

From the Crowd: Remembering Peterloo

Windmill Street, Manchester, 8 p.m. Friday 16th August 2019



It had rained all day and Manchester was saturated by early evening, when I arrived for the 8 p.m. performance of From the Crowd at Windmill Street on the site where exactly 200 years earlier the infamous

Peterloo Massacre had taken place.

I remembered how as a boy I had been excited by the heavy snow in Newcastle on 30th January 1972. Bloody Sunday. I have often thought it might have been better if there had been heavy snow that day in Derry too. Similarly, perhaps if the weather had been as bad in Manchester 200 years ago, it might have cooled the temper of the Hussars somewhat and the cold blooded murder might not have taken place. But then again it might have made no difference at all...

I was somewhat early to the event in Windmill Street and after having my rucksack searched in a sad reminder of another terrible massacre in Manchester just two years ago, I settled in to watch the preparations. Slowly the crowd gathered, in the about the same spot as Henry Hunt, Samuel Bamford and the huge crowd of 60 000 had assembled peacefully on that much sunnier August 16th, back in 2019. The event ahead of me would try and recreate the Peterloo massacre, whilst also remembering some of the many injustices we can witness with our own eyes today.

Soon a friendly 'Laurel' came along; a woman brandishing a laurel like those brandished by peaceful demonstrators at Peterloo, telling us what was to happen. It was made clear that this was a participatory event aimed at giving us a feel about what it might have been like to have been at the same place exactly 200 years ago. It was also to be an event where audience participation was important. Consequently we were all given a coloured wristband, mine being gold and were asked to keep an eye on two huge screens for when it would be our time to join in.



“We need to take power into our own hands, the future is what we make it, not what old rich men make it” – part of the participation – on this occasion for those with green wristbands

The 'Laurel' also explained that there would be nine contemporary events linked to the story of Peterloo. The event then began with an impassioned speech about the Climate Crisis and Climate Strikes, performed by a young climate striker. Following that we were all given a piece of bread.

We were then treated to a dramatic reinterpretation of the entry of terh marchers into St Peter’s Fields, complete with red flags proclaiming liberty and other slogans from Peterloo. We were given the opportunity to imagine what it must have been like to have been part of the crowd on that tragic day 200 years ago.

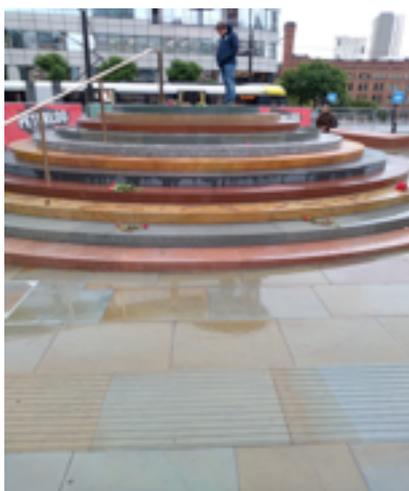


The ‘protestors’ march in carrying red flags emblazoned with words such as ‘liberty’...



Part of the controversial memorial to Peterloo, remembering massacres at other political protests

Then the issue of the controversial Peterloo Memorial came up. As can be seen from the picture below, there is no disabled access to the top of it. To see it fully, you have to be able to walk and climb it. Consequently, the memorial was described as vile by a disabled man, who bitterly criticised Manchester City Council. We were told how they had ignored a large amount of campaigning to build it as it was, but how increasing pressure had now forced Manchester City Council to provide disabled access in the future.



The Peterloo Memorial...currently without disabled access to the top

We then had another participatory event with liberal use of Shelley's famous poem 'The Masque of Anarchy'. We read sections of it out

together, relating it to Peterloo and to injustices today.

I had already noticed that there was a signer for deaf people on the cat walk, furiously signing about everything that was said. It was then pointed out that the rights of deaf and disabled people have often been ignored and that 20 years ago Manchester witnessed the first march in support of sign language.



Learning how to say the words 'people' and 'power' in sign language

Next on the list of problems from today was austerity. We were delivered to a song about 'Bankers total bankers' and how they caused the crash, but the rest of us had paid the price.

Then came a dramatic representation of the approach of the soldiers that fateful day 200 years ago. A choir sang of how the soldiers attacked anybody who was in the way regardless of who they were. We then all joined in with another song about the 60 000 at Peterloo.

Another burning issue covered was the injustice of asylum detention. A former detainee described how it was worse than prison, as those

incarcerated were innocent. We sang along with a song exclaiming "these walls must fall, shut down Yarl's Wood.."

Back to Peterloo, we heard the poignant story of a young girl killed at Peterloo, a pensioner killed, an unborn child killed...so many innocent victims. We then joined in with more communal singing, exclaiming "Sing, Sing, Sing, Liberty..."

Any visitor to Central Manchester cannot help but notice that the city has a terrible problem with homelessness. A homeless man told us of how homeless people are dying on the street in Manchester, while big new blocks are being built. Looking up he asked of those living in high rise luxury flats, "can you see me?.....Even the cranes look down on me.. "_

We were then told what the aftermath of Peterloo looked like. It was "like a battlefield" this is your day.. The message was "You took us unprepared...next day will be ours..."

Manchester is famous for many things, one of them being its gay village down near the canal. Two members of the LGBT community explained to us how it now costs £70 to be involved with Pride. They went on to exclaim to the organisers of Manchester Pride that "Pride is not for your profits, pride is for the people. Pride should be a protest..."

The event ended with the names of those killed at Peterloo were displayed one by one on the large screens with simple piano accompaniment...It was an appropriate ending to a moving experience.

The event was ambitious and covered a lot in just 45 minutes, but it was a success. It effectively and imaginatively told the story of Peterloo, while also reminding us of some of the many challenges we need to rise to today. At a time when there are over a million foodbank users a year in this country, when child poverty is pushing the six million mark and when we have unprecedented crises in vital areas such as education and the NHS, this was a timely reminder.

Mike Leigh describing the event in The Guardian on Tuesday 20th August had this to say:

“What if the folk at Peterloo, who were fighting for the vote, could time-travel to 2019? Would they not be appalled and disgusted by the fact that we have the vote, yet so many people don’t use it? Would they not be astonished at the deceit of Brexit? At how working-class people still starve two centuries after the iniquitous Corn Laws? That last year there were 1.6 million recipients of emergency food parcels in the UK, half of the contents going to children?”

It is over 90 years since the people of this country won the vote for all over-21s. But there still seems to be much unfinished business.



Flowers laid on the Peterloo Memorial in memory of the 18 innocent people killed at Peterloo

Peter Sagar August 2019