

OLIVER CROMWELL (1649 - 1660)



I'm in a side chapel of Westminster Abbey, where on the ground there's an inscription, marking the burial place of Oliver Cromwell. It's curious, because usually a gravestone gives the date someone's born, and the date someone dies, but that would make Cromwell just three years old, which obviously can't be right. But I'm going to leave you with that puzzle, whilst we explore what happened in England after the death of Charles the 1st.

By the late 1640s the greatest power in the land was the army. In theory it answered to Parliament, but with every victory it had won, it had grown stronger. The soldiers had come to believe that God had a purpose for England – and that the army was the instrument by which that purpose would come about.



They were camped in Putney, south west of London. Putney was close enough to London for the army to defend the capital in times of danger, but far enough away so as not to upset the citizens of London who hated the presence of all those soldiers. Because the soldiers reminded them of the grim truth: that England was now under military rule. And that England's future rested on decisions made not by Parliament, but made here, in Putney, by the army.

In 1647, Cromwell invited soldiers from every regiment to meet with the Generals in St Mary's Church, Putney. Their job was to debate the political future of England.

The basic question was who should have the vote? Back then, in the 1640s, only men with property had the vote. And the Generals thought that was right and proper – if you had property, you had a stake in society. But the soldiers saw things differently. Why should anyone obey the law, they said, if they had no vote?

And what was happening here, three hundred years after the Peasants' Revolt, was a repetition of those same arguments used by that long-dead radical priest, John Ball. And in these years of civil war the battle lines were being drawn again, between those with property and those without, those with power, and those without.



South-west of Putney is St George's Hill, home to one of England's most exclusive golf clubs. This haven of comfort and privilege was once a key location in the drama of the English Revolution. In 1651, a group of revolutionaries called the Diggers moved into St George's Hill. And they said the land was for everyone, and to prove the point they started planting vegetables and growing crops; it was a kind of early commune, everyone living together in peace and harmony. And anyway, the local landowners of course were completely freaked out.

So they hired thugs to move the Diggers off the land. The commune was broken up, the Diggers were dispersed.

There was a chance in these years to completely transform English society – what they called at the time, “a world turned upside down” – rights for the poor, rights for women, a redistribution of wealth. But the old forces of order extinguished that chance. Ever since the Norman Conquest, Land and Property were the real powers in England – and the death of a king couldn't change that simple fact.

At the centre of all this was Cromwell. He feared the revolutionaries. But just as much, he despised the MPs, the guardians of the old order.

After the land-grab of the Norman Conquest, and the land-grab of Church lands in the Reformation, there followed in these years a third great land-grab, as the gentry helped themselves to the estates of royalist noblemen who'd either died or fled the country. And Cromwell watched in despair at all the MPs scurrying around doing dodgy deals, lining their pockets. Until at last he grew sick of it. In 1653 Cromwell decided only the army was fit to govern England, only the army had the true fire of God in their hearts – so he took a troop of soldiers into Parliament and he closed Parliament down. In one move he betrayed everything the Civil War was meant to achieve. The tyranny of kings was replaced with the tyranny of Oliver Cromwell.



And this is where he lived – Hampton Court Palace. It's a pretty heavy irony – that this country farmer who'd fought against the power of kings was now living in a king's palace, a king in all but name. And so for four years he ruled in God's name, thrusting his ideas of godly living down the throats of the English people, increasingly hated by rich and poor alike. Until, in 1658, he died, and the whole structure of military tyranny collapsed like a house of cards.

I think what Cromwell knew, was that if he'd left power in the hands of the MPs, they'd have voted to bring back the king. That's what most people wanted in their heart of hearts. That's why the crowd had groaned when the axe took off Charles' head. And that's exactly what happened. Within a year of Crom-



well's death free elections were held, and Parliament called for the restoration of the monarchy. And Charles Stuart, Charles I's son, sailed over from France where he'd been living in exile, and he was crowned Charles II in Westminster Abbey on April the 23rd, 1661.

And the answer to that puzzle about Cromwell's inscription? Well, 1658 was the year he died, as Lord Protector of England, and he was buried in Westminster Abbey in a fancy funeral, with a sword in his hand and a crown on

his head. And 1661 was the date when – on Charles II's orders – his corpse was ripped out of his tomb and displayed on stakes across the country.

Was it all for nothing? Two hundred thousand lives lost in the civil war – and the wheel of history had just come full circle.