

Red Saunders  
**Hidden**

Exhibition Guide



## *The Swing Riots, 1830*

*'The lane down to your farm is dark. We will light it.'*

A 'Swing' letter sent to a farmer in Kent, c.1830

In 1830, discontent erupted across rural England. Land enclosures in the 18th and early 19th century had forced agricultural workers off common land, forcing them to work for wealthy landowners. After continued hardship and falling wages, workers were left starving and desperate. The spark for the Swing Riots may have been a series of poor harvests and the introduction of the threshing machine, which threatened to take away their winter employment.

Protestors attacked landowners' property by breaking threshing machines and setting hayricks and barns on fire. They worked together to produce petitions and hold wage meetings, and sent threatening letters to landowners signed 'Captain Swing'. This invented character, regarded as the figurehead of the movement, may have been inspired by landowners' threats that protestors would 'swing' or be hanged for their actions. Whilst the Swing Riots were most widespread East Anglia, they also took place throughout England, including Yorkshire.

The Swing Riots achieved some successes in the short term, with some landlords reducing rents and farmers increasing wages to agricultural workers. However, many landlords went back on their word later and called for reprisals against the rioters. By December 1830, almost two thousand people were awaiting trial; nineteen were executed, and a further 481 transported to the penal colony of Australia.

In the long term though, the Swing Riots played a key role in supporting calls for political reform as the only real solution to the widespread social, political and agricultural unrest throughout Britain. The riots strongly influenced Earl Grey's Whig government and led to a number of laws including the Reform Act (1832) and the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834), and the setting up of workhouses across the country to help the poor.



## *Hild of Streonshalh (Hilda of Whitby) 614 - 680*

*'Her prudence was so great that not only indifferent persons but even kings and princes asked and received her advice'.*

*The Ecclesiastical History of the English, 731, the Venerable Bede*

Hild was the founder of the monastery of Streonshalh, later renamed Whitby by Viking invaders, in present-day North Yorkshire.

She decided to become a nun at the age of 33, and became the abbess of Streonshalh in 657. In this influential 'double monastery', men and women lived separately, but worshipped together in church. According to accounts by the seventh-century monk the Venerable Bede, Hilda upheld ideals of Christianity, and ruled that all property and goods be held in common. Bede describes Hild as a woman of great energy, who was a skilled administrator and teacher. Renowned for her knowledge and spiritual power, she offered counsel and advice to kings, commanding a level of prestige and authority usually reserved for (male) bishops.

Hild valued learning and actively recruited students for her monastery, including Caedmon, the earliest known English poet. A champion of female education, her monastery fostered a community of highly educated women.

From the late nineteenth century until the present day, there has been a revival of interest in St. Hilda. With the development of education for modern women she has become the patron of many schools and colleges all over the world, such as the College of St Hild and St Bede in Durham, and St Hilda's College, Oxford.



## *Leveller Women in the English Revolution 1647*

*'...we are assured of our creation in the image of God, and of an interest in Christ equal unto men, as also of a proportional share in the freedoms of this Commonwealth'.*

*Petition of Women, Affecters and Approvers of the Petition, 1649*  
Attributed to Katherine Chidley

Also known as the English Civil War, the English Revolution (1640 to 1660) was a series of conflicts between Parliamentarians (people who supported Parliament) and Royalists (those who upheld the divine right to rule of kings). Many different groups participated in these conflicts. The Leveller movement supported Parliament and the overthrow of the monarchy. Levellers championed religious tolerance and democracy, with female members particularly speaking out for gender equality.

This image is inspired an account of a meeting of Levellers with supporters of Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army at an encampment near Malton in North Yorkshire. A female Leveller stands on a barrel to address her audience of dissenters and soldiers resting in woodland. Taking advantage of the revolution's temporary assault on patriarchal (male-led) authority, women claimed the right to be heard. This was an act of political and physical bravery in which they risked torture and execution. The woman in this image is unnamed, but she is inspired by accounts of female Levellers Katherine Chidley and Elizabeth Lilburne.

Meetings like these took place throughout England in 1647 to debate the direction of the revolution. This was a decisive moment after the Parliamentarians had won a number of battles and imprisoned King Charles I. He was later executed in 1649 and the monarchy replaced by the Commonwealth of England (1649 - 53), and then with a Protectorate (1653 - 59) under Oliver Cromwell's personal rule. Although the monarchy was eventually restored in 1660 with King Charles II, it was only with the consent of Parliament. Therefore, the English Revolution effectively set England on course to adopt a constitutional monarchy, in which the monarch's powers were limited.



### *William Cuffay and the London Chartists, 1842*

*'The conduct of Cuffay throughout his trial was that of a man... His protest from first to last against the mockery of being tried by a jury animated by class-resentments and party-hatred showed him to be a much better respecter of the constitution than either the Attorney General or the Judges on the bench. Cuffay's last words should be treasured up by the people.'*

*The Northern Star, 7 October 1848*

Chartism was a revolutionary democratic movement that spread across England in the 1830s and 1840s. The Chartists called for parliamentary reform, as outlined in their six point charter, which included demands such as a vote for all men over the age of twenty one, secret ballots, equal constituencies and payment of MPs, enabling members of the working class to stand for parliament.

William Cuffay is an often overlooked member who was elected president of the London Chartists in 1842. Born to an ex-slave turned naval cook, Cuffay found work early in life as an apprentice tailor. Though he originally had Conservative political interests, Cuffay joined the Chartist cause after being dismissed from his job following a protest organised by the Tailors' Union in April 1834. Appalled at the way he had been treated, and with a renewed belief in the need for workers to be represented in parliament, Cuffay joined the Metropolitan Tailors' Charter Association. He became a major figure in the Chartist movement, being elected to the national executive of the National Charter association before finally being elected president.

Considered a militant Chartist, Cuffay was present at the Kennington Common Meeting in London in 1848, where large crowds in support of the Chartists were roughly dispersed by soldiers and special constables. Cuffay was later arrested and put on trial after evidence from a government spy claimed that Cuffay was planning an armed uprising. Cuffay maintained that the trial was unlawful but was sentenced to 21 years transportation to the Australian penal colony of Tasmania. Though he was pardoned three years later, he remained in Tasmania and campaigned for workers rights until he died in a workhouse, aged 82.



## *Wat Tyler and the Peasants' Revolt, 1381*

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381, led by Walter 'Wat' Tyler, was the largest and most widespread rebellion in British history. The revolt was triggered by growing unrest and resentment amongst peasants across England. The Black Death epidemic of 1348 to 1350 had killed thousands of people, meaning the labour force was dramatically reduced. At first, this meant that peasants could get more money for their forced labour. Some demanded their freedom or bought their own land from their overlords. However, by 1381, there were growing fears that lords would simply demand their land back. In addition, King Richard II, aged just fourteen and under strong influence from his advisors, had increased poll tax. This was a fixed payment per person that was supposedly intended to fund overseas wars. The increase was too much for most peasants to bear.

Tax collectors found themselves confronted by villagers prepared to stand up for their rights. Local conflicts led to a larger uprising, culminating in a march to London by perhaps over 50,000 peasants and villagers from Kent and Essex. Wat Tyler emerged as their leader. On 14 June 1381, Richard II agreed to meet Tyler and his supporters at Mile End in London. Tyler demanded freedom from serfdom (forced labour), the right for peasants to buy and sell their own produce, and a pardon for all offences committed during the rebellion. The king signed a charter agreeing to these demands and most of the peasants returned home. However, some remained to lead a violent siege on the Tower of London resulting in the execution of the Lord Chancellor, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lord Treasurer. This is the only time in its history that the Tower has been captured.

The following day Tyler and his supporters met once more with the king. They made more radical demands, including the confiscation and redistribution of land belonging to the wealthy Church. Tyler was immediately killed by the king's men. Richard II later claimed that any promises he had made to the peasants had been done so under threat. A judicial enquiry was undertaken and all leaders who had survived the rebellion were executed. However, although the revolt itself ended in failure, it succeeded in helping to end serfdom (forced labour) in medieval England. And never again did a government successfully impose a poll tax on the people of this country.



## *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Newington Green Dissenters, 1781*

*'Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience.'*

*A Vindication on the Rights of Women, 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft*

In 1784, Mary Wollstonecraft (1752 – 1797) co-founded a school for women in Newington Green in London. The Newington Green community was a hub for political and radical thinking, and for the discussion of ideas. Through the Newington Green community, Wollstonecraft was introduced to publisher Joseph Johnson, who commissioned her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1786).

Wollstonecraft continued to publish radical works with her pamphlet (booklet) entitled *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790). This was a response to Edmund Burke's writings about the French Revolution in which he championed the inherited rights of the monarchy. Wollstonecraft attacked the notion of monarchy and supported the idea of republicanism, in which a nation is governed by an elected leader. Along with Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1792), her pamphlet had a major influence on reformers.

Red Saunders' image shows Wollstonecraft in 1792, after her return from Paris, where she lived during part of the French Revolution. In the image, she is shown wearing a tricolour cockade (the symbol of the Revolution) on her cloak. That same year, she had published her most important work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In this publication, Wollstonecraft argued for the need for women's education. She held current educational restrictions to blame for keeping women in a state of 'slavish dependence'. Her radical ideas overshadowed those of many of her male contemporaries. She called for the abolition of the monarchy, Church, and military hierarchies in order to achieve social equality. An instant bestseller, the book has become a founding text of modern feminism.

Mary Wollstonecraft died as a result of childbirth in September 1797. Her daughter, Mary Shelley, continued in her mother's literary footsteps and wrote one of the great works of science fiction, *Frankenstein* (1818).



## *Thomas Paine, 1772*

*'A nation under a well regulated government, should permit none to remain uninstructed. It is monarchical and aristocratical government only that requires ignorance for its support'.*

*The Rights of Man, Part 2, 1792, Thomas Paine*

Norfolk-born Thomas Paine was a key political figure in both England and America. After moving to America in 1774, Paine caused a stir with his publication *Common Sense* (1776). He attacked the British monarchy and called for American independence. The publication was a bestseller and greatly contributed to the American Revolution.

Paine published his best known work, the two-part *Rights of Man* (1791 and 1792), when he returned to England. Like Mary Woolstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790), the book was made in response to writings by Edmund Burke criticising the French Revolution. Paine believed events in France signified the beginning of a new democratic world, which would reject conventions of power based on tradition and superstition. He also called for welfare benefits such as pensions and maternity benefits, which could dramatically improve the lives of the working class and spark their interest in politics.

Paine spent a great deal of time in France during and after the revolution, gaining citizenship and continuing to spread his radical republican democratic ideas until imprisonment in 1793. Paine spent his time in prison writing a new book, *The Age of Reason* (1793 – 1794). This was his most controversial work yet, attacking organised religion and specifically Christianity. He went as far as to state that the Bible was not the definitive word of God. *The Age of Reason* offended a large number of Paine's supporters on both sides of the Atlantic. He died in 1809 in poor conditions in New York, after living his final years suffering from depression and alcoholism.

Whilst Paine remains little known in the UK, his reputation in America has grown since his death. He is now considered one of the 'fathers' of American independence, and was quoted by Barack Obama in his presidential inauguration speech.



## John Ball, 'Hedgerow Priest', 1380

*'Matters cannot go well in England, nor ever shall, until all things shall be held in common, when there are no vassals or Lords'*

John Ball

John Ball, also known as 'the hedgerow priest', was a hugely popular roving preacher. He argued for social equality and his radical views brought him into conflict with the Church. After being removed from his post at St James' church by his bishop in 1366, Ball gave open-air sermons on village greens or other public spaces, without being connected to a particular church or parish. However, he continued to offend the Church with his attacks on social and religious hierarchies which kept peasants in a state of poverty and serfdom (forced labour).

He was excommunicated (banished from the Church) and imprisoned several times, but continued to preach. His sermons had a huge influence on stirring up the Peasants' Revolt led by Wat Tyler in 1381. Ball was a prisoner at Maidstone Prison, Kent when the revolt broke out. He was rescued by peasants and gave a rousing open-air sermon to the rebel army that had assembled at Blackheath. He argued that all men were created equal by God, and should not be oppressed by the Church and monarchy:

*'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman? From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men. For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning, he would have appointed who should be bond, and who free. And therefore I exhort you to consider that now the time is come, appointed to us by God, in which ye may (if ye will) cast off the yoke of bondage, and recover liberty'*

Ball went on to support Tyler throughout negotiations and further rebellion in London. After the eventual failure of the Peasants' Revolt, he was named as a ringleader by judicial enquiries. He was captured in Coventry and hung, drawn and quartered on in the presence of King Richard II on 15 July 1381, and his head later displayed on a pike on London Bridge.