the address details of the recipient as people did not use envelopes in this period. Instead, letters were folded and sealed. The author of the letter was written on the back when it was filed: ‘Parliament Joan’, another name for Elizabeth Alkin. As well as being a nurse, she carried out more secret duties for Parliament.

Transcript
For the right worshipful Mr Blackbourne
Secretary to the Comissioners of the Navie at Whitehall
there deliver
London
[Bottom of letter, upside down]
2 July 1653
Parliament Joanes
Letter
Source 5: spies and informers

This is an extract from a report from Constance Stringer to Parliament.

Transcript
The Information of Constance Stringer widdowe on the behalfe of the Common Wealth against Francis Moore of Seven stoke in the County of Worcester Gentelman. That when Worcester Citty was a Garrison for the late Kinge the said Francis Moore in the yeare 1644 was a Commander and in armes in that Citty against the Parliament and did then doe many Acts of Hostility there.
An extract from a Report of the Parliamentary Committee in Shropshire about Mary Crompton.

Transcript
Mrs Mary Crompton did keepe a Garrison [troop camp] against the Parliament which Garrison was taken by forces Commanded by this Committee she is adjudged a Delinquent [Royalist] And her reall and personall Estate [lands and goods] to be seized.
Here are pictures from two Civil War pamphlets: ‘The Resolution of the Women of London to the Parliament’ (1642) and ‘The Parliament of Women (1646) © British Library.

So far in this lesson you have looked at manuscript sources which were handwritten and either produced by a government department or sent into the government. At the time they would probably only have been read by a small selection of people.

However, during the Civil War the use of print increased dramatically. More people had access to pamphlets and newsletters that were produced by the printing press.

Both of these images come from the front pages of pamphlets that were available for members of the public to purchase and read. Some pamphlets would contain news or gossip, and some were official publications of Parliament. These pamphlets have images of women on them and tell us something about the ways in which people at the time represented women and thought they should act.