

## Prince Rupert's Dog

On the whole, it turned out not to be a great bank holiday. On Easter Monday 1643 Prince Rupert of the Rhine came with his royalist cavalry and smashed through the middle of Birmingham. The makeshift barricades and earthworks did little to deter him.

Birmingham probably had this coming. There were all those tales of Birmingham-made arms supplied to Parliament, the raiding of the King's baggage train en route to Edgehill, and support for the people of Coventry, when they closed their gates to a royal entrance. Charles called Birmingham the most disaffected town in England; his nephew decided to sort the place out.

The Battle of Birmingham generated what is probably the earliest surviving illustration of the town. A woodcut, made for propaganda purposes, shows Prince Rupert astride his horse, his pistol directed towards the little town of "Brimidgham". The place is in flames.

The woodcut also shows, unwisely standing directly underneath Prince Rupert's rearing horse, a white dog. The pamphlet to which this woodcut is attached makes much of the aforesaid pooch. After the battle, it claims, and amid all that raping and pillaging, Rupert's unruly soldiers drank themselves legless, "healthing upon their knees, yea, drinking healths to Prince Rupert's dog".

This, then, was a very important dog indeed, arguably the most famous in English history. What do we know about him ?

The English Civil War was far from being Prince Rupert's first brush with military service. He had already fought in the Seven Years' War against Spain, and also in the Thirty Years' War. It was during the latter - at the Battle of Vlotho in 1638 - that the Prince had been captured, and imprisoned in the fortress of Linz in modern-day Austria.

It was while Rupert was holed up in Linz that he made friends with a white hunting poodle, given by the Earl of Arundel to keep him company. The dog went by the name of Boye.

With plenty of time on his hands Rupert and Boye became close companions. Indeed, critics said that the Prince taught the dog all the good manners he himself lacked.

In 1642, then, when Prince Rupert came to the aid of his uncle, Charles I, in England, Boye came with him. He was, by all accounts, a popular member of the royal court, with more than a few tricks up his sleeve. One had only to say the name of the Parliamentary commander - John Pym - and Boye would cock his leg.

Boye slept in Rupert's bed, played happily with the royal princes, enjoyed hearing mass, and sat with his head in the King's lap. This was a trick the King would later be able to perform with his own head.

In the field, too, Boye proved himself a fearless and doughty comrade. When his owner was on the battlefield, so too was Boye, and the royalist soldiers adopted the dog as a kind of mascot, promoting Boye to the rank of sergeant-major-general. Boye became a kind of icon of the royalist cause.

Thus far, as far as I can tell, the story is true. From this point onward, however, legend, myth and rumour begin to take over. Prince Rupert's dog became, as it were, a sitting target for the propagandists on both sides of the conflict. To the Roundheads Boye was the Devil's dog or a witch's familiar. Perhaps he was a reincarnation of the 16th-century prophetess, Mother Shipton, or one of the Prince's lady friends mutated into a lap-dog. Boye featured in at least half a dozen pamphlets at the time, and always larger than life.

To the royalist pamphleteers and satirists - men like the poet, John Cleveland - such beliefs were typical of the ignorant credulity of the other side. Indeed, they made every effort to exaggerate the claims of sorcery in order to poke fun at Puritan stupidity.

No such tales of the black arts circulated in Birmingham after the battle. To the Parliamentarian pamphlet writers Boye simply represented the casual cruelty of Rupert's mob, drunkenly toasting a mere dog, while they brutalized the men and women of the town.

As for Boye himself, the Battle of Birmingham proved to be one of the last of his walkies. He duly arrived with Rupert at Marston Moor in July 1644, in what proved to be the final and decisive encounter of the war. By all accounts the dog was securely tied up behind the royalist lines, but he managed to slip the leash and chased after his master. Naughty Boye.

When the fight turned against the royal forces, Prince Rupert fled from the field. His pet, however, was not so lucky. Wandering lost on the battlefield, Boye was unceremoniously shot by a Roundhead soldier, and this too was the subject of a contemporary woodcut. By now the dog was black, not white, a much better colour for a creature of the devil.

Boye was buried on Marston Moor, which at least saved him from a far more grisly fate. There might have been a trial for war crimes, perhaps, or a good hiding from Oliver Cromwell.