

*Our dedicated volunteer Jeremy Jones shares a ballad he originally wrote to coincide with an anniversary moment on 11 January 2021. The words to the song are followed by Jeremy's description of its origins. As he explains, the ballad connects to the story of the Swing Riots. These same events were referenced in the first response posted as part of 51 Voices, during the same week in January 2021. With his kind permission we are sharing Jeremy's ballad as part of 51 Voices to mark volunteer week 2021 (1–7 June).*



The first 51 Voices item was a model thresher made by local firm Barrett, Exall & Andrewes (MERL 51/2).

## *The Ballad of William Winterbourn*

I am a man of Kintbury, my name it matters not,  
But there is one who once dwelt here, his name should not be forgot.  
For Winterbourn, named William, was Captain of our band.  
He led us round from farm to farm with hammer in his hand, brave boys,  
With hammer in his hand.

Work was scarce and food was too; what could poor people do  
But break machines that stole our work, starved women and children too?  
Oh Winterbourn he led us forth our work to carry out  
To rid the earth of Satan's tools, when Swing rode round about, brave boys,  
When Swing rode round about.

Captured and brought before the court where Park spared the lives of some  
He found no excuse for William; to dread decision he did come.  
Though women wept and pleaded, petitions they were sent,  
There was no room for mercy. William's time on earth was spent, brave boys,  
William's time on earth was spent.

And when the day appointed came for him to meet his fate,  
Outside the walls of Reading Gaol a crowd arrived 'fore 't was too late.  
He mounted up the scaffold, was plain for all to see.  
The trapdoor fell, a groan went out, it was too much for me, brave boys,  
It was too much for me.

In Kintbury soil he now does lie, brought home to be at peace,  
And though his bones were not grown old, his toil it had to cease.  
A victim of a vengeful state, he was made to die.  
He gave his life for others' good, he heard the hungry cry, brave boys,  
He heard the hungry cry.

And though those days are long ago, forget not William's name,  
And on his anniversary spread word of this man's fame.  
Place flowers upon his grave: forget-me-nots and rosemary.  
He died for the likes of you and me, he died for our liberty, brave boys,  
He died for our liberty.

**Jeremy Jones**

**27 November 2020 (amended 12 December 2020)**

## Writing the Ballad

I began volunteering at MERL in 2010, and in 2013 I became one of The MERL Players. It is out of my involvement with this group that *The Ballad of William Winterbourn* had its eventual birth.

The MERL Players are drawn from MERL's volunteer community and had their origin in training organised for volunteers who acted as guides in the museum, with the volunteers playing roles including Dairy Maid, Blacksmith, Farm Labourer, and Sheep Shearer. The Players also created two Christmas presentations: “Christmas With The Palmers” (2012); and “A Victorian Christmas” (2013). In 2016 they created and performed “Our Country Lives”, for the reopening of MERL.



The MERL Players perform a Christmas show in front of a large audience during the 'Winter Warmer Christmas' family event, December 2017.

When I joined them, The MERL Players were working on a production entitled "Performing Protest – Riots Against Technological Change in the 19th Century" for National Science and Engineering Week, at the suggestion of Rob Davies (volunteer coordinator at the time), who had an interest in the Swing Riots, and Keith Jerrome, who was involved in an annual commemoration of William Winterbourn's execution. The play focused on machine-breaking that took place in Berkshire in November 1830, particularly in and around Kintbury. The target of the rioters were the threshing machines that they considered were responsible for depriving them of work. Collectively, these episodes, which extended across the south of England, became known as The Swing Riots. Norman Fox's book *Berkshire to Botany Bay* was a great source of inspiration for the production.

We gave the first public performance of the play at The MERL on 22 March 2014. Subsequently, we gave performances to the Hungerford Historical Association (where Norman Fox was in attendance); the Twyford and Ruscombe History Society; at Reading Library; and to the Reading History Society. We also started to attend the annual commemoration of William's death at his graveside in Kintbury, organised by Keith Jerrome and members of the Trade Union movement and Labour Party. One spin-off from the play has been a series of presentations about the Swing Riots given to Womens Institute groups, history societies, and clubs by The MERL Players Kaye Gough and Jenny Knight.

During its development we had looked for a piece of music that we could use in our play. Finding nothing that related to the rioting in Berkshire in general, or William in particular, we ended up borrowing a song from Hampshire, “The Owslebury Lads”, substituting “Kintbury” for “Owslebury”.

In 2019, I started attending sessions at [Readifolk](#) (Reading's Folk Club). I was very impressed by those other singers who had written their own songs. I didn't have an extensive repertoire of songs, and had nothing that I had written myself. During the second Covid-19 lockdown, I decided that I must try to write a song. It didn't take long to decide that William and the Kintbury Riots would be a suitable subject. I wanted the song to be ready for 11 January 2021, the 190th anniversary of William's execution.

I started jotting words and phrases down on scraps of paper, and began coming up with complete lines. One of these was “when Swing rode round about”, which I thought might be the last line of each verse. However, I decided that this would take the focus away from William, and dropped the idea. Whilst out on a walk, I came up with “I am a man from Kintbury” and felt that this would be a great way to start the song. It places the action and establishes the singer's credentials. Then, everything just began to fall in to place. I hoped that the song would sound as though it could have been created in the nineteenth century, by someone who had been in Kintbury in 1830, and had knowledge of the events. I suppose I thought of an old man in a pub with a glass of beer and a pipe, dispensing his wisdom to an audience of local people.

The tune emerged alongside the words, the one reinforcing the other. Again, I hope that it sounds like something from the nineteenth century.

Because of Covid-19, the commemoration of William's execution this year took place via Zoom, and it was during this event that the *Ballad* had its first public performance. In 2022 I hope that it will be performed in Kintbury. However, there would be no *Ballad of William Winterbourn* were it not for my volunteering at The MERL and my fellow Players.

**Jeremy Jones**

**May 2021**

**[To hear Jeremy sing his ballad follow this link here, scroll down, and click play on the audio player.](#)**