THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT
THE PEAK COUNTRY, 1520–1770

This book provides a new approach to the history of social conflict, popular politics and plebeian culture in the early modern period. Based upon a close study of the Peak Country of Derbyshire between c. 1520 and 1770, it has implications for understandings of class identity, popular culture, riot, custom and social relations.

A detailed reconstruction of economic and social change within the region is followed by an in-depth examination of the changing cultural meanings of custom, gender, locality, skill, literacy, orality and magic. The local history of social conflict sheds new light on the nature of political engagement and the origins of early capitalism. Important insights are provided into early modern social and gender identities, civil war allegiances, the appeal of radical ideas and the making of the English working class. Most of all, the book challenges the claim that early modern England was a hierarchical, ‘pre-class’ society.

Andy Wood is Lecturer in History, University of East Anglia
Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History

Series editors

ANTHONY FLETCHER
Professor of History, University of Essex

JOHN GUY
Professor of Modern History, University of St Andrews

JOHN MORRILL
Professor of British and Irish History, University of Cambridge,
and Vice Master of Selwyn College

This is a series of monographs and studies covering many aspects of the history of the British Isles between the late fifteenth century and early eighteenth century. It includes the work of established scholars and pioneering work by a new generation of scholars. It includes both reviews and revisions of major topics and books which open up new historical terrain or which reveal startling new perspectives on familiar subjects. All the volumes set detailed research into broader perspectives and the books are intended for the use of students as well as of their teachers.

For a list of titles in the series, see end of book.
CONTENTS

List of figures page x
List of tables x
List of maps xi
Preface xiii
List of abbreviations xvi

Introduction ‘Terms we did not understand’: landscape, place and perceptions

1 Social relations and popular culture in early modern England 10
   Class and social history 10
   Rethinking class in early modern England 18
   Local cultures and popular cultures 26

Part I The structures of inequality

2 Economy and society in the Peak Country, c. 1520–1570 41
   Technology and industry 41
   Land, wealth and community 45
   Landscape and population 53

3 Industrialization and social change, c. 1570–1660 57
   Population change and technological innovation 57
   Enclosure and common right 66
   The mining industry and its workforce 72

4 The Peak Country as an industrial region, c. 1660–1770 89
   The economics of regional identity 89
   The priorities of capital 98
   Poverty and labour 102
Contents

5 Social conflict and early capitalism
   The Peak Country and the Industrial Revolution 113
   Custom and economic change 116

Part II The conditions of community

6 ‘The memory of the people’: custom, law and popular culture
   Custom, law and popular culture in early modern England 127
   ‘Time out of memorie of man’: mining custom in the early
      sixteenth century 137
   ‘A kind of levelling custom’: the opponents of free mining 143
   The uses of literacy: speech, writing and custom 150

7 The politics of custom
   Law, order and the sense of the past 163
   Gender, place and the construction of social identity 169

8 Community, identity and culture
   Gender, work and identity 179
   Community and local culture 188
   The supernatural and the underworld 195

Part III The politics of social conflict

9 ‘Pyllage uppon the poore mynorz’: sources of social conflict,
   1500–1600 203
   Late medieval quiescence 203
   The ‘troublesome people’ of the Tudor High Peak 209

10 ‘All is hurly burly here’: local histories of social conflict,
   1600–1640 218
   The confrontation over free mining in the Wapentake of
      Wirksworth 219
   The politics of a parish and the King’s Attorney-General 223
   The ‘illegal combinations’ of the High Peak 231
   Riot, litigation and free mining rights in the High Peak 238

11 The Peak in context: riot and popular politics in early
   Stuart England 249
   Redefining popular politics 249
## Contents

Gender and the social basis of plebeian politics 254  
Traditions of resistance 261  

12 ‘Prerogative hath many proctors’: the English Revolution and the plebeian politics of the Peak, 1640–1660 267  
War and allegiance 267  
The Levellers, the miners and the eighth Earl of Rutland 277  
The transformation and defeat of the miners’ political project 286  

13 The experience of defeat? The defence of custom, 1660–1770 295  
Changing interests, changing alliances 296  
Resistance, protest and survival 303  

14 The making of the English working class in the Derbyshire Peak Country 316  

Bibliography 326  
Index 346
FIGURES

3.1 Total baptisms per decade, four parishes, 1560–1769  
3.2 Surplus/deficit of baptisms over burials, four parishes, 1560–1769  
3.3 Price of lead ore per load, 1540–1770

TABLES

2.1 Comparison of the 1524–5 Lay Subsidy with lists of miners of the 1520s
2.2 Comparison of the 1543 Lay Subsidy with the 1541–2 list of miners
3.1 Occupational ascriptions in Youlgreave burial register, 1558–1604
3.2 Landholding on Cavendish estates, 1610–17
3.3 1653 production totals for five townships, expressed in loads and dishes
4.1 Seasonality of marriage in three parishes, 1560–1770 (%)
4.2 Occupations of grooms in three parishes, 1754–70
6.1 Number and gender of deponents to Consistory, Exchequer and Duchy of Lancaster courts, 1517–1754
6.2 Literacy of Peak Country deponents at the Consistory Court of the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield, 1593–1638
6.3 Literacy in eight mining townships, 1641–2
6.4 Literacy in three mining parishes, 1754–70
8.1 Structure of 1,463 Peak mining households in 1641
Maps

1 The topography of the Peak Country  page 29
2 The parishes of the Peak lead field  31
3 The administrative divisions of Derbyshire  32
4 The township boundaries of the Peak Country lead field  34
5 The manorial structure of the Peak lead field, c. 1640  35
6 The growth of the Peak lead field, c. 1540–1600  42
7 The population of the Peak Country in 1563: the distribution of acres per household  54
8 The population of the Peak Country in 1638: the distribution of acres per able-bodied man  64
9 The population of the Peak Country in 1664: the distribution of acres per household  65
10 Free mining as an employer: free miners as a percentage of the adult male population, 1641  78
11 Wage dependency and marginality: percentage of the mining workforce described as ‘cavers and hirelings’ in 1641  79
12 Industry and society: total percentage of the population dependent upon mining, 1638–1641  80
13 Topographies of poverty: percentage of households exempted from the Hearth Tax, 1664  91
14 The assertion and defence of custom: the extent of free mining rights, c. 1580–1762  208
PREFACE

In the summer of 1988, I was present in Chesterfield, in the north-east of Derbyshire, to hear a speech given by the Member of Parliament for that town, Tony Benn. In that speech, Tony Benn referred to the presence of Levellers in Derbyshire. This intrigued me greatly. The Levellers were one of the most radical of the political movements of the late 1640s, and have been claimed by British socialists as their ideological ancestors. But historians of the Levellers have shown that the movement’s base of civilian support was concentrated into the south-east of England, and into London in particular. What were Levellers doing in Derbyshire in the late 1640s?

At the time at which I first heard mention of the Levellers’ connection with Derbyshire, I had it in mind to start a doctoral thesis on the organization of that movement outside London. I was, and remain, convinced that a closer understanding of grassroots Leveller politics and organization have important implications for the understanding of plebeian politics and culture in early modern England. My intention was to produce an argument about Leveller organization based upon a series of local case-studies. The Leveller presence in Derbyshire seemed as good a place to start as any, partly because it seemed so odd, and partly because of a longstanding personal affection for the Peak. In the autumn of 1989, I began my doctoral work. Checking the secondary literature on the Levellers, I found that the key source for their involvement in Derbyshire was a petition written in the name of the miners of that county, and published in September 1649 in the Levellers’ newspaper The Moderate. Upon investigation, this petition raised more questions than it answered. It certainly demonstrated a degree of support for the Leveller movement amongst some of the miners of the Peak Country, in the north-west of Derbyshire. But for all that the petition was couched in the kind of language I had come to associate with the Leveller movement, it spoke to a local and peculiar politics of which I had no knowledge. It seemed that the miners were aggrieved by the denial of their customary rights, for which they blamed ‘Great men’ in general and the Earl of Rutland in particular. The denial of

xiii
those rights had prompted the miners to declare their support for the Levellers. Yet much remained unclear. What were these customary rights? What did the Earl of Rutland have to do with the matter? And what did this apparently trivial, local dispute have to do with the radical politics of the Leveller movement?

This book attempts to answer these questions, and a host of others besides. I cannot remember the point at which, as a postgraduate student, I stopped telling people that I was researching the Leveller movement, and started saying that I was writing about the Derbyshire Peak Country in the seventeenth century. In 1993, I eventually wrote a doctoral dissertation on that subject. In 1995, I started working on the subject again, this time for publication, and with a rather more ambitious chronology. Over a decade after I first heard Tony Benn refer to Levellers in Derbyshire, the book is finally finished. In the course of its production, I have incurred a great many debts. First of all, enormous thanks are due to the supervisor of my doctoral work, Keith Wrightson, from whose imagination, enthusiasm and critical support I have long benefited. John Morrill and Rab Houston were careful but sympathetic examiners of my PhD dissertation; in another context, this time in the company of Anthony Fletcher, John Morrill enabled the production of this book. At the University of York, Jim Sharpe and David Parrott’s inspired teaching turned me into an early modernist. In my time at the Universities of York, Cambridge, East London, Liverpool, East Anglia, and at University College London and the Institute of Historical Research, I have incurred many other debts. The British Academy have been generous: they funded my doctoral work between 1989 and 1992, awarded me a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in 1995, and in 1997 even gave me a small grant to finish my work in Matlock. In 1992, the Institute of Historical Research awarded me a Scouloudi Research Fellowship, thereby keeping my head above water. I am grateful to John Arnold, Mick Brightman, Cathy Carmichael, Andy Davies, Michael Fearson, Dennis Glover, Paul Griffiths, Steve Hindle, Pat Hudson, Peter Martin, Simon Middleton, Kate Peters, Dave Rollison, Heather Shore, Tim Stretton, John Sutton, Eric Taplin and Garthine Walker for their ideas, criticisms and enthusiasms. Thanks to the staff of the repositories (listed in the Bibliography) where I consulted documents; but regrettably His Grace the Duke of Rutland refused access to his splendid holdings at Belvoir Castle. Pete Herdan and Ian Kirkpatrick have had to endure my conversation about the Peak Country for far too long. Deb Riozzi’s friendship kept me going through my doctoral research, and much more. I reconceived and wrote this book between September 1995 and April 1998. I have shared those years with Lucy Simpson, and they have been the best of times.
Preface

The book is really about two things: it is about the history of working people, and it is about the Peak Country. I first learnt about both subjects from my parents, Jim and Joyce Wood, and I dedicate this book to them.

Andy Wood
Norwich
ABBREVIATIONS

AgHR  Agricultural History Review
APC   Acts of the Privy Council
BL    British Library
BPDMHS Bulletin of the Peak District Mines Historical Society
CHT   Chatsworth House
CSPD  Calendar of State Papers Domestic
DAJ   Derbyshire Archaeological Journal
DCL   Derby Central Library
DRO   Derbyshire Record Office
DRS   Derbyshire Record Series
EcHR  Economic History Review
HLRO, MP House of Lords Record Office, Main Papers series
JRL   John Rylands Library
LJRO  Lichfield Joint Record Office
LPL   Lambeth Palace Library
MCL   Manchester Central Library
NAO   Nottinghamshire Archives Office
P&P   Past and Present
PRO   Public Record Office
SA    Sheffield Archives
TT    Thomason Tracts
VCH   Victoria County History of Derbyshire