

The Putney Debates

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

Mr Olivey



Rediscovering the Putney Debates

In 1890, the historian C.H. Firth made a remarkable discovery in the library of Worcester College in Oxford. Under a dusty pile of old books and manuscripts, he had found the records of a debate that took place in October 1647. This source has fascinated historians ever since.

C.H. Firth had found the long-lost records of the Putney Debates. These debates took place in St Mary's Church after the First English Civil War. These were a debate between ordinary soldiers from the New Model Army - called Levellers - and the leaders of the army.



Leveller demands

At the end of the English Civil War, Parliament owed the 22,000 men in the New Model Army almost £ 3,000,000. Yes, these men wanted to be paid, but also they wanted so much more. Many claimed to have fought for God's cause and for freedom. They were not mere **mercenaries** fighting for money. These Leveller soldiers wanted votes and religious freedoms.

Henry Ireton, one of the leaders of the New Model Army, did not want to listen to the demands of the Leveller **agitators**. He wanted to negotiate with Charles I. He did not want poor, ordinary men to have any political power.



Radical Pamphlets

The ideas debated at Putney were truly remarkable. For the first time in English history, ordinary men called for the vote (most did not want servants or women to gain the vote). Some Levellers, however, even discussed giving women the right to vote. These ideas shocked the English **elites**.

Agitators within the army spread these radical ideas through cheap **pamphlets**. Texts like 'The Case of the Army Truly Stated' and 'The Agreement of the People' were read and discussed up and down the land.



After the Putney Debates

The Putney Debates ended suddenly when Charles I escaped from Hampton Court on 11 November. The Levellers were not happy that their demands for **religious toleration** and votes for all men were ignored.

Some Levellers, led by Thomas Rainsborough, led a **rebellion** against the leaders of the New Model Army on 15 November at Corkbush. It was not successful. One of their men, Richard Arnold, was shot and killed. Yet the radical ideas discussed at Putney lived on and continued to inspire English reformers centuries later.



Glossary

Mercenaries - Soldiers who will fight for whoever pays them the most money.

Agitators - Radical soldiers within the New Model Army who started petitions.

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

Pamphlets - Cheap printed booklets, often full of news, lies and rumors during the seventeenth century.

Religious toleration - giving people the freedom to practice their own faith, even if it is different to yours.

Rebellion - When people refuse to obey and challenge their leaders.



Comprehension Questions

1. Who was involved in the Putney debates?
2. What did the Levellers want?
3. How did the English elites respond to the Levellers?
4. Why did the Putney debates end?
5. What happened at Corkbush on 15 November 1647?

