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.

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THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

The Peak Country, 1520–1770

ANDY WOOD
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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 long-standing 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
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 Frearson, 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 Riozzie’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
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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
IJRO  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