

## GREEN INVESTMENT — old style

### The Days of Digging

The cold month of January is more conducive to learning about garden history than gardening techniques. While inflation is predicted to level off in 2024, annual food prices, and particularly fruits and vegetables, are expected to rise another \$700 for a family of four. Prolonged price rises can stretch the social fabric. One such stretch occurred in England between 1642 and 1651—the civil war between those supporting Parliament and the Royalists. Parliamentary forces led by Oliver Cromwell prevailed, leading to the execution of King Charles I. The aftermath saw widespread economic and social disruption. The victorious but now unemployed citizen soldiers expected their quality of life to improve and the recent translation of the Bible into English led many to seek justice through the redistribution of wealth.

One movement, “The Diggers”, were guided by a pamphlet entitled “The New Law of Righteousness” by Gerrard Winstanley. He found inspiration in two verses from the biblical Book of Acts. “And all that believed were together, and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need”. Winstanley himself wrote “true freedom lies where a man receives his nourishment and preservation, and that is in the use of the earth.” The Diggers encouraged the landless poor by inviting “all to come in and help them, and be promised meat, drink and clothes.” This was ‘ground-breaking’ appeal.

Groups of ‘Diggers’ sprang up in twenty towns in central England. These ‘agrarian socialists’ moved onto unoccupied common land and began to build simple houses, plant grains and vegetables and share livestock. It wasn’t long before private landowners saw this movement as a threat to their own use of common lands. The Church, one of the largest landowners in England, was alarmed by this movement’s potential claims on their property. In response, Digger communities soon became the victims of arson. Organized gangs tore up fields and confiscated livestock seemingly with the

blessing of Church and State. In an effort to restore social order and stability, the son of the executed King was returned to reestablished English Throne. In the next few decades the transition from feudalism to capitalism was achieved. The former peasants became the landless poor labourers, contracted to work on the farms and estates of wealthy property owners.

Our modern world seems once again grappling with social upheaval. In England this recently led to the formation of new “Digger” groups and an annual festival in Wigan, home of Diggers founder Gerrard Winstanley. The Manchester Urban Diggers for example seek to promote food sovereignty through “educational services and growing fruit, vegetables and herbs to make available to the local community”.



Today, in Canada, Food Bank demand is surging. Almost all land that is suitable for food production is privately owned. Often prime farmland is devoted to the raising of animal feed. In Prince Edward County there is almost no ‘common land’ aside from roadsides, power line corridors and a few parks. Many areas of former farmed land that are now scenic private acreages. Here in the County we’ve seen a few initiatives that are reminiscent of the Diggers—the citizen-led tree planting, community gardens at Delhi Park, several farmers markets, and the County Food Hub in Sophiasburg. Homelessness and landlessness are increasing in our modern world. Climate change has caused the flooding of some low-lying agricultural lands, while elsewhere in many southern areas farms are no longer productive due to persistent drought. Mass migration is one of

the consequences...national borders have many impoverished knocking at the door. It has been almost 400 years since the Diggers sought an alternative lifestyle. For us, a New Year has just begun, what new or old ideas will be unearthed?

*I hope this in-depth probe into the Diggers story wasn't boring!*

- By Robin Reilly

At their Black River Forest Garden, the Reilly's raise many types of plants and animals within a larger project to restore a diverse meadow and forest landscape.

