

A personal selection of Wessex, British Isles and world history.

“The triumph of the industrial arts will advance the cause of civilization more rapidly than its warmest advocates could have hoped, and contribute to the permanent prosperity and strength of the country far more than the most splendid victories of successful war.”

Charles Babbage

This month J&T 180 looks at a prince of little consequence, the chief's daughter who's name is practically a legend and two English visionaries who revolutionised the future of the planet.

## THE SPARE<sup>1</sup>

When King John was succeeded by his eldest son as Henry III (1207 - 1272), John's second son, Richard (1209 - 1272), was made Earl of Cornwall (below) and was regarded like our Prince Harry as 'The Spare', there in the wings in case anything happens to the king. This affected him deeply (as with Harry) throughout his life.



He was always striving for honours, land and money. As a result he became extremely wealthy and often made loans to Henry who, like his father, was always short of money.

Henry was only nine when he succeeded to the throne and so was protected by the great William Marshall who was elected Regent by the barons. William, who had served Henry II, Richard the Lionheart and John was noted for his extreme loyalty. I did not really appreciate this until reading about Richard of Cornwall when it became obvious that no-one thought anything of changing sides; this applying to everyone from the Pope downwards. Once a baron found himself on the wrong side, he could almost always sue for forgiveness which was given at a price, cynically set out as up to seven times their estates' income. The Second Barons' War was the most serious event of Henry's reign and when Simon de Montfort was killed at the battle of Evesham in 1265, his body was horrifically mutilated as an example to others. Which showed how frightened royalty and aristocracy was of anything remotely like 'democracy' gaining a foothold.

To hold on to or increase their power royalty used money, strategic marriages and forming alliances. In Richard's case, he had enough money to bribe his way. Although he was as venal and bullying as everyone else in this period he was good at reconciling enemies and avoiding conflict. With these two attributes he was invited to become *King of the Romans* in effect the German states. In this he was successful and it put him in line to become Holy Roman Emperor (the descendent of Charlemagne). Remarkably he nearly achieved this; unfortunately there was another claimant, Alfonso X of Castile. It was up to the Pope to decide whose claim to support but he was involved with the war of the Guelphs and Ghibbelines and did not want a strong Holy Roman Emperor. Also, as the Popes were nearly always elderly, they kept dying and Richard had to start his campaign over and over again.



Richard supported his brother in the battles with Simon de Montfort but unfortunately both were captured and imprisoned after the battle of Lewes in 1264. Henry was released but Richard languished for a year. This not only took him out of circulation but made him a laughing stock with the lower orders. Although released, his estates had been trashed and he never really regained his power. He was very fond of the ladies and married three times, the last when he was in his sixties to a very attractive fifteen year old German girl, Beatrice of Falkenberg. Above: Sanchia of Provence and Richard of Cornwall, 1260, in the choir of Meissen Cathedral.

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## MERCURY WOMEN<sup>2</sup>

In the 17th century, these ladies were news-sellers. The news came in the form of small 8-page newsbooks. During the Civil War (1642 - 1651) the publications were used as propaganda weapons by both sides. As Napoleon said: *Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.*

One of the most effective publishers was Elizabeth Alkin (c1600 - c1655) who was also a Parliamentarian spy. She tracked down Royalist publishers and reported them to the authorities. Often she would take over the name of the offending newsbook for her own use (see right).

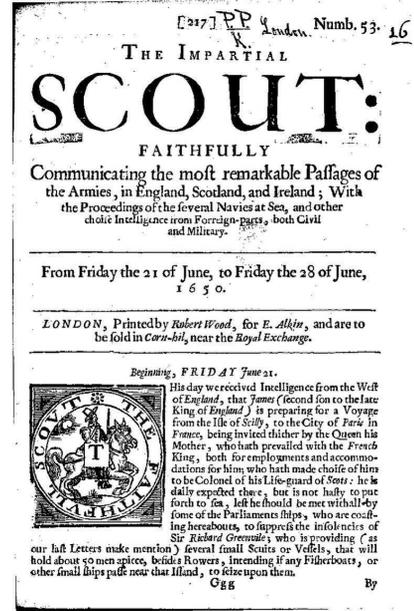
There are a number of records of payments for information - her husband was actually hung by the Royalists for spying - and she operated from Oxford, then the Royalist headquarters. The enemy called her *Parliament Joan* which was a derogatory term at the time.

During the Anglo-Dutch war (1652 - 1654) she nursed the wounded who were brought into the English ports and although she was rewarded, as with her spying, it was at a rate much lower than paid to men.

Below is a letter from her to the Secretary of the Admiralty Commissioners, now in the National Archives. It starts....

*Mr Blackbourne*

*I intreate [beg] you presenting humble service to all my Masters, and to your selfe, Sir you have sent mee downe to Harwich [port town in Essex] with five pounds, but believe mee it hath cost mee three times soe much, since my cominge hither, I have laid out my moneys for divers [various] necessaries about the sick & wounded men heere, it pitties mee, to see poore people in distresse, I cannot see them want if I have it, a great deale of moneys I have given to have them cleansed, in their bodies and their haire Cutt, mending their Clothes, reparacions [repairs], and severall things else...*



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### GOING NATIVE<sup>3</sup>

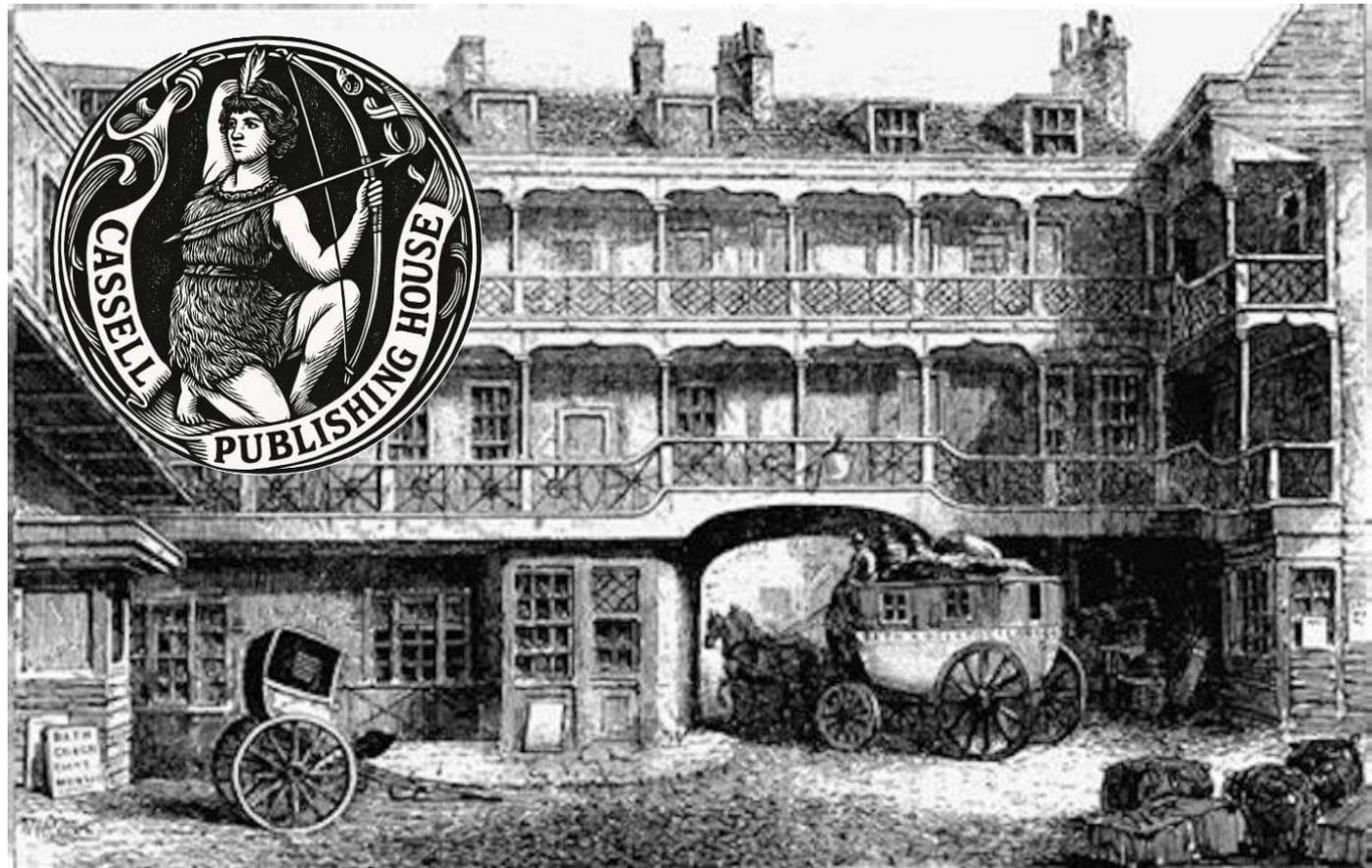
What is the connection between American actor and film-maker Edward Norton (born 1969) and Pocahontas (1596–1617), the daughter of a Native American Tsenacommacah, paramount chief of the Powhatan paramountcy. Pocahontas is Edward's 12th great grandmother! Pocahontas married a tobacco farmer and came to England where she met James I. She, her husband and son were due to sail back to Virginia but Pocahontas contracted an illness (possibly smallpox) and died at (appropriately) Gravesend in Kent where a statue was erected to her (right).



Interestingly, her image was manipulated to suit the times and the audience - and that was even before Disney got to work. The Victorian version makes her look almost white whereas the 1950s McFall statue, originally in Red Lion Square, has her posed as a rather unlikely nude. To be fair, this statue was commissioned by publishers Cassells for their new headquarters. Their old HQ was bombed in 1941. It was in fact on the site of a medieval inn where Pocahontas had stayed. The Inn was called The Belle Sauvage, probably after her (see below).



The Inn was in addition the home of the amazing wood carver, Grinling Gibbons. Cassell's old HQ also had a statue of the same name outside, this time by the great Eric Gill, who also produced the publisher's colophon below.





## WEAVING A COMPUTER<sup>4</sup>

When the computer pioneer Charles Babbage received guests, he liked to show them a framed portrait of the French weaver Joseph Marie Jacquard seated beside a model of his loom. ‘Oh, that engraving?’ the duke of Wellington asked when his attention was drawn to it.

But it wasn’t an engraving. It was a sheet of finely woven silk – a thousand threads to the inch – so subtle and detailed that it deceived many who saw it. It also held the secret to Babbage’s analytical engine: Jacquard’s right hand rests on a stack of punch cards, which controlled the loom’s operation (left).



Jacquard was born in Lyon in 1752 into a family of silk weavers. It was the city’s principal trade, involving some 40 per cent of the workforce. He patented his first loom on 23 December 1800. Punch cards were a later innovation, elaborated from the work of an earlier weaver, Jean Baptiste Falcon. Jacquard’s card-driven loom was operational by April 1805 when Napoleon made it public property. Thereafter, all of the emperor’s ceremonial clothes were woven using Jacquard’s process.

The possibilities were endless. Jacquard’s portrait required 24,000 individual cards, each with 1,050 hole positions, for example. The complexity was an avatar of the modern world. So was the speed. Weaving had been a two-person job; Jacquard’s loom only needed one and worked 24 times faster. Lyon’s weavers were so unhappy it is said they threw Jacquard into one of the city’s rivers.

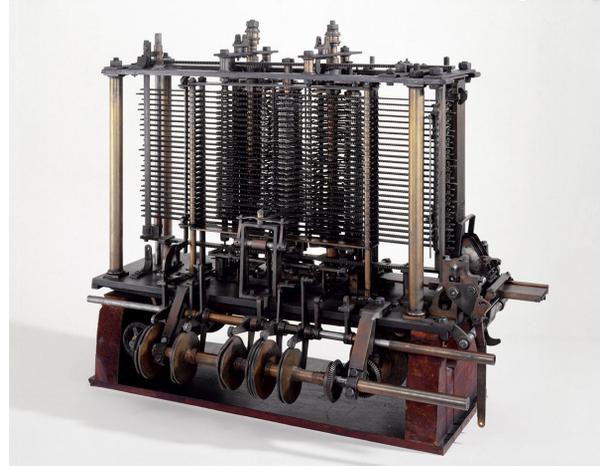
Babbage had spent the 1820s working on a cogwheel-based calculating machine, known as a difference engine. When he became aware of Jacquard’s work, he saw its potential immediately. ‘The system of cards which Jacquard invented are the means by which we can communicate to a very ordinary

loom orders to weave any pattern that may be desired’, he wrote to a friend. ‘Availing myself of the same beautiful invention I have by similar means communicated to my Calculating Engine (right) orders to calculate any formula however complicated.’

Fellow pioneer Ada Lovelace put it more elegantly: ‘We may say ... that the Analytical Engine weaves algebraic patterns, just as the Jacquard-loom weaves flowers and leaves.’

Ed: Whilst dining out in a lovely hill-top medieval village just outside Lyon, I called over the head waiter because I could not translate one of the items on the menu. Ah he said, it is such an amazing dish the chef has called it ‘the brains of the Jacquard loom weavers of Lyon’.

Taken from Matthew Lyons article in History Today December 2025.





## DID YOU KNOW?<sup>5</sup>

Brazil remained under Portuguese control even after Napoleon took over Portugal. In fact the Royal Family escaped to Brazil and ruled from there. When they returned to Lisbon in 1821, the heir to the throne, Prince Pedro, stayed behind and declared an independent empire. The Brazilians liked the independence but not the hereditary monarchy, even though it was all the rage in Europe, so it became a republic in 1889. Below, Pedro I of Brazil courtesy of Portuguese American Journal.

In the 11th century Islam was revived by waves of invaders from Central Asia. Being newly converted they infused their energy into the Caliphate and named their leader Sultan. After capturing Palestine they threatened Constantinople. The Emperor in desperation appealed to the Pope, Urban II who had a brainwave. As Europe was plagued by the infighting of royal families he would call a truce and announce a War of the Cross to recapture Jerusalem. And so the Crusades were born.



1. Extracted from *Richard of Cornwall* by Darren Baker (Amberley Publishing 2022). Seal courtesy of Berkhamsted Castle. Meissen figures courtesy of hubert-herald.nl.
2. From various sources. The Impartial Scout courtesy of Wikipedia, in the Public Domain.
3. From various sources. Gravesend statue courtesy of Guide London. Nineteenth century depiction courtesy of Wikipedia. Cassell's statue courtesy of McFall. Cassell's colophon courtesy of the publisher. Inn courtesy of OnLondon.
4. Jacquard loom punch cards courtesy of the Science & Industry Museum. The difference engine courtesy of Wikipedia and displayed at the Science Museum in London.
5. With thanks to *The No-Nonsense Guide to World History* by Chris Brazier (New Internationalist 2006).