

## CHARTISM IN MID NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND AND ITS IMPACT ON THE WEAVERS OF BROMPTON.

*Thanks to Harry Fairburn for providing this extract/notes of his talk to the Brompton Heritage Group which took place in the Village Hall on 27 March 2007*

I think before getting under way I should say what exactly Chartism was about. Chartism was a working class political movement in the years from 1839 to 1848. Supporters of this movement were called Chartists because their political objectives were contained within a so called Peoples Charter. The idea of a Charter was rooted in the myth of Magna Carta which was believed to be a statement of rights. The Charter contained six points was launched on 8 May 1838 by politically conscious artisan London radicals.

Every man over 21 years to have the vote  
A secret ballot to be introduced  
A MP did not have to have a property qualification.  
All MPs to be paid  
All constituencies to be equal in terms of population size  
Finally: Elections to Parliament to be held annually.

Interestingly there was no mention of the House of Lords or of womens' rights. To achieve these objectives petitions to Parliament were made in 1839, 1842 and 1848. All were rejected.

As you are aware five of these demands were eventually achieved except than that of annual Parliaments.

While Chartists were in broad agreement about the Charter it was additionally an umbrella for other radical proposals particularly the rejection of the New Poor Law. (that is the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834)

How did this all come about?

I would argue that Chartism was a cry for help particularly among the industrial areas of the North of England. There is evidence in early and mid nineteenth century Britain of a close connection between economic crises and political unrest. The commentator William Cobbett once said 'I defy you to agitate a fellow with a full stomach.' One historian has pinpointed specific years between 1790 and 1850 when social tension might be expected to be unusually high or low. What he has shown is that when bread prices were high and allied to business depression there was a correlation with Chartist activities in the late 1830's and early 1840's. On the other hand in years of low bread prices and economic well being in the years 1843 to 1846 there was a more muted response from Chartist sympathizers.

In the eighteenth century distress often resulted in riot. High bread prices in Newcastle resulted in "the Keelmen entering Newcastle in terrible numbers with all sorts of weapons." The nineteenth century saw in the main a transition from riot to a political awareness among the working classes. This awareness

was inspired by eighteenth century reformers like Thomas Paine in his work "The Rights of Man". Building upon Paine's work was the radical press led by the famous paper the Poor Mans Guardian issued from 1831 by Henry Hetherington. This paper and others gave working class radicalism with a new sense of purpose. Furthermore the Reform Bill of 1832 left only one man out of six with the vote. The Bill was a great disappointment particularly to the London artisans who had supported the reform of franchise. They now felt betrayed. The radical press built up the image of the Great Whig Betrayal beginning with the Reform Bill, the suppression of the Swing Riots and more fundamentally the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. The New Poor Law was of particular concern in the north of England where violence had occurred to delay the implementation of the Act.

I have now covered briefly the background to the rise of Chartism. In 1838 and 1839 there was no national organization to the movement but often Working Mens Associations were established at a local level often inspired by the visit of prominent speakers like Feargus O'Connor. It was O'Connor who founded the Chartist newspaper the Northern Star. In fact it is from this newspaper historians have been able to obtain much information about Chartist meetings and its organizations. During 1838 the idea of a National Convention was developed. Delegates from various organizations were appointed with this event to take place the following year. These delegates finally assembled in London on 4 February 1839. The delegates saw the Convention as an alternative parliament but also there was an intent to add to the half a million signatures to a National Petition already gathered. Accordingly fifteen missionaries were sent out to areas where there was a perceived lack of spontaneous support.

One of these missionaries was Peter Bussey who came to the North Riding. He was born at Aiskew, near Bedale in 1805. His parents moved to Bradford when he was quite young and later took up employment in the worsted trade. Bussey became quite active in Trade Unionism and a vocal opponent of the New Poor Law. By 1837 Bussey was a publican at the Hope and Anchor in Bradford and displayed a notice in the window of the pub "No more Poor Rates paid here until the Poor Law is repealed". After the property was seized to pay the rates Bussey turned to the Chartist movement. Bussey often used extremist language and on one occasion was quoted as saying: "Let those who cannot purchase a rifle get a musket. Those who cannot get a musket let them buy a brace of pistols. And those who cannot buy pistols must get a pike. Aye a pike with a shaft eight feet long and a spear fifteen inches at the end of it" Bussey had clearly been influenced by the violent language used at the Convention which had alienated middle class delegates particularly from the Birmingham Political Union. The departure of the Birmingham delegation gave more scope to the group that has been described as the Jacobins who used the rhetoric of the French Revolution. One of this group, G.J. Harney, compared himself with the revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat. Other speakers at the Convention argued for the historical precedent for the right of citizens to bear arms. Behind all this it should be understood that the age of Chartism

was also the age of melodrama on the stage and fire and brimstone in the pulpit. Other chartist meetings were just as much revivals as they were for Methodists. Some Chartists regarded Christ as the first Chartist. Many of the linen weavers in Brompton were Primitive Methodists and their problems of the 1830's were highlighted in the reports of the Brompton Primitive Methodist Circuit. In March 1837 "a great part of our members and hearers being weavers or otherwise connected with that business, our finances have been affected by the depression in that trade." As the weavers in many areas formed the backbone of the Chartist movement it would be unusual if the Primitive Methodist Ministers in Brompton were not sympathetic to the cause.

Bussey's visit to the North Riding was referred to by the Tory Yorkshire Gazette on 9 March 1839 with: "Mr Peter Bussey the delegate from the Chartist Convention commences his tour of agitation through the North and East Riding on Wednesday next. We think however that the good sense of the inhabitants of these districts is such that they will not be deluded into the violent and rebellious conduct which has been displayed in the manufacturing districts." No doubt the Gazette was referring to anti Poor Law riots.

Bussey saw the hand loom weavers in the North Riding as potential supporters for the Petition. They were the casualties of the Industrial Revolution. The distress of the weavers was identified by Solomon Keyser's contribution to the Report of the Royal Commission upon Handloom Weavers in 1840. Keyser's evidence came from his discussions with weavers of both Brompton and Northallerton who described the depth of their poverty. After Bussey's visit to Guisborough he went on to Stokesley where he addressed a meeting from a window of the Black Bull. Following this an open air meeting took place near Swainby on the afternoon of 19 March 1839. The Northern Star reported that this meeting attracted many hundreds who poured in from the West C leveland linen manufacturing villages of Osmotherley, Carlton, Faceby, Hutton Rudby, Potto and Ingleby. "They heard a "long, powerful, and effective speech" from Bussey which received loud and continuous cheers". On 20 March Bussey entered Northallerton.

A meeting took place in a large room on the 20th at the Oak Tree Inn at 7 o'clock in the evening. The Northern Star reported that the room was crowded to excess and many could not obtain access to the meeting as a consequence. The Chairman of the meeting, Mr Joseph Ingram, read out the National Petition before Bussey spoke to condemn the policies of successive Whig and Tory Governments. A resolution was passed to support the National Petition with the signatures of those present and also to establish a Working Mens Association.

On the following day, Thursday, Bussey addressed the inhabitants of a considerable manufacturing village called Brompton where he addressed the people from the window of an Inn when the National Petition was adopted. The weavers of Brompton had previously organized strikes to support higher wages in both 1818 and 1825 which pointed to their organizational abilities. In 1818 the sentencing of four strikers for entering into an illegal combination was overturned on appeal to the North Riding Quarter Sessions. In 1825 the Brompton and Northallerton weavers obtained the increase in wages they fought for." This was the last recorded instance of industrial action before the

decline of the industry in the late 1820's and the 1830's.

On the evidence of the Northern Star all Bussey's meetings were well attended. On the other hand the Yorkshire Gazette quoted Bussey as saying "The parsons and political Tories exerted themselves to 1839 the utmost in order to prevent the people from assembling. They threatened the shopkeepers with the loss of their custom and the labourers with the loss of their employment."

On 7 May 1839 the Petition of 1.25 million signatories was rejected by Parliament. The proposal that the House of Commons support the Petition failed by 235 votes to 46. Disraeli was one of those who spoke in favour (see his novel "Sybil.") If Bussey's visit to Northallerton is judged in terms of signatories to the Petition then it must be seen as a failure. William Lovett wrote to a number of Working Mens Associations seeking responses to a questionnaire.

One of the towns responding was Northallerton. A key question was: How many signatories were there to the National Petition?

Bradford indicated 27,000

Knaresborough 500

Northallerton None

On 17 July 1839 Durham and Darlington Associations attempted to continue Bussey's missionary work in the North Riding. A deputation included Miles Brown, Darlington's principal Chartist leader, John Batchelor from Sunderland and John Rogers, a Thirsk hatmaker arrived in Northallerton. The Northallerton magistrates refused permission for the meeting no doubt being influenced by Miles Brown's inflammatory speeches in Darlington. The meeting went ahead regardless at the Market Cross. Despite some interruptions Brown made a rousing speech and threatened "that the men of Durham and Northumberland were competent to give the gentlemen a good drubbing when the day of reckoning came." After a meeting in Thirsk, just to the north of the town, the crowd was swollen by navvies from the Great North of England Railway. On 25 July the Durham Chartists came to Brompton and "a public meeting of the inhabitants and the supporters of the Charter was held on the front of Mr Hustwaites, innkeeper." Brown made an impact and the weavers responded with "We will, with our right arms support the Charter." Upwards of 50 members were after enrolled in the Association despite the presence of the manufacturers Messrs Wilford and Patterson. Probably in the region of 230 weavers were in Brompton at that time.

After the visits by the Durham Chartists there was no further Chartist activity either in Northallerton or nearby weaving communities. Nationally in the late summer onwards there were many arrests of Chartist leaders. There was great anxiety in Darlington as there was a growing tendency in the use of violent language by Chartist speakers who appeared to encourage the perceived threat of insurrection. Alarm reached its peak on 15 August with the announcement of a great meeting in the Market Place. Additional special constables were recruited and a company of 50 soldiers of the 77th foot were rushed from Stockton taking advantage of the railway connection to Darlington. The meeting ended peacefully. Nevertheless Miles Brown was arrested on 23 August and charged with seditious libel at a meeting in Darlington on 17 July and John Batchelor similarly charged at the house of W.

Oliver the printer for the Darlington Chartists on 31 August. The 77th Foot left Stockton on 26 September. At the end of the day it was found that drunken members of the regiment had committed more violence than either the Chartists of Darlington or Stockton.

It may have been quiet in the North Riding but not elsewhere. There were rumours in all parts of the country during the autumn that there were to be insurrection. It was only in South Wales that anything happened. On the night of 3/4 November in the region of 7,000 colliers and iron workers led by John Frost marched on Newport. The purpose was to capture key towns and establish a republic. After a fierce battle the Chartists were dispersed by two dozen soldiers and twenty four people were killed or died from their injuries. The myth that British soldiers would not open fire in such circumstances had been exposed. Frost and others were charged with high treason but in escaping the death penalty they were subjected to transportation. Further attempts at planned insurrections at Bradford and Sheffield were "killed in the bud" due in part to the Home Office use of spies to infiltrate the local Chartist organizations. The imprisonment of the Bradford and Sheffield Chartists in the Northallerton House of Correction did much to put Northallerton on the map during a period when almost 500 Chartists nationwide were to serve prison sentences.

The trials of the Bradford and Sheffield Chartists took place at York Castle in March 1840. The ring leaders were found guilty of "Conspiracy with intent to create riots and Disturbances and having in Prosecution of that Conspiracy procured arms and riotously assembled together." The apparent leader of the Bradford conspiracy was William Peddie who was sentenced to four years imprisonment at the Beverley House of Correction. However it is thought that the real leader was Peter Bussey who disappeared shortly before the arrests. It is thought that he had "cold feet" about the matter. (He later turned up in charge of a boarding house in New York.) Of the eleven prisoners held in the Northallerton House of Correction had sentences running from 12 months to 4 years. These sentences were relatively light compared with those imposed on the Swing rioters earlier in the 1930's. In the riots between 1 January 1830 and 3 September 1832 1976 prisoners were sent to trial with 505 sentenced to be transported and 252 sentenced to death. Of this total 19 executions were proceeded with. Several prisoners in Northallerton were given early release particularly if they were suffering from ill health. One prisoner, John Clayton, died, after completing 12 months of his two year sentence with hard labour. The leader of the Sheffield conspirators was Samuel Holberry who was sentenced to 4 years imprisonment. Owing to poor health he was transferred to York Castle in October 1841 and he died during 1842 from tuberculosis. He was then aged 27. In a letter to the Northern Star Holberry blamed his ill health on his treatment in Northallerton. It that was said Holberry's funeral attracted 50,000 people. Five years ago I was advised that just a few years earlier a Samuel Holberry Society had just been wound up following the death of the 96 year old Secretary. Only two prisoners served their full term of imprisonment in Northallerton. John Marshall had been given 2 years with hard

labour and William Brooke who had been given 3 years. The decisions whether or not to grant early release were probably influenced by the interviews conducted with prisoners by Captain W.J. Williams of the Home Office. Williams while being impressed by the integrity of Holberry thought very little about Marshall whom he thought "was a very bad man" who sought to implicate others in the conspiracy to secure his own release. Marshall was already known to the authorities, although acquitted while serving in the East Yorkshire militia, had been brought to trial with others for breaking into a counting house. Additionally there was a petitioning campaign mounted nationally for the release of Chartist prisoners or the amelioration of their terms of employment. When Captain Williams interviewed the prisoners he obtained details of their weekly diet in Northallerton.

Breakfast: One quart of oatmeal porridge and half pound of wheaten bread.  
Dinner: For two days one quart of potatoes with salt and half pound of wheaten bread.

For three days one quart of stew made of beef potatoes, oatmeal and onion  
With half pound wheaten bread

For the remaining two days one quart of broth thickened with oat meal and onion and 1 lb of wheaten bread.

Supper: one quart of oatmeal porridge and ½ lb of bread.

The national movement's high hopes and aspirations of 1839 were extinguished by the early 1840's. Nevertheless attempts were made to rebuild the movement. But this was a turning point. Never again would Chartism recapture the sense that the achievement of power was within their immediate grasp. The way forward was done with the foundation of the National Charter Association in Manchester in July 1840. This organization provided for the payment of key officials in a bureaucratic national structure, the registration of members at a local level and the improvement of local organization. The NCA urged constitutional means to achieve their objects and stressed sobriety. It has been suggested that the NCA was the first working class political party. One immediate object was a campaign to save the lives of Frost (see march on Newport) and his associates from execution. The reduction of their sentences to transportation for life was seen as a success. There has been debate whether the structures of the movement owe more to trade union, Methodist or parish government experience and precedent. There appeared to be slow progress in the establishment of branches in this area. There was no mention in the Northern Star of Northallerton or Brompton for the whole of 1841. However in October 1841 there was reference to a meeting in Middlesbrough with delegates from:

Stockton  
Stokesley  
Hartlepool  
Middlesbrough

with a view to them joining the NCA. At this meeting it was decided to make contact with Chartist friends in Darlington and Yarm. In December 1841 the

Northern Star gave a list of 299 branches of the NCA which included Darlington and Yarm. The establishment of the NCA in Darlington was important as it became a eventually a regional centre. The first reference to Northallerton in 1842 was in May. Under the heading Northallerton the Northern Star stated: "Mr Brook will lecture at this place on Whit Sunday if all is well"

Later the Northern Star referred to a delegate meeting in Darlington on 22 May on business of great importance with delegates to come from Northallerton, Brompton, Richmond, Barnard Castle, West Auckland, Bishop Auckland, Darlington and Stockton on Tees. A report on this meeting in the Northern Star referred to the collection of monies from each branch to employ lecturers "but not until we have a month's pay in hand." It was proposed that each branch should subscribe on a weekly basis as follows: Darlington 4s., Richmond 3s., Barnard Castle 3s., Bishop Auckland 3s., Northallerton and Brompton 3s., West Auckland 1s.6d., Stokesley 2s.6d., South Shields 2s., Wingate Grange Colliery 2s.6d., and Hartlepool 1s.6d. A further meeting was arranged for Sunday 20 June which was to do with the Brooke case. (The Chartist prisoner) The meeting for the 20th June appears to have been unreported.

Isaac Wilson, a weaver from Brompton is in evidence when a meeting was held in Northallerton in July 1842. Wilson was the Secretary of the Northallerton and Brompton NCA and took the chair when a Mr. Williams of Sunderland gave a lecture at the Northallerton Market Cross. "At the appointed hour a goodly number of the spirited and intelligent weavers of Brompton marched into the Town and took up their position at the Cross." I have heard that there may have been a Chartist choir in Brompton which is possibly substantiated by the Northern Star. Their reporter wrote that "The Brompton patriots appear to have cultivated the art of singing to some purpose for during the journey back (to Brompton) they poured forth the fervour of their hearts by singing patriotic songs.

Isaac Wilson appears in the 1841 census as living in Water End Brompton and his age given was 25. At the same address, the property was unnumbered were Elizabeth Wilson aged 75 and Jane Wilson aged 45 described as a pauper. The continual imprisonment of Brooke in the House of Correction appears to have given the local Chartists a new focus. Wilson's letter to the Northern Star in August 1842 was headed "Brooke the Northallerton Victim" The letter went on to say "Brother Chartists, We the Committee of patriot Brooke's Victim Fund lay before the public the decision of the Board of Magistrates. They refuse him being taken into our resources it being contrary to Northallerton prison discipline. They will allow him pen, ink, paper and books and exempt him from labour providing we pay for his prison diet. He is at present in the Hospital and lives as he being convalescent we expect his discharge immediately into the prison diet consequently we commence paying in order to render his dreary abode as little irksome as possible. We therefore appeal to the great Chartist body on his behalf and publish our balance sheet to show." The figures show donations of £1.11.1 (including 6s.1d from the Hand Loom Weavers of Northallerton and Brompton)

The letter was dated 9 August 1842 and requested that all donations be directed to Isaac Wilson Secretary of Brompton.

Brooke went on to serve his sentence and was released in March 1843. Brooke had been interviewed in 1840 by Capt. Williams who found that Brooke had no significant complaints to make about his treatment. However Brooke entered Northallerton H of C he had a track record of several terms of imprisonment for refusing to support his wife. None of the other prisoners had criminal records or had served terms of imprisonment.

Wilson's letter was the last reference I found to any Chartist organization in Northallerton or Brompton. Before Brooke completed his sentence he was joined by 27 of the so called "plug plot" rioters sentenced for terms of between four months and eighteen months hard labour in September 1842 for offences of "Unlawfully entering premises" and "Conspiracy and Riot." The plug plot riots and many strikes occurred in several towns in Lancashire and the West Riding with rioters reacting to wage reductions of 25% and wider economic hardship of the times, by drawing the plugs from factory boilers and other acts of vandalism. These riots were not organized nationally, in fact the national leadership was very embarrassed by the events, but local chartist leadership was involved. Fergus O'Connor came out against the strikes as violence had been greater in the summer of 1842, apart from the Newport affair, than in 1839. The arrest of many of the rioters, in the region of 1500 dealt with by the lower courts, the rejection of the National Petition, despite doubling the number of signatories discouraged many within the movement. This Petition not only included the essential points of the Charter but also a demand of the repeal of the Poor Law Amendment Act as well as the Act of Union between Britain and Ireland. All this had a negative impact on the movement. Additionally there was a successful harvest in 1842 as well as improved economic conditions. There was also the restoration of the wage cuts that inspired the plug plot riots.

After 1842 the national leadership began to disintegrate leaving the local branches of the NCA without effective direction. Fergus O'Connor, for example, pursued his back to the land scheme. During the years 1843 to 1845 there was no reference to a NCA branch in Darlington in the copies of the Northern Star. Chartism did not necessarily die as a consequence. For example in November 1843 the radical The Stokesley News and Cleveland Reporter publishing material by T. Cartwright a local Chartist looking for support among the linen weavers. Nevertheless in 1846 the Northern Star referred to a petition being prepared in Darlington to obtain the release of John Frost the leader of the Newport insurrection. It said that "as there is no society in the town a few of the right sort set to work in earnest in getting petition sheets." This virtually confirmed the absence of a Chartist organization in Brompton/Northallerton. The decline in Chartism as a political force is illustrated by the decline in the average yearly sales of the Northern Star from 1839 to 1844.

1839 30,000

1840 18,000  
1841 13,000  
1842 12,000  
1843 9,000  
1844 7,400

There was a brief recovery in Chartism nationally in 1848 resulting in the mass meeting at Kennington Common, attended by O'Connor, when it was intended that a procession would march on London to present a further Petition. This procession was banned by the authorities who were prepared to use the army to reinforce the police. The Petition was laughed out of court as it was found that many of the signatures were forged and it contained even the name of Queen Victoria. This then saw the end of Chartism as a creditable political movement. London in 1848 was not Paris. There was no evidence of a Chartist organization in this area in 1848.

What is most difficult to understand is why the Chartists felt they could succeed. That is why I said earlier that Chartism was a cry for help. Let us look at two possible strategies open to the Chartists. One was the route of moderation, education and temperance. This approach was one that believed in the supremacy of reason and ability to influence public opinion. Yet none of the main political parties offered support or saw the need for further reform. The alternative strategy was resort to force. Some limited success had been achieved with riots to prevent the election of Boards of Guardians. This route risked alienating moderate chartists. In any event when violence took place, or was planned, the forces of law and order were too strong. One possibility might have been to enter into alliance with the Anti Corn Law League. The latter organization could have gained the support of working class demonstrations so well exploited by those seeking political reform prior to the 1832 Act. In the main the Chartist leadership was against such an alliance. An important consideration of course was the extremist language of many Chartist speakers which would have in all probability deterred the middle classes who formed the backbone of the Anti Corn Law League.

What is important to point out that the restriction to the franchise did not necessarily mean that the working classes were oppressed. Much useful legislation was passed to assist the working classes eg.

Mines Act 1842  
Factory Acts 1844 and 1847  
Repeal of Corn Laws 1848  
Public Health legislation 1848

Finally there is a traditional view is that Fergus O'Connor made a negative contribution to the Chartist movement. This view reflected in part the criticism of other Chartist leaders with whom he had fell out.. They were of course not impartial. A more considered view has emerged. While he did divide the leadership yet he united the movement. Without him there would not have been a Chartist national movement.