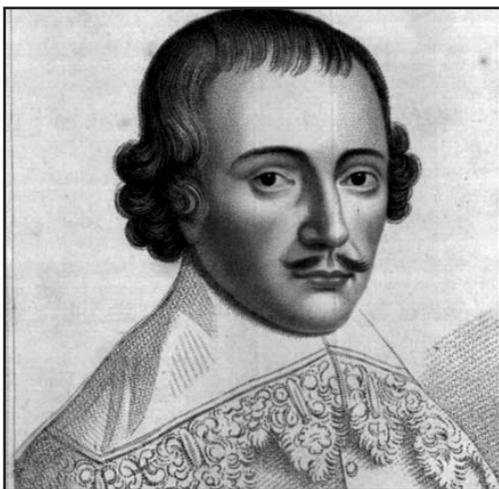


John Lilburne



John Lilburne

Who was John Lilburne?

The Lilburnes were originally a Northumberland family taking their name from the villages of East and West Lilburn, in the parish of Bamburgh, Northumberland. Richard Lilburne, married to Margaret Hixon, was a landowner of estates at Thickney Puncharden and elsewhere in County Durham. They had 4 children of which John was the third eldest and was probably born in Sunderland in 1614. After attending schools in Bishop Auckland and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, John was apprenticed to John Hewson, a London clothier and Puritan.

He stayed with Hewson from around 1630 to 1636 and in 1636 was introduced to the Puritan physician John Bastwick, an active pamphleteer against the government of the Church by bishops, who with William Prynne and Henry Burton, was persecuted by Archbishop William Laud.

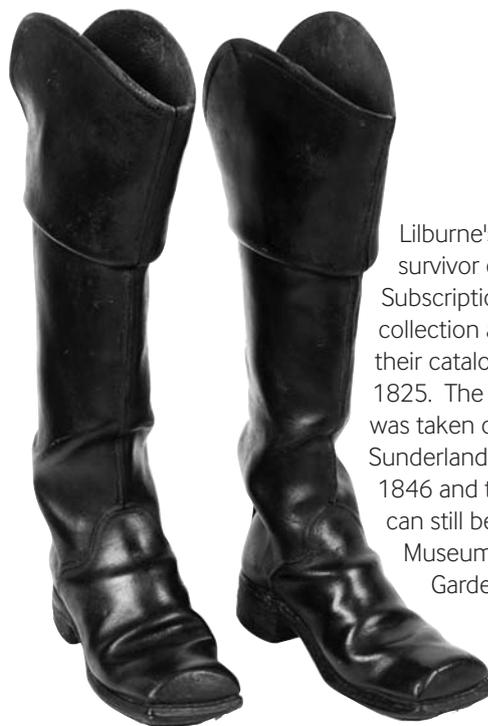
'Freeborn John'

Lilburne became involved in the printing and distribution of unlicensed Puritan books and pamphlets in London, for which he was arrested in December 1637 and later brought before the Court of Star Chamber. He obstinately refused to take the oath and claimed that his prosecution was unlawful. His sentence was to be whipped from the Fleet prison to the New Palace Yard, Westminster, where he was to stand in the pillory, then to be imprisoned until he conformed and admitted his guilt. The sentence was carried out on 18 April 1638 with Lilburne loudly declaring that he had committed no crime against the law or the state but that he was a victim of the bishops' cruelty.

He was kept in prison for nearly three years and on his release, his uncle, George Lilburne of Sunderland, helped him with capital to set up as a brewer.

In or before September 1641 he married Elizabeth, daughter of Henry Dewell, a London Merchant. During his imprisonment, Lilburne wrote the first of many pamphlets that publicised the injustices committed against him. When the First Civil War broke out, Lilburne enlisted as a captain in Lord Brooke's regiment of foot and fought at the battle of Edgehill. Lilburne then joined the Earl of Manchester's Eastern Association army in 1643 where he became lieutenant-colonel in a regiment of dragoons in 1644.

On 2 July 1644 he fought at Marston Moor and later that month negotiated the royalist surrender of Tickhill Castle in Yorkshire. However, membership of the New Model Army, which was instituted in army reorganisations of early 1645, would have required him to take the solemn league and covenant.



Lilburne's boots are a survivor of the Subscription Library's collection appearing in their catalogue of 1825. The collection was taken over by Sunderland Museum in 1846 and the boots can still be seen at the Museum & Winter Gardens today.

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This, besides requiring adherence by oath, pointed strongly to a Presbyterian and Scots-dictated church settlement; Lilburne could not stomach an oath, the Scots, or Presbyterianism, so he left the army on 30 April. Lilburne began to seriously campaign for 'freeborn' rights that all English people have from their birth, as opposed, for example, to those rights bestowed by the monarchy.

He was then imprisoned from July to October 1645 for denouncing Members of Parliament who lived in comfort while the common soldiers fought and died for the Parliamentary cause. During this imprisonment he wrote the tract, *England's Birthright Justified*, in which, amongst other ideas, he made proposals for parliamentary reform.

In July 1646, he was imprisoned in the Tower of London for denouncing his former commander the Earl of Manchester as a traitor and Royalist sympathiser. It was the campaign to free him from prison which spawned the political party called the Levellers.

There had been rumours that the Levellers were conspiring with Royalists to overthrow the new republican government. On 26 October 1649 Lilburne was brought to trial at the Guildhall, charged with high treason and with inciting the Levellers mutinies. A jury had acquitted John and within days a commemorative medal had been struck, bearing Lilburne's image and the names of the jury. Lilburne was imprisoned seven times between 1645 and 1652 campaigning for religious and political liberties.

Later Years

During the 1650's he was imprisoned many times by Oliver Cromwell, finally being incarcerated in Dover Castle. On parole at Dover, Lilburne met Luke Howard, a Quaker whose serenity impressed him and began the process of his own conversion. In the last of his 83 pamphlets, *The Resurrection of John Lilburne*, he declared that he had given up political activism and become a Quaker. In the summer of 1657, whilst visiting his wife, who was expecting their tenth child, he caught a fever and died at Eltham, Kent on 29 August aged 42.

Finally, what of his place in history? The Dictionary of National Biography has Lilburne as '...one who, before his time, made a case for a written constitution, a democratically elected legislature bound by law and something like a bill of rights.'



Commemorative medal 1649 - Sunderland Museum & Winter Garden.

Find out more about John Lilburne

For more information, visit the Local Studies Centre at Sunderland City Library & Arts Centre, which has books on John Lilburne, such as:

- 'Free-born John' by Pauline Gregg (1961)
- 'Sunderland and its Origins monks to mariners' by Maureen M Meikle & Christine M Newman
- 'John Lilburne the Leveller – A Christian Democrat' by M A Gibb (1947)
- 'Oxford Dictionary of National Biography' (2004)

More information and images can be found on www.oxforddnb.com