

SIR THOMAS WYATT'S ASSAULT ON
COOLING CASTLE, 30TH JANUARY 1554.

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THE assault and capture of Cooling Castle is but a small incident in the rebellion of Sir Thomas Wyatt, and passes almost unnoticed, save for a brief reference, in the writings of local historians. The effect of this trivial local action on the general progress and result of the insurrection was probably negligible; but it might, under different circumstances, have played a more important part in the conduct of the brief campaign. As regards the actual assault of the Castle, all that we know of the details of the fight is contained in a long letter, written immediately after the capture and sent to Queen Mary, by Sir George Brooke, Lord Cobham, the defender and lord of Cooling. The full context of this letter will be found in Vol. XI. of *Archæologia Cantiana* (pp. 141-2), and it is therefore unnecessary to reproduce it at length again. If we accept the letter on its face value, the explanation of the fall of the castle seems simple enough and hardly open to controversy. But if, however, we subject the letter to a critical analysis from a military aspect, and study it in conjunction with such details of Wyatt's rebellion as are generally known, we perceive certain features which may lead us to the conclusion that there was more behind this incident, slight though it may seem, than a casual perusal of Lord Cobham's letter discloses.

In putting forward the following suggestions as to the possible true cause of the fall of Cooling Castle, it is admitted that the arguments are based upon certain deductions and opinions. It may be, of course, that the facts as given in Lord Cobham's letter are the correct ones, though we must bear in mind that his letter is the report of a general who has suffered defeat, at the hands of a party of rebels, a general

who, therefore, would fully realise that his life was in jeopardy for his failure. It is but natural that he would make out the best case possible in his own defence ; and none would blame him if he erred on the side of exaggerating his own difficulties. That he recognised the peril of his position is shown by the fact that his despatch was written immediately on the fall of the Castle and the urgency with which he forwarded it to the Queen is clearly indicated in its address, which ran : " To the Queen's most excellent Majastie—hast, hast, post hast, with all dyligence possible, for the lyfe, for the lyfe."

Lord Cobham was certainly taking no chance of his messenger dallying on his journey and seems fully to have understood the importance of being first in the field with his own version of the affair. Further, we must not lose sight of the fact that some doubts seem to have existed, and some suspicions expressed, as to Lord Cobham's complete devotion to his cause—facts he was quite well aware of, for, in his letter, after many protestations of his loyalty and references as to his services, he plainly states : " Although I understand I have been otherwise reported to your highness."

In venturing upon a critical analysis of the actions of the two commanders in this unimportant fight, it must not be forgotten that the principles governing the conduct of war-like operations have varied but little from the earliest times, though the methods by which those principles are applied are subject to the developments of the science of warfare. The object of a commander is to defeat his enemy as quickly as possible, and to effect this he follows certain accepted principles. Whether as a means to an end he employs slings and stones, bows and arrows, or the most highly destructive armaments or aircraft depends merely on the age in which he lives.

The object of Sir Thomas Wyatt's rebellion was to prevent the proposed alliance of Queen Mary with Philip of Spain. It was part of a more general scheme which included among its instigators the Earls of Devon and Suffolk, Sir Peter Carew of Devon, and many of the nobility and gentry.

The arrest of the other leaders before they could raise their followers in their respective areas forced Wyatt to play a lone hand. The rebellion, however ill-advised, may certainly be considered a patriotic one in its conception. That the proposed alliance was objectionable to a large and influential section of the English nation is very certain. Though Sir Thomas Wyatt occupies a place in history as a rebel and traitor, it must be urged in his favour that, unlike the rebellion in the earlier part of the reign in which the unfortunate Lady Jane Grey fell a victim and such that had for its object the altering of the succession of the Crown from the Tudors to the Dudleys, Wyatt's rebellion was not one for personal gain. Indeed, he might have conscientiously supposed that had he succeeded in his object, it would be for the good of the country. These facts should be duly borne in mind as they may have considerably influenced the course of the incident in local history we are treating.

Wyatt raised his standard at Maidstone and collected a force of some 1,500 men. He marched to Rochester and, making the Castle his headquarters, fortified the bridge, thus commanding the passage of the Medway. At Rochester his army recruited up to a strength of about four thousand. The Queen's general, Thomas, Duke of Norfolk, proceeded on the 28th January to Gravesend, where he found the Sheriff of Kent (Sir Robert Southwell) and the trained bands of the county, as well as a number of nobility and gentry, among whom he enumerates, Lord Cobham, the Vice Chamberlain, and Sir John Fogge. Norfolk states this force was not exceeding 300 men. Cobham left the royal forces on the 29th and proceeded to his castle at Cooling. From there he reported to the Duke that Wyatt intended to fight it out, and he therefore cautioned Norfolk not to advance too far. This advice was quite sound, since Wyatt was in territory strongly favourable to him, and was in greatly superior strength. Norfolk, however, receiving reinforcements of some 700 or 800 men, advanced on Rochester. He was met by Wyatt at Strood, and, owing largely to treachery among his own forces and to desertions to the rebels, he

suffered defeat. Among Wyatt's captures were four cannon which later played an important part in the attack on Cooling. After his reverse the Duke retired on Gravesend, and so ended the first phase. Lord Cobham, from Cooling, advised the Queen of Norfolk's retreat. He enclosed in his despatch a copy of his letter to Norfolk and also a letter from Wyatt to himself, inviting him to join his forces, and proceed to London, and at the same time begging Cobham to arrest the Duke's progress.

We must now consider Wyatt's next move with some care; for on the following day he advanced on Cooling Castle. Generally speaking the main considerations controlling the movements of a commander are (a) military, (b) moral, and (c) political. We will deal first with the military considerations, but before doing so let us recall the qualifications of the commander. Wyatt was a tried soldier who had both seen service and won good opinions. In 1543 he was at the siege of Landrecies, where he distinguished himself and was highly spoken of. The Earl of Surrey commended to Henry VIII Wyatt's "hardiness, painfulness, circumspection and natural disposition to the war." These facts concerning Wyatt's military abilities are worthy of record, for they prove him to have been no novice nor untried general; and consequently we must consider his plan of campaign with these factors in our minds.

Wyatt's objective was of course London. He actually marched there via Gravesend and Dartford, and thence to Blackheath, where he encamped. His subsequent campaign is not material to our arguments, but it is important to note his line of advance—Rochester, Gravesend, Dartford. The success of a rising largely depends upon the rapidity with which the rebel force can advance on its objective; and to attain that objective before the defending armies are aware of the rebel's project and before they can organise and oppose them. Such must be the first consideration of an insurgent leader. Obviously, therefore, after Wyatt had secured his victory over the royal forces at Strood, his first consideration should have been to push on rapidly to his next immediate

objective, viz., Gravesend. Had he done so there seems little doubt he would have caught and again defeated the disorganised royal army, and would have considerably strengthened his own position.

Why, therefore, did he turn aside and attack Cooling Castle? It cannot possibly be urged that the capture of this castle, situated as it is in the wilds of the "cul-de-sac" of the Hundred of Hoo, was of vital strategic importance. Neither can it be said that its capture was essential to protect Wyatt's own advance on Gravesend. The castle lies some seven miles east of Gravesend, and in his advance on that place from Strood it would not be necessary for him to come within five miles of the Castle. Castles are not like mobile armies; they are absolutely stationary and their offensive range is limited. Nor is it to be supposed that Wyatt feared any raiding attack upon his flank by a sortie from the garrison, for he was probably quite aware that the garrison was inadequate even for defence of the castle. Not only does it seem that the capture of the Castle of Cooling was entirely unnecessary to Wyatt's plan of campaign—but to venture with an army into that peninsular of land in which the castle lay was tactically unsound; for in doing so he endangered his line of retreat. A glance at the map will at once show that, with Wyatt's army "bottled up" in a narrow strip of land surrounded on three sides by two big rivers and the sea, the royal army had only to throw a force anywhere east of the line Gravesend-Rochester, and entrap Wyatt into a situation from which he had no line of retreat. The royal commander was at Gravesend at the time—with a broken army it is true, but with every facility for obtaining reinforcements from London. It may, therefore, be urged that Wyatt's advance on Cooling was from a military aspect, entirely unsound in its conception.

Let us now consider the moral effect of the advance on Cooling. It may be admitted that the capture of the castle would have a good moral effect upon his rebel forces. A victory at Strood, followed by the capture of a stronghold

(a position doubtless of considerable importance in the eyes of his local followers) would encourage his army and perhaps bring in hesitating recruits. But, surely, a greater moral effect would be obtained by marching on and capturing the important town of Gravesend and the remains of the royal army ?

There now remains the political considerations, usually the most potent of all ; and here, it is suggested, we find Wyatt's real object in advancing on Cooling, viz., that his aim was to seize the person of Lord Cobham, the most powerful brain and political factor in the neighbourhood. He evidently intended to use the captured Lord Cobham as a political weapon. This view seems to be supported by a passage in Lord Cobham's letter to the Queen—"they enforced me (after the capture of the castle) to promise upon mine honour to be with them to-morrow at Gravesend." If, therefore, this was Wyatt's real object when he attacked Cooling, he certainly achieved it. But this consideration next arises, would the moral and political effect of the capture of this local stronghold and its lord appear to be worth the valuable time which might have been expended upon it ? For Cooling Castle was a formidable stronghold and might have withstood a siege of some days. The danger to his army was one which an experienced general like Wyatt must have foreseen. It must have occurred to him that the longer he remained in the cul-de-sac the more perilous became his position. The answer seems fairly obvious. Wyatt is not likely to have taken these risks unless he was certain that Cooling would fall rapidly to his attack. It actually fell in six hours only. On what then would he base his assumption ? The answer may be that he was aware that the garrison was small and the arms and munitions scarce ; as actually was the case. But even a small and resolute garrison can put up a considerable defence when in strong position. To determine the position fairly we must review the defensive strength of the Castle. At the present time, when the castle is but a crumbling ruin, it is difficult accurately to estimate what was its strength in the days when it stood complete. But



COOLING CASTLE.—Gatehouse of Inner Ward.

from the general principles governing the construction of this type of castle, and from what we can still learn of those arrangements *in situ* we can arrive at a fairly accurate valuation of its strength.

In construction and characteristics Cooling Castle was of the Edwardian or Concentric type; though the term "concentric" in the strict application of the word, hardly applies; for in this type of Castle, the usual arrangement was that of one ward within another—three wards usually occurring—arranged so that each ward was capable of being defended separately, and of being reinforced, in case of attack, from an inner ward. In the event of one ward being captured, that ward could be completely isolated from the others. At Cooling there existed two wards, not one within the other, but side by side, apart, separated by a deep and wide moat, surrounding both of them; and so constructed that the outer and larger ward covered the defences of the inner ward—the castle proper—and protected the flanks of the latter. Each ward could be separately defended; each was capable of being isolated by the simple process of raising the connecting drawbridge. Reinforcements could be sent from one ward to another. The Castle was so planned that an attacker was forced to engage and capture the outer ward before he could successfully develop an attack against the inner ward. The wide moat around the castle made direct attack upon the inner ward without taking possession of the outer one, an extremely difficult proceeding. Cooling, therefore, though small in size as compared with many other mediæval castles, was capable in itself of a protracted defence, and its material strength was considerable. As to the strength of the garrison, we can only assume that the numbers must have been small. Lord Cobham, though he records the strength of his attackers at 2,000, does not enumerate his own strength—a point, one imagines, he would have been careful to emphasise. The only figures we are given are those relating to his casualties—"at which assault three or five of my men were slain and divers hurt"—hardly overwhelming casualties. Lord Cobham lays particular stress upon his

lack of munitions—a very grave matter indeed—“having no other munitions but three or five hand-guns, pikes and the rest blackballs”—and blames his lack of arms upon “your grace’s officers of the bulwarks and ships.” All these are vital facts which in fairness to the commander, must on no account be ignored.

But Lord Cobham’s conduct in this affair demands some scrutiny. He left the Duke of Norfolk’s army, presumably, with the express purpose of taking over the command of his castle. We must suppose, therefore, that he possessed some good intelligence that an attack on Cooling was anticipated by the rebels. Had such not been the case, one would suppose that the presence of Lord Cobham, as the most important person in the neighbourhood, would have been an asset to the royal forces. Now, we have argued that the siege of Cooling Castle by Wyatt was fraught with certain dangers to his forces—dangers which the Duke might have appreciated, and it would obviously have been to Norfolk’s advantage, if he were aware of Wyatt’s intentions, to have lured him into the “cul de sac” and to have held up his advance by forcing him to sustain a protracted siege of the castle, until the Duke could receive reinforcements and cut off Wyatt’s retreat, forcing him to fight at a disadvantage. To effect this Cooling would require a fairly strong and well-equipped garrison, which Lord Cobham well knew it did not possess, but which he might have obtained from the Duke. It is difficult to understand any commander, knowing his post to be threatened with attack, and knowing his resources to be totally inadequate, both in men and munitions, not strongly representing the fact to his general. Had he done so, and had his request been refused, it is reasonable to suppose the fact would have appeared very prominently recorded in his dispatch to the Queen. For it would be most material to his defence of his conduct; and he does not seem to have omitted any plea which he could think of in his own favour.

The assault and capture may be summed up in—lack of men and munitions; dissatisfaction among the garrison,

and the formidable assaulting power of Wyatt's two cannon "which did so sore batter the castle and gates that without that they could never have prevailed." The power of cannon against structure is a considerable factor and must be duly considered. In these days of huge and immensely powerful armaments, capable of projecting tons of highly destructive shells at long ranges, we are apt to overestimate the true value of the mediæval cannon—a weapon often more dangerous to friends than to enemies. Its effective range was small and well within cross-bow shot; and resolute defenders could play havoc with the gunners. The walls of Cooling were of considerable strength; the gates defended by strong oak doors, portcullis and drawbridge; while the moat, which on the south side of the castle—obviously the side attacked, the great gateway being situated in the south wall—must have been at least fifty feet wide at the outer ward and 120 feet wide at the inner ward. Under all the circumstances, only a six hours' defence and three to five killed does not point to an over-resolute resistance.

The following deductions therefore seem logical: That Wyatt's attack on Cooling was not a matter of military exigency, but a move of a political nature, aimed at securing the person of Lord Cobham; and that he had every reason to anticipate a feeble resistance and a quick capture of the Castle. That the defence, making every possible allowance, was not conducted with the resolution it might have been. Such reflections may have occurred to the Queen herself when she sent Lord Cobham to the Tower. She may have taken into account the relationship which existed between the two commanders—Wyatt and Cobham were first cousins and one of Cobham's sons was with Wyatt's army—a fact which, though not in itself proof of any collusion, is, to say the least of it, unfortunate, when one of the commanders fails to hold his post.

Taking everything into consideration, one is inclined to the belief that Lord Cobham, while not prepared openly to espouse Wyatt's cause, was nevertheless far from hostile to it. He may not have wished to fight with Wyatt, but he may

not have been anxious to oppose him with any more vigour than was necessary to divert any suspicion from himself. In the matter of an insurrection, neutrality would certainly not be permitted to a person of Lord Cobham's position. Undoubtedly he found himself in a very delicate and embarrassing situation, from which he seems to have tried to extricate himself by the well-known plan of running with the hare and hunting with the hounds.

Though, therefore, one may be sceptical of accepting Lord Cobham's letter as a true record of his actions, one can have every sympathy towards him in the unenviable position in which he found himself; when, hampered by strong ties of family. With his own sons in opposite camps, he would be an object of suspicion, probably from that very fact; forced to oppose a cause he may have conscientiously believed in, though he may have been adverse to furthering it *vi et armis*, and forced into the limelight by being compelled to defend his own home against the rebels, he may have reverted to the expediency of trying to serve both sides, by trying to defend his post sufficiently to satisfy this Queen, while surrendering it in time not to cause any great hazard to his family. He may have judged—and rightly—that the fall of his castle would in no wise affect the issue of the campaign. Cobham's imprisonment was of short duration, for, on the intercession of the Count d'Egmont, the Queen ordered his release on the 24th March, extending also her clemency to his eldest son, William Brooke.

THE ENGRAVED PLATE AT COOLING CASTLE.

The authenticity of the engraved copper inscription-plate at Cooling having been called in question, it has been thought well to summarise the facts concerning it, so far as they can be ascertained.

The plate, it will be remembered, is attached to the southern face of the easternmost one of the pair of drum-towers which flank the entrance of the outer gatehouse. To