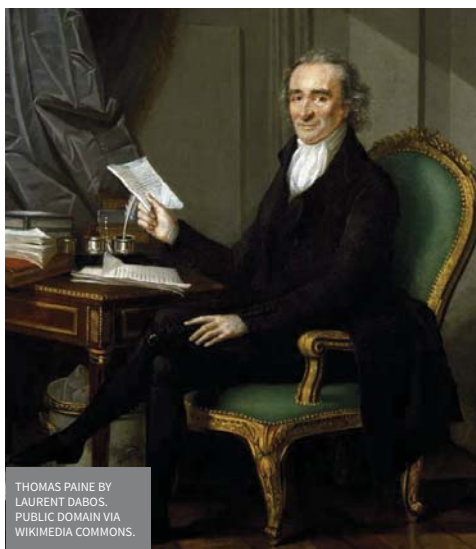


BY PAMELA J FISHER

# Supporting king and constitution: expressions of loyalism in Leicestershire, 1792-3



THOMAS PAINE BY  
LAURENT DABOS.  
PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA  
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

The people of Castle Donington, in north-west Leicestershire, had ambitious plans for 5th November 1792. An effigy of Thomas Paine had been made, and while being held “*in confinement*” the previous evening, someone filled its head with gunpowder before re-attaching it to the body. On the 5th, the effigy was placed in a cart and drawn through the principal streets behind a band playing “*God save the King*”, as a single bell solemnly tolled. The procession was attended by a “*party of gentlemen*”, who fired several volleys over the effigy, “*as a triumph of reason and unanimity over discord and malice*”. When the procession halted, a “*trial*” was held. Those defending Paine were soon persuaded of his guilt, and sentence was passed. The effigy was taken to “*the place of execution*”, where it was hung over a signpost, and burnt, following which the church bells rang “*a merry peal*” in “*joy*”.

Thomas Paine was one of the most influential writers of the late 18th century. Born in Norfolk in 1737, he set sail for the American colonies in 1774, where he wrote *Common Sense* (1776), a pamphlet setting out the case for American Independence, which quickly sold over 150,000 copies. Failing to find a meaningful role within the new republic, he left for France in 1787, before returning to England. Paine answered Edmund Burke’s denunciatory *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) with *The Rights of Man* (1791), which asserted that the British people had not submitted themselves to the crown forever. A second part, published in February 1792, promoted the reform of parliament and taxation. Paine was summoned before the courts in June 1792, but his trial on a charge of sedition was postponed until December.

The “*execution*” at Castle Donington had clearly been carefully planned, with the knowledge and support of many inhabitants, including some gentlemen and the vicar or churchwardens. The timing was apposite for a political message in support of the constitution, being the anniversary of both the discovery of the gunpowder plot in 1605 and the arrival of William III in Devon in 1688. It also came at a time when the revolution in France was becoming more violent. George III had issued a proclamation in May 1792 warning people to guard against attempts to subvert the government, and ordering county magistrates to seek out the authors, printers and distributors of seditious writings. As yet there had been little response. The flames from Castle Donington’s bonfire would have seared a warning into the minds of any spectators seeking to upset the social order, while the volleys, bells and the addition of gunpowder would have broadcast the event to a wider audience, creating a topic of conversation for the days which followed. Keen to avoid any dilution of their political message, the organisers informed the *Leicester Journal* that Paine was executed for “*disturbing the peace of a people, who are happier... under our present auspicious Government... than they can possibly be under any other form which this deluded man, or his votaries, can devise*”.

It was the first of over 400 recorded burnings of Tom Paine in effigy in towns and villages across Britain. It foreshadowed a shift in public sentiment, mostly expressed by a wave of loyalist declarations between late November 1792 and early March 1793. The *Leicester Journal* reported on 11th January 1793 that there was “*scarce a town* »

or village within the circulation of this paper" that had not shown its support for the constitution. Loyal addresses were not a new phenomenon, and the movement was self-propelling, with people keen to prevent any inference being drawn from silence. Of greatest interest are the towns and villages which felt it necessary to pay to advertise their declarations and resolutions in a newspaper: those whose resolutions took the strongest line against treachery and sedition, and the possible motivations which lay behind these actions and the burning in effigy of a revolutionary.

The first to act after the events at Castle Donington was an anonymous old soldier calling himself Nobody. Citing the proverb "what is everybody's business is nobody's business", Nobody paid for an insertion in the *Leicester Journal* on 30th November 1792. It reported on a meeting at the Crown and Anchor tavern in London on 20th November, where an association had been formed "For preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers". The meeting had passed resolutions to discourage and suppress seditious publications, and to recommend that others formed similar associations "in their different neighbourhoods". Historians have disagreed over whether the association was formed with the encouragement of Pitt's government, but its resolutions suited the government's needs.

The first two loyalist meetings recorded in Leicestershire took place on 17th December, in Leicester and Market Harborough, but their resolutions differed from those passed at the Crown and Anchor. The mayor called and chaired the Leicester meeting. His advertisement promised a resolution to detect and punish anyone responsible for circulating seditious publications, but those present unanimously resolved no more than to support the constitution, to use their "utmost efforts to repress riots and unlawful assemblies" and to accept the signatures of supporters of these resolutions. As signatures were only accepted in working hours, this would have excluded most except gentlemen and the professional classes. The existence of a constitutional society in Leicester, which wished to see annual elections to a reformed parliament, may have made it impossible to obtain unanimity to any stronger resolutions. At Market Harborough, the unanimous resolutions of 198 people meeting under the chairmanship of Reverend Farrer also went no further than supporting the constitution and vowing to prevent riots. Nonetheless, it publicly thanked the victuallers in the town, "who have voluntarily stepped forward" to declare that they would not countenance any seditious meeting or "treasonable conversation" on their premises.

Advertisements record the resolutions passed over the next two months at meetings held in Ashby de la Zouch, Hinckley, Loughborough,

Lutterworth, Market Harborough (a second meeting), Melton Mowbray, Ashby Magna, Barrow upon Soar, Claybrooke, Great Bowden, Great Dalby, Kegworth, Kibworth, Mountsorrel, Peatling Parva and Wigston Magna. Some included the inhabitants of neighbouring villages: for example, the people of Castle Donington joined the Kegworth meeting. The second meeting at Market Harborough was attended by the inhabitants of at least 17 villages in Leicestershire and Northamptonshire, and a meeting in Melton Mowbray included residents from at least 13 villages.

Although the published resolutions were similar in tone, they varied widely in breadth and wording. The chairmen, generally magistrates, and prominent members of the local gentry or clergymen, were clearly determined to achieve unanimity, and compromises presumably had to be made. Each set of resolutions can therefore be seen not only as a broader reflection of the views of those present, but perhaps also as a reluctance of some to become personally involved. Some, including the meeting at Mountsorrel, saw the licensed trade as their first line of defence, and the publicans and innkeepers of Leicester and Hinckley joined those of Market Harborough in rising to the challenge.

Many of the meetings were held on weekday mornings. Those present would have been largely business and property owners, and here a determination to assist magistrates in preventing riots was almost universal. Meetings at Ashby de la Zouch, Great Bowden, Great Dalby, Lutterworth and Wigston Magna resolved to assist magistrates in suppressing seditious publications, and at Barrow upon Soar those present also agreed to take before the magistrates anyone "speaking rebellious discourse" against the government. The strongest resolutions were passed at Loughborough, under the chairmanship of William Herrick of Beaumanor, at a meeting which included inhabitants of neighbouring villages. An association was formed whose members would ensure that those publishing or distributing seditious literature or uttering seditious words would be punished.

They recommended that publicans not allow their premises to be used for the circulation of seditious literature or meetings of unlawful combinations (a far wider scope than sedition), or those seeking constitutional change. They threatened to apply to the magistrates to remove the licence of any publican disregarding that recommendation. They also promised to take action against anyone caught posting handbills or graffiti which could disturb the peace, adding that the association would defray the cost of any

***"An association was formed whose members would ensure that those publishing or distributing seditious literature or uttering seditious words would be punished."***

FASHION BEFORE EASE BY JAMES GILLRAY. PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.



prosecutions arising from these resolutions.

Not all took this hard line. Despite their chosen lengthy title, after expressing their abhorrence of recent pamphlets, the "Kegworth and Castle Donington Association for Promoting His Majesty's late Proclamation, and for Defending the Constitution against All Innovations Whatsoever" failed to resolve to suppress seditious literature, but did agree to raise a subscription to purchase "proper books" to be distributed to counter the effects of seditious writings. Similarly, although a strong line in respect of seditious literature was suggested in the advertisement for a meeting at Melton Mowbray, those present only resolved to "plainly point out to our Workmen, Apprentices, Servants, Labourers and others, the Fallacy of those detestable Doctrines".

In Kibworth and Lutterworth, "Protestant Dissenters" held meetings ahead of other inhabitants. Freedom of worship had been provided for most by the *Act of Toleration* (1689), but some civil restrictions still applied. Just one year after the Priestley riots in Birmingham, many nonconformists felt it expedient to proclaim publicly their loyalty to king and constitution to counter any possible accusation that they sought a new form of government which would overturn the link between church and state. It is notable that many of the other well-publicised meetings were in places where religious nonconformity was strong, likely at the behest of nonconformists.

Two people suffered personally in this more febrile atmosphere by suspicions levied against them. A claim that baker William Mitchell of Kibworth uttered seditious words was publicly contradicted by three others, but not before he had lost business as local opinion turned against him. In Castle Donington, the words "George the Third shall not reign next March", allegedly uttered by clockmaker Thomas Erpe on 17th November 1792, led to his trial at the assizes in 1794. He was found "guilty of speaking the words, but not with a seditious intent".

Other burnings of Thomas Paine in effigy took place in many other villages in the county, three of which were reported in detail. In Kibworth, the effigy "underwent almost an incessant flagellation" when being drawn through the streets in a cart, while a parade of music played "God save the King". It was then consigned to a bonfire. In Lutterworth, an effigy of Paine inscribed with the words "Behold the Villain that would dethrone the King, Adorns the Gibbet, and well becomes the String!", was drawn round the streets in a cart before being hanged in the market place on a gallows 10 feet high. Here it was shot and "attended with repeated huzzas". A fire was then lit, and the effigy turned to ashes. In the evening, an unnamed person was chaired around the town, attended with lighted torches and a band of music, in the manner of an election celebration, while the bells rang and people sang and played "God Save the King".



THE CONTRAST 1792 WHICH IS BEST BY THOMAS ROWLANDSON. PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Shepherd residents walked in procession to Charnwood Forest with a band of music and their effigy, where "Paine" was burnt. Proceedings closed with a dinner at the Queen's Head.

Displays such as these fitted well with the popular culture of the period, and combined an evening's entertainment with a more serious political message. The meetings and burnings ceased in mid-February, as suddenly as they had begun. Loyalty had been proclaimed across the county, and the people were united as the revolutionary government in France declared war on Britain. A more sombre mood returned, leaving the nuances of the resolutions neatly recorded for later historians to unpick. ■

## About the author

Dr Pamela Fisher is the Volunteer Programme Manager for Leicestershire Victoria County History Trust, and has just completed a parish history of Castle Donington.

**Pamela J Fisher**  
Leicestershire Victoria County History Trust

**Further reading:**  
F. O'Gorman, 'The Paine burnings of 1792-93', *Past and Present*, 193 (2006), 111-55.  
A. Mitchell, 'The association movement of 1792-3', *The Historical Journal*, 4 (1961), 56-77.  
M. Duffy, 'William Pitt and the origins of the loyalist association movement of 1792', *The Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), 943-62.