

THE DIGGERS

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Edward Hyde, later Earl of Clarendon (1609-74), who had been a member of the Long Parliament in 1640 and became Charles II's First Minister after the Restoration, always referred to the prolonged crisis of the intervening years as 'The Great Rebellion'. The historian Samuel Rawson Gardiner (1829-1902) popularised the idea that there had been a 'Puritan Revolution'; and it was only in the 20th century that we were told that in the period between 1640 and 1660 there had been an 'English Revolution'. Perhaps the most revolutionary act was not the execution of King Charles I, but the establishment of communism in Surrey shortly afterwards, for in April 1649, a group of communists occupied St George's Hill in the parish of Walton-on-Thames, before moving on to Little Heath in nearby Cobham. They were led by Gerrard Winstanley, originally from Lancashire, and they were known as the Diggers. Startling though this development was, it proved to be short-lived. The Diggers on St George's Hill were forced to give up in August 1649, under pressure from the local squire, parson and other inhabitants of the area, backed by the Army. The settlement at Little Heath is said to have lasted through the winter, but was suppressed in April 1650. Scholars have discovered that there were other Digger communities – for example at Wellingborough in Northamptonshire and Iver in Buckinghamshire; but these were not so well publicised at the time and their history is obscure. Winstanley remains the Diggers' only prophet and polemicist. He published over a dozen tracts, including *The New Law of Righteousness* and *The Law of Freedom in a Platform*, advocating the establishment of a new and better society.

David Petegorsky & Christopher Hill

I first heard of the Diggers in 1964, when my schoolmaster, who was from Wigan, lent me *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War*, by David Petegorsky (1915-56), published by Gollancz for the Left Book Club in 1940. I was sixteen and we were studying the 17th century for 'A' level, and amongst our textbooks was *The Century of Revolution* (1961) by Christopher Hill's (1912-2003), which I came to regard as the gospel. I had not yet heard much about Karl Marx and these books made a big impression, which my history master did little to discourage. He was clearly a man

of the Left, and proud of Gerrard Winstanley, who also came from Wigan. For him, Winstanley was one of the most advanced thinkers of the 17th century, and Hill's analysis of English society the most profound.

Petegorsky was a Marxist of the old school, and his work had been published in the same year as Hill's equally hard-line *The English Revolution of 1640*. In 1940 both writers preached dialectical materialism: history was inevitably proceeding from primitive communism to feudalism, capitalism, socialism and ultimately communism; and the engine of change was the class struggle. Each regarded the English Civil War as the victory of the *bourgeoisie* over the aristocracy; and looked forward to the ultimate victory of the proletariat in the next revolution. The function of the historian was to explain how the dialectic worked in any given society. To my young mind, this was stirring stuff. History was not just 'one damned thing after another'. There was a pattern to it, for those who had the intelligence to see; and it almost seemed to give a purpose to life. Marxism explained what had happened in the Russian Revolution, which had changed the world forever. It was the key to understanding the present and the future, as well as the past.

In a series of books between 1940 and the 1960s, Hill was concerned to show that the Civil War had been the critical moment of the *bourgeois* revolution. The *bourgeoisie* had overthrown the feudal aristocracy and even, for a few years after 1649, the monarchy. The Stuart monarchy may have been restored in 1660, but it had lost much of its prerogative power. The aristocracy had not been put to the sword, but the gains of the revolution had not been lost. England had become a capitalist society, with a legislature composed of a new class and an executive harnessed to do its bidding. She was poised to take a leading role in the development of commerce and empire.

In contrast to Hill, who had a long life and a long list of books to his name, Petegorsky died in the 1950s and produced only one book, but this provided a detailed, if somewhat uncritical, analysis of Winstanley's writings and included a short history of the Diggers. He stressed was that, although Winstanley had been a prolific writer, he had also believed in direct action: 'action is the life of all and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing.'

In the 1970s and '80s, Christopher Hill modified his original thesis about the English Revolution. Rather than concentrating on the triumph of the *bourgeoisie* – which was problematic, in view of the aristocratic nature of English society in the 18th and even 19th centuries - he pointed to the revolution within the revolution. He emphasized the importance of the event which had done most to 'turn the world upside down'. With the abolition of censorship in 1640, a wealth of radical literature had burst forth, and many different political and religious groups had been able to spread their ideas - Levellers, Ranters, Seekers, Quakers, Muggletonians, and of course the Diggers. And Gerrard Winstanley was different from the rest because (like Marx) he thought that philosophers had only interpreted the world, whereas the point was to change it. The Diggers may have made little impact at the time, but in Hill's eyes they were the harbingers of new society, when the workers of the

world would overthrow their oppressors and create a better world. They had at least shown that an alternative way of life was possible.



Mosaic in Cobham

Critique

Back in Surrey, the Digger experiments involved very few people; and we do not know what circulation Gerrard Winstanley's writings ever achieved. Reading Petegorsky's book again after 50 years, it is difficult to agree with his verdict that Winstanley was a profound and brilliant thinker, or with John Gurney's conclusion that he had a 'carefully thought out programme for change'.

At the time critics described the Diggers and their leader as a 'distracted crack-brained people' – a verdict which A.L.Rowse (1903-1997) would heartily have endorsed. Even from the Marxist point of view, Winstanley had no clear concept of the nature of the class struggle. The Ranter Laurence Clarkson analysed it more precisely: he wrote of a struggle between yeomen, farmers, tradesmen and labourers on the one hand, and nobility and gentry on the other; but for Winstanley, conflict was simply between the 'landowners' and the rest. Likewise, his ideas about

history were naïve. He thought that private property in land had been introduced into England by the Normans. Wilfully or not, he completely misunderstood what the Civil War had been about, though he had lived through it. After the Digger communes failed he appealed to Oliver Cromwell put things right, though Cromwell's notoriously conservative views about society were a matter of record. (The future Protector believed that society was rightly composed of noblemen, gentlemen and yeomen, things should stay that way). This was hardly the man to implement the Digger manifesto of April 1649:

Take Notice, that England is not a Free People, till the Poor that have no Land have a free allowance to dig and labour the Commons, and so live as Comfortably as the Landlords that live in their Inclosures.

Gerrard Winstanley did not believe in Soviet-style 'scientific socialism'. He wanted a return to an ancient and primitive communism. He was intensely religious, and believed that the world could easily be changed by the power of God, and without coercion. Religion had not yet come to be regarded as the opium of the people: rather, it was the answer to everything. The revolution could be brought about by example and persuasion; and, once it had happened, men would obey the law because this was 'written in everyone's heart.' Winstanley was a failed businessman, who had come to believe that it was impossible for an honest man to make a living in the City of London. He had taken refuge in the countryside, where he was fortunate enough to have a smallholding and sometimes styled himself 'gentleman'. Yet he advocated the abolition of private property in land, commerce, money and law, along with monarchy, aristocracy and gentry. He had more in common with the members of modern protest movements than with the dedicated members of the Communist Party who were to be found everywhere in the 1930s, when Petegorsky was doing his research and Hill was visiting the Soviet Union.

Winstanley had little time for the King, or for Parliament, or for the idea of a written constitution (an idea which appealed to the Levellers). His programme for action was limited to the notion that the dispossessed should occupy the land and treat it as a 'common treasury.' It is hardly surprising that he met with much opposition in Surrey, not just from Squire Drake, Parson Platt and the Army, but from many of the 'country people' whom he was trying to liberate. Many of the commoners of Walton were hostile to the Diggers because they were from Cobham, and were therefore outsiders, whilst many in Cobham thought they were appropriating land for their own use which rightly belonged to the community as a whole. Admirers credit Winstanley with skilful advocacy, and a knowledge of human rights, when he defended himself in court. A lawyer might well conclude that, while his objections to procedure were sound, he had no real argument of substance, when he tried to justify trespass on common land by arguing that his persecutors were simply 'Normans' or 'Norman lackeys'.

Petegorsky has been little criticised, whereas Hill's reputation has taken a turn for the worse. Hill repeatedly suggested that his position would be vindicated when more research was done; but there has been a large number of books written about the English civil war in the last fifty years and, on the contrary, they have mainly served to undermine the Marxist analysis, as have developments in the wider world.

As early as the 1950s, conservative historians rejected the idea that there had been a revolution in 1640, or for that matter in 1649, among these being B.H.G.Wormald, author of *Clarendon, Politics, History & Religion* (1951) and A.L.Rowse (who characteristically thought that too much time was devoted to the close analysis of the writings and thoughts of people of no importance). In their *Members of the Long Parliament* (1954) Brunton & Pennington demonstrated that there was no discernible social difference between Royalist and Parliamentary MPs. In *The World We Have Lost* (1965) Peter Laslett showed that revolution was virtually impossible in early 17th century society. In the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1975 J.H.Hexter criticised Hill's methods of 'resource-mining' and 'lumping'. But the most devastating critique was contained in Alastair Maclachlan's *Rise and Fall of Revolutionary England- Essay on the Fabrication of Seventeenth Century History* (1996). Meanwhile, in several books, culminating in *The Fall of the British Monarchies* (1991), Conrad Russell had given an alternative explanation of the civil wars as a whole, not confined to English history. Many writers have re-emphasised the importance of religion – for example David Underdown's *Fire From Heaven, Life in an English town in the Seventeenth Century* (1992) – and others have placed a new stress on the importance of popular Royalism – for example, Robert Ashton in *Counter Revolution, The Second Civil War and Its Origins, 1646-8* (1994).

John Gurney has recently written two excellent books on Winstanley and the Diggers: *Brave Community: The Digger Movement in the English Revolution* and *Gerrard Winstanley, The Digger's Life and Legacy*. In the end, these continue to endow the central character with too much wisdom, consistency, goodness and modernity: but they have thrown new light on Winstanley's life.

Petegorsky knew that his hero had been a member of the Merchant Taylors' Company in the City in 1637, but moved to Cobham when his business failed, possibly around 1643. There, he had his own cottage which he did not dispose of when the Diggers set up their commune nearby; though he undoubtedly became their leader, prophet and defender. Likewise, it has long been known that Winstanley's Digger tracts were all written between 1648 and 1652: there is nothing from the 1640s when he was a rather unsuccessful cloth merchant or from the 1660s when he had once again become 'respectable'. However, Gurney tells us that in August 1650, after the failure of the second commune at Little Heath, Winstanley and a number of Diggers went to stay at Pirton in Hertfordshire, with the eccentric widow Lady Eleanor Douglas or Davies (*née* Touchet, 1590-1652), who owned a manor there. Quite how this came about is unknown, but it is surely significant that Lady Eleanor was a prophetess, who had accurately predicted the deaths of one of

her husbands and of the Duke of Buckingham, and announced that 1650 was to be a year of 'jubilee and restoration'. The fact that the Diggers went to work for her at all is surely an indication that, even during his most political period, Winstanley still retained a messianic belief that the end of the world might be nigh.

The Diggers stayed in Pirton until December 1650, helping to gather in the crops and save Lady Eleanor's estate from financial ruin. Even at the time, this gave rise to accusations that they had 'sold out' because the Lady owned tithes, and the Diggers had therefore become 'tithe-gatherers'. In any event there was a quarrel and Winstanley accused his hostess of exploitation. She, for her part, accused him of fraud, and there was a parting of the ways; but it was after this that Winstanley wrote *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1652). Gurney thinks that this demonstrates a new sophistication in his thinking about the ideal society. Others may think that the new system he recommends now is simply a more repressive version of the old, with the addition of numerous *apparatchicks*, with powers of life and death over the rest of the population.

Another episode in Winstanley's life which seems to have been unknown to Petegorsky is that the communist visionary re-joined society after the Restoration, when he inherited property, re-married and had three children. He is listed as a tenant of Ham in Cobham in 1662, as well as an overseer of the poor and a churchwarden in the parish of St Andrew's. In 1671 and 1672 he is recorded as one of the two Chief Constables of Elmbridge Hundred. He is also known to have become engaged in various law suits where he had occasion to resort to the laws and lawyers he once affected to despise. As a younger man, he had been against all magistrates and office-holders, tithes, the keeping of the Sabbath and the very concept of an Established Church, and would certainly have condemned his older self for 'selling-out'. Yet he is now commemorated by a memorial plaque inside the parish church in Cobham.

Gurney makes light of the evidence that Winstanley became an 'Anglican' in the 1660s. He thinks it possible that he still felt the same about fundamentals; but it is striking that even Winstanley's erstwhile persecutor Parson Platt refused to conform, when the clergy were required to read the Anglican Book of Prayer in 1662; and was ejected from his living on that account. On the other hand, we know that in the last year of his life, 1675, Gerrard moved back to London, where he had a substantial house, went into business as a corn chandler and became a Quaker.

It is remarkable that those who have written about Gerrard Winstanley since 1940 have tended to adhere to Petegorsky's view that he was a pioneering socialist, but it could equally well be said that his life is a classic demonstration of the shortcomings of socialism as a creed – in particular, its essentially utopian view of human nature and politics. It could equally well be said that the Digger episode was merely a phase in Winstanley's life. After all, he was 40 when he was involved in the communes in Walton and Cobham, but 51 at the time of the Restoration and 66 when he moved back to London. Why should we not conclude that, rather than

becoming a reluctant conformist after 1660, he simply saw the errors of his former ways?

A Visit to Cobham

St George's Hill is almost three miles from the centre of Cobham and about the same distance from Weybridge. According to the local historian David Taylor (*Gerrard Winstanley in Elmbridge*, 2000) the exact location of the Digger settlement on St George's Hill is not known. One source describes it as being 'next to Campe Close', which may put it close to the modern Camp End Road; but another local historian has suggested that it is more likely to have been on lower ground near Silvermere Farm. On the other hand, Little Heath, where the Diggers settled after leaving the Hill, is certainly to be found near Oxshott station. Notwithstanding the vagueness about the former site, the area as a whole has become a centre of pilgrimage. Indeed Taylor (*Cobham, A History*, 2003) considers that Winstanley has become 'Cobham's most important resident.' Elmbridge Borough Council has named two new streets in Cobham after him; and in 2000 a Winstanley Trail was created around Cobham and a memorial stone was unveiled on Cobbett's Hill, near Weybridge Station. This has a spade on one side and some vegetables on the other, and carries the inscription

Worke together, Eat bread together; declare this all abroad.

Just as the regicides were remembered by radicals as diverse as the Tolpuddle Martyrs, Edwardian Liberals and the Labour Party's George Lansbury, the Diggers were taken up by modern socialists and communists and now by environmentalists. There is a monument in the Alexandrovsky Gardens, Moscow, erected shortly after the Russian Revolution, which commemorates Winstanley alongside Marx and Engels. In 1961 David Cate published an entertaining novel about the Diggers (*Comrade Jacob*) which was made into the film *Winstanley* in 1975: Christopher Hill was historical adviser. A Digger pamphlet provided the title for Caryl Churchill's play *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976). In 1975 Leon Rosselson composed a song entitled *The World Turned Upside Down*, which was based on Winstanley's *Diggers' Song*, though the title was taken from Christopher Hill's book of the same name. This was covered by Billy Bragg during the miners' strike of 1984; and Tony Benn selected it when he appeared on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* in 1989. In 1999 the 350th anniversary of the Digger commune was observed by George Monbiot's movement *The Land is Ours*, which briefly occupied St. George's Hill, before the North Surrey Water Board had them evicted. In 2011 a Digger Festival was held in Wigan, where there is now a Winstanley House, home to a Citizens' Advice Bureau and a branch of the trade union UNISON.

The visitor to Cobham today might be forgiven for thinking that there is much in all this which smacks of sentimental anachronism. The reality, when one visits the area now is that God has clearly been vanquished by Mammon, and

capitalism is triumphant, as it is everywhere outside Cuba and North Korea. Cobham is a prosperous community, which owes nothing to Winstanley's experiment. The heaths have become leisure parks rather than hives of agrarian activity. Meanwhile St George's Hill has become home to a gated community for the *über*-rich. It is now synonymous with a 640 acre estate, where the average house price is £3,000,000 and where fading pop-stars reside or once resided. According to a bookseller in Cobham, it is also home to a number of Russian exiles. One imagines that these good folk are not much like Vladimir Lenin, who once sought asylum in Switzerland. Nor will they have moved here to remember the pioneers of socialism.



Memorial stone, Cobbett's Hill