The world turned upside down

Enquiry: In what ways was Britain turned upside down in the seventeenth century?

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Describing a world turned upside down

When historians write about change over time, they use certain words to describe *which* aspects of the past changed. There are many different ways to describe the changes that turned Britain upside down in the seventeenth century. Here, however, I am only going to consider three aspects of Britain that changed from 1642 to 1658: society, politics and religion.

Society refers to how people lived and what they thought about their lives. Politics refers to how people were ruled and who had (and did not have) power. Religion refers to what people believed about God and the church.

Social changes

Society was turned upside-down in seventeenth-century Britain. During the English Civil War, over 200,000 people died. Thousands of women were **widowed** and many children were orphaned. Some people lost everything, and the number of beggars in England increased dramatically. Some groups, like the Diggers, challenged Britain's strict **social hierarchy**. Winstanley's idea that the earth was a 'common treasury' shocked the **elites** at the top of English society. Finally, during the Interregnum (1649-60), Cromwell's Puritans banned football, theatre and celebrating Christmas.

Political changes

In 1642, many people in England believed that kings were appointed by God. This is why the country was **traumatised** when Charles I was executed in 1649. To some, Parliament had not only beheaded a king - they had killed God's appointed ruler in England. The 1640s and 1650s saw all kinds of radical political ideas emerge; at the Putney Debates of 1647, the Levellers demanded votes for men aged 21 and over. Some Levellers even considered giving votes to women! The New Model Army was very powerful; it challenged the power of the King and Parliament.

Religious changes

Puritanism - a strict version of Protestantism that emphasised simplicity - drove many changes that turned seventeenth-century Britain upside down. Cromwell's deep hatred of Catholicism led to several **massacres** in Ireland in 1649. Yet religious changes did not only lead to violence. The most popular sect in the 1650s - the Society of Friends or the 'Quakers' - were pacifists who believed that an 'inner light' could be found inside anyone. Ultimately, it is very difficult for historians to know about a person's internal beliefs. It is also impossible to know whether groups like the Ranters ever existed at all.

Glossary

Widowed - when a wife's husband dies.

Elites - wealthy and powerful people at the top of society.

Social hierarchy - the ranking of people in society from top to bottom.

Traumatised - really upset, concerned and worried by something.

Dissolved - to close down or dismiss something.

Massacre - the deliberate, brutal killing of a large number of people.

Comprehension Questions

1. Name three categories historians use to describe different types of changes over time.

2. Give an example of a social change that took place in Britain between 1642 and 1658.

3. Give an example of a political change that took place in Britain between 1642 and 1658.

4. Give an example of a religious change that took place in Britain between 1642 and 1658.