

**“Those that come
out of the North
country are the
greatest pests of the
Nation. The
Diggers came
thence.”**

***A ramble around the Diggers, their
times and their origins***

This is a squatters' rant, not an academic treatise. The author's only acquaintance with universities etc. is as places to blag hot showers and subsidised canteens. But care has been taken with the facts, as far as resources allow, and to distinguish them from speculation (of which there's a fair bit). Comments or info. on any mistakes very welcome. See end for contact details.

The quote above is from a Colonel Shapcot, at the trial of the Quaker, James Naylor in 1656-57, urging that Naylor be removed to Yorkshire. Spouting ignorance and bigotry seems to be a speciality of Colonels in all ages, and this is a prime example. Certainly, Gerrard Winstanley came from Wigan, but for the most part, the Diggers did not “come out of the North Country” at all.

SO WHERE DID THE DIGGERS COME FROM?

Until everything was stirred around by the civil wars, relatively few people in the 16th and 17th centuries moved from one part of the country to another. Certainly, many were dispossessed by enclosure, but it was not yet on the scale of the following two centuries or accompanied by the industrialisation which later caused people to crowd into towns. People who lost their livelihoods through landlords' greed would, more commonly, still live in their home areas, often subsisting as day labourers. They may have had to become "cottars" or "borderers" (i.e. squatters) existing on the fringes of their home villages or nearby ones. Those who did move away would be more likely to go to the main towns in their counties, rather than to more distant places. Even the poorest people - itinerant or "vagrant" beggars, entertainers, blaggers, or other ingenious duckers-and-divers would generally not move away from the regions where they were born.

There was a little more likelihood of movement amongst skilled craftspeople or traders, but again, it would often be to their local or county towns. Some of these did move to London or Bristol and this was a step which sometimes helped small traders to become big traders. In other cases, of which Gerrard Winstanley was an example, it simply led to them going bust. However, this is to start moving into the world of the new "middle sort of people", the lower end of the rising mercantile or middle class. Movement to completely different parts of the country may sometimes have been advantageous for them, but it was not a realistic option for the great majority of the "poor oppressed people of England".

But by the end of the civil wars, many such people had been taken away from their home areas for the first time, either to fight or because of the widespread devastation, disruption and polarisation of the population, all of which came on top of some exceptionally severe weather and several bad harvests. **So, it's reasonable to get an impression of where the Diggers came from by studying their surnames. In most cases, these are likely to indicate where the people themselves - rather than, as nowadays, their ancestors - were born and brought up.** It can't be 100%, but it should give us some insight. I have delved into a pile of reference works on English and Welsh surnames to try to do this. Even today, many people's surnames reflect where their paternal ancestors came from just two or three generations ago, and sometimes only one.

THE DIGGERS WE KNOW ABOUT

Many of the Diggers' pamphlets appeared under the name of Gerrard Winstanley. One was written by Robert Coster, and some were anonymous. Several pamphlets, however, appeared under a list of names, usually including Winstanley, who is thought to have written most or all of them. The subscribing of a list of names of people who

supported a political pamphlet was common practice at the time. The Diggers' ones subscribed in this way are:

The True Levellers Standard Advanced

A Declaration from the Poor Oppressed People of England

An Appeale to all Englishmen to judge between Bondage and Freedom

and *A Letter Taken at Wellingborough*

(all associated with the Surrey Diggers), and two *Declarations of the Grounds and Reasons Why We the Poor Inhabitants.. etc.*, one from Wellingborough and one from Iver, each signed by nine people, not including Winstanley.

Most of the lists of names on these pamphlets claim to be of people actually involved in occupying sites, though some were perhaps supporters or regular visitors, rather than the permanent occupiers. *A Declaration from the Poor Oppressed People of England* is subscribed by 45 people and is simply "*Signed for and in behalf of all the poor oppressed people of England and the whole world.*" It includes Winstanley and many of the names appearing on other pamphlets from the Surrey Diggers. Some of these names were probably well-wishers or aspiring Diggers. That not everyone who wanted to join Digger settlements could do so is illustrated in the *Letter Taken at Wellingborough*. This was a round-robin letter from the Surrey Diggers to the other Digger sites and supporters, after they had been evicted from George Hill and had established a new site at Little Heath, near Cobham. It is subscribed by 22 of the Surrey Diggers "*Besides their Wives and Children, and many more if there were food for them*". That the names signed were often somewhat random is illustrated by *An Appeale to all Englishmen...* 25 names of Surrey Diggers are subscribed "*And divers others that were not present when this went to the Presse*".

WHY NO WOMEN?

The penultimate quote above draws attention to the fact that all the signatories to all the pamphlets are men. This is quite normal for the period. The Diggers were amongst a small handful of way-out extremists (as perceived) who supported the right of women to preach. At least, it was one of many "scurrilous" allegations against them they didn't refute. They were also careful in several of their pamphlets to say that in using the terms "man", "men", "mankind", etc. they meant and included women as well as men. Not a mind-blowingly radical idea or the best choice of inclusive language, we might think, but let's not forget how we've benefited from three centuries and more of feminist thought and agitation which was really just beginning in their day. Such an awareness of sexism in language is virtually unique in the 17th century (at least, I

have found it nowhere else) and seems to be well ahead of its time.

So why were no women included amongst the signatories to the pamphlets? It may be that despite their advanced position (for the time) on the status of women, some of them still held the “conventional” view -adhered to by some reactionaries right up to the early years of the 20th century that young people were represented by their fathers and that, once married, it was the husband who spoke for the woman and the whole family. The Levellers demanded votes for all men and the notion that that women might have their own views, not necessarily in line with their husbands’, apparently carried little weight. Winstanley seems to have pulled back at least half way to the “conventional” view by the time he wrote his substantially less radical utopia *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* in 1652. By that time, of course, he was functioning more as an individual thinker than as the scribe or ideologist of a community of activists which certainly included many women. We don’t know whether either he or the Levellers ever came across the views of a few women like Hester Biddle, who asserted women’s right to independent political thought, though it usually had to be done from the dock when charged with daring to preach in public.

It is clear from the opening of *The True Levellers Standard Advanced* that at the time of establishing their first settlement in Surrey the Diggers (or *True Levellers*) rejected the nonsense of women’s views being represented by their fathers or husbands:

“And the Reason is this, Every single man, Male and Female, is a perfect creature unto himselfso that the flesh of man being subject to Reason, his Maker, hath him to be his Teacher and Ruler within himself, therefore needs not run abroad after any Teacher and Ruler without him, for he needs not that any man should teach him...”

That passage has the unmistakable ring of Winstanley’s thought and prose. It may be they felt they had to compromise when publishing pamphlets. A pamphlet signed by women would not have been taken seriously, including by many women, and would have appeared as something from the loony fringe (a well-populated territory at the time, in which the Diggers were most anxious not to be placed). A deliciously subversive speculation - which I offer purely in hope and have not the slightest shred of evidence to support is that some of the signatories might have *been* women, adopting male names for the purpose.

SUSAN KING & GERRARD WINSTANLEY

Let’s not leave the almost entirely hidden topic of the Digger women without a mention for SUSAN KING. She rarely gets one, partly because we know very little about her. What we do know is that she was married to Gerrard Winstanley through all the upheaval, repression, imprisonment and poverty of the Digger years. Couldn’t

have been easy, could it? They married in London in 1640. She was originally from Cobham and it was through her that Gerrard came to Surrey in the first place. War conditions and being ripped off by people he trusted caused his small textile business to fail, and in a dire predicament they went to live with her parents and work on the family farm. It seems that Gerrard had much support and help not only from Susan, but from her family.

We don’t know if they had any children, but as they were together for between 17 and 24 years, it’s possible they did. The names of any children and what happened to them would not be recorded, however, because they would not have been baptised in the established church, and there were no such things as secular birth certificates. Susan died some time between 1657 and 1664, and Gerrard later married ELIZABETH STANLEY (interestingly, another related Lancashire surname) with whom he had three children. By the time of their birth, Gerrard seems to have been sufficiently reconciled to the church - at least temporarily for their births to be recorded. Jeremiah was born in 1665, Elizabeth in 1667 and Clement in 1669. Gerrard was getting on a bit by this time. He would have been 60 in the year Clement was born.

By the time Gerrard died in 1676, the family had moved to London and it seems he was once again at odds with the church, because he had a Quaker burial. An explanation of this might lie in the fact that the period when the family appears in church records (and when, indeed, Gerrard held various parish offices) was one of especially severe repression against the Quakers.

The record of his burial says that he was survived by his wife, Elizabeth, and two sons, Gerrard (presumably the boy baptised as Jeremiah) and Clement. There is no mention of his daughter, Elizabeth. Whilst the presumption of the times might have been that a mere daughter wasn’t worth mentioning, this wasn’t the Quaker way. So unless there was an error (and the Quaker clerk made one over Gerrard’s age) it looks like Elizabeth may have died in childhood, a common enough occurrence.

I have not included Susan King’s name in the analysis below. To do so would be to make the same mistake as was general at the time. It would be wrong to identify her as one of the Diggers simply because her husband was. Maybe she was, maybe she wasn’t. It’s unlikely she would have been opposed to the Diggers, but we don’t know if she played any part. Perhaps she was very active in the digging. Perhaps she supported the project and the ideas behind it, but couldn’t help wishing someone else’s husband would put his neck on the line and write the next pamphlet. Maybe Gerrard’s two years of frantic activism between 1648 and 1650 was a cause of tension between them. We just don’t know, and we’re not not likely to find out..

What is fairly clear is that after the eviction from Little Heath in 1650, Gerrard felt a need to sort his life out. *And*

don't we know that feeling! From contemporaries such as the ex-Ranter Lawrence Clarkson who accused him of “treacherously retreating from Georges Hill” to some modern academic historians who haven't a clue about the sort of burnout two years of 24/7 activism engenders, Winstanley has been accused of selling out. Our experience should help us to judge him less harshly. He felt a great sense of obligation to many “kind friends” who had supported him, including by lending money, and was anxious to repay and thank them. This seems to have been the main focus of his life in the year or two following 1650. One of those “kind friends” was certainly William King, Susan's father, who seems to have had a high regard for Gerrard. We don't know for sure if he was amongst those who lent him money, but it's likely he was one of very few in a position to do so.

From the known fragments of his life, what others said about him, and his own comments we can get an impression of Gerrard's character. His ability to inspire others is obvious, but probably lay more in his ideas and clarity of thought than in action, much as he valued action over words. He seems to have been a person of genuine, unpretentious integrity, one of those transparently honest and selfless folk who are always admired and trusted. But such qualities are sometimes combined with a slightly unworldly naivety which fails to appreciate that not everyone is so trustworthy. The result is that such rare and lovely people are sometimes too easily ripped off or taken advantage of, and this happened to Gerrard more than once. It is said that he was a rather muddled and disorganised character, and he more or less admits this himself. He was someone with understanding and vision, very forward-thinking ideas and the ability to express them lucidly. But an organiser he wasn't.

AN UNORGANISED REVOLUTION?

In fact, organisation wasn't a strong point of any of the radical activists in the 17th century. Most of them saw only the political ideas which inspired them. The priority was to “declare it all abroad” by agitation, symbolic action, publishing pamphlets etc. If the ideas could be spread widely enough, their truth and power alone would cause the old order of property and money to crumble. Behind this lay a widespread millenarian conviction that the world had been turned upside down, that the thousand-year reign of Christ was about to begin and all injustice and oppression would soon be swept away. There was no point in organising. It was going to happen anyway. The point was to see it coming and be on the right side. The most you could do was to give the inevitable victory a bit of a shove forward. This was, of course, a contributory factor in the defeat of movements such as the Levellers and the Diggers by the proto-capitalist faction which had seized power, led by highly efficient and ruthless drivers such as Cromwell and Ireton.

It took our forebears a couple more centuries to fully

appreciate the necessity for planning ahead and organising well. Let's bear that in mind the next time we're tempted to cobble something half-arsed together and hope it'll do! Winstanley himself seems to have learned the lesson more quickly. The whole tenor of *The Law of Freedom in a Platform*, written in 1652, makes that clear. He had never been taken in by the millenarian miasma swilling around him. His outlook was -or at least became- much more secular, practical and future-oriented. This is why his thinking stands out nowadays as so astonishingly modern. We can only conclude that his apparently poor organising ability was a matter of individual temperament, not of ideology.

SORTING OUT THE NAMES

Ahthe names! You thought I'd rambled away from that one, didn't you? The pamphlets listed above appear, at first sight, to be subscribed by 101 people. However spelling, including the spelling of names, was not standardised in the 17th century and printers often made uncorrected errors. It's fairly clear from examination that some of the 101 were different versions of the same name and that the real total is 88, including 9 from Wellingborough and 9 from Iver. The disproportion in the number of names we know between Surrey and the other sites is not particularly significant. Wellingborough was a strong Digger settlement and Iver was in one of the main areas of radical agitation at the time. No names at all are known for any of the Diggers at the other settlements, of which there were probably 8 to 10.

Apart from the signatories to the pamphlets, only one other Digger name is known, ADAM KNIGHT. The only mention of him is that he was the companion of THOMAS HEAYDON when they were both arrested carrying the *Letter Taken at Wellingborough*, on a sort of Diggers Roadshow to raise support and funds for the hard-pressed Surrey Diggers. Official accounts say that four men were nicked with the *Letter*, but the text names only Thomas Heydon and Adam Knight as its bearers. The other two were probably local Wellingborough Diggers or supporters. Thomas Heydon's name is previously known in connection with the Surrey Diggers. He was a signatory of *A Declaration from the Poor Oppressed People of England*, and of the *Letter* itself. But Adam Knight had not signed any previous pamphlets and, curiously, was not even a signatory of the *Letter*, notwithstanding that he was one of its bearers. So who was Adam Knight, and why does his name not appear on any of the pamphlets? We don't know, but we can make a couple of reasonable guesses.

Young people's rights to political thought and action, independent of their fathers or “masters”, were, if anything, even more repressed than those of mature women. As mentioned above, a few courageous and independent women were asserting that right by preaching and agitating. The idea that young people might have the same right was

virtually inconceivable. Young men, of course, would eventually come into the political inheritance of their gender; the right to hold their own opinions, recognised at least in radical circles. The “conventional” view was that a man became independent when he was married and the head of his “own” household. Until then, he was supposed to do (and think) what he was told. Political thought or action by young men, unguided by their elders, was thought particularly dangerous, presumably because they were seen as having more capacity for organised violence than women. It was widely thought that only men over 40 should occupy positions of influence or responsibility.

We know that Winstanley held firm but unfashionably futuristic views that young people’s ideas should be respected and listened to, that they should be given opportunities for self-development and encouraged to take responsibility based on their “wits” rather than their age. It’s therefore not unreasonable to guess that Adam Knight might have been a capable youngster, perhaps not considered old enough to sign pamphlets in 1649 for the same reasons of wider credibility which I suggest above may have led to the exclusion of women’s names. In the following year, however, accompanying Thomas Heydon on what must have been an arduous but important journey may have been an excellent opportunity for him to broaden his experience and exchange ideas with others active in similar struggles.

An alternative explanation might be that Adam Knight was a Digger or active sympathiser who was simply not one of the Surrey group, but from some other place. His name is associated with the South and West Midlands.

Of the 88 names, 11 are no use in determining where the Diggers might have come from as they are very common in every part, or almost every part, of England (and Wales, too, in one case). These names are BARKER, BROWN, GRAY, HALL, TURNER, two SMITHS and four TAYLORS. Another seven names are obscure and not included in even the oldest or most compendious directories I have found. In some cases, I think I can guess why. The geezer who signed himself HENRY SLAVE was taking the piss with a facetious false name, a practice not unknown to 20th and 21st century squatters (1). DANIEL FRELAND might look like another joker, though FREELAND is listed as a known but rare Oxfordshire name and there is also a long-established family of that name in the Cobham area which can be traced at least to the previous century (2). So Daniel Freland is counted as a Surrey local.

(1) But sometimes not recommended. Not if you want to win court cases, anyway. You can’t get legal aid or exemption from fees in false names Contact Advisory Service for Squatters for advice.

(2) I am grateful to David Taylor, a meticulous local historian of the Cobham area for information on the Freeland family.

The political theory that the “Norman yoke” had at last been cast off by the execution of Charles I was widely held amongst radicals at the time, including the Diggers. Indeed, it was their main legal argument for their right to cultivate the commons. So HENRY NORMAN may be another facetious name, but I have included it as it is a known and listed name associated with London.

JOHN CURRANT and WILLIAM TENCH, however, look like pseudonyms. WILLIAM HATHAM and CHRISTOPHER BONCHER may be corruptions of names I have not been able to trace. ROGER TUIS and JOHN PRA (not, apparently an abbreviation) are very weird names, perhaps corruptions or more false ones.

That leaves us with 70 names we can analyse for their origins. But there is still a problem. Some English names are exclusively associated with a particular county or part of the country. WINSTANLEY, for example, was until recent times, normally found only in Lancashire, where there is a village of that name. If we didn’t know it already, it would be fairly safe to assume Gerrard came from there.

At first sight, HENRY BICKERSTAFFE also appears to have been from Lancashire, as that is where his name originates. However, it is known that the Bickerstaffe family had been settled in Surrey since at least his father’s time (3). There are indications that Henry was older than most of the Diggers (4) so, notwithstanding his name, he should be counted as a Surrey local. Unless his family had also taken the unusual step of relocating in an earlier generation, for which there is no evidence, ROBERT SAWYER (or SAYER or SAYEAR) could really only have been from East Anglia.

Other names are associated with two or more different regions, but not with others. JOHN HARRISON, for example, could have been from the Midlands, the North East or the North West, but he is unlikely to have been from anywhere south of there, where the name HARRIS prevails instead, with a border region in the Midlands where the two names mingle. Conversely, the two CHILDEs and CLIFFORDs might have been from the South East or the South West, but they certainly weren’t from the North or Midlands. In some cases, therefore, the names are more useful in establishing where people did not come from than, rather than where they did.

This is reflected in the graphs below, where it has been necessary to have categories such as “South Generally”

(3) My source for this is an interesting conversation with Jim Alsop Professor of British History at McMaster University, Ontario during the Diggers 350 celebrations in 1999.

(4) It may be possible to establish Henry’s age from original sources such as parish records, but I haven’t had time for this.

and “South or Midlands” as well as more specific ones. **What is established though, is that the Diggers came overwhelmingly from the south of England. At most and allowing for no more anomalies than already mentioned - 11 of the 70 (including 9 of the Surrey Diggers) came “out of the North country” and some of those were more likely from the Midlands.**

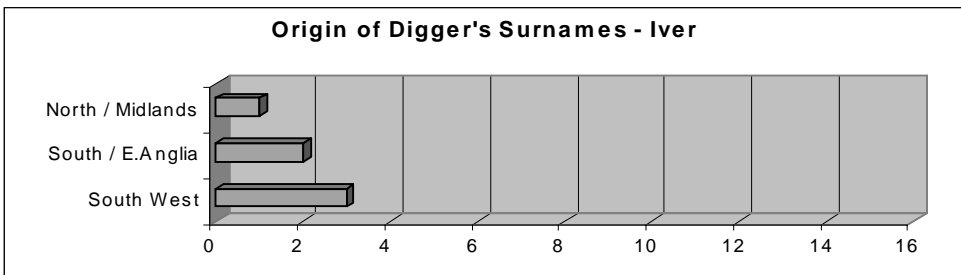
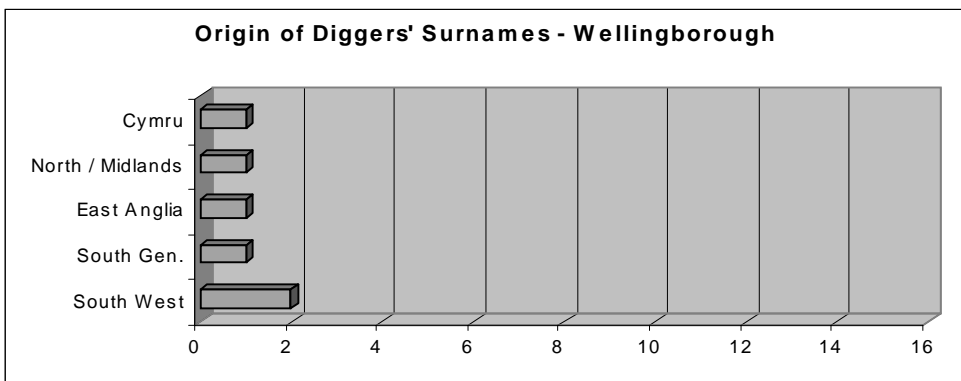
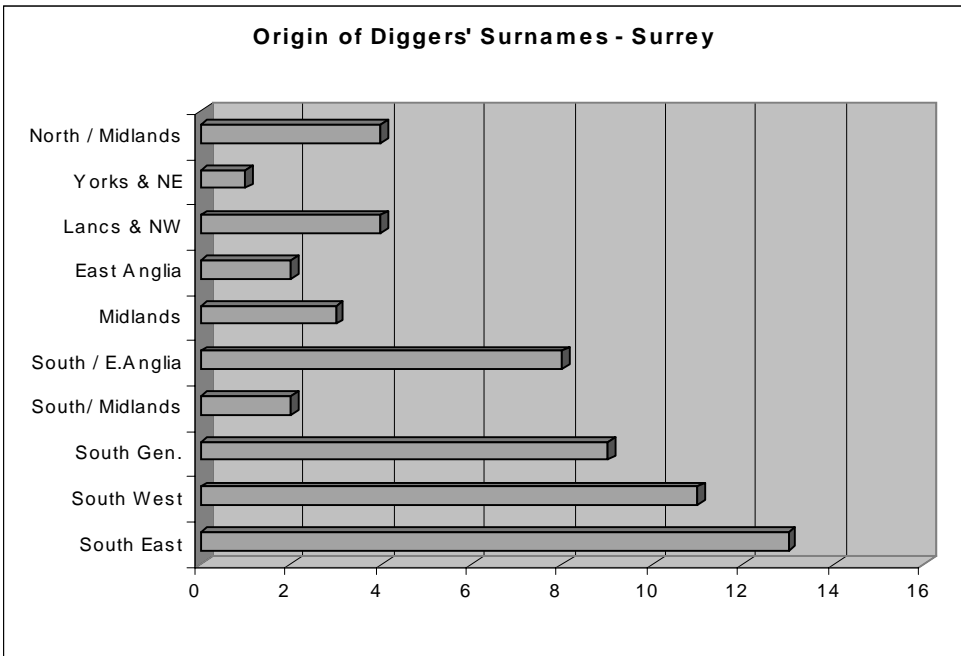
The only work I know of on the Diggers’ names is in **Another Digger Broadside** (Keith Thomas, 1969 Past

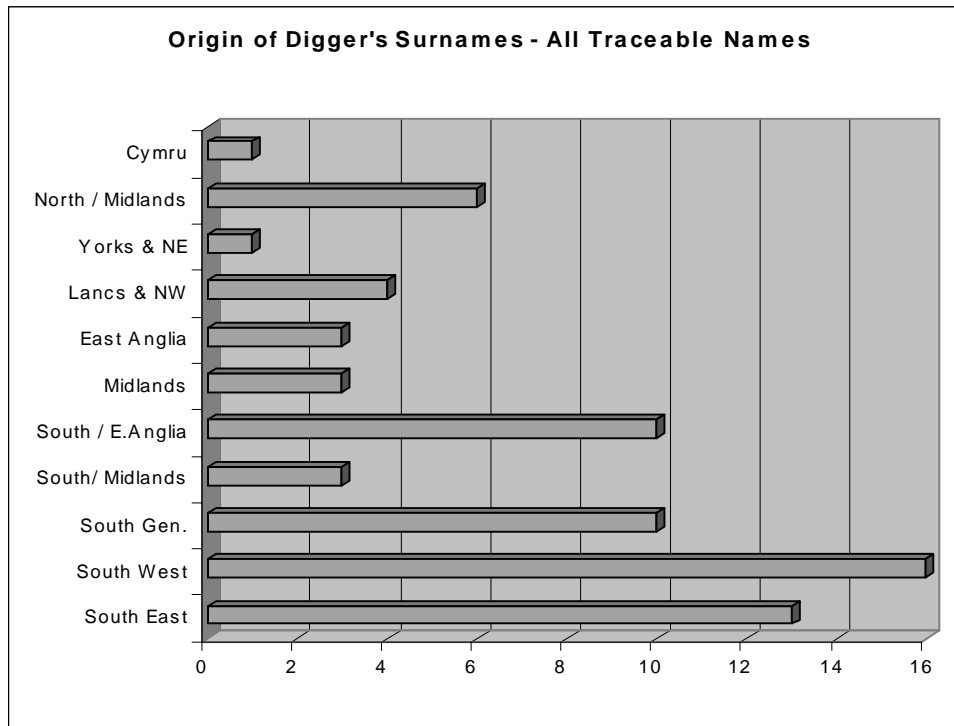
& Present No.42) and concerns the Iver settlement, where he establishes that all the signatories were local people, at least in the sense that they remained in the area long after the Digger settlement was evicted.

Given Buckinghamshire’s character as a border area between regions, that is in line with what I have found, but it does not help us with where the Iver Diggers might have come from before the establishment of their settlement. What the names indicate about this is clear on the graph below.

I wonder if Colonel Shapcot’s strictures about Northerners being ‘pests’ were applicable to PARSON PLATT? This clergyman was instrumental in the arrest of Gerrard Winstanley, Henry Bickerstaffe and Thomas Starre and organised and encouraged the trashings and evictions at George Hill.

PLATT IS AS RESOUNDING -A LANCASHIRE NAME AS THEY COME!





CONCLUSIONS & SPECULATIONS

It is striking that a large number of the Diggers seem to have come from the South West. Whilst the scattering of names from other parts of England might be within the margin of error of my inevitably rough method of counting apparent surname origins, the disproportionate number of them with west-country associations looks large enough to be significant. The explanation for this might lie in the political geography of England at the time and the background of the people who became Diggers.

Late 1648 and the early months of 1649 was the period when the Levellers and other radical agitators in the army were under terminal pressure. The final military defeat of the Levellers did not come until shortly after the Diggers kicked off; but the writing was already on the wall. It had become clear to everyone - indeed explicit - that the revolution in which the ordinary people of England had expended their "blood and treasure" was not a revolution for them or their freedom, but for the rising mercantile class. The new regime of the gentry had its provisional wing in the Independents, led by Cromwell, Ireton, Fairfax etc., which had carried out a Parliamentary coup d'état against their more temporising and king-friendly Presbyterian predecessors. The new regime was now ruthlessly enforcing its control.

Disillusion and disintegration amongst those who had struggled against the royalists since 1642 was rife and the army, in which much revolutionary agitation had taken place, was being disbanded or diverted to repressive campaigns in Ireland and Scotland. Many of those who

had been most politically active or who refused to serve in Ireland were dismissed without their arrears of pay.

Strange as it may seem to us, the execution of the king in January had engendered a general feeling of calamity and doom amongst many people. It was against this background that the Diggers saw not calamity and doom, but opportunity. The "Norman Yoke" had been cast off, they argued, and it was time for people to overthrow the landlords and lawyers together with their system of "propriety" (property), to take over the land to meet their needs, and "make the earth a common treasury for all".

It is thought that the Diggers included a strong element of former Levellers and other activists cast adrift by the ending of the wars, dispossessed and frustrated by the political developments which followed, but determined not to be defeated. If this was the case, it might explain why so many of them apparently came from the South West. That area had been the main stronghold of Royalism in the wars. Its nobility was more solidly behind the King than anywhere else, and the royalists even had active support from many of the local gentry, precisely the sort of people who were mainstays of the Parliamentary cause in other parts of the country. Support for the Parliamentary side in the South West was confined to certain towns, such as Dorchester, and other pockets where local conditions favoured it.

As for the activity and involvement of the majority of people, the West country had an unusual movement known as the CLUBMEN. They were mean, tough vigilante bands, often well organised but - as their name implied - without much weaponry. Fundamentally neutral in the wars, they

might occasionally support one side or the other, varying according to local attitudes. The Somerset Clubmen tended to support Parliament, whereas those in Dorset and Devon were more likely to co-operate with the Royalists. However, these were passing tactical alliances. The Clubmen's main concern was to resist conscription, billeting of soldiers, confiscation of supplies etc. by *either* side and to keep the war and its ravages away from their communities. They weren't averse to expropriating whatever they could from the establishments of whichever of the wealthier protagonists was currently on the losing side.

Those who came from the West country and had fought for or supported the Parliamentary cause would often have been swimming against the tide of their home areas. By 1649, returning there to rebuild their lives must have been a daunting prospect. The region was extensively trashed and there was still a strong and ruthless current of Royalism, now organising itself underground. The parochial, non-ideological, opportunist approach of the Clubmen would not have had much countervailing appeal to activists whose political thinking had developed by leaps and bounds in the war years. They had seen more than enough of bloodshed and terror, and of the old ways in which England had been run. They had a vision of building a new co-operative society, rejecting property and the machinations of the clergy, lawyers and money men, and such a radical perspective was not one the Clubmen were likely to share.

There being nothing much to go back home to except hard times and sporadic royalist terrorism, people from the South West would have been much more attracted to the revolutionary milieu and ferment of ideas in areas such as Kent, the environs of London (including Surrey), the south and east Midlands, and especially Buckinghamshire and the Thames Valley, where the radical wing of the Levellers had its greatest strength. Some of them, it seems, made new homes in these places, trying bravely and imaginatively to create a sort of real **IDEAL HOMES EXHIBITION**.

**So sod the Daily
Mail and Olympia.
Why don't we
have a pop at it too?**

**Jim
Advisory Service for Squatters
January 1999
[revised January 2000]**

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