

THE CHARTISTS

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‘The Springtime of the Peoples’

Celebrating the 160th anniversary of the Chartist rally on Kennington Common 10th April 1848

The Chartist movement, that culminated in a rally on Kennington Common on 10th April 1848, has been the subject of lot of academic study and debate for many years. Opinions vary. Arguments rage. To cover all interpretations and nuances of the movement is beyond the scope and resources available for this booklet. Consequently it provides a broad introduction to Chartism: who the Chartists were, what they wanted, the events of that momentous day - and how it affected what is now Kennington Park.

The seeds of discontent

Chartism was a product of industrialisation, reflecting the great social, economic and political changes that took place from 1830 to 1850. The Industrial Revolution had driven thousands of agricultural labourers to the cities, where they worked long hours for little pay under dangerous conditions. A succession of bad harvests in the 1830's meant food prices were high and people went hungry.

Working people joined forces to improve their lot. They lent massive support to the 1832 Reform Act, drawn by the possibility of being given the vote or legislation to help them. But, after the Act, only 850,000 people had the vote from an adult male population of over six million. The 1833 Factory Act regulated child labour but not adult working hours and the 1834 Poor Law treated poverty as a crime and forced thousands of people into harsh workhouse regimes.

Using their economic muscle was problematic. Although trade unions were no longer illegal, the transportation to Australia of the Tolpuddle Martyrs for organising a union made people wary of joining a union. For many, the only way to bring about change was by reforming the political system.

The Peoples' Charter

In 1836, William Lovett, set up the London Working Men's Association. The following year Lovett drafted a petition which, in its Preamble, declared that

“whereas the Commons House of Parliament now exercise in the name and on the supposed behalf of the people the power of making laws, it ought...to be made the faithful and accurate representative of the people's wishes, feelings and interests.”

To this end, it called for six fundamental reforms:

- Equal Electoral Districts
- Universal suffrage for men over 21
- Annual Parliaments
- No property qualifications for MPs
- Vote by ballot
- Payment of MPs

The petition was put together in the form of a Parliamentary Bill and spread around the country. It attracted more than a million signatures and was 3 miles long. It was the first of five such petitions, the third of which was the focus of the rally on Kennington Common. A national Convention was held for each petition, with local Chartist groups electing delegates to represent them.

Rank and file

The Chartists were a cross-section of the working population, and included printers, newsagents, shopkeepers, tradesmen, weavers, spinners, tailors, shoemakers and factory workers. Chartism was strongest in centres of old decaying industries but weak in agricultural areas and the south-west. Support was greater in cities like Manchester and Birmingham than it was in London.

Each area had its own grievances, leaders and priorities, so national unity was more apparent than real, although the *Northern Star* newspaper provided a mouthpiece for Chartist groups around the country. In 1839 it sold around 50,000 copies a week but, as each edition was shared, its actual readership was much higher. Chartism's strength was its ability to encompass the dissatisfactions of working-class people. It became a standard to rally round for every person or group with a grievance, mission or political demand. But that also weakened it. Had it had one single goal, like the Anti Corn Law League, differences in objectives and strategy might not have been so critical.

The leaders

The two main Chartist leaders were as different as those who followed them and had opposing views on how best to achieve their goals.

William Lovett, was a mild mannered Cornish cabinet maker, who advocated peaceful action. His idea of ‘moral force’ contrasted sharply with that of Feargus O’ Connor, an outspoken lawyer. He believed that moral force should be exerted but, if it failed, then physical force should not be ruled out. He was a gifted speaker, and founded and edited, the Chartist newspaper the *Northern Star*. The difference is best summed up in the slogan adopted by the movement: ‘peaceably if we may, forcibly if we must.’

The road to radicalism

The petition of 1839 was accompanied by mass meetings around the country. But the petition was rejected. A few months later, 7,000 colliers and ironworkers marched on Newport, the first step in setting up a republic. 24 people were killed by the police. Other risings were planned but by June 1840 at least 543 Chartists, including Lovett and O’Connor, had been imprisoned.

Despite this, the National Charter Association was founded in 1840 and, with O’Connor’s release in 1841, it organised a second Convention and petition. This was rejected in May 1842. The authorities suspected Chartists were behind a series of strikes that broke out in the North that summer and arrested strike leaders. But the case against O’Connor was dropped and, for the next six years, he practically ran the organisation. In 1847 he became MP for Nottingham.

The Year of Revolutions

Bad harvests in 1846 and 1847 set off a commercial crisis that left people hungry. There were revolutions in many European countries, including France, Hungary, Sicily and Austria. The *Northern Star* called it ‘The Springtime of the Peoples.’

In Trafalgar Square, a demonstration against income tax was taken over by Chartists and windows across central London were smashed. Riots took place in Glasgow and Manchester in March and on March 13th, 20,000 people gathered for a meeting on Kennington Common, watched by 6,000 police. A placard there read ‘The Republic for France – The Charter for England’ to which William Cuffay, a black Chartist activist responded, “aye, and if they refused us the Charter, we should then begin to think about a republic.”

The Convention met again and called for people to assemble on Kennington Common on April 13th 1848 and march on Parliament with another petition. Another Chartist, John Leno, declared he “was for rebellion and war, and despaired of ever obtaining justice....save by revolution.”

The Government acts

Throughout the country, people flocked to sign the petition. In Chartist strongholds, guns were bought and pikes sharpened. In a letter, a Londoner wrote:

“London is in a state of panic from the contemplated meeting of the Chartists, 200,000 strong on Monday...I expect a revolution within two years; there may be one within 3 days. The Times is alarmed beyond measure.”

The government passed a “gagging bill” in early April aimed at silencing revolutionary speeches with huge financial penalties and transportation to Australia. A law was invoked from the Restoration period making it illegal for more than twenty people to present a petition to the House of Commons and for a meeting to be held within one mile of Westminster.

The eighty year old Duke of Wellington was entrusted to make all the necessary defence arrangements. A massive force of serving troops, pensioners and police already existed but Wellington also recruited some 120,000 special constables across London. Queen Victoria took refuge on the Isle of Wight.

Chartist leaders, including O’Connor, called for peaceful protest and feared a bloodbath if the Chartists tried to use force against such overwhelming odds. On the eve of the rally, a supporter wrote to O’Connor:

“Nothing rashly. The government must be met with calm and firm defiance. Violence may be overcome with violence, but a resolute determination not to submit cannot be overcome... Aim not to destroy the government, but to render a class government impossible.”

Monday, 10th April 1848

Sunrise

Troops took up their positions at central points from where they could be easily brought to defend the bridges over the Thames and watch the road between Kennington Common and Westminster. 8,000 were deployed between the Tower of London and Millbank alone. They were carefully hidden out of sight, reserved for emergencies with the main patrolling duties left to the police and the thousands of special constables. Heavy gun batteries were brought in from Woolwich.

8am – 9am

Chartists gathered at assembly points in Stepney Green, Clerkenwell Green, Russell Square and Peckham Fields.

9am

Members of the Convention assembled at a meeting room in Fitzroy Square. The police told them that the petition could be delivered to the Commons but without a procession. O’Connor urged the meeting “in the name of God, not to hold the procession, and thus throw their great cause into the hands of pickpockets and scoundrels, and give the government an opportunity of attacking them.” Another leading figure, Ernest Jones,

argued they should go ahead with the procession - whatever opposition they encountered. A resolution was passed adjourning the meeting to Kennington Common.

10am

Delegates left the Convention room, followed by supporters whose numbers grew along the way. The procession was headed by a carriage for the petition while a second carriage took the delegates. Mottos inscribed on the carriage read: "The Charter. No Surrender. Liberty is worth dying for" and "The voice of the people is the voice of God." Each of the Charter's points were proclaimed from six banners mounted on the carriage.

The procession moved along Goodge Street, Tottenham Court Road and stopped to collect the petition from an office in Bloomsbury. Five huge bales were placed in the first carriage and the procession moved on along Holborn, Farringdon Street and Blackfriars Bridge. There were so many demonstrators, it took an hour for the whole procession to cross the bridge.

11.30am

"On reaching Newington Church' the *Illustrated London News* reported, "the appearance of the masses was most bewildering." One supporter said later, "every road converging to Kennington Common thronged with working men." Estimates of the numbers of people who assembled on the Common vary from 200,000 to 20,000. It's impossible to calculate, although the Common wasn't big enough to hold the upper estimate. As Wellington said, 'God knows how many really did attend!'"

On arrival at the Common, O Connor was escorted by police to the Horns Tavern just across the road from the Common. There, Richard Mayne, Commissioner of police, told him the rally would be allowed to continue but that no procession to Westminster could take place.

O'Connor told the crowd on the Common that the authorities were in control of all the bridges and urged them that accompanying the petition to Parliament could risk bloodshed. Instead, he said, a couple of delegates would take the petition to Westminster by cab. The crowd voted for the proposal and, after many speeches, the meeting broke up. "By a quarter past two," a newspaper reported, "a stranger to the day's proceedings would never have guessed, from the appearance of the neighbourhood, that anything extraordinary had taken place."

Rejection and decline

O'Connor claimed the petition had some six million signatures. The Commons reported that there were fewer than two million, stating that the remainder had been forged or were written in the same hand. This could be because people were scared to write their own names for fear of reprisals, or were unable to write and asked someone else to sign it for them. Women's signatures were also discounted. The petition was rejected. Support

slowly ebbed away; much smaller petitions were presented and rejected in 1849 and 1851.

The Chartist legacy

In the short term the Chartists failed to see any of their six points become law. But by 1928, all but one (annual Parliaments) were on the statute books. The significance of Chartism was as a prototype for later working class movements, for marking the rise of class consciousness. For the first time working people had a voice and the opportunity to alert complacent ruling classes to their existence, needs and rights. Marx and Engels considered it 'the first working man's party the world ever produced'.

There were implications for Kennington Common too. The authorities saw such a large meeting space so close to Westminster as a potential threat, although many Chartists felt that having the rally in Kennington was a tactical error as it was on the other side of the river from Parliament. Although there had been talk of enclosing the Common in 1833 and 1843, the Chartist rally gave the move real impetus and the Common was enclosed in 1853. In March 1854, Kennington Park, the earliest public park in south London, opened for the first time.

Another Chartist legacy for the park was Prince Consort's Lodge. It was originally built for the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the command, and expense, of Prince Albert, President of the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes.

After the Exhibition, the building was meant to be used as a gate lodge on Primrose Hill, but it was relocated to Kennington Park instead - because of the park's association with Chartists. It was a very visible piece of evidence that action was being taken - and by Royalty no less - to improve the lot of the masses.

Seen in this light, the Lodge is the only 'memorial' in the park to recognise its connection with the Chartists. At some point in the future this may be put right so that Kennington Park's place in the history of working class politics is acknowledged, remembered - and honoured.

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