

In September 1855 Feargus O'Connor, demented and impoverished, died in a Notting Hill lodging house and 'The End' was finally written to the last chapter of the story of the Chartist movement which with other radical organisations had haunted England with fears of revolution lurking in the shadows for over sixty years.

This poor relic of a man was the same giant who at the height of his power, with a voice to match his stature and the charisma to lead his fellows to the brink of rebellion, claiming descent from the Kings of Ireland, harangued the crowd in Palace Yard, Westminster. He claimed then that he would smarten up the poor working classes who were too dirty to sit in the Commons, but if he washed them, kitted them out in new suits and perfumed them with 'the latest fashionable stink' would prove the best 658 men who ever sat there.....!

A suburban inquest, a verdict of death from natural causes and the need for a public collection to pay for his funeral was a sorry end for a man who surely would have preferred to fall at the head of a mob, shouting defiance. The 'Gazette' at least in reporting the inquest, referred to his background, distinguishing him from all the other poor Irishmen who perished in the back rooms of Notting Hill's sleazier streets.

This comparatively minor event has a symbolism far greater than the death of one man, being the whimper rather than the bang which was changing Victorian England from simmering revolution to radical reform slow enough though it may appear to modern minds. 'The mob' of course, had not been subdued for ever, even as late as the 1880s there were scenes in central London which make any civil disturbance of the 1980s pale in comparison.

The Chartists,            leaders,            at least, had never advocated revolution in terms of physical violence, although their numbers aroused panic in the hearts of those who were constantly in fear that this continental disease was about to cross the channel. Their very name is indicative of their purpose, the reform of government by words rather than by deeds, but their presentation of those aims, by numbers of marching men and women, had the appearance of insurrection. William Cooke Taylor, a Whig politician, free trader and campaigner against the Corn Laws who made a tour of some of the Lancashire manufacturing towns in the 1850s, wrote in his notes 'There are mighty energies slumbering in these masses. Had our ancestors witnessed the assembly of such a multitude as is poured forth every evening from the mills of Union Street, magistrates would have assembled, special constables been sworn in.

The military would have been called out and some fatal collision have taken place. The crowds now scarcely attract the notice of a passing police man , but it is nevertheless a crowd and therefore susceptible to the passion which may animate a multitude '.

The poor are always with us, and always a problem but the changing face of England in the mid 19th century, and earlier had brought the nagging pain up into a throbbing fester as the neater pattern of parish life was changed, bringing huge numbers of people into the urban conurbations .

' A manufacturing populace is always ready for rioting ' wrote Robert Mouthey. ' The direction which their fury may take is accidental'. Writing in his ' Letters from England ' he added that there were two causes which could rouse the peasantry to rebellion and two causes only , intolerable oppression or religious zeal , no other motive was powerful enough. It was certainly not religious zeal that inflamed the masses in those days of the 1840s and ' 50s few of them knew or cared at all about religion, but the oppression was there right enough and had been for decades if not generations.

The Elizabethan Poor Laws had been adequate enough in their way for times when parishes were self-contained and might be expected to support their people in times of hardship, sickness or old age those who had been in the care of the church before the Dissolution of the monasteries. The system worked after a fashion as long as there were not too many paupers and work was usually available for the able-bodied , but by the end of the 18th century enclosures having taken away the labourers' small holdings , game laws stopping the snaring of rabbits and wildfowl and cottage industries being put out of business by factory weaving and spinning, real poverty moved into the rural districts on a massive scale . Labour was so cheap that even a man in work could not support his family and at Speenhamland in Berkshire in 1795 the magistrates decided that in the face of widespread famine, low paid farm workers should have their wages supplemented by the parish rates so that each received a sum fixed by the price of bread and the size of his family . This did not take into account the speed with which employers would seize on the opportunity to ensure that their labourers would cost them even less, their wages being subsidised by the ' dole ' , the labourers in their turn were robbed of any incentive to work or save, money ' put by' only preventing them from receiving any relief.

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Large families were also encouraged as extra mouths brought more assistance, at least that was the opinion of such as Harriet Martineau in her writings on the Poor Law and Faupers, as well as those in power and politics.

The Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834 was born out of the report of the Commissioners appointed to consider its reform. They came to the conclusion that outdoor relief discouraged the honest and industrious, protected the lazy and improvident and encouraged early marriages and large families. Perhaps because their Chairman was the Bishop of London, Charles Blomfield, they did temper their justice with <sup>some</sup> mercy, agreeing that outdoor relief should still be given to those who were too old or sick to work but able bodied men and women and children were to be placed in workhouses, employed in work which was 'not repellant,' but unattractive enough to make the workhouse a place to be avoided. The 'Speenhamland System' was to be abolished and the control of the poor handed over to Boards of Guardians elected by the ratepayers and administered by relieving officers, who would be paid professionals. In practice, the 'mercy' was usually lacking. Poverty, it was considered, was probably due to stupidity, extravagance, drunkenness or fecklessness and should be punished accordingly, outdoor relief would be cut to a minimum and those who could not support themselves would be accommodated in workhouses made so inhospitable than many would have preferred prison, especially as the 'sentence' in them could be without end.

By the end of the Napoleonic wars 'the elements of convulsion were at work among the masses of the labouring population' wrote Samuel Bamford the Lancashire weaver-writer who had described London as 'a great Babylon', and nothing was more likely to cause that convulsion than the Corn Laws which artificially inflated the price of bread, the staple food of the poor both in towns and villages. Introduced in 1815 their object was to protect the English farmers from foreign competition now made possible by the end of the war. The government, under the premiership of a hard-line Tory, Robert Banks Jenkinson, Earl of Liverpool, favoured farmers because they were mostly from the wealthier classes and the rents they paid provided the fortunes of the loaded gentry predominant among Tory Members of Parliament.

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The withdrawal of the Napoleonic army from Germany and the end of the 'Continental system' which put severe restrictions on shipping, including the importation of foreign corn, threatened to bring down the price of wheat to the disadvantage of the English farmers who had been profiteering from famine conditions, and inferior land used during the war was no longer being cultivated. The Corn Law of 1815 forbade all imports of foreign wheat as long as English corn was selling for less than eighty shillings a quarter. This measure was only partly successful and in 1828 the Duke of Wellington, now Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury, set up a sliding scale placing a high duty on corn imports when the price of home grown grain was low and low duty when the English prices rose. But all through the the twenty years from the first imposition of the tax working people considered it to be one more means whereby their suffering through the dearness of bread was used to subsidise the rich. In addition to this, the abolition of Income Tax originally introduced by William Pitt in 1797 as a war measure, may have pleased the wealthy but not those who found the compensatory indirect taxes on food and clothing an additional hardship on their already meagre earnings.

Influenced by the economist, David Ricardo, who believed the lowest possible wage by which a man could be kept alive was the basis of prosperous industry, and the clergyman, the Rev. T R Malthus, whose 'Essay on Population' advocated birth control induced by poverty and starvation rather than mechanical means (more available food encouraging breeding) no wonder the study of economics was known as the dismal science. In the light of such doctrines the government policy was one of repression as an antidote to revolution, a policy which brought them to the brink of disaster.

In the year after the first Corn Laws a great political demonstration took place in Spa Fields led by the radical Henry Hunt under the tricolour flag while a body of the unemployed set off from Manchester to petition the Prince Regent, becoming known as the Blanketeers from their intention to sleep by the wayside. There were other petty disturbances in various parts of the country, all severely dealt with by the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, three of the rioters at Derby being executed. It was a policy of repression which stung not only those who writhed beneath its iron heel but the radical writers, the intellectual

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freedom fighters ' inspired by the ideals of Byron and Shelley and the rhetoric of William Cobbett and Hunt who had acquired the title of ' Orator ' .

In August 1819 the suppressed ferment broke loose again with the disaster of St Peters Fields, Manchester, where the cavalry were ordered to <sup>charge the</sup> crowd with eleven fatal casualties ( the numbers being greatly exaggerated when the terrible story was told from mouth to mouth across the country ) But it was not this, or the ' Cato ' conspiracy of the following year, when conspirators plotted to murder the entire cabinet as they sat at dinner , which brought about the fall of the Liverpool government , rather it lay with the Whigs' championship of the King's recalcitrant wife, the eccentric, coarse Caroline of Brunswick, whom the crowds still preferred to her cad of a husband. The failure of the King's Bill of Pains and Penalties to take away her rights and the suicide of Lord Castlereagh led to the change of heart and victory of the Tory ' wets ' , prominent among whom was the young Robert Peel , the son of a wealthy cotton manufacturer , breaking the traditional links of the party with the Tory landed gentry.

But even the leadership of the old war horse and hero of Waterloo, Wellington, was not enough to keep the Tories in office indefinitely in such troubled times. In 1830 there was a revolt of farm labourers<sup>s</sup> against the introduction of threshing machinery ( four years later the famous Tolpuddle Martyrs were sentenced to transportation for having formed a trade union, ) . In 1831 there were riots at Bristol, as serious as any known , in protest against the rejection by the House of Lords ( including the Bishops ) of the popular Reform Bill, public buildings were set alight and there were many casualties.

When the young Princess Victoria succeeded her ailing old uncle, ' Sailor William ' , in 1837, 'The Times' predicted that evil was likely to befall the new reign and the Queen must be protected from the perils of which she might not be conscious. These perils in the view of 'The Times' would certainly have included Lord Melbourne who they described as the ' slave of the radical Joseph Hume and the anti-Saxon Papist O'Connell' ( the Irish Nationalist leader, Daniel O'Connell ) 'the same Lord Melbourne who has for the last two years or more been levying open war against or trickily undermining the ancient laws the fundamental institutions and Protestant monarchy of Great Britain. ' . They did not mention the other Irishman, the red-headed giant Feargus O'Connor, and his followers , who after a National Chartist Convention set up in London and Birmingham.

were drawing up their six point plan for government in Britain which was far closer to the democratic system of the present time than most people realise. Their demands were based mainly on universal suffrage, believing that the removal of power from the rich would result in all their needs, such as work, cheaper food, better homes, and less repressive laws, being met. It called for suffrage at manhood, voting by secret ballot, no property qualifications for MPs (who would also receive salaries), equal electoral districts and annual elections.

Feargus O'Connor had been born into a family of rebellion, Protestants from County Cork, his father was a revolutionary and his uncle had settled in France, serving as a general in the Napoleonic army. Feargus became an admirer and follower of Daniel O'Connell with whom he shared a belief in non-violence, for despite his heated invective he was always opposed to physical force. In 1832 he entered English politics as the Member for County Cork, although by this time he had broken with O'Connell and taken up the cause of the Working Class Movement, first as a member of the London Working Men's Association which sought 'to draw <sup>into</sup> one bond of unity the intelligent and influential portion of working classes in town and country and seek by every legal means to place all classes of society in possession of equal political and social rights'. It was one of their leaders, William Lovett, who with Francis Place, drew up the list of demands which formed the basis of the People's Charter. ( Lovett also wanted to include the enfranchisement of women, but this was considered likely to bring the whole Charter into ridicule ).

The move to draw up a National Petition to support the Charter began in Birmingham where a Political Union had been formed, rather oddly, by a banker whose main concern seems to have been a desire to reform the currency. Peaceful protest was not very attractive to the masses of underfed impoverished labourers drawn to Chartist meetings, they only understood the law of the club and the fist against oppressors.

When O'Connor came to London he met Bronterre O'Brien, another Irishman from a refined middle class background, son of a tobacco and wine merchant, from Trinity College Dublin, who was to work with him for the Charter although the two were never really in harmony. Soon O'Connor was to leave the Working Mens Association to form his own London Democratic Association before taking over the radical newspaper 'The Northern Star' in Leeds, where he gave plenty of editorial space to air the views that they were both expounding with splendid

Irish eloquence from outdoor platforms. Already the movement was split between those of militant and more moderate views, although popular opinion was alarmed by torchlight meetings and threats of strikes. Sir Charles Napier, hero of Corunna, even invited the Chartist leaders to see a demonstration of artillery fire to persuade them that armed rebellion could only end in a massacre for them.

In May 1839 the House of Commons had still refused to receive the Charter and when it did consider it in July rejected it by a huge majority. A strike 'a sacred month of protest' was planned for August and there were riots in Birmingham. The strikes came to nothing, but real trouble flared in November in Newport and Monmouth when a mob of 20,000 believed to be armed (although this was probably only a rumour) rioted and 24 Chartists were either killed or died later of their wounds. The Mayor who called out the troops was invited to visit the Queen at Windsor and knighted. O'Connor had tried to stop the riot and certainly had no intention of organising a similar demonstration in the north, although he was sent to gaol for libel, and Lovett sent to prison for 13 months. O'Connor had now split from Lovett and started his own National Chartist Association, realising that Lovett, disillusioned with working class support, was now looking towards the middle classes to further his political views.

O'Connor was still determined to persuade Parliament to accept his "National Petition", the signatures on which had now reached over three million, with additional calls for the rights of Englishmen to be 'free of unendurable tyranny, mass arrests, transportation and imprisonment' for campaigning for the rights they demanded.

When the Petition was eventually presented again to Parliament in 1842 Macaulay said he regarded 'universal suffrage, unless preceded by universal education, fatal to all purposes for which government exists' and O'Connor was described, even by those with sympathy to the radical cause, as 'a foolish, malignant cowardly demagogue'. The year 1842 was one of terrible deprivation and poverty such as was to give this decade the name of the 'hungry forties', and the rejection of the Charter yet again was greeted with further outbreaks of angry demonstrations.

A gathering at Blackburn threatened to march south to present their cause to the Queen, there were riots in Ireland, Colliers who had had their wages cut called a strike and the County Yeomanry was called out, there were riots in Manchester, Stockport and Cheshire with looting and vandalism.

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Burslem Town Hall was taken and sacked with other similar incidents all over the Midlands and the North. It was London's turn in August when the mob tried to prevent the posting of soldiers north to quell the disorders there. The strike weapon was also being used in the north, 'Plug Plots' encouraging workers to sabotage the boilers in factories by taking the plugs out. Despite his continued opposition to violence, O'Connell was arrested but let off, although fifty of his supporters who were less lucky were sentenced to transportation.

Friedrich Engels, the son of a German textile manufacturer who was to be the co author with Karl Marx of the Communist Manifesto, came to England in 1844, the same year that he had met Marx in Paris, to study English and the cotton industry but paid more attention to the conditions of those working in it. In a report on 'The Condition of the Working Class in England', which was written for German readers, he described living conditions in scathing terms. 'The clothing of the workers is generally scant and that of the great multitude is in rags. Food in general is bad and their homes are poverty stricken. Each exploits the other and the end of it all is that the stronger treads the weaker underfoot and the powerful few, the capitalists seize everything for themselves while to the weak many, the poor, scarcely a bare existence remains.'

But Engels saw in these miserable conditions the birth of a new unity among working class people, the Trade Unions and Chartism and Socialism 'destroying the sentimental bonds between employer and employee reducing it to one of solely pecuniary profit.'

At the time he wrote this Engels was of course witnessing England in the height of one of the worst periods of the 19th century. Before the decade of the 'forties had dawned the northern part of the country, masters as well as men, was united against the iniquitous Corn laws which apart from devaluing the workers' wages through the disproportionate high cost of bread, hindered the manufacturers' export efforts, their foreign customers being unable to sell their cheap grain to accumulate exchange to buy English goods. There was also the association with favour shown to the landed gentry at the expense of the labouring classes who

saw it as a further imposition by those who had already robbed their forebears of their small holdings



Earlier in the same year that the Chartists had presented their first unsuccessful petition ( 1839 ) the leaders of the Anti Corn Law League had drummed up opposition to the ' Bread Tax '. Foremost in the movement were John Bright and Richard Cobden, Bright was a Quaker and both were millowners from Lancashire and when they brought their successful street oratory to Westminster their power of persuasion was enormous .

The last straw which broke the power of the Corn Law supporters was the failure of the harvest in 1845 , the same year as a disastrous blight decimated the Irish potato crop and the two nations faced starvation without the aid of cheap imported grain . Prime Minister Robert Peel, probably the first of all the ' Tory Wets ' , had already re introduced income tax to lower the taxes on food , now he had no choice but to remove that on corn . He was supported by about a hundred of his members and the whole Cabinet, with the exception of Lord Stanley , heir to Earl of Derby , and the whole of the Whig Opposition . Other Tories, led by Benjamin Disraeli, already at odds with Peel , made up the opposing side

Unlike the majority of his party who came from the landed gentry and lamented the movement of power and wealth from the land and agriculture to manufacturing, Benjamin Disraeli was captivated by the city . He was still a Conservative back-bencher who had just written his novel ' Coningsby ' . In it he describes a scene in his hero's lodgings where ' even the bedroom was lit by gas in the wonderful city where the illuminated factories had more windows than Italian palaces and the smoking chimneys were taller than Egyptian obelisks , Even inside the mills, in the weaving rooms where a thousand or 1500 girls may be observed in their coral necklaces , some pretty, some pert , some graceful, some jacid , a little serious , few sad ' . He had changed his mind somewhat only a year later when in ' Sybil ' or ' The Two Nations ' ( the rich and the poor ) he wrote of the distress of the working people during the period of the Chartist movement .

The Corn Laws went, although the event had little immediate effect on the price of bread ( which remained a contentious issue for another decade or more ) and so did Peel , for in 1846 the Whigs were back in government , led by Lord John Russell , with Palmerston as Foreign Minister , but England was entering upon a period of unstable government by faction . Following the death of Peel after a fall from his horse in the Mall in 1851 ,

the ' new Tories ' were leaderless the ' wets ' being left to support the Whigs, who were also prevented by their small majority from undertaking really liberal measures apart from free trade. ( The Tories were not to achieve another overall majority for another thirty years ).

' The Times ' gave the news of the repeal of the Corn Laws its wholehearted support. ' They who have long desired this change and have long traced its manifold bearings on the welfare and happiness of the people will in one moment see the realisation of that fair prospect '.

The Chartist movement was now hopelessly split into factions with Feargus O 'Conner still determined to go it alone, he did not even support the anti-Corn Law campaigners, favouring instead his own agricultural scheme, a land-owning association which would lease out small holdings on a co-operative basis, first named the Co Operative Land Society later becoming the National Land Company but branded by O'Connors detractors as a land lottery. However it brought O Connor back into the public eye and in 1847 he was elected to Parliament for Nottingham. He had already travelled in Europe where he met leaders of the German revolutionary party, including Marx and Engels, exiled in Belgium.

One wonders what Charles Strutt would have thought had he known that living near to him, at least until 1850, when he was evicted, was Karl Marx, the house in which he lodged at Anderson Street Chelsea, bears no blue plaque today and Marx left it to move to Dean Street, Soho where he wrote the greater part of 'Das Kapital'. In October 1856 he moved again to Grafton Road, Kentish Town, and finally to Mailan Park Road in the same area.

In 1848 the fall of King Louis Phillippe of France encouraged the militants in the old Chartist movement to try again. Louis Philippe took refuge in England with his queen but there was revolution also in Milan, Vienna, Naples and Rome, co-inciding with disturbances in Ireland where in the climate of famine the Nationalists were stirring up support with fighting talk by such as Charles Gavin Duffy's ' We must leap the barriers, if needs be we must die rather than let this providential hour pass over us unliberated.'

The Chartists were holding a meeting in a London tavern when the news came of the Paris Revolution and led by Julian Harvey,

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another of their leaders, marched out into the night to meet other groups, singing and shouting. A great meeting was arranged to take place at Kennington Common in April when the latest petition would be presented once again to Parliament.

Prince Albert was *also* worried, suspecting that the organisation had means of secret communication, possibly by pigeon post. The Duke of Wellington was called in to organise the defence of London a large body of special constables was sworn in including Prince Louis Napoleon who was soon to rule France, first as President then as its new Emperor. Troops were brought in and buildings fortified. The Queen, <sup>who</sup> had just given birth to her sixth child, Louise, went to the Isle of Wight and the government took over the telegraph system. Feargus O'Connor was already ill and continued to preach non-violence. Bronterre O'Brien declared that the government was too strong for them and they might as well give in.

The procession was forbidden but on April 10 a contingent set out from the John Street Institute in Westminster headed by a horse-drawn wagon carrying the petition wrapped in bales, followed by another in which rode O'Connor and other leaders. Other groups were converging from various parts of London as well as Irish contingents bearing banners 'Ireland for the Irish'. O'Connor was asked to meet the Commissioner of Police who told him the meeting could be held on the Common at Kennington but the procession must not cross the bridge to Westminster. O'Connor, who by now felt the situation was beyond him, agreed and after hearing speeches by the various leaders the crowd broke up and dispersed as heavy rain started to fall, leaving O'Connor and a few of his companions to take the precious petition to the Commons in a cab.

Small groups of Chartists still continued to meet, although the Queen thanked God that the rally had turned out a complete failure. 'the people's indignation of their peace being interfered with by such wanton and worthless men having shown limitless indignation and loyalty. The Prince was aware that Chartism had not completely disappeared, recording that the Police often broke a number of heads when breaking up such gatherings. The Irish rebellion also failed. Men must eat to be able to fight, said

Palmerston and he was right, starving men can only think of their bellies. All these events however can be judged in the light of contemporary history, when the six points of the Charter have passed into common acceptance and comment on Ireland is superfluous. The National Land Company was failing, with the small holders unable to meet their payments and O'Connor indicted for dishonest management. A man of tremendous talents he was probably brought down by his excessive independence and arrogant courting of publicity and his recklessness, particularly in financial matters. Although cleared of any criminal charges the mud had stuck and he was also now a sick man, some of his own most enthusiastic supporters turning against him.

So the story reaches its sad ending in September 1855 when the 'Gazette' reported that 'Yesterday Mr Brent, the Deputy Coroner of Middlesex, opened an enquiry into the cause of death of Mr F. O'Connor the well known Chartist leader, which took place on Thursday last at the residence of his sister, in Albert Terrace, Notting Hill gate. The inquest had been applied for by Mr Roger O'Connor, nephew of the deceased, who was present during the proceedings and displayed a good deal of excitement.

Although the jury had apparently been allowed to view the body Mr Roger O'Connor had not been allowed to see it. The Coroner therefore arranged for a constable to take Mr O'Connor to the house where it was lying and adjourned the inquest for a few days in order to allow the chief Coroner, Mr Wakeley, to take the case.

When Roger O'Connor returned from viewing his uncle's body he complained loudly of the state in which he found it which in his opinion proved at least a great want of care. A Jury man protested at such a statement which he hoped would not go forth to the public as he had seen nothing to justify it in the state of the body.

The Coroner said natural causes were quite sufficient for the appearance complained of, but as the question had been raised it might be as well for the jury to view the body again. The jury did so and on their return said they were still quite satisfied, and there is no further report of the inquest, which presumably ended without any further incidents.

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During the proceedings , in reply to a question from the Coroner as to the probable time of Mr O ' Connor's burial, a gentleman present was reported as saying that he believed Miss O ' Connor, the deceased's sister, was in great difficulty as to that respect as she had not the requisite funds. Dr Harrington Tuke said that Mr O'Connor had been an inmate of his establishment ( presumably a lunatic asylum ) for three years and as a mark of respect he would be happy to advance any sum necessary for the funeral expenses, and a juryman said he would be happy to contribute a sovereign. The foreman of the jury, a Mr Durnford, added that he understood it to be the wish of a very large number of people belonging to the working classes that Mr O'Connor should have a public funeral and he thought their wish should be complied with.

It was announced in the same issue of the 'Gazette' that ' the mortal remains of Mr O ' Connor will be interred in Kensal Green Cemetery on Monday next ( September 10 ). The funeral will be public and the expenses attendant on it defrayed by subscription. The friends and admirers of the deceased in his early political movements for the ameliorations of the conditions of the working classes , the extension of universal suffrage and the six points of the Charter will muster in strong force at the Prince Albert, Notting Hill and follow the corpse two abreast to the Cemetery where an oration will be delivered over the deceased's body by a working man. The subscriptions for a testimonial to the deceased are proceeding favourably.'

Politically Feargus O'Connor had been dead since the end of the decade, just as Sir Robert Peel had also 'died' in the eyes of the political public long before his actual death following a fall from his horse in the Mall in 1851. His repeal of the Corn Laws split his own party in two with Disraeli leading the attack against him, pursuing an enmity which had always existed between them. Peel had been defeated in 1848 not by a vote on the Corn Laws but on an Irish matter ( the Coercion Bill ) and the government had passed briefly to the Whigs under Lord John Russell the delicate third son of the Earl of Bedford who had led the House of Commons some 11 years earlier under the premiership of Melbourne . Thus begun six years of see-saw administration with no stable majority, all the parties being split into factions

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Leading performers on this political stage were Benjamin Disraeli, (whose leadership of the Tories was described as 'the greatest triumph that liberalism had ever achieved'!) Edward Stanley, 14th Earl of Derby, Lord Palmerston, William Gladstone and Lord Aberdeen (George Hamilton Gordon) who was eventually to lead the Coalition of 1852 formed after Gladstone's attack on the Disraeli budget (which had reduced taxes on commodities but extended Income Tax to earned income of £100 and unearned income of £50, plus a tax on houses) and brought about the fall of the minority Tories, now led by Lord Derby. Thus when Strutt launched his 'Gazette' in 1853 it was at a time of even more unstable politics, a period when the vicissitudes of the Crimean war and its disastrous disappointments brought recriminations and scathing language against which present day parliamentary insults pale in comparison. (Disraeli described Palmerston on one occasion as 'an old painted pantaloon and utterly exhausted imposter'!).

Peel had been dead for two years but there were still those in Parliament who could be described as 'Peelites' and reforms in the franchise were spreading interest in Parliamentary affairs to enormous numbers of people who had once considered that the choice of their rulers was something far beyond their jurisdiction.

Palmerston was never in favour of wider suffrage, he was to tell the Queen some years later that he would 'give much to discover some qualification which admit some of the best and most intelligent of the working classes to the right to vote,' and offered a few suggestions based on savings or wages, in 1852 however he was still of the opinion that the secret ballot was a shameful underhanded sort of action, 'sneaking into a ballot box and poking a piece of paper in, looking round to see no one could read it this he thought was not only unconstitutional but unworthy of the character of the straightforward and honest Englishman.

No one could possibly have denied that the electoral system was a shambles and wide open to abuse and corruption and it was not until 1854 that the Corrupt Practices Act brought some effort to end this, including penalties for the intimidation of voters, easily achieved when landlords and employers required their underlings to support them or else, apart from direct or indirect bribery. Although the vote was available to householders of property with a £ 10 rateable value this 'book' qualification was little use

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as it did not automatically ensure that one's name would appear on the register. Many people in cities such as London paid rates through their landlord and had to make a claim to be registered in their own right. It was estimated that at least a tenth of those entitled did not appear in the lists and on the other hand party agents would offer to pay the rates in return for support. The Queen's Speech to Parliament, reported in the 'Gazette' on January 31 1854, made references to this attempt to end Election abuses.

' Measures will be submitted to you for amendment of laws relating to the representation of the Commons in Parliament. Recent experience has shown that it is necessary to take more effective precautions against the evils of bribery and corrupt practices at Elections. '

The speech also referred to ' The blessing of an abundant harvest... ....by this dispensation of Providence the price of provisions has been enhanced and <sup>the</sup> privations of the poor have been increased, their patience has been exemplary and the care of the legislature evinced by the reduction of taxes affecting the necessities of life has greatly tended to preserve the spirit of contentment.

' I look forward to the removal of the last legislation restriction upon the use of foreign shipping .

' The laws relating to the relief of the poor have of late undergone much salutary amendment but there is one branch to which I earnestly direct your attention . The law of Settlement impedes the freedom of labour and if this restraint can with safety be relaxed, the workman may be enabled to increase the fruits of his industry and the interests of capital and labour will be more firmly united.'

This Settlement law had allowed the urban areas to escape responsibility for redundant labour imported from rural districts, the out of work being sent back to their home villages to support. This more equitable system of caring for the destitute by bringing towns and villages together in a ' Union ' still presented many parishes with a huge burden . This is shown by a Gazette report on Poor Relief in August 1855.

' In a return just issued by 623 Unions, representing 14,130 parishes the total expense in maintenance and outdoor relief in the half year ending Lady Day 1855 was £ 2, 535 662. This is an increase

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of £112 390 compared to the corresponding half year '54. The total number of paupers in receipt of relief on July 1 1855 amounted to 810,893 compared to 796,681 in July 1854, an increase of 14,182. There were increases in every county except Cambridge, Cornwall, Dorset, Durham, Norfolk, Huntingdon, Salop, Suffolk and Precon'.

Despite the repeal of the Corn Laws, the price of bread was still a contentious subject, its fluctuations being regularly reported in the 'Gazette' and have to be considered in the light of the level of wages and the price of other commodities, (bread was still the staple ingredient in many diets.)

On the morning of February 19 1855 in Liverpool, a mob raided bakers' shops helping themselves to loaves. A 'Times' report said that 'although the shops closed in every direction some of the rioters not only asked for bread but small gangs of desperate fellows entered shops and houses and demanded money.

' In one part of the city (the neighbourhood of Islington and Brunswick Road) <sup>people</sup> were alarmed by seeing a mob of the number of about 500 consisting in the main of boys and youths... apparently from 16 to 17 years of age... led on by some half a dozen rough looking men, whose appearance indicated a determination for mischief and riot rather than hunger or starvation. As is usual in these lawless acts the mob included a number of women'.

The report continues to describe how this mob raided more bakers' and provision shops, 'they wanted bread and they would have it!' and also added stone throwing to their activities breaking shop windows and those of the rooms above'.

In October the same year a huge demonstration took place in Hyde Park on the same subject of expensive bread. After this a correspondent writing in the 'Gazette' objected to the Park being turned into a nursery for infant politicians. 'In my time boys cared little or nothing about the price of a quarter loaf and were happy in the innocent enjoyment of games suited to their age.

' I grieved to see police yield passive obedience to that riotous mob of juvenile ruffians ranging from ten to 18 years, who appeared to be in possession of the park. Now I am a great advocate of liberty of the subject but not unrestrained liberty of those<sup>to</sup> whom its enjoyment is a source of annoyance to others.

cont.



I suggested to an intelligent policeman the propriety of about twenty of the force being furnished with birch rods and he caught at the idea and said he was quite sure if so armed that he and his comrades could clear the park without difficulty.

( The use of Hyde Park for demonstrations was becoming a new fashion earlier in the year tradesmen had gathered to protest about Sunday trading restrictions ).

On October 17 1855, the Wednesday before the dear bread demonstration, the correspondent of the 'Gazette' called ' Estellina ' ( who also contributed poems to the paper and may well have been Strutt himself writing under a pseudonym ) took a ' let them eat cake ' view in ' her ' highly re-actionary opinion.

' Bread is very dear no one can deny but the scarceness is due to natural causes, why blame the government for what it cannot help ? Besides, if bread is expensive what other provisions are not and labour is well remunerated . The working man need not think he is the only sufferer by the present pressure, or envy his richer neighbours. If the poor have many mouths to feed and numerous wants to supply the higher classes have the same and besides that a position to keep up . If the working man has <sup>less</sup> means of gratification than his landlord, he has less anxiety and responsibility.

It is a hard thing for a poor man to make ends meet, but violating the Sabbath with rebellion and bloodshed is no way to remedy the evil . The people should co-operate with the aristocracy and not act in opposition to those who are in authority.

x x x

Trying to run a city the size of London as if it were ( as it was really ) a string of country parishes now joined together , caused incredible overlapping and chaos in administration, as Charles Strutt comments in his editorial of October 1854.

London, he said contained more wealth, more power, more of everything, good and bad, than all the States of Grace put together, and also contained a great number and variety of governments.

' The poor rate, the county rate , the police rate , the paving rate , the lighting rate, the watery rate , the sewers rate, the gas rate, the house tax and income tax, most of them levied by persons which in your humble opinion seem not very fit to be entrusted with such responsible powers '.

cont.

If you are rather puzzled and disgusted and enquire of your friend in the next street you find he pays different rates to different men and is as much out of your government as if he lived in Birmingham or Bessarabia ! It certainly does strike you that for six or seven yards in front of your house, £25, for the maintenance of an entire agricultural family, is a heavy contribution to the poor, that £ 5 .15 is a good deal to pay annually for that length of paving and £8 a year a good deal for your two or three small cisterns of water, and so on , yet as you know absolutely nothing about the matter, except that the man at the door knows you are entirely at his mercy, you must pay, or see your house over run by an army of brokers and your goods divided among them.

' You can no more resist the stream of rates and taxes than you can turn the tide at Gravesend. There are 213 acts of Parliament administered by 276 bodies and there are 9,548 persons in possession of Parliamentary power over their less fortunate fellow citizens. ( A cry from the heart of a 19th century taxpayer ! ). ' In one parish of St Pancras there are 17 paving districts which have no more to do with each other than the pavement of our St Pauls with that of St Peters in Rome !

' Walk a mile almost any way in the metropolis and you pass from one jurisdiction to another two or three times and a faint line in the pavement indicates that you have passed to a new set of rules a new power, lighterer, waterer, new gas or water company, not only independent but most probably at war with the powers that rule over the flagstone behind you ! There are really not two parishes within the bills of mortality that have the same constitution. London is one of the worst managed regions in the world. Perhaps reform will come at last, about AD 2000 , so we will content ourselves with leaving a record of this picture of the metropolis for the use of posterity. '

Obviously if reform had been necessary in parliamentary government it was no less so in local administration, where, as Strutt laments, there was no uniformity, often consisting of no more than a few favoured individuals meeting in a local hostelry once a year to discuss parish business being able to run things pretty well to suit themselves, or in other instances, where the meetings were ' open ', still able to impose their views through fear or favour.

In 1831 Sir John Hobhouse ( Lord Broughton - better known for his efforts to improve factory conditions for children ) had introduced a measure by which vestries at least had to be elected annually by ballot instead of even serving for life.

In September 1854 the announcement was made in the 'Gazette' of the formation of a Kensington Parochial Association for Ratepayers and Owners of Property in favour of reduction in taxation and reformed management of our parish ' Points they intended to raise included watching parochial expenditure vigilantly and to use every exertion for ensuring strict economy. There was also to be ' strenuous endeavours to repeal certain obnoxious clauses in the Kensington Improvement Act which had been introduced without the knowledge of sanction of the parish. They also sought the repeal of the Sturges Bourne ' plurality of votes act as contrary to the spirit of the age and to substitute it with Hobhouse's Act for better government of elections in the parish,' and

to end the election of Trustees of the Poor for life ; The Trustees also to be required to furnish annual accounts, ( a meeting was to be held to discover whether certain of the Trustees were still alive ! ) ; to procure the election of ratepayers to parochial offices who are known to be earnest advocates of Justice, Retrenchment and Economy and to agitate for all Vestry meeting to be convened in the evening instead of the morning to allow ratepayers to attend '.

A candidate for election to the Board of Guardians in December 1854 took an advertisement to announce his manifesto under the heading of ' Enormous and Unnecessary Parochial Rate, Empty Houses Extravagant Salaries of Officials! ' He demanded a reduction of the rates, alteration of the present unjust and partial rating of house property, reductions in the salaries of paid officials, the establishment of public baths and wash houses, evening meetings of the vestries, the support of the parish church by pew rents, in lieu of church rates, the triennial election of Trustees of the Poor instead of the present election for life and the abolition of the turnpike gates...

One of the main problems was the re-organisation of old parishes into manageable units. A meeting was held on March 11 1854 to support the Reform Bill introduced by Lord John Russell as ' being in the main a liberal and just measure ' +t proposed to unite the parishes of Chelsea and Kensington but the title <sup>it was mooted</sup> /should not be Chelsea, but Kensington, from the latter's superiority.

At least as a compromise the title could be the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea ( which eventually came about in the 1960s ! ) The population of Kensington, said the ' Gazette' consisted of 50,000 with 8,000 new houses, and both numbers were rapidly increasing, with plenty of new works in progress, in addition to those by the government in connection with the new National Gallery and Museum . By comparison, the parish of St Luke's, Chelsea, consisted of only 780 acres, mostly built up already and therefore incapable of much increase. Kensington on the other hand was up of 11 miles in circumference and likel in a few years to contain a population treble that of its neighbour.

The dissolution of the old municipal corporations some twenty years earlier, with all their opportunities for corruption ( many were known to spend most of their revenue on themselves!) left local government entirely in the hands of a motley throng known as 'Improvement Commissioners' who could be all things to all men and to themselves, from fairly conscientious and honest to lackadaisical, reactionary to progressive, according to who they were. They were mainly co-opted or elected for life, and with powers as wide as law and order to lighting and street cleaning. The powers of boroughs to take over their duties was optional and some form of central organisation only began after the emergencies of the cholera outbreaks in the 1840s.

Reporting on Sir Benjamin Hall's Bill for the Better Local Government of the Metropolis in April 1855 'The Observer' said it was not to be expected that some 14,000 or 15, 000 members of antiquated paving trusts, lighting boards etc., with long strings of paid officials, who had been receiving good salaries and with little to do, would quietly submit to having their snug little privilege abolished. They were grumbling and growling and holding private meetings and organising opposition to the Bill.

But with one exception the whole of the metropolitan press had declared itself in favour of the principles of the Bill and it had to be admitted on all hands that the metropolis had been most grossly mismanaged, enormous sums had been extracted from the ratepayers' pockets for the purpose of jobbery and misrule.

This pious hope was in vain, as events after the election soon proved ~~and~~ further gazette reports and letters were to reveal

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Gaslight Gazette Chapter X Page 24

The remedies that were proposed were the best that could be adopted and presented consolidation without the evils of centralisation.

Had the proposition been to have only one body for the entire management of London, opponents of centralisation would have had reason to complain the same as if the present metropolitan boroughs had been formed into municipalities, owing to the extent of their areas. Tower Hamlets had a population of 550,000 nearly double that of the City of Liverpool and would be difficult to manage. There was much satisfaction over the proposal to appoint Medical Officers of Health, even the Medical Officer of the City of London ( Sir John Simon ) who had at first been jeered at by the old party on the Corporation of the City, was now universally admitted to have afforded a signal service in his efforts to contain the cholera epidemic.



Kensington's new Vestry Hall had been completed a few years earlier in 1852 ( it remains today having been first converted into a public library and then the headquarters of the Bank Meli of Iran ) In its early days it was surrounded by a high iron railing with a pillared gateway mounted on either side by two ornate lanterns, otherwise the building, which is almost immediately opposite Kensington High Street Station, is outwardly the same as it was 130 years ago..

Commenting on the forthcoming election of the Improvement Commissioners a 'Gazette' editorial reported that the Commissioners may have expressed regret at the great expense that they had incurred but the form of accounts was far from intelligible and would never have appeared unless there had been public agitation. A clear and satisfactory balance sheet should have been drawn up. Whatever the result of the election there is satisfaction that the enquiry and stir made in these affairs going on for the past six months should be of great benefit to parochial affairs generally.

... a few years ago. The new Vestry Hall had been completed a few years ago. ( It remains today having been first converted into ... )

Nor content with the grave charge of mismanagement of parochial business the Improvement Commissioners were desirous of acquiring further odium. They had singled out three or four reforming ratepayers who had been present at the Vestry Hall at the close of the recent exciting election and charged them with creating a disturbance whereby damage was done to the Chairman and others of the Commission, (although in the opinion of the 'Gazette' the incident seemed to have arisen entirely from the irritating behaviour of the Commissioners themselves.)

This unseemly scene must have been one of the sensations of the year in the neighbourhood. It appears that there was a set to in which the Chairman's coat was torn, those involved having already looked a little too favourably on the wine when it was red. As if this were not enough the injured parties decided to sue for damages and not in any old local court but the Kings Bench to the indignation of those who considered such litigation an extravagant luxury at the ratepayers' expense.

A 'Gazette' Editorial accused them of wasting hundreds of pounds in avenging the dishonour done to a member's paletot. Economists calculating the cost of the wretched garb will conjure up the thousand benefits forever lost by the wilful and profligate diversion of so noble a sum on such a tattered shred. They will cry out how schools might have benefitted, educational institutes been founded, the decayed paragon when receiving relief will accept his diminished dole writhing under the suppressed complaint that from him was snatched a portion of his meal by vindictive men mouldering in their unhonoured graves, who deemed it better that the paupers should be poorer than that official effrontery should be checked and a damaged coat go undefended in the costliest court in the land.

The complaint was taken up by a 'Gazette' correspondent, who said that the Solicitor to the Commissioners had said that the case should not cost more than £100. This at a time when so many parts of the parish need paving and improving. Is it just that some hundred pounds of the ratepayers' money should be wasted on a course which will not benefit anyone but a set of lawyers?

An open letter from Mr Tisdall of Holland Park Farm took a more personal and outspoken line.

cont.

Mr Tisdall not only accused Mr Reynell, the Chairman of the Commissioners, whose coat was torn, of provoking the incident, but of ' being under the influence of intoxicating liquor at the time.

' If it is anyone who should be prosecuted it is yourself because you provoked the violent scene of that day by your own irritating conduct while acting as Chairman, or your hotheaded partisan, Mr Madywell, who when expostulated with for his turbulence boasted in return of the use he made of his thick stick. I regret your coat was torn to ribbons but still think you deserved censure, you not only partook of drink yourself but you encouraged others to partake of it and allowed its use to be publicly defended by your clerk. It was a bad example to this drunken parish. I beg to ask whether the disgraceful proceedings of the day did not partly arise from the influence the liquor had upon your temper. '

The 'Gazette' was also concerned about the financial effect that a prosecution in the High Court would have upon the families of the four accused ratepayers, although a fund was to be set up to help to pay for their defence. The action of the Commissioners could only draw odium and ill feeling from the parishioners as it exhibited a spirit of revenge ill becoming a body of men claiming the character of Christians and gentlemen, as well as elevating the defendants to the status of martyrs.

Sadly there is no satisfactory ending to the story as no further reports of the case appear, presumably as the High Court action took such a long time to come to trial that the 'Gazette' had by then ceased publication.

The spirit of Feargus O'Connor would have to wait many years uneasy in his grave before his dream of universal suffrage without fear or favour, ( even of a torn coat ) would come to fruition.

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