The Risings of 1817

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Introduction

On the night of 8-9 June 1817 there took place two linked armed risings in Huddersfield and Sheffield, known as the Folly Hall and Pentridge risings. In each place there were gatherings of some three hundred people, who believed that they were part of a 'general rising' in which rebels in different towns would link together and set of a snowballing march on London, where they would be welcomed by other rebels who had secured the capital. In each place, smaller groups of men raided a few houses expecting to find arms, apparently convinced that they had to make a now-or-never choice of 'Death or Liberty'.[1] The arrest of all those present at a Yorkshire delegate meeting near Dewsbury on 6th June had lent urgency to both risings. And in both places, as in Dewsbury, the authorities had spies on the case and arrested the leading rebels, with three in Pentridge executed for the accidental murder of a domestic servant. The London delegate, William Oliver, who had travelled the region with Joseph Mitchell of Lancashire knitting together the conspirators and promising them metropolitan support, was exposed as a spy.

This mysterious tangle of risings has long fascinated students of working-class history, not least because of the strong connections between the rebel areas and the strongholds of Luddism a few years before. This links the campaign for a radical reform of parliament with wider resistance to the industrial revolution. It also appears to link wartime Luddites and trade unionists with post-war radicals and reformers through a tenacious underground of illegal militancy. It makes Luddism appear political and radicalism appear physically militant, offering a premature conjunction of the forces which in the Marxist formula are expected to generate revolution in a mature class society. E. P. Thompson wrote: 'We may see the Pentridge rising as one of the first attempts in history to mount a wholly proletarian insurrection, without any middle-class support.'[2] He believed that 'Even without Oliver's patent provocation, some kind of insurrection would probably have been attempted, and perhaps with a greater measure of success.' Brooke and Kipling broadly agree: 'The 1817 uprising reveals a high degree of amateurism and self deception amongst the insurgents, but they cannot be dismissed as mere dupes of Oliver.'[3]

This mention of Oliver the spy raises the big problem to get round: how much reliance to place on the evidence of spies and informers. Spies' reports, and correspondence between magistrates, military officers and Home Office officials who were all informed by these same reports reports, constitute the main body of sources for these events. Historians who are sceptical of insurrection and revolution have less of a problem here: the claims of Oliver and his like can be

dismissed as fabrications designed to entrap reformers. The scenario which results is consistent with itself, and with the indignant of their supporters claims that honest radicals had been entangled in plans of dark forces. Ironically it is radical historians who are most reliant on the claims of spies; the risings of 1817 may, as E P Thompson wrote, have been unaided by middle-class allies but they were certainly aided by middle-class opponents. The influence of spies can be hard to distinguish from the often melodramatic language of the radicals themselves. In Lancashire at least spies often operated in pairs, and even a small secret meeting might be attended by three spies, one of them completely unknown to the others. So even when spies' reports of insurrectionary speeches are corroborated by each other and by other witnesses, they may only be reporting the words of other spies acting as *agents provocateurs*. What started out as an attempt to assess the character of a popular movement turns into a game of smoke and mirrors.

It has become possible to take a longer, more careful view of the source materials because of a British Academy funded pilot to digitise and catalogue a sample section of the Home Office disturbances papers in the National Archives, the sample chosen being 1816-17.[4] Volunteer transcribers, gathered originally at workshops associated with the Peterloo Witness Project and the Manchester Histories Festivals, have helped put many of the key items online, with more to follow.[5] With care, spies and informers can be identified and tracked, evidence sifted, and the words and actions of radical conspirators distinguished from those of the infiltrators among them. This work in progress is too detailed for a single lecture. Rather, I am going to try and outflank these issues by looking not at this or that local episode of armed unrest but at the wider picture, from the broadly-based campaign to petition parliament for reform led by the London Hampden Club in 1816-17, through the Spa Fields meetings in London, and the attempted marches of the Manchester 'Blanketeers' to London on 10 March 1817, the abortive Manchester rising at the end of March, to the risings at Folly Hall in Huddersfield and Pentridge in area of Debryshire close to Sheffield in early June 1817. My argument is that these constituted a continuum of linked campaigns, from petitioning to armed rebellion, linked by a common sense of reclaiming democratic rights backed by the constitutional right to resist. As each attempt is successfully blocked by government, practical support for the next radical step gradually diminishes until we end up with underground conspiracies. One phrase allegedly used at the house of George Dawson of Folly Hall sums up the connections: 'Petitioning was of no use and therefore there was a plan formed to overthrow the present system of government.' The wooden phrase about overthrowing the present system of government sounds like a spy's formulation, but the reported sense of frustration with the failure of petitioning was certainly an important force behind the risings of 1817.

From Westminster Hall to Folly Hall: the campaigns of 1816-17

The central figure in the petitioning campaign of 1816-17 was Major John Cartwright, now a member of the exclusive London Hampden Club, whose criteria for membership included the ownership of property worth £300 a year and willingness to pay a subscription amounting to several weeks' wages for a working man. A veteran constitutionalist, Cartwright had supported the American colonists in their struggle for

'no taxation without representation', and his motto was 'hold fast by the laws'. He believed that there had been an Anglo-Saxon democracy in England which had been destroyed by the invading Normans, and that Magna Carta in 1215 had seen these ancient rights partly restored by the barons' revolt against King John. He has organised a public meeting in Palace Yard on 600th anniversary on 15 June 1815, and his plan for a reformed parliament included annual elections on 15 June. Like Tony Benn he became more radical in old age, and more willing to mobilise the masses. His 1812 and 1813 tours of the districts affected by Luddism, setting up local Hampden Clubs and Union Societies to turn the agitation into non-violent political channels, are well-known, but the societies were short-lived. In July 1816 however a general meeting of the Hampden Club resolved to embark on a petitioning campaign for parliamentary reform, and this was followed by the establishment of a further round of local societies; dozens were founded in Lancashire & Yorkshire in the summer of 1816.

'Old Cartwright has got his agents at work', wrote John Lloyd, the over-active clerk to the Stockport magistrates in September, 'low men who are flattered by a correspondence with a man they consider of consequence.'[6] Manchester Union Society was founded at a public meeting on 28 October 1816, and a membership ticket survives – probably one purchased by a spy. The campaign began with shadow boxing over the requisitioning of local meetings, as local activists requested the magistrates to hold a formal town meeting to discuss the distress affecting the area and then went ahead and organised their own when the magistrates refused. As the radical weaver Elijah Dixon later explained: ''A Number of us considered a Parliamentary Reform was highly necessary therefore we signified the same to the Public & desired the Boroughreeve to call a Meeting to Petition Parliament for a Reform and some Redress for the Grievances … seeing no People of Property came forward they declined having anything to do with it, so … we thought it high time for something to be done.' [7] What we would now call democratic legitimacy here came from both the high numbers of householder requesting the meeting and from the failure of the authorities to act. Manchester Union Society was formed at a public meeting which in effect claimed to be more representative than the authorities (in Manchester's case, the court leet, the parish and the quarter sessions).

On 2 Nov 1816 the London Hampden Club made a further decision:
to draft a bill for parliamentary reform, which draft was
to be also submitted to a 'Meeting of Persons who may be deputed from Petitioning Cities, Towns, or other Communities, to Confer Together in the Metropolis … before it be finally submitted to Parliament.'[8] The following day William Cobbett, another Hampden Club member, published his ambitious, and seditiously-titled, address 'TO THE JOURNEYMEN AND LABOURERS OF ENGLAND WALES, SCOTLAND, AND IRELAND'. As editorial material detached from his stamped newspaper the *Political register* it could be sold without the expensive newspaper stamp duty, bringing the price within reach of working people. Cobbett argued that what the conservative commentator Edmund Burke had dismissed as the 'swinish multitude' had fought for country, and paid taxes indirectly on soap, candles, malt (beer), and even in practice corn through the operation of the corn laws or 'bread tax'. Cobbett advised his readers: 'Any man can draw up a petition, and any man can carry it up to London.'[9]

Cobbett's famous manifesto was slightly preceded by another, from Lancashire: *An Address to the People,* published as a pamphlet around the beginning of October 1816 by its author, Joseph Mitchell of Liverpool, the Lancashire agent (with William Benbow) for Cobbett's *Political Register*.

Mitchell's *Address* quickly came to the attention of the Home Office, who noted that it was also circulating in Manchester, where Mitchell was an associate of the radical *Manchester Observer.* Most of the pamphlet consisted of a long, melodramatic address to the Prince Regent denouncing the suffering of the country and urging him to do his royal duty and install a reforming government – exactly the public aim of the 'Blanketeers' who attempted to March from Manchester to London in March 1817.[10]

Two mass meetings reform addressed by Orator Henry Hunt at Spa Fields, in London pushed the petitioning process further. The first meeting, on 15 November 1816, resolved to petition the Prince Regent to recall parliament to deal with distress. Cartwright & Burdett sought to arrange a meeting with the Prince Regent but were told it was impossible to see the Prince Regent before 2 March. The second meeting, on 2 December, resolved instead to present a national petition for reform at the opening of parliament, expected on 28 January 1817, and then adjourned until 10 February to hear the results of their petition.

So far the story has been a constitutional one, of lawful petitioning. But in parallel a more militant movement which had no faith in petitioning had taken root in the tavern underworld of London. The Spa Fields meetings were organised by a group of ultra-radicals who followed the teachings of Thomas Spence, who believed in equality through land nationalisation. (The group would meet its end with the execution of several of its members in a plot to assassinate the cabinet in 1820, the Cato Street conspiracy). Before the start of the second Spa Fields meeting two young members of the group led some of those assembled off through the east end of London in an unauthorised move to seize weapons from gunshops and capture the Tower of London – an English storming of the Bastile. The main body of the London ultras realised that they would need much greater numbers to set off a rising. Their plans for the next few months was to support any venture which offered to bring large numbers of provincial reformers to London. It didn't matter that they came to petition either parliament or the Prince Regent, measures in which the ultras had no faith, because they were sure to be disappointed, giving them an angry crowd which they could work with. How do we know all this? Because the meetings of the London ultras were completely penetrated by spies who sent detailed reports of every meeting to the Home Office within hours. The London group in turn were in touch with the Lancashire radicals through Joseph Mitchell, who had come to London in November to liaise with Cartwright and the Hampden Club over the petitioning campaign, but who naturally fell in with the tavern society of the Spenceans. News of the expected Spa Fields rising was eagerly awaited by some in Lancashire. The Home Office's Oldham correspondent, Captain Chippendale of the Oldham Local Militia, wrote:

> On Wednesday last [4 Dec.] Intelligence reached this Neighbourhood of the Disturbances that arose out of the Spa Fields meeting in London … Amongst other things it was reported that the Bank was destroyed and the Tower surrendered to the Insurgents … My agent … who was sent in the direction of Manchester found the Road crowded with Groups of people all the way. About midnight they began to draw towards Manchester for the Purpose of learning the news brought by the Mail. … When the news was not confirmed their disappointment was extreme.

It was this sort of scenario that the Folly Hall and Pentridge conspirators must have had in mind the following spring.[11]

Meetings in Middleton and Manchester on 9-10 December met to hear the news from London, and resolved to support the call by the Spa Fields meeting for a bill to presented at the opening of parliament. The poster advertising the Middleton meeting set out the rationale. It rejected the politics of the 'soup kettle', a reference to the Prince Regent's donation of £4,000 of emergency food relief. At the same time it cited hunger as the reason for urgent action, recalling the food rioters' motto of 'We'd rather be hanged than starved'.[12] John Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions* (Ashgate, 2010), 224. It declared publicly that this was a final notice – the people would petition 'Once more', the implication being that action would follow. The meeting also received a letter from John Cartwright for the London Hampden Club requesting that one in ten of their local members should accompany petition to London, prefiguring the march of the Blanketeers .[13]

In response to pressure the London Hampden Club changed its plan. The reform bill was now to be presented at the opening of parliament late Jan 1817, accompanied by petitions from all over the country. There would be a national delegate meeting at the Crown & Anchor Inn on the Strand in London on 22 January to decide the terms of the bill. The Hampden Club's constitutional strategy was now on the same track with the strategy of the London Spencean revolutionaries, focused around a mass petitioning campaign for a parliamentary reform bill which the Hampden Club hoped would succeed and which the Spenceans expected to fail and so sanction more militant activity.

Signatures on the Hampden Club petition were gathered all over the country but particularly in the north-west. A delegate meeting held at Middleton, north of Manchester, on 16 December resolved 'That the increasing wretchedness of our Condition has rendered it absolutely necessary to send out Missionaries into all parts of the United Kingdom where the Nature & Cause of our Distress has not been publicly asserted & its Remedy insisted on.'[14] As the image shows, the London Hampden Club petition was an innovative document. Its preamble and prayer (or demand for action) were in the traditional form of a petition to parliament, but were followed by blank ruled columns below in which people could sign as citizens, without being required to justify their demand by reference to their address, status, title or property. The petitioning campaign was accompanied by the a series of open-air public meetings, in Manchester, Middleton, Oldham and other places in the north-west which declared in favour of manhood suffrage ("representation co-extensive with taxation"), selected their delegates to the London meeting on 22 January, and adjourned until 10 February 1817.

At the London delegate meeting William Cobbett initially sat on the fence, doubting the practicability of creating a new electoral register but was persuaded by the Middleton delegate Samuel Bamford that the militia rolls could serve as electoral register.

The reform bill was presented to the House of Commons by the popular naval commander Lord Cochrane on 29 January. Cochrane sought to have the petitions read one by one but noise prevented the first from being heard. Eight were introduced – one large one from Bristol (15,700 signatures), and seven from the Oldham area. Three were accepted 'to lie on the table', 4 were rejected,

and one withdrawn. There were over 500 local petitions for reform in all. Nearly al were refused on various technical grounds: signatures not verifiable as coming from places claimed, text and signatures on different pieces of paper, printed text, and above all insulting and unparliamentary language. The Chancellor of Exchequer complained that the petition from the township of Quick in Saddleworth 'presented a direct libel-a gross attack upon the privileges, the conduct and character of that House.' George Canning insisted that 'to assert, that the constitution had been subverted … was no longer the language of petition; it was a direct excitement to rebellion.' Cochrane demurred: 'It was … by no means proper for them to cavil about the mere form or construction of words, but to receive the petitions of the people, as thus only could the sense of the country be known. William Cobbett claimed (with some exaggeration) that some 1½ million signatures had been rejected – several times the entire parliamentary electorate. The lesson that could be drawn was that petitioning for democracy had become constitutionally inadmissible.

Public outdoor meetings of inhabitants of towns all over Lancashire, adjourned from December and January, reconvened on 10 February to formally hear the results of their petitions to parliament. This was the same date as the third, reconvened Spa Fields meeting. There was clearly co-ordination between the London ultra-radicals and the provincial leaders, the go-betweens being William Benbow and Joseph Mitchell. The tactic of simultaneous meetings across the country came from the London ultras, who believed (correctly) that the limited military forces in the north of England would be too thinly stretched to provide effective policing if simultaneous unrest were planned. Troops stood by – but all passed off peacefully for there was as yet no second-stage plan. However, speakers at several of the regular indoor meetings held in Manchester had already been rehearsing the arguments. At one in Manchester on 3 Feb William Benbow spoke from the chair.

> You must be firm and unanimous and petition them again & again until the Nation is all in one Mind & then they will not dare to refuse us … Every 20 of you to sign a separate petition & 10 out of every 20 may carry their own petition up to London. You may do this without asking leave of the magistrates then when there are five hundred thousand men in London will 5 or 6 hundred dare to refuse you? No – if they do we will annihilate them – I mean (checking himself) bring them to order… you may arm yourselves according to your rank & station with Weapons for your own defence.[15]

Benbow had been in London in contact with Major Cartwright, and the idea of petitions of 20 accompanied by ten of the signatories was Cartwright's. 1661 Act Against Tumultuous Petitioning, at Restoration of Charles II, had restricted the scale of petitions to parliament in order to prevent the kind of mob-handed petitioning that had helped to fuel the star of the civil wars twenty years before. But no limit to the number of separate 20-name petitions that could be submitted, each accompanied by up to ten of the signatories.

Benbow at this stage talked of petitioning again, but the view quickly took hold that more fervent petitioning was not enough. A week later the radical

London paper the *Black Dwarf* carried a spirited 'I told you so' piece which urged instead the next step was remonstration to the throne, backed by force.

> Bravo! John Bull! Bravo. You have the right of petitioning, have you? …
> They want *respectful* petitions … [and] you may use your *right of petitioning* as frequently as you please… … Then it is moved, … that it do lie *on* the table. … But … the proper time never comes, and your grievances are never redressed. … while you possess the right of petitioning, and they possess the right of neglecting your petitions, it is just the same thing as if you had no right at all.
> … was James *petitioned* to abdicate his throne? Or was William *petitioned* to accept the Bill of Rights? No! no! the *right of petitioning* with your ancestors meant the right of laying their grievances before the *highest authority*, and demanding, or ENFORCING an attention to their wrongs.[16]

The references were to the Glorious Revolution of 1688-9, when the autocratic Catholic monarch James II had been overthrown in England without a fight (although amid rioting, with the armed forces of William of Orange having landed in the country). William and Mary, as part of the coronation ceremony, were then required to give assent to Bill of Rights before taking office, creating an enduring constitutional monarchy. The Bill of Rights guaranteed the right of petitioning the throne, without restriction, but not parliament. The 1661 Act Against Tumultuous Petitioning guaranteed the right to petition parliament, but in a restricted form. It was also widely (but wrongly) believed that Magna Carta guaranteed the right to petition the crown. The rebuilt Palace of Westminster after the 1834 fire included in the public St Stephen's Hall a wall painting with the caption: 'King John confronted by his Barons assembled in force at Runnymede does willingly assent to Magna Carta the foundation of justice and freedom in England 1215.' In the radicals' next step, the people were to play role of the barons.

The Manchester meeting reconvened at St Peter's Field on 3 March 1817, when a crowd of 5,000 endorsed the next step: a march to London to petition, or remonstrate with, the Prince Regent over the head of parliament. The date was set for the following Monday, 10 March 1817. At an indoor meeting on 6 March Manchester, John Johnston assured people: 'If your leaders can get you through a few towns, you are sure of Hosts of recruits. If we could get you as far as Birmingham, the whole would be done, for I have no doubt you will be one hundred thousand strong. Then, Gentlemen, it would amount to an impossibility to bring any thing to resist you (loud cheers).'[17] As early as mid-January the young orator John Bagguley, after a drinking session following a meeting in Eccles, had confided in the spy Peter Campbell what the real plan was.

> Campbell said you are well aware, Baguley that Parliament will not grant your petition – I know that said Baguley but all the multitude who join us are not to know that secret. Said Campbell how shall we manage when our petition is rejected – we have not an organiz'd body – Baguley said three fourths of us are already organiz'd for we have been in the Militia in Volunteer Corps & in the regular Army. Said Campbell where are your

> arms? Answer – Independent of the depot in Chester there are 3 places in Manchester where we can procure them; & from our brothers in Sheffield we can get any quantity as well as from Birmingham where we have friends in great numbers…[18]

The plan was fantasy, but the model appeared credible. A few days before it Habeas Corpus suspended, allowing internment without trial, and a number of leaders were arrested. Nonetheless on 10 March 10,000 people gathered to see the march to London set off. Copies of the petition which they carried survive in the Home Office papers, both in the printed version and examples copied out by hand, showing the constitutional twenty names in two groups of ten, with one man marked as the group leader. Whereas the Hampden Club petition had emphasised unconstitutional and excessive taxation as the prime reason for parliamentary reform, the Manchester petition emphasised economic distress, with the implication that forcible resistance would be justified if complaints were not heeded. The Prince Regent was asked to dismiss his ministers and bring in a reform ministry, with hints that his throne would lose its legitimacy if he refused. The constitutionalist character of the petition was essential in this respect; rejection would then legitimate forceful mass action. John Bagguley, more guarded in public, explained the plan to a meeting on 8 March:

> Now you are to class in tens, but 20 of your Neighbours must connect yourselves and write out your Petitions and you all must sign it – and 10 of you must go with it to the Prince Regent. After it is Signed you must wrap it up in a piece of Brown Paper and tie it round your right Arm with a bow of white tape and come with your things on your back with your 10th Man being the chosen Man with the Petition on his right Arm … and if any disorderly Person makes his way amongst you, stick close together and shoulder him out, for we will have nothing but order and regularity.[19]

The marchers formed up in tens, but a regiment of horse surrounded hustings and arrested 27 people including the speakers, Bagguley & Drummond. More were arrested on the way to Stockport, and more in Stockport, Macclesfield and Ashbourne – some 270 in all.

Those arrested were largely young adult males, unemployed and with little to lose, credulous about promises of food, money and shelter along the way. Only a minority had the knapsacks and blankets recommended to them for the jounrey, which gave the marchers the title of 'Blanketeers'. The map on Katrina Navickas's website, www. http://protesthistory.org.uk/, shows how most of them came not from a distance (like the Peterloo victims) but from working-class areas north and east of the city centre centring on New Cross, also the centre of political unrest in the post-war years. When 18 of the would-be marchers – nearly all of them young unemployed men with nothing to lose – were examined, none showed any sophisticated awareness of constitutional issues or the political process. Asked 'What did you go for?', 8 mentioned petitioning or 'Petitioning the Prince Regent'. Asked 'What were you petitioning for?', two mentioned 'reform of parliament' or 'radical reform of parliament', and one said 'I was petitioning against the Suspension of the Habius Corpus Act'. None mentioned 'remonstration'. Nearly all who gave a reason mentioned

economic distress. Once again we get the sense that distress was felt to trump all, recalling again the rationale of the food rioters, 'rather be hanged than starved'.[20]

The next day, 11 March, delegates appeared in Oldham and Middleton seeking support for a plan to attack Manchester. As it emerged the aim was essentially to repeat the march of the Blanketeers as conspiracy. The activists would gather supporters from the surrounding countryside by firing a rocket, set fire to public buildings and factories to divert police and troops, raid police the station and barracks for guns, & gather together crowd in centre and defend it as it set off towards London. The rhetoric was similar, with the familiar claim that if it could only get away safely the march would be tens of thousands strong by morning. In Middleton Bamford gathered witnesses, had the agent repeat his proposal, then denounced it as the work of spies, man a dupe. But others did follow. The key man in this plan for a Manchester rising was Joseph Mitchell. George Bradbury, questioned by the Privy Council on 16 & 22 April 1817, described Mitchell as the agent of the London Hampden Club leaders, a printer and a distributor of Cobbett's Political Register by which he made part of his living: ''He is a fresh coloured man, broadish set about 5ft 6 or 7.'[21] Mitchell had been in London in November and early December around the time of the Spa Fields meetings. He was in Manchester again by 10 December, where the Oldham militia captain William Chippendale's spy number 2 met him. Chippendale wrote:

> No. 2's Exertions & usefulness increase every Day indeed every hour. He has wormed himself completely into their confidence. <u>On Saturday he is to dine with Mitchell</u> and a confidential party … Mitchell was in London. … He is now in Manchester. He is a sort of Chief for the whole of this part of the country. No. 2 is to be particularly introduced to him and recommended to his particular Friendship & Confidence.[22]

Mitchell was one of the missionaries appointed at the Middleton delegate meeting on 16 December. He and William Benbow were supposed to travel as a pair, but seems that Benbow went to London and Mitchell (who had objected to another proposed companion) pursued his own route which included Yorkshire, where he was said to have a relation. He was allowed to take with him £5 of the reformers' very scarce funds. He was back by mid-January, where he appears in a report on a meeting in Manchester by the reliable spy Peter Campbell: '…a very numerous body was collected when Mitchell the famous Liverpool Orator was holding forth and telling his audience about the progress of his Missions thro' Yorkshire Staffordshire Warwickshire & Shropshire, said everything was going on well in these counties, better than he could have conceived.' He was elected a delegate to the Crown and Anchor meeting in London, and in the days afterwards he accompanied Samuel Bamford on a tour of the capital's ultra-radical haunts. At one pub they heard an account of the attempt to storm the Tower of London the previous month. On another occasion they visited Knightsbridge barracks to look up an old friend of Bamford's, a veteran of the Peninsular war and now a colour sergeant. Their casual distribution of radical propaganda among the troops would have been a capital offence under legislation passed not long afterwards.[23]

Mitchell played a leading role in promoting the Blanketeers' expedition, although when Habeas Corpus was suspended he went to ground for a time and reappeared making more cautious noises. The Manchester rising which followed was prepared at two secret meetings, one on Monday 17 March at the Rose Tavern, Chadderton, and the other on 24th at the house of one John Lancashire in Middleton. Mitchell was not at either but seems to have gone to London once more to act as go-between. The London radical press offered targeted encouragement to the Manchester rebels and sought to prepare London radicals to receive them. On 26 March, just before the still-secret date of the Manchester rising, the *Black Dwarf* printed extracts from Southey's play *Wat Tyler,* to be followed by *The Republican* on 29th. Southey had written *Wat Tyler* while still a youthful reformer; now, as a Tory and Poet Laureate its publication caused him severe embarrassment. *Wat Tyler* gloried in the achievements of the 'Peasants' Revolt' of 1383 in briefly forcing Richard II to make concessions to an army of rebels which had occupied London.[24] It included this piece of dialogue, which reflected exactly the position of the Manchester radicals.

> KING. Was this the way
> To remedy the ill? – you should have tried
> By milder means – petition'd at the throne –
> The throne will always listen to petitions.
>
> TYLER. King of England,
> *Petitioning for pity* is most weak,
> The sovereign people ought to *demand* justice….
> The hour of retribution is at hand,
> And tyrants tremble – mark me, King of England.

The plot came to nothing, for every stage of it was closely monitored by spies, who seem to have egged on the wilder spirits. On Friday 28 March the core conspirators were arrested in the Royal Oak inn, Ardwick, on the outskirts of central Manchester. Other radicals (including Samuel Bamford) were rounded up in the next few days, sent to London for questioning by Privy Council, and mostly interned until end of year. On Sunday 30 March, the intended day of the rising, all was quiet.

The same plan however had been spread to other places, possibly through the agency of Mitchell. In the later part of March a delegate from Nottingham was reported to be in Manchester canvassing support for an organization of delegates from Lancashire, Yorkshire, Nottingham, Derbyshire, Leicestershire & Warwickshire for some unspecified design, presumed by informants to be 'revolution'.[25] In early April the spy 'AB' reported: 'Mr Mitchell was at Oldham last week, and that he had offered to attack Manchester if they would furnish him with 5000 men, and that he would take the town or lose his life in the attempt, but as no person seconded this measure he sold a watch that cost him £15 for £10 and got some money in that he had owing him for pamphlets with which it is supposed he is gone to America.'[26] But Mitchell had gone not to America (that appears to have been the intention of Benbow, who was arrested in Dublin) but back to London. He had survived two waves of arrests and was a marked man.

At this point the story of the Huddersfield and Pentridge risings begins. In London in early April Mitchell was introduced to Edward Pendrill, a London

ultra-radical who had recently been turned by the government and was now an informer. Pendrill introduced him to one William Oliver, a government undercover agent. The plan was hatched for Mitchell and Oliver to tour the north of England to gain support for an armed rising while others in London made plans to receive the rebels. Oliver's narrative allows us to his connections with Mitchell and with Lancashire.[27] In early May Oliver and Mitchell visited Mitchell's native Liverpool. On Sat 3 May Oliver and Mitchell met the wife of John Knight, the veteran Oldham reformer now interned, and various of Knight's friends in Manchester: 'They now gave me to understand that they could not depend upon each other at Manchester, being generally so treacherous, and gave up all hopes of any good being done by the People.'[28] They then crossed to Yorkshire. On 7 May Mitchell was arrested at Huddersfield by magistrates who were not aware of the use the Home Office was making of him. He was brought to Manchester, then London, where he was examined with 4 others. His pockets were emptied, providing a remarkable collection of printed radical ephemera, receipts, and even a letter to Oliver about his laundry (see illustration).[29] On 20 May Mitchell was committed for High Treason and held without trial until Jan 1818 when he was released with the rest on the expiration of emergency powers.

Oliver was left to travel alone. At the end of May Oliver back in Manchester with Whitworth & friends. 2 delegates from Nottingham ("Old Bacon") & Leicester there but failed miserably in attempt to stir up people at the races. Oliver: 'On my return to Manchester I found they were actively watched by the Magistrates, and Mr Whitworth said he was sure they had no chance in that place of ever attempting at Reform any more, for he now considered them all in Fetters at present.' Manchester had had its attempted rising and was now suspicious of roving delegates with assurances of rebellion elsewhere. Huddersfield and Pentridge, without such experience but aware that risings had genuinely been in Manchester & London, went ahead. Oliver himself was exposed in June 1817, but this did not save the Pentridge rebels from execution.

Oliver was a spy. But was Mitchell? He had taken part in the radical campaigns of 1818 and 1819 in Lancashire and was at Peterloo. When a Yorkshire county magistrate was held at York on 18 October 1819 to consider petitioning the Prince Regent for an inquiry into Peterloo, Mitchell attended to relate his own experiences and to denounce the proposal to petition the Prince Regent. The editor of the *Leeds Mercury,* Edward Baines, accused him from the platform of being 'an agent of Government, employed to do injury to the cause of the People.' There were cries of *'down with him!'* from the crowd, at which Mitchell 'looked dreadfuly confused' and left the platform.[30] Soon afterwards he started a periodical, *The Blanketteer*, to clear his name, but his reputation never recovered.[31] Bamford however wrote: 'had he been a spy, he would not have been left to struggle with poverty and disgrace in England, but would have been removed, and provided for, as Oliver was. HAD HE BEEN A SPY HE WOULD HAVE BETRAYED THOSE WHO NEVER WERE BETRAYED.'[32] Bamford meant himself. Mitchell, he concluded, as 'the blind instrument', Oliver 'the intelligent agent who directed'. Other agents' reports bear this out. In early January 1819 William Chippendale's agent No. 2 encountered Mitchell at a meeting in Failsworth as the cause of reform began to revive: 'Mitchell went through his old justification as to being in company with Oliver but Kent gave him the Lie to his face and he never will get rid of the odiom [sic] for Wroe said that if he appeared on the stage at

Manchester he would be put off.' Mitchell went through his old justification as to being in company with Oliver but Kent gave him the Lie to his face and he never will get rid of the odiom [sic] for Wroe said that if he appeared on the stage at Manchester he would be put off.[33]
A pathetic letter from Mitchell to the Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth in February 1822, in an unexpected corner of the Home Office papers, bears out Bamford's judgement.

> My Lord, at the time the charge was made I laughed at it, nor did I consider myself in danger, till I found myself actually in the depth of the cannal [sic] which runs from Leeds to Liverpool, where I had been thrown by a party who had waylaid me in the night, & where (when in the water) I had large stones heaped upon me, & which only by miricle [sic] escaped putting and end to my sufferings. I… rather chose to fly that part of the country than appeal to any power but my conduct to establish my innocence. But threats still followed me, and in almost every breath whispers so assailed me, that it was in vain I attempted to do the least good for my family. Implyoment I could not get, nor business of any kind could I embark in with the slightest success. … in vain I sought privacy, for … I was followed by circular letters, my business destroyed, & in several places, myself publicly pointed out, abused as a spy & an injurer, (under the implyment of government), of the people, & assaulted.
>
> I should not have troubled your Lordship, was I not totally deprived of my last friend, & had my only employment & means of procuring bread for my family – a family of seven small children – completely withdrawn from me, & no chance of me being able to get it restored, unless I can procure from some ifficient [sic] source, a proof that I have not been in the employment of Government either as a spy, or any other capacity whatever. [34]

S0, we can be sure that Mitchell was not a spy, and therefore that the risings which he and Oliver sought to instigate, however much Oliver may have contributed, were genuine. Mitchell's involvement, taken alongside the wider context, indicates a continuum of radical activity in 1816-17, seamlessly proceeding from the constitutionalist parliamentary agitation of the elite London Hampden Club, through the half-constitutional, half-insurgent march of the Manchester Blanketeers, to the increasingly isolated and hopeless risings which followed its failure.

Conclusions

This examination of the context for the risings of 1817 has, I hope, moved the agenda on from the older arguments about the quality and level of 'revolutionary' commitment on the part of the rebels. There were plenty of home-grown justifications for popular resistance to unconstitutional behaviour by government for us not to need to resort to comparisons with the French revolution or to those exercises in the dreary theology of class struggle which sucked much of the life out of the subject in the 1970s. As E P Thompson and Gwyn Williams both recognised 50 years ago, the English tradition of the

constitutional right to resist (not to mention the right of the citizen to bear arms in his own defence, which remained unchallenged into the Victorian period), and the rich heritage of artisan politics, provided the essential context for post-war radicalism.[35] The language of universal rights as articulated by Thomas Paine spread rapidly and widely in England's historically fertile soil. But when looking for a concrete rationale for resistance, and still more a practical plan to bring about constitutional change through popular pressure, Paine had nothing to say. Indeed, the massacres and terror of 1792 the French revolution merely provided a horrible example which nearly killed off not only Paine himself the but English radical movement which it had initially stimulated.

Even less productive is the quest for a class-conscious revolutionary movement on Marxist model. The Marxist emphasis on equating revolutionary intent with the factory-based working class in the 'mature' stages of the industrial revolution has led, ironically, to the more serious rebellions of the post-war years being discounted as premature and half-baked.[36] Home-grown constitutionalism contained within itself a rationale for citizen resistance with far greater popular appeal and (though it failed in the short term) far greater potential for secure and lasting reform than any supposedly 'progressive' revolutionary creed. It is worth remarking too that this was a specifically *English* constitutionalism, in tacit opposition to the loyalist British identity which Linda Colley has, with general (if not universal) consent, identified as the strongest political movement of the era of the French and Napoleonic wars.[37]

One final observation. E P Thompson's identification of an underground revolutionary tradition perforce shared by Luddites and radicals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has provoked a great deal of debate. It has not suffered as much as it might from the careful John Dinwiddy's identification of the Yorkshire 'Black Lamp' organisation as a palaeographical mistake.[38] It is worth asking how much the events of 1817 in Yorkshire and Derbyshire owed to the Luddite experience of five years earlier. The details of place and personnel are beyond the scope of this lecture, but the form is suggestive. The experience of Luddism must have made the expectations of contact with other risings in Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire – the other main Luddite centres – credible. The willingness to find weapons and use physical force, more so than in Lancashire, also echoes Luddism. The Huddersfield and Pentridge risings both began with house-to-house searches for useable weapons on the Luddite model, and involved moorland gatherings and manoeuvres at night also familiar from those years. In Manchester by contrast the plan was for an attack on the city followed by a rapid march to the capital, both of which lacked credibility. It is also worth remembering that the Luddism of 1812 was also closely associated with foods riots, in both Yorkshire and Manchester. In both places, hunger was pressed by the radicals and widely accepted by the populace to legitimate desperate action. Perhaps, as Thompson, Bohstedt and Navickas have all suggested in different ways, we can look to food riots not only for a fading ideology of moral economy and crowd action but for an important strand of popular politics. It is perhaps in this, after all, that the English radical experience most matches that of the French revolution.[39]

While they may have taken root in the landscape of the early industrial revolution, the attempted risings that took place in Lancashire, Yorkshire and

Derbyshire in the Spring of 1817 were political actions for parliamentary reform. The rich materials available locally need to be put alongside the now more easily available Home Office material for 1816-17 to gain a fuller picture of what happened at Folly Bridge and Pentridge. It's going to be an interesting bicentenary.

This article is lightly referenced, limiting references mainly to direct quotations. A fuller picture should be available in my forthcoming book *Peterloo: the English Uprising* (expected 2018).

[1] Alan Brooke and Lesley Kipling, *Liberty or Death: Radicals, Republicans and Luddites*, 2nd edn (2012).

[2] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin edn, 1968), p. 733.

[3] Brooke & Kipling, *Liberty or Death* p.87.

[4] British Academy Small Research Grant SG 130774 'The English Reform Movement of 1816-17: Understanding the Home Office disturbances papers'. The project took digital images of a sample section of papers in the National Archives, HO 42/153-174 and HO 40 3-10. Some of the HO 42 material has been catalogued in detail and all of the HO 40 material has been catalogued in outline on the National Archives website. The images themselves are not available online but can be made available to researchers. Much of the Pentridge material is in HO 42/167, with further material in HO 40/9. Contact RPoole@uclan.ac.uk or k.navickas@herts.ac.uk

[5] See the Peterloo Witness Project website http://peterloowitness1819.weebly.com/

[6] HO 42/153 f. 353 Lloyd to Beckett 18 Sept 1816.

[7] HO 40/5/4a (Manchester Papers no. 8) fol. 1338. Anonymous report, 'Speeches – March 6th – Johnson, Baguley & Mitchell.'

[8] HO 40/3 Part 2, Item 6, fols 784-7. Enclosure with Fletcher's of 23 Nov. 1816. Knight's letter, 77 Hanover St, 21 Nov 1816, to Kay, as copied by AB and addressed to Capt. Warr.

[9] These events are dealt with in an earlier essay, 'French revolution or peasants' revolt? Petitioners and rebels from the Blanketeers to the Chartists', *Labour History Review* 74, 1 (April 2009).

[10] HO 42/153 fols. 376-82; HO 40/9 part 3, item 139.

[11] HO 40/3 Part 1 fol. 702 'XY' (William Chippendale), Oldham, to Byng, 7 Dec. 1816.

[12] John Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions* (Ashgate, 2010), 224.

[13] HO 42/158 fols 164-5. List of 'Papers respecting the Hampden Clubs'; HO40/3 Part 2, 805, 808-9: Chippendale to Fletcher, Oldham Dec. 19th 1816.

[14] HO40/3 Part 2 fols 808-9; HO40/3 Part 1 f. 760 Report of meeting at Wellington Garratt, Tuesday evening 17 Dec. 1816.

[15] HO 42 159 f. 28. Information of Sergeant John Oldham before Ethelston 8 Feb 1817

[16] 'The right of petition', *Black Dwarf* 12 Feb. 1817.

[17] HO 40/5/4a (Manchester Papers no. 11) fol. 1350. Deposition of John Livesey of Manchester, 7 March 1817.

[18] HO 42/158 f. 55-6, Peter Campbell's report, enclosure with Ethelston's of 16 Jan 1817.

[19] HO 40/5/4a (Manchester Papers no. 8) fol. 1338. Anonymous report.

[20] The blanketeers material can be found principally in HO 42/162, 164 and 172, with fair copies of correspondence in HO 40/5/4. Transcripts of some of this material can be found at the Peterloo Witness Project website (in progress), http://peterloowitness1819.weebly.com/

[21] HO 41/27.

[22] HO 40/3 Part 1 fol. 726 [90],. Chippendale to 'Joseph Warren' (Ralph Fletcher), Manchester, 12 Dec. 1816.

[23] Samuel Bamford, *PLR* (1839-40), ch.5.

[24] Robert Poole, '"To the last drop of my blood": politics and melodrama in early nineteenth-century England', in *Performance, Politics and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-century Britain* ed. Kate Newey, Jeffrey Richards & Peter Yeandle (Manchester University Press, 2016).
[25] HO 40 5 4b fol. 1485 (Manchester Papers no. 63). Anon., 4 April 1817 (Copy)
[26] HO 40/5/4b, Manchester Papers no. 82; HO40/5 4a fol. 1528, report of A.B. 12 April 1817.
[27] HO 40/9/Part 2, fols 77-124.. 'Narrative of Oliver, a government agent' (W. J. Richards), 23 May 1817. See also Malcolm Chase, 'Richards, W. J. (1774?–1827)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/57111, accessed 25 April 2016].
[28] A letter from the regional military commander, Sir John Byng, on 4 June confirmed this: 'corroborated information from the neighbourhood of Manchester states, that every attempt to effect a co-operation in the intended rising has failed.' HO 42/166 fol.1.
[29] HO 40/9 part 3.
[30] *The London Alfred*, 3 Nov. 1819.
[31] *The Blanketteer,* 23 Oct. 1819 (British Library).
[32] Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical,* ch. 12.
[33] HO 42/183 f. 386, No. 2 to Chippendale, 4 Jan. 1819.
[34] HO 44/11 f. 351, Joseph Mitchell, 30 St Johns Square, Clerkenwell, London, to Sidmouth, 5 Feb. 1822.
[35] Gwyn Williams, *Artisans and Sans Culottes* (1968; 2nd edn, 1989), 5-8, 114.
[36] John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (1974), ch. 2.
[37] Linda Colley, *Britons* (Yale, 1992); E. P. Thompson, 'Which Britons?', in his *Persons and Polemics* (1994).
[38] J R Dinwiddy, J L Baxter & F K Donnelly, 'Debate: the "Black Lamp" in Yorkshire 1801-1802', *Past and Present* 64 (2974).
[39] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (1991); Katrina Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism in Lancashire 1789-1815* (Oxford UP, 2009), chs 5-6; Bohstedt, *Politics of Provisions;* Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest 1789-1820* (Oxford U P, 1970).