

WIGAN: HOME OF GERRARD WINSTANLEY AND SOCIALISM

By Derek Winstanley

Who do you think is the most famous and influential Wiganer of all time? Billy Boston, who holds the Wigan try scoring record? Perhaps Sir Ian McKellen, star of Lord of the Ring and The Hobbit? Or George Formby, the ukulele player" Well, I don't think it is any of these!

And I can't provide a photo of him, as he was born in 1609. And we don't even have a painting of him. In fact, most people in Wigan have never heard of him. His name is Gerrard Winstanley. Winstanley, of course, is a very common name in the Wigan area.

People like Sir Isaac Newton and Galileo are famous because they did things that changed the world. But new ideas often upset the apple cart; existing institutions, powers and beliefs are threatened and people in positions of authority often take steps to repress and sometimes obliterate people with new ideas. Joan of Arc was burned at the stake for heresy – and later made a saint. Gerrard Winstanley wasn't burned at the stake, but he did challenge established authorities and propose a new order. He and his band of followers were quickly squashed, but his ideas have lived on through his writings that have endured through the centuries. Researchers and political leaders in many countries have analyzed his work and used his ideas to promote social and political agendas. Today, he is recognized worldwide as one of the most impressive figures in early modern European history and the foremost radical of the English Revolution.

But before I tell you more about Gerrard Winstanley, it is important to recall conditions in England 400 years ago. The 17th century was a period of upheaval – a world turned upside down. People were dissatisfied with the Monarchy, the Church and the social hierarchy. Huge differences between the haves and have-nots created inequalities and a class struggle. Civil war started in 1642 and for about ten years Englishmen fought Englishmen.

Much of the dissatisfaction and rebellion stemmed from the invasion of England by William the Conqueror in 1066. He and subsequent monarchs exerted great power and allocated many parts of the land to their favourites from across the Channel and extended their social and economic control through the Church and religion. Members of Parliament were chosen by a select few and most Englishmen and all English women were not allowed to vote. There was radical questioning of the status quo and revolutionary hope was in the air. Revolution did occur: Oliver Cromwell overthrew and executed King Charles 1 and set himself up as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England. But despite the hopes of many, Cromwell turned out to be no better than the Monarchy he had deposed. He protected his own interests and many say he was a dictator. In the turmoil, many cults and religious and political groups were formed.

Gerrard Winstanley was baptized in Wigan Parish Church on October 10, 1609; his father was a cloth merchant. At that time there were perhaps only about twelve or fifteen Winstanley families in and around Wigan. Research tells us that he must have come from a relatively well off and influential branch of the Winstanley family that was well connected to the Rector and the burgesses of Wigan – the burgesses were the select group that managed the affairs of the town. In fact, his father probably was a Church warden and a burgess himself. Gerrard most likely went to Wigan Grammar School, founded in about 1597. The main branch of the Winstanley family had moved to Wales in about 1490, made their

money in the wool and cloth trade and built Winstanley Hall when they returned to Winstanley in the 1550s.

When Gerrard was 21 he became an apprentice at the prestigious Merchant Taylors' Company in London – no doubt through connections that the Winstanleys had fostered. After he became a Freeman at Merchant Taylors' he married Susan King and did well in London as a cloth merchant until hard times struck in 1643. An economic depression caused him and many others to become bankrupt.

From a quite privileged position he lost almost everything and hit rock bottom. He became a cowherd. So in his lowly position what did Gerrard do? He certainly did not sit back and wait for others to change things. He developed a clear understanding of the problems and grievances he and his countrymen were facing, articulated what he believed to be everyone's rights and created nothing less than a vision and a strategy for a new world – a New Commonwealth.

He saw how the Church, Monarchy and Aristocracy represented their own interests and not the interests of the masses, for most whom life was degraded and unjust. He pulled together the spiritual, economic, political and social aspects of the human condition and wrapped them up in a radical theology and philosophy. He identified what it meant to be human and got down to what he called the "*natural state of man*", the state he wanted to restore. This was a bloke born and raised in Wigan who dared to take on Cromwell and the rest of the world! But it was no good just developing ideas and keeping them to himself – he had to get the support of others and take action. One of his guiding principles was "*Action is the life of all and if thou dost not act thou dost nothing*". Or, as a Wiganer might say, "*If tha' does nowt, tha meet as weel be deead*".

So he founded a group called The True Levellers, also known as The Diggers, for reasons I will explain. They were called The True Levellers because there was another group called The Levellers, influenced by the writings of John Lilburne, who also wanted change; but, as usual, they wanted change to benefit themselves, while leaving the masses impoverished. The True Levellers wanted fundamental or true change that would benefit the impoverished masses.

One of the first things the True Levellers did was to dig and cultivate common land in Surrey in 1649. They believed that the Earth was a "*common treasury*" for all, not just for the privileged few. Other groups of Diggers formed in other parts of the country, but they were all put down by Cromwell's men and the magistrates by 1651. The digging stopped, but the fight had only just begun. Gerrard Winstanley began to write profusely.

Here is a summary of the key grievances The Diggers held against the way things were and the vision they had for changing all that:

GRIEVANCES

- Monarchs and aristocrats took land from the common people by force and murder and they exert unjust power and authority.
- Monarchs and the aristocracy use the Church and Church leaders to help enforce their illegitimate power and authority.
- This upper class and a growing middle class exploit the masses in the lower class.
- The lower class has lost its rights as human beings (dignity, liberty, independence, happiness, well being and the right to vote and participate) and are exploited, impoverished, persecuted, oppressed and bereft of meaningful religion.

- The entire social, political and economic system is immoral and unjust.

VISION

- Equality of power, liberty, happiness, representation and opportunity for all men and women.
- Social organization for the welfare and security of all.
- Common ownership of land and resources.
- Free distribution of products of the land to meet needs.
- Free medical services.
- A well informed citizenry resulting from free and compulsory education.
- Public servants responsive to the needs and wills of the people.
- A legal system based on reason and equity.
- Recognition of the ecological interdependence of man and nature.
- Knowledge of nature and its laws is knowledge of God.

And here are some of the strategies they developed for achieving their vision:

STRATEGIES

- Do as you would be done by.
- Take non-violent, humanist action.
- Abolish private ownership of land and resources.
- Show love and humility.
- Elect all public servants through universal suffrage and limit the length of tenure.
- Support scientific research.
- Satisfy your needs by honest labour and share the results of your labour.
- Adopt a legal system based on reason and equity.
- Abolish institutional religion and professional lawyers.

Academic researchers have failed to explain where Gerrard Winstanley's radical ideas came from. But if you know David Sinclair's and George Bridgeman's histories of Wigan, it is not difficult to fathom.

In Wigan, there had been for many years a major power struggle between the Rector, burgesses and common people concerning rights, might and ownership and distribution of resources. Gerrard's formative experience in Wigan would have revealed to him the questionable motives and practices of organized religion, public disdain for and contempt of the Church, and exposed him to the almost vice-regal power and abuse of power by the Rector, who also was Lord of the Manor. Although probably part of the middle class in Wigan, Gerrard undoubtedly would have been acutely aware of the poverty that most Wiganers suffered. In Wigan it was a class society with laborers at the bottom, burgesses in the middle, the Rector and Lord of the Manor above, and the Aristocracy, Church and King at the top.

Through radical collective action, Wiganers rose up to challenge the established order and were successful in making gains and leveling the playing field on which contests took place. *"The inhabitants formed a sort of clan".* For the Rector, *"The weeds in his baronial garden were more numerous than the flowers, and he was at his wits end how to uproot them".* *"Many [Wiganers] put on the garb of conformity for the sake of peace and security. There were thousands of wolves in sheep's clothing. Many who believed not in the justice of the law conformed to its letter, but had no faith in the spirit of its creed".* Wiganers wanted the rights that the Lord of the Manor claimed.

In resolve of Wigan's disputes, the King's arbitrators ordered that Wiganers did have the right to dig for coal and clay on the common land. The granting of these rights to Wiganers must have set the precedence for Gerrard Winstanley to claim the right to dig and cultivate common land near London and provided the stimulus for him to lead The Diggers in radical action. In 1649 Gerrard Winstanley elevated the demands of oppressed Wiganers to the national level and declared that "*... the earth was not made purposefully for you, to be Lords of it, and we to be your Slaves, Servants, and Beggars; but it was made to be a common Livelihood for all, without respect of persons: ...*"; "*... we have a free right to the Land of England, being born therein...*". Gerrard Winstanley's national appeal "*... to set us free from the kingly power of Lords of the Manors ...*" echoes the same appeal by Wiganers in Gerrard Winstanley's home town.

It was through soul searching at the bottom of an abyss that he suddenly came to understand Wigan, Wiganers and a real God. In his own destitution he became a true Wiganer – no longer in a privileged position, but now with the advantage of education and experience. We find that "*Winstanley in addressing those in power – Fairfax, Cromwell, the Army, the Parliament – presents himself not simply as a private citizen but as a poor man, dressed in humble garments, working with his hands, one whose language is simple, unadorned and direct, and who speaks the truth on behalf of those, like him, who can 'hardly get bread, ...'*". He became the national crier for radical reform.

Gerrard Winstanley is described by many as a founder of socialism, communism, pacifism, green activism and maybe a founder Quakerism. In 1918 Lenin carved Gerrard Winstanley's name on an obelisk in Moscow, but The True Digger would probably have been horrified by the dictatorial and totalitarian regimes that came to power throughout the world in the name of communism. His was a much gentler, human form of socialism emphasizing equality, freedom, liberty, dignity, love and sharing.

It is likely that Gerrard Winstanley learned much and was greatly influenced by his upbringing in Wigan. Indeed, I conclude that socialism has its roots in Wigan and socialism was given firm expression by a Wiganer in London. Sir Christopher Hill, the great historian of the English Civil War, refers to "*... the backward north*" and it is this erroneous perception among many academics that has stifled any other conclusion other than Winstanley's brilliant perceptions and profound insights must be a product of his experiences in London!

The Wigan Diggers' Festival was started in 2011 to remember and honour Gerrard Winstanley's life and ideas. That was a great success and it has become an annual event (<http://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/diggersfestival/>). The old Social Services Office in Crawford Street is named Gerrard Winstanley House, but the organizers of the Diggers' Festival want to establish an appropriate, permanent memorial to Gerrard Winstanley in his home town.



Gerrard Winstanley House in Crawford Street and Wigan Parish Church. DW photo



First Wigan Diggers Festival on the Mesnes Playing Field, September 2011. DW photo



Memorial Obelisk for the Great Socialist Thinkers and Revolutionaries in Moscow. <http://travel.thegughupf.net/europe/russian-federation-2009-1/moscow/photo-galleries/inside-the-kremlin>