

WHEN THE KING LOST HIS CROWN

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King Charles I believed in the divine right of kings and disdained Parliament. His attempts to govern without Parliament's consent led to civil war that tore apart England, and Wigan, from 1642 to 1651.

The first blood of the civil war was shed by a Wigan contingent of Royalists in Manchester. It is well known that Wigan, a Royalist stronghold, was stormed in 1643 and sacked after Royalists lost the Battle of Wigan Lane to Parliamentary forces in 1651. It is less well known that Wiganers and people connected to Wigan played other interesting and prominent roles in the war. Here I identify some of these people and their roles.

From the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, the rector of Wigan Parish Church served with almost regal power as lord of the manor. King James I presented Dr. John Bridgeman as rector and lord of the manor in 1616; Dr. Bridgeman was chaplain to James I and Bishop of Chester. From 1625 to 1643 he served as rector of Wigan under Charles I.

Wigan burgesses elected two Members of Parliament. By 1640 a split in allegiances between the Wigan Members of Parliament became evident: Orlando Bridgeman, Dr. Bridgeman's son, was a Royalist and Alexander Rigby a Parliamentarian. Rigby, who probably was educated at Wigan Grammar School, was in command of Parliamentary forces that led an attack on Lathom House. Orlando Bridgeman had served as Solicitor-General to Charles, the Prince of Wales. In 1642 he was expelled from the House, but was knighted in 1643.

During the civil war a series of manifestos, published between 1647 and 1649 and mostly associated with the Levellers under the leadership of John Lilburne, offered a foundation for constitutional changes. It was John's brother, Colonel Robert Lilburne, who commanded elements of the Parliamentary forces at the Battle of Wigan Lane and was one of the signatories on the death warrant of King Charles I. Another group – the True Levellers, or Diggers – under the leadership of Gerrard Winstanley, a Wiganer, proposed much more radical changes that many say provided a foundation for socialism and even communism.

In 1649 the High Court of Justice found Charles I guilty of high treason, sentenced him to death, and he was executed. The President of the Court was John Bradshaw of Cheshire and of the widespread Bradshaw family of Bolton. In the 1490s, James Winstanley, the grandfather of Edmund Winstanley of Winstanley Hall, had joined an earlier John Bradshaw in Wales, where they operated a successful wool and cloth trade. Edmund's mother, Elizabeth, married John Bradshaw Jr.; Elizabeth was daughter of Sir Gilbert Gerard of Ince Hall, Wigan, who served as Attorney-General to Queen Elizabeth I. The

Bradshaighs of Haigh in Wigan were of the same family as the Bradshaws and in Wigan Parish Church is a chapel and memorials honoring Sir William Bradshaigh and his wife Lady Mabel. In 1543, Ralph Bradshaw, Esq., was Mayor of Wigan.

An uncle of Alexander Rigby was James Winstanley, gent., of Billinge, who was admitted to Gray's Inn in London in 1624. Orlando Bridgeman also was admitted to Gray's Inn in 1624, as was Thomas Fairfax, parliamentary commander-in-chief during the civil war, in 1626 and John Bradshaw in 1627. James Winstanley provided legal counsel to Gerrard Winstanley and regicides Colonel Robert Lilburne and Colonel John Moore and in 1650 acquired the Braunstone Estate in Leicestershire.

With the execution of Charles, the monarchy was abolished, a republic called the Commonwealth of England was established and Oliver Cromwell became Lord Protector. After the deprivation of Bishop Bridgeman, a nonconformist minister, James Bradshaw of Darcy Lever near Bolton, was granted parsonage of Wigan and he encouraged the siege of Lathom House – the seat of Royalist the Earl of Derby. No Members were returned to Parliament during the Commonwealth or under Protector Oliver Cromwell. Hugh Forth and Robert Markland briefly represented Wigan in 1659 under Protector Richard Cromwell.

In 1654 Gerrard Bankes became Mayor of Wigan. He was one of six Wiganers, including Gerrard Winstanley, given the name Gerrard in the period 1607 to 1613 when Gerrard Massie was Rector of Wigan. Gerrard Bankes' father, like Gerard Winstanley's father, was churchwarden at Wigan Parish Church.

Restoration of the monarchy began in 1660 when Charles II was received as King. In that year Sir Orlando Bridgeman served as Presiding Judge at the trial of the regicides of Charles I, including John Bradshaw. Bradshaw died in October 1659 and was buried in Westminster Abbey, but posthumously he was found guilty of high treason and his body was exhumed, hung in chains at Tyburn and beheaded.

Charles Hotham served as rector of Wigan from 1653 to 1662, when he was ejected for refusing to subscribe to the Act of Uniformity. After the Restoration, Sir Orlando Bridgeman purchased the patronage of Wigan rectory and in 1662 presented Dr. George Hall, Bishop of Chester and chaplain to Charles II, as rector. Dr. John Wilkins, a founder of the Royal Society and Bishop of Chester, was presented as rector of Wigan in 1668: in 1656 he had married Robina, Oliver Cromwell's sister.

John Molyneux, son-in-law of Alexander Rigby, and Roger Stoughton were elected to the First Parliament of Charles II in 1660. It was in the Third Parliament of Charles II in 1679 that we see political parties appearing for the first time: Charles, 2nd Earl of Ancrum, son of a confidential friend of Charles I, and Roger Bradshaigh, son of Sir Roger Bradshaigh of Haigh Hall, represented Wigan as Tories. William Bankes of Winstanley Hall was the first Whig Member for Wigan later in 1679; William was grandson of James Bankes who purchased Winstanley Hall from Edmund Winstanley in 1595.

The ancient and loyal borough of Wigan came to the brink of utter disaster and in so doing played its part in establishing the precedent that an English monarch cannot govern without Parliament's consent. New privileges were granted to the Corporation including the liberty to buy or sell

property with public money. Of great interest is the web of social, religious, economic and political connections 400 years ago, long before cars, railways, canals, radio, television and the internet. Communication was by personal contact, letter and horses.

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