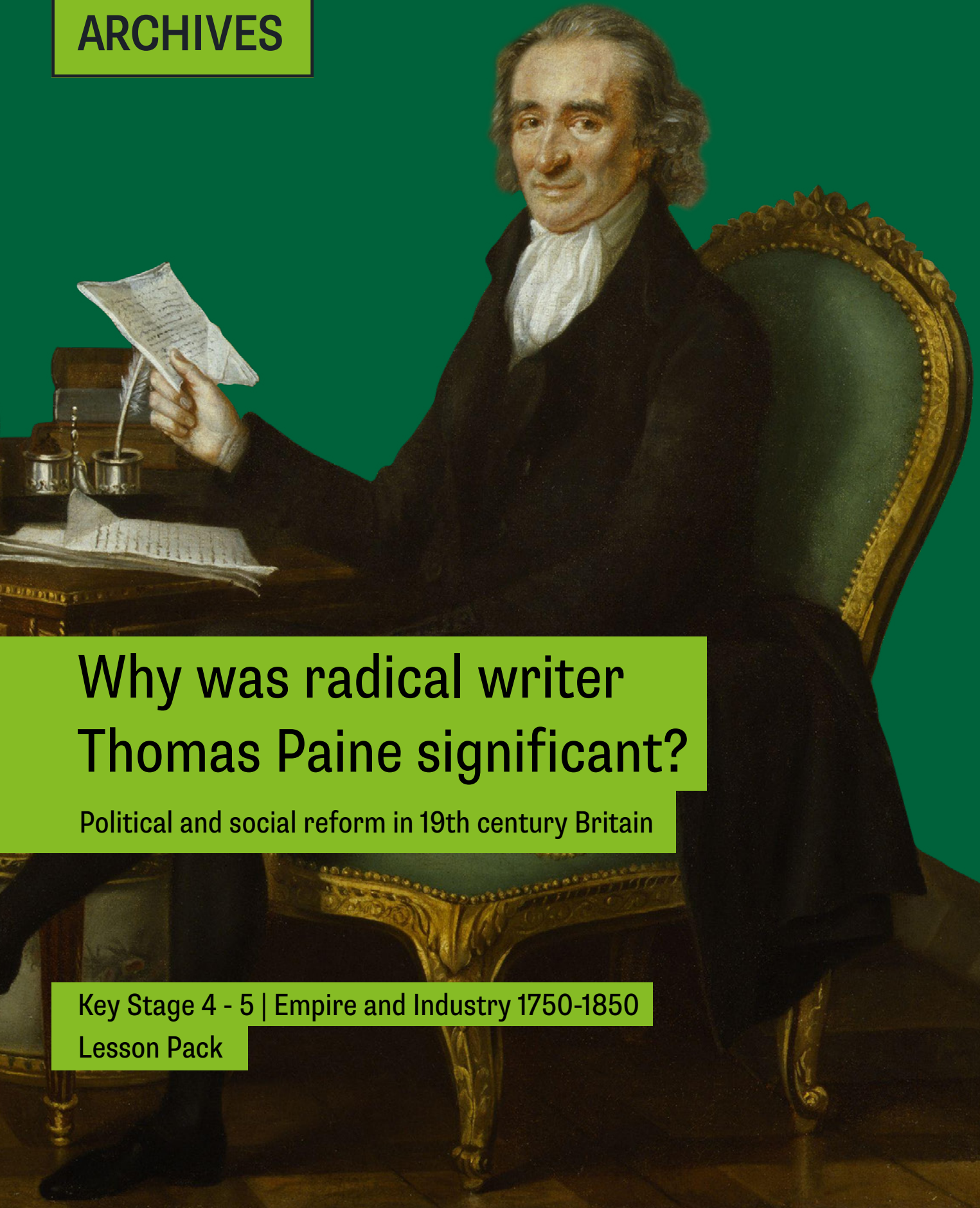


THE

NATIONAL

ARCHIVES



Why was radical writer Thomas Paine significant?

Political and social reform in 19th century Britain

Key Stage 4 - 5 | Empire and Industry 1750-1850
Lesson Pack

Introduction

Very few people had the right to vote in the late eighteenth century. Politics and the running of the government was limited to a small number of wealthy people and certain people later called radicals, questioned if this was the best way of government.

The most important radical writer at this time was Thomas Paine (1737-1809). Paine was born in Thetford in Norfolk and later moved to America where he played an influential role in drafting the Declaration of Independence. He later travelled to France and became involved in the French Revolution, working with the leaders to produce the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man'. Paine wrote a book called 'The Rights of Man' which said that everybody should have the right to be involved in government. His book sold half a million copies and was read by many more. It was frequently used as the discussion topic for political groups called corresponding societies.

Thomas Paine supported the development of corresponding societies, which grew up across the country in the 1790s in Derby, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow London, Perth, Norwich, Nottingham and Sheffield. The societies aimed to gain public support for parliamentary reform including annual parliaments and universal suffrage.

Using the original documents in this lesson, find out how Thomas Paine and other radicals demanded change in how the country was to be governed. How did the government respond?

Suitable for:

KS 4 - 5

Time period:

Empire and Industry
1750-1850

Connections to the Curriculum:

Key stage 4

AQA GCSE History:
Britain: Power and the people: c1170 to the present day:

Key stage 5

Edexcel GCE History:
Protest, agitation and parliamentary reform in Britain, c1780–1928

OCR GCE History:
From Pitt to Peel:
Britain 1783–1853

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Teacher's Notes

Students use sources from The National Archives to explore how the radicals campaigned for the 'representation of the people'.

The first source to be examined is a handbill from the London Corresponding Society in 1793. It shows how the radicals petitioned to make their arguments to Parliament. The hand bill shows how they used printed material to publicise their ideas. The existence of the society itself and others like it suggests that radicals met together to discuss the importance of political rights. Their purpose was to persuade and educate people about reform. It is also worth discussing the tone of the petition, which is highly respectful.

The second source is a printed account from the London Corresponding Society about the arrest of Thomas Hardy, 12 May 1794. Why was he seen as a threat to the government? What was the Government's attitude to radicalism and the London Corresponding Society? The source could also provide the opportunity to discuss the role of the press and how these events were reported differently by radicals and government. Teachers can discuss the meaning of the catalogue code 'TS' meaning Treasury Solicitor. This suggests that the document was part of a collection of legal papers relating to the trial of Thomas Hardy for treason and as any material produced by the London Corresponding Society would be of interest to government lawyers.

Finally, students look at a short extract from Thomas Paine's 'The Rights of Man'. Definitions of political terms mentioned are given with the transcript. Here students can read first hand Paine's ideas and the arguments he used to defend them. It is a chance to explore why the government at the time did not find them acceptable.

Finally, using a source from outside The National Archives, James Gillray's political cartoon 'Fashion before Ease;—or,—A good Constitution sacrificed for a Fantastick Form', 1793 allows students to consider visual evidence on Thomas Paine. The students can deconstruct the symbolism of the image working with the meaning of the caption. Paine's 'Rights of Man' would reshape the British constitution to give Britannia more of a French form- this is because Paine is shown wearing the French revolutionary red bonnet with the tricolore

Teacher's Notes

cockade or rosette. Thomas Paine had also been a stay maker before he took to politics. The spelling of Paine as 'Pain' in the notice on the cottage is probably a pun to highlight the uncomfortable corset required to reshape Britannia according to French fashion.

James Gillray's satirical prints were often displayed in shops or coffee houses in the late eighteenth century. The prints, costing three shillings each, were aimed at an educated, wealthy metropolitan audience. The Prince of Wales, frequently caricatured, collected them.

You may want to split the lesson for students working individually or use the document sources in paired/group work. Finally students should be encouraged to think about the limitations of looking at this evidence to evaluate any understanding of the demand for reform to the political system.

All sources are transcribed and difficult language defined in square brackets.

Sources

Illustration image: Portrait of Thomas Paine, circa 1791 by Laurent Dabos (1761–1835) a French painter of portraits and of historical and genre subjects. NPG 6805 © National Portrait Gallery

Source 1: London Corresponding Society handbill, 1793, Catalogue ref: TS 24/3/34

Source 2: Extract from a printed account by the London Corresponding Society on the arrest of Thomas Hardy, 12 May 1794, Catalogue ref: TS 24/3/33

Source 3a: Extract from the second part of 'The Rights of Man' by Thomas Paine, 1792, Catalogue ref: TS 24/3/10, pp.18-19

Source 3b: Political cartoon by James Gillray entitled: 'Fashion before Ease;—or,—A good Constitution sacrificed for a Fantastick Form', London, Published by H. Humphrey, 1793. © Library of Congress

Background

The second half of the eighteenth century saw a blossoming of ideas concerning popular rights. In 'The North Briton Radical', a newspaper founded in 1762 by radical John Wilkes attacked on King George III and his Government. Wilkes was arrested on a general warrant: a document detailing the crime but not the name of the suspected criminal. Wilkes challenged the general warrant and eventually won his case. These events launched the cries of "Wilkes and Liberty!" and other popular slogans for free speech as a resistance to illegitimate power. Wilkes eventually fled to France but returned in 1768, becoming Member of Parliament for Middlesex. After a spell in prison and a series of expulsions and re-elections, Wilkes returned to popular campaigning arguing for the freedom for parliamentary debates to be reported and in favour of parliamentary reform.

This period was not marked by huge gains in rights but it re-introduced the idea of popular rights as an important aspiration. Parliament was pressurised to bring in a number of (unsuccessful) bills for reform. Pressure came from publications such as Major Cartwright's *Take Your Choice* (1776), which argued for manhood suffrage, the secret ballot, annual elections and equal electoral districts.

Following the French Revolution, the idea that 'political 'rights' meant the participation in the political process beyond the rights of the elite, became popular. The *Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine became the most famous expression of this idea and was very important for the corresponding societies. They began to meet at the same time that a revolution was taking place in France, during the late 1780s and the 1790s. The radicals, thought that citizenship came from universal 'natural rights'. This meant that all men (though not necessarily all women) had a right to take part in politics, whatever their social class, political background or religious beliefs. They referred to each other as 'citizens'. The government in Britain was worried that the corresponding societies might start a revolution. They became very concerned when the French revolutionaries executed their king. Many radicals were arrested and laws passed to ban corresponding societies and unions.

Thomas Hardy was a radical and the Secretary of the London Corresponding Society. It was the first radical group to be open to everyone. Their motto was that 'our members be

Background

unlimited'. Hardy wanted to send a petition to Parliament in the hope that the political system would be reformed. Alarmed by the events in France and by the popularity of the London Corresponding Society, officials arrested Thomas Hardy in May 1794 for high treason. Shortly after Hardy's arrest, supporters of the government attacked his home and the shock resulted in the death of his pregnant wife.

Along with the political clampdown against individual radicals, the Government faced the Royal Naval mutinies in 1797 and increased trade union activity. In quick succession the Government passed legislation against 'unlawful oaths' (naval mutineers had made such oaths to each other in 1797), corresponding societies and finally 'combinations' or trade unions.

Food prices rose and some common lands were enclosed in the second half of the eighteenth century. There were food riots from the 1750s to the 1770s and in the 1790s until 1801. Some historians have described those who took part in food riots as protecting their rights within a 'moral economy'. These ideas also informed opposition to the continued reduction and removal of the common rights of the small farmer and landless workers. The loss of rights caused by enclosure resulted in various enclosure riots at places such as Charnwood Forest (1748-51), West Haddon (1765), Sheffield (1791), and Burton on Trent (1771-72). Such events also informed the democratic ideals of Thomas Paine and later movements such as the Chartists.

Tasks

Task 1

London Corresponding Society handbill, 1793 , Catalogue ref: TS 24/3/34

The London Corresponding Society, and others across the country made Thomas Paine's 'Rights of Man' available, members wrote articles, organised speakers to tour the country, held debates, meetings and discussions. The membership consisted of working men, artisans, tradesmen, and shopkeepers. However, when Britain later became involved in war with France, those who demanded parliamentary reform were regarded as traitors and a threat to law and order.

- What type of document is this?
- What is the tone of the document?
- What was the purpose of the London Corresponding Society according to this document?
- Is this society campaigning for reform linked to social or economic issues?
- What method did the London Corresponding Society use for its campaign?
- How did it encourage people to give their support?
- What other sources might provide evidence for why people demanded political reform?
- What type of people might have joined the London Corresponding Society?

Tasks

Task 2

Extract from a printed account by the London Corresponding Society on the arrest of Thomas Hardy, 12 May 1794, Catalogue ref: TS 24/3/33

Thomas Hardy, founder of the London Corresponding Society and eleven other leading radicals who demanded political reform were arrested. Hardy was taken to jail and later interrogated by a committee that included the Prime Minister William Pitt and some cabinet ministers. Soon after, Parliament passed a bill that suspended 'habeas corpus' and allowed the government to imprison all twelve men in the Tower of London without formal charge in a court for several months.

- In what manner was Thomas Hardy arrested according to this account?
- The document mentions 'the attack on Mr Wilkes' – use the Background to find out more.
- According to this account, how did the government limit political rights in the 1790s?
- Why do you think Thomas Hardy is described as 'Citizen Hardy' and readers are called 'Fellow citizens' in this source?
- Does this source infer why the government feared radicals like Thomas Hardy?
- How would you describe the tone and attitude of this source?
- Thomas Hardy was found not guilty of treason due to lack of evidence. Is this verdict surprising? Read the article in the External links about the details of his trial.

Tasks

Task 3

Source 3a

Extract from the second part of 'The Rights of Man' by Thomas Paine, 1792

Catalogue ref: TS 24/3/10, pp.18-19

[See the explanations with the transcript for key terms in the document.]

- What two systems of government is Thomas Paine describing?
- Why does Paine disagree with 'hereditary government'?
- Do you think the British government would find Paine's views acceptable at that time?

Give your reasons.

- What makes Thomas Paine so significant in the struggle for political reform?

Tasks

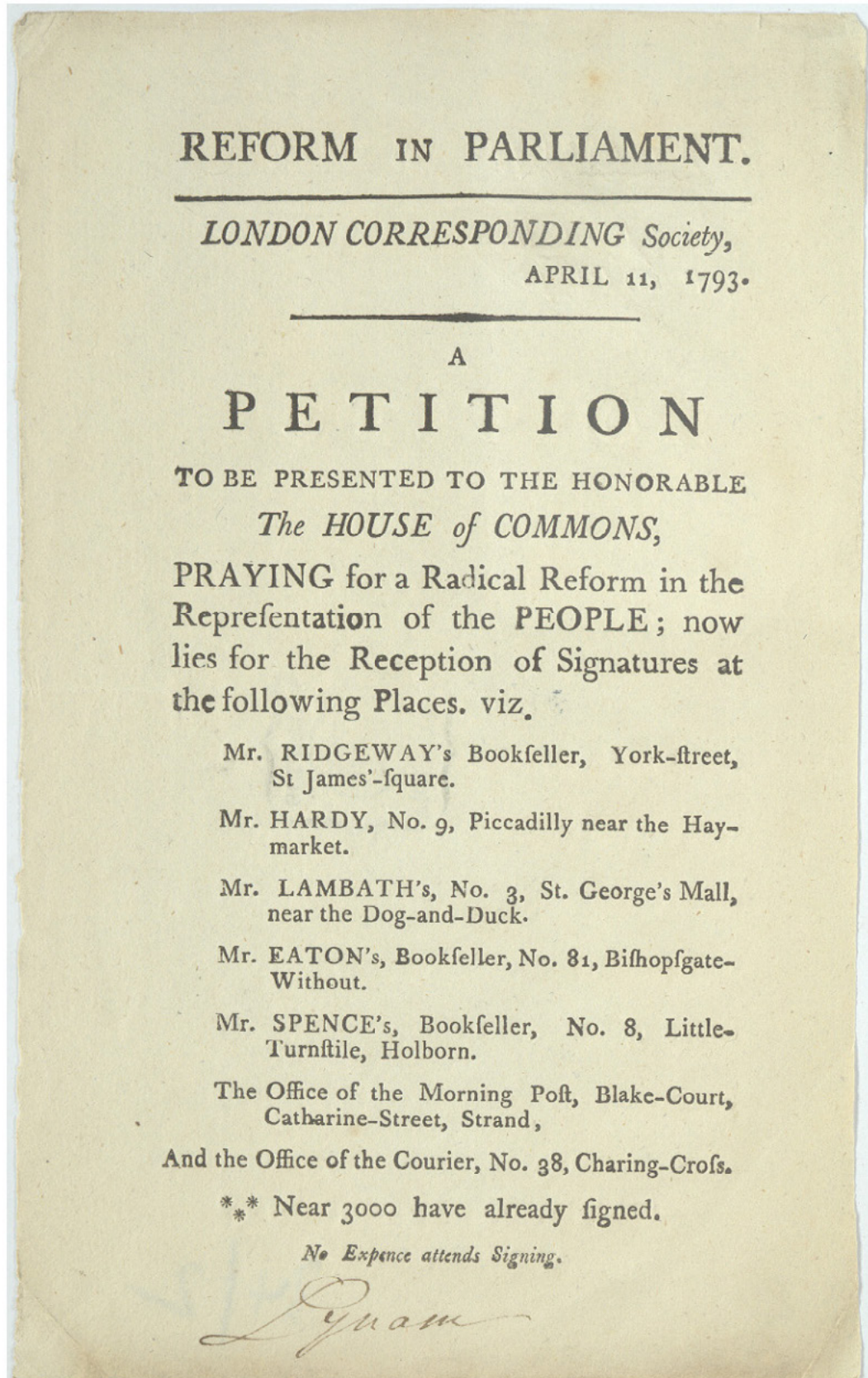
Source 3b

Political cartoon by James Gillray entitled: 'Fashion before Ease;—or,—A good Constitution sacrificed for a Fantastick Form', London, Published by H. Humphrey, 1793. © Library of Congress

- How can you identify and describe the characters: Britannia; Thomas Paine?
- What is happening in the scene?
- How does the caption help to explain the meaning of the cartoon?
- Why is Thomas Paine shown as a 'stay maker from Thetford'?
- Can you explain why the spelling of 'Pain' is used instead of 'Paine'?
- What is the symbolism of the oak tree in the cartoon do you think?
- What does the cartoon infer about artist James Gillray's attitude towards Thomas Paine and his work?
- Where or how would people have seen this image?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using visual evidence like this cartoon?

Source 1: London Corresponding Society handbill, 1793

Catalogue ref: TS 24/3/34



Source 1 Transcript

REFORM IN PARLIAMENT.

LONDON CORRESPONDING Society,

April 11, 1793.

A PETITION

TO BE PRESENTED TO THE HONORABLE

The HOUSE of COMMONS,

PRAYING for a Radical Reform in the
Representation of the PEOPLE; now
lies for the Reception of Signatures at
the following Places. viz

Mr. RIDGEWAY's Bookseller, York-street,
St James'-square.

Mr. HARDY, No. 9, Piccadilly near the Hay-
market.

Mr LAMBATH's, No. 3, St. George's Mall,
near the Dog-and-Duck.

Mr EATON's, Bookseller, No. 81, Bishopsgate-
Without.

Mr. SPENCE'S, Bookseller, No. 8, Little-
Turnstile, Holborn.

The Office of the Morning Post, Blake Court,
Catharine-Street, Strand.

And the Office of the Courier, No. 38, Charing-Cross.

Near 3000 have already signed.

No Expence attends Signing.

Source 2: Extract from a printed account by the London Corresponding Society on the arrest of Thomas Hardy, 12 May 1794

Catalogue ref: TS 24/3/33

A N
ACCOUNT OF THE SEIZURE
O F
CITIZEN THOMAS HARDY,
SECRETARY TO THE
LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY.

THE house of Citizen Hardy, was assailed about half an hour after six on Monday morning, the 12th May, 1794, by a messenger from one of the secretaries of state, accompanied by four or five runners, who, after securing his person, proceeded to his bed-room. Mrs. Hardy having learned the occasion of the intrusion, requested them to withdraw while she put on some clothes: This they refused, and she anxious for an opportunity of sending for some friends, was obliged to dress herself in their presence, one of them walking about all the while with a pistol in hand. She was no sooner up than they proposed to search the bed, but on her expostulating sharply with them on the extreme indecency of such conduct they forbore. Mrs. Hardy however found the purpose for which she had risen frustrated, not only herself but even the lodgers being closely confined during the search. On their finding a considerable quantity of letters, one of them observed "there was enough to send him abroad, if not to hang him:" This appeared to another too humane a way of speaking, therefore addressing himself to Mrs. Hardy, he said "I hope you will have the pleasure of seeing him "hanged before your door." Such discourse to an affectionate wife, considerably advanced in her pregnancy, evinced a large share of that humanity which characterizes the present administration.

(3)

FELLOW CITIZENS,
We have given you as above a detail of events, the most indecent, cruel and illegal, with which Britain has been disgraced, since the attack on Mr. WILKES, which terminated in a decision of the Court of King's Bench, that general warrants were illegal.

Conscious that there did not exist any circumstances which could justify any such proceedings, and utterly disbelieving that government suspected the existence of any such; we were led to conclude that these outrages were only meant to agitate the public mind, and, give to ministers an opportunity of wresting from the people some of their yet remaining rights. The encroachments which we chiefly expected, were a suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, a Convention Bill and the introduction of system of judicial proceedings similar to those usurped by the Court of Justiciary in Scotland, and it was our intention to warn our countrymen against such attempts, trusting their united efforts would have been able by constitutional means to rescue their country from the impending danger.

The precipitancy of administration has however, prevented at least in part those salutary effects, and we now see the personal freedom of every individual Briton, subjected to the malice of the king's ministers: but neither the terrors of this situation or any other shall prevent our exposing to the just resentment of our countrymen, the falsehoods circulated by the ministerial newspapers, purporting to be the Report of the Secret Committee of the House of Commons; and Mr. Pitt's speech on making that report. But first, we request the attention of every friend of truth and justice, nay, it may not be wholly useless, if some of the members of the secret committee will duly weigh the following circumstances.—It has long been notorious to the *London Corresponding Society*, that letters addressed to *Citizen Hardy* and every other active member, were generally opened at the post-office, and that several have never been delivered. These letters it is reasonable to suppose have rested somewhere, and nowhere more reasonably than in the offices of the secretaries of state.

TREASURY

Source 2 Transcript

AN
ACCOUNT OF THE SEIZURE
OF
CITIZEN THOMAS HARDY,
SECRETARY TO THE
LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY.

The house of Citizen Hardy, was assailed [attacked] about half an hour after six on Monday morning, the 12th May, 1794, by a messenger from one of the secretaries of state, accompanied by four or five runners [policemen], who, after securing his person, proceeded to his bed-room. Mrs. Hardy having learned the occasion of the intrusion, requested them to withdraw while she put on some clothes: This they refused, and she anxious for an opportunity of sending for some friends, was obliged to dress herself in their presence, one of them walking about all the while with a pistol in hand. She was no sooner up than they proposed to search the bed, but on her expostulating [protesting] sharply with them on the extreme indecency of such conduct they forebore [held back]. Mrs Hardy however found the purpose for which she had risen frustrated, not only herself but even the lodgers being closely confined during the search. On their finding a considerable quantity of letters, one of them observed "there was enough to send him abroad, if not to hang him:" [enough evidence to convict him and transport him from England]. This appeared to another too humane a way of speaking, therefore addressing himself to Mrs. Hardy, he said "I hope you will have the pleasure of seeing him "hanged before your door." Such discourse to an affectionate wife, considerably advanced in her pregnancy, evinced [revealed] a large share of that humanity which characterizes the present administration. ...

Source 2 Transcript (continued)

FELLOW CITIZENS

We have given you as above a detail of events, the most indecent, cruel and illegal, with which Britain has been disgraced, since the attack on Mr. WILKES, which terminated in a decision of the Court of King's Bench, that general warrants were illegal.

Conscious that there did not exist any circumstances which could justify any such proceedings, and utterly disbelieving that government suspected the existence of any such; we were led to conclude that these outrages were only meant to agitate the public mind, and give to ministers an opportunity of wresting [taking] from the people some of their yet remaining rights. The encroachments [limitations] which we chiefly expected, were a suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, a Convention Bill and the introduction of system of judicial proceedings similar to those usurped by the Court of Justiciary in Scotland, and it was our intention to warn our countrymen against such attempts, trusting their united efforts would have been able by constitutional means to rescue their country from the impending danger.

The precipitancy [hasty action] to administration has however, prevented at least in part those salutary [improving] effects, and we now see the personal freedom of every individual Briton, subjected to the malice of the king's ministers: but neither the terrors of this situation or any other shall prevent our exposing to the just resentment of our countrymen, the falsehoods circulated by the ministerial newspapers, purporting [claiming] to be the Report of the Secret Committee of the House of Commons, and Mr. Pitt's [William Pitt the Younger] speech on making that report. But first, we request the attention of every friend of truth and justice, nay, it may not be wholly useless, if some of the members of the secret committee will duly weigh the following circumstances. – It has long been notorious to the London Corresponding Society, that letters addressed to Citizen Hardy, and every other active member, were generally opened at the post-office, and that several have never been delivered. These letters it is reasonable to suppose have rested somewhere, and nowhere more reasonably than in the offices of the secretaries of state.

Source 3a: Extract from the second part of 'The Rights of Man' by Thomas Paine, 1792

Catalogue ref: TS 24/3/10, pp.18-19

18

RIGHTS OF MAN.

PART II.

The first general distinction between those two systems, is, that the one now called the old is *hereditary*, either in whole or in part; and the new is entirely *representative*. It rejects all hereditary government:

First, as being an imposition on mankind.

Secondly, As inadequate to the purposes for which government is necessary.

With respect to the first of these heads—It cannot be proved by what right hereditary government could begin: neither does there exist within the compass of mortal power, a right to establish it. Man has no authority over posterity in matters of personal right; and therefore, no man, or body of men, had, or can have, a right to set up hereditary government. Were even ourselves to come again into existence, instead of being succeeded by posterity, we have not now the right of taking from ourselves the rights which would then be ours. On what ground, then, do we pretend to take them from others?

With respect to the second head, that of being inadequate to the purposes for which government is necessary, we have only to consider what government essentially is, and compare it with the circumstances to which hereditary succession is subject.

Government ought to be a thing always in full maturity. It ought to be so constructed as to be superior to all the accidents to which individual man is subject; and therefore, hereditary succession, by being *subject to them all*, is the most irregular and imperfect of all the systems of government.

Source 3a Transcript

Explanations:

'Hereditary government': Government that is passed down by inheritance, e.g. a son of a king becomes king after his father dies

'Representative government': Government in which the people are represented by individuals chosen from among them, usually by election

'Hereditary succession': the act of passing property, a job or a title from one family member to another, e.g. from father to son

Transcript

The first general distinction between those two systems, is that the one now called the old is hereditary, either in whole or in part; and the new is entirely representative. It rejects all hereditary government:

First, as being an imposition [forced burden] on mankind.

Secondly, as inadequate to the purposes for which government is necessary.

With respect to the first of these heads [ideas] – It cannot be proved by what right hereditary government could begin: neither does there exist within the compass [range] of mortal power, a right to establish it. Man has no authority over posterity [future generations] in matters of personal right; and therefore, no man, or body of men, had, or can have, a right to set up hereditary government. Were even ourselves to come again into existence, instead of being succeeded by posterity, we have not now the right of taking from ourselves the rights which would then be ours. On what ground, then, do we pretend to take them from others?

With respect to the second head, that of being inadequate to the purposes for which government is necessary, we have only to consider what government essentially is, and compare it with the circumstances to which hereditary succession is subject.

Government ought to be a thing always in full maturity. It ought to be so constructed as to be superior to all the accidents to which individual man is subject; and therefore, hereditary succession, by being subject to them all, is the most irregular and imperfect of all the systems of government.

Source 3b: Political cartoon by James Gillray entitled: 'Fashion before Ease;—or,—A good Constitution sacrificed for a Fantastick Form', London, Published by H. Humphrey, 1793.

© Library of Congress



Source 3b Transcript

Fashion before Ease;—or,—A good Constitution sacrificed for a Fantastick Form'

A pair of scissors and a tape inscribed: 'Rights of Man'.

A thatched cottage inscribed: Thomas Pain, 'Staymaker from Thetford. Paris Modes, by express'.

[Stay maker is a maker of corsets]

External links

Read more detail on trial of [Thomas Hardy](#)¹

The [Thomas Paine](#) National Historical Association²

British Library article with documents on the [impact of the French revolution in Britain](#)³

Video from Royal Holloway, University of London: [Who was Pitt the Younger? Pitt and Parliamentary Reform](#)⁴

¹ <https://monthlyreview.org/2019/11/01/the-trial-of-thomas-hardy/>

² <https://www.thomaspaine.org/>

³ <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-impact-of-the-french-revolution-in-britain>

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19zkxbraf_4



Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

Our resources are designed to be printed and used in classrooms, which means hyperlinks aren't always accessible digitally. We include the full link at the bottom of the page so that you can type in the address without distracting from the main text of the lesson materials.

Did you know?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free workshops onsite in Kew and online in your classroom.

Our [Onsite Workshops](#) are available for free here at The National Archives and allow students to experience genuine original documents reflecting over 1000 years of history. From Elizabeth I's signature to the telegrams of the sinking Titanic, students love the wow-factor of being able to see real history on the desk in front of them.

Our [Online Workshops](#) allow our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone. We'll arrange a test call before your session to check the tech is working.

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