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Women and the English Civil Wars

How did these conflicts affect their lives?

Key Stages 3-4 | Early modern 1485-1750

Lesson resource

Introduction

Historians have estimated that during the English Civil wars, 1642-1649 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.

Use the sources in this lesson to find out about the lives of these women during the English Civil Wars and focus on the different roles that they played. Each 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.

Suitable for:

KS 3 - 4

Time period:

Early modern 1485-1750

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Teachers' notes

This lesson has a video starter activity based on one of our documents to 'hook' students into the lesson tasks that follow. 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](#).¹

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.

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

Background

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.

External links

[BCW Project](https://bcw-project.org/)¹, a useful content website on the English Civil Wars.

[Civil War and Revolution](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/)², a themed collection of articles by leading historians.

[BBC Hunting for History video](https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/history-ks3-the-british-civil-wars/z4kdf4j)³ exploring these sources and life during the English Civil Wars.

Related resources

Use our [Civil War website](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/civilwar/)⁴ to find out about archival sources and investigate the conflict involving King Charles I, Parliament, the people and Oliver Cromwell.

Connections to curriculum

Key stage 3

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

Key stage 4

Edexcel GCSE History (9-1). Unit: Warfare and British Society, c1250-present, option 12, Warfare and English Society in the Early Modern Period: the experience of war.

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.

¹ <https://bcw-project.org/>

² https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/history-ks3-the-british-civil-wars/z4kdf4j>

⁴ <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/civilwar/>

Tasks

History Hook - Starter Activity

Watch our video [History Hook: The Civil Wars](#)¹.

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)

- Which side did Mary support?
- Why is she making this petition or request?
- How might the Civil Wars have put families in a difficult situation?

Source 2

The mark of Mary Robinson (SP 23/184 f.921)

- How has Mary signed her name in this document? Do you think that she was able to write her own petitions?

Source 3

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

- What does this source tell us about what happened when a city came under attack during the civil wars?
- What might it have been like to live through a civil war siege as a civilian?
- 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

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

- 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?
- What does this source also tell us about the type of care that Elizabeth Alkin provided to wounded soldiers?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcLzpmvKY7Y>

Tasks

Source 4b

Reverse side of letter showing the note 'Parliament Joan's Letter'.

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.

- Can you see the lines where the letter would have been folded?

In addition, the author of the letter was also written on the back when it was filed. This letter says that the author was 'Parliament Joan', another name for Elizabeth Alkin because as well as being a nurse, she carried out more secret duties for Parliament.

Source 5

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

Constance Stringer was also a spy, or 'informer' for Parliament like Elizabeth Alkin. They passed on information about who was fighting for the King to Parliament.

- What might have motivated Constance Stringer to spy for Parliament?
- Could this have been a dangerous thing to do?
- In what ways might it have been easier for women to act as spies rather than men?

Source 6

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

- What is Parliament accusing Mary Crompton of doing in this source?
- Does it surprise you that a woman might have been accused of this?
- 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

'The Resolution of the Women of London to the Parliament' (1642) and 'The Parliament of Women' (1646) © British Library

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

Tasks

the use of print increased dramatically and 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.

Questions

- 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?
- 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?
- Which image do you think depicts women in a more positive way? Explain your reasons why.

Source 1: Petition from Mary Robinson to the Committee for Compounding, July 1646. Catalogue Ref: SP 23/184 f.916

That yo^r y^e is a very aged woman, and hath for
 this long y^est or thereabouts bin bedrid, but having
 sent her young with a her^e and acunt into the King
 Shire, and mainteyning him in that shire, her
 estate is herofore squandered, and being hardly
 forry for this her offence,
 She humbly prayeth His Hon^{or} Com^{rs} to
 take her dishonestly taken into
 Confiscation, and that she should

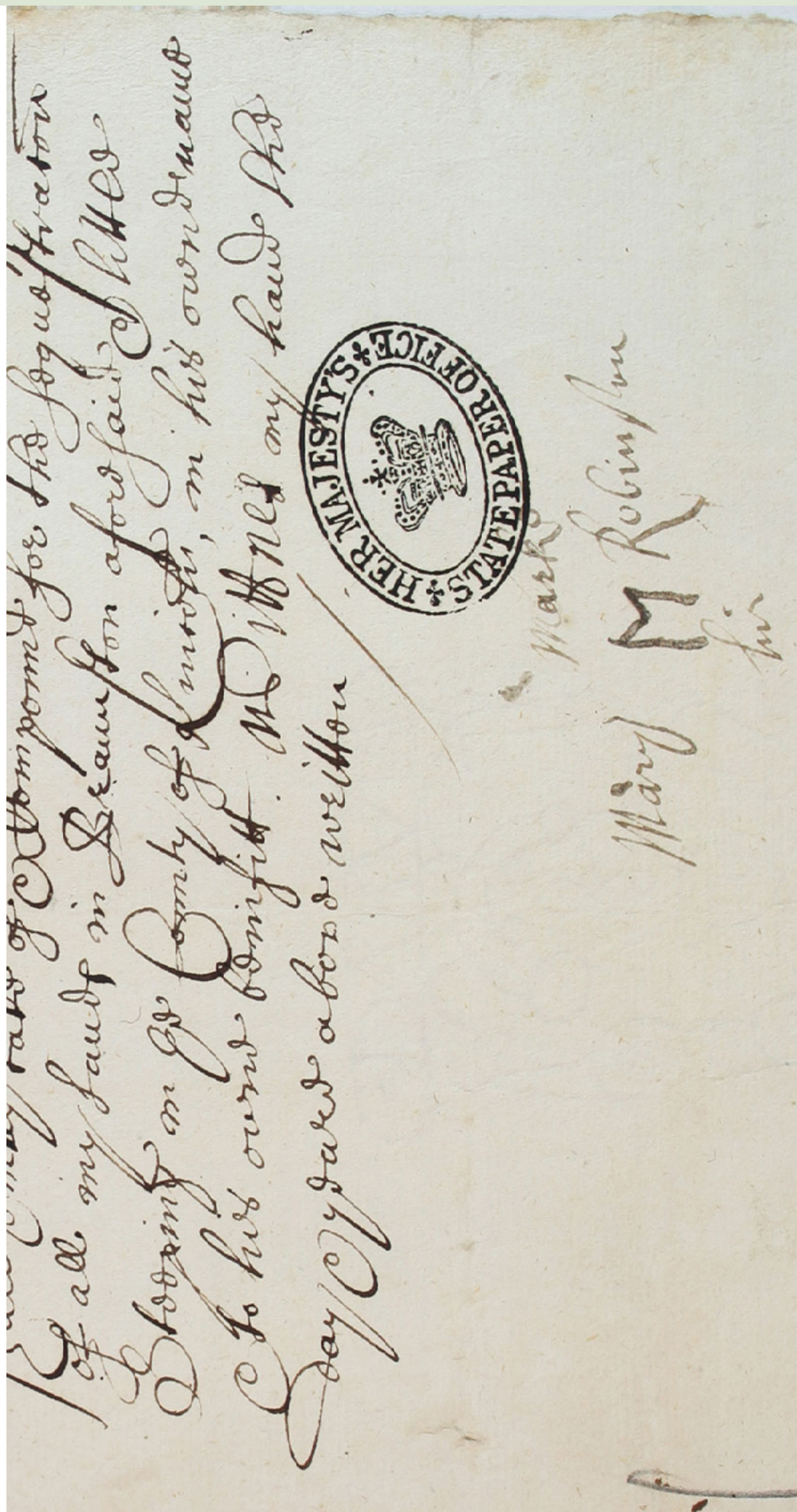


Transcript: Source 1

That your petitioner [Mary Robinson] is a very aged woman, and hath for this two yeares or thereabouts bin bedridd [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: The mark of Mary Robinson.

Catalogue Ref: SP 23/184 f.921




Source 3: Petition from 'many hundreds of widows of Liverpool' to the Committee for Compounding, April 1648. Catalogue Ref: SP 23/188 f.939

To the honorable house of Commons in Parliament Assembled

The humble petition of Colonnell John Moore, a Member of the honorable House of Commons and the well affected Inhabitants of the City adiant part thereof unto Liverpool together with many hundreds of Widows and fatherlesse Children; whose husbands and fathers lost their lives, and estates when the late Rupert, with his barbarous popish Army

Sheweth

That your petitioners to their utmost abilities resisted the yvater Army of the late Rupert when hee beleagured Liverpool untill by their lost their estates; and many of your petitioners wives, husbands, others dispoyled, and with wiyves; and many of your petitioners husbands weree baronously massacred and yett most unprovoked, and all dispoyled and robbed of their estates to the value of 30000, and upwards.



Transcript: Source 3

The humble petition of Collonell John Moore a Member of the honourable howse [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 petitioners to their uttmost 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...

Source 4a: Letter from Elizabeth Alkin to the Admiralty
Commissioners, July 1655. Catalogue Ref: SP 18/38 f.9r

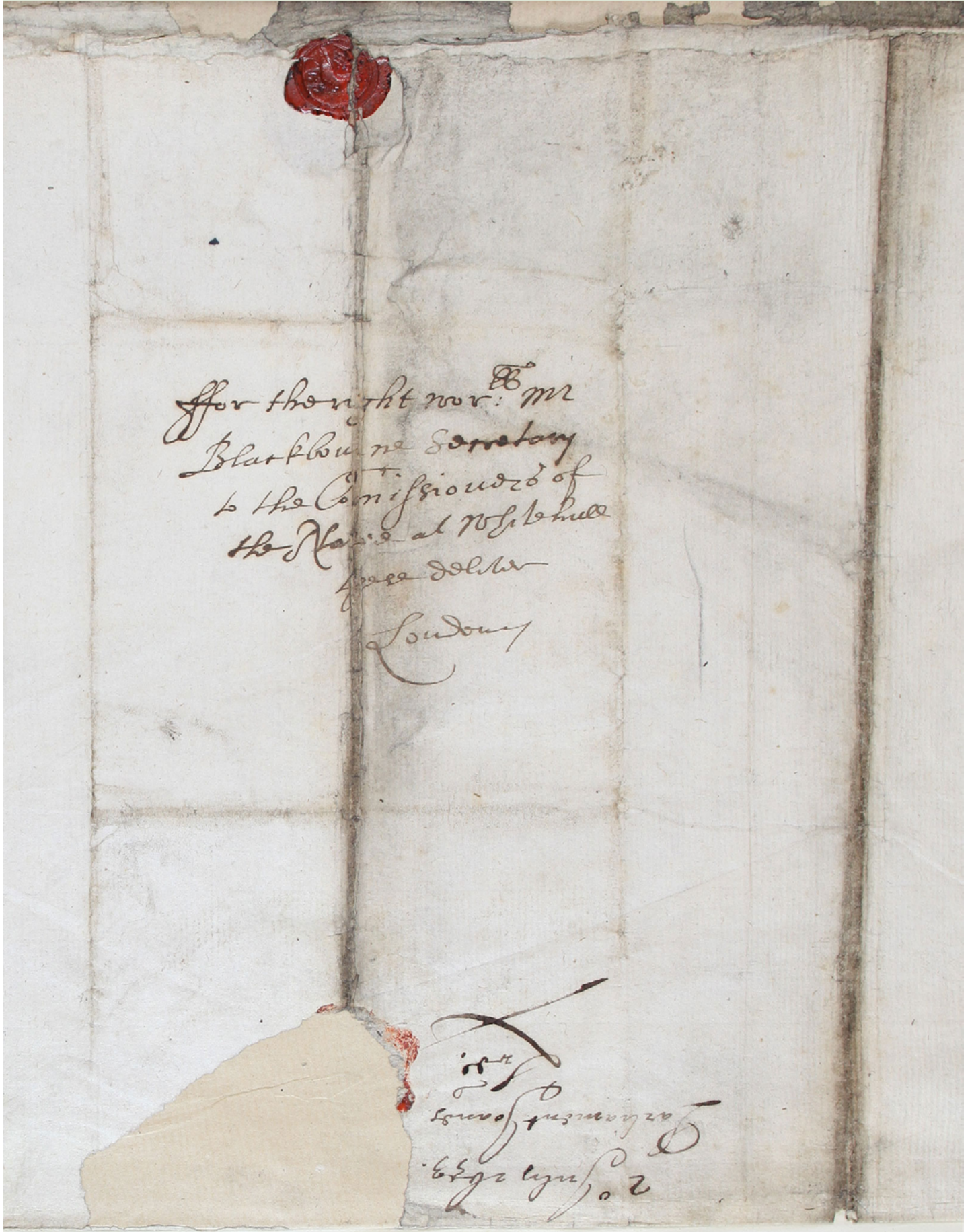
85
Mr Blakbourne,
I miswaite you present my humble service to all my
Masters, and to yo^r selfe, & you have sent mee downe
to Larnwith with five pounds, but believe mee it hath cost
mee three hundred for much, I mis my tomyngs hitherto, I have
paid out my money for dybed more saved about the first &
wounded men howe, it pittied mee, to see poore people in
distresse, I cannot see them woul if I had it, a great deal
of money I have given to have them cleayed, in their bodies, -
and their haire cutt, mendinge their shooes, & reparat, and
severall things else, Soe that I have spent both the money

Transcript: Source 4a

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 heere, 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 have them cleansed, in their bodies and their haire Cutt, mending their Clothes, reparacions [repairs], and severall things else...

Source 4b: Reverse side of letter showing the note 'Parliament Joan's Letter'. Catalogue Ref: SP 18/38 f.9r



Transcript: Source 4b

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: Information of Constance Stringer to Parliament, February 1651. Catalogue Ref: SP 23/120 f.33

The information of Constance Stringer
 was done on ye behalf of the Comonwealth
 ag: Francis Moore of Lower Stoke in
 ye County of Wiltshire Gent: 33

That when the City was a Garrison for
 ye late King the says Moors was in ye
 yeare 1644: was a Comander and in comd: in that
 City againt the Parliamt: and did there see many
 Nobles of High Nobility there:

MAJESTY

Transcript: Source 5

Constance Stringer was also a spy, or 'informer' for Parliament, like Elizabeth Alkin. They passed on information about who was fighting for the King 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.

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

Upon Enquiry taken that ^{is} Mary Crompton
did keep a Garrison at the Church and
Garrison was taken by force Demand'd by the
County she is adjudg'd a Delinquent
in all and personal Estate to be seized and

Transcript: Source 6

Mrs Mary Crompton did keepe a Garrison [troop camp] against the Parliament which Garrison was taken by forces Comanded by this Committee she is adjudged a Delinquent [Royalist] And her reall and personall Estate [lands and goods] to be seized.

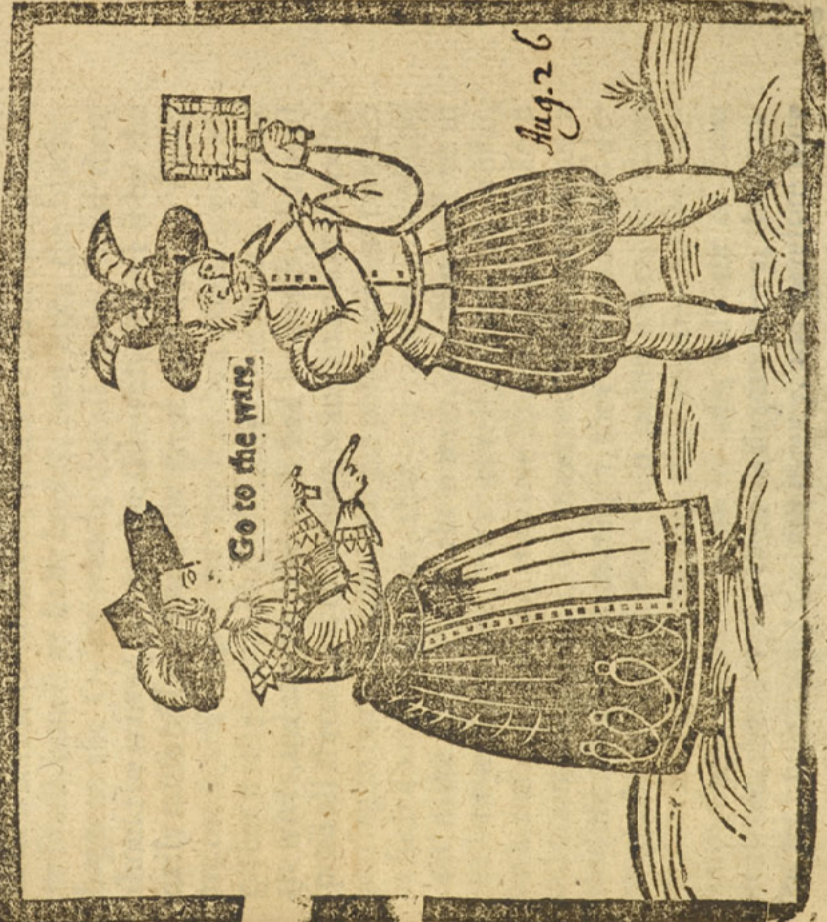
Source 7: 'The Resolution of the Women of London to the Parliament' (1642) and 'The Parliament of Women' (1646). © British Library

220
 THE
 Parliament of Women.
 With the merrie Lawes by them newly
 Enacted. To live in more Ease, Pompe, Pride,
 and wantonneſſe: but eſpecially that they might have ſu-
 periority and domineere over their husbands; with a new way
 found out by them to cure any old or new Cuckolds, and
 how both parties may recover their credit
 and honeſty againe



London, Printed for W. Wiſſon and are to be ſold by him in
 Will-yard in Little Saint Bartholomewes. 1646.
 Aug: 14: London 1646.

14
 THE
 RESOLVTION
 of the Women of London to the Parliament.
 Wherein they declare their hot zeale in ſending their husbands to the
 warres, in defence of King and Parliament, as alſo the proce-
 dings of the King at York, with their full determination
 in maintaining this their Reſolution, to the
 admiration of the Reader.
 with their deſires to the Parliament that this may be printed.



Transcript: Source 7

[Right]

THE RESOLUTION

Of the Women of London to the Parliament.

Wherein they declare their hot zeale in sending their husbands to the warres [wars], in defence of King and Parliament, as also the proceedings of the King at York, with their full determination in maintaining this their Resolution, to the admiration of the Reader.

With their desires to the Parliament that this may be printed.

[Speech bubble]: Go to the wars.

[Left]

THE Parliament of Woman

With the merrie [merry] Lawes by them newly enacted. To live in more Ease, Pompe, Pride, and wantonnesse: but especially that they might have superiority and domineere over their husbands: with a new way found out to them to cure any old or new Cuckolds, and how both parties may recover their credit and honesty againe.



Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

Our resources are designed to be printed and used in classrooms, which means hyperlinks aren't always accessible digitally. We include the full link at the bottom of the page so that you can type in the address without distracting from the main text of the lesson materials.

Did you know?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free workshops onsite in Kew and online in your classroom.

Our [Onsite Workshops](#) are available for free here at The National Archives and allow students to experience genuine original documents reflecting over 1000 years of history. From Elizabeth I's signature to the telegrams of the sinking Titanic, students love the wow-factor of being able to see real history on the desk in front of them.

Our [Online Workshops](#) allow our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone. We'll arrange a test call before your session to check the tech is working.

Find out more:

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