# Levellers Day 2024 draws fresh connections between 17th-century executions and modern social justice



Almost four hundred years ago, on 17 May 1649, three soldiers were executed on the orders of Oliver Cromwell, the military leader of the Parliamentarians during the English Civil War. These men were part of the Levellers, a group advocating for civil rights and religious tolerance. Initially aligned with Cromwell against King Charles I, the Levellers eventually found themselves at odds with him as they perceived his growing authority as dictatorial. This discord culminated in the capture of approximately 300 Levellers by Roundhead troops, leading to the execution of three prominent figures: Cornet James Thompson, Corporal Perkins, and Private John Church.

The tensions that escalated into this tragic event stemmed from the Levellers’ dissatisfaction over wages and their deployment to fight in Ireland. This discontent among the ranks of the New Model Army marked a significant turning point, as their executions symbolised the suppression of their radical ideals. Today, the legacy of the Levellers is celebrated annually in Burford, as a reminder of their struggles for equality and justice.

On the 50th anniversary of this poignant commemoration, Levellers Day took place on 17 May 2024, serving as both a remembering of the past and a platform for discussing contemporary issues. Attendees were encouraged to reflect on the lessons of history, linking the challenges of 1649 to those still faced today. The event featured a vibrant programme that commenced with performances by local choirs in Burford Cemetery, followed by a memorial led by Reverend Canon Professor Mark Chapman, who emphasized inclusivity during the commemoration. Julia Spragg, a co-ordinator for the Oxfordshire Greenpeace group, remarked on the Reverend's address as being particularly impactful, illustrating the inclusion of historical narratives in current activist movements.

The day was filled with music, including a performance by the Celtic folk rock band Stocious. The highlight was the traditional march through Burford, which brought together locals and visitors alike, culminating in a lively debate at Warwick Hall. This year’s discussions tackled the pressing themes of poverty and injustice, resonating deeply with the struggles the Levellers faced centuries earlier. Participants included notable figures such as the Reverend Canon, Sarah Wooley from the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union, Professor Danny Dorling, and Sam Gurney, the Trade Union Congress regional secretary.

The community's robust support for the event reflects a growing recognition of its significance, with Spragg expressing hope that the enthusiasm could inspire increased participation in ongoing efforts to address climate change, notably with Greenpeace’s upcoming Mass Lobby of Parliament in July. Such connections between past and present issues serve to honour the legacy of the Levellers while igniting a proactive approach to contemporary social justice.

As Levellers Day 2025 approaches, scheduled again for 17 May, the theme will centre on confronting poverty and inequality, inviting historians like Dr. John Rees and Jonathan Healey to lead historical tours and discussions. This enduring commemoration not only celebrates the sacrifices made by the Levellers but also encourages ongoing dialogue about the relevance of their ideals in modern society. Organisers expressed gratitude to attendees and community organisations, such as the Oxford and District Trade Union Council, for their support in sustaining this important cultural event.

The spirit of the Levellers endures not only as a historical memory but as an ongoing call to action for justice and equality, inspiring new generations to advocate for the rights of all.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: Sources (1), (2)
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7. Paragraph 7: Sources (1), (4), (6)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/25174344.burfords-50th-levellers-day-honours-cromwells-victims/?ref=rss> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.executedtoday.com/2016/05/17/1649-three-banbury-mutineers-at-burford-church/> - This article details the execution of three Leveller leaders—Cornet James Thompson, Corporal Perkins, and Private John Church—on May 17, 1649, in Burford churchyard, Oxfordshire. The Levellers, a radical political movement advocating for civil rights and religious tolerance, had mutinied over pay and the prospect of being sent to fight in Ireland. Their execution marked a significant suppression of the Leveller movement within the New Model Army. The article also notes that Levellers' Day is commemorated annually on the Saturday nearest to May 17 in Burford.
3. <https://calendarcustoms.com/articles/burford-levellers-day/> - This guide provides information about Burford's Levellers' Day, an annual event held on the Saturday nearest to May 17 to commemorate the execution of three Leveller leaders in 1649. The event features debates, music, dancing, speeches, and a grand parade, with participants often wearing seventeenth-century costumes and laying posies in the churchyard in memory of the fallen. The article also mentions that in 2025, Levellers' Day is scheduled for Saturday, May 17.
4. <https://royalhistsoc.org/calendar/levellers-day-2025-festival/> - This announcement from the Royal Historical Society details the Levellers' Day 2025 festival, scheduled for Saturday, May 17, 2025, in Burford, Oxfordshire. The theme for the 50th anniversary event is 'Confronting Poverty and Inequality.' The festival will take place at Warwick Hall from 10:30 am to 4:30 pm and will feature historians Dr. John Rees and Jonathan Healey for a historical working tour.
5. <https://www.thebridgeburford.co.uk/events-calendar> - This events calendar for Burford, Oxfordshire, lists Levellers' Day on Saturday, May 17, 2025, from 10:30 am to 4:30 pm at Warwick Hall. The event commemorates the Levellers' movement and includes a march, music, and talks. The calendar also provides information on other local events in Burford during May 2025.
6. <https://levellersday.wordpress.com/> - The official website for Levellers' Day provides historical context about the Levellers' movement and details about the annual commemoration held in Burford, Oxfordshire. The site includes information on the event's history, themes, and activities, as well as resources for those interested in learning more about the Levellers and their impact on English history.
7. <https://www.executedtoday.com/tag/levellers/> - This page on Executed Today features articles about the Levellers, including the execution of three Leveller leaders in 1649. The Levellers were a radical political movement advocating for civil rights and religious tolerance during the English Civil War. The page provides historical context and details about the movement's leaders and their ultimate fate.