



The violence of the Peterloo Massacre is captured by an artist

Commemorating the Peterloo Massacre of 200 years ago

By Andrew Harris

On the 16th August this year it will be exactly 200 years since the Peterloo Massacre of 1819. It cost the lives of 18 people and it is thought that about 700 were injured – many of them seriously. But after a period of increased repression it was the trigger for national reforms for which people were desperate. It paved the way for many of the liberties we enjoy today although it was 100 years before all the main reforms were achieved. It was a tragedy which became a triumph 13 years later.

Britain escaped the upheavals of revolution in France from 1789 and the internal strife of mainland Europe during the Napoleonic Wars. 1815 saw victory at the Battle of Waterloo and the impact of the new Corn Laws which raised the price of all cereal grain in Britain to protect producers. After a brief post-war boom the wages of cotton spinners and weavers collapsed causing additional hardship. Added to longstanding discontent with a rotten voting system – only a few men passing a property qualification could vote – a febrile atmosphere resulted and the authorities feared the sort of revolution which had affected so many other countries.

Against this background 25,000 people met at St Peter's Field in Manchester in 1817 with the intention that 5,000 of the men march to London to petition the Prince Regent – King George III was indisposed near the end of his reign – for parliamentary reform. The Manchester magistrates were alarmed at this prospect and literally read the Riot Act and the people were dispersed by the King's Dragoon Guards. The ringleaders were arrested but released when no serious charges were lodged against them – an interesting contrast to revolutionary France where there was no such due process.

The economic conditions of cotton workers became worse. In early 1819 a crowd of 10,000 gathered in St Peter's Field – which was then an open area of 2.9 acres north of Windmill Street in modern Manchester – to hear the radical orator Henry Hunt who argued that the oppressive Corn Laws should be repealed. Despite the presence of the cavalry this meeting passed off without incident.

Following this peaceful meeting a 'great assembly' was organised by the Manchester Patriotic Union – a group of radicals from the *Manchester Observer* newspaper. Joseph Johnson



was the founder of the newspaper and Secretary of the Union who invited Henry Hunt to chair a public meeting in Manchester on the 2nd August 1819 and he wrote *“Nothing but ruin and starvation stare one in the face, the state of this district is truly dreadful and I believe nothing but the greatest exertions can prevent an insurrection. Oh that you in London were prepared for it.”* Government spies discovered the letter which was seen as planning an insurrection so the 15th Hussars – a cavalry unit - were moved to Manchester.

The 2nd August meeting was delayed to the 9th August

TOP: St Peter’s Field was a mass of vulnerable humanity on the 16th August 1819.* LEFT: Captain Hugh Hornby Birley who was thought to be personally responsible for much of the violence. ABOVE: Protest took many forms. A powerful message.



The people were pleading for reform.

when it was banned by the magistrates but Hunt and his followers were determined to proceed: hence the meeting was planned for Monday the 16th August 1819.

The 16th August 1819 was a warm sunny day when an estimated 60,000 men, women and children converged on St Peter's Field. Anxious not to be seen as a motley crowd they were mainly in their Sunday clothes with many women in white – the 'uniform' of the Manchester Female Reform Society. They marched on foot from most of what is now Greater Manchester – the biggest contingents being from Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport and Bury. Paintings of the time show an amazing gathering – 60,000 people in a site of 2.9 acres translates to an average of 4.3 people per square yard. Or 5 people per square metre for younger

readers. It was a crush!

The Manchester Magistrates met for breakfast in the Star Inn on Deansgate at 9 o'clock that day then at 10:30 moved to a house from where they could watch the gathering crowd. Fearing a riot or rebellion they had arranged for 600 men of the 15th Hussars, 120 cavalry of the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry, the Cheshire Yeomanry, a large number of infantry, a Royal Horse Artillery unit with six-pounder guns and 400 special constables to be present. Sadly the commander of the British Army in the north of England – General Sir John Byng – was not present as he preferred to be at the York Races where two of his horses were competing. He had 'absolute confidence' in his deputy Lieutenant Colonel Guy L'Estrange. But the villain of the piece that day was to be a captain of cavalry.

Seeing that Henry Hunt was being greeted enthusiastically, the chairman of the magistrates - William Hulton – issued an arrest warrant for Hunt plus Joseph Johnson and two others. Constable Jonathan Andrews felt the need for military help in executing the warrant so Hulton requested the support of the army. The cavalry unit became stuck in the crowd and panicked – hacking about them with their sabres. Hulton saw signs of resistance and at 1:50 pm ordered the 15th Hussars to intervene and disperse the crowd. The Hussars formed into a line at the eastern end of St Peter's Field and charged into the crowd. The Cheshire Yeomanry charged from the southern edge of the field but the crowd couldn't easily disperse as the infantry were blocking the exit to Peter Street with bayonets fixed. An officer of the 15th Hussars was heard trying to control the out of control Manchester and Salford Yeomanry who were cutting at everyone they could reach. He shouted "For shame! For shame! Gentlemen: forbear, forbear! The people cannot get away!"

The original order to attack the crowd was given by 38-year old Captain Hugh Hornby Birley of the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry who is reputed to have personally



ABOVE LEFT: May God confound the magistrates and yeomanry. ABOVE RIGHT: Another way of recording savagery.



ABOVE: Part of what was St Peter's Field is now the Radisson Hotel on Peter Street.* BELOW: The Memorial Plaque to Peterloo on Peter Street. Some victims died later in 1819 confusing the numbers.* BOTTOM: Peter Street now has modern attractions.*

accounted for many of the deaths and injuries inflicted upon the innocent. Birley was a leading Manchester millowner, Tory and magistrate. The resulting carnage was horrific. 13 people died that day and a further 5 died of their injuries in the next five months. About 700 people were wounded. One sad tale is about John Lees of Oldham who had volunteered to join the army and fought at Waterloo. He was sabred by his fellow soldiers on St Peter's Field but it took him an agonising 24 days to die. Shortly before his death he said to a friend "At Waterloo there was man to man but there (at St Peter's Field) it was downright murder." It is thought that of the 700 people wounded, many were severely injured but had to conceal their injuries for fear of retribution. Women formed about 12% of the crowd but were about 25% of the casualties. This could have partly been because many were dressed in white which signified support for the Manchester Female Reform Society

The slaughter on St Peter's Field quickly became known as Peterloo by ironically combining St Peter's and Waterloo which had been fought four years earlier. This was not appreciated by the authorities who did not respond to the call for reform. The police and courts were instructed to go after the journalists, press and publication of the *Manchester Observer*. The editor James Wroe was imprisoned for 12 months, fined £100 – a large sum in those days – for sedition i.e. conduct inciting rebellion against the authority of a state or monarch. The fine bankrupted Wroe then other court cases and police raids





The People's History Museum – PHM - across the bridge from Salford Central railway station.*

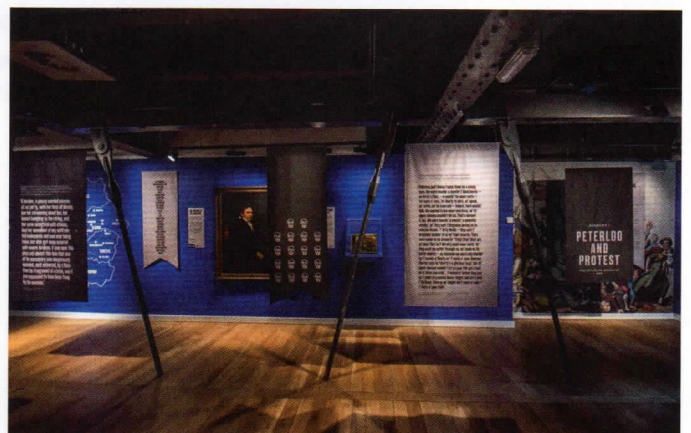


PHM displays banners which reflect the struggle for workers' rights.

forced the closure of the *Manchester Observer* in February 1820. Six new Acts of Parliament extended repression and control.

Hunt was charged with sedition and sentenced to 30 months in prison and four others sentenced to lesser terms. The authorities feared that the country was heading towards an armed rebellion - a view reinforced by uprisings in Burnley and Huddersfield. In 1820 the Cato Street conspiracy planned the murder of all the cabinet ministers but the police foiled the plot and five conspirators were executed and another five were transported to Australia. Those executed were hanged then beheaded and – like the Gunpowder Plot of Guy Fawkes 215 years earlier – their lifeless heads were displayed on spikes to deter others.

All was not lost, however. In 1821 the *Manchester Guardian* was founded and 11 years later the Representation of the



The “Disrupt? Peterloo and Protest” exhibition explains all.

People Act 1932 – commonly known as the Great Reform Act – doubled the franchise and abolished many of the worst examples of rotten boroughs. Manchester achieved its own two representatives in Parliament at last.

Continued discontent led to Chartism - a working class movement demanding political reform. It existed from 1838 and took its name from the People's Charter of that year which called for six reforms –

- A vote for all men aged over 21, of sound mind and not convicted of any criminal offence;
- The secret ballot to ensure free and fair elections;
- No property qualification for MPs to enable electors to choose the man of their choice;
- Payment for MPs to enable people of modest means



The actual dress worn by a woman near St Peter's Field in 1819.



A visit to this exhibition is recommended.



The PHM offers hospitality too.

to be elected;

- Constituencies to be of equal population to ensure equal representation for all.
- Parliament to be elected annually – the only reform never achieved.

Chartism rattled the authorities and caused the construction of many barracks near industrial cities and boroughs – like Preston's Fulwood Barracks which were completed in 1848. The oppressive Corn Laws were repealed in 1846.

The pace of reform in Britain has been slow but steady. It took 99 years after Peterloo for all men over 21 and women over 30 to win the vote – and another 10 years for women to match the male franchise. It may not have seemed like it at the time but Peterloo started our progression toward a more fair and democratic society in which male and females and the rich and poor all have rights and feel that they are part of society. It remains imperfect and the discontent and disillusionment of many have echoes of what caused the protest on St Peter's Field on the 16th August 1819.

To learn more about what caused the Peterloo Massacre, and what flowed from it, a visit to the *"Disrupt? Peterloo*

and Protest?" exhibition in the People's History Museum in Manchester – the national museum of democracy - is strongly recommended. It is near Salford Central railway station, open daily, free to enter and the exhibition runs until the 23rd February 2020. On the 16th August this year a new and impressive permanent monument by the artist Jeremy Deller will be unveiled in Manchester to commemorate the courage and loss of those killed and injured as a result of the Peterloo Massacre 200 years ago. We will remember them.

Andrew E. Harris – www.andreweharris.co.uk – gratefully acknowledges the generous help provided by Mark Wilson, Jenny van Enckevort and Kloe Rumsey of the People's History Museum. All the pictures are courtesy of the Museum except those with an asterisk which are supplied by Andrew Harris. We regret that the article about the British Red Cross in the North West trailed in our July edition had to be abandoned.

