5. Political Significance of Peterloo

A peaceful demonstration

Monday morning 6 August 1819, in an orderly way, thousands of workers and their families poured into Manchester. Banners were waved bearing slogans such as "Liberty and Fraternity" and "Taxation without Representation is Unjust and Tyrannical," whilst bands played patriotic tunes that included Rule Britannia and God Save the King. There appeared a festive spirit.

On they came in cheerful mood; organised contingents from Bolton and Bury; 6,000 marching from Rochdale and Middleton; others from Saddleworth and Stalybridge; 200 women dressed in white from Oldham, together with families bringing their children and picnics too.

A vast crowd, estimated at 60,000, gathered at St Peter's Fields to attend a meeting calling for parliamentary reform. For adults the vote mattered. It would change everything, forcing politicians to listen to their views and urgent needs – and, crucially, to respond with action.

Young businessman, 25-year-old John Benjamin Smith, was watching with his aunt from a window overlooking the open space on the edge of the town near St Peter's Church. He later wrote: "There were crowds of people in all directions, full of good humour, laughing and shouting and making fun … It seemed to be a gala day with the country people who were mostly dressed in their best and brought with them their wives, and when I saw boys and girls taking their father's hand in the procession, I observed to my aunt: these are the guarantees of their peaceable intentions – we need have no fears."

People were expecting speeches and a good day out. What they were not anticipating was violence, carried out by troops sent in to disperse them, so aggressively that 18 people were killed and more than 650 injured. It was the bloodiest political clash in British history. What happened at St Peter's Fields would become known as the Peterloo Massacre – a name coined by local journalist James Wroe, a pun on the Battle of Waterloo four years earlier. Wroe paid for this. His radical newspaper, the Manchester Observer, was closed and Wroe sentenced to a year's imprisonment for seditious libel.

Ordinarily, most would be at work on a Monday, chiefly in the cotton mills. There were 2,400 power looms locally in 1813; 14,000 by 1820, and 115,000 within 15 years. But the handloom weavers, working from home, traditionally took Mondays off after working all weekend. They still formed a majority in the Lancashire cotton trade: 40,000 in Manchester alone, compared with 20,000 spinning-machine operatives in the factories. They feared for their jobs as well as loss of income. Earnings had halved after the Napoleonic Wars and the future was bleak.

The case for reform

Manchester had no MP unlike Old Sarum, a rural area outside Salisbury, largely abandoned since the Middle Ages and inhabited by sheep. It had two MPs. Manchester was expanding rapidly with a population of 24,000 in 1773, rising to over 90,000 by 1819.

The Times reported from inner-city New Cross area in the week of Peterloo: "It is occupied chiefly by spinners, weavers and Irish of the lowest description … its present situation is truly heart-rending and over-powering. The streets are confined and dirty; the houses neglected and the windows often without glass. Out of the windows the miserable rags of the family hung up to dry; the household furniture, the bedding, clothes of the children and a husband seen at the pawnbroker."

Not this day. Workers wore their Sunday best. Many were literate and articulate and, where previously they had argued for better wages and petitioned the king for food, they sought political change now as well. How could such a large town have no representation at all?

Working men should have the vote alongside propertied classes. Female reform societies had sprung up across the north-west, calling for votes for women. Subjected to ridicule, they were depicted by cartoonists such as George Cruickshank as sluts and whores, abandoning their families to meddle in things that weren't their business. It was why women dressed in white on this day – to symbolise purity of character and motive. It was also why the cavalry would single them out. If they sought equal rights as men, they could expect the same treatment.

Articulating the message

Peter's Fields, a three-acre open space on the edge of the town, was only just big enough for such a mass of people. A radical activist Samuel Bamford, a key witness, reported that by midday, at the centre of the field, two carts had been roped together to form the hustings for the speakers. People were packed so closely that "their hats seemed to touch."

They had come to hear Henry Hunt, an articulate and well-known orator of the parliamentary reform movement. A tall, handsome man, he was from a very different background to those he was addressing. He had inherited 3,000 acres of prime land in Wiltshire when his father died but had squandered his inheritance to elope with a friend's wife. Only when he found himself ostracised by the county gentry did he become a radical, speaking out far and wide.

Hunt had built a career chasing radical causes but not as a Member of Parliament, although he briefly became an MP in 1830. His fluency meant he was feared by the landed classes. "Orator" Hunt flirted rhetorically with violence – the government must be changed "peacefully if we may, forcibly if we must" – but he steered clear of inciting his audiences to rebellion.

Dressed in his trademark white top hat, Hunt was revered by working people. Egotistical and vain, he had a tendency to fall out with his followers, not always for political reasons. Hunt had been at controversial and even violent meetings before, not least at Spa Fields in central London in December 1816. A breakaway radical faction started a riot, hoping to provoke a general uprising. Plans were foiled when armed troops prevented the mob from attacking the Bank of England. Local magistrates and ministers of the Tory government wanted Hunt to be arrested. So far he had escaped imprisonment. Mass meetings in London, Birmingham and Leeds in the summer of 1819 had passed off peacefully, as had a previous meeting he had addressed at St Peter's Fields that January. The authorities were watching and waiting.

Originally, the meeting had been scheduled for 9 August but was cancelled following warnings by magistrates that the organisers' intention for the meeting – to "elect" an unofficial MP to represent the people of Manchester – would be a seditious act. When Hunt arrived he was furious to find the meeting called off. Reluctantly, he stayed in Manchester as the meeting had been rearranged for the following Monday, 16 August. It was to discuss parliamentary reform only in the most general terms and so was allowed to go ahead.

Hunt's memoirs show a touch of arrogance: "Everything conspired to impress on my mind the conviction that I alone had the power of conducting this great meeting in a peaceable, quiet and constitutional manner. I made up my mind not to desert them." Hunt was dismissive of Joseph Johnson, one of the organisers of the Manchester meeting, for being a brush-maker. He described staying at his house during the week of the postponed meeting as "one of the

most disagreeable seven days that I ever passed; however, most fortunately for me, Johnson was from home a considerable portion of this time, attending to his brush-making."

The weekend prior to the Monday, Hunt presented himself to the authorities to check that no plans were in place to arrest him. Given this assurance, the meeting was permitted and was to go ahead as planned.

Fearing Violence

For the authorities, it required only a spark to ignite an English revolution, equal to storming the Bastille in 1789, mindful of the Luddite riots too. Starting in Nottinghamshire in 1811 they soon spread to the West Riding and Lancashire, leaving a trail of broken machinery in mills After Waterloo in 1815, thousands of troops returned home to find little work. With a poor harvest in 1816, and imposition of the Corn Laws, uprisings about food and living conditions were now widespread. In March 1817 unemployed weavers from Lancashire started out for London but dispersed when stopped en route by troops. Unrest continued to grow.

Lord Sidmouth, Home Secretary, used undercover spies to gain intelligence about subversive activities. His actions had been widely criticised but, in the absence of a civilian police force, options were limited. If unrest was threatened, local militias, amateur yeomanry on horseback or even the army, were to be called out. Sidmouth spoke privately about Britain tranquillised by bloodshed. He guaranteed that civic authorities could rely on parliament to indemnify them if violence did occur. Such incidents would be addressed by force, sending a message.

Manchester, a large and industrial town, was run under an almost medieval system with 18 volunteer magistrates and a stipendiary full-time magistrate taking full charge of law and order. All these men of property: lawyers, retired businessmen and even Church of England clergymen were unlikely to be sympathetic to political reform. They also believed that non-conformists and agitators were stirring up worker discontent, none more than Rev. William Hay. A local saying was: "when he winks, heaven blinks, when he speaks, hell quakes."

Chairman of the magistrates that day was 32-year-old William Hulton, local landowner and inexperienced in law. Maintaining order was corrupt deputy constable, Joseph Nadin, former spinner, turned thief-catcher. Paid by results, he received £2 for every felony and a 'Tyburn ticket' exempting him from public duty. Hated by the working class, in 1812 he arrested 38 weavers for political offences. Manchester loyalists were numerous and feared too, notably cotton traders and mill owners. Many favoured parliamentary reform – for their own benefit.

They had their own newspapers arguing against reform and in 1817 had funded the creation of a local mounted militia, the Manchester Yeomanry to repel any mob. Troops, resplendent in dashing new blue-and-white uniforms, with peaked shako helmets and red cockades, and armed with sabres, were made up of local Tory businessmen, shopkeepers, lawyers and their sons. They seemed to be spoiling for a fight with the radicals, if not a major showdown.

Magistrates took no chances and signed up 400 special constables, armed with long wooden truncheons. They deployed 60 yeomanry troops from Manchester, with 420 from Cheshire in reserve, and called in 340 regular cavalry from the 15th Hussars, plus 400 infantry and two six-pounder cannon from the artillery. With over 1500 men it seemed like a formidable army.

The rescheduled meeting had been widely publicised. Its modest purpose was to consider "the propriety of adopting the most LEGAL and EFFECTUAL means of obtaining a REFORM". Hunt issued a statement urging "steady, firm and temperate deportment." He stated, "Our enemies will seek every opportunity by means of their sanguinary agents to incite a riot, that

they may have a pretence for spilling our blood, reckless of the awful and certain retaliation that would ultimately fall on their heads." Hunt implored his supporters to bring "no other weapon but that of a self-approving conscience."

Widely announced, newspapers from London and other cities sent reporters to cover it. Few events in British history had been reported in this way. Over 300 people would later give accounts of what they had witnessed and there were 10 press reports in the days following. John Tyas, a reporter from *The Times* on the hustings, was promptly arrested. John Taylor, who promised to file a report for him, later went onto to found the *Manchester Guardian.*

Jeremiah Garnett, later his second editor at the *Manchester Guardian*, was also at Peterloo, working for the loyalist *Manchester Courier.* On refusing to publish his report, Garnett left the paper. The authorities relied heavily on the testimony of troops and loyalists to contradict the weight of evidence against them. The clash of evidence fuelled national debate on the events that took place, the violence used and who was responsible.

Magistrates, watching from the upper floor of a neighbouring private building, grew anxious as a massive crowed gathered. Hunt eventually arrived in an open-topped barouche carriage at 1:00 pm to great cheers. Sitting beside the coachman, dressed in white and waving a flag, was Mary Fildes, organiser of the Manchester committee of female reformers.

Hunt wrote in his memoirs, "The moment that I entered the field, 10 or 12 bands struck up the same tune, 'See the conquering hero comes' … and from the multitude burst forth such a shout of welcome as never before hailed the ears of an individual." A path was then cleared for Hunt to get to the hustings platform.

Two lines of special constables – loyalist civilians signed up especially for the occasion – had formed, making an aisle from the magistrates' house to the hustings. The constables were soon enveloped by a swelling mass of people, at which point the magistrates panicked and put into operation a pre-arranged plan. They sensed trouble brewing, violent in words rather than deeds, for this enormous mob wanted reform and a voice.

Hay, a volunteer magistrate, wrote to Sidmouth later justifying action as magistrates had "felt a decided conviction that the whole bore the appearance of insurrection; that the array was such as to terrify all the king's subjects and was such as no legitimate purpose could justify". A group of loyalists were asked to sign an affidavit that they believed the town was in danger, and a warrant for the arrest of Hunt and several other organisers was drawn up. Nadin, told by the magistrates to serve it, asked for military help from the yeomanry in case of resistance.

Out of control

Hunt had barely commenced when he saw the mounted Manchester Yeomanry approaching the edge of the crowd at a fast pace. The first troops to be called had been milling in back streets and drinking in local taverns. Now fired up, they were ready to quell any implied act of subversion. Clattering down Cooper Street, they knocked over a 23-year-old woman, also called Fildes. Her son William fell out of her arms onto the cobbles, under the hooves of horses. William was the first fatality. Outside the magistrate's house the Yeomanry cheered, waving sabres in the air. A cry went up, "Soldiers! The soldiers!" Hunt urged, "Stand firm my friends! You see they are in disorder already. This is a trick. Give them three cheers."

The yeomanry plunged into the crowd at a gallop to make way for Nadin so he could serve Hunt's arrest warrant. Losing order in the crush, they lashed out with sabres. Watching from a window Rev Edward Stanley rector of Alderley, in Manchester on business, wrote: "Their

sabres glistened in the air … they soon increased their speed and with a zeal and ardour which might naturally be expected from men acting with delegated power … continued their course, seeming individually to vie with each other who should be first."

Rev. Stanley continued, "As the cavalry approached the dense mass of people, they used their utmost efforts to escape, but so closely were they pressed in opposite directions by the soldiers, the special constables, the position of the hustings and their own immense numbers, that immediate escape was impossible."

Hugh Birley, yeomanry commander, attempted to arrest Hunt who would surrender only to civil power and gave himself up to Nadin. He was pushed from the platform and along the line of constables to the magistrates' house and then felled by a blow to the head as he mounted the entrance steps. Women's suffrage campaigner Mary Fildes, battered around the head by constables, went into hiding. Tyas, *The Times* correspondent, was taken into custody, as was the radical Samuel Bamford who had played no active part.

Regular Hussar troops had been mobilised. Their commander, Col Guy L'Estrange, looked up at anxious faces in the first-floor window of the magistrates' house, and bellowed, "What am I to do." Landowner and magistrate William Hulton shouted down: "Good God, sir! Do you not see how they are attacking the yeomanry? Disperse the crowd!"

In the melée, the yeomanry hacked at banners, shouting "Have at their flags!" They were also incensed by woollen red liberty caps – symbols of the French revolutionaries – dangling from poles. As the yeomanry became engulfed, the Hussars charged and the crowd began to flee as best they could. Behind them were troops, striking out at random with their sabres.

Seeing that streets surrounding St Peters Fields were partially blocked by infantry, some took refuge in the yard surrounding the Quaker chapel, only for troops to ride in. In the panic, many were crushed against walls or fell down cellar steps into basements. Onlookers saw victims lying on the ground as those wounded tried to crawl away. In less than 30 minutes it was over. Only the debris of banners, musical instruments and various articles remained.

Said Sam Bamford from Middleton, horsemen appeared "waving their sabres over their heads - and slackening rein – and, striking spur into their steeds, they dashed forward and began cutting the people. Mounds of human beings remained where they had fallen, crushed down and smothered." The *Manchester Chronicle* mentioned terror and confusion. The *Leeds Mercury* said, "No language can do justice; the people were thrown down by hundreds and galloped over, so indiscriminate was the attack and furious."

Swept into this mass, "yeomen and constables in their confused attempts to escape ran one over the other … the fugitives literally piled up to a considerable elevation above the level of the ground." Lt. William Jolliffe of the Hussars later wrote, "The Hussars drove the people forward with the flats of their swords but sometimes, as is almost inevitably the case when men are placed in such situations, the edge was used." His only surprise was so few injuries.

Loyalists claimed: "With a factious perverseness peculiarly their own, they (the mob) have set at open defiance the timely warnings of the magistrates" who insisted they had read the Riot Act, ordering the crowd to disperse. If they did, few could have heard. Not in question was their not allowing an hour for the crowd to disperse as the law required.

Next day, the *Star* reported: "All the roads leading from Manchester to Ashton, Stockport, Cheadle, Bury, Bolton are covered with wounded stragglers. There are 17 wounded persons

along the Stockport Road, 13-14 on the Ashton road, at least 20 on the Oldham road, seven or eight on the Rochdale road, besides several others on the roads to Liverpool.

Some concealed their injuries for fear of retribution from employers but 654 were sufficiently injured to require medical treatment. The figure is precise as names, addresses and details of injuries were drawn up by newspapers and radicals. A relief committee was set up to raise funds to help the wounded and their families. Contrary to assertions of the authorities, fewer than a quarter were crushed in the dense crowd: more than 200 were sabred, 70 battered by truncheons, and 188 trampled by horses.

At least two fatalities were special constables. Some died on the spot whilst others lingered for weeks. The wounds were ghastly: deep sabre cuts to the head and arms, a nose nearly cut off, one man driven into a lime pit and burned, "a piece the size of a half crown clean off the head" of another. William Marsh, aged 57, suffered a "sabre cut on back of the head, body crushed, bone shattered in left leg."

Three of his six children worked at a factory owned by Birley, yeomanry commander, who on hearing of Marsh's injuries sacked them. Many injured knew their attackers and could identify them, including Edward Meagher who fired at a crowd mocking him outside his house. Mash was acquitted by magistrates as was the yeomanry who had done their duty in dispersing an unlawful assembly, implying with the intent of disturbance, or even sedition or subversion.

John Brierley of Saddleworth, aged 31, was trampled by horses and crushed, but his lunch of bread and cheese, which he was keeping in his hat, saved him when a sabre cleft through it. James Lees, 25, who had fought at Waterloo and now a weaver, received two deep sabre cuts to the head. At the infirmary a doctor asked if he was spent of political meetings. Lees replied no, whereupon he was turned away. Before he died three weeks later, Lees told a relative: "At Waterloo there was man to man, but here it was downright murder."

A few days later, the Prince Regent sent a message to the authorities of his "great satisfaction at their prompt, decisive and efficient measures for the preservation of the public tranquillity." They in turn then gave a vote of thanks to the military. "The yeomanry had merited the entire approbation of all the respectable inhabitants of this large and populous town."

Aftermath of Peterloo

With so many witnesses, and press coverage too, what occurred could not be covered up but it could be squashed. The authorities claimed that troops had been attacked first with stones and cudgels. If so, it did not explain why women and children standing close received sabre blows. The relief committee raised £3,408 to help the wounded, but saw little of it as more than £2,200 went to lawyers representing Hunt and his fellow accused. Most of the wounded received £2 or less: Marsh and Brierley received £1 each, and Lees' family £2.

In March 1820, Hunt and his ring-leaders were convicted after a trial in York, on a charge of "unlawful and seditious assembling for the purpose of exciting discontent." He was sentenced to two and a half years at Ilchester jail where he wrote his memoirs. Three others received a sentence of one year each.

Peterloo, and aftermath, shocked the nation, but didn't lead directly to parliamentary reform. Authorities had closed ranks against any change. The Duke of Wellington warned: "Beginning reform is beginning revolution." It would be another 13 years before a limited parliamentary reform was passed. Most of those at Peterloo would not qualify for a vote based on property qualifications. Peterloo remains a milestone in a long road to political reform, stretching by

slow, incremental changes from 1832 to 1928 that finally enfranchised women as well as men aged 21 and over. It had taken almost 100 years since the modest breakthrough in 1832.

Hannah Barker, professor of British history at Manchester University, comments that Peterloo, in becoming a national event, was commemorated in vivid cartoons, on plates and teapots and even handkerchiefs. It symbolised the struggle for democracy against state suppression and the fight of ordinary people for civil rights and liberties – these are still important issues today."

Yet, you have to look quite hard for evidence. There is a circular memorial plaque high on the wall of the Free Trade Hall, and the People's History Museum has a small display of artefacts, including two sabres, reputedly belonging to a member of the yeomanry from Droylesden.

Events that morning changed British politics forever. John Taylor rushed his report on the night coach to *The Times* in London and spent months reporting on the fate of those severely injured. He decided to start his own newspaper, the *Manchester Guardian*, with the financial backing of other middle-class radicals; 10 put up £100 each, and an 11th contributed £50.

The first edition, rolling off the presses on 5 May 1821, was devoted to enlightenment values, liberty, reform and justice. It was launched with great confidence and optimism by a man who believed that, "in spite of Peterloo and police spies, reason was great and would prevail."

The massacre transformed a movement for political reform into a crusade for justice too, for victims especially. In his book, *Return to Peterloo*, historian Professor Robert Poole writes, "Had the Manchester meeting demonstrated, to the amazement of high Tories, that large numbers of working people could rally peacefully for a political purpose, what would the reformers' next step have been?" The probability was nothing until forced to do so. "One thing we don't know about Peterloo is what would have happened if it hadn't happened, for we are still living with its aftermath." It was a wake-up call for a failed political system.

"They were called radicals," says Dr Janette Martin, archivist at Manchester's John Rylands Library. "But among the number were all sorts of people, many what you would describe as entirely moderate: workers and Napoleonic War heroes, paupers and patriots, women and children and Hunt himself had been a member of the gentry. This was a peaceful movement that cut across previous social boundaries."

When promoting his film about that fateful day, the director Mike Leigh called for schools to teach it as part of their history curriculum. Professor Poole comments, "It has very much become part of the national consciousness over the last few years. Now we must ensure it stays there. It is too important to be forgotten," two hundred years later.

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