

1642-1652: The Diggers and the Levellers



A history of the radical movements the Diggers and the Levellers which sprung up around the English Civil War.

The political and social upheaval that resulted from the English Civil War in the seventeenth century [effectively two conflicts between 1642 -1646 and 1647/48] led to the development of a set of radical ideas centred around movements known as 'Diggers' and 'Levellers'

The Diggers [or 'True Levellers'] were led by William Everard who had served in the New Model Army. As the name implies, the diggers aimed to use the earth to reclaim the freedom that they felt had been lost partly through the Norman Conquest; by seizing the land and owning it 'in common' they would challenge what they considered to be the slavery of property. They were opposed to the use of force and believed that they could create a classless society simply through seizing land and holding it in the 'common good'.

To this end, a small group [initially 12, though rising to 50] settled on common land first at St George's Hill and later in Cobham, Surrey and grew corn and other crops. This small group defied the landlords, the Army and the law for over a year. In addition to this, groups travelled through England attempting to rally supporters. In this they had some successes in Kent and Northamptonshire. Their main propagandist was Gerard Winstanley who produced the clearest statement of Digger ideas in 'The Law of Freedom in a Platform' published in 1652. This was a defence and exposition of the notion of a classless society based in secularism and radical democracy

The relatively small group of followers of Digger ideas was never particularly influential and was quite easily suppressed by Cromwell and Fairfax.

The most significant of these movements were The Levellers whose revolutionary ideas resonated throughout the succeeding centuries, mostly notably in the demands of the Chartists in the nineteenth century.

The Levellers' ideas found most support in the ranks of the 'New Model Army', formed by Oliver Cromwell in 1645 and were largely responsible for the defeat of the Royalist forces led by Charles I, particularly in the decisive Battle of Naseby in June 1645.

By the end of the first civil war in 1646 Leveller ideas were particularly influential and culminated in the Putney Debates where ordinary soldiers debated revolutionary ideas with their generals; it was at this series of meetings that Leveller Colonel Thomas Rainborough argued the case for universal suffrage:

"I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he, and therefore truly, sir, I think it is clear to every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government."

Unfortunately, this outbreak of democracy within the ranks of the army was relatively short-lived; the outbreak of the second civil war in 1647 allowed the generals to reassert their authority and Leveller influence began to wane. An attempted mutiny by Leveller soldiers was brutally suppressed in Burford, Oxfordshire in 1649; leaders were executed by Cromwell's soldiers and others were tried for high treason.

Why this brutal suppression? What did the generals find so threatening about the Levellers?

Who were the Levellers?

The Levellers were a relatively loose alliance of radicals and freethinkers who came to prominence during the period of instability that characterised the English Civil War of 1642 – 1649. The most prominent Levellers were John Lilburne, Richard Overton, William Walwyn, John Wildman, Edward Sexby and Colonel Thomas Rainborough.

What bound these people together was the general belief that all men were equal; since this was the case, then a government could only have legitimacy if it was elected by the people. The Leveller demands were for a secular republic, abolition of the House of Lords, equality before the law, the right to vote for all, free trade, the abolition of censorship, freedom of speech and the absolute right for people to worship whatever religion [or none] that they chose. This programme was published as 'The Agreement of the People'.

These ideas came out of the social classes from which the Levellers originated; they were mainly skilled workers and peasants and the 'petty bourgeoisie'. Since many of them had fought in Cromwell's New Model Army they were used to discussion, argument and the free dissemination of ideas; it was this intelligent debate allied to the need for discipline that had led to the defeat of the Royalists and the victory of the republic.

The Levellers were essentially radical idealists; their demands could be seen as a form of early socialism [they were pretty much the same as the demands of the Chartists some two hundred years later], but they had little or no understanding of the workings of a capitalist economy. It is unfair, though, to expect this of them since capitalism as an organised form of social production would only assert itself much later in the development of Britain as an industrial nation.

Indeed, it is important to note that their views on the social order were not particularly

progressive; these were rooted in the notion that prior to 1066 and the Norman Conquest a democratic society had existed in Anglo-Saxon times where the land was held in common by the people [perhaps this is in line with Karl Marx's idea of the concept of 'primitive communism'; that is, the form of social organisation that existed in pre-industrial society].

The victory of William the Conqueror in 1066 had enabled him to impose a form of foreign [that is, Norman] domination on the people. [1] This enabled him to reward his followers with huge swathes of land seized from the formerly 'free men' of England. This was particularly so in the North of England where opposition was brutally suppressed.

The Levellers argued that since God had created all men as equals, the land belonged to all the people as a right. Their programme was, then, essentially an attempt to restore the situation that they believed had existed previous to the Norman Conquest; they wanted to establish a 'commonwealth' in which the common people would be in control of their own destiny without the intervention of a King, a House of Lords and other potential oppressors.

The Agreement of the People was drawn up by a committee of Levellers including John Lilburne which was to have been discussed at a meeting of the commonwealth armies at Newmarket in June 1647. In brief this is what they asked for:

- Power to be vested in the people
- One year Parliaments, elected by equal numbers of voters per seat. The right to vote for all men who worked independently for their living and all those who had fought for the Parliamentary cause
- Recall of any or all of their MPs by their electors at any time
- Abolition of the House of Lords
- Democratic election of army officers
- Complete religious toleration and the abolition of tithes and tolls
- Justices to be elected; law courts to be local and proceedings to be in English [not French!]
- Redistribution of seized land to the common people

"[T]here had never been anything like such a spontaneous outbreak of democracy in any English or Continental Army before this year of 1647, nor was there anything like it thereafter till Workers' and Soldiers' Councils met in 1917 in Russia" [2]

It is hardly surprising, given this programme of demands, that the rich and powerful felt threatened by the Levellers. This is particularly so, given that some of the Leveller demands, almost 400 years on, have still not been met! Since Leveller demands went so much further than Cromwell and other republican leaders could even begin to meet, then they had to be crushed.

The outbreak of the second civil war gave them the opportunity to do this and so the movement which would have surely rid the people of the parasitical classes once and for all was brutally put down.

The final victory of the Parliamentary forces later in 1648 not only led to the execution of the King, but also the suppression of Leveller ideas for a time.

Leveller ideas, though, posed a real challenge to the power and authority of Cromwell particularly with their attitude to the situation in Ireland. The New Model Army had been set up to defend Parliament at home, not to act as a mercenary force which would advance the imperialist ambitions of the English ruling class. The Catholics in Ireland, it was argued, had

a claim to freedom and equality which was just as valid as that which the Levellers were arguing for at home.

In 'The English Soldier's Standard', it was argued that military intervention in Ireland would only mean that the Irish would become a subject people exploited by precisely those who the Levellers were struggling to overcome in England. The point was that influential levellers were implacably opposed to the reconquest of Ireland.

When significant elements of the New Model Army refused to embark for Ireland it was obvious that a crucial point had been reached. Radical elements had to be crushed in order for Cromwell to assert his authority. This was achieved at Burford in Oxfordshire where Fairfax and Cromwell surprised the Levellers and defeated them [albeit it with only a handful of casualties]. From this time [May 1649] the New Model Army was completely in the control of Cromwell.

This does not mean, though, that Leveller ideas were totally eradicated. On May Day 1649, the third and final version of the 'Agreement of the People' was published. This is the last collective statement of the Leveller leaders and is their most complete political programme. Its preface stated:

"Peace and freedom is our design; by war we were never gainers, nor ever wish to be."

In this version of the Agreement, there is a restatement of essential Leveller ideas, though there is a divergence between them and the aims of the Diggers to eradicate the ownership of private property. In all other respects, the programme is not dissimilar to earlier versions; the emphasis is still on universal [male] suffrage, accountable government, religious toleration, civil rights, and so on.

Leveller ideas mainly appealed to the dispossessed in society; that is, those who were most threatened by what the Levellers were proposing were unlikely to be persuaded by appeals to the 'common good'. Since the Levellers were unable to mobilise their followers to any great degree and, given their defeat at Burford, they lacked the ability to challenge the army or government, it is almost inevitable that they were unable to pose any future threat to the ruling class or [restored] Monarchy.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that Leveller ideas are irrelevant or were consigned to the 'dustbin of history'. Both the Levellers and Diggers are of crucial importance to the development of working class history since they stand in the proud tradition of English radicalism and challenge to the ruling orthodoxy.

Like the Tolpuddle Martyrs and the Chartists of a later period, the Diggers and Levellers posed a serious threat to the ruling class; their direct appeals to the poor and dispossessed resonate throughout the centuries – whilst the language and mode of expression may have changed, the essential demands of these radicals remain as vibrant and necessary today as they were when they were first put.

Some 450 years after the Diggers established their commune at Cobham, we still need to establish the common ownership of property and the development of society based on need, rather than profit. The words of Winstanley echo throughout the centuries:

"When men take to buying and selling the land, saying 'This is mine', they restrain other fellow creatures from seeking nourishment from mother earth.....so that he that had no land

was to work for those, for small wages, that called the land theirs; and thereby some are lifted up into the chair of tyranny and others trod under the footstool of misery, as if the earth were made for a few and not for all men.”

Our task must be to rescue the words of the Diggers and Levellers from obscurity and to locate them quite firmly in the context of working-class history and struggle; to seek inspiration from their words and actions; to ensure that all of these disparate voices are united under the common theme of working class resistance to poverty and oppression

Jim Fox

From [Revolutions Per Minute](#)

[1] See RPM issue 9 - ‘Rich at Play – foxhunting, land ownership and the Countryside Alliance’ which reveals how even today many of the major landowners in Britain are descended from those whom William allocated land to.

[2] P181 – The Levellers and the English Revolution by H.N. Brailsford