

**WHO WERE THE ENGLISH RADICALS?
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ANABAPTIST NETWORK**

**WORKSHOP ON THE DIGGERS
(notes)**

The Diggers came to prominence in 1649 when they occupied some common land in Surrey, England. They established a self-sufficient commune there, issued a manifesto called The True Levellers Standard Advanced, and appealed to others to join them. Among their leaders were Gerrard Winstanley and William Everard, and they took their action both as a practical response to their hunger and as a first step towards creating a communist – that is, moneyless and propertyless - society. They inspired similar ventures across England, but opposition from local gentry forced their experiment to close after a year.

A key Digger tenet was that the earth was created by God for all to share – a ‘Common Treasury’. Individual ownership was not part of the creation story, and Diggers aimed to restore the earth to communal ownership. In this they went further than many of their contemporaries who, while they accepted that a ‘propertyless’ age had once existed, argued that the ‘Fall’ made its realization again impossible. Fallen humanity was so subject to impulses of greed, fear, envy and lust that society could not only survive unless accommodation were made to the need to own and protect private property.

The Diggers, however, believed that human nature was affected by social factors, that self-interest and greed were sustained by the system of buying and selling; and therefore as people discovered the benefits of communitarian living they would be transformed and the process of breaking down the system built upon private ownership would be unstoppable. Diggers envisaged a gradual process in which, as people set up communes, the system of hiring labour - the only way the rich could manage their huge estates - would disintegrate. Had their programme succeeded it would have transformed society in a profoundly radical way.

Also underpinning the Diggers’ hopes for the restoration of society to its original communitarian state was a belief that such a restoration constituted the second coming of Christ. Christ would not appear suddenly or dramatically but ‘rise up’ in men and women and enlighten them to the delights and benefits of owning land in common. Christ’s appearance would effect a change at the level of the individual and society, leading to a recovery of that state of true community not known since before the Fall. To the Diggers, Christ remains ‘buried’ in the earth, giving it a sacred quality. It is our ‘true Mother...that brought us forth’ and that ‘loves all her children’, wrote Winstanley, though she is hindered from ‘giving all her Children suck’ because landlords enclose the land and force poor people to starve.

The Diggers’ theology was very different from that taught by the Church. Diggers stressed the immanence of God and how everybody has their creator dwelling within them, and thought the doctrines of the Church were designed to keep people in subjection to the authorities. They saw the clergy, along with landlords and lawyers, as a sort of unholy trinity upholding the iniquitous system under the king, and while they welcomed the removal of the monarchy and introduction of the Commonwealth, they argued that only a total transformation of the system over which the king presided would lift the people’s burden. Hence they appealed for the interests of the poor majority to be recognised, for Parliament to make the Common-wealth exactly that.

Although the Diggers were committed to appeals to Parliament and to direct action they never advocated the use of violence. They believed that the use of the sword would merely result in one section of society lording it over the other, as was the case at present. And since, once Christ began to rise in men and women he could not be stopped, the question of using violence to change society did not arise.

Although the Diggers' venture was short-lived their ideas have long survived them, mainly because of the powerful pamphlets of their main theorist Gerrard Winstanley. The Diggers stand within that marginal political tradition which has argued the case for communitarian and ecologically-sensitive economic arrangements over market-based economies predicated on profit, competition and individualism. They continue to inspire writers and activists on the left, from anarcho-syndicalists to anti-roads protestors, from Christian socialists to Greens.

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