

August-19



Dear Club Members,

Two hundred years ago, on Monday 16th August a massacre occurred at St Peter's Field Manchester. It was a notable event because it was the start of the process of the British working classes gaining the vote, and also due to the horrifying number of deaths and injuries. A crowd of 60,000-80,000 had gathered from many areas surrounding Manchester. They gathered to protest about the lack of representation for the new city of Manchester, which had a booming population due to the Industrial Revolution and the rising number of the cotton mills. The whole of Lancashire was represented by just 2 members of Parliament, and only men who owned land with a rental income of 40 Shillings a year could cast their vote, in person, in Lancaster. One million people were represented by just 4 people in the area of Manchester. At the time there were 515 MPs for England and Wales, of these, 351 were returned by the patronage of 177 individual voters and a further 16 by the direct patronage of the government: all 45 Scottish MPs owed their seats to patronage. Added to this discontent about political representation, was an economic recession which came about at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Textile workers were earning 3 times less in 1818 as they were in 1803. The Corn Laws led to a shortage of food in the country, causing rising prices, leading to famine.

Members of the Manchester Patriotic Union, a group of radicals from the Manchester Observer newspaper organised a "great assembly" in the month of August. The founder of the newspaper, Joseph Johnson wrote to the famous political orator Henry Hunt inviting him to address a political rally. The letter included this line-
"Nothing but ruin and starvation stare one in the face [in the streets of Manchester and the surrounding towns], the state of this district is truly dreadful, and I believe nothing but the greatest exertions can prevent an insurrection. Oh, that you in London were prepared for "
However, their communications were being read by government spies, and the 15th Hussars army cavalry regiment were sent Manchester in preparation for the rally.

Johnson and Hunt were determined that the rally would not fall victim to the popular opinions against giving the working poor a political vote. Namely that they were ragged, dirty and rowdy. The groups that marched in to St Peter's field had been told to dress in their Sunday best, and many had drilled and reversed before the gathering. Peterloo was unusual due to the number of female protestors, many of who wore white to show their purity.

When all the protestors had assembled they were in an area roughly as large as 45 tennis courts, with narrow access points, many of which were blocked by the cavalry soldiers. The local magistrates issued a warrant for the arrest of Henry Hunt, Joseph Johnson, and other organisers. Due to the crowds it was decided that the military would need to be present to allow the arrest to be carried out. The cavalry officers were sent charging through the packed crowds, on horseback, with drawn swords and caused a general panic. The main exit route was also blocked by the 88th Regiment of Foot, who had formed up with drawn bayonets.

It became a massacre. With inexperienced soldiers (who were possibly drunk) panicking, and frightened crowds unable to escape. The number of deaths and injuries, has never been established with certainty, but it's suggested that 11-15 were killed and 400-700 injured. The women in the crowd were significantly more likely to be injured. Only 12% of the crowd were female, but 168 of the 654 officially recorded casualties were women.

The general public were horrified by the massacre, and many commemorative items went on sale, with the proceeds going to the victims. Press coverage of the event was unusually thorough, many journalists from further afield than Manchester had been present, and reports were in many national newspapers. Many of the organisers were jailed, and the commanding officers were acquitted of all charges as the gathering was judged to have been illegal. The immediate response of the government was to introduce legislation reducing civil liberties, the Manchester Observer was shut down, and by the end of 1820 every significant working-class radical reformer was in jail.

In 1832 the Great Reform Act created the Manchester parliamentary borough, and the area elected its first two MPs. One of the candidates was the great reform campaigner William Cobbett. The name Peterloo stemmed from the battle of Waterloo, which had happened just 4 years earlier.

Until now the only commemoration of the massacre was a small blue plaque on a building in the city near to the site of St Peter's field. Earlier this month a new memorial was unveiled. The design is beautiful, but inaccessible by anyone who has mobility issues. It is ironic that a memorial to a campaign for democracy and inclusion should suffer from limited democratic participation and leave some people feeling excluded.

For my colour inspiration today I've used a popular image from the time, that would have been seen by many as they read about Peterloo. It features the blue jacketed cavalry officers charging through the crowds, cutting down the women dressed in white.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Further Reading-

Wikipedia Page on Peterloo

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peterloo_Massacre#cite_note-FOOTNOTEBush200531-69

Commemorative Article in the modern Manchester Evening News, the top picture is the one I've used for colour inspiration-

<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/peterloo-massacre-matters-manchester-13499354>

Henry Hunt-

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Hunt_\(politician\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Hunt_(politician))

Criticism of the inaccessible Peterloo memorial-

<https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/disabled-campaigners-complain-peterloo-memorial-16347868>

Artists commemoration of the anniversary-

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jun/15/peterloo-emily-howard-michael-symmons-roberts-mif>

William Cobbett-

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Cobbett

BBC Radio documentary (should also be accessible outside the UK-

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00076tg>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3csz56x>

People's History Museum in Manchester has a free exhibition focusing on Peterloo, on until 23th February 2020

<https://phm.org.uk/exhibitions/disrupt-peterloo-and-protest/>

If you can't make it then the page above links to lots of further reading on many of the aspects of Peterloo

The events were also made in to a film, called Peterloo it's available on Netflix in the UK.

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