

## 1600–1800

### What was seen as radical in society at this time?

#### **Political radicalism**

The English Civil War occurred between 1642 and 1651, and the change in regime gave the people an opportunity to change the way in which they were governed, in order to make the country more fair to all classes. As the monarch was removed, people felt that they would finally have a fair and democratic government led by Parliament, which led to some radical groups being formed to try to achieve this. The first of these large groups was the Levellers, who were present from 1647 to 1649. This group wanted power to be distributed more evenly in order to make elections more fair and remove 'rotten boroughs', where there were far more MPs than the constituents needed. The Levellers did gain significant support, as they sent a petition to Parliament in 1648 that was signed by a third of Londoners. However their support was not necessarily in the right places, as the supremacy of Parliament and the power of the rich was threatened, meaning that they didn't have enough power to make change. In the last year there were some mutinies, resulting in a few deaths, and in May there was a march of 400 troops to discuss the implementation of demands, but they were ambushed. While there had been significant levels of resistance, Parliament showed that it still had power and control over the people. After the failure of the Levellers, the Diggers formed as a group. These believed in a very basic form of communism, where land was shared out equally. However, this group never gained masses of support outside of Surrey and was put down very quickly following threats of legal action.

#### **Religious radicalism**

In this period, England was a Protestant state following the Church of England, and while many people did align with this, there were many that followed other religions or branches of Christianity. These people who didn't follow the established religion were called nonconformists, and these included Jews and Catholics, but also certain groups of Protestants like Methodists and Baptists, founded in 1738 and 1612 respectively. Very few nonconformists were persecuted, meaning that many went around the country preaching and sometimes gaining lots of support. By 1790, there were 58,000 Methodists across England, thanks to the preaching of those such as the founder, John Wesley.

#### **Food riots**

These riots occurred mostly in the late eighteenth century, as food prices became incredibly high. Large numbers of peasants organised riots, with the help of unions, to introduce affordable food prices. One of the most common actions was for groups to patrol towns and enforce lower prices on food. This happened in the Thames Valley in 1766 and Halifax in 1783, as two examples of this. Large groups also took over marketplaces for days at a time, forcing sellers to put affordable prices on their food. In the height of the food riots in 1795, groups would even intercept the transport of food and steal it, which caused huge issues, as farmers

no longer trusted their product to get to the market, meaning that they were reluctant to send it away.

### **Empire and slavery**

In the sixteenth century, Britain began to establish overseas colonies. By 1783, Britain had built a large empire, with colonies in America and the West Indies. The growth of the British Empire was possible because of slavery. The slave trade refers to the transatlantic trading patterns that were established as early as the mid-seventeenth century. Trading ships would set sail from Europe with a cargo of manufactured goods to the west coast of Africa. There, these goods would be traded, over weeks and months, for captured people, provided by African traders. It has been estimated that by the 1790s, 480,000 people were enslaved in the British Colonies. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, people began to campaign against slavery, though this was seen as radical. In 1807, the British government passed an act of Parliament abolishing the slave trade throughout the British Empire.

### **What was radical in Stroud?**

Stroud had a history of nonconformity dating back to 1576, which meant that it was a perfect place for newer nonconformists to gain support. In the mid- to late-1600s, nonconformist ministers began to settle in Stroud, and it is thought that they were encouraged to do so by the nonconformist nature and history of the area. An example of this is Daniel Capel, who became a minister in Stroud in 1690. He was a Presbyterian (strong Protestant, with Puritan origins), which was a nonconformist religion and one of the oldest to be present in Stroud. Many more ministers came to Stroud because of nonconformity, and later the town would become an important place for the new Protestant branch of Methodism.

In 1738, John Wesley founded the Methodist Church and he began preaching his beliefs in the following year. Stroud has a strong link to the growth of this church, as John Wesley preached here in 1742 and 1744, only a couple of years after its foundation. Acre Street Methodist Church was built in 1763 to provide a place of worship for the new Methodists in Stroud, and by 1796 it had to be enlarged due to the growing number of members. After the building of this church, John Wesley returned to Stroud in 1765, where he preached to an 'overflowing congregation' as his beliefs had become so popular. He then returned to Stroud every year to preach Methodism until his death in 1791. Stroud has a lot of history with John Wesley and Methodism, having been one of the first places for the religion to gain widespread support. As well as that, Acre Street Chapel is now the oldest surviving octagonal Methodist chapel, although it is now a Salvation Army base, as it was replaced by Castle Street Methodist Chapel.

Food riots did become a problem in the Stroud area in 1795, as prices became so high that the peasants couldn't afford enough food. The people reacted to this by sending letters to the gentlemen of Uley to request more food as they couldn't live on what they had. The peasants were listened to and they did receive more bread, although the quality was incredibly low,

meaning that the situation didn't improve much. As a result of this, a meeting was requested on Minchinhampton Common to discuss the troubles. Three hundred people met on the common in September (followed by a smaller gathering on 5 October) and troops were put on standby in case the meeting escalated, but they were not needed. Some members of the lower class sent threatening letters to the richer landowners in an attempt to get what they wanted, and this did cause concern. Justices of the peace (similar to policemen) got involved in trying to figure out the source, and they even had to write to London for advice. However, the threat soon disappeared without any specific action taken to remove it.

The town's most famous Stroudwater Scarlet broadcloth is instantly recognisable in the military uniforms of the British Empire's forces, and records show it being traded across the Atlantic in North America and as far east as China. However, one particular business link stands out in its importance in the growth and maintenance of Stroud's textile industry. This link was with the British East India Company (EIC), which, after being founded and granted its royal charter in 1600, shipped British goods alongside European military tactics and technologies across the Indian subcontinent and China, while shipping profits and loot back to Britain.

There was a small Black presence in Stroud in the late eighteenth century. Church registers contain records of three Black people. Adam John Parker was buried in St Lawrence in 1786, William Jupiter – or Jubiter – was buried in Rodborough in 1778, and the 12-year-old son of Qualquay Assedew was christened in Stroud as William Ellis (the vicar's name) in 1801.