



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

The impact of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars

What were the main pressures facing the country c.1810?

The influence of Corresponding Societies

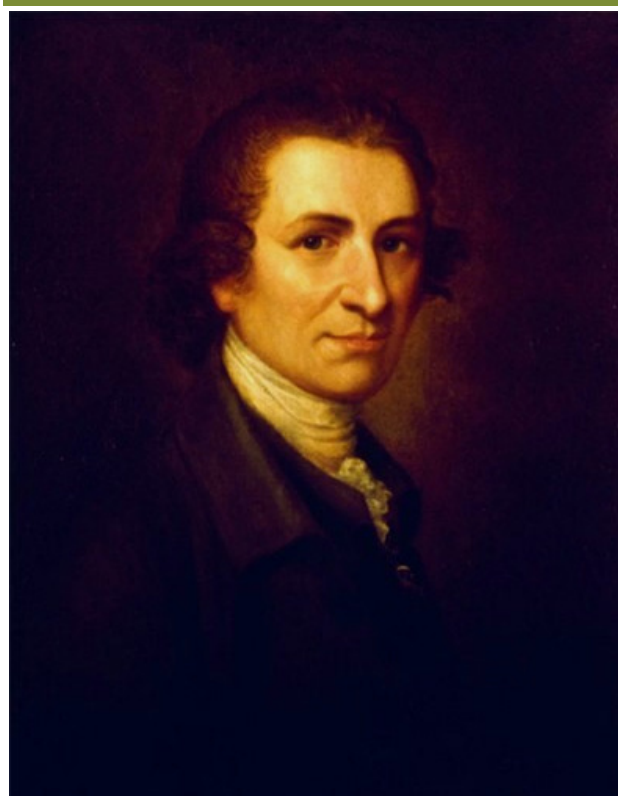
Europe had been thrown into political, economic and social turmoil in the late eighteenth century. The **French Revolution** that started in 1789 had been the culmination of generations of oppression that finally manifested itself in the fall of the Bastille. Britain during this time was in the developing throes of the **Industrial Revolution**. Reactions to the French Revolution in Britain were mixed, but one thing it certainly did was to provoke widespread and intense debate about the political system in Britain itself.

One extremely important publication during this period was the *Rights of Man*, written by **Thomas Paine**. Paine believed that power lay with the people, stating that everybody should have a right to be involved in government. The book became widely printed and read, but also led to a reaction from the ruling classes in Britain who increasingly began to consider such ideas dangerous to the existing status quo. The result was a series of **repressive laws** passed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that sought to control the publishing of material that contained **Radical** ideas that proposed widespread political reform.

However, many were inspired by the ideas and events of the French Revolution and of the writings of people such as Paine. Groups of people, calling themselves Radicals, formed **Corresponding Societies** in some larger towns. These groups started to meet at the time the French Revolution was taking place. In late 1791, the first Corresponding Society was established in **Sheffield** and by 1792 it had over 2,000 members, becoming extremely prominent in stimulating political debate and even agitation in the region.

In January 1792, the **London Corresponding Society** was founded by a shoemaker called **Thomas Hardy**. Membership was open to anyone who could pay a penny at each weekly meeting. The Society soon adopted a programme that would form the basis of the Radical movement's demands: **universal male suffrage; annual parliaments** and the **redistribution of 'rotten boroughs' to the large towns**. It grew rapidly, developing a highly organised structure, but also attracting the attention of the Government who were determined to curtail its activities.

[Thomas Paine, a key figure in inspiring the birth of Radical ideas]



By Matthew Pratt (1734-1805) - Part of the Kirby Collection of Historical Paintings, Lafayette College Art Collection, Easton, Pa., Public Domain - <https://goo.gl/XY6VYQ>



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

By 1794, the **Government's fear of revolution** in Britain led to the **arrest** of some of the leaders of the London Society, including Hardy, all being charged with treason. Despite the acquittal of the men due to totally unsubstantiated claims, the passing in 1795 of the Treason Act and Seditious Meetings Act, made it increasingly difficult for Corresponding Societies to organise large meetings. The result of these harsh laws was to weaken the movement and a **law of 1799 banned** the London Corresponding Society and others thus bringing to an end this early period of Radical activity.

Despite this however, the Corresponding Societies played a significant role in giving organisation and direction to those who wanted reform of the political system. The **Napoleonic Wars**, which would last from 1803-1815, would combine with the upheaval caused by the **Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions** to give impetus to the demands for the reform of political, economic and social systems in Britain. It would be during this period that **Radicalism** would emerge as a potent force for change.

The impact of war on the economy; demobilised soldiers; the Corn Laws

The Napoleonic Wars had an enormous impact on the economy. The cost of the war had left Britain with a **national debt** of £861 million. Taxation was high and extremely unpopular. In 1814-15, despite high taxation, government spending exceeded income from taxation by 45 per cent. The cost of paying interest on loans was crippling, accounting for approximately 80 per cent of government expenditure. As a result, paying off the national debt and reducing public spending became the main priorities for the Tory Government that took control under **Lord Liverpool** in 1815.

Income tax was obviously an important source of revenue for the Government. However the ending of the war saw increased demands for its abolition, especially from the landed class. In 1815-16 the Whigs organised a successful campaign against it which was passed by Parliament despite the attempts of Liverpool to prevent it. Although the abolition of income tax was popular, the effect it had on government finances was obvious. To compensate for lost revenue, Liverpool had to cut government spending, borrow more money and most importantly, increase **indirect taxation**. Such taxes on the purchase of goods inevitably **hit the poor hardest, pushing up prices** on everyday goods such as food.

The ending of the Napoleonic Wars also had the effect of driving up **unemployment**. Changes in agriculture, such as the process of enclosure and the increasing mechanisation of the textile industry had led to reductions in the amount of labour needed. More importantly however, was the effect that **demobilised soldiers and sailors** had on unemployment. **Three hundred thousand servicemen** were demobilised and all were returning to a country in which finding work was already a challenge. The industries that had been stimulated by war such as textiles, iron and armaments, all suffered as a result of the ending of the war, further exacerbating the situation.

The issue of **corn** also dominated government business during this period. A series of good harvests from 1813-15 resulted in an abundance of corn which had the effect of **lowering**



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

prices. This obviously put farmers under a lot of pressure, reducing the income of the landed aristocracy and gentry. At first they responded by **reducing wages**, but then through their influence in Parliament they were able to secure the passage of the **Corn Laws of 1815**. This law prohibited the import of corn until the price of home-grown corn reached 80 shillings a quarter (12.7 kg). The law was clearly designed to keep the price of corn high, which although protecting landowners' incomes meant that the price of food, particularly bread, increased thus penalising the working class the most.

The effect of the passing of the Corn Laws was immediate. Outside of Parliament it was seen as **selfish and unjust** – yet another imposition on the poor to benefit the wealthy landed class. Petitions were organised and **riots** took place in London in March 1815, which required the use of troops to restore order. The increase in food prices that accompanied the Corn Laws contributed to working class distress throughout the country, especially in rural areas. Food riots in 1816 and 1818 were a further reaction to the Corn Laws, which became a focus of working class protest during this period. Indeed the period would now see a combination of factors finding common issue around which to rally – that of **parliamentary reform**.

[The Radical cartoonist George Cruikshank's view of the Corn Laws. Rich landowners are turning away cheap foreign corn, saying that if the poor can't buy it at their price they must starve. The man with his family is refusing to do so and states he would rather emigrate to a friendlier country than suffer under the heels of the rich.]





1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

The demand for parliamentary reform; the impact of industrialisation on Radical thinking

During this period very few people had the right to vote. In most areas, **only male property owners** could – the overwhelming mass of the population had little say in choosing MPs. There were two types of **constituency** (an area represented by an MP) – **counties and boroughs**. In county constituencies all men who owned freehold property worth over 40 shillings a year were entitled to vote. In boroughs, or towns, the voting qualification was far more complicated with various rules applying. For example, in a **corporation borough** only those members of the town corporation (council) could vote. In a **potwalloper borough** only those who owned property with a fireplace and lockable door could vote, proof of which would be provided by rattling your key in your cooking pot – potwalloping!

An even greater oddity was the distribution of MPs to constituencies. On average there were just over **700 voters** for each constituency, but this was just an average. For instance, Manchester in 1750 had been virtually a village community and therefore had no MP but because of the Industrial Revolution Manchester by 1830 had 182,000 inhabitants – but still had no MP.

On the other hand, many **towns had grown smaller** as people had moved to the newly expanding industrial towns, but still had MPs to represent them. These were known as **rotten boroughs** and were a great source of discontent for those who demanded parliamentary reform. For example, by 1830, Old Sarum in Wiltshire was no more than a windy hilltop with a castle, but every election time seven voters met to choose their two MPs. At Gatton in Surrey it was even easier – there was just one voter.

Rotten boroughs were often places where **corruption and bribery** were rife. More often than not most voters worked for a local landowner and or rented land from him. They voted for the person he told them to vote for. Another term for these constituencies was **pocket boroughs**, because they were in the pocket of the local landowner.

In some places where there were many voters, a proper election might take place with several candidates. However, since elections were **public affairs** each voter had to announce whom he was voting for. As thousands often turned up to watch the election, abuse, threats and even murder could be the consequence of not voting for the 'correct' candidate. As a result of this bribery was commonplace – in Liverpool in 1830 for example, the price reached £150 per vote towards the end of the election.



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

[George Cruikshank's view of the rotten borough system – 'The System that Works so Well'. In it you can see a mill signifying Parliament with the names of various rotten boroughs on it. Underneath the 'mill' are the poor, ordinary people who cannot vote. The 'borough bridge' is being supported by rifles, signifying the military and these rotten boroughs are pouring out vast amounts of 'jobs', 'pensions', 'government contracts' and so on. These are being greedily stuffed into the pockets of the ruling classes from the bowl of 'public money'.]



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The parliamentary system and its abuses was seen by many people as the root cause of the suffering of the majority of the population. As such, demands for parliamentary reform became the rallying point for **Radicals**. They believed that most people were unfairly treated in terms of pay and living conditions because they had **no political say**. Although the Radicals were not an united group, there were a few national figures. **Major John Cartwright** was one of the most famous. He campaigned for:

- Universal suffrage (which at the time meant a vote for all adult males)
- Annual Parliaments
- Voting by secret ballot

These were the most common of all Radical demands, although they also campaigned vigorously for the **abolition of the Corn Laws**.

Two other very famous Radicals were **Henry (Orator) Hunt** and **William Cobbett**. Hunt, as his nickname suggests, was a **brilliant public speaker** who regularly addressed crowds numbering in tens of thousands, demanding Radical reforms. Cobbett was extremely influential as a **journalist**. His cheap weekly journal, the Political Register, had enormous impact – 200,000 copies of the first issue had been sold by the end of 1817. Cobbett blamed the political system for poverty and the abuses which existed.



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

The Radicals were keen to use the general discontent throughout the country to direct attention to the issue of parliamentary reform. Meeting places or **Hampden Clubs** were set up to discuss reform and the issue gained great prominence throughout the country.

Industrialisation had undoubtedly reshaped Britain, creating an industrial working class in the towns and cities that were no longer content to accept the status quo as it had been for centuries. **Political ideas** were now disseminated and discussed, a fact recognised by people such as Cobbett and the Lancashire poet and Radical, Samuel Bamford. Rural areas had seen their population diminish, but their political influence was overwhelming. The new industrial areas were largely unrepresented, as were the **new, wealthy middle class** of merchants and manufacturers who could clearly see that the parliamentary system was tipped against them. **Radical thinking** during this period was therefore targeted at the very people who were excluded from the political system and, as shall be seen, contributed to the outbreak of protests that would shape the first half of the nineteenth century in Wales and England.

Early outbreaks of protest

What were the most significant protests in the period 1810-1832?

Causes and events of the main forms of protest

The protests of the Luddites 1811-1812

The gradual and inexorable change from **Domestic** to **Factory System** had far reaching implications for British society. Generation after generation of cottage industry workers had witnessed relatively little change to their way of life. In the cloth industry, carding, spinning and weaving had been undertaken by the family, children included, in the confines of the home. The relatively slow increase in population and lack of competition meant that work had been sustained, skills were handed down through the generations and a passable existence was eked out. However, the developments in particularly the **cotton industry** in the eighteenth century would usher in a new world, developments that would transform the fabric of society forever.

John Kay's invention of the 'flying shuttle' in 1733 was the first of several important innovations that would eventually result in the establishment of the Factory System. In 1764 James Hargreaves invented the 'spinning jenny', which mechanized the process of spinning, reducing the number of spinners required. In 1769, Richard Arkwright's water frame and his subsequent use of them in what were effectively the first factories in the world, initiated the drive to industrialisation. Further inventions such as the spinning mule and power loom revolutionised the manufacturing process. In 1770 for example, the cotton industry was worth £600,000, a figure that had risen to £10,500,000 by 1805. Although the economic impact of these developments for manufacturers were beneficial to say the least, the **social and economic impact** for people such as skilled handloom weavers, was devastating.

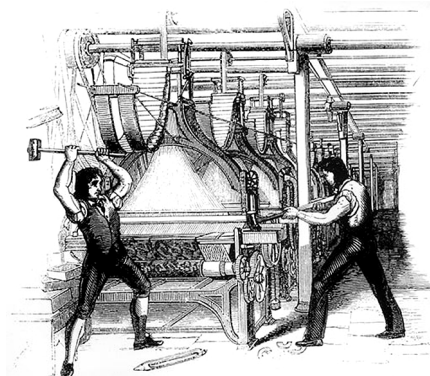
One manifestation of the impact that the changes of the Industrial Revolution brought, can



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

be seen in the protest of the **Luddites**. The first decade of the nineteenth century was characterised by hardship due to the demands and effects of the Napoleonic Wars. Increasing unemployment, food prices and poor harvests created desperate conditions for large swathes of the working class across Wales and England. These factors, combined with increasing **mechanisation** and the use of **unskilled labour**, led to the creation of the **Luddite movement** – a widespread protest against machinery and the introduction of working practices that undermined the wages of skilled artisans.

[A later depiction of Luddite activity, dated 1844]



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Allegedly named after a young apprentice, **Ned Ludd**, whom it is said destroyed a stocking frame in the late 1770s, **Luddism** became an organised movement whose threatening letters and proclamations assumed the title 'General Ludd' or 'King Ludd'. Apparently beginning in March **1811** in **Nottingham**, November the same year witnessed widespread attacks by '**stockingers**' or 'framework-knitters', skilled artisans who produced hosiery on stocking frames. Protesting against the use of unskilled labour and new frames that produced inferior cloth, they proceeded to send threatening letters to factory owners to remove their frames and if they refused, break into factories and destroy the machinery. By early **1812** the attacks had spread to the West Riding in **Yorkshire** where highly skilled **croppers**, who finished off pieces of woollen cloth and whose livelihood had been practically destroyed by the invention of the shearing frame, took part in night raids to destroy frames and workshops.

The authorities found it difficult to catch the protestors. Many Luddites had organised themselves into secret societies where an oath was taken to ensure loyalty and prevent capture. Local communities were reluctant to provide information about the Luddites, who were after all, trying to preserve the way of life of those communities. However, in the absence of readily available evidence, the reaction of the authorities was extremely harsh. Although measures existed to deal with such activities, the government passed the **Frame Breaking Act 1812**, which introduced the **death penalty** specifically for frame breaking. Troop presence in the affected areas was significantly increased, which reduced the amount of attacks, particularly in Nottinghamshire.

However, the early months of 1812 saw intense Luddite activity in areas of Yorkshire, with attacks on mills and even mill owners becoming more prevalent. After clashes with troops in attacks in the West Riding, the mill owner William Horsfall, an outspoken anti-Luddite, was murdered in a revenge attack. The perpetrators, led by a man called George Mellor, were finally arrested in October 1812 and Mellor and sixteen others were **hanged** in January 1813.

The punishment meted out to Mellor as his associates served the purpose of deterring other Luddite style activities. However, during their most active period, the Luddites destroyed thousands of frames and in some places did at least manage to intimidate mill owners into



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

raising wages and abandoning the use of wider frames. However, the severity of the government response put an end to the protests, which were effectively the old order and way of working being swept away by the advance of industrialization.

The Spa Fields Riots 1816; the March of the Blanketeers 1817

The changing way of working life, that was having such a profound effect on the majority of the population, undoubtedly contributed to demands for the reform of Parliament. Whilst the Luddite protests were a response to specific changes in working practices, the period 1816-1820 witnessed several major protests that combined political, social and economic factors as their main driving forces.

The political unrest following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 was fuelled by the growth of Radicalism in many of the manufacturing districts of the country. In November 1816, **Henry Hunt**, the most prominent Radical speaker in the country, was invited to address a protest meeting at **Spa Fields**, Islington, London, with the aim of gathering support for the presentation of a petition to the **Prince Regent** requesting the reform of Parliament and general assistance to the population suffering economic distress. On 15 November, the meeting took place at Spa Fields, peacefully attended by approximately 10,000 people. However, upon being chosen, along with fellow reformer **Sir Francis Burdett**, to take the petition to the Regent, first Burdett refused to do so and then Hunt was twice prevented access to see the Regent.

The failure of the meeting led to the calling of a second to be held on 2 December, the aim being to protest at Hunt's treatment. The meeting, attended by 20,000, was used by extreme Radicals, known as **Spenceans**, as a means of pursuing their revolutionary goals. Hunt's late arrival enabled some of the protestors, **Dr James Watson**, his son Arthur and the known Spencean **Arthur Thistlewood**, to lead a group toward the Tower of London, looting a gun shop as they proceeded and also killing a pedestrian. The group however, were met at the Royal Exchange by the Alderman and seven constables with the three being arrested and the rest dispersed.

The aftermath of the riots was significant in several respects. A former sailor, **John Cashman**, who was more likely to have been caught up in the looting of the gun shop as opposed to being an extreme Radical, was executed. However, the trial against the main perpetrators collapsed due to the obvious use of government spies, or **agent provocateurs**, to instigate trouble. In this case the discrediting of the character and reliability of John Castle, who was exposed as a spy, saved Thistlewood and the Watsons from the gallows. Despite this however, the level of violence served to frighten the Government under its Prime Minister **Lord Liverpool** and Home Secretary **Lord Sidmouth** who feared revolution.

The Government's fear of revolution dominated their response to protest. In **March 1817**, three working class Radicals in Manchester, Samuel Drummond, John Bagguley and William Benbow, organized a protest march from **Manchester to London** to draw attention to the plight of unemployed **spinners and weavers** in Lancashire. The plan was for the men to take a petition to the **Prince Regent**, in the expectation that at least 20,000 would take part. Some Radicals in Manchester, for example, **Samuel Bamford**, advised against the march, insisting



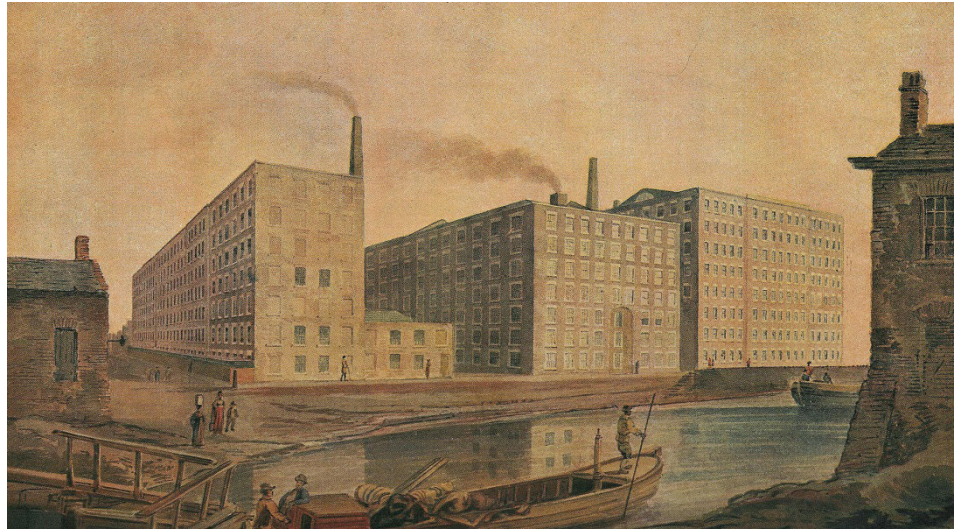
1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

that the authorities would never permit such an action to take place. Nevertheless, on 10 March 1817, around 5,000 marchers met in St Peter's Field, Manchester to commence their peaceful protest.

The organizers decided that each man should carry a blanket, not only to keep them warm, but also to indicate to people en route that they were spinners and weavers. As a result

the protest became known as the **March of the Blanketeers**. However, the authorities were determined to prevent even peaceful protest and set out to stop the march.

[Manchester cotton mills c.1820]



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The intention was for the men to march in groups of ten, thereby avoiding accusations of illegal assembly. However, the **Riot Act** was read and troops were sent in to disperse the marchers. Drummond and Bagguley were arrested, but several marchers set off, only to be pursued and then attacked by the military. Many received sabre wounds with scores being arrested under vagrancy laws. The unfortunate end to the Blanketeers march signified how the Government would not tolerate even peaceful protest during this period, with further measures introduced to clamp down on Radical protest.

The forming of political unions; the Reform Bill Riots, 1831

During the 1820s Britain experienced an **economic recovery** and as a result the influence of Radicalism waned as people found themselves in work and in slightly better circumstances. The restrictions of the Six Acts (to be discussed later) were gradually lifted and repealed and other more pressing issues came to the fore of government business. However, by the **early 1830s** the country was once again in the grip of **widespread protest**. Attempts by the Whigs to promote the issue of reform during the 1820s had been staunchly opposed by the Tory Government. However, the growth in the number and wealth of industrialists in the manufacturing areas that were not represented in Parliament led to increased pressure for reform.

One way in which this pressure manifested itself was in the formation of **political unions**. In 1828 Thomas Attwood founded the **Birmingham Political Union** whose aim was to campaign for reform by peaceful methods such as organising public meetings and petitions to be presented to Parliament. By 1832 its membership was 25,000 and it served as a stimulus for the formation of other political unions in towns and cities across the country. The influence of these political unions was such that the Government now had to take notice.

Although these unions wanted parliamentary reform, they were not united. Middle class



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

manufacturers wanted to be represented by people such as themselves, an aim of the **National Political Union** founded by **Francis Place**. However, people such as **William Lovett** and **Henry Hetherington**, who founded the National Union of the Working Classes, favoured a more radical policy of working class representation. Either way, by 1830 the cause of reform was being advanced in several newspapers. *The Times* was one of the national newspapers that favoured reform and in the manufacturing districts locally published newspapers such as the *Leeds Mercury* were vociferous in their support.

However, it was once again economic factors that significantly increased the pressure for reform. Poor harvests from 1828-30 and an economic depression from 1829-31, led to higher food prices and increased unemployment. The continued efforts of the House of Lords to frustrate the progress of the **Reform Bill**, blocked by the Upper House in October 1831 and which more of will be discussed later, provoked **disturbances and riots** across the country.

The most significant of these riots took place on 31 October when rioters took control of **Bristol** for two days with public buildings being stormed and set on fire. Twelve people were killed, over a hundred wounded and four were later executed for their part in the riot. The Bristol riot was not unique for earlier in the month riots had occurred in places such as London, Nottingham, Derby, Bath and Newark. At Nottingham the castle was burned down and in London the houses owned by the **Duke of Wellington** and bishops who had voted against the Reform Bill were attacked.

The Reform Bill Riots were the culmination of twenty-two years of agitation. As will now be examined, the response of the Government and authorities to the various protests of this period would be guided by a general fear of revolution and the desire to suppress popular discontent.

[The suppression of the Bristol riots, October 1831]



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1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

Government reaction

How did the government react to popular protest at this time?

Agent provocateurs; the suspension of Habeas Corpus, 1817

The **French Revolution** had cast an enormous shadow over Europe during this period, particularly in the way it influenced the thinking of monarchies and governments who believed that a similar event could happen in their countries. As such the ruling classes in Britain had taken measures to try and stop the spread of revolutionary ideas in the immediate aftermath of events in France. The first decade of the nineteenth century had seen unrest increase, but the Napoleonic Wars had preoccupied the country. Their ending in 1815 however had seen an increase in Radical activity and one measure a nervous government took to combat the movement, was through the use of **agent provocateurs**.

Agent provocateurs were **spies** who were employed by the government to infiltrate Radical groups in order to gain evidence about them. However, they also served the purpose of stirring these groups to take direct action, mostly on completely false promises that the country was ready to rise in revolution. Desperate men were often ready to believe these spies, who tended not only to be unscrupulous characters, but prone to wild exaggeration in order to prove their worth to the government.

One of the most famous spies during the period was **William Oliver** who was heavily involved in provoking the **Pentrich Rising, 1817** which culminated in the execution of Jeremiah Brandreth, Isaac Ludlum and William Turner. The government's use of spies however, was well known and brought it considerable criticism. **Samuel Bamford**, a weaver, poet and Radical, whose account of this period is a valuable historical record, recalled a late night meeting with an associate who had become involved with Oliver. He later recorded:

'The fact was this unfortunate person...had during one of his visits to London, formed a connection with Oliver the spy, which connection...gave a new impulse to secret meetings and plots in various parts of Lancashire, Yorkshire, and Derbyshire and ended in the tragedy of Brandreth, Ludlum and Turner, at Derby.'

Bamford went on to note that:

'From that very week, private meetings, for highly criminal purposes, again commenced. Agents came from Manchester and glided through the country, depositing their poison wherever they could.' (Passages in the Life of a Radical pp.70-71).

Government fears during this period were increased in January 1817 after a missile was thrown through the glass window of the Prince Regent's coach on the way to the opening of Parliament. Their response was to pass the **Gagging Acts**, made up of the Treason Act which made it high treason to assassinate the Prince Regent and the **Seditious Meetings Act**, which made it illegal to hold meetings of over **50 people** for the purpose of airing grievances. Strict conditions were



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

applied to any meetings that were permitted. The aim was clearly to prevent the assembly of potential protest and the law also sought to suppress any organisation where an oath not authorised by law was required.

[Jeremiah Brandreth, executed for his role in the Pentrich Rising, an event partly caused by the government's use of agent provocateurs]



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The government also responded to what they saw as a dangerous series of events, by **suspending the Habeas Corpus Act** at the end of February 1817. The Act essentially preserved the right of every person in prison to be brought before a court of law to be tried. Habeas Corpus or 'you may have the body' had its origins in the medieval era and was viewed as one of the fundamental pillars of people's rights. Various governments had suspended it during times of perceived threat however, such as in 1794 and 1798. The suspension in 1817 served to highlight the fear the Government had of **Radical protest** and possible **revolution** during this period, reflected in Lord Sidmouth's assertion in Parliament that there was a 'traitorous conspiracy...for the purpose of overthrowing...the established government'.

The importance of the suspension on the Radical movement was recognised at the time. **Samuel Bamford** later commented that:

'A cloud of gloom and mistrust hung over the whole country. The suspension of the habeas

corpus act was a measure that...was of a nature to cause anxiety in the most indifferent of us...It seemed as if the sun of freedom were gone down, and a rayless expanse of oppression had finally closed over us.' (Passages in the Life of a Radical pp.43-44).

The oppressive measures taken by the Government were a key feature of the time and a reflection of their concern over Radical activity, as well as often being an irrational response to the exaggeration of agent provocateurs. Despite the fact that the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act was **repealed in 1818** and liberties restored, the deterioration in the economy in 1818-19 led to a new wave of protest that would culminate in the **Peterloo Massacre, 1819**.

The Peterloo Massacre, 1819

Radicalism was given a boost in 1819 when another trade depression led to wage cuts and an increase in unemployment, creating yet more distress in the manufacturing districts.



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

Mass meetings were organized to protest against poor living conditions and to demand **parliamentary reform**. Four huge rallies were planned by Radicals for Birmingham, Leeds, London and Manchester in July-August 1819, with **Henry Hunt** being the main speaker at the Manchester rally.

As has been seen however, the attitude of the authorities, especially that of the Manchester magistrates, was one of fear and suspicion towards Radical protest. As a result they arranged for a large number of soldiers to be present at the Manchester meeting scheduled for **16 August**. This included the **Manchester and Salford Yeomanry**, made up of volunteer soldiers such as publicans and shopkeepers, who were not sympathetic to the Radicals.

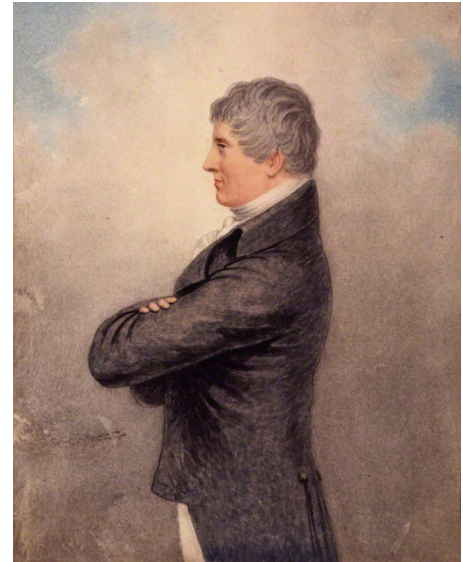
On the morning of 16 August, thousands of people made their way to **St Peter's Field**, a crowd made up of men, women and children carrying banners with slogans such as 'No Corn Laws', 'Universal Suffrage' and 'Vote by Ballot'. The magistrates had met at 11.00am in a house overlooking the area and had become increasingly worried by the growing size of the crowd and its apparent discipline, which in their minds resembled a military organization. By around 1.00pm the crowd's size numbered from about **60-80,000** possibly more and at 1.20pm the main speakers, including Hunt, arrived, joined by several newspaper reporters. It was around this point that the magistrates, led by the Chairman **William Hulton**, decided that *'the town was in great danger'* and decided to arrest Hunt.

The arrest warrant was given to the Deputy Constable **Joseph Nadin** who was accompanied by special constables and the **Yeomanry** into the crowd. However, although they made it to Hunt and executed the arrest warrant, the Yeomanry found themselves stuck in the crowd and started to hack their way out with their sabres, causing panic in the crowd. To the watching magistrates this appeared like an assault on the Yeomanry and as a result Hulton ordered in the **regular troops** waiting on the outskirts of St Peter's Field to disperse the meeting.

The 15th Hussars led by Colonel L'Estrange charged into St Peter's Field and within ten minutes the area had been cleared. **Eleven people were killed** and several hundred injured as a result of the action.

The immediate reaction of the Radicals and the public in general to what happened at St Peter's Field was one of disgust and outrage. The event soon became known as the **Peterloo Massacre** in mocking reference to the **Battle of Waterloo**; only this time the 'brave soldiers' had fought women and children.

[A portrait of Henry Hunt, painted c.1810]



Portrait of Henry Hunt by Adam Buck (c. 1810), © National Portrait Gallery, London



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

[A depiction of the events at St Peter's Field, published by the Radical, Richard Carlile]



By Richard Carlile (1790–1843) - Manchester Library Services, Public Domain - <https://goo.gl/9ys2cJ>

However, the Home Secretary **Lord Sidmouth** and the **Prince Regent** both sent letters to the Manchester magistrates congratulating them for the action they had taken, commenting upon the satisfaction that the Prince Regent had derived from 'their prompt, decisive and efficient measures to preserve the public tranquillity'. The attitude of the government indeed hardened and there was a desire to **suppress the Radical movement**, whom it blamed for increasing disturbances in the country.

The Six Acts; the Cato Street Conspiracy

The response was characterised by the hasty passing of a series of laws, later known as the **Six Acts**, or 'Gagging Acts', that were rushed through Parliament by the Tory Government under Lord Liverpool. The measures were designed to stop Radical meetings and newspapers as well as reducing the possibility of an armed uprising. The laws passed were: -

- **Training Prevention Act** – a measure which made any person attending a gathering for the purpose of military style training or drilling liable to arrest and seven years transportation.
- **Seizure of Arms Act** – this gave local magistrates power to search any property or person for weapons.
- **Seditious Meetings Prevention Act** – this prohibited the holding of public meetings of more than fifty people without the consent of a magistrate.
- **Misdemeanours Act** – a measure that attempted to speed up trials.
- **Blasphemous and Seditious Libels Act** – this provided stronger punishments, including the banning of publications that criticized the Government.
- **Newspapers and Stamp Duties Act** – this imposed a stamp duty, or tax, on certain Radical newspapers such as the *Political Register*, making them more expensive and therefore reducing their circulation.

Although the Six Acts were not as severe as some laws in other European countries, they did serve to restrict Radical activities. In many ways, they were an overreaction, fuelled by the Government's fear of organised protest and although their impact may have in reality been relatively mild, they came to be seen as a symbol of the oppressive nature of the Tory Government of the time.



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

The 'Peterloo' massacre had enraged extreme Spencean Radicals such as Arthur Thistlewood, who believed in violent revolution. After Peterloo his anger against the Government increased and with fellow minded conspirators, he was now determined to take action, in an event that became known as **The Cato Street Conspiracy**.

In February 1820, the *New Times* newspaper reported that several members of the Government were attending a 'grand Cabinet dinner' at Grosvenor Square in London. Thistlewood and his fellow conspirators, principally William Davidson, Richard Tidd, James Ings and John Brunt, decided they would gain entry to the building and **assassinate** all the Government ministers. The heads of the leading ministers would then be placed on poles and paraded around the slums of London, leading to an armed **revolution** that would overthrow the Government.

However, unbeknown to the conspirators, they had been infiltrated by a spy, **George Edwards**. The authorities had full knowledge of the plan with Edwards even providing the grenades they were to use. Renting a building in Cato Street, the gang met prior to the intended action, but the authorities were prepared and stormed their hideout in an attempt to arrest them. Thistlewood and some of the gang did not surrender and in the scuffle he stabbed and killed one of the officers, Richard Smithers. Despite escaping, Thistlewood was shortly arrested on the information of Edwards and along with the four others was put on trial.

The trial caused a sensation at the time. Edwards was considered too unreliable a witness, but some of the conspirators were offered pardons to testify against the five main protagonists. Being found guilty, they were sentenced to be **hung and beheaded**, with the sentences being carried out at Newgate Prison on 1 May 1820 in front of a crowd of several thousand spectators, many of whom had paid local inhabitants for the privilege of watching from their houses.

['A Free Born Englishman' – a cartoon originally dating from c.1795, but later adapted by the Radical cartoonist George Cruikshank to depict the effects of the Six Acts (1819)]



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1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

The Cato Street Conspiracy was the last major attempt at revolt during this period, but had clearly demonstrated the extent to which **agent provocateurs** were used to ferment discontent. The conspirators were vehement in their criticism of George Edwards as being the reason why they took part and after the trial it was noted that he had disappeared, apparently to New Brunswick in Canada, thus avoiding any repercussions from his dubious actions.

[George Cruikshank's depiction of the arrest of the Cato Street Conspirators, 1820]



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['A May Day Garland for 1820': members of the Government dance around the heads of the Cato Street Conspirators, whilst the spy Edwards happily fiddles in the background]



A May Day Garland for 1820, © National Portrait Gallery, London



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

The 1832 Reform Act

During the 1820s Britain experienced an **economic recovery** and as a result the influence of Radicalism waned as people found themselves in work, thus reducing discontent. The Six Acts were gradually repealed and other issues dominated government business. However, by the **early 1830s** the country was once again in the grip of **widespread protest**. As discussed earlier, the **Reform Bill Riots** were the most serious form of violent protest the country had witnessed during this period. The riots were the result of attempts to prevent the passage of the Reform Bill, aimed at extending the franchise and removing rotten boroughs. However, such was the pressure for reform that the Government's reaction was to find itself inexorably drawn to allowing an extension of the franchise.

In November 1830, the Tory Government led by the **Duke of Wellington**, an arch-opponent of reform, fell from power. The Whigs, led by **Earl Grey**, offered to form a new government provided the **King, William IV**, agreed to a Reform Bill. This was an event of great significance and thus the battle lines were drawn between pro and anti-reformers.

However, the **Reform Bill** that was introduced in **March 1831** was not as radical as some had hoped, yet it still horrified many Tories. The vote in all constituencies, be they boroughs or counties, was to be uniform. In boroughs the occupation of a house or shop worth an annual value of £10 still meant that the overwhelming majority of working class people were not eligible to vote. In the counties, the franchise was already with those who owned land by freehold worth 40 shillings. To this group were added copyholders, an ancient form of lease, who held land worth at least £10; leaseholders whose land was worth £50 and tenants who paid £50 in rent. The clear result was that the **ownership of substantial property** was still the determining factor.

The Bill's introduction saw the **Government defeated** which was followed by its resignation. The following election once again saw the Whigs returned with a majority of 140 MPs, demonstrating that the issue of reform was dominant. October 1831 saw a second Reform Bill introduced, only to be defeated in the House of Lords, which prompted the Reform Bill Riots previously mentioned.

The **third introduction** of the Reform Bill took place in the spring of 1832 and was once again passed by the House of Commons. The Lords attempted to alter the Bill, which led to the Whigs calling on the King to create enough **new peers** to force the Bill through. The King refused and asked the Duke of Wellington to form a new government, which they were unable to do. The reformer **Francis Place** encouraged prosperous manufacturers and investors to withdraw their money from banks, thus halving the national reserve of gold in a few days. This and the overwhelming pressure throughout the country, **forced the King to agree to Earl Grey's demands** to which the Lords eventually dropped their opposition in the face of the threat to create new peers. **The Reform Act thus became law on 7 June 1832.**



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

[A painting commemorating the passing of the Reform Act. In the foreground are the principle figures in the fight for and against reform]



By Sir George Hayter (1792-1871), Public Domain, <https://goo.gl/liAZrU>

The passing of the Reform Act was a major concession by the government in the face of popular protest – at least by the standards of that time. Prior to the Act approximately one in ten men in Wales and England could vote, afterwards it was about **one in five**. Many **rotten boroughs** were abolished and a redistribution of seats took place. The manufacturing districts were now represented as were the prosperous middle classes. However, working class men and indeed many from the middle classes felt **angry** at the limited scope of reform. This would in turn lead to the **Chartist movement**, of which more will be discussed later.

Industrial protest in Wales

Why did the Merthyr Rising break out in 1831?

Long-term causes: working and living conditions, the truck system, the role of the industrialists

The Industrial Revolution had an immeasurable impact upon the social, economic and political fabric of Wales. The speed of the developments meant that areas such as **Merthyr Tydfil** grew from small, rural villages into large, bleak industrialised towns in a relatively short space of time. The availability of coal and iron ore had driven the industrialization of South Wales, with the population in Merthyr increasing at a faster rate than other Welsh towns. By 1831, over



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

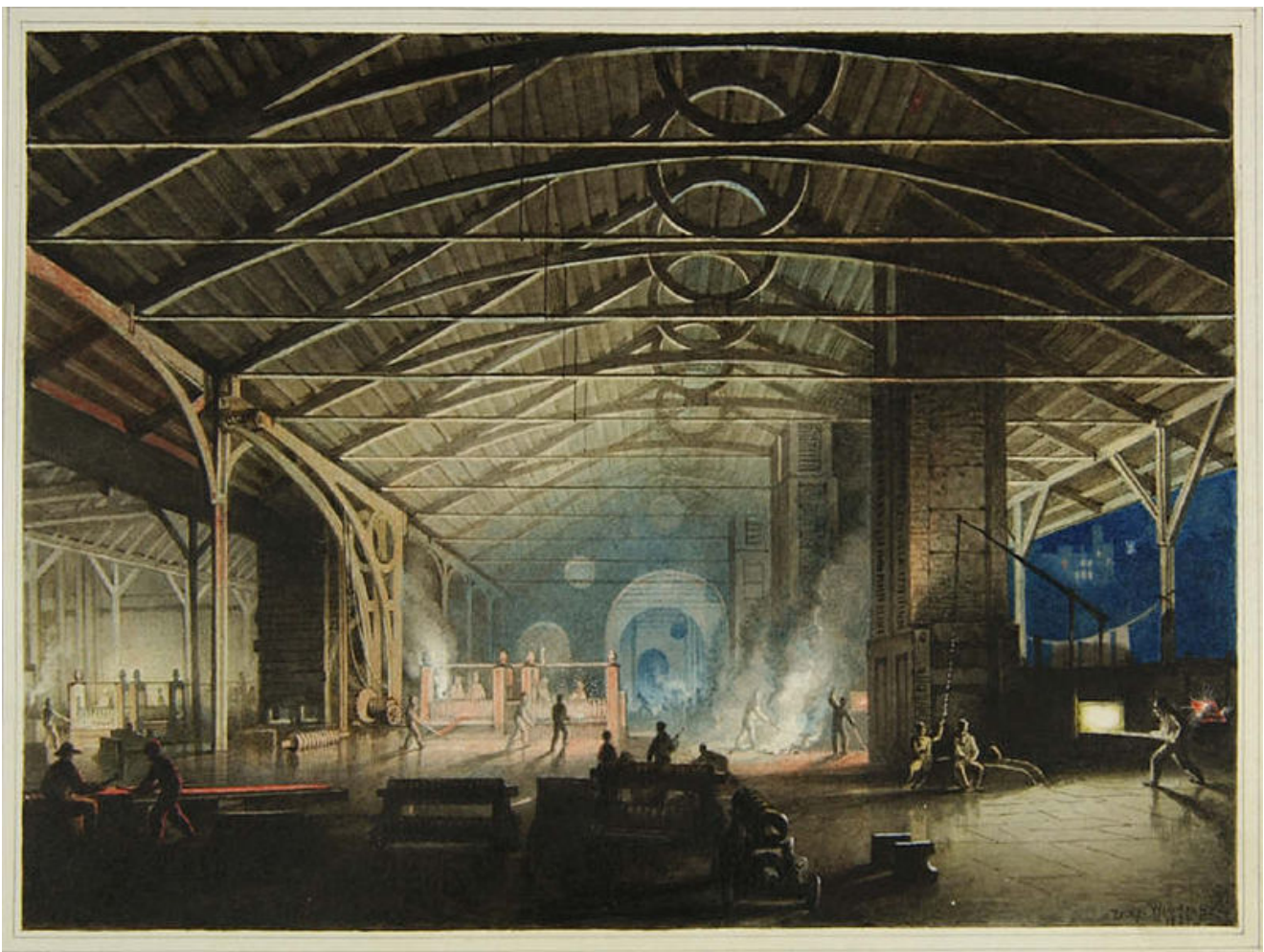
30,000 people lived there with most of the inflow of people coming to work in the **iron works**.

Merthyr had become an ideal centre for the iron industry due to the presence of the necessary raw materials and by the end of the 18th century there were four great ironworks in Merthyr: -

- **Penydarren**, owned by the Homfrays
- **Plymouth**, owned by Anthony Bacon and then Richard Hill
- **Dowlais**, owned by Josiah John Guest
- **Cyfarthfa**, owned by the Crawshays.

Cyfarthfa became the largest, producing a large percentage of British and indeed world iron. **William Crawshay** became one of the wealthiest men Britain has ever seen – in current values his wealth would have been in excess of £5 billion. The iron was needed for the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of the industry was accompanied by an increased demand for coal and as a result many mines were therefore developed by the ironmasters.

[A painting of Cyfarthfa Ironworks at night c.1825]



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1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

The wealth of the ironmasters contrasted greatly with the poverty of their workers. **Working and living conditions** in the town were often desperate. Work tended to consist of 12-13 hour shifts, 7 days a week with very few holidays. Although many of the jobs in the ironworks were skilled, most had great dangers such as 'iron splash'. The wages varied although not a great deal from one ironworks to the next.

Living conditions were equally difficult. The rapid increase in the town's population had led to a proliferation of cheap housing being built, usually on behalf of the ironmasters. Being crammed together, often overcrowded and with very little sanitation or clean water supply, **epidemics of cholera and typhoid** were common and the death rate for infants bordered on the murderous. The quality of the building materials was poor – houses were built of **sandstone** which let in the damp, leading to the inevitable respiratory problems.

Compounding the situation of the workers was the continued use in Merthyr of the **truck system**. Workers were often paid once a month, which meant that many got into debt. Others were paid in **tokens**, or truck, which could only be exchanged at shops ran by the ironmasters. These shops were known as '**tommy shops**' and the prices in them tended to be higher than in ordinary shops. Goods were often of an inferior quality or adulterated and as a result of these factors the truck system was a great source of discontent amongst the workers, representing the control the ironmasters had over them.

[Cyfarthfa Castle c.1840]



Cyfarthfa Castle (c. 1840), Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru – The National Library of Wales

Of the ironmasters of the time, the two most influential were **William Crawshay**, the owner of Cyfarthfa and **Josiah John Guest**, the owner of Dowlais. They did make a contribution to life in Merthyr however. The Guest family built a library, chapels and schools for their workers, but although they lived in the environs of Merthyr, the wealth they displayed was clearly in contrast to the workers. In 1825 Crawshay had a castle built for himself overlooking Cyfarthfa works. The cost

of nearly £30,000 was reflected in the way **Cyfarthfa Castle** dominated the town, another reflection of the control they held over nearly all aspects of life in Merthyr.



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

Short-term causes: economic depression, Radicalism and unionism, demands for parliamentary reform, wage cuts.

The above factors can be considered as **long-term causes** of the Merthyr Rising. The onset of an **economic depression**, combined with other short-term factors, would result in the timing of the Rising. 1829 saw a fall in the demand for iron, which would lead to three-year depression in the iron industry. Since this was a time of rising prices, hardship increased for working people. The result was that many families got into debt. If they could not pay, records were kept at the **Court of Requests**, who would send bailiffs to seize goods. As such this debtors' court was hated by the people of Merthyr as a symbol of their oppression and fuelled discontent in the town.

Although during the 1820s the general economic recovery in the country had lessened the appeal of Radicalism, the core demand for **parliamentary reform** had not diminished and these demands were strong in Merthyr. The town had no representation in Parliament, whereas rotten boroughs, constituencies with very few voters, still existed. The Merthyr workers wanted the vote so they could be represented by someone who would help to improve their lives. However, **Radicalism** and the demand for parliamentary reform were also important to people such as **Crawshay and Guest**, who supported the Reform Campaign that was dominating British politics at the time.

1831 saw what was known as the '**Reform Crisis**'. March 1831 saw the Whig Government bring a bill before Parliament to reform the House of Commons and extend the franchise. When the bill was defeated in April 1831, the Government resigned to fight a general election on the issue. All around Britain there were meetings and demonstrations supporting reform, including Merthyr.

Whilst parliamentary reform was seen as one way of improving workers' lives, another was through **unionism**. The protests for parliamentary reform provided an opportunity for unions, such as the 'Colliers Union' to try to gain a foothold in Merthyr and it seems as if this form of activism was a contributory factor to the Rising. For example, just prior to the Rising, on 30 May 1831, a mass meeting of ironworkers was held at **Waun Common**, the largest political meeting of workers held in Wales up to this point. This reflected the increased degree of organisation that was prevalent amongst the workers.

The meeting had partly been caused by the effects of the depression, which had resulted in William Crawshay announcing that he was **cutting the wages** of Cyfarthfa ironworkers. On 23 May the wage cuts came into effect and the next day Crawshay exacerbated the situation by sacking eighty-four puddlers. The action merely served to enflame discontent in the town and combined with the other grievances, accounted for the timing of the event.

Events of the Merthyr Rising

After the meeting there was action. Bailiffs from the Court of Requests visited the property of **Lewis Lewis**, known in Welsh as **Lewsyn yr Heliwr** or Lewis the Huntsman, in order to



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

recover debts. He refused to give up property, thus challenging the authority of the Court, although a compromise was reached where they took a trunk belonging to him. The next day with anger growing, a crowd at Hirwaun took back Lewis' trunk from a shopkeeper who had taken possession of it. This served as the motive for a general repatriation of goods that had been taken by the Court of Requests.

On 2 June the growing crowd marched into Merthyr, going from house to house taking goods seized by the Court of Requests. They ransacked the house of a bailiff, Thomas Williams and by the afternoon the crowd was swelled with other ironworkers. The magistrates and ironmasters took up residence at the **Castle Inn** and enrolled about seventy Special Constables. The Chief Magistrate **J.B. Bruce**, accompanied by Anthony Hill, tried to persuade the crowd to disperse, but with little success. The **Riot Act** was read in Welsh and English but the crowd remained.

In the evening the crowd assembled outside the house of **Joseph Coffin**, the President of the **Court of Requests**, eventually destroying the records of peoples' debts as well as the house. As a result of the increasing violence, troops were now called in from Cardiff, Brecon, Llantrisant and Neath.

On 3 June the Brecon soldiers arrived and went to the **Castle Inn**. A crowd of 10,000 gathered outside and a deputation went in to put forward their demands which were:

- Abolition of the Court of Requests
- Higher wages
- Reform
- A reduction in the cost of essential working equipment.

The ironmasters refused to consider these demands and the deputation returned to the crowd. The High Sheriff then told the crowd to disperse, with Crawshay addressing the crowd from the Castle Inn. However, this action seemed to anger the crowd who tried to surround the soldiers. **Lewis Lewis** was hoisted onto the shoulders of some of the crowd and called for the soldiers to be disarmed. According to Crawshay, who later wrote in defence of his role in the Rising, the front ranks of the crowd surged forward and:

'The most terrific fight ensued...the soldiers were nearly overcome; the major and many men were wounded and knocked down by bludgeons, and stabbed by the bayonets taken from them' (*The Late Riots at Merthyr*, 1831).

The soldiers in the windows of the Inn then **opened fire on the crowd**, killing three of the crowd instantly and after fifteen minutes of further intensive fighting, the crowd were eventually dispersed. 16 soldiers were wounded and up to **24** of the crowd were killed, although since many bodies were taken away and buried in secret, the actual number is unknown.

The next day saw the Swansea Yeomanry arriving from Neath ambushed and their arms taken from them. It now seemed as if the crowd had complete control. However, near the gates of Cyfarthfa Castle, the crowd met with another deputation of protestors, but whatever the



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

content of the discussions the march now started to break up. It may have been that the increasing military presence and a lack of common objectives contributed to this event – **the protestors could not agree on their aims**. Although there were further sporadic incidents, this was the turning point in the Rising.

By 6 June, a crowd ranging from 12,000-20,000 were on their way to Merthyr meeting the Merthyr protestors at Waun. The authorities now decided to take decisive action. Troops were sent, the Riot Act read and the **soldiers levelled their muskets**. The crowd panicked, gave way and the leaders of the rising now fled. Panic spread throughout Merthyr as the authorities raided houses and arrested 18 leaders, including Lewis Lewis who was eventually caught in a wood near Hirwaun. They were sent to Cardiff prison to await trial. The reaction of the authorities would prove however, that protest would not be tolerated and that an example would be made in order to deter others.

[A depiction of the Merthyr protestors bathing one of their flags in a calf's blood]



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The growth of Chartism

How and why did Chartism develop?

The reasons for the rise of Chartism

Chartism, a natural development of Radicalism, was one of the **first mass working class** movements in history. The principal reason for the formation of the Chartist movement was undoubtedly widespread **disappointment** and even **anger** at the **1832 Reform Act** that had given the vote to certain elements of the middle class but not to all. Of even greater importance was that the Act had not enfranchised the working class at all. As a result of this many people **demanding further reform** of the parliamentary system to ensure greater representation.

Several other factors combined with this dissatisfaction. **Living and working conditions** for the working classes were in general, still desperate and demands for improvements were becoming more widespread. The introduction of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834, which brought about the dreaded **workhouse** system, rallied many elements of society in opposition to it. The **influence of newspapers** which favoured further reform, kept the issue at the forefront of public debate which when combined with the Government's **attitude towards the working classes** and trade unionism, epitomised in the treatment of the **Tolpuddle Martyrs**, served to provide fertile ground for continued discontent.

The influence of Radicalism had never really gone away, despite measures such as the Six



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

Acts in 1819 and the waning of its appeal during the economic recovery of the 1820s. During the 1830s groups were formed that demanded further reform of parliament, for example the **London Working Men's Association**, led by William Lovett, Francis Place and six Radical Members of Parliament. The **Birmingham Political Union** also became prominent in calls for further reform. In 1837 the London Working Men's Association drew up a list of demands to Parliament that formed the basis of the **People's Charter**. In May 1838, the Charter was published, clearly showing the continuing influence of the Radical movement. Its demands were:

1. A vote for every man at twenty-one years of age.
2. A secret ballot to protect the elector.
3. No property qualifications for MPs so that a constituency could elect a man of their choice, rich or poor.
4. Payment of MPs so that ordinary working men could afford to represent their constituency.
5. Equal constituencies securing the same amount of representation for the same number of electors.
6. Annual parliaments which it was believed would prevent bribery and corruption during the election process as well as making MPs more accountable.

The roles of Lovett and O'Connor; physical and moral force Chartism; the Convention and the Petitions

Two of the most prominent Chartist leaders were **William Lovett** and **Feargus O'Connor**. Lovett was the secretary of the London Working Men's Association and possibly the author of the People's Charter. He was firmly opposed to the use of violence as a means of obtaining their aims. His firm belief was that Chartism would be achieved through **peaceful means**, such as petitions and education.

O'Connor joined the Chartists in 1836. An Irish landowner and former Member of Parliament, he eventually assumed the role of National Leader. In 1837 he bought a newspaper ***The Northern Star*** in Leeds and used it to spread his ideas of Chartism. However, opposed to Lovett he believed in attaining the Charter by whatever means possible, including the use of **direct physical action**. His reputation for single-mindedness led to him arguing with other prominent Chartist figures, including Lovett, who disliked his arrogant attitude. Such disagreements would be an important factor in the eventual demise of the movement.

The differences between Lovett and O'Connor were mirrored across the Chartist movement, especially in terms of how the demands would be achieved. As a result, Chartism quickly became identified as having two main strands – **physical force** and **moral force Chartism**. Physical force Chartists, led by O'Connor, advocated the use of a general strike if their demands were not met, which could lead to an armed uprising should resistance continue. Moral force Chartists, led by Lovett, advocated the use of petitions, meetings, newspapers, pamphlets

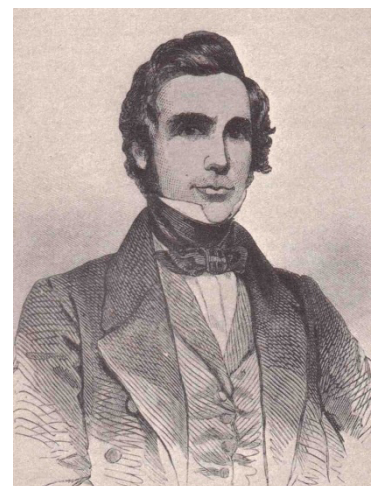


1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

and education to persuade the Government to accept the Charter. The divisions however, weakened the Chartist movement. Physical force Chartists were branded as being dangerous by the authorities and provided them with an excuse for the use of the military to deal with such protests. Moral force Chartism was inherently weak due to the fact that lacking influence it could simply be ignored.

In 1838, the various Chartist groups around the country met in Birmingham and agreed upon the six points, also deciding to collect signatures for a **national petition** which would be presented to **Parliament**. They also agreed to hold a **National Chartist Convention** in London in February 1839 to decide on the movement's future strategy. However, during the Convention the differing views proved insurmountable and at the end of the debates Lovett and the 'moral force' Chartists walked out due to the suggestion of violent tactics being adopted by the 'physical force' Chartists. The Government, alarmed at such developments put the military on alert.

[Portrait of William Lovett]



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In July 1839 the **First Chartist petition** was presented to Parliament by the MPs Thomas Attwood and John Fielden, with it was claimed approximately 1,280,000 signatures. Inevitably however, the **House of Commons rejected** it by a vote of 235 to 46. There were some disturbances around the country which were quickly dealt with, but the Government took no chances arresting and imprisoning over 500 Chartists including Lovett and O'Connor.

The failure of the petition was inevitable, but it didn't prevent the Chartists reorganising and attempting a **Second Petition in 1842**, at a time when the economic situation had deteriorated. Once again, this time by 287 to 49, MPs refused to consider the issue. The rejection of the petition and the depression led to strikes breaking out across the country, also known as the **Plug Plot**, where strikers removed the plugs from steam-engines to prevent them functioning. However, by September the strikes had petered out, due to a lack of leadership and the use of force and strong punishments by the Government.

[The Second Chartist Petition being taken to Parliament, 1842]



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The rejection of the petition and a recovery in the economy after 1842 saw Chartism much diminished as a political force. As was nearly always the case however, a downturn in economic circumstances led to a **revival of the Chartist** movement in 1847-8. The still active Feargus O'Connor organised another petition



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

and a mass public meeting to be held at **Kennington Common**, London on 10 April 1848.

The Government took no chances and arranged for a large military and police force to be present, eventually outnumbering the 20,000 Chartists who turned up for the meeting. Passing without trouble, O'Connor delivered the petition to Parliament claiming it contained over five and half million signatures. However, upon examination it was found there were fewer than two million of which many were forgeries. The event marked the end of Chartism as a serious force for political change, but the impact it had during the ten or so years it was particularly active was undeniable.

Chartism in Wales: the march on Newport and events at Llanidloes, 1839

The 1832 Reform Act had, as in England, benefited the rising middle classes. The Merthyr ironmasters were an example of how the Act had enfranchised those with money or property. The lack of political power for the working people of Wales had contributed to the rise of Chartism, particularly in the new industrial areas of the country. However, Chartist groups were also established in rural areas. For example, in 1837 a **Working Men's Association** was set up in Carmarthen by Hugh Williams, a local solicitor.

However, it was in industrial areas that Chartism was most active. In the coal mining valleys of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire there were thirty-four Working Men's Associations by 1839. In Monmouthshire, the leading figure was **John Frost** of Newport. Frost was a Radical who had supported the Reform Bill and he was a leading member of the Newport Political Union. In 1836 he was elected Mayor of **Newport** and Justice of the Peace. However, the following year he was replaced as **Mayor** by his rival Thomas Phillips and as a result he became disillusioned with local politics as it was becoming heavily involved with Chartism and even acting as Newport's delegate to the Chartist National Convention in London.

Chartism quickly spread in the area, helped by the popular orator, **Henry Vincent**, who supported 'physical force' Chartism. Due to his activities Vincent was banned from Newport and the authorities now began to take counter-measures against Chartism. Meetings were banned, people armed and drilled to resist the Chartists and **Vincent** and three other prominent Newport Chartists were **arrested** in May 1839.

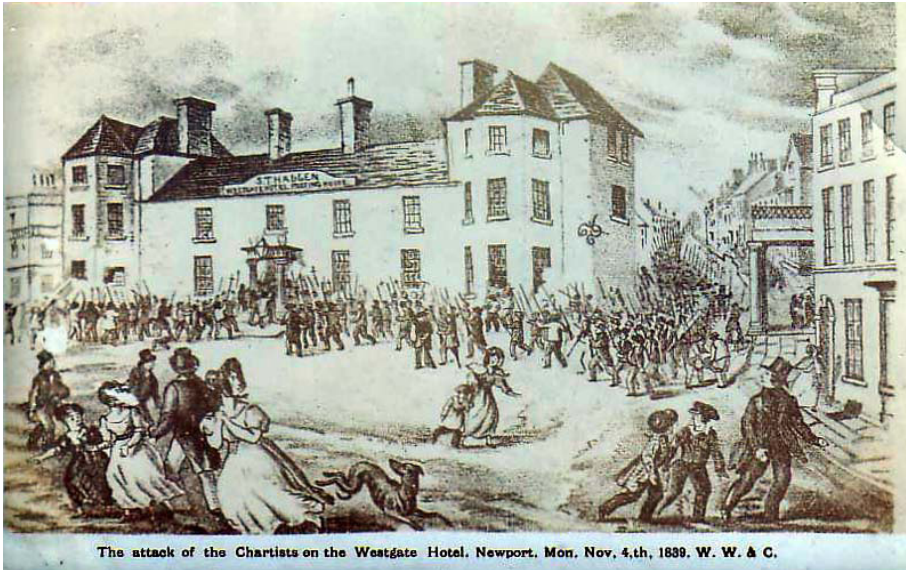
As a result of these arrests, 'physical force' Chartism gained more supporters in the area and on 20 May there was a great Chartist meeting at Blackwood where three leaders emerged – **John Frost, Zephaniah Williams and William Jones**. They started to organise into groups and began to store weapons, although Frost was later to claim he had been forced to take part. The aim was to march on Newport, which may have been part of a **larger British rising**. It has therefore been suggested by some historians that it was an attempt at a **national revolution**.

The **March on Newport** was planned for 4 November. Frost led from Blackwood, and gathering men and arms on the way, he reached Cefn. William Jones' group from Risca **did not arrive**, possibly having other plans. The men at Cefn were not at full strength, were soaked due to the appalling weather and had possibly been drinking, but they still decided to continue the



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

[The attack of the Chartists on the Westgate Hotel, Newport, 4 November 1839]



The attack of the Chartists on the Westgate Hotel, Newport, Mon. Nov. 4th, 1839. W. W. & C.

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march into Newport, their composition numbering **several thousand**.

However, the authorities had learned of these plans. Thomas Phillips, the Mayor and Frost's rival, had sworn in 500 special constables and had requested troops to be sent to Newport. On 3 November thirty soldiers were stationed at the **Westgate Hotel**. Chartist spies informed Frost of this and the march therefore made its way down **Stow Hill** into Newport towards the hotel.

As the Chartists tried to gain entry, the **soldiers fired on the crowd outside** and then on the Chartists who had managed to gain entry to the Hotel. In the resulting chaos of battle, **many Chartists were killed** – approximately twenty-two, although there was secrecy about the number killed. This was the highest number of casualties in any riot in Britain in the 19th and 20th centuries. Due to the overwhelming superiority of the soldiers' firepower, the rest of the **Chartists fled the scene** in disorder.

[The Chartist attack on the Westgate Hotel]



De Luan / Alamy Stock Photo

The immediate aftermath of the Rising saw the authorities pursue the leaders. Reward posters were put up, the **leaders arrested** and evidence collected. Sixty of the most important were sent to Monmouth for trial. The Chartist defence was that the march was just a show of strength to get Vincent pardoned. The prosecution claimed the Chartists were guilty of treason.

The main leaders were found guilty in January 1849 and posters of the sentences were issued to deter others. Frost, Williams and Jones were found guilty of high treason and sentenced to be **hung, drawn and quartered**. However, after a vigorous campaign to get the sentences reduced they were eventually **transported**. Only John Frost returned



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

to Wales, to a hero's welcome in 1856 after receiving a pardon.

The Newport Rising however, was not the only example of Chartist protest in Wales. **Mid-Wales** had seen the development of 'wool towns' in the early nineteenth century – Newtown, Welshpool and **Llanidloes**. Conditions in the woollen factories were harsh, as were living conditions and public health in general. These factors, combined with the new Poor Law of 1834 and general discontent, had led to the formation of **Chartist branches in mid-Wales**, the first being in Newtown in 1837.

One of the main leaders of Chartism in mid-Wales was **Thomas Powell**. Along with other prominent Chartists in mid-Wales he advocated 'moral force' Chartism as a means of achieving the People's Charter. However, Chartists such as **Henry Hetherington**, who travelled throughout mid-Wales in the spring and summer of 1839, urged audiences to follow 'physical force' Chartism and soon won over many supporters in the area.

However, the most prominent member of the authorities in the Llanidloes area was **T. E. Marsh**, a former Mayor of the town and leading magistrate. He decided that action needed to be taken against the Chartists in the area, asking for assistance from the Home Secretary, for which he received three policemen. Marsh was not to be deterred however, swearing in about 300 Special Constables, most of whom were probably tenants of his who had little choice in the matter.

By 29 April 1839 rumours were rife that Marsh was about to arrest local Chartist leaders. The next morning a meeting of Chartists was held at the **Long Bridge** in the town, where it was reported that the policemen had arrested Chartists who were being held at the **Trewythen Arms**. The crowd proceeded to the hotel only to find it protected by fifty of Marsh's Special Constables. This did not deter the protestors who stormed the building, releasing their fellow Chartists, beating the policemen and seriously damaging the interior of the Hotel.

[The Trewythen Arms, Llanidloes, scene of Chartist disturbances in April 1839]



Image courtesy of Llanidloes Museum. Owner of original photo unknown.

During the next few days, Llanidloes remained under the **control of the Chartists**. However, all was peaceful with Chartist patrols ensuring law and order was maintained. Marsh had now requested military assistance from the Home Secretary and **troops** eventually arrived in the town on 3 May, only to find little if any disorder. It seems however that Marsh was determined to be rid of Chartism in the town and thirty-two local Chartists were arrested, including Thomas Powell. Some of those arrested certainly had no



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

connection to what had happened in Llanidloes, which suggests that wider motives were at play.

However, despite the lack of evidence against many of the accused, all were found **guilty** and **harsh sentences** issued. Three Llanidloes men, Abraham Owen, Lewis Humphreys and James Morris were sentenced to **transportation**, with the remainder receiving prison sentences of varying terms. The sentences aroused much anger in mid-Wales with Marsh being a particular object of persecution for many years to follow. However, how much the protest had specifically to do with Chartist aims has been a matter of debate, although Chartism in the area remained active well into the 1850s.

Rural protest

What conditions led to rural protests in this period?

The causes of the Swing Riots

The advances of the Industrial Revolution had impacted upon rural economies in several ways. The Radical writer **William Cobbett** had commented upon the changes in the English countryside during a series of journeys he made around southern England during the 1820s, eventually published in the book **Rural Rides**. The observations he made were critical of the changes that had occurred – the new farming methods, the impact upon the labouring classes as well as the general deterioration in the villages he had ridden through, where cottages were falling down and land was running to waste. He was particularly scathing about the condition of the agricultural labourers, who were not experiencing the economic recovery of the 1820s, which had decreased the influence of Radicalism in many industrial areas.

Despite the fact that the **Corn Laws** had been passed to stabilise the price of corn, they failed to achieve this and during this period the price fell, resulting in a reduction of farmers' incomes and therefore a **cut in wages** for their labourers. Since wages in these rural areas were generally well below average, the majority of labourers were on **parish relief**, which due to the increasing cost had been **cut**. The poverty of the labouring classes had led to an increase in crime, particularly poaching, and as a result harsh punishments were given if trespassers were caught, which was especially the case after the **Game Laws** of 1816 which set the penalty for poaching at seven years' transportation.

Added to this was the burden of the **church tithe**, which by this period had in effect become an extra tax that was payable to the Church of England parson, often to pay his wages. The collecting of tithes was rigorously enforced and this financial demand was extremely unpopular amongst the labouring class.

There was also increasing **unemployment** in rural areas, with some farmers now using **machinery** to cut their costs, which made the position of the labourers even worse. It was the



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

increasing use of the **threshing machine** that was the last straw for the by now desperate labourers. Hand threshing had been a valuable source of employment during the summer months, but the introduction of the threshing machine, which inevitably caused unemployment, was viewed as another attack on a way of life that was facing extinction. The culmination of these factors would be the **Labourer's Revolt**, more commonly known as the **Swing Riots**.

The activities of the Swing rioters: destruction of property, threatening letters

On 28th August 1830, a threshing machine was destroyed at Lower Harde, near Canterbury in Kent. This was the first in what would be followed by nearly 1,500 incidents associated with what became known as the **Swing Riots**. The incidents were spread from Kent to Cornwall, from Hampshire to Lincolnshire, with some even further north and took the authorities by surprise. Named after a fictitious leader '**Captain Swing**', the tactics adopted by the rioters included the destruction of threshing machines, arson, extortion of food or money from the rich, rioting and the sending of threatening letters to landowners and clergy.

[Although published in 'Punch' in 1844, fourteen years after the Swing Riots, this cartoon titled 'The Home of the Rickburner', accurately sums up the desperate situation faced by agricultural labourers.]



"The Home of the Rick-Burner"
by John Leech, Punch,
1844, public domain.

[A contemporary drawing of an attack by Swing rioters]



Classic Image / Alamy Stock Photo

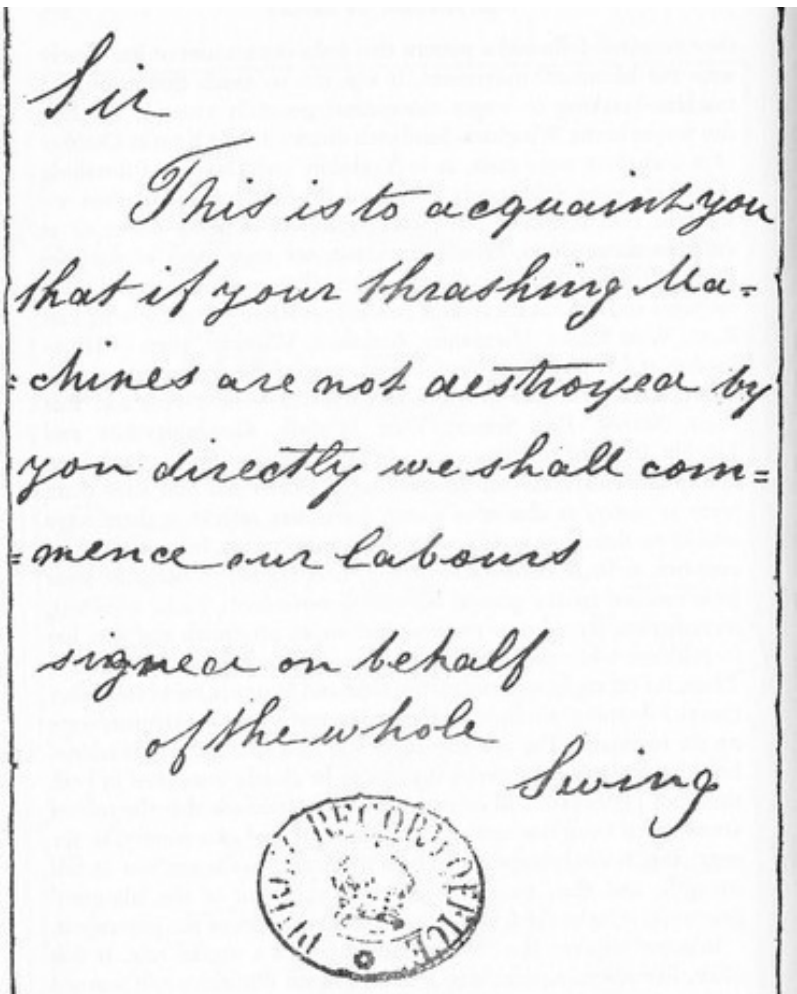


1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

The attacks were mainly undertaken by small gangs at night, with the majority being male farm labourers in their twenties and thirties. The anger of the rioters was principally directed against **threshing machines**, but arson attacks on hay ricks were also commonplace. The main focus of the rioters was on property – barns were targeted as were buildings that contained engines for the threshing machines. Occasionally **corn riots** took place, where fields of corn were sometimes burnt by the rioters. Corn was also stolen from warehouses and sold at a cheaper price to the poor.

The Swing Riots were also notable for the use of **threatening letters**, usually containing a warning to raise wages, stop the use of machinery, cut tithes or suffer the consequences. Signed by 'Captain Swing' or 'Swing' they brought fear to landowners and clergy who occasionally responded by acceding to the demands.

[An example of a threatening letter sent during the Swing Riots]



Sir

This is to acquaint you
that if your thrashing Ma-
chines are not destroyed by
you directly we shall com-
mence our labours

signed on behalf
of the whole Swing

RECORD OFFICE

Public Domain - <http://www.executedtoday.com/tag/swing-riots/>

The causes of the Rebecca Riots

The countryside of west Wales was in many respects removed from many of the improvements that had been brought by the Agricultural Revolution. Some farmers owned their own small farms – they were **freeholders**, but the majority were **leaseholders** who rented or leased their lands. By the 19th century, some of the leases were short term – only for a year, which resulted in a lack of stability for farmers. **Rack-renting**, or the loss of land to someone paying a higher rent, was becoming increasingly common.

Tensions between tenants and their landlords were exacerbated by their vastly differing lifestyles. The **landowners** exerted both social and political power over west Wales, tending to be an MP for their area and or a Justice of the Peace, with responsibility for law and order, rates and poor relief. Their luxurious lifestyles contrasted greatly with the poverty of their tenants. Many were **absentee**, living in London, which made them even more out of touch with the many problems of their tenants.

Religious and linguistic differences further served to alienate tenants from their landlords. Whilst the overwhelming majority of tenant farmers spoke only Welsh, their landlords spoke



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

[Dynevor Castle in Carmarthenshire, seat of the Rice Family]



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only English. Similarly, tenant farmers tended to be **Non-Conformist** in belief, attending chapel, whereas the gentry were **Anglican**, belonging to the Church of England. This became an important factor in causing the Rebecca Riots since tenants had to pay rent and pay **tithes**, which were one-tenth of a person's produce that had to be given to the Church. By the nineteenth century, many of the rights to these tithes had been bought by landowners and after the **1836 Tithe Commutation Act**, these were payable in cash – clearly an extra burden on the already poor. The strength of Non-Conformity in west Wales meant that the chapels and Sunday schools held considerable influence. In criticizing the Church of England and the landlords who supported it, many preached upon **Genesis 24 verse 60**:

'And they blessed Rebekah and said unto her, let thy seed possess the gates of those which hate them.'

The influence of such preaching and religious fanaticism would manifest itself in the activities of the Rebecca rioters.

The poverty that people often found themselves in had, up to 1834, seen them receive **poor relief** – a system of support that dated from Tudor times. The system was becoming increasingly unaffordable however and in that year the **Poor Law Amendment Act** saw the introduction of



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

the **workhouse** as a replacement for financial support. These were dreadful places and soon became a strong focus of resentment, which further served to stir discontent in west Wales.

There had been a tradition of protest before 1839. One such example was that of **ceffyl pren** or wooden horse, where an unpopular person, or effigy of the person was carried on a wooden pole to humiliate them and a mock trial then held. This type of local justice, where people would blacken their faces during the proceedings, had some of the ideas of the later Rebecca Riots. The lack of a police force to deal with such incidents, the only authority emanating from sworn-in Special Constables, ensured that such forms of protest and justice often went unchecked.

These long-term agricultural, tenancy and cultural issues were compounded by the tenant farmers' need for **lime** as a fertilizer which served to reduce the acidity of the soil. Whilst there were many lime quarries on the edge of the south Wales coalfields, for many farmers in west Wales these were a comparatively long distance away and travel there was slow, over **very poor roads**. Travel to these quarries would be via **turnpike roads**. It would be the abuses prevalent in the turnpike system that would spark the Rebecca Riots.

Turnpike Trusts had been established in the late 18th century, where groups of businessmen bought up areas of land, repaired or built roads and charged **tolls** for travellers to use them. However, by the 1830s in west Wales a major problem was the number of trusts and therefore gates in the area where travellers had to stop and pay. At first lime was exempt from charge, but since people used to cover other goods with it, tolls were imposed which were strongly objected to by poor tenant farmers. In addition to this, **toll farmers** were employed, the most notorious in the area being **Thomas Bullin**, who was active in erecting new gates and ensuring payment compliance. Although it seems as if the turnpike roads and their charges were the main reason for the Rebecca Riots, as can be seen from the combination of factors described, they were really just the **last straw** – yet another imposition on the poor to profit the rich.

The activities of the Rebecca Rioters: threats, attacks on tollgates and workhouses

1838 into 1839 witnessed considerable hardship in west Wales due to a hard winter and a poor harvest. At the same time, toll-collecting in the Whitland area was given to Thomas Bullin, who immediately increased charges and set up new gates – four of which were near the village of **Efailwen**, near St Clears. This appears to have been the prompt for the first Rebecca attack which took place on **13 May 1839** during which the new gates and a tollhouse were destroyed. However, this event, whilst causing a great deal of local interest, appeared to be an isolated incident as there were to be no more disturbances for three years.

Protest was to revive however in the early 1840s due to a series of harsh winters and subsequent poor harvests. In **October 1842**, the Main Turnpike Trust erected four new gates on its roads, an act which led to Rebecca and her supporters reappearing to destroy the gates at Pwll Trap and Mermaid near St Clears. The reaction of the authorities to the attacks were restricted by a lack of resources. Requesting help from the Government, all the local authorities received were two Metropolitan Policemen, so they were forced to enrol more Special Constables who, along



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

[A letter dated 16 December 1842, from 'Becca & children' threatening action against those associated with 'Bowlin (Bullin) and company']

Take Notice

I wish to give you notice especial to those which has sworn to be constable in order to grasp Rebecca and her children but I can sure you that it will be to hard matter for Bowlin and company to finish the job that they began and that is to keep up the gate at Stangege and wine fact set

Now take this few lines as information for you to mind yourselves, you that had any connection with the Bowlin Mr. Mc. Lees, Mr. Thomas Blue Boar, all three property in one night shall be in conflagration if they will not obey to this notice. and that to send them vagabonds away with you are favourable to, I always like to be plain in all my engagement - is it a reasonable thing that they in pose so much on the country only picking poor labourers and farmers pockets, and you defend that all the Gates that are on these small roads shall be destroyed, I am willing for the gates on the Cerron Road to stand it is shameful nothing for us welshmen to have the one of Hinequist have a dominion over us, do you not remember the long knives which Hinequist hath invented to kill our fore fathers and you may depend that you shall receive the same, if you will not give up, when I shall give you a visit and that shall be in a short time and now I would give an order to leave the place before I will come, for, I do determine that I will have my way all through, As for the constable and the Grapshoppers which fly in the summer no more of them than the Grapshoppers which fly in the summer there are others which as marked with Becca, but they shall not be named now but in case they will not obey to this notice she shall call about them in a short time.

Town Marstonisth } Faithful to Death
Dec 16 1842 } with the county
Becca & children

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with local landowners and clergy became the target of another Rebecca attack – that of sending **threatening letters**.

January and February 1843 saw gates attacked at Trevaughan, Kidwelly and all over west Wales. The first attack at Carmarthen was on 26 May and action now became more **violent**, spreading to attacking property of those against Rebecca. Guns were used on 16 June when Special Constables were fired on near Carmarthen and as a result of this the Government finally sent in troops, the 4th Light Dragoons from Cardiff.

The destruction of the toll gates would take place at night, with one man taking the role of 'Mother Rebecca' and the rest her 'daughters'. After a brief ceremony derived from the aforementioned passage in the Bible, the gates would be destroyed. However, as 1843 went on, Rebecca's scope widened, the most prominent example being the attack on the **Carmarthen workhouse**.

On 19 June 2,000 Rebecca supporters marched into Carmarthen with the intention of presenting their grievances to JPs at the Guildhall. However, the focal point of resentment in the town, the **workhouse**, soon became the target of attack. The protestors got inside, caused damage and were apparently about to burn the building when the soldiers arrived, taking sixty prisoners.

The seriousness of this incident was not lost upon the authorities.

However, more gates were attacked at Carmarthen and threatening letters were sent to clergy

[The Rebecca Rioters, as depicted in the Illustrated London News, 1843]



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1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

who forced Non-Conformists to give money to the Church. Despite the heavy troop presence, activity became more violent with the targets spreading. Workhouses in general were threatened along with clergy and the gentry. Rebecca also attacked **salmon weirs**, as landowners used them to dam rivers to get good salmon fishing on their estates, which upset people further up the river. The landowners' response was to sack labourers.

However, by mid 1843, the increasing violence of the riots had begun to make many Rebecca supporters disaffected. The *Times* journalist, **Thomas Campbell Foster**, whose accounts form a valuable record of events during this time, noted that many farmers had started to change their tactics, wanting to establish a Farmers' Union and hold mass meetings. The largest one of these meetings was held at **Mynydd Sylen**, near Llanelli, where more moderate tactics were advocated.

However, despite this, others preferred to carry on with their violent activities, some of whom had little connection with Rebecca but were using the protest as a means of extorting money or merely causing trouble. Two of the most notorious were men not connected with the area – **John Jones**, known as Shoni Sgubor Fawr and **David Davies**, known as Dai'r Cantwr. On 6 September a group of over 100 Rebeccaite attacked the gate at Pontarddulais, which resulted in several arrests. Within two days the only fatality during the protests occurred at the **Hendy** gate, when the 75 year old toll keeper **Sarah Williams** was shot during the destruction of the gate. Three weeks later, with large sums of money offered for information leading to their arrest, Shoni and Dai were captured. This and the reaction of the authorities both in terms of the increase in military force in west Wales and a willingness to look into the farmers' grievances, saw the Rebecca movement peter out and the protests come to an end, although isolated outbreaks took place into 1844.

Impact of industrial and rural protest

What were the results of the industrial and rural protests after 1830?

The results of the Merthyr Rising: the execution of Dic Penderyn; abolition of the truck system, parliamentary representation

Industrial and rural protest had a considerable impact during the period after 1830. The **Merthyr Rising** of 1831, as has been discussed, was one of the most significant episodes of working class action witnessed. The results of the Rising would have both short and long-term effects. The Rising undoubtedly shocked the Government, particularly the Home Secretary **Lord Melbourne**, who believed that the Colliers Union were behind the Rising. The issue was debated in the House of Commons and efforts made to apportion the blame. William Crawshay was blamed in some quarters, such as by *The Observer* newspaper, who accused him of stoking up Radicalism in the town and then cutting wages and sacking workers. Overall though, it seemed clear that the **authorities were determined to punish the leaders to show that dissent and violence would not be tolerated.**



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

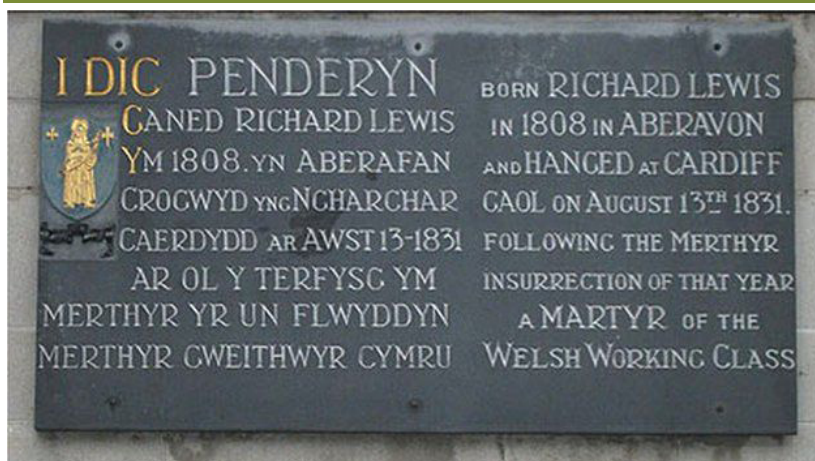
The trial of those accused of involvement in the Rising commenced on 13 July 1831, with twenty-eight men and women charged for house raids and seizing weapons. Several were transported for life, with some given hard labour or acquitted. However, the sentences given to **Lewis Lewis** and **Richard Lewis**, known as **Dic Penderyn** attracted the most attention. Lewis Lewis, already found guilty for an attack on a Thomas Lewis' house and sentenced to death, was also charged along with Richard Lewis for attacking and wounding a Highlander soldier **Donald Black**, with a bayonet, intending to kill.

Donald Black said he did not know who had done it in the confusion outside the Castle Inn. Indeed only two witnesses identified Richard Lewis, both Special Constables. One of them, **James Abbott**, had a grudge against Richard Lewis – they had apparently had a fight in the days before the Rising over the issue of reform. The outcome of the trial was that Lewis Lewis was found not guilty of the attack, but **Richard Lewis guilty** – the judgement being that of **sentenced to death**.

After the trial petitions for mercy were sent and evidence collected on both sides. This resulted in the delay of the execution. Lewis Lewis' sentence was changed to that of transportation, but Lord Melbourne was determined that an **example** be made of Richard Lewis. Therefore on 13 August, Richard Lewis, or **Dic Penderyn**, was **executed in Cardiff**.

The execution and martyrdom of Dic Penderyn was one of several consequences the Rising had for Merthyr. In the immediate aftermath the ironmasters led by Josiah John Guest decided to **stamp out the unions**. Workers at Dowlais and Plymouth were told to give up the Union or lose their jobs. Those who refused were 'locked out' of work and after a few months they were starving and poor and were forced to return to work. This was another **victory for the ironmasters**.

[A commemoration plaque for Dic Penderyn at Merthyr Library]



A commemoration plaque for Dic Penderyn at Merthyr Library.

representative in Parliament. However, the election for the new seat, in which about five hundred were eligible to vote, resulted in an unopposed triumph for the Dowlais ironmaster, **Josiah John Guest**. It therefore seemed that the workers' action had brought little success as the ironmasters now had industrial and political power.

Although not directly a consequence of the Rising, the truck system was a source of concern for the Government. As a result of the abuses that were prevalent in **1831** the **Truck Act** made the practice of paying workers in tokens that could only be used at company shops **illegal**. In this respect the workers of Merthyr did gain a positive result. The parliamentary reform crisis that resulted in the passing of the Reform Act in 1832 also gave Merthyr its **first**



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

However, it could be said that in the longer term the Welsh workers realized that they were a class who needed to work together to improve their lives. Indeed it has been suggested that the Merthyr Rising witnessed the **'birth of the Welsh working class'**. As such the Rising has gone down in Welsh History as an important part of working class history, development and tradition.

Reasons for the failure of the Chartist movement

Despite being the largest political movement of the period, the Chartist movement was **unsuccessful at the time** and achieved very little. This was due to several factors which were of varying significance. The **disagreements** between its leaders and the split between **'moral' and 'physical force'** Chartism inevitably weakened the movement. The lack of common objectives that resulted from this further contributed to the discontent in the movement. The use of **violence** by the 'physical force' wing of Chartism **alienated the middle classes** who had originally supported the movement. Events such as the Newport Rising and the resulting **negative press** they received only served to damage the reputation of the movement. Some publications such as *Punch* ridiculed Chartism and these served to influence public opinion.

Chartism also suffered from a **lack of funds** with which to undertake an effective nationwide campaign. The drift of the middle classes away from the movement had diminished the possibility for it to spread its appeal. It was inevitable that during a period when **communication** was still relatively slow, despite the development of the telegraph and railway system, that the organisation would remain fragmented and unable to effectively communicate a national message.

There can be little doubt however that the main reason for the failure of the Chartist movement was the **radical nature of its demands**, which attitudes of the time were simply **not ready to accept**. The governments of the time were never likely to agree to the demands of the Charter. To do so would have inevitably resulted in the landed classes losing their power and influence. In this respect, Chartism was ahead of its time.

The Government also had at its disposal of course, the **tools of power**, such as troops, the legal system, special constables and police. Chartist leaders and supporters were arrested with short sentences serving the purposes of

[A satirical cartoon published in 'Punch' in 1848. It pokes fun at Chartism, claiming to show 'A Physical Force Chartist Arming for the Fight']



A PHYSICAL FORCE CHARTIST ARMING FOR THE FIGHT.

. One Chiff, a shrewdster, was accused, with others, for treacherous practices, and after trial was transported.

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1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

removing momentum from the movement. **Prison sentences** usually resulted in poverty for the prisoner's families which served to discourage others. As was always the case, a general **upturn in the economy** in the late 1840s diminished its support, as did some moves towards improvements in working conditions such as the 1847 Factory Act.

There can be no doubt however, that Chartism did make an important contribution to the progress of reform. The Government was forced to respond to the demands of the people and in the longer term all the points of the People's Charter were met, apart for the demand for annual elections. This may of course have been a natural development, but its impact was undeniable.

Government reaction to rural protests: arrests, transportation, and legislation including the Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834, and the Turnpike Act, 1844

The initial reaction of the authorities to the outbreak of the **Swing Riots** was one of relative apathy since it was believed that the disturbances would soon end. As such the sentences given to those caught were relatively light. However, by late autumn 1830, the scale of attacks increased, as did the fear of landowners who were obviously influential in Parliament. The landowning classes of England felt severely threatened by the riots and responded with harsh, **punitive measures**.

The new Whig Government which came to power in November 1830 began to realise the seriousness of the situation. Lord Melbourne, the Home Secretary, instructed magistrates to enrol more **special constables** and throughout the southern counties hundreds were **arrested** and charged. The offering of rewards was a method of trying to get people to inform on the rioters, but local loyalties often made the offers worthless. However, the offer of £50 for each person caught and convicted of destroying machines was substantial, but nowhere near the £500 offered for the conviction of arsonists. Posters therefore became the main method of communicating with communities affected by the Swing Riots.

The Government were determined to crush the riots and the reason was clear – the attacks were mainly on the property of rich landowners, many of whom were MPs. As a result of the **Swing Riots** 1,976 prisoners were tried, which easily made it the protest movement that suffered the harshest consequences during this period. Out of the 1,976 people who were accused, 800 were acquitted, **505 were transported** to Australia, 644 were imprisoned, 7 were fined and 1 was whipped. More importantly however, there were **19 executions**, although 252 had originally been sentenced to death. The sentences of

[A poster issued to the 'peasantry' of Gloucester during the Swing Riots, warning them of the consequences of their actions, 1830]

To the Peasantry OF THE COUNTY OF GLOUCESTER.

The Government has required the Magistrates to take immediate measures for putting an end to the disorderly meetings now existing in open defiance of the Laws.

The Magistrates have called upon all well affected Persons to aid them in organizing a vigorous resistance to the disturbers of the public peace.

A Force is thus collecting, against which it will be impossible for you to contend.

We are most anxious to prevent the exercise of it.

We assure you, there is every disposition on the part of the Landowners and their Tenantry to listen to your grievances, and to afford all just and reasonable redress. But, it is impossible for those who are interested with the maintenance of peace and order, to enter on the consideration of your grievances, while they are made known to them only by disorder, and acts of violence.

For your own sakes, therefore, we implore you to return quietly to your work, to enable us to call a Meeting of your Masters and their Landlords, to take your condition into their consideration, which we pledge ourselves to do, as soon as your return to good order, will justify our interference on your behalf.

SHERBORNE.
APSLEY.
JAMES DUTTON.
J. RAYMOND BARKER.
J. TREVOR.

JOHN BROWN.
H. E. WALLER.
I. B. NEWELL.
JOSEPH CRIPPS.

EDWARD CRIPPS.
CORNELIUS PITT.
WILLIAM PRICE.
WILLIAM LAWRENCE.

WILLIAM FOWLER, PRINTER, CIRENCESTER.

Poster issued to the 'peasantry' of Gloucester, 1830, from the Gloucestershire Archives.



1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

execution and transportation showed how harshly the Government were determined to deal with the riots.

The problems of poverty in the countryside had contributed to increasing calls to review the system of poor relief that had been in force since the Elizabethan Age. The Swing Riots had made the need for change more pressing. As a result in 1832 a **Royal Commission** was set up to look into how to improve the Poor Law and reduce its crippling costs. The result of the Commission was the **Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834**.

The Act was designed to solve the problems caused by the increasing costs of poor relief and the strain placed on it by a growing population. It was intended to be a uniform system with less eligibility. The crux of the new system revolved around the **workhouse**. Parishes were grouped into unions and every union had to build or adapt an existing workhouse into which the poor would go. **Conditions** in the workhouses were **deliberately harsh**, with families split and all living under strict discipline and work conditions. Combined with a poor diet for those unfortunate enough to have to enter them, the workhouses were meant to be a deterrent, a spur for the poor to find work.

As a result they undoubtedly became a focal point of resentment for the poor, exemplified by the attack on the Carmarthen workhouse during the Rebecca Riots. The Rebecca Riots however, despite the fact that the workhouse system remained, did achieve some success in terms of legislation. One of the main grievances in west Wales had been the abuses prevalent in the turnpike road system. As a direct result of the activities of the Rebecca rioters, the Government began to look into their grievances – a key factor in the relatively swift ending of the protests.

A full **Commission of Enquiry** was set up in October 1843 under the chairmanship of a local landowner **Thomas Frankland Lewis**. Evidence was collected and the report published in March 1844. Despite his position as a landowner, Frankland Lewis proved to be unbiased in his report, highlighting the main causes of the riots. He concluded that the **price of tolls and the mismanagement of funds** had been an important factor, among several others such as the

[An anti-Poor Law poster, produced in 1837]



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1B. Radicalism and Protest, 1810-1848

payment of tithes, the workhouse system, ignorance of the Welsh language and poor harvests that increased the poverty already prevalent in west Wales.

The report recommended several reforms to the turnpike trust system that were accepted by the Government. The result was the passing of the **Turnpike Act** in August 1844. As a result tolls were reduced, the number of gates were cut, the toll on lime was more than halved and Road Boards were set up to check on the management of turnpike trusts. Unusually, the Chairman of the Enquiry gave the **rioters credit**, recognizing that they had taken the only course of action open to them.

However, despite the reform of the turnpike trusts, the basic problem of **rural poverty** remained, as did those of the workhouses, payment of tithes, increasing mechanization and land hunger. Similarly, in the **urban areas** conditions for the working class remained poor and life was a daily struggle. The period 1810-1848 had brought considerable upheaval, accompanied by widespread protest, but the huge **inequalities in society** remained and successive governments only **gradually accepted change**.