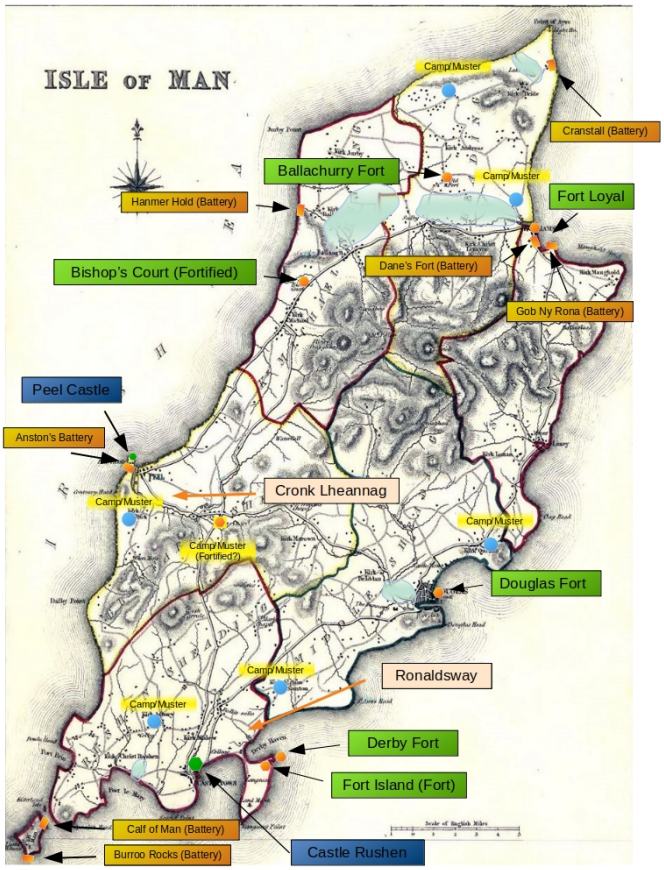
The Manx Rebellion of 1651

A Wargaming & Role-Play Resource

Historical background, forces, terrain, weather, battle tactics, and playable scenarios for the Parliamentary invasion of the Isle of Man during the English Civil War. Designed for tabletop wargaming with optional role-play of key characters.



Isle of Man: principal forts, batteries, and muster points, October–November 1651.

How to Use This Resource

This is written for wargamers. The historical narrative provides the setting, order of battle, terrain, weather, and period tactics. Scenarios are built for pike-and-shot rules. Players may take the roles of key characters (Illiam Dhone, Countess of Derby, Colonel Duckenfield, Major Thomas Stanley, etc.) and make political or military decisions that affect the table. Alternative paths are included: the rising may fail, the fleet may be scattered by storms, or the outer forts may still be held when the Parliamentarians land.

Historical Background and Causes

James Stanley, 7th Earl of Derby, held the Isle of Man as a Royalist base after Marston Moor. His attempts to alter traditional land tenure (“tenure of the straw”), free quartering of English troops, and heavy wartime taxes created deep resentment. Illiam Dhone (William Christian), Receiver-General and militia commander, led the rising of 19–21 October 1651 after news of Derby’s defeat and execution reached the island. Roughly 800 parish militia seized the outer forts. The two great castles (Rushen and Peel) remained in Royalist hands until the Parliamentary landing.



William Christian (Illiam Dhone), Receiver-General and militia commander – a natural player role.

Isle of Man Militia

Parish-based force under Captains of the Parish (one per parish plus town companies). Mobilised by sending the wooden cross around the parish. Strength in 1651: approximately 800 men assembled at Ronaldsway; contemporary estimates put the trained militia at about 1,500. Equipment mixed (musket, pike, half-pike, local weapons). Four horsemen per parish formed a light mounted element. Illiam Dhone commanded the militia after the Earl's departure. In the rising they took the outer works but failed to hold Peel Castle (one captain mortally wounded). Treat them as motivated but poorly drilled parish companies.

Defences and Key Positions

Major works: Castle Rushen, Peel Castle (with Anston's/Aston's Battery on Peel Hill covering the harbour and approaches), Derby Fort on St Michael's Isle, Ballachurry/Kerroogarroo star fort (bastions, wet ditch), Bishop's Court earthworks, and numerous smaller coastal batteries. The Peel Hill battery was built c.1648 specifically to dominate approaches to the castle. Ballachurry was unfinished but defensible.

Actions at Ballachurry and Peel Hill

Ballachurry Fort, 21 October 1651: Militia under Illiam Dhone demanded the surrender of the fort. Major Thomas Stanley refused. After heated exchanges at the gate, Ewan Curghey's men set fire to the nearby house of John McSayle (a member of the garrison). Seeing the flames, many of the garrison deserted and the fort fell. This was a Manx militia action, not a fight with the later Parliamentary force. In alternative scenarios the fort may still be held when the Parliamentarians arrive.

Peel Hill Battery and Peel Castle: The earthwork battery on Peel Hill overlooked the castle and harbour. Militia briefly seized the castle but were driven out. The battery would have been used against them. Any force investing the castle or attempting a landing nearby must face its fire. Ideal for a small-scale action in 15 mm or 28 mm.

Parliamentary Forces and the Invasion

Colonel Robert Duckenfield commanded. Land forces listed in contemporary accounts:

- Lord General's Regiment of foot (Lt-Col Charles Worsley)
- Major General Deanes' regiment of foot (Lt-Col William Mitchell)
- Colonel Duckenfield's own regiment of foot
- Two troops of horse

Fleet of approximately 44 sail. Exact strengths for the expedition are not recorded; a working estimate is 1,000–1,200 men. Delayed by contrary winds and storms (25 and 27 October). Landed unopposed at Ramsey Bay on 28 October after militia assurances. Invested the two remaining castles; articles signed

31 October.



Lieutenant Colonel Robert Duckenfield – Parliamentary commander and possible player role.

Terrain, Season and Storms

Late October–early November. Frequent gales and sudden squalls in the Irish Sea. Contemporary accounts stress contrary winds and “tempestuous” storms that delayed the fleet and complicated landing. Northern curraghs and flooded ground restricted movement. Coastal batteries commanded the obvious landing places. Short days and weather reduced effective ranges. On the table, roll for weather each phase or day; storms can scatter ships, delay reinforcements, or force a landing in poor conditions.

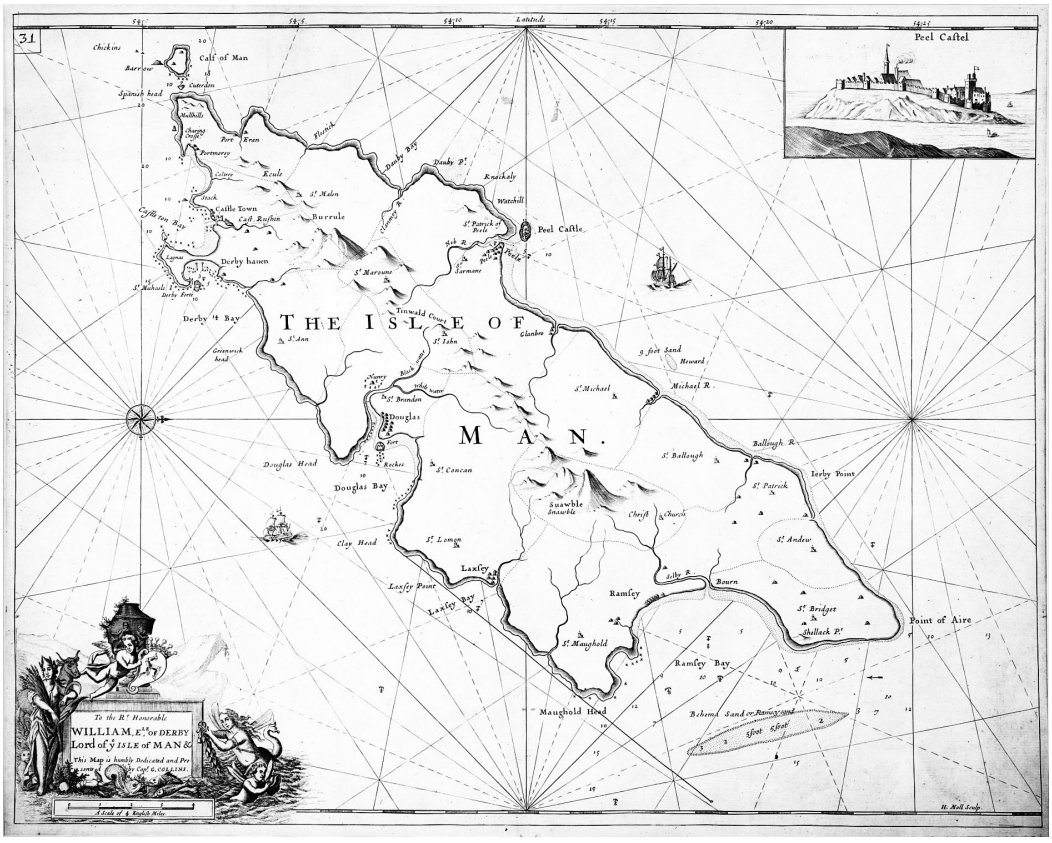


Chart of the Isle of Man, c.1693 – useful for terrain layout.

Historical Battle Tactics (Pike & Shot)

Tactics of the period were built around the pike-and-shot formation. Pikemen (16–18 ft pikes) formed the solid centre to protect the shot from cavalry and to close for the push of pike. Musketeers stood on the flanks or in ranks and delivered volleys. By the mid-1640s the proportion of shot had risen; many New Model regiments were roughly two-thirds musketeers. Manx militia were less well drilled and more mixed in equipment.

Common methods included volley and advance, Swedish-style salvee, Dutch-style countermarch, and the final push of pike. Cavalry (especially Parliamentary horse) charged in formation and rallied to charge again; the two troops with Duckenfield would have been used mainly for reconnaissance, pursuit, or supporting the investment of the castles. Artillery was most effective when pre-positioned on high ground or in coastal batteries. Peel Hill and the other batteries could deny beaches or dominate castle approaches. In a contested landing the sequence would have been naval or boat fire to suppress batteries, first wave ashore under fire, rapid formation of pike-and-shot blocks, then advance to seize the nearest fort.

Most Manx actions never reached a full push of pike. They were decided by the seizure or desertion of small garrisons, the threat of burning houses (Ballachurry), or the simple presence of a large fleet. Weather remained a constant factor that could scatter ships or force a landing in bad conditions.

Wargaming: Scales, Rules and Role-Play

Scales: 15 mm is the practical minimum for campaign or multi-fort games. 10 mm works at a pinch for a full-island layout. 28 mm is excellent for the smaller actions (Ballachurry gate, Peel Hill battery, beach landing). Any English Civil War pike-and-shot ruleset is suitable; add simple weather, fort artillery, loyalty, and intelligence rules.

Role-play option: Players may take key characters and make decisions that affect the table. Examples:

- Illiam Dhone – raises the militia, decides whether to treat with the fleet or fight, controls the outer works.
- Countess of Derby – holds Castle Rushen, decides when (or whether) to negotiate.
- Colonel Duckenfield – chooses landing site and timing, manages weather and intelligence.
- Major Thomas Stanley – defends Ballachurry; may or may not know the rising is widespread.
- Parish captains – control local militia companies and the cross-summons.

Playable Scenarios

1. Seizure of the outer works / Ballachurry (19–21 October) – Manx militia versus remaining Royalist garrison. The burning of McSayle's house is a morale/desertion trigger.

2. Peel Hill battery versus militia (or later Parliamentary force) – battery dominates approaches to Peel Castle and the harbour.

3. Landing at Ramsey (25–28 October) – weather dice each phase; militia may already hold most coastal works. Contested version uses the amphibious sequence above.

4. Investment of Castle Rushen and Peel.

Alternative paths:

- No rising – conspirators arrested or decide against revolt. Outer forts remain Royalist; landing faces defended batteries.
- Fleet badly disrupted by storms – ships scattered, landing piecemeal or delayed for days. Parliamentarians do not automatically know the status of every fort (especially Ballachurry).

Force Notes for the Table

Manx militia: parish companies, mixed arms, high motivation when defending traditional rights, poor drill. Remaining Royalists: small professional or English garrisons plus fort artillery. Parliamentary: three foot regiments plus two troops of horse, better trained, vulnerable during landing or in bad weather. Small Royalist naval presence can be abstracted as limited support.

Aftermath

The island passed to Lord Fairfax for the Commonwealth period and returned to the Stanleys at the Restoration. Illiam Dhone was executed at Hango Hill on 2 January 1663.

Compiled for wargaming use from contemporary accounts (Mercurius Politicus), Manx Society volumes, A.W. Moore, and local fort notes. Images include period maps, portraits, and site photographs.