

"Freeborn" John Lilburne. 1615-1657 by John Millington

(Agitator, Soldier, Pamphleteer, Leveller, Quaker, who negotiated the surrender of Tickhill Castle, July 1644).

After the Battle of Marston Moor, 2 July 1644, resistance in the North came almost to an end. There were still some "strongholds" occupied by the royalists. One of these was Tickhill. The Earl of Manchester allegedly referred to Tickhill Castle as "not worth the lives of ten men". The Earl, Commander of the armies of the Eastern Association, had moved to Doncaster where he made his Headquarters. He regarded Sheffield and Tickhill Castles and Welbeck House as insignificant, much to the annoyance of Cromwell who wanted these places taken.

At the end of July 1644, against Manchester's wishes, but, at the instigation of Cromwell, John Lilburne, shown right, with 200 dragoons, a cornet, a quarter master and 30 horsemen approached the castle. There was a parley and arrangements were made to meet at an inn in Doncaster to discuss surrender terms. The articles of surrender were signed and the Royalist garrison was given safe conduct passes. The Earl of Manchester entered the Castle on 28 July, and gave thanks to God that the surrender had been bloodlessly accomplished. He seems to have forgotten his original assertion because in his official report to Parliament he states that he has "...freed those parts from the violence and oppressions which they suffered under the garrisons of the enemy... Tickhill Castle being the nearest and most prejudicial to the Isle of Axholme... The place is of consequence, in respect it lies to hinder all commerce betwixt Derbyshire and these parts". He also makes sure that Lord Fairfax receives a copy. (An inventory of ammunition and stores was made: 'Provisions i.e. 100 Qtrs. of Grain, many barrels of salt butter, 1 stone of Cheese, powdered beef; a number of cattle and sheep; a cannon, 100 muskets, 60 horses, powder and match'). For his unauthorised action Lilburne was publicly berated by Manchester, so he was later infuriated when Manchester subsequently took the credit.



Lilburne had had a turbulent life. Prior to the war he had been brought before the Court of Star Chamber for distributing puritan pamphlets. He refused to recognise the court, or take the oath and was whipped, pilloried and imprisoned for 3 years. At the outbreak of the Civil War he had joined the army and fought at Edgehill under Essex. He had held Brentford against Prince Rupert while the Roundheads evacuated their artillery. He had been taken prisoner and sent to Oxford to be tried for High Treason. He smuggled a letter to his wife who petitioned Parliament which threatened to execute Royalist prisoners if he were put on trial. Lilburne was finally exchanged. Later, he was to be promoted Lieutenant Colonel in Manchester's army and had served with Cromwell at Lincoln and with distinction at Marston Moor.

In April 1645 Lilburne resigned from the army to resume his involvement in mainly political and social issues. He involved himself in a local dispute over the drainage and enclosure of lands within the Isle of Axholme. Many occupants felt aggrieved that their livelihoods had been taken from them, illegally, and there was riot and disorder particularly in the Epworth area. Drainage banks were pulled down so that land sown with corn was flooded, ditches were filled in and cattle were driven into standing corn. Sir Ralph Hansby, of Tickhill, along with others of the Royalist interest, had invested in this drainage project which had been going on for some years.

As the war progressed Lilburne now moved into political comment by condemning MPs who live at home in comfort and were now wealthy..." while soldiers who had risked their lives and lost limbs on battlefields were penniless and hungry, as were the starving widows and orphans of those who had died fighting for Parliament".

Lilburne was arrested in August 1645 but released in October. He attacked the Earl of Manchester for his war conduct and was arrested April 1646 for this attack and was sent by the House of Lords to the Tower. His wife, who was to bear him ten children, rented a house opposite. They signalled to one another, until the Tower windows were boarded up. Lilburne pulled the boards down, and threatened to set fire to them if they were put up again.

"Freeborn" John Lilburne (continued)

By 1647, when relations between the army and Parliament broke down, Lilburne was again in prison. Parliament wanted to disband the army. Many regiments refused to disband until grievances had been settled. Many soldiers just wanted to be paid; they wanted compensation for injuries received; immunity from prosecution and care of widows and children. New political and religious ideas were being discussed. It was a world "turned upside down". Despite being in prison, Lilburne added fuel to the flames of dispute between Parliament and the army by having his friends circulate his pamphlets among the soldiers. One of his pamphlets stated that.....

All and every particular and individual man and woman, that ever breathed in the world, are by nature all equal and alike in their power, dignity, authority and majesty, none of them having (by nature) any authority, dominion, or magisterial power one over or above another.

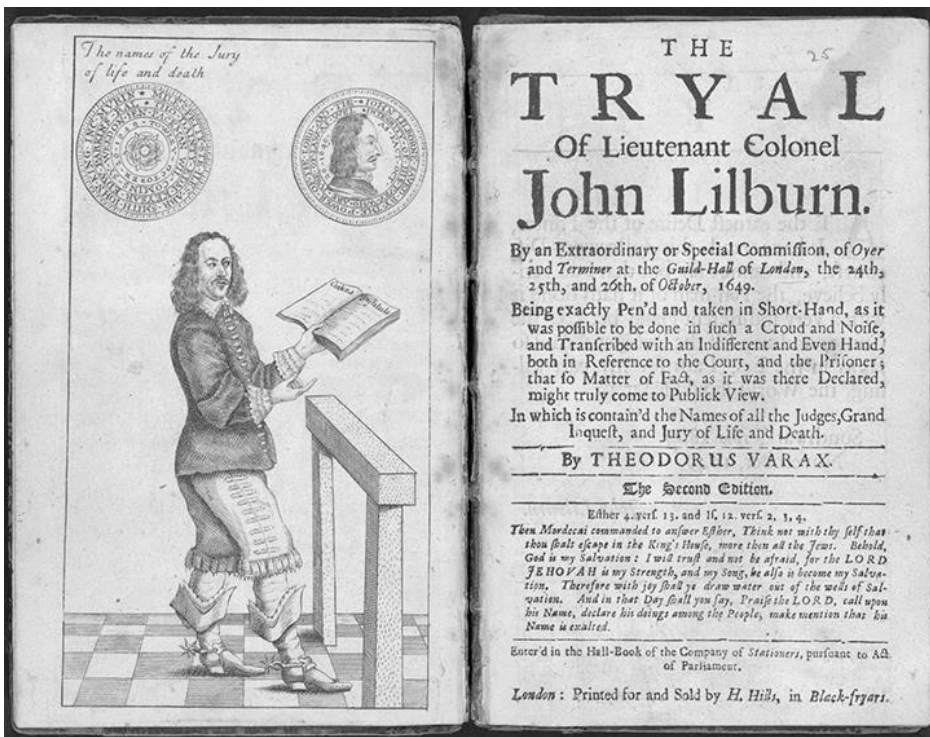
Each regiment had a committee of “agitators”, and many followed the doctrine of the Levellers, under the leadership of Lilburne and others. The principal demands of the Levellers involved religious toleration; a wider franchise for men; equality before the law and the laws written in English so that men could read them for themselves. The Levellers wanted biennial parliaments, and an end to imprisonment for debt; an elected magistracy and the end of impressment into the army.

Lilburne’s leadership of the Leveller cause brought him into direct conflict with Cromwell, who wanted some reforms but none so extreme as those of the Levellers. He denounced Cromwell as “the most evil, treacherous, mendacious, hypocritical and tyrannical of leaders”, though he refused to join in a conspiracy against him. He denounced the Earl of Manchester as a traitor and a royalist sympathiser. He continued to attack the government with his pamphlets and was again imprisoned in the Tower, and in Dover Castle. Part of the account of Lilburne’s trial in 1649 is illustrated below. He was eventually fined and banished in 1652 to the continent for a while for publishing a pamphlet for which he was charged with criminal libel. (He stayed in the Netherlands, only to be arrested on his return without permission in June 1653.)

Because of his unremitting attacks on the Government, and Cromwell himself, Lilburne was in out of prison for the last eight years of his life. He was charged with high treason, found not guilty but detained indefinitely.

Before the outbreak of war, Lilburne had been a martyr for puritan doctrine, he later became an advocate and champion of democracy. Along with Col. Thomas Rainsborough, who was murdered in Baxtergate, Doncaster, in 1648, he was a leading Leveller. He finally became a Quaker. The Quakers believed that God would continue to punish England by civil wars and unrest until Englishmen became better human beings; that the individual should renounce force, abandon politics, and concentrate on personal purity and kindness.

“Freeborn” John died of fever, 29th Aug 1657. He was visiting his wife on the birth of their tenth child. He was 42 and had spent more than 12 years of his life in prison.



Lilburne’s memorial:-

“Is John departed, and is Lilburne gone?
 Farwewell to both, to Lilburne and to John.
 Yet being dead, take this advice from me,
 Let them not both in one grave buried be:
 Lay John here, and Lilburne thereabout,
 For if they should meet, they would fall out.”

A detailed account of Lilburne’s life by Andrew Sharp can be found at the website www.oxforddnb.com