

**Durham Miners Heritage Group  
Information and Activities Package**

# **Teaching Notes**

## **The Birth of Trades Unions - Peterloo**

*The following three pages are not intended for Keystage 2 teaching, but are included as background information for the personal interest of those teaching this subject and possibly as material for class discussion. They recount an example of misunderstandings and external events beyond anyone's control influencing the lives of ordinary people and the subsequent course of history.*

**D**uring the early months of 1815 a dormant volcano in the Philippines, Tambora, started to erupt. By April the eruptions had become very large and violent indeed – at least ten times larger than the better known Krakatoa eruptions of 1883. The dust and gasses thrown into the upper atmosphere severely reduced the amount of sunlight reaching the Earth's surface worldwide. The global effects, a severe change in the weather worldwide, lasted for the next three years.

In Europe, 1816 became known as 'the year without a summer'. Harvests failed and famines set in. Many died. The price of grain soared. In Britain this came on top of an economy already ruined by 22 years of almost continuous war with France.

The obvious solution to the shortage of bread was to import cheaper corn, still available from overseas.

The ending of the war with France, which had effectively occurred in 1814, had seen a fall in the price of imported grain as global trade returned to something more like normality. British landowners, who dominated Parliament, recognised that the importing of cheap grain was reducing their potential income. Millers and bakers would find it much cheaper to import grain from the newly expanding prairies of the United States and Canada, from South America and from the Russian and Ukrainian steppes.

Starting in 1815, Parliament passed a series of Acts, which became known as The Corn Laws, either preventing the importing of foreign grain or levying high taxes on imported grain, until and unless the price of domestically produced grain fell below a certain figure, thus guaranteeing the income of British farmers and landowners. The Corn Laws restricting the import of grain came into effect at just the same time as domestic

harvests failed as a result of the Tambora eruption.

The ability of the working people of Britain to feed, clothe and house themselves declined considerably as the price of food soared. Discontent became increasingly emphatic and public disquiet more and more vociferous. A movement, as yet neither defined nor organised, began to emerge – a feeling that the ordinary working people of Britain should have some part in determining their conditions of their employment, their standards of housing, and how they were governed and taxed – a feeling antagonised by the imposition of the Corn Laws by a Parliament dominated by the land-owning classes; a Parliament made up of a ruling class and in which the ordinary masses of the people had no say and no influence.

During the years of war with Napoleonic France, people had been willing to accept as necessary for the security of the nation restrictions as to their freedom to speak openly about their conditions; restrictions as to their freedom to air their disquiet as to their treatment by their employers and by their government. However, by the middle of the second decade of the nineteenth century the war was long in the past and conditions rather than improving were proving to be even more trying than a decade before. Passive disquiet was starting to

emerge as public expressions of discontent.

On 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1819, a public meeting was held on the then outskirts of Manchester, an area known as St Peter's Field.

Two and a half years before a crowd of factory workers had met in the same place in an attempt to obtain a meeting with the Prince Regent in order to air the grievances of the ordinary working people. That they had been dealt with very brutally, and many subsequently sentenced to long prison sentences might have been taken as a forewarning of what would happen that August day. However, the meeting in March 1817 had been somewhat belligerent, unofficial, exclusively of working men and far smaller.

The meeting in August 1819 was intended to be entirely peaceful and was held with the prior consent of the magistrates, given freely and without objection well in advance. On this occasion the people came as families; husbands, sober and unarmed, with their wives and children, dressed in their best Sunday clothes with picnics.

The main speaker whom they came to hear was a famous orator, Henry Hunt. Renown for his public speaking skills, 'Orator' Hunt, although a wealthy Wiltshire landowner and farmer himself, was

then famous throughout Britain as a radical and formidable campaigner for the rights of the ordinary labouring people.

Hunt was to make a speech in which he would demand of the Government the repeal of the Corn Laws, that is to say, affordable bread for working peoples, and for the enfranchisement of all adult males, that is representation in Parliament, by and for the working peoples; in short, a vote for all working men. Women campaigned for their men folk, recognising that votes for women was at that time unrealistic.

What happened next was terrible, yet extremely well documented. The press, local and national, were present in large numbers, as were many impartial but well respected persons. It seems that the Manchester magistrates and dignitaries panicked at the size of the crowd that gathered, estimated to have been between 50 and 60 thousand. Perhaps with the memory of the Revolution in France in mind, then only a little over twenty years in the past, they ordered the Manchester Yeomanry, who were there together with regular soldiers to police the event, to disperse the crowd.

The Manchester Yeomanry were not regular soldiers but were part-time volunteers, with only rudimentary training and comprised largely local farmers, publicans, factory owners, and

their sons. The very people (perhaps with the exception of publicans) against whom the meeting was directed. Many of the Yeomanry were reported to have been unskilled and untrained in the use of the sabre as a flat edged, non-cutting weapon. Many were also drunk.

The exact figures will never be known, and were underreported in the official statements, but when the Yeomanry were finished around a some sixteen to eighteen of the crowd lay dead, and over six hundred wounded, many severely, by sabre cuts or under the hoofs of the horses of the Yeomanry.

The regular militia, also on duty, comprising well trained cavalry, many veterans of Waterloo, were appalled at what they witnessed, some later expressing their disgust publically.

Coming four years after the defeat of Napoleon's forces at Waterloo the events of that Monday afternoon were dubbed by the press 'The Peterloo Massacre'.

The reactions to Peterloo marked the start of the organised labour movement in Britain and the birth of class distinctions in British society as we understand them today. Prior to Peterloo *interests* had been represented in Parliament, rather than people. Prior to Peterloo, people's individual rights had rarely been

considered. Rather the interests of farmers, landowners, factory owners, manufactures had been represented. Peterloo brought into the forefront of representation individual people.

Representation of the individual would be continued to be campaigned for over the course of the next century. In 1832 Parliament passed a dismal Act in an attempt to appear to be appeasing the demands for a wider franchise of ordinary people. It was not until 1867, however, that the enfranchised of adult males in Britain significantly widened. Fifty two years later and one hundred years after Peterloo women in Britain over thirty years of age would join men in being able to take their seat in Parliament. Ten years later, all adults over the age of 21, irrespective of sex, would be given the vote.

The first 'western' nation to grant equal right to women with regards to voting and taking their seat if elected to Parliament was New Zealand, 11 years before the United Kingdom. (It is ironic to recall that for at least three extensive periods Britain has had a female Head of State that colluded to deny women seats in Parliament or the right to vote for their representative in Parliament.)

It was concomitant with the recognition of individual rights, with the recognition of the equal

rights of all, regardless of gender, class, creed or colour, that the Trades Union movement evolved to campaign and secure decent treatment and payment for and of those whom they represented.