

THE

NATIONAL

ARCHIVES



How did the government respond to a mass protest at 'Peterloo' in 1819?

Political and social reform in 19th century Britain

Key Stages 3-5 | Empire and Industry 1750-1850

Lesson



Introduction

Between 1815 and 1819, there were a series of disturbances in Britain. Political meetings were held to protest against the government and demand reform. The climax came in 1819, when 60,000 people gathered at St. Peter's Fields in Manchester. The main speaker at the meeting was Henry Hunt, a leading political reformer. The crowd gathered to hear Hunt speak about parliamentary reform.

However, the Manchester magistrates chose to arrest Hunt. They used the local yeomanry (amateur cavalry) to seize him. In the chaos that followed, 11 people died and many were injured. This event soon became known as 'Peterloo', after the recent Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

After these events some people blamed the magistrates; others cited the violence of the crowd. Many attacked the behaviour of the yeomanry, saying they were guilty of overreacting because the meeting was peaceful. However, the government chose to defend the magistrates and the yeomanry and promptly introduced new laws to restrict political rights.

Using the original documents in this lesson, find out about events at 'Peterloo' and the response of the authorities.

Suitable for:

KS 3-5

Time period:

Empire and Industry 1750-1850

Connections to curriculum:

Key Stage Three

- Britain as the first industrial nation – the impact on society.

Key Stage Five

- AQA GCE History: Challenge and transformation: Britain, c1851–1964: Challenges to the status quo, c1886–1914: Social change; trade unions and new unionism.
- Edexcel GCE History: Industrialisation and social change in Britain, 1759–1928: forging a new society: The impact of workers' unions on working conditions, 1759–1928: the match girls' strike.
- OCR GCE History: Liberals, Conservatives and the Rise of Labour 1846–1902: Salisbury's ministries of 1885–1892 and 1895–1902; domestic policy.

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Teacher's notes

Students use sources from The National Archives to examine events at St Peter's Field, Manchester in August 1919.

Starter Activity

Teachers can use our illustration image, an anonymous print published in 1819, as a starter document to introduce the lesson. [Students are later tasked to compare this to another image in Source 2.]

The image from the British Museum is entitled: 'To Henry Hunt, Esquire, as chairman of the meeting assembled on St. Peter's Field, Manchester on the 16th of August, 1819'. The title continues: 'and to the Female Reformers of Manchester and the adjacent Towns who were exposed to and suffered from the Wanton and Furious Attack made on them by that British Armed Force the Manchester and Cheshire Yeomanry Cavalry'. According to the National Portrait Gallery, who have also have print of this image, it was published by radical journalist Richard Carlile. From 1817, Carlile promoted two radical weeklies, 'The Black Dwarf' and 'Sherwin's Weekly Political Register'. In 1819 he was put on trial for publishing the work of Thomas Paine and was heavily fined and jailed for 9 years.

It shows a view of the scene around the platform on the day. A woman holds a banner inscribed 'Manchester Female Reform' which shows a female figure trampling on 'Corruption'. There are three more banners on the platform saying: 'Universal Suffrage'; 'Liberty or Death', 'Universal Civil and Religious Liberty'. In the foreground a man holds a banner on which a female figure holds a sword and is pursued by one of the yeomanry. Each banner is topped with a cap of Liberty.

- Ask the students to describe what they see.
- Who does the artist show sympathy for? How is this achieved?
- What do we learn about the role of female reformers at this meeting?
- What does the original caption of this image add to our understanding of events at 'Peterloo'?
- What other sources do we need to help understand what happened?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of visual evidence?

Teacher's notes

In this lesson, students examine a letter sent to the authorities in Manchester on behalf of Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary on 4 August 1819. Sidmouth gave advice on the steps to be taken before the meeting happened in St Peter's Fields.

Students can explore what is revealed about the government's attitude to the meeting. Are they prepared to use force to disperse the crowd? In what situation would the public behaviour be the subject of prosecution?

The second source is a coloured engraving of the events at St Peter's Fields on 16 August 1819 in Manchester. Students can discuss the advantages and disadvantages of visual evidence. The engraving shows how 'Peterloo' soon came to be used as radical propaganda. It is also possible for them to find out more about the story of John Jenkins who bought the engraving by using other original sources on the 'Chudleigh show' in our themed collection Democracy and Protest (part 2).

Students then look at a scrap of paper giving an account of events at St. Peter's Fields in Manchester which shows that few expected the Yeoman Cavalry to be used to break up the crowd. This brief, vivid, immediate account is said to be our earliest report of 'Peterloo', 16 August 1819. This information was received in London the following day and sent to Lord Sidmouth's office. With this document, students acquire more context for the engraving seen in Source 2.

The fourth source is an extract from a printed paper called 'Evidence disproving some of the charges': an attempt to explain away the death of a child called William Fildes at 'Peterloo'. Here the authorities justify their actions, admit that a child was trampled to death in the Yeomanry charge, and blame the mother for letting go of her child when startled by the charge. There was a huge amount of public discussion after events at 'Peterloo', and this source could have been used by the radical press to explain the use of force by the authorities to break up a peaceful meeting.

The final source is letter from the Home Office on behalf of Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary, praising the conduct of the Manchester magistrates at 'Peterloo'. Apparently the Prince Regent had also extended his praise of their handling of the situation. Both

Teacher's notes

feared revolution and were not sympathetic to reforming the political system. Sidmouth was responsible for the Six Acts of 1819 following 'Peterloo', which were intended to reduce disturbances and radical propaganda. A contemporary magistrate's account by W. R. Hay can also be found in our themed collection Democracy and Protest (part 2).

By way of conclusion, teachers could ask the students, which document in this lesson is the most useful for understanding events at 'Peterloo'? How did the government respond? What are the limitations of looking at this evidence to evaluate any understanding of these events?

You may want to split the lesson for students working individually or use the document sources in paired/group work. All sources are transcribed and difficult language defined in square brackets. For further original sources on 'Peterloo' and the later 'Cato Street Conspiracy', see our themed collection Democracy and Protest (part 2), which teachers could also use to create further tasks and activities.

Please note that content in this lesson has been redeveloped from content in our Power, Politics & Protest focussed topic website, which has been archived as the interactive parts no longer work.

Background

'Popular radicalism' was based on democratic ideals and was critical of government corruption. After the French Wars, there was a return to public political meetings and riots. The Spa Fields riots were incidents of public disorder resulting from the second of two mass meetings held at Spa Fields, Islington in London, 1816. There was a rising at Pentrich in Derbyshire in 1817. A few months before these events, a demonstration was held in Manchester by radical weavers known as the 'Blanketeers'. They planned to march to London and present a petition to the Prince Regent about the depression in the textile industry in Lancashire and the suspension of Habeas Corpus (making it possible for people be imprisoned unlawfully). This so-called 'March of the Blanketeers' was broken up violently and the leaders imprisoned.

Perhaps the best-known demonstration for political rights at this time is known as the 'Peterloo Massacre.' The reform meeting at St Peter's Field in Manchester in August 1819 followed two years of revived interest in the radical press, mass petitioning and trade unionism, still illegal at this time.

It has been estimated that perhaps 60,000 men, women and children met at St Peter's Field to hear Henry Hunt and others speak in favour of political reforms and rights for the poor. For several weeks beforehand, the reformers practised military drills with those planning to attend to ensure order on the day. However, local magistrates believed the reformers were preparing for armed rebellion; they declared the meeting illegal and warned people to stay at home. The meeting went ahead and started peacefully. However, when Hunt arrived, the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry (the amateur cavalry) were sent by the magistrates to arrest him. They slashed their way through the crowd, killing 11 people and resulting in 400 people being injured. The 15th Hussars on standby, who had previously fought at Waterloo, came in to support the yeomanry and cleared the field. Out of contempt for what happened, the disaster soon became referred to as the 'Peterloo'.

Mr W. R. Hay, a Lancashire magistrate, justified the position of the local authorities when he wrote to Lord Sidmouth, 16 August 1819 to say: 'the whole bore the appearance of insurrection; that the array was such as to terrify all the king's subjects, and was such as the magistrates had felt a decided conviction that no legitimate purpose could justify'. He goes on to describe the flags at the hustings which can be seen in the engraving showing the event: 'The flag on which was "Equal Representation or Death," was a black one; and in addition, on the same side, had "No borough mongering - Unite, and be Free;" at the bottom, "Saddleworth, Lees, and Morley Union;" on the reverse, "No Corn Laws; - Taxation,

Background

without Representation, is unjust and tyrannical." On the Middleton flag was, "Let us die like men, and not be sold like slaves;" reverse, "Liberty is the birth right of man."

However, others reported events differently. The radical 'Manchester Observer' and 'The Times' of London commented on the deaths and hundreds of casualties caused by the cavalry, which the authorities tried to discredit by referring to individual cases, as shown by one of the sources in this lesson.

There were further protest meetings resulting in arrests as news of events spread. The government, which had supported the actions of magistrates after 'Peterloo', introduced new laws to prevent any future disturbances. The 'Six Acts' were aimed at suppressing any meetings for the purpose of radical reform. They meant that drilling for military exercises was forbidden and warrants were issued to search for arms. Far more repressive was the extension of stamp duty to more newspapers, increased powers for magistrates to seize seditious literature, and powers to prevent meetings designed to present petitions.

Tasks

Task 1

A letter sent to authorities in Manchester on behalf of Lord Sidmouth, Home Secretary, 4 August 1819. Catalogue ref: HO 41/4 f.434

This letter advised on steps to be taken before the meeting happened in St Peter's Fields in August, 1819.

- What steps should be taken to discourage the meeting in Manchester from happening?
- On what grounds would Lord Sidmouth be prepared to use force to 'disperse the mob' or break up the meeting?
- What does the letter suggest about the government's attitude to the meeting?
- Why do you think the writer chose to use capital letters for some words like: 'Reflection'; 'Advertisement'; 'Inexpediency'; 'Acts of Felony'?

Task 2

Engraving showing events at St Peter's Fields on 16 August 1819 in Manchester. Catalogue ref: MPI 1/134

The engraving shows how events at 'Peterloo' soon became used as radical propaganda. This picture was purchased by John Jenkins, an ex-weaver and ex-Royal Marine, who 'by the aid of a magnifying glass [made the figures] appear as large as life' while he described what happened. In November 1819 Jenkins had been exhibiting the picture at Chudleigh, in Devon, when his activities came to the attention of Gilbert Burrington, vicar of Chudleigh and magistrate. Burrington sent Jenkins to the Exeter House of Correction as a vagrant and passed information of his seditious conduct to the Home Secretary.

House of Correction: a place where those who had committed minor offences and considered capable of reformation were confined.

- Can you describe what is happening in this scene?
- What do the flags reveal about the purpose of the meeting?
- Does the source infer anything about the role of women in political protest?
- Who does the artist show sympathy for? How is this achieved?
- What is the value of the original caption and key displayed with the image?

Tasks

- What other sources would be useful to understand what happened?
- Why do you think John Jenkins was arrested for displaying this picture? [See task caption]
- What are the similarities and differences between this source and the illustration image for the lesson?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of visual evidence?

Task 3

A scrap of paper giving account of events at St. Peter's Fields in Manchester shows that few expected the Yeoman Cavalry to be used to break up the crowd. This brief, vivid, immediate account is said to be our earliest report of 'Peterloo', 16 August 1819. This information was received in London the following day and sent to the office of Lord Sidmouth. Catalogue ref: HO 42/192 f207

The Liberty cap has been a symbol of freedom since at least Roman times. It was worn during the American Revolution and was adopted during the French Revolution. In Britain in 1819, the 'Cap of Liberty' was also the name of a radical weekly newsletter.

- This note was written on the day. Can you think of any advantages or disadvantages this might mean for historians?
- What was the size of the crowd mentioned here?
- What do you think was the purpose of the flags and liberty caps seen at the meeting?
- How and why were 'lives lost and a number wounded' at the meeting?
- Does the writer justify the use of the cavalry against the crowd?
- Does the writer reveal his attitude to these events? Explain your views.
- Compare this source to Source 2 showing events at St. Peter's Fields. Can you spot any similarities and differences with this version of events?

Task 4

A scrap of paper giving account of events at St. Peter's Fields in Manchester shows that few expected the Yeoman Cavalry to be used to break up the crowd. This brief, vivid, immediate account is said to be our earliest report of 'Peterloo', 16 August 1819. This information was received in London the following day and sent to the office of Lord Sidmouth. Catalogue ref: HO 42/192 f207

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Tasks

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- Compare this source to Source 2 showing events at St. Peter's Fields. Can you spot any similarities and differences with this version of events?

Task 5

Letter from the Home Office on the conduct of the Manchester magistrates, 23 August 1819, Catalogue ref: HO 41/4 f.496

- What was the opinion of Lord Sidmouth, Home Secretary, on the actions of the magistrates?
- How did the Prince Regent react to the events in Manchester?
- Why do you think both government and monarch praised the magistrates?
- How do their views compare with those of the artist who made the engraving, Source 2?
- How does this source relate to the content of Source 3?
- The events at St. Peter's Fields in Manchester quickly became known as the 'Peterloo Massacre'. Is this a helpful description? Explain your answer.

Source 1: A letter sent to authorities in Manchester on behalf of Lord Sidmouth, 4 August 1819. Catalogue ref: HO 41/4 f.434

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Whitehall August 4th 1819

G. Norris Esq^r
Manchester

Sir,

Lord Sidmouth having further considered the Question which was the Subject of yesterday's Letter, desires me to say that Reflexion convinces him the more strongly of the Inexpediency of attempting forcibly to prevent the Meeting on Monday. Every Discouragement and Obstacle should be thrown in its way, and the Advertisements from the Magistrates will no doubt have a salutary Effect in this respect. But his Lordship thinks that it would be imprudent to act up to the Spirit of the Advertisements. He has no doubt that you will make arrangements for obtaining Evidence of what passes; that if any thing illegal is done or said, it may be the Subject of Prosecution. But even if they should utter Sedition or proceed to the election of a Representative Lord Sidmouth is of opinion, that it will be the wisest course to abstain from any endeavour to disperse the Mob, unless they should

Source 1: A letter sent to authorities in Manchester on behalf of Lord Sidmouth, 4 August 1819. Catalogue ref: HO 41/4 f.434

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should proceed to Acts of Felony or Riot. We have the strongest Reason to believe that Hunt means to preside & to deprecate disorder. I ought to have mentioned that the opinion which I have expressed for Lord Sidmouth, is supported by that of the highest Law Authorities.

I am &c
H. Hobhouse

Whitehall 4 Aug: 1819

Mr. Mark Popham

Source 3: Account of events at St. Peter's Fields in Manchester.

Catalogue Ref: HO 42/192 f207

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Manchester
August 16/1819

Gents
The Meeting took place at 1 o'clock Hunt
in the Chair with 16 flags & 7 caps of Liberty
hoisted up amongst upwards of 60,000 people
the Cavalry has just broken in upon them
the flags are taken Hunt secured several
lives are lost and a number wounded the
Cavalry are now securing the streets in all
directions 1/2 past 2 o'clock Yours J. Allen

Transcript: Source 3

Manchester

August 16, 1819

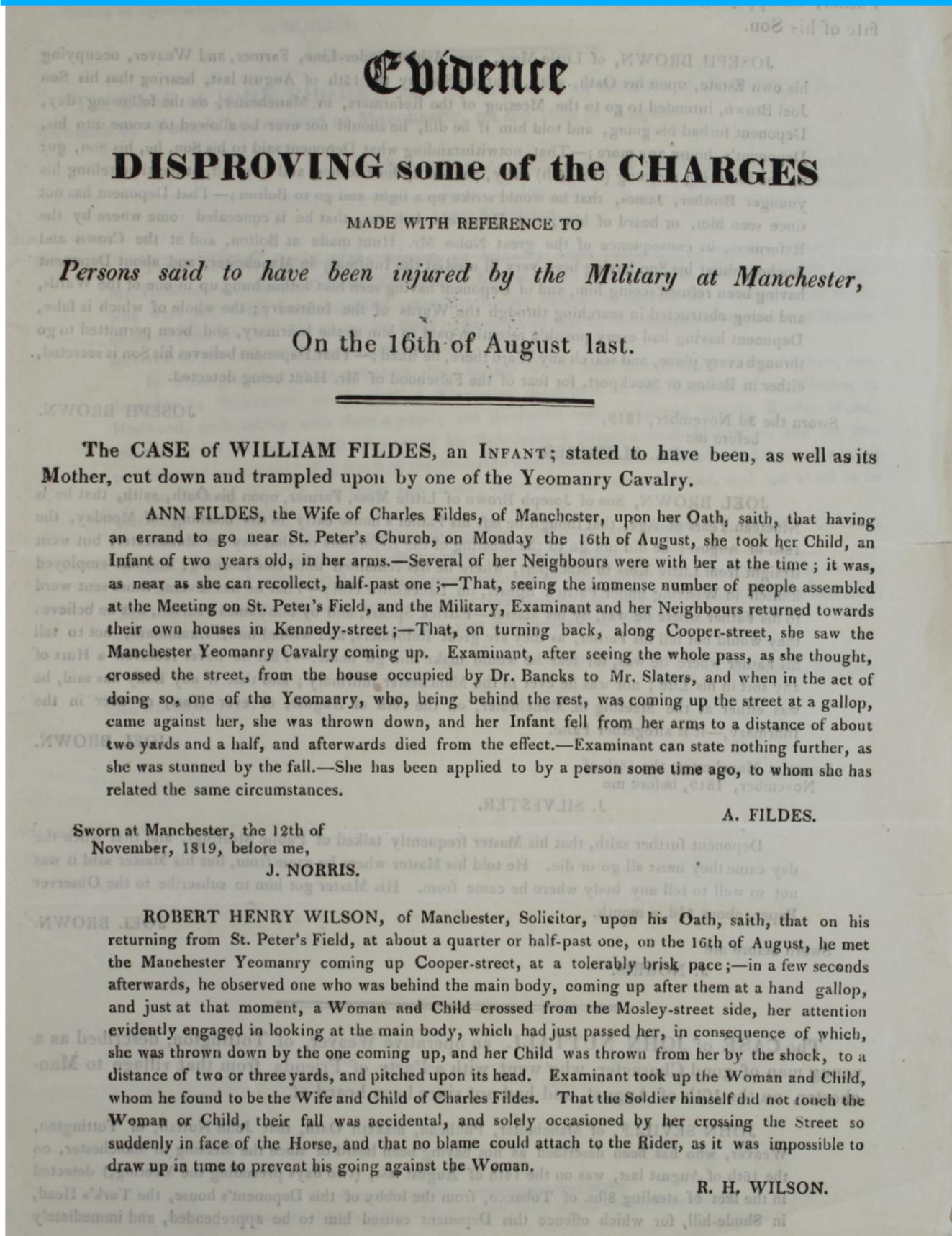
Gents,

The meeting took place at 1 o'clock. Hunt in the chair with 16 flags and 7 caps of Liberty hoisted up amongst upwards of 60,000 people, the cavalry has just broke in upon them, the flags are taken, Hunt and his party secured, several lives are lost and a number wounded. The cavalry are now securing the streets in all directions, ½ past 2 o'clock,

Yours

J. Allen

Source 4: Extract from a printed paper called 'Evidence disproving some of the charges'. Catalogue Ref: HO 42/199 f217



Transcript: Source 4

EVIDENCE
DISPROVING some of the CHARGES
MADE REFERENCE TO

Persons said to have been injured by the Military at Manchester,

On the 16th of August last.

The CASE of WILLIAM FILDES, an Infant; stated to have been as well as its Mother, cut down and trampled upon by one of the Yeomanry Cavalry.

ANN FILDES, the Wife of Charles Fildes, of Manchester, upon her Oath, saith [said], that having an errand to go near St. Peter's Church, on Monday the 16th of August, she took her Child, an Infant of two years old, in her arms.-Several of her neighbours were with her at the time; it was, as near as she can recollect, half-past one; - That, seeing the immense number of people assembled at the Meeting on St. Peter's Field, and the Military, Examinant [witness] and her Neighbours returned towards their own houses in Kennedy Street; - That, on turning back, along Cooper Street, she saw the Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry coming up. Examinant, after seeing the whole pass, as she thought, crossed the street, from the house occupied by Dr Bancks to Mr Slaters, and when in the act of doing so, one of the Yeomanry, who, being behind the rest, was coming up the street at a gallop, came against her, she was thrown down, and her Infant fell from her arms to a distance of about two yards and a half, and afterwards died from the effect.- Examinant can state nothing further, as she was stunned by the fall.- She has been applied to by a person some time ago, to whom she has related the circumstances. A. FILDES

Sworn at Manchester, 12th of
November, 1819, before me,
J. NORRIS

ROBERT HENRY WILSON, of Manchester, Solicitor, upon his Oath, saith [said], that on his returning from St. Peter's Field, at about a quarter or half-past one, on the 16th of August, he met the Manchester Yeomanry coming up Cooper Street, at a tolerably brisk pace; - in a few seconds afterwards, he observed one who was behind the main body, coming up after

R. H. WILSON.

Transcript (cont.): Source 4

them at a hand gallop, and just at that moment, a Woman and Child crossed from the Mosely Street side, her attention evidently engaged in looking at the main body, which just passed her, in consequence of which, she was thrown down by the one coming up, and her child thrown from her by the shock, to a distance of two or three yards, and pitched upon its head. Examinant took up the Woman and the Child, whom he found to be the Wife and Child of Charles Fildes. That the Soldier himself did not touch the Woman or the Child, their fall was accidental, and solely occasioned by her crossing the Street so suddenly in the face of the Horse, and that no blame could attach to the Rider, as it was impossible to draw up in time to prevent his going against the Woman.

R. H. WILSON

Source 5: Letter from the Home Office on the conduct of the Manchester magistrates, 23 August 1819. Catalogue Ref: HO 41/4 f.496

William Hulme Esq. 100
Manchester Sir

23rd August 1819.

I am directed by Lord Sidmouth to acknowledge the Receipt of your letter of the 20th instant, in which, as Chairman of the Select Committee of Magistrates of the two Counties of Lancaster and Chester, you by their direction request permission to publish Lord Sidmouth's letter of

Source 5: Letter from the Home Office on the conduct of the Manchester magistrates, 23 August 1819. Catalogue Ref: HO 41/4 f.496

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of the 10th instant, in which His Lordship expressed His Approbation of the conduct of the Magistrates at Manchester on the 16th.

As Lord Sidmouth's letter of Saturday last to the Duke of Devon and Stamford conveyed the most gracious Approbation of H. M. H. the Prince Regent, of the conduct of the Magistrates at Manchester, and expressed the great Satisfaction which His Royal Highness had derived from their prompt, decisive, and efficient Measures to preserve the public Tranquillity; which must be of far greater Value than any thing only proceeding from Lord Sidmouth himself; His Lordship presumes that it can no longer appear to the Magistrates to be of any consequence to give publicity to His letter of the 10th instant; and His Lordship would accordingly prefer that it should not be published. — But His

Lordship

Source 5: Letter from the Home Office on the conduct of the Manchester magistrates, 23 August 1819. Catalogue Ref: HO 41/4 f.496

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Lordship sees no objection to a Publication of His letter of the 21st —

I have the Honour to be Sir
H. M. H. House.

Transcript: Source 5

Whitehall 23rd August 1819,
William Hulton Esq,
Manchester

Sir

I am directed by Lord Sidmouth to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 20th instant in which, as chairman of the Select Committee of Magistrates of the two Counties of Lancaster and Chester, you by their direction request permission to publish Lord Sidmouth's letter of the 18th instant in which his Lordship expressed his approbation [approval] of the conduct of the magistrates at Manchester on the 16th.

As Lord Sidmouth's letters of Saturday last to the Earls of Derby and Stamford conveyed the most gracious appreciation of H.R.H. the Prince Regent, of the conduct of the magistrates at Manchester, and expressed the great satisfaction which His Royal Highness had derived from their prompt, decisive and efficient measures to preserve the public tranquillity, which must be of far greater value than anything only proceeding from Lord Sidmouth himself,

His Lordship presumes that it can no longer appear to the magistrates to be of any consequence to give publicity to his letter of the 18th instant, and His Lordship would accordingly prefer that it should not be published. But His Lordship sees no objection to a publication of his letter of the 21st.

I have the honour to be etc.

H. Hobhouse

External links

[Unboxing Peterloo from The National Archives¹](#)

[Peterloo 2019 – An animation with historian Dr Robert Poole²](#)

[Video from Royal Holloway, University of London³](#), looking at the historical significance of the Peterloo Massacre of 1819.

[Explore collections at the British Museum⁴](#) to find other prints, including those of George Cruikshank, and objects relating to 'Peterloo'.

The People's History Museum: online exhibition on [Peterloo: Disrupt? Peterloo and Protest⁵](#)

Connections to curriculum

Key stage 3

Britain as the first industrial nation – the impact on society.

Key stage 5

AQA GCE History: Industrialisation and the people: Britain, c1783–1885: Government and a changing society, 1812–1832.

Edexcel GCE History: Protest, agitation and parliamentary reform in Britain, c1780–1928: Aspects in depth: Mass protest and agitation.

OCR GCE History: British Period Study: British Government in the Age of Revolution 1783–1832: Liverpool and the radical challenge 1812–1822: Peterloo, government policy on law and order.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/TheNationalArchives/videos/peterloo-200-unboxing-st-peters-field/735961496854737/>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2eQkUuVW2wU>

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eh_pikNIEp4

⁴ <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?keyword=Peterloo>

⁵ <https://phm.org.uk/exhibitions/disrupt-peterloo-and-protest/>



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.

Find out more:

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