

*Brave Community: A communal and personal tribute to our friend and colleague, John Gurney (1960-2014).*

John knew that to inhabit a place, to live there in full measure, you need to find its stories. When John moved from Sussex to the north-east with Rachel in 2004 I instinctively wondered how a man of the ‘chalk’ would locate the voices not of the ‘cheese’ – to steal the terms of David Underdown’s parable of the English Revolution – but of the peat, of the Pennines and Cheviots. With hindsight, I can see how naïve that was. John was someone who in both his professional and personal lives could sniff out a story and extract the gold from the archive that made time and place shine fresh. To walk with him around North Shields was to see the streets and buildings with different eyes, not only in the sometimes prosaic now but as part of a more poetic then, as home places to Commonwealth-era churchmen, eighteenth-century ship captains, Victorian professionals. To browse John’s famously extensive library – he found Keel Row Bookshop fast and you knew that if there was much good stuff left either he was away or he already had it – is to see how finding the spirit of a place was central to his vision. There are the expected classics, the Pevsners and Shell Guides of course, but there are also the modest and invaluable works of local history, waymarkers to the places he lived through his life, the volumes of Northumbrian legend and folktale, a complete collection of the romantic oral histories of George Ewart Evans. John was an active recorder of his own family’s lore and traditions, of the older generations on tape and in text, of Rachel, Thomas and Anna through his love of photography. Among the many things I learned from John during the years I knew him was that being a historian and making a home, physical and imaginative, were part of a common enterprise.

It was then fitting that on 21 May 2016 well over seventy-five historians, friends, family and locals should fill St Andrew’s church in Cobham, Surrey, to remember him. John devoted much of his professional life to finding the mid-seventeenth century stories of Cobham and its next-door neighbour Walton through his work on Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers, the compelling and multifaceted group of ecological prophets cum proto-communist radicals who in 1649 occupied wastelands on St George’s Hill to plant and sow and make of the earth ‘a common treasury’. That work reached its climax in two extraordinary books, *Brave Community: The Digger Movement in the English Revolution* published in 2007 and *Gerrard Winstanley: The Digger’s Life and Legacy* of 2013. Perhaps because of having no expert knowledge of the period and its feuds, what I am constantly struck by is the way John lovingly recreated the environment and political temperature of the parishes in 1649-50, the networks of family and business connection that linked Winstanley to Cobham, to London and back to his home-place of Wigan, the specific conditions of landscape and place on St George’s Hill. The description of the hill’s location and ecology in Chapter 5 of *Brave Community* is a masterclass in how to deep-mine an archive while never losing sight of how the riches brought back to the surface fit into a greater whole and why they matter.

Rachel’s expressed aim for the day was to make something ‘John himself would have enjoyed’. She spoke later – with a dignity and power that would seem almost unbelievable only to those who do not know her – of how she carefully chose

the title 'Brave Community' for the afternoon, to celebrate the bravery that John had shown during his illness and the community that had gathered to honour him in St Andrew's, where Winstanley had served as churchwarden in the latter years of his life.

The historian of Cobham, David Taylor, opened the proceedings before introducing a selection of Winstanley's works read by Stephen Hall from the Wigan Diggers, seven of who travelled down from Lancashire to pay tribute to John, who had spoken about his work at their annual festival in September 2013. Michael Wood from the University of Manchester then reminisced, with the engaging skill familiar to anyone who has seen his work on TV over the decades, about his encounters with the Diggers, from his time at Manchester Grammar School, through his meetings with Christopher Hill at Oxford, to his filming on St George's Hill with David Taylor in 2012 for his series *The Great British Story*. All three speakers in different ways stressed how Winstanley's ideas about the land, about power and powerlessness and the need for action were becoming more relevant than ever in the twenty-first century. Michael Wood made a claim for Winstanley to take his place in English literature as well as political thought, as perhaps the greatest writer of English prose of the seventeenth century and a forerunner to William Blake in his intense meditations on the Bible and as a maker of idiosyncratic and yet wholly original and deeply resonant myths. He reminded us of how dangerous Winstanley's ideas remain ("they will never be on 'Thought for the Day'!"), yet also how necessary they are to the story of what it means to be British.

After a short break a more academic panel discussed John's work on Winstanley and historians' present understanding of the Diggers. David Taylor, Ariel Hessayon and Rachel Foxley explored – among other things – Winstanley in Cobham, the religious and millennialist contexts of his writings and the relationships between the Diggers and the Levellers. I was struck here and throughout the day by the intense and genuine interest of the local people of Cobham, now a well-heeled place of footballers, stockbrokers and multi-million pound mansions, in some of the fiercest critics of private wealth and property this country has ever produced. The enthusiasm of the questions and the desire to learn more about their own radical movement, clearly evidenced by the speed and completeness with which the copies of John's books available to buy sold out, only reinforced the message of the day: Winstanley continues to speak, even over 350 years.

Finally, we were treated to two of John's own great enthusiasms, the 1975 film *Winstanley* by Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo, and the music of Leon Rosselson, who agreed to perform live for us. Andrew Bradstock introduced a fifteen-minute clip from the film that captured the hardships the Diggers faced on the hill and the persecution they encountered from the local forces of the constituted order. But, as befitted the day and John's work, the clip had been chosen as a celebration of hope and possibility over despair. A beautiful shot showed the Diggers mowing in harmony on St George's Hill with a Tolstoyan serenity, concluding with the arrival of joyous and unexpected news: they are not alone; the Digging is spreading through England.

Despite this, there was only one place to end. It is sometimes hard to separate my memories of John from the music of Leon Rosselson, with his songs, especially and naturally 'The World Turned Upside Down', running as a kind of soundtrack

whenever I think of him. 'They were dispersed / But still the vision lingers on': as the familiar words sung by Leon himself, Rachel, Thomas, Anna and as many of us who could still find our voices swirled beneath the Norman tower and spilled out through the twelfth-century porch into the early evening light of the churchyard, a thought of high seriousness took root: 'it does and it will, and it is through your words that we have come together and in this place.' Followed swiftly by another, less serious and more important: 'yes, you would have enjoyed this.'

*Scott Ashley*