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The *Diggers' Festival*: Organising a community festival with political connotations

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Introduction

This chapter examines the organisation of a community festival from an ethnographic perspective drawn from the festival organiser's viewpoint. It will provide some context on the reasons for founding the *Diggers' Festival* and examine key issues and difficulties surrounding the launch and development of a small festival that relates to historical political activities in the market town of Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, UK. As we shall see, most current political festivals in the UK tend to be events launched to commemorate historical milestones that have a political resonance. The chapter will make specific reference to the festival's funding, audiences and branding, concluding with recommendations on how to move the festival forward.

During 2010 the author was asked by the Independent Socialists of Wellingborough (ISW) to organise an evening event to commemorate the 17th century radicals known as the Diggers. As an individual with socialist leanings, the author agreed to promote the first event, which was held during March 2011, and was launched and branded as the Wellingborough *Diggers' Festival*. Even though it was in its infancy arguably only an evening event with two professional performers, Ian Saville, a magician who promotes himself as 'Magic for Socialism' (Saville, n.d.), and well-established local folk and Americana band The Old Speckled Men, booked, it was felt necessary to launch the festival name and the branding, with the aim being to produce a steady growth into the fourth or fifth years. It was essential to raise awareness of the identity and purpose of the festival amongst like-minded individuals, the local community and people from surrounding areas. The fourth festival grew from being organised solely by the author to having a committee of an

additional five volunteers who coordinated an afternoon fringe event based in a town centre public house with three live music artists/bands, including punk/poet Attila the Stockbroker. A writer who had written historical fiction for teenagers, including one that takes its inspiration from Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers, was invited as a guest speaker to present her work in the local library. The local museum hosted a week long display on the Diggers including a copy of the declaration and a copy of a field map dated 1838 identifying the location of the Bareshanks field (the site of the Wellingborough digger community). The programme for the evening event commenced with a local author Alan Moore (*V for Vendetta*, *Watchmen*) as a key speaker, followed by performances by two professional live bands with 'left' tendencies. In addition to the general considerations of organising a festival, for instance audience, budget, funding, licensing, entertainment and promotion, coordinating a festival with such strong socialist values was going to be a challenge because of the political connotations.

A brief history of the Diggers

To put the festival into perspective it is necessary to ascertain what and who the commemorations were for. Led by Gerrard Winstanley, the Diggers' movement was part of the radical ideology that swept England at the time of the Civil War (1642-1651); taking over common land and running it as a 'common Treasury to all' (Winstanley, [1649] 2009). Initially known as the True Levellers, they became known as the Diggers because of their involvement in cultivating land. "Among the many social, political and religious eruptions in the time of the Commonwealth was the little known Digger Movement which commenced in Surrey in 1649 and ended at Wellingborough in 1650" (unknown. 1932: 18). A declaration dated 12th March 1649 (1650) identifies nine men from Wellingborough who briefly occupied the field known as Bareshanks, off Hardwick Road, Wellingborough to plough and sow seeds for the community. This declaration emphasised the commonness of poverty in the local area and the non-existence of support for the poor people (Gurney, 2007). The document "included specific demands that reflected local needs and preoccupations" (Gurney, 2007: 188). Like Winstanley, the Diggers of Wellingborough felt that the common land belonged to the poor and this resulted in them being welcomed by the starving inhabitants of the town. "[S]everal freeholders had agreed to give up their claim to the commons, and some farmers had already offered them seed" (Jones, 1986: 7). Unfortunately, Bareshanks was used for only a short period of time before the Justice of the Peace for Northampton, Thomas Pentlow, put into force laws that were opposed to individuals intruding on other men's properties.

This resulted in “four of the Diggers [being] arrested; the remainder were dispersed with force” (unknown 1932: 20).

Arguably, the Diggers were the first socialist movement, hence the small group of like-minded people, the ISW, deciding to launch the *Diggers Festival*, the first we know of in the country, to remember all those concerned.

Political festivals in the UK

The Wellingborough *Diggers' Festival* is not the first politically themed festival to take place within the UK. During the same year as the first Wellingborough event, the northern town of Wigan, the birthplace of Gerrard Winstanley (1609) also launched their first *Wigan Diggers Festival*. The commemorations began “on a wet morning in September 2011, [when] a small group of marchers passed through the town of Wigan to Mesnes Field, a popular open space threatened with development” (Gurney, 2013: 9). The main event was held in a public house and included “speeches and talks on Gerrard Winstanley, to drink and to listen to bands and choirs including Bolton Clarion Choir singing the Digger anthem ‘You Noble Diggers All’” (Gurney, 2013: 9).

In a small village in Dorset, South West England, the *Tolpuddle Martyrs' Festival* and Rally is held to celebrate “trade unionism and to remember the sacrifice of the six farm workers from the village” (Tolpuddle Martyrs' Museum, 2014a). During the period of 1834 the six men had “formed a trade union to protest their meagre pay of six shillings a week” (Tolpuddle Martyrs' Museum, 2014b), which equates to thirty pence sterling in today's money. The men were sentenced to seven years transportation to Australia. “After three years, during which the trade union movement sustained the Martyrs' families by collecting voluntary donations, the government relented and the men returned home with free pardons and as heroes” (Tolpuddle Martyrs' Museum, 2014c). Records show that commemorations for the Tolpuddle Martyrs have been in existence in one form or another since 1875 “when the Agricultural Workers Union presented an engraved watch and illuminated address to James Hammett, the only one of the six Martyrs to return to Tolpuddle” (Tolpuddle Martyrs' Museum, 2014c). Various forms of the commemorations have taken place, including the 150-year anniversary in 1984. The festival in its current form has been running since the late 1990s. It is held annually in July for three days and includes camping and a programme of numerous performances of live music, speeches, debates and poetry. Early afternoon on the Sunday there is wreath laying at Hammett's grave followed by a procession through the village with marching bands accompanied by members and supporters of various trade unions with their