

William Cobbett, Thomas Paine and Fleet Street

VOL. 1 - No. 19

THE HERITAGE of FLEET STREET

LONDON 2022

William Cobbett (1763-1835) was a brilliant journalist, author and public speaker who, late in life, became M.P. for Oldham. The son of a Farnham tavern keeper, he started out as a farm labourer and gardener before enlisting in the army.

As a young man he was extremely conservative in his political beliefs, beginning his career as a journalist by opposing the French Revolution and its supporters (including Thomas Paine) under the pseudonym Humfrey Hedgehog and Peter Porcupine. But in 1803 he was converted to radical reform by reading Paine's *Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance*, an objection to the government's funding system because it seemed to transfer wealth from the poor to the rich, as well as threatening to bankrupt the nation. Thereafter, Cobbett became a constant scourge of the political establishment. Declaring himself 'the poor man's friend', he adopted as his symbol the gridiron, thus signifying his determination to give corruption and its practitioners a severe roasting.

Thomas Paine had died abroad in 1809 and was buried on his farm in New York State. In gratitude to him, Cobbett decided, ten years later, to repatriate his remains and give them a fitting funeral in Paine's birthplace, the Norfolk town of Thetford. However, when Cobbett with the bones in his baggage reached England in November 1819, he faced fierce criticism from both conservatives and radical reformers alike. For them Paine was not, as Cobbett claimed, a great patriot but a monstrous enemy of church and state, on account of his anti-christianity and his hostility to hereditary government. Realising his mistake, Cobbett, a monarchist and Christian, decided to let matters lie. But rather than disposing of the bones, he retained them for the rest of his life, mainly stored in shops he rented in Fleet Street for printing and selling his works. Throughout the 1820s the bones were kept at 183 Fleet Street in Johnsons Court and then, in the early 1830s, they were moved to 11 Bolt Court. Eventually, in 1833 they were taken from Fleet Street to a farm in Surrey where Cobbett lived with them until his death in 1835.



William Cobbett



Paine's posthumous connection with Fleet Street also lay in the fact that Cobbett's first storage address for the bones was a shop formerly rented by William Sherwin (1800-1848), a bold youth who was as infatuated as Cobbett with Paine, but for different reasons. In the window of Sherwin's shop a notice declared it to be 'The Republican Office' from which Sherwin published in March 1817, at the age of seventeen, a weekly journal initially called the 'Republican' and then 'Sherwin's Political Register' (1817-19). Yet his main mission was to republish Paine's political writings which, for fear of prosecution, no one had attempted for twenty-two years. This he had fulfilled by October 1818.

In the highly dangerous work of republishing Paine, Sherwin was joined in 1817 by Richard Carlile (1790-1843), a tinsmith. Carlile's aim was to reprint Paine's theological works, notably *The Age of Reason* which dismissed the Bible as fiction, a task he had accomplished by December 1818. When Sherwin gave up his shop at 183 Fleet Street in December 1818, Carlile established a book shop and printing office at 55 Fleet Street. For selling Paine's *The Age of Reason* he was convicted of blasphemy and given a six-year sentence (from 1819 to 1825) in Dorchester Gaol. Terrified of a similar fate,

the newly married Sherwin abruptly ended his connection with Paineite radicalism.

Despite his imprisonment, Carlile managed in the early 1820s to continue the publication and sale of Paine's works through a succession of shops: 55 Fleet Street was followed by 84 and 135 Fleet Street. This was thanks to his wife, his sister and several shop assistants (most of whom were consequently imprisoned). In addition, he produced a weekly journal entitled the 'Republican' that, for six years (1819-26), maintained a network of Paine Societies throughout the land.

During this time Paine's bones lay a stone's throw away on the other side of Fleet Street, but Carlile would have nothing to do with them or with Cobbett, preferring to read Paine's works rather than worship his remains. A final stage in the tale came with Carlile's release from prison in 1825 and his establishment in 1826 of another shop, at 62 Fleet Street. This he called his Temple of Reason. From it, Carlile upheld the cause for a further ten years, finally retiring to Enfield where, in the year of Cobbett's death and with failing health, he gave up the struggle to found a Paineite republic.



William Cobbett, Thomas Paine and Fleet Street Additional notes

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Further Reading:

George Spater, *William Cobbett, the Poor Man's Friend* (1982).

Penny Young, *Two Cocks on the Dunghill: William Cobbett and Henry Hunt, their Friendship, Feuds and Fights* (2009).

Michael Laccohee Bush, *The Friends and Following of Richard Carlile: a Study of Infidel Republicanism in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2016)