

Quakers, Diggers and Ranters

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

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The Society of Friends

The execution of Charles I shocked England. As society tried to recover, different groups of Puritans started to think about new ways to worship God. The most popular **sect** was the Society of Friends (known as the 'Quakers' because their followers shook when they had religious experiences). Quakers disliked the **hierarchy** of the church and its priests; they believed that an 'inner light' of God could be found in all people. George Fox travelled the country preaching this message of hope. Quakers met in houses, barns and fields. They were **pacifists** and allowed women like Margaret Fell to preach.



The Diggers

The Diggers (or True Levellers) were a more extreme version of the Levellers who were at the Putney Debates. Men like Gerrard Winstanley claimed that the earth was a 'common treasury' for all men and women to share. Diggers planted peas and corn on unused **common lands** like St George's Hill.

The wealthy **elites** were terrified by the Diggers. They hated the fact that they challenged England's hierarchy. The elites used the law and violence to crush the Diggers. Winstanley's cow was arrested for trespassing on a lord's land and, in 1649, 'King Property' destroyed the Diggers' farms and cottages.



The Ranters

The most extreme group who *might* have existed during the 1650s was the Ranters. Ranters believed that, since God had decided all their actions, God had also decided when they should **sin**. Thus, by sinning, they claimed to be following God's plan for them. Ranters drank alcohol, fought one another, gambled and ran around towns naked, swearing and shouting.

Accounts of the Ranters' behaviour shocked the country. The only problem for historians is that we cannot be sure if they actually existed. We only know about the Ranters because of pamphlets attacking their behaviour.



Gangraena

One of our sources about the Ranters is Thomas Edward's book Gangraena (which was first published in 1646). In this book, Edwards wrote about new Puritan sects like the Ranters. Edwards was very rude about these groups; he compared them to 'gangrene' - a disease that rots peoples' flesh.

Because of books like Gangraena, the Society of Friends (Quakers), the Diggers and the Ranters all faced **persecution** and attacks. Despite this, the Quakers still exist today. The Diggers no longer exist; 'King Property' finally defeated them in the 1650s. The Ranters may never have existed at all.



Glossary

Sect - a group that has separated from an established Church.

Hierarchy - where people are ranked according to their status or importance.

Pacifists - people opposed to all warfare and violence.

Common lands - lands that are owned by no one.

Elites - the people at the top of a society or hierarchy.

Sin - something immoral that is considered to go against God's laws.

Persecution - treating an individual or group because of who they are or what they believe.



Comprehension Questions

1. What did the Society of Friends think about the established church in 1650s England?
2. What did the Diggers think about land and property?
3. What did the Ranters believe?
4. Why can't historians be sure that the Ranters existed?
5. What disease did Thomas Edwards compare these Puritan sects to in his 1646 book?

