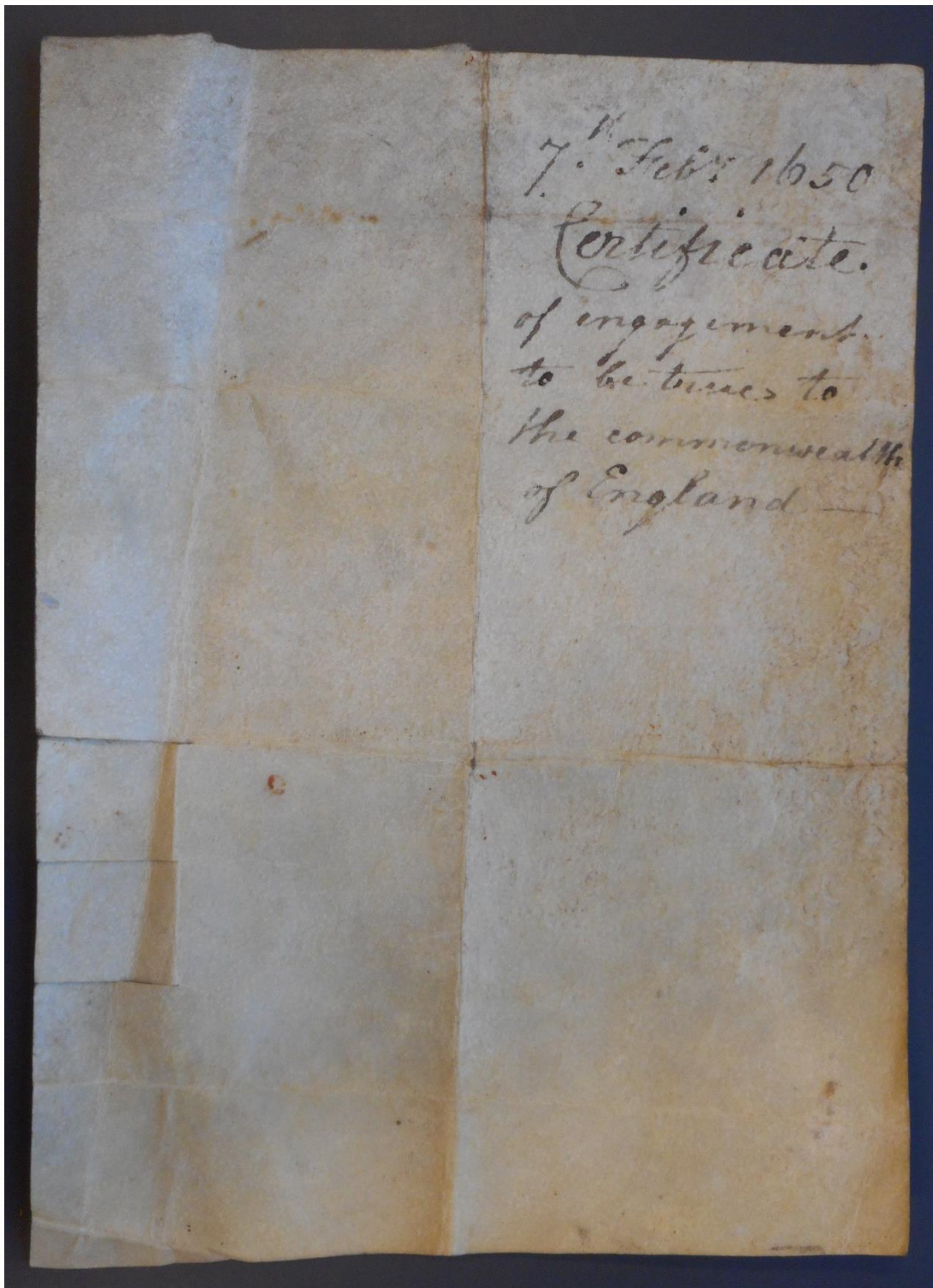


## **Certificate of Engagement to the Commonwealth of England, 1650 (CR1223)**

September's Document of the Month is a certificate of engagement to the Commonwealth of England signed by Thomas Hartwell of Dascott, Worcester in 1650.

This document hails from a tumultuous time in English history, the English Civil War. By the time the declaration was made, England had been beset by strife for some years and although the civil war was technically over, a climate of fear and suspicion remained.





**"7<sup>th</sup> Feb 1650 Certificate of engagement to be true to the commonwealth of England,"**  
the document is over 350 years old. Warwickshire County Record Office CR1223.

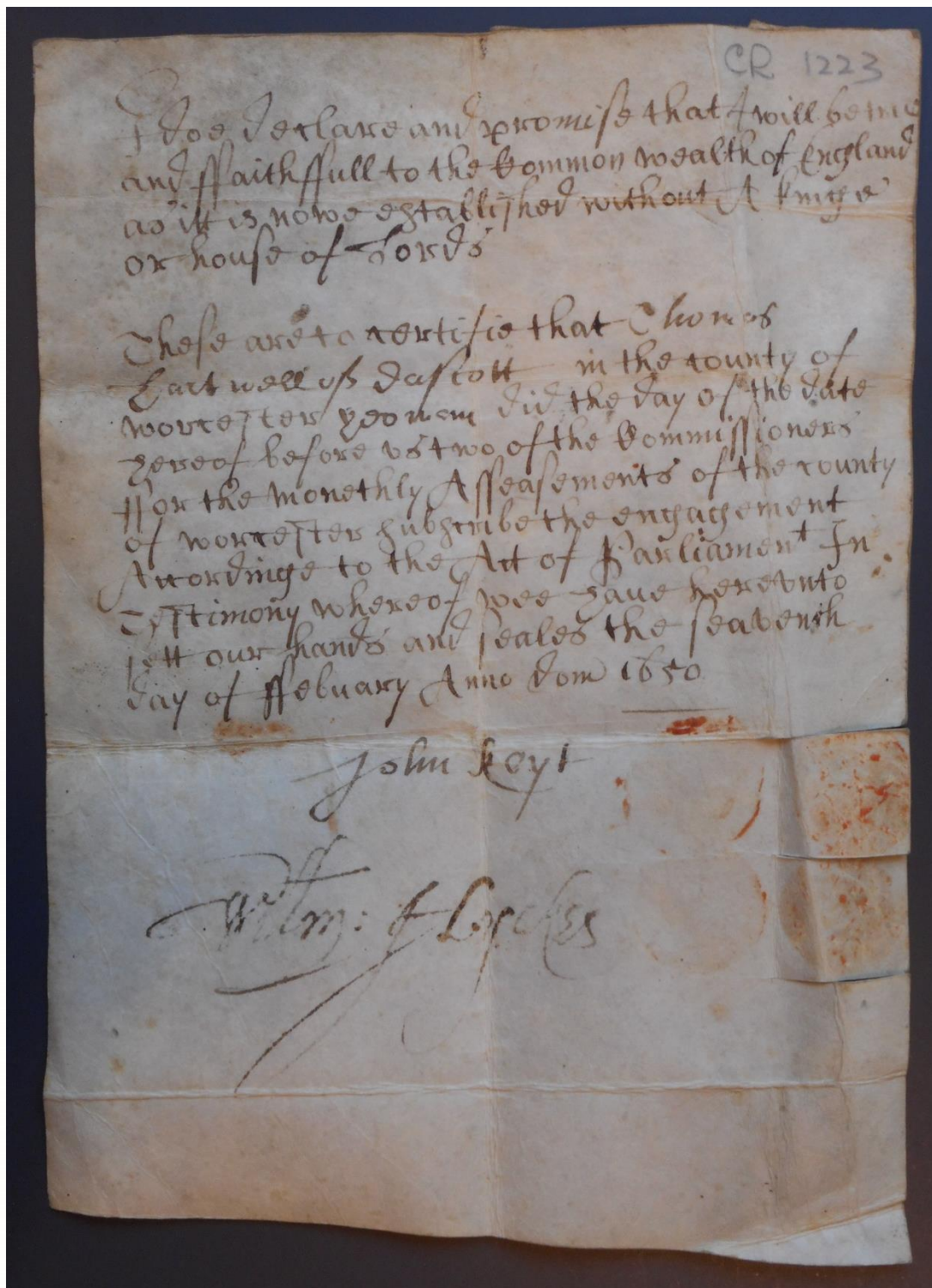
Following the execution of King Charles I, the Rump Parliament, which was deeply concerned about the divisions in society, had devised the certificate of engagement to the Commonwealth of England. Initially the declaration was to be signed by all MPs, clergymen, school teachers and university lecturers, members of the armed forces and officials in the courts of law<sup>1</sup>. However, this alone was not enough to ensure the stability of England's new constitution. In fact, Charles II's relationship with the Scots prompted an agreement that signing the declaration should be obligatory for all men over the age of 18<sup>2</sup>. It was after this decision that Thomas Hartwell of Dascott pledged his allegiance to the Commonwealth in February of the same year.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Oath of Engagement," in The Commonwealth, last modified, 14 September, <http://bcw-project.org/church-and-state/the-commonwealth/oath-of-engagement>.

<sup>2</sup> 'January 1650: An Act For Subscribing the Engagement.', in Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660, ed. C H Firth and R S Rait (London, 1911), pp. 325-329. British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/acts-ordinances-interregnum/pp325-329> [accessed 29 August 2018].





Thomas Hartwell's pledge followed a standardised form, and was made by all men over the age of 18. Warwickshire County Record Office CR1223.

The document reads:

*I do declare and promise that I will be true and faithful to the commonwealth of England as it is now established without a king or House of Lords.*

*Those are to certify that Thomas Hartwell of Dascott in the county of Worcester yeoman did the day of the date hereof before two of the Commissioners for the monthly assortments of the county of Worcester subscribe the engagement according to the Act of Parliament in testimony whereof we have hereunto set our hands and seales the seventh day of February AD 1650.*

*John Keyt  
William J Lockss*

### The civil war in Warwickshire

While the certificate of engagement was an obligatory declaration, it does reveal some far less ordinary insights into Warwickshire's civil war history. The identity of Thomas Hartwell remains something of a mystery, and one can only guess at his true allegiance during the civil war. However two other names also appear on the certificate, John Keyt and William Lockss. Of these, the former had a particularly intriguing role.

Baptised in Alcester in 1616, Sir John Keyt was in fact a committed royalist, who supported Charles II in reclaiming the throne. A decade after Thomas Hartwell pledged to support the Commonwealth, and with the monarchy re-established, Keyt was given the title of Baronet by the King<sup>3</sup>.

All this seems to be in curious contradiction with the appearance of his name at the end of a certificate of engagement to the Commonwealth. Whilst it is possible that a different John Keyt presided over Thomas

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<sup>3</sup> "John Keyt" Ancestry. Online [https://search.ancestryinstitution.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?qh=hBj8U0c80i37M9xutnG2JA%3D%3D&gl=allgs&gss=sfs28\\_ms\\_f-2\\_s&new=1&rank=1&msT=1&gsfn=John&gsfn\\_x=0&gsln=Keyt&gsln\\_x=0&msypnftp=Warwickshire&msbdy=1616&catbucket=rstp&MSAV=0&uidh=ir7](https://search.ancestryinstitution.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?qh=hBj8U0c80i37M9xutnG2JA%3D%3D&gl=allgs&gss=sfs28_ms_f-2_s&new=1&rank=1&msT=1&gsfn=John&gsfn_x=0&gsln=Keyt&gsln_x=0&msypnftp=Warwickshire&msbdy=1616&catbucket=rstp&MSAV=0&uidh=ir7) [accessed 29 August 2018].

Hartwell's declaration, it is equally likely that many royalists signed certificates of engagement in conflict with their true beliefs and with little intention of honouring their promises. Ann Hughes<sup>4</sup> suggests the majority of Warwickshire supported the monarchy or remained neutral during the war, and John Keyt's story appears to be a compelling example of the county's prevailing ideological conviction. However, even in the face of this, people may have been compelled to follow the government's request.

### Living through the civil war

The civil war wreaked havoc on the lives of many Warwickshire citizens. Today, their stories remain largely hidden, but September's Document of the Month coincides with an important project currently underway.

Funded by the Heritage Lottery and supported by the Dugdale Society and the Friends of the Warwickshire County Record Office, *Living Through the Civil War*, explores the accounts of people who survived, but were deeply affected by, the Civil War. As villages were pillaged and passing soldiers wreaked havoc across the county many ordinary people found their lives ruined by the war. Even if they had harboured sympathies for the monarchy, it does not seem unlikely that someone like Thomas Hartwell might have conceded to sign a certificate of engagement regardless of his political leaning, and even that John Keyt might have been willing to bear witness to this.

The true story behind the declaration may never be known. It has links to both Warwickshire and Worcestershire, and given the document came to the County Record Office from Sussex, it has surely had an interesting history! What is certain is that we must be grateful it is now back in Warwickshire, offering a glimpse into the lives of John Keyt and his contemporaries as they attempted to endure the civil war.

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<sup>4</sup>Ann Hughes, *Politics, Society and Civil War in Warwickshire, 1620-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).