

John Wildman

Leveller and Famous Plotter

The World turned upside down!



The 1640's were the most tumultuous decade in our history. It saw civil war, the victory of parliament over the monarch and the execution of a king. But it also brought about by not one but three revolutions – constitutional, religious and military.

Truly for those who lived through it – it was the world turned upside down! It was a decade that saw the birth of democracy as we know it today. It would not be an easy birth with many birth pangs along the way

But it is to me the source of endless fascination that two of the leading protagonists in this process, Henry Marten and John Wildman, came from or were associated with this little corner of Berkshire. Was modern democracy born in Shrivenham?

Putney Debates - Oct/Nov 1647

The pivotal moment came in autumn of 1647 in the sleepy Thameside village of Putney which was HQ of New Model Army.



Parliament has just won the most devastating War in our history, proportionately more people were killed than in WWI, large parts of the country have been laid waste, on top of this there was exceptionally wet weather and bad harvests - starvation stalked the land, rebellion was breaking out in the north and the west.

The Army, the famous New Model Army – the People's army – “disciplined, brave and above all meritocratic” is on the point of mutiny and are

advancing on London. They hadn't been paid for months and they were to be disbanded without so much as an acknowledgement. But above all – what was all their sacrifice for? Was it just to return to the old order?

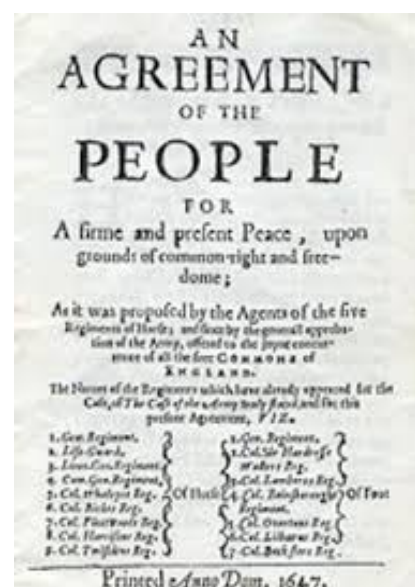
To diffuse the situation Army Council calls a ground-breaking series of debates to be held in St Mary's Church, Putney that were the first instance of true democracy in British history. These debates culminated on 5th Nov 1647 and can rightly be said to lay foundation of modern democracy. Indeed it was astounding that they took place at all!

Ostensibly about the disbandment of the army and lack of pay, the debate soon focused on the nature of a new constitutional settlement for post-war England.

The nature of these debates were to influence of John Locke and Tom Payne and led in direct line to the American Declaration of Independence – “*We hold these things to be self evident....* According to Geoffrey Robinson their influence can be traced all the way to the Modern Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So, I believe 5th Nov should be celebrated for the foundation of our democracy rather than that rather arcane plot we remember today.

The argument in the debates raged between moderate voices arguing for the status quo and the radicals calling for universal adult male suffrage.

Onto the scene comes a young firebrand - civilian spokesman for the Levellers who hijacked proceedings much to Ireton's fury. He put forward the Leveller manifesto “the Agreement of the People” which introduced for the first time such revolutionary ideas as freedom of religion, regular parliaments and equality under the law. This extraordinary man conspired through fifty years and five reigns to bring about a democratic English republic. He was imprisoned for his beliefs by Charles I, by Cromwell and by Charles II – a fifth of his active life spent in prison. Yet he ended his days one of the richest aldermen in London and a knight of the



realm. So this is the story of this man.... John Wildman

Early Life - Corpus Christi

John Wildman was described as notoriously taciturn and saturnine! Little is known about his background.

He was born 1623, to Jeffrey and Dorothy Wildman in the Norfolk town of Wymondham and educated at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge and may have studied law in London. He was 19 at the start of the first civil war and there is some evidence that he was made an officer in the Lifeguards by Cromwell. He is at the astonishingly young age of 24 at the time of the Putney Debates.



It is not known how he developed his radical views and how he was selected to be the civilian spokesman for the Leveller cause at such a young age. Already he was a close associate of John Lilburne, the Leveller leader.

Around 1655 marries Lucy Lovelace, daughter of Lord Lovelace, sister of Margaret, Henry Marten's wife. Thus Marten becomes his brother-in-law as well as closest friend and confidante. Together with Marten's lifelong partner Mary Ward they formed a little coterie of friends addressing each other in ciphers. Lucy shared her husband's fortunes and misfortunes for 37 years and died six months before him. She is a loyal partner who successfully manages his business interests during his long spells in prison.

Leveller and Scapegoat

In November 1647 Charles is held prisoner in Carisbroke Castle on the Isle of Wight. In the same month after the Putney debates two regiments of the New Model Army mutiny and arrive at Ware with copies of "Agreement" in their hats. Cromwell acts decisively. Trooper Arnold is shot for refusing to sign the declaration of loyalty – first martyr to republican democracy. The army is split up and agitators dismissed.

For Wildman, this is too much: "...army are betrayed by their officers entering in combination with the Lords and Presbyterians". From now on, he violently criticises Cromwell for supporting the monarchy. "If Cromwell were an honest man, then I would never trust honest men again".

Wildman and Lilburne are thrown into prison for sedition and this sparks huge popular protest and the militia is called out to suppress it. They are brought before the House but remain in prison. Rumours circulate that Wildman and Lilburne with Marten are plotting to murder Cromwell and depose the King.

The Man in the Mask?

Wildman was released August 1648 and on 6th December came Pride's Purge when the army invaded Parliament and expelled all those in favour of an accommodation with the king. Wildman is at forefront of a new Agreement of the People that defines and sets limits of government. The army grandees and Levellers at last reach agreement.

In January 1649 the king was brought to trial and executed on a specially prepared scaffold outside the Banqueting House in Whitehall. A rumour spread that Wildman was one of the heavily disguised executioners!



Leveller leaders now argue that king should not have been executed before a democratic system had been established in place of kingship. By hurrying the process Lilburne and Wildman believe that Cromwell betrayed the cause which they fought for.

The Speculator

In summer 1649 two regiments that were due to be sent to Ireland, espousing the Leveller cause mutiny. Cromwell catches up with them at Burford and the three ringleaders, Cornet Thompson, Cpl Perkins and Pte Church are shot in front of the church thus becoming first Leveller martyrs. Now Lilburne continues to oppose Army Council but Wildman disassociates himself from

Lilburne and Leveller's views and is consequently abused as a traitor. "My fellow rebel, Johnny Wildman, where art thou?" was Lilburne's lament.

At this stage Wildman probably serves with Sir John Reynold's regiment of Horse as a major.

To pay for the war, Parliament confiscates the land of leading Royalists and taxes them heavily. Between 1650 and 1655 Wildman is engaged in bold property speculation dealing in Royalist estates. He bought lands in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Gloucestershire, London, Somerset and Northumberland as well as acting as agent for Royalists forced to sell their land.

As a result he amasses considerable fortune that keeps him in affluence for the rest of his life.

The Wildman Plot

Wildman is elected to parliament as MP for Scarborough but excluded from the House because he is "*.. so great disturber of law and peace.*"

In 1655, he frames a petition against Cromwell's "monarchical" government and devises plot to overthrow Cromwell and introduce republican government. He is arrested near Marlborough in the act of dictating the plan for the plot. Arms and ammunition are discovered in his house. The conspirators are arrested and imprisoned then Cromwell acts swiftly to prevent a rising in London. Although none of the conspirators were executed failure of the plot drives the Levellers into active alliance with Royalists against Cromwell.

A Tangled web

In exchange for his release Wildman offers to spy on Royalist exiles in Holland. During his 16 months of imprisonment his business affairs have fallen into chaos. His creditors beg Cromwell for his release! He is granted three months liberty on bail of £10,000! On release in May 1657 he purchases Beckett Estate from Henry Marten for £9,300. He also purchases a tavern known as Nonsuch House in Covent Garden which is to become a meeting place for future



plotters. For the rest of the Interregnum he plays a dangerous double game.

Wildman's Gunpowder Plot

He immediately embarks on a Spanish-Royalist-Leveller plot to blow Cromwell sky high! He hatches the plot by bribing some old soldiers to attack Cromwell on the way to parliament but he fails to show so the plot is abandoned. In the meantime there is another plan to set fire to Whitehall. The sentries are bribed and gunpowder is smuggled into the building but one of the sentries' nerve fails him and they are discovered. Under interrogation Wildman in his role as double agent does not give anything away but the arch-plotter, Edward Sexby, the Leveller leader is betrayed and tortured in the tower. There is no evidence Wildman was betrayed him. Within 6 months he is leader of yet another Spanish-Royalist plot to kill Cromwell.

Now Wildman secretly supports the Royalists and in return for his support he demands that Charles II governs in accordance with the Leveller concept of constitutional monarchy. However in March 1658, the plot ends in fiasco and the plotters are arrested. Royalists suspect Wildman is implicated in the betrayal of this plot but once again there is no evidence that he did so.



The Second English republic

Cromwell dies in 1658 and is succeeded by his son, Richard, as Lord Protector. In May 1659 the army overthrows Richard. The Rump parliament is recalled and there is a brief period of de facto Republican rule by a Council of State. Chaos reigns and army grandees stage a coup but Gen Monk in Scotland supports Council of State and the coup fails.

In the meantime Wildman gathers a force of disaffected volunteers and seizes Windsor Castle for the government and the Rump. General Monk now sets off for London from Coldstream in support of the Council of State with a regiment of guards. Thus Coldstream gives its name to the oldest regiment in the British

Army. (When Monk dies in 1670, The Earl of Craven becomes first Colonel of Coldstream Guards)

In April 1660 comes the Declaration of Breda promising indemnity and general toleration to all those who opposed the king as determined by parliament. General election follows with large Royalist majority. Thus the republican experiment is destroyed by the army that created it and Wildman is one of the last to reluctantly acquiesce. For next 28 years, he will not admit defeat.

Republicans and the Restoration

King Charles II arrives in England in May 1660 to a magnificent reception. Within six months Wildman is dominant figure in the reconstituted post office.

The Post Office's key function was the collecting intelligence by censoring and opening letters. This role had been intensified and systematized under Cromwell and Wildman manoeuvres himself into position of spying on disaffected elements plotting against the monarchy. But he continues his double game using the post office as a republican plotting centre under the nose of the new king.

The Cavaliers' revenge

Plots against the Cavalier's parliament continue. Wildman and other republicans as prime suspects are put in the tower. Despite emphatic denials, the king is convinced Wildman is one of the leaders of a widespread conspiracy to overthrow the Restoration Government. None of them were brought to trial but continue to be held in tower. His fellow plotter James Harrington goes mad but Wildman despite torture and hardship remains stalwartly republican. Eventually Lucy who is running her husband's business affairs applies for Writ of Habeas Corpus but Wildman is shipped off to Scilly Isles and is not released until 1667. He is imprisoned for a total of six years.

The 'creature' of Buckingham

In 1666 England is hit by the plague, the Great Fire and heavy war expenses after



defeat in the war with the Dutch. Rumours of republican invasion begin to resurface. Earl of Clarendon is ousted as leader of the government and Wildman's old mentor the Duke of Buckingham takes over. He is released from prison and becomes confidante of Buckingham who is de facto ruler. He thus is keeping alive the republican influence. But as Buckingham's star wanes, in 1670 Wildman and his family obtained permission to travel abroad. When he returns England is torn by factions and ripe for conspiracy.

The Popish Plot

In 1678 Titus Oates, a clergyman discredited for immorality, reports a Popish plot with Jesuits plotting to overthrow the king and restore Roman Catholicism. This was a tissue of lies but it leads to execution of countless Jesuits priests, the exile of Duke of York, anti-catholic hysteria and the prosecution of five catholic Lords. It almost brings about the destruction of parliament and even imperils the throne.

It precipitates the Exclusion Bill crisis but Charles dissolves parliament to prevent the Bill being passed and the country drifts towards civil war.

The Rye House Plot

Country is in ferment with Whig and Tory rivalry over the Exclusion Bill, a bid to exclude Catholics from inheriting the throne which would disinherit the king's brother, the future James II.

In the midst of this comes the so-called Rye House Plot. Pro-exclusion Whigs together with republicans plot rebellion. Their leader is Algernon Sidney, an ardent Republican and Wildman is his closest associate, acting as pamphleteer-in-chief, paymaster and arms buyer to the group.

The plan was to assassinate the king and his brother as the Royal party passed Rye House, north of London returning from Newmarket races but miraculously a fire breaks out at



Newmarket so the races were cancelled and the king returns a week early.

Many suspects are arrested but there is not slightest evidence that the plan ever existed. However Sidney, Wildman and others are arrested in June 1683 and in November 1684 Sidney is condemned to death and executed. They could find no evidence against Wildman and he is released on bail.

On 6th February 1685 Charles II has a seizure and dies and the bigoted Catholic King James II ascends the throne.

Towards Revolution.

On 27th May 1685 the Duke of Monmouth lands at Lyme Regis with 150 men. He gathers a small army of nonconformists, artisans and farm workers but is defeated by John Churchill at the Battle of Sedgemoor on 5th July. Subsequently the notorious Judge Jefferies and Bloody Assizes inflicted a reign of terror on the unfortunate people of Somerset.

Wildman is arrested on 19th July but once again the authorities can find no evidence against him. Once again he flees abroad and becomes a fugitive remaining in exile for three years with a price on his head.

But the ferment continues. James is determined to revive the divine right of kings over which his father, Charles I, lost his head. Catholics are preferred and promoted and parliament dissolved. Wildman and other exiles are bidding their time.

James arrests and puts on trial those bishops refusing to allow the Declaration of Indulgences which would extend religious liberty to Catholics and Non-conformists, to be read out in all Anglican churches.

Now Whigs and Tories combined to conspire to issue an invitation to William of Orange to come to the rescue and invade England. William's wife, Mary was the elder daughter of James II and set to inherit the throne should James not have a son. Her husband



William of Orange was fighting a protracted war against Louis XIV of France.

A King for the People

But the Republican threat remained and one reason that compelled William to invade was the fear of the English republicans bringing back the Commonwealth! On 5th November 1688, William lands at Tor Bay and marches on Exeter. Support for James melts away and he flees to France. On 18th December William enters London.

The so-called Convention Parliament is convened to decide on the form of government and Wildman is elected MP for Great Bedwin with his son, MP for Wootton Bassett. After protracted deliberations Parliament finally decides James II has abdicated and William and Mary should reign together. Wildman is rewarded for his support of William with the return to his old post as Postmaster-General.

Thus finally the republican movement who had plotted for so long came to be absorbed into constitutional monarchy and John Wildman, Leveller of 1647, anti-Cromwellian of 1655, tavern philosopher of 1659, political prisoner of 1661, Rye House plotter of 1683 and exile of 1685 finally comes to see his hopes realised.



Postmaster-General

Importance of the post office has grown since introduction of Penny Post and Wildman was responsible for interception of letters from potential danger zones and reporting to the Secretary of State. He became de facto responsible for the state security system. One of his tasks involved pursuing the “evil” adherents of James II.

The following year he has become disillusioned with the rule of William and Mary and he is suspected of yet another republican conspiracy against the crown and is dismissed as Postmaster and finally retired from public life to Beckett.

But with his close connexions with the City of London he is made a Freeman of the City in December 1689 and the following January is chosen as alderman and the Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Middlesex.

On 29th October 1692, Major John Wildman is knighted by the king at the Guildhall. Six months later, he dies peacefully at Beckett aged 70. He is buried at St Andrew's, Shrivenham.

His son has no male heir so he adopts John Shute, later first Earl of Barrington "in the Roman fashion".

Last Word

Let the inscription on his memorial in St Andrew's Church, Shrivenham have the last word:

"that if his executors should think fit there should be some stone of small price set near to his ashes, to signify, without foolish flattery, to his posterity, that in that age there lived a man who spent the best part of his days in prisons, without crimes, being conscious of no offence towards man, for that he so loved his God that he could serve no man's will, and wished the liberty and happiness of his country and all mankind"

