

AN INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH CIVIL WAR FOOT COAT COLOURS AND ORGANISATION .

Peter Berry

General

The English Civil War has been the subject of study for 350 years. It is unfortunate that it is only now that we are beginning to establish how the soldiers were dressed and equipped. The fault mainly lies with the romantic version of the conflict that envisaged befeathered rakehells fighting for the King against soberly dressed, hypocritical snivelling bullies fighting for Cromwell.

The Victorians especially viewed the events of the through their own distorting mirror and the results of all of this can be seen on many a wargames table, where Royalist musketeers sporting lace collars and big hats adorned with feathered plumes are engaged in mortal combat with Roundhead pikemen wearing lobster pot helmets and striped rugby shirts.

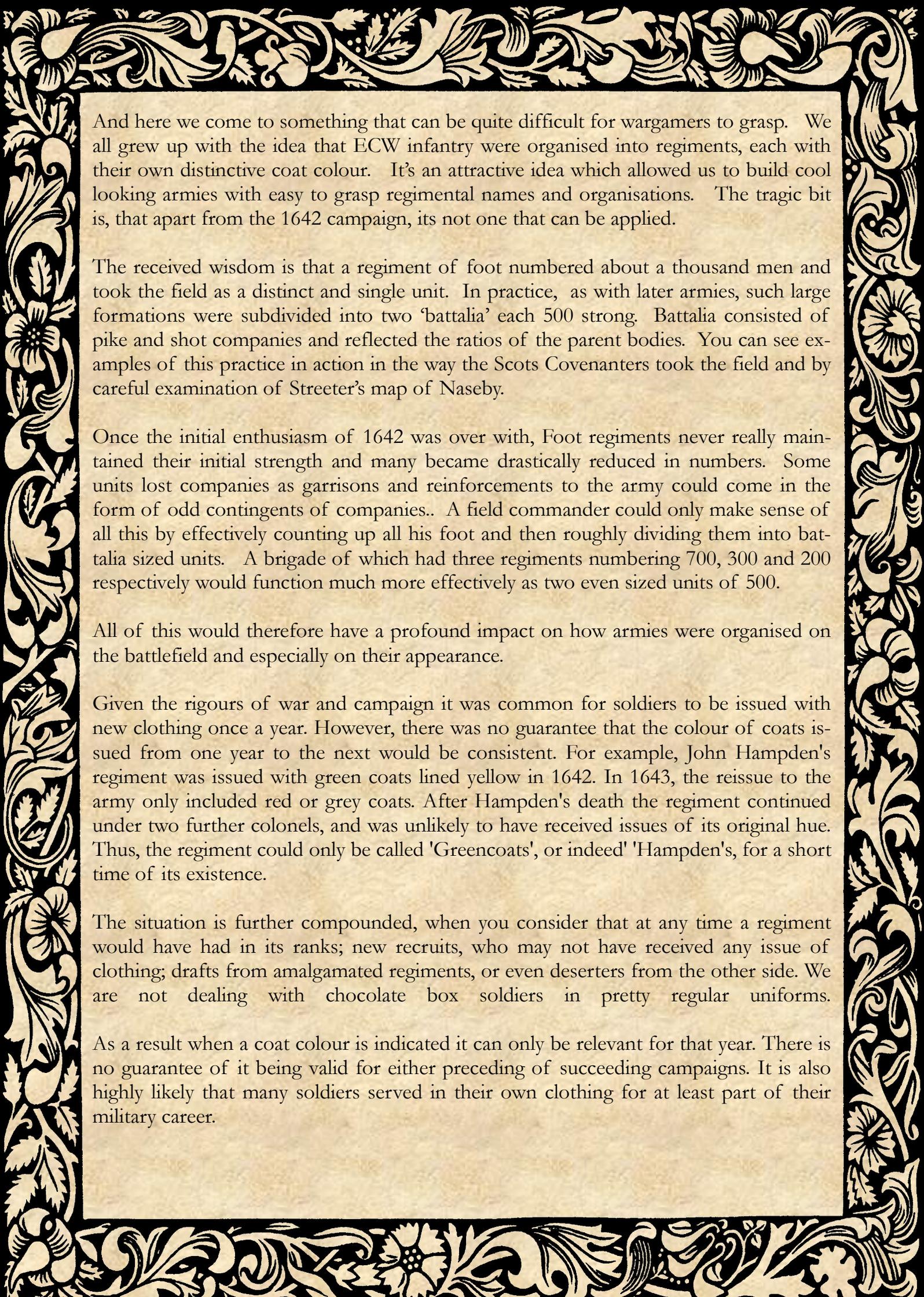
It will surprise many to realise how little is actually known about the appearance of Civil War armies. For example, wargamers expect to know all the coat colours and flags for Hopton's Foot and then get very upset when that information is simply not available.

Armies, Regiments and Battalia

The Civil War was one contested by a number of regional forces. Although the Oxford army and Essex's army tend to hog the limelight as the main field forces for the opposing sides, there were many sizeable forces fighting for both causes as independent or semi-independent bodies. These regional armies would often have quite distinctive characteristics that marked them apart from the main forces.

It is also a point worth making that both of the main field armies underwent massive changes in composition, organisation, personnel, equipment and experience on a continual basis. The armies of 1642 were very different to those that took the field a year later and so it went on. If you come across a set of rules that attempts to condense all the different armies over all of the years of the conflict into two simple lists headed 'Roundhead' and 'Royalist' then you really have to question how much the author understands the complexities of the historical situation/

The Polemos ECW wargames rules contain comprehensive lists concentrating on the two main field armies which are covered on a year by year basis, but also taking in the West Country, Yorkshire, Scotland and Ireland. Each lcontains a breakdown of the armies, lists of known regiments and formations and where known coat colours..

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a light beige color, framing the text on a dark background.

And here we come to something that can be quite difficult for wargamers to grasp. We all grew up with the idea that ECW infantry were organised into regiments, each with their own distinctive coat colour. It's an attractive idea which allowed us to build cool looking armies with easy to grasp regimental names and organisations. The tragic bit is, that apart from the 1642 campaign, its not one that can be applied.

The received wisdom is that a regiment of foot numbered about a thousand men and took the field as a distinct and single unit. In practice, as with later armies, such large formations were subdivided into two 'battalia' each 500 strong. Battalia consisted of pike and shot companies and reflected the ratios of the parent bodies. You can see examples of this practice in action in the way the Scots Covenanters took the field and by careful examination of Streeter's map of Naseby.

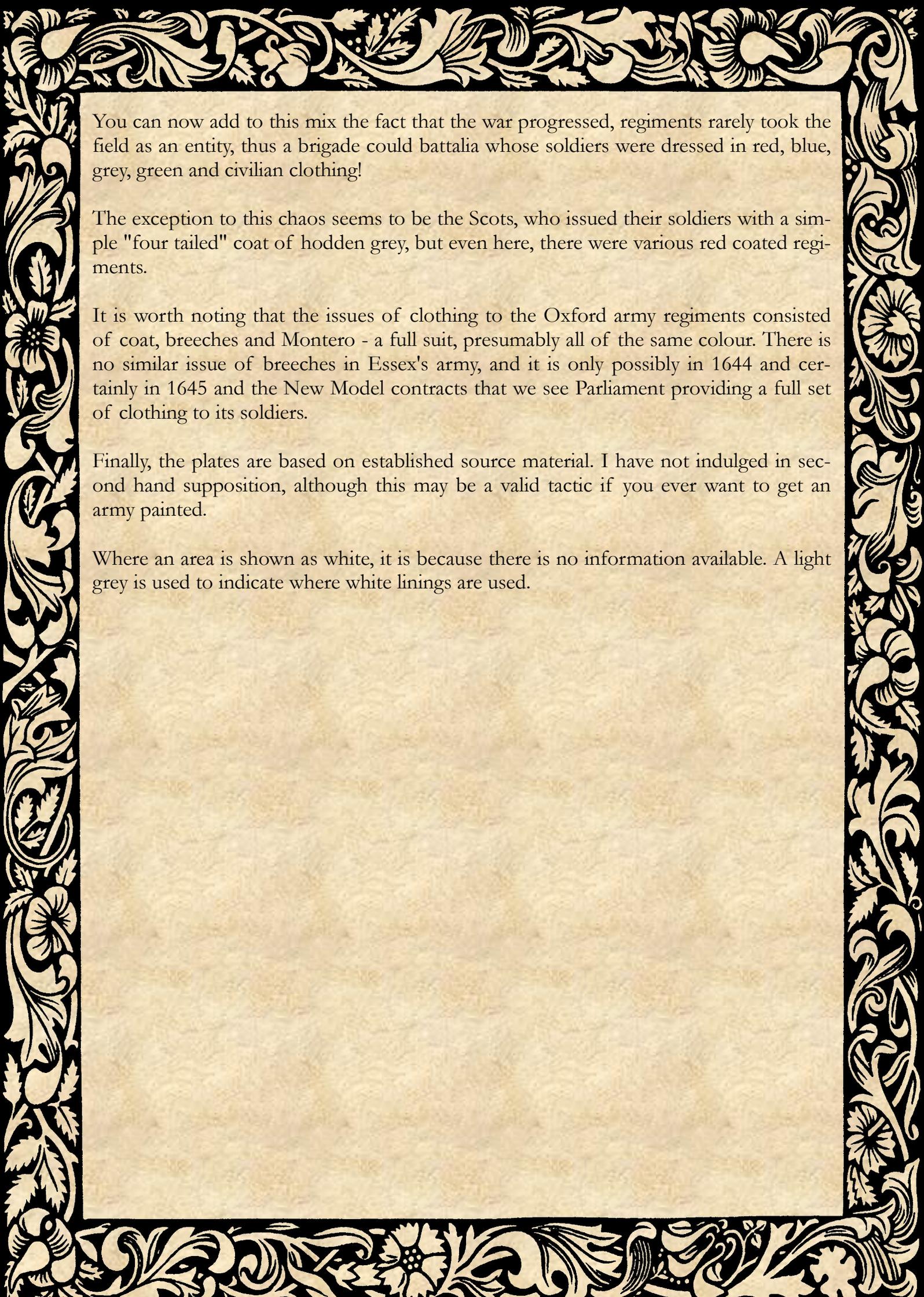
Once the initial enthusiasm of 1642 was over with, Foot regiments never really maintained their initial strength and many became drastically reduced in numbers. Some units lost companies as garrisons and reinforcements to the army could come in the form of odd contingents of companies.. A field commander could only make sense of all this by effectively counting up all his foot and then roughly dividing them into battalia sized units. A brigade of which had three regiments numbering 700, 300 and 200 respectively would function much more effectively as two even sized units of 500.

All of this would therefore have a profound impact on how armies were organised on the battlefield and especially on their appearance.

Given the rigours of war and campaign it was common for soldiers to be issued with new clothing once a year. However, there was no guarantee that the colour of coats issued from one year to the next would be consistent. For example, John Hampden's regiment was issued with green coats lined yellow in 1642. In 1643, the reissue to the army only included red or grey coats. After Hampden's death the regiment continued under two further colonels, and was unlikely to have received issues of its original hue. Thus, the regiment could only be called 'Greencoats', or indeed 'Hampden's', for a short time of its existence.

The situation is further compounded, when you consider that at any time a regiment would have had in its ranks; new recruits, who may not have received any issue of clothing; drafts from amalgamated regiments, or even deserters from the other side. We are not dealing with chocolate box soldiers in pretty regular uniforms.

As a result when a coat colour is indicated it can only be relevant for that year. There is no guarantee of it being valid for either preceding or succeeding campaigns. It is also highly likely that many soldiers served in their own clothing for at least part of their military career.

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You can now add to this mix the fact that the war progressed, regiments rarely took the field as an entity, thus a brigade could battalia whose soldiers were dressed in red, blue, grey, green and civilian clothing!

The exception to this chaos seems to be the Scots, who issued their soldiers with a simple "four tailed" coat of hodden grey, but even here, there were various red coated regiments.

It is worth noting that the issues of clothing to the Oxford army regiments consisted of coat, breeches and Montero - a full suit, presumably all of the same colour. There is no similar issue of breeches in Essex's army, and it is only possibly in 1644 and certainly in 1645 and the New Model contracts that we see Parliament providing a full set of clothing to its soldiers.

Finally, the plates are based on established source material. I have not indulged in second hand supposition, although this may be a valid tactic if you ever want to get an army painted.

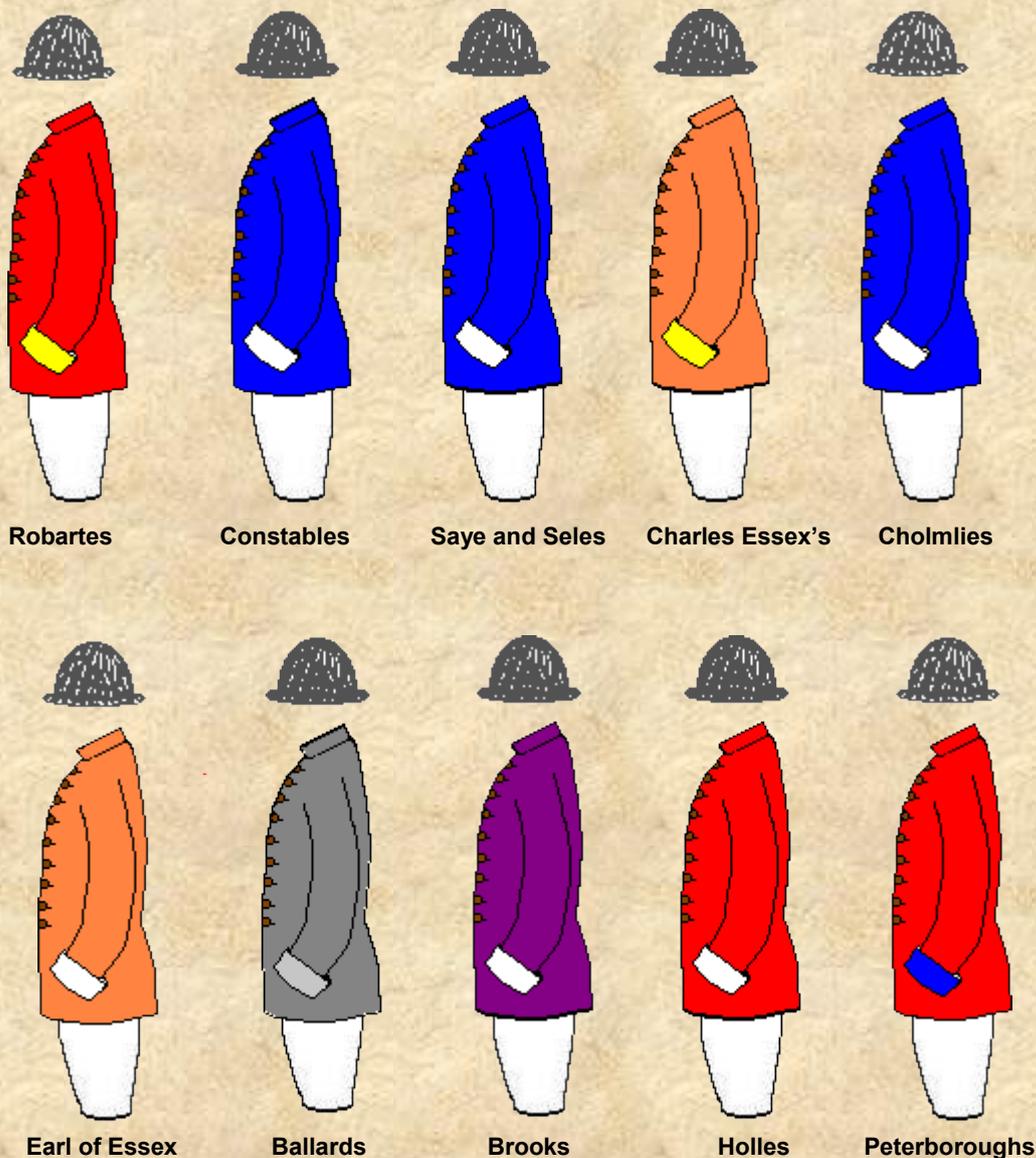
Where an area is shown as white, it is because there is no information available. A light grey is used to indicate where white linings are used.

ESSEX'S ARMY 1642-1644

This was the main Parliamentary field army of the first English Civil War. It has received the most intense study, yet despite this details remain sketchy after 1642. In general, soldiers were issued with shoes, hose, shirts, snapsacks, and coats. Knitted monmouth caps were the most likely form of headwear.

1642

The initial outfitting of the main army was comprehensive, and it is the one for which we have the most complete records. Many of these regiments did not survive intact into the second year of the war, so this nice complete picture must be treated with great caution.



Robartes

Constables

Saye and Seles

Charles Essex's

Cholmilies

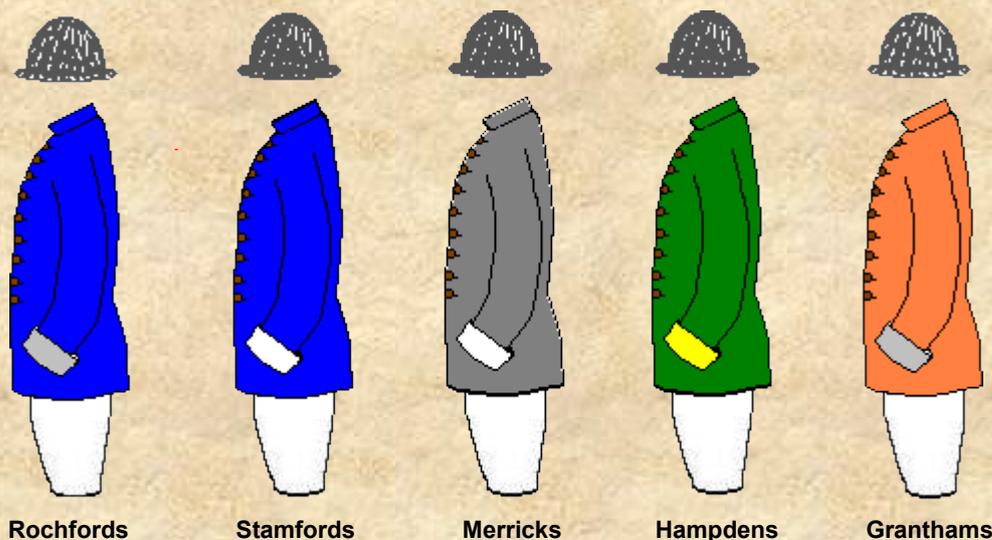
Earl of Essex

Ballards

Brooks

Holles

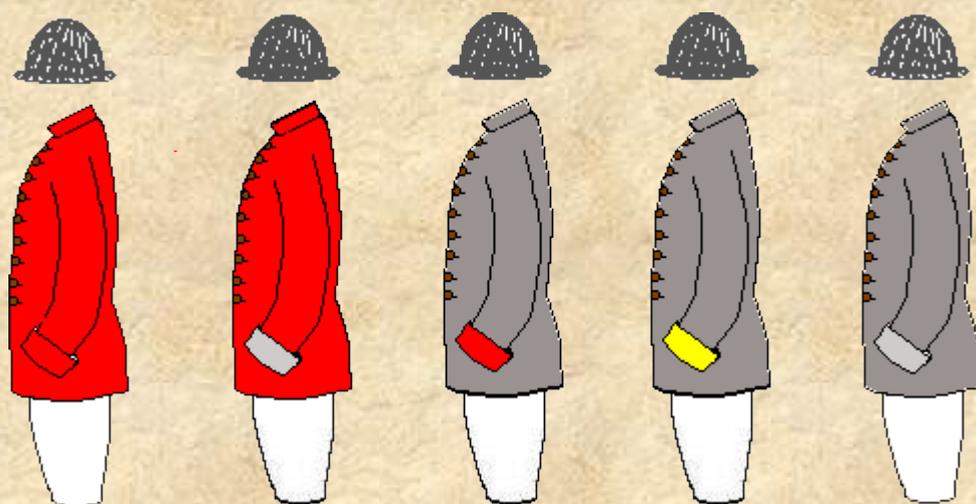
Peterboroughs



Rochfords Stamfords Merricks Hampdens Granthams

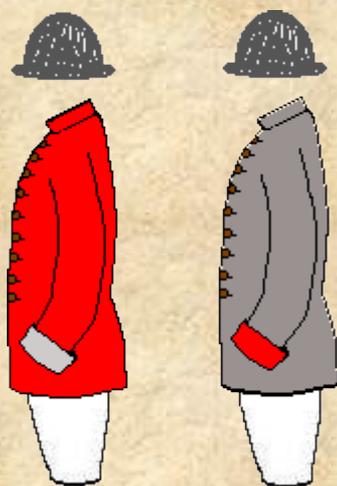
1643

The orderly picture of 1642 now disappears. The troops campaigned in their 1642 issue coats, but there was large-scale amalgamation of regiments, and no heed was taken to the coat colours of the constituent units. There was an issue of new coats made to the army in Autumn 1643. However, the coats issued did not tally with the previous year's, nor were they issued uniformly to regiments. The foot of 1643 were dressed in a range of motley colours, mostly red and grey, and coats were not of a uniform colour within regiments. A reference of the time refers to 'Parliament Grey' - a reflection of the much more sober appearance of Parliament's main army.



Coats issued to Essex's Foot in Autumn 1643

Further reductions and amalgamations prior to the Lostwithiel Campaign plus new recruits meant that the army would have taken on an even less harmonious appearance. The West Country campaign was a disaster and the Foot needed to be re-equipped and re-clothed. This was done in a remarkable effort of mobilising resources in Portsmouth in September 1644. While we have details of the numbers involved, unfortunately we have no indication of the colours of the new coats. Peachey and Turton suggest that they would have been a uniform colour with either red or grey being favourites. The Foot were able to take part in the second battle of Newbury, but this was their last campaign. In April 1645 the regiments were disbanded and the men re-enlisted into the units of the New Model Army.



Possible clothing issued at Portsmouth refit

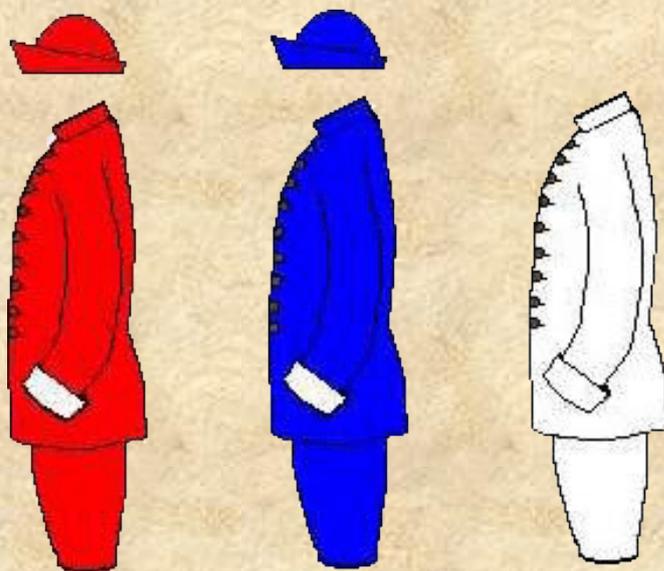
THE OXFORD ARMY

1642

It would seem that Charles was considering clothing at least part of his army in March 1643, and Thomas Bushell equipped the, "...liefe Guard and three regiments more, with suites, stockings, shoes and mounteroes...". The colours of the uniforms and the regiments receiving the issue remains unclear. Red is traditionally the colour attributed to the Lifeguards, and a reference is made to that colour when describing them at Edgehill, although it is unclear as to whether this refers to the coats or the regimental colours. However, these four regiments notwithstanding, it is highly likely that large part of the Royalist Foot at Edgehill served in their civilian clothing.

1643

In July suits of clothing consisting of coats, breeches and monteroes were issued to troops in Oxford. These suits were blue or red, but unfortunately we cannot attribute them to specific regiments. We can determine that Darcy's, Charles Gerrard's and Lunsford's/Rupert's wore blue, and that the King's Lifeguard wore red. It is also highly probable that the regiments of Percy, Pinchbeck, Dyves and Pennyman were dressed in grey/whitecoats, as befitted their Northern origin.



Earl of Essex

Ballards

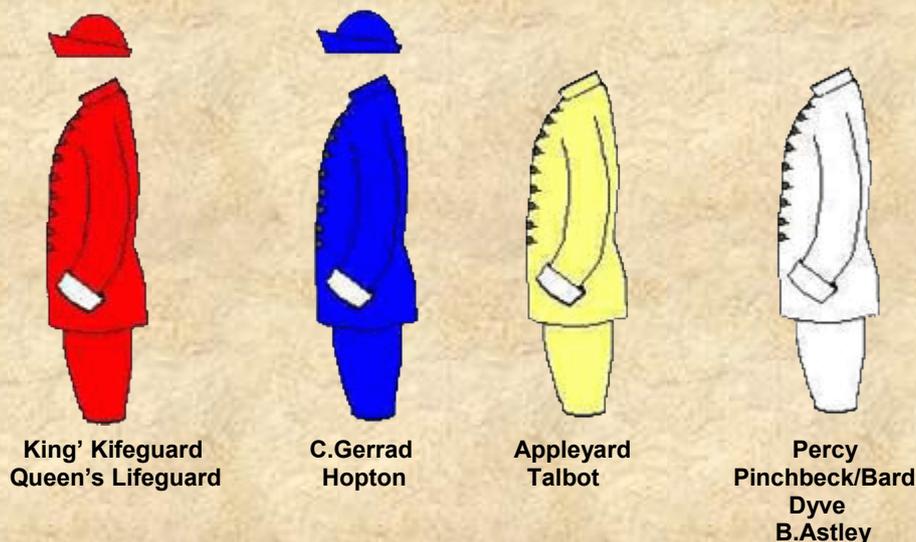
Brooks

Holles

Peterborough

1644

Much of the confusion of the previous year becomes clearer, as more references enable us to identify more coat colours. However, there is one group of regiments who received an issue of clothing in either red or blue, but we cannot accurately define which.



The following may have been issued either red or blue clothing: J. Astleys, Pennymans, Lisles, Thelwells.

1645

The most important point to note is that in its final campaigns, the Oxford Foot was a composite body of old regiments, garrisons and new-levied men, formed into battalia and brigades to make viable battlefield units. These brigades could not have presented anything like a uniform appearance. Apart from a reference to Rupert's regiment being bluecoats, we have no further information to add to what is outlined below. Given that I would suggest that red and blue uniforms would have dominated with a sprinkling of white/grey and the odd yellow coat.