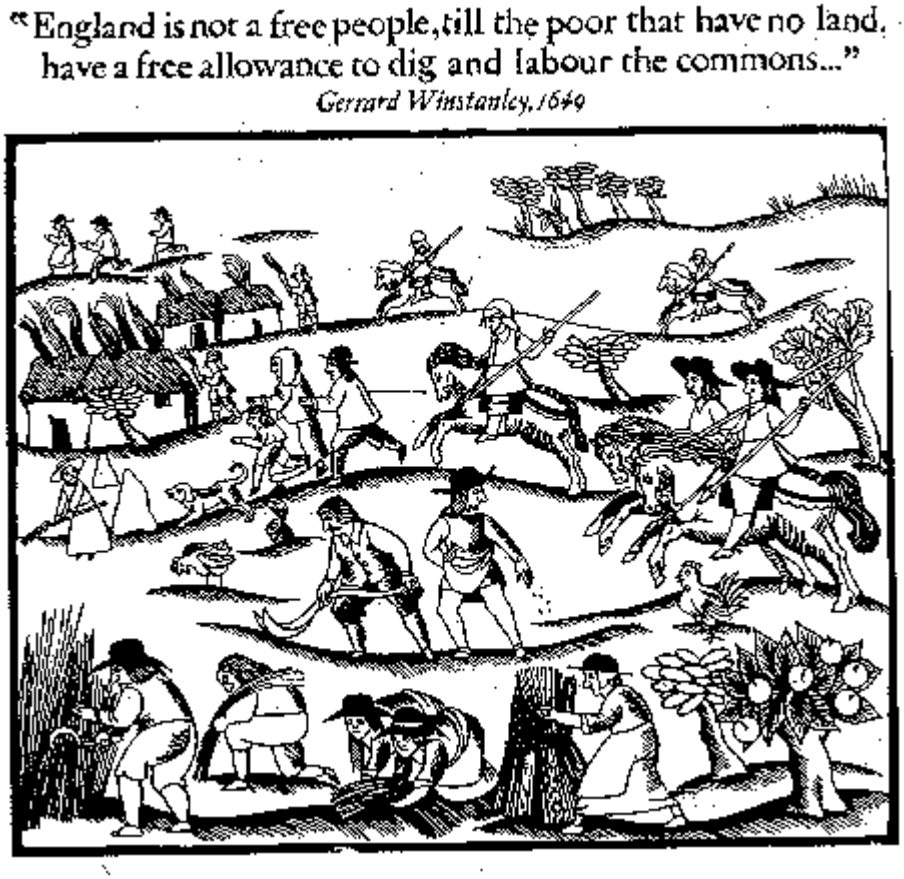
Civil disorder in England in the 1630s - Ian Brooke



A snapshot from history showing that the spirit of direct action and mass civil disobedience is very much part of the fabric of English history.

Disorder

We are told that in England there are no traditions of rebellion and that revolutionary ideas are an infection from the continent that is resisted by the more conservative traditions of the British people. This has never been the case and indeed our forbears of the 17th century were to demonstrate courage and ingenuity in fighting on a whole range of issues.

The pressures of religious and economic change were to make the decades leading up to the civil war ones of great disorder where the ordinary people made their will felt in a determined manner. In many areas where the puritans were in the ascendancy there were disputes over their attempts to ban festivals such as May Day and Christmas, as well as racing and football matches. In Weymouth, 1618, a crowd ignored the orders of a puritan Mayor to disperse and marched off behind trumpets and drums to set up a maypole leading to a rash of arrests for drunkenness and assaults on constables. In 1619, a riot ensued in Stratford on Avon when there were attempts to take down the Maypole, and other disturbances arose all over the country where people felt their traditions were at risk from religious reformers. It was not uncommon for rioters to be liberated from the stocks or pillory by angry crowds who then proceeded to beat up constables.

This was an age when many country people depended on common land for their living for the grazing of cattle and collecting wood, land that increasingly caught the attention of landowners keen

to fence commons off for the production of grain or sheep to profit from the growing markets of London and the continent. Such common land was often an age old right that people were prepared to fight for and rebellions against these 'enclosures' occurred.

In 1603, King James I himself was besieged in Northamptonshire by crowds complaining of enclosures and by 1607 this had developed into rebellion with people pulling down the fences of enclosed land and being labelled 'levellers'.

In Gillingham Forest, in 1626, rioting occurred that forced the local Sherriff and his armed men to retreat before a mob and disturbances continued for two years. There were riots in the Forest of Dean in 1631, that continued to throw down enclosures till 1633 and later riots of coal miners in 1637 in the area. Meanwhile, in Shaftsbury, troops mutinied joining the Gillingham rioters they were supposed to be putting down. Such instances occurred all over the country and similar mass direct action was used to resist the draining of the Fens in East Anglia for commercial purposes usually by Royalist gentry.

A typical response of ordinary people to the shortages and high price of corn during the economic slump of the 1620s was also to take direct action and seize grain being exported for profit and to force its sale to local people at a fair price. In Southampton in 1608 local women refused to wait for the corporation to debate grain shortages, they boarded a ship and seized its cargo of grain rather than have it be exported. Similar incidents occurred in Weymouth in 1622 and Dorchester in 1631. Whilst at this time corn barges headed down the river Severn to Bristol were frequently hijacked. At times petitioning was enough to get some action to benefit the poor but at times the threat of rebellion was needed to get the authorities to take notice.

Ship Money Rebellion.

Indeed the ability to protest was one of the few political expressions available to ordinary people who were unable to vote and at a time when Parliament was elected by a narrow group of people from the landed classes and generally was called only when the King required it, usually for the granting of taxes.

For over a decade Charles I refused to call Parliament believing himself to be chosen by God to rule alone. From 1639 to 1640 Charles fought a series of unpopular wars in an attempt to force his version of a prayer book on the Scottish Presbyterians. In 1636 he initiated a one off payment for the navy known as Ship Money which became a regular tax despite not having been ratified by the calling of a Parliament which he sought to avoid. In 1637 the trial of John Hampden for non payment of the tax found in favour of the King but made Hampden a national hero and led to a campaign of non payment and deliberate blocking of the courts with assessment disputes. As with the poll tax of the late 1980s those unable or refusing to pay often had goods seized by bailiffs who were often then resisted as the following official records from the time show.

"Robert Markes.....and William Caninge, a bailiff, being authorised by warrant for the levying of money arrears of his majesty's service of shipping....were much abused in the exsication of their office by several persons in many particulars as calling them thieves, rogues, assaulting them, throwing scalding water upon them, rescuing distresses (seized goods) taken.

The following records also form a picture of resistance:-

“John Edlyn of Pinner Marsh being distrained and a horse in custody: the said bailiff, was much beaten by the servant of the said Edlyn and the horse rescued away.

The wife of John Bugberd of Stanmore Parva did shut the door against the bailiffs and hurt one of them.

Richard Owen being demanded the money charged upon him refused to pay and then opposed the bailiff.

Non payment, legal challenges and community opposition to bailiffs eventually made the tax unworkable and like the poll tax of 350 years later it collapsed. Indeed, whilst the anti-poll tax campaigners of the 1980s sought inspiration from the anti-poll tax rebellion of Watt Tyler in 1381 whilst a more relevant analogy in the Ship Money rebellion of the 1630s lay hidden from history.