

## Hear the People's Voices: England's hidden history in song and story

Screen has been showing loop of projected names and title of performance.

Image disappears. Sue enters to deliver welcome

*Sue: Welcome and introduction to the Friends Meeting House - health and safety, exits, phones off, photos? format of the evening – interval, refreshments, donations.*

*Encourage people to join in the chorus of the songs they know. Don't applaud till the interval*

Sarah W and choir enter from the two back doors

**'Sow seeds of hope'** : *in unison on the tune, once only*

**Speaker Bridget** The idea for this concert came out of discussions after the Brexit vote. We were troubled by the divisions that had revealed, and the open expressions of racism and prejudice. At the same time we felt that a false impression of England was being promoted, and we are talking here specifically about England - Wales, Scotland and Ireland have their own stories. Our concern was with an aggressive English nationalism which expressed nostalgia for a rural and imperial past.

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We asked – what could we do? Well, we are singers, we take our name from the sea green ribbons worn by the Levellers, a political movement for rights and equality at the time of the English Civil War. We sing about another England, the England of those who have fought and campaigned down the ages for equality and freedom, justice and peace,. In our concert you will hear some of the many voices that have been raised in defence and celebration of that England.

*Possibly hum Sow seeds of hope*

The history of England is not a simple or single story. Nor is it a patchwork – rather it is a tapestry woven from many threads. Without the threads of what happens to ordinary men and women it is incomplete.

To use a popular phrase, we are taking our country back, but back from what, not from Europe, not from the outside world, but rather from the forces within our own country that seem to be working against the common good.

Here is what the historian Dorothy Thompson wrote 25 years ago

*We must take back the language of freedom and the practices of democracy from the people who are perverting them. ...Their policies impoverish us materially and oppress us politically. We have to take our country back, and defend it in our own way.. ...Every one of us is involved, and we are the only people who can do it...*

Where shall we begin?

**Speaker Anne Watson**

**The Peasants Revolt of 1381**, sometimes called the 'English Rising' is the first recorded popular uprising in England. The people were seeking an end to three hundred years of serfdom. The introduction of a poll tax to pay for the war in France was the last straw.

The uprising was led by Wat Tyler, and John Ball, a priest who preached popular sermons. He is best known for saying, *When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?* In other words all are born equal. 'My friends, he said, *things cannot go well in England, nor ever will, until everything shall be in common and all distinctions levelled.*' This challenge to hierarchy and call for equality is a refrain repeated over the centuries.

Here is a song about John Ball *do join in the chorus*

<b>John Ball</b>
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**Speaker: Pete Cranston**

The Peasants' Revolt was violently suppressed but this did not quell rebellion. There were major uprisings in the following centuries and no government attempted to impose a poll tax again for 600 years. It has been argued that, rather than Magna Carta, it was the Peasants Revolt which laid the foundations of freedom.

**1603 – 1714 Civil War and Revolution**

By the 1600s there was a ferment of questioning of the authority of crown, church and state. In a country with a war ravaged economy and widespread hunger, different groupings arose with radical visions. The Diggers, set up a colony at St Georges Hill and began to plough the land, cultivate vegetables and build homes. Their founder Gerrard Winstanley spoke of *'laying the foundation of making the Earth a common treasury for all, both rich and poor'*.

<b>The Diggers song</b>
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**Speaker: Sarah Westcott**

Another group, the Levellers wore rosemary sprigs in their hats and seagreen ribbons for identification. . Our next song celebrates the women in the Levellers. Led by Elizabeth Lilburne, they petitioned parliament for the release of her husband John Lilburne, and other Levellers imprisoned in the tower on charges of high treason. 6000 women signed the petition. They were turned away from parliament with the words ‘ *You are desired to go home, and look after your housekeeping*’..when told they should stay at home and wash the dishes they said’ *Sir, we have scarce any dishes left to wash*’. When they were allowed in the soldiers threw squibs at them. ‘*What will you have?*’ demanded Cromwell, to which they responded ‘*Those rights and freedoms of the nation that you promised us*’

These Bonny Besses led the first recorded mass public demonstration by women .

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**Bonny Besses**

**Speaker: Simon Pratt**

The Diggers were concerned with land rights, the Levellers sought equality. The authority of the church was challenged by many dissenting religious groups such as the Quakers. John Lilburne, the Leveller, became a Quaker, and had a Quaker funeral. The Quakers did away with priests, creeds and sacraments, and claimed all men and women were equal and had a direct relationship with God. They refused to pay church taxes and would not take oaths of allegiance.

Our next song is about George Fox, one of the founders of Quakerism.

**George Fox**

The Quakers’ refusal to take up arms became the foundation of conscientious objection to war, and commitment to peace.

**Sow Seeds of hope ---in two parts**

## Speaker Sue Smith

English history can't be seen in a vacuum, and was very much influenced by wider events. In the eighteenth century the French and the American revolutions spread and embedded notions of individual rights and freedoms. Mary Wollstonecraft, author of a *Vindication of the Rights of Women* went to France. Tom Paine, author of pamphlets such as '*The Rights of Man*' and '*Common Sense*' was involved with both the French and the American revolutions, urging people to '*kick off religion and monarchy*'. He died a pauper in Manhattan, and although author William Cobbett brought his bones back to England for a proper burial, he too ran out of money, and Tom Paine's bones went missing for good.

### Tom Paine's bones

Tom Paine's bones may have disappeared without trace, but the Norfolk town of Thetford, which initially rejected their native son, now has a statue outside the Town Hall with his words '*My country is the world, my religion is to do good*'.

## Speaker: Ali

Thomas Paine talked of his *feelings of indignation* about slavery. They brim over here when he wrote *It is chiefly the people of Liverpool that employ themselves in the slave trade' ...had I command of the elements I would blast Liverpool with fire and brimstone.*

When we think of the movement to abolish slavery we think of familiar names such as William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, and John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace*. But there had been a black presence in Britain for at least two centuries and they organised and lobbied for abolition in a campaign group called the Sons of Africa.. Ottobah Cugoano, a leader of the African community in 18<sup>th</sup> century London, was one of the first to publicly demand total abolition. The autobiographies of Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince, who was born into a slave family in Bermuda, brought the experience of slavery to life for readers in England. Mary Prince was the first woman to present an anti-slavery petition to Parliament

She wrote:

*Oh the horrors of slavery. How the thought of it pains my heart. But the truth ought to be told of it; and what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave,, I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows: and I would have all the good people in England to know it too ,that they break our chains and set us free.....*

### . Slave's Lament

**Speaker: Bridget**

.The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw many struggles for greater representation; hunger was widespread as the corn laws made bread unaffordable. There were food protests in Manchester before the event that became known as the Peterloo massacre in 1819. Thousands gathered, many wearing their Sunday best, and carrying banners demanding parliamentary reform, to hear Henry Hunt, a famous orator..Local magistrates panicked.

The yeomanry were ordered to arrest the speakers. They charged to the hustings and the crowd linked arms to prevent the arrest. This was interpreted as the crowd attacking and the cavalry were sent in. Hundreds of men, women and children were seriously injured and there were deaths.

<b>Peterloo 1819.</b>
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**Speaker: Fran**

**Chartists 1836 – 1848**

Peterloo led to the rise of the Chartist movement. The Reform Act of 1832, failed to extend the vote beyond property owners. So in 1838 a People's Charter was drawn up with six demands – right to vote (for all men), voting by secret ballot, abolition of property qualifications for MPs, payment of MPs, equal constituencies, annual parliamentary elections. One of the leading Chartists was William Cuffay, son of a former slave, who served on the national executive and was voted president of the London Chartists - a contemporary report refers to the *black man and his party*.

<b>Chartist Anthem</b>
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Of the six demands of the Chartists we have achieved all except the annual parliamentary elections.

**'Sow seeds of hope':** *all three parts, three times through*

**INTERVAL**

Gather in the voices (and choir) in call and response as follows

Sarah W. enters. Sounds the note by singing "We"

Choir respond and from the two entrances at the back

**'We shall go singing to the fashioning of a new world' :** *unison, once through*

## Speaker Ange

### The industrial revolution

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries people moved from the country to the towns as the industrial revolution brought massive change. In the factories work was low paid and conditions often dangerous .

Our next song was probably written by a weaver in Batley. In it we hear the words 'I know I can guttle when I hear my shuttle go, 'Poverty, poverty knock'. At least I know I can eat when the deafening looms clatter 'Poverty knock'

These fears were felt throughout the generations. In the 1930s' depression, there was great hardship for skilled workers, who had been operating. 4 or 6 looms at a time and were now reduced to 2 or 1; then the boycott of Empire goods by the Indian independence movement really hit home. Gandhi was invited to Lancashire to speak to the unemployed textile workers. My out-of-work grandparents were in the crowd to see him in the hope he would help them when he saw the poverty there. But there was no change. My grandmother is remembered for saying with emphasis 'Two looms'.

### Poverty Knocks

## Speaker: Gill

The new factories brought working people together: there was a thirst for education and the opportunity to organise.

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The state viewed organisation by working people with suspicion. ***The Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800***, passed during the wars against Napoleon, forbade societies for the purpose of political reform, and made any sort of strike action illegal..

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The Dorset agricultural labourers , who became known as the Tolpuddle martyrs, protested against the lowering of wages, were arrested and convicted under the 'unlawful oaths act'. Their supporters organised a political march – said to be one of the first successful marches, and 800,000 signatures were collected for their release. In 1834 they were sentenced to penal transportation to Australia. The Tolpuddle martyrs were subsequently pardoned and returned to England.

### Tolpuddle Man

## Speaker : Ruth

Women were active in the labour movement but had no place in national politics in the nineteenth century. . It is now 100 years since some women were given the vote, and memories of the struggle seem to have dimmed. A recent general knowledge quiz asked for the name of the King's horse but not the name of the suffragette, Emily Wilding Davison, who died on the Epsom racecourse in 1913 in an attempt to pin a suffragette badge on the horse.

At her funeral 5,000 suffragettes and supporters accompanied her coffin and 50,000 people lined the route through London

### Emily Inspires us yet

Emily Davison came from a middle class background, and the suffragettes have sometimes been described as a middle class movement. But there were many working class women in the movement. As Louisa Entwistle, a Blackburn weaver, said at Westminster Police Court *I am here on behalf of my companions who work in the mill, and until we get votes we shall not be satisfied.* At a national demonstration in Hyde Park, working class speakers said they were there for the working classes, not as a *cat's paw for the middle class.*

**'We shall go singing to the fashioning of a new world':** *tune plus alto and bass,  
twice through*

**Speaker : Simon Pratt**

The struggle between capital and labour, profit and people's welfare, and the importance of protection and strength in joint action are illustrated in our next song. It was written by Florence Reece, the wife of a Kentucky miner in the depression years of the 1930s, and has travelled and been adapted over the years.

**. Which side are you on?**

**Speaker Sue**

Our next song from the 1930s takes us to the Derbyshire Peak District and the mass trespass by ramblers at Kinder Scout. The magistrates handed out harsh sentences to the five arrested that day. For Ewan MacColl, who was there and wrote the song, rambling was part of his politics. He could not have foreseen the long term effect of the action –improved access to the countryside from 1949 through the national parks, long distance footpaths such as the Pennine Way (opened in 1965) and the right to roam established through the Countryside and Rights of Way Act of 2000.

**Manchester Rambler**

**Speaker: Sally**

Moving on , we come to the movements of our own times, responding to the impacts of the second world war , the dropping of weapons of mass destruction on Japan, the nuclear arms race and the Cold War. This Easter marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first march between the atomic weapons research establishment at Aldermaston and London. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament went on to organise an annual Easter march and tens of thousands took part in the early 60s

Our next song, by Peggy Seeger, comes from the mass movement of women who established a peace camp at Greenham Common in Berkshire. The camp began in 1981, the first blockade of the base was in 1982 when around 30,000 women joined hands to Embrace the Base. In 1983 70,000 protesters formed a human chain to Aldermaston and the ordnance factory at Burghfield. The protest was a challenge to traditional notions of woman as homemaker and man as warrior. One Greenham woman said: *as women we have been actively encouraged to be complacent by sitting at home and revering men as our protectors; we now reject this role. The law is concerned with the preservation of property. We are concerned with the preservation of all life. How dare the government presume the right to kill others in our names.*

**Carry Greenham Home**



## **Speaker Hazel**

We turn from peace activism to two key events of labour activism, both involving women. The Grunwick dispute was an industrial dispute about trade union recognition at a Film Processing Laboratory in London, Most of the strikers were from Pakistan and India, and their leader was an inspirational woman, Jayaben Desai. Though the dispute ended in defeat, it is remembered today for the way in which thousands of workers, black and white, men and women, came together to defend the rights of migrant women workers.

The miners' strike of 1984-5 was a long and bitter industrial dispute. Women formed local action groups to organise community kitchens; they joined picket lines and spoke at political meetings. The strike failed, and the pits closed, but it was a key moment in women's entry into the public sphere. When the miners returned to work they walked defiantly behind colliery bands, and alongside the women and children who had provided immense solidarity and support.

In our next song we hear the voices of those women from the mining communities as we sing 'So if you call me sister when I join your picket line, better be there for me brother when I fight for mine..

## **No Going Back**

## **Speaker Gill**

There is no going back on so many fronts. There are gaps in the stories we have told. Since Roman times it has been an act of resistance to live in same sex relationships. We have not looked at that decade of struggle, the 70s, which saw the first Gay Pride rally and protests against racism and fascism. Those struggles, together with those of the labour movement, and the peace campaigns continue.

We have seen many achievements, universal suffrage, the rise of the peace movement, equalities legislation. The post war settlement brought the welfare state. In 1948, the setting up of the UN and its charters of rights seemed a defining moment. But these gains are being eroded and the struggles for the rights of citizens are not over. People who are not seen as citizens still have their rights denied or abused. – asylum seekers, migrants, prisoners, the mentally ill, those living in poverty or facing homelessness in this age of austerity.

The mythology of Little England to be defended against foreign invaders and the enemy within must be challenged with a more generous and dynamic vision. We all need to raise our voices, old and young. Hope for the future depends on preparation of children and young people now.

We shall end our concert with words attributed to William Morris, words that are used by the co-operative youth movement, the Woodcraft Folk, at the end of their meetings::

*And this shall be for a bond between us: that we are of one blood you and I; that we have cried peace to all and claimed fellowship with every living thing; that we hate war and sloth and greed, and love fellowship..and that we shall go singing to the fashioning of a new world.*

**'We shall go singing to the fashioning of a new world': *all parts, four times through***