John Wilkes, the second son of six children of Israel Wilkes, a malt distiller, was born in Clerkenwell on 17th October 1725. He was sent away to boarding school where he mastered Latin and Greek by the age of fourteen. In 1744 he attended the University of Leiden. (1)

Wilkes returned three years later for an arranged marriage on 23rd May 1747 to a bride some ten years older than himself, Mary Mead, whose dowry from her wealthy widowed mother was the manor of Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire. (2)

It was a marriage of convenience and Wilkes spent most of his time with his friends at the Hell Fire Club. A daughter, Mary, was born in 1750. After ten years he permanently separated from his wife. Wilkes retained the Aylesbury estate and agreed to pay his wife £200 a year. Their daughter chose to live with her father, and their loving relationship was thought even by his severest critics to be a redeeming feature of Wilkes's life. (3)

John Wilkes in the House of Commons

Wilkes was described as "a rake and libertine in the usual manner of the juvenile wealthy of his day". (4) Bored by his life of pleasure, Wilkes decided to become involved in politics and in 1757 he was elected MP for Aylesbury. At the next general election in 1761, he avoided a contest for his Aylesbury seat by offering 300 of the 500 voters £5 each. During this period he was "an imperialist of the Chatham school" At this time "he seems to have had no other idea than to play the political game as it was played by all young gentlemen of ability and means". (5)

Wilkes made his maiden speech on 13th November 1761, in support of William Pitt, who was demanding a war with Spain. Horace Walpole was not impressed with his performance: "His appearance as an orator had by no means conspired to make him more noticed. He spoke coldly and insipidly, though with impertinence; his manner was poor, and his countenance horrid". (6)

Dispute with George III

In 1762, the new king, George III, arranged for his close friend, the Earl of Bute, to become prime minister. This decision upset a large number of MPs who considered Bute to be incompetent. John Wilkes became Bute's leading critic in the House of Commons. In June 1762 Wilkes established The North Briton, a newspaper that severely attacked the king and his Prime Minister. (7)
In his first issue Wilkes wrote "the liberty of the press is the birthright of a Briton, and is justly esteemed the firmest bulwark of the liberties of this country". (8) In the edition published on 23rd April 1763, he said the king’s speech at the opening of Parliament gave "his sacred name to the most odious measures and the most unjustifiable public declarations from a throne ever renowned for truth, honour and the unsullied virtue." He added that the "spirit of discord" will "never be extinguished, but by the extinction of their power". (9)

George Grenville, the new prime minister, decided to prosecute Wilkes for seditious libel. Wilkes responded by writing: "The government have sent the spirit of discord through the land, and I will prophesy, that it will never be extinguished, but by the extinction of their power. A nation as sensible as the English, will see that a spirit of concord, when they are oppressed, means a tame submission to injury, and that a spirit of liberty ought then to arise, and I am sure ever will, in proportion to the weight of the grievance they feel." (10)
was protected by privilege from arrest on a charge of libel. His discharge was greeted with great popular acclaim and Wilkes left the court as a champion of liberty. (11)

Wilkes returned to attacking the king and his government. Samuel Martin, a supporter of the king, challenged Wilkes to a duel after he called him "the most treacherous, base, selfish, mean, abject, low-lived and dirty fellow that ever wriggled himself into a secretaryship". (12)

Martin had been busy at target practice that summer and some suspected it was part of a government plot to kill Wilkes. On 16th November, 1763, Wilkes was seriously wounded by Martin by a shot in the stomach. A week later, Parliament voted that a member's privilege from arrest did not extend to the writing and publishing of seditious libels. Before Wilkes could be detained by the authorities, a group of his friends arranged for him to be taken to Paris. (13)

**Middlesex Election**

John Wilkes visited London briefly in December 1767, and returned in February 1768, living quietly under the name of Osborn until parliament was dissolved on 11th March 1768. Wilkes decided to stand for the **Middlesex** constituency. Organised supporters, including a 6,000-strong contingent of Spitalfields weavers, paraded the streets and forced every carriage to either show Wilkes' colours (blue) or to chalk their vehicle with the slogan "Wilkes and Liberty". (14)

George Rudé, the author of *Wilkes and Liberty* (1962) has argued that Wilkes managed to get the support of the "mob". This had long-term consequences. Rudé suggests that the "mob" was on its way to becoming a self-conscious radical crowd as it was part of a political education that gave people a predisposition to turn out in defence of popular liberties, in defiance of authority, and in "movements of social protest, in which the underlying conflict of poor against rich... is clearly visible." (15)

Wilkes triumphed by 1,292 votes to 827 and 807 for the other two candidates. After being elected Wilkes was arrested and taken to **King's Bench Prison**. For the next two weeks a large crowd assembled at **St. George's Field**, a large open space by the prison. On 10th May, 1768 a crowd of around 15,000 arrived outside the prison. The crowd chanted "Wilkes and Liberty", "No Liberty, No King", and "Damn the King! Damn the Government! Damn the Justices!". Fearing that the crowd would attempt to rescue Wilkes, the troops opened fire killing seven people. Anger at these events led to disturbances all over **London**. (16)

On 8th June 1768 Wilkes was found guilty of libel and sentenced to 22 months imprisonment and fined £1,000. Wilkes was also expelled from the **House of Commons** but in February, March and April, 1769, he was three times re-elected for Middlesex, but on all three occasions the decision was overturned by Parliament. In May the House of Commons voted that Colonel Henry Luttrell, the defeated candidate at Middlesex, should be accepted as the MP. John Horne Tooke and other supporters of Wilkes formed the **Bill of Rights Society**. At first the society concentrated on forcing Parliament to accept the will of the Middlesex electorate, however, the organisation eventually adopted a radical programme of parliamentary reform. (17)
John Wilkes was released from prison in April 1770. Still banned from the House of Commons, Wilkes joined the campaign for the freedom of the press. In February, 1771, Parliament attempted to prevent several London newspapers from publishing reports of its debates. Wilkes decided to challenge this decision and the government reacted by ordering the arrest of two of his printers. A large crowd soon surrounded Parliament and afraid of what would happen, the government ordered the release of the two men and abandoned attempts to prevent the publication of reports of its debates. (18)

Parliamentary Reform

Wilkes also rewarded the London handloom-weavers for their support by obtaining an Act that regulating their wages and conditions, which in bad times had been falling to as little as 10s. a week. He became the main representative of the poor in Parliament. When the coal-heavers of East London went on a protest march they chanted "Wilkes and Liberty - and coal-heavers for ever". (19)

In 1774 John Wilkes was elected Lord Mayor of London. According to his biographer Peter D. G. Thomas, "The mayoralty of Wilkes must rank as one of the most splendid in London’s history. His generosity, popularity, and flair for publicity combined to make it memorable; and affection for his daughter, Polly, an elegant lady
mayoress, also explained why he put on such a show. He gave frequent and lavish entertainments - his expenses of £8,226 exceeding by £3,337 his official allowances - and he ended heavily in debt. Wilkes, as when sheriff, took his duties seriously. He concerned himself with the regulation of food prices and with charity for prisoners, and he initiated a campaign against prostitutes, thereby gaining respect and respectability; the archbishop of Canterbury attended one of his functions." (20)

John Wilkes was also elected once again to represent Middlesex in the House of Commons. It has been argued that "Wilkes drew his support from many different types of people, not only artisans, small shopkeepers and the mob, but also new men in business, banking and commerce, scattered across the country as well as in London, alarmed that the sound conduct of the nation's affairs was being endangered by political faction... Wilkes, the outsider who so potently challenged old entrenched interests and factional Court politics, appeared to speak to their needs." (21)

Wilkes campaigned for religious toleration and parliamentary reform. "That every free agent in this kingdom should, in my wish, be represented in Parliament. That the metropolis, which contains in itself a ninth part of the people, and the counties of Middlesex, York, and others, which so greatly abound with inhabitants, should receive an increase in their representation. That the mean and insignificant boroughs, so emphatically styled the rotten part of our constitution, should be lopped off, and the electors in them thrown into the counties; and the rich, populous trading towns, Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and others, be permitted to send deputies to the great council of the nation". (22)

Wilkes called for the redistribution of seats from the rotten and pocket boroughs to the fast growing industrial areas such as Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield. Although not a supporter of universal suffrage, Wilkes argued that working men should have a share in the power to make laws. He became leader of a movement that "asserted the belief that political power should emanate from below and not percolate down from above." (23)

Wilkes pointed out that as Parliament had power over people they needed representation. "The poorest peasant and day labourer has important rights respecting his personal liberty, that of his wife and children, his property however inconsiderable, his wages... which are in many trades and manufactures regulated by the power of Parliament... Some share therefore in the power of making those laws which deeply interest them... Without a true representation of the Commons our constitution is essentially defective." (24)

**American War of Independence**

Tom Paine, the son of a Quaker corset maker, and a former excise officer from Lewes, believed that the parliamentary system could be changed by political action. In 1777 he published *Common Sense*, a pamphlet that supported the American War of Independence. "The theme of the pamphlet was simple. Government by kings was indefensible. Government by kings from a foreign country was worse. Both had to be overthrown and replaced by representative parliaments." (25)

John Wilkes, like Paine, also gave his support to the American colonists. He offered words of encouragement to America, commending resistance to the import duties on tea and other items. Wilkes said "I hold Magna Carta to be in full force in America". In parliament Wilkes urged conciliation rather than coercion, and denounced the American war as bloody, expensive, and, above all, futile, telling the House of Commons that "men are not converted... by the force of the bayonet at the breast". (26)
and entered the war on 6th February 1778, transforming it into a global conflict. Spain also joined in on the side of the Americans and the British began to lose control of America. (27)

On 10th December 1777, Wilkes moved repeal of the Declaratory Act of 1766 as a final attempt to save the colonial link, but secured only ten votes. The failure of the 1778 peace commission led him to urge recognition of American independence, Wilkes pointed out: "A series of four years disgraces and defeats are surely sufficient to convince us of the absolute impossibility of conquering America by force, and I fear the gentle means of persuasion have equally failed". (28)

Wilkes was also a passionate opponent of the harsh criminal code. As Wilkes grew older he became more conservative. Radicals grew dissatisfied with Wilkes and in the 1790 general election he was defeated at Middlesex. Wilkes now retired from politics and took no part in the growth of radicalism that followed the publication of, The Rights of Man. In the book Tom Paine attacked hereditary government and argued for equal political rights. "The whole system of representation is now, in this country, only a convenient handle for despotism, they need not complain, for they are as well represented as a numerous class of hard-working mechanics, who pay for the support of royalty when they can scarcely stop their children’s mouths with bread." (29)

John Wilkes died on 29th December 1797.

Primary Sources

(1) John Wilkes, The North Briton (25th April 1763)

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(2) John Wilkes, speech in the House of Commons (23rd March 1775)

That every free agent in this kingdom should, in my wish, be represented in Parliament. That the metropolis, which contains in itself a ninth part of the people, and the counties of Middlesex, York, and others, which so greatly abound with inhabitants, should receive an increase in their representation. That the mean and insignificant boroughs, so emphatically stiled the rotten part of our constitution, should be lopped off, and the electors in them thrown into the counties; and the rich, populous trading towns, Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and others, be permitted to send deputies to the great council of the nation.


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when sheriff, took his duties seriously. He concerned himself with the regulation of food prices and with
charity for prisoners, and he initiated a campaign against prostitutes, thereby gaining respect and
respectability; the archbishop of Canterbury attended one of his functions. Genial host and busy
administrator, Wilkes hoped to take advantage of his popularity by securing election to the lucrative if
onerous post of City chamberlain, manager of London’s finances. But, after persuading the incumbent to
resign, he was defeated in 1776 by a ministerial candidate, for by then his seemingly unpatriotic
opposition to the American War of Independence was proving to be a solvent of Wilkite control of the
City.

**Student Activities**

Child Labour Simulation (Teacher Notes)

Richard Arkwright and the Factory System (Answer Commentary)

Robert Owen and New Lanark (Answer Commentary)

James Watt and Steam Power (Answer Commentary)

The Domestic System (Answer Commentary)

The Luddites (Answer Commentary)

Handloom Weavers (Answer Commentary)

**References**


(6) Horace Walpole, *Memoirs of the Reign of King George the Third* (1894) page 142


(8) John Wilkes, *The North Briton* (6th June 1762)

(9) John Wilkes, *The North Briton* (19th April 1763)

(10) John Wilkes, *The North Briton* (25th April 1763)


(22) John Wilkes, speech in the *House of Commons* (23rd March 1775)
(24) John Wilkes, speech in the *House of Commons* (27th March 1776)
(26) John Wilkes, speech in the *House of Commons* (20th November, 1777)
(28) John Wilkes, speech in the *House of Commons* (26th November, 1778)
(29) Tom Paine, *The Rights of Man* (1791) page 74