

Poole, Robert ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9613-6401> (1999) Making up for lost time. *History Today*, 49 (12). pp. 40-46.

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MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME. ROBERT POOLE

HISTORY TODAY, VOL. 49, NO. 12, DECEMBER 1999

Robert Poole revisits the 'Calendar Riots' of 1752 and suggests they are a figment of historians' imagination.

THE EARLY 1750s ARE THE SARGASSO Sea of the eighteenth-century. The ship of state lay becalmed between the last throes of Jacobitism in the 1740s and the first stirrings of radicalism in the 1760s, between the last political aftershocks of the seventeenth century and the first rumblings of the age of reform. Birds, claimed Horace Walpole, might have made their nests in the Speaker's chair safe from any disturbance by political debate. The general election of 1754 was the least widely contested of any in British history. Lewis Namier studied the period, and came to the conclusion that there was no real politics in the eighteenth century, effectively sterilising his subject for decades. More recently, the revisionist J.C.D. Clark first demonstrated his audacity by entitling the result of his exhaustive labours in the dreary politics of the 1750s *The Dynamics of Change*.

Of all the years of this moribund interlude, 1752 was the deadest. The crowded calendar of events in one leading textbook on the period (Geoffrey Holmes and Daniel Szechi's *Age of Oligarchy*) can find only four noteworthy happenings in that year: the battle of Trichinopoly (India); the death of Sir William Cheselden (a surgeon); the end of 'another somnolent parliamentary session'; and the subject of this article, the reform of the calendar of September 1752, with its attendant riots. No wonder the calendar riots have so often been noticed.

Now, with the upsurge of interest in the calendar as we approach the millennium, the calendar rioters are enjoying another outing. With the opening of the Greenwich time exhibition this month, and with a controversy about the true date of the millennium rumbling on in the correspondence columns of the press, the time seems right to have another look at those peculiar calendar rioters of nearly 250 years ago. According to the *Greenwich Guide to Time and the Millennium*, there were 'riots on the streets of London' at the change of the calendar in 1752. But who rioted? And why, exactly? And why has this most colourful of eighteenth-century disorders somehow missed the attention of serious researchers?

The background is straightforward enough. Britain, the most antipopish of all Protestant countries, was almost the last to adopt the Gregorian calendar reform of 1582. This had been promulgated by Pope Gregory XIII as part of the Counter-Reformation, and was adopted in the Roman Catholic world in the 1580s and in most of the Protestant world in 1700. In September 1752, eleven days were removed from the British calendar to bring it in line with that used in continental Europe, and with the heavens. Tradition recalls that the English mob rioted against a simple reform which they did not understand. G.J. Whitrow's recently re-issued *Time in History* explains.

In 1752, when the British government ... decreed that the day following 2 September should be styled 14 September, many people thought that their lives were being shortened thereby. Some workers actually believed that they were going to lose eleven days' pay. So they rioted and demanded 'Give us back our eleven days!'... The rioting was worst in Bristol, in those

days the second largest city in England, where several people were killed.

No history of the eighteenth century is complete without at least a passing reference to these calendar riots. From the old Oxford History of England volume of the 1930s to the new Oxford History of the 1990s, through the pages of David Ewing Duncan's current bestseller *The Calendar* and those of the material issued with the authority of Greenwich itself, the calendar rioters rampage on.

According to which version you read, the crowds resented the loss of eleven days' pay, the imposition of a 'popish' calendar imported from Roman Catholic countries, 'the supposed profaneness of changing the saints' days', or even the loss of eleven days of their lives. ...