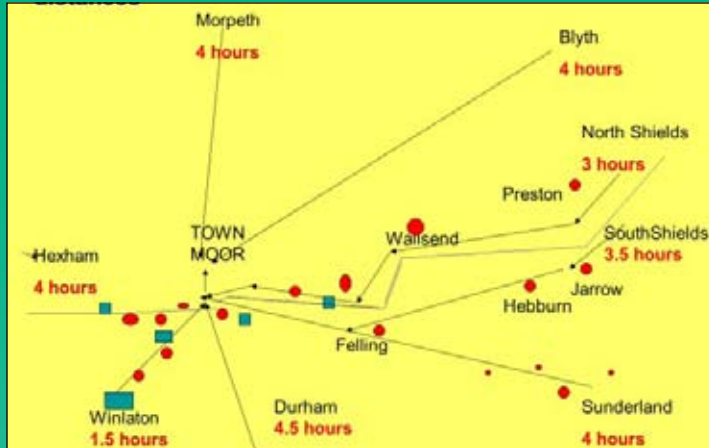


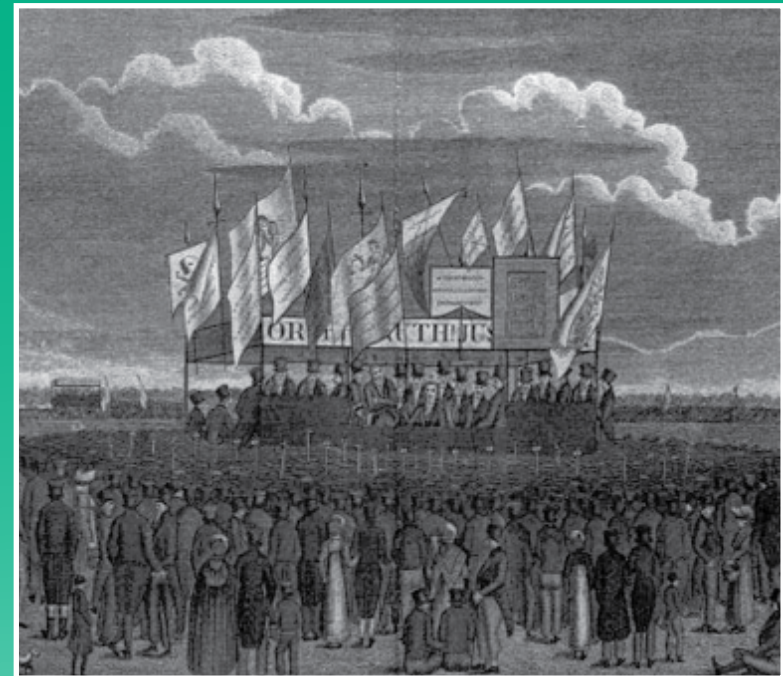
The Wind from Peterloo

1819 – Newcastle’s great reform demonstration

Marching Distances



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On 11th October 1819 tens of thousands of people poured on to Newcastle Town Moor to register their anger at the recent event in Manchester, the Peterloo Massacre, where unarmed demonstrators had been cut down by the sabre-slashing Yeomanry. In its size the Newcastle gathering may rate, even today, as the biggest political event in the north east region’s history, yet it is little known. This booklet seeks to examine the background and piece together the story of the happenings and their aftermath.

Who are the real conspirators?

Summer 1815 marked the end of over twenty years of war with France. The demobilisation of soldiers and sailors, the ending of government war contracts and poor harvests brought wide-scale unemployment and desperate food shortages. The Tyne and Wear areas were sharply affected and in September the seamen went on strike, closed both rivers and interrupted the coal trade.² They displayed tenacity and solidarity, had a strong organisation, picketed efficiently and were financially supported by riverside workers and miners, while the belligerent ship owners were generally, if sometimes equivocally, backed by local and state authorities.

Strikers are always open to the charge that outsiders are stirring up trouble in a normally compliant work force. The Seaman’s Chronicle was largely a statement of the seamen’s case and strongly refuted the attacks in the Mitchells’ *Tyne Mercury*, a reputedly radical paper which might have been expected to have supported them. The *Chronicle* contained no political remarks – perhaps to avoid disunity and gain public support. The strikers stayed out until late October and achieved a raise in pay, but failed to win the higher manning levels they wanted to counter the high levels of unemployment.³ Those suspected of being strike leaders were arraigned at the Northern Assizes in 1816.

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John McPherson, alias John Grant alias John Reed, was said to be a Scots troublemaker who had been active in previous conflicts, yet he was believed to have recently returned to the area. None of the men's depositions raised political issues.⁴ The seamen appear to have maintained their organisation and struck at least three times more in the next five years.

As the strike was drawing to a close one of the best known English radicals, the veteran Major John Cartwright, visited the north east. He stayed with the ironmaster, lawyer and radical Whig, James Losh, in Jesmond, a suburb of Newcastle.⁵ Cartwright was attempting to draw together radical groups across Britain in order to resume agitation for a reform of Parliament. The Newcastle radicals – mainly middle class businessmen, writers and lawyers subsequently published an address in favour of reform, and formed the United Committee of Political Protestants. Like their organ, the *Tyne Mercury*, they argued for strikers to return to work, despite the workers espousing some of the causes they promoted.

In the bleak summer of 1816, probably caused in part by the volcanic cloud that swept over Europe from the massive volcanic eruption in Indonesia, grain yields fell by 75%,⁶ and it was reported that 'the whole of the wheat and barley this year will be unsound'.⁷ Grain prices rose and the Corn Laws that were designed to protect farmers against foreign imports made matters worse. Across northern England, handloom weavers, framework knitters and similar craftsmen who had had their living standards raised by the demands of the war economy were now being impoverished by the plummeting demand for their products.

On 8th October the *Tyne Mercury* carried an anonymous article entitled, 'Conference of the Alphabet'. 'On Saturday last, a Conference took place, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon. The twenty six letters of the alphabet met on a sheet of paper to take into consideration the hardships of the present times, the causes of the same and the best remedies to be applied'. They decided that the only solution to war, taxation, corruption and 'misrepresentation of the people in Parliament' was

'radical reform of the House of Commons'.

On that date, in Sunderland market 'the whole of the corn was seized by the populace'.⁸ The Corporation and vestries⁹ opened soup kitchens for the 'deserving poor'. Each beneficiary had to obtain a ticket from a former employer and be prepared to do public works such as street cleaning and pavement construction. The kitchens supported 700 seamen. Newcastle, South Shields, North Shields, Morpeth, Gateshead and Winlaton followed suit. The soup kitchen in High Bridge, Newcastle, served over 1500 quarts of soup on its opening day – enough to feed up to 3000, or almost one third of the population, at the recommended ration of one pint each. The Gateshead kitchen supplied soup on two days a week. Fourteen collieries delivered 52 keels of coal on the Quayside for the relief of the poor and a vestry- inspired door to door collection raised over £2,400.¹⁰

In December 1816 and January 1817 the *Tyne Mercury* published three articles by William Cobbett, covering seven and a half pages.¹¹ In spring Henry Hunt addressed a mass meeting in London that turned into a riot and led to the arrests of four alleged leaders who were subsequently charged with 'conspiracy'. Soon after a march of unemployed weavers – called the 'Blanketeers', after the woollen blankets they wove and wore – left the north west but was broken up by Hussars and charged with conspiracy. However, juries found them not guilty. These cases exposed the role of the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth's, spy system. When London juries also freed Tom Wooler and William Hone¹² it was another blow against the government. Late in 1817 came the trial, conviction and condemnation of Jeremiah Brandreth, William Turner, George Weightman and Isaac Ludlam (a Methodist lay-preacher) for murder and high treason following an abortive rising at Pentrich in Derbyshire. These young and apparently guileless men had been made desperate by the decline of their trades and gnawing hunger. The *Tyne Mercury* reported the judge's summing up and pronouncement of the death sentence that 'they severally be carried back to the place from whence they came and that they be drawn upon a hurdle to some place of execution, where they shall be hanged by the neck and their

heads severed from their bodies which should be divided into four parts and disposed of as his Majesty should direct. Might the Lord God have compassion on their souls'. The *Tyne Mercury* also reported the last pathetic meetings of the prisoners with their close families and the executions. Ludlam clasped his hands tightly in front of him and prayed. Brandreth asked to be tied tightly in case he fell off the hurdle, but a clergyman stopped him completing the sentence, 'Oliver is responsible for this'. 'Oliver' was the name of an agent provocateur who had led them. The *Tyne Mercury* argued the Home Secretary and government, who had been humiliated by the previous acquittals, were the real conspirators and should have been in the dock, but they were determined to show no mercy in order to deter others.¹³

On September 16th 1817 the *Tyne Mercury* reported the annual dinner to commemorate the birth of Charles James Fox, the great Whig politician, in an unprecedented seven columns. The speakers – Earl Grey, Sir Matthew White Ridley M P., Lord Lambton, Ralph Naters and Robert Donkin - were leading members of the local Whig establishment. They severely condemned the Tory government's repression of dissenters, the deployment of spies and provocateurs, and called for the extension of the franchise and an end to government corruption.¹⁴

Most of the workers from Yorkshire, Lancashire and the midlands who were indicted in 1817 had been hand workers – or their close associates – in the domestic economy, and often lived in isolated communities. They were driven by helpless desperation, because their trades were doomed. Skilled or unskilled factory hands, coal miners, seamen, keelmen and iron founders may have suffered temporary unemployment and dearth, but probably did not see them as permanent, and informal and formal collective organisation offered hope of redress.

In February 1818 the United Committee of Political Protestants in Newcastle petitioned Parliament for reform of the franchise, but there were few other reports of radical activity on Tyneside, and none about the United Committee that year. However the *Tyne Mercury*

gave extensive coverage to events in Lancashire, parts of Yorkshire, Nottingham, Derby and London, and its editorial and correspondence columns carried regular discussion of the key trials of the Blanketeers, the alleged attempted risings in Yorkshire and the east midlands and the prosecution of the Spafields rioters and radical journalists in London.

In early summer 1819, the *Manchester Observer* reported many meetings in northern England, Scotland and London. In June, Cartwright and Hunt addressed a meeting in Palace Yard, Westminster, and called for national initiatives on the franchise.¹⁵ In July a large open-air assembly in Newcastle was followed a few days later by another in Spittal Dene, North Shields, said to be over 1,000 strong. Both meetings advocated universal suffrage and annual parliaments, but, following the propagandist methods of the Methodists, they proposed building permanent organisations, based on a system of classes that would be divided when they had twenty members. Similar meetings took place in Sunderland and Winlaton. Police Constable Chadwick was sacked for attending reform meetings and quoting the *Black Dwarf* approvingly, and the radical paper subsequently reported other – unnamed – dismissals from the force.¹⁶ One of the NE reports was by 'J M'. This was probably John Marshall, the main producer of radical pamphlets and leaflets, from his print shop, bookshop and lending library in the Flesh Market, Newcastle.¹⁷

On the 16th August 1819 a massive crowd assembled in St Peter's Field, Manchester, to hear leading radical orators make the case for a reform of Parliament. A group of the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry, backed by the 12th Hussars, hacked and slashed their way into the crowd. They killed twelve men and women and wounded over 400. Sardonicly echoing the battle of Waterloo, only four years earlier, the 'Peter-loo Massacre' entered the language of class struggle, never to disappear. Reportedly, 100,000 people – more than one in ten of the population - took to the streets in London in protest and there were large gatherings in Birmingham, Bristol, Merthyr, Norwich, Wigan, Carlisle, Brampton, Derby, Sheffield, Huddersfield, Bradford, Leeds and several places in Scotland.¹⁸

The Times reported the carnage at Peterloo on 18th August and copies would have been on the Newcastle coach that day. On the 23rd the *Tyne Mercury* reprinted a large chunk from the *Manchester Observer*. Soon after an *Address of the Reformers of Fawdon to their brothers the Pitmen, Keelmen*,¹⁹ and *other Labourers on the Tyne and Wear* was published in Newcastle.

The bloated tax eaters accuse us of conspiring. Now, the rich keep their arms in their houses – they are now training their tenants and servants in their halls and parks – their obsequious dependents are members of the Yeomanry Corps – they possess unbounded property... Yet after all, who are the real conspirators? Is it not the rich that are conspiring against the unprotected poor?' John Marshall published it.²⁰

Edward Thompson says of the Tyne and Wear after Peterloo that 'the whole district seemed to turn over to the reformers'.²¹ That autumn the Home Office correspondence suggests a good deal of anxiety developing about Newcastle and apparently more than any other district.²²

By September the United Committee was discussing petitioning the Mayor to call a protest meeting. On the 18th Reverend Robert Gray of Bishop Wearmouth told the Home Secretary that 'a man named Brayshaw and other emissaries from Manchester have recently been employed in Sunderland and the contiguous towns and have organised two or three clubs upon the plan of the artful resolutions of which I enclose a copy'.²³ On the 21st Lord Sidmouth thanked 'Dr Gray', 'Though I confess I'm disappointed in the hopes which I had entertained that the spirit of turbulence would not have reached y[ou]r part of the country'. The Mayor of Newcastle, Archibald Reed was newly in office for the third time, and was not known as a reactionary Tory, but on the 22nd he sent the Home Office 'a mischievous handbill and pamphlet,' *The Necessity of Parliamentary Reform*, written by Joseph Brayshaw from Leeds (not Manchester) and published by John Marshall in Newcastle. He also reported that local reformers had asked him to call a meeting. On the 23rd *The Times* recorded

that 'Two troops of carabineers arrived here (Leeds) yesterday, and this morning proceeded on their route for Newcastle. They are to be followed by other troops for the Northern Districts where much alarm and uneasiness still exists'. On the 25th the Tyne keelmen tackled the coal owners' attempts to replace them with new technology, 'spouts', especially below Newcastle Bridge. These devices stretched out over the river and could load collier vessels directly. John Marshall published *The Address of the Keelmen of the River Tyne* and this evidently rekindled the local establishment's old fear that radical reformers might ally with disaffected workers.

On the 27th Sidmouth advised Reed that 'the procession can take place peacefully but if any seditious language is used and applauded you must read the Riot Act' after which failing to disperse 'becomes a Capital Felony'. Reed told the reformers that he could not support or condone the event, but would not stop it if it was peaceful. The acting magistrate at South Shields, Joseph Bulmer, wrote to Sidmouth on the 28th: 'This is not the time, my lord, for masters to do anything that looks like oppressing their labourers'.²⁴ On the 29th Mr W Boyd of North Shields asked Sidmouth for 'an armed militia of the better classes of property owners, armed by the government'. (The Home Secretary had counselled great care in the selection of such people and was wary of handing out arms, especially in large towns. He generally preferred Yeomanry cavalry.) That same day, Dr Gray opined that 'there has never been a period where the vigilance of magistrates and those loyal' to the government had been more 'urgently necessary'. Sidmouth assured him by return that 'more help will come'.

On 1st October a civil servant replied to Reed on behalf of Sidmouth, regretting the 'disorderly conduct of a body of lightermen (keelmen) employed on the River Tyne', but the Navy were 'sending a sloop from the Forth'. The Vicar of Ryton, Reverend Charles Thorp, was concerned about Winlaton iron workers and pitmen. On the 5th Sidmouth told him about the sloop and noted that 'the persons to whom you particularly refer should be narrowly watched and I have to request that any material Intelligence should be passed on to me'. On the 7th Sidmouth noted

that ‘The mischief done by the Publication’ – the *Black Dwarf* – ‘you particularly mention has been extreme’. It was to be ‘earnestly wished’ that ‘the itinerant Vendors of sedition and blasphemous libels were in all flagrant instances apprehended by warrant from the Magistrates’. That same day the Duke of Northumberland told Sidmouth about a report from Nicholas Fairles, a South Shields magistrate.²⁵ Bulmer reported: ‘tis certain the reformists will endeavour to promote discord as much as they can. We have some of them here, but ‘tis only among the *labouring* class. I have learned they intend to hold a meeting tonight’.²⁶ On 8th and 9th Reed reported that the keelmen were refusing to settle their dispute and he expected ‘disturbances’ at the reform meeting on the 11th.²⁷

The Great Reform Meeting

Careful preparations had been made for the meeting in Newcastle on Monday 11th October 1819.²⁸ Several days before the area was inundated with leaflets, with detailed instructions for the day, and many pamphlets were in circulation. On the day contingents came from North Shields, South Shields, Sunderland, Gateshead, Whickham, Winlaton, Benwell, Fawdon and Morpeth, as well as Newcastle. There were several assembly points for feeder marches that went to a rally just south west of the Haymarket in Newcastle. Mackenzie recalled: ‘Passing the New Jerusalem Temple, Prudhoe St., and Prudhoe Place, we come to the Parade which was first opened for the inspection of the Newcastle Volunteers by Colonel Rawdon, April 20th, 1808. This large angular area had long been a dirty, unseemly waste...’ *The Times* reported that ‘before half the divisions had arrived’ the Parade Ground was ‘completely filled’. At four people per square yard it could have held around 15,000, and doubling that suggests there were at least 30,000 demonstrators at that stage.

The organisers decided to march to the Race Course on the Town Moor. It took over an hour for the marchers to move a few hundred yards and cross Barras Bridge. A man carrying a Roman fasces, symbolizing unity as strength, led the way, and Winlaton Brass Band played patriotic tunes

including *Rule Britannia* and Robert Burns’ *Scots Wha hae*. They were followed by the United Committee members, who each held a white rod with a small knot of crepe tied with white at the top. Then came ‘the hustings, drawn by 3 horses, the divisions following each other in close and equal ranks, 4 and 6 men deep’.

Archibald’ Dick’s etching, ‘The Great Reform Meeting’, shows a sea of men in black on the Town Moor with women and children playing about the edges. Behind the hustings, at a considerable distance, is a phalanx of banner-carrying marchers, perhaps near the outer rail of the Race Course. Most men wore black top hats, but some had white ones, like ‘Orator’ Hunt. (He had recently been released from prison and his triumphal entrance to London was widely reported.) The hats make the men seem mainly middle class, from today’s perspective, but keelmen, seamen and miners also wore hard black hats in 1819.

Rank and file participants rather than leaders and speakers usually make slogans on banners, and they can add a valuable dimension to our understanding of the ideas that were generally held. There were many banners and flags on display with slogans including,

‘In memory of those who were murdered at Manchester and history recording the dreadful events of that day’.

Surrounding the words, **‘We mourn for the massacred at Manchester’** was a wreath composed of rose, thistle and shamrock of England, Scotland and Ireland. **‘Order, Love and Unity’.**

A blue flag with gold letters read, **‘We’ll brothers be for a’ that— England, Ireland and Scotland’.**

Former sailors or soldiers were evidently present and angry:

‘we fight your wars but look how you treat us’. A tri-coloured flag read, **‘England expects everyman to do his duty—Do unto all men as they should do unto you’ ‘An hour of glorious Liberty is worth a whole eternity of Bondage’...‘Though hand join in hand the wicked**

shall not go unpunished’.

One banner quoted Burns: **‘We’ll brothers be for a’ that’**. A black flag with red border bore **‘Rachel weeping with her children’**, and **‘would not be comforted because they were not’**.

Others bore the slogans, **‘A wonderful and horrid thing has been committed in the land’**,

‘When the wicked beareth rule the people mourn. Solomon’,

‘Excessive Taxation generates poverty’ and, **‘May justice overtake the Manchester murderers’**.

A red flag proclaimed: **‘Take away the wicked before the King, and his throne shall be established—he that smiteth a man so that he die shall surely be put to death’**.

A banner carrying skull and crossbones had slogans front and back: **‘The day of retribution is at hand’** and **Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory’**. The strong biblical imagery suggests that Methodist and other dissenting congregations were involved [which ones are not evident].

Another lamented: **‘These are the times to try men’s souls’**. This came from Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, published during the American War in 1776, and suggests his influence remained significant over forty years later.²⁹

The Female Reformers of Winlaton represented **‘THE WINLATON REFORM SOCIETY. Evil to him that evil thinks’**. **‘Annual Parliaments—Universal Suffrage—Vote By Ballot’**. The North Shields Reformers paid homage **‘To the immortal memory of the Reformers massacred at Manchester on 16th Aug. 1819’**.

Another called for **‘Hunt and Reform’**. The Political Protestants of Benwell carried a large red flag with the words, **‘Hunt and Liberty’**. (Some of these slogans were identical to those mentioned in reports

from similar meetings, like that at Carlisle, where the main speaker had been Eneas Mackenzie.)

Mackenzie was elected Chairman and pointed out that the enormous attendance should surprise hostile elements, including members of Newcastle Corporation, who were renowned for their corruption and had spent the weeks before the event campaigning against it, vilifying the organisers and advising employers to keep their work people away. Mackenzie was particularly severe on the *Newcastle Courant*, which he saw as leading this hostility in a quite unprincipled way. Disinterested observers should be impressed, not only by the size of the turnout, but also by its solemn mood and good behaviour, and that order and discipline made the meeting more powerful. He commended the Manchester meeting for its similar intentions, roundly attacked the magistrates and clergy and reserved special contempt for the vicious members of the Yeomanry, ‘a species of force unknown in the English law...these brutes may cover themselves with the honourable garb of soldiers, they are not Englishmen, they are base cowards’. He also attacked the government that had advised the Prince Regent to commend the Yeomanry’s bloody attack.

A series of motions concerning the Manchester events and what to do about them was read out to the meeting. There was no demand for universal suffrage, as expressed on several banners, and the focus was on hitting the authorities where they were most vulnerable. The meeting unanimously passed resolutions that asserted the right of freeborn Englishmen to protest to Parliament and condemned those concerned involved with the deaths at Manchester, or had approved them. A fund to assist the Manchester victims was opened and another was set up to help local people who might fall foul of the authorities when attempting to exercise their constitutional rights. The slogans, the identically worded motions, Mackenzie’s involvement and everything about the conduct of the meeting strongly suggest that a national organisation – secret of course, because of the need to steer clear of possible conspiracy charges – was at work.

Since beginning of the French wars in 1793 the Methodist church

**IN MEMORY OF THOSE
WHO WERE MURDERED AT MANCHESTER**

We fight your wars but
look how you treat us
England expects everyman
to do his duty—Do unto
all men as they should
do unto you' 'An hour
of glorious Liberty is
worth a whole eternity of
Bondage'... 'Though hand
join in hand the wicked
shall not go unpunished

**In memory of those
who were murdered at
Manchester and history
recording the dreadful
events of that day**

The day of
retribution is at
hand

**Thanks be
to God who
giveth us
the victory**

**These are the times to
try men's souls**

**Hunt and
Reform**



generally had taken a very strong line against radical protest and had become a strong – though not necessarily very effective – conservative force among working people. However one speaker on the Town Moor, the Reverend William Stephenson, was a Methodist minister at North Shields. Subsequently, the arch conservative Methodist leader, Reverend Jabez Bunting, demanded that the church's Committee of Privileges in London sack Stephenson, since 'reform' was not their business. Bunting succeeded, but fourteen congregations on Tyneside later seceded.³⁰

Mr Layton, also from North Shields, referred to the scale of the event: 'This day will long be memorable in the annals of Newcastle. This is the first meeting of the kind that has been held in this part of the country. From York to Glasgow there never has such a meeting taken place before. This day will prove the greatest the Corporation of Newcastle has ever known'. Job Jamieson, a Newcastle tailor, spoke last. He invited the meeting to get involved in the struggle for reform and stressed that the Newcastle 'Society' was not a conspiracy, but was open to all comers. Mackenzie closed the meeting by asking everyone to go home in an orderly fashion and not be provoked by any hostile elements. He recalled that a 'regiment' of sailors returning to North Shields refused free beer!

How many people went to Newcastle Town Moor

The meeting of 11th October 1819 took place in the shadow of Peterloo, but there was no violence, no one died, no one was known to have been injured and there was no riot. It happened far away from the epicentres of revolt – London, Manchester, Yorkshire and the east midlands – and it is not celebrated in modern radical history. Yet several non-participant as well as participant observers described it as vast and some felt it was awesome.

The three Newcastle papers all put 100,000 as a maximum figure attending the meeting. The *Tyne Mercury* suggested 76,000 were in 'the area where the tents are pitched on race days', with the rest spread more thinly beyond. *The Times* reported that it was 'ascertained by

actual admeasurement, that the space occupied by the body of the meeting would hold 76,000 persons, at the rate of four to a square yard; but when the thousands of scattered spectators are included, and the close manner in which they stood, the whole may be stated at 100,000. Perhaps the largest meeting ever held'. *The Black Dwarf*, *An Account of the Meeting* and Mackenzie concurred. *The Durham Advertiser* plumped for 'above 50,000' and was gratified that only 104 had marched from Sunderland. The Mayor of Newcastle told the Home Secretary that 40,000 were present, but the military had given a figure of 'over 12,000'.

Many local historians have looked askance when I mentioned contemporary reports of 76,000 people attending, and some put that down to the tendency of participants to exaggerate the numbers, since nobody had any experience of large crowds. Organisers and reporters get a feel for the size of an event, but if an event 'feels' like over 20,000, you might round up to 30,000, but not to 50,000 or 100,000, especially if you want to maintain credibility. Of course, rounding down takes place too, usually by the law enforcement agencies anxious not to give the demonstrators too much credibility, and Parliament later heard a figure as low as 7,000.³¹ Yet citizens of Newcastle regularly attended fairs and race meetings on the Town Moor and one of the contemporary accounts invoked their previous experiences on the Race Course. An 1881 scale map shows that tents on race days took up around a quarter of the Race Course within the rail, and if people were packed tightly, the figure of 76,000 is by no means unfeasible, but where might they have come from?

The United Committee of Political Protestants, and the Newcastle Branch especially, was probably largely middle class, since it was predominantly a commercial town. Less than one in ten of the adult male population was qualified to vote in Parliamentary elections, but many skilled craftsmen had served apprenticeships and were guild members, freemen and so became voters, though the town had a substantial unfranchised middle class. In 1832 5000 Newcastle men voted for the first time, and allowing for deaths and population increase, there can't have been many fewer in 1819. Many probably participated

in the Town Moor meeting, though the only named Newcastle speaker with a vote was the tailor, Job Jamieson. Few middle class women probably participated, though many may have been observers like Miss Bruce.³²

News of Peterloo had caused widespread outrage and talk of a big meeting would have been on everyone's lips. The slight hint of danger may also have been attractive. Many homes were poorly lit, overcrowded, cold and damp, and so the streets of Gateshead and Newcastle teemed with people and many would have been caught up in the demonstration as it passed their doors. Fairs, race meetings, circuses and grisly public hangings often drew crowds of spectators, especially in clement weather, and we know that the demonstrators were accompanied by hundreds of petty traders and performers. So it seems likely that almost everyone who was not hostile or incapacitated attended. A meeting of a few thousand could plausibly be characterised as a 'middle class' event; with hindsight, this was 'perhaps the biggest assembly ever to take place' in Newcastle,³³ so it must have been mainly working class people, and these were the overwhelming majority of the Tyne and Wear district population. Could they have got to Newcastle?

There could only have been a vast demonstration if very large numbers of people from outside Newcastle had attended. The 1821 census found that just over 400,000 people lived between the Tweed and the Tees. Almost 200,000 lived in Newcastle, Gateshead, Whickham, Winlaton, Wallsend, Byker, Elswick, Westgate, and Castle Ward (Kenton, Gosforth, Fawdon, Kenton, Longbenton, Lemington, Newburn), but a sizeable number were probably too young, too old or too infirm to walk that far, and a maximum potential attendance of around 100,000 is feasible. The number of working women is not known, but there may have been large numbers of them. There were contingents from Winlaton and Benwell, and it may well be that almost the entire able bodied population from there and from other industrial villages like Fawdon also turned out. Most Tyneside collieries, shipyards, chemical works and potteries were outside Newcastle's boundary, but there

would be a substantial number of craft and unskilled workers in the building and brewing trades and among riverside workers, and many craft workers in the furniture, printing, glass and tailoring trades.

The main means of transport for poor people was their legs and they were used to walking long distances. The heavily populated areas on and around the mouth of the Tyne, and near the Wear and Blyth, were home to over 100,000 people, and seamen, keelmen and other river workers and, in all probability, landless labourers from nearby towns and villages, will often have walked to Newcastle, or hitched a lift on a cart or a waggonway, in order to shop, socialise and attend major events. Durham and Hexham are a four-hour walk away from Newcastle, and it takes three hours and twenty minutes from South Shields and Sunderland. We know that at least 300 seamen came from North Shields and over 100 from Sunderland. Since the 17th century workers had celebrated 'Saint Monday' to double their one day of rest,³⁴ and this may well have occurred in 1819. It is possible that most of the striking keelmen had an organised presence to bring their case to the widest audience, and the fact that the meeting took place on a normal working day meant that workers effectively went on strike, and there may even have been a 'general strike'. A figure of 76,000 on the Town Moor – almost one in five of the entire population of Northumberland and Durham – looks somewhat unlikely, but there is no reason to rule out the figure of 40,000.

Aftermaths

After 11th October 1819 the Newcastle papers reported a quiet end to the Town Moor meeting, and its organisers emphasised its sobriety and orderliness; yet the fact that it took place at all and drew so many working people on such a contentious political issue was perhaps its most threatening feature to the opponents of reform, who showed their apprehension in private correspondence and loyal public messages to the Prince Regent and the government. Some in Durham, Tynemouth and Ryton were quick to draw up addresses professing intense loyalty, whilst pouring contempt upon reformers and radicals.³⁵ General Byng had commented on an earlier demonstration: 'The peaceable demeanour

of so many thousand unemployed men is not natural'.³⁶

On the 12th Archibald Reed, Mayor of Newcastle, told the Home Secretary, Sidmouth: 'It is impossible to contemplate the meeting of the 11th without awe, more particularly if my information is correct that 700 of them were prepared with arms (concealed) to resist the civil power'.³⁷ David Rowe suggests that Reed was 'slightly unhinged',³⁸ yet Edward Thompson believed that 'radical classes were formed' with 'the rapidity of a revivalist campaign in all the surrounding industrial villages and ports' including in Jarrow, Sheriff Hill, Penshaw, Rainton, Houghton, Newbattle, Hetton, Hebburn, South Shields, Winlaton and Sunderland.³⁹

On the 15th the South Shields acting magistrate, Joseph Bulmer, told the Home Secretary that the keelmen 'will not go to work till after Monday, so that all may attempt the meeting'. The Earl of Darlington also reported to Lord Sidmouth that he trusted that 'the refractory keelmen and the Radical Reformers' were 'perfectly separate', but they 'formed a part of that large assemblage who met on Newcastle Town Moor on Monday'.⁴⁰

That same day North Shields radicals and keelmen pelted the Mayor of Newcastle, Archibald Reed, and his party with stones at the Northumberland Hotel on Shields Quay. Marines fired on the crowd from a boat and Joseph Claxton, a riverside worker, was killed.

That incensed the crowd and Reed was forced to retreat back to Newcastle. The only man arrested was a radical local shoemaker who had been at the Town Moor event, but seamen had walked from North Shields to Newcastle in large numbers four days earlier, and it seems likely that some Newcastle keelmen would have been permanently stationed at North Shields, to picket the new spouts, and knowing that the Mayor wanted to break their strike, more would have made their way to North Shields. By the 17th Reed believed that the keelmen's strike was settled, but 'this will not render us secure. The Reformers are now in a state of Almost Rebellion'.⁴¹

The reform activists appears to have retreated to indoor meetings and respectful addresses. 'Radical Jack', Lord Lambton, tried to organise petitions from Sunderland and Durham, but apart from a very lively correspondence in the Newcastle papers, the movement seemed to submerge. At the Sunderland meeting in October, Lambton made some hostile remarks about alleged wild elements associated with the Town Moor meeting, but the tensions within the reform movement are illustrated by a rejoinder from Thomas Hodgson, a Winlaton weaver, in the *Newcastle Chronicle* on 23rd October: 'A person in your exalted station in life cannot be supposed to have much intelligence of what is going on amongst the lower orders of plebeians and on that account generally abundantly ignorant of what is known to every person but themselves. In short the Reformers wish for such a Reform in the House of Commons as will realise that favourite WHIG toast, the Sovereignty of the People'. On 18th November Lambton's reply in the *Chronicle* insisted that that he 'had no suspicions of the Reformers as a body of men', but just happened to differ on Annual Parliaments and Universal Suffrage.

Meanwhile, on the 25th October the reactionary colliery viewer John Buddle wrote to Sidmouth: 'Until within these few weeks our Colliers and the body of Labourers, of every description, connected with the Coal Works, never troubled their heads with politics'; but they had changed, and the *Black Dwarf* and the *Black Book* 'are to be found in the *Hat Crown* of almost every pitman you meet'.⁴²

Newcastle Corporation offered work to redundant keelmen, lest they unite with disputatious pitmen, seamen and radicals, and by late October most keelmen were back at work. Reed was anxious that the employers should all honour the agreement, but undertook to pay them himself and recover the money from the coal owners if he had to. Yet on the 27th he told Sidmouth that 'the disaffection of the pitmen rapidly increases' and at Mount Moor Colliery near Gateshead Fell, 'all the pitmen except five have joined the Radicals, and almost the entire body of the pitmen entertain the same mischievous and abominable principles'.⁴³ Buddle was also astonished by the pitmen's 'constant

cry' that they worked 'far too hard for their wages' and 'cannot resist' on them. 'One fellow at Heaton, after having solemnly made this declaration last say [sic; i.e. pay] Friday, gave 6s. 10d. next day for a White Hat', just like Orator Hunt.⁴⁴

On 22nd November Reed reported about a shortage of silver coins, because they had been 'hoarded by radicals and the timid';⁴⁵ though he later wrote that he did not think there was a strong connection between workers and reformers.⁴⁶ *The Crimes of Reformers. Address to the labouring classes on Tyne and Wear*, published by John Marshall, ended with a quote from Burns: 'Then let us fight about, Till Freedom's spark is out, Then we'll be damn'd, no doubt'.

The NE authorities were trying to draw up an inventory of cannon held in private hands and have them removed to secure sites like Tynemouth Barracks.⁴⁷ The loyalists' appeals for military and naval support was answered positively, but the most determined wanted to strengthen the part-time Yeomanry and form squads of special constables. Despite some government caution, this happened. By 4 December the *Newcastle Chronicle* was able to report that the Yeomanry Cavalry, The Coquetdale Rangers, had arrived in Newcastle from Alnwick, and would be there for ten days, while the Yeomanry Cavalry of South Tyneside, Axwell Park and Bywell, were patrolling the streets of Gateshead and would be joined by the 40th regiment of Foot. Durham had also 'taken on a military appearance', thanks to the Durham and Gibside Yeomanry. A group of Newcastle men had appeared before the Mayor – the chief magistrate – charged with assaulting soldiers, while 400 others gathered round. It was probably a drunken fracas, but it merited considerable coverage in the local press because the crowd had shouted slogans such as, 'Liberty or Death! 'Death or Glory!' and 'Hunt for Ever!'

By 6th December Joseph Clark of Benton House had reported to the Home Secretary at least three times about the alleged arming of pitmen at local collieries, but Sidmouth assured him that Parliament would soon be giving magistrates new powers. Sir A F Barnard wrote to Sidmouth expressing his worry at the street disturbances in Newcastle

and calling for a full enquiry, but on the 22nd Sidmouth asked the Mayor for an explanation whilst expressing his master's full confidence in his ability to deal with such 'tumults'. The radicals had made further 'requests' to the Mayor to permit outside assemblies on 22nd October and 15th November.

During November Sidmouth advised Reed to use the ancient Borough Charter to refuse to allow non-residents to enter the town, but by 9th December 'the whole naval force in the North Sea' was 'stationed in the Tyne'.⁴⁸ There was no correspondence from 'the usual suspects' to the Home Office.

The workers' upsurge and the *mass* reform movement had subsided. On 20th December the *Newcastle Chronicle* reported what was to be the last big demonstration that year had taken place after 600 people marched from Blyth and Cowpen to Bedlington, 'preceded by drum and fife, each class leader bearing a white wand bound with crape' (sic) and 'accompanied by band of musicians bearing a flag, "woe unto the wicked. It shall be ill with them for the reward of their hands shall be given them."' Another flag was inscribed 'Arise Britons and Assert your rights'. The main orator, Mr Layton of North Shields, a recent Town Moor speaker, called for 'Universal Suffrage, Annual Parliaments and Vote By Ballot', and was seconded by a Mr Spoor.

The frigate *Wye*, with a squad of highly visible marines, stayed on the Tyne until the New Year, and the radicals' proposed meeting on 28th January did not take place. The local press, including the *Tyne Mercury*, recorded no radical initiatives for at least six months.

The Six Acts

Lords Castlereagh and Sidmouth aimed to squash the radical upsurge of 1819 by further repressive legislation. On 29th November Castlereagh laid out the case in Parliament for what became known as the 'Six Acts' to be enacted through Parliament: 'nothing can be more obviously useless and mischievous than the assembling of immense multitudes' and the proponents of the proposed legislation concentrated

considerable attention not on Peterloo, but on the north east in general and the Newcastle Town Moor meeting in particular. They claimed that two magistrates had been forced to flee their homes and take sanctuary in Newcastle. It is quite possible that the Reverend Charles Thorp of Ryton had been so provocative that he might well have feared for his safety among the colliers and iron workers at Winlaton.

Early in December Lord Darlington of Raby Castle, one of the two largest landowners in County Durham, spoke of ‘twenty factious demagogues’ who ‘had done all the mischief and prepared the minds of the people to rebel’ and ought to be ‘hung or incarcerated’. He had information that ‘14 to 15,000 men on the banks of the Tyne and Wear were ready for rebellion’. The Duke of Northumberland believed the figure was nearer 100,000 and included 16,600 armed colliers. Darlington quoted a local clergyman – probably Thorp – who had told him that ‘*The Black Dwarf, The Republican and the Cap of Liberty* are constant subjects of discussion by colliers’. The Earl of Strathmore of Barnard Castle, the other biggest landowner in County Durham, informed the House that Eneas Mackenzie and John Marshall sold these publications in Newcastle. The government was raising the stakes and feeding a climate of fear in order to justify further repressive legislation. Someone told the tale about 700 armed workers attending at the Newcastle meeting, but a foreman of a local iron works had told Lord Lambton that it was impossible for closely supervised workmen to obtain sufficient material to make weapons. Sir Matthew White Ridley also played down the threat with the preposterous claim that ‘scarcely a single person’ at the Town Moor meeting ‘was really an inhabitant of Newcastle’.⁴⁹

An important part of NE MPs’ constituents were reformers who would value British freedoms, but wished to dissociate themselves from the radical wing of the mass movement, so there was also equivocation within the ranks of the reform.⁵⁰ Whig reformers were acutely aware of the danger from the masses and picked away at the reactionary case, but they were unable to damage it substantially because they shared a ruling class distaste for street politics, especially when it seemed effective.

Local authorities, above all those in Newcastle, had overcome their problems in recruiting reliable special constables by the end of 1819. Under the Seditious Meetings Act of December, indoor meetings could be exempted, so in January 1820 the moderate Newcastle reformers presented a respectful request to the Mayor. He refused, but they held a very large meeting in the Turks Head Hotel Long Room all the same, and reports give a very precise account of what separated them from the radicals. Charles Bigge MP took the chair and referred to a handbill, widely distributed in the town the previous evening. It announced that ‘a numerous meeting of deputies from the different reform societies in the town and from various parts of Northumberland and Durham’ had gathered ‘in one of their reading rooms in Queen Street’ and ‘unanimously agreed not to form any connection’ with ‘moderate reformers’ or ‘attempt to interfere with or disrupt their meeting’. Tensions were still high in the town and the Mayor had asked for troops. The 40th Regiment who had marched from Sunderland, were equipped with ball cartridges. A patrol of constables was on the streets and the Yeomanry Cavalry was in attendance.

Sir Matthew White Ridley, fresh from the Commons debate on the Six Acts, opined that ‘a reform of the Commons House was essential to the health of the constitution’. James Losh, who had represented employers against workers several times before and after the Town Moor meeting, firmly attacked the radicals’ demands. On Annual Parliaments, he argued that a year was far too short a time to learn how the system worked and would deter men of quality from standing. On Universal Suffrage, he believed that the masses were not mature enough to vote wisely and power would simply devolve onto the rich and influential, so what was needed was a re-distribution of seats away from rotten boroughs to the centres of trade, and the extension of the franchise to those owning modest amounts of property. (At some distant point in the future it might be extended further.) On Vote by Ballot, the idea of voting secretly was an insult to the British elector. The moderates decided to present a petition to the Prince Regent, and their anxiety was clearly shaped by the feeling that some reform was essential to answer the rising tide of radicalism.⁵¹

At the end of January King George III died. It seemed that the mass reform campaign in the north east had ended. Only the most modest reference to it appeared during the general election campaign⁵² in Newcastle and Ridley was re-elected in spring.⁵³ The radicals supported Queen Caroline, who had been abused and marginalized by her husband, the new King George IV, but they went little further than petitioning.

The reform movement in the north east appears to have been very large indeed. ‘Radical Monday’ 11th October 1819 had mobilised tens of thousands and whole villages were swept up in it. But behind the turnout lay an organisational network that assembled contingents, created resolutions and banners with slogans, and maintained order and discipline. Its startling presence was confirmed by in the brutal response of its enemies, but was it revolutionary moment?

Probably the most important ingredient of a revolutionary situation, and rarest, is true mass involvement. This is what the numbers on the Town Moor suggest and what the enemies of reform seem to have witnessed before and afterwards, but within weeks of that spectacular event the organisation seems to have disappeared and the movement melted away. There was to be no sign of its re-emergence, or an obvious rupture in the solidarity of the ruling class and its subalterns in the middle class, for another decade. The Six Acts were the fag end of a prolonged period of savagery from the state and its supporters. The villains of Shelley’s *Masque of Anarchy*, written weeks after Peterloo, were the Tory brutes Liverpool, Castlereagh and Sidmouth, but they were reaching the end of their careers. Their successors did not regard overwhelming force as a completely viable method of dealing with organised workers, whether in crowds or at work, and much of the new legislation remained unused, except in the war against the illegal, ‘unstamped’ press, which rumbled on for years, though its transgressors were gaoled, not sabred, transported or hanged.

The situation had been well short of revolutionary, but it probably had a longer term impact on thinking on both sides of the class divide. If we

regard the north east movement as part of a wider national experience it can be seen as a significant transitional moment in radical strategy.⁵⁴ A mass demonstration had succeeded French Jacobin adventurism⁵⁵ and petitioning as the favourite method of radical protest, while Jacobinism may have run its course for the rulers too. The social composition, organisation, order and self discipline of the Town Moor meeting was an important milestone in the development of the reform movement, and when it arose again on a grand scale, in 1830, it was accompanied by a rise in independent action by working people. Yet though the pressure – or the anticipation of pressure – of that very class ensured its ultimate legislative successes, it was ignored in the settlement of 1832.

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- 1 I am grateful to Malcolm Chase, Dave Harker and Norman McCord who read and commented on earlier versions of this booklet. They bear no responsibility for the views expressed.
- 2 Norman McCord, ‘The Seamen’s Strike of 1815’, *Economic History Review*, 1968.
- 3 TS/11/836 PRO, National Archives, Kew.
- 4 ASSI/41/11 Northern Assizes (Newcastle), 1816, and KB28/456/457, PRO.
- 5 *The Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright*, ed. F D Cartwright, London, 1826, Volume 2, p 116. *The Diaries and Correspondence of James Losh*, ed. Edward Hughes, Durham, 1962-3, Volume 1.
- 6 Patrick Webb, ‘Emergency Relief during Europe’s famine of 1817,’ Discussion Paper, School of Nutrition, Tufts University, USA, 2002, [p ?].
- 7 *Tyne Mercury*, 8th October 1816
- 8 *Tyne Mercury*, 8th October 1816
- 9 The administrative committee of a parish.
- 10 *Tyne Mercury* 25th November, 26th December 1816, 11th January, 11th February 1817.
- 11 *Tyne Mercury* 21st and 28th December 1816, 11th January 1817.

- 12 Wooler and Hone were radical newspaper editors constantly pursued by the authorities.
- 13 *Tyne Mercury* 27th October, 10th, 17th November 1817. See also E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, 1963, pp 602- 710.
- 14 Eneas Mackenzie, *The History of Newcastle*, Newcastle, 1827, Thompson, pp 690-91.
- 15 *Black Dwarf*, August 4th and 11th 1819.
- 16 Christopher Hunt, *The Book Trade in Northumberland and Durham to 1860*, Newcastle, 1975, p 65.
- 17 Reports or mentions in sundry local newspapers, August-September-October, 1819.
- 18 The keelmen took coal from the Tyne and Wear riversides to seagoing vessels in small barges called keels.
- 19 Newcastle City Library, Local Studies. [Reprinted: Newcastle, Frank Graham: 1969].
- 20 Thompson, p 690.
- 21 HO41/5 Disturbance Entry Book. Newcastle features 35 times, Manchester 30, the West Riding of Yorkshire 14, Lancashire 13, and Birmingham 12.
- 22 HO42/195.
- 23 HO42/195.
- 24 HO41/5.
- 25 HO42/195. My italics.
- 26 HO41/5.
- 27 The story of the day's events, except where otherwise indicated, is based on three reports in the local press *Tyne Mercury*, 23rd October, The Times of 16th October, which was mainly based on a letter dated 12th October that had been published in the *Newcastle Courant*, and *The Black Dwarf* of the 27th. *The Manchester Observer* of 27th October may have had its own reporter, but *The Nottingham Review* and *The Leeds Mercury* copied from Newcastle papers. Archibald Dick, 'The Great Reform Meeting', etching, Newcastle City Library, Local Studies. The anonymous pamphlet, *An Account of the Meeting...*, was published in Newcastle later in 1819; *Radical Monday, a Letter from Bob in Gotham to his cousin Bob in the country*, was published in Newcastle in 1821; and see also Mackenzie, pp 81-4; Thomas Oliver's scale map of Newcastle, 1831; John Bruce Williamson, *Memorials of John Bruce Schoolmaster in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne and of Mary Bruce His Wife* (Newcastle, 1903).
- 29 Local radicals may have been aware that William Cobbett had just returned from America, allegedly carrying Paine's bones, though they seem to have been lost in Liverpool!
- 30 D. Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750-1850*, London, 1984, pp 106-108.
- 31 3 December, 1819, *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol XLI, London, (1820).
- 32 op cit. John Bruce Williamson,
- 33 *The Times*, Extract of a letter dated Oct.12th, 16th October, 1819.
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- 35 *Newcastle Chronicle*, 4th December, 1819. The loyalists of Durham, Tynemouth and Ryton
- 36 Thompson, p 681.
- 37 HO41/5.
- 38 D. J. Rowe, 'The Strikes of the Tyneside Keelmen in 1809 and 1819', *International Review of Social History*, 1968, p 72.
- 39 Thompson, p 690.
- 40 HO42/195,196.
- 41 HO42/196, Reed to Sidmouth, *Newcastle Chronicle*, 17th October, Joseph Bulmer to Sidmouth, 19th October 1819.
- 42 J.L. & Barbara Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer 1760-1832*, London 1919, p 26.
- 43 HO42/197.
- 44 Hammonds, pp 26-7.
- 45 HO41/5. 22nd November, 1819. The coin shortage was a hot issue and the government soon responded with a new issue.
- 46 HO41/5, 22nd November 1819.
- 47 HO41/5 Sidmouth to Bishop of Durham, Duke of Northumberland and Lord Darlington, 6th, 25th November 1819.
- 48 HO41/5 25th, 29th November, 6th, 9th, 22nd December 1819.
- 49 *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol XLI, London, (1820), 3rd,4th December 1819.
- 50 E Halevy, *The Liberal Awakening*, London, 1949 (Revised edition), pp 67-79.
- 51 *Newcastle Chronicle*, 27th January 1820.

- 52 At that time a General Election had to be held following the death of the monarch.
- 53 Poll Book, Newcastle Election, 1820, Newcastle City Library, Local Studies.
- 54 Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834*, Cambridge, MA, 1995. Transitions in repertoires of contention is a theme of this rewarding book and chapter 6 deals with the post-1815 period.
- 55 The notion that a tiny group of determined people could seize power alone and act for the people at large.

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