

# 200 years since the Peterloo Massacre

By Paul Bond  
16 August 2019

Commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre has revealed that the social tensions that gave rise to that critical event of British history remain unresolved.

On August 16, 1819 a crowd of 60,000 to 100,000 protestors gathered peacefully on Manchester's St Peter's Field. The rally had been called to hear Henry "Orator" Hunt, a landowner from the southwest of England, appeal for adult suffrage and reform of parliamentary representation. This democratic demand, however, was only part of the reason for the large turnout.

Manchester, then England's second largest city, had no parliamentary representation whatsoever, like many new industrial centres. For liberal bourgeois reform figures, even sympathetic ones like Hunt, who remained genuinely committed to working class suffrage, parliamentary representation was about ensuring the effective administration of capitalism through their inclusion. In a speech four years after Peterloo Hunt argued that "There must be high and low, rich and poor; but the honest working man ought to have all the conveniences of life, and some of its comforts".

The disenfranchised working class—cotton workers, many of them women, with a large contingent of Irish workers—who made up the crowd were struggling with the increasingly dire economic conditions following the end of the Napoleonic Wars four years earlier.

Wages were falling, a situation exacerbated by rapid industrialisation and technological advances, and the country was wracked by a series of poor harvests. To protect the profits of the landowners, the notorious 1815 Corn Laws restricted importation of foreign corn until home-grown wheat reached a certain price. This made bread unaffordable. Famine was widespread.

The industrialisation that was impoverishing the population was also rapidly forming a working class that was beginning to identify itself as a class and to respond politically to these conditions. In dread of the memory of the French revolution and the revolutionary wave it had triggered across the world, the British ruling class responded brutally.

With arrest warrants issued against Hunt and other speakers, the Riot Act was read out by magistrates from the window of a house overlooking the assembly. It is certain that hardly anyone in the massed crowd would have heard this and, in any event, the magistrates did not allow an hour for the crowd to disperse as the law required. Instead, the protestors were immediately and brutally attacked by cavalry, sabres drawn. Alongside professional soldiers, the corrupt officials sent in the part-time local yeomanry, many of them drunk.

Men and women were attacked with sabres and cudgels and trampled underfoot by horses where they fell. The day's first fatality was two-year-old William Fildes, knocked from his mother's arms near St Peter's Field by a galloping trooper and trampled by the yeomanry's horses. Contemporary publisher Richard Carlile said women were targeted in particular.

The yeomen deliberately destroyed banners and symbols of liberty in their wanton rampage. The pursuit of protestors continued for days, even after the hussars reined in the yeomanry's excesses. The London *Times* noted in its report on August 23 that Manchester "now wears the

appearance of a garrison, or of a town conquered in war."

Henry Hobhouse, the then permanent undersecretary of the Home Office backed the request of the stipendiary magistrate of Manchester, James Norris, for a permanent infantry barracks to be constructed in the city.

Casualty figures are difficult to determine. It is known that 18 people were killed, including in the resulting riots and those who died subsequently of injuries sustained on the day. John Lees, a military veteran who died of his injuries three weeks after the massacre, said, "At [the Battle of] Waterloo it was man to man, but there it was downright murder."

Some 400 to 700 people were estimated to have been injured, many seriously. The real figure is probably much higher, however, as the continued persecution by yeomanry deterred many from seeking help. The ruling class waged a determined campaign to dismiss the impact of the massacre, and the fear in the population of retribution was real.

Three of William Marsh's children were dismissed from jobs at a local mill owned by the leader of the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry, Captain Hugh Hornby Birley, because their father had attended the meeting. Birley was one of four yeomen acquitted in a civil case brought by an injured weaver. The judge concluded that their actions had been justified in dispersing an illegal gathering.

James Lees went to Manchester Infirmary with two sabre wounds on his head. He refused to accept the surgeon's demand that he says "he had had enough of Manchester meetings," so was denied treatment.

John Rhodes suffered a sabre wound to the head and died three months after the massacre. Local magistrates ordered the dissection of his body in order to prove his death was not a result of Peterloo: the coroner duly recorded death by natural causes.

Margaret Goodwin, a 60-year-old widow, was struck down with a sabre by yeoman Thomas Shelmerdine, her own neighbour. Wounded on the back and head, she was trampled by horses, suffering damage to her eyes. Unable to continue working by taking in laundry, she took out a civil case against Shelmerdine. Magistrates threw the case out.

James Wroe, editor of the radical *Manchester Observer*, coined the name "Peterloo" shortly after the massacre—in an ironical echo of the Battle of Waterloo, where a British-led allied army commanded by the Duke of Wellington, along with Prussian, Dutch and other forces, defeated Napoleon in June 1815. The comparison was explicit, bitter and sarcastic. An anonymous "officer of His Majesty's Royal Navy" wrote satirically in the *Manchester Observer*:

*Sing no more of Wellington  
And of his warlike conquering crew  
How dim the glory of their sun  
Before the blaze of Peterloo.*

The repression continued with even greater effort in the aftermath of the massacre. Hunt and four other speakers were convicted of sedition and jailed. Wroe was found guilty of publishing a seditious publication, and the *Manchester Observer* was subject to a series of raids and court cases that resulted in its closure.

Writing to the Chartist *Northern Star* in 1845, Friedrich Engels placed

the savagery at Peterloo in its international context: “The putting down of the French Revolution was celebrated by the massacres of Republicans in the south of France; by the blaze of the inquisitorial pile and the restoration of native despotism in Spain and Italy, and by the gagging-bills and ‘Peterloo’ in England.” (*Marx/Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 6, p.23, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1976).

The government declared its support for the actions of the magistrates and the army, with Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth reporting the thanks of the Prince Regent to the local magistrates. Such repression was long planned. Replying to a Lancashire magistrate six months before Peterloo, who informed him of the rising tide of disaffection in the working class, Hobhouse said he and Sidmouth feared that “your country will not be tranquilized, until Blood shall have been shed either by the Law or the sword.”

As militancy and anger at Peterloo rose in the working class, the government introduced the Six Acts to suppress any gatherings for the purpose of reform and to crush all dissent. Also known as the “Gagging Acts” they included laws aimed at silencing what was termed the “blasphemous and Seditious libel” of the radical press. The measures were described by historian Élie Halévy as “counter-revolutionary terror.” Mass arrests and imprisonment followed. The immediate result was an even greater decline in civil liberties.

The memory of Peterloo burned, and continues to burn, in the memory of the working class. It was a vicious and bloody step along the road to the self-identification of the working class and its fight for political and social emancipation. Official commemorations, however, do not celebrate this essential aspect of Peterloo. Instead, we are being treated in great measure to a celebration of the liberal and reformist defenders of capitalism.

The *Guardian* newspaper, for example, boasts that it is a direct product of Peterloo. It was founded in 1821, after the closure of the *Manchester Observer*, as the *Manchester Guardian*. Its founder, John Edward Taylor, was a local cotton manufacturer and later, merchant, who had witnessed the massacre. He was backed by other reform-minded businessmen, who seized on the closing down of the radical press to assert their own political agenda. Taylor himself had hitherto expressed open hostility to radical reform, denouncing its advocates for having “appealed not to the reason but the passions and the suffering of their abused and credulous fellow-countrymen.”

Taylor’s founding pledge to “warmly advocate the cause of Reform [and] endeavour to assist in the diffusion of just principles of Political Economy” was a restatement of the concerns of the liberal bourgeoisie confronted by a politically active working class.

Contemporaries saw through the class interests expressed by the *Guardian*, with George Condy, editor of the *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, describing the newspaper in 1836 as the “foul prostitute and dirty parasite of the worst portion of the mill-owners.”

Engels, who made a close study of the mill-owners, was blunt: “I have never seen a class so deeply demoralized, so incurably debased by selfishness, so corroded within, so incapable of progress, as the English bourgeoisie; and I mean by this, especially the bourgeoisie proper, particularly the Liberal, Corn Law repealing bourgeoisie.” (*The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1845).

It is revealing of the *Guardian*’s contemporary political role that its former northern editor, Martin Wainwright, observed in a March 16, 2001 article that Taylor would have been little troubled by the condemnation of Condy. He notes that the *Manchester Guardian* marked his death in 1844 with an obituary boasting, “The reforms which Taylor considered absolutely essential to the good government and well-being of his fellow countrymen have all been effected almost precisely in the form in which they have been advocated in the columns of this journal.”

Wainwright claims of Taylor, “The absence of red banners and a

downtrodden youth mean that his achievement will never rank as romantically revolutionary, but the motive and independence behind it are as deadly to unjust authority as orators and the mob.”

Much of the celebration of Peterloo has centred on the idea that its culmination was the election of Labour governments to ameliorate the worst excesses of capitalism by reform. In comments at last year’s Labour Party conference, for example, Jeremy Corbyn pledged to “honour the heroes of Peterloo by being true to their cause,” with Labour “fighting for democracy and social justice against poverty, inequality and discrimination.”

He cited Peterloo victims John Ashworth and Sarah Jones, saying, “In the next Labour government, our very own Jon Ashworth, as Health Secretary, and Sarah Jones, as Housing Minister, will be carrying forward the struggle to protect and extend democratic rights. Hopefully without becoming martyrs in the process.”

This, under conditions where leading military figures have talked about mounting a mutiny against any incoming Corbyn government, is terrifying in its complacency.

Writing in 1846 of the significance of Chartism, Engels explained why at the time of Peterloo the “essentially democratic movement of the working classes was more or less made subservient to the liberal movement of the bourgeoisie.”

The working class, “though more advanced than the middle classes, could not yet see the total difference between liberalism and democracy—emancipation of the middle classes and the emancipation of the working classes; they could not see the difference between liberty of money and liberty of man, until money had been made politically free, until the middle class had been made the exclusively ruling class. Therefore, the democrats of Peterloo were going to petition, not only for Universal Suffrage, but for Corn Law repeal at the same time... But from that very day when the middle classes obtain full political power—from the day on which all feudal and aristocratic interests are annihilated by the power of money—from the day on which the middle classes cease to be progressive and revolutionary, and become stationary themselves, from that very day the working-class movement takes the lead.” (*Marx/Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 6, p.29, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1976)

Labour has long played its essential political role in propping up the stagnant rule of the bourgeoisie, while conditions are increasingly desperate for the working class. The true nature of the capitalist state is revealed time after time. Labour has ruled Manchester for decades and did everything possible to bury the memory of Peterloo. Until this year there was no memorial to Peterloo in the city. A sole plaque, in place for decades until 2007, lyingly declared that what took place was a “dispersal” not a massacre and did not even state that anyone died.

Celebrations of Peterloo are tempered by a recognition within the ruling elite that this can provoke a powerful response from the working class. When the artist Jeremy Deller’s new memorial for the massacre was criticised for being inaccessible to wheelchair users, Manchester City Council decided to open it to the public without any formal ceremony.

Campaigners who have fought for years for a memorial described this move as a “kick in the teeth.” Denise Southworth, a descendant of Peterloo victim Mary Heys, said the council “will have all these dinners—20 years since Manchester United won the treble—but for something like this they don’t want to know.”

Fifty years after Peterloo, loom worker John Wrigley told a journalist that he had marched that day: “Peterloo, lad! I know. I were theer as a young mon. We were howdin’ a meetin’ i’ Manchester—on Peter’s Field, —a meetin’ for eawr reets—for reets o’ mon, for liberty to vote, an’ speak, an’ write, an’ be eawrselves—honest, hard-workin’ folk. We wanted to live eawr own lives, an’ th’ upper classes wouldn’t let us.... [The poet Robert] Burns says as ‘Liberty’s a glorious feast.’ But th’ upper classes wouldn’t let us poor folk get a tast on it. When we cried... freedom o’

action they gav' us t' point of a sword. Never forget, lad! Let it sink i' thi blood. Ston up an' feight for t' reets o' mon—t' reets o' poor folk!"\*

This is the spirit in which Peterloo should be remembered. It was a milestone in the struggle of the British and international working class to liberate itself from capitalist oppression.

\*[Peterloo, lad! I know. I was there as a young man. We were holding a meeting in Manchester—on Peter's Field,—a meeting for our rights—for the rights of man, for liberty to vote, and speak, and write, and be ourselves—honest, hard-working folk. We wanted to live our own lives, and the upper classes wouldn't let us.... [The poet Robert] Burns says that 'Liberty's a glorious feast.' But the upper classes wouldn't let us poor folk get a taste of it. When we cried... freedom of action they gave us the point of a sword. Never forget, lad! Let it sink in your blood. Stand up and fight for the rights of man—the rights of poor folk!"]

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