

THE
LEVELLERS MOVEMENT

AN ACCOUNT OF PERHAPS THE FIRST POLITICAL MOVEMENT
TO REPRESENT THE ORDINARY PEOPLE

Including THE DIGGERS AND RANTERS,
OLIVER CROMWELL, THE AGREEMENT OF THE PEOPLE and
MAGNA CARTA



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FOREWORD

THERE'S little to disagree with the Levellers over: "they wanted a democracy where there was no King, and a reformed House of Commons that represented the people, and not the vested interests of the ruling classes". We could go with that.

A key point of difference would be the rapidity with which they dropped the call for women's suffrage. But even so, they flirted with it...

Their name of "Levellers" was believed by the ruling class to indicate their wish to abolish property rights and develop an equalisation of wealth; certainly a call for their suppression to those who had both the wealth and the property.

Their use of petitions with thousands of signatures is a reminder to us, in an age where such things are easy to organise (and where the population of the country is more than 10 times that of the 17th century), of the strength and breadth of the support they gathered from the people.

And their ability to call the great and good to debates where their views could be put is a salutary reminder of the shallowness and evasiveness of our politicians when questioned.

Although they were a national movement they are firmly rooted in the SERTUC region with key events taking place, and support coming from, Banbury, Bishopsgate, Buckingham,

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Burford, the City of London, Hertfordshire, the Isle of Wight, Putney, Oxford, Southwark, Westminster, Windsor, and of course in pubs in all of these places.

There have been many erudite books written about the Levellers and the other movements of the time. This booklet does not seek to compete with them of course but to offer the story in another form: a short outline of the key events followed by context pieces on the main players and organisations.

There is much to learn from the Levellers, not least to admire and emulate their courage and their ability to inspire the people to aim for a better life and to demand equality with the “greatest” in the land, and a decent standard of life for the common man and woman.

My sincere thanks and admiration to the book’s author, journalist and writer PETA STEEL, for her commitment and skill. I believe the outcome of her labours will add to the knowledge and determination of our members to fight for a better world for future generations.

Megan Dobney
SERTUC Regional Secretary
May 2015

Our previous publication celebrating the campaigning and fight of workers in our region is *The Spithead and Nore Mutinies of 1797*. This is also available from the SERTUC office.

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ON 17 May 1649, three soldiers were executed in Burford churchyard, Oxford, on the orders of Oliver Cromwell. The three men, Cornet Thompson, Private Perkins and Corporal Church, were members of the Levellers movement and had been amongst the leaders of a mutiny against Cromwell, whom they accused of betraying the ideals of the 'Civil War'. They along with other soldiers, members of Cromwell's New Model Army, had refused to serve in Ireland until demands made by the Levellers had been met. Lack of money, with pay badly in arrears, had also added to the mens' anger. Some 340 prisoners who had been taken and locked up in the church overnight were led out the next day to see the three soldiers shot. These executions, which saw the quenching of further rebellions from within the army ranks, were the culmination of action taken by Cromwell to quell the growing opposition to parliament. It would bring an end to attempts to produce a constitution promoted by the Levellers which would have granted the franchise to ordinary Englishmen and given them control of parliament.

The Levellers were in many ways the first political grouping to actually represent the ordinary people and not the vested interests of the wealthy and the aristocracy. The Levellers were an influential protest group that operated during the civil war and the interregnum.

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Often referred to as a party they were actually a movement made up of people who challenged the existing attitudes towards religion and how the country was run. The early 'movement' came together from men, mainly civilians who were well to do businessmen and skilled craftsmen such as printers, cobblers, and weavers, along with dissident and independent religionists who shared the same common ideals. They would form the backbone of Oliver Cromwell's model army.

Although they only existed for a few years they did much to raise the consciousness of many for the need to have a constitution. They wanted a democracy where there was no King and a reformed House of Commons which represented the people, and not the vested interests of the ruling classes, and which would have far more importance and responsibility, than the House of Lords. They called for the reform of law, religious tolerance and free trade. The Levellers wanted a constitution that allowed extended franchise, guaranteeing individual rights, and a government that was answerable to the people and to parliament. Surprisingly, although they included women within their ranks who gave much support, they dropped calls for the extension of the vote to them. Nor did they call for the vote to be extended to include servants or beggars, claiming that servants and women would vote whichever way the head of the household told them to do. The Levellers were also against censorship, and published their own newspaper and pamphlets. They raised funds to pay for their propaganda in the form of subscriptions from their members, with each paying according to what they could afford.

Their name *The Levellers* was given to them by their enemies,

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and it's believed in particular by King Charles I, to imply that they favoured abolition of property rights and equalisation of wealth. Neither of which they actually supported. The name largely came from their own declaration that "all degrees of men should be levelled and an equality should be established". It is believed that the name was first officially used in a letter dated 1 November 1647, which referred to the extremists in the army. Described as political radicals, they originally met in groups amongst the pulpits and taverns of southern England and London as the First Civil War drew to an end, their support coming from the people of the City of London and Southwark, and outside London from Buckingham and Hertfordshire where they formed themselves into local branches, usually taking the name of the local tavern from which they operated. The other main grouping of members came from within the ranks of what would become the New Model Army, soldiers deeply dissatisfied at the lack of change after the First Civil War. Green ribbons representing liberty became the symbol of the Levellers and were worn during demonstrations and protests and to help them identify each other; the green ribbons would be worn by the soldiers during the Civil Wars. Later they would wear sprigs of rosemary in remembrance of those who had died.

Their leaders John Lilburne, Richard Overton, and William Walwyn, all radicals who were frequently imprisoned for their beliefs, received much support from the public for their resistance to the autocratic regime of Charles I. A king had been defeated but as soldiers and public both argued there was, with the exception of possible religious reform, little obvious evidence of other changes.

In July 1645 Lilburne, who took up a position in the army, as

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did other Leveller members, criticised MPs for living in comfort whilst common soldiers fought and died on their behalf for the cause. He also accused the speaker of the House of Commons of having corresponded with the royalists, this resulted in him being arrested and imprisoned by parliament, an action that led to protests and the presentations of petitions. He was eventually freed in October following the presentation of a petition signed by 2,000 leading London citizens and was rearrested the following year and imprisoned in the Tower of London, this time for denouncing his former army commander Lord Manchester as a royalist sympathiser. It was this imprisonment and the surrounding campaign to release him which in many ways acted as the catalyst in encouraging the movement to take action and to form itself into a cohesive opposition to the existing political sides. Overton, who had his own secret printing press, was arrested in 1646 for publishing a pamphlet attacking the House of Lords and used his time in prison to write a Leveller manifesto *An Arrow Against All Tyrants and Tyranny*. Many of Overton's articles were published in the Leveller journal *The Moderate*.

Dissatisfaction at the way in which they were treated, with wages sometimes withheld, led to unrest amongst members of the army and in particular amongst those later incorporated into Cromwell's New Model Army. 'Agitators', each of them recognised by the Army Commanders, were elected from the regiments to represent them on the General Council. But this did not satisfy some of the regiments, with five of the cavalry regiments electing new "unofficial agitators". They produced their own pamphlet called *The Case of The Army Truly Stated*, which was presented to their

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Commander-in-Chief Sir Thomas Fairfax on 18 October 1647. They demanded a dissolution of parliament within a year and changes to be made to the constitution of future parliaments, which would be regulated by a 'law paramount' and would stop anyone trying to change the way the country and its people were governed.

Their demands caused uproar amongst the senior officers, who ordered the unofficial agitators to appear before the Army's General Council at what became known as the Putney debates. These would see a series of discussions which would take place between the political establishment which also included army leaders such as Fairfax, and the dissident members of the army, mainly Levellers aided by citizens who in turn included other Levellers. These took place at St Mary's Church in Putney from 28 October until 11 November 1647 and were mainly chaired by Oliver Cromwell whose son-in-law Ireton appeared as one of the leading debaters for the Army Council. Lilburne, previously imprisoned in the Tower of London by the House of Lords where he had been visited by Cromwell who had tried to persuade him to exert his influence to moderate the growing hostility towards parliament, was let out on 9 November so that he could prepare evidence for the committee that was examining whether the House of Lords had the right to imprison commoners, something which Cromwell himself thought was wrong.

On the first day the Agitator Robert Everard presented *An Agreement of the People*, a document which emanated from members of the army and essentially reflected the philosophy of the Levellers in that it was both republican and democratic, and sat at odds with the terms of the settlement already endorsed by the General Council

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which called for greater civil justice but left the terms for how it was to be introduced in the hands of the King, who was expected to agree to them and to introduce a series of laws which would be enacted through parliament. The Agitators did not trust either the King or the establishment and demanded that changes should come from the bottom up, with the vote being given to all men.

The debates were the first to actually try and define who voters should be. Much of the dialogue was based on principles laid out in the Bible. The debates and the civil war were held during a time of much religious upheaval with many of the soldiers and their supporters, men of strong faith, questioning the way in which the churches had been run. These arguments caused dissent amongst some who were advising the soldiers on the grounds that the Bible could not be used as a model for civil government, and that only reason and negotiation could be the basis of any settlement. On 4 November the General Council of the Army accepted that all soldiers and others “if they be not servants or beggars” ought to have a voice in elections. Four days later Cromwell, who had been absent from this part of the debate when the decision to endorse this part of the agreement had been passed with only a majority of three, persuaded the Council to reverse its previous decision. He argued that such a decision to grant voting rights to all would lead to anarchy.

On 11 November at the end of the debates, Charles I escaped from imprisonment and fled to Carisbrooke Castle on the Isle of Wight; discussions and future plans for a constitution would now take place against a background of war.

The Putney debates led to an agreement that there should be

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three meetings with the troops. The first was held at Corkbush Field on 17 November 1647. There was now anger as a breakdown took place over the constitutional plan of settlement between the Levellers and the army leaders as their Commanders Sir Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell, who had earlier shown some sympathy with the Levellers, concerned at the level of support for the movement amongst the army and worried about increased anarchy tried to impose *The Heads of The Proposals* drawn up by the Army Council. They demanded that every soldier should sign a declaration of loyalty to Fairfax as commander in chief and to the Army Council. Most soldiers agreed to sign as they were guaranteed their back payments with threats to disband some of the regiments being dropped; but several regiments carrying copies of the *Agreement* and with pieces of paper stuck in their headband carrying headlines of “England’s Freedom, Soldiers Rights” refused to comply. Thomas Rainsborough clashed with Fairfax when he tried to present him with a copy of the *Agreement*. This opposition was quickly quashed as soldiers were arrested and one ringleader, Private Richard Arnold, was executed. Troops summoned to the other two meetings agreed to accept the Army Council manifesto.

Petitions continued to be presented with the largest *To the right honourable The Commons of England* signed by nearly a third of the population of London being delivered on 11 September 1648. The death in action in October of Thomas Rainsborough lost the Leveller movement one of its greatest leaders and thinkers. He was a Member of Parliament and had been one of the major speakers at the Putney debates. It was Rainsborough who during the Putney debates had clearly laid out the Levellers beliefs: “the poorest he

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that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he... every man that is to live under a government ought first, by his own consent, to put himself under that government". A large Leveller-led demonstration in London took place on the day of his funeral as thousands of mourners, many wearing Leveller regalia, including bunches of rosemary, turned out to mark the occasion.

In December 1648 King Charles was recaptured and sent to Windsor Castle. On 6 January 1649 what became known as the Rump Parliament began sitting. All those members of parliament who had been in favour of negotiating with the King had been expelled. The Rump Parliament now gave parliament the right to make new Acts of Parliament without the King's approval.

The Agreement of the People which had been modified since last being delivered to the Army Council in 1647, was presented to the parliament on 20 January 1649, the same day that King Charles I was put on trial for treason against the people. He was found guilty and on 30 January 1649 at Whitehall Palace in London was beheaded. The Levellers themselves, although described as republicans, never formally endorsed the execution. Lilburne himself condemned it on the grounds that the King should not have been put on trial until a constitutional settlement had been reached and a legal government had been set up.

In February 1649 the Grandees banned petitions from soldiers to parliament therefore stopping them from influencing how the country was to be run, and how they were to be treated. A series of protests, and what was tantamount to mutiny, broke out amongst the army. In March, eight Leveller troops approached Thomas Fairfax, Commander in Chief of the New Model Army

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demanding the restoration of this right; five were cashiered from the army. In April, 300 infantrymen in Colonel John Hewson's regiment refused to serve in Ireland unless the Leveller demands were satisfied. They were all cashiered without their back pay. Later that month, mutiny broke out as soldiers in the Bishopsgate London regiment of Colonel Edward Whalley made similar demands to those in Hewson's; ordered to leave London, they refused to do so. Fifteen soldiers were arrested and court martialled, six were sentenced to death (although five were later pardoned), one, Robert Lockyer a former Leveller agitator, was hanged on 27 August. A thousand men, marched in file at his funeral, preceding his coffin covered in bunches of rosemary dipped in blood. Thousands of men and women wearing Leveller green ribbons, badges and rosemary followed to be met at the graveyard by a large crowd of the public from London and Westminster. Lilburne, William Walwyn, Thomas Prince and Richard Overton had in the meantime been imprisoned in the Tower of London by the Council of State, where in May they had written an outline of the reforms they wanted, a pamphlet *An Agreement of the Free People of England*. Some of the reforms such as the right to remain silent have since become law.

Cromwell himself led an attack on 400 troops, the Banbury mutineers, commanded by Captain William Thompson who had also rebelled in favour of Leveller demands. Several of the mutineers were killed, Thompson himself escaped. On 17 May 1649, three leaders of the mutiny were shot. The Leveller support in the army was destroyed and without it, despite the release from prison of Walwyn and Overton, and later Lilburne after he was acquitted following his trial, the Leveller cause was at an end. There

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was one last attempt to influence the future government of the country between the years of 1651 and 1657 when Lilburne, who by then was in exile along with John Wildman, entered into negotiations with Charles II and other exiled royalists to promote a monarchical restoration under Leveller terms. The talks broke down and the days of Leveller influence on how the country was to be governed came to an end.

But although the Levellers as a movement ceased, many of their ideals remained. Every year there is a memorial meeting held on Levellers Day in May at the Burford Church. Tony Benn speaking there in 1976 referred to the debt that was still owed to them: “the elimination of the Levellers as an organised political movement could not obliterate the ideas which they had propagated. From that day to this the same principles of religious and political freedom and equality have reappeared again and again in the history of the labour movement and throughout the world”.

Much of the American Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence is based on the beliefs of the Levellers as it drew heavily on the writings of Tom Paine, himself described by Benn as being a direct descendant of the Levellers. Thomas Jefferson was to pay tribute to the Levellers and to the Putney debates as being an inspiration to those waging the American war of Independence.

THE DIGGERS AND THE RANTERS

THE Diggers, originally known as the True Levellers, were a group of people led by Gerrard Winstanley who took the name Diggers when they began to farm on common land. Their beliefs were founded on the tenet that there was an ecological inter-relationship between humans and nature. Winstanley argued that “true freedom lies where a man receives his nourishment and preservation and that is in the use of the earth”.

They were Protestant English agrarian socialists who believed that the common land should be cultivated by small egalitarian rural communities. In many ways they could be described as “true Levellers” as they advocated an even more egalitarian way of life than the Levellers themselves, whose leaders denounced them for their communism.

In 1649 Winstanley and 14 others, using the sobriquet True Levellers to differentiate themselves from the Levellers and the beliefs of John Lilburne and the other leaders, published a pamphlet *True Levellers Standard Advanced* in which they advocated the farming of common land, a central platform to their philosophy. They wanted the restoration of rights that had been robbed from the common man as a result of the Norman conquest of 1066 claiming that the birthright of the ‘common people of England’ had been exploited by a foreign ruling-class.

At the same time that the True Levellers issued their pamphlet a group of their members who became known as the Diggers put their beliefs into practice by beginning to plant vegetables on common land at St George’s Hill, Weybridge. The price of food had soared at that time, and for many poor people it was difficult to find vegetables and food they could afford. The Diggers issued an invitation to all to come and help them,

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promising them meat, drink and clothes in return. They intended to pull down all the enclosures so the local population could come and work with them, expecting their numbers to increase to thousands within days. There was an immediate complaint made to the Council of State in April, which declared that it was “feared that they have some design in hand”.

Thomas Fairfax, commander of the New Model Army, responding to requests from the local landowners, visited the Diggers’ camp along with some troops, and having spoken to Winstanley and the other leader, William Everard (who subsequently left the movement), decided that the Diggers meant no harm. He advised the landlords to use the local courts instead.

The Diggers were forced off the land after a campaign of harassment waged by a local landowner that saw gangs attacking the camp subjecting them to beatings and an arson attack on one of their communal housings; this culminated in a court case in which having been accused of being Ranters and not being allowed to speak in their own defence, the Diggers were found guilty despite the fact that Winstanley had himself attacked the Ranters for their beliefs and for their sexual practices. The Diggers abjured the use of force and instead of facing eviction by the army left St George’s Hill in August 1649.

The Diggers now broke up into different groups with some of the evicted members moving a short distance to Little Heath in Surrey where they cultivated some 11 acres, built six houses, and harvested winter crops. They also published several pamphlets. Despite having originally shown some sympathy towards them the local landlord of the manor in Cobham, Parson John Platt, turned on them using his power to stop local people from joining or helping them. By April 1650 Platt and other local landowners, having used force against them, succeeded in forcing the Diggers off the land. Platt’s own wife left him and ran off with one of their leaders.

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In late March 1650, four members of the Surrey Colony were arrested carrying a letter signed by, among others, Winstanley calling upon people to set up Digger colonies and to provide money to help the Surrey Diggers. The men travelled through other counties such as Middlesex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, Huntingdonshire and Northamptonshire, where groups were set up.

One group was set up near Wellingborough in Northamptonshire, and in April 1650 the Council of State ordered a Justice of the Peace for Northamptonshire to take action against what they described as “the Levellers in those parts” and to put them on trial. Nine were arrested and imprisoned in Northampton jail; charges were not brought against them though the Justice refused to free them.

Gradually as a result of the continuing legal actions and mob violence the Digger colonies were dispersed. They left behind them a remarkable legacy of traditional folk songs, one written by Winstanley and set to music by Leon Rosselson, stories and archive material. A film has been made about Winstanley and the Diggers. Attempts have been made in recent years to revive their spirit with the setting up of modern Digger communities such as in San Francisco, America. In 1999 a British activist group celebrated the 350th anniversary of the Diggers by holding a march and occupying St George’s Hill, the site of the first colony.

The Ranters, with whom the Diggers were erroneously associated was another of the emerging non-conforming dissenting groups that refused to accept the authority of the English church, believing that God dwelt in every creature and that there was no need for the church, scripture or services. Ranters rejected a belief in individual immortality and stressed “the desire to surpass the human condition and become godlike”. They also believed in a life where a “believer is free from traditional restraints, that sin is a product only of the imagination and that private ownership of property is wrong”.

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They were much influenced by the Brethren of the Free Spirit who had operated in the 14th century and had believed that everyone should live a godlike life. The leader of the Ranters was Laurence Clarkson, or Claxton, who had joined them in 1649.

Ranters, who also believed in nudity, using it as a form of social protest and to draw attention to their beliefs of abandoning earthly goods, were regarded by the government as being a threat to public social order. Even Gerrard Winstanley of the Diggers criticised them accusing them of having “a general lack of moral values or restraint in worldly pleasures”. They were open to much derision often being featured in satirical cartoons. The establishment took a harder stance against them as they were considered by the church to be a heretical sect, accusing them of fanaticism and sexual immorality. Members were put in prison until they agreed to recant.

Despite the actions taken against them, the movement spread throughout the country, usually amongst what was described as the lower classes, but mainly amongst those who rejected Puritanism. Although they came into conflict with early Quakerism, they are believed to have gradually converted to Quakerism during the time of the Restoration.

THE CIVIL WARS

THE English Civil Wars which lasted from 1642 to 1651 were a series of conflicts that broke out between King Charles I and parliament over the way in which the country should be governed. Although they were termed English, they also affected Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The first two wars saw Charles I locked in conflict with parliament, and the third and last war between his son and supporters of what became known as the Rump Parliament; this last war saw the final military defeat of Charles II and brought the Civil Wars to an end.

The wars in many ways started with religious conflicts between King Charles I and the Scottish Covenanters, known as the Bishops' Wars. These were two armed rebellions as the Scots rose in 1639 and 1640 against the authoritarian attempts by Charles I to reform the Scottish Presbyterian church. It was the costs incurred by Charles I in fighting these two rebellions, the first ending in an inconclusive treaty and the second in a series of defeats for Charles, which led to him trying to raise taxes without parliamentary approval. The second of the two rebellions forced him to summon the Long Parliament to ratify the Treaty of London of August 1641, bringing the Scottish uprisings to an end.

King Charles inherited the throne in 1625 and had from the beginning taken an autocratic approach to his powers, believing that he had a divine right to rule. In the first five years he summoned and dissolved parliament three times. He then tried to rule without either the House of Commons or the House of Lords; for the next 11 years no parliament met. Charles then recalled parliament so he could raise the money to pay Scottish war expenses which he had agreed to settle as part of the treaty.

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This parliament, known as the Long Parliament and summoned in 1640, lasted for the next 20 years. The newly called parliament, led by John Pym, was determined to limit the King's powers. It took away the King's right to dissolve parliament and made it illegal for the King to impose his own taxes. A further law was passed giving members of parliament control over the King's Ministers. Charles I reacted in fury and on 4 January 1642 sent his soldiers to arrest John Pym and four other parliamentary leaders, who managed to escape before they arrived. Members of parliament also fled and regrouping decided to raise their own army. Charles also left London and began to form his own army. The Civil War was now inevitable.

The sides were split by religious affiliation with the parliamentary forces drawn from the Puritans, and the King's from the Anglicans and the Catholics. The North and the South West and Wales tended to side with the King, whilst the people living in London, the East and the South East supported parliament. The armies themselves also split with a large number of nobility and their followers joining the King's ranks, which initially gave Charles I the advantage of a well trained cavalry (given the name 'cavaliers' after the Spanish horsemen who had been responsible for killing many Protestants in Europe).

This advantage led to an early victory for Charles when his troops won the battle of Edgehill in October 1642 when the parliamentary side failed to stop the royalists advancing on London. Instead of pressing his advantage Charles I withdrew his troops to Oxford which became the royalist capital for the rest of the war. 1643 saw the royalist armies securing major victories in the West Country and Yorkshire, and a one year ceasefire in Ireland, releasing troops stationed there to return to join the King's army. Parliament secured a military alliance with the Scottish Covenanters with the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant, which saw the Army of the Covenant crossing the River Tweed and marching into England.

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In November 1644, after a series of battles which had seen power ebbing to and fro, Cromwell attacked the leadership of the Earl of Manchester and in December he called for the formation of a new national army, which in turn saw the formation of the New Model Army under Sir Thomas Fairfax, and with it a series of victories for parliament. Negotiations on the Uxbridge Treaty had already begun between the King, parliament and the Scots. But in May 1646, King Charles I finally surrendered to the Covenanter Army, and a month later Oxford, which had been besieged by the New Model Army, surrendered, bringing to an end the First of the Civil Wars.

The Second Civil War broke out after Charles I plotted with the Scots and in December 1647 negotiated a secret treaty with them in which he promised church reform guaranteeing to establish Presbyterianism for the next three years in exchange for the Scots promising to invade England and restore him to the throne.

A series of royalist risings through England backed up by an invasion of the Scots in summer 1648 led to skirmishes and battles which saw parliamentary forces put down rebellions in Wales, where some of their own unpaid soldiers had changed sides, and in the south and the north of England. In August, the parliamentary forces led by Cromwell defeated the Scots at the battle of Preston, which marked the end of the Second English Civil War. Many of the royalist leaders were executed and on 30 January 1649, following his own trial, King Charles I was beheaded.

The third English Civil War, 1649 to 1651, was the final war as Charles II sought to take his father's throne as various dissident armies in Ireland and Scotland rose to fight against the parliamentary forces. In Ireland, joint royalist and confederate forces had risen against the parliamentary forces but had been defeated at the Battle of Rathmines on 2 August 1649. Thirteen days later Cromwell was able to land in Dublin and began a harsh campaign in which he massacred thousands of Irish

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Catholics, and which would tie up English troops for another four years. The ramifications of the cruelty shown by Cromwell were to last for centuries.

Scottish forces united following King Charles' execution but still in some ways remained divided by the Covenanters and the royalists led by Montrose. Charles II in May 1650 signed the Treaty of Breda between himself and the Covenanters, aligning himself with them and gradually cutting his ties with the royalists who were defeated in a number of battles, which saw their leader the Duke of Montrose delivered up to parliamentary forces. On 1 January 1651 Charles was crowned King of the Scots and would rule for another 10 months. After a series of defeats he finally fled for his life after the Battle of Worcester and on 16 October escaped to Normandy in France, bringing to an end the civil wars.

The first two civil wars were responsible for allowing changes to the constitution that introduced many of the legal protections for defendants and restored the power of the people over the monarch, stopping the ruler from introducing measures which might impinge on their rights.

THE NEW MODEL ARMY

THE New Model Army, raised from veteran soldiers, many with deep Puritan beliefs and some with Republican convictions, was an army formed by parliamentarians during the English civil war in 1645. It had very close associations with the Levellers, many of whose members served in it.

Its name came from the proposal first made in June 1644 to remodel parliament's army after its defeat at Cropredy Bridge. The army, made up of recruits from regional associations, was indisciplined with soldiers often reluctant to take part in campaigns outside their local areas. This particularly applied to the London regiments who became mutinous, refusing to follow orders. In December Oliver Cromwell made a speech to the House of Commons calling for the formation of a national army with no regional affiliations which could operate anywhere. The New Model Army Ordinance Act was passed on 19 February 1645, with Sir Thomas Fairfax appointed as its Captain General and Commander in Chief. Oliver Cromwell became Lieutenant General of Horse, and second in command.

The new army of some 22,000 men was made up of different regiments comprising foot soldiers, cavalry, musketeers, dragoons and artillery. The majority of veterans served in the cavalry, mainly coming from the armies of Manchester, Essex and others who had served under its previous commander. The infantry included some veterans, and men pressed into service and drawn from London, the South East and the East. Subject to strict discipline, they were promised that in return they would receive regular pay.

Their uniforms were different with the infantry wearing coats of venetian red with marks to indicate different regiments; the cavalry wore

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distinctive iron helmets, which along with their short hair earned them the name of the Roundheads; the term ‘Cavaliers and Roundheads’ being used to describe the opposing sides in the Civil War

Other parliamentary armies operated at the same time, including the Scottish Covenanter army that served under Lord Leven, the Northern Association based in Yorkshire, and the Western Association Army of Wiltshire and four western counties.

Fairfax, a stern disciplinarian, welded the New Modern Army into a strong cohesive, fighting force, promoting and appointing officers on merit rather than on their background. This brought a high degree of motivation, with several new officers coming from the working classes, or from the lower ranks of the soldiers themselves.

In June 1645, within months of its formation, the New Model Army won one of its most spectacular victories at the battle of Naseby; the following year the first of the civil wars came to an end. This led to further reorganisation of the Model Army with the smaller parliamentary armies being disbanded or incorporated into its ranks. Fairfax was appointed Commander in Chief of all parliament’s forces in England and Wales.

The ending of the First Civil War in 1646 saw attempts by parliament to try and disband the army without having settled arrears in pay, failing to make any provision for the relief of the wounded soldiers, the widows or the orphans or granting indemnity from prosecution of any soldiers for actions carried out whilst under orders. There was outrage and increased politicisation amongst the soldiers who appointed a group of Agitators from their midst to lobby for their rights; this was after all the people’s army. These representatives of the army sat next to their high commanders, known as the ‘Grandees’ at the Putney debates called in October and November 1647 to debate the future constitution of England.

In their document *The Representation of the Army* published in 1647, the army Agitators declared “We were not a mere mercenary army, hired to

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service any arbitrary power of a state, but called forth and conjured by the several declarations of parliament to the defence of our own and the people's just rights and liberties”.

Following the Second Civil War in 1648 army officers, led by Cromwell, purged the parliament of the King's supporters which led to the trial and execution of the King and to the establishment of a republican Commonwealth in England. The political influence of the Levellers grew with soldiers turning to them as they rebelled against the way in which they were treated. This culminated in the mutinies and executions of 1649, when the Levellers' actions were harshly suppressed by Fairfax and Cromwell, bringing an end to the movement and to their influence within the army.

The Model Army became an army of occupation in Ireland and Scotland and was used to uphold the republican constitution in England during the 1650s when the people wanted a return to the monarchy. In 1649, under Cromwell's leadership, the Model Army had invaded Ireland to fight the Irish Catholics who had risen against the Protestant settlers eight years previously. This campaign, with its atrocities in Wexford and Drogheda, led to a hatred of Cromwell from the Irish which lasts until this day. The army suffered its only major defeat in the storming of Clonmel in May 1650.

Cromwell took over as Commander in Chief from Fairfax following his refusal to lead the invasion of Scotland to fight against Charles II; victories at Dunbar and Worcester finally led to an end to the civil wars.

The Model Army, fiercely loyal to Cromwell despite his earlier conflicts with their Leveller members, provided him with the support needed to retain his hold on power throughout his period in office. But with his death and the succession by his son Richard, who insisted upon continuing his father's role as Commander in Chief, the links between the Lord Protector and the army loosened as republican opponents of the

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protectorate spread dissent amongst the soldiers. Richard was deposed by a military junta which led to a short restoration of the Commonwealth and with it measures to try and curtail military power, which instead led to the dissolution of parliament. A possible civil war, with the army of occupation in Scotland demanding the return of parliament, was averted when the soldiers refused to fight against their former comrades.

In 1660 the pro-Royalist Convention Parliament which authorised the restoration of the Stuarts ordered the disbandment of the entire New Model Army. The last regiment under General Monck was saved to put down an insurrection in London, but was finally disbanded and on 14 February 1661 laid down its weapons. It was immediately incorporated into King Charles II's new standing army, becoming known as the Coldstream Guards. It remains the oldest regular army regiment and is the last direct link to the New Model Army.

AGREEMENT OF THE PEOPLE

THE AGREEMENT OF THE PEOPLE was the name given to a series of manifestos produced by the Levellers between the years 1647 and 1649, at the height of the civil war and the English Revolution. They were plans for written constitutions, known as Agreements, which aimed to provide a more just and representative state.

These were the first attempts to produce a written constitution which reflected an agreement between the people and their representatives which would lay down ground rules for the fundamentals of governance, or as they became known 'foundations of freedom'. The Agreements were meant to legitimise new constitutional structures, guaranteeing the sovereignty of the people and stripping the monarchy and the House of Lords of political power. They called for the separation of the legislative and executive arms of government as well as outlining plans that ensured individual freedoms could not be interfered with by government; they covered freedom of religious conscience, legal equality, and an end to censorship.

The first *An Agreement of the people for a firm and present peace upon grounds of common right* was drafted in October 1647 and probably written by John Wildman, one of the Leveller leaders who was to take part in the Putney debates which had been called by the Army Council, following disquiet about future proposals for the running of the state after the end of the first civil war. Agitators (representatives) of the New Model Army, many of them Levellers along with civilian Levellers, hoped that the Agreement would form the basis of the country's new constitution.

The Agreement contained four clauses. The first, demanded that the

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people's representatives or Members of Parliament should be elected in proportion to the population of their constituencies; the second that the then parliament should be dissolved on 30 September 1648. The third stipulated that future parliaments should be elected biennially and sit every other year from April to September; and the fourth stated that the biennial parliament, consisting of a single elected House, should be the supreme authority in the land, with powers to make or repeal laws, appoint officials and conduct domestic and foreign policy.

The Agreement also laid down various conditions under which parliament was allowed to operate. It was not allowed to interfere with freedom of religion, nor was it to press men into service in the armed forces. It stated that all laws passed by parliament were to be for the common good, and in a gesture towards a future peace, that it could not prosecute anyone for their part in the recent war, but at the same time it could not exempt anyone from the ordinary course of law.

These proposals were debated at the Putney debates, where the 'Grande'es', parliamentary leaders Cromwell and his son-in-law Henry Ireton, argued against the extension of the franchise to all adult males. Parliament viewed the Agreement as being potentially destructive and Sir Thomas Fairfax was ordered to investigate its authors. Army support for the Agreement was quashed at the Corkbush Field mutiny, when the Grande'es ripped it up and imposed their own settlement.

Military and civilian supporters continued to debate the Agreement and in April 1648, *The Armies Petition, or a new Engagement* was drafted by a group of Agitators at St Albans. This new document included more specific proposals for legal and economic reform. At the same time a civilian broadsheet was also published promoting the same ideals.

The defeat of King Charles I and the ending of the Second Civil War led to more discussion about the Agreement, with John Lilburne promoting an extended version of the original one. He hoped to get the

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new proposals accepted by a committee of Levellers, London Independents, MPs and Grandees at Whitehall in December 1648 before the King was put on trial, enabling it to be conducted on the basis of a new legitimate and legal constitution. The talks broke down when Lilburne and his colleague Richard Overton walked out following interventions by Henry Ireton and other army officers who insisted upon making further modifications to the document. The talks continued without their presence, and although concessions were made regarding franchise, the delays were such that the revised Agreement was presented to parliament on 20 January 1649, the very same day that the trial of Charles I began, resulting in a decision to postpone discussion on the Agreement until after the trial was completed. It was never to be brought before parliament again. This would be the last time that the army would be involved in drawing up such an agreement, something that both Ireton and Cromwell had been working towards.

The third and final Agreement, *An Agreement of the Free People of England, tendered as a Peace Offering to this distressed Nation* was written by John Lilburne, Richard Overton, William Walwyn and Thomas Prince, smuggled out and published whilst they were prisoners in the Tower of London on 1 May 1649. Signed jointly by the men who had been imprisoned by the Council of State, it contained 12 clauses. These included the right to vote for all men over the age of 21, excepting servants, beggars and royalists; annual election to parliament, with members serving one term only; no army officer, treasurer or lawyer could be an MP, to avoid conflict of interest; equality of all persons before the law; trials to be heard before 12 jurymen, freely chosen by their community; the law was to proceed in English and cases were not to extend longer than six months; no-one was to be punished for refusing to testify against themselves in criminal cases; the death penalty was only to be applied in cases of murder; imprisonment for debt was to be abolished; tithes were also to be abolished

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and parishioners were to be given the right to choose their ministers; taxation was to be levied in proportion to real or personal property; and military conscription, monopolies and excise taxes were to be abolished.

Within weeks of its publication the army mutiny, led by the Levellers at Burford, was suppressed bringing to an end the Leveller movement. Many of the demands made in the final Agreement such as trial by a 12 man jury and the right to remain silent rather than testify against themselves, equal parliamentary constituencies and the concept of everyone being equal under the law paved the way for changes to the law and many of our civil liberties.

THE PUTNEY DEBATES

THE Putney Debates saw the defining moment when the parliamentary forces, army and politicians came together to try and hammer out a new constitution on which the Kingdom would now be run. The debates took place between 28 October and 9 November 1647 at St Mary's Church in Putney between soldiers and officers of Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army and included civilian representation. They were held after the first of the Civil Wars and addressed a number of issues such as whether or not they should continue talks for a settlement with the King and whether there should even be a King or a Lord, and even a House of Lords. The most important part of the discussions was centred on whether or not there should be universal suffrage and what form of constitution this country should have; it marked the beginning of argument on what democracy should be, an argument that continues today.

The debates came at the end of a turbulent summer which had seen the defeat of Charles by the New Model Army under Sir Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell. Attempts by Fairfax and the Army Grandees to negotiate a settlement with the ever vacillating Charles and with parliament on how the country should be run in the future, had seen the military and civilian radicals the Levellers turn on them, accusing Cromwell's son-in-law Henry Ireton in particular, of not representing their interests. The Grandees were accused of betraying the interests of the ordinary man and the common soldier.

In October 1647, five of the more radical cavalry regiments elected Agitators, new agents, to represent their views. They issued a political manifesto *The case of the army truly stated* and threw their support behind the

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Levellers' proposals outlined in *The Agreement of the People*. They wanted universal suffrage, biennial parliaments, a reorganisation of constituencies and for full authority to be given to the House of Commons instead of the King or the House of Lords. Equality before the law, freedom of conscience and freedom from being pressed into serving in the military forces, were also essential items they wanted to see enshrined in any constitution.

The Grandees responded by inviting the army representatives along with their civilian supporters to debate these proposals before the Army's General Council, which had been set up by the New Model Army, and was chaired by Oliver Cromwell, who was given a veto. A committee was set up to finalise the constitutional changes. Demands by the Levellers calling for the overthrow of the monarchy were vetoed by Cromwell. The debates divided into two sides with the Levellers and Agitators being led by Thomas Rainsborough, and the Grandees by Cromwell's son-in-law Ireton who worked closely with him to try and modify the more radical demands. Cromwell himself was to often quote from the Bible and refer to God in his contributions to the debates. In many ways the debates would turn into a duel between Rainsborough and Ireton, with the former emerging as the most eloquent of speakers. Ireton laid down the opposition to Leveller proposals insisting that his own *Heads of the Proposals* covered all the issues raised by the Levellers and Agitators in a far less disruptive way than theirs. Most of the debates, followed by hundreds who had poured into the church to hear them, centred around the right to vote which the radicals regarded as being a fundamental right of all freeborn Englishmen, won for them by fighting in the civil war, a view that Cromwell and Ireton saw as being tantamount to anarchy, insisting that it should only be granted to property owners. At this stage women had been included in the call for universal suffrage, but this was later dropped as the arguments became increasingly belligerent with radicals questioning why the ordinary soldier had fought to defend parliament.

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Two statements from Rainsborough and Ireton succinctly marked the difference between the two sides. “I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live”, declared Rainsborough, “therefore truly, I think it’s clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government... I do think that the poorest man in England is not bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under”.

“No person hath a right to an interest or share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom”, Ireton responded “and in determining or choosing those that shall determine what laws we shall be ruled by here – no person hath a right to this, that hath not a permanent fixed interest in this kingdom”.

Prayers were heard each morning before the arguments began which became increasingly vociferous as debaters tried to define who qualified to vote. Levels of anger increased with Cromwell trying to calm things down, in the end the Levellers agreed to a compromise which refused the vote to women and servants on the basis that they would vote whichever way the head of the house told them. Beggars were also refused the vote. The Grandees in return, conceded that soldiers who had fought for parliament should be allowed to vote. There were only three votes against the proposals.

Although the Levellers proposal *The Agreement of the People* was not accepted by the Army Council as becoming the constitution, they did agree that the document could be put before the troops themselves. The Levellers hoped that it would be adopted by popular consent by the soldiers, which in turn would force the Army Council to accept it. Cromwell, concerned that this would lead to indiscipline in the army, and a collapse in authority, moved a motion on the 8 November suspending the Army Council temporarily, and ordering the Levellers and the Agitators back to their regiments, bringing to an end the Putney debates.

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A new committee, consisting of only officers, was empowered to draw up another manifesto this time representing the interests of Commander in Chief Thomas Fairfax and the new Army Council which was to be presented to the troops in place of that of the Levellers. This culminated in the near-mutiny at Corkbush Field and the ending of any opposition from radicals.

On 11 November, King Charles escaped from Hampton Court, the Second Civil War threatened, bringing together the different arguing factions. The representation of the rank and file on the Army Council was quietly dropped in early 1648.

To this day there have been many discussions, mainly aimed at producing written constitutions for granting more autonomy to Scotland, which had its own Constitutional Convention, and to Wales and Northern Ireland. It would be some 360 years later before proposals for a written constitution for the United Kingdom would be raised by Labour's Gordon Brown in his first week as Prime Minister.

As for the minutes of the actual debates themselves, these had been taken by a young army clerk William Clark who used his own form of shorthand to record the proceedings; and it's these which have given us a chance to read in full detail what happened at the debates.

THOMAS RAINSBOROUGH

THOMAS RAINSBOROUGH, one of the most articulate parliamentarians, led on behalf of the Levellers during the Putney debates, clashing with Cromwell and Ireton. Rainsborough, a republican, was the highest ranking officer to support the Levellers having fought in both parliaments' navy and army.

Rainsborough, born in 1610, came from a prominent family and was the son of Sir William Rainsborough, a Vice Admiral in the Royal Navy who had also been ambassador to Morocco, where he had built up a reputation as a fighter against white slavery for which he had been knighted. He was also a Member of Parliament. Thomas would eventually inherit his father's property in Southwark. He followed his father into the navy and was serving in it at the outbreak of the First Civil War in 1642. He was put in command of the *Swallow* and other English warships when parliament took control of the navy. In May 1645, Rainsborough was transferred to the New Model Army, becoming a Colonel and was given command of a regiment which fought at the battles of Naseby and at Bristol, Berkeley Castle and the siege of Droitwich. He distinguished himself at the Battle of Langport when he led 1,500 musketeers in an attack on the royalist position. On Fairfax's recommendation he was appointed Governor of Worcester, a position he held until April 1647.

In 1647 he was elected Recruiter MP for Droitwich and at the same time continued with his military duties. He was heavily involved in the army's political activities and was chosen as one of their delegates to present the Heads of the Proposals to King Charles I in July 1647, which the King rejected, earning him Rainsborough's animosity. He was particularly vociferous in supporting the aims of the Levellers, which caused a deal of concern for Cromwell and his son-in-law Richard Ireton,

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as Rainsborough, far more of a radical than them, espoused the idea of universal suffrage.

In August 1647, a group of Presbyterian MPs tried to stage a counter revolution which Rainsborough played a major part in putting down.

During October and November, Rainsborough was to speak on behalf of the Levellers and the army agitators during the Putney debates, which were based on *An Agreement of The People*, constitutional proposals drafted by the Levellers. To the dismay of Fairfax, Cromwell and Ireton who led on behalf of the Grandees, Rainsborough was one of the most eloquent debaters calling for universal suffrage and for the constitution to be adopted without the King's agreement. Three months later after Charles had fled, parliament adopted Rainsborough's proposal to go ahead without Charles in the 'Vote of No Addresses'.

An agreement was reached at the end of the Putney debates that there would be three meetings with soldiers. The Army Grandees led by Thomas Fairfax wanted to impose their own Heads of Proposals on the troops which required them to swear an oath of loyalty to Fairfax and the Army Council. The first held at Corkbush Field on 17 November saw some of the soldiers, mainly Levellers, refusing to obey orders and the first open confrontation between Rainsborough and Fairfax when Rainsborough tried to give him a copy of the *Agreement of the People*; Fairfax was angered and brushed him aside.

In January 1648, at the insistence of Cromwell and Fairfax, who wanted him out of the way, Rainsborough returned to naval service and was appointed Vice Admiral in command of a squadron guarding the Solent and the Isle of Wight where King Charles was being held as prisoner. His radicalism was not popular in the navy with many officers being sympathetic to the Presbyterians. A number of parliament's warships mutineered in spring 1648 when the Second Civil War began. Rainsborough was seized by the crew of his flagship and put ashore.

THOMAS RAINSBOROUGH

He transferred back to the army taking command of the Tower Guards, a newly raised regiment, and captured Colchester after the siege. Fairfax, who wanted him as far away as possible from political power appointed him head of parliament's forces in Yorkshire. His appointment was resisted by the then army commander who refused to accept his authority which meant that whilst the wrangle continued Rainsborough was quartered at Doncaster. On the night of 30 October 1648, four royalists broke into his lodgings and tried to take him prisoner, and in the struggle Rainsborough was killed. There have been allegations made, and not proven, that both Cromwell and Fairfax were implicated in his death having failed to provide him with enough protection.

His funeral was turned into the largest Leveller political demonstration as some 3,000 mourners, many from London and wearing the ribbons of sea green in his memory, turned out in force.

His death was a severe set-back for the Levellers as they had lost their leading supporter in the army and someone who could have been a potential rival to Cromwell as eventual Lord Protector.

On 12 May 2013, Tony Benn unveiled a plaque commemorating Thomas Rainsborough in St John's Churchyard, Wapping. Paying tribute to him Benn said "We have made progress in fighting for equality and Thomas Rainsborough started that journey hundreds of years ago". Musketeers from the Rainsborough Regiment of the Sealed Knot re-enactment society fired a volley in salute.

PETITIONS

THE right of the subject to petition the monarch for the redress of personal grievances has not only been in existence since Saxon times but is enshrined in the Magna Carta, and again in an Act of 1406.

The beginnings of parliament may well have originated with the presentation of petitions for consideration by the King's Council. The first known petitions presented to the Lords and both Houses of Parliament date from the reign of Richard II, but became more widely used from the reign of Henry IV. A Committee for Motions of Grievs and Petitions was first appointed in 1571. Receivers and Triers of Petitions were appointed by parliament in medieval times to collect petitions, with major cases being referred to parliament and others to local courts.

During the time of Charles I, petitioning became one of the major methods of airing grievances by people not represented in parliament. Charles believed that he could use the royal prerogative to govern without the advice and consent of parliament. Petitions were used by members of the public and particularly those in London to protest and try to restore many of the rights that they felt were facing erosion under his authoritarian rule. As parliament's influence and importance increased, the House of Commons set up committees specifically to examine petitions, particularly those concerned with religious liberties. The House was not always sympathetic to such petitions, those with the most signatures tended to get more support. The Levellers in particular presented a number of petitions to parliament, sometimes protesting at what they saw as unjust laws and actions such as the imprisonment of their leaders. These certainly helped to ensure that the Leveller leaders were set free after various trials. A number were presented on behalf of John Lilburne, with one being supported by Oliver Cromwell. Others such as calling for votes for women,

PETITIONS

despite getting public support, were less successful being deferred to the Putney debates which took up many of the issues regarding the constitution. Members of the Model Army were initially allowed to organise and submit petitions but this right was curtailed by Cromwell and Fairfax as they tried to increase discipline amongst the army. Petitions were continually submitted to parliament by individuals on a range of subjects for which they wanted some form of redress; the poet Milton presented one in favour of divorce on the grounds of incompatibility.

Parliament itself also presented petitions using them to try and influence and modify Charles' behaviour. In 1628, as a precondition to granting any future taxes, parliament forced the King to give his assent to the Petition of Right. This called upon him to agree to settle a number of complaints made against him over his non-parliamentary taxation and his use of imprisonments without trial. They also protested at the illegal use of martial law and of making forced billets. The King managed to make sure that there would be doubts about its authenticity as a legal document by only granting his grace, indicating that he was only agreeing to sign it and not as being something he believed in.

The Bill of Rights of 1689, following the 'Glorious Revolution', restated the right in somewhat unambiguous terms 'it is the right of the subjects to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal'.

The Petition of Rights' condition of banning of the King's right to levy taxes was adopted by the French revolutionary parliament in its attempts to write a new constitution, the document also sought to enshrine the measure of *habeas corpus* within its terms. The revolutionary Tom Paine was to cite *habeas corpus* as part of his *Rights of Man* when having been imprisoned during the revolution he was threatened with the guillotine.

The right to petition is also incorporated in the First Amendment to the US constitution which guarantees the right of the people to 'petition the

PETITIONS

government for a redress of grievances’.

The Leveller ideals were also incorporated some 200 years later by the Chartist movement who would themselves present a series of petitions aimed at electoral reform. The largest was the Great People’s Charter of 1848, signed by an estimated 150,000.

Petitioning is still being used by members of the public and MPs as a way of influencing and changing laws made by parliament. Nowadays groups have been set up to collect a number of signatures to a petition that meet those required to guarantee it being laid before the House of Commons, ensuring that a debate has to take place on an issue that a particular government might not want to have discussed.

THE BISHOPSGATE MUTINY

THE Bishopsgate Mutiny in April 1649 was one of several that would culminate in the eventual rising and the subsequent execution of Leveller soldiers, members of Cromwell's New Model Army, which in turn would lead to the gradual fizzling out of the movement. The mutiny amongst soldiers of Colonel Edward Whalley's regiment based in Bishopsgate came as the men refused to obey orders and leave London. The men were protesting at the decision of the Parliamentary Grandees (senior officers) in February to forbid soldiers from delivering petitions to parliament.

In March eight Leveller soldiers had approached Lord Thomas Fairfax, Commander of the New Model Army demanding the restoration of their withdrawn rights to deliver petitions. Five were immediately cashiered out of the army. A further 300 infantrymen from Colonel John Hewson's regiment were cashiered without pay after they had refused to serve in Ireland until the Leveller demands were met.

The Bishopsgate soldiers made similar demands resulting in them being ordered out of London. They refused to leave the City fearing that once they had they would be faced with the choice of obeying orders or being cashiered without back pay. The mutiny capsized when the mutineers surrendered following personal appeals to them by both Cromwell and Fairfax. Fifteen of the leading soldiers were arrested and court martialled, with six of them being sentenced to death. Five were pardoned but one, Robert Locklier, a former agitator was shot by a firing squad in front of St Paul's Cathedral on 27 April 1649.

His funeral was turned by the Leveller's into a massive demonstration, with thousands of mourners wearing Levellers' green ribbons and with bunches of rosemary in their hats.

THE BANBURY MUTINY

THE Banbury Mutiny in May 1649 was the last attempt by Leveller soldiers to defy their army commanders, the Grandees, and to influence how the country was to be run. Delays over pay were also added to the list of grievances that led to the rebellion.

The mutiny came after the failure of earlier ones (such as that at Bishopsgate) and took much the same course with men refusing to serve in Ireland unless their demands were met. Led by Captain William Thompson, a Leveller who issued a manifest entitled *England's Standard Advanced*, 400 soldiers mutineered in support of John Lilburne, then imprisoned in the Tower of London, and in support of the *Agreement of the People*.

Although Cromwell had sought to defuse the mounting problems over pay by getting a sum of £10,000 from parliament to settle claims, the men refused to return to their barracks and set off from Banbury to speak to other regiments quartered in Salisbury about their political demands. Cromwell and Fairfax moved swiftly to quash the mutiny. Despite having sent Major White to reassure the men that there would be no action taken against them and that there would be some form of mediation, they launched a night time attack on the men on 13 May. Several of the mutineers were killed during skirmishes as parliamentary troops surrounded them, the majority then surrendered. Some several hundred soldiers were locked up in Burford Church for several days until the 17 May when three ringleaders, Cornet Thompson, Private Perkins and Corporal Church were executed by firing squad in the churchyard. The other men were pardoned by Fairfax.

THE BANBURY MUTINY

Captain Thompson (Cornet Thompson's brother) escaped with two Troops of Horse and was chased into Northamptonshire, only to die a few days later when he refused to surrender and was killed in a fight. On 25 May Cromwell was able to report to parliament that the mutinies had been suppressed and that the influence of the Levellers in the army was at an end.

Since 1975 a Levellers Day event has been held in Burford on the Saturday nearest to the anniversary of the execution of the three soldiers. In 1979 a plaque to commemorate the death of the three was unveiled on the church wall by Tony Benn.

THE MAGNA CARTA

ON 15 June 1215, 800 years ago, a group of powerful barons met with King John at Runnymede, a small island in the Thames near Windsor, and forced him to sign the Magna Carta, or Great Charter, a contract between the King and his subjects which would allow him to govern England and deal with its people according to the customs of feudal law. Some of the 63 conditions outlined in that document still survive and are the bedrock of present day law. Many of the discussions and arguments that have taken place on what sort of constitution this country has and should have are based on those clauses, chief of which is clause 39 which states that no-one can be imprisoned without being put on trial, one of the main points cited by the Levellers during the Putney debates. The Magna Carta is an intrinsic part of how people in this country expect to be treated, establishing that no man is above the law.

King John was made to sign the Charter following his behaviour in raising high taxes without asking the barons, something that would lead to the downfall of King Charles I when he tried to raise taxes without parliamentary approval. The barons had risen against the King following a series of disastrous military campaigns and his constant demands for more money. He had also angered the Roman Catholic church, with the Pope banning all church services in England in 1207, and then in 1209 excommunicating him. In 1214 bowing to pressure, John accepted the power of the Catholic church bestowing on it in return many privileges; he also suffered a series of military defeats in France which led to him demanding more money from taxes which in turn led to the barons rising in arms against him. They captured London, but failed to totally defeat John with the result that by spring 2015 they were finally willing to talk,

MAGNA CARTA

resulting in the writing of the Magna Carta. The Charter actually received its name in 1217 when it formed part of a peace treaty concluded by John's son, Henry III.

The Magna Carta, has been renewed by each monarch since then. It has been amended by various statutes to try and suit the politics of the time, but the basic core has become the bedrock on which laws and justice have been enacted through the ages. During the middle ages the Magna Carta was looked on as being sacrosanct with statutes that conflicted with its terms being ruled invalid.

The Magna Carta was used extensively in the early 17th century by jurists such as Sir Edward Coke to argue against the Divine Right of Kings. James I and Charles I, both arch advocates of their divine right to rule, tried to suppress the use and any discussion of the Magna Carta. Evoking the spirit of the Magna Carta, the Putney debates during the Civil War sought to formulate what sort of state there should be. The restoration of Charles II saw the use of the Magna Carta in codifying the ancient writ of *habeas corpus* passed by parliament in 1679.

Clauses have been subtly changed and in particular clause 39 which stated 'No freeman shall be seized or imprisoned, or be stripped of his rights or possessions or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land'. It was one of the most prominent to be debated and was changed with 'No freeman' being expanded to state that 'no man', of whatever estate or condition he may be, and that no one was to be dispossessed, imprisoned, or put to death without 'due process of law'.

The Magna Carta's influence has continued with its definitions of freedom and democracy being reflected in countries such the United States of America where breaches by King George of the clauses when it came to tax raising and law making were used retrospectively as one of the reasons

MAGNA CARTA

for the creation of the country in 1776. The Putney debates and the Levellers were cited by Thomas Jefferson as being an inspiration for the revolution.

In 1947 India enshrined the Magna Carta's principles within its constitution. The basic tenets of the Magna Carta act as the guiding principles to the freedom of people and are still being used in setting down the terms of how they should be treated. Arguments about the imprisonment of people without trial now incorporated in natural law were used when questioning the running of Guantanamo Bay. The Conservative MP David Davies resigned and fought a by-election over the imprisonment of possible terrorists in this country without due legal process.

The actual document itself is written on parchment and kept securely locked away but in celebration of its 800th anniversary all its parts were brought together and exhibited at the British Library during 2015.

OLIVER CROMWELL

OLIVER CROMWELL is one of the most controversial characters in history, lauded by parliamentarians and republicans, and hated by monarchists, Catholics, and in particular the Irish; a hatred that lasts to this day. Cromwell was a man of four parts, a politician, a soldier, a man of religion and a farmer.

Cromwell having worked to rid the country of a tainted corrupted monarchy found himself in the invidious position of being forced to become its first and, so far, only political leader to rule the country. Cromwell served as the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland from 1653 until 1658. He was for a time to support the Levellers but later was to turn on them.

Oliver Cromwell was born on 25 April 1599 into a family of minor farming gentry in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire. Katherine Cromwell, the sister of Henry VIII's minister Thomas Cromwell was an ancestor. Having gone to a local school in Huntingdon, he went on to study at Sidney Sussex College at Cambridge University, which he left in 1617 without taking a degree, and moved to London to study law, returning home on the death of his mother. In 1620, he married Elizabeth Bourchier, whose father was a prominent London leather merchant who owned extensive lands in Essex. They were to have nine children, of whom three died in infancy. The family lived the mundane lives of farmers, though his own fortune increased when he inherited a number of properties. His marriage to Elizabeth Bourchier brought him new contacts with leading London merchants, and in turn with the Earls of Warwick and Holland.

In 1628 Cromwell was elected as Member of Parliament for Huntingdon, a position he held for two years, but following a row with local townspeople over the granting of a Charter to the town which led to him

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being summoned before the Privy Council, he moved to Cambridge where he was elected as MP in the Short Parliament of 1640, and again in the Long Parliament of 1640 to 1649.

It was during the late 1620s or early 1630s that Cromwell experienced a religious crisis and became an independent Puritan, believing in the ethics of living a good hard-working life. The lifestyle of King Charles I and his court was an anathema to him. Whereas Charles I believed he ruled through divine intervention and therefore could do what he wanted, Cromwell believed that his own duty was to enact the reforms and deeds that he thought God wanted. He would frequently refer to God and the need for a better society based on Bible teachings during speeches and debates. He was sympathetic towards the plainer Protestant sects of the time, loathing the trappings of the power and wealth of the bishops, but did not believe that the reformation had gone far enough and wanted to eliminate all the remaining Catholic beliefs and doctrines. His views on how he believed that people should live their good 'Christian' lives would be put into practice when he eventually took on the mantle of Lord Protector.

He suffered from a melancholia, for which he sought treatment; it was a condition, probably aligned to headaches or migraines, which was to trouble him for much of his life and many were to say influenced some of his judgements.

Charles I had ruled the country for some 11 years after dissolving parliament in 1629, but faced by a shortage of funds to fight the Scottish Rebellion, had been forced to call parliament in 1640. This Short Parliament, as it became known, only lasted for three weeks. A second parliament, the Long Parliament, was called the same year. Following his election Cromwell, having moved with his family to London so that he could attend the gatherings, made contacts with the influential friends of his father-in-law, which resulted in him being given the responsibility to present

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a petition for the release of John Lilburne, then in prison for importing religious tracts from the Netherlands. This would be his first link with people who would form the backbone of what became the Levellers, to whom he felt sympathetic. Conflict between the King and his parliament was already beginning to break out as the group to whom Cromwell now found himself aligned, pressed for further reformation. In May 1641 Cromwell, acting on their behalf, put forward the second reading of the Annual Parliaments Bill, later taking a role in drafting the Root and Branch Bill for the abolition of episcopacy.

Armed conflict between parliament and the King broke out in late 1642, heralding the start of the English civil war; Cromwell from its very beginning was an active and committed officer in the parliamentary army. Despite having limited military experience, he rapidly showed himself to be an able leader, attributing his success to God's will. Initially appointed a Captain in charge of a small body of mounted troops based in Cambridge, he was promoted in 1643 to the role of Colonel and given command of his own cavalry regiment. The regiment played a major part during a series of sieges and small battles which helped to secure East Anglia and the East Midlands against the royalists. Later that year he became a Lieutenant General and was appointed second in command, under the Earl of Manchester, of the Eastern Association Army, seen as being parliament's largest and most effective regional army. He helped the parliamentary forces to win a major battle at Marston Moor, securing the north for parliament. Though the parliamentarians won the battle they failed to capitalise on the victory, being less successful in other campaigns waged in the South Midlands and Home Counties. This saw the beginnings of arguments between Cromwell and the other commanders such as the Earl of Manchester, whom he blamed for failing to outflank the King's army at Newbury, allowing much of it to escape. Manchester in turn accused him of recruiting men of "low birth" as officers. Cromwell was also criticised by

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the Scottish Presbyterian leaders and generals, allies during this war, for his encouragement of unorthodox Independents and Anabaptists. This and other differences with the Scots would lead to a major schism in the future.

By the end of 1644 it was apparent that the war would continue, and in early 1645 parliament passed a bill, the Self-denying Ordinance, that included measures to set up the New Model Army – a fighting force which was remodelled on a national basis. Cromwell played a major part in bringing in the reforms, introducing discipline. He was appointed as its second in command as Lieutenant General of Cavalry under the command of Sir Thomas Fairfax. The Model Army's success in defeating the royalists at Naseby and Langport, followed by other successful sieges, brought the first civil war to an end with King Charles I surrendering to the Scots on 5 May 1646. Cromwell and Fairfax took the formal surrender of the royalists at Oxford in June.

Cromwell returned to parliamentary life but in February 1647 suffered an illness which meant that he had to retire to the country to recuperate. He returned to London to discover that the parliamentarians were divided about what to do with the King. The majority wanted to restore him and to pay off the Scots, disband much of the Model Army – many of whom had not been paid – and agree in exchange to a Presbyterian settlement of the church, something that Cromwell rejected.

More problems emerged as Cromwell struggled to strengthen and unite the New Model Army which, angered by the failure of the parliament to pay their wages, had petitioned against the changes. Negotiations between them and Cromwell broke down. More talks now took place over a constitutional settlement with King Charles seeming willing to compromise; Cromwell, who was now taking a lead, backed proposals which would allow further negotiations, at the same time as checking the powers of the executive and setting up regular elected parliaments. Groups inside the army, such as the Levellers demanding full political equality for

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men, thought this did not go far enough. Throughout the autumn of 1647 the Putney debates took place with Cromwell, his son-in-law Ireton and Fairfax on one side, and the army Agitators and representatives of what was now emerging as the Levellers on the other, to discuss what would have been a new constitution for the country. This time Cromwell was to turn on the Agitators, rejecting their demands in favour of alternative proposals formulated by the Army Grandees (which included himself, Fairfax and Ireton). He and Fairfax put down various mutinies caused by Leveller supporters in the army.

In 1648, the second English civil war broke out as King Charles having escaped sought to take back control of his throne. Cromwell, commanding a large section of the Model Army, crushed a rebellion in South Wales and defeated the Scottish-royalist invasion of England, which ended with the capture once again of the King. Cromwell became the leading power broker at talks within parliament on whether or not to put the King on trial and to execute him. Again he disagreed with the Levellers who wanted a constitution to be put in place which would scrap the monarchy and the House of Lords before any trial of Charles I so as to give it a more legal basis. Cromwell, sick of the vacillating and concerned that the royalists would mount another attack to rescue and restore King Charles to the throne, saw no other choice than to push through the decision to put the King on trial. On 27 January 1649 Charles I was sentenced to death and was executed three days later.

Following the execution of the King, Cromwell was to lead major military campaigns which saw the English taking control of Ireland with the ruthless crushing of the Catholic forces and the deaths of many of its people, followed by the defeat of the Scots and the ending of the second civil war. By then he had been appointed commander in chief of all the armed forces, and as such through the early 1650s had to intervene several times to prop up or remove an argumentative series of republican

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governments. Finally in December 1653 he became head of state as the Lord Protector, a position he held under a written constitution ensuring that he shared political power with parliament and a council. As Lord Protector he reorganised the national church, establishing puritanism and along with that the closure of various theatres and entertainments. He allowed Jews to return to Britain. He ended the various wars with Portugal and Holland, and became an ally with France against the Spanish, defeating them at the Battle of the Dunes. In 1657 he became the only commoner to be offered the crown, which he refused. He died in London on 3 September 1658 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 his body was dug up and hanged in chains. He was also beheaded. His death left a void that his son Richard, appointed his successor, was unable to fill.

History's view of Cromwell is mixed; to historians such as Thomas Carlyle he was a champion of liberty, to others he was a regicidal dictator. Churchill looked on him as a military dictator, and Leon Trotsky saw him as a class revolutionary. In a BBC poll held in 2002 he was selected as one of the 10 greatest Britons of all time. But for his harsh treatment of the Irish, the Catholics and the Scots he would have been seen as one of the greatest upholders of the rights of the common man.

A statue of Oliver Cromwell stands outside the Houses of Parliament, a reminder of a man who ruled the country for its only time as a republic. A man who could have been King, but instead became the country's Protector.

JOHN LILBURNE

“IF the World was emptied of all but John Lilburne, Lilburne would quarrel with John, and John with Lilburne” was a description of John ‘Freeborn’ Lilburne, one of the most charismatic, dynamic and infuriating of the Leveller leaders and attributed to his close friend the lawyer, republican and regicide Henry Martin. Imprisoned under both Charles I and Cromwell, Lilburne was directly and indirectly responsible for changes in the law, establishing key reforms, some safeguarding until today this country’s liberties, many laid down in the Magna Carta and which had previously been disregarded by the establishment. The growth and influence of the Levellers was largely due to him, and he was prepared to suffer for his beliefs and in particular for that of common liberty.

John Lilburne was born in 1615 in Sunderland, the third son of Richard Lilburne, a minor country gentleman, and was educated at schools in Bishop Auckland and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He moved to London in 1630 to work as an apprentice to a wholesale clothier Thomas Hewson who was a Puritan, and over the next six years whilst working with him became increasingly involved in studying their various teachings. Through him he met the Puritan physician John Bastwick, then in jail having had his ears lopped off after being persecuted by Archbishop Laud. He agreed to join him in his struggle with the Anglican church and went to Holland, then the centre of opposition to Catholicism, to organise the printing of a book that Bastwick had written.

In December 1637 Lilburne was arrested and brought in front of the Star Chamber accused of unlawfully publishing and writing “Libellous and Seditious Books”. Lilburne declaring himself to be “freeborn” effectively refused to recognise the court by refusing to take the oath or to answer any questions on the grounds that the prosecution against him was unlawful.

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Despite his protestations he was found guilty and sentenced to be whipped at the cart-tail from the Fleet Prison to New Palace Yard, Westminster, where he was to be put in the pillory and then to be imprisoned until he confessed his guilt. The sentence was carried out on 18 April 1637, and as he proclaimed his innocence, claiming that he had not broken the law but was the victim of the bishops' cruelty, the people of London turned out to encourage and support him and to demonstrate against the government.

He was to remain in prison for the next three years and whilst there wrote a series of pamphlets protesting against the injustices that had been practised against him. In November 1640 King Charles was forced to summon the Long Parliament, enabling Oliver Cromwell MP to raise Lilburne's case with a passionate speech, denouncing the process of due law and attacking the bishops. Parliament ordered Lilburne's release which saw him plunging into the revolutionary spirit then enthusing Londoners, with him leading an apprentices' riot against the King's guards. These were the first of numerous trials that established his reputation in fighting for the rights of the 'freeborn', these included the right to hear what accusation had been made, the right to face one's accuser and the right to avoid self-incrimination. After a particular gruelling trial when he was forced to pass water in a bowl before the court, he also won the right that every prisoner should be treated with care and due dignity during any appearance.

He married Elizabeth Dewell, the daughter of an influential London merchant who shared her husband's politics and was to be one of his greatest supporters, risking her own life and liberty to enable him to retain his freedom. Despite most of their marriage being spent apart, as he was shunted to and fro during his many prison sentences, they were to have 10 children.

On the outbreak of the first civil war Lilburne was quick to enlist in the parliamentary forces as a Captain in Lord Brooke's regiment of foot, fighting at the battle of Edgehill. In November 1642 he was taken prisoner by the royalists as his regiment tried to stop them advancing on London.

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He was sent to Oxford, the royalist headquarters, where as one of the first parliamentary officers to be captured he was to have been put on trial for treason and rebellion. His wife leapt to his defence petitioning parliament on his behalf, causing an emergency debate to be held which resulted in a threat to execute royalist prisoners in retaliation. Lilburne's trial was called off after Elizabeth herself, though pregnant, took parliament's message to Oxford. He was eventually exchanged for a royalist officer in May 1643.

Lilburne returned to the parliamentary forces to be commissioned at Cromwell's instigation as a Major in Colonel King's regiment of foot in the Eastern Association Army. In May 1644 he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in the Earl of Manchester's regiment of dragoons, in which he fought with distinction at the battle of Marston Moor in July that year. Manchester was one of the more controversial commanders, criticised for his lack of action after the battle. Lilburne was described by Manchester as being a "mad man" after controversially deciding to accept the surrender of royalist forces at Tickhill Castle despite Manchester having dismissed him when he had first asked whether he could negotiate the surrender. Lilburne contrarily chose to interpret this dismissal as being granted permission and went ahead accepting the surrender without a shot being fired. Manchester reacted by giving him a serious dressing down in front of the bemused royalist prisoners, and then took the credit himself for the surrender. Lilburne was later to be one of the main witnesses against Manchester when he was denounced by Cromwell in the House of Commons.

In April 1645 he left the army after refusing to sign the Solemn League and Covenant required from all New Model Army officers following parliament's new alliance with the Scots. He had already been warned about his behaviour by the Committee of Examinations of the House of Commons having written to William Prynne, who though responsible for the trial and execution of Archbishop Laud was now seen as being more right wing and a protector of the Presbyterians, and complained about how intolerant the Presbyterians were, having argued

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that the Independents should be allowed free speech. He was hauled back in front of the committee on 18 June and was again let off with a caution, leading to anger from Prynne who arranged for two pamphlets to be published attacking Lilburne's behaviour; he in turn replied with *Innocence and Truth Justified*.

He was sent to Newgate prison again from July to October 1645 for denouncing MPs who lived in comfort instead of enlisting while the common soldiers fought for them. He had also criticised the speaker, this time angering his old friend John Bastwick who had reported him to the House of Commons. Whilst in prison he continued his attacks writing a series of pamphlets and, referring to the Magna Carta, described the injustices he had suffered at the hands of the authorities and outlined the corruption, including profiteering, that was prevalent and attacked monopolies and excise. He also called for press freedom; these writings smuggled out by friends alienated him from many of his powerful friends including Oliver Cromwell but found him support from the public at a time of increased political agitation, and more importantly from the newly formed Levellers. His arguments, including those that there should be a new form of government answerable to the people and with a constitution outlined in *England's Birthright Justified*, were to form the basis of the Leveller programme. He was released on bail.

But in early 1646 he was back in front of the House of Lords accused of libelling his former commander the Earl of Manchester. He refused to kneel before the Lords and refusing to answer their questions put his fingers in his ears. He also became entangled in a bitter dispute over the failure of MPs to pay compensation awarded to him following his persecution by the Star Chamber. He was sent to the Tower of London where he again continued his practice of writing pamphlets attacking the various establishments. Although he remained in jail he was still able to communicate with the army Agitators and contributed to the Leveller

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manifesto *An Agreement of the People*. He was again released on bail from jail in November 1647 and hurried to support the Levellers at Corkbush Field, but arrived to find that the Grandees led by Fairfax had suppressed the dissent and restored order. He continued to build up the organisation of the Levellers but in January 1648 his bail was withdrawn and he was charged with sedition after denouncing the House of Lords at a Levellers meeting in Smithfield.

He was released on the outbreak of the second civil war and in December 1648 took part in the negotiations with Henry Ireton between the Grandees and the Levellers with Lilburne trying to get the Grandees to accept the *Agreement* before Charles I was put on trial so as to give the trial a legal basis according to a new constitution. Talks failed with Lilburne refusing a nomination to sit on the High Court of Justice and he left London so as to avoid both the trial and the execution.

He attacked the new republican government in *England's New Chains Discovered* calling upon soldiers and citizens to reject what he described as the unconstitutional rule of the Grandees. In March 1649 Lilburne and other Leveller leaders were arrested and in October, he was put on trial charged with high treason. Lilburne, who chose to defend himself, was found not guilty although he remained in prison until finally after pressure from both the public and parliament he was released. In December he was elected as a Councillor for the City of London but his election was declared void. He withdrew for a short while from public life working as a soap-boiler, a position found for him by Cromwell. He later sought to take up a career in law, but was blocked by the Inner Temple.

In January 1652, following a property dispute, he was put on trial for criminal libel and was judged to be treasonous. He was fined heavily, and under threat of death was banished from England. He moved to Amsterdam and Bruges publishing documents defending himself and attacking the government. Lilburne also formed an unlikely alliance with

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exiled royalists and was willing to support the monarchists if they guaranteed that the rights of the people were upheld as set out in the Leveller beliefs. These talks came to nothing, and following Cromwell's actions in throwing out the Rump Parliament in April 1653 he returned to England claiming that his banishment was now void and seeking protection from the Lord Protector. He was arrested and in July was again put on trial for his life. The people thronged to the Old Bailey to hear him make a series of arguments, one that he was not the same man that had left the country, and was able to get a copy of the indictment against him. He was found not guilty, but the government broke the right of *habeas corpus* and instructed that he was to be held in prison indefinitely.

He was transferred to a number of prisons including Jersey, where the Governor complained that he caused more problems than all his other prisoners. He was eventually brought to Dover Castle and was allowed out on a daily parole and was able to visit his wife and children who had moved to be near him. He became a Quaker, visiting various Quaker meetings in Kent. In his last pamphlet *The Resurrection of John Lilburne* he announced that he had given up political activism. He died on 29 August 1657 after catching a fever when visiting his wife shortly before she gave birth to their tenth child. He was 42 years old.

In 1961 the late Michael Foot, then a Labour MP, citing the part played by the Levellers in "establishing parliamentary freedom and democracy in this country" called for a memorial to Lilburne to be erected in Westminster. John Lilburne's works had a strong influence on American law, with the late United States Supreme Court Judge Hugo Black frequently citing his works in his opinions and writing in an article for *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that he believed that John Lilburne's constitutional work of 1649 formed the basis for the basic rights contained in the American constitution.

GERRARD WINSTANLEY

GERRARD WINSTANLEY was the leader and one of the founders of the True Levellers or Diggers. The son of a mercer who dealt in fabrics he was born in Wigan, Lancashire in 1609 and moved to London where he became an apprentice in the cloth trade, also becoming a freeman of the Merchant Taylors' Company in 1637. Two years later, he married Susan King, the daughter of a London surgeon. In 1643 his business was ruined by the civil war and he was made bankrupt. He and his wife moved to Cobham, Surrey where he found work as a cowherd. He was to write "I was beaten out of both estates and trade, and forced to accept the goodwill of friends, crediting of me, to live a country life".

Frustrated and angry at what had happened he came increasingly under the influence of John Lilburne and the Levellers, publishing four pamphlets in 1648, arguing that all of the land should belong to the community and not to individuals. He used the Bible to make his point, in 1649 using the gospels to outline his beliefs. He published two pamphlets *The New Law of Righteousness* and the *True Levellers* in which he claimed that when God made the earth he had not spoken about "one branch of mankind being able to rule over another one". He also claimed "No man shall have any more than he can labor himself or have others to labor with him in love, working together, and eating bread together".

Shortly after publishing the pamphlets he founded the Diggers, or the True Levellers as they were called to differentiate them from the Levellers; and to make the point that whereas the Levellers sought to level the laws and allow the right to maintain ownership of property, the True Levellers believed in levelling the ownership of property itself. In April 1649 he and William Everard, a former soldier, along with 30 followers took over the common land on St George's Hill in Surrey and sowed the ground with

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parsnips, carrots and beans in order to “lay the foundation of making the earth a common treasury for all, both poor and rich”. Other Digger groups took over land in Kent, Surrey, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire. Land owners angry at the developments petitioned the government who in July gave instructions to General Fairfax that Winstanley should be arrested and that General Fairfax should break up the communities on the grounds that “this is the beginning to whence things of a greater and more dangerous consequence may grow”. Fairfax concluded that the Diggers meant no harm advising the landowners to use the courts. Instead the landowners resorted to physical violence eventually forcing the Diggers off the land. Winstanley escaped to Pirton in Hertfordshire where he worked as an estate steward for a year for Lady Eleanor Davies finally losing his job after he was accused by her of mismanaging her property. He returned to Cobham where he continued to fight for the redistribution of the land and to publish pamphlets. Again using the Bible as his base, in *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* published in 1652 criticising Cromwell’s government, he advocated that property and wages should be abolished and that there should be a communal society. As far as he was concerned all institutions were by their “nature corrupt”.

Winstanley became a Quaker working with Edward Burrough, one of its early leaders, but despite continuing to be one for the rest of his life, he became involved with the local government of his parish church. Believing that everyone, however sinful would be saved, even if at the last hour, he wrote a book *The Myserie of God* believed to be the first theological work in English to advocate Christian Universalism. In 1657 he and his wife were given some property in Cobham which saw him entering the local establishment, becoming in turn overseer for the poor and churchwarden, and eventually, elected Chief Constable of Elmbridge.

On the death of his wife Susan in 1664, Winstanley sold the property and returned to London to work again in trade. He married again and

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became a corn chandler. He died in 1676, and was still involved with disputes, this time over a small legacy. He was still a Quaker when he died on 10 September 1676.

The history of the Diggers is still celebrated today, and Winstanley himself has been portrayed in several films and in particular by Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo in their *Winstanley* which came out in 1975; they also produced a book about the making of the film. There have been several books written about his works and writings, one included an introduction by Tony Benn. Since 2011, a Wigan Diggers Festival is held annually in his birth town.

RICHARD OVERTON

RICHARD OVERTON was a playwright and Leveller pamphleteer who was one of the leading figures in the movement, frequently being arrested and imprisoned for his beliefs and writings. He was also to turn against the Cromwell Protectorate.

Little is known about Overton's early life, there is some speculation that part of it was spent in Holland, and some that because of his interest in agriculture he lived in Lincolnshire. Overton was supposed to have been at Queen's College, Cambridge, and he may well have come from a wealthy background as he owned a printing press, which he kept hidden so that he could secretly publish various satirical tracts under false names.

He first became known in 1640 to 1642 as the author of various satirical attacks on Catholicism and the church reforms carried out for King Charles I by Archbishop Laud; it was around this time that he probably converted to General Baptism. In January 1644 he published *Man's Mortalitie* in which he claimed that the human soul as well as the body was subject to death, but that they would be resurrected at the Last Judgement. This belief was denounced as being heretical by the Presbyterians.

In 1645 Overton turned his attention to the Presbyterians with satirical pamphlets that proved highly popular with the Independents and soldiers. He also wrote a series of tracts that laid down what were to become the key principles of the Leveller movement. These included reform of law, annual parliaments and the abolition of tithes, monopolies and tax. In July 1646 the *Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens* was published; believed to have been written by Overton and William Walwyn, it was the founding document of the Levellers.

John Lilburne was at that time in prison and Overton took up his case against the House of Lords in *An Alarum to the House of Lords* which was

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published in August. The pamphlet was condemned and Overton was himself arrested. Refusing to accept the Lords' jurisdiction he was jailed in Newgate Prison. Despite his incarceration he continued to write and publish a number of pamphlets in which he proclaimed individual rights. He called upon the New Model Army, in which there were a number of his supporters, to intervene and to reform the corrupt parliament, and began the process of bringing the civilian Leveller members together with the army Agitators by supporting the soldiers' grievances against parliament, which in turn would lead to the Putney debates. His wife Mary and his brother Thomas were also jailed. Overton and Lilburne were finally released, after a series of petitions and public uproar and protests from the New Model Army who demanded that the prisoners should either be put on trial or released. Let out of prison in the autumn of 1647, Overton and Lilburne went to Ware in Hertfordshire hoping to give support to the Leveller mutineers at Corkbush Field. The rebellion was over by the time the two men arrived.

He continued to support petitions promoting that of the London Levellers in September 1648 and in December presented a petition *The Plea for Common Right and Freedom* to General Fairfax which protested against the decision of the council of the army to alter Lilburne's draft of the *Agreement of the People*. He and Lilburne, along with two other Leveller leaders, walked out of the talks. They were again arrested in March 1649 after producing *England's New Chains Discovered*. Refusing to accept the Council of State's authority and incriminate themselves as the document's authors, they were locked up in the Tower of London. The final version of the *Agreement of the People* was published in May during their imprisonment, but the only viable opposition organised by the Levellers came to an end with the suppression of the army Levellers at Burford.

Few details of his later life are known although he was certainly imprisoned again and continued to produce pamphlets.

KATHERINE CHIDLEY

KATHERINE CHIDLEY and Elizabeth Lilburne emerged to become the leaders of what have been described as the ‘Leveller women’; a vibrant group of women who wanted social equality. Many of their actions such as demonstrating, writing pamphlets, drawing up petitions, laid the basis for what would become future claims for equality fought for by women in suffrage campaigns.

Many of the women were associated with the Levellers through marriage and family ties, others through their beliefs. In 1616 Katherine, whose background is unknown, married Daniel Chidley, a tailor from Shrewsbury, Shropshire, and supported the Leveller cause through a conviction that men, and in particular women, were treated unjustly by both church and the state. In many ways she can be described as one of the first feminists as it is believed, but not proven, that she was the first woman to write a petition to parliament calling for equal rights for women. She also wrote a number of pamphlets urging parliament to replace Anglicism, not by the popularly supported Presbyterianism but by Independency. She argued that there should be toleration and respect for the spirituality of both sexes.

Women in the 17th century had few or no rights; their legal position depended on their husband’s goodwill. Chidley protested with her husband David against the established church, and they were summoned before the consistory court for non-attendance at church, and in Katherine’s case for not attending church after childbirth. In the late 1620s, following their persecution by the church the family, including seven children, moved to London. And it was here that they joined other separatists like John Lilburne in the struggle against the Bishops.

Katherine’s first tract *The Justification of the Independent Churches of Christ (1641)* was published by the printer William Larnier, shortly after the

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Long Parliament met in November 1640. It was written as a riposte to the arguments against religious tolerance made by the influential London preacher Thomas Edwards, later a Presbyterian minister, who was worried that it would undermine the authority of husbands, fathers and masters over their wives, children and servants. Though she claimed that her arguments were not written in a scholastic way, she relied heavily on the Bible to make her arguments. Churches, she claimed did not require appointed pastors or teachers, but those that were elected by the people. She compared the officers of the Church of England to “locusts, which ascended out of the bottomless pit”. The humblest members of society, she said were better qualified to create churches than the “ill-meaning” priests. Citing the seventh chapter of Corinthians 1 which declared that a wife might be a believer even if her husband was not, Chidley challenged Edwards to debate with her publicly on the merits of religious separatism. More tracts were to follow with the last publication to appear above her name being a broadsheet giving “good counsel to the petitioners for Presbyterian government, that they may declare their faith before they build their church”. Printed in November 1645, the broadsheet accused the Presbyterian Ministers of London of only being interested in their own maintenance and power. She appealed for the release of imprisoned separatists, and repeated her offer to debate any matter of church doctrine with the Presbyterians. Though he refused to debate with her publicly Edwards took to print and in his next book described her as a “brazen faced audacious old woman”.

In 1647 she and her eldest son Samuel travelled to Bury St Edmunds where they helped to found a separatist church. Both mother and son were to collaborate closely with one, as she described, inciting people, and the other one writing.

In 1649 Daniel Chidley died. Katherine took over his haberdashery business and proved that she was also an intelligent business woman, winning two substantial contracts to supply 4,000 and then 1,000 pairs of

KATHERINE CHIDLEY

stockings for the parliamentary army in Ireland. Her involvement with leading politicians may also have helped her to success.

In the later 1640s, she and her son had also become involved with the Leveller movement. Despite the fact that they called for the extension of franchise only for men, Chidley became an ardent supporter, continually arguing that women should also be treated equally, particularly within the family. "I pray you tell me" she demanded "what authority the unbelieving husband hath over the conscience of his believing wife; it is true he hath authority over her in bodily and civil respects, but not to be a lord over conscience." The women Levellers, influenced heavily by Chidley, released a substantial number of petitions to parliament. They demanded redress from high taxes, more work and less dictatorial government; they also opposed meddling in Irish affairs. The first petition in 1649 called for the freeing of the imprisoned Leveller leaders and in particular John Lilburne. It was instrumental in getting him released from prison after he was found not guilty; despite attempts made by the court not to free him.

In 1649, 10,000 Leveller women signed a second women's petition to parliament. It called for equal rights for all women and equality with men regardless of class or background. The petition is believed to have been written by Chidley herself. "Have we not an equal interest", the petition declared "with the men of this nation in those liberties and securities contained in the Petition of Right, and other good laws of this land." Many of the arguments were based on those made by Chidley in her past battles with Edwards. Chidley rallied to the defence of Lilburne once more, when he was on trial again in 1653. She organised a new petition, this time with some 6,000 signatures which was presented to parliament. Parliament refused to acknowledge it on the basis of them "being women and many of them wives".

Chidley is believed to have died shortly afterwards as there is no further record of her involvement with either the Leveller movement or of any public protest.

KING CHARLES I

CHARLES I was a King who believed he reigned by divine intervention, giving him the right to rule without recourse to parliament and whose intransigence led to two civil wars in which thousands would lose their lives.

Charles I became King of three countries, England, Scotland and Ireland in March 1625 following the death of his father James VI of Scotland who had inherited the English throne in 1603. Born in 1600, with a slight stammer, his father instilled in him the profound belief that he was anointed by God to rule. He inherited the throne as the thirty years war raged in Europe; English Protestants exerted pressure on him to intervene in the fight against the Spanish and the Catholics. He came under the influence of the Duke of Buckingham who masterminded a series of disastrous and expensive campaigns against Spain and France. Fiercely loyal to Buckingham, who was subsequently assassinated, Charles dissolved his first two parliaments when they tried to impeach him, and ruled without recourse to consulting with his subjects or taking notice of their laws. Charles spent much money on building up his art collections and on the trappings of state and not on paying for the growing debts he was incurring.

He called a third parliament so as to raise funds to continue the wars and in 1628 he was forced reluctantly to accept the Petition of Rights as a precondition for the granting of future taxes making known his opposition to its terms which curtailed some of his actions. Other high handed treatment of parliament would lead him into conflict with it. He was to state "I must avow that I owe the amount of my actions to God alone". On 10 March 1629, he dissolved parliament, after the speaker trying to adjourn the House was held in his seat whilst members passed a series of motions against the King's actions. It would be another 11 years before Charles would call another parliament.

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The lack of a parliament to grant legal taxes meant that Charles had to turn to other highly unpopular methods to raise funds including ship money, forced loans and the sale of commercial monopolies. He took an increasingly more dictatorial role in line with his belief of divine rule, using the Star Chamber, with sessions held in secret to prosecute opponents. He also instituted various controversial religious policies which reflected his more elaborate High Anglican form of worship. His marriage to the French Catholic Princess Henrietta Maria caused consternation amongst English Protestants. He insisted upon religious conformity across the three countries and in 1637 attempts to make the Scottish Kirk accept the Anglican liturgy and Laudian Prayer book (named after Archbishop Laud) led to the Scottish National Convention being set up to fight his efforts, which resulted in the Bishops' Wars between the two nations, leading to his eventual downfall. In order to pay for the war, he had to recall parliament in 1640. The Short Parliament as it became known refused to co-operate with his plans, and was dissolved within weeks.

The need for money increased as the Scots occupied Ripon and made a treaty giving them payment until their grievances were settled. Charles was forced to recall parliament, known as the Long Parliament, which turned on his advisors Archbishop Laud and the Earl of Stafford who were impeached and condemned to death, with Charles doing little to support them. Ship money and other fines were declared illegal and the fated Star Chamber abolished. The King was forced to agree that parliament could not be dissolved without its own consent, and the new Triennial Act of 1641 set a maximum three year term for parliaments. The Irish uprising of 1641 led to more tension between the King and his parliament as to who should govern the army. Parliament issued a 'Grand Remonstrance', a list of grievances, and impeached 12 bishops and the Queen. Following his failure to arrest five leading parliamentarians, and the decision of parliament to allow troops to be raised only by officers

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approved by parliament, Charles fled to Nottingham and on 22 August 1642 declared war on his own subjects. The first civil war had begun.

Although Charles had early victories, the parliamentarians, led by Cromwell and Fairfax, reorganised the army gradually taking the upper hand. Charles became desperate seeking help from Catholics in Ireland and from Europe, including those he had fought against. In May 1646, he sought refuge with the Scottish Army which handed him over to parliament in exchange for money owed to them as laid down in their treaty.

Charles, thinking that he was still in command, thought he would be able to play one side off against the other, telling the Parliamentary Commissioners “You cannot be without me, you will fall to ruin if I do not sustain you”. As the parliamentarians debated the constitution, Charles ‘escaped’ from Carisbrooke Castle to the Isle of Wight having made contact with the Scots leading to them providing an army in exchange for the imposition of the Covenant on England. This led to the second civil war, which would end with Cromwell’s victory at Preston in August.

Charles’ deviousness had left the parliamentary army with the abiding impression that a permanent peace was impossible whilst he lived. Parliament was purged of those who might have been sympathetic to him, and established a High Court of Justice to put Charles on trial. On 20 January he was charged with high treason ‘against the realm of England’; he refused to plead saying he did not recognise the legality of the High Court.

On 27 January 1649, Charles was sentenced to death, and was beheaded three days later on a scaffold outside the Banqueting House, in Whitehall, London. In his last speech he said “A subject and a sovereign are clean different things... I am a martyr of the people”.

In order to avoid the automatic succession of his son, an Act was passed on 30 January forbidding the proclaiming of another monarch; on 7 February the office of the King was formally abolished.

THE STAR CHAMBER

THE Star Chamber, named after the star-spangled ceiling of the room where it met in the old Palace of Westminster, was effectively the judicial arm of the King's Council. Although its roots go back to the medieval ages, the court only became powerful as a separate entity during the reign of Henry VII. In 1487 the court became a judicial body separate from the King's Council, with a mandate to hear petitions of redress.

The judges were mainly made up of privy councillors and judges of the common law courts; they were responsible for administering justice directly and supervising other courts. The work of the court expanded significantly under the Tudors and it received petitions involving property rights, public corruption, trade and government administration, as well as dealing with disputes over land enclosures and instances of public disorder. The court was initially a court of appeal, but its power grew under Henry VIII and his councillors Wolsey and Cranmer, with plaintiffs being actively encouraged to bring their cases directly to the Star Chamber and to by-pass the lower courts.

Although it had the power to order torture, prison and fines, it could not impose a death sentence. During the time of the Tudors, its sessions were carried out in public.

The Stuarts gave the Chamber more powers and used it in many ways for their own good. By the time of Charles I it had become a tool of the King and his court who used it to assert their own powers. Both James I and his son used it to examine cases of sedition, which meant that it could be used to suppress any opposition to the wishes of the King and his court. Nobles deemed too powerful to be tried in the lower courts were liable to

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be tried by the Star Chamber. It was effectively used by Charles I as a parliamentary substitute during the years of 1628 and 1640 when he refused to call parliament. The sessions were now held in secret; there was no right of appeal and punishment was swiftly dealt out to those judged to be enemies of the crown. In 1637 it had ordered the cutting off of the ears and the branding on the foreheads of three Puritan leaders, sending them to prison for life. John Lilburne, later a Leveller had become a favourite of the people after he had heroically defied the Star Chamber refusing to answer any questions on the grounds that as a “freeborn Englishman”, he was entitled to his right against self-incrimination. The Star Chamber sentenced him to be whipped all the way from Fleet Street to Westminster. He was surrounded by a large crowd who supported him, earning him the nickname of ‘Freeborn John’.

It was the treatment of Lilburne and other dissenters such as the three Puritan leaders that in 1641 led to the Long Parliament under the leadership of John Pym passing The Habeas Corpus Act which abolished the Star Chamber.

The United States, said to be aware of the injustices practised by the Star Chamber, took on board the need for a protection under law when it incorporated the fifth amendment into its constitution that rules no-one should be made to self incriminate themselves.

The actual term of the Star Chamber is now sometimes used in a derogatory way to describe someone being unfairly treated or judged by a few people (usually management) or that of secret meetings at which decisions are made.

JOHN MILTON

JOHN MILTON, widely acknowledged as one of this country's greatest poets, refused to turn his back on civil injustice and wrote a series of polemics and tracts focusing on his belief in liberty.

Milton's background was one of privilege. He was born on 6 December 1608 in Bread Street, London. His father was a wealthy scrivener, a form of solicitor and money lender, who despite having been brought up in a strong Catholic family had left the faith to become a Protestant; he was determined that his son was to have the best education available. Milton was sent to St Paul's School, a series of tutors was employed as Milton was drawn to foreign languages and academic studies. In 1625 he went to Christ's College, Cambridge. While there he wrote a number of short poems, and earned a reputation for standing up for his beliefs. His poem *On Shakespeare* was published in the second folio of Shakespeare's plays on his graduation in 1632.

He returned to live at his father's house where he began to write a series of poems. In 1638, following the death of one the college's young fellows, a book of poems composed in his memory was published and included Milton's pastoral elegy *Lycidius*. It was immediately acclaimed as the most outstanding contribution, and is to this day regarded as one of the greatest lyric poems in the English language. The poem also marked the first of his attacks against the church and the beginnings of his alignment with parliament. That year Milton embarked on a 15 month Grand Tour of Europe and spent most of his time in Italy, where despite his anti-Catholic views he spent much time with the intelligentsia, including Galileo, then under house arrest. His poems written in Latin and Italian added to his growing reputation.

He returned to London and a country which was on the verge of the

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civil war. It was as a result of his growing disquiet at what he saw as civil injustice that he began to write a series of anti-church tracts which were filled with satire and clever rhetoric. Married by this time unhappily to Mary Powell, some 17 years younger than him, his marriage collapsed when she left him, and her family, rejecting Milton's beliefs, declaring their support for Charles I. This prompted Milton to write a petition in favour of divorce on the grounds of incompatibility. In 1643 he published the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, which was reprinted in 1644. His writings on divorce caused an uproar in parliament, in the clergy, and amongst the public, where he earned the nickname 'Milton the divorcer'. His wife, along with her monarchist family, eventually moved back to live with him having been thrown out of Oxford following the ousting of royalists from the city. Surprisingly the couple were reunited and several children were born. After her death Milton married twice more.

But it was as a result of the divorce and the government's attempt to suppress his ideas that Milton wrote the *Areopagitica* which was one of the first arguments made in favour of freedom of the press, or in this case, censorship before publication. Believing that truth was more important than anything else, and that man had the right to find out about it and to make sure it was known, he argued in favour of freedom of inquiry. He took a more moralistic stand on how some forms of censorship should still apply, arguing that governments had the right to censor materials after publication if they were immoral or against Protestantism.

In 1649, two weeks after the execution of Charles I, Milton committed himself to supporting the republican side and the execution of kings. In his tract *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* he argued that a monarch's power was not absolute but derived from the public and that this amounted to a social contract. If the monarch broke the contract by abusing his power, the people had the right to remove him from his position. A few months after its publication, Milton was appointed to the position of Secretary of Foreign Tongues to the Council of State.

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Milton's eyesight had been gradually deteriorating, and by the end of 1651 he was blind. Despite this handicap he continued in his position until 1659. Cromwell had died in 1658, causing the collapse of the English Republic as bitter rows broke out between the army and politicians. Milton was to write several pamphlets denouncing corrupt practices in church governance and attacking the idea of a state dominated church. Realising that the country was heading towards a return to monarchy he published his last major pamphlets *A Treatise of Civil Power* and *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*. It was a last vain protest in which he expressed his despair that his countrymen were ready to re-embrace what he described as 'servitude'.

The return of Charles II in May 1660 saw him and his followers taking revenge on the leaders of the Commonwealth, many of whom were executed or imprisoned. Others escaped abroad. Milton was hidden by friends throughout the summer, his books and tracts were publicly burnt, and his name was to have been excluded from the list of those to be pardoned. In the early autumn, Milton was arrested and imprisoned for several months; his name was eventually added to the list of people to be pardoned and he was freed by order of parliament following the presentation of petitions from influential friends.

In the mid-1650s Milton had begun work on *Paradise Lost*. Composed orally and dictated to a scribe over the following decade, written in blank verse, it is acknowledged as one of our finest pieces of literature. Despite his notoriety and unpopular political reputation, the work was immediately recognised as a masterpiece. It was revised in 1674, and *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* appeared in 1671.

Milton died on 9 November 1674 aged 65. He is buried in the Church of St Giles, Cripplegate. His reputation restored, his funeral, according to a description of the time, was attended by many of the "learned and great friends in London not without a friendly concourse of the vulgar". There is a monument to John Milton in Westminster Abbey.

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