

## Peterloo

Robert Poole examines the massacre at St Peter's Fields' Manchester, in 1819 – a formative episode in the history of democracy in Britain.

# Peterloo: the E



**O**N MONDAY 16 August 1819, troops under the authority of the Lancashire and Cheshire magistrates attacked and dispersed a rally of some 40,000 radical reformers on St Peter's Field, Manchester.<sup>1</sup> Twenty minutes later some 650 people had been injured, many by sabres, many of them women, and between fifteen and eighteen people lay dead or mortally wounded. Independent witnesses were horrified, for there had not been any disturbance to provoke such an attack, but the authorities insisted that a rebellion

had been averted. Waterloo, the final victory of the European allies over Napoleon and imperial France, had been four years earlier; now, at 'Peterloo', British troops were turned against their own people. There were Waterloo veterans on both sides. How could such a thing have happened, and what is its historical significance?

'Peterloo' has long been acknowledged as a formative episode in the history of democracy in Britain. It has also been seen as an early episode of class war: a historic clash of factory

# English Uprising

workers and their exploiters in the heartland of the industrial revolution. On the conservative side, it has been explained as an unintended ‘incident’, a ‘tragedy’, or as a local convulsion for which the government bore no direct responsibility. Its legacy was claimed in the nineteenth century by liberalism and in the twentieth by socialism. My own argument, based on a thorough examination of the extensive local correspondence in the Home Office papers in the National Archives, is different again. I emphasise the leading role of Lancashire’s radical movement in English popular politics; the uniquely conservative character of Regency Manchester, notwithstanding its economic advancement; the responsibility of central government; national politics as the principal context for the events of 1819; and the significance of the attack on female reformers. I also suggest that we can now recognise in the radical movement the origins of a political phenomenon that was not apparent a generation ago: an us-and-them English populism. The acuteness of economic distress and social division, and the severity of what happened in Manchester, are not in doubt; there was never a worse time to be working class than in Regency England.

## 1817: the failure of petitioning

Because it took place in Manchester, the ‘capital of cotton’, the Peterloo massacre has been seen as an episode of northern industrial protest. ‘There is no term for this but class war’ wrote E. P. Thompson in his classic 1963 work *The Making of the English Working Class*, and with reason. The commander of the volunteer Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry was a leading cotton master, Hugh Hornby Birley, and although few

factory workers were present, some 40 per cent were handloom weavers, the most conspicuous economic casualties of the industrial revolution. It was, however, a class war levied from above as much as from below, and although it was fuelled by economic collapse it was waged on political rather than economic territory.

Waterloo marked the end of twenty-two gruelling years of war between the allied powers and revolutionary and imperial France. A massive economic slump ensued as hundreds of thousands of troops returned home seeking work just as wartime industries ground to a halt and government spending was cut back. The Lancashire cotton industry underwent a decline, just as the ‘lost summer’ of 1816, caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora, brought near-famine conditions the following winter. The world wars of the twentieth century would be followed by peace dividends for those who had fought and suffered: in 1918 the Representation of the People Act and homes fit for heroes, and in 1945 the welfare state and national parks. In 1815 there were hopes that the business of political reform, halted in 1793, would be resumed; however (to adapt a phrase of Margaret Thatcher), a Tory government that had just won a war against revolutionary change at European level was not about to let it in by the back door at home.

The landed classes received their ‘peace dividend’ in the form of the Corn Laws, which kept grain prices high by preventing imports. The middle classes welcomed the end of the wartime income tax. Working people, however, continued to pay taxes on essential items like malt, soap, candles and paper, as well as record prices for bread thanks to the Corn Laws. Yet, during the war, the regulations protecting their trades had been abolished and their trade unions

Left: ‘To Henry Hunt, Esq., as chairman of the meeting assembled in St. Peter’s Field, Manchester, sixteenth day of August, 1819, and to the female Reformers of Manchester and the adjacent towns who were exposed to and suffered from the wanton and fiendish attack made on them by that brutal armed force, the Manchester and Cheshire Yeomanry Cavalry, this plate is dedicated by their fellow labourer, Richard Carlile’ (Manchester Libraries, public domain)

## Peterloo: the English Uprising

banned, all by act of parliament. Britain's long history of tax breaks for the rich and free market discipline for the poor was first cemented in these years of war.<sup>2</sup>

The pain was economic, but for radical reformers the diagnosis was political. Wealthy financiers lived comfortably off the interest on the national debt while a host of parasitic office-holders gorged conspicuously on the revenues of the state. Parliamentary power had effectively been bought up by the propertied classes, grown fat on the profits of war. Peers in the House of Lords controlled more than half the seats in the Commons, which in turn obediently voted to keep the whole system in place. Radicals had a name for this system: 'old corruption'. Their solution was to give control of parliament back to the people through universal suffrage (by which they meant male suffrage), using the power of the people to break the power of the 'boroughmongers'.

The veteran writer John Cartwright argued that such a revolution was no more than the restoration of England's 'ancient constitution' which had existed before Anglo-Saxon England fell under the 'Norman Yoke' in 1066. In this narrative, which in the Regency period of 1810–20 was as influential as Thomas Paine's 'Rights of Man' manifesto, the long push-back against royal power had begun with the revolt of the barons and the Magna Carta in 1215. The current regime dated from the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89, when parliament had forcefully but bloodlessly ejected an autocratic monarch and instituted a parliamentary monarchy based on the rights of property. But, since then, the executive had hijacked the powers of the Crown to regain control over parliament, the ruling Whigs had gradually turned into ruling Tories, and the rights of the people had been over-ridden in the name of war against French-backed revolution. It was time for another bloodless revolution: what the barons had done in 1215 and the propertied classes in 1688–89, the people would do after 1815. But which people?

For the rump of the Whig party that had gone into opposition, the solution to executive dominance was parliamentary reform: some combination of rolling back the power of the Crown over the Commons with an extension of the franchise. Proposals ranged from minor tinkering with the distribution of seats to giving all male householders the vote but, although Whigs liked to talk expansively of 'the people', such schemes were based on property ownership or occupation. A small group of reforming Whigs in the Commons who favoured

householder suffrage were called 'radicals', and in parliamentary terms they were. The term 'radical' however is best reserved for reformers outside parliament who claimed the vote for all adult males on the basis of citizenship alone. It was this dividing line between a property franchise and a democratic one that distinguished Whig reformers from radicals.

In the post-war years, then, radical reformers committed to manhood suffrage as a matter of survival were met by a Tory elite determined to repel the nightmare threat of democracy and revolution. The radicals' first recourse was the thoroughly constitutionalist strategy of petitioning parliament. In his mass-circulation *Address to Journeymen and Labourers* in November 1816, the populist writer William Cobbett urged his readers, 'Petition is the channel for your sentiments, and there is no village so small that its petition would not have some weight. You ought to attend at every public meeting within your reach.' By the spring of 1817 this campaign had mustered close to a million signatures on seven hundred local petitions to parliament – almost one in five adult males, and at least twice the size of the entire electorate. In relative terms it was as successful as the first Chartist petition of 1839, which gathered 1.3 million signatures.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the petitions were brusquely disallowed by parliament on technical grounds, either because they were found insulting or simply because they were printed. This last was a simple innovation that greatly magnified the social reach of petitioning. The government responded with emergency legislation: habeas corpus, the right to be tried by law, was suspended and dozens of radical activists imprisoned without trial. This rejection of petitioning, a constitutional right of last resort guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, was shattering. It led to several abortive risings of the spring of 1817: the attempted march of the Manchester 'blanketeers' to London, and the attempted armed risings which followed in Manchester, Huddersfield and Nottingham. All were easily foiled, not least because spies and government agents were deeply involved at their core; this kind of open unrest was easier to deal with than the awkward issues posed by popular constitutionalism.

### 1819: London and Manchester

The reformers of 1819 had to learn from the failures of 1817. Petitioning alone lacked teeth, but conspiracy and violence had also failed. Henry Hunt, the acknowledged figurehead of

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the radicals, understood that if government had violated the constitution, resistance became legitimate. Building on Cartwright's work, he devised the 'mass platform' strategy of militant citizenship so well described by John Belchem.<sup>4</sup> The constitutionalist strategy was also an insurgent strategy. At this point the leadership of the radical movement passed from London, where Hunt had agitated, to Lancashire, which had the numbers. More specifically, it passed to the group around the *Manchester Observer*, founded in 1818 and already the country's leading radical newspaper.<sup>5</sup> The political situation in Manchester enacted, in extreme form, the struggle between popular Radicalism and 'old corruption' in the country as a whole.

Manchester might have been economically progressive, but its High Tory authorities were as reactionary as any in the country. In 1819 the town was governed by a secretive and corrupt oligarchy operating through an archaic jumble of local institutions: manor, parish, and improvement commission. A tacit revolving door system ensured that the handful of opposition figures were excluded from office, and so they occupied themselves with chipping away at corruption and mismanagement from within the ranks of the police commission and the parish vestry. The famous 'Manchester School' of liberalism had yet to establish a significant political presence, and the corporation of Manchester still lay nearly twenty years in the future. The *Manchester Observer* effectively harried the local authorities at the same time as pursuing a national campaign for reform.

As the economy recovered in 1818, a series of successful wage strikes in cotton and other trades gave the region's workers practical experience in mobilisation for a cause: there were mass meetings, processions from town to town, and resourceful confrontations with employers, troops, and overstretched magistrates. As a double-dip economic recession took hold in 1819 and unemployment spread, attention turned again to political reform. In June, the *Manchester Observer* group promoted mass meetings in Ashton-under-Lyne and Oldham, and then broadcast their appeal 'to the people of England' to rise and reclaim their lost rights. A series of mass meetings in the industrial north, but also in Birmingham, London, and other cities, called again for reform of parliament. But when parliament was no longer recognising mass petitions, how to translate boots on the ground into political change?

In 1819, several plans were floated. In Birmingham a mass meeting of would-be citizens appointed a 'legislatorial attorney', or unofficial

MP, to represent them in parliament; the Manchester meeting was first advertised to consider this option before it was changed on legal advice. A group of such representatives denied entry to the Commons might have formed a Convention, or alternative parliament, on the model of the Chartist convention. A mass meeting in London's Smithfield on 21 July (originally planned for Bastille day, 14 July) resolved that without parliamentary reform the people's allegiance to the Crown would be dissolved from 1 January 1820. The resolutions to be put to the Manchester meeting have been lost, seized by the authorities as evidence and then destroyed when they proved unhelpful, but they included a boycott of all taxed goods, beer included, to starve the state of revenue.

Hunt also hoped to win the support of the millions of the catholic population of Ireland to shift the democratic balance in the UK in favour of reform, as well as to raise the spectre of another Irish rebellion which might spread to England. On this issue he aligned himself with the London ultra-radicals, who had no inhibitions about promoting rebellion. This also allowed him to play a radical version of the patriotic card, rallying the peoples of England, Scotland and Ireland in claiming their historic rights of free speech and democracy against an oppressive British warfare state. Hunt's aim was to present the radical movement as unstoppable, while positioning himself as the only person who could control it until the government decided to back down. As he put it in a letter to Manchester, 'We have nothing to do but concentrate public opinion, and if our enemies will not listen to the voice of a whole people they will listen to nothing, and may the effects of their folly and wickedness be upon their own heads.'

In the weeks before Peterloo, the radical movement acquired one further reinforcement: women. Women had been active in the support and campaign networks for radical prisoners in 1817, in the cotton strikes of 1818 (for significant numbers of young women worked in factories), and in the radical Sunday schools of Stockport. In the summer of 1819, several female reform societies were formed in Lancashire and Cheshire. They did not claim votes for themselves but rather supported the claim for male household suffrage, which they saw as a vote on behalf of the whole family. The Ashton female reformers described their role as 'aiding the men in their laudable endeavours' and declared: 'let us prove that we are true born English women, and that we are determined to bear this illegal oppression no longer'.

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The editor of the radical newspaper *Black Dwarf* was converted to female suffrage on more pragmatic grounds: ‘soldiers and police officers, they cannot be arrayed against WOMEN!!! THAT would be despicable in the extreme ... This array of women against the system my friend, I deem the most fatal omen of its fall.’ Tory commentators were not impressed, attacking Stockport’s female reformers as ‘Mothers instructed to train their infants to the hatred of every thing that is orderly and decent, and to rear up rebels against God and the State ... the most degraded of the sex.’ Such statements (and they were many) were a clear enough warning that female reformers who strayed onto the male political platform could not expect chivalric treatment. The Bolton magistrate and spymaster Colonel Fletcher, after reading of a demonstration of female reformers at Blackburn, wrote that such meetings, ‘under whatever pretext they may be called, they ought to be suppressed, even though in such suppression, a vigour beyond the strict letter of the law may be used in so doing’.

### The Manchester massacre

The meeting that assembled at Manchester on Monday 16 August 1819 was nationally recognised as the climax of the summer’s ‘mass platform’ campaign. Processions of handloom weavers dressed in their Sunday best, carrying hand-woven flags and banners with messages of hope, and accompanied by family members, banners, and bands of music, flooded into Manchester. They did not protest as ragged victims of the factory system but as citizens-in-waiting. These well-conducted processions of disciplined communities proclaimed their fitness for citizenship and the vote: democracy on the move, citizenship made flesh.

What made the Manchester meeting national news was the fact that there were at least ten press reporters on the field, from Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, and London. The representatives from the capital were Charles Wright of the Tory *Courier* (also gathering information to relay to the authorities), Richard Carlile of the radical *Sherwin’s Political Register* (shortly to become *The Republican*), and John Tyas of *The Times*, who was a critic of Hunt but whose hard-hitting account was a landmark of political journalism. The *Manchester Guardian* would not be founded until 1821, when it bought up the presses of the bankrupt *Manchester Observer*, but its first editor John Edward Taylor was present and sent an impromptu

account to the London press after Tyas was arrested, to ensure that official accounts did not go uncontested in the capital.

Three months after the event the Home Office published a selection of documents designed to incriminate the radicals, vindicate its own conduct, and back up the case for repressive legislation. The documents included its own last-minute advice that the radicals were not planning any disturbance on the day, and that intervention would probably not be necessary. A private note however qualified that advice:

This advice will of course not be understood to apply to an extreme case, where a magistrate may feel it incumbent upon him to act even without evidence, and to rely on Parliament for an indemnity.

The Home Office had earlier told the local magistrates:

Your Country will not be tranquillized, until Blood shall have been shed either by the Law or the sword. Lord Sidmouth [the home secretary] will not fail to be prepared for either alternative, and is confident that he will be adequately supported by the Magistracy of Lancashire.

When the magistrates went in hard to pre-empt the rebellion which they believed was imminent, they did so in the confidence that they would be backed up by government no matter what. That was indeed what happened.

The Manchester meeting of 16 August was initially attacked by two forces of loyalist volunteers: nearly 300 special constables with truncheons, and the ninety-strong Manchester and Salford Yeomanry, an official vigilante force formed in the aftermath of the 1817 disturbances. The older-established Cheshire Yeomanry came up in support alongside the regular cavalry of the 15<sup>th</sup> Hussars. As Hunt’s procession entered the field to tremendous cheers the watching magistrates panicked and called in the cavalry to support the town constables in arresting him. The Manchester Yeomanry, taking the order as authority to attack, arrived first and, pausing briefly to regroup, galloped into the crowd. They accidentally ran down and killed a small child and (even more embarrassingly) a special constable, the landlord of the loyalist Bull’s Head Inn. Hunt steadied the crowd and submitted quietly to arrest but the Yeomanry then attacked the hustings, smashing poles, slashing flags, and carrying off the

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remains as trophies. Special constables joined in, beating and chasing reformers. In the middle of all this mayhem the regular cavalry of the 15<sup>th</sup> Hussars, arrived and were ordered to disperse the crowd. They did so by charging in line across a field whose exits were already blocked by infantry with bayonets, and by the sheer weight of the crowd as it fled in panic.

A recently rediscovered set of seventy petitions submitted to the Commons in May 1821 asking for an inquiry into Peterloo shows a quite breathtaking level of individual violence. Women reported being cut at with sabres, trampled by horses, and then beaten with truncheons as they got up to escape. These multiple injuries and repeated attacks by known members of the Yeomanry on the defenceless, continued after the field was cleared, and show a worse picture even than the official relief committee's lists of hundreds of individuals 'sabred', 'beaten' and 'trampled'. Women were twice as likely as men to be injured, including sabre wounds as well as trampling and crushing. All the evidence indicates that they were deliberately targeted. Cruikshank's famous graphic images of troops attacking defenceless women and children forever formed the image of Peterloo in the public mind, as the exhibition in Westminster Hall in the summer of 2019 demonstrated once more.

In the summer of 1819 the 'Manchester massacre' generated a national wave of protest meetings, continuing late into the autumn, even bigger than the wave of reform meetings which preceded it. The radical analysis of a repressive state determined to squeeze all trace of popular rights out of the system seemed to have been borne out, especially when the repressive Six Acts at the end of the year choked off most avenues for effective radical mobilisation. In the end, notwithstanding a tide of incendiary rhetoric, the radicals pulled back from physical confrontation. The London ultra-radicals vigorously promoted waves of simultaneous mass meetings in November and December designed to overstretch the military and provoke an armed rising. Hunt and his supporters opposed them, determined to retain possession of the moral and constitutional high ground in order to use the demand for a parliamentary inquiry into a battering ram for reform. Talk of rebellion was part of the political discourse of the age, but when push came to shove few English radicals were actually prepared to mount one, and fewer still to lead it.

In political terms it was the Whig party which gained most from Peterloo, particularly its reforming wing. In the West Riding

'The Massacre of Peterloo or Britons Strike Home', by George Cruikshank, 1819. The speech balloon reads: 'Down with 'em! Chop 'em down my brave boys: give them no quarter they want to take our Beef & Pudding from us! – & remember the more you kill the less poor rates you'll have to pay so go at it Lads show your courage & your Loyalty. (Public domain)

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of Yorkshire, a stronghold of Ludism in 1812 and rebellion in 1817, the establishment Whigs had little fear of an uprising in 1819. Their more conservative leader, the Lord Lieutenant of the county Earl Fitzwilliam, went so far as to give his approval to a formal county meeting to demand an inquiry into Peterloo; he was promptly removed from office by the government. Edward Baines, editor of the *Leeds Mercury*, whose son was one of the reporters at Peterloo, led a high-profile campaign against the Tory government. The paper came closer than it knew to being closed down, but emerged much stronger, as did other Whig papers. A particular beneficiary was the middle-of-the road *Times*, whose chief reporter John Tyas brought back a particularly hard-hitting report from Manchester. The general election of 1820, which followed the accession of George IV, who had notoriously congratulated the troops after Peterloo, saw significant gains for the Whigs, putting them on the road to effective opposition after fifty years of near impotence.

In the 1820s, the Whigs in parliament made a series of moves to disenfranchise a handful of rotten boroughs in the south of England and give their seats to Manchester, Leeds, or Birmingham. All of them failed. In 1831–32 however a mass movement similar to that of 1819, this time under middle-class leadership, succeeded in ejecting a Tory government still implacably opposed to parliamentary reform. Further mass meetings induced the House of Lords to back down and pass the Great Reform Act. This was the sort of scenario envisaged by the radicals of 1819, but this time the reformers were far better organised, and crucially backed by many of the middle classes and by bills in parliament. When a quarter of a million people rallied in Birmingham to support the Reform Bill the government had armed troops at the ready with sharpened sabres, but this time it was the authorities who blinked: they dared not risk another Peterloo. There is room to argue that,

notwithstanding the very limited provisions of the 1832 Reform Act, this time round the mass platform strategy succeeded.

In the nineteenth century, the memory of Peterloo was claimed by the reform wing of the Liberal movement; in the twentieth century by the labour movement and the left. In the 2010s, a political period as turbulent as the 1810s, another candidate for the legacy has emerged: populism. Gentleman leaders such as Hunt and Cobbett (former wartime patriots both) rallied their followers using populist language and techniques. How far they had a vision of building an enduring infrastructure of democracy is unclear; their aim was to bring an unrepresentative government to irreversible account through mass pressure. The radical and democratic ideas of Thomas Paine continued to sustain the core of the radical movement, but its success in 1819 owed as much to a strain of outraged patriotism which had developed during the war years and exploded in angry despair in the ruinous peace that followed. The radical movement sought to mobilise the English people to reclaim their lost rights from an over-mighty British state.

In my book I call this episode ‘the English uprising’, a subtitle which did not immediately appeal to the publisher when it was written into the contract in 2015. As I began writing, an English populist movement against the supposedly over-mighty European state for a time swept all before it; one did not need to be a populist to see the parallels. When I delivered the typescript in 2018 the publisher suggested making ‘the English Uprising’ the main title. I decided to stick with the original: the democratic legacy of Peterloo, whether left or liberal, should outlive that of populism. But how will it all look a century from now?

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*Uprising was published by Oxford University Press in July 2019. He is co-author of the graphic novel, Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre.*

### Links

- Robert Poole, *Peterloo: the English Uprising*. 30 per cent discount with code AAFLYG6 at <https://global.oup.com/academic>.
- *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre*, the graphic novel: [www.peterloo.org](http://www.peterloo.org).
- Peterloo 2019 commemoration & resources: <https://peterloo1819.co.uk/>

### References

Except where noted, all references can be found in my book *Peterloo: the English Uprising*.

- 1 This figure of 40,000 is lower than the 50–60,000 usually given. The reasons are given in the concluding chapter of my book. Numbers were not counted, and at this period both authorities and radicals exaggerated the size of meetings.
- 2 For a more positive assessment of the period as one of the expansion of effective government, see Roger Knight, *Britain Against Napoleon: The Organization of Victory 1793–1815* (Allen Lane, 2013); for a rounded account, see Jenny Uglow, *In These Times: Living in Britain through Napoleon's Wars 1793–1815* (Faber & Faber, 2014).
- 3 ‘The 1817 mass petitions for parliamentary reform’, UK Parliament petitions committee website: <https://old.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/petitions-committee/petition-of-the-month/the-1817-mass-petitions-for-parliamentary-reform/>.
- 4 John Belchem, *Orator Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism* (1985; Breviary Stuff publications, 2012).
- 5 Robert Poole, ‘The Manchester Observer: Biography of a Radical Newspaper’, open access at <http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/journals/bjrl> (issue 95/1, 2019)