

History

1848: how close was a British revolution?



- ▶ How did people try to fight for their rights in the 1800s?
- ▶ Who were the Chartists and what did they want?
- ▶ What did the Chartists achieve?

Year 8
History

On 10 April 1848, a huge meeting was planned at Kennington Common, South London. Half a million angry people were expected to attend. They wanted change. After the **rally**, the people were going to march to Parliament and present a petition containing six million signatures, outlining their demands. Fergus O'Connor, a man who was due to speak at the rally, had even published new plans for running the country – with him as the new President!



Source A The Kennington Common Rally, April 1848

As you might expect, the Government saw this as a threat. They thought it might be the start of a revolution, similar to others that had happened in other countries. Queen Victoria was moved out of London to the safety of the Isle of Wight. 150 000 new policemen were signed up and 100 000 heavily-armed soldiers were brought in to protect the city. The old war hero,

the Duke of Wellington, was put in charge of London's defences and immediately took over the railways and telegraph services.

But what was the rally all about? What changes did the people want? Were they successful? And how close did Britain really come to revolution in the spring of 1848?

Today, as much as ever, people complain about the way the Government runs the country. You rarely watch a news or current affairs programme without some discussion about tax rises, hospital waiting lists, the criminal justice system or the state of Britain's schools (watch the news tonight and find out!).

In 1750, many people complained about issues that concerned them – living and working conditions, rising prices and voting rights. Sometimes, groups of unhappy people joined together to protest – sometimes peacefully, but often violently. In fact, between 1750 and 1840, there were over 700 full-scale riots in Britain!

Read the three fact boxes carefully. They outline some of the more famous riots and protests. For each one, make sure you understand what the protesters wanted and whether or not their actions had any effect.

Fact box No. 1: ▶ The Luddites



Some workers were upset that new factory machinery could do the work that maybe ten men used to do. These men formed gangs and went around smashing up the new machinery. In 1811, the machine-smashers, or Luddites as they became known, destroyed machines in the Midlands, Yorkshire and Lancashire. They were led by a man called Ned Ludd who lived secretly in Sherwood Forest, Nottingham – but no one ever found him (perhaps he never really existed).

The gangs caused thousands of pounds worth of damage – and the Government took strict action. Machine-smashing became a crime punishable by death.

Fact box No. 2: ▶ The 'Swing' Riots

In 1830, the machine-smashers reappeared. This time, workers in the countryside attacked farm machinery because farmers began to use machines to do the work that men used to do.

Fields were set on fire, farmhouses were burned down and barns smashed up. Farmers received threatening letters, often signed by 'Captain Swing', the leader of the rioters (it is unlikely he ever existed any more than Ned Ludd did!).

Again, the Government took tough action. Nineteen people were hanged, 644 put in prison and 481 were transported to Australia. Despite the riots, farmers continued to use the new machinery and many farm workers left the countryside to look for work in the towns and cities.

Fact box No. 3: ▶ The 'Peterloo'

For many hundreds of years, only a small number of men (rich ones) had been allowed to vote in elections. Many ordinary people, who couldn't vote, felt this was unfair. They thought that MPs would listen more closely to their complaints about their lives if they were voters. In August 1819, a huge, non-violent meeting was held in St Peter's Field, Manchester. Thousands of men, women and children attended, carrying banners demanding 'Votes for All'. However, things soon got out of hand.

The Government sent in soldiers to arrest the speakers and break up the crowd. But the sword-waving soldiers managed to kill 11 people and injure 400 more. The youngest victim was a baby, William Fildes, who was knocked out of his mother's arms and trampled to death by horses.

WORK

- What did Luddites and Swing Rioters have in common?
 - In what ways were they different?
- Why do you think they both failed?
- Why were Ned Ludd and Captain Swing never caught?

Source B People soon called the massacre 'Peterloo', a sarcastic reference to the famous Battle of Waterloo, when British soldiers defeated the French in 1815.



As you have probably worked out, one of the hottest issues in Britain in the 1800s was the right to vote. Increasing numbers of ordinary people wanted to choose their leaders by voting for them in elections. This system of choosing leaders through voting is known as **democracy**.

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

As a class, discuss what is meant by the word 'democracy'.

At the beginning of the 1800s, Britain was a sort of democracy. There were elections to choose people to run the country, but only those who owned valuable property were allowed to vote. This meant that in 1831, out of a population of about 20 million people, only 450 000 were rich enough to vote – and choose the people to run the lives of the rest. Poorer people thought this was unfair – if they had the right to vote, perhaps they might be able to 'vote in' MPs who would improve their lives!

FACT: Rules, rules, rules!

ELECTION RULES, 1830

- No man under 21 can vote ... and no women at all!
- Only men who own property worth 40 shillings per year (if they were to rent it out) can vote.
- Voting is not secret ... you have to announce who you're voting for.
- Each man standing for election is called a **candidate**. The candidate with most votes becomes the Member of Parliament (**MP**) for that area ... and you're not paid to do the job.
- As an MP, you will probably belong to one of the two main political parties – the **Whigs** or the **Tories**. The Whigs feel that some changes are needed to the voting system (and Britain in general), whilst the Tories don't want any changes at all.
- The political party which has the most MPs forms the Government and its leader becomes Prime Minister (**PM**). The Government makes the laws. The king or queen doesn't interfere too much so running Britain is left up to the PM and his MPs.

This is how democracy worked in Britain in 1830. Does any part of it seem unfair or just plain wrong?

The election in **Source C**, typical of one in the early 1800s, was a poor way to find people to run the country. Clearly there were problems with Britain's democracy. There was no secret voting and people were bribed to vote by those who wanted to become MPs. Also, some places (called 'rotten boroughs') only had a couple of voters (Appleby in Cumbria had one voter!), yet still sent an MP to Parliament to help run Britain.

By 1832, some MPs feared that a revolution was near. They worried that a group of rioters might become strong enough to take over the country by force and remove those currently in power. These MPs realised that change was essential and introduced modifications to the system of voting.



The 'Great' Reform Act was a huge disappointment for many ordinary working men. They wanted the vote but still didn't get it. Yes, the changes were a move in the right direction, but still four out of five men had no rights over their country. In 1836, a new campaign group was formed. Most members of this group simply wanted more change – but others wanted to take over the country and change it by force.

The Government soon saw these men as a massive threat – they were known as the Chartist.

Source C The Election by William Hogarth. Can you see:

- i) the rich men being brought in on their carriages to vote?
- ii) one of the voters (underneath the blue flag) being told how to vote?
- iii) two thugs dragging a sick man to the election so he can vote?

The Reform Act, 1832

- number of voters increased to about 800 000
- gave some big, new industrial towns, like Manchester, MPs for the first time
- some of the old 'rotten boroughs' removed

The changes made in 1832 are often called the 'Great Reform Act' by historians. But was it so great? Still only one in five men could vote – and no women! You still had to own property to vote and there were still some rotten boroughs. And voting still wasn't secret – which led to the problems encountered in **Source D**.

Source D An account of an election in Wolverhampton in 1835

'Everybody was told that if they voted against Colonel Anson they would be in trouble, if they voted for him they were greeted with loud cheers. If they voted for Sir Goodricke they were kissed, boxed and spat on. One voter had a load of horse dung thrown all over him and dead birds were thrown at another.'

WORK

1 Look at **Source B**:

- a What did the St Peter's Field demonstrators want?
- b What sort of people went to the demonstration that day?
- c Why do you think the Government reacted so violently to the demonstration?
- d How does the artist show the Government had no sympathy for the people at St Peter's Field?
- e Whose side was the artist on? Explain your answer.

2 Explain what is happening in **Source C**. Refer to as many details in the painting as possible.

- 3 a Using these two pages, make a list of things that were either wrong or unfair about the voting system before 1832.
- b Can you think of any new voting rules that could be introduced to stop some of the problems you've noted in your answer to a?
- 4 a What percentage of people were allowed to vote before and after 1832? (Use a calculator!)
- b What is your opinion of the Reform Act of 1832? Is it right that some historians call it the 'Great' Reform Act? Explain your opinions carefully.

The Chartists – reformers or revolutionaries?

In 1838, a meeting was held in Birmingham to draw up a list of desirable changes to the voting system in Britain. Ordinary working people attended the meeting – printers, shopkeepers, tailors, carpenters, shoemakers, newsagents and factory workers. The meeting agreed on six demands and the list was called **the People's Charter**. Those who agreed with the 'Charter' became known as **Chartists**.

➤ **Source E** This is what the Chartists wanted. They discussed the possibility of including 'votes for women' but decided this was a step too far!

The six points of the PEOPLE'S CHARTER

1. Every man of 21 years of age or over should be allowed to vote.
2. Voting should be done in secret. This would stop bribery.
3. Anyone should be allowed to become an MP, not only those who own property.
4. MPs should be paid and then ordinary people could afford to become MPs.
5. Voting districts (constituencies) should have an equal number of voters.
6. There should be an election every year.

All Chartists wanted change. They saw that many rich people in Britain were getting even richer, but most workers remained poor ... and lived in horrible conditions. They wanted the Government to help them, but believed they didn't care! Some workers even lost their jobs because new machinery replaced them. They felt that very little was done to help them because there was no one to speak up for them. The Charter would be their attempt to make the voting system fairer – and open to all (except women – maybe later!). If working men had the vote, they could elect MPs who promised to look after them!

For the Chartists, persuading Parliament to adopt their ideas was the difficult part. They held huge rallies in big cities such as Birmingham, Liverpool and Leeds, hoping to attract support and show the Government that a huge number of people agreed with them. Then, in 1839, they drew up a **petition**, signed by over one million people (it was three miles long!) who supported the Chartists' ideas. The petition was sent to Parliament so that MPs could see how many people wanted the changes.

Parliament ignored the petition when it arrived at their door. So another petition was organised, this time containing three million signatures. Yet again, Parliament ignored it. Some Chartist leaders started to get angry at Parliament's refusal to listen. Some talked about revolution, taking the country over and forcing the changes. Others continued to encourage the old-fashioned, peaceful methods. Read **Sources F** and **G** carefully. Try to work out which one of the leaders wants to use force and which one wants to remain peaceful.

➤ **Source F** From a speech by William Lovell, one of the Chartist leaders

'Let us, friends, seek to join together the honest moral, hard-working and intelligent members of society. Let us find out about our rights from books. Let us collect information about our lives, our wages and our conditions. Then let us publish our views. Then MPs will agree there must be change, without having to use violence or arrest.'

➤ **Source G** From a speech made by Fergus O'Connor, another Chartist leader

'I do not want to use force, but if we do not succeed we must use violence. It is better to die free men than live as slaves. Violence is the right thing to do if it wins us our freedom.'

In 1848, a third petition was organised. This one had over six million signatures! The Chartists planned a huge meeting of half a million Chartists on Kennington Common, South London, before marching to Parliament with their demands.

The Government was worried – was this the start of a revolution? Plans were drawn up to defend London and Queen Victoria was moved to safety. But the meeting was a huge flop! It rained heavily and only 20 000 Chartists turned up (see **Source A**). That's right – a possible revolution failed because of bad weather!

The petition turned into a bit of a flop too. When Parliament inspected the petition, it was found to contain fewer than two million names – and many of them were fake. Queen Victoria herself was supposed to have signed it ten times, as well as 'April First', 'Cheeky the Marine', 'No Cheese', 'Pugnose', 'Flat nose', 'Long nose' and 'Mr Punch'.

After their dramatic failure in 1848, little was heard of the Chartists again. They had failed ... or had they?

A success story?

The Chartists were the first organised national protest movement. They drew attention to the problems and frustrations of working people and showed that there were national issues that the Government must pay attention to. In fact, of their six original demands, all but one (point 6) later became law.

For a few brief days in the spring of 1848, the Government feared the Chartists. How does Britain really come to revolution is open for discussion, but the Chartists showed that the working class was a powerful and potentially threatening force that must be **pacified** in the future.

▼ **Source H** From J. D. Clare's 'Investigating History, 1750–1900'

'In 1867, the Second Reform Act gave the vote to every man who had a house, and in 1884, the Third Reform Act gave the vote to every British man who was not mad, a criminal, or a lord. In 1872, the Ballot Act said that people had to vote in secret by putting their ballot paper in a ballot box. This stopped people bribing or bullying voters into voting for them.'



WISE UP WORDS

rally democracy petition Chartists
candidate Whigs MP
the People's Charter ballot Tories pacify

WORK

- 1 a Who were the Chartists?
b List their six demands.
c Pick two that you think were most important to the workers. Give reasons for your choices.
d Which of the six demands is not in force today?
e Can you think why this has never been made law?
- 2 Look at **Sources F** and **G**.
a Rewrite each source in your own words.
b Write a sentence to explain these two words:
reformer • revolutionary
c In your opinion, who was the reformer and who was the revolutionary? Give reasons for your decision.
- 3 Write an essay that answers the question, 'Were the Chartists a success or not?' Organise your essay into short paragraphs:
 - What changes did the Chartists want?
 - Why did working people join them?
 - How did they try to get change?
 - What had they achieved by 1850?
 - Were they a long-term success, rather than a short-term one?

TOP TIP: Your essay title is a question – make sure you answer it!

Sexist Britain?



▶ How did women's rights differ from men's?

▶ How had women's rights begun to change by 1900?

In 1832, Joseph Thomson tried to sell his wife at auction for 50 shillings (£2.50). He told buyers (**Source A**):

Source A

'Gentlemen, I offer my wife, Mary Anne Thomson, whom I mean to sell to the highest bidder. It is her wish as well as mine to part forever. She has been a snake to me. I took her for my comfort but she has turned into a curse, a tormentor and a daily devil. However, she has a bright and sunny side. She can read novels, milk cows, make butter and shout at our maid. She cannot make rum, gin or whisky, but she is a good judge from long experience in tasting them.'

Unbelievably, Mr Thomson managed to sell his wife for 20 shillings (£1.00) and a dog! Today, we are shocked by the actions of this man. In fact, what Mr Thomson did is now against the law, but in 1832, it wasn't. Mr Thomson was simply treating his wife as his property – and he was free to do whatever he wanted with her. Look through **Sources B to F** carefully. In today's world where men and women have equal rights under the law, it is difficult to imagine women's place in society between 1750 and 1900.



▲ **Source C.** A punishment for nagging wives in 1812. 'The Ducking Stool'

Source B From J F Aylett's 'The Suffragettes and After'

'[In 1800], once married, her husband owned her. That was the way men saw it, and in effect, that was the law of the land. A wife's duty was to obey her husband. If she did not, he could beat her. A wife's duty was to please her husband; if she did not he might take a mistress. Either way, there was almost nothing she could do about it. An Act of Parliament was necessary to end a marriage. It could cost £2,000 and only two women ever did it. It was quite different for the man. He could spend all her money and she could not stop him. If he got into debt, her possessions could be taken to pay off the debts... even her clothes!'

Source D Adapted from what was said by Thomas Huxley, a leading scientist in the 1800s

'In every way, both mental and physical, the average woman is inferior to the average man.'

Source E The writer W M Thackeray's thoughts on the ideal woman. Make sure you understand words such as 'exquisite' and 'humble'.

'An exquisite slave, a humble, flattering, lace-making, piano-playing being who laughs at all our jokes, however old they are, helps us and fondly lies to us throughout life.'



WISE UP WORDS

maintenance inferior